The Three Characteristics of Existence

According to the Buddha's teaching, all our experiences in the world are characterised by three things, known as the "three marks" or "three characteristics" and best thought of as adjectives that describe our experience.

Everything is:

Sanskrit	Pali	English
anitya	*anicca*	impermanent
duḥkha	*dukkha*	unsatisfactory
anātman	*anattā*	not self

These characteristics are linked to one another, and we can use the body as an example for this, as discussed further in one of the texts below: Because our body changes (it gets old and less capable, and eventually will die) it is unsatisfactory, and this is why it is inappropriate to identify too closely with it, to assume it is "our self."

Ageing and death are the classic examples of impermanence, and when we focus on these we might think the alternative translation of *duḥkha* as "suffering" makes good sense. The fact that everyone we love will perish, and that we ourselves will one day have to face our own demise, causes us great suffering. But *duḥkha* also covers milder forms of dissatisfaction: not getting what we want, experiencing the end of good times (because even the most pleasant experiences are impermanent), having to do things we don't enjoy. To call such experiences 'suffering' may seem like an overreaction, and make Buddhism sound very miserable.

In addition, suffering is not an adjective in English, meaning that teachings like "all things are suffering" sound a bit strange. On the other hand, describing death or bereavement as "unsatisfactory" would be bordering on offensive. This is an example of where a term needs a different translation in different contexts, because we haven't got a single word in English that captures it.

The idea that everything is *duḥkha* is also the first of the Four Truths of the Noble Ones. In other words, understanding how unsatisfactory the world is forms the first realisation, the starting point of the Buddhist path. After realising that everything is unsatisfactory, Buddhists can understand the causes of this (ignorance and craving) and work towards bettering their situation through developing wisdom and non-attachment.

According to Buddhist teachings, the unsatisfactoriness of our experiences can be eased in part by accepting the impermanence that characterises our lives. In other words, it is not necessarily the constant change itself that is the problem, but our desire to keep things the same, or the anxiety that we have about the change. Letting go of our attachment to things that are changing, and understanding that such attachment only causes more suffering, is a key underpinning of Buddhist teachings.

The teaching that everything we experience is "not self" is probably the most complex of the three characteristics. Sometimes this is translated as "no-self", implying that the term is part of a statement: there is no self. As with the other two characteristics, however, it is better thought of as an adjective: nothing in our experience deserves to be considered as, or be called, our "self". This idea became one of the most important and discussed topics in Buddhist thought, both in India and in other Buddhist cultures (in Tibet, China and elsewhere), and continues to be a focus of discussion among Buddhists, and among scholars of Buddhism, around the world today. This idea took many forms, and was developed in many different ways in different times and places, but the central message remains the same.

Sometimes this characteristic is translated as "not soul", which is not totally incorrect; however, the Indian word being translated here can be used in Buddhist and other Indian literature to mean "myself" or "who or what I *really* am," and so the English "self" works better, and does not risk confusion with all of the different ideas of about "the soul" in, for example, Christian teaching.

In India, teaching about not-self had a very particular context. Early forms of Hinduism (or what is sometimes called "Brahmanism"), which were present at the same time as Buddhism began, were very interested in the topic of "the self" and what it really was. So too were other traditions of renunciation like Buddhism, for example Jainism. If we are bound to the process of transmigration, but we seemingly die at the end of our present life, then there must be *something* about us that survives and is "reborn" into a next life. If my deeds (in other words, karma) are the things that dictate how I will be reborn, there must fundamentally be some "me" who is doing these things, and will experience the results of them, even though it appears that I change throughout my lifetime (and, certainly, I would change as I am reborn in a next lifetime). Many religious traditions in ancient India reflected on what this self, or the centre of continuity across lifetimes, might be. Some believed that to know what it really was, so what we *really* are, would be an important step in ending transmigration completely.

