

2 Buddhist Selflessness

Like many religious doctrines, No-self or *anātman* did not emerge fully formed at birth. In the earliest extent of Buddhist texts, the alleged discourses of the Buddha (*Suttas*) preserved in the ancient Pali language, the doctrine of No-self is found only in an incipient form. The locus classicus of No-self in the Pali Canon is the Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta or the “Discourse (*sutta*) on the fact of things having the characteristic (*lakkhaṇa*) of Not-self (*anatta*)” (Collins 1982: 97), which tradition identifies as the second sermon that the Buddha delivered. There, the Buddha declares that each of the five constituents of the personality, beginning with the physical body (*rūpa*), is “a not-self”:

What do you think, monks, is body permanent or impermanent?

Impermanent, sir.

Is what is impermanent satisfactory or unsatisfactory?

Unsatisfactory, sir.

Is it fitting to regard what is impermanent, unsatisfactory, and subject to change (in this way) “this is mine, this I am, this is my self?”

No, sir.

So, monks, whatever body has come to be, whether past, future, or present, gross or fine, in oneself or without . . . must be seen as it really is, with right insight, thus “this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.”

(S.iii.66–67 and parallels; trans. Collins 1982: 98)

The text extends this same analysis to the remaining four constituents or aggregates (*skandha* in Sanskrit, *khandha* in Pali) – namely, sensation, perception, dispositions, and consciousness – declaring each to be devoid of self. The realization that the constituents are selfless engenders an attitude of disgust, which leads to repulsion, which in turn leads to liberation.¹ In a dramatic confirmation of this teaching, the text informs us that five monks to whom the Buddha delivered this sermon attained enlightenment immediately upon hearing it.

The discourse presumes that the analysis of the personality into the five aggregates is exhaustive. As the scholar of Pali Buddhism Steven Collins argues, it would be a misreading of the text to conclude that if none of the constituents are self then something else is (1982: 98). The text, however,

does not explicitly state that there is no self, full stop. In fact, the link that the text posits between selflessness and liberation *presupposes* the concept of the self as the ultimate object of attachment: attachment betrays a belief that self is present in whatever it is to which one is attached (Norman 1981: 22). This idea of the self as the ultimate object of desire appears to have been part of the larger thought world in which Buddhism arose. In the Upanishads, the great Vedic sage Yājñavalkya tells Maitreyī, one of his wives, that everything one values – spouse, children, wealth, royal power, the gods, the Vedas – is valuable because of the universal self or *ātman* that it instantiates (Collins 1982: 80; BAU. 4.5.6–7). It is a testament to the depth of Maitreyī’s spiritual understanding that she does not object to what superficially appears to be a narcissistic theory of spousal affection! The Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta’s central claim is simply the converse of this idea: to realize that something is selfless is ipso facto to sever any attachment to that something. As we shall see later in Chapter 5, the fact that the Buddhist scriptures stop short of an explicit denial of a self has occasioned much disagreement and misunderstanding on the question of the self in early Buddhism.

Milinda’s Chariot

The first explicit denial of the self is found in a somewhat later (first century CE) text, *The Questions of King Milinda (Milindapañha)* (Frauwallner 1969: 65). One of the most famous and beloved texts of Buddhist literature, the *Milindapañha* is ostensibly the record of a series of didactic conversations between the historical Greco-Bactrian king, Milinda (Gk. Menandros, c. 150 BCE) and a legendary Buddhist monk named Nāgasena. The teaching on selflessness figures prominently in this text, as it forms the occasion for the dramatic conversion narrative with which the body of the text begins.²

Although the king appears throughout most of the text as an eager and respectful pupil of Nāgasena, their initial encounter reflects the adversarial nature of intellectual debate in ancient India. Nowhere is the agonistic character of philosophical debate more evident than in the ancient Upanishads, where we are told that the loser’s head will shatter into seven pieces should he or she³ fail to acknowledge that the victor’s wisdom exceeds his or her own (Witzel 1987; Insler 1989–1990). Historically, the stakes of such debates were probably somewhat less severe. Typically, when representatives of rival religious communities debated in ancient and medieval India, they were competing for royal patronage. The tradition of adversarial debate survives in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism, where it forms part of the scholastic training of monks, particularly in the Ge-luk tradition of the Dalai Lama (See Dreyfus 2003: 203, 229–266). Now public debate, in both ancient India and modern Tibet, has a formal structure. The adversaries assume the roles of defender and questioner. The former states a thesis, which he will defend against the latter’s questions in the manner of a courtroom witness undergoing cross-examination. The questioner, for his part, tries, through an insidious line of questioning, to get the defender to contradict either a previous statement or

common sense (Dreyfus 2003: 211–217). In the ancient debates, once the initial line of questioning runs its course, the adversaries reverse roles; the questioner now assuming the role of defender and vice versa.

Milinda's first encounter with Nāgasena is billed as an epic showdown between two masters of intellectual disputation. The king has established a reputation as a formidable debater with a penchant for vexing the community of monks with questions of insidious intent (Milind. 14: 2–4; trans. Rhys Davids 1963: 23). Nāgasena, for his part, has been groomed from birth to defend the Buddhist Dharma against Milinda's dialectics. Each party brings to the event what is effectively a cheering section: the king is accompanied by 500 Greeks (*Yonakas* – “Ionians”), and Nāgasena by a great assembly of monks. In response to the king's request to identify himself, Nāgasena remarks that his name is only a nominal designation with no underlying referent. His deliberately provocative statement that “no person (*puggala*) is found here” will form the topic of debate.⁴ As we shall examine more closely in Chapter 5, this formulation was at the center of a historical dispute that is known as the Personalist controversy in Indian Buddhism. The literary account of the dispute between Milinda and Nāgasena therefore seems to allude to an event in the history of Indian Buddhism.

As mentioned previously, the king, in the role of questioner, will try to catch Nāgasena in either a contradiction or an absurdity. It is immediately apparent that Milinda believes Nāgasena has made his job remarkably easy by committing himself to a statement that is patently absurd. Indeed, in the mind of the king, the debate is all but over. All that is left for him to do is to enumerate some of the logical implications of Nāgasena's statement that fly in the face of common sense. “If there is no person involved in the matter,” the king asks, “who gives to you members of the Buddhist community (*sangha*) your robes, food, lodging, and medicine for the sick? Who is it who enjoys such things when they are given? Who leads a life of righteousness, and who meditates?” Nāgasena's statement, if true, undermines the moral foundations of society:

If that be so there is neither merit nor demerit; there is neither doer nor causer of good or evil deeds; there is neither fruit nor result of good or evil karma. . . . O most revered Nāgasena, if a man were to kill you there would be no murder!

In what appears to be a gratuitous demonstration of the absurdity of Nāgasena's proposition, the king proceeds to enumerate parts of the body where the monk's identity might be thought to reside:

You tell me that your brethren in the Order are in the habit of addressing you as Nāgasena. Now what is that Nāgasena? Do you mean to say that the hair is Nāgasena? . . . Or is it the nails, the teeth, the skin, the flesh, the bones.

At this point, we get the impression that the king is almost toying with the monk, unaware that this type of analysis, which is simply an expanded version of the

analysis we saw in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta, will soon be turned against him to devastating effect.

Milinda concludes the enumeration of selfless body parts with the list of five aggregates:

“Then is it all these *skandhas* combined that are Nāgasena?”

“No, great king.”

“But is there anything outside the five *skandhas* that is Nāgasena?”

“No, great king.”

Here with Nāgasena’s negative reply, we get the explicit denial of self that was lacking in the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta.

Milinda wraps up his argument with a dramatic demonstration of the contradiction entailed in Nāgasena’s claim that “no person is found here”:

“Then thus, ask as I may, I can discover no Nāgasena. Nāgasena is a mere empty sound. Who then is the Nāgasena that we see before us?” Nāgasena quite literally stands as the refutation of his own thesis.

