CRITICAL NOTICE

Questioning the grounds for *Buddhist Physicalism*

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Buddhist Physicalism? Non-self Metaphysics and Phenomenal Consciousness

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1. Introduction

The Buddha puts forward a dualist metaphysics in the early Buddhist discourses (*Nikayās*). The first centuries after the Buddha's death led to the emergence of multiple schools and traditions that attempted to organise, interpret and systematise the Buddha's teachings. Though the philosophers in these traditions regarded the *Nikayās* as authoritative, that did not deter them from interpreting the Buddha's teachings in ways that were conducive to their theoretical and practical concerns. For example, the Abhidharma philosophers reduced the five psychophysical aggregates (*skandhas*) into constituent, discrete psychophysical events (*dharmas*) and reinterpreted impermanence as momentariness. The Yogācāra school rejected the psychophysical dualism of the *Nikayās* in favour of consciousness-only idealism. It is in this spirit that Siderits raises a closely related question: Might there be room in the Buddhist tradition for a newly developed physicalism? (5) Siderits presents considerations to suggest that a Buddhist physicalism is possible and indeed plausible. Siderits' book is a masterful consideration of a live issue in contemporary philosophy: the place of consciousness in a physicalist world. We applaud the spirit of the book and Siderits' motivation to consider Buddhist Physicalism as a live option in

contemporary philosophy, a contender for having the correct metaphysical view of phenomenal consciousness. In this critical notice we will, of course, take a critical perspective on Siderits' important book. *Buddhist Physicalism?* is wide-ranging; we will focus on one important set of themes regarding the ontology of composites and the invocation of persons.

The thesis of 'mereological nihilism' plays a crucial role in Siderits' take on Indian Buddhist metaphysics. According to Siderits, mereological nihilism – the thesis that only impartite entities are strictly speaking real – is accepted by all Abhidharma schools as well as the main schools in the Mahāyāna tradition, with the exception of Sammatīyas (the Personalists) in the Indian tradition (33). The Personalists Buddhist rejected mereological nihilism, their view is that persons though complex, are 'ultimately real' (This term will be clarified later). Mereological nihilism plays a crucial role in the argument in *Buddhist Physicalism?*. Siderits uses it to argue for the possibility and the plausibility of Buddhist Physicalism: the constraints imposed by mereological nihilism and momentariness are not reasons for rejecting physicalism (33), but together they constitute good reason for showing that phenomenal consciousness cannot be strictly speaking or ultimately real (80). Siderits uses mereological nihilism to argue for a Buddhist reductionist stance on which all phenomenal consciousness is only a conceptual construction.

According to Siderits, '…the adoption of mereological nihilism gives the Buddhist a valuable tool for defending the non-self thesis' (20). He draws on the famous chariot example, first found in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (SN, henceforth) and later developed in the *Kathāvatthu* and the *Milindapañha*. In the SN, the Buddhist nun Vajirā explains:

> Just as, when the parts are assembled, there is said to be a chariot, so there being the psychophysical elements (*skandhas*), it is said conventionally there is a being (SN I. 135 quoted by Siderits p. 19)

Siderits offers the following interpretation: 'Vajirā is suggesting, through her use of the example of the chariot, that we adopt mereological nihilism, the view that there are no partite entities' (20). We disagree. Note that the claim in the passage is that we use the conventional term 'being' for an assemblage of psychophysical elements, just as we use 'chariot' for the assemblage of its parts. There is no hint in this passage that the parts of the person or the parts of the chariot are simple, impartite entities. Siderits concedes that there is no argument for mereological nihilism in the early Buddhist *Nikāyas* but that 'an argument for the conclusion that composite entities cannot be strictly speaking real is found in various forms throughout the Abhidharma literature' (29).

2. Neither identical nor distinct

So, what is the Abhidharma Buddhist argument for mereological nihilism? Chapter 2 §1 of *Buddhist Physicalism?* presents a 'neither identical nor distinct' argument (29–33), but the only reference to the texts is to refer back to his discussion of the chariot analogy in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Chapter 1, §4). To be fair, the phrasing is often used in the Theravāda Abhidhamma texts, for example in the *Kathāvatthu* and *Milindapañha*. But it is worth noting that the 'neither identical nor distinct' in these texts is not offered as an argument to support mereological nihilism. Consider the use of the chariot analogy in the *Milindapañha*. King Milinda has just conceded that the chariot is just a conventional name for the assemblage of its parts, the pole, axle, wheel, etc. The Buddhist monk Nagasena explains:

> You understand the chariot. It is the same with me. It is because of the head hair, body hair, and so on all the way to the brain matter in the skull, and it is because of form, feeling, perception, habitual patterns and awareness [*skandhas*] there comes to be 'Nagasena', which is just a word, an appellation, a designation, a common usage, a mere name. But in the absolute [ultimate] sense there is no person to be found here. (trans. Heim 2025: 71).

