

BEING AND NOTHINGNESS IN ANTIQUITY

*Dharmas, Emptiness, and
Ultimate Reality:
Buddhist Perspectives on Being
and Nothingness*

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Preamble

- ✿ “Buddhist perspectives”
- ✿ How to relate ideas in non-Western traditions
- ✿ Some relevant Buddhist ideas

The Buddha, Buddhist Thought, and Soteriology

- ❖ Soteriological orientation of Buddhist Thought
- ❖ The Buddha's attitude toward ontology
- ❖ Limitations of human concepts

Buddhist Ontology: Context and Issues

- ❁ Buddhist ontology: extensions of the Buddha's teachings
- ❁ The context of the Buddha: Vedic/ Brahmanical tradition vs Śramaṇa movement
- ❁ saṃsāra, incessant cycles of rebirth
- ❁ personal identity & karma as intentional action



Buddhist Ontology: Dharmas as Elements of Existence



- ❁ The origin of suffering: craving
- ❁ Doctrine of no-Self (*anātman*)
 - ❁ five aggregates (*skandha*)
- ❁ The “self” in constant flux
 - ❁ 18 elements of cognitions (*dhātu*) & 12 spheres of cognition (*āyatana*), which resulted from 6 sense faculties (*indriya*) & corresponding objects
- ❁ Elements of existence: dharmas



Abhidharma: Taxonomies of dharmas

- ❖ Two types of dharmas:
 - ❖ conditioned: material, mental, non-material perceptual
 - ❖ unconditioned, e.g., *nirvāṇa*, space
- ❖ Theravāda taxonomy of dharmas: 82 dharmas
 - ❖ (a) consciousness, (b) 52 associated mentality, (c) 28 physical phenomena, and (d) the unconditioned *nirvāṇa*

Mahāyāna: The Selflessness of dharmas

The bodhisattva Noble Avalokitesvara, practicing [his] practice in the profound Perfection of Wisdom, looked down. [And] he regarded the **five skandhas as empty**.

Emptiness of the five aggregates

Here, Śāriputra, **form is emptiness; emptiness itself is form. Form is not distinct from form. And the same goes for sensation, concept, conditioning force and consciousness.** Here, Śāriputra, all dharmas have the mark of emptiness...

Non-difference between emptiness & the five aggregates

Therefore, Śāriputra, in emptiness there is... **no eye, ear, ... no form, sound, ... no eye-realm and so on up to no realm of mind-consciousness; no ignorance ... up to no old-age-and-death...** **There is no suffering, arising [of suffering], extinction [of suffering], or path;** knowledge and no attainment.

six sense faculties

six sense objects

six sensory consciousness

12 links of dependent origination

Four Truths



Madhyamaka: Nagarjuna's Emptiness

- ❖ Nāgārjuna (c. 2nd century CE)
 - ❖ systematizer of the emptiness doctrine
- ❖ Madhyamaka
 - ❖ a middle way between the extreme of eternalism (*śāśvatadr̥ṣṭi*) and the extreme of annihilationism (*ucchedadr̥ṣṭi*)
- ❖ Dharmas are not independent, indivisible elements with inherent existence (*svabhāva*)

Emptiness and *svabhāva*

- ❖ Emptiness: absence of *svabhāva* (inherent essence/substance/nature, etc.)
- ❖ Two main conceptual dimensions of *svabhāva*
 - ❖ Ontological
 - ❖ **As essence:** a property an object could not lose without ceasing to be that very object
 - ❖ **As substance:** irreducible, objective, and independent constituent of reality
 - ❖ Cognitive
 - ❖ Soteriological implications: liberation from suffering





Nāgārjuna's Thought on Emptiness

- ✧ Emptiness as critique of other positions
 - ✧ Not a philosophical position but a method
- ✧ Without emptiness, reality is not possible; emptiness may be equated to dependent origination
- ✧ Potential issues: barriers between things (e.g., *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*) obliterated. Thus, the notion of two truths:
 - ✧ conventional: distinctions exist on the mundane level
 - ✧ ultimate: everything is empty

Yogācāra: The Mind and Ultimate Reality

- ❖ Yogācāra is not just a philosophy but also an elaborate system of practice
- ❖ the most sophisticated examination & description of how the mind works
- ❖ forging new doctrines and synthesized prior teachings





Consciousness-Only (Vijñaptimātra)

- ✿ Translations: cognition-only, representation-only; mind-only
- ✿ What does it hold? Everything we know is filtered through the mind
 - ✿ What appears in cognition is constructed or projected
 - ✿ objects are mere representations & categories are mere designations
 - ✿ resulted in subject-object dualism, which perpetuates ignorance & desire
- ✿ The mind as the solution: understand how the mind operates and put an end to flawed mental operations

Three Natures (*trisvabhāva*)

- ❁ Imaginative construction (*parikalpita*)
 - ❁ mental constructions obstructing our view of what truly is the case; the world of subject-object dualism
- ❁ Dependent on other causes (*paratantra*)
 - ❁ webs of causes and conditions at play, bringing forth mental construction; akin to the Madhyamaka notion of emptiness
- ❁ Consummation (*pariniṣpanna*)
 - ❁ removal of mental construction from web of cause and conditions, leaving only reality as it is



