

Self/No-Self

‘We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves.’ Norbert Wiener ‘Body is not self, feelings are not self, perception is not self, mental constructs are not self and consciousness is not self... When one sees this one becomes detached from these things, being detached the passions fade, when the passions have faded one is free, and being free one knows one is free.’ Samyutta Nikaya 3.66 After many intense years of study and bhavana, or mental development, the Buddha, sitting under the Bodhi tree on the night of a full moon, experienced a remarkable insight. He realised that all observable phenomena are dynamic, subject to constant change, to co-rising and ceasing, and that there are no permanent beginnings or end states, physical or mental. Everything changes; there is no fixed essence or ultimate nature, only a process of becoming (Anicca). Likewise, there is no static, permanent self or soul, only a continuously evolving pattern.

The total, essential, or particular being of a person.¹ • ‘...when we describe a “self” usual core conceptions include: an individualistic self that is very aware of itself, its uniqueness, sense of purpose, will it is at the center of an individual’s psychological world.’² • ‘The self is always on center stage, and the world is judged and evaluated by and through it. Also, the self and other are sharply demarcated: the self is a distinct entity and has an identity unique from other selves and all other things. The self “belongs” to the individual who is its sole owner and who has a sense of personal control of it which is thought essential to maintaining a strong, healthy self. It is believed that in a healthy state, the self is stable, it is coherent and integrated. Rooted in individualism, the Western self is, in short, the measure of all things.’³ • The self includes, ‘Specific psychological boundaries, an internal locus of control, and a wish to manipulate the external world for its own personal ends.’⁴ • Underlying Western self-conceptions are presuppositions asserting: (a) a subject–object distinction; (b) a self–other demarcation and individual identity; and (c) the centrality and sovereignty of selfhood. Sampson (1988) From these definitions, it is clear that the self includes being essential, bounded, sovereign, the measure of all things, and distinct. An understanding of the elemental nature of the concept of the inherent static self, or I, in our modern Western culture can begin to be developed. To further illustrate this, here are a few famous quotes from an almost endless list of sources by modern writers extolling the individualistic self: • ‘I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more un-sustained I am, the more I will

This seemingly simple perspective has profound implications. According to the Buddha’s teachings, when we draw arbitrary distinctions between a self and the environments in which we live, our actions become distorted by self-centeredness. Frustration and suffering (dukkha) are the inevitable consequences. By contrast, when the self is correctly understood to be a cognitive construction – a representation, many of the (supposedly essential) problems of life lose their urgency and emotional strain. But, by taking the Buddha’s perspective, we can revolutionise our understanding of what we call our self, and our interpretation of the world around us. Our journey towards developing a comprehension of the Buddha’s teachings begins with an examination of the definition of the self. Western conceptions of the self and their historical roots will be discussed and contrasted against the Buddha’s doctrine of non-self (anatta). Contemporary Western Self In Western cultures, the word self is usually taken to refer to a unique, inherent, core identity at the centre of each person. The Western belief in the sense of self is deeply entrenched in popular, scientific and philosophical traditions. In Western culture, the reality of an authentic self is normally taken entirely for granted. From when we first begin to understand and use language as infants, and continuing throughout one’s life, the use of words such as ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘mine’ reinforces the ideas of individuality and independence. This in turn shapes how we explain the world and our place within it. To better understand how we typically think about the self, it may be helpful to begin with some current definitions of self, which reflect the prevailing Western cultural view.

For example, Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle posited that an individual’s essence consisted of an immaterial and spiritual substance, named spirit, psyche, or soul, which is separate from the body, and thus survives death. Similar ideas were continued by theologians of the

Middle Ages such as Thomas Aquinas who, in the 1200s, emphasised the immortality and superiority of the soul to the body in which it dwelled. This conception of an individual's psyche or self as a spiritual entity separate from the physical, led to subsequent conceptions of mind and body duality. Famously, in the 1600s, beginning with his *Cogito, ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am), René Descartes proposed Cartesian rationalism, which emphasised a mind and body duality. Even though careful analysis shows that to somehow separate the physical (body) from the nonphysical (mind) is nonsense, Cartesian dualism, what the English philosopher Gilbert Ryle said characterised the human mind as, 'the ghost in the machine', has continued to dominate Western thinking until today. Descartes's notion of the soul was given a degree of respectability when the word mind was introduced to replace the religious concept of soul. Raymond Martin, Professor of Philosophy at Union College, has written extensively about the intellectual transformation that occurred in the eighteenth century, when the religious soul was replaced first by a philosophical self, and then by a scientific mind. In fact, many supposedly new and contemporary theories of the self were first discussed in the eighteenth century.⁵ Naturally, as a reflection of the culture in which it is embedded, Western psychology has also become dominated by a worldview whereby the individual self plays a central role as an explanatory construct. As Girishwar

respect myself.' Charlotte Brontë • 'From where I'm sitting, I AM the centre of the Universe!' Sebastyne Young • 'And now I see the face of God, and I raise this God over the earth, this God whom men have sought since men came into being, this God who will grant them joy and peace and pride. This God, this one word: "I".' Ayn Rand