At this point, the two adversaries exchange roles as Nāgasena commences a new line of questioning. After remarking that the king is far too refined and delicate to have possibly arrived at their meeting place on foot, an utterly gratuitous remark that I cannot help but think was a first-century Buddhist monk’s idea of trash-talking, Nāgasena establishes that the king came by carriage. He then proceeds to analyze the king’s chariot in order to localize its putative essence:

Then if you came, Sire, in a carriage, explain to me what that is. . . . Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the ropes, or the yoke, or the spokes of the wheels, or the goad, that are the chariot?⁵

Nāgasena concludes with a statement formally identical to the *reductio ad absurdum* argument the king had used against him. Only now, the reductive analysis being applied to the king’s chariot, it makes perfectly good sense: “Then thus ask as I may, I can discover no chariot. Chariot is a mere empty sound. What then is the chariot you say you came in?”

Nāgasena’s rejoinder is devastating. He wins over the king’s 500 Yonakas, who shout out applause. No less impressed is the king, who declares that Nāgasena’s rejoinder would have met with the approval of the Buddha himself. Henceforth, the king willingly assumes the role of a pupil. Nāgasena, now no longer an adversary but a teacher, proceeds to answer Milinda’s questions about the Buddha’s teaching, employing an array of memorable images and apt analogies that have made this text justly famous.

Nāgasena’s analogy of the personality and the chariot may be more impressive rhetorically than it is philosophically, however. Had he not been unduly taken in by Nāgasena’s rhetoric, Milinda could plausibly have objected that it is inappropriate to extend the analysis of artifacts to organic forms like persons. Be that as it may, Nāgasena’s teaching that the person or self is reducible to the impersonal

constituents of the personality, in a manner analogous to the reduction of the chariot to its parts, represents the classic expression of the No-self doctrine in so-called Hīnayāna (or non-Mahāyāna) Buddhism.

Vasubandhu's Reductionism

The reduction of the person or self to the impersonal constituents of the personality represents the heart of the Abhidharma (the higher or further (*abhi*) teaching), the systematic theology, as it were, of early Buddhism. Each of the half dozen or so early Buddhist schools had their own corpus of Abhidharma treatises, although only those of two schools, the Theravāda and the Sarvāstivāda, survive in anything resembling a complete form.⁶ In addition to the canonical Abhidharma works, there are later Abhidharma manuals that attempt to streamline and systematize the disparate analyses of the various canonical Abhidharma treatises within a given tradition. Within the broader Sarvāstivāda tradition, by far the most important of these is the comprehensive *Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya* (Commentary on the Treasury of Abhidharma) authored by one of the giants of Indian Buddhist thought, Vasubandhu (late fourth–early fifth century CE). A concise, indeed paradigmatic, statement of the No-self doctrine is found in the third chapter of this work.⁷

There, Vasubandhu introduces the doctrine of selflessness as a response to the non-Buddhist argument that the self is the necessary presupposition of rebirth. Vasubandhu denies that there is a self in this sense of an “internally functioning person”⁸ who casts off one set of aggregates at death and then takes on another set on rebirth. In support of this assertion, he cites a statement of the Buddha: “There is action and there are the consequences of action, but there is no actor who abandons one set of aggregates and appropriates another set.”⁹ Such a concept of a self, Vasubandhu maintains, is superfluous for an understanding of the mechanism of rebirth. Interestingly, Vasubandhu then considers the question of what understanding of the self he would be willing to accept. He replies that he does not reject the term *self* if understood as simply a metaphorical expression for the collection of aggregates.¹⁰

Vasubandhu's concession here brings to the fore an important point relating to our earlier discussion of the status of folk psychology in Abhidharma analysis. That he is willing to retain the language of selves and persons so long as these are understood to refer simply to the collection of aggregates indicates that while his position on the ontological status of the self is clearly reductionistic, it is not eliminativist.¹¹ That is to say, the self or person for Vasubandhu is not an illusion in the strong sense that it simply does not exist, like phlogiston or caloric fluid. It is illusory only in the weaker sense that it is not what it is commonly taken to be, namely, a separate substance. Put differently, while Vasubandhu, like all Buddhists, certainly maintains that on the level of ultimate truth there are no selves, he nevertheless concedes that at the level of conventional truth, the discourse of selves, unlike that of phlogiston and caloric, does have some undeniable practical benefits (Sidertis 1997: 465).

That the self, the ostensible vehicle of transmigration, can be identified with the aggregates means that the doctrine of selflessness can be reconciled with the doctrine of rebirth, at least to Vasubandhu's satisfaction. This is so to the extent that rebirth can be explained in terms of a sequence of continually changing aggregates. Vasubandhu compares the process by which the continuum of aggregates bridges the gap between two existences to the way a torch can be moved to a different place even though its flame consists only of a sequence of momentary combusive events. Thus, "even though the self does not exist, the continuum (*santāna*) of aggregates, conditioned by defilements and actions, enters the mother's womb," thereby inaugurating another birth.¹²

The reductive relation between the self and the aggregates is a relation between two levels of description. These levels correspond to what the Buddhists call the two truths, that is, reality as conventionally described and reality as ultimately described. It is clear that for Vasubandhu, and for Abhidharma thought more generally, lower-level things – the *dharma*s, paradigmatically, the five aggregates – are more real than upper-level things, like selves and the composite objects of everyday experience. Vasubandhu dramatizes this fundamental asymmetry between the levels of macro-level things and micro-level things with a memorable image illustrating the difference between the two truths. He defines *conventional truth* as "that with respect to which the concept does not arise when it is broken into parts."¹³ The example he gives is that of a jar: the idea of a jar no longer arises after it has been shattered into smithereens; thus, jars are only conventional realities. By contrast, the concepts corresponding to ultimate truths – in the case of the shattered jar, the aggregate of physical form – arise even when the thing is broken. Abhidharma ontology rests on this fundamental asymmetry between lower- and upper-level existents.

It is not self-evident, however, that the sentiment of reality should attach itself more readily to lower-level things than to upper-level things. In a penetrating analysis of the intuitive sense that lower-level things are more real than their upper-level counterparts, the philosopher William C. Wimsatt notes that the asymmetry of the composition relation between parts and wholes – Xs are composed of Ys; thus, Ys are not composed of Xs – should be offset by what he calls the partition relation: that Ys are parts of Xs (Wimsatt 1976: 243). Indeed, sometimes, we are willing to ascribe more reality to the whole than its parts. Aristotle, for instance, maintained that the parts of animals have a weaker claim to the title of substance than their corresponding wholes (*Metaphysics* Z.2). And it is not at all intuitive that quarks, the ultimate building blocks of matter – to take another example – are more real and substantial than the atoms they compose; it is not without irony that the term *quark* comes from a work of fiction! Wimsatt suggests that the feelings we have regarding what is most real derive from what he calls the direction of explanatory primacy (Wimsatt 1976: 245 and *passim*). All things being equal, that in terms of which something can be explained is felt to be more real than the thing explained.¹⁴ Notwithstanding a modern predilection, owing to the exclusion of teleological explanations in science, to explain upper-level entities reductively in terms of lower-level entities, there is no reason in principle that the

direction of explanatory primacy cannot go the other way. Indeed, in many cases, parts can only be explained in terms of the wholes upon which they depend (Wimsatt 1976: 245–246). More precisely, in various self-organizing (or synergetic) systems, from lasers to the motor systems coordinating the movements of various limbs, a kind of circular causality between the system and its component parts obtains (Haken 1987: 426–427 and *passim*; Kelso 1995: 8–9 and *passim*). There is one important domain of human activity, however, that pulls the sense of reality in the direction of lower-level entities like a gravitational field. This is “the mechanical engineering paradigm of making artifacts by stringing together parts” (Wimsatt 1976: 246). If the whole is constructed by putting parts together, Wimsatt reasons, then it is natural to think that it can be explained that way too (1976: 246). To the extent, then, that we think of things on the model of human artifacts, the direction of explanatory primacy, and therewith the feeling of reality, goes from wholes to parts. Wimsatt’s analysis provides an insight into the rhetorical power of Nāgasena’s chariot image in bringing plausibility to the counterintuitive notion that the personality is reducible to its constituent parts. At the same time, it reveals the inadequacy of the reductive analysis of Abhidharma, based as that analysis is on aggregative systems like simple human artifacts, for autonomous, self-organizing systems like human persons. For these systems rely as much on global-to-local patterns of influence as on local-to-global influence (MacKenzie 2011: 254–255 and *passim*).

