

AN INTERPRETATION OF THE NOT-SELF DOCTRINE

The teaching of the Buddha is primarily practical in aim. Its goal is to enable us to overcome suffering on the basis of the Four Noble Truths. But this practice rests squarely on a theoretical understanding of human nature. Both the not-self doctrine and the ideas of *kamma* and rebirth are central to the Buddha's message. Our purpose in this part of the book is to understand and evaluate the Buddha's teaching on these topics. This will put us in a position to examine the Four Noble Truths.

We will begin with the doctrine of not-self (*anattā*, the negation of *attā*, meaning 'self'). The contention that we are not selves (nor have selves) is probably the greatest theoretical obstacle in Buddhism for Western stream-observers. Yet acceptance of this contention appears fundamental to the Buddha's portrayal of the path from suffering to *Nibbāna*. Unfortunately, what the Buddha says concerning the absence of self seems to conflict with other things he says and is not obviously a cogent account of our experience. Partly as a result, the not-self doctrine has been interpreted in different ways. In this chapter, I will propose a resolution of these problems. First, I will survey some typical expressions of the not-self doctrine and discuss the main difficulties in interpreting them. Then I will draw a distinction between two conceptions of selves – substance-selves and process-selves – and I will suggest that the Buddha taught that substance-selves have no reality in any sense, while process-selves have no independent reality but do have a form of dependent reality. Specifically, the existence of a person's process-self depends on certain beliefs and attitudes the person has, but may and should abandon. In the absence of these, the process-self ceases to exist. This is what happens when *Nibbāna* is fully attained: the relevant beliefs and attitudes are given up, and so there is no longer a process-self. Since there never was a substance-self, there is no self at all. In light of the distinction between substance- and process-selves, the Buddha's teaching concerning the self may be rendered consistent with his overall teaching and, perhaps, intelligible as an interpretation of our lives.

Of course, whether it is correct is another matter. In chapters 7 and 8, we will explore the considerations the Buddha offered to bring us to the

realization that there are no substance-selves and we will examine whether he could answer some important objections to his view that the only selves that exist are dependent process-selves. Finally, in chapter 9, we will turn to *kamma* and rebirth. To complete the argument of the present chapter, I will argue that these ideas are consistent with the Buddha's not-self teaching on the ground that the dependent existence of process-selves is sufficient to explain what he says concerning these ideas. Beyond this, we will need to consider why the Buddha believed in *kamma* and rebirth, and what may be said for and against our doing so.

1 Characteristic expressions of the not-self doctrine

The Buddha speaks of the absence of selves in numerous texts. In whatever manner these may be interpreted, there is no question that he taught some not-self doctrine. To see what this is, let us first examine some of the more important statements concerning the absence of self. The Buddha says he does 'not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair in one who clings to it' (M 231). Since a doctrine of self results in sorrow and the like, and the central teaching of the Buddha is that all such forms of suffering can and should be overcome, there should be no clinging to any doctrine of self. It might be thought that the Buddha's objection is not to a doctrine of self per se, but merely to clinging to it: the Buddha thinks clinging is conducive to suffering and should be abandoned. Though this is true, it is also significant that the Buddha regularly singles out a doctrine of self as one view to which it is especially important not to cling. For example, he says that when he has achieved 'true knowledge,' a *bhikkhu* 'no longer clings to sensual pleasures, no longer clings to views, no longer clings to rules and observances, no longer clings to a doctrine of self.' When he does not cling in this way, the Buddha says, he is not agitated and 'personally attains *Nibbāna*' (M 163). Though all forms of clinging are problematic, clinging to a doctrine of self is especially problematic. (As we will see, this is because it is the source of all other forms of clinging.) Just as clinging to a doctrine of self results in suffering, no longer clinging to such a doctrine is instrumental to attaining *Nibbāna*.

Moreover, the problem is not simply clinging to a doctrine of self. It is also that any such doctrine is false. Just after the first passage above, the Buddha says:

Since a self and what belongs to a self are not apprehended as true and established, then this standpoint for views, namely, 'The self and the world are the same; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change; I shall endure as long as eternity' – would it not be an utterly and completely foolish teaching?