Buddhism accepts that we are reborn, and agrees that this, along with the causes of transmigration, are the problem that needs to be dealt with. But otherwise it challenged wider Indian thinking by arguing that in fact there is *nothing* that deserves to be considered a permanent, unchanging self, and that we should think about this life, and future lives, differently: its central teaching is that although I transmigrate, and that I suffer as I do so, nothing in this process should be considered to be "my self".

Before we go further, it is important to grasp that Buddhism is certainly *not* teaching that "I do not exist": if this were simply the case, there would be no point in "being a Buddhist", in doing any kind of Buddhist practice, and really there would be no problem to deal with in the first place! Also, quite clearly, in *some* sense, I exist: I cannot doubt my having experiences, and that is the starting point. But the point in this teaching is that we do not exist in the fashion that we commonly think that we do: we are not permanent, unchanging things, as we commonly suppose ourselves to be in our day-to-day lives.

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Consider this problem: are you the same person that you were 10 years ago? Presumably your body has changed a great deal, and likely more than you realize. Science tells us that after 10 years (or fewer) every cell in our physical bodies will have been replaced by another, so there is no physical part of you that is the same. So also your thoughts and opinions have surely changed since then; also your tastes, and very probably the very way that you see the world – as you grew, learnt, reflected, and were affected by different things in your life. Is there anything in that person, 10 years ago, that you can identify still here now? If so, what is it? If not, is it fair to say that there was one "self" back then, who exists now?

If you agree that there is no "self" from 10 years ago who exists now, what about the person ten minutes ago? The change is now not so drastic, but your body *has* changed in very small ways since then, as have your feelings and attitudes and experience of the world: even reading these words has changed your perspective on the world, ever so slightly. So, is it fair to say that there is something of the person 10 minutes ago that remains in the person reading this now? And, if not, what about 10 *seconds* ago...?

There are different ways to think about this issue, and philosophers down the centuries in many different cultures have come up with different responses. But in Buddhism the important message is that although *you* exist, there is nothing about you that remains the same, so nothing that you should consider to be "your-self" in a fixed, permanent, or particularly important way.

Initially this can seem scary: we generally think that we are the same person from moment to moment, or throughout our lives. Buddhism teaches that we must let go of this fundamental kind of attachment: attachment to anything in our experience, either our physical person or our mind, or our sense of "who we really are," and accept that our identity is really a process of constant change. Really appreciating this is considered to be particularly difficult, and someone who can truly understand that nothing in their experience should be thought of as the self, on a fundamental level, is supposed to be close to the attainment of nirvana.

There is another very strong, positive message in this also. If everything about me is changing, then by working at who I am I can change myself in significant and positive ways: my body, my feelings, my ideas, my attitudes, and how I think about things can all be changed, and realizing this I can work to make myself – that is, the constantly changing series of experience that make up who I am in the world – better. I can change my diet or exercise; I can learn more, and so change my perspective on the world; I can attempt to be kinder, and make acting kindly a more prominent part of my character. To do so, teaches Buddhism, is to move closer to the goal of escaping transmigration.

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About the Sources

There are four textual sources provided in this worksheet.

We begin with two stories that illustrate Buddhist teachings on impermanence and suffering, two characteristics that are closely intertwined, and often addressed together. The first is the story of a woman called Kisagotami, who has to come to terms with impermanence and then becomes a senior nun in the Buddha's monastic community. The second story exposes the two types of suffering that can arise – bodily and mental – and the different remedies required.

These two stories also tell us something about how the Buddha was understood to have taught. Neither of these stories show the Buddha giving a sermon or trying to verbally persuade his audience. Instead he teaches through leading someone through their own realisation. This is the Buddha as a teacher but also a psychologist, diagnosing a problem and seeking to help cure it; this medical metaphor for the Buddha is also familiar from the Four Truths of the Noble Ones.