Interestingly enough, there were Buddhists in Vasubandhu’s time who most likely argued this very point. These Buddhists were known as Personalists or Pudgalavādins, and as we shall see in Chapter 5, Buddhist reductionists like Vasubandhu worked out their reductionist understanding of No-self in the context of what appears to have been a vigorous controversy with this group. Unfortunately, as is typically the case with the historical losers of past hegemonic struggles, virtually no Pudgalavāda works survive. Thus, most of what we know of Pudgalavāda teaching is refracted through the distorting lens of their adversaries. In a laudable effort to compensate for this limitation, Amber Carpenter offers a philosophical reconstruction of the likely philosophical motivations for the Pudgalavādins’ characteristic claim that “the person exists really and ultimately.” She notes that the Pudgalavādins certainly would have been dissatisfied with Vasubandhu’s reductionist explanation for karma and rebirth, namely, that the concept of a causal sequence of momentary particulars suffices to explain how a conative event pertaining to the cluster of ever-changing physical and psychological states at one moment can have a karmic effect on another cluster at a later moment. How, Carpenter asks (or imagines a fourth-century Pudgalavādin asking), is it determined that this particular group of subpersonal elements belongs to the causal stream corresponding to our concept of the person? After all, the surrounding elements, those relegated to the environment, also interact causally with the elements comprising the “person” stream (Carpenter 2015: 13–20 and *passim*).¹⁵ The very concept of a causal stream presupposes a principle of individuation, Carpenter reasons, and that principle of individuation is nothing other than the person or *pudgala* (2015: 15). “The *pudgala* just is the fact that these and not

other aggregates are connected to each other as they are not to others” (2015: 18). As a principle of individuation that is “presupposed, not projected” (2015: 16), the person exists ultimately, although not, Carpenter hastens to add, substantially in the manner of non-Buddhist concepts of the self or *ātman*.¹⁶ The Pudgalavādins’ distinction between an ultimate level of existence and the concept of substance appears to have been a casualty of polemic, as the writers upon whom we are forced to rely, adversaries of Pudgalavāda like Vasubandhu and later writers like Śāntarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, actively suppressed it in their effort to assimilate Pudgalavāda to the *ātmavāda* of the non-Buddhists or Tīrthikas. Although the Pudgalavādins’ arguments for the irreducibility of the person were effectively suppressed with the hegemony of the reductionist view of persons, those arguments, as we shall see in Chapter 5, (re)appear in the Madhyamaka philosophy of Nāgārjuna (see Arnold 2019).

Insight Meditation as a Technique of Devaluatory Redescription

In our discussion of the Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta earlier, we saw how the perception of each of the aggregates as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless (*anicca*, *dukkha*, and *anatta*, respectively) weakens our attachment to them. This exercise in seeing all things as possessed of the three characteristics forms the basis of the practice of vipassanā or insight meditation. Vipassanā can be understood as a technique for realizing the Buddha’s Third Noble Truth. As we saw earlier, to see things as selfless is ipso facto to see them as unworthy of attachment. To gain an insight into the selflessness of things is, therefore, to put an end to the desire that is the primary cause of suffering.

Although the Buddhist tradition speaks of the vision of things as impermanent, unsatisfactory, and selfless as an unmediated insight into the way things really are, vipassanā meditation is perhaps more accurately understood as a technique of strategic redescription (Schulman 2010: 402–403 and *passim*). Redescription is a powerful concept in the study of human experience because it links the cognitive, the attitudinal, and the behavioral. To regard something under another description is to change one’s attitude towards it and, therewith, one’s behavior as well. To take a rather homely example, let us say that I find myself in an antique shop tagging along my spouse. If I happen to be in a disagreeable mood, I might be tempted to redescribe the various knickknacks on display as someone else’s unwanted junk. And this change in description, of course, makes a difference: one is much less likely to spend good money on someone’s useless old junk than one is on hard-to-find vintage home furnishings. Redescription is a particularly relevant concept in the study of politics or, to be more specific, for understanding hegemonic struggles among various factions to establish a normative representation of some aspect of the social world. It makes a big difference, to cite an example from American politics during the Iraq war, to call a buildup of military forces a surge, suggesting a temporary increase in troops that will decisively turn the tide of battle, rather than an escalation, evoking the possibility of a Vietnam-style

quagmire. How a politician described the proposed buildup indicated whether or not he or she voted to support it.

An excellent example of the use of redescription to shape attitude and behavior in Buddhist practice are the meditations on the body recommended in the “Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness” (*Satipaṭṭhāna-sutta*), the locus classicus of mindfulness meditation. There, the Buddha asks the assembled monks or bhikkhus to contemplate the body “from the soles of the feet and down from the top of the hair.” They are encouraged to undertake the same kind of exhaustive analysis of the body into its component parts that we saw in the king’s initial line of questioning in the *Milindapañha*:

In this body there are head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones, bone-marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, diaphragm, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, spittle, snot, oil of the joints, and urine.

(M.i.57; trans. Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 147)

In contrast to what we saw in the *Milindapañha*, here the point is not simply to illustrate how the body can be analyzed into a set of impersonal parts in accordance with the doctrine of No-self. The meditation is clearly intended to instill in the monks an attitude of disgust and revulsion at the physical body. And if this reflection on blood and guts weren’t enough drive the point home, the text goes on to consider the body in various states of decay, the subject matter of the notorious graveyard meditations:

Again, bhikkhus, as though he were to see a corpse thrown aside in a charnel ground, one, two, or three days dead, bloated, livid, and oozing matter, a bhikkhu compares this same body with it thus: “This body too is of the same nature, it will be like that, it is not exempt from that fate.”

(M.i.58; trans. Nanamoli and Bodhi 1995: 148)

Again, the point is not simply to exemplify a doctrine, in this case the truth of impermanence. Rather, it is to instill feelings of horror and disgust when contemplating the human body.

As Eviatar Schulman notes, it is clear that these meditations involve more than a dispassionate contemplation of the body as it is (2010: 401–403). They are highly selective (re)descriptions of the body intended to counteract our instinctive feelings of lust and attachment. Nowhere is Schulman’s point that such devaluatory descriptions of the body involve more than simply “a naked perception of things as they really are” more apposite than a particularly misogynistic episode from the Life of the Buddha, vividly described by the Sanskrit poet Aśvaghoṣa. On the eve of his Great Departure from the palace, Prince Siddhartha finds himself entertained by a group of attractive female musicians sent by the king in a last-ditch effort to weaken his son’s ascetical resolve. The gods, sensitive to the prince’s indifference to the women’s enticements, have them succumb to a

drug-like slumber. Āśvaghoṣa describes with an almost perverse delight the immodest postures involuntarily assumed by the anesthetized women and their unbecoming snoring and drooling. Falling under the Bodhisattva's objectifying gaze, the unconscious women arouse his contempt:

Dirty and distorted lies here exposed
the true nature of women in this world;
Deluded by their nice clothes and jewelry
men become infatuated with them
(BC. 5: 64; trans. Olivelle 2009: 151)

His resolve fortified by this misogynistic vision, the Bodhisattva wakes up his personal attendant, Chandaka, and makes preparations for his departure from the palace and, therewith, worldly existence.

