Tricycle Talks
"How to Lose Yourself"
Episode #119 with Jay Garfield
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Jay Garfield: Human life is interactive and interdependent. That means we cannot ground our morality on the idea that we are autonomous individual agents who freely decide or don't decide to associate with one another. We have to understand our existence as that of interdependent beings, who owe everybody else an enormous debt of gratitude, whose interests have no priority over those of others, whose every good is a social good and depends upon the activity of others. When we do that, we replace talk about autonomy and rights and privileges with talk about cooperation, talk about gratitude, and those are moral moral attitudes that bring us to a much greater maturity and also make our societies much better than discussions of competition and survival of the fittest and individual liberties to do whatever I want, regardless of whatever anybody else wants.

James Shaheen: Hello, and welcome to *Tricycle Talks*. I'm James Shaheen, and you just heard Jay Garfield. Jay is a scholar of Buddhist philosophy and professor at Smith College. In his new book, *How to Lose Yourself: An Ancient Guide to Letting Go*, which he co-wrote with Maria Heim and Robert Sharf, he presents a series of accessible and engaging translations of key Buddhist texts on the fundamental teaching of no-self. In my conversation with Jay, we talk about why our preoccupation with the self causes us so much suffering, how dismantling the self is a project of moral development and spiritual freedom, and what it means to be a person without a self. So here's my conversation with Jay Garfield.

James Shaheen: OK, so I'm here with Jay Garfield, a scholar of Buddhist philosophy and professor at Smith College. Hi Jay, it's great to be with you.

Jay Garfield: Terrific to be here. Thanks for having me.

James Shaheen: So we're here to talk about your new book, *How to Lose Yourself: An Ancient Guide to Letting Go*, which you co-wrote with Maria Heim and Bob Sharf. To start, can you tell us a bit about the book and what inspired you to write it?

Jay Garfield: So let me begin with why we decided to write the book. Princeton for some years has had this terrific series called Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers, where they've invited people to produce accessible literary translations of classic texts that can be of use to people as they try to seek meaning in their lives or try to improve their lives. They're books that aren't meant to be principally for scholars but are meant to bring scholarship to people who might not otherwise be interested or have access to it. Up to this point, all of these texts have been either from the Greek or the Roman tradition. They produce them with the English on one side, on the left, and with the original source language on the right, kind of mirroring the Loeb Classical Library, so that if people do happen to have access to the languages, or if they just want to see what those languages look like, they're right there. But in any case, they've always been Western texts up to this point. Earlier last year or maybe the year before, I published *Losing Ourselves* with Princeton University Press, which is a book about why we don't have selves, why we aren't selves, why we're persons, and my editor there said, "Hey, Why don't we try to produce something that would, at the same time, be the reader to accompany that book but also to introduce non-Western philosophy to the Ancient Wisdom for Modern Readers series?" And so, we decided that if we were going to do something on Buddhist versions of no-self, which is what they wanted, I wasn't willing to restrict that to the tradition in which I work, the Indo-Tibetan Madhyamaka tradition, but that it would be important to try to have the Theravada tradition and the Chinese tradition represented as well. Fortunately, I had two really good friends and colleagues, Maria Haim and Bob Sharf. Maria works in the Theravada tradition, and Bob works in the Chan and Zen tradition. They agreed to join me in this enterprise, and so we produced this little book, *How to Lose Yourself*.

James Shaheen: You begin the book with a series of words and phrases we hear every day—finding yourself, self-consciousness, self-promotion, and so on—and you say that as a culture we seem to be self-obsessed. So can you say more about this preoccupation with the self? It seems so ubiquitous in our language and our culture that we don't even notice it.

Jay Garfield: Yeah, and I think we've got to be specific about what we mean by our culture here. I think what we mean is a culture that's generally inflected by the Abrahamic religious traditions. It's a central idea in the Abrahamic religion traditions that fundamentally we are souls or selves, and of course that gets articulated in different ways by different sects, by different philosophers, but a really deeply held view that permeates all of those traditions is that at bottom there's a core me, that I'm not my body, I'm not my mind, I'm the thing that has that body and mind, I'm the thing that's going to be eternally rewarded if I'm good, eternally punished if I'm bad, and so on and so forth. That's really central. It's easy for us to lose sight of the fact, especially in a largely secular age when many people do not see themselves as especially religious, that so much of our ordinary way of taking up with the world is conditioned by the religious traditions that have shaped our cultures, and we have been shaped by these traditions. As a result, we kind of reflexively think of ourselves as selves, and we don't ask why. We don't ask, "Gee, do I ever see a self there? Have I ever encountered something that's a self? Does it make any sense?" It's just part of the oxygen that we breathe as members of a broadly Abrahamic Western culture, and as a result, when we start wondering about what it is to lead a good life, we wonder, "How can I improve myself?" When we start thinking about justice, we start thinking about "Are we treating every self equally? Is this something that I would want for myself?" and so forth. And so our moral lives, our political lives, our epistemological lives, our emotional lives tend to all get refracted by this conviction that we exist as selves and everything else is alien.

