Self: delusion, fiction, myth or prerequisite?

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1   Introductory remarks

Like most students of the Sanskrit language, whenever I am confronted with a difficult passage, the meaning of which does not immediately leap into my comprehension, I make a batch of popcorn. Popcorn never fails to fascinate. One begins with a modest volume of barely yellow kernels of regularly shaped dessicated corn, applies heat for a while, and ends up with an astonishingly larger volume of geometrically wild masses of white solid material soft enough to chew. Before heat is applied, two kernels are barely distinguishable, but after heat is applied, no two kernels have the same shape. One cannot help wondering what has caused the transformation of smooth dense ellipsoids into craggy soft lumps. In particular, one cannot but wonder what accounts for the variety of resultant shapes—for the fact that each kernel of popped corn has its own unique contours.

On first consideration it seems as though the conditions under which each kernel was popped were fairly uniform, so it appears as if different effects have arisen out of the same set of causes. It is only because it would do too much damage to our concept of causality that we begin the assume that there must have been subtle differences in the conditions under which each kernel of dry corn exploded into a fascinating morsel. Perhaps there were tiny currents in the heated oil or in the air creating isotherms, and perhaps these subtle differences in temperature created the obvious differences in shape. Or perhaps we might think that each kernel's shape was influenced by contact with bursting neighbors, at least until we stop to realize that even if kernels are popped one at a time, without any contact with neighboring kernels,

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they are still distinctly shaped. The mind is capable of cooking up a feast of hypotheses, most of them untestable. Not only is the mind capable of forming these hypotheses, but it is driven to do so in order to avoid having to conclude that like causes can produce unlike effects. (I am guessing that even minds that have not been conditioned by reading Hume have at least a half-hearted commitment to the principle that similar causes give rise to similar effects.)

The observation that apparently similar conditions give rise to apparently different effects, as in the popping of corn, is one way in which the principle that like causes give rise to like effects is apparently breached. Another apparent aberration is the observation that apparently similar effects have different causes. A discussion of this occurs in Dharmakīrti's commentary to the chapter on reasoning *(svārthānumana)* his own *Pramāṇavārttikam* at verse 12. Here the observation is that speaking can be the effect of two different mentalities. We find that a person whose mentality is vitiated by distorted views speaks, but so does a person whose mentality has been liberated from delusions. The fact that someone speaks indicates nothing about the speaker's mentality. Not only can people with different mentalities speak, but they can say exactly the same words. Therefore, says Dharmakīrti, a speech tells the listener what the speaker hopes the listener will believe, but speech by itself can never tell a listener whether the contents of the speech are true.

Dharmakīrti explicitly discusses the limits of our being able to infer a person's mentality by the way the person speaks or from the things that she says. He does not, so far as I am aware, write more generally about the limitations of being able to make accurate assessments of personality by observing a person's behavior. Therefore what I plan to do in this presentation is not to report on a discussion of a problem that is on record, but rather to explore a number of issues that arise from how Indian Buddhist philosophers thought about persons and personalities. More than that, I would like to offer a few reflections on which classical South Asian Buddhist ideas might be of value in twenty-first century North American culture, and which ideas currently in vogue might help make sense of South Asian Buddhism.

Mark Siderits (2003) offers a useful schema for the different positions that Indians in general and Indian Buddhists in particular took on the reality of the self.[1] He outlines three possible stances, which he calls non-reductionism, eliminativism and reductionism, which he explains as follows:

> Suppose that users of a given discourse reglarly refer to things
> of kind *K.* There are three possible views one might take with
> respect to the ontological status of *K.* One might be a non-

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[1]There are some contenxts in which one might wish to distinguish selves from persons, but in the discussions that follow, *self* and *person* will be treated as synonymous terms.