Following these two stories we explore two textual extracts about "not self". The first, from what is understood to be the Buddha's second sermon, shows how the three characteristics are related, as well as how the illusion of a fixed permanent self can be unpicked. The second, from a post-canonical text that presents us with a conversation between a monk named Nagasena and a king called Milinda, provides a powerful metaphor for the continuity of rebirth even when everything is 'not self'. Once again the Buddha is shown as a skilful teacher who calls on the experiences of his own audience, and this tradition of skilful teaching is continued by other Buddhist teachers, such as Nagasena the monk.

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Kisagotami and the Mustard Seed

Once upon a time there was a young woman called Kisagotami. She married and had a son, a lovely little boy. Disease struck the village, and the young child got sick and died. Kisagotami was distraught, and could not accept what had happened. She carried her child from house to house asking for medicine to cure her little boy. Time after time the people tried to tell her the child was dead, but she would not believe them.

Eventually a kindly villager told her, "I can't give you medicine, but I know a man who can help you. Go and visit the Buddha in his monastery." Kisagotami followed his directions and approached the Buddha.

"Please give me medicine to cure my son!" she entreated the Buddha. The Buddha replied, "Can you fetch me a mustard seed?" "Of course!" responded Kisagotami, delighted by how simple this requirement was. "One thing, though," added the Buddha, "the mustard seed must come from a house in which nobody has ever died."

So off Kisagotami went again, knocking on the doors of the village, asking for a mustard seed. Everyone could spare her a seed, but when she asked if anyone had died in the household, the reply every time was: "Yes, of course."

After a while, the truth began to dawn on Kisagotami. Death was everywhere. Everyone had lost somebody they loved. She was foolish to think she was special, or that her child could be spared.

At last Kisagotami was able to accept that her child had died. She had a funeral performed, then returned to the monastery, where she thanked the Buddha for his teaching, and asked to become a nun. She was ordained and became one of the most high achieving nuns in the Buddha's community. After diligent practice, Kisagotami achieved nirvana, and was thereby freed from the cycle of death and rebirth.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source

Why can’t Kisagotami understand that her son is dead?
Why doesn’t the Buddha just tell Kisagotami that everyone dies, rather than sending her off on the impossible mission?
What does Kisagotami learn as she goes house to house seeking a mustard seed?
What effect does Kisagotami’s lesson have on her?
What does she achieve as a result?

Application to other contexts

What are the advantages of learning from experience rather than from being told something?
Can you think of an example of something important you have learnt by discovering it yourself?
Why is it important to be able to accept the death of loved ones?
Is there anything that can make it easier?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

What do Buddhists believe about impermanence, and how does this story demonstrate this?
What do Buddhists believe about suffering, and how does this story demonstrate this?
What does the story tell us about the relationship between these two beliefs?
What do we learn about the Buddha as a teacher? How does he choose to teach his followers?
What is the significance of Kisagotami eventually achieving nirvana?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is a paraphrase based on the Pali commentarial traditions surrounding the verses of the elder nuns (*Therīgāthā*). A translated version can be found here:
https://www.accesstoinsight.org/noncanon/comy/thiga-10-01-ao0.html
There are countless other versions, including animated youtube ones, available online, since this is one of the most famous Buddhist stories.
On the transformative power of maternal grief see Reiko Ohnuma, *Ties That Bind: Maternal Imagery and Discourse in Indian Buddhism* (OUP 2012), chapter 2.

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The Buddha Cures a Sick Child

The Buddha, the Blessed One, was staying with his community of monks in the Jeta Grove in the city of Shravasti.

In the city of Shravasti at that time there lived a certain merchant who was rich, of great wealth and property, and extensive, wide holdings. After a long marriage, he and his wife eventually had a son named Vadika. Their only child, the boy Vadika was raised with great care, and when he was about five or six years old he was sent to a teacher and studied all the sacred texts. He had a sharp mind, and quickly mastered all that he was taught. He was very dear to his father.

