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Preface

The Journal of Religions and Various Sciences (JRS), Vol. 6, No. 1, January–June 2026, aims to provide an open platform for creating and exchanging knowledge in religious studies, sociology, liberal arts, the humanities, the social sciences, and interdisciplinary studies. At a time when society is undergoing profound cultural, technological, environmental, and human-value transformations, high-quality scholarship plays an essential role in explaining emerging phenomena, questioning established knowledge, and proposing new directions for society. The journal therefore gives priority to original studies that employ appropriate methodologies, present well-reasoned analyses, and cite credible and verifiable sources. It is also committed to developing English-language academic articles in accordance with TCI criteria and international academic journal standards. Every manuscript undergoes preliminary screening and evaluation by three qualified peer reviewers, enabling authors to strengthen their work and produce manuscripts that are rigorous, credible, and capable of communicating effectively with the academic community.

The editorial board warmly invites scholars, researchers, lecturers, students, and other interested contributors from Thailand and abroad to submit English-language research or academic articles for publication consideration. The journal welcomes studies that offer new knowledge or conceptual frameworks, comparative perspectives, interdisciplinary integration, and analyses of contemporary issues concerning religion, humanity, and society. Publishing with JRS not only brings your work to a wider readership but also provides constructive feedback from qualified reviewers, helping to enhance the quality of your manuscript and foster dialogue with national and international academic communities. No fees are charged at any stage of submission, peer review, or publication. We therefore invite you to share your valuable findings, ideas, and perspectives with JRS as we build a vibrant space for learning and advance knowledge for the benefit of academia and society.

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The Walking Buddha and the Aesthetics of Movement : Embodiment of the Dhamma in Sukhothai Sculpture

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Abstract

The walking Buddha, known in Thai as Phra Phuttha Līlā, is one of the most distinctive achievements of Sukhothai sculpture. Unlike the more common seated, standing, and reclining images, the walking Buddha represents the Enlightened One in controlled physical motion: one heel is raised, the body follows a gentle curve, one hand commonly displays the gesture of fearlessness, and the face remains perfectly composed. This article examines the walking Buddha not merely as a stylistic innovation but as a visual embodiment of Buddhist teachings. It argues that Sukhothai sculptors transformed doctrinal qualities—including mindfulness, equanimity, fearlessness, compassion, and the active communication of the Dhamma—into an idealized moving body. The image does not depict movement naturalistically. It reconciles physical motion with mental stillness, thereby visualizing the Buddhist principle that disciplined action can arise from an unagitated mind. The article also evaluates competing interpretations of the image, including the Buddha's descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven, his meditative walking after enlightenment, and his journey to teach. Because no single interpretation accounts for every example, the walking Buddha is best understood as a polyvalent image. Its aesthetic force lies in presenting Buddhahood as both transcendent and dynamically present within the human world.

Keywords: walking Buddha, Buddhist aesthetics, Buddha image, Buddhist art

Introduction

Buddha images throughout Asia most commonly represent the Buddha seated in meditation, standing while teaching or offering reassurance, or reclining at the time of his final nirvana. The Sukhothai tradition developed another form to an exceptional degree: the Buddha walking gracefully forward.

The walking image is commonly called Phra Phuttha Līlā in Thai. The term *līlā* conveys movement, grace, deportment, or a mode of proceeding. The image is instantly recognizable. One foot is placed ahead of the other, while the heel of the rear foot rises from the ground. One arm usually hangs in a gentle curve, and the other hand is raised. The torso bends subtly, the robe follows the body's rhythm, and the flame-like extension of the *uṣṇīṣa* continues the upward movement of the composition.

The face, however, does not express physical effort. The eyes are lowered, the mouth is calm, and the features remain composed. This combination produces the form's central aesthetic paradox: the body is moving, but the mind appears motionless.

Sukhothai artists did not invent every representation of a walking Buddha. Earlier South and Southeast Asian art contained figures of the Buddha moving within narrative reliefs, and possible prototypes have been identified in Indian, Mon, Burmese, Sri Lankan, and Khmer traditions. Brown (1990) demonstrates that walking Buddha imagery had a wider history across South and Southeast Asia. What distinguished Sukhothai was the development

of the walking Buddha into a major independent icon, particularly in three-dimensional bronze.

The image's meaning cannot be reduced to a single event. It has been interpreted as: the Buddha walking in meditation after enlightenment; the Buddha descending from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven; the Buddha journeying to preach; the Buddha approaching devotees with reassurance; the dynamic movement of the Dhamma through the world.

The available evidence does not establish that every Sukhothai walking Buddha represented precisely the same episode. This article therefore approaches the image through Buddhist aesthetics: how does its visual structure make Buddhist qualities perceptible?

The central argument is that the walking Buddha embodies disciplined movement. Its physical form translates mindfulness, fearlessness, compassion, and equanimity into a visible body. Sukhothai sculptors created neither an ordinary human walking naturally nor an immobile divine abstraction. They created an awakened body in which action and stillness coexist.

Historical Background

Sukhothai and the formation of a sculptural tradition

Sukhothai flourished as an important political and religious center during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Its culture developed at a crossroads of Mon-Dvāravatī, Khmer, Sri Lankan, Burmese, peninsular, and local traditions. Its art should consequently not be described as an isolated national creation.

Sukhothai inherited established traditions of monumental Buddha imagery. Dvāravatī communities had produced standing Buddha images centuries earlier. Khmer-related art contributed techniques of monumental construction and frontal sacred representation. Sri Lankan and Mon Buddhist networks transmitted Theravāda texts, relic practices, images, and models of monastic authority. Pagan and other Burmese traditions may also have contributed to the development of walking imagery.

Wisetchat (2013) identifies Pāla, Sri Lankan, Dvāravatī, Lopburi, Pagan, and Lan Na traditions among the possible cultural sources relevant to the Sukhothai Buddha. Yet Sukhothai artists did not merely combine recognizable foreign features. They reorganized them into a distinctive system of bodily proportion and expressive rhythm.

Dating problems

The chronology of Sukhothai sculpture is not always secure. Many images lack inscriptions identifying their dates, donors, or original locations. Portable bronze images could be moved, reconsecrated, or placed in later monasteries. Stylistic dating depends upon comparison and may become circular when one undated work is used to date another.

Krairiksh (1993) demonstrates that major interpretations of Sukhothai art developed through modern historiography and that dates traditionally assigned to particular monuments or stylistic phases require critical examination. The famous large walking Buddha now at Wat Benchamabophit in Bangkok, for example, has conventionally been associated with the high classical style and the reign of Mahādharmarāja I or Li Thai, but such an attribution should be treated as an art-historical interpretation rather than an uncontested documentary fact.

A sīmā stone from Wat Sorasak depicting a walking Buddha carries a date corresponding to 1412, providing valuable evidence that the type was established by the early fifteenth century (Stratton, 2009). Other reliefs and sculptures may be earlier, but their dates remain less certain.

The dating problems do not diminish the importance of the walking image. They require caution in describing it as the invention of one particular king, monk, or workshop.

From Narrative Figure to Independent Icon

Walking in Buddhist narrative art

In narrative reliefs, movement is comparatively easy to represent. A sculptor can place the Buddha among disciples, buildings, trees, or divine figures. The surrounding scene explains where he is going and what event is taking place.

An independent three-dimensional walking Buddha presents a more difficult problem. Once removed from narrative surroundings, movement must be communicated by the body alone. The sculpture must also remain physically stable. A natural walking body continually shifts its center of gravity, but a bronze image must stand permanently.

Sukhothai artists solved this problem through controlled asymmetry. One leg bears visual and structural weight; the other suggests forward motion. One arm hangs beside the body; the other is raised. The hips, torso, shoulders, and arms follow interrelated curves. The image appears to advance without losing balance.

Brown (1990) observes that earlier walking figures in relief may have contributed to the development of the freestanding Sukhothai type. Relief allows the background to support the figure, whereas a bronze in the round must solve the technical problems of projecting arms, narrow ankles, and shifted weight. The successful transfer from relief to independent sculpture represents a major technical and conceptual achievement.

Freedom from one narrative

When the walking Buddha became an independent icon, it gained semantic freedom. Without surrounding figures or narrative markers, the image no longer had to represent only one event. A devotee could associate it with several moments in the Buddha's sacred biography.

This polyvalence helps explain the image's enduring religious effectiveness. It can be interpreted historically, doctrinally, ritually, and aesthetically. Movement becomes the principal sign, while the destination remains open.

The Formal Grammar of Movement

The raised heel

The raised heel is the clearest indication that the Buddha is walking rather than standing. Yet the step is not represented naturalistically. The stride is usually restrained, and the soles may remain unusually flat or idealized.

The image does not record one instant of rapid movement like a modern photograph. It creates a generalized and continuous act of walking. The Buddha is not shown beginning or completing a particular step; he is eternally proceeding.

This suspended movement removes the figure from ordinary time. The image is still as an object but moving as a sign. It invites the viewer to imagine the next step, although the sculpture never physically completes it.

The S-shaped curve

Many Sukhothai walking Buddhas possess a gentle axial curve extending from the legs through the hips and torso to the neck and flame-like *uṣṇīṣa*. The curve is sometimes compared to a flame, vine, or flowing line.

It creates movement without muscular tension. The Buddha does not thrust his body forward. The body's rhythm appears effortless, as though movement arises naturally from inward equilibrium.

The line also connects the earthly and transcendent dimensions of the image. The feet touch the ground, but the figure grows progressively lighter as the eye moves upward. The flame-like finial completes the visual ascent, transforming bodily movement into spiritual radiance.

Arms, hands, and counterbalance

The arms establish a counter-rhythm. One arm descends in a long curve, while the raised arm interrupts the vertical flow and opens the figure toward the viewer. The gesture prevents the Buddha from appearing absorbed in private movement. He walks in relation to other beings.

The raised hand is most commonly interpreted as *abhaya-mudrā*, the gesture of fearlessness, protection, or reassurance. The open palm is directed outward, while the fingers extend upward. The gesture communicates the absence of threat.

The visual combination of walking and reassurance is doctrinally significant. The Buddha does not remain distant and immobile. He approaches while dispelling fear. Movement becomes an expression of compassion.

The robe as moving line

The monastic robe in Sukhothai sculpture is often indicated by restrained lines rather than represented as a heavy mass of fabric. It adheres closely to the body, allowing the viewer to perceive the idealized form beneath it.

In walking images, the robe's edge may reinforce the direction of movement. Small curves, folds, or projecting ends suggest that fabric responds to the advancing body. Yet the garment never becomes turbulent. It participates in the same controlled rhythm as the limbs. This balance is essential. Excessively dramatic drapery would imply speed, wind, or agitation. The Sukhothai robe indicates motion without disturbing serenity.

The serene face

The face provides the counterpoint to the body. The lowered eyes suggest meditation or inward awareness. Arched eyebrows, smooth cheeks, and a restrained smile communicate tranquility. The expression does not react to the surrounding environment.

The face does not imply unconsciousness or emotional emptiness. It suggests a mind fully aware but not controlled by sensory contact. Movement occurs without distraction.

The contrast between the moving body and serene face visually distinguishes enlightened action from ordinary action. Human beings often move because of desire, fear, impatience, or confusion. The walking Buddha moves without psychological disturbance.

Mindfulness Embodied

Knowing the body while moving

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* describes mindfulness of bodily postures: when walking, a practitioner knows that they are walking; when standing, they know that they are standing; when sitting or lying down, they understand the body's posture. It also instructs practitioners to act with situational awareness in going forward and returning, looking, bending, carrying robes, eating, and other activities (Bhikkhu Sujato, 2018).

The walking Buddha should not automatically be treated as a direct illustration of this discourse. No inscription attached to every image identifies it as a representation of *satipaṭṭhāna*. Nevertheless, the teaching provides an appropriate doctrinal context for understanding the image.

The Buddha's movement is neither impulsive nor distracted. Each part of the body appears coordinated. The raised heel, balanced torso, measured stride, and composed face make mindful movement visible.

The sculpture thus communicates a basic Buddhist principle: meditation is not confined to motionless sitting. Awareness can accompany bodily action.

Walking meditation

Walking meditation, Pāli *caṅkama*, has long been part of Buddhist monastic practice. It alternates with seated meditation, sustains alertness, and brings mindfulness into physical movement.

One interpretation associates the Sukhothai walking Buddha with the Buddha's meditative pacing during the weeks following enlightenment. Some art-market and museum descriptions use *caṅkama* to identify the posture. Brown (1990), however, demonstrates that walking Buddha imagery has a complicated history and cannot always be assigned confidently to one episode.

Even without a fixed narrative identification, the connection with walking meditation remains philosophically productive. The figure embodies movement governed by awareness. It demonstrates that stillness is a quality of mind rather than merely the absence of locomotion.

Fearlessness in Motion

The *abhaya-mudrā* gives the walking image an interpersonal dimension. An image with both arms resting at its sides might appear simply to walk past the devotee. The open palm addresses the viewer directly.

Fearlessness has at least two aspects. First, the Buddha is himself without fear because he has overcome ignorance, craving, and attachment. Second, he offers freedom from fear to others by teaching the causes and cessation of suffering.

The gesture does not express domination. The palm holds no weapon and makes no demand. Its authority arises from openness. The Buddha's power is demonstrated by his capacity to approach without threatening.

This gives the sculpture an ethical quality. In ordinary political imagery, a moving ruler or warrior may signify conquest. The walking Buddha transforms movement into peaceful presence. He advances but does not invade; commands attention but does not coerce; possesses power but does not display aggression.

The image can therefore be read as a visual contrast between *dhamma-vijaya*, conquest through righteousness or teaching, and conquest by force. This does not prove that every patron intended such a political interpretation, but it helps explain why the form could support ideals of Buddhist kingship.

Compassion and the Movement of the Dhamma

The Buddha who goes forth to teach

The historical Buddha did not remain beneath the Bodhi tree after enlightenment. Buddhist narratives describe him traveling among cities, villages, forests, and kingdoms to teach different communities. His ministry was defined by movement.

The walking image can therefore represent compassionate availability. Enlightenment does not result in withdrawal from all relationship. The Buddha moves toward beings who require instruction.

The raised hand and forward step reinforce one another. The gesture says, in visual form, "Do not fear," while the step reduces the distance between Teacher and devotee. Compassion becomes spatial: the Buddha crosses the gap separating wisdom from suffering beings.

Turning the Wheel through bodily movement

The dissemination of Buddhist teaching is traditionally described as turning the Wheel of the Dhamma. A walking Buddha may be understood as making the Dhamma itself mobile. The teaching moves because the Teacher walks.