reductionist about *K*s, holding that things of this sort belong in our final ontology—that the *K*s will be among the items mentioned in any complete theory about the nature of reality. Or one might be an eliminativist about *K*s, holding that the belief in the existence of *K*s within the discourse community is wholly the product of a false theory. Finally, one might be a reductionist about *K*s, holding that while *K*s may be said in a sense to exist (*pace* the eliminativist), their existence just consists in the existence of things of a more basic sort, things of which the *K*s are composed, so that (*pace* the non-reductionist) *K*s do not belong in our final ontology. (Siderits, 2003, 1)

James Duerlinger (1993, 81) offers a slightly different schema. He divides theories of the self into revisionist theories and non-revisionist theories. A revisionist theory is one that acknowledges that the self does exist in some way, but its reality is something other than we are initially inclined to believe it is. All reductionist theories, says Duerlinger, are revisionist. A revisionist theory may be non-reductionist; I take it that this corresponds to what Siderits calls an eliminativist theory. In contrast to these revisionist theories are two kinds of non-revisionist theory. Duerlinger calls the first of these realism, the view that the self is real and is what under normal circumstances—that is, when we are not obviously insane—we take it to be. The second type of non-revisionist theory Duerlinger calls conventionalism, the view that the self exists as a conventional reality but not as an ultimate reality.[2]

At the risk of confusing the picture even further, I would like to offer another schema, which is not designed to capture positions that were taken but rather positions that could be taken. The positions I will be discussing are as follows:

Self as a delusion In this view, there is no self at all, and all language that appears to refer in any way to a self or a person should be expunged from our vocabulary. This position corresponds approximately to what Siderits calls eliminativism.

Self as a fiction In this view, the self or person can be seen as a useful fiction; if one were to explore the matter fully one would discover that all talk of a self is a conveniently simplified way of talking about a set of events that is too complex to talk about in ordinary conversation. If asked whether the self actually exists, one holding this position might say "Yes, in a sense there is a self, but its nature is not captured by the way we usually talk about it." This position corresponds approximately to what Siderits and Duerlinger both call reductionism.

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[2]Duerlinger suggests that Candrakīrti holds a position of this kind. Thupten Jinpa (2002) suggests that Tsonghapa followed a similar doctrine in Tibet.

The self as a myth In this view, the self is such a useful construct for some particular purpose that the question of whether the self really exists seems pointless to ask. Neither Siderits nor Duerlinger has an equivalent of this position.

The self as a prerequisite In this view, self is not merely a convenient construct; it is such an indispensable construct that to talk of its unreality verges on being nonsensical. This position corresponds to what Siderits calls non-reductionism and to what Duerlinger calls realism.

Some of these positions that I have described may overlap with others to some extent, but not in ways that worry me for the purposes of this discussion. To each of them I will offer more texture as I discuss them individually.

2   Self as delusion

The first of the positions to be explored very briefly is the view there simply is no self or person at all and that thinking in terms of a self is so destructive of our flourishing that it is a habit of thinking that one should make every effort to break. Some people, when they first encounter Buddhists texts saying that all the possible factors of experience are *anātman* (not-self), are tempted to take these texts as denying all validity to the topic of selves and persons. It is not uncommon to encounter Buddhists (in the West at least) who seem to exhibit a mild discomfort when unable to find suitable circumlocutions for such words as "myself," as if to use such expressions violates a linguistic taboo that it is part of Buddhist practice to observe. At the very least a need seems to be felt to repeat worn-out observations about Buddhist painters not being to make self-portraits because they have no selves to portray. As a serious position, however, it is difficult to imagine eliminativism gaining many adherents. Duerlinger (1993, 81) is right when he says "we cannot very well simply abandon a first person singular concept of ourselves." It may be amusing to try to do so, but the usual result of such experiments is to become convinced that reforming our linguistic habits by expunging all references to self is as unnecessary as it is difficult. Speaking of a self does not require holding the arguably naive view that there exists a single thing to which such words as "I" or "myself" invariably refer. One can still speak of a self as a fiction or as a myth. We turn now to the first of those two alternatives.

3   Self as fiction

It is common, I think, to regard the most prevalent Indian Buddhist view of the self to be that the self is a kind of socially constructed fiction.

