

### Notion of person according to the four schools

There are big differences about person between Buddhist and non-buddhist schools of thought. Gang.sa/person is the central topic of discussion between them.

The four Buddhist schools have their own assertions about the nature of person. If we posit person how we believe it is, such an assertion would run counter to Buddha's teaching of the four seals in which Buddha said, all phenomena are empty and selfless. If one were to negate person totally it would be a very dangerous nihilistic way of thinking, leading to aimless wandering for a long time in the three lower realms. We must posit person between reified eternalism and the utter nonexistence/nihilism of person.

The Buddhist view of person is grounded in a piece of a sutric stanza, "Just as a chariot is posited on a collection of parts, (the wheels etc), so is a person posited on a collection of aggregates" This stanza explains the Buddhist position. Buddha said, "Just as a chariot is posited on a collection of its parts similarly is the sentient being" These last two lines really pinpoint the Buddhist position.

Each school interprets these lines in its own way. The mere collection of the aggregates is what a person is according to Vaibashika.

The Sutra school does not differ much from this – they call it the continuum of aggregates. Mind Only/Cittamatra school contends that person is the foundation consciousness. Madhyamaka (uma rangupa ) Autonomous school says it is the mental consciousness. Prasangika Madhyamika says it is that which is merely labelled by concepts in dependence on the collection of aggregates.

All Buddhist schools posit person in a relation to their aggregates. They all believe person is like an illusion.

Vaibasheka see person as like the illusion a magician conjures up, one which he immediately dissolves. Similarly a person is born through the power of karma and delusion and not long after the person dies and ceases to exist.

Sautantrika (Sutra school) says person is like an illusion which a magician instantaneously conjures up; it is manifest for a moment and then is dissolved back quickly. A person is reborn due to the power of action in the first moment and then because impermanence is incessantly born into the person the manifestation of this karma which is person disappears again. Without the need for any outside destructive cause to smash it out of existence, person comes to an end.

Mind Only sees the illusion of person in the way a magician conjures up horses, oxen or doves. They are suddenly produced and seem to be real due to the magicians skill but they are empty of being real externally existent animals. A person, who exists adventitiously, dependent on the predisposition within the person's consciousness, is empty of a real external existence.

For Autonomous Madhyamika, person is like a magician's illusory animal. It arises in part due to the power of incantation and magical spells. Pebbles and twigs used to make up the pretend animal have 50% of the elements of a horse or cow etc. (may have the colour and form). When the two come together, the spells/incantations which deceive the eye of the audience, and the twigs/pebbles which have some inherently existing horse/cow in them, the illusion is complete. Just so a person exists characteristically/inherently (but not truly; there is a big difference) within the collection of the aggregates and on that collection an unmistakable valid cognition apprehending the intrinsic nature of things labels *person* onto it.

Prasangika/Consequentialist Madhyamika see person as illusory like a magician's illusion of a horse or a cow in this way; A magicians conjuring may manifest in something which looks like a horse and the magician may call it a horse but when a real horse is searched for at the site of the illusory horse a real horse will not be found. The appearance of it is simply a construct with a label affixed by the perceiving mind, and when searched for critically a real horse or cow will not be found. In the same way a person is simply, merely labeled/designated onto the collection of aggregates and the person cannot be found within or outside the aggregates.

This is how four schools assert what a person is.

**Question from Geshela:** Do you see any fallacies in Vaibasheka saying a person is the collection of his or her aggregates? What are the absurdities of it?

**Answer from audience:** If the five aggregates were the person then there would be five persons, or if the aggregates are person then one person would mean one aggregate.

Yes that's right.

**Question from Geshela:** If the collection is person are there any other problems? **Answer from audience:** Once the aggregates dissolve at death then the person would also cease to exist. Geshela says that is the same as the first fallacy.

**Geshela asks again:** Is it valid to consider the collection of aggregates as a person? **Answer:** Invalid.

**Question:** Why?

**Answer from audience:** There has to be something that continues from lifetime to lifetime. If it's the aggregates then these dissolve at death and nothing would go beyond to the next life.