Now, I also want to say, I don't want to entirely blame the Abrahamic tradition for this. The very fact that the Buddhist tradition has to argue so strenuously for the no-self position, as did for

instance, in the West, people like Hume, indicates that there's something pretheoretic about this. It's not just that explicit doctrine teaches us that we have selves, but there seems to be what we call in the Buddhist tradition an innate self-grasping, an innate tendency to see ourselves as selves, even if that's not reasonable. We're susceptible to that illusion, as I've argued in my book, *Losing Ourselves*, in the same way that we're susceptible to perceptual illusions, like the Müller-Lyer illusion. And so when you take the illusion and then you ramify the illusion by religious and philosophical speculation that articulates it as though it's the very nature of reality, we get a pretty strong sense that we are selves, and so dislodging that becomes a really complicated philosophical project, whether you're in India or in Scotland.

James Shaheen: Well, it's interesting because the whole notion of dislodging it has a premise, and that's that this preoccupation with self causes so much suffering. So could you say something about how it causes suffering?

Jay Garfield: Sure, and it's a central tenet of every Buddhist school that it does, so this is something I can say without restricting it specifically to the Madhyamaka tradition or the Indian and Tibetan tradition. When we think about what grounds Buddhist thought, and of course for listeners to this podcast, this is old stuff, but it's worth reminding ourselves fairly often, Buddhism is all about solving a problem, and that problem is the ubiquity of suffering. That's the first noble truth. But the first noble truth only sets the problem. The second truth, that is, the truth of the cause or the origin of suffering, is the one that really gets us into thinking about ourselves. And so we're told in the second truth that suffering is conditioned by attraction and aversion and that attraction and aversion are conditioned by a primal confusion about the nature of reality, and part of that primal confusion is the illusion of the self, the idea that the world basically revolves around me.

One way to think about that is this way. There are a lot of different ways to get at this, but here's a way that I like to think about it. When I take myself to be a self, I distinguish myself from the rest of the world as objects. I take myself to be a subject and everything and everybody else to be

my objects. Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* had a beautiful image for that. He said that it's like thinking of yourself as like the eye with respect to the visual field. The eye doesn't appear in the visual field, but rather everything in the visual field is an object for the eye as a subject. The moment I do that, I take myself to be a subject standing over and against the world rather than one more dependently originated, causally open sequence of processes. I take myself to have a very special role because now I'm the only subject. You, by the way, are not a subject. You are an object in my world. And what that does is it gives me a kind of ontological pride of place, and that means that even if I think I've got to work my way out of this, it's at least a prima facie reason to take my own interests, my own desires, my own values more seriously than I take other people's and to think that satisfying my own desires and my own preferences and acting on my own beliefs is prima facie rational. Now, of course, we can then qualify that and say, oh yes, but I've also got to consider other people and my preferences should concern their preferences as well. But it still comes back to my preferences and that I should have this kind of concern for other people, and that puts me at the center of my moral universe.

The moment I do that, I have a problem, because you're probably doing the same thing, and each listener is doing the same thing, and we can't each be the center of the moral universe, and it can't be that each of us has got onto the right preferences and the right goals and the right desires, the right political views, and so forth. And so conflict arises. Attraction arises to people who share my views; aversion arises to people who thwart my interests or who have different views; and the whole mass of suffering gets going. So unlike boring and fun optical illusions like the Müller-Lyer illusion illusion, this is an illusion that has real practical consequences, and the practical consequences are moral conflicts and strife and war and all of the other things that we find.

It also, by the way, causes us personal damage, because the moment I think of myself as a self, and the moment I take seriously the fact that that self is going to die, the fear of death overtakes us, and we end up with a life that's entirely inframed by the fear of death. Those who are familiar

with the bhavachakra, the wheel of life icon, will recognize this because what that icon tells us is that we live our lives inframed by the fear of death. That Yama that is framing the entire icon is what's determining the entire wheel of cyclic existence and we're constantly cycling from emotional state to emotional state to emotional state without any control, all of that's dependent on the self illusion.

James Shaheen: Jay, you put forward losing ourselves as an antidote to finding ourselves. What do you mean by losing ourselves, and how does losing ourselves allow us to actually see more clearly?

Jay Garfield: So the first thing to say, of course, is that's kind of a shorthand because you can't lose something that you never had, and my view is that self is something that you never had in the first place. But what I mean is losing our sense of self, losing the idea that we are a self. Because once we lose the idea that we're selves, we can ask the question, well, what kind of thing are we? And then we can begin to answer that question in a revealing way. The way in which the Buddhist tradition leads us to answer that, especially the work of people like Chandrakirti, around whom my thought orbits a lot, and in the West, David Hume's view about what we are, the way that we understand that is that we're not selves, we're persons.

