LIKE most other wisdom traditions, Buddhism assumes that suffering is contingent on ignorance and attachment, while liberation from suffering is dependent on wisdom and detachment. If we cling to what we are not without being aware of it, we will suffer; liberation from suffering requires that we become aware of our false identifications, thereby letting the clinging go.

The wisdom in question here is first of all self-knowledge. But what is that? In the Indian cultural area it is mostly understood as an insight into the true and real self (ātman), as opposed to false self-conceptions. Typically, the self is assumed to be a reality, not only an appearance. The self may for instance be understood as the innermost ground of an apparent person, a kind of substantial thing in itself. This basic assumption is understood in different ways in different schools of Indian philosophy, such as the six orthodox Brahmanic schools (nyāya, vaiśeṣika, sāṅkhya, yoga, mīmāṃsā and vedānta) and the heterodox Jains. Still more variations are to be found in other cultural traditions.

The Buddhists who where also a heterodox school, gave a radically different answer to the question of how self-knowledge should be understood. They held that what is required in order to be liberated from suffering, is insight into what one is not; that is, an insight into the fact that one’s identifications do not constitute a substantial self; they are non-self (anātman). This difference is often characterised as a contrast between the self way (ātman-vāda) of the other schools and the non-self way (anātman-vāda) of the Buddhists. Many Buddhists hold that this insight into what is non-self is sufficient to let go of clinging, thereby bringing the causes of suffering to extinction (cp nirvāṇa), and suffering itself to cessation (cp nirodha). If this is so, then it is unnecessary to investigate what is one’s true self, and in that way one avoids to get entangled in the endless controversies about this latter question.

THREE TURNINGS OF THE WHEEL OF DHARMA

This approach is typical of early Buddhism, in what is called the first turning of the wheel of dharma; that is, of the teaching. The first turning takes its point of departure from what is held to be the first talk of Siddhārtha Gautama (c 563-483 BCE – Before the Common Era) after he had become an awakened or enlightened – a buddha. It is called: “The Discourse Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dharma.” Here the Buddha outlines the four noble truths about suffering, its causes, its cessation, and the path to its cessation. This constitutes the basic framework for all Buddhist schools. Obviously, it is formed on the basis of a medical analogy
with its diagnosis, etiology, prognosis, and therapy. This gives the basic truths a practical, rather than a theoretical orientation.

This and the other talks of the Buddha were collected in the Sūtra-piṭaka. They were interpreted and systematised in the advanced teaching (abhidharma) which was the source of systematic commentaries and treatises in the eighteen Abhidharma schools that developed over the first 500 years after the Buddha. The central catchword here is “non-self” (anātman).

The second turning of the wheel of dharma emerged around the beginning of CE (– the Common Era), with a new group of texts purporting to be discourses of the Buddha that were handed down orally and esoterically until then. Conspicuous among these texts are the Discourses on Perfect Wisdom (Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra), and their systematic interpretation within the Middle Way School (madhyamaka), the founder of which was Nāgārjuna (c 150-250 CE). The central catchword here is “emptiness” (śūnyatā). When applied to persons and other phenomena, it means the same as being empty of substantial own-being. This interpretation of “emptiness” as “emptiness of own being” (svabhāva-śūnyatā) corresponds approximately to what in Tibetan is called rangtong. As in the first turning, the person is seen to be without a substantial self (pudgala-nairatmya) or to be empty of independent own-being; but in contrast to the first turning, other phenomena are also seen to be empty of own-being; (dharma-nairatmya). In both turnings self-knowledge is understood without relying on assumptions about a true or real self (ātman).

This changes, however, when we come to the third turning of the wheel of dharma. The adherents of this approach are less hesitant than other Buddhists to talk about self-knowledge as an insight into the true and real self, when this notion is introduced in a certain way based on self-reflection as practiced in the Yoga-Practice School (yogācāra). When reflecting on the mind/heart (citta), one finds no definable thing or characteristics. This search culminates in an insight that the mind/heart is empty of anything that can be delineated in a dualistic manner. It is nondualistic. In Tibetan this kind of emptiness is called shentong – “empty of other”. In the literature that emerged within this school this insight was elaborated in terms of a teaching which assumed that the buddha-nature is inherent in the mind/heart of all sentient beings.

In the early centuries of the CE there appeared a number of so-called tathāgatagarbha texts. The first of these seems to be the Discourse on the Buddha Nature (Tathagatagarbhasūtra), while the most important of them is the systematic treatise on this text and other related tathāgatagarbha texts, the Treatise on the Buddha Nature (Ratnagotravidhāga = RGV = Uttaratantraśāstra) which is ascribed to Maitreya and Asaṅga (c 310-390). According to tradition, Asaṅga is considered to be a founding father of the Yoga Practice School; in the same way that Nāgārjuna is considered to be the founding father of the Middle Way School. Later the RGV became an important bridge from the sūtra tradition to the tantra tradition, and to a great extent it has provided a theoretical foundation of the practice of dzogchen and mahāmudra meditation and contemplation as they were developed in Tibet.

The three turnings of the wheel of dharma that I have mentioned should not be confused with another division into the three vehicles: the little vehicle (hīnayāna), the big vehicle (mahāyāna) and the diamond vehicle (vajrayāna). The first turning of the wheel of dharma
belongs to Hīnayāna, while the second and third turnings both belong to Mahāyāna. Vajrayāna has its theoretical basis in all three turnings, especially the last two. Its unique contribution pertains to its tantric practice.

One difference between the Hinayāna and Mahāyāna approaches pertains to their ideals of a free person. This is epitomised in the difference between the ideal type of an arhat – “a worthy person,” and a bodhisattva – “a being who seeks awakening.” Both are searching for awakening and liberation from suffering, but an arhat does so in order to achieve his or her own liberation, regardless of how others fare; while a bodhisattva does so in order to be able to help all beings to awaken and be free from suffering. This latter motive is called bodhicitta – “an awakened mind/heart”, although this term also implies the resolution or vow of a prospective bodhisattva, given upon the entrance of the bodhisattva path. If there is room for saying that a bodhisattva seeks his or her true and real self, then this must be understood to be a selfless or unselfish self. It is a profoundly altruistic, not an egoistic motivation.

When the Buddha’s basic framework of the four noble truths is interpreted in view of the teachings about the inherent buddha nature, the causes of suffering are described in terms of the cognitive and affective obscurations that veil the inherent buddha nature, and liberation is described in terms of its unveiling. In some contexts this description is also given in terms of self-knowledge. Here self-knowledge is understood not only as insight into the rangtong-emptiness of all the phenomena that the mind/heart is not, but also in terms of the shentong-emptiness of the mind/heart itself. The adherents of this approach talk about these insights into emptiness of own being and emptiness of other as being insights into the essential nature of the mind/heart itself. Awakening to them is to achieve an awakened mind/heart (bodhi). A buddha is one who has achieved this unsurpassed, perfect and completely awakened mind/heart (anuttarāntar-samyak-sambodhi). So this is the buddha mind. And what is more, they do not shy away from characterising this as one’s true and real self.

Interpretations along these lines have received much criticism from adherents of the first two turnings of the wheel of dharma. Opponents have objected that if Buddhism is laid out in this way, there is a danger that it will abandon its distinguishing marks and become indistinguishable from non-Buddhist schools in India and elsewhere.

**Question and overview**

This gives rise to the following question:

Is the assumption about a true or real self in the third turning of the wheel of dharma compatible with the teachings about non-self and emptiness in the ways they are understood in the first and second turning?

I shall discuss this in view of where we might search for our true and real self. In the Indian context there is an underlying assumption in this search. It is presupposed that if there is a true and real self, then it must be permanent, happy and pure. The question, then, is: Can such a self be found anywhere, and if so, where? I propose to divide the field of search as follows.
The basic division is drawn between a dualistic and a nondualistic approach. Within the dualistic field, we may search for a true and real self in an ontological sense with a basis in either conditioned or unconditioned phenomena.

If we believe that such a self may be found with a basis in conditioned phenomena we are suffering from a cognitive distortion (\textit{vipary\text{"a}sa}). The Buddhists distinguish four such distortions. To endorse them is a paradigm case of ignorance or delusion. Wisdom, on the other hand, implies an insight into the higher truth of the matter, seeing that all conditioned phenomena are non-self, besides being impermanent, connected with suffering, and impure. These are the three marks of existence (\textit{trilak\text{"a}ta}), and when they are applied in the practice of insight meditation, they may turn out as the three gates of liberation (\textit{vimok\text{"a}sa-mukha}).

Alternatively, we may believe that such a self can be found with a basis in unconditioned phenomena. In that case, we are suffering from the extreme view of eternalism (\textit{s\text{"a}svata-v\text{"a}da}). Or we may deny this and believe that this denial implies that not even a person is to be found. Then we are suffering from the extreme view of nihilism (\textit{uccheda-v\text{"a}da}). Buddhism has always tended to avoid these extremes and to prefer a middle way. It is an open question, however, whether the Abhidharma schools of the first turning succeeded in avoiding a kind of nihilism on account of their reductionistic conception of the person.

Within the nondualistic field we do not search for a true and real self in an ontological sense, neither on the basis of conditioned nor on the basis of unconditioned phenomena. Here too, we can distinguish two main approaches: that of the Middle Way School (\textit{madhyamaka}) which is mainly based on the notion of emptiness of own-being (\textit{rangtong}); and that of the Yoga Practice School (\textit{yog\text{"a}c\text{"a}ra}), or more specifically, the branch of it that propounds the teachings about the buddha nature, based on the \textit{tath\text{"agatagarbha} texts}. Among adherents of this latter approach we find proponents of the notion of emptiness of other (\textit{shentong}). It seems that both of these schools have room for a nonreductionistic conception of the person within the framework of apparent truth, and that they agree that as a highest truth, the person is non-self and empty of own-being. Adherents of the Middle Way School emphasise the importance of dialectical argumentation in order to gain this insight, but this is considered to be a means subservient to silence beyond the limits of dualistic language. They consider this insight to be sufficient in order to be liberated from suffering, and keep their silence with regard to whether there is or is not a true and real self.

Adherents of the teachings about the buddha nature, on the other hand, find that this negative or apophatic approach is too meagre, and they supplement it with a more positive or cataphatic approach where they develop the teachings about the buddha nature and the buddha qualities, such as wisdom and compassion. The buddha nature is assumed to be inherent in the mind/heart of all sentient beings, although most beings are not mindful of it because their awareness is veiled by cognitive and affective obscurations. As a consequence, they suffer. Awakening is understood as an unveiling of the inherent wakefulness of the mind/heart; that is, of the buddha nature, and this is based on the practice of mindfulness and awareness where the mind/heart is empty of other (\textit{shentong}), that is, of dualistic conceptions, and abides in self-evident clarity. What is more, this is characterised as the basic ground of our true and real self. So here we are at the heart of the matter. Opponents have read this as an eternalistic
position. We shall attempt another reading which is in part phenomenological, and in part based on the difference between categorical terms and transcendent terms. If that reading is tenable, the teachings about the buddha nature can be understood as a supplement to the Middle Way School. Moreover, the teachings of both of these schools must be understood as pointers to a silence beyond discursive thinking.

**Dualistic approaches**

(1.1) **Seeking the self in conditioned phenomena**

**Cognitive distortions**

Suppose we are seeking a way of being that is characterised by completeness and perfection in which there is permanence, happiness and purity. Suppose also that we believe that such a state is our true and real self, and that it is to be found among conditioned phenomena in the world and in time. Then we are in for trouble, since we are building our house on sand, or on the four cognitive distortions (Pāli: vipallāsa; Sanskrit: viparyāsa). The teaching about these distortions can be traced in the earliest Buddhist texts. It is implied in what is alleged to be the Buddha’s second discourse after his awakening − “The Discourse on the Mark of Non-Self” (Anattalakkhaṇasutta), and it is stated more explicitly in for instance the Pāli text of Aṅguttara-nikāya IV, 49:

> There are four cognitive distortions which may be either of perception (saññā-vipallāsa), or consciousness (citta-vipallāsa) or of views (diṭṭhi-vipallāsa). And which are these four? To regard what is impermanent (anicca) as permanent (nicca); what is painful (dukkha) as connected with happiness (sukha); what is non-self (anattā) as a self (attā); what is impure (asubha) as pure (subha).