This interpretation is especially relevant to Sukhothai's transregional religious environment. Monks, texts, relics, ordination lineages, and images traveled among Sri Lanka, the Malay Peninsula, Myanmar, and different mainland centers. The walking Buddha could resonate with a culture in which religious authority was repeatedly carried across geographical boundaries.

Bronze images were themselves mobile. Unlike a massive stupa or rock-cut monument, a metal image could be transported, donated, installed in another city, or copied by distant workshops. Brown (2014) emphasizes the role of portable metal icons in the spread and transformation of Buddhism. The walking Buddha is thus mobile in two senses: it represents movement, and as a bronze object it could participate in networks of circulation.

The Descent from the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven

A common interpretation associates the walking Buddha with the Buddha's descent from the Trāyastriṃśa heaven after teaching the Abhidhamma to his mother and the assembled deities. In Southeast Asian art, the descent is frequently depicted with the Buddha moving between Brahmā and Indra or accompanied by celestial beings.

The interpretation helps explain why the Buddha appears simultaneously moving and transcendent. He proceeds from a divine realm into the human world, making superior knowledge accessible to earthly beings.

Reliefs at Sukhothai-related sites, including Wat Traphang Thong Lang, have been discussed in connection with the descent. When attendant deities or celestial context survive, the narrative identification becomes comparatively strong. In a freestanding image without attendants, however, the identification is less certain.

A general walking Buddha may recall the descent without representing it exclusively. The icon can condense several sacred journeys. It is therefore methodologically safer to say that the descent is one possible field of meaning rather than the definitive subject of every walking image.

Motion and Stillness as a Buddhist Aesthetic

The Middle Way of representation

The Sukhothai walking Buddha avoids two visual extremes. It is neither rigidly static nor dramatically active. The body moves, but nothing appears excessive.

This balance corresponds aesthetically—not necessarily through direct textual illustration—to the Buddhist Middle Way. The image avoids both physical lifelessness and emotional agitation. Its movement is energetic without violence and graceful without sensual indulgence.

The doctrine becomes visible through formal moderation:

Visual feature	Avoided extreme	Possible doctrinal quality
Measured step	Hurry or inertia	Mindfulness
Curved but balanced body	Rigidity or instability	Middle Way
Serene face	Excitement or unconsciousness	Equanimity
Open palm	Aggression or withdrawal	Fearlessness and compassion
Smooth robe	Turbulence or heaviness	Discipline and simplicity
Upward flame	Earthbound weight	Wisdom and enlightenment

These correspondences are interpretive rather than documentary equations. Nevertheless, their coherence helps explain why the Sukhothai walking Buddha has been experienced as an exceptionally successful embodiment of Buddhist ideals.

Idealization rather than naturalism

The walking Buddha is not anatomically naturalistic in a modern Western academic sense. Fingers may be unusually long and equal; shoulders broad; waist narrow; limbs smooth; cranial flame elongated; and posture more curved than an ordinary walking body.

Such departures are not failures of observation. They produce an enlightened body distinct from ordinary human embodiment. Bautze-Picron (2021) notes that representations of the Buddha across South Asia developed according to iconographic rules concerning his

extraordinary bodily marks. The Buddha image is a metamorphosed body whose visible form expresses spiritual status.

Sukhothai sculptors used idealization to make internal qualities visible. Elongation suggests lightness; smoothness suggests freedom from tension; symmetry communicates order; and controlled asymmetry communicates conscious movement.

Rhythm as visual meditation

The sculpture guides the viewer's eye rhythmically. It may begin at the grounded foot, move along the curved leg and narrow waist, follow the raised hand, pass through the face, and conclude at the flame.

This visual progression encourages slow looking. The viewer does not receive the image through one isolated detail. Perception moves through the sculpture as the Buddha moves through space.

Because the image is three-dimensional, the viewer can also walk around it. The sculpture looks different from the front, side, and rear. From the front it may appear nearly symmetrical and stable; from the side, the raised heel and forward leg make its movement more apparent. The devotee's circumambulation activates the image's changing contours. The aesthetic experience thus involves two movements: the represented movement of the Buddha and the actual movement of the viewer.

Bronze, Balance, and Technical Knowledge

The development of the freestanding walking Buddha depended upon advanced bronze-casting skills. Slender ankles, extended arms, projecting hands, and shifted weight presented structural risks. Large images required careful control of casting, internal support, alloy composition, and surface finishing.

Technical knowledge was therefore inseparable from religious meaning. Without stable casting, the ideal of effortless movement could not be materialized. The sculptor's achievement lay in making heavy metal appear weightless.

Bronze creates another productive contrast. The material is durable and static, but its polished or smooth surface reflects changing light. As viewers move around the image, highlights travel along the limbs and robe, creating an impression of further motion.

Brown (2014) argues that metal icons played an important role in Buddhist transmission because they could be transported and reproduced. In Sukhothai, bronze enabled both the mobility of objects and the visual representation of mobility.

The Viewer and the Ethical Experience of the Image

A Buddha image is not only an art object to be observed from an analytical distance. Within a monastery it participates in offerings, chanting, recollection, vows, and meditation. Its meaning develops through ritual relationships.

The walking Buddha positions the devotee in a distinctive way. A seated Buddha may appear permanently enthroned or absorbed in meditation. A reclining Buddha directs attention toward final nirvana. A walking Buddha seems to enter the devotee's space.

The encounter may generate several responses: reassurance through the open palm; confidence through the Buddha's approach; mindfulness through contemplation of measured movement; recollection of the Buddha's teaching activity; aspiration to carry awareness into everyday conduct.

The image does not teach through propositions alone. It forms ethical imagination. It shows what an action might look like when freed from greed, hatred, fear, and delusion.

Religious Meaning and Political Patronage

Sukhothai sculpture developed within networks of royal and monastic patronage. Monumental Buddha images required substantial resources, organized workshops, metal, labor, and ritual authority. Their creation inevitably had political dimensions.

A ruler who sponsored Buddha images presented himself as a supporter of the *sāsana*. Yet the image also placed royal power beneath the superior authority of the Buddha. Unlike a royal portrait, the walking Buddha does not glorify the donor's physical body. It displays a perfected body against which ordinary rulers could be morally evaluated.

The moving Buddha may also have corresponded with Sukhothai's claim to be a center from which Theravāda Buddhism spread to surrounding territories. Images, monks, texts, and relics moved through networks supported by rulers. The form could therefore embody a vision of religious expansion distinct from military conquest.

Such an interpretation should not turn the sculpture into a simple instrument of state ideology. Monks, artisans, local donors, and devotees also shaped its production and meaning. The walking Buddha exceeded the intentions of any single patron.

Modern National Aesthetics and the “Thai” Walking Buddha

In modern Thai art history, the walking Buddha became evidence of Sukhothai's golden age and distinctive Thai genius. Its elegance, gentleness, and serenity were interpreted as expressions of an idealized national character.

This interpretation helped preserve and popularize Sukhothai art, but it also risks detaching the image from its transregional history. Possible Mon, Burmese, Sri Lankan, Khmer, and Indian precedents may be minimized when the image is presented as an entirely unprecedented national invention.

Krairiksh (1993) demonstrates that the historiography of Sukhothai art was shaped by modern projects of classification and national interpretation. Wisetchat (2013), by contrast, demonstrates how the Sukhothai Buddha developed through relationships with multiple regional styles while acquiring distinct characteristics.

The walking Buddha can therefore be recognized as a major Sukhothai achievement without treating it as culturally pure. Its originality lies in transformation. Sukhothai artists gave unprecedented prominence and formal coherence to an image whose conceptual and visual possibilities had circulated through the Buddhist world.

Conclusion

The Sukhothai walking Buddha is more than a graceful variation within the iconography of Buddhist sculpture. It is a visual argument about the nature of enlightened action.

Its raised heel, measured stride, curved torso, flowing robe, open palm, serene face, and ascending flame work together to reconcile movement with stillness. The Buddha acts without agitation, approaches without threatening, and moves through the world without becoming attached to it.

Several narratives may inform the image. It may evoke the Buddha's meditative pacing after enlightenment, his descent from the *Trāyastriṃśa* heaven, his journeys to teach, or the wider movement of the Dhamma. Because freestanding examples frequently lack narrative attributes, no single explanation should be imposed upon all of them.

The image's deeper coherence is ethical and contemplative. It makes mindfulness visible through coordinated movement, fearlessness visible through the open palm, equanimity visible through the serene face, and compassion visible through the forward step.

The Buddha does not wait for suffering beings to approach; he appears to move toward them.

The walking Buddha also demonstrates the relationship between doctrine and artistic technique. Buddhist ideas did not automatically produce the sculpture. Craftspeople had to solve problems of weight, balance, casting, proportion, and visibility. Through these material decisions, heavy bronze was made to appear light and a motionless object was made to walk.

Its originality consequently emerged from synthesis: inherited Buddhist iconography, regional sculptural traditions, Theravāda teachings, workshop knowledge, patronage, and local aesthetic judgment. The result was neither a literal illustration of scripture nor an autonomous exercise in beauty. It was an embodied Dhamma.

The enduring power of Phra Phuttha Līlā lies in this union. It shows that Buddhist stillness is not immobility and that liberation does not require withdrawal from meaningful action. The mind may be peaceful while the body moves; wisdom may remain unshaken while compassion advances into the world.

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Non-Self and the Self-Constructing Brain: A Dialogue between Buddhist Philosophy and the Neuroscience of the Default Mode Network

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Abstract

The Buddhist doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) and contemporary neuroscience both challenge the idea that personal identity depends upon an immutable inner subject. Early Buddhist philosophy analyzes a person into five aggregates—material form, feeling, perception, volitional formations, and consciousness—and argues that none can properly be regarded as a permanent self. Neuroscience similarly investigates selfhood as a collection of distributed and dynamic processes rather than the product of a single “self-center” in the brain. The default mode network (DMN), involving medial prefrontal, posterior cingulate, precuneus, and lateral parietal regions, has been associated with autobiographical memory, self-referential judgment, social cognition, future simulation, and mind-wandering. Meditation research suggests that some practices may alter DMN activity and its connectivity with attention, salience, and executive-control networks. These findings provide a productive basis for dialogue with Buddhist accounts of conditioned self-construction. Nevertheless, the DMN cannot simply be identified with the Buddhist concept of self, and reduced DMN activity does not constitute neuroscientific proof of *anattā*. This article distinguishes the philosophical, experiential, and neuroscientific levels of analysis, arguing that Buddhism and neuroscience converge methodologically in treating selfhood as constructed and dependent but differ in their aims and standards of evidence. A responsible dialogue can illuminate how self-related processes arise and change while avoiding both neuro-reductionism and the uncritical use of science to validate Buddhist doctrine.

Keywords: non-self, Buddhist philosophy, neuroscience, meditation, five aggregates

Introduction

The question “What is the self?” has occupied philosophy, religion, psychology, and neuroscience for centuries. Many traditions have understood the self as a stable subject that owns experiences, initiates actions, and remains identical through change. Buddhism offers a radical critique of this assumption. The doctrine of non-self maintains that no permanent, independent, and controlling self can be found within the physical and mental processes constituting a person.

Contemporary neuroscience approaches the problem from a different direction. Rather than searching for a metaphysical soul, neuroscientists investigate the neural systems involved in bodily awareness, autobiographical memory, agency, emotional evaluation, social identity, and self-referential thought. The emerging picture is not of a single location in which the self resides but of multiple interacting processes distributed across the brain and body.

The default mode network has become particularly important in this discussion. Initially identified through patterns of activity observed when participants were not engaged

in externally demanding tasks, the DMN is now associated with internally directed cognition, including remembering the past, imagining the future, reflecting upon personal traits, understanding others, and constructing narratives (Menon, 2023; Yeshurun et al., 2021).

Because several of these functions contribute to the experience of personal identity, some popular accounts describe the DMN as the brain's "self-network" or even the neurological location of the ego. Meditation studies reporting altered or reduced DMN activity have consequently been presented as evidence that contemplative practice dissolves the self and confirms the Buddhist doctrine of anattā.

Such claims are philosophically and scientifically premature. The Buddhist doctrine of non-self is not merely a prediction that one neural network will decrease in activity. It concerns the impermanent, conditioned, uncontrollable, and non-possessable character of all five aggregates. The DMN, meanwhile, performs numerous cognitive functions that cannot be reduced to egoistic thinking.

This article establishes a critical dialogue between Buddhist philosophy and DMN research. It asks where the two frameworks converge, where they differ, and what conclusions may responsibly be drawn from meditation neuroscience.

The Meaning of Non-Self in Early Buddhist Thought

What Non-Self Denies

The Pāli term anattā is formed from the negative prefix an- and attā, meaning self. It is commonly translated as non-self, not-self, or no-self. These translations carry different implications. "No-self" can sound like the categorical assertion that persons do not exist in any sense, whereas "not-self" emphasizes the practical examination of experience: this is not mine, this I am not, and this is not my self.

The Buddhist teaching does not deny the conventional existence of persons. People possess names, maintain relationships, remember events, make decisions, act intentionally, and experience consequences. What is rejected is an independent, permanent, and fully controlling essence underlying these processes.

Buddhist non-self should therefore be distinguished from three other positions: 1. It is not the claim that human beings are absolutely nonexistent. 2. It is not the claim that subjective experience never occurs. 3. It is not the claim that ethical responsibility is meaningless.

The doctrine concerns how the person exists: as a dependently originated process rather than an immutable substance.

The Five Aggregates

The Buddhist analysis organizes personal experience through five aggregates: 1. Material form (rūpa); 2. Feeling (vedanā); 3. Perception (saññā); 4. Volitional formations (saṅkhāra); and 5. Consciousness (viññāṇa).

Material form includes the body and physical processes. Feeling refers to the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral affective tone of experience. Perception recognizes and identifies features. Volitional formations include intentions, dispositions, emotions, and constructed responses. Consciousness arises in dependence upon sense faculties and objects.

In the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, the Buddha asks whether each aggregate is permanent or impermanent, satisfactory or unsatisfactory, and suitable to be regarded as "This is mine, this I am, this is my self." Because the aggregates change, produce vulnerability, and cannot be controlled completely, none qualifies as an enduring self (Bodhi, 2000; Saṃyutta Nikāya 22.59).

The argument does not attempt to identify a smaller self hidden behind the aggregates. It challenges the assumption that any component or combination of components can serve as an independent owner.

Impermanence and Lack of Control

Impermanence is central to the non-self analysis. A permanent self should remain unchanged, yet bodily and mental processes continually arise and cease. Memories fade, dispositions develop, emotions change, and consciousness occurs in momentary dependence upon conditions.

Lack of complete control supplies another argument. If the body were truly self, one should be able to command it never to age or become ill. If feelings were self, one should be able to experience only pleasant feelings. The inability to exercise sovereign control demonstrates that these processes are conditioned rather than possessions of an independent subject.