Reflecting the modern fascination and enchantment with the self, one of the few words recently added to the English dictionary is *selfie*, which is defined as, 'A complimentary self-portrait photograph, typically taken with a hand-held digital camera or camera phone and is displayed on social media'. The Oxford Dictionary even declared 'selfie' as word of the year. As an endorsement of this modern self-absorption, some writers have even promoted selfies as an appropriate tool of self-love, stating the practice can be equivalent to staring at your reflection in the mirror. Truly, the selfie may be taken to represent the apex of modern misunderstanding about the nature of the self and, correspondingly, the search for happiness and equanimity through pride and self-admiration. The centrality of the self in Western thought can be traced back through antiquity and perhaps even prehistory. Archeological evidence from ancient cave paintings in France suggests to some observers that prehistoric human beings already pondered the existence of a non-physical, psychological self. Werner Herzog, who produced a recent film documentary about France's famous Chauvet Cave, described viewing the pre-historic paintings found therein as akin to witnessing, 'The origin of the modern human soul'. In Western culture, the existence of a self has long been established on the basis of a wide variety of soul theories.

Many other psychologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had creative and influential ideas about the nature of the self, including significant figures such as the originator of psychoanalysis Sigmund Freud, and psychologist Carl Jung. For example, psychoanalytic therapy is predicated on expanding the self-as-knower: to render more of the unconscious conscious. Freud developed a structural model of the psyche comprising the entities id, ego and superego while Jung wrote extensively about the collective unconscious (or transpersonal) memories of humankind stemming from our ancestral past as universal predispositions. Psychoanalyst Karen Horney, later attributed individuals with an ideal self to be representing the type of person that they wish to be, whereas psychoanalyst Heinz Kohut expanded the doctrines of psychoanalysis by conceiving the modern school of Self Psychology, which posits the self as the central agency of the human psyche. The import of ideas of these early personality theorists to the field of psychology (in general), and to psychoanalysis in particular, was significant. And, whilst much has changed since the days of Freud and Jung, contemporary psychological theory still does not address the standing of the more fundamental issue, that is, the validity of an authentic, bounded, and individualistic self. Few of the ideas of the early personality theorists were formulated as empirically testable hypotheses. In response, in the early-to-mid twentieth century, B. F. Skinner and the Behaviorist School of Psychology sought to redefine psychology as an empirical science by focusing exclusively on

observable behaviours and foregoing unobservable inner states. Although the Behaviorists made many useful discoveries, their denial of internal mental

Misra and Kenneth J. Gergen recently wrote, on the place of culture in psychological science:

‘Mainstream psychology has been vigorously engaged in characterizing human lives in terms of mechanistic and individualistic constructions, with the aim of predicting and controlling the behaviour of a cultural and decontextualised others. Committed to a belief in psychological universals, this enterprise is directed at verifying a peculiarly Western intelligibility.’⁶ Although no longer identified as being a soul, the self as a common construct permeates contemporary psychology. There is a surfeit of models of the self applied in psychotherapy and self-help literature, and according to Edward G. Muzika, there are at present over 200 varieties of psychotherapy, and since few, if any, assert that self is an illusion, most work at strengthening the self and making it more able to bear pain and create pleasure.⁵ All of these theories aim towards lessening distressing symptoms and agitation, to result in greater self-acceptance and adjustment. They seek to strengthen the self so that it can feel and express more feelings, attain a deeper, clearer articulation, and the confidence to able to overcome difficulties and achieve success in the world. The assumption of the existence of the self has been a major preoccupation of psychologists from the earliest days of the field. The father of American psychology, William James, who wrote his classic text *Principles of Psychology* in 1890, offered a broad definition of the self as a topic for scientific study: ‘In its widest sense a man’s Self is the sum total of all that he can call his, not only his body and his psychic powers (normal cognitive activity), but his clothes and his wife and children, his ancestors