According to the first sentence in this passage, we can have cognitive distortions in three ways: through the way we perceive things, through the way we conceive of them or feel about them, and through the opinions we hold about them. We tend to have a selective perception, and often it is adapted to wishful thinking in a distorting manner.

According to the next sentences in this passage, we can distinguish four kinds of cognitive distortion. These may be regarded as an explication of ignorance and in that way a contribution to the Buddhist analysis of the causes of suffering. I shall reformulate them separately and insert the Sanskrit key terms:

1. We have a cognitive distortion if we assume that what is impermanent (anītya) is permanent (nītya).
2. We have a cognitive distortion if we assume that what is connected with suffering (duḥkha) is connected with happiness (sukha).
3. We have a cognitive distortion if we assume that what is non-self (anātman) is a self (ātman) or belongs to oneself (ātmya).
4. We have a cognitive distortion if we assume that what is impure (aśubha) is pure...
I suppose we can reformulate this as a statement about a conjectured true and real self who is supposed to be permanent, happy and pure, and, we must add, this self is supposed to be founded on conditioned phenomena. The proponent of this view, of course, would not consider it to be a cognitive distortion. Calling it a cognitive distortion implies a negative judgment which is based on a different view. In this Buddhist context the contrary view is summed up in the three marks of existence which we come to next.

If the contrary views represent the truth of the matter, then it seems quite obvious that whoever identifies himself or herself with certain conditioned phenomena and clings to them in the belief that “this is me, I am this, this is myself,” as the Buddha formulated it in his second discourse. When a person cognitively identifies himself or herself with certain phenomena in this way, and affectively clings to them, he or she will probably also believe that these phenomena constitute one’s true and real self, and that this self has own-being. For this reason, he or she will also believe that this self is marked by permanence, happiness and purity. When it turns out, however, that these things are impermanent, connected with suffering, and impure, suffering will follow in the wake.

**Marks of existence**

This suffering will go on as long as its causes and conditions are in force. Therefore there is no liberation from suffering for the deluded. Only if the causes of suffering are brought to extinction is suffering brought to cessation.

The three marks of existence (Pāli: *tilakkhaṇa*; Sanskrit: *trilakṣaṇa*) deny what the cognitive distortions affirm. For this reason they are considered to be suitable antidotes against belief in the cognitive distortions, and they provide central topics for Buddhist insight meditation. The logical structure of this reasoning is *modus tollens*: (1) If *p*, then *q*; (2) not *q*; therefore (3) not *p*. In this instance: (1) If there is a true and real self based on conditioned phenomena, it must be permanent and connected with happiness; and also pure if we include the fourth characteristic mentioned above. The wise among the Buddhists deny the consequent of this implication: (2) It is not the case that any conditioned phenomena are permanent, connected with happiness, and pure; in other words: all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, connected with suffering, and impure. From this it follows that the antecedent of the implication must also be denied: (3) It is not the case that there is any true and real self based on conditioned phenomena. The wise will see that for all conditioned phenomena it can be said: “This is not me, I am not this, this is not my self,” as the Buddha said in his second discourse.

I mentioned above that the three marks of existence are implied already in the Buddha’s second discourse. Moreover, they are mentioned in the *Dhammapada*, verse 277-279, which is also one of the oldest texts in the Buddhist tradition. I shall quote it and insert the key terms in Pāli:

277: When through wisdom (*pamāṇāya*) one sees (*passati*) that all conditioned...
phenomena (*sabbe saṅkhārā*) are impermanent (*anicca*), then one is detached as to suffering (*dukkhe*). This is the path (*maggo*) of purity (*visuddhi*).

278: When through wisdom one sees that all conditioned phenomena (*sabbe saṅkhārā*) are connected with suffering (*dukkhā*), then one is detached as to suffering. This is the path of purity.

279: When through wisdom one sees that all phenomena (*sabbe saṅkhārā*) are non-self (*anattā*), then one is detached as to suffering. This is the path of purity.

We can reformulate these three verses as follows:

1. All conditioned phenomena are impermanent.
2. All conditioned phenomena are connected with suffering.
3. All phenomena are non-self.

It seems reasonable to interpret the first two statements as pertaining to impermanent phenomena, and the third statement as pertaining to all phenomena, regardless of whether they are impermanent or permanent. For this reason it appears to be not entirely correct to translate *tilakkhaṇa* or *trilakkhaṇa* as “the three characteristics or marks of all conditioned phenomena.” The third mark is not restricted to conditioned phenomena. We shall return to this point.

In the text it is said that these three marks are seen through wisdom (*paññāya*). The notion of wisdom (Pāli: *paññā*; Sanskrit: *prajñā*) here is, of course, the contrary of ignorance (Pāli: *avijjā*; Sanskrit: *avidyā*). This contrast can also be explained in terms of discernment and the lack of it. It is the lack of discernment that mutilates and confuses the three marks of existence and transforms them into the four cognitive distortions. Besides, this contrast can be explained on the basis of the mindfulness (Pāli: *sati*; Sanskrit: *smṛti*) and awareness (Pāli: *sampañña*; Sanskrit: *samprajanya*) that wisdom has, and ignorance lacks.

Another word that comes close to ignorance in meaning is delusion (*moha*). This word signifies one of the three unwholesome roots (*akuśala-mūla*), and appears to be used in contexts where ignorance interacts with the two other roots: greed or attachment (*lobha*) which also implies clinging (*upadana*), and hatred or aversion (*dveśa*). As long as we are unaware of this process, the interaction between these three factors tends to be mutually reinforcing; and together they produce suffering. One example of this is the interaction between delusion and clinging. Let us suppose that we project certain mental constructions about our self and our life world. Our assumption that these constructions refer to things and facts with an independent own-being will be strengthened in proportion to our clinging to them. Moreover, our clinging to these assumptions will be strengthened in proportion to the strength of our assumption that they have an independent own-being. In this way, there is a mutual reinforcement and a vicious circle here, which thrives when we are not mindful of it. On the other hand, in so far as we are mindful and aware of it, it can be converted into a virtuous circle. More of this presently.
In the text quoted this transformation from ignorance to wisdom and from attachment to detachment is called the path of purity.

**Gateways to liberation**

When the three marks of existence are applied as countermeasures against the four cognitive distortions, they are turned into three gateways of liberation. In Pāli they are called *vimokkha-mukha*,\(^7\) and in Sanskrit *vimokṣa-mukha*.\(^8\) They are called the signless liberation, the desireless liberation, and the emptiness liberation.

Traditionally the Buddhists distinguish three phases in the appropriation of their teachings: hearing or reading about them, reflecting on them, and meditating on them. On interpreting the teachings, it may be helpful to apply them to one’s own situation. One tries, for instance, to become aware of one’s own mental distortions and to test their validity in view of the marks of existence.

The three marks of existence are central themes of Buddhist insight meditation (Pāli: *vipassanā-bhāvanā*, Sanskrit: *vipaśyānaḥ-bhāvanāḥ*). In order to have a liberating power, it is necessary that these meditations reach a certain level of concentration (*samādhi*) that transcends the more or less distracted consciousness of ordinary life. For this purpose insight meditation is combined with tranquillity meditation (Pāli: *samata-bhāvanā*; Sanskrit: *śamata-bhāvanāḥ*). In this way the insight into the three marks of existence are turned into three gateways of liberation. They belong to the central repertoire of Buddhist meditation, not only in early Buddhism, but also throughout later phases of Buddhism.

In the *Path of Analysis* (*Paṭisambhidāmagga*), ii. 58, they are formulated as follows:

> When one who has great resolution brings [formations] to mind as impermanent, he acquires the signless liberation. When one who has great tranquillity brings [them] to mind as painful, he acquires the desireless liberation. When one who has great wisdom brings them to mind as not-self, he acquires the void liberation.\(^9\)

I propose to reformulate them in this way:

(1) Through meditation on impermanence (Pāli: *anicca*; Sanskrit: *anitiya*) one may acquire the signless liberation (Pāli: *animitta-vimokkha*; Sanskrit: *animitta-vimokṣa*).

(2) Through meditation on suffering (Pāli: *dukkha*; Sanskrit: *duḥkha*) one may acquire the desireless liberation (Pāli: *apaṭṭihita-vimokkha*; Sanskrit: *apaṭṭihita-vimokṣa*).

(3) Through meditation on non-self (Pāli: *anattā*; Sanskrit: *anātman*) one may acquire the emptiness liberation (Pāli: *suññatā-vimokkha*; Sanskrit: *śūnyatā-vimokṣa*).

To be sure, there are many other themes of insight meditation in addition to these three, all having the same function and purpose of liberation from suffering.\(^10\) The point of having a large supply is not to practice them all, but to have something to choose from that suits
different needs and temperaments of different individuals. This may also be relevant for the same person in different stages of the way to inner freedom. Access to this repertoire is especially relevant for a teacher who may guide quite different students.

In some cases meditation on impermanence will have the greatest effect, in other cases meditation on suffering. Some may prefer the combination of meditation on non-self and emptiness. This option comes closest to the line followed in the present essay. Maybe this last gateway has been conducive for the transition from the first to the second turning of the wheel of dharma? In this changeover there was a shift of emphasis from “non-self” to “emptiness”, as indicated in this gateway.

Whichever of these gateways is chosen, the common point is to develop mindfulness and awareness of how the mind constructs conceptions about our personal identity as embedded in conceptions of the life world. As I suggested above, if we are unaware of this process, there will be a vicious circle in the interaction between delusion, greed and hatred. On the other hand, to the extent that we are aware of it, this vicious circle may be converted into a virtuous circle. If clinging strengthens the assumption that the person is a self with own-being; the insight that the person is non-self and without own-being may weaken the clinging. A breakthrough to such an insight may be sudden, but it has to be practiced again and again in new situations where one is applying mindfulness and awareness of one’s unwholesome reactions to the situation. In that way, it is a gradual process of liberation from suffering.

(1.2) Seeking the self in unconditioned phenomena

Let us suppose that we meditate on the three marks of existence in such a way that we are able to let go of the four cognitive distortions. In this way we pass through the gateways of liberation. If this is sufficient, why say anything more? Many Buddhists, perhaps most, have found this approach quite adequate, and have refrained from adding anything to this. Others, however, have found this treat to be too meagre. It is quite negative or apophatic. They have missed something more positive or cataphatic.

Let us look at this difference in relation to the statement quoted above where the Buddha says with regard to all conditioned phenomena: “This is not me, I am not this, this is not my self.” This statement may be read in two ways, either as a nonaffirming or as an affirming negation. In the former case the negation is read simply as a negation without having any further implications as to what is truly me, what I really am and what my true and real self is. I simply leave these questions open. In the latter case, on the other hand, I read the negation as having implications. If this is not me, then something else is; if I am not this, then I am something else; if this is not my self, then my true and real self is something else. More specifically, I may conclude that if my true and real self is not based on conditioned phenomena, then it is based on unconditioned phenomena. We shall first consider an eternalistic position which endorses this possibility, and then a nihilist position which rejects it and assumes that this rejection implies a reductionistic conception of the person.

Eternalism

It seems that when Buddhists talk about eternalism (śāśvata-vāda), they mostly refer to the assumption that the person is grounded in a self who has an everlasting existence, without
beginning or end in time. It is this eternalistic view (śāsvata-drṣṭi) which is generally the
target of Buddhist criticism, together with its opposite, the nihilistic view (uccheda-drṣṭi).
They are considered to be extreme views.