Again, it seems that the point is that the assemblage of the psychophysical aggregates (*skandhas*) or other visible or tangible body parts are referred to by the conventional name Nagasena. There is no suggestion that the parts that make up the chariot or person need to be impartite entities. The argument is only claiming that persons are composed of aggregates.

Rather the 'neither the same, nor someone else' phrasing is used in the *Milindapañha* to explain 'the relationship between the "person" who acts and the one who is reborn to experience the consequence' (Collins 1982: 182). The phrasing appears in the following dialogue. The king is puzzled about rebirth without a transmigrating self. He asks:

> 'Nagasena, sir does the person who is reborn become the same person or someone else?' The elder replied: 'Neither the same, nor someone else.' (Heim 2025: 103)

The king finds this answer baffling and asks for an analogy. In response, Nagasena queries the king about continuity within a lifetime.

> ‘Once you were a tiny infant lying on your back, tender and naïve. Is he the same as you are now, all grown up?’
>
> ‘No, sir, now that I am an adult, *I* am different than that tiny infant lying on his back, tender and naïve.’ …
>
> ‘What about the person who is becoming educated and the person who is educated? Are they different? What about the person who has committed a crime. Is he different from the one who is punished by getting his hands and feet cut off?’
>
> “No, certainly not. But what would you say about this?” (Heim 2025: 103)

The king is baffled, no doubt. And again, Nagasena explains the point by offering a battery of examples. Here’s one:

> ‘Just as, great king, fresh milk in a little while turns to curds, and from curds into butter, and from butter into ghee. What if someone were to say that the milk, the curds, the butter, and the ghee are the same? Would it be correct to say this?’
>
> ‘No, because each is produced relying on the other.’
>
> ‘In the same way, the continuity of phenomenal states is connected: this arises, that ceases; the next thing is connected practically simultaneously. Therefore, neither this, nor something entirely different that goes along as the continuity from the previous moment of awareness.’ (Heim 2025: 105)

The example explains continuity without requiring a persisting substance. The continuity is explained by the causal relations that explain how the milk evolves through a series of other forms into ghee. Similarly, the continuity within a lifetime and across lifetimes is explained by causal (karmic) relations that explains how the series of psychophysical aggregates we call by a name, say ‘Milinda’ evolves from that of the tiny infant to the adult king, and so on until the next life. Just as the milk and ghee are not the same physical aggregates, but nor are they entirely different aggregates: the ghee is because of the connection with that milk. So also, the tiny infant and the adult king are not the same psychophysical aggregates, but nor are they entirely different aggregates: the king is because of the connection with the tiny infant. The ‘neither identical nor distinct’ phrasing offered to explain continuity is implicitly referring to the Buddhist doctrine of causation, dependent origination rather than mereological nihilism.

3.The two truths

Siderits uses the two truths/two existents distinction to elaborate the case for mereological nihilism (40ff.). The two truths theory was introduced in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (AN II.60) as a simple hermeneutic strategy. The Ābhidharmikas transformed it into an ontological distinction exploiting the ambiguity in the Sanskrit term '*sat*' which is variously translated as 'reality', 'being' and 'truth'. Siderits traces the doctrine to the following passage in Vasubandhu's magnum opus *Abhidharmakośabhāsya* (AKBh henceforth):

> The Fortunate One has proclaimed four truths; he has also declared two truths, (1) conventional or relative truth (*saṃvṛti-satya*), and (2) ultimate truth (*paramārtha-satya*). What are these two truths? The cognition of a pitcher ends when the pitcher is broken; the cognition of water ends when, in the mind, one analyses water. The pitcher and the water, and all that resembles them, exist relatively or conventionally. The rest exists ultimately (AKBh 6.4, adapted from Sangpo 2012, 1891)