**Geshela:** If person were simply the collection of aggregates, the subject - object dichotomy ceases to be. Who takes the rebirth? It is the person. What is appropriated then? It is the aggregates. If the collection of aggregates were the person the agent/subject and object dichotomy would collapse. The person is the receiver of the aggregates and the aggregates are what are received. If the collection is person, then there is no delineation of the two. They would become indistinguishable.

**Audience:** If it is just a collection of aggregates you couldn't say "my body, my mind..."

**Geshela:** That's great thank you.

**Geshela:** The absurdities already pointed out are the ones cited in scripture.

Vaibashika says a person is the collection of aggregates. Is this a valid position?

Among other absurdities, the Madhyamaka school point out if the collection of aggregates were the person, then it would mean the collection of parts (of a chariot/car for example) would be the whole (the chariot or car) regardless of whether they were assembled or not. That is the fallacy.

**Question from audience re words for mind in Tibetan.** Sem, namshe, and lo - all mean mind in Tibetan.

**Answer:** Lo rig.pa, she.pa are synonyms. Sem, so.sem, yi and nam.shi are synonyms and refer to primary mind.

The Vaibasheka school position suffers from a lot of absurdities or fallacies. Apart from that it specifically goes against last line of citation; "Likewise *depending on* the aggregates conventional sentient beings are labelled/ known as person." This is Buddha's own word. This stanza is taken literally by all four schools. This is a key quotation on Buddhism. Someone gets up depending on a walking stick; the one who gets up can not be the walking stick because the stick is what the person is dependent on. That which is dependent on X can't be that X. The scriptures say, "It is as if Devadatta gets up dependent on Devadatta".

The same fallacies apply to the Sautantrika / Sutra school definition of person, the continuum of aggregates. If they were it would mean in the formless realm a person could not exist because there there is no form.

The Mind Only school is unique in positing 8 consciousnesses; 5 sense consciousnesses, 1 mental consciousness, 7<sup>th</sup> is delusional and 8<sup>th</sup> is foundation consciousness. Mind Only say the foundation consciousness has existed throughout beginningless time. They have their own reasonings.

What absurdities are there to say person is the foundational consciousness? Prasangika has come up with many fallacies. If foundation consciousness were person then Buddha wouldn't say *depending on the aggregates*. He'd have said depending on the foundation consciousness.

**Question from audience:** Did Buddha mention foundation consciousness?

**Answer:** Buddha would have mentioned foundation consciousness because Mind Only presents its thought based on the Thought Unravelling Sutra which Buddha taught during the third wheel of dharma.

As you know Savatantrika Madhyamika/Autonomous school posits person as that which is labelled by valid cognition apprehending intrinsic characteristics and intrinsic existence of a person from within the aggregates and parts.

For Savatantrika Madhyamika person has two elements; is 50% objective inherent existence and 50% subjective labelling by valid cognition to which an aspect of inherent existence appears. They use this mouthful to explain this line of the sutra; “depending on the aggregates conventional sentient beings are known”. They say these two lines suggest that another consciousness needs to posit a person; not just person existing in and of itself (50%) – there is also a need to be labeled (50%).

Secondly they say person exists partially inherently from their own side. It is a prerequisite for a person to be posited. For example it is only in relation to the aggregates of a human can you have an awareness that there is a human. In relation to aggregates of a dog you never think there is human. There is a humanness in the aggregates of a person. You can't find humanness in aggregates of the dog. This clearly shows there is a need for aggregates to have something intrinsic in them for it to be labelled as that. When you observe the aggregates of a dog you never get an awareness of a human – for that we must observe human aggregates. That is why they say the human exists partially inherently through their own aggregates.

According to this school person is like an illusion just as a magician needs the items of the illusion and a spell. Only with both can the illusion be conjured. If the illusions can be conjured independent of the pebbles and twigs even with nothing you could have illusions out of thin air. That a magician does need the items shows that the illusion partially exists in the items themselves.