One author who has explored this possibility recently is Charles Goodman. Noting that in the literature of the Vaibhāṣikas there is a tendency to refer to the words for selves (and wholes or collections in general) as non-literal language *(upacāra)*, Goodman speaks of what he calls metaphoricalism. He explains the idea as follows:

> A metaphoricalist account of the status of a certain class of problematic entities starts from the observation that people frequently talk as if there were such entities. They do so, at least in part, because (apparent) reference to such entities is useful: it allows them to say things concisely and conveniently that might otherwise be difficult or impossible to convey. The metaphoricalist proceeds to note that the usefulness of talk about the problematic entities does not depend on their existence. Even if they did not exist, we would still have pragmatic reasons to pretend that they existed and to talk about them within that pretense. (Goodman, 2005, 385)

So Goodman draws upon work by Kendall Watson on fiction, metaphor and pretense. To make a slight adaption of an example given by Goodman, even though we know that Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn are fictional characters in novels by Mark Twain, we do not hesitate to say it is true that Sawyer and Finn were friends and that they smoked corncob pipes and that it is false that Tom Sawyer was a Texan cowboy. In a similar way, even though the Buddha knew he had no personal identity, he did not hesitate to say that we was Ānanda's cousin and that his other cousin, Devadatta, was a good monk who had somehow taken a turn for the worse.

To the best of my knowledge, there is no traditional Sanskrit term that corresponds to the English word "fiction"—the Monier-Williams English-Sanskrit Dictionary has an entry for "fiction," but they all show signs of being modern inventions. The most commonly used Sanskrit expression for the category to which a self belongs is *prajñapti.* This Sanskrit word does not mean fiction; rather, it's most common meanings are such things as "teaching, information, instruction" and so forth. It's Pali counterpart, *paññatti* is often understood in the sense of "idea, name, concept." The Sanskrit compound *prajñaptimātra,* and the Pali *paññattimatta* could both be understood in the sense of "nothing but a name," or "merely an idea" and thus come close to the idea of a fiction. It could be because of its use in this compound that Dan Lusthaus (2002) suggests translating the word as "heuristic," a word that is usually applied to the trial-and-error method of learning or discovery. So if "self" is a heuristic concept, then it is presumably a provisional or tentative model that is pressed into service until such time as a more precise and accurate idea can be discovered to replace it. Perhaps what those who like to speak in terms of self as being a heuristic model are suggesting is that at present we do not know exactly what there is underlying our thoughts and actions,

but until such time as we do know, we might as well speak as if we were persons.

I take it that calling something a fiction is somewhat different from calling it a heuristic model. When one calls something a heuristic model, I suppose one is saying that the truth has yet to be found out, whereas when one calls some idea a fiction, then one is saying that the truth is known and has turned out to be something different from that which is being called a fiction. When one says, for example, that Sherlock Holmes is a fictional character who lived in a fictionalized version of the city of London during Victorian times, one is suggesting that one knows the truth about who really lived in Victorian London and knows that Sherlock Holmes was not among them. Or when one says that Sherlock Holmes's consultation with Sigmund Freud about cocaine addiction was an episode in a work of fiction, one is saying that it is known who Freud's real patients were, and among them there was no Sherlock Holmes. So to say of something that it is a fiction is to say that we know what the truth is; it is also saying, often, that despite knowing what the truth is, we are willing to play along with something untruthful for some reason—perhaps we are hoping to be entertained, or perhaps we are wish to preserve social harmony by indulging what we know to be the false beliefs of others.

Now what would be involved in saying that the self is a fiction? What might it mean to say that Buddhists regard the self as a fiction? Presumably it would imply something like this: even if I myself have no real idea what the truth is, I have confidence that someone, such as the Buddha, knew the truth of what is really going on when people commonly see their experiences as those of a self having thoughts and actions, and what is really going on is that these thoughts and actions are taking place without the benefit of an actual person or any other kind of agent doing them; and because I have confidence that the Buddha knew the truth of this matter, I am willing to relegate all my intuitions about having a self or being a person to the same place I relegate all discussions of Sherlock Holmes.

