



# Example of the chariot

The classic example of the principle of no-self is found in *The Questions of King Milinda*. The monk Nagasena asks King Milinda what mode of transport he used to come and meet him, and his answer is ‘a chariot’. He asks the king what a chariot is. Is it the axle, the wheels, the wooden frame, the yoke or the reins? Naturally, the answer is that none of these things on their own constitute a chariot. But if none of the parts are the chariot, where is the real chariot? The king replies:

*“It is in dependence on the pole, the axle, the wheels, the framework, the flagstaff, etc., that there takes place this denomination ‘chariot’, this designation, this conceptual term, a current appellation and a mere name.”*

Nagasena agrees with the king. He is saying that what we conventionally call a chariot only exists in dependence upon all the parts that make it up; if some or all of those parts were missing, there would be no chariot there. A chariot is not something that exists over and above the sum of its parts: it is simply a concept, a word that we apply when all the parts are assembled and function together in a particular way. One can go even further and conclude that there is nothing called ‘chariot’ that exists in actuality; ‘chariot’ is simply a term used to designate a particular association of pieces of wood and metal. The corollary of this is also true: if we take all the pieces apart, or destroy them, then the ‘chariot’ no longer exists. Therefore, chariots only have conditioned existence: they exist in dependence on certain causes and conditions coming together in a particular way, and once those causes and conditions change chariots cease to exist.

A modern example of this would be a car. What is a car? Clearly it is not simply the tyres or the engine or the steering wheel, and so on, on their own. A car exists when all its parts are assembled in a particular way so that it functions like a car. So once the car gets old and we take it to the car breakers, can we still call it a car when it has no wheels, or no windows, or no engine, or no steering wheel? At what point does a car cease being a car when we start taking it to pieces? And once we have disassembled the entire car and there is nothing left but spare parts, is there still an ‘essence of car’ that exists? And if so where, how, and how do you know?

Discovering Buddhism, Dominique Side (Chapter 10: The Three Marks of Existence)



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