The Doctrine of Anatta In contrast to traditional Western views, the Buddha discovered through his mental training and final Awakening, or Enlightenment, that the self is, indeed, a fiction. It is an abstraction of the mind, which we continue to construct over the course of a lifetime. The Buddha taught that one can observe and understand mental processes without any need for an innate I at the centre of the experience. There is thinking, there is feeling, and there is perception, but these activities do not require a substantial self as an authority except as a linguistic convention. In actuality, there is nothing authentic about the self except our belief in it. This realisation is at the heart of the Buddha’s Truth of Anatta, or no-self. The doctrine of Anatta is the Buddha’s most unique and radical teaching. Mark Epstein, psychiatrist and author, has said that, ‘This emphasis on the lack of a particular, substantive agent is the most distinctive aspect of traditional Buddhist psychological thought.’⁸ Even though most people will commonly agree that our body, thoughts, feelings, and experiences change over time, they also believe that underneath the change is a unique and consistent self. Indeed, a majority of people still believe in the self’s continuation after physical death. As the philosopher, René Descartes, famously concluded, ‘I think therefore I am,’ it is normal to identify what we do, think, and feel with our self – our I, me, and mine. For example, I am happy, this is me, and the car is mine. For the Buddha, the roots of dukkha, or suffering, are found in such identifications. These identifications, although they are only conventional labels, once believed in, become psychologically established and propagate a view of the world in which we feel separate and alienated from our inner and outer experiences. Believing in the states was not conducive to a greater understanding of cognitive abstractions including notions like the self. In the mid-20th century there was an enthusiastic resurgence of interest concerning the dynamics of the self and personal identity with the Humanistic psychology of Carl Rogers, Abraham Maslow, and Clark Moustakas, to name but a few. Psychologists began to emphasise the importance of the self-concept and positive self-regard, and to reconsider mental constructs as valid objects of scientific investigation. The term ‘cognitive psychology’ was put forward in the late 1960s by American psychologist Ulric Neisser. Cognitive psychology can be described as the study of mental processes such as attention, language use, memory, perception, problem solving, creativity and thinking. According to Neisser, cognition involves all processes by which the sensory input is transformed, reduced, elaborated, stored, recovered, and used. In other words, every psychological phenomenon is a cognitive phenomenon. Other significant figures in the field of Cognitive Psychology include Albert Bandura, Aaron Beck, Antonio Damasio, Albert Ellis, Michael

Gazzaniga, George Kelly and Lev Vygotsky. Whilst comparisons between the Buddha's teachings and Western psychology are not uncommon, most have only compared the techniques and applications of the two. Although this can be informative and useful for both traditions, it is only through accepting the primary doctrines of the Buddha that one can truly understand the similarities and profound differences. These differences are at the heart of a very different world view, which Western psychology is not at present willing to assimilate.

discouraged "I-making" or "mine-making", both terms imply egoism.' We can see that as much as the Buddha emphasised the elimination of egotism, he did not intend the annihilation or depersonalisation of what modern psychology labels the empirical self or the individual experiences. The terms 'I', or 'self' are pragmatic linguistic conventions that reflect the living experience that all conscious living beings have. The idea of no-self doesn't mean that we don't exist, or that we are robots with no volition to act in the world. Instead, we are constantly changing beings, always in flux. Giving it a fixed name and identity is just a convention that humans came up with that enables us to talk about it. The whole idea of self is a fiction or narrative. The problem is that as soon as we attach labels and concepts to something, our egos start objectifying it, conclusively establish, and create fantastic stories to make something static and permanent out of it. And that's where begins our point of illusion and suffering. Actually, I refers to an illusory epiphenomenon, a useful abbreviation that can represent a myriad of identifications, schemas and the numerous chemical/electronic transactions taking place among them, every single second. We regard our I as real. This is the reference that culture and society gives to the level of complexity in the physical system underlying it. And as the Buddha discovered, we are conditioned to construct notions using high level abstractions. If, as in the Buddha's psychology, the intrusion of the self into the field of sense perception begins with the construction of the notions of I (subject), and mine (object), the self originates at the stage of sensation, and this duality is maintained until it is fully crystallised and sustained at the conceptual level. We don't recognise it separateness of you and I, and attempting to maintain, nourish, and propagate this identification of I (often at the expense of the other), we cause ourselves, and others, much grief and suffering through our self-deception. It has been said that the Buddha wanted to destroy the self, or the I. But this is incorrect simply because there is no permanent and substantial basis of personal identity called self to destroy. The teaching of anatta is in no way a denial of the empirical reality of the individual personality. The Buddha taught that the individual personality is a functional, unified and interconnected integrity operating on many levels. Personality factors have a constancy, yet are also everchanging. Whilst recognising that the I, or self, is a fluid cognitive fiction, the Buddha also understood that it is a convenient and helpful functionality. The Buddha himself used such terms as 'I', 'you', 'he', 'she', and 'person', but he did so only to facilitate communication in conventional speech with conventional understandings. The Buddha teaches not in order to destroy, but to transcend, or surpass, the ignorance which comes from attributing a substantial reality to the self. As David J. Kalupahana explains: 'In the context of the five aggregates (khandhas), the Buddha was not reluctant to speak of "I" or "myself" or even of the "self". Without admitting to a "ghost in the machine" or a transcendental apperception, the Buddha was willing to recognize the feeling of individuality, of self. It is a feeling that can contract and expand depending on the context. It does not represent a static entity to which everything belongs. [...] There seems to be no justification for assuming the Buddha encouraged the annihilation of this feeling of self. Indeed, the reality of feelings and emotions that occur in the stream of experience are relevant to an explanation of harmonious life. [...] Thus the Buddha spoke of "I" or "myself" and "mine" but avoided becoming...constantly fed by perceptions, which does not represent a static entity to which everything belongs.'