Lack of complete control does not mean that persons possess no agency. Practice, education, medicine, and social conditions can influence experience. The point is that agency itself is conditional and limited rather than the power of an unconditioned controller.

Is Buddhism Eliminating the Person?

Buddhist philosophy distinguishes between conventional personal language and analysis of ultimate constitution. Conventionally, it is meaningful to say that a person acts, remembers, practices meditation, and experiences the result of action. Analytically, no independent self can be found apart from conditioned physical and mental processes.

This distinction avoids two extremes. Substantialism reifies the person as an enduring essence, while nihilism concludes that no persons or responsibilities exist. The Buddhist Middle Way recognizes causal continuity without permanent identity.

Siderits (2007) describes this position through a reductionist interpretation: statements about persons can be conventionally useful even when no irreducible self exists. Other scholars emphasize that early Buddhist teaching may be primarily therapeutic, directing practitioners to cease identifying with the aggregates rather than constructing a comprehensive metaphysical theory.

These interpretations differ, but they agree that non-self is not equivalent to saying that nothing matters. Suffering remains experientially significant, and intentional actions continue to have consequences.

Neuroscientific Approaches to the Self

Neuroscience does not investigate a single unified object called “the self.” It studies multiple processes contributing to different forms of self-experience. These include: Bodily ownership; The sense of agency; Spatial perspective; Emotional evaluation; Autobiographical memory; Personality judgments; Social identity; Narrative continuity; and Distinctions between self and others.

These processes involve different but interacting neural systems. Bodily self-awareness may involve interoceptive, somatosensory, vestibular, and multisensory systems. Agency depends partly upon prediction and comparison of intended and observed movements. Autobiographical selfhood involves memory, language, affect, and narrative organization.

It is therefore misleading to ask where “the self” is located as though it were one object. A more productive question is how different forms of self-related processing are generated, integrated, and maintained.

Northoff et al. (2006) found that cortical midline structures were repeatedly involved when participants processed self-related information. These findings support the view that self-reference depends upon identifiable neural processes. They do not demonstrate the existence of a single, permanent neural self.

The Discovery and Organization of the Default Mode Network

The default mode network was identified through observations that certain brain regions showed relatively high activity during passive or internally oriented conditions and reduced activity during many externally demanding tasks. The network includes major regions such as: Medial prefrontal cortex; Posterior cingulate cortex; Precuneus; Angular gyrus and lateral parietal regions; Medial temporal subsystems; and Interacting hippocampal structures.

The term “default” initially referred to a characteristic pattern of neural activity when participants were not performing a specified external task. It does not mean that the brain is inactive during rest. Internally directed cognition can be highly complex.

Menon’s (2023) review of two decades of DMN research emphasizes its functional diversity. The network contributes to autobiographical and semantic memory, self-reference, social cognition, language, narrative processing, mind-wandering, and construction of internal models.

The DMN is not a single uniform system. Different subsystems participate in different tasks, and the network continually interacts with salience, executive, memory, sensory, and attentional networks.

The DMN and Self-Referential Processing

Self-referential processing occurs when information is evaluated in relation to oneself. An experimental participant may be asked whether a personality adjective describes them, whether an event belongs to their past, or how they might respond in a future situation.

Meta-analytic research has linked self-reference with medial cortical regions, including medial prefrontal and posterior midline structures (Northoff et al., 2006). The DMN also contributes to autobiographical memory, enabling past events to be incorporated into a personal narrative.

This supports the hypothesis that a sense of identity is constructed through ongoing processes rather than stored as a single unchanging object. The brain retrieves memories, integrates emotional significance, predicts future possibilities, and updates self-representations.

Yeshurun et al. (2021) describe the DMN as a point at which culturally shared narratives and idiosyncratic personal experience interact. This reinforces the understanding that selfhood depends upon social, linguistic, and narrative conditions.

However, the DMN should not be equated with the self for several reasons: 1. It contributes to thinking about other people as well as oneself. 2. It supports memory, language, narrative, and future simulation. 3. Self-related processing also depends upon networks outside the DMN. 4. The DMN is dynamic and heterogeneous rather than a single ego module. 5. Damage or altered activity in the network does not necessarily eliminate all self-experience.

The DMN is one contributor to particular forms of self-construction, especially narrative and reflective selfhood. It is not the complete neural basis of subjectivity.

Minimal and Narrative Forms of Selfhood

A useful distinction can be drawn between minimal and narrative selfhood.

The minimal self refers to immediate first-person experience: bodily presence, sensory perspective, and the sense that an experience is occurring here and now. It may arise without an explicit story about personal identity.

The narrative self refers to the temporally extended story through which a person connects memories, roles, values, relationships, and anticipated futures. The DMN appears

particularly important for narrative and autobiographical dimensions, although it also interacts with processes supporting immediate self-experience.

Buddhist analysis can address both levels. Mindfulness of the body and feelings investigates immediate embodied experience, while contemplation of perceptions, formations, and consciousness challenges identification with narrative and cognitive constructions.

Nevertheless, the Buddhist doctrine of non-self does not require the disappearance of all functional self-models. An awakened person can conventionally distinguish their body from another person's, remember commitments, use a name, and plan actions. What is abandoned is attachment to these processes as an independent and permanent essence.

Meditation and DMN Activity

Meditation research has examined whether attention and mindfulness practices alter DMN activity. Brewer et al. (2011) reported that experienced meditators showed differences in DMN activity and connectivity during several forms of meditation. These findings were consistent with reduced mind-wandering and altered relationships between default-mode and control regions.

Garrison et al. (2015) found that meditation was associated with relatively reduced DMN activity across several neuroimaging studies. Subsequent research has shown a more complex pattern than simple suppression. Meditation may alter connectivity between the DMN, salience network, and executive-control systems (Bremer et al., 2022).

Different practices may affect networks differently: Focused-attention meditation repeatedly redirects attention from distraction to an object. Open-monitoring practices observe changing experience without selecting a single object. Loving-kindness practice cultivates affective and social attitudes. Self-inquiry may engage self-referential processes rather than suppress them. Nondual practices may alter ordinary distinctions between observer and observed.

It is therefore inaccurate to claim that “meditation turns off the DMN.” Some practices reduce activity in particular regions under specific conditions, while others change connectivity or regulation. The pattern depends upon the practice, expertise, task, and method of analysis.

Meditation, Mind-Wandering, and Rumination

Mind-wandering involves thoughts shifting away from an intended task toward internally generated content. It may include planning, remembering, fantasy, creativity, or worry. It is not inherently pathological.

Rumination, by contrast, is repetitive and often negatively toned thought associated with distress and depression. Altered DMN activity and connectivity have been studied in relation to maladaptive self-focus and depressive rumination (Nejad et al., 2013).

Mindfulness can help practitioners recognize wandering or ruminative thought without automatically following it. The important mechanism may not be elimination of internal thought but improved regulation of when and how it occurs.

This distinction aligns with Buddhist practice. The problem is not that every self-related thought exists. The problem is grasping, identification, craving, aversion, and ignorance. Planning compassionate action or remembering an ethical commitment may involve self-related cognition without strengthening attachment to a permanent self.

A well-trained mind is therefore not necessarily a mind with minimal DMN activity. It is a mind capable of engaging and disengaging self-related processes appropriately.

Does Reduced DMN Activity Prove Non-Self?

Reduced or altered DMN activity cannot directly prove the Buddhist doctrine of non-self. Several reasons support this conclusion.

Category Difference

Anattā is a philosophical and soteriological teaching concerning the status of all conditioned phenomena. DMN activity is an empirical measurement of neural signals. The concepts belong to different explanatory levels.

Correlation Is Not Identity

A particular pattern of brain activity may correlate with reduced narrative self-reference. This does not mean that the neural pattern is identical to the realization of non-self.

Multiple Functions of the DMN

Because the DMN supports memory, social cognition, language, and future simulation, reduced activity cannot be interpreted simply as reduced ego.

Non-Self Includes All Aggregates

Buddhist non-self applies to body, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. It cannot be reduced to the activity of one neural network associated with only some cognitive functions.

Awakening Is Normative and Transformative

Realization of non-self is traditionally evaluated through reduced greed, hatred, delusion, and attachment. A brain scan does not independently establish these ethical and soteriological changes.

Neuroscience may show how self-related processes become less dominant or more flexible. It cannot determine by itself whether this constitutes liberating wisdom.

Convergences between Buddhism and Neuroscience

Despite these limitations, meaningful areas of convergence exist.

Rejection of a Single Self-Center

Neither early Buddhist analysis nor contemporary network neuroscience requires a single internal location where an enduring self resides. The sense of self emerges from interacting processes.

Dependence upon Conditions

Buddhism explains personal experience through aggregates and dependent origination. Neuroscience describes self-related functions through neural development, bodily regulation, memory, language, social interaction, and environmental learning.

Dynamic Construction

Both frameworks recognize that self-representation changes. Memory is reconstructed, personality develops, roles shift, and neural networks reorganize through experience.

Distinction between Process and Substance

Neuroscience investigates self-processing rather than discovering a self-substance. Buddhism similarly analyzes physical and mental processes without identifying an independent owner.

Trainability

Meditation research suggests that attention and self-related processing can be modified through practice. This is consistent with the Buddhist premise that attachment and identification are conditioned and therefore transformable.

These convergences support dialogue but not complete equivalence.

Fundamental Differences

Research Questions

Neuroscience asks how self-related functions are generated by neural systems. Buddhism asks why identifying conditioned phenomena as self produces suffering and how that identification can cease.

Method

Neuroscience employs imaging, behavioral tasks, electrophysiology, lesion studies, computational modeling, and statistical analysis. Buddhism employs ethical cultivation, meditation, introspection, doctrinal analysis, and soteriological evaluation.

Ontological Commitments

Neuroscience commonly works within methodological naturalism. Buddhist traditions include additional commitments concerning karma, rebirth, liberation, and the relation between consciousness and conditioned existence.

Goals

Neuroscience seeks explanation and prediction. Clinical neuroscience may aim at treatment. Buddhist practice ultimately seeks freedom from suffering and attachment.

Standards of Evidence

Neuroscientific claims require replicable measurements and controlled inference. Buddhist realization involves first-person insight, transformation of conduct, and evaluation within a contemplative tradition.

These differences should not be erased in the pursuit of interdisciplinary agreement.

The Five Aggregates and Self-Related Brain Processes

A cautious comparison between the five aggregates and neuroscientific processes may illuminate functional parallels. It must not be treated as a one-to-one anatomical mapping.

Buddhist aggregate	General function	Possible neuroscientific field of comparison
Material form	Body and physical processes	Embodiment, interoception, sensory and motor systems
Feeling	Pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral tone	Affective valuation and reward–aversion processing
Perception	Recognition and categorization	Perceptual processing, memory, and categorization
Volitional formations	Intentions, habits, and dispositions	Executive control, learning, emotion, and predictive processing
Consciousness	Awareness dependent upon faculty and object	Distributed conscious processing and sensory awareness

The comparison shows that the person involves many interacting systems. However, the aggregates are phenomenological and soteriological categories, not ancient neuroanatomical hypotheses. Attempting to assign each aggregate to a specific brain region would distort both Buddhism and neuroscience.

The DMN may be particularly relevant to aspects of perception, formations, memory, and consciousness involved in narrative selfhood, but it does not correspond exclusively to any aggregate.

Ethical Responsibility without a Permanent Self

Both Buddhist philosophy and neuroscience raise the question of how responsibility is possible if the self is constructed.

Buddhism grounds responsibility in causal continuity rather than permanent identity. Intentions shape dispositions, actions affect others, and later experiences arise partly through

earlier conduct. The agent who experiences a result is neither absolutely identical to nor completely different from the earlier agent.

Neuroscience similarly shows that behavior arises through biological, psychological, developmental, and social conditions. Recognizing these conditions may reduce simplistic blame, but it does not eliminate the need for responsibility, protection, education, and rehabilitation.

A process account can support a developmental view of responsibility. Because persons are not fixed essences, harmful patterns may change. Ethical systems can create conditions encouraging restraint, understanding, restitution, and transformation.

Non-self should not be used to avoid responsibility. The statement “there is no self, so no one performed the action” confuses ultimate analysis with conventional causality. Conventionally, intentions and actions have consequences.

Non-Self, Mental Health, and Clinical Caution

Reduced attachment to rigid self-narratives may support mental health. A person who no longer treats the thought “I am a failure” as an immutable identity may respond more flexibly. Mindfulness-based therapies use decentering in a manner that resembles limited aspects of non-self practice.

Nevertheless, Buddhist non-self should not be presented as a universal clinical technique. Some people experiencing trauma, depersonalization, psychosis, or unstable identity may find poorly guided self-dissolution practices confusing or distressing.

Depersonalization is not the same as liberating insight. Depersonalization may involve alienation, emotional numbing, unreality, and fear. Buddhist realization is traditionally associated with clarity, reduced attachment, compassion, and freedom from suffering.

Clinical application therefore requires attention to: Psychological stability; Trauma history; Intensity of practice; Quality of guidance; Participant interpretation; Adverse experiences; and Availability of professional care.

The distinction between a flexible conventional self and attachment to an intrinsic self is especially important. Therapy may appropriately strengthen a coherent conventional identity while Buddhist insight examines the reification of that identity.

Neuroplasticity and the Constructed Self

If self-related processes depend upon changing neural networks, they are in principle modifiable. Meditation, psychotherapy, relationships, education, culture, and repeated behavior may all affect the patterns through which identity is constructed.

Research reporting changes in DMN connectivity after mindfulness training supports the possibility that relationships among self-referential, salience, and control processes are plastic (Bremer et al., 2022; Tang et al., 2015).

Neuroplasticity, however, should not be romanticized. Plasticity is ethically neutral and biologically constrained. Trauma, addiction, chronic stress, and prejudice may also shape neural patterns. The fact that the brain changes does not guarantee beneficial transformation.

Buddhist cultivation contributes a normative framework: transformation should reduce greed, hatred, delusion, and suffering. Neuroscience can investigate mechanisms of change but does not independently determine which changes constitute wisdom.

The Problem of Neuro-Reductionism

Neuro-reductionism treats subjective, ethical, or philosophical phenomena as nothing more than neural events. Such reduction may be tempting when colorful brain images appear to provide objective explanations.

All ordinary human experience depends upon brain and bodily processes, but neural description does not exhaust meaning. An act of compassion involves neural activity, intention, another person's suffering, ethical understanding, cultural context, and behavior. A brain scan captures only selected aspects.

The Buddhist doctrine of non-self likewise includes philosophical reasoning, meditative observation, ethical transformation, and liberation. Identifying it with decreased posterior cingulate activity would omit nearly all these dimensions.