It is possible, however, to understand the term “eternal” (śāsvata) in other senses as well. One
alternative possibility is that “eternal” can be understood in the sense of “timeless”. This,
again, can be understood concretely or abstractly. The abstract interpretation as an eternal
truth (once true, always true) is not so relevant here. When it is understood concretely, it refers
to a way of being in the present without thought of past or future. Of course, as long as we
live, we live in a present. But most of the time we have little or no awareness of it because we
locate our present position in relation to a horizon of understanding that refers to other times
and other places. Our attention is more or less directed toward what is absent, and in this way
we become absent-minded, without being aware of it, as in a dream. Sometimes, however, we
become aware of our own projections, and in this way we become present-minded. We wake
up from the dream and become aware of the living presence without attempting to locate it
within any external framework. Then we do not regard the present here and now as if it were
contained in space and time; but, on the contrary, we regard our conceptions of space and time
as contained in the present here and now.

Corresponding to these two senses of “eternal”, we may distinguish two kinds of eternalism:
one based on what is supposed to be everlasting, the other on what is timeless. Since they are
incommensurable, the arguments that are directed against the first interpretation have no
bearing on the second. We should keep this in mind when we come to the third turning of the
wheel of dharma.

Those who interpret the eternal in terms of the everlasting, regard the person as a being in the
world and in time. They conceive of the person as grounded in a substantial self, and as a
consequence of this they also endorse a substantialistic conception of reincarnation. The
innermost self of a person is supposed to reincarnate in new temporal persons in life after life,
depending on the merits of the person’s karma. While the merit or demerit of a person varies
over time, the substantial core of the person is supposed to be invariant throughout. We may
call this substantialistic conception of the person and the self an ontological view. This way of
understanding eternalism has been a prevailing notion within most Indian schools of
philosophy, both among the orthodox schools and in Jainism, although not among the
Materialists, and it has many parallels in other traditions.

Those who interpret the eternal in terms of the timeless, on the other hand, assume that there is
an aspect of the person that is incommensurable with things and beings in so far as they can be
delimited in space and time. But here we have to tread carefully, because the way this
approach is understood in Advaita-Vedānta, which is one of the orthodox schools, is quite
different from the way it is understood in the third turning of the wheel of dharma in
Buddhism. In Advaita-Vedānta we find what we may call a henological version of this view.
“Henological” derives from the Greek heis henos – “one”, and is a term that is used in
connection with Western Neo-Platonic schools. It seems that it would be all right to use in in
connection with Advaita-Vedānta as well provided we pay heed to the differences that also
exist between these traditions. In Advaita-Vedānta the innermost self of the person is held to
be one with the innermost divine ground of all there is – ātman is one with brāhmaṇa. True enough, there appear to be a multiplicity of persons and other beings in the world and in time. But only the ignorant get attached to them and believe in their substantial reality. The wise see their apparent reality as an illusion and are detached from them. With regard to reincarnation this implies that although there appears to be a multiplicity of persons who reincarnate in different places and times, the highest truth of the matter is that they are only apparent manifestations of the one and only transmigrant – the godhead himself or herself. They are understood as the play (līla) of the godhead, as pure magic (māyā).

As I mentioned, when Buddhists criticise the extreme view of eternalism (sāśvata-dṛṣṭi), it seems most likely that they directing their objections to the eternalism based on what is everlasting and not on what is timeless in the way this was understood in Advaita Vedānta. This latter position was really a late-comer in the debate. It was developed by Gauḍapāda (c 640-690) and Śaṅkara (c 700-750), probably under the influence of Buddhist philosophy; so this approach was simply not known or discussed by Buddhists before that time, and later it has not been discussed much either. So presumably, what the Buddhists referred to was a view of the person as a substantial self, or as belonging to a substantial self, grounded in unconditioned phenomena. And this self was assumed to be everlasting.

Let us at this point go one or two steps further into the Buddhist construction of a concept of the person and the self. In the Buddhist approach this construction starts with the experience of phenomena (dharma). They are classified in various ways of which one of the most fundamental is the five groups (pañcaskandha), that is: (1) the group of corporal phenomena (rūpa) and the four groups of mental phenomena (nāma): (2) sensations and feelings (vedanā); (3) perceptions and conceptions (saṃjñā), including judgments about what is sensed, which presupposes concepts, propositions, images and memories; (4) dispositions (saṃskāra) to proliferate the feelings and concepts in the last two groups within one’s horizon of understanding, associating them with other concepts, propositions, narratives, pictures, etc; and (5) consciousness (vijñāna) of these four preceding groups.

The corporal phenomena are further divided into the six sense organs or sense faculties (indriya): eye, ear, nose, tongue, tactile organs of the body, and the faculty of imagination; together with their six corresponding domains of sense objects (viśya): visual forms and colours, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile objects and objects of imagination and thought. Together these make up the twelve sources (āyatana) of consciousness. When there is consciousness of them, we have the eighteen fields or elements (dṛṣṭu) of consciousness. It is assumed that when we construct a perception or conception of our self or another as a person, we do so on the basis of data selected from these groups of corporal and mental phenomena. These phenomena contribute to the conception of the person as a whole.

At this juncture the Buddhists face a crucial question. Can the person as a whole be understood as the sum of those phenomena it is composed of, or is this whole something more than the sum of its parts? We shall consider three answers to this question. The first one is reductionistic. It assumes that the person as a whole can be reduced to the sum of its parts. This implies a criticism of the nonreductionistic conception of the person. So we may start with these objections:
A nonreductionistic conception of the person presupposes that the person as a whole is something more than the sum of his or her parts.

This brings up the question what "something more" refers to? On a phenomenological level, that is, on the level of how phenomena immediately appear, it is usually assumed that:

(2) The person as a whole appears to be something more than the sum of his or her parts because (a) the person appears to be a synchronic unity in the multiplicity of characteristics and (b) to have a diachronic identity through time and change.

This phenomenological level corresponds more or less with the apparent truth of the Buddhists. Even a reductionist could agree that this is how we perceive and conceive a person. But this brings us to the next question: Should we accept this apparent unity and identity as valid in the sense that we consider ourselves to be bound to perceive and conceive of a person in this way? Here the reductionist would answer no. This is a pure illusion. While a nonreductionist would answer yes, but this could be justified in different ways: in terms of phenomenology, philosophy of language or ontology. The eternalist chooses an ontological justification which is grounded on the following assumption:

(3) If the apparent unity and identity of a person is valid, it is implied that this unity and identity is anchored in a substantial self with independent own-being.

In other words, the eternalist assumes that the phenomenological unity and identity of a person presupposes an ontological grounding in a substantial self. This is a guarantee for the validity of the apparent unity and identity. As we shall see, this implication in (3) is also accepted by adherents of the Abhidharma Schools, at least for the sake of the argument, when they argue for their reductionism. On the other hand, the implication in (3) is rejected by adherents of the Middle Way School, and through this they attempt to refute the reductionistic conception of the person. Anyway, adherents of this kind of eternalism seem to assume that the person is grounded in a self with own-being and everlasting existence; and that this means that the self has its basis in unconditioned phenomena. So we should perhaps add the following:

(3*) And this self belongs to the class of unconditioned phenomena.

Over the 2500 years of Buddhist history, there have been Buddhists and commentators on Buddhism who have attempted to interpret the teaching in the direction of an eternalism of this type. This tendency has perhaps been more common among Western than Eastern interpreters of Buddhism.¹¹

One argument that has often been used in this connection is drawn from verse 277-278 of the *Dhammapada*, which we have quoted above. It is pointed out that in these two verses it is said that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent and connected with suffering. This is interpreted in a restrictive sense so that all and only those phenomena that fall under the class of conditioned phenomena are impermanent and connected with suffering. From this it is concluded that unconditioned phenomena are permanent and connected with happiness. This implication, I suppose, would be endorsed by most Buddhist.
The controversial point, however, is the next step in the argument. Here an analogical extension is drawn to the case of the self. Adopting the same pattern of argumentation, it is held that the notion of non-self applies to all and only conditioned phenomena, and consequently, that there is room for the assumption that a true and real self can be based on unconditioned phenomena. An example of such a self would be the Buddha, existing in the state of nirvāṇa without remainder (Pāli: anupādisesanibbāna; Sanskrit: nirupādiṣेतु-nirvāṇa) – that is, without support from conditioned phenomena – the five the groups of corporal or mental phenomena. Moreover, it is assumed that in so far as the self of the Buddha exists in this way, it is permanent and connected with happiness. So here we have an assumption about a true and real self in an ontological sense.

The opponents of this position, on the other hand, have an obvious objection to this argument. It is simply incompatible with the next verse in the Dhammapada – verse 279: “… through wisdom one sees that all phenomena are non-self (anattā).” They read this verse as stating that all phenomena are non-self, regardless of whether they are conditioned or unconditioned. This seems to be a reasonable interpretation, and since this text carries much weight among Buddhists, it has held the day for many. We can sum up this conclusion as follows:

(4) There is no substantial self with independent own-being.

This counter-argument, however, would not be so pertinent with regard to the other version of eternalism that we distinguished – where the eternal is understood as timelessness. In Advaita-Vedānta this teaching about the self (ātman) has been developed in a nondualistic manner that purports to go beyond the distinction between conditioned and unconditioned phenomena. The term advaita may be interpreted as “not other”. It seems plausible to understand it as an affirming negation. In the negating part of it one denies that the self is the other. Here the other presumably includes whatever can be grasped by ordinary dualistic thinking and feeling which make up the person and the corresponding life world of the person. If the true and real self is nothing of this other, then it is something in itself. The self is the innermost ground of the person, and one with the innermost ground of all being, the godhead itself.

Generally, it is concluded that since dualism (dvaita) pertains to whatever the self is not; the self is nondualistic (advaita). I think, however, that Buddhists of the Middle Way School would take exception to this and object that advaita is nevertheless a form of crypto-dualism. It thrives on the distinction between dvaita and advaita, and this too is a dualism, albeit at a higher level – a meta-level. We use our dualistic conceptual thinking and feeling in order to perceive or conceive our self as a delimitable person. Advaita-Vedānta denies that this person is the self, and assumes that this denial implies that the self is something else. The self is not something relative, hence it is something absolute, having its own inherent being. This implies a strong commitment to a metaphysical theory of what there is, which may be understood either ontologically in terms of substantial being, or henologically in terms of internal unity.

Sometimes the teachings about emptiness (śūnyatā) in the Middle Way School are interpreted in this direction. The philosophers of this school do not agree to such an interpretation. Nāgārjuna, for instance, warns that to understand emptiness incorrectly is like seizing a snake incorrectly. At a later stage in Buddhist philosophy it has been common to use the term
advaya — “not-two” as a trade mark for the Buddhist variety of non-dualism, as contrasted with the Hindu advaita. The difference is that advaya should be understood as a non-affirming negation, as opposed to advaita which is an affirming negation. In Buddhism it is supposed that whatever we perceive or conceive by means of conceptual distinctions, is dependent on these distinctions. Being dependent, they are empty of independent own-being. The Buddhists of the Middle Way School would criticise the conception of the self in Advaita-Vedānta on this ground. Since the notion of the self is implied by the negation of what is not self, it is dependent; and for that reason it has no independent own-being, but is an empty concept. The Buddhists assume that the reason why one conceives of the self as an ontological being or a henological unity is that one clings to the notion of the self. And if one clings to it, it will be counterproductive on the path to inner freedom. Seeing its emptiness of own-being, one lets it go. And that is the Buddhist way.

Nihilism

Buddhists tend not only to avoid the view of eternalism (śāśvata-dṛṣṭi), but also the view of nihilism (uccheda-dṛṣṭi). They aspire to find the middle way between these extreme theoretical positions, just as they aspire to find the middle way between the extreme practical positions of sensualism and ascetism. Different schools have different interpretations of this middle way, however. Earlier I suggested that it may be that the Abhidharma schools of the first turning of the wheel of dharma ended up with a kind of nihilistic view of the self and the person, since they deny the self and believe this implies a denial of the person, or at least a reductionistic conception of the person.