So we're not arguing that we don't exist. That would be insane, right? If you begin a philosophical project by saying I'm going to convince you that you don't really exist, nobody's going to listen. But you might begin a philosophical project by saying you're not what you think you are, and now it's time to listen.

We're not selves; we're persons. And what are persons? Persons are conventionally constructed as individuals, as any kind of collectivity is. We arise as a collectivity of psychophysical processes. If we take the standard Buddhist analysis of that, the Buddhist classification, that means physical processes, that means sensory processes, perceptual processes, psychological traits and emotional traits and dispositions, and our consciousness and reflective thought. But it

really doesn't matter how you decide to do that. That's the standard five skandhas, but modern cognitive science does it differently. That's fine.

What we are are constantly evolving, open-ended streams of causally interacting psychophysical processes. Now, when you pay attention to that, a lot emerges, because then you realize that we are causally and responsibly open to other persons as well. We are not subjects for whom other persons are objects; rather, we are members of co-constituted societies in which other persons and we are in open causal interaction. What that means is that our primary attitude toward people isn't that of an object for my satisfaction but rather a colleague in co-constituting a world, a colleague in co-constituting a language, a way of thinking, a way of proceeding, and that generates the possibility of genuine friendship, generates the possibility of really caring about others rather than just using them. It generates the possibility of finding pleasure and joy in the success of others. And it generates a more equanimous relationship and more impartial view of other people, the familiar *brahmaviharas*. Generating the brahmaviharas and living in the kind of joy that the brahmaviharas can lead us to requires first shedding the illusion of self and understanding the interdependence and interactivity of persons.

James Shaheen: Jay, you write, "When we allow our fantasies of self to dissolve, we discover instead the radically interdependent nature of our existence," which you just alluded to. Can you say more about this? How is dismantling the self actually a project of moral development and spiritual freedom?

Jay Garfield: As I said, it began with metaphysical development. It began by developing a different understanding of ourselves, and that understanding replaces the illusion of independence with the reality of interdependence.

So, one of the things if you grew up in the United States is that you start hearing things from an early age like you've got to learn to think for yourself, you've got to stand on your own two feet, you've got to be independent, you've got to be creative, you've got to be author of your own

destiny. We all hear that kind of language all the time. When you try to spell it out, it starts sounding really stupid. So if I'm going to stand on my own two feet, do I also have to make the shoes that I'm standing in? Do I have to make the dirt that I'm standing on? If I'm going to think for myself, does that mean I should never listen to my teachers or my parents or experts who give me advice? If I'm going to be independent, does that mean that I never rely on anybody else for anything? I have to fix my own car. Oh, I've got to build my own car. Oh, I've got to mine the metal that goes into building my own car. It goes on and on. It's a way of occluding the fact that we are fundamentally and necessarily interdependent.

Homo sapiens is a species of hypersocial great ape. When I talk about hypersociality, I mean that we create the niche in which we can survive, and we can only survive in that niche, and that is a social niche. The Robinson Crusoe model of the individual who happens to live alone, the social contract model of lone individuals in a state of nature who decide to form a society, makes absolutely no sense at all. The only way you can decide is to be able to think. The only way you can think is to have a language in which to do that instead of concept. And the only way you can do that is to be part of society that's constituted that.

Human life is interactive and interdependent. That means we cannot ground our morality on the idea that we are autonomous individual agents who freely decide or don't decide to associate with one another. We have to understand our existence as that of interdependent beings, who owe everybody else an enormous debt of gratitude, whose interests have no priority over those of others, whose every good is a social good and depends upon the activity of others. When we do that, we replace talk about autonomy and rights and privileges with talk about cooperation, talk about gratitude, and those are moral moral attitudes that bring us to a much greater maturity and also make our societies much better than discussions of competition and survival of the fittest and individual liberties to do whatever I want, regardless of whatever anybody else wants.

And so I think that we only get a genuine moral sense, the kind that, as I said earlier, was articulated in the Brahma Viharas, when we understand ourselves as interdependent persons, and

that thinking about ourselves as selves, as independent, autonomous, substantial beings who are subjects of a world, only gets in the way of moral thought, only gets in the way of moral maturity, and only gets in the way of human happiness.

James Shaheen: I'd like to turn to the passages in the book. The book consists of readings from a variety of Buddhist sources spanning three languages and traditions. For this conversation, we'll focus mostly on the Middle Way teachings, but to give our listeners some background, could you tell us a bit about what early Buddhist writings say about the self—or the lack thereof?

Jay Garfield: Sure. The teaching of no-self is a teaching that begins at the very beginning of the career of Buddhism. It's something that the historical Buddha Siddhartha Gautama taught in many, many Pali sutras, that when we look for the self, we don't find it, and that what we find is nothing but a constantly evolving set of psychophysical processes, and that the person, that stream of psychophysical processes, is empty of any self. Indeed, the notion of emptiness that plays such a big role in the Madhyamaka and the Yogacara traditions has its origin in that idea of the person being empty of a self. That kind of teaching is there from the very beginning. We might think of Buddhism, in fact, as the Indian doctrine that rebels against the self-centric thinking of most of the orthodox traditions in Indian philosophy.