The opposite mistake is neuro-validation: using any neural finding associated with meditation as proof that Buddhist doctrines are scientifically true. A responsible dialogue treats neuroscience as relevant evidence about mechanisms without granting it authority over every philosophical and religious question.

An Enactive and Embodied Dialogue

The dialogue need not be limited to comparing Buddhist doctrine with isolated brain regions. Enactive and embodied approaches understand cognition as emerging through interactions among brain, body, environment, and action.

Varela et al. (1991) brought Buddhist philosophy into conversation with cognitive science by emphasizing embodied experience and the absence of a central controlling self. Thompson (2015) further explored how selfhood and consciousness are enacted through biological, experiential, and social processes.

This approach resonates with dependent origination more closely than a simple brain-localization model. The self is not constructed by the brain acting alone. It emerges through bodily regulation, interpersonal recognition, language, culture, memory, and ongoing engagement with the world.

Even the phrase “the brain constructs the self” should therefore be qualified. The brain is essential, but the self-model is formed within embodied and social life. A brain separated conceptually from its environment cannot explain the complete person.

A Multilevel Model for Dialogue

A responsible interdisciplinary framework can distinguish four levels:

Level	Central question	Relevant method
Neural	What networks participate in self-related processing?	Imaging, electrophysiology, lesion and connectivity studies
Psychological	How are identity, memory, agency, and emotion organized?	Behavioral research, clinical assessment, and cognitive modeling
Phenomenological	How is selfhood experienced moment by moment?	First-person reports and contemplative investigation
Philosophical-soteriological	Does any process constitute a permanent self, and how does identification produce suffering?	Buddhist analysis, reasoning, ethics, and meditation

No level should be collapsed into another. Neural evidence constrains claims about biological mechanisms, while phenomenological analysis contributes information about experience that imaging cannot provide directly. Buddhist philosophy raises normative and liberating questions that empirical measurement alone does not settle.

The levels can nevertheless inform each other. Meditation reports may guide experimental hypotheses; neuroscience may reveal hidden mechanisms; psychology may operationalize types of self-processing; and Buddhist analysis may clarify the distinction between functional selfhood and reified self-belief.

Discussion

The dialogue between anattā and DMN research is most productive when framed as a comparison between process models of selfhood.

Buddhism analyzes the person into five impermanent and conditioned aggregates. It denies that any aggregate or their collection provides an independent owner. Neuroscience analyzes selfhood into distributed processes involving body awareness, agency, emotion, memory, social cognition, and narrative organization.

DMN research supports the claim that autobiographical and reflective identity depends upon dynamic neural processes. Meditation research suggests that practitioners may modify their relationship to some of these processes.

However, the similarities do not establish doctrinal identity. The DMN is neither the self rejected by Buddhism nor the neurological ego that must be switched off. It is a heterogeneous network supporting several adaptive functions.

The Buddhist goal is not permanent suppression of autobiographical thought. It is freedom from attachment and mistaken identification. A person may remember the past, plan the future, and use conventional identity without believing that these processes constitute an immutable self.

Conclusion

Buddhist philosophy and contemporary neuroscience converge in challenging the idea of a single, permanent, and independently existing self. Early Buddhism analyzes personal experience through the five aggregates and demonstrates that each is impermanent, conditioned, and lacking sovereign control. Neuroscience identifies distributed systems that produce bodily, emotional, autobiographical, social, and narrative aspects of selfhood.

The default mode network contributes importantly to autobiographical memory, self-reference, social cognition, future simulation, language, and mind-wandering. It participates in constructing and maintaining personal narratives but is not a single center in which the self resides.

Meditation may alter DMN activity and connectivity, particularly its interaction with attention, salience, and executive-control networks. Such findings suggest that self-related processing is trainable and flexible. They do not prove the Buddhist doctrine of non-self or provide a neural measurement of awakening.

Non-self is broader than a reduction in narrative self-reference. It concerns the absence of an independent owner throughout body, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness. Its realization is traditionally evaluated through the reduction of greed, hatred, delusion, and suffering—not through a brain scan alone.

A responsible interdisciplinary dialogue should therefore avoid two extremes. Neuro-reductionism should not translate anattā into one pattern of neural activation, while religious appropriation of science should not claim that neuroscience has verified Buddhist liberation.

The most defensible conclusion is relational rather than reductive: both Buddhism and neuroscience reveal selfhood as a dynamic construction dependent upon multiple conditions. Buddhism adds the soteriological question of why attachment to that construction produces suffering; neuroscience adds empirical knowledge concerning the mechanisms through which self-related processes arise and change. Together, they can deepen understanding of the person without turning either the brain or emptiness into a new metaphysical self.

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Nāgārjuna's Dialectic and the Eightfold Negation : Deconstructing Extreme Views in Madhyamaka Philosophy

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Abstract

Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* begins with an eightfold negation: neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor permanence, neither identity nor difference, and neither coming nor going. These negations summarize the Madhyamaka critique of philosophical views that treat phenomena as possessing intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). They are sometimes misunderstood as a nihilistic rejection of causation, change, identity, and the empirical world. This article argues that Nāgārjuna's dialectic does not deny conventional reality but dismantles the conceptual extremes produced by reification. Through consequence-based reasoning, relational analysis, and the four-cornered negation known as the *catuṣkoṭi*, Nāgārjuna demonstrates that phenomena cannot arise, cease, persist, differ, arrive, or depart through an independent essence. These processes remain conventionally valid because they occur through dependent origination. The eightfold negation thus does not replace existing metaphysical theories with another theory of ultimate reality. It reveals the emptiness of all theoretical positions when they are interpreted as descriptions of intrinsically existing entities. By connecting dialectical analysis with dependent origination, the two truths, and the relinquishment of views, this article concludes that Madhyamaka reasoning is therapeutic and soteriological. It frees thought from eternalism and annihilationism while preserving the causal and ethical world necessary for Buddhist practice and liberation.

Keywords: Nāgārjuna, Madhyamaka, dialectic, eightfold negation, *catuṣkoṭi*, emptiness

Introduction

Nāgārjuna is one of the most influential and controversial philosophers in the Buddhist tradition. His principal work, the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, or Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way, presents a sustained examination of causation, motion, perception, the aggregates, personal identity, action, suffering, time, the Four Noble Truths, and *nirvāṇa*. The text does not construct a conventional metaphysical system. Instead, it analyzes the assumptions underlying philosophical explanations and shows that they become incoherent when phenomena are treated as possessing intrinsic nature.

The dedicatory verses of the *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* summarize this project through eight negations. Nāgārjuna pays homage to the Buddha, who taught dependent origination as: Neither cessation nor origination, neither annihilation nor permanence, neither identity nor difference, neither coming nor going. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 2013, dedicatory verses)

The verses are often called the eightfold negation. They contain four conceptual pairs: 1. Cessation and origination; 2. Annihilation and permanence; 3. Identity and difference; and 4. Coming and going.

At first sight, the negations appear to contradict ordinary experience. Things seem to originate and cease, remain temporarily identical, differ from other things, and move from one place to another. If Nāgārjuna denies all these processes, his philosophy appears to eliminate the empirical world and approach nihilism.

This interpretation overlooks the distinction between conventional functioning and intrinsic existence. Nāgārjuna does not deny that a flame conventionally arises when appropriate conditions are present or ceases when its fuel is exhausted. He denies that origination and cessation can be established as processes involving intrinsically existing causes, effects, or entities.

The eightfold negation is therefore directed against reified interpretations of phenomena rather than against conventional experience. It expresses the Middle Way between the extremes of absolute existence and complete nonexistence. Phenomena function because they arise dependently, but precisely because they arise dependently, they lack independent self-nature.

This article examines the philosophical structure of Nāgārjuna's dialectic and explains each pair of the eightfold negation. It also analyzes the relationship between dialectical reasoning, the *catuṣkoṭi*, dependent origination, emptiness, the two truths, and liberation from attachment to views.

Nāgārjuna and the Purpose of Madhyamaka Dialectic

Nāgārjuna is generally dated to approximately the second or third century CE. Although historical information concerning his life remains limited, his writings became foundational for Indian Madhyamaka and profoundly influenced Tibetan and East Asian Buddhist traditions.

The term Madhyamaka means the “Middle Way” or “Middle Position.” Its middle character does not signify an arbitrary compromise between competing theories. It refers to the avoidance of philosophical extremes, particularly eternalism and annihilationism.

Eternalism maintains that persons or phenomena possess permanent and self-sustaining natures. Annihilationism either denies meaningful causal continuity or supposes that a genuinely existing entity is completely destroyed. Nāgārjuna argues that these positions share a hidden premise: both assume that things must possess intrinsic nature either to continue or to be annihilated.

Madhyamaka dialectic exposes this premise. It asks whether a phenomenon exists through its own nature or only through causes, conditions, components, relations, and conceptual designation. If it depends upon these factors, it cannot possess a fully independent essence.

The purpose of this method is not only theoretical. Buddhist philosophy connects false views with suffering. The belief in an intrinsically existing self supports attachment to “I” and “mine,” while the belief in fixed identities supports hostility, pride, fear, and craving. Philosophical analysis becomes soteriologically significant when it weakens the reification that sustains these afflictions.

Nāgārjuna's dialectic is therefore both critical and therapeutic. It criticizes metaphysical claims while training the practitioner to recognize the constructed character of the categories through which reality is grasped.

Intrinsic Nature as the Target of Critique

The central object of Nāgārjuna's criticism is *svabhāva*, commonly translated as intrinsic nature, inherent existence, own-being, or self-nature. A phenomenon possessing *svabhāva* would exist independently of external causes, constituent parts, conceptual designation, and relations to other phenomena.

Nāgārjuna argues that intrinsic nature is incompatible with dependent origination. If something exists through its own immutable nature, it cannot be produced by causes or changed by conditions. Conversely, if it is affected by causes and conditions, its existence cannot be entirely self-established.

In Chapter 15, Nāgārjuna states: The arising of intrinsic nature through causes and conditions is not reasonable. Intrinsic nature arising from causes and conditions would be a nature that was made. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 15.1)

A “produced intrinsic nature” would be contradictory. What is produced depends upon something else, whereas intrinsic nature is supposed to be independent. If the nature of fire depends upon fuel, oxygen, heat, and other conditions, it is not an independently existing essence.

The dialectical critique consequently does not seek to prove that phenomena are absolutely nonexistent. It demonstrates that the manner of existence attributed to them— independent and self-grounded existence—is incoherent.

Westerhoff (2009) explains that Nāgārjuna examines several interconnected meanings of *svabhāva*: independence from causes, independence from conceptual construction, and possession of a permanent defining essence. His arguments show that no phenomenon can satisfy these conditions while remaining causally effective.

The Structure of Nāgārjuna’s Dialectical Method

Nāgārjuna employs several overlapping forms of argument. Three are particularly important: consequence reasoning, relational analysis, and the *catuṣkoṭi*.

Consequence Reasoning

Consequence reasoning begins with an opponent’s claim and examines its implications. If the consequences contradict experience, Buddhist doctrine, or the opponent’s other commitments, the original claim must be abandoned.

For example, suppose suffering possessed an intrinsic nature. It could not depend upon ignorance and craving, could not arise through conditions, and could never cease. The Four Noble Truths would become impossible. The attempt to establish suffering as intrinsically real therefore destroys the causal and soteriological functions one seeks to explain.

The consequence method is later associated especially with the *Prāsaṅgika* interpretation of *Madhyamaka*. However, the precise relationship between Nāgārjuna’s arguments and later Tibetan classifications should not be projected backward without qualification. Nāgārjuna uses consequences extensively, but he also makes direct claims concerning dependent origination and emptiness.

Relational Analysis

Many *Madhyamaka* arguments examine conceptually interdependent pairs such as cause and effect, agent and action, whole and part, motion and mover, or self and other. Each member of the pair can be understood only in relation to the other.

If a cause were intrinsically a cause, it would have to possess that nature independently of producing an effect. Yet something is called a cause precisely because of its relation to an effect. Similarly, an effect is identifiable only in relation to its cause. Neither can be established independently.

Relational dependence does not eliminate the conventional distinction between cause and effect. It shows that the distinction cannot be grounded in self-existing essences.

The Four-Cornered Analysis

The *catuṣkoṭi*, or *tetralemma*, examines four logically possible positions: 1. A phenomenon exists; 2. It does not exist; 3. It both exists and does not exist; and 4. It neither exists nor does not exist.

Nāgārjuna often rejects all four when they are interpreted as statements about intrinsic existence. This does not necessarily mean that ordinary logic has been abandoned. The four alternatives fail because each attempts to establish an intrinsically determinate metaphysical position.

The *catuṣkoṭi* is not identical to the eightfold negation, but both serve the same broader purpose. They prevent the mind from escaping one reified position only to become attached to its opposite.

The First Pair: Neither Origination nor Cessation

The first pair concerns origination (*utpāda*) and cessation (*nirodha*). These are central to Buddhist causal teaching: conditioned phenomena arise and cease. Why, then, does Nāgārjuna negate them?

The object of negation is intrinsic origination and intrinsic cessation. Nāgārjuna's opening analysis presents four possible ways in which something might arise:

Neither from itself nor from another, nor from both, nor without a cause does anything whatever arise anywhere. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 1.1)

Origination from Itself

If an effect arises from itself, it must already exist before its production. Production would then be redundant because the thing already exists. A seed cannot produce a plant that is intrinsically identical to the seed, since the plant's production would add nothing new.

Origination from Another

If an effect arises from something intrinsically different, no necessary relation connects them. If complete difference were sufficient for causation, darkness could produce light, a stone could produce consciousness, and anything could arise from anything else.

The argument does not deny that causes and effects are conventionally distinguishable. It rejects their absolute otherness.

Origination from Both

Combining self-production and production from another does not resolve their difficulties. If each alternative is incoherent independently, their combination cannot create a coherent explanation.

Origination Without a Cause

If things arose without causes, their occurrence would be entirely arbitrary. There would be no reason for rice to grow from rice seeds rather than from stones, and disciplined practice would have no systematic relationship with liberation.

Nāgārjuna therefore rejects all forms of intrinsic origination. Conventional arising remains possible through networks of conditions. A plant arises in dependence upon a seed, water, soil, light, temperature, and biological processes. No single independent entity crosses from nonbeing into self-established existence.

Intrinsic cessation is rejected for a corresponding reason. If something possessed an immutable nature, it could not cease. If it were entirely nonexistent, there would be nothing to cease. Cessation is conventionally intelligible only as the transformation of a dependently arisen process.

The Second Pair: Neither Annihilation nor Permanence

The second pair negates annihilation (*uccheda*) and permanence (*śāśvata*). These correspond to two major extremes rejected throughout Buddhist philosophy.