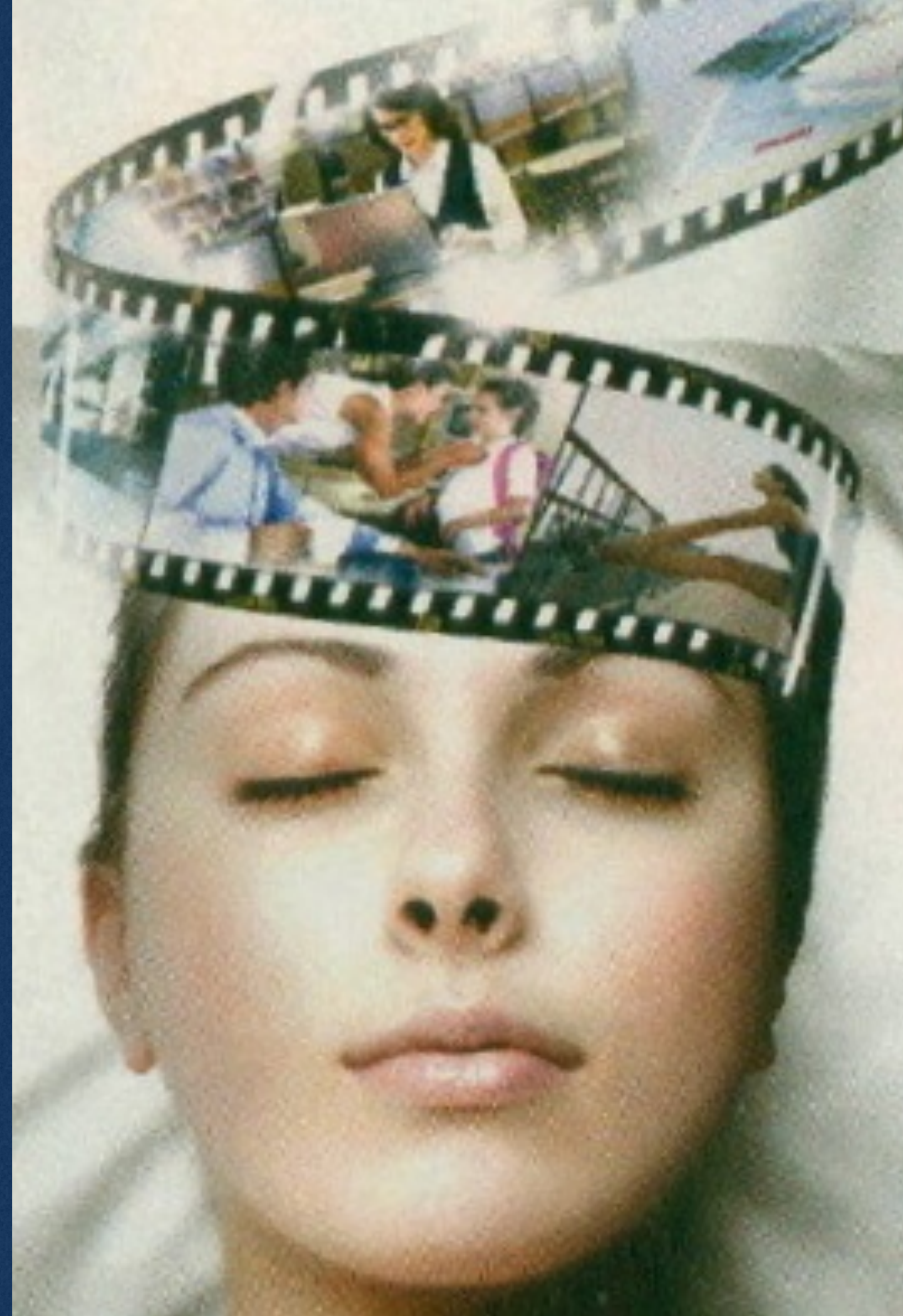
Traditional Theory of the Mind



- ❁ Mainstream theory based on the six senses/consciousnesses
 - ❁ Five sensory consciousnesses (visual, auditory, gustatory, olfactory, tactile): produced by contact between sense organ (e.g., eye, ear, etc.) and corresponding sense field/object (e.g., color, sound, etc.)
 - ❁ Mental consciousness (*manovijñāna*) arises from contact between the mind (*manas*) and mental objects (thoughts, ideas); capable of thinking about what other senses perceived
- ❁ Did not sufficiently account for
 - ❁ the origin of the sense of "self"
 - ❁ the continuity of experience, and the link between an act and its eventual karmic effect