Of course a willingness to indulge in what knows to be an untruth need not be attended by a wish to be entertained. We all voluntarily trade in fictions just for the sake of convenience. It saves time and energy to speak in ways that we know to be careless or inaccurate. So when one says that the self is a fiction one might be saying that one is going to continue using the word "self" or the pronoun "I" in about the same way one uses the word "sunset." Of course we all *know* that the sun does not really rise and set, even though most people who know this would have no idea how to prove that what they believe on this matter is true. Despite what we know to be the case, it is so much more convenient to say "the sun is setting" than to say "the earth is turning in such a way that from where we stand, the sun is becoming decreasingly visible, and because its light is coming to us through more air than

it comes through at midday, its light is being refracted toward the red end of the spectrum." So a Buddhist *knows* there is not really a self but knows that it is more convenient—not to mention romantic— to say "I fell in love with the woman who is now my wife while we were walking along a beach and observing a beautiful sunset" than to say "feelings of attachment arose simultaneously with the perception of red and yellow colors conditioned by refraction of the light of the sun as it passed through the atmosphere of the earth as the earth turned in such a way that the sun was becoming decreasingly visible from the vantage point of the transitory consciousness that arose, attended by strong feelings of attachment." (It is no accident that few people read works of Buddhist abhidharma to their lovers by candlelight; that body of literature was *designed* to take everything interesting out of experience.)

As was suggested earlier, it seems to be commonly believed that Buddhists in India regarded the self as a fiction of some kind. I do not think that common belief is wrong, but I do at times wonder whether it is right, or at least whether saying that Buddha taught of the self as a fiction does justice to the complexity of his teaching on the matter. One of the most thought-provoking texts on this question is the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta, the ninth sutta in the Dīghanikāya. In sections 39–53 of that sutta and following, the Buddha is portrayed as saying that there are three kinds of appropriations of self *(atta-paṭilābha)*. There is, he says, a coarse or material *(oḷārika)* self made up of the four material elements and nourished by physical food, a mental *(manomaya)* self consisting of the functioning sense-faculties, and a formless *(arūpin)* self consisting of perception *(saññāmaya)*. For each of these three kinds of self, the Buddha says he teaches a doctrine designed for abandoning *(pahānāya)* it.

Now if the self is construed as a fiction, what exactly might the Buddha mean in saying that he is offering a way to abandon it? If something is truly a fiction, then one cannot have it in the first place, so there is no question of abandoning it. Of course, it could be that abandoning a fiction means just realizing that it is a fiction and not a reality. So, for example, when a child comes to realize that the story of a lagomorph who brings decorated eggs to good children at Easter time is a fiction and not a historically accurate narrative, we might say that the child abandons the Easter Bunny; this is an odd way of stating the situation, but I suppose it is an allowable way of saying it. So it is possible that when the Buddha says he offers a way of abandoning the three kinds of self, he is conserving the energy that would be required to say that he offers a way of realizing that the three kinds of self are fictions and not realities. While it is possible that he meant something of that sort, there is no strong reason to interpret his words in that way, and that construal does feel more like an over-interpretation than the most natural one.

In the passages of the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta that follow the one just cited, we find the Buddha saying that whenever the coarse material

self is present, it would be wrong to call it a mental self, and whenever the mental self is present, it would be wrong to call it a formless self.[3] This point is then illustrated by an analogy with the various stages that milk undergoes. From the cow one gets milk, and that turns into coagulated milk, which in turn becomes butter, which can be clarified into ghee. When milk is present, one does not call it ghee, and when ghee is present one does not call it coagulated milk. This analogy sounds like a warning to be sure to use whatever nomenclature is suitable for each phase of a continual process; it is not entirely obvious that this is the best analogy for the different kinds of self the Buddha talked about earlier, since it is not obvious that the mental self is something that evolves out of an earlier coarse material self. Before the analogy was given, it sounded as if the point being made was that there are several things that exist simultaneously but that only of them is likely to be the focus of attention at any given moment. But, the imperfection of the analogy aside, it seems as though the point is that one should be careful to give whatever name is suitable to what is being experienced. One is not fully prepared for the Buddha's summary of this discussion. After speaking of how it is appropriate to call a coarse material self by the proper name, he says of all these names (in Maurice Walshe's translation):