Permanence assumes that a person, substance, or phenomenon retains an unchanging essence through time. Annihilation assumes either that a self-existent entity is eventually destroyed or that death terminates causal continuity and makes moral action meaningless.

Nāgārjuna writes: “It exists” is a grasping at permanence; “It does not exist” is the view of annihilation. Therefore, the wise should not dwell in either existence or nonexistence. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 2013, 15.10)

The Middle Way rejects an eternal self without reducing the person to absolute nonexistence. A person is a causally continuous but constantly changing series of physical and mental events. The later person is neither absolutely identical to nor completely different from the earlier person.

This has important implications for karmic responsibility. If an unchanging self existed, action could not transform it. If no causal continuity existed, the consequences of action could not affect a later stage of the person. Dependent continuity avoids both problems.

The flame of a lamp provides a useful analogy. A flame changes from moment to moment and depends upon fuel and oxygen. It is not a permanent substance, yet its later stages are causally connected to earlier stages. Extinguishing the flame is neither the annihilation of an eternal entity nor proof that the flame never conventionally existed.

Nāgārjuna’s rejection of permanence and annihilation thus protects both impermanence and causal continuity. It also demonstrates that the two extremes are mutually dependent: annihilation can be conceived only when something is first imagined as intrinsically existent and subsequently destroyed.

The Third Pair: Neither Identity nor Difference

The third pair concerns identity (ekārtha) and difference (nānārtha). Nāgārjuna repeatedly demonstrates that related phenomena cannot be established as either intrinsically identical or intrinsically different.

Consider fire and fuel. If fire were absolutely identical to fuel, burning and what is burned would be indistinguishable. The act of burning could not be explained because no relationship could exist between two distinct factors. If fire were completely different from fuel, it could exist independently and continue burning without fuel.

Conventionally, fire and fuel are neither simply identical nor entirely separate. Fire depends upon fuel, while fuel becomes fuel within the process of combustion. Their identities are relational.

The same analysis applies to the agent and action. If the agent were identical to the action, a person would exist only during the particular action and could not perform different actions. If the agent were entirely separate from action, one could be an agent without ever acting.

The whole-part relationship produces similar difficulties. A chariot is not identical to any individual part, but it is not wholly independent of its parts. It cannot be found as an additional substance located outside the wheels, axle, frame, and their arrangement.

Nāgārjuna does not conclude that wholes or agents are absolutely nonexistent. They exist as dependent designations. Their conventional identities are established through components, relations, purposes, and linguistic practices.

The negation of absolute identity and difference is therefore not a rejection of all distinctions. It rejects the transformation of functional distinctions into metaphysically independent boundaries.

The Fourth Pair: Neither Coming nor Going

The final pair concerns coming (āgama) and going (nirgama). Nāgārjuna’s analysis of motion in Chapter 2 is one of the best-known demonstrations of his dialectical method.

Motion seems to require a mover, a path already traversed, a path not yet traversed, and a presently traversed location. Nāgārjuna asks where motion can be found.

Motion cannot occur in the already-traversed path because movement there has been completed. It cannot occur in the not-yet-traversed path because movement has not yet occurred there. If motion occurs in a presently traversed path, that path must already be identified through the motion it is supposed to explain. The account risks circularity.

A similar problem arises with the mover. If a mover exists independently of movement, someone could be a mover while entirely motionless. If the mover is identical to movement, there would be no distinction between the person who moves and the event of moving.

These arguments do not deny that people conventionally walk or that objects change location. They reveal that motion cannot be isolated as an intrinsically existing entity independent of a mover, spatial relations, temporal stages, and conceptual designation.

Coming and going are relational concepts. Something “comes” only relative to a selected destination and “goes” only relative to a point of departure. The same movement can be described as coming by one observer and going by another. This perspectival dependence undermines intrinsic coming and going without eliminating observable movement.

The negation also has a broader Buddhist meaning. If phenomena possess no intrinsic nature, no self-existent entity travels unchanged through time, causation, or rebirth. Continuity occurs through conditioned processes, not through the movement of a permanent substance.

The Eightfold Negation and Dependent Origination

The eight negations are not isolated skeptical claims. They describe dependent origination freed from metaphysical reification. The dedicatory verse praises the Buddha for teaching dependent origination as free from origination, cessation, permanence, annihilation, identity, difference, coming, and going.

The relationship may be summarized as follows:

Negated pair	Reified assumption	Dependent-origination analysis
Origination–cessation	Self-existing things enter or leave existence	Conditioned processes emerge and transform relationally
Permanence–annihilation	A substance either endures or is destroyed	Causal continuity occurs without immutable identity
Identity–difference	Related things must be absolutely one or separate	Phenomena are distinguishable but mutually dependent
Coming–going	A self-identical entity moves between fixed points	Motion depends upon mover, space, time, and perspective

Dependent origination does not mean that an already constituted entity enters into relationships after it exists. Relations and conditions are partly constitutive of what the entity is. A cause is a cause only in relation to an effect; a parent is a parent only in relation to a child; and a moving object is identified through changing spatial and temporal relations.

Nāgārjuna’s most explicit statement appears in Chapter 24: Whatever is dependently originated, that is explained to be emptiness. That, being a dependent designation, is itself the Middle Way. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 2013, 24.18)

The eightfold negation describes the absence of intrinsic nature, while dependent origination explains the conventional functioning of empty phenomena. Emptiness and dependent origination are consequently not competing explanations.

Is Nāgārjuna a Nihilist?

Nāgārjuna’s opponents accuse him of nihilism. If all phenomena are empty, they argue, then the Four Noble Truths, moral action, the Buddhist community, and nirvāṇa cannot exist.

Nāgārjuna responds that these phenomena would be impossible if they possessed intrinsic nature. Suffering can cease only because it is conditioned rather than immutable. The path can transform the practitioner only because neither the practitioner nor the mental defilements possess fixed essences.

He writes: For one for whom emptiness is possible, everything is possible. For one for whom emptiness is not possible, nothing is possible. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.14)

This statement does not mean that anything can happen without conditions. It means that causation, transformation, and liberation are possible only because phenomena lack unchangeable intrinsic nature.

Nihilism asserts that nothing exists or matters. Madhyamaka maintains that things function conventionally and produce consequences, but not through self-established essences. Fire burns, suffering is painful, compassion reduces harm, and ignorance conditions attachment. Their emptiness does not eliminate these differences.

Garfield (1995) therefore interprets Nāgārjuna as rejecting the claim that conventional reality requires an ultimate metaphysical foundation. The absence of such a foundation does not destroy the conventional world.

The Eightfold Negation and the Two Truths

The distinction between conventional and ultimate truth prevents the eightfold negation from being misunderstood.

Conventionally, phenomena originate and cease, persist through limited periods, differ from one another, and move between locations. These descriptions are necessary for ordinary life, ethical practice, and Buddhist teaching.

Ultimately, none of these processes can be established through intrinsic nature. Under analysis, origination depends upon causes and effects, identity depends upon difference, and motion depends upon spatial and temporal relations.

The two levels may be distinguished as follows:

Conventional truth	Ultimate analysis
A seed produces a plant	Neither seed nor plant possesses an independent causal essence
A person changes over time	No permanent self can be found within the changing process
Fire differs from fuel	Fire and fuel cannot be established as completely separate
A traveller moves toward a city	Traveller, motion, path, and destination exist relationally
An action produces a result	Neither action nor result operates through immutable self-nature

Ultimate analysis does not cancel conventional truth. It exposes the dependent mode through which conventional truth functions.

Nāgārjuna consequently states that Buddhist teaching relies upon two truths and that ultimate truth cannot be taught without convention (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.8–10). The eightfold negation is communicated through language even though it reveals that linguistic categories lack intrinsic foundations.

Does Nāgārjuna Hold No Position?

Nāgārjuna is sometimes understood as claiming that he has no thesis. In the *Vigrahavyāvartanī*, he responds to critics by saying that if he had a proposition, he would incur the faults attributed to him, but because he has no proposition, those faults do not apply.

This claim requires careful interpretation. Nāgārjuna clearly writes sentences, offers arguments, and defends dependent origination. “Having no thesis” cannot mean that he makes no conventional claims whatsoever.

It more plausibly means that he advances no metaphysical thesis asserting the intrinsic nature of reality. His statements function conventionally and therapeutically. They reveal contradictions in reified positions without establishing a new intrinsically true doctrine.

This aspect of Madhyamaka has produced considerable scholarly debate. Robinson (1957) argued that Nāgārjuna's reasoning depends upon logical relations accepted within the opponent's system. Garfield (2002) emphasizes that Madhyamaka can make conventionally true assertions without treating them as ultimately grounded. Westerhoff (2009) interprets Nāgārjuna as rejecting the metaphysical foundations presupposed by competing ontologies.

Nāgārjuna's "positionlessness" is therefore not intellectual silence. It is refusal to reify philosophical conclusions.

The Emptiness of the Dialectic

Nāgārjuna's reasoning must itself be empty. If the dialectic possessed an intrinsic and universally self-validating nature, it would contradict the analysis applied to all other phenomena.

An empty argument can nevertheless function. Medicine does not need intrinsic nature to cure illness; it functions through causes and conditions. Likewise, a dialectical argument can correct a mistaken view through language, shared assumptions, reasoning, and the intellectual capacities of its audience.

Nāgārjuna compares incorrectly understood emptiness to a snake seized improperly or a spell used without sufficient knowledge (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 24.11). The dialectic must not become an instrument for declaring all statements meaningless or for winning disputes without ethical purpose.

Once the reified view has been relinquished, the corrective argument should not become a new object of attachment. Madhyamaka analysis resembles a tool used to remove a conceptual obstruction rather than a permanent metaphysical structure.

This is sometimes described as the emptiness of emptiness. Emptiness is not the ultimate essence of things; it is the absence of the essence imagined by reifying cognition. The dialectic reveals this absence while remaining dependent upon conventional language and reasoning.

Dialectic as Philosophical Therapy

Nāgārjuna's dialectic resembles philosophical therapy because it addresses the psychological attachment underlying metaphysical positions. People do not hold views only as abstract propositions. Views structure identity, desire, fear, and relationships with others.

Belief in a permanent self supports possessiveness and defensiveness. Belief in fixed identities can transform temporary conflicts into absolute opposition. Belief that pleasure possesses an intrinsic capacity to provide happiness sustains craving, even when experience repeatedly demonstrates its instability.

The eightfold negation weakens these patterns: 1. Negating intrinsic origination and cessation challenges attachment to fixed beginnings and endings. 2. Negating permanence and annihilation releases the mind from eternalist security and nihilistic despair. 3. Negating absolute identity and difference challenges rigid distinctions between self and other. 4. Negating intrinsic coming and going undermines the assumption of a permanent entity travelling through change.

This therapeutic function does not imply that conceptual reasoning alone produces liberation. Ethical discipline, meditation, and the cultivation of compassion remain essential. Dialectic removes intellectual obstacles and supports insight, but transformative realization requires the reorientation of perception and conduct.

Ethical and Soteriological Implications

The eightfold negation has direct implications for Buddhist ethics. If persons possessed fixed natures, moral transformation would be impossible. A cruel person would remain essentially cruel, while an ignorant person could never become wise.

Because personal characteristics arise conditionally, they can change through new conditions. Repeated wholesome intentions develop habits; mindfulness changes responses to emotional states; education transforms understanding; and compassion can interrupt cycles of retaliation.

Emptiness does not excuse misconduct. Intentional actions remain causally effective within conventional reality. The absence of an intrinsically existing agent does not remove the continuity between intention, action, and consequence.

The negation of absolute identity and difference also supports compassion. Self and other are conventionally distinguishable, but neither is an independent substance. Human well-being depends upon families, communities, ecosystems, institutions, and innumerable forms of cooperation. Recognizing this dependence can weaken self-centered attachment.

Yet Madhyamaka should not be reduced to a general claim that “everything is connected.” Nāgārjuna’s analysis is more precise: phenomena lack intrinsic nature because their identities and functions depend upon conditions, parts, relations, and designations. Ethical conclusions must also draw upon Buddhist teachings on non-harming, compassion, intention, and wisdom.

Samsāra and Nirvāṇa

The dialectical method reaches its soteriological culmination in Nāgārjuna’s analysis of nirvāṇa. If nirvāṇa possessed intrinsic nature, it would be independent of conditions and could not be attained. If it were a newly produced entity, it would be conditioned and impermanent. If it meant absolute nonexistence, liberation would be indistinguishable from annihilation.

Nāgārjuna rejects these alternatives and states: There is not the slightest difference between cyclic existence and nirvāṇa. There is not the slightest difference between nirvāṇa and cyclic existence. (Nāgārjuna, trans. 1995, 25.19)

The statement does not mean that suffering and liberation are conventionally identical. Samsāra is experience structured by ignorance, craving, and attachment, whereas nirvāṇa is freedom from these conditions.

The verse negates an intrinsic ontological difference between two self-existing realms. Nirvāṇa is not located elsewhere. It is realized when the dependently arisen world is no longer grasped through intrinsic existence.

The eightfold negation thus prepares the way for liberation. When origination, cessation, identity, difference, permanence, annihilation, coming, and going are no longer reified, the conceptual foundations of attachment are weakened.

A Synthesis of the Eightfold Negation

The overall structure of Nāgārjuna’s analysis may be represented as follows: Each pair becomes problematic when treated as an intrinsic description of reality. Dialectical examination does not leave absolute nonexistence behind. It reveals dependent origination as the Middle Way.

The eight negations can therefore be understood as four applications of one fundamental insight: Because phenomena arise and function dependently, they cannot be established through either side of a metaphysical opposition.

Contemporary Philosophical Significance

Nāgārjuna's dialectic remains relevant to contemporary debates concerning identity, language, metaphysics, and epistemology. It challenges the assumption that meaningful discourse requires independently existing essences.

Modern discussions of personal identity similarly question whether a person must possess an unchanging core. Madhyamaka offers a model of continuity based upon causal and relational processes rather than permanent substance.

The critique of absolute identity and difference may also illuminate social classification. Categories such as nationality, ethnicity, occupation, and social status possess conventional functions but do not describe immutable essences. Recognizing their constructed and relational character can reduce essentialist prejudice without denying their real social effects.

In epistemology, Nāgārjuna challenges the search for an ultimately self-validating foundation. Knowledge can be reliable through interconnected practices of perception, inference, testimony, testing, and correction. Dependence need not imply arbitrariness.

These comparisons should be made cautiously. Nāgārjuna addressed Indian philosophical and Buddhist soteriological problems rather than contemporary analytic philosophy or social theory. Nevertheless, his dialectical critique provides conceptual resources for examining how useful distinctions become oppressive or incoherent when transformed into absolute realities.