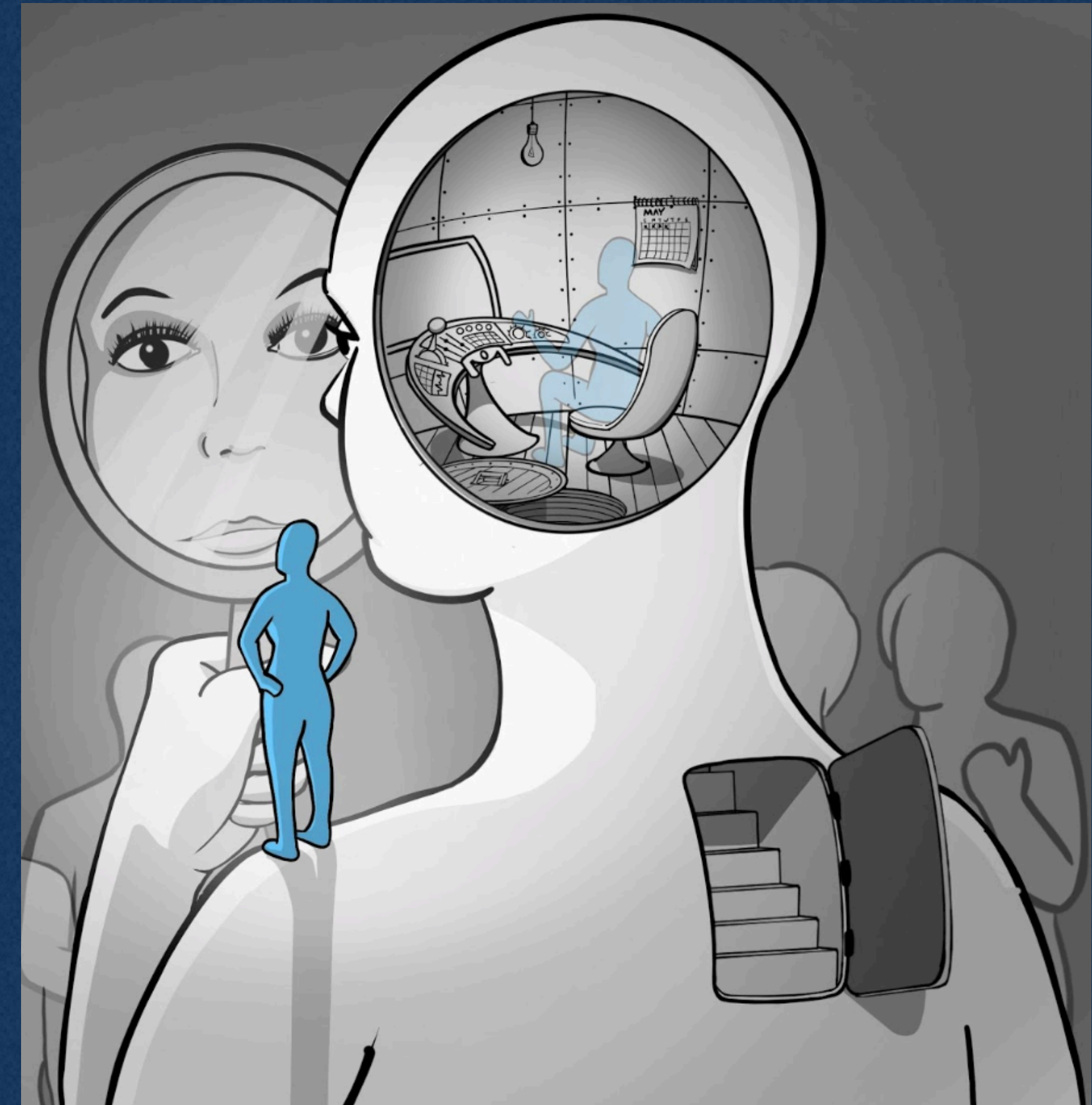
The Eighth Consciousness: Ālayavijñāna

- ❁ Commonly translated as “Storehouse Consciousness”; subconscious part of the mind
- ❁ Serves as a repository for karmic seeds (*bīja*), which are produced by experience and stored over a lifetime or many lifetimes
 - ❁ These seeds perfume the storehouse consciousness as they affect the regeneration new seeds
 - ❁ Causal seeds remain latent until a new conscious experience causes seed to sprout, infusing new cognition
- ❁ Another important metaphor: Ālayavijñāna as the ocean & karmic actions as waves



"Self" and the Seventh Consciousness

- ❁ Known variously as the "defiled/tainted mind" (*kliṣṭamānas*) or the "appropriative consciousness" (*ādānavijñāna*)
- ❁ responsible for appropriating experiences as "mine" & infesting them with sense of self
- ❁ Takes the eighth consciousness as its object & seeing it as an unchanging Self



Liberation and Ultimate Reality: Overturning the Basis (*āśrayaparāṇṭti*)



- ❖ Karmic continuity ceases by overturning the basis as all consciousnesses becomes direct cognition
- ❖ “Great mirror cognition”:
 - ❖ bad seeds gone and mental disturbances (greed, hatred, etc.) eliminated, i.e., all cognitive obstruction eliminated
 - ❖ seventh consciousness not operational, i.e., no false projection of Self
 - ❖ no discriminatory activities but direct cognition, i.e., cognizing reality as it is, no subject-object dualism

CONCLUSION