> But, Citta, these are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the Tathāgata uses without misapprehending them."[4] (Walshe, 1987, 169)

That same passage is translated by T. W. Rhys Davids as follows:

> For these, Kitta, are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world. And of these the Tathâgata (one who has won the truth) makes use indeed, but is not led astray by them. (Rhys Davids, 1899, 263)

Rhys Davids also provides us with a footnote:

> The point is, of course, that just as there is no *substratum* in the products of the cow, so in man there is no *ego,* no constant unity, no 'soul' (in the animistic sense of the word, as used by savages). There are a number of qualities that, when united, make up a personality—always changing. When the change has reached a certain point, it is convenient to change the designation, the name, by which the personality is known—just as in the case of the products of the cow. But the abstract term is only a convenient *form of expression.* There never was any personality, *as a separate entity,* all the time. (Rhys Davids, 1899, 263, n. 1)

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[3]D. ix. 49: "Yasmiṃ Citta samaye oḷāriko attapaṭilābho hoti, n' eva tasmiṃ samaye manomayo attapaṭilābho ti saṅkhaṃ gacchati. . . "

[4]Itimā kho Citta loka-samaññā loka-niruttiyo loka-vohārā loka-paññattiyo yāhi Tathāgato voharati aparāmasan ti.

Both the translations—Walshe's and Rhys Davids—and Rhys Davids's foot-note, certainly support the notion that the Buddha is speaking of something like convenient fictions here. One problem with their translations, however, is that there is no basis in the original Pali text for the word "merely" that appears in both translations. The text does not say "These are *merely* names etc."; it says "These are names. . . by which the Tathāgata communicates." Now the Tathāgata who uses these names is described as being "*aparāmasan*" which is the negation of the present participle of the verb *parāmasati*. This participle, translated as "without misapprehending" by Walshe and as "not led astray" by Rhys Davids, usually means something like "not being attached" or "not being influenced." So on the most innocent reading—that is, the reading that is arguably the least interpreted in the light of later doctrinal commitments—the Buddha would be saying something more like this:

> For these are popular expressions, popular ways of speaking, popular terms by which the Tathāgata, without being attached, does business."

There is no need to see this as implying that the concepts of self are fictitious. All the text actually warrants is that a wise person takes care not to become attached to the self. While it may be helpful under certain circumstances to see a potential object of attachment as a fiction, it is certainly not necessary. One can, for example, avoid being unduly influenced by neo-conservative Republicans without regarding them as fictitious beings, in the same ontological category as King Kong or Ebenezer Scrooge.

While there is no counterpart for the word "merely" in the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta, there certainly is in the Milindapañho. Here we find the often-quoted reply of Nāgasena when Milinda asks what his name is:

> But though (my) parents gave (me) the name of Nāgasena or Sūrasena or Vīrasena or Sīhasena, yet it is but a denotation, appellation, designation, a current usage, for Nāgasena is only a name since no person is got at here.[5] (Horner, 1964, Vol. 1, 34)

This text sets the tone for most Indian Buddhist doctrine that follows. It is interesting that its terminology is almost exactly the same as that of the Poṭṭhapāda Sutta; the only difference is that Milindapañho adds the word *mattaṃ* (merely, only, nothing but). So a name becomes a mere name. Moreover, to reinforce that point, we are told in Milindapañho, unlike in Poṭṭhapādo, that no person is apprehended here. So while it would be plain wrong to say that plenty of Indian Buddhists seem to

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[5]Api ca mātāpitaro nāmaṃ karonti nāgaseno ti vā sūraseno ti vā vīraseno ti vā sīhaseno ti vā apica kho mahārāja saṅkhā-sammaññā-paññatti-vohāra-nāma-*mattaṃ* yadidaṃ nāgaseno ti. Na hettha puggalo upalabbhatī ti.

have regarded the self or person as a kind of fiction, a name without a referent, I would like to argue that it is not *necessary* for Buddhists to advocate the view that the self is a fiction. Let us leave the question open for now and return later to exploring whether there may be good reason *not* to follow the hermeneutics of fiction.