This charge of nihilism (uccheda-vāda), however, needs some clarification before we proceed. In the first place, the Western term “nihilism” is a fairly modern term associated with a number of dimensions of meaning − metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, political and theological − only some of which are relevant when using this term to translate the Pāli and Sanskrit term uccheda, which basically means “cutting off”. At the time of the Buddha adherents of non-Buddhist school of the Materialists (cārvāka) were commonly regarded as proponents of an extremely nihilistic view. They admitted the existence of consciousness as proved by perception, but rejected the assumption that consciousness implies a self. They held that consciousness is nothing more than a conscious living body. Moreover, they held that when the body dies, its life is cut off (uccheda); then the individual is utterly annihilated. For this reason, assumptions about past lives or future lives and of rebirth are rejected. This view was usually considered pernicious since it encourages moral irresponsibility and hedonism.

It would not be fair to charge the Abhidharma Schools of nihilism in the same sense as the Materialists. They differ from the Materialists both with regard to the assumption of rebirth and morality. The Abhidharma philosophers assume that although a person does not have an ontological, or even a conceptual, status, the ignorant believe it has; and as long as they do, they will continue to suffer and be reborn to new lives of suffering in samsāra. This is explained on the basis of merit accumulated through wholesome or unwholesome actions (karma).
Still, the Abhidharma philosophers agree with the Materialists in a reductionistic conception of the person and the self. The person as a whole is nothing but the sum of its parts and the self is nothing more than the person; that is to say, both are nothing. And this “nothing” expresses a central part of the ordinary meaning of “nihilism”.

In view of the discussion in the last section, we can reconstruct a possible argument for their position:

(5) If we accept (3) and (4), it is implied that the apparent unity and identity of a person are not valid.

And from this we can draw the following conclusion:

(6) If we accept (1) and (5), it is implied that the person as a whole is nothing but the sum of its parts; in other words, we accept a reductionistic conception of the person.

We should add two comments to this. In the first place, according to this reconstruction, the Abhidharmists here accept the implication stated in (3), at least for the sake of the argument. That is, they accept that if the appearance of a person’s unity and identity is tenable, this requires the assumption that the person is anchored in a substantial self with own-being. This implication is challenged by the Middle Way philosophers who point out that it is quite possible to accept the appearance of a person with unity and identity, and at the same time deny that the person is a self with own-being. As a consequence of this, the Middle Way philosophers are in a position where they can accept a nonreductionistic conception of the person. This can be accepted within the framework of apparent truth. And at the same time this can be combined with the highest truth that the person is non-self and empty of own-being, which is in accordance with the distinguishing tenets of Buddhism. In this way the Middle Way philosophers challenge any adherent of (3), whether they are adherents of eternalism (in the sense of belief in an everlasting self) or of nihilism.

Secondly, the Abhidharmist also accepts the contraposition of this implication. That is, if one rejects the assumption of a substantial self with own-being, then one must also reject the assumption that the person as a whole is something more than the sum of its parts. The apparent unity and identity must be regarded as an illusion. In the Middle Way School, on the other hand, the whole implication in (3) is questioned. Here it is pointed out that it is quite possible to deny that there is a substantial self with own-being, without denying that there is a person with unity and identity.

The Abhidharmist conception of the person can be characterised as reductionistic, nihilistic and atomistic. It is reductionistic because it assumes that the person as a whole can be reduced to the sum of its parts, these being the multiplicity of corporal and mental phenomena out of which the perception or conception of a person is constructed. It is nihilistic because it concludes that the person is nothing but this sum; nothing in addition. And it is atomistic because it assumes that the phenomena that the whole construction can be reduced to, cannot themselves be reduced to anything else. In a certain sense, they are indivisible, thus having an atomistic structure. Hence, atomism. In view of this the Abhidharma philosophers’ approach to justification can be characterised as foundationalistic, since they assume that our constructions of concepts and statements about ourselves and each other as persons, living
beings and other things in the life world can be reduced to this foundation of basic, atomistic phenomena.

In this connection the Abhidharma Schools faced a problem. In their atomism they assumed that each separate phenomenon (dharma) has a substantial own-being (svabhāva), but how can this be squared with the assumption that they have only a momentary being? The Sarvāstivāda School which was one of the prominent Abhidharma Schools, attempted to solve this problem by introducing a distinction between two aspects of each phenomenon: one latent, the other manifest. Although each phenomenon only manifests as a momentary power point, it may be assumed that before and after its manifestation it has a latent being. This assumption implies that all phenomena have their own-being in all three times – past, present, future – and this is the basis for the name of the school: sarva – “all”, asti – “being”, and vāda – “way” or “school”; that is, sarvāstivāda. In this way it was assumed that each phenomenon has its own-being (svabhāva). This is also the reason why the Abhidharma Schools restricted the field of application of the notion of non-self (anatman) and emptiness of own-being (svabhāva-śūnyatā) to complex beings such as persons (pudgala-nairātmya). They objected to applying these notions to simple individual phenomena.

This point was a target of criticism in Mahāyāna Buddhism from the very first. They extended the notions of the non-self of persons (pudgala-nairātmya) and emptiness of persons (pudgala-śūnyatā) to singular phenomena (dharma-nairātmya and dharma-śūnyatā). One of the arguments used against the assumption that singular phenomena have their own-being, is that all phenomena have a dependent origination (pratītya-samutpāda). When this is interpreted widely so as to encompass not only causal dependence but also conceptual dependence, it points in the direction of the conclusion that all phenomena are empty of own-being.

If this is accepted, the atomism of the Abhidharmists is undermined, and therefore also their reductionism and nihilism is undermined. In this way, the door is opened in Mahāyāna Buddhism to a nonreductionistic conception of the person as an apparent truth, combined with the highest truth that the person is non-self and empty of own-being.

Before going further into that, let us look briefly at one other objection to the Abhidharmist reductionistic conception of the person. This pertains to the notion of moral responsibility which seems to be undermined by the Abhidharmist denial of personal identity. According to the Abhidharma explanation, the person as a whole is nothing but the sum of the five groups of corporal and mental phenomena out of which we construct the conception of the person. In a temporal perspective, these groups of phenomena can be regarded as flowing through time. Like the flow of a river, this flow can be divided into stages, earlier and later. The apparent identity of the person is here reduced to the sum of stages. Since each stage is numerically different from earlier and later stages, it follows that the constellation of phenomena that constitute the person as a whole at any one stage, is numerically different from the constellation of phenomena that constitute the person as a whole at any earlier or later stage. The assumption that it is the same person, is due to such factors as the causal contiguity between these stages, the contiguity between them, and the fact that they are more or less similar. Because of these factors we have a natural belief that it is one and the same person,
and that this means that it is a strictly identical person. But this belief has no basis in experience, since all we experience is different stages. Hence it is a pure illusion.  

This seems to undermine our conception of moral (and legal) responsibility. According to our moral language game, the ascription of moral responsibility to a person appears to presuppose strict identity between the one who takes responsibility for an action, and the one who is held responsible for the consequences of the action. If we blame or praise, punish or reward someone for the consequences of an action, it must be the one who is responsible for the action and not someone else. But according to the reductionistic analysis, it is an illusion to believe that it is identically the same person in these different stages of the process of action. If that is so, then blame and praise, punishment and reward seems to be out of place. But this goes against the grain and appears to be quite counter-intuitive and contrary to common sense.

One reason why the Abhidharmists end up in this quandary is that they reduce strict identity through time to the identity of the stages in a flow. But why should they do that? One easy way out of this has been been pointed out by the American philosopher Willard Van Orman Quine (1908-2000) in his discussion of his apparent paradox of Heraclitus (c.540-475 BCE) that it is not possible to step into the same river twice; for “other and yet other waters are flowing on”. Quine draws a distinction between stage identity and process identity. Even if we cannot step twice into the same river stage, this is not a reason why we cannot step twice into the same river. To hold that this is impossible is to oversee the difference between stage identity and process identity. This lack of discernment seems to be common to Heraclitus, Hume and those Abhidharma philosophers who hold a reductionistic conception of the person.

A related consideration can be drawn from the phenomenology of the German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). He understands consciousness as being directed toward an intentional object, and he distinguishes two aspects of this: the noema and the noesis. The noema or noematic system is the intentional object which consciousness is directed toward; while noesis or the noetic acts consist of the different phases of the attention when it is directed toward the object. Although the noetic acts are numerically different, it does not follow that each act has its own separate object. They are directed toward the same object, but focussing on different aspects of the object. This model could be adapted to a nonreductionistic understanding of the person who would then take the place of a noematic system, which could be assumed to be identically the same through the multiplicity of successive acts directed towards it, both be the own person and by others. This notion could fruitfully be applied to the Buddhist understanding of the person in the second and third turnings of the wheel of dharma as well.

Personally, I find these and other such arguments for a nonreductionistic conception of the person much more convincing than the arguments for a reductionistic conception. I think it would be a good thing if Buddhists became more aware of this possibility of a nonreductionist conception of the person within their framework, and put more effort in developing it.

(2) Nondualistic approaches – beyond the conditioned and unconditioned
One of the arguments used in Mahāyāna Buddhism against the assumption that singular phenomena have their own-being, is that all phenomena have a dependent origination. This pertains to both conditioned and unconditioned phenomena; that is, to phenomena that are dependent on external causes and conditions and phenomena that are not, such as empty space and nirvāṇa. How should we understand that phenomena that are independent of external causes and conditions, nevertheless have a dependent origination? Perhaps it can be understood in the sense that when we think of such phenomena, we are dependent on the language we use? Without language we could form no such distinctions as that between what is conditioned and unconditioned, or between what is dependent and independent. Even a fundamentalist, who seeks to build up a world view on the basis of assumptions about unconditioned phenomena, is dependent on language in order to construct the notion of such phenomena, as well as on the context of usage where this thinking or discourse takes place.

To this is added, in the second turning of the wheel of dharma, the assumption that whatever has a dependent origination is empty of own-being (rangtong). It seems to follow that this can apply to anything that can be delineated by means of language. It can be applied to the unconditioned, to the independent, and even to this kind of emptiness itself: emptiness of own-being is also empty of own-being. When this is seen in the right way, there is not much to hold on to. And that is just the point – to let go of clinging, and thereby to be free from the causes of suffering. This corresponds to the Buddhist nondualism that we referred to above by the name advaita – “not-two”, which is a very negative or apophatic way to liberation, much more radical than the advaita of the Vedāntins.

The insight here is that the mind tends to proliferate (prapañca) its intentional universe by drawing conceptual and emotional distinctions (vikalpa). It spawns concepts, assertions, denials, judgments, justifications, objections, rebuttals, pictures, and narratives about oneself and others in one’s life world. When affective clinging is added to this, we have the projection of the mind’s constructions into what is supposed to be an independent reality with own-being. Being unaware that this is a projection of the mind, we take it to be reality itself, and thereby we become slaves of it. On the other hand, when we are aware that this world picture is a picture world, and that it is empty of own-being, this awareness tends to still the procreative powers of the mind and enable us to listen to its inner stillness.

We shall now look at some aspects of this in the second and third turnings of the wheel of dharma.

**Emptiness of own-being (rangtong)**

The second turning of the wheel of dharma in early Mahāyāna made a fresh start in attempting to find a middle way between eternalism and nihilism. This pertains both to the stūras of this movement, such as in the Sūtras on the Perfect Wisdom, and to the systematic commentaries and treatises on them, such as in the Middle Way School.

A crucial point is this school’s understanding of the two truths: the apparent truth (saṃprati-satya) and the highest truth (paramārtha-satya). I shall first comment on how this distinction can be applied on the way we perceive or conceive a person, how it is used to find a middle way between nihilism and eternalism, and how it gives room for a nonreductionistic
conception of the person within the framework of apparent truth. Then I shall comment on the approach of this school to the highest truth which is discursive in the initial phase, and intuitive in the subsequent phase moving into the realm of silence beyond dualistic thinking.