Vispassanā and Weak Central Coherence

That the “true nature” of the women was supposedly revealed only when they were in an unconscious state raises the unsettling question of whether the detachment wrought by the vision of selflessness is bought at the high price of stripping the objects of contemplation of mentality and agency. Consider another revealing illustration of the No-self doctrine from Buddhaghosa's *The Path of Purification* (*Visuddhimagga*), the definitive statement of Buddhist path in the Theravāda tradition:

Therefore, just as a marionette is void, soulless, and without impulse (*suññam nijjīvam nirīhakam*), and while it walks and stands merely through the combination of strings and wood, yet it seems as if it had curiosity and interestedness, so too, this mentality-materiality (*nāma-rūpam*) is void, soulless, and without curiosity, and while it walks and stands merely through the combination of the two together, yet it seems as if it had curiosity and interestedness. This is how it should be regarded. Hence the ancients said:

The mental and material are really here,
But here there is no human being (*satto manujo*) to be found,
For it is void and merely fashioned like a doll –
Just suffering piled up like grass and sticks
(Vsm. 594–595, XVIII.31;
trans. Nanamoli 1991: 613–616)

Prima facie, this vision of people as soulless puppets resembles the way individuals with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) are supposed to perceive their social worlds, namely, in terms of observable patterns of behavior stripped of internal mental states (Frith 2003: 86–88; Gallagher 2005, Zahavi and Parnas 2003).¹⁷ Actually, the suggestion that the Buddhist perception of selflessness resembles autistic “mindblindness” in certain respects is not quite as facile and improbable

as it might first appear. This so particularly if one considers one influential theory of autism that views the condition, at least in its less extreme manifestations, less as a cognitive deficit than as a “cognitive style,” that is, as a particular way of processing information that exists on a continuum extending to so-called normal individuals. An account of autism in terms of a difference in cognitive processing has the advantage over more traditional “deficit” accounts (such as the theory that autistics have an impairment in their theory of mind faculty) in that it accounts not only for the difficulty individuals with ASD have with certain cognitive tasks but also for the proficiency – and even, in the case of savant phenomena, the uncanny mastery – they display in others (Happé 1999: 217; cf. Frith 2003: 161–163). The developmental psychologist Uta Frith hypothesizes that autism can be characterized by what she terms “weak central coherence.” Central coherence refers to the processing of information in context. Weak central coherence, or “field independence,” refers to a tendency to focus on local detail without regard for the larger configuration or Gestalt in which the detail appears (Frith 2003: 151–168). Many of the unusual abilities and talents often associated with autism – such as an uncanny facility with jigsaw puzzles, a curious resistance to optical illusions, remarkable feats of rote memory, perfect pitch, and so on – can be readily explained in terms of this tendency to focus on the proverbial trees without being distracted by the forest.¹⁸ It is precisely this facility “for seeing wholes in terms of parts rather than as unified gestalts” (Pring et al. 1995: 1073) that invites comparison with the Buddhist vision of persons as aggregations of mental and physical states. The characteristic detachment of individuals with weak global coherence (Frith 2003: 160–161), moreover, bears an intriguing resemblance to the freedom from grasping that results from the arhat’s insight into the impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness of things. In particular, the curious detachment from bodily sensation – such that “sensory stimuli are perceived without being experienced . . . as happening to them” (McGeer 2001: 125) – seems like a literal description of the Buddhist notion of suffering without one who suffers (cf. Vsm. 513, XVI.90). More generally, individuals with ASD have a reduced sense of self and personal agency (Crespi and Badcock 2008: 254). The Abhidharma writings, with their tediously repetitive lists of *dharmas* isolated from the context of narratives of persons acting in the world – writings that are supposed to express the higher truth realized by the *arhat* – could almost be taken as an image of the autistic mind with its circumscribed special interests and its almost preternatural capacity for remembering seemingly random sequences of events.¹⁹

I have drawn this analogy with the ASD phenomena in order to focus attention on a particular cognitive style that happens to be especially prominent – and thus, easy to identify and describe – in individuals with this condition. I do not mean to suggest that Buddhists adepts must have been “on the spectrum” (although many likely were) nor that the practice of insight meditation has the power to engender ASD in so-called normal or neurotypical individuals. A helpful model for understanding the relation between the practices mediating the truth of No-self and analogous experiences and behaviors associated with ASD is provided by McCauley and Graham’s (2020) analysis of the analogous relation between

religious ritual and obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD). McCauley and Graham suggest that religious ritual, in tandem with the idea that having an unacceptable thought is the moral equivalent to carrying out the corresponding action, not only can increase the rate at which (preexisting) OCD is expressed as religious scrupulosity in certain cultural settings but also “can, at least temporarily, give rise to something closely resembling features of scrupulosity among normal participants” (McCauley and Graham 2020: 134). In a similar way, the meditative practices through which the truth of selflessness is realized can temporarily evoke functional analogues of some of the cognitive states associated with ASD, in particular, the diminished sense of self that is characteristic of individuals with that condition (McCauley and Graham 2020: 178–182, 184–186).²⁰ But just as there is no evidence that religious ritual increases the incidence of clinical OCD (McCauley and Graham 2020: 136–137), so, too, is there no evidence that the prolonged practice of insight meditation impairs or disables our theory of mind. For all their otherworldliness, the Buddha and other enlightened personages in the Buddhist sutras are free of the social ineptitude that accompanies ASD in its extreme manifestations. There is nothing to suggest that they suffer an impairment of their theory of mind faculty. Moreover, one should not lose sight of the fact that the analytical, reductive style of vipassanā meditation represents only one particular trajectory in Buddhist practice, one that was never intended, in any case, to be isolated from the other components of the path, namely, generosity (*dāna*) and morality (*sīla*), both of which emphasize the social dimensions of selflessness. I should also mention in this connection an ancient tradition of meditation whose aim is to cultivate the innate “seed” of loving-kindness (Skt. *maitrī*, Pali *mettā*), gradually extending this wish for the well-being of others from the self and its narrow circle of loved ones to all sentient beings (Gethin 1998: 186–187).

An Analogy with Aesthetic Experience

Clearly, the point of the analytical techniques of vipassanā meditation is not to eradicate our inveterate mentalizing tendency (assuming this were even possible). Rather, I suggest, such practices are intended to strategically suspend or attenuate that tendency in order to foreground other modes of relating to the world that tend to be pushed out of consciousness when the linguistic-narrative mode of thinking that is characteristic of folk psychology holds sway. I think the best way to explain this idea of breaking with folk psychology in order to foreground another mode of being-in-the-world is by way of an analogy with aesthetic experience.