¹⁰ To understand the consequential change in psychology when moving from the Western to the Buddha's views of selfhood, it is instructive to consider an analogy from the field of immunology. Philosopher Alfred I. Tauber has argued that the traditional view of the self in Western culture is analogous to an individual-based biology. In such a framework, the biological entity (the self) requires defence against threats or pathogens (the other). Immunology is often described as the science of discrimination between self and non-self by following a reductive

exercise: defining the components of immunity and their regulation as a self-contained system. Since the end of the nineteenth century, immunologists have generally adopted this insular perspective, and the standard description has evolved as a military metaphor, whereby an entity, or self, is defended by an army of immune factors fighting to protect the organism. Accordingly, in this formulation, the self, as a distinctly defined entity, is separated from (and even hostile towards) the environment. Alternatively, Tauber describes biological functions, and the immune system in particular, from an ecological standpoint, which emphasises the interaction between an organism and its environment as a series of exchanges, with the regulation of biological systems arising in response to this. When the self/no-self discrimination recedes as a governing principle, the self is recognised as an archaic formulation and ecologic controls arise from the larger organisation in which the immune system is fully integrated.

as abnormal because the subject-object relationship is the foundation of cognition. So, what starts as a complex, conditionally arisen physiological process, develops into a conceptualisation between the subject and object, a duality. This concept of I serves as the matrix of our complex cognitive processes, and as such, becomes a convenient symbolic device. In fact, the self-concept is a cognitive construction. As Kalupahana states, ‘...This selectivity in consciousness accounts for the possibility and, therefore, the ability on the part of the human being to choose, think and act, and these represent the core of selfhood or personality in the Buddha’s doctrine.’⁹ The abstracted cognitive embellishments serve as relative, convenient designations or identifications, which construct a virtual presence of the self illusion. It is based in ignorance, and through steadfast identifications and identity, creates craving and suffering. Only now are we beginning to empirically support the Buddha’s insights of anatta, which he gained through the introspective practice of bhavana, or meditation. The accomplishment of a transcendent state of equanimity, void of an illusion in owning one’s self, is the aim of the psychological training, or bhavana in Buddhism. The belief and fascination with the self, and the futile clinging to personal identities that it engenders, is understood to be a basis of personal and societal suffering. Specific negative manifestations of this ignorance by the individual include lust, hatred and delusion. At the societal level, some of recognisable symptoms may comprise quarrel, strife, petty disagreements, conceit, dogma, slander and jealousy. What the Buddha discovered upon awakening, was that contrary to a static, inherent self, there ‘was only a changing stream of

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‘In other words, as applied to the problem of self/non-self discrimination, from this ecological perspective, there can be no circumscribed, selfdefined entity that is designated the Self, but rather there is an organism that is under constant challenge to respond along a continuum of behaviors, and it adapts and changes accordingly. In the case of the immune system, reactivity may vary from a fully-fledged immune response to mild irritation to quiescence.’¹¹ Terry Marks-Tarlow offers an alternative, organicallybased description of how we cannot separate ourselves from our experience,

which takes place through the body: 'Most of us take for granted the ability to distinguish between ourselves as observers and what we observe in the world. Outwardly our skin seems visible proof of a clear boundary that encases and protects our organs. Inwardly our sense of self, when intact, also feels like a relatively clear boundary, at times even to the point of isolation from others. Yet whether we consider our bodies or minds, the subjective experience of closed boundaries rests precisely on the opposite state of affairs – wide-open portals that continually allow transaction between inside and outside, body and world, self and not-self. Cycles of re-entry continually oscillate between creating and erasing the seam where observer and observed, perceiver and perceived, inner and outer, self and other, intersect and self-cross paradoxically. At this seam, self and world appear mutually co-determining.'¹² These perspectives are analogous to Buddhist psychology, which seeks to transcend the distinct self/noself distinction.