So that's where we begin, and indeed, one of the things that anybody who reads this book will see is that there's a tremendous continuity between the Pali Buddhist tradition and the Sanskrit and Tibetan Buddhist tradition and the Chinese Buddhist tradition, because even the very same metaphor that gets used in the questions of King Milinda, a paracanonical Pali text that we have part of our translation here, that is, the metaphor of the chariot, gets deployed in a slightly different but very continuous way in the 7th century in the Madhyamaka tradition. So the continuities are very real. And one of the things that I hope that this book brings to readers is the sense that sectarianism within Buddhism is generally distorting, that the unities in thought among Buddhist traditions are far greater than the subtle but important differences between them. In

terms of a doctrine of no-self, I think it comes out loud and clear in this collection that there's no real big difference, just difference in exposition

James Shaheen: How do Middle Way teachings build on or depart from this understanding?

Jay Garfield: You know, I would not think in terms of departure, but I would think in terms of building on. And that's not surprising. I mean, the Buddhist tradition is a very rich intellectual tradition, and rich intellectual traditions are characterized by progressiveness, that successive generations take ideas and push them a little bit further and develop with a little bit more sophistication than previous generations, and I really see the Buddhist tradition as no different in that respect. So personally, I don't like to think in terms of the decay of the dharma from a golden age but rather progressing the dharma toward a golden age.

James Shaheen: I like that. I like that.

Jay Garfield: Perhaps a slightly more Western view of history, but it's the one that I appreciate. Anyway, when we look at what Nagarjuna, Chandrakirti, and Tsongkhapa, who are the three principal figures that I translate in my section, are doing, they are extremely absorbed by the doctrine of the two truths, which is a kind of explicit development within the Mahayana tradition, something that might be there in embryo in the Pali tradition but is made explicit in the Mahayana tradition.

So when we think about two truths or two realities or two domains, the contrast is between an ultimate truth and a conventional truth. The ultimate truth is the way things actually are in reality, the way they're seen to be on final analysis, and that is the emptiness of any intrinsic reality, or the emptiness of subject-objectuality, if you want to take the Yogacara understanding, but it's emptiness, whereas the conventional truth is the truth as we understand it in the ordinary transactional world of everyday, the kind of ordinary empirical world. Now, part of the

philosophical problematic and the spiritual problematic of the Madhyamaka, the Middle Way tradition, is to understand how these two truths fit together.

Nagarjuna, very famously in the *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, the *Fundamental Verses on the Middle Way*, argues both that the two truths are completely distinct but that you have to understand the conventional truths in order to approach the ultimate but also that the two truths are identical and that there's absolutely no difference between them.

The way that Tsongkhapa, his great Tibetan commentator, argues that, which I think is really beautiful, is to say that the two truths are extensionally identical but intensionally distinct. That is, they are two different aspects of the same world. One way of looking at the world is to look at it as a set of discrete, interdependent causal processes and things, so we get independent origination, and that's the conventional way to look at it. The other way to look at it is to say, oh, but each of those is empty of any essence, empty of any core. One way to put that is to say the ultimate truth is that nothing exists ultimately. The ultimate truth is that the only kind of existence there is is conventional existence. So once we take that attempt to understand the two truths as the defining project, we can now take that understanding of the two truths, ultimate truth and conventional truth, and extensional identity and intensional difference, and bring them to thinking about what it is that a human being is.

Now, one of the cool things that Chandrakirti decides is there are things that exist conventionally but not ultimately, but there are also things that don't even exist conventionally but that we believe to exist conventionally. So, for instance, we might say right now, Gee, maybe tables and chairs don't exist ultimately, but Santa Claus, I hope I'm not breaking any bad news here, doesn't even exist conventionally.

Santa Claus, the tooth fairy, unicorns, and so forth are examples of things that don't even exist conventionally. Chandrakirti, when he starts thinking about the self, says, guess what, the self is also something that doesn't even exist conventionally. The kind of analysis that tells us that

there's no self is ordinary scientific analysis into a phenomenon. There's nothing that it explains. We don't ever observe it. It doesn't have any causal processes. It doesn't make any damn sense. It's just prejudice.

The person, however, while it doesn't exist ultimately and is empty of any ultimate existence like everything else, does exist conventionally. So the error of positing a self, Chandrakirti and Nagarjuna say, is an error within the conventional world. You could have a subsequent error, which would be to say that the person exists ultimately. But when we examine what the person is, we prevent ourselves from getting to that error, because we see that the person is just an impermanent, constantly changing collection of psychophysical processes.

So here we're building on the Theravada or the pre-Mahayana understanding of no-self and saying, guess what? That no-self isn't a matter of something that doesn't exist ultimately; it's a matter of something that doesn't even exist conventionally. But when we understand the person, we see something which has a conventional existence but no ultimate existence.