Consider a painter, whose craft requires an ability to transpose an image into line and color (Pring et al. 1995: 1066). The activity of painting entails a series of rapid gestalt shifts from image to pigment and back again.²¹ Non-artists find the first of these transitions – from image to pigment – especially difficult. They find it difficult, in other words, to break from the image and view things abstractly and reductively. This difficulty is particularly evident in the portraits of novice painters. Typically, the inexperienced artist will paint the whites of the eyes as, well, white. The result is a visage with wild, popping eyes like a figure in a Bela

Lugosi horror movie. This unhappy result evinces a failure to abstract this area of color from its immediate context in the eye; actually, under typical lighting conditions, the white of the eye is considerably darker in value than the surface of the nose and cheeks. To facilitate a break with the image, some art teachers will have their students try copying a picture upside-down or to focus on the negative spaces of the background, thereby inducing a kind of abstract, “autistic” vision. And yet this break from the image is only a moment within a larger process whose aim is to recreate the image on the canvas; ideally, each dab of pigment will lose its individual identity as it melts into the image the artist wishes to create (Pring et al. 1995: 1066). At least in representational painting, the point is to transpose the image, not eradicate it. Predictably, it is with respect to this second moment of the artistic process, where the artist forms a coherent whole out of decomposed elements, that normal artistically talented individuals excel over artistic savants with autism (Pring et al. 1995: 1074).²²

For me, one of the most satisfying aspects of the visual arts is experiencing this tension between the identity of the medium qua physical medium and the medium qua conveyer of the image. In oil paintings with a heavy impasto, like those of, say, Rembrandt or Lucian Freud, one sees the physicality of the medium obtrude into the image. More modern art forms self-consciously display this tension rather than, as in the extreme case of trompe l’oeil paintings, trying to suppress it. There is perhaps no better example of this play between physical object and represented image than Picasso’s ingenious sculpture, *Bull’s Head* (1943), an image of the head of a bull fashioned from the seat and handlebars of a bicycle (see Figure 2.1). The piece holds the two warring identities of bicycle parts and bull’s head together in perfect balance, allowing neither to gain the upper hand and efface the other. A similar effect is created by Marcel Duchamp’s deliberately provocative work *Fountain*, an inverted urinal intended for display at the inaugural exhibition of the New York Society of Independent Artists in 1917 (see Figure 2.2).²³ In this work, the agency of the artist, already minimal in *Bull’s Head* with its rudimentary level of craftsmanship, is reduced to the act of removing the object and inverting it so that it rests on a pedestal (Janson 1977: 661). Along with Duchamp’s other Readymades, *Fountain* provides a visual demonstration of the philosophical idea that a thing is what it is by virtue of its place in a context of involvement (Heidegger 1962: 95–107 [pars. 15 and 16]; idem, 1971). Transferring an everyday object like a urinal or a bottle rack from a utilitarian to an aesthetic context has the effect of partially liberating it from the official concept of what it is. Suddenly conspicuous in a way they were not when they were simply means to practical ends, such displaced utilitarian objects begin to look odd and enigmatic (Rubin 1977: 17–19). The central insight behind the Readymades is that releasing objects from their everyday contexts of involvement reveals qualities – their physical presence and odd beauty – that would otherwise escape notice. This idea can be generalized to aesthetic experience in general. In his penetrating and original essay “The Origin of the Work of Art,” Martin Heidegger argues that the work of art opens up a world in which the work’s material aspect – whether stone or metal, color



Figure 2.1 Pablo Picasso, Bull's Head, 1942. Assemblage, leather, metal. Musée National Picasso, Paris.

Source: Photo credit: © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY. © 2022 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

or tone – “comes forth for the very first time” (Heidegger 1971: 46 and *passim*). In other words, the work establishes a context – in Heidegger’speak, it sets up a world – in which there is revealed a truth of things that tends to be hidden when those things are put to use. The “truth” that is revealed through the work of art does not vanish without a trace, however, when the percipient returns to the preoccupations of everyday life. As Leonardo da Vinci noted, art teaches us how to see (*saper vedere*), a perceptual capacity that extends from the work of art to the perceptual world (Cassirer 1944: 144, 146–147).

I would like to suggest that this idea – that the work of art enacts a break with the context of everyday involvement in order to foreground a different mode of



Figure 2.2 Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1950 (replica of 1917 original). Porcelain urinal. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Source: Photo credit: The Philadelphia Museum of Art/Art Resource, NY. © 2022 Association Marcel Duchamp/ADAGP, Paris/Artists Rights Society (ARS), NY.

perception – provides a model for what is going on in insight meditation. By encouraging a break with the cognitive habits and preoccupations of folk psychology, the practice of insight meditation brings about an insight into the nature of things that will inform and transform one's experience and understanding of the world.

From Mind Sharing to Mind Understanding

To explain what I mean, let me begin with what is for most the ambiguous first fruit of the practice of mindfulness meditation: an acute and disconcerting awareness of the restlessness of the mind. The novice practitioner discovers that the mind is continually and effortlessly spinning narratives in which the self plays the starring role. We verbalize continuously to ourselves about ourselves (Donald 1991: 369). More generally, it is through the stories we tell about ourselves that we make sense of our actions and present ourselves to others. For Dan Dennett, this tendency to spin stories about ourselves forms a fundamental and irrepressible part of human nature. To dramatize this point, he appeals to Richard Dawkins's concept of the extended phenotype, the idea that the phenotypic effects of a gene extend outside the body of the organism into its environment (Dawkins 1989: 238–240 and *passim*). Dennett compares our irrepressible need to tell stories about ourselves to the way spiders spin their webs, snails exude their shells, and beavers construct dams (1991: 415–418). Indeed, the narratives we tell are more fundamental than even the self; our sense of self, Dennett remarks, is more the product than the source of those narratives (1991: 418).²⁴ What we see when we attempt to watch our minds, then, is precisely this inveterate narrativizing tendency at work – the mind's need to tell and retell the story about the self as it continually seeks to assimilate new experiences into a unified and coherent narrative.

According to the “narrative practice hypothesis” of Daniel Hutto, this inveterate drive to make sense of human behavior by telling stories forms the basis of folk psychology, which Hutto defines as our capacity to understand intentional action in terms of reasons (Hutto 2008: ix, 2–3). In the previous chapter, I presented the argument, put forth by Hutto, Shaun Gallagher, and Victoria McGeer (among others), that our ability to make sense of human behavior is primarily a matter of how we expect people to act in certain situations and only secondarily and exceptionally a matter of inferring hidden mental states in the people with whom we interact (Hutto 2008: 36–37; Gallagher and Hutto 2008: 30; Gallagher 2005: 212; McGeer 2007: 148–149; Zahavi 2007: 32–33 and *passim*). These expectations are implicit in the norms and routines that structure our everyday social interactions: what one does after one finishes a meal in a restaurant, how one greets the spouse of a colleague, and so on. These social scripts form the rudiments of the full-blown stories we tell to explain, both to ourselves and others, why we did what we did (McGeer 2001: 119).

Hutto and Gallagher present their “narrative alternative to theory of mind” in the context of a “layered model” of human intersubjectivity, according to which our capacity to understand the intentional behavior of both self and others rests on more rudimentary and developmentally prior modes of social interaction (Gallagher and Hutto 2008: 22–23). According to such a model, the development of social understanding can be understood as a stepwise progression from, as John Baresi and Chris Moore (2008: 43 and *passim*) put it, mind sharing to mind understanding. It is a progression, moreover, in which the earlier mind sharing stages are preserved even as they are subsumed by cognitively more sophisticated ways

of understanding other minds (Zlatev 2008: 219). The progression begins with a cross-modal integration or matching of the proprioceptive perception of one's own body with the visual perception of another's (Baresi and Moore 2008: 43). This idea that an action-perception matching system lies at the foundation of human social cognition receives neurological support from the discovery, in the 1990s, of a set of neurons in the macaque monkey that respond to both the execution and the observation of object-directed grasping motions (Gallese and Goldman 1998; Gallese 2005).²⁵ This matching of acts that are seen with acts that are done can be seen in the imitative behavior of young infants (Meltzoff and Moore 1995: 49, 53). In imitating its caregivers, the infant learns to relate the observed bodily acts of others to its own internal states.²⁶ It is on the basis of body imitation that the infant will eventually learn to view the self as an abiding, objective entity in the world of others and, at the same time, other persons as entities imbued with subjectivity like itself (Meltzoff and Moore 1995: 44, 65, cf. 53–54). So long as bodily mimesis remains on the level of matching the visually perceived body of the other with the proprioceptively perceived body of oneself, however, there is not yet a conceptual differentiation between self and other (Zlatev 2008: 223; Gallese 2006: 16). At this most fundamental stratum of intersubjectivity, self and other inhabit what the neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese calls a shared “we-centric space” (Gallese 2006: 16). Now, the developmental path from body imitation to full-blown folk psychology is complex, to say the least. Our folk psychological practice of making sense of human behavior in terms of reasons rests on a number of prerequisite abilities and skills, each involving the interaction of multiple perceptual, cognitive, and motor systems (Hutto 2008: 27–28). Theorists like Gallagher and Hutto single out one factor in this admittedly complex process as being of particular importance, however. This is the child's early exposure to stories of people acting for reasons in relation to others. It is by participating in, and internalizing, conversations about people interacting with each other that children develop a sense of themselves as organizing centers of experience (Hutto 2008: 27–32 and *passim*; Gallagher 2006: 225). Hutto's “narrative practice hypothesis,” thus extends Dennett's earlier insight concerning the role of narrative in constituting the self in relation to others.