But soon after, as a result of some actions he had done in a past life, Vadika's body was struck by physical pain. He wondered, "What evil deeds did I do, to cause my body to experience this pain?" And his father, seeing his son's condition, was very anxious, and tortured by the fear his son would die. With his face covered in tears of grief he quickly summoned a doctor and showed him his son's disease. "What is the disease, and what has caused it to occur in my son's body?" he asked. The doctor looked at the symptoms of the disease and started a treatment, but this did not calm the illness; instead it got worse.

His father saw his son's illness get stronger, and thinking his son would certainly die since it was impossible even for the doctor to cure his illness, he fell on the ground in a faint. Seeing this, his son became even more anxious, his mind even more agitated by worry. The boy, afflicted by illness, almost unable to speak, somehow said to his father, "Don't give up! Hold onto your courage and stand up! You mustn't be afraid for my life like I am. Worship the gods in my name, and give gifts. Then I will get better."

Hearing his son's words, the man worshipped all the gods and gave gifts to all the holy men. But even then the boy's illness did not ease, and so he became even more worried: "My father has worshipped all the gods and given gifts, but I am still not better." Then he recalled the qualities of the Buddha and began to pay homage to him in his mind.

Now there is nothing that is unknown, unseen, unrecognized and unobserved by the *buddha*s, blessed ones. Indeed, being greatly compassionate and devoted to benefitting the world, *buddha*s survey the world with their *buddha*-vision looking for beings in need of help.

The Blessed One, seeing from afar the condition of that boy Vadika, emitted golden rays of light that were brighter than a thousand suns, and which illuminated the whole house. And he emitted beams of loving kindness, cultivated during thousands of aeons, which delight the body at the merest touch. Then the Blessed One arrived at the gatehouse, and the doorkeeper announced that the Blessed One was standing at the door. Vadika experienced faith and was comforted. He said, "Come in, Blessed One! The Blessed One is welcome. I wish to see the Blessed One." The Blessed One entered and sat down.

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Once seated the Blessed One said to Vadika, "What troubles you, Vadika?" Vadika replied, "I have pain in my body and in my mind." Then the Blessed One taught him about having loving kindness towards all beings: "This will counteract the mental pain." And then he thought: "Oh, if only Shakra, the king of the gods, would bring some medicinal herbs here!" And at the Blessed One's thought, Shakra, the king of the gods, appeared bringing medicinal herbs, and he gave them to the Blessed One. And the Blessed One, with his own hands, gave them to Vadika saying, "This will calm the fiery pain in your body."

With his body calmed and made comfortable, the boy developed faith towards the Blessed One. With faithful mind, he made a great offering of food to the Blessed One together with his community of monks, clothed them with a hundred thousand cloths, and honoured them with garlands of all sorts of flowers.

Then he made a fervent aspiration: "By this root of virtue, the arising of this thought and this properly given gift, just as the Blessed One, unsurpassed king of doctors, healed me, may I too in a future time become a *buddha* in this dark world that is leaderless and without a guide. May I carry across those beings who have not crossed over, liberate those who are not liberated, console those in need of consolation, bring to complete nirvana those who have not entered complete nirvana."

Then the Blessed One, understanding the boy's karma and character, smiled. Now according to the natural order of things, when a *buddha* smiles, rays of light issue from his mouth and some go upwards and some downwards. Those that go downwards, they go to the hells. They warm the cold hells and cool the hot hells, and they ease the suffering of the hell beings. The rays of light that go upwards go to the heavens, and shout out "Impermanent! Suffering! Empty! Not self!" to the gods, to remind them not to get caught up in their happy state.

The rays of light then reassemble behind the Buddha, and re-enter his body, prompting him to make a prediction. In this case, the Buddha predicted that the boy Vadika would, indeed, become a *buddha* in a distant future time.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source

What is the relationship between the boy's physical pain and his mental pain?
Why does the boy's father suffer?
What is the Buddha's solution to the mental pain?
What is the Buddha's solution to the physical pain?
Why does the Buddha have different solutions to the two types of pain?
What sort of special powers does the Buddha have?
Why does the boy want to become a *buddha* himself?