From the viewpoint of apparent truth, a person seems to be a whole of corporal and mental phenomena, and this whole seems to be more than the sum of its parts. Conceptually, it implies that the person is seen as having unity in the plurality of characteristics, and as having identity through time and change. Prima facie, therefore, we have a nonreductionionistic conception of the person. From the viewpoint of the highest truth, on the other hand, the person is seen to be non-self and empty of independent own-being.

Both of these truths are grounded in dependent origination. What makes a person phenomenologically real, according to apparent truth, is that he or she takes part in causal networks, being an effect of other causes and conditions; and being a cause or contributory condition of other effects. On this ground it is possible to distinguish dreams and mirages of a person from a real person in accordance with common sense. Endorsing this, nihilism is avoided.

What makes a person non-self and empty of own-being, according to the highest truth, is also that the person is dependent on causes and conditions. In order for the person to be a substantial self, it would have to have an own-being. But since the person is dependent on causes and conditions, it has no independent own-being. Endorsing this, eternalism is avoided.

This conception of the person could probably be characterised as a kind of conceptualism which takes the middle way between the nominalism of the reductionists and the realism of the ontologists. It seems to be a kind of phenomenological position.

This reasoning is applied not only to persons and other complex things, but also to their constituents, the purportedly singular phenomena. In this way the scope of the notion of non-self is extended from persons (pudgala-nairatmya) to all phenomena (dharma-nairatmya), and the same thing applies to the scope of the notion of emptiness of own-being (svabhava-samnyatva).

We may add that according to the philosophers of the Middle Way School, eternalism and nihilism could be explained by a lack of discerning wisdom; that is, by ignorance. The eternalist acknowledges the person nonreductionistically as an existing being (bhava), but fails to see the difference between this and a being with own-being (svabhava). The nihilist, on the other hand, acknowledges that the person has no own-being (nibhava), but fails to see the difference between this and a nonentity (abhava). Contrary to both of these, the Middle Way philosopher acknowledges the person as an existing being within the framework of apparent truth, and sees that the person is non-self and empty of own-being within the framework of the highest truth.

If this interpretation of the two truths is acceptable, it seems possible to talk about a Buddhist personalism within the framework of the second turning of the wheel of dharma. As a hypothesis, I hold that this is indeed the case. It must be admitted, however, that this possibility was scarcely developed by the Indian adherents of the Middle Way School. Nevertheless, I believe that it was seen to be a genuine possibility, and it may be that much of
the Vajrayāna philosophy is founded on this assumption, for instance as a presupposition for
the development of buddha maṇḍalas and personal maṇḍalas. Moreover, this possibility was
further developed by Middle Way philosophers in Tibet, notably by Tsongkhapa (1357-1419).

When Buddhism was received in the West over the last two centuries, it has to a fairly great
extent been filtered though the conceptual framework of Theravāda Buddhism, this being the
only one of the eighteen Abhidharma schools of the first turning still extant. Of course, any
talk about Buddhist personalism fits badly with them, since they hold a reductionistic
conception of the person. But this reductionism is not representative for the second and third
turnings of the wheel of dharma, so I believe it is fair enough to talk about Buddhist
personalism. Personally, I feel that this is rather fortunate for the fate of Buddhism in the
West.

I shall now add some comments on the highest truth in the Middle Way School. Basically, this
is understood as an insight into the emptiness of own-being (svabhāva-śūnyatā) of all
phenomena, which is the same as a denial of own-being (nāt-svabhāva). Quite often this has
been misinterpreted as a kind of nihilism, implying a denial of existing beings (abhāva). The
question here is: How does the denial of own-being differ from the denial of existing being?

I think it may be helpful to view Nāgārjuna’s approach to this question on the background of
the four avyākta-vastu; that is, the four questions which have not been determined by the
Buddha. These were speculative philosophical questions about (1) whether the world is eternal
(that is, everlasting in time), or not, or both, or neither; (2) whether the world is infinite (that
is, indefinitely extended) in space, or not, or both, or neither; (3) whether the Tathāgata (that
is, the Buddha) exists after death, or not, or both, or neither; and (4) whether the self (ātman)
is identical with the body or different from it. As we see, the first three of these questions are
formulated in terms of four alternatives (cattakoṭi). This was a common practice in India at
that time. These questions were put to the Buddha on several occasions, including once by
Vacchagotta in the Aggi-Vacchagotta Sutta of the Majjhima Nikāya. But he refused to answer
them, considering this kind of speculative questions to be a distraction from the task of
achieving awakening and liberation from the passions and suffering.

The Buddha’s refusal to take a position on the four alternative answers to the first three
questions can be understood as a nonaffirming (or nonimplicative) denial. Let us relate this to
question (3). If the Buddha had answered that the Tathāgata exists after death, he would have
committed himself to some variety of eternalism; had he answered that the Tathāgata does not
exist after death, he would have committed himself to some variety of nihilism; and had he
answered that both or neither of these alternatives is the case, he would either have
contradicted himself or be committed to some variety of three valued logic. In each case he
would have raised a claim in the current debate about these questions, and this would have
signalled to others that if they wished to take part in the debate, they would have a
Corresponding duty either to accept the claim or to refute it. That is a basic norm in the game
of argumentation which is an adversary procedure.

The Buddha did not recommend this kind of engagement to his followers. He pointed out the
risk it involved to get ensnared in ego-involved defilements such delusion, greed, hatred,
clinging, arrogance, doubt, dejection, etc; all of which would be counterproductive on the path to inner freedom. This situation is well described in one of the oldest Buddhist texts, the “The Chapter of Eights” (Aṭṭhakavagga) and “The Chapter on Going to the Far Shore” (Pārāyanavagga) of the Sutta Nipāta:\footnote{19}

787: An involved person is indeed involved in dispute(s) in respect of doctrines, (but) how, about what, could one dispute with one who is not involved? He has taken up and laid down nothing. He has shaken off all views in this very world. 796: When, abiding in his (own) views, (thinking) ‘It is the highest’, a person esteems it as the best in the world, then he says all others are inferior. Therefore he has not passed beyond disputes. 830: … Seeing this too one should not dispute, for the experts say that purity is not gained thereby. 894: Standing (firm) in his decision, measuring (others against) himself, he enters into further dispute in the world. (But) the [person] who has left all decisions behind does not cause trouble in the world. 919: Only within himself would he be at peace. A bhikkhu would not seek peace from another. For one who is at peace within himself [there is nothing taken up, how much less anything laid down] 1076: ‘There is no measuring of one who has gone [out], Upasīva,’ said the Blessed One. ‘That no longer exists for him by which [they might speak of] him. When all [phenomena] have been removed, then all ways of [speaking] are also removed.’

In view of this it seems reasonable to assume that the Buddha’s refusal to answer the four questions had a practical purpose − to pacify the mind’s innate tendency to proliferate (prapañca) dualistic thinking and feeling (vikalpa). As a hypothesis I assume that this is also the aim of Nāgarjuna’s denial of own-being (niḥ-svabhāva) which is equivalent with the emptiness of own-being (svabhāva-śūnyatā) with regard to all phenomena. If this is correct, the point of these teachings is practical rather than theoretical. It is not an attempt to propound a definite ontological or henological doctrine. I shall quote some verses from Nāgarjuna’s \textit{Fundamental Verses of the Middle Way} (Mūlamadhyamakakārikā = MK) that seem to support this interpretation.

As a start, let us look at what he says about the middle way between eternalism and nihilism:

15: 10 To say ”it is” is to grasp after eternalism (śāsvatagrāho). To say ”it is not” is to adopt the view of nihilism. Therefore a wise person does not rely on (na āśrīyeta) ”exists” or ”does not exist” (astīvā na astītve).\footnote{20}

This seems to imply that the middle way between eternalism and nihilism should not be understood in terms of propositions that affirm or deny existence, but rather in some kind of bracketing of ontological statements of this kind.

With regard to the four unanswered questions of the Buddha, and the four alternative answers to the first three of them, Nāgarjuna also refuses to take a standpoint to them, and he too justifies this from a practical point of view – that taking a position will not be conducive to peace, or may even be harmful. This theme is followed up in quite a few places in the \textit{MK}:
22: 12 How can the tetralemma (catuṣṭāvyam) of eternal (sāśvata), non-eternal (aśāśvata), etc, be in the peaceful (śānte)? How can the tetralemma of finite (anta), infinite (ananta), etc, be in the peaceful?\textsuperscript{21}

In some contexts, however, it seems that Nāgārjuna promotes views on behalf of the Buddha where he seems to affirm or deny one of the four alternative answers, for instance in this verse:

18: 6 The buddhas have taught that there is a self (ātmā) and that there is non-self (anātmā); but they have also taught that that there is something that is neither self (na ātmā) nor non-self (na ca anātmā).\textsuperscript{22}

It seems reasonable to regard such statements as context dependent. They are adapted to the preconceptions of particular interlocutors or audiences. Under certain conditions it may be a skilful means (upāya) to assert or deny that the self is or is not or both or neither. Nāgārjuna seems to regard such statements as heuristic devices serving special pedagogical objectives. As such they must be understood as provisional teachings (neyārtha), not definitive (nītārtha); and perhaps as apparent truth (saṁvṛtisatya), not the highest truth (paramārthasatya). The following two passages seem to confirm this interpretation:

18: 8 Everything is as it is (tathyaḥ), not as it is (na va tathyaḥ), both as it is and not as it is (tathyaḥ ca atathyam eva ca), neither as it is nor not as it is (na eva atathyam na eva tathyaḥ); this is the teaching of the buddhas (buddhānaśāsanaḥ).\textsuperscript{23}

22: 11 That something is empty (śūnyam iti), non-empty (aśūnyam iti va), both or neither (ubhayaḥ na ubhayaḥ ca iti) – these should not be declared (na vaktavyam). It is expressed only for the purpose (arthaḥ) of explanation.\textsuperscript{24}

In view of this we should expect that Nāgārjuna and the other philosophers of the Middle Way School would be quite reserved with regard to affirming or denying that there is a true and real self who is permanent, happy and pure. They would also be reserved with regard to affirming or denying anything about the Buddha after the death of his body – the parinirvāṇa; and by extension, anything about the buddha nature:

22: 14 Since he is by empty (śūnye asmin) with regard to own-being, the thought that the Buddha exists or does not exist (bhavati ... na bhavati iti vā) after nirvāṇa (paramātma nirodhā) is never appropriate (na eva upapadyate).\textsuperscript{25}

22: 15 Those who develop mental fabrications (prapaṭṭayantī) with regard to the Buddha, who has gone beyond all fabrications, as a consequence of those cognitive fabrications, fail to see (na paśyantī) the Tathāgata.\textsuperscript{26}

Nothing is excepted from this very guarded approach, not even the teachings about emptiness itself:

13: 8 The victorious ones have said that emptiness is the relinquishing (niḥsarapāṃ)
of all views (ṣaṁśṛṣṭāṁ). Those who hold emptiness as a view (ṣūnyatādṛṣṭis) are incurable (asādhyan). 27

24: 11  If emptiness if viewed wrongly (dur-dṛṣṭā) it can destroy the slow-witted. Like a snake incorrectly seized (dur-grhitas) or like a spell incorrectly cast (duṣ-prasādhitā). 28

These statements should be taken as a serious warning against interpreting the "emptiness" (ṣūnyatā) of the Middle Way philosophers as equivalent with The Absolute in other traditions, be in Vedānta, Neo-Platonic traditions, Hegelianism or whatever. As I said, the point of these teachings is not theoretical as much as practical, as a means to remove the obstacles to an insight that goes into a stillness that lies beyond dualistic thinking:

25: 24  When the proliferation of mental constructions (prapañca) and all assumptions about objective supports (sarva upalambha) are pacified (upāsamaḥ), there is bliss (śivaḥ); no dharma (kas cit dharmas) was taught (deśītaḥ) by the Buddha anywhere (na kva cit) to anyone (kasya cit). 29

This point is also brought out in the dedicatory verse at the beginning of the treatise, as well as in its very last verse:

Dedicatory verse: I prostrate to the Perfect Buddha, the best of teachers, who taught that whatever is dependently arisen is unceasing, unborn, unanihilated, not permanent, not coming, not going, without distinction, without identity, and free from conceptual construction (prapañcopa upāsamaḥ). 30

27: 30 I pay homage (namasyāmi) to Gautama, to he who out of empathy and sympathy (anukampāṁ upādyā), taught the true dharma (saddharmam) as the relinquishing of all views (sarvadṛṣṭiprahāpāya). 31

It must be admitted that the philosophers of the Middle Way School are perhaps better known for their dialectical skills when they reduce their opponents ad absurdum, rather than for their silence. Their dialectics is directed against views that fall under eternalism or nihilism; that is, view that affirm own-being or deny existence. Clinging to such views in a dogmatic manner is seen as a cause of suffering; refuting these views is seen as a means to let go of clinging, and thereby to be liberated from suffering.