James Shaheen: You know what I found interesting is that you pointed out that in early Buddhism, the relative and the ultimate are ways of speaking, whereas in the Mahayana we're describing two levels of reality.

Jay Garfield: That's right. And that's the progress.

James Shaheen: That was very helpful to read that. So Nagarjuna discusses the relationship between the conventional and ultimate realms of language, especially the use of terms like "I," "me," and "mine" in everyday conversation. So could you say more about how the conventional and ultimate play out in our language?

Jay Garfield: Sure. First of all, of course Nagarjuna emphasizes that anything we can talk about is conventional. Ultimate reality, being emptiness, is really beyond discursive thought, beyond discursive language. But when we talk about "I" and "mine," the important thing to recognize is

that the referent of I, or the referent of mine always has to be the conventional person, not an ultimately real phenomenon—something in the world, not something that stands over and against the world. And there's no problem talking that way, so long as we keep in mind what we're talking about.

So it's very easy to slip, and let's think about that now. So if I say, for instance, my body is over five feet tall. That's true. But when we parse that phrase, "my body," we might say, okay, so there's two things here. There's me and my body, and I am an immaterial thing that now owns that body, parsing the genitive in terms of ownership and distinguishing two entities. That's the moment where we screw things up. Instead, if we simply say "the body to which I can refer as mine" or "the one that's called Jay" is over five feet tall, and I'm careful not to distinguish myself from that body, then we're OK. There's no problem with that.

When I say that I am talking with James right now, that's true. But if I think that means that there's a self that's doing the talking, that's false. There's a *person* that's doing the talking. And we're familiar with this kind of thing if we think of it in terms of institutions, which make the point really easily. So if we say something like "The federal government is responsible for Medicare," that's true. But we don't mean by that that the federal government is some entity independent of all of the people and institutions that constitute it, right? Or if I say "The federal government has three branches," I don't say, "Oh, there's the three branches, and then there's the government that has them." The three branches are simply part of the government. And we're always aware of that when we talk about other things, that we're not distinguishing a thing from its components. But when we turn to ourselves, we immediately draw that distinction between the thing and its possessions, or that which pertains to it, the "I" and the "mine." And the moment we grasp that "I" and "mine" as distinct things, we've fallen into the trap.

James Shaheen: So the book also includes a section from Chandrakirti's *Introduction to the Middle Way*. So could you tell us about Chandrakirti as a philosopher?

Jay Garfield: Yeah. I love talking about Chandrakirti as a philosopher. In fact, Sonam Thakchoe and I just finished a big book on Chandrakirti as a philosopher. I'm advertising now. It will come out later this year from Oxford.

Jay Garfield: Chandrakirti is In many ways one of my very favorite philosophers in the entire history of global philosophy because he's a philosopher within the Buddhist tradition who so beautifully takes the world seriously in the context of emptiness and the doctrine of the two truths, and he's somebody who really understands conventional reality as a reality, conventional truth as truth.

You see, it's really easy when people distinguish the two truths to say, "OK, that's right, conventional truth is just what you do until ultimate truth comes along, and ultimate truth is real truth. Conventional truth is masquerading as truth. It's just falsehood; it's just confusion." And many people within the Buddhist tradition and many people who study the Buddhist tradition understand the true truths in that way.

Chandrakirti recognized that if you do that, you can't make any sense of ethics, you can't make any sense of the path, you can't make any sense of the reality of suffering, you can't make any sense of what motivates Buddhism in the first place, because all of those things are conventional realities. Suffering is conventionally real. Persons are conventionally real. The path is conventionally real. If you decide to disparage the conventional truth by saying that it's not actual, that it's just an illusion, then you can't make any sense of Buddhism.

So Chandrakirti explained powerfully why conventional reality is a kind of reality and why its emptiness and its interdependence is what gives it so much force. He also explained why we can have knowledge of conventional truth, because again, there are Buddhist philosophers, and there are philosophers who study Buddhism, who say that one of the problems with Buddhism is we can't make any sense of knowledge of the conventional, because if conventional phenomena

don't exist, you can't know anything of them, and that the only kind of knowledge you can have is the supermundane knowledge from transcendence.

Chandrakirti said, no, you can't ever get to that supermundane realm, you can't ever get to transcendence if you don't begin by knowing what kind of thing a person is, if you don't begin by knowing how conventional reality or dependent origination works. And so he's somebody who always saw ultimate truth not as a substitute for conventional truth but as a partner in trying to understand the nature of the world. I find that quite profound.

The other thing about Chandrakirti is that by taking convention so seriously, he took our social nature seriously. And I think this is really important. Many people who approach any spiritual tradition, Buddhism included, focus weirdly on individuals and talk about an individual alone, sitting and realizing. Chandrakirti pointed out that we are essentially social, that language is conventional, that thought is conventional, and that without the societies that institute these conventions, we're nothing. So he didn't only take the world seriously; he took our nature as collective, social, conventional beings seriously. And for those reasons, I think Chandrakirti was an extraordinarily prescient and extraordinarily rich philosopher.