Application to other contexts

Can you think of other examples of when a physical problem might cause mental pain?
Why do you think developing loving kindness towards others might help ease one's own mental suffering?
Do you think this story is right to separate out the physical and mental suffering?

Reflecting on wider Buddhist issues

What do Buddhists believe about suffering, and how does this story demonstrate this?
What does the story tell us about the way Buddhists should deal with painful experiences?
How does suffering/dissatisfaction relate to non-attachment?
What is loving kindness and why is it relevant to discussions of suffering?
What do we learn about the Buddha? How does he help others?
What is the difference between this Buddha and *buddha*s as a general category?
How and why might someone want to become a *buddha*?

Sources / Further Reading

This story is a paraphrase based on story 6 of the Sanskrit *Avadānaśataka*, a text from sometime in the first half of the first millennium CE. A full translation, along with an introduction to the text and translations of another 39 stories from it, can be found in Naomi Appleton, *Many Buddhas, One Buddha: A Study and Translation of Avadānaśataka 1-40* (Equinox 2020).

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The *Anattalakkhaṇa-Sutta* – Proving that there is no self

Shortly after his attainment of awakening, the Buddha was seated with his five first disciples, and he spoke to them about the content of their everyday experience. When doing this, he classified all that they experience into five 'heaps' (Pali *khandha*s; Sanskrit *skandha*s) of similar kinds of things that we experience, or five 'aggregates' that make up our sense of the world:

1) Physical form (Pali/Sanskrit *rūpa*). Our sense of ourselves as beings with bodies that move around and exist in the world.
2) Feelings (Pali/Sanskrit *vedanā*). Our sense of whether something is pleasant or unpleasant to us (or neither).
3) Ideas (Pali *saññā*; Sanskrit *saṃjñā*). The thoughts that we have that make sense of both what we perceive (see, hear, touch and so on).
4) Attitudes (Pali *saṅkhāra*; Sanskrit *saṃskāra*). Our basic opinions about things, including our attraction to them, or repulsion from them.
5) Perception (Pali *viññana*; Sanskrit *vijñāna*). What our senses are detecting at every moment: what we see, hear, smell, taste, touch and also, when we reflect on these things, what we think.

The Buddha implied that this provided a good account of all things that we experience: if we did not experience any of these things – had no physical body, no feelings, no ideas, no attitudes, and did not perceive anything – it would be hard to say that we even existed.

The Buddha asked his audience to think about each of these five types of experience. He suggested that none of these five things should be considered to be our "self" – none of them is what I really, truly am – and he proved this to his monks by asking them to think about it themselves.

"Monks," said the Buddha, "what do you think about your physical form? Is it something that is permanent, or is it impermanent?"

The monks realized that nothing in their body remained the same: it had been changing ever since they had been alive, growing from childhood into adulthood, but also in subtle ways ever since. As they grew old, their bodies would change even more, and eventually they would die.

"It is impermanent, sir" answered the monks.

"And if it is impermanent," continued the Buddha, "does this mean that your body is something that you find satisfying, or is it unsatisfying?"

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The monks thought again, and reflected that anything that is impermanent, and is changing, and ultimately will pass away, cannot be something that is really, truly satisfying.

“It is unsatisfying, sir” the monks admitted.

“And so,” continued the Buddha, still further, “is what is impermanent, and so unsatisfying because it is changing, something that you would consider to be really you, or what is really yours?”

“No, sir, we would not...”

So the body, the monks concluded, is not what they really are, not their true self, or something that they should consider particularly important or precious. The Buddha then asked the same questions about the other four “heaps” of their experience, and the monks had similar thoughts. Feelings are constantly changing, so none of these feelings can be what the self really is, or where the self can be found. Ideas certainly change, so the same is true there. Attitudes obviously change, as we come to like or dislike different things at different times. And our perceptions? These are changing constantly, as we see, and hear, and smell, and taste, and touch, and think different things from moment to moment: nothing anywhere in my physical person, or in my mind, stays the same – so where, in all of this, is something to consider and hold to as “my self”?