Suppose an opponent has given up his or her dogmatic views. What happens with the dialectics then? It is laid aside as long as there is no need for it, and one abides in quiet silence. In this perspective, the discursive approach to the highest truth can be regarded as preliminary, while the subsequent intuitive silence can be regarded as ultimate. There are quite a few striking statements in the MK that corroborate this view. 32

**Emptiness of other (shentong)**

As I mentioned above, I believe that the adherents of the third turning follow the Middle Way School of the second turning with regard to their understanding of the two truths, albeit with a
supplement. If this is correct, they too have room for a nonreductionist personalism within apparent truth, combined with the highest truth that a person is non-self and empty of own-being. But in contradistinction to the adherents of the second turning, they do not leave it at that. They feel that this negative, apophatic approach is too meagre, and that it will be helpful to supplement it with a more positive, cataphatic description of the awakened mind/heart.

The essence of the mind/heart is described as empty of other and its nature as luminous. It is empty like empty space, but differs from space in being luminous, which is to say, it is a special quality of cognitive awareness. It may be helpful to distinguish two kinds of consciousness when describing this luminosity: reflected and reflexive.\(^3^3\) Reflected consciousness is thematic and positional; it uses language, concepts, discursive thinking to identify objects, properties, relations, narratives, etc. That is the thematic aspect of it. And it localises the position of its theme in relation to some referential system such as environing places, times, etc. That is the positional aspect of it. Reflexive consciousness on the other hand, is non-thematic, non-positional. It would not be appropriate to characterise the mind’s/heart’s luminosity as a cognitive clarity that the mind/heart is empty of other, for this would be a thematic description, and hence belong to the reflected consciousness; whereas this is rather a reflexive consciousness or self-awareness.

When the mind/heart awakens to its emptiness of other and luminosity in this way, other qualities of the awakened mind are spontaneously engendered, such as loving-kindness, compassion, rejoicing in others’ happiness, equanimity; generosity and the other bodhisattva virtues.

From this basis two further steps are taken: first to the buddha nature, then to the true and real self. As for the first of these, let us look at an important piece of evidence in the \(RGV\) (\(Ratnagotravibhāga = Uttaratantraśāstra\)) verse 155:

155: The buddha nature (\(dḥātu\)) is empty of the adventitious [stains] that are by nature separable. But it is not empty of the supreme \(dharma\)s that are by nature inseparable.\(^3^4\)

The buddha nature is said to be empty of adventitious stains, but not of its buddha qualities. The term “empty” in this context is not the emptiness of own-being (rangtong) of the second turning of the wheel of dharma, but rather the emptiness of other (shentong) of the third turning. Even so, this does not imply that we have an innovation at this point. It seems that this sense of “empty” is closely related to the usage that we find in the oldest layers of Buddhist texts, such as “The Shorter Discourse on Emptiness” (\(Cūkasuṇātāsutta\)) and “The Longer Discourse on Emptiness” (\(Mahāsuṇātāsutta\)) of the Pāli Canon.\(^3^5\)

The translation of verse 155 above is not strictly correct since the original text does not use the term “buddha nature”, but \(dḥātu\). In view of the entire text, however, we can safely infer that the term “buddha nature” may be substituted for \(dḥātu\) and \(dharmaḥdḥātu\) in this text. They are the foundation for the teachings about the buddha nature.

The term \(dḥātu\) is a very old term in the Buddhist vocabulary. In the first turning of the wheel of the teaching, it belongs to the ABC of the five groups (\(skandha\), the twelve sources
(āyatana) and eighteen fields or elements (dhātu) of consciousness. Dharmadhātu is one of the eighteen elements (dhātu), notably those elements that are objects or contents of the mind. In this ancient usage, dhātu and dharmadhātu are used in a dualistic sense where each term is delineated from other terms by means of conceptual divisions.

In the third turning, however, this terminology was reinterpreted in a nondualistic direction. Here dharma-dhātu came to mean the elementary nature (dhātu) of all phenomena (dharma); sometimes understood as the universal matrix which is space-like or empty in nature, from which all phenomena arise. Perhaps it can be understood as the basic ground out of which all dualisms spring, being itself beyond all dualisms.

At this point we encounter the philosophical underpinnings of the teachings about the buddha nature. Up to a certain point it is acknowledged that what we are talking about here is strictly speaking beyond the limits of language. It is unutterable and unthinkable in a discursive manner. In verse 155 above it is said that “the supreme dharmas are by nature inseparable.” For one thing, this seems to imply that we cannot draw a distinction here between a logical subject and logical predicates. The supreme dharma is cannot be isolated and identified as a thing to which we ascribe attributes, since that would presuppose a dualistic way of thinking. I suppose this is the rationale for calling it “suchness” (tathatā) or “being so” [perhaps “thatness”] (tattva); the elementary nature such as it is (yathābhūtam).

The term tathāgata is often used as a title for an awakened or enlightened being (buddha). In this sense the word can be explained either as “one who has gone (gata) thus (tathā)” or as ”one who has come (agata) thus (tathā).” He or she is no longer deluded by the proliferation (prapañca) of dualistic thinking and feeling (vikalpa) but has seen the truth of nondualistic reality.

The term tathāgata is also sometimes used in a little different sense as the buddha nature (buddhatvā), which is supposed to be inherent in the innermost ground of the mind/heart of all sentient beings. It is supposed to be there whether they are aware of it or not. Most beings are in fact unaware of it, since this awareness is veiled by defilements (kleśa) such as delusion (moha), greed (lobha) and hatred (dveṣa). In so far as the inherent tathāgata is veiled in this way it is called tathāgatagarbha – “the tathāgata embryo” as it is often called in the Tibetan tradition, or “the tathāgata womb” as it is often called in the Chinese tradition. The reading of it as an embryo or seed could be misleading, since it is not really a potentiality, but something supposed to be actually there, albeit covered by veils of defilements. This supposition has a bearing on the meditative practice which is based on it. This meditation is not understood as a means to engender the tathāgata as if it were not already there, but to uncover it. On the other hand, in so far as the inherent tathāgata is unveiled in this way it is called dharmakāya – the body of a tathāgata or buddha; that is, one who has awakened to the elementary nature of all phenomena (dharma).

We should add here that in the third turning of the wheel of dharma, and even more so in vajrayāna, the notions we have looked at were expanded into a myriad of further conceptions and tantric practices. The notion of the Buddhas dharmakāya, for instance, was developed into
the teachings about the Buddha’s two bodies (dharmakāya, rūpakāya), three bodies (dharmakāya, saṃbhogakāya, nirmānakāya) and four bodies (svabhāvikakāya, dharmakāya, saṃbhogakāya, nirmānakāya), etc.; and it was developed in a little other direction in the teachings about the five buddha-families with their exceedingly rich mythology and their devotional approach (bhakti). Here we find a Buddhism based on faith (śraddhā), devotion (pūjā), prayer (pūjā), petition (vandanā) for atonement, praise and hymns of praise; the use of visualisations (for example of mañḍalas with buddhas, bodhisattvas and various deities), sacred sounds and formulas (mantras), sacred symbolic gestures of the hands or bodily posture communicating specific meanings (mudras), etc. We shall not go further into all of this, however.

But there is one further point that is of central concern for the theme of the present essay. This is the bearing of the preceding notions on the search for a true and real self. In some contexts the unveiling of the inherent buddha nature is described as the highest realisation of the transcendent self (ātma-pāramitā). Let us have a look at the verses 35-39 in the first part of RGV where we have a central evidence for this.

In verse 35-36 of RGV, we are presented with the four qualities that we have been looking at earlier, this time arranged in a different order: purity, self, happiness and permanence. In the present case they are characterised as transcendent qualities (guṇa-pāramitā). The term pāramitā is especially interesting in this connection. Quite often it is simply translated as “perfection”, but sometimes it is translated as “transcendent”, the idea being, for instance, that we have to transcend or go beyond saṃsāra in order to attain nirvāṇa. This would imply a dualistic understanding of it. But it can also be understood in a nondualistic sense, as transcending dualistic thinking. I believe that this would be the most appropriate interpretation of it in the present context. It would, however, also make sense to translate pāramitā with “transcendental”. When this term is understood in the Kantian sense, to say that an assumption has a transcendental status in relation to something else, is to say that it is a necessary presupposition for that other thing. Kant would say, for instance, that certain formal aspects of the mind, such as the intuitions of space and time and the categories, are necessary conditions for the possibility of perceiving or conceiving phenomena. He also talked about a transcendental self as a notion of “I” that has to accompany our thinking. Something along these lines might be employed in the present context as well.

In verse 37-38 the four qualities are described as follows:

37. Since [karmic] tendencies have been given up, the dharmakāya is transcendent purity. Since conceptual constructions (prapañca) of self (ātman) and non-self (anātman) have completely ceased, it is the transcendent self (ātma-pāramitā).

38: Since the skandhas of mental nature and their cause have gone, it is transcendent happiness (sukha pāramitā). Since it realises that saṃsāra and nirvāṇa are one, it is transcendent permanence.38

Statements like this in the third turning of the wheel of dharma have often been interpreted as simply equivalent with an eternalistic conception of the self. Opponents have read them as
maintaining that there is a true and real self, based on unconditioned phenomena (dharma), and as being permanent, happy and pure. If this is a correct interpretation, the teachings about the self in the third turning, as well as the teaching about the buddha nature on which it is based, appears to be incompatible with the basic Buddhist teachings on non-self and emptiness of own-being. Moreover, this is seen as a danger to the integrity of the Buddhist teachings, diluting its borders in relation to non-Buddhist schools in India and elsewhere.

It may be questioned, however, whether that is a correct interpretation. True enough, these statements do affirm that there is a self who is permanent, happy and pure. But this self is said to be transcendent and beyond dualistic conceptual constructions of self and non-self. The term “transcendent self” (ātma pāramitā) in this connection seems to point beyond the dualistic conceptions we have been working with so far. We are into another terrain now. On the other hand, these verses do not entirely support this shift of perspective, since the three other statements about the self are justified in other ways. I shall reformulate them as follows:

1. The self is said to be transcendent (ātma pāramitā) because it is beyond the conceptual constructions of self (ḥīman) and non-self (anāḥīman).
2. It is ascribed transcendent permanence (nitya pāramitā) because it realises that saṁsāra and nīrvāṇa are one.
3. It is ascribed transcendent happiness (sukha pāramitā) because [clinging to?] the skandhas of mental nature and their [corporal?] cause have gone.
4. And it is ascribed transcendent purity (subha pāramitā) because the dharmakāya is pure by nature and since the [karmic] tendencies have been given up.

In the shentong tradition, on the other hand, the three latter justifications are modified so as to follow the paradigmatic example of the first one. In the same way that the self is transcendent because it is beyond the dualistic conceptual constructions (prapañca) of self and non-self, so it is transcendently permanent, happy and pure because it is beyond the conceptual dualisms of permanent and impermanent, happiness and suffering, and purity and impurity. In short, these statements point to something beyond conceptual proliferation (niśprapañca). When the statement about the true and real self is interpreted along these lines, I believe that the objection mentioned above is sufficiently rebutted.