James Shaheen: You know, it's interesting, as I listened to you and as I read Chandrakirti, I thought of him in some ways as a bulwark against nihilism.

Jay Garfield: Yes, exactly.

James Shaheen: Yeah. So, you say that Chandrakirti argued that since followers of the Middle Way do not believe that there is any fundamental nature of reality, they cannot advance any theses on the nature of reality. How, then, do they write anything at all?

Jay Garfield: They write quite a lot, and they can write because they're writing about the conventional world, about the actual world, but they're not trying to write by giving its ultimate

nature but by talking about how we find it, by talking about what interdependence looks like in a way that is antifoundationalist.

This may get too technical, but I'm going to take you through it anyway. When people think about knowledge and when people think about reality in any philosophical tradition, often the most common and the default position is a kind of foundationalism in knowledge. It's the idea that our entire edifice of knowledge is built upon foundations of things that we know immediately or indubitably and that everything else is built on top of that. Anybody who's read Descartes or Berkeley will recognize that kind of position, that there are certain foundations of knowledge that we know immediately. For Descartes, that I exist, that I am, that clear and distinct perception gives me truth, and so forth. For Berkeley, it's the sensations, and that everything else is built on top of that.

In the ontological realm, in the realm of reality, they think, OK, there has to be some basic stuff. Well, we used to think it was atoms. Now maybe we think that it's subatomic particles. Oh, sorry, now we think it's quarks. No, now we think that it's quantum fields. But at some point, we think there's got to be something that's basic and that everything else is built on top of that. Chandrakirti was resolutely antifoundationalist. He argued that there were no ultimate grounds of knowledge. There isn't a bottom. There are no ultimate ontological grounds. Instead, he was a coherentist. He thought that what makes the world work is that everything holds together in a coherent way, that when we come to know things, we use methods of obtaining knowledge that are vindicated by the very knowledge that they generate. The knowledge that we generate, we accept because we get it from reliable ways of obtaining knowledge. When we look at wholes and macroscopic objects, sure, they're made out of microscopic objects, but those microscopic objects only exist as parts of macroscopic objects. And so in each domain, Chandrakirti argued, there are no foundations. The search for foundations is like the search for a self, of something primal that exists outside of all of this and supports everything else.

Chandrakirti's message is, don't look outside of the world or outside of your experience for something that supports it. Look inside. It all holds together and coheres. That's what the world of interdependence is, the world of dependent origination is. And it's not only empty of any essence; it's empty of any ground or foundation. And that antifoundationalism, which is a hallmark of postmodern Western philosophy, was right there in the Buddhist tradition in the 7th century in Chandrakirti's poems.

James Shaheen: You know, perhaps unsurprisingly, this philosophical style makes Chandrakirti notoriously difficult to read and interpret. I was just mentioning that to John Dunne. So how do you begin to try to understand what he's putting forth? I read it repeatedly and each time I get something different.

Jay Garfield: Yeah. The important key to reading Chandrakirti, and my colleague Sanam Thakchoe and I have been just immersed in Chandrakirti for the last few years working on this book, and it's become more and more obvious to us, the key is to make sure that you read everything. Because most people, I mean, for instance, there are a lot of people, both canonically and contemporary, who take Chandrakirti to be a nihilist, like the 9th and 10th Karmapas. Many people have argued that Chandrakirti is a nihilist. Some people have said that's the problem with Chandrakirti; some people have said that's the great thing about Chandrakirti. Typically in Tibet, people who read him as nihilist say, "See, what a great idea," and people in the West who see him as nihilist say, "See, it's just worthless, you've got nothing to teach us." But they agree about the nihilism, and I think that arises from cherry-picking a very few verses, a very few remarks, mostly from the *Madhyamakavatara*, that can be read that way.

But if you read Chandrakirti comprehensively, and you read Chandrakirti's *Commentary on the Four Hundred Verses* and you read his discussion of the five aggregates, and if you read through the corpus, just read through the corpus, and you ask yourself the question, "OK, there do seem to be sentences that are in tension with other sentences here. Sometimes he's saying we have to take conventional reality seriously, sometimes he has conventional reality as illusory." You ask

yourself the question, "What's the reading that makes the entire thing cohere and makes it make sense?" We realize it's only a realistic reading that does that, an antifoundationalist realistic reading.

So sometimes people take the antifoundationalism to be nihilism, and we say no, it's realistic coherentism. But the most important point is to say that when Chandrakirti says that the conventional reality is deceptive or illusory or false, he always means false in the sense of illusory, illusory in the sense of deceptive, and that's not illusory in the sense of nonexistent but in the sense of deceptive.