Though this distinction between the two truths and the corresponding notion of two kinds of entities is no doubt mentioned in AKBh, it is not nearly as foundational in Abhidharma as in some Mahāyāna traditions (Lusthaus 2010: 101). This is reflected in the fact that though Vasubandhu introduces the two truths briefly in the Chapter 6 on the *Explanation of the Path*, it plays no major role in the AKBh. Rather, when it comes to matters of ontology, another distinction is central to the AKBh, and that is the distinction between *dravyasat* (substantially real) and *prajñaptisat* (conceptually real) (for example, 1.10d, 1.43d, 2.22d, 2.5, 2:46b, 2:47, 2.6, 4:113c, 4:3b-c, and many occurrences in Chapter 9). Gold explains the distinction as follows: 'For Vasubandhu, everything that is real or substantial (*dravya*) is causally efficient, having specifiable cause-and-effect relations with other entities. Everything that does not have such a causal basis is unreal, and if anything, it is merely a conceptual construct, a mere convention (*prajñapti*)' (2022). For Ābhidharmikas, more generally, causal efficacy (*kāraṇabhāva śakti*) is regarded as the criterion of reality (Pruden 1990: 135; Dhammajoti 2007: 143; Gold 2022; Chadha and Nichols 2026).

Vasubandhu's argument against the reality of selves in the AKBh Chapter 9 is not that they are not ultimately real mereological simples. Such a claim would have no force against his Hindu opponents in the AKBh, the Naiyāyikas. The self, according to the Naiyāyikas, is an enduring simple substance that is the subject of experience, agent of action and bearer of karmic responsibility. Rather, Vasubandhu's argument against the Naiyāyikas uses the causal efficacy principle. Vasubandhu offers an explanation of experience, agency and (karmic) responsibility in terms of causal relations between impermanent psychophysical aggregates. Consider, for example, Vasubandhu's

explanation of action as a causal series of mental states resulting in bodily action: 'For from recollection there is interest; from interest consideration; from consideration wilful effort; from wilful effort vital energy; and from that, action. So, what does the self do here?' (Sangpo 2012: 2575). Vasubandhu's explanation of an action in terms of causal relations between mental states – Recollection → Interest → Consideration → Wilful Effort → Vital Energy → Bodily Action – is directly aimed at questioning the Naiyāyika claim that we must posit the self as an agent. Vasubandhu claims that we don't need to posit a self because there is nothing for it to do.

Again, Vasubandhu does not invoke mereological nihilism or the notion of ultimate truth to deny the reality of persons. Vasubandhu's argument against the Personalists is *not* that the person isn't a simple *dharma*. Rather, he argues that the person is not causally efficacious and thus not substantially real (Sangpo 2012: 2525–26). Since it's clear that the person is not a *dharma*, why wouldn't Vasubandhu just make this incontrovertible argument? Because showing that persons aren't *dharmas* would not suffice to show that they are not substantially real.

4.Practicalities

We've argued that the two truths do not play a central role in the arguments against selves and persons in the Abhidharma tradition. However, there is an additional angle that Siderits pursues. According to Siderits, the Ābhidharmikas think that there is great practical import that favors recognizing *persons* as conventionally real. Siderits adverts to three examples from the Milindapañha to illustrate the point: a pregnant woman, a student and a criminal. Without the personhood convention, Siderits writes,

> [the pregnant] woman is unlikely to act on any advice we give her concerning how to promote the future health of herself and her infant. The young student is unlikely to be moved by appeals to the future benefits conferred by study that is presently disagreeable. And because the criminal identifies with neither that past stretch of the series that committed the crime nor that future stretch that is no longer imprisoned, they will not feel remorse and will not be moved to refrain from future criminal activity (21).

Although Siderits takes the examples from the *Milindapañha*, the text itself makes no such claims about practical advantages of invoking persons. Here is the full presentation from the *Milindapañha*:

> Is the mother a different person in each of the first four weeks of pregnancy? And is she another person still when her child is small? And then another when the child has grown up? What about the person who is becoming educated and the person who is educated? Are they different? Or the person who has committed a crime. Is he different from the one who is punished by getting his hands or feet cut off? (Heim 2025: 103)

The text goes on to discuss these examples in terms of the idea that the later individual is 'neither this nor something entirely different'. But there is nothing about the practical import of such issues.

This is not to say that there is no practical concern about rejecting selves and persons. Perhaps there are certain practical advantages to thinking of oneself as a persisting self or person. However, it's important not to exaggerate the concern here. Take motherhood, for example. Certainly for many animals, mothers care and invest heavily in their own offspring, and they do so without presupposing either *ātman* (self, soul substance) or conventional persons. The same is plausibly true for human mothers. More generally, explicit thoughts about one's self might play a relatively small role in our individual decision making. Even in the case of criminal behavior, while facilitating internalised rules can be effective, this needn't involve any presuppositions about the self (for discussion, see Berryman et al. 2024).