Discussion

The eightfold negation summarizes Nāgārjuna's entire philosophical project. Its purpose is not to deny the observable world but to dismantle the assumption that conventional processes possess intrinsic nature.

Origination and cessation are conventionally valid transformations, but no self-existent entity enters or leaves existence. Permanence and annihilation are extremes produced by imagining an independent substance that either continues forever or is completely destroyed. Identity and difference function within ordinary analysis but cannot be established absolutely between relational phenomena. Coming and going describe motion relative to spatial and temporal perspectives, not the movement of an immutable essence.

Nāgārjuna's dialectic is negative in method but constructive in consequence. By removing intrinsic nature, it preserves causation, change, ethical development, and liberation. Dependent origination becomes intelligible precisely because causes and effects are empty.

The dialectic also remains self-critical. Its negations are conventional instruments rather than absolute propositions. Emptiness itself is empty, and the Middle Way must not become another dogmatic position.

Conclusion

Nāgārjuna's eightfold negation—neither origination nor cessation, neither permanence nor annihilation, neither identity nor difference, and neither coming nor going—is a concise formulation of the Madhyamaka critique of intrinsic existence.

The negations do not claim that nothing arises, changes, differs, or moves in conventional experience. They demonstrate that these processes cannot be explained through independently existing entities. What arises does so through conditions; what ceases is a conditioned process; what continues does so through causal transformation; and what moves does so relative to spatial, temporal, and conceptual frameworks.

Nāgārjuna's dialectical method includes consequence reasoning, relational analysis, and four-cornered examination. These methods expose the contradictions generated when conventional concepts are converted into ultimate metaphysical categories. The dialectic does

not replace rejected positions with a new theory of an intrinsically existing emptiness. It releases thought from attachment to all such positions.

The eightfold negation consequently expresses the Middle Way. It avoids eternalism without falling into annihilationism, acknowledges conventional distinctions without absolutizing them, and affirms causal continuity without proposing a permanent substance.

Its ultimate purpose is soteriological. Reified views sustain attachment, hostility, and ignorance. By recognizing the emptiness of the self and all phenomena, the practitioner becomes capable of responding to changing conditions with greater wisdom and compassion.

Nāgārjuna's dialectic is therefore neither destructive skepticism nor verbal paradox for its own sake. It is a disciplined method of freeing thought from the extremes that arise when dependent phenomena are mistakenly grasped as self-existent realities.

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Dependent Origination as a Bridge between Nibbāna and Emptiness : An Analysis of Reality and the Absence of Intrinsic Essence in Buddhist Philosophy

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Abstract

Dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda/pratītyasamutpāda*) occupies a foundational position in both Theravāda and Mahāyāna Buddhist philosophy. In the early Buddhist discourses, it explains the conditioned arising of suffering, the continuity of *samsāric* existence without a permanent self, and the possibility of liberation through the cessation of causal conditions. In Madhyamaka philosophy, particularly in Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*, dependent origination becomes the principal basis for demonstrating emptiness (*śūnyatā*): because phenomena arise in dependence upon causes, conditions, parts, and conceptual designation, they lack an independent intrinsic nature (*svabhāva*). This article examines dependent origination as a conceptual bridge between *nibbāna* and emptiness. It argues that *nibbāna* and *śūnyatā* should not be treated as exact synonyms. *Nibbāna* primarily denotes the cessation of craving, ignorance, suffering, and rebirth, whereas *śūnyatā* describes the absence of intrinsic existence in all phenomena, including conventional objects and doctrinal categories. Nevertheless, the two concepts converge soteriologically through dependent origination. Insight into conditionality reveals both how suffering is produced and why neither the person nor the constituent processes of existence possess an immutable essence. Properly understood, emptiness does not negate causal efficacy, ethical responsibility, or liberation; it explains their possibility. Dependent origination thus connects the Theravāda analysis of cessation with the Madhyamaka critique of substantialism while preserving significant differences between the two traditions.

Keywords: dependent origination, *paṭiccasamuppāda*, *nibbāna*, Theravāda, Madhyamaka

Introduction

Dependent origination is among the most fundamental and philosophically complex teachings in Buddhism. It explains that phenomena do not arise independently but occur in dependence upon appropriate causes and conditions. In its most familiar formulation, the principle states: when this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises; when this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases (Bodhi, 2000).

This teaching performs several functions. It explains the arising and cessation of suffering, provides an account of continuity without an eternal self, supports the doctrine of kamma, and establishes the possibility of liberation. It also offers a middle position between

eternalism—the belief in permanent substances or selves—and annihilationism—the belief that a genuinely existing person is completely destroyed.

In Theravāda Buddhism, dependent origination is generally interpreted through the arising and cessation of suffering. When ignorance, craving, and clinging are present, the cycle of conditioned existence continues. When these causes are eliminated through wisdom, the process leading to suffering and rebirth ceases. This cessation is inseparable from the realization of nibbāna.

In Mahāyāna Madhyamaka, dependent origination receives a wider philosophical application. Nāgārjuna argues that whatever arises dependently cannot possess *svabhāva*, an independent or self-established nature. Dependent origination consequently entails emptiness. Emptiness does not mean nonexistence; it means the absence of an intrinsic essence that would enable something to exist independently of causes, conditions, parts, relations, and conceptual designation (Garfield, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013).

Dependent origination may therefore be understood as a bridge between nibbāna and *śūnyatā*. On one side, it explains the cessation of suffering and the attainment of nibbāna. On the other, it establishes the emptiness of phenomena and supports the Madhyamaka middle way. The relationship, however, requires careful analysis. Treating nibbāna and emptiness as wholly unrelated obscures their common foundation, while identifying them without qualification erases their distinct philosophical functions.

This article argues that dependent origination links nibbāna and emptiness through three interconnected insights: suffering is conditionally produced and can therefore cease; persons and phenomena lack immutable essences; and liberation becomes possible precisely because conditioned processes are capable of transformation.

The Meanings of Dependent Origination

Specific conditionality

The Pāli expression *paṭiccasamuppāda* and the Sanskrit *pratītyasamutpāda* are commonly translated as “dependent origination,” “dependent arising,” or “conditioned co-arising.” The general principle is expressed through the formula:

When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases.

This formulation does not simply assert that everything has a cause in a linear and deterministic sense. It describes structured conditional relationships. A phenomenon occurs when the conditions supporting it are present, changes when those conditions change, and ceases when the indispensable conditions are removed.

The *Paṭiccasamuppāda Sutta* states that the principle remains valid whether or not a Buddha appears. A Buddha discovers, understands, and teaches this conditional structure rather than creating it. The discourse describes it as the stability of the Dhamma, the regularity of the Dhamma, specific conditionality, suchness, non-falsity, and non-otherwiseness (Sujato, 2018b). Dependent origination is therefore not an arbitrary religious belief but a statement about the regularity of conditioned experience.

The twelvefold sequence

The best-known expression of dependent origination is the sequence of twelve factors: 1. Ignorance (*avijjā*) 2. Volitional formations (*saṅkhārā*) 3. Consciousness (*viññāṇa*) 4. Name-and-form (*nāmarūpa*) 5. The six sense bases (*saḷāyatana*) 6. Contact (*phassa*) 7. Feeling (*vedanā*) 8. Craving (*taṇhā*) 9. Clinging (*upādāna*) 10. Becoming (*bhava*) 11. Birth (*jāti*) 12. Aging, death, sorrow, and suffering (*jarāmaraṇa*)

This sequence may be interpreted across successive lives, as an account of the structure of present experience, or through combinations of these perspectives. Scholarly debates continue regarding its earliest meaning and the historical formation of the twelve-link

formula (Shulman, 2008). Nevertheless, its practical purpose is clear: it identifies conditions through which suffering emerges and therefore points toward conditions that can be transformed.

The sequence should not be understood as the migration of a permanent soul. Consciousness and the remaining factors arise through conditions. Continuity exists, but the process contains no unchanging possessor standing outside it. Dependent origination thus explains how causal and moral continuity can operate without an eternal self.

Dependent origination as the middle way

The Kaccānagotta Sutta connects dependent origination with the rejection of the extremes of existence and nonexistence. When one sees the arising of the world correctly, one does not adopt the view that the world is nonexistent. When one sees its cessation correctly, one does not adopt the view that the world possesses permanent existence. The Buddha therefore teaches by the middle: ignorance conditions volitional formations and eventually suffering; through the cessation of ignorance, the sequence ceases (Sujato, 2018a).

The discourse does not claim that conventional phenomena are entirely unreal. Nor does it affirm that they possess permanent being. It redirects inquiry from “Does the world absolutely exist?” to “Through what conditions do experiences arise and cease?” This shift from substance to process provides an important foundation for later Madhyamaka philosophy.

Dependent Origination and Nibbāna

The conditioned arising of suffering

In early Buddhist teaching, dependent origination is principally concerned with suffering and its cessation. Ignorance prevents beings from understanding impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, non-self, and the Four Noble Truths. Conditioned by ignorance, volitional activities reproduce patterns of cognition and behaviour. Contact and feeling give rise to craving when they are not understood with wisdom. Craving develops into clinging, becoming, birth, and renewed suffering.

The sequence does not imply that human beings are powerless. Because suffering is conditioned, interventions are possible. Mindfulness can prevent feeling from automatically developing into craving. Wisdom can eliminate ignorance. Ethical conduct can transform volitional patterns. Meditation can weaken attachment and disclose the impermanent and selfless character of experience.

Dependent origination consequently differs from fatalism. It does not teach that everything is predetermined by past kamma. Present actions, perceptions, relationships, and environmental circumstances form part of the causal field. The conditionality of experience creates the possibility of moral responsibility because intentional actions can influence future conditions (Harvey, 2013).

The cessation sequence

Dependent origination has two directions. The forward sequence explains the arising of suffering, while the cessation sequence explains liberation:

With the cessation of ignorance, volitional formations cease; with the cessation of volitional formations, consciousness ceases...with the cessation of birth, aging, death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, sadness, and distress cease.

“Cessation” should be interpreted in relation to the saṃsāric function of the factors. It does not necessarily mean that all forms of consciousness, feeling, or bodily life vanish when a person becomes awakened. An arahant who is alive continues to experience sense contact and feeling. What has ceased is the ignorance, craving, and appropriation through which these processes create renewed becoming and suffering.

Nibbāna is realized through the extinction of greed, hatred, and delusion. The Asaṅkhata Saṃyutta identifies the unconditioned with the destruction of passion, aversion, and delusion and presents the Noble Eightfold Path as the way leading to it (Sujato, 2018c). Nibbāna is therefore not simply the final chronological event at the end of a causal chain. It is the liberation realized when the causes sustaining bondage have been eliminated.

Nibbāna and the unconditioned

Theravāda sources distinguish nibbāna from conditioned phenomena. The Udāna speaks of an unborn, unbecome, unmade, and unconditioned, without which escape from the born and conditioned would be impossible (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2012). Theravāda Abhidhamma subsequently classifies nibbāna as the unconditioned element.

This does not require understanding nibbāna as an eternal substance. Its unconditioned character indicates that it is not fabricated by ignorance and craving and does not arise and pass away as conditioned phenomena do. It is known through the cessation of those processes rather than produced as their effect.

The language of cessation and the language of the unconditioned thus perform complementary functions. The former prevents nibbāna from becoming a metaphysical entity; the latter prevents it from being reduced to temporary calm, psychological absence, or simple annihilation (Collins, 1998; Gethin, 1998).

From Dependent Origination to Emptiness

Nāgārjuna's expansion of conditionality

Madhyamaka philosophy accepts dependent origination but draws out its anti-substantialist implications. Nāgārjuna asks what it means for anything to arise dependently. If a phenomenon depends upon causes and conditions, it cannot exist entirely by its own power. If it depends upon parts, it cannot possess an indivisible essence independent of those parts. If its identity depends upon conceptual and linguistic conventions, it cannot be self-defined.

Nāgārjuna's target is *svabhāva*, which may be translated as intrinsic nature, own-being, or inherent existence. Something possessing *svabhāva* would exist from its own side, independently of external conditions and conceptual designation. Yet such independence would make causal transformation impossible. A thing fixed by its own immutable nature could neither genuinely arise nor change in response to conditions.

In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* 24.18, Nāgārjuna identifies dependent origination with emptiness, dependent designation, and the middle way. The following verse adds that because nothing exists without depending upon something, nothing is nonempty (Garfield, 1995; Siderits & Katsura, 2013).

Emptiness is therefore not added to phenomena as a separate property. It is the absence of the independence that dependently originated phenomena could never possess.

Causal, mereological, and conceptual dependence

Madhyamaka discussions commonly identify several dimensions of dependence.

First, phenomena depend upon causes and conditions. A plant depends upon seeds, soil, water, temperature, and numerous ecological conditions. Mental states similarly depend upon contact, perception, memory, bodily conditions, habits, and attention.

Second, composite phenomena depend upon parts. A chariot, house, organism, or institution cannot be found as a self-sufficient entity separate from its components. Yet it is not simply identical with any one component. Its identity exists relationally.

Third, phenomena depend upon conceptual designation. Something functions as money, property, a border, or an academic institution within systems of social recognition. Conceptual dependence does not mean that the object is merely an individual fantasy. It means that its identity cannot be established independently of the practices through which it is identified and used.

These forms of dependence demonstrate emptiness without denying conventional existence. A chariot lacking intrinsic essence can still carry a passenger. A person lacking an eternal self can still experience suffering, act intentionally, and cultivate wisdom. A medicine that is empty of independent existence can still relieve illness when the relevant conditions are present.

Emptiness is not nothingness

The most persistent misunderstanding of *śūnyatā* is that it asserts universal nonexistence. If nothing existed in any sense, there could be no dependent origination, ethical conduct, suffering, path, or liberation. Nāgārjuna's argument is almost the opposite: causal efficacy is possible because things are empty of fixed essence.

A seed can develop because it is not an immutable, self-contained entity. An unwholesome habit can be changed because it lacks a permanent nature. Suffering can cease because it depends upon removable conditions. If phenomena possessed independent and unchanging essences, transformation and liberation would be impossible.

Emptiness therefore protects the possibility of change. It rejects neither experience nor causality but the assumption that experienced things exist independently and permanently. In this sense, emptiness is a philosophical clarification of conditionality, not a denial of the world.

The emptiness of emptiness

Emptiness must itself not be reified. It is not a cosmic substance, an absolute void, or a foundation beneath conventional reality. Emptiness is also dependently designated in relation to phenomena mistakenly regarded as intrinsically existent. Without the error of intrinsic existence, emptiness has no independent object or function.

Garfield (1994) calls attention to this "emptiness of emptiness." Emptiness is indispensable as a corrective to substantialism, but it becomes dangerous if converted into another absolute view. Its purpose is therapeutic: to eliminate reification rather than replace one essence with another.