(M 232)

The answer to this rhetorical question is ‘Yes.’ Here the Buddha plainly says that a self is ‘not apprehended as true and established.’ Since there is no self, it is false both that the self and the world are the same and that the self exists eternally after death (these views refer to the emerging ideas of the *Upaniṣads*). In this connection, the Buddha elsewhere distinguishes three kinds of persons: those who ‘describe an existing self that is unimpaired after death,’ those who ‘describe the annihilation, destruction, and extermination of an existing being (at death),’ and those who ‘assert *Nibbāna* here and now’ (M 839). The Buddha’s position is obviously the last of these. It is distinguished from the first two views – that the self exists after death and that it is destroyed at death – because these views both mistakenly assume there is a self that may or may not continue to exist beyond the time of death. For the Buddha, there is no such self.

Oftentimes the not-self doctrine is expressed by indicating the inappropriateness of the words ‘I’, ‘my’, and ‘mine’. These words have no ultimate reference for a person who has attained *Nibbāna*. For example, the Buddha says a person who thinks ‘*I am at peace, I have attained Nibbāna, I am without clinging*’ is actually still clinging (M 846). Liberation, he goes on to say, is ‘through not clinging.’ Once *Nibbāna* has been achieved, it will no longer make sense to have any thoughts involving the word ‘I.’ Such thoughts refer to a self and hence they are not free from the clinging that is associated with a self. Addressing his son, Rāhula, the Buddha says, ‘develop meditation on the perception of impermanence,’ for when you do this, ‘the conceit “I am” will be abandoned’ (M 531). About himself, he says, ‘It is by knowing thus, seeing thus, friends, that in regard to this body with its consciousness and all external signs, I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency to conceit have been eradicated in me’ (M 908). Once enlightenment has been achieved, there will no longer be occasion to think in terms of such self-referring concepts as ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

The most frequent statements of the not-self doctrine occur in connection with the five aggregates: material form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness. We will consider these more closely in the next chapter. For now, the important point is that these are put forward as an exhaustive list of what we ordinarily think constitutes a person. Hence, if a person is or has a self, then this self must be found in connection with one or more of these aggregates. But the Buddha maintains that it is not: ‘Material form is not self, feeling is not self, perception is not self, formations are not self, consciousness is not self . . . all things are not self’ (M 324). In a frequent refrain, the Buddha says we should ‘not regard material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form as in self, or self as in material form,’ and likewise for the other four aggregates (M 889). Just as often the Buddha says, ‘One sees all material form as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: “This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”,’ and similarly for the remaining aggregates (M 890). Sometimes this point is expressed in the language of

emptiness or voidness (*suññatā*). For example, with respect to different aspects of the aggregates, it is said of each aspect that it ‘is empty of self and of what belongs to self’ (C II 1164).

To sum up, according to the Buddha, ‘It is impossible, it cannot happen that a person possessing right view could treat anything as self – there is no such possibility’ (M 928).

2 Some interpretive problems

It is evident that the Buddha has much to say to the effect that there is no self. But there are different interpretations of the not-self doctrine, and some have argued that, despite the texts we have just reviewed, the Buddha actually maintains that there is a self in some significant sense. (In fact, this was held early on by some purported followers of the Buddha called the ‘Personalists’.) There are several reasons why some interpreters of the Buddha have resisted the conclusion that he thinks there is no self in any sense. First, the absence of any self is a threatening idea to many. Much that we take to be valuable about human beings seems to center on the thought that we are selves: if this were wrong, our lives might seem meaningless or less worthy than we thought. Moreover, without a self, our understanding of individual moral responsibility might appear undermined: how can I be responsible for what I did yesterday if ‘I’ does not refer to a self? Second, it is often difficult to understand what the Buddha means by saying there are no selves. For example, it is hard to grasp what it means for the Buddha to have attained *Nibbāna*, but not be able to correctly think ‘I have attained *Nibbāna*.’ Such concerns lead to the suspicion that there must be some sort of self he implicitly affirms. Third, it may be wondered whether the not-self view provides a cogent account of our lives. What are we, if we are not selves? If a strict not-self doctrine cannot make intelligible sense of our experience, then perhaps there is a tacit acceptance of some kind of self. Finally, there are things the Buddha says that seem to leave open the possibility that there is a self and even to deny the not-self doctrine, and there is much else that he says that appears to presuppose a self. Once again, this gives us reason to think he must accept a self in some sense.