We see this throughout Indian Sanskrit literature. When we characterize something as false or deceptive, we mean it exists in one way but appears in another. So it's like a magical illusion, like the Müller-Lyer illusion, like an optical illusion, that it exists in one way but appears in another. When we do that, we can then ask the question, OK, how does Chandrakirti say that things appear? He says that they appear as though they are intrinsically real. They appear to have fundamental grounds. They appear to have essences. We appear to be selves. How do they exist? They exist interdependently, not independently; inessentially, not essentially; ungrounded, not grounded; as persons, not as selves. And so we say that the passages that nihilistic readers of Chandrakirti point to as evidence of an nihilism, when you read them in context of realistic passages, we recognize that they're not nihilistic at all; rather, they are illusionists. They're saying that things exist in one way, not in another. We call that a qualified realism. It's a realism, but it's not a realism that says things exist as they appear. It's a realism that says that things appear in one way but in fact exist in another.

James Shaheen: Yeah, you know, my impression is that these are not things to be dismissed and that's why earlier I inadvertently agreed with you that he is not a nihilist. But anyway, I'm no scholar, it's just the impression I've had from the reading I did. So how does Chandrakirti make use of the two truths to dispel any notion of a self?

Jay Garfield: Largely by arguing that the self doesn't even exist conventionally, and I think that's really important. So he uses this kind of reasoning, and this is the subtle difference between the chariot example as it's used in the *Milindapañha*, which is translated in the first part of our book, and the chariot example as it's used in the *Madhyamakavatara*, in the second part of the book. In the questions of King Milinda, we kind of get the idea, OK, the self doesn't exist ultimately, but it exists conventionally. Chandrakirti says, not so fast. The thing that exists conventionally is in fact a person, not even a self. So Chandrakirti is taking it one step further and saying that it's not that the self is a conventional existence that doesn't exist ultimately but that the self doesn't even exist conventionally and so isn't even a candidate for ultimate reality or ultimate existence. It's more like Santa Claus than it is like the table in front of me.

James Shaheen: Ok, so as you mentioned Chandrakirti makes use of the chariot analogy. Could you tell us about the chariot analogy? I mean, one objection I've heard people say is that a chariot doesn't have consciousness, so it's a very uncomplicated metaphor or analogy. But anyway, tell us a little bit about the chariot analogy.

Jay Garfield: Chandrakirti offers us a kind of sevenfold partition of the ways that a chariot might exist. For instance, it might be one of the parts of the chariot might be the real chariot. Maybe it's the seat, maybe it's the axle. It might be that the chariot is all of the parts conceived together. It might be that the chariot is a separate thing that has the parts, a separate thing that's constituted by the parts, or it might be the parts assembled just in a particular way, and so forth. And he argues that in none of those ways can we make any sense of identity with the chariot. The chariot can't be a single part because there is no part that is a whole chariot. If I give you an axle and say, “Now you've got the chariot,” you say, “No, no, no, I've got some axle for the chariot.” The chariot can't just be the set of parts because, as you know, when you order a chariot from Amazon, what you get is a big box that's got all of the parts plus instructions to go to an online site that's down in order to get instructions for how to assemble it. So you wouldn't say, “Well, now I've got a chariot.” You'd say, “Well, now I've got a box of chariot parts, but what I

really want is a chariot. I've got a long day ahead of me." It can't be even the parts just as they're assembled. When you finally put it together, you say, "Now I've got a chariot," and I say, "What is a chariot?" You say, "It's this set of parts all assembled." Why not? Well, suppose that you start riding your chariot around. The left wheel breaks. And so you go and you get a replacement wheel. You've now got a different set of parts, but you've got basically the same chariot. And we can continue in this way.

Moreover, you can't say that a chariot is the thing that has the parts, because if you take the parts away, you don't have a chariot left. You don't say, "You take the parts, I'll keep the chariot." You end up with all the goodies and I don't have anything at all. So for all of these reasons, Chandrakirti argues, you can't think of there being a thing called the chariot that has any conceivable relation to its parts.

So he says, look, the self is just like that. You can't think of me as the owner of my parts, as something that is one of my parts, as something that's all my parts organized just the way they are right now, and so forth.

On the other hand, what we can say is, just as we can say conventionally that there is a chariot even though we don't think of there being, even conventionally, a chariot apart from its part, apart from the way they are, rather we say that the chariot is an imputation that we construct dependent upon its parts and our conventions for talking, riding, hitching up horses, and so forth. Similarly, we can say that the person exists, but it exists as a designation, as an imputation. It exists as something dependent upon all of the psychophysical processes that constitute me but not identical to those psychophysical processes.

Chandrakirti didn't have this language, but in the language of contemporary metaphysics, we would say that the person, like the chariot, supervenes on its parts and on our conventions but isn't identical to those parts or to those conventions, so that whenever you've got the conventions we have for imputing identity and existence and a set of aggregates just like mine, you can

impute a person, and that's conventionally right. But without those, you don't have a person at all.