Nibbāna and Śūnyatā: Identity or Difference?

Reasons for identifying them

Several considerations support a close relationship between nibbāna and emptiness.

Both oppose attachment to self and substance. The realization of nibbāna requires relinquishing identification with the five aggregates. The realization of emptiness reveals that neither persons nor aggregates possess intrinsic existence.

Both depend upon the middle way. Early Buddhist dependent origination avoids the extremes of eternal existence and annihilation. Madhyamaka emptiness avoids the extremes of substantialism and nihilism.

Both require the cessation of ignorance. In the twelvefold sequence, ignorance sustains suffering. In Madhyamaka, ignorance superimposes intrinsic existence upon dependently originated phenomena. Wisdom terminates this distorted mode of apprehension.

Finally, Nāgārjuna applies emptiness analysis to nirvāṇa itself. In *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* chapter 25, nirvāṇa is not treated as an intrinsically existing entity standing outside or opposite *saṃsāra*. If nirvāṇa possessed *svabhāva*, it would become precisely the kind of metaphysical essence that Madhyamaka rejects.

Reasons for distinguishing them

Despite these connections, nibbāna and *śūnyatā* perform different conceptual functions.

Nibbāna is principally soteriological. It denotes the cessation of defilement, suffering, and renewed existence. It is the goal attained through the Noble Eightfold Path.

Śūnyatā is principally analytical and ontological in a critical sense. It indicates the absence of intrinsic nature in all phenomena. A table is empty, anger is empty, a person is empty, the path is empty, and nirvāṇa is empty. Emptiness is therefore applicable much more broadly than nibbāna.

Moreover, Theravāda does not normally define nibbāna as the emptiness of all dharmas, even though Pāli texts contain important teachings on emptiness and non-self. Madhyamaka, conversely, refuses to make nirvāṇa an independently existing unconditioned essence. These differences reflect distinct philosophical frameworks rather than simple terminological variation.

Nibbāna and emptiness should consequently be described as soteriologically convergent but conceptually nonidentical.

The Two Truths and the Functioning of Conditional Reality

Madhyamaka explains emptiness through the distinction between conventional and ultimate truth. Conventional truth includes ordinary persons, objects, causes, moral choices, and linguistic practices. Ultimate truth is the emptiness of those phenomena—their lack of intrinsic existence.

The distinction does not divide reality into two independent worlds. The ultimate is not a hidden realm behind the conventional. It is the way conventional phenomena exist: dependently and without intrinsic essence. Ultimate analysis finds no self-established entity, but this does not prevent conventional phenomena from functioning.

Nāgārjuna states that the Buddha's teaching relies on two truths and that the ultimate cannot be taught without conventional practices. Without realizing the ultimate, however, nirvāṇa cannot be attained. The distinction is thus pedagogical and epistemological as well as philosophical (Thakchoe, 2022).

This framework clarifies why emptiness does not destroy morality. Moral agents are conventionally real, intentions produce consequences, and suffering remains significant. The absence of an eternal self does not eliminate responsibility because responsibility requires causal continuity, not metaphysical identity. The person who experiences a result is neither an unchanging substance nor wholly disconnected from the earlier causal process.

Theravāda and Madhyamaka formulate this issue differently, but both rely upon continuity without permanent identity. Dependent origination supports a process-based understanding of agency: actions matter because present processes condition future ones.

Dependent Origination as the Conceptual Bridge

The bridging function of dependent origination can be presented through three movements.

From arising to cessation

Dependent origination first explains how suffering arises. Suffering is not imposed by a creator and does not occur without conditions. Ignorance, craving, clinging, and becoming sustain it. Because these conditions are impermanent and removable, suffering can cease. This is the movement from dependent origination to nibbāna.

From dependence to emptiness

Dependent origination also reveals that conditioned phenomena cannot possess independent essence. Whatever depends upon causes, parts, relations, or designation cannot exist through svabhāva. This is the movement from dependent origination to śūnyatā.

From emptiness to transformability

Finally, emptiness explains why cessation is possible. Ignorance and craving are not permanent properties of an eternal self. They are conditioned patterns. Because they are

empty of fixed nature, they can be weakened and abandoned. This movement returns from emptiness to the practical possibility of nibbāna.

The relationship can be summarized as follows:

Dimension of dependent origination	Theravāda emphasis	Madhyamaka emphasis
Conditioned arising	Origin of suffering and rebirth	Impossibility of independent existence
Absence of a permanent agent	Non-self and continuity without a soul	Emptiness of persons and all dharmas
Conditioned cessation	Ending ignorance, craving, and becoming	Transformation is possible because phenomena lack fixed essence
Middle way	Avoiding eternalism and annihilationism	Avoiding substantialism and nihilism
Liberating realization	Nibbāna	Wisdom realizing śūnyatā

This model does not imply that Madhyamaka merely repeats Theravāda terminology or that Theravāda already contains every later Madhyamaka argument. Nāgārjuna extends conditionality into a systematic critique of svabhāva. Nevertheless, this development remains intelligible because dependent origination already provides a middle path between fixed existence and absolute nonexistence.

Ethical and Practical Implications

The relationship between dependent origination, nibbāna, and emptiness is not merely theoretical.

First, it supports moral responsibility without belief in an eternal self. Intentional actions influence the future through causal continuity. The agent is a changing process, but actions remain ethically consequential.

Second, it undermines rigid identity. If persons arise through biological, psychological, social, and linguistic conditions, no individual is permanently identical with anger, greed, trauma, status, ethnicity, or ideology. This does not deny personal history. It recognizes that identity is conditioned and transformable.

Third, the insight encourages compassion. Recognizing the conditions that contribute to harmful behaviour need not excuse wrongdoing, but it prevents the reduction of a person to an intrinsically evil essence. Ethical responses can address both individual intention and the conditions that shape conduct.

Fourth, the teaching guards against spiritual attachment. Nibbāna must not be imagined as an eternal possession acquired by a metaphysical self. Emptiness must not become an object of dogmatic belief. Both concepts require the abandonment of appropriation.

Finally, dependent origination integrates wisdom with practice. Ethical discipline modifies conditions supporting harmful action. Meditation reveals the arising and passing of mental phenomena. Wisdom understands their impermanence, conditionality, and absence of self. Liberation becomes possible through the coordinated transformation of these conditions.

Philosophical Limitations and Interpretive Cautions

Comparative study must avoid claiming that Theravāda nibbāna and Madhyamaka emptiness are unquestionably the same reality expressed in different words. Such a claim risks erasing genuine disagreements.

Theravāda commentarial traditions classify nibbāna as an unconditioned ultimate reality, whereas Madhyamaka analysis denies intrinsic nature to nirvāṇa as well as saṃsāra.

The traditions also employ different theories of truth, different analyses of dharmas, and different accounts of the bodhisattva path.

It is equally inaccurate, however, to portray Madhyamaka emptiness as a complete rejection of early Buddhist doctrine. Nāgārjuna explicitly grounds his middle way in dependent origination and uses the structure found in the Kaccānagotta Sutta to reject existence and nonexistence as absolute positions. His innovation lies in the scope and philosophical rigor with which conditionality is applied, especially to the apparent intrinsic nature of all dharmas.

A careful comparison must therefore distinguish historical derivation, conceptual development, and functional similarity. Dependent origination is the common doctrinal foundation. Nibbāna and śūnyatā are different developments within soteriological frameworks that seek to overcome ignorance and attachment.

Conclusion

Dependent origination forms a powerful bridge between nibbāna and emptiness. In early Buddhist and Theravāda thought, it explains how suffering and rebirth arise through conditions and how they cease when ignorance and craving are eliminated. Nibbāna represents the liberation realized through that cessation.

In Madhyamaka, the same principle becomes the basis for demonstrating śūnyatā. Because phenomena depend upon causes, conditions, parts, relations, and conceptual designation, they cannot possess an independent intrinsic essence. Emptiness is not nothingness; it is the absence of self-established existence. Far from destroying causal efficacy, emptiness makes causation, change, ethical cultivation, and liberation intelligible.

Nibbāna and śūnyatā should not be treated as exact synonyms. Nibbāna emphasizes the cessation of bondage, while śūnyatā describes the mode of existence of all phenomena. Nevertheless, they converge through the transformative logic of conditionality. Suffering can cease because it is dependently originated, and transformation is possible because the conditions of suffering are empty of permanent essence.

Dependent origination therefore links ontology, epistemology, ethics, and liberation. It reveals a world that is neither composed of eternal substances nor reduced to nothingness. Reality is relational, conditioned, and dynamic. To understand this reality is not merely to acquire a philosophical theory; it is to recognize that suffering has conditions, that those conditions can be abandoned, and that liberation is possible.

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Ānanda as the Custodian of Buddhist Memory: Orality, the First Buddhist Council, and the Construction of Sutta Authority

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Abstract

Ānanda occupies a unique position in Buddhist collective memory. As the Buddha's personal attendant, an outstanding learner, and the monk traditionally credited with reciting the discourses at the First Buddhist Council, he became a symbolic link between the historical Buddha's spoken teaching and the scriptural collections transmitted by later Buddhist communities. This article examines Ānanda's role within the oral culture of early Buddhism, the traditional account of the First Council, and the construction of scriptural authority through the introductory formula "Thus have I heard" (*evaṃ me sutam*). It distinguishes the normative memory preserved in Buddhist texts from what can be established through critical historical research. The Theravāda Vinaya portrays the council as a communal recitation in which Mahākassapa presides, Upāli recites the Vinaya, and Ānanda recites the Dhamma. This narrative does not describe the writing of a complete canon but the authorization of oral recitation. Repetition, numerical lists, formulaic passages, communal rehearsal, and specialist reciters supported the preservation of texts while also allowing controlled variation. The council narrative constructs authority through eyewitness proximity, disciplined memory, contextual attribution, and communal confirmation. Yet differences among surviving Vinayas and parallels indicate that early Buddhist literature developed through collective transmission rather than the memory of one individual alone. Ānanda is therefore best understood both as a probable historical transmitter and as a literary embodiment of authorized Buddhist memory.

Keywords: Ānanda, Buddhist memory, First Buddhist Council, Pāli canon

Introduction

Religious traditions must address the problem of continuity. A charismatic teacher may instruct disciples directly during his lifetime, but after his death the community must determine how the teaching will be preserved, authenticated, interpreted, and transmitted. Early Buddhism faced this problem without appealing to a permanent prophetic successor or a divinely revealed written book.

The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta presents the Buddha as declaring that the Dhamma and Vinaya should serve as teacher after his passing. This declaration transfers authority from the physical presence of the Buddha to a body of teaching and discipline that must be remembered and collectively maintained (Walshe, 1995).

Ānanda becomes central to this transition. Buddhist tradition remembers him as the Buddha's attendant, a monk of extensive learning, and a person with extraordinary powers of recollection. Because he had direct access to the Buddha and heard a large number of discourses, he was selected to recite the Dhamma at the First Buddhist Council.

His role raises several historical and philosophical questions. How could large bodies of discourse be preserved before they were committed to writing? Does the formula *evam me sutam*, "Thus have I heard," identify Ānanda as the narrator of every discourse? Did the First Council establish the canon in its final form? How did communal recitation transform personal memory into authoritative scripture?

This article argues that Ānanda's significance operates at two interrelated levels. At the historical level, he represents the disciples who preserved and transmitted teachings in an oral culture. At the literary and institutional level, he embodies the authorized witness whose memory connects later recitation with the Buddha's speech. His authority is not entirely individual. It becomes scriptural authority only through communal interrogation, recitation, and ratification.

Ānanda's Position in the Early Buddhist Community

The Buddha's attendant

Ānanda is traditionally described as a cousin of the Buddha and one of his principal disciples. He eventually became the Buddha's regular personal attendant. The discourses portray him performing practical duties, communicating messages, arranging meetings, asking questions, and serving as an intermediary between the Buddha and different members of the Buddhist community.

The attendant's position gave Ānanda unusual access to teaching situations. He heard discourses delivered to monastics, laypeople, rulers, wanderers, and members of other religious groups. He also asked the Buddha to repeat teachings delivered in his absence.

Traditional accounts maintain that when Ānanda accepted the position, he requested several conditions intended to prevent the appearance that he was seeking material advantage. He would not automatically receive the Buddha's robes, food, or lodging, but he would be permitted to introduce visitors, seek clarification, and request repetition of teachings he had missed. Whether every detail is historically recoverable, the narrative portrays the ideal attendant as close to authority without exploiting that proximity.

Foremost in learning and memory

The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* places Ānanda foremost among monks who had heard much, possessed strong memory, understood the sequence of teachings, and attended upon the Buddha (Bodhi, 2012). These are related but distinct qualities.

Having "heard much" (*bahussuta*) does not simply mean possessing a large quantity of information. In an oral culture, a learned disciple was expected to hear, retain, recite, examine, and understand teachings. Memory was inseparable from disciplined listening and repeated rehearsal.

Ānanda's remembered learning made him a "treasurer of the Dhamma" (*dhammabhaṇḍāgārika*) in later tradition. The title presents memory as a form of custodianship. The teaching is a communal treasure entrusted to a responsible person rather than personal intellectual property.

Memory and spiritual attainment

The traditional narrative introduces a tension between learning and liberation. At the Buddha's death, Ānanda is portrayed as a stream-enterer rather than an arahant. Despite his knowledge, service, and proximity to the Buddha, he has not yet completed the path.

Before the First Council, he intensifies his practice and attains arahantship. Tradition reports that he awakens while moving from a standing or walking position into a reclining

posture, before his body has fully reached the bed. The story emphasizes that textual knowledge and memory, although indispensable, do not substitute for direct realization.

Ānanda consequently personifies both the value and limitation of learning. He is qualified to preserve the discourses because of his memory, but the council narrative also requires his spiritual completion before he joins the assembly of arahants.

Early Buddhist Literature as Oral Literature

The oral environment

The earliest Buddhist texts were composed and transmitted in an environment where oral preservation was normal. Writing existed in ancient India, but the principal early Buddhist collections were structured for memorization, recitation, and performance rather than private silent reading.

The absence of manuscripts does not imply unsystematic preservation. Ancient Indian religious and educational cultures developed sophisticated techniques for retaining large bodies of material. Buddhist monastics lived in communities where memorization could be distributed, rehearsed, and corrected collectively.

Allon (1997) and Cousins (1983) identify numerous features of Pāli discourses that reflect oral composition and transmission: Repetition of words and passages. Standard opening and concluding formulas. Numerical lists. Recurring doctrinal sequences. Parallel sentence structures. Stock descriptions of people and places. Narrative framing formulas. Abbreviations later expanded by reciters or editors.

These features may appear stylistically repetitive to modern readers, but they function as mnemonic architecture.