4   Self as myth

Let me turn now to the view, or attitude, that the self is such a useful construct for some particular purpose that the question of whether the self really exists seems pointless to ask. One could arrive at this attitude in a variety of ways, but there is one in particular I would like to look at.

A way of being relatively indifferent to the whole issue of truth is to cultivate an attitude like that exhibited by, among others, some Quakers. Quakers are given to using such phrases as "the inward light," "that of God in everyone," "the seed," "the inner Christ" and so forth, but one looks in vain for carefully formulated theological discussions of what exactly these terms mean or what the universe would have to be like for them to be names of distinct entities. They are phrases that Quakers use to speak of a family of experiences and of ways of organizing one's life in accordance with experiences that one sees as significant. If a Quaker finds a way of speaking useful, she might say "that speaks to my condition" without expecting that the way of speaking would speak to the condition of another person. Expressions such as "the inward light" are arguably most useful when they are the least defined and most vague. It would not be impossible for a Quaker to function without the concept of the inward light, but the concept is mighty useful and therefore might as well be retained, no matter how much puzzlement it may occasion philosophers, scientists, theologians and others who make it their business to impose precision on as much discourse as possible.

The concept of person or self could be seen as rather like that of the Quaker notion of the inward light. It could be seen as a concept that we agree to use without anxiety as to whether it refers to any particular entity that would be certified by a qualified ontologist as legitimately belonging on the inventory list of pieces of the universe's furniture. As mentioned before, neither Duerlinger nor Siderits mention any view like this, probably because nothing quite like it existed in classical Indian Buddhism. I mention it merely because someone might wish to avail himself of it as a softer version of the view to which I now turn, namely, seeing the concept of self as person as a prerequisite to any kind of human enterprise.

5 Self as prerequisite

Steven Collins makes the observation that there is a Buddhist literature, *abhidhamma*, in which the task is to replace all personal language with reference to impersonal events. In the language of Duerlinger and Siderits, both of whom are following Derek Parfit and Collins (1982) himself, abhidhamma carries out a reductionist project in which all references to persons are seen as nothing but a shorthand way of talking about a complex of conditioned events. This literature, he suggests, serves the purpose of aiding in the cultivation of certain kinds of unselfish behavior, but no one—not even a monastic—is expected to think and speak in this deliberately impoverished and impersonal language all the time. Rather, the reductionist language is something that some meditaters do some of the time in order to cultivate a particular set of virtues. Outside the specialized abhidhamma literature, however, authoritative Buddhist texts speak without embarrassment of persons, personalities, selves and characters. Talking in such terms seems useful if not necessary for talking of karma, rebirth, ethics, responsibility and a variety of social roles that monks, no less than lay persons, occupy. As Collins puts it,

> Buddhist monks as social agents. . . are unitary and enduring persons. It is not simply a convenient (or "conventional" fiction) to use ordinary language to refer to such persons. There is, *in principle,* an analysis of such agency which can dispense with reference to persons, but such a reductionist discourse cannot serve the social, legal, or behavioral purposes of the nonreductionist discourse which it can, *in principle,* replace. (Collins, 1994, 69)

To say that a reductionist discourse *cannot serve* the social, legal and behavioral purposes suggests that some notion of self as a reality is a prerequisite to certain kinds of human activity. What I would like to argue is that some notion of self as a reality could be seen as also indispensable to the principal goal of Buddhist practice. One might begin with something along the line of John Locke's definition of a person:

> *Person,* as I take it, is a name for this *self.* Wherever a man finds what he calls *himself,* there, I think, another may say is the *same person.* It is a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit, and so belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of a law, and unhappiness and misery. (Locke, 1959, Book II, Chap. XXVII, paragraph 26)

Now if one were to believe that this "forensic" concept of person were indispensable for both human law and some sort of cosmological law, as Locke did, one could also easily believe that without some such view of person there can be no spiritual practice aimed at reducing the amount of unhappiness *(duḥkha)* that a person endures.