Following a suggestion of the psychologist Merlin Donald, I propose that Buddhist insight meditation can be fruitfully understood in terms of this kind of layered model of human intersubjectivity. In his book *Origins of the Modern Mind* (1991), Donald presents a theory of cognitive evolution that informs the model of human intersubjectivity that I have been describing.²⁷ Central to Donald's theory of human cognition is the evolutionary principle that complex biological structures like the human mind-brain preserve vestiges of earlier adaptations (1991: 2–3, 269 and *passim*). Accordingly, Donald views the human mind as a hybrid structure consisting of several distinct systems of representation arranged hierarchically. Each of these systems, moreover, corresponds to a stage or “culture” in human cognitive evolution. Donald identifies four such “collective systems of knowledge and behavior” that reflect the cognitive abilities of the individuals in question (1991: 148), namely, the episodic culture of the common ape-human ancestor, which evinces an ability to perceive complex events and situations as

perceptual units (1991: 125–126, 148–157); mimetic culture consisting of expressive acts that are intentional but not (yet) linguistic (1991: 168); mythic culture marked by the use of language as the principal medium of communication and narrative as a way of articulating the human community's place in the cosmos (1991: 213); and finally, what Donald calls theoretic culture, which emerges with the development of literacy and the use external means of memory storage, from written records to computer hard drives.

The details of the four cognitive cultures Donald postulates and the three great evolutionary transitions marking their successive emergence are less important for our purposes than Donald's suggestive remarks about the shifting locus of consciousness in this hybrid model of the mind. Donald sees consciousness as the subjective accompaniment of whatever system of representation is currently in control. While the locus of control tends to align with the most recently evolved cognitive structures, all three of the representational systems that are distinctive of humans – namely, the mimetic, the mythic, and theoretic – can serve as the temporary center of control, depending on the particular cognitive demands of a given situation (1991: 368–369). Thus, in Donald's model, “the functional locus of ‘consciousness’ can shift, depending upon the representational system currently in command” (1991: 369). When one of the higher systems is inactive, control and, therewith, consciousness defaults to the next highest level (1991: 369, 370). The fact that we normally do not notice these shifts probably has to do with the characteristic unity of conscious experience, or stated more strongly, the fact that consciousness abhors breaks in coherence (Edelman and Tononi 2000: 23–29). This essential feature of consciousness is strikingly evident in the fortunate fact that people with “split brains” experience a fully integrated – and not, as one might expect, a split – consciousness (Gazzaniga 2011: 52, 54).²⁸

In his discussion of consciousness, Donald remarks that “many rituals, including forms of meditation” can be understood as attempts to induce a shift from one locus of control to another (1991: 371). Although Donald does not elaborate on this insight, we might hypothesize on the basis of his overall theory that insight meditation consists of a set of techniques designed to induce a shift from what Donald calls the oral-narrative system to the mimetic system. These are the two systems in Donald's schema that he says dominate human consciousness (1991: 368).²⁹ What Donald calls the oral-narrative system corresponds to the folk psychological narratives through which we make sense of human behavior in terms of persons acting for reasons. Mindfulness techniques, I suggest, function to attenuate the operation of this system, if not deactivate it altogether, prompting consciousness temporarily to revert to the next level in the cognitive hierarchy, the mimetic. Admittedly, mimetic cognition in Donald's theory is a broad category (Zlatev 2008: 218). It encompasses the prelinguistic, gestural forms of communication prominent in the dramatic arts and social ritual as well as the forms of iconic representation found in the visual arts (Donald 1991: 167–176 and *passim*). Most directly relevant to the present discussion is that the category also includes the prelinguistic forms of social cognition, such as bodily imitation and empathy, that fall under the general heading of primary intersubjectivity.

Bare Attention

How exactly might the practice of meditation enact this shift in consciousness from the oral-narrative to the mimetic system? Here, I focus on the practice of bare attention that is central to the popular, if controversial, bare insight method that was developed in Burma during the last century (King 1992: 116–144; Clough 2012: 207–226). Bare attention is a modern interpretation of the concept of mindfulness (*sati*) as it appears in the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness (*Sati-paṭṭhāna-sutta*), a text we looked at earlier in our discussion of devaluatory redescriptions of the body. Bare attention refers to a dispassionate, nonreactive mode of perceiving reality. One observes things as they are, without imposing cognitive labels or value judgments. In keeping with the literal meaning of *vipassanā* (discernment, discrimination),³⁰ bare attention is also a form of analysis. In *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*, Nyanaponika Thera remarks that the practice of bare attention will reveal the “seemingly uniform act of perception” to be a sequence of single phases. This basic observation,

will show, e.g., the basic differentiation of the perceptual process: the presentation of the comparatively bare sense data, and the subsequent phase of interpreting and evaluating them.

(Nyanaponika 1996: 25)

Nyanaponika’s description here of perception as a two-stage process whereby a moment of bare sensation is followed by a cognitive interpretation betrays the influence of the empiricist tradition in Western philosophy; Nyanaponika, after all, was a European convert to Buddhism (né Siegmund Feniger) with a Western education. At the same time, however, the formulation above coheres with the epistemological tradition of classical Indo-Tibetan Buddhism, which distinguished two moments of perception, the first without (*nir-*) the second with (*sa-*) determination (*nirvikalpaka-* and *savikalpaka-pratyakṣa*, respectively). Whether of Eastern or Western provenance, this two-stage conception of perception is problematic from a phenomenological perspective. Heidegger puts it in an eloquent (and uncharacteristically lucid) passage:

We never really first perceive a throng of sensations, e.g., tones and noises, in the appearance of things . . . rather, we hear the storm whistling in the chimney, we hear the three-motored plane, we hear the Mercedes in immediate distinction from the Volkswagen.³¹ Much closer to us than all sensations are the things themselves. We hear the door shut in the house and never hear acoustical sensations or even mere sounds. In order to hear a bare sound, we have to listen away from things, to divert our ear from them, i.e., listen abstractly.

(Heidegger 1971: 26)

Bare attention, I submit, is “a listening away from things.” As indicated previously, it can be fruitfully compared to the “autistic” moment in the artistic process whereby

elements of experience are decomposed and decontextualized.³² Perceptions and their objects, like the scenes in a movie, are what they are in the context of the larger narrative of the self and its activities. As Robert Wright puts it, paraphrasing the psychologist Paul Bloom, “the stories we tell about things, and the stories we tell ourselves about things, influence how we feel about those things and, presumably, thus shape the essence we sense in them” (2017: 165). One’s appreciation of a painting, for example, is influenced by the belief that a particular artist created it. Similarly, one’s enjoyment of a glass of wine might be influenced by the knowledge that it came from a reputable winery in a good year (Bloom 2010: 1–2, 45–46; Wright 2017: 165–167). Applying Bloom’s analysis of pleasure to the practice of meditation, Wright presents mindfulness meditation as a technique of de-narrativizing experience, that is, of “stripping away the story, the background knowledge, behind . . . sensory experience” (2017: 170). This is done simply by making momentary perceptions and feelings the objects of focal awareness. This foregrounding makes those feelings and perceptions conspicuous in a way they were not before, in much the same way that Duchamp’s bottle rack becomes conspicuous when removed from its everyday context of involvement and placed on a pedestal in an art exhibit. Lifted up out of the narrative stream of the self, feelings and perceptions shed the cognitive labels and affective valences they had in that narrative context.