An example that I personally find better than the chariot for contemporary readers is the convention of money, which I talk about in my book, *Losing Ourselves*, because it's a little bit easier to see how the conventions work. If I hold up a dollar bill, and I hold up a twenty dollar bill, and I ask, what makes this one twenty times as valuable as that one, it's not the paper and it's not the ink, so the twenty aren't in that bill, the one isn't in that bill. Rather, it's a whole set of conventions that involve things like the Federal Reserve. Our practice is of buying and selling things that make one worth twenty and one worth one.

Human beings, people, are constituted normatively in much the way that money is. Sure, we've got bodies that move around, but it's not the bodies that move around that make us who we are. Sure, we've got thoughts that are really important, but it's not just the thoughts, and it's not just the emotions, it's those whole complexes that allow us to say, let's value these things as persons. And so we might say that we supervene on our bodies, on our thoughts, on our actions, on our histories, but also on all the social processes that lead us to value beings like us as persons.

James Shaheen: You know, Chandrakirti also argues that letting go of the notion of I makes us less clingy. So I'd just like to quote him here. "Because there is no object of action without an agent, there can be no 'mine' without an 'I.' Therefore, by seeing both 'I' and 'mine' to be empty, a practitioner attains liberation." So can you say more about how letting go of notions of "I" and "mine" reduce our attachment and possessiveness?

Jay Garfield: What Chandrakirti means is that we need to lose our sense that "I" refers to an entity, to a self, and that "mine" refers to objects that somehow are connected independently to that self, so that I could think of "I plus my body," "I plus my mind," "I plus my dog," and so forth, and to think of "I" as one thing and all of those others as things that pertain to it or that are related to it in some kind of contingent way. Instead, he wants us to think of "I" as a pronoun that

doesn't refer to a self but is simply useful in designating the person Jay Garfield in this context, and when you use it, it designates the person James. And we can use those things conventionally to designate persons without thinking that we're referring to something substantial in the same way that when we talk about the federal government we don't think there's a substance independent of the legislature, the judiciary, and the executive branch that we're referring to. We think we're using a convention to refer to a large, complex, constantly changing set of political processes. Similarly, when we talk about "mine," we can think of things as perhaps legally mine; we can think of things as the body that incarnates me that's different from thinking of something that's legally mine; we can think of something as an action of mine, like raising my hand. But we, again, don't need to think that there's a substantially existent self and then an independent object that's connected by an ownership relation. Instead, we can think of "mine" simply as meaning it's something that this conventional self did, owns, or participates in, and that conventional person is what's designated by the "I," not some metaphysically real self lying behind it.

So it's important to see that there's no nihilism here. Chandrakirti isn't arguing that we can't use the word "I" or that when we use the word "I," we're not referring to anything at all. What he is saying, though, is that when we use the word I, we're not referring to a self, and we're certainly not referring to anything that exists ultimately. We're just engaged in a bit of conventional discourse.

James Shaheen: You know, you talked about this a little bit earlier when, say, our notion of self is attenuated how we might behave, so putting this all together, what might it actually look like to live without a self?

Jay Garfield: Well, first of all, it looks just like this, because we all, in fact, live without selves. The problem is that we live *as though* we have selves. And so what would it look like not to live as though we have selves? It would be to have a lot less anger, a lot less pride, a lot less competitiveness, a lot more gratitude, a lot more care, a lot more friendship, a lot more default

sense that what I am is part of a larger whole rather than a self-contained individual, a lot more sense that these other people around me are my colleagues and friends rather than my competitors, a lot more sense that when somebody does something that I find offensive or problematic or says something offensive or problematic, the immediate reaction shouldn't be blame and anger but rather care and an attempt to get them to be relieved of that attitude rather than to be punished for it.

James Shaheen: So Jay, anything else before we close?

Jay Garfield: Well, I would just say that I think it's really important when people read this book to read all three parts to get a sense of the progressivity of the Buddhist tradition and of the commonalities but also of the subtly different insights between Buddhist philosophers and of the kind of progressivity that we see in the Buddhist tradition.

James Shaheen: Jay Garfield, it's been a pleasure. For our listeners, be sure to pick up a copy of *How to Lose Yourself*, available now. If you enjoyed this conversation, check out our last podcast episode with Jay, "Learning to Live without a Self." Thanks again, Jay.

Jay Garfield: Thank you very much. It's been a pleasure as always. Take care.

James Shaheen: You've been listening to *Tricycle Talks* with Jay Garfield. Tricycle is a nonprofit educational organization dedicated to making Buddhist teachings and practices broadly available. We are pleased to offer our podcasts freely. If you would like to support the podcast, please consider subscribing to Tricycle or making a donation at tricycle.org/donate. We'd love to hear your thoughts about the podcast, so write us at feedback@tricycle.org to let us know what you think. If you enjoyed this episode, please consider leaving a review on Apple Podcasts. To keep up with the show, you can follow *Tricycle Talks* wherever you listen to podcasts. *Tricycle Talks* is produced by Sarah Fleming and the Podglomerate. I'm James Shaheen, editor-in-chief of *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. Thanks for listening!