But there is also a second objection that needs to be faced. The opponents this time are adherents of the Middle Way School; or perhaps we should say, extreme adherents of this school.

One of the premises in this objection turns on the dependence of language. When adherents of the third turning of the wheel of dharma elaborate their specific teachings on the buddha nature and the self, they are dependent on language in order to formulate it. This pertains, for instance, to the statement that there is a true and real self, and that it has the attributes of being permanent, happy and pure. It also pertains to the underpinnings of this statement, such as its foundation in the emptiness of other (shentong) of the mind/heart, this being the essence of the mind/heart; in the luminosity of the mind heart, this being its nature; in the other spontaneous qualities; these characteristics being equivalent with the statements about the inherent buddha
nature, the buddha qualities, etc. The same thing applies to the deeper philosophical underpinnings that we have looked at in terms of dharmadhātu, tathatā, tathāgata, tathāgatagarbha, dharmaṃkāya, etc.

Another premise is the teaching about emptiness of own-being (rangtong) in the second turning of the wheel of dharma. One of the arguments for emptiness of own-being is dependent origination.

From these premises it is concluded that the teaching about a true and real self has a dependent origination, and therefore it is empty of own-being. In this way, even the teaching about shentong can be reduced to rangtong.

Those who accept this standpoint, reject the claim adduced by the adherents of the third turning that their teaching should be regarded as the highest truth (paramārtha-satya), or at least as a supplement to the teachings about the highest truth in the second turning. They also reject the claim that these teachings may be regarded as definitive teachings (nītārtha). As against these claims, the extreme opponents hold that these teachings do not even fall within the domain of apparent truth (saṃvṛti-satya), since they are simply false. For that reason they are not even preliminary teachings (neyārtha) either, nor even a skilful means (upāya). Altogether, this builds up to a rather polemical stance.

Disputes of this kind have gone on for hundreds of years in Tibet. The proponents of the third turning have usually regarded the opponents’ objections as beyond the point. They have simply not understood the distinctive character of the teachings in the third turning. This, of course, is quite a challenge. What is this distinctive character?

As a hypothesis I propose that it turns on the distinction between two kinds of terms which we may call categorical and transcendent terms; and two kinds of statements which we may call categorical and transcendent statements. Let us see how this distinction can be applied to the statement that:

The true and real self is grounded in the inherent buddha nature which is permanent, happy and pure.

The terms “self” and “buddha nature” in this statement appear to serve as a logical subject, while the terms “permanent”, “happy” and “pure” appear to serve as logical predicates. Now, I suppose that these terms may be read either as categorical terms or as transcendent terms, and that the statement as a whole may be read as a categorical or transcendent. It seems that the extreme opponents of this teaching about the buddha nature read the statement as categorical, while the proponents read it as transcendent.

We can get a further clue to this distinction in the verse 155 from RGV which we quoted above: “The buddha nature is empty of the adventitious [stains] that are by nature separable. But it is not empty of the supreme dharmas that are by nature inseparable.” Perhaps we may correlate the separability with categorical terms, and the inseparability with transcendent terms?

The distinction between categorical and transcendent terms has an interesting parallel in Western philosophy of the High Middle Ages. The categorical conception has its main source
in Aristotle’s analysis of the categories where he sorted out logical subjects which he assumed referred to primary or secondary substances, and logical attributes such as quality, quantity, relation, place, time, action, passion, etc. The meaning of a subject term is assumed to be the substance to which it purports to refer to, while the meaning of a predicate term is dependent on its definition in the sense of delineation in relation to other predicates. These teachings were adopted by Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), and brought to bear on the attribution of certain perfections to God. In this context they were understood as attributes that God has.

The Aristotelian categories also give a lead to the meaning of transcendent terms and spiritual perfections, as these terms were used in the Neo-Platonic tradition in the West, for instance by Meister Eckhart (c 1260-1328). Paradigmatic examples of transcendent terms are "being", "unity", "truth" and "goodness"; while the spiritual perfections included such terms as "wisdom", "love", "compassion" and "justice". These terms were called transcendent (transcendentia) because they transcended Aristotle’s list of categories. When these terms were ascribed to God, they were not understood as attributes that God has, but as attributes that God is. And since God is assumed to be absolutely infinite, and therefore indivisible, it follows that although these attributes are distinct, they are also inseparable. This is the crucial point of similarity with the transcendent terms of the third turning of the wheel of dharma.

In this way transcendent terms may be considered to be nondualistic. They point beyond the dualisms between subject and predicate and between the predicates. They also point beyond the dualism between subject and object or between subject and subject. In contradistinction to the categorical terms, transcendent terms do not derive their meaning from external reference or external delineation, but from their internal source. Since they are inseparable, they mutually imply each other; that is, they are equivalent. Each term points to all the others.

The pointing function of these terms has an important bearing on the practical transmission of this kind of teaching. A skilful teacher will know how to use them in a proper context to point to that which is beyond all dualisms, so as to awaken recognition of it in his or her student. The reason why this may work, is that there is a common ground for this transmission; it is the innermost nature of both teacher and student; that is, their true and real self, which is their buddha nature. This is an atonement (at-onement) beyond dualistic proliferations and projections, a meeting in the depth of silence.

With regard to the practical application of this teaching, I will quote verse 154 from the RGV which is one of the most famous verses in Mahāyāna literature:

154: Here there is nothing to remove and nothing to add. The one who sees the truth of being as it is, by seeing the truth, is liberated.

To be sure, this verse can be interpreted and applied in several ways. I shall consider two possibilities. Common to both is that the “here” in the beginning of the first line can be understood as “in this type of meditation” – an approach which combines tranquillity meditation (śamatha) and insight meditation (vipaśyanā), for instance in the way it is done in the formless meditation practice of mahāmudrā and dzogchen.

According to the first possibility, the first part of the first sentence should be given a rangtong interpretation, and the second part a shentong interpretation. In the first part it says: “Here
there is nothing to remove”. Why not? Because there is nothing there in the first place! There appear to be certain obstacles, and the ignorant endorses them and ascribes own-being to them. But the wise sees that the highest truth of the matter is that they are empty of own-being. Ultimately, therefore, they are not there; hence there is nothing to remove.

In the second part it says: “Here … there is nothing to add.” Why not? Because it is already there! On this interpretation, the things to add would be the buddha qualities, such as emptiness of other and luminosity; compassion, loving-kindness, generosity, patience, etc. When the mind/heart awakens and is aware of its emptiness of other, the “other” refers to the mental defilements; that is, the obstacles. But now it sees that they are empty of own-being, and this triggers the insight that the mind/heart is not empty of its own wakefulness, that is, buddha nature, together with the buddha qualities that are spontaneously there. They are not pre-meditated and do not need to be contrived, since they are inherent in the mind/heart in its pure state. This implies, moreover, that this state of awakening is not a static state, as if it were a kind of quietism. It is a dynamic state where the qualities of the awakened mind (bodhicitta) provide the deepest motivation for the activities of buddhas and bodhisattvas.

The second sentence says that “the one who sees the truth of being as it is, by seeing the truth, is liberated.” The fruit of this insight meditation is to see the truth of being as it is, which in this context presumably should be understood as the truth of nonduality; and when this is seen with the right tranquillity and concentration, it liberates the mind from suffering.

An interesting feature of this interpretation of the first sentence in verse 154 is that it integrates the rangtong and shentong approaches in a very harmonious way. If one practices according to this interpretation, one assumes, so to say, that basically one is already in a state of perfection. This is in a way, a matter of faith or confidence, since it points to what is beyond a conceptual grasp. Here one sees the situation from the viewpoint of the highest truth, and one is aware that here there is nothing to remove and nothing to add. As one abides in this state, it is quite likely that thoughts and feelings will come and go. It may occur to one that certain unwholesome things should be removed, or that certain wholesome things should be achieved. Instead of clinging to these ideas and acting on them, one is simply aware of them in a state of reflexive awareness, and eventually they loose their momentum without distracting one’s attention from the calm abiding. In this way one meditates beyond discursiveness and dualistic thinking. As in the case of the second turning which ends in silence, this practice in the third turning also ends in silence.

Let us then have a brief look at the second interpretation of verse 154. Here the first sentence is not divided into two, but interpreted in its entirety. First it is interpreted within the framework of apparent truth, then within the framework of the highest truth. And this is done in two ways: from the viewpoint of rangtong, and then from the viewpoint of shentong.

First, it appears that certain things are to be removed and certain things are to be added. Things that are motivated by unwholesome roots (akuśala-mūla) need to be removed, and things that are motivated by wholesome roots (kuśala-mūla) need to be achieved. The former comprises things that are motivated by defilements (kleśa) such as aversion (dveṣa), attachment (lobha) and delusion (moha); the latter comprises things that are motivated by
loving-kindness (maitrī), compassion (karuṇā), sympathetic joy (muditā), equanimity (upekṣā), generosity (dāna), patience (kṣānti), energy (vīrya), etc.

The ignorant are not aware of their delusions and take their conceptual constructions and projections to be objective things in themselves with independent own-being. This reification is probably proportional to the strength of the emotions of aversion or attachment, giving rise to judgmental attitudes that take on a more or less fundamentalistic character. So they are adamant that there are things to be removed or added.

The wise, on the other hand, are mindful about the conditioned nature of these mental constructions and projections. Seeing that fundamentalistic convictions are due to a combination of ignorance and clinging, he or she also has an insight into the highest truth that these things are empty of own-being. Being aware of this, the mind/heart awakens to its emptiness of other; that is, its inherent buddha nature and other buddha qualities. This is a nondualistic attitude – open, gentle, non-judgmental, forgiving, compassionate and loving.

Conclusion

What are the results of this searching for a true and real self in Buddhist traditions? Let us first recall an underlying assumption in this search. It is presupposed that if there is a true and real self, then it must be permanent, happy and pure. But is there anything like that to be found? And if one believes there is can this belief be squared with the central Buddhist teachings about non-self and emptiness of own-being in the first two turnings of the wheel of dharma?

We have, in fact, found three positive answers to this question, two of which are perhaps not so promising. The first one assumes that such a self can be found as a being in the world and time, based on conditioned phenomena. This alternative is rejected by most Buddhists as being a cognitive distortion. It ignores what Buddhists take to be a fact – that all conditioned phenomena are impermanent, connected with suffering and impure; which implies that they are non-self and empty of own-being.

The second answer assumes that if such a self cannot be found inside the world and time, it can be found outside the world and time, and be based on unconditioned phenomena. This self is supposed to be eternal in the sense of everlasting, without beginning or end in time. This alternative is also rejected by most Buddhists as being an extremely eternalistic view. Both of these answers are conceived in a dualistic framework that distinguishes between conditioned and unconditioned phenomena inside and outside the world and time.

The third answer, however, is nondualistic. The Middle Way School of the second turning and the Yoga Practice School of the third turning are both nondualistic, but the Middle Way School is more negative or apophatic in its approach to the self. This school makes a point out of distinguishing between the person and the self. I have suggested that it has room for a nonreductionistic conception of the person within the framework of apparent truth, combining this with the highest truth that the person is non-self and empty of own-being. I believe that one could even talk about a Buddhist personalism in this regard. This school employs dialectical argumentation in order to refute all kinds of assumptions that there is a substantial self with independent own-being. The main argument is that whatever is conditioned is empty of own-being (rangtong). This covers not only causal conditioning, but also conceptual. As a
result, all that can be conceived in dualistic terms – what I have called categorical terms – is seen to be empty of own-being. In so far as a person is convinced by these arguments, he or she will let the assumptions about own-being go, and then there is nothing more to argue dialectically about. Here one can abandon oneself to meditative silence. Nothing further is said about other possibilities of assuming a true and real self.