The practice of bare attention, then, by making feelings and perception the objects of focal attention, temporarily neutralizes or suspends the running narrative of the self and its activities. If Donald’s hypothesis about meditational practice is right, then this suspension of our self-narrative should prompt a temporary shift from the oral narrative system of cognition to the more basic mimetic system. To the extent that our sense of self in clear distinction from others is constituted by the folk psychological narratives that are temporarily suspended in the practice of bare attention, meditation places us at a level of intersubjective experience in which self and other, subject and object, are distinguished but not separated. This level would correspond to an experiential realization of the No-self doctrine.

In actual practice, though, the practice might afford little more than a glimpse of the prelinguistic, mimetic state of primary intersubjectivity. In other words, it need not create a total break with narrative-discursive thought. Even in Donald’s theory the shift from one representational system to another is not all-or-nothing. It is a matter, rather, of which system is dominant. He acknowledges that in many states of awareness the systems of representation are active in varying degrees at the same time (Donald 1991: 370). The practice of bare attention, then, on the foregoing interpretation, bumps consciousness down to a level at which the oral-narrative system of folk psychology is no longer dominant but may still continue to be active.

Exchanging Self and Other

Earlier I compared the reductive analysis of the self as an aggregate of impersonal components to the “autistic” moment of artistic creation in which the artist mentally decomposes the objects of perception into line and pattern.

If the perception of selflessness ended here, Buddhist insight meditation would indeed amount to a kind of induced autism, a fragmented vision of reality. And yet again on analogy with the artistic process, this decompositional moment is followed by a return to the world of persons and conventional things, but with this crucial difference, that the glimpse into the subpersonal realm of the *dharma*s dissolves what the Pali tradition calls personality belief (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*), the theoretical belief in the self as a substantial entity (Collins 1982: 93–94). This loss of personality belief imparts a permeability to one's sense of self and an essential openness to others. Here, the technical and philosophical sense of selflessness converges with the everyday ethical sense of selflessness as unselfishness. Selflessness, in other words, implies compassion. Compassion (*karuṇā*) is esteemed in all forms of Buddhism, even if it is largely implicit in Abhidharmic discussions of No-self. But it is in Mahāyāna Buddhism that compassion attains a special prominence as a self-consciously held mark of Buddhist identity, one that was expressed, ironically enough, through invidious contrasts with the non-Mahāyāna adept or *arhat* who allegedly strives selfishly for his own enlightenment.³³ True selflessness expresses itself in compassion towards other sentient beings. Nowhere is the intrinsic connection between selflessness and compassion more eloquently expressed than in the eighth-century Buddhist poet Śāntideva's treatise *Entering the Path of Enlightenment* (*Bodhicaryāvatāra*). In the eighth chapter on "The Perfection of Contemplation," Śāntideva presents the realization of selflessness as the presupposition of the practice of "exchanging of oneself with the other" (*parātma-parivartana*). What renders me insensitive to the suffering others and, at the same time, makes my own suffering unbearable to me, is my attachment to self (*ātma-sneha*) (BCA vv. 92–93, Vaidya 1960: 156). With the realization that the self is illusory comes the realization that all joys and sorrows are equal (cf. BCA 8: 90c, Vaidya 1960: 155):

Sequences and combinations [of elements], like multitudes and armies, are false. There is no-one to whom sorrow belongs. Therefore, who is there to claim sorrow as his/her own?

All sorrows without distinction are ownerless (*asvāmikāni duḥkhāni sarvāny evāviśeṣataḥ*).

These sorrows, simply because they are sorrows, are to be prevented. How, then, can a restriction [of this task to one's own sorrows] be made?

(BCA 8: 101–102, Vaidya 1960: 158–159)

Genuine empathy – the ability to attend to the joys and sorrows of others as my own (BCA 8: 90d, Vaidya 1960: 155) – is not possible until one sees through the illusion of the self. So long as the sense of self that is sustained by folk psychological narratives is converted into a personality belief in the self as a separate substance (Collins 1982: 93, 132), genuine compassion is not possible.³⁴

Notes

- 1 Ganeri (2017: 304–305) insightfully relates the Buddhist adept’s cultivated disgust towards the selfless constituents to the immune system’s capacity to distinguish the pathogens that it rejects from the body’s own tissues. In light of this analogy, one can perhaps regard the exercise of detachment described here in the Anattalakkaṇa Sutta as a kind of induced auto-immunity syndrome on the level of psychology.
- 2 Or to be more precise, the conversion scene precedes the main body of the text in which Nāgasena answers Milinda’s questions. There is a prologue that recounts Nāgasena’s birth and training, among other things.
- 3 Yes, women appear in the Upanishadic debates. See BAU 3.6 and 3.8, where Yājñavalkya debates a formidable (but ultimately inferior) female antagonist named Gargī Vācakanvī.
- 4 Milind. 25: 12–13: *na h’ettha puggalo upalabbhatīti*.
- 5 The chariot metaphor for the self can be traced to a verse in the Pali Canon, S.i.135. See Kapstein (2001: 77–79).
- 6 Sarvāstivāda Abhidharma survives only in Chinese with currently no translations in modern European languages. The Theravāda Abhidhamma is well preserved in Pali, and its seven canonical treatises have been translated into English. See Gethin (1998: 204).
- 7 A more extensive refutation of the concept of the self or person comprises its ninth and final chapter.
- 8 AKBh. 432.12: *antar-vyāpāra-puruṣaḥ*; trans. Gold (2015: 232).
- 9 AKBh. 432.13–14. *asti karmāsti vipākaḥ, karakas tu nopalabhyate, ya imāṃśca skandhān nikṣipati anyāṃśca skandhān pratisandadhātī*.
- 10 AKBh. 432.18. *yadi tu skandhamātram evātmēti upacaryate, tasyāpratiṣedhaḥ*.
- 11 A lucid explanation of the difference between reductionism and eliminativism as it relates to the Buddhist No-self doctrine can be found in Siderits (2003: 1–13).
- 12 AKBh. 433.5–6: *asaty apy ātmani kleśakarmābhisaṃskṛtaḥ skandhānām santāno mātuḥ kuṣim āpadyata iti*. See trans. in Gold (2015: 232). I follow Gold (2015: 232, 296n2) in reading the locative absolute here as *asaty-apy-ātmani* instead of the *saty-apy-ātmani* in Śāstri’s text.
- 13 Trans. Arnold (2005: 21, 225n24). *yasmin avayavaśo bhinne na tad buddhir bhavati tat samvṛtisat*.
- 14 A similar point is made by the psychologists Jesse Preston and Nicholas Epley (2005), who argue that the value of a belief is determined in part by its explanatory power. Like Wimsatt, the authors suggest that much of the appeal of lower level analyses (neuroscience, say, as opposed to social psychology) lies in their ability to explain higher-level phenomena (2005: 830–831).
- 15 Interestingly enough, this same methodological problem arises in the identification of neural networks inasmuch as any given neuron has connections to many different networks (P. S. Churchland 2002: 18).
- 16 The ninth (and final) chapter of the *Abhidharmakośa Bhāṣya* is devoted to a refutation of Pudgalavāda. Vasubandhu’s strategy there is to force his Pudgalavāda opponent to make a choice between the claim that the person exists substantially or (merely) conceptually. Carpenter argues that this assimilation of the “two truths” (conventional and ultimate reality) to the distinction between conceptual reality and substantial reality (*prajñaptisat* and *dravyasat*, respectively) distorts the authentic Pudgalavāda teaching (2015: 7–11). She suggests that the Pudgalavāda teaching that the person is “inexpressible” (*avaktavya*) as either separate from or identical to the aggregates is the unhappy result of their being forced to accommodate their teaching on the person to an either-or categorical schema in which their concept of the person did not fit (2015: 10–11, 27, 30, and passim). Forced to express themselves in negations (the person is “neither identical with nor distinct from” the aggregates), Pudgalavāda was vulnerable to the charge of logical incoherence (Siderits 1997: 470). While I find Carpenter’s take on

the “inexpressibility” teaching insightful, and indeed helpful in understanding the later philosophical debate, I would argue that historically, the inexpressibility teaching most likely derives from the ancient discourse of the Buddha’s unanswered questions and an apophatic current of Buddhist thought found at the earliest strata of the tradition. See later, Chapter 5.