Still, we grant that there probably are cases where the presupposition of a continuing person might have some good outcomes. Perhaps some students need to think about rewards to their future self to motivate their studies. However, even if there is some benefit to belief in a (conventional) person, for the Buddhist, there is also a cost, which is paramount – suffering. The soteriological mission of Buddhism is to reduce suffering, and the primary way to do this is to extirpate the notion of self. So even if there are practical advantages to believing in persons, one must also consider whether retaining the notion of a persisting (if conventional) person will also perpetuate the suffering that is supposed to be eradicated by recognizing that the self doesn't exist. It would take a very subtle psychological makeup to internalise the idea that whenever one is thinking of persons, the idea is of *a conventional* thing, rather than a *self*. So there is reason to worry that the whole point of denying the ultimate existence of the self is subverted by affirming the conventional existence of the person. Replacing talk of ultimate selves with talk of conventional persons is likely to sustain attachments. These attachments and interests are

exactly the sorts of things that encourage the defilements of greed, hatred and the 'I' delusion. Insofar as persons are registered as enduring beings, the convention just seems to bring back in the attitudes that implicate the self – pride and self-blame, hatred, jealousy, etc. – leading to unwholesome thoughts and actions. Buddhist thinkers promote meditation practices that involve '"breaking down the barriers" between self and other, as Buddhaghosa puts it, and "exchanging self and other" in Śāntideva' (Heim 2019: 13). The person convention risks reinstating the barriers that the Buddhists recommend undoing. Postulating more or less persisting persons will lead to the unwholesome emotional habits and biases that lead us to prioritise our personal futures (Chadha 2021).

5.Illusionism about consciousness

One of the leading ideas in the book is that conscious experiences are not ultimately real because they are composites (184). This includes painful experiences, which are not ultimately real according to Siderits' Buddhist Physicalism. Painful experiences are merely conventional 'useful fictions' (ibid.). That's because a painful experience is a composite which can be decomposed into an occurrence of the pain *dharma* and an occurrence of consciousness. Siderits thinks that a judicious application of the two truths theory might help with the concern about the illusory nature of conscious experiences. He appeals to Madhyamaka philosophers Nāgārjuna and Candrakīrti to argue that conscious experiences are like images and reflections existing in dependence on real aggregates or simple *dharmas* (for the Abhidharma). Images and reflections are in a sense deceptive for they lack the nature of the real thing. But images and reflections do have their uses; while one cannot kiss a loved one over facetime, one can use the image on facetune to groom one's face on the go (Siderits 185 mentions a variant of this example from Candrakīrti). This, importantly, is part of his motivation for pursuing physicalism as a plausible Buddhist philosophy.

What does illusionism about consciousness mean for the fundamental Buddhist concern about reducing suffering? Mereological nihilism seems to imply that suffering isn't genuinely real. But this has an ironic result. If suffering is not real and we can derive this from basic principles of Buddhist metaphysics, it seems like the argument against the existence of the self would be superfluous. If suffering is conscious, and conscious states don't exist, then suffering doesn't exist; and if suffering doesn't exist, this should be the focus of the soteriology, not the non-existence of the self. Furthermore, if consciousness is an illusion, what does it mean for the centrality of conscious experiences in Buddhist meditative practices? Some kinds of conscious meditative experiences are central to the Abhidharma and Buddhist tradition more generally – they are crucial for attaining

awakening. These concerns show that treating conscious experiences as an illusion looks to be antithetical to the soteriological orientation of the entire Buddhist project. This suggests that the idea of Buddhist Physicalism, yoked to mereological nihilism, really is difficult to square with the Buddhist tradition.

We think the solution to this conundrum depends on clarifying the ontology of composites in Abhidharma Buddhism. We agree with Siderits that according to Abhidharma philosophers, conscious experiences are composites. But we would maintain that Vasubandhu, and Abhidharma Buddhists more generally, think that some composites are real and that *some* composite conscious experiences are among the reals (see Chadha and Nichols 2026). Discussions of ontology in Abhidharma Buddhism often invoke the *Causal Efficacy Principle,* which states that an entity is real if and only if it is causally efficient (*kāraṇabhāva śakti*). The notion of reality that is invoked in the arguments about ontology in the Abhidharma that recruit causal efficacy is not the two truths, but the distinction between *dravyasat* (substantially real) and *prajñaptisat* (conceptually real). For example, when it comes to matters of ontology of composites of conditioned factors, Vasubandhu frequently invokes the notion of *dravysat* in the *Abhidharmakośabhāṣya* (AKBh, henceforth) the seminal text for the Abhidharma tradition (See AKBh 1.10d, 1.43d, 2.22d, 2.5, 2:46b, 2:47, 2.6, 4:113c, 4:3b-c, and many occurrences in Chapter 9). We are not alone in thinking that for the Ābhidharmikas causal efficacy is the criterion of reality; many contemporary philosophers agree with us (See Pruden 1990: 135; Dhammajoti 2007: 143; Gold 2022). Siderits himself also mentions this principle (31).