In the Yoga Practice School there was felt a need to supplement this negative approach with a more positive or cataphatic elaboration. This was done in the *tathāgatagarbha* texts that develop the teaching about the buddha nature and buddha qualities that are supposed to be inherent in the mind/heart of all sentient beings. Through self-reflection the mind/heart is brought to the insight that in its innermost essence it is empty of other (*shentong*), and this is a supplementary notion of emptiness in relation to the *rangtong* conception. Moreover, this experiential insight can be refined so as to discern the difference between reflected and reflexive self-consciousness. In so far as the mind/heart has a reflected self-consciousness, it is thematic and positional. It characterises itself by means of categorical terms as a subject with certain properties and relations. On the other hand, in so far at the mind/heart has a reflexive self-consciousness, it is non-thematic and non-positional. This, in fact, is not an awareness that the mind/heart has, but one that the mind/heart is. It is seen to be empty of other, not like empty space, because it is self-evidently luminous. Once seen, it also generates the other qualities of the awakened mind, such as compassion, loving-kindness, generosity, patience, etc. These qualities are described by transcendent terms that derive their meaning not by dualistic distinctions, but from the inner source they point to. They are distinct, but inseparable. They also have an implicate order in the sense that insight into one of them implies insight into the others.

This is the ground on which the teachings about the buddha nature and the true and real self are based in the third turning. The innermost ground of the mind/heart is characterised as a self who is permanent, happy (blissful) and pure.

Here we are at the heart of the matter. The question we raised in the beginning was whether this teaching in the third turning is compatible with the teaching about non-self and emptiness of own-being in the first two turnings. This, of course, depends on how this teaching is interpreted. Opponents have interpreted it as categorical, dualistic terms. If that is a correct interpretation, the teaching in the third turning appears to be incompatible with the central teachings in the first two turnings.

On the other hand, it is doubtful that this is a correct interpretation. If these terms are interpreted as transcendent terms and not as categorical terms, the teachings in the third turning is incommensurable with the teachings in the first two turnings rather than incompatible with them. In that case, the statement about the true and real self could be reformulated in this way: There is a true and real self who is transcendent in the sense of being beyond the distinction between self and non-self; who is permanent in the sense of being beyond permanence and impermanence; who is happy or blissful in the sense of being beyond happiness and unhappiness; and who is pure in the sense of being beyond purity and impurity.

Here we have to have our tongue in check and not draw the conclusion that if these teachings are not incompatible, then they are compatible. Incompatibility presupposes a dualistic
framework, but since the framework here is nondualistic, it would be better to maintain that they are incommensurable.

Perhaps I am making too much out of the theoretical point of compatibility and commensurability here. An accomplished teacher would probably have a more pragmatic approach to the question of how the rangtong of the second turning relates to the shentong of the third turning. When he guides students this will be a question of what will be the most skilful means (upāya) in a given case.

For some students the negative, apophatic rangtong approach will be quite sufficient. The teacher sees that although nothing is said about the buddha nature or the other buddha qualities, or about the true and real self and its qualities, they are bubbling up in the student. That is well and good, and there is no need to go further into a shentong approach.

For others, however, this approach may be insufficient; they need something more positive or cataphatic as a support and motivation. Then the shentong approach will be brought in. This can be done in several different ways. Some will emphasise meditation with form and various kinds of tantric practices (bhakti); others will emphasise meditation without form, perhaps consisting in the teacher’s direct pointing to the essence and nature of the mind/heart, and the student’s direct recognition of it, and little or no use of tantric practices; and others again will combine these two approaches in different ways.

Should it happen that the student becomes overly attached to these positive approaches, the skilful teacher will introduce a new dose of the rangtong approach.

Whether the negative or positive approach is chosen, they seem ultimately to culminate in a way of being where one opens one’s mind/heart to a reality that goes beyond conceptual proliferation, dualistic thinking and feeling, and reification of this. They open the mind/heart to a living experience of the timeless present. Those who engage in this are silent, and as long as they are silent, there is not much that they disagree about. Could we say that those who search for the self in Buddhist (or other) traditions reach a kind of agreement here? Or would it be better to say that this is beyond agreement or disagreement?

Strictly speaking we should distinguish three main branches of the third turning of the wheel of dharma: (1) The phenomenological and psychological school of Asaṅga and Vasubandhu; (2) the logical and epistemological school of Dignāga and Dharmakīrti; and (3) the school which develops the theme of the inherent Buddha Nature, especially with reference to the *Tathāgatagarbha-sūtra* and its commentary, the *Ratnagotravibhāga (Uttaratantra) sūtra* which is commonly ascribed to Maitreya, cannelised to and commented by Asaṅga, but probably written by someone else, for instance Saramati; as well as a number of other *tathāgatagarbha* texts, such as *Mahāyānasūralokākāra, Śīla-devi-sīyamanāda-sūtra, Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra, Latikāvatāra-sūtra* and *Avataṃsaka-sūtra*. At this point, I would like to acknowledge my dept to Lama Shenpen Hookham’s path-breaking study, *The Buddha Within. Tathagatagarbha Doctrine According to the Shentong Interpretation of the Ratnagotravibhaga* (1991).


5 *Anattalakkhaṇasutta* in the *Sapṭapanni-nikāya*, XXII, 59.

6 Cp Keown 2003, p 309.

7 There is a synopsis of the three gateways to liberation in Buddhaghosa, fifth century: *Visuddhimagga*, chapter 21, §§ 66-73, pp 121-127 in Bhikkhu Ānāmalī’s translation. He refers to Chapter 2 of *The Way of Analysis (Paññāsaṁbhidāmagga)* as his primary source. That text forms part of the *Suttapiṭaka*, but actually it is a scholastic *Abhidhamma* treatise. Buddhaghosa has also a number of other references to *Suttapiṭaka* and *Vinaya-piṭaka*. Cp also Paravahera Vajiraṇa Mahāthera 1962, Chapter 29, “Vimokkha-mukha, The Three Entrances to Deliverance”, pp 397-406.

8 An overview of how the three gateways to liberation were followed up in early Mahāyāna Buddhism can be found in Lamotte 1949-1976, Vol 1, pp 321-323 and Vol 3, pp 1213-1232.

9 Quoted in Buddhaghosa: *Visuddhimagga*, p 768 in Bhikkhu Ānāmalī’s translation from 1964.

10 One of the oldest and most classical sources of Buddhist insight meditation is *The Great Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness (Mahasatipaṭṭhānasutta)*. See Nyanaponika Thera 1983 and the fine study in Norwegian by Kåre Lie 2006. In this text it is assumed that insight may be gained through the practice of mindfulness and awareness with regard to the body, feelings, mind and phenomena. In the subsequent tradition these four fields of application have been matched with the three marks of existence and together with them been used as antidotes against the four cognitive distortions. In this connection, mindfulness of the body is seen as awareness of impurity, mindfulness of feelings as awareness of suffering, mindfulness of the mind (thoughts that come and go) as awareness of impermanence, and mindfulness of phenomena (mind objects) as awareness of emptiness. These correlations have been widely used in the Buddhism of the Far East. Cp Sheng Yen 2006.

11 See for instance Pérez-Remón 1980 and the literature referred to there.

13 The term “nihilism” was introduced by the Russian author Turgeniev in his novel *Fathers and Sons* in 1862.

14 The argumentation here is surprisingly similar to the explanation of personal identity proposed by the Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711-1776), *Treatise*, “Of Personal Identity,” 1888, pp 251-263.


16 Paul Williams 1998 has made a useful survey of recent Western criticism of the reductionistic conception of the person and shown its relevance in a Buddhist context. I think this is well taken, except for his application of it to the Mahāyāna philosopher Śāntideva. Cp Chapter 12 in his book: “Conclusion: How Śāntideva Destroyed the Bodhisattva Path”, pp 164-176. I have attempted to refute this aspect of his contribution in Wetlesen 2002: “Did Śāntideva Destroy the Bodhisattva Path?”

17 The classical place where this distinction is drawn in the Middle Way School is in Nāgārjuna’s *MK* 24: 8-10.

18 The crucial text for this justification is Nāgārjuna’s *MK* 24: 18: “Whatever is dependently co-arisen That is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the middle way.” The Middle Way School has developed a number of supplementary arguments for the same conclusion. But fundamentally, all the arguments seem to be derived from this one.


26 Based on Garfield 1995, p 282.

27 Based on Garfield 1995, p 212; Streng 1966, p 198.

28 Based on Garfield 1995, p 299; Streng 1966, p 213.


30 Based on Garfield 1995, p 100.


32 Cp Nāgārjuna: *MK*, the introductory verse of dedication; and then 13: 8; 18: 5; 6, 7, 8, 9; 22: 11, 12, 15; 24: 18; 25: 24; and the very last verse in 27: 30.

33 This distinction between reflected and reflexive consciousness has been used in Western phenomenology, for instance by Sartre, and a somewhat similar version of it has been applied to Buddhist philosophy by Williams 1998b, pp 19 ff, 29 ff and 235 ff, where he also refers to Descartes, Kant, Brentano and Sartre.

35 Majjhima-nikāya, 121 and 122.

36 It is interesting to compare this with God’s answer to Moses when he asks for his name in Deuteronomy 3: 13-14: YHWH − “I Am who I Am” [or perhaps: “He Who Is the Being Who He Is”]. The idea seems to be that Being in this statement is both a subject and a predicate.

37 It is also interesting to compare this assumption that the buddha nature (tathāgata) is inherent in all sentient beings with the assumption in the Semitic religions that all humans are created in the image and likeness of God. According to one possible interpretation, both these approaches are based on the supposition of a basic pure nature that has been veiled and that can be unveiled. Fundamentally this nature is pure; in the Buddhist context it is the buddha nature (tathāgata), in the Semitic case it is the image of God. It is the ground which is understood to be invariant. The generation of impurities is explained by adventitious defilements or sins that veil the original purity and generates suffering. As a consequence, each being deviates from the perfect likeness of the original. This is a variable factor. In so far as the veils are removed, however, the original purity is restored. Much of this is structurally similar in the two traditions. But they differ with regard to the scope of the inherent nature. Being created in the image and likeness of God is confined to the class of humans, while the inherent buddha nature is extended to the class of sentient beings, including all animals, but excluding plants and micro-organisms, unless they too are assumed to be sentient. But that assumption is rather rare.


39 This is the line taken by Lama Shenpen Hookham who follows Khenpo Tulsrim and Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche in this regard. See Hookham 1991, p 202.

40 See the index in the second volume of Eckhart 1993 under “Transcendentalien”, “Analogielehre” and “Sein”.

41 This notion of recognition seems to have much in common with the Platonic notion of anamnesis.

42 See Takasaki 1966, p 300, n 53. He refers to 9 Mahāyāna texts where this verse is quoted.

43 This is the translation of Lama Shenpen Hookham which I have taken from her Standard Morning and Evening Liturgy, Hermitage of the Awakened Heart, 2005, p 7.

44 This possibility was pointed out to me in an interview with Lama Shenpen Hookham in her November retreat 2005. Hookham 1991 discusses RGV 1: 154-155 on pp 38-56, 148-149 and 229-233. See also Khenpo Tulsrim 2000, p 173 f, and of Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche 2003, p 271 f.

45 Compare Jn 8: 31-32: “To the Jews who believed in him Jesus said: ‘If you make my word your home you will indeed be my disciples, you will learn the truth, and the truth will make you free.’

46 The meaning of dzogchen is “the great perfection”. It is also interesting to compare this with the Christian notion of perfection in Matt 5: 48, “You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect.”

47 It is interesting to compare this with the Hesychastic tradition in the Eastern Orthodox Church. The name of this school derives from the Greek hesychia which means “silence” or “stillness”. On Hesychasm, cp Leloup 2003.

48 It seems that many wisdom traditions in spite of their cultural differences emphasise the value of such a silence.
Literature


Sheng Yen, Chan Master 2006: “The Four Foundations of Mindfulness”, *Chan Magazine*, Volume 26, Number 2-3; published by the Institute of Chung-Hwa Buddhist Culture, Chan Meditation Center, 90-56 Corona Avenue, Elmhurst, NY 11373.