- 17 See Alison Gopnik’s description of how someone with autism perceives the world, cited in Pinker (2009: 331). Other people are “noisy skin-bags” with “two dark spots near the top of them that swivel restlessly back and forth” and “a hole beneath the spots [from which come] a stream of noises.” I suspect, however, that the picture of the experience of individuals with autism as a kind of radical behaviorism is a rather crude approximation, derived as it is from artificially subtracting an element of normal experience.
- 18 See Happé (2001: 247–250) on possible links between weak central coherence and deficits in theory of mind.
- 19 The likely historical genesis of the Abhidharma, in which its sprawling system of interrelated *dharma*s was built up mechanically from the short, self-contained lists of doctrinal items found in the sūtras, would seem to epitomize the piecemeal “systematizing” tendency which, in its extreme form, Simon Baron-Cohen identifies as the hallmark of the autistic mind (Baron-Cohen 2002). On the overlap between Baron-Cohen’s concept of systematizing and Frith’s concept of weak central coherence, see Frith (2003: 163–164).
- 20 While McCauley and Graham note that certain meditative practices mimic the “absent self” of individuals with ASD (2020: 184–186), they do not elaborate on the nature of the relation between meditation and ASD the way they do for the relation between religious ritual and OCD. As mentioned in the text, I use their analysis of the latter relation to illuminate the former.
- 21 Edelman and Tononi (2000: 25) suggest that our inability to perceive both “gestalts” at the same time is a consequence of the unity and internal coherence that belongs to the very nature of consciousness.
- 22 Relevant here is the observation that individuals with autism tend to have difficulty with the perceptual shifting between the two “interpretations” of ambiguous figures like the well-known duck-rabbit figure (McGeer 2001: 114). That savants with autism excel at only one aspect of the artistic process, namely, the segmenting of objects into components, accounts for the impression I have that savants are better at rendering inanimate objects, buildings in particular, than people and animals. I must confess that I find some of their portraits, while impressive in many respects, to be somewhat wooden when judged by an admittedly demanding aesthetic standard. See, for example, the portrait of Uta Frith by the savant Claudia Holder (Frith 2003: 148).
- 23 Lincoln (1989: 142–144) recounts the controversy engendered by the exhibition of this work, showing how it exemplifies the symbolic inversion of social norms, in this case, the prevailing aesthetic expectations and sensibilities of the New York avant-garde.
- 24 Zahavi (2014: 59–62 and *passim*) argues that this narrative self rests on a more fundamental, experiential self that is responsible for the subjectivity or first-person character of experience. See also Damasio’s distinction between a temporally unextended core self and an extended autobiographical self (1999: 17 and *passim*).
- 25 See Churchland (2011: 135–154) for a more cautious assessment of the evidence supporting the hypothesis that the mirror neuron system forms the substrate of social understanding. For a critique of the motor theory of social cognition, see also Jacob and Jeannerod (2005) and Jacob (2008). Jacob and Jeannerod distinguish between motor intentions and social intentions, and they argue that if our capacity mentally to simulate an agent’s actions does in fact afford an understanding of his or her mental state, this capacity would pertain only the agent’s motor intention, not their social intention. They dramatize this point by considering someone observing Dr. Jekyll performing an appendectomy. On the basis of motor simulation alone, the observer would be unable

to distinguish the beneficent social intention of Jekyll's actions from the sadistic social intention of his evil alter ego, Mr. Hyde, who performs the same surgical actions on his non-anesthetized victims (Jacob and Jeannerod 2005: 22; Jacob 2008: 206).

- 26 Cecilia Heyes provides a compelling explanation for how exactly the infant learns to connect "the felt but unseen movements of the self with the seen but unfelt movements of the other" (2018: 119). At the basis of imitation are "vertical associations" between the sensory representation of an action and the motor representation of the same action. It is thanks to a stock of such vertical associations that the cognitive system can translate the perceived sequence of action components into a motor sequence of that action (2018: 122–128). Heyes's "associative sequence learning model" emphasizes the role of social learning in the forging of vertical associations, specifically, those involving actions that the infant cannot perceive him/herself doing (such as facial expressions or whole-body movements).
- 27 Zlatev (2008: 218 and *passim*) acknowledges the influence of Donald's theory explicitly.
- 28 Edelman and Tononi (2000: 27–28) mention other clinical phenomena, in addition to the experience of split-brain patients, that dramatically testify to the seamless continuity of conscious experience. These include anosognosia, the denial on the part of some stroke victims of paralysis and complete sensory loss on one side of their bodies; Anton's syndrome, the condition of people with massive occipital damage who are curiously unaware of the resulting blindness; and possibly the strangest of them all, hemineglect, the multisensory lack of awareness of the left side of things, a condition of which the individual is completely unaware.
- 29 Donald says that meditative practice represents "an attempt to reduce the dominance of linguistic, especially analytic, thought" (1991: 371). This statement seems to suggest that meditation targets both the mythic and the theoretic systems of representation. The oral-narrative system mentioned earlier would seem to correspond to the former, but he does not make this correspondence explicit in the context of his discussion of consciousness. There, thus, seems to be some flexibility in Donald's terminology here, where the categories of mental systems seem to function as ideal types. The relevant categories for understanding the shift in consciousness enacted by meditative practice would be linguistic and pre-linguistic modes of thought.
- 30 Etymologically, *vipassanā* consists of the Sanskrit root $\sqrt{pas}$, "to see," modified by the prefix *vi*, "apart," "away."
- 31 Readers of a certain age will remember the unmistakable clatter of the old VW Beetles with their air-cooled motors. Today's Volkswagens are water-cooled, like every other new car, and do not sound noticeably different from Mercedes.
- 32 Individuals with autism describe, in fact, experiencing unprocessed (uninterpreted) sensation, which can be overwhelming. See McGeer (2001: 125–126).
- 33 A representation of the arhat, by the way, that is incoherent inasmuch as arhatship consists in the realization of the truth of selflessness. A selfish arhat, in other words, is a contradiction in terms.
- 34 There are many philosophers who would challenge Śāntideva's claim that compassion or empathy requires one to eliminate or overcome a differentiation between self and other. For example, Dan Zahavi, representing an important current in 20th-century continental philosophy, argues that, to the contrary, empathy *presupposes* an experienced difference between self and other; constitutive of empathy is a recognition of the irreducible subjectivity of the other (2014: 188–194). The disagreement between the philosophical trajectory that Zahavi represents and Śāntideva's No-self view is fundamental. As we saw in the Introduction, however, the disagreement between self and No-self accounts of empathy can nevertheless be mitigated by distinguishing between a minimalist notion of experiential selfhood, on the one hand, and the bounded self of metaphysical speculation (personality belief), on the other. We shall return to this topic at the end of the next chapter.

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