The monks realized that there was nothing in their experience to which they should cling: although these five types of experience were all that they knew, they should not think of any of them as being where to find something impermanent, or satisfying, or apart from change.

Each of us are changing constantly, and so there is nothing in us that is permanent or fixed. The monks had a sense of calm, realizing that one of their problems was assuming that any of these types of experience was particularly special or precious, and they attained nirvana.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source
What are the five "heaps" that the Buddha uses to talk about experience?
Why do the monks decide that none of them can be 'the self'?
What is persuasive about the way that the Buddha teaches his monks that there is nothing that they should think of as the self?
How does teaching about not-self relate to the two other marks of existence (impermanence and dissatisfaction/suffering)?
What happens to the monks as a result of understanding the Buddha's teaching? Why?

Application to other contexts
Can you explain your experience of the classroom *right now* using these five categories?
Can you think of other reasons why any of the five 'heaps' – your physical body, feelings, ideas, attitudes and perception – are not worthy of being considered 'what you really are'?
Does this description of our experience, being made of five 'heaps', provide a full account of everything that you experience? Or is there anything that you think is missing?
If none of the heaps of my experience are "my self", what does this mean for how I live my life?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues
Are you persuaded by this Buddhist account of what we are, and that there is no (permanent) self? Are there any problems with it in relation to other Buddhist teachings?
How does this teaching about the self relate to other key Buddhist teachings you have studied?

Sources / Further Reading

This is a paraphrase based on the Pali *Anattalakkhaṇasutta*, or sometimes *Pañcavaggiyasutta*: a translation of which can be found here:
https://www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/sn/sn22/sn22.059.nymo.html
Many scholars have written about Buddhist teaching about "not-self", and have sometimes come to quite different conclusions about it (this is not easy stuff!). For some accounts, see for example:

Rupert Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (OUP, 1998), chapter 6.
Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons* (CUP, 1982), part II.
Thanissaro Bhikkhu, *Selves and Not-Self* (2011), available to download here:
https://www.accesstoinsight.org/lib/authors/thanissaro/selvesnotself.html
Mark Siderits, *Buddhism as Philosophy: An Introduction* (Ashgate, 2007), chapter 3.

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From *The Questions of King Milinda*

When Nagasena arrived at the king's palace, Milinda asked the monk what his name was.

"I am known as Nagasena," replied the monk, "and by that name other monks address me, and that name my parents gave me. But it is just a name, and refers to no person with a fixed self."

The king was puzzled by this, and asked further: "If there is no person with a fixed self in front of me, then who is it now in front of me who became a monk, and has received offerings as a monk since? Who does good or bad deeds, and seeks to attain nirvana? If other monks are used to calling you Nagasena, what is it that they are calling by that name? Is it your hair, or your nails, or teeth, or skin, or what...?"

The king listed parts of the physical person, Nagasena, in front of him, but each time Nagasena reassured him that none of these things he named were, in fact, the monk Nagasena.

"Is Nagasena then the physical body? Or some feelings, or ideas, or attitudes, or perception?" The monk again said that none of these things were, in fact, "Nagasena". Nor was it these five things combined, nor anything apart from them.

"So," concluded the king, "I can find no-one called "Nagasena" at all! Who is it standing here, using that name?" enquired the king.

"You came here today, king, in a chariot?" replied Nagasena.

"I did..."

"And is the chariot the central pole, down the middle of its structure?"

"It is not..."

"Is the chariot then the axel, between the wheels? Or is it the wheels themselves?"

The king replied that it was neither. Nagasena listed all of the component parts of a chariot – the frame, its ropes, the parts of the wheels – until he had exhausted it all. The king denied that any of these things was the chariot. Nor was it necessarily all of these things together (a pile of wood, including wheels, is no chariot...), nor was it something apart from these things.