The first two of these reasons for supposing there must be a doctrine of self in the Buddha’s teaching are not very compelling, but the last two require serious consideration. That we find an idea of someone else threatening or difficult to understand may give us some basis for suspecting we have misunderstood it. But in the absence of other considerations, these grounds of suspicion cannot cast much doubt on what appears the evident interpretation. There is no reason to think that, in general, the ideas of other people in distant times and places are unlikely to be threatening or hard to grasp: it is misguided charity to insist on interpreting such ideas so that they conform more or less to what we already think. However, if the not-self doctrine does not provide

a cogent account of our lives, or if there are grounds in the teaching of the Buddha himself for thinking he believes there is a self or does not rule it out, then perhaps the not-self passages quoted in the last section should not be taken at face value. A number of reasons have been advanced for thinking the Buddha may have endorsed or not precluded a self. Let us begin by briefly examining these reasons. We can then consider what the best overall interpretation of the Buddha's teaching concerning the self might be in light of everything he says and the presumption that it could provide a coherent interpretation of our experience.

To start, the most prominent argument for the not-self doctrine, that no self is found with respect to each of the five aggregates, is consistent with the existence of a self independent of these aggregates. Even if the self is not material form, feeling, perception, formations, and consciousness, it may be something else. Hence, this argument is consistent with the existence of a self. However, by itself, this contention provides no reason to think the Buddha believes there is a self. If he thinks this, it may be expected that he would talk about, or at least assume, such a self; and if he speaks in these ways, then the texts showing this would be the primary reason for discerning a doctrine of self in his teaching.

There is an important passage in which the wanderer Vacchagotta asks 'Is there a self?' and 'Is there no self?' The Buddha remains silent in response to both questions. But if he believes there is no self, it might seem he would not be silent: surely he would directly say there is no self. However, the continuation of the passage shows that the Buddha has no hesitation about the not-self doctrine. Queried by Ānanda about his perplexing response, the Buddha says he interprets Vacchagotta's questions as pertaining to the dispute between the eternalists and the annihilationists. The eternalists held that the self exists eternally after death, while the annihilationists held that it ceases to exist at death. Hence, both presupposed that there is a self; their disagreement concerned the duration of this self. Since the Buddha believes there is no self, he rejects both positions, and he could not answer Vacchagotta's questions in a way that suggested he sided with either. He could not say 'there is a self' because this would contradict his position that 'all phenomena are nonself.' But neither could he say 'there is no self' because 'Vacchagotta, already confused, would have fallen into even greater confusion, thinking, "It seems that the self I formerly had does not exist now"' (C II 1393–4). To sum up, the Buddha is silent because Vacchagotta's questions falsely presuppose that there is a self that may or may not exist after death. Similarly, I might be at a loss what to say to someone who asks if I still surf when I never surfed in the first place: 'Yes' and 'No' are both misleading answers. Of course, we might wonder why the Buddha does not go on to offer his full teaching to Vacchagotta. But the fact that he does not implies no backing away from the not-self doctrine. He evidently thinks this is not the appropriate occasion for explaining that doctrine, that doing so

would only further bewilder Vacchagotta, given his preoccupation with the eternalist–annihilationist debate.