The key question then is which conscious experiences have causal efficacy. The term for consciousness '*citta*' is used in many different senses in the Abhidharma corpus (For example, see AKBh 2.34ab). It can signify a simple *dharma* (*citta*) or a composite of mental *dharmas citta* together concomitants (*citta-caitaiskas*). Conscious states themselves are, as noted, always composites, and there is an important distinction between two kinds of conscious composites: sensory consciousness and conceptual consciousness. The pain sensation and the cognition of pain are both composites and arise in such quick succession, it is difficult for us ordinary beings to distinguish between the two. The key question concerns the causal efficacy of these kinds of states, and it seems that we get an answer from a central passage in the AKBh. The passage is often quoted to explain the phenomenology of conscious experiences without there being a subject of experience; Vasubandhu's response to the question about who sees or cognises is 'consciousness cognises' just as the 'bell rings'. He explains:

> This manner of speaking: 'Consciousness apprehends [the object]' [*vijñānam, vijñāti],* [implying that consciousness is an agent] may also be justifiable from another point of view. Successive moments of consciousness arise in regard to the object: the previous moment is the cause of the later moment; [in a stream of consciousness,] consciousness is therefore the cause of consciousness; it is therefore called agent (*kartr*) since it is the cause. Similarly when we say that a bell rings. (Sangpo 2012: 2564)

Vasubandhu here wants to reject the idea that there is a genuine conscious agent who has an experience, but he is also affirming the causal efficacy of some conscious states: 'consciousness is the cause of consciousness'. Vasubandhu maintains that sensory consciousness arises at the moment of sense-object contact which gives rise to a felt sensation; this might be an experience of seeing blue or an experience of pain (*vedana citta*). The felt sensation or sensory consciousness is a composite, *vedana citta* together with concomitants (*citta-caitaiskas*). Vasubandhu explains:

> It does not happen that consciousness is produced by one single atom of a sense-faculty, by one single atom of an object-field. *In fact, the five categories of* [sensory] *consciousness have the aggregations for their basis and their cognitive object* (ibid. 299).

Vasubandhu's point here is that individual conscious *dharmas* (*citta*) arise because of the contact between a sensory organ (e.g., the eye) and its appropriate object (e.g., the color blue), but sensory consciousness is not produced by collision of two *dharmas* – the sensory organ and its proper object are both composites. And so is the arising sensory consciousness: a *vedana citta* together with concomitants (*citta-caitaiskas*). We will use the standard Abhidharma example of 'cognising blue' to explain the account of sensory episodes, A sensory episode or percept is triggered by the presence of a sensory faculty (e.g., eye) and its proper object (e.g., blue) in its vicinity. But the mere presence of these two is not sufficient for the conscious experience. The Ābhidharmikas add that the universal factors such as *contact* between eyes and blue colour, *mental application* or *attention* to the blue, *ideation* or some discrimination of blue, *sensation* or *feeling* of coolness, *intention* directed to blue, etc. are also necessary for the cognizing blue. Although there is some discrimination of blue, concepts are not involved at this stage. The eye faculty can discriminate between colour categories blue and yellow, without implicating concepts and language (See also Block 2023, Chapter 6). This sensory consciousness causes the conceptual consciousness establishes that sensory consciousness is substantially real (*dravyasat*), it is causally efficacious. The conceptual

cognition, however, does not enjoy causal efficacy and is only conceptually real (*prajñaptisat*). Thus, we think that the Abhidharma Buddhists would say that conceptual consciousness is an illusion that is only conventionally true, but they can deny illusionism about sensory consciousness since sensory consciousness enjoys causal efficacy.

Although we have taken issue with several of the arguments in Siderits' book, it is an extremely rich and rewarding work. Siderits brings his characteristic analytic rigor and clarity to challenging issues in Buddhism and philosophy of mind. The prospect for a physicalist account of consciousness in a selfless universe is a vital question for both Buddhist philosophers and contemporary philosophy of mind. And this is the most important contribution of the book – *Buddhist Physicalism* makes a powerful case that Buddhism remains a living philosophy.

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