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As they spoke further, Milinda remained confused by some aspects of Nagasena's teaching, and had still some problems. The teachings of the Buddha, like the teachings of other religious leaders that he knew of, understood that we are all being reborn, endlessly, and because of actions that we do (that is, because of karma). In those other teachings, it is clear enough that my "self" is reborn, and receives the results of past actions. But if Buddhism does not permit that there is a self, and so nothing particular about me survives into a next lifetime, how can it be said to be "me"?

Struggling to ask the question, Milinda asked Nagasena: "is it the case that one does not transmigrate, and yet nonetheless one is reborn?"

"Indeed, your majesty, one does not transmigrate, and yet one is reborn."

"How, Venerable Nagasena, does this work? Provide me with an analogy..."

Nagasena suggested that the king imagined a row of oil lamps or candles that have not yet been lit. The first is lit, and slowly burns down as the wax of the candle melts and the wick is burnt up. But just before this happens, someone uses that lit candle to then light the next one – the first candle is then extinguished, but the second candle is alight. This second candle also then slowly burns down, but again it is used to light a third candle before it is extinguished...and so on, one candle after another.

Nagasena asked the king: "Is it the case, your majesty, that the flame of one lamp (or candle) has transmigrated from one to the next?"

Milinda has to admit that this is not the case – although it may look like it, it is not the case that the first flame has survived moving from one place to the next. Rather, before it went out, the first flame was used to produce the second one, and the second one used to produce the third. In other words, one flame *caused* the next one, in a sequence that could in theory go on forever.

So, there is no enduring self from one lifetime to the next (indeed, not even across one lifetime), but rather events in one lifetime *cause* a next one, in the manner that a flame, itself always in motion and changing, can produce a new flame after it, before it dies. In this way, we may be "reborn", but there is no lasting "self" that permanently endures throughout this process.

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Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the source
Why is Nagasena not the same as his body, or feelings, or ideas, or attitudes, or perception?
Why is a chariot not the same as its different parts?
What simile does Nagasena use to explain how rebirth works?
What continues when the flame moves across, and what changes?
What continues when a person is reborn and what changes?

Application to other contexts
With a partner, can you make Nagasena's point about not-self using a different simile instead of a chariot?
Can you think of another image that helps to explain how someone can be reborn?

Reflection on wider Buddhist issues
Remembering what else you have learnt about not-self teaching, what is the practical message of Nagasena's simile of the lamps (or candles)?
Can you think of any other similes to help explain aspects of Buddhist teaching that you have learnt about so far?
What role do the five "heaps" that make up a person play in this discussion?

Sources / Further Reading

The Questions of King Milinda (Pāli *Milindapañha*) is a Buddhist text possibly produced in the last century before the Common Era (we do not exactly know!). It imagines, or perhaps even remembers, an interaction between an intelligent king, called Milinda, ruling in what is today Afghanistan, and a Buddhist monk called Nagasena (Skt. Nāgasena), who visits the king and speaks to him about Buddhist doctrine. *The Questions of King Milinda* contain some well-known explanations of Buddhist ideas that were intended to make clear for broad audiences some of the most significant aspects of the Buddha's teaching. This is a paraphrase based on passages in the Pali *Milindapañha*. The chariot passage is translated here:
https://suttacentral.net/mil3.1.1/en/tw_rhysdavids?reference=none&highlight=false
And the oil lamp passage (which we have adapted to be about candles) here:
https://suttacentral.net/mil3.5.5/en/tw_rhysdavids?reference=none&highlight=false
The full text is very long, but can be found here:
https://www.sacred-texts.com/bud/milinda.htm
An alternative translation, based on a Chinese version that also dates back as far, called the *Nāgasena-sūtra*, can be found here: https://www.bdkamerica.org/product/analysis-of-the-middle-and-extremes-the-scripture-on-the-monk-nagasena/

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