A similar point may be made about another text in which the Buddha appears to reject the not-self teaching. Speaking about a person who is preoccupied with his past, present, and future existence, the Buddha says, ‘When he attends unwisely in this way, one of six views arises in him.’ The first two of these views are described as follows: ‘The view “self exists for me” arises in him as true and established; or the view “no self exists for me” arises in him as true and established.’ All six views are said to be those of an ‘untaught ordinary person’ who is ‘not freed from suffering’ (M 92–3). The implication might seem to be that an enlightened person would think neither that the self exists for me nor that it does not. Hence, the Buddha appears to reject, or at least not accept, the not-self doctrine. However, if we take the view ‘self exists for me’ to mean the self exists eternally (eternalism) and the view ‘no self exists for me’ to mean the self is destroyed at death (annihilationism), then we may understand the text as stating that neither eternalism nor annihilationism should be accepted because they both falsely presuppose there is a self.¹ Moreover, the context makes it clear that the Buddha thinks these views are among those things that are ‘unfit for attention.’ One who ‘attends wisely’ does not concern himself with the dispute between eternalism and annihilationism. Rather, he focuses on the Four Noble Truths. When he does this, he is said to abandon three fetters, the first of which is ‘personality view’ (M 93).

More serious concerns are raised by the fact that in expressing his own outlook the Buddha often speaks as if there is a self. For example, he says that one of the ‘seven qualities of the true man’ is that he is a ‘knower . . . of self’ (L 502). Again, the Buddha speaks a great deal about self-cultivation and self-discipline. For instance, in *The Dhammapada* he says that ‘with oneself fully controlled one gains a protector which is hard to gain’ (Buddharakkhita translation: section 160). Moreover, he regularly employs personal pronouns such as ‘I’ and ‘he’ that appear to refer to a self. Thus, in describing a meditation exercise, the Buddha says, ‘Breathing in long, he understands: “I breathe in long”; or breathing out long, he understands: “I breathe out long”’ (M 531). What do words such as ‘I’ and ‘he’ refer to if not a self?

It may be that in these passages the Buddha is merely employing conventional modes of speech without intending to endorse their ordinary metaphysical implications. But what do these pronouns refer to in the absence of selves? In any case, the most troublesome philosophical difficulty is the fact that the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth seem to presuppose the existence of selves. If there are no selves, then what can it mean to say that my morally wrong actions now will bring unhappiness to me in the future? Must there not be a self that both performs the action and bears the fruit of it? Again, if there are no selves, then what is reborn? Does not the cycle of rebirth require that my self existed in previous lives and will exist in future lives until *Nibbāna* is attained?

One possibility, of course, is that the Buddha does not have a consistent teaching concerning the self. However, we should accept this conclusion only after we have found deficient all attempts to reconcile his not-self teaching with comments that seem to presuppose a self and in particular the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth. In my view, the Buddha does have a consistent doctrine of the self. In order to establish this, I will argue that the best interpretation of his teaching is that he implicitly accepts a distinction between substance-selves that have no reality and process-selves that have a dependent reality that ends with the attainment of *Nibbāna*. Let us now turn to this distinction.

3 Two conceptions of the self: substance and process

A view prominent at the time of the Buddha held that each person's true self was identical with the ultimate ground of reality (*brahman*). It might be suspected that the Buddha's not-self doctrine is nothing more than a rejection of this distinctive understanding of the self. If this were the case, then Western stream-observers might have little or no disagreement with the Buddha's teaching about the absence of self (since they are unlikely to understand their selves as identical with the ground of reality). However, though the Buddha does deny views about the self that were prominent in his culture, his not-self doctrine has implications that go beyond the denial of these local views. In particular, he rejects a conception of the self that is probably accepted by many stream-observers and has been widely endorsed in the Western philosophical tradition. I will call this the substance conception of the self (it was briefly discussed in chapter 3, section 3). On the other hand, there is another conception of the self that the Buddha implicitly appears to affirm, albeit in a significantly qualified form. I will call this the process conception of the self. Let us first describe these two conceptions and then consider what the Buddha says about them.