Let us say, just for the sake of discussion, that a Buddhist were convinced that the ameliorative program of Buddhist practice really has no foundation other than that of some kind of self or person similar to the sort that Locke described. How could a Lockean Buddhist square such a view with what is usually presented as Buddhist doctrine? The standard way of reconciling the personal way of thinking with the impersonal is to appeal to the two levels of truth. One could, in other words, say that the person way of thinking is for ordinary life but that eventually—when the practitioner is intellectually and emotionally prepared to jettison the idea of a self altogether—it is superseded by the more accurate portrayal of reality as impersonal events. Steve Collins articulates this strategy for solving the problem of reconciling personal with impersonal views with admirable clarity:

> Within Buddhist thought, there is an apparently simple answer to the problem. Two levels or kinds of language and truth are distinguished: the conventional and the ultimate. It is true "ultimately" that there is no self, but "conventionally" it is possible to designate the temporary psycho-physical configurations of impersonal events we think of as persons by proper names, pronouns (including "I"), definite descriptions, and other means of reference.... In a characteristically Indian solution to a dilemma, two apparently incompatible alternatives are both kept but ordered into a hierarchy. (Collins, 1994, 66)

While looking at the so-called two truths as a hierarchy wherein a higher truth sublates a lower works well enough, there may be an alternative way of approaching the problem that does not require that the allegedly lesser truth be replaced or superseded by the higher. Rather than seeing the Sanskrit term *satya* (Pali *sacca*) as truth, suppose we see it as meaning something like goodness. The advantage of doing this is that when one sees one good as higher than another, one need not eliminate the lower. Saying, for example, that personal integrity is a greater good than, say, physical health does not require a commitment to seeing physical health as entirely unworthy of pursuit. Similarly, one could say that attaining freedom from the root causes of unhappiness, among which is selfishness, is a higher good than maintaining a deserved good reputation as a citizen of one's country by obeying the state's laws, but this would in no way imply that it is not a very good thing to be (and be perceived as) a good citizen of a good state. Truths, it seems to me, are much more jealous than goods. Competing goods can easily co-exist, whereas competing truths seem to feel a need to fight to the death.

If we look at the impersonal perspective of abhidhamma as a good strategy for achieving the good of being less self-centered, and the personal perspective as a good strategy for achieving the good of being

a responsible member of the community of sentient beings, then both perspectives have quite a legitimate place, and one need only develop a good sense of occasion. When is it better to think and speak abhidhammically, and when is it better to think and speak as a person among other persons?

Now so far what I have suggested is that we might look at the Buddhist doctrine of non-self *(anātman, anatta)* more as a shorthand way of stating an ethical desideratum than as a metaphysical claim. Indeed, I have been told by several Japanese Buddhists that this is just how most Japanese Buddhists understand the doctrine of non-self—as an invitation to be more ethical by learning not to be selfish, not as a metaphysical claim about what kinds of things are real. But suppose our metaphysical habits die hard, and we find ourselves hankering to have a metaphysical understanding of the relationship between the personal and the impersonal. Is there any way of seeing both the personal discourse and the impersonal discourse as simultaneously true in the same way? Mark Siderits suggests a way that this might be done.