**Question from Geshela:** Do you see any fallacies for a person to exist partially inherently and partially labeled?

**Answer:** Something which is inherent can't be dependent.

**Geshela:** That is a great answer but I have another one. Looking at aggregates of a dog, you don't think that is human. Why do you need an awareness of it as a dog and some dogness as well? (50% objective and 50% subjective)

**Answer:** It would be incomplete without the observer. **Geshela:** I like that idea because you have given serious thought to it.

**Question from Geshela:** What are the fallacies if person is half inherent and half labeled?

Take the example of a mirage. You have real water and you have mirage-like water. If you drink real water it performs a function, washing away dirt, quenching thirst. Mirage water does not perform a function. It doesn't evaporate, wash things or quench thirst. Why?

From Savatantrika Madhyamaka point of view, both waters are labelled by mind. That is the same for both. Why does one perform the function of water and one does not even though they are both called water?

**Answer:** ?

**Geshela:** We have a Tibetan proverb; “You emerge from the ocean and jump into the well.”

Thank you we are almost there but not quite.

**Question from Audience:** Doesn't the mirage have inherent qualities too? And is there a need to talk of inherent qualities if a thing is labeled? And example of water and mirage; a person in a place for the first time sees a mirage thinking its water but someone who lives there knows that what is seen is not water but a mirage.

**Geshela:** A lot of answers touch on the dependence/inherent dichotomy saying they cannot go together. The criticism of this school can be leveled only by Prasangika Madhyamika. Savatantrika Madhyamika says; for a magician to conjure an illusion he needs items of illusion and incantations. For an illusion to appear there needs to be partial objects of illusion present in the items. When those aspects existing inherently in the items – are labelled as dove etc, the illusion arises. If magician didn't need the items he'd be able to conjure illusions anywhere out of thin air. Similarly a person exists partially inherently objectively. That is why it is only in relation to human aggregates that you get awareness of a human – not a dog. Why? Because there is a partial humanness in human aggregates which force you to validly posit human.

Prasangika say, “You are wrong. If items of illusion have partial objective horse and cow, for example, then it would mean that later visitors whose eyes have not been affected by incantations, come to the site of the magical illusion, they would be able to see horses and cows. But in truth they will see nothing. If horse or elephant existed inherently from the side of the items of the illusion, you could either only see horses, or you could only see elephants. You couldn’t see the two together. If horses and elephants did exist inherently from the items of illusion you would either have to have either a consciousness perceiving horses or one perceiving an elephant. You could not perceive both at same time.

Similarly if person existed inherently from the basis of labelling/designation, the aggregates, there is no need for designation because it is already there. E.g this side of the hill and that side of the hill – it is only in relation to the other. If this became this you don’t need that.

Every phenomenon has unique defining features/ properties. This is the most difficult area. This is confirmed in two lines from Pramanavartika, “As all phenomena inherently has a self nature in them”. This is the sticking point for all schools of Buddhism below and including Savatantrika Madhyamika.

Why does the unique nature of water perform the function of water while mirage water does not perform function? Whilst both are labelled by mind, from Prasangika school view, water performs because it has a *valid basis of designation* whereas the mirage does not.

This is important. For Prasangika for a thing to exist conventionally/ relatively/ nominally it must have three things –1) It must have a valid basis of designation – that’s why you can’t call a human a dog. 2) That must not be affected by a second valid cognition. That which you call water must not be affected by another valid cognition.3) It must also be free from criticism/affected by ultimate analyzing valid cognition – emptiness.

#### **To sum up Prasangika school view of person:**

Just as the chariot is neither the collection of its parts whether assembled or not, nor is the total shape of parts assembled the chariot. What is a chariot? It is what is simply labelled dependent on the parts, which has a valid basis to be called this. So too a person is neither a collection of the aggregates, nor the aggregates themselves, nor the foundation consciousness. A person is merely labeled/ constructed. A person does not exist from within the aggregates either.

Tonight we have covered the notion of person posited by the four schools of thought. This is the most important issue. I was itching to test you but time is up.