Repetition and numerical organization

Lists such as the Four Noble Truths, five aggregates, six sense fields, seven factors of awakening, and Noble Eightfold Path organize doctrine into memorable structures. Numerical organization reduces cognitive burden and allows material to be recalled in a predictable order.

Repetition similarly supports accuracy. A recurring formula about ethical discipline, meditative absorption, or dependent origination does not have to be independently reconstructed each time. Familiar units can be inserted into different contexts.

This modular character contributed both to stability and to variation. Large textual units could be reliably preserved, but different reciter communities might shorten, expand, reposition, or interpret them differently.

Communal recitation

The Pāli term *saṅgīti* means communal recitation, rehearsal, or chanting together. The term conventionally translated as “council” therefore emphasizes oral performance rather than parliamentary debate or written publication.

Communal recitation has several epistemic advantages. Individual memory can fail, but group recitation allows discrepancies to be identified. A reciter who omits, alters, or relocates a passage can be corrected by others familiar with the material.

The preservation of early Buddhist literature was thus neither purely individual nor anonymously mechanical. It depended upon trained persons embedded within communities of recitation.

Verbatim preservation and controlled variation

Scholars disagree over how rigidly early Buddhist texts were preserved. Cousins (1983) emphasized their character as oral literature and the possibility of variation or improvisation. Wynne (2004), by contrast, argues that internal evidence supports a relatively fixed and often verbatim form of oral transmission.

These positions need not be treated as absolute opposites. Oral transmission can preserve substantial bodies of wording with considerable accuracy while still producing variations in arrangement, expansion, formula selection, and interpretation. Comparative study of Pāli, Sanskrit, Chinese, and Tibetan parallels demonstrates both remarkable agreement and significant difference (Allon, 2021).

The evidence therefore supports neither the assumption that every canonical word was fixed during the Buddha's lifetime nor the claim that early discourses were freely invented by later reciters.

The Traditional Account of the First Buddhist Council

The crisis after the Buddha's death

According to the Cullavagga of the Theravāda Vinaya, Mahākassapa learns of the Buddha's passing while travelling with a group of monks. A monk named Subhadda reacts by saying that the community is now free from the Buddha's instructions and can do what it wishes.

This response alerts Mahākassapa to the danger of doctrinal and disciplinary fragmentation. He proposes a communal recitation of the Dhamma and Vinaya. Five hundred monks are selected, and the assembly is traditionally located at Rājagaha during the rains retreat.

The story presents the council as a response to a crisis of authority. Without the Buddha's physical presence, the community risks disagreement over what he taught and how monastics should live.

Mahākassapa, Upāli, and Ānanda

The council narrative distributes authority among several figures. Mahākassapa provides senior leadership and presides over the questioning. Upāli recites the monastic discipline. Ānanda recites the discourses.

Mahākassapa asks Upāli where particular rules were established, concerning whom they were formulated, what circumstances gave rise to them, and how they should be understood. He asks Ānanda comparable questions concerning the discourses: where they were delivered, to whom, and under what circumstances.

This question-and-answer structure transforms memory into public testimony. Ānanda does not merely announce that he remembers the Buddha's words. His memory is elicited, contextualized, and confirmed before an assembly.

Ānanda's admission to the council

The narrative initially presents a difficulty: Ānanda is indispensable because of his learning but has not attained arahantship. The council is to consist of arahants, and thus he must complete his practice before participating.

His awakening on the night before the council resolves the tension between two kinds of authority: Mnemonic authority based on direct hearing and memory. Spiritual authority based on liberation.

The story thereby constructs the ideal transmitter as both learned and purified. Whether this dramatic timing is historical cannot be determined, but its literary function is clear.

The charges against Ānanda

After the recitation, the assembly requires Ānanda to acknowledge several alleged faults. Different Vinaya traditions preserve different lists, but the Theravāda account includes such matters as failing to ask which disciplinary rules were minor, stepping upon the Buddha's robe while sewing it, allowing women to venerate the Buddha's body first, failing to request the Buddha to remain for the full possible lifespan, and supporting the establishment of the bhikkhunī order.

Ānanda often explains that he did not regard himself as guilty but confesses out of confidence in the assembly. These episodes complicate the image of complete harmony. They show that authority within the early community was negotiated and that Ānanda's closeness to the Buddha did not exempt him from collective scrutiny.

Anālayo (2015) suggests that the council accounts may preserve tensions concerning discipline, communal identity, and the treatment of Ānanda. The narrative both authorizes and subordinates him: his memory is indispensable, but its institutional acceptance depends upon the senior assembly.

“Thus Have I Heard” and the Authority of the Suttas

The introductory formula

A large number of Buddhist discourses begin with *evaṃ me sutāṃ*, usually translated as “Thus have I heard.” The formula is followed by an account of where the Buddha was staying and who was present.

Later Buddhist tradition normally identifies the first-person speaker as Ānanda. The formula has consequently been understood as his declaration at the First Council.

Its authority rests on auditory proximity. The narrator does not claim divine inspiration or private revelation. He claims to have heard the teaching. Authority passes through a human chain of listening, retention, and recitation.

The components of authentication

The standard opening of a discourse often includes several elements: 1. A claim of having heard the teaching. 2. A statement that it occurred on a particular occasion. 3. A geographical setting. 4. The identification of participants. 5. The circumstances that prompted the discourse.

These elements locate teaching within an event. The discourse is represented not as an anonymous philosophical proposition but as instruction addressed to specific persons under particular conditions.

The formula creates what may be called contextual authority. The meaning and appropriateness of a teaching can be related to its audience, situation, and pedagogical purpose.

Does Ānanda narrate every sutta?

It is methodologically unsafe to assume that the historical Ānanda personally heard and recited every text that begins with *evaṃ me sutāṃ*. Some discourses concern events where the transmitted narrative does not explicitly place him, while different Buddhist schools preserved comparable formulas in collections shaped over long periods.

The formula probably became a conventional marker of authenticated transmission. Ānanda serves as its paradigmatic narrator, but its function exceeds individual autobiography.

Buswell and Lopez (2014) note that traditional accounts credit Ānanda with reciting the *sūtras*, while modern scholarship treats the collections as products of prolonged oral transmission and editorial development. The authority formula should therefore be interpreted both traditionally and historically.

Traditionally, it points back to Ānanda's hearing. Historically, it marks a text as belonging to a recognized lineage of recitation.

From Personal Memory to Communal Scripture

Memory must be authorized

The council narrative does not present Ānanda's recollection as scripture merely because he remembers it. His recitation becomes authoritative through communal procedures: Selection of a qualified reciter, Formal questioning, Specification of context, Recitation before an assembly, Confirmation by other senior monks, Continued communal rehearsal.

Scriptural authority is therefore distributed. It belongs neither solely to the original speaker nor solely to the reciter. It arises through a relationship among the Buddha, eyewitness transmitters, the monastic community, and successive recitation lineages.

The function of collective agreement

Collective agreement does not necessarily prove that every word is historically identical to what the Buddha said. Its primary institutional function is to establish a shared basis for teaching and discipline.

Without an authorized body of Dhamma and Vinaya, regional communities could adopt incompatible rules and doctrines. Communal recitation makes coordinated religious life possible.

Authority in this setting is partly pragmatic. A recognized collection supports unity, education, ethical regulation, and continuity.

The Pūrāṇa episode and the limits of closure

The Theravāda Vinaya reports that the monk Pūrāṇa arrives after the council. When invited to accept the communal recitation, he responds that the Dhamma and Vinaya have been well recited but that he will remember them as he heard them directly from the Buddha.

This episode is significant. It suggests that the council did not immediately eliminate alternative lines of memory. Eyewitness transmission continued outside the selected assembly.

Anālayo (2015) interprets such episodes as evidence of concern about communal concord and the possibility of disagreement. The canon was not created by a single effortless act of closure. It emerged through negotiation among overlapping memories and reciter communities.

Historicity of the First Council

Reasons for caution

Modern scholars have questioned whether the First Council occurred exactly as described. Several problems require caution.

First, the surviving accounts were preserved by different Buddhist schools and differ in important details. Second, the canonical collections display evidence of historical development that cannot plausibly be assigned in final form to a single gathering immediately after the Buddha's death. Third, later accounts expand the story and attribute increasingly comprehensive canonical results to the council.

Mukherjee (1994) identifies tensions and inconsistencies within the council narratives and argues against treating them as simple historical records. Harvey (2013) similarly notes that the tradition should not be read as evidence that the entire canon was fixed at one moment.

Reasons not to dismiss the entire tradition

Critical caution does not require concluding that no gathering occurred. The death of a founding teacher would plausibly motivate senior disciples to consult one another, coordinate discipline, and rehearse important teachings.

Accounts of a first communal recitation appear in several Vinaya traditions, suggesting that the memory is not exclusively a late Theravāda invention. Cross-traditional agreement on central figures such as Mahākāśyapa, Ānanda, and Upāli may preserve an early narrative core.

Gombrich (2006) and Wynne (2004) argue that early Buddhist literature preserves substantial old material through disciplined oral transmission. A historically plausible reconstruction is therefore that meetings and recitations occurred after the Buddha's death, while the elaborate canonical council narrative represents later organization and interpretation of those events.

Narrative truth and historical fact

The council story has value even where its details cannot be verified. It communicates Buddhist ideas about legitimate transmission: Teachings should be remembered accurately. Discipline and doctrine must be preserved together. Authority requires communal responsibility. Learning must be joined with spiritual practice. No individual stands entirely above the Saṅgha. Continuity depends on both faithful preservation and collective concord.

The narrative is therefore a charter of textual and institutional authority, not merely a chronicle of past events.

Ānanda as a Figure of Mediated Authority

Ānanda's authority differs from that of the Buddha. He does not claim to have discovered the Dhamma independently. His authority is derivative and testimonial: he heard, retained, and transmitted.

Yet this secondary status does not make his contribution insignificant. Without a recognized transmitter, the Buddha's teaching could not become the teaching of later communities. Ānanda mediates between presence and absence, oral event and remembered discourse, individual experience and communal canon.

His authority has four dimensions:

Dimension	Basis of authority
Proximity	Personal attendance upon the Buddha
Memory	Extensive hearing, retention, and ordering of teachings
Spiritual qualification	Traditional attainment of arahantship before the council
Communal authorization	Questioning and confirmation by the assembly

The balance among these dimensions is important. Proximity without accuracy is insufficient. Memory without ethical integrity is vulnerable. Private recollection without communal confirmation may not produce shared scripture.

Memory, Variation, and Canonical Plurality

The existence of different Nikāya and Āgama collections demonstrates that Buddhist oral transmission produced both stability and plurality. Parallel discourses may share a doctrinal core while differing in wording, structure, narrative setting, or arrangement.

These variations need not be interpreted simply as corruption. Oral traditions organize and transmit material according to the needs, dialects, doctrinal emphases, and recitation lineages of particular communities.

Allon (2021) emphasizes the importance of studying patterns of textual variation rather than assuming either perfect identity or uncontrolled invention. Variation can reveal how texts were expanded, condensed, combined, and adapted.

Ānanda's symbolic role does not eliminate this collective history. Instead, he personifies the ideal of fidelity within a process that was necessarily communal and historically dynamic.

Educational Significance

Ānanda's portrayal offers a model for Buddhist education.

First, careful listening is treated as an intellectual discipline. Hearing requires attention, retention, contextual awareness, and the ability to reproduce meaning accurately.

Second, memory is joined with understanding. Ānanda is celebrated not merely for storing verbal sequences but for recognizing their order and significance.

Third, learning remains incomplete without practice. His awakening before the council dramatizes the distinction between knowing the teaching and realizing it.

Fourth, knowledge is communally accountable. Even an exceptionally learned monk submits his recollection to questioning and confirmation.

Fifth, preservation is a form of service. Ānanda's memory benefits later generations rather than functioning as a basis of private ownership.

These principles remain relevant in digital education. Information is now easily stored, but accurate contextual understanding remains difficult. The ability to retrieve a quotation does not equal wisdom, and the rapid circulation of decontextualized teachings can produce misunderstanding. Ānanda's model emphasizes attentive reception, source awareness, contextualization, ethical responsibility, and communal review.

Conclusion

Ānanda stands at the threshold between the Buddha's living voice and the formation of Buddhist scripture. As attendant, learner, reciter, and symbolic "treasurer of the Dhamma," he embodies the human processes through which religious memory becomes authoritative tradition.

The First Council narrative portrays this transformation as a communal recitation. Mahākassapa provides leadership, Upāli recites the Vinaya, and Ānanda recites the Dhamma. The event does not describe the writing of a complete canon. It describes oral authorization through questioning, contextual attribution, recitation, and collective confirmation.

The formula *evaṃ me sutāṃ* expresses this mode of authority. It grounds the discourse in hearing rather than revelation and in human transmission rather than an unmediated sacred text. Although tradition identifies the speaker with Ānanda, the formula eventually functions as a broader marker of legitimate recitation lineage.

Historical research does not support the claim that the entire extant canon was fixed verbatim at one council. Comparative Vinaya accounts, textual variation, and evidence of gradual development point to a prolonged collective process. Yet neither should oral transmission be dismissed as inherently unreliable. Formulaic composition, repetition, numerical lists, specialist reciters, and communal rehearsal enabled substantial stability.

Ānanda is consequently more than an individual with extraordinary memory. He is the literary and institutional figure through whom Buddhist traditions explain how hearing becomes recollection, recollection becomes communal recitation, and communal recitation becomes scripture. His authority is powerful precisely because it is mediated: it depends upon proximity to the Buddha, disciplined memory, spiritual qualification, and confirmation by the Saṅgha.

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- Societal relevance

3. The article is neither under review nor published elsewhere. The article must be in the form of an academic essay, presenting the discussion of the research in an objective way.

4. Elements of the article:

- Title in English
- name of the author(s)
- 300 words abstract in English
- Author(s) affiliation(s)
- Keywords (maximum 7)
- Content of the article:

Research article:

- ☐ Abstract
- Introduction
- Research methodology
- Results
- Discussion
- References

Academic Article, Review Article:

- Abstract
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- Content
- Conclusion
- Suggestions
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5. An original article should range between 3000 and 7000 words excluding abstract, references, diagrams and data sets.

File format: Microsoft Word (*.doc or *.docx), Times New Roman 12, in (English) journal.

The submitted file which includes graphs, charts and images should be located at appropriate locations in the text, between paragraphs, not within them. All figures should have figure numbers and titles (title case) and should be referred to by figure number in the text. A figure's number and the title should be placed above and outside the figure, for example, table 1 or image 1 and Figure. Figures need to be clear and the author must have the original copyright.

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- Citations need to be placed after the sentence (author's name, year of publication).
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