In *Personal Identity and Buddhist Philosophy,* Siderits has a chapter discussing the notion of supervenience, a concept from analytic philosophy that has been used primarily in the context of philosophy of mind. There was a time, about forty years ago, when some philosophers favored a reductionist way of speaking about all the events we collectively refer to as "mind" by saying that speaking of mind is really nothing but a familiar way of speaking about essentially physical events, such as neuro-physiological and chemical states in the central nervous system. Talking about the mind and consciousness was seen as little more than a carry-over from a prescientific age when people still believed in souls and spirits and were innocent of biochemistry and synapses. For a variety of good reasons, the reductionist trend gave way to another way of looking at the relationship between mental events and physical events. This way was able to see both "mind" and "body" as realities, neither being fully explained by the other, one being strongly influenced by the other. In this way of looking at things, the events that we call "mind" are said to be supervenient on the events that we call "body." A supervenience relation between two classes of property A and B exists if and only if any change in one class is explained by a change in the other. Class A is supervenient on class B if any change in A is explained by a change in B. Siderits, invoking this kind of relation, suggests a situation in which it might be used:

> Is it not still possible that a more respectable ontological status might be found for persons than that of a conceptual fiction? Specifically, might it not be the case that when sufficiently many psychophysical elements interact in a sufficiently complex way, there arise genuinely novel properties, properties the occurrence of which could not have been predicted

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from our knowledge of the constituent psychophysical elements alone? This view—that persons non-reductively supervene on th psychophysical elements—seems attractive precisely because it holds out the hope that we can make do without occult entities while still honoring our common-sense commitment to the existence of persons. (Siderits, 2003, 75)

There are predicates that we can apply to persons that we cannot apply as meaningfully to psychophysical elements. Persons have personalities and can know themselves, reflect on where they stand in the acquisition of virtue, have mentors, undergo psychoanalysis, take up Buddhist contemplative practices, become better citizens, become arhants or bodhisattvas, be *kalyāṇamitras* be ordained as monks, be abbots of monasteries, die and be reborn (unless, of course, they are arhants); there is no reason to rule out being reborn as more than one person at a time. Since doing many of those things that only persons can do are important to Buddhism as a path, one could argue that being a person is equally important. There is no need for reductionism, and one way of being a non-reductionist is appeal to the notion of supervenience.

One of the advantages that supervenience theory has is that it enables one to speak of a causal relationship between two sets of complex events without having to specify precisely what elements of one set are influences of precisely what elements of the other.[6] We can even acknowledge that there can be more than one cause for the same kind of effect—there can be what John Stuart Mill called a plurality of causes for a given effect and a plurality of effects stemming from a single cause.

While acknowledging that speech is non-reductively supervenient on intentions and other *saṃskāras* and on the movement of certain muscles in the head, we can also acknowledge that different kinds of intentions could give rise to exactly the same speech acts, and that scoundrels can utter precisely the same words as buddhas and saints, even though scoundrels and saints do not have exactly the same mentalities. These acknowledgements are more difficult for a reductionist. Dharmakīrti, for example, defined the particular nature (*svabhāva*) of a being as the totality of its causes (*sakalā kāraṇasāmagrī*). This would mean that two things that had different complexes of causes could not have the same nature, and from this it should follow that the speech of a swindler would not have the same nature as the speech of a buddha. Part of the causal complex of a buddha's speech is a desire to liberate sentient beings from their troubles, while part of the causal complex of a swindler's speech is to take advantage of sentient beings' naive trust. So how could their speech have the same nature? Why should it be

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[6]We can, for example, acknowledge that the ability to speak is supervenient on neurophysiological events taking place within the brain, and still have room to acknowledge that when one part of the brain of a stroke victim is damaged, another part of the brain can become a new center of speech-enabling events.

impossible, as Dharmakīrti acknowledges it is, to know from what a person says or how she says it, whether she is a charlatan or a buddha? Puzzles of this kind do not arise for those who analyze events in terms of non-reductive supervenience, because such analysis begins with an acknowledgement that the causal relations among most things complex enough to be interesting can be talked about in general but not in detail. In other words, we can know *that* the shape of a kernel of popped corn is caused by heat, but the popping of corn is such an enormously complex event that it is impossible in practice to say just why a particular kernel of popped corn has the shape it has.

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