According to the *substance conception*, a self is a single, unified substance (we might also say it is a being, entity, or thing). In this respect, a self is like other substances in the world such as ordinary physical objects. A substance is something that is *ontologically distinct* from other substances – that is, though a substance has properties, it is not itself the property of another substance. Moreover, though one substance may causally depend on other substances, each substance remains a distinct or separate entity. For example, the sun might cause a plant to live, but the sun is one thing and the plant is another. In addition, a substance is something that has *identity* – that is, in some respects it persists through time unchanged so long as it exists. A substance may change, but it cannot change in every respect and remain the substance it is. Hence, some properties of a substance may change over time. For instance, a planet might gradually change from bright red to reddish-brown. The color of a planet is an accidental property. But a substance also has essential properties, properties that cannot change without the substance

ceasing to be what it is. These properties are necessary to the identity of the substance. An essential property of planets is that they orbit a star such as the sun. If Pluto ceased to orbit the sun and moved unendingly away from it, it would no longer be a planet. Hence, as long as a particular planet exists, it has the property of orbiting a sun.

On this account, then, a self is a substance in the sense of being ontologically distinct from other substances and having a set of essential, unchanging properties that are necessary for its identity as a self. The properties that are distinctive of a self, in contrast to substances such as plants and planets, are that it has capacities that enable it to regularly experience, remember, imagine, feel, desire, think, decide, act, and so on. A self is a substance that has all or most of these attributes as essential properties (hence, we say a self is a subject who experiences and an agent who acts). In some cases, a self *undergoes* these things. For example, we might think of an experience or feeling as something that happens to us. But in other cases, a self *does* these things. For example, thinking, deciding, and acting are usually considered things a self does rather than undergoes. Sometimes, as in a daydream, it may be unclear whether an attribute of a self is something it undergoes or does. But that a self is a substance that undergoes some things and does others is essential to what it means to be a self. Moreover, a self *controls* those things it does in a sense that it does not control those things it undergoes. For example, I cannot change the fact that when I look at the book in front of me I have an experience of something rectangular, but I can determine whether or not to pick up the book. Finally, on this account, a self has a reflexive property: it is capable of being *aware of itself as a substance-self*. A self not only experiences and decides, it can be and often is aware of the fact that it is a self that experiences and decides. A self has the capacity for self-awareness or self-consciousness.

To sum up, according to the substance conception, a self is a substance-self, a substance that is ontologically distinct from other substances (*distinctness*) and has essential properties that do not change (*identity*); these properties include the regularly exercised capacities to experience, remember, imagine, feel, desire, think, decide, act, and the like (*attributes of undergoing and doing*); the substance-self controls those things it does (*self-control*); and it has the capacity to be aware of itself as a substance-self (*self-awareness*). This conception of the self is familiar in Western traditions. For example, Descartes appeared to have such a conception in mind when he declared that he was ‘a thing that thinks’ – that is, ‘a thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions’ (Descartes 1984: 19). Each aspect of the substance conception of the self may invite controversy and would require a more detailed formulation to be fully adequate. But this account should be sufficient for our present purpose. It is important to recognize that this description is neutral with respect to several important philosophical controversies concerning the self. For instance, it does not specify whether or not the self is immortal, is distinct from the

body, is found in human beings but not other animals, or possesses a free will. (Descartes affirmed all of these points, but they are not part of the substance conception of the self as defined here.) Nonetheless, for many persons, an essential part of the reason human beings have the value they have – for example, that they are worthy of love or respect – is the fact that they are substance-selves.

Let us now turn to the *process conception* of the self. On this account, there are no substance-selves. Rather, the phenomena the previous account described as substances-selves are in fact process-selves. The key difference between the two accounts is that the process conception rejects what the substance conception regards as fundamental: that the world is made up of substances that are ontologically distinct and have identity through time. Instead, according to the process conception, the world should be understood as consisting solely of processes. Whereas the substance conception takes (apparently) discrete and stable objects such as moons and monoliths as its paradigms of what is real, the process conception suggests that the proper paradigms are occurrences such as whirlpools and wind storms that are obviously interdependent on their environment and ever-changing. On this account, a process is not a thing, entity, or being, but an event, activity, or becoming: it is a specific movement within the world, interconnected with other movements and in constant change in every respect. A particular process is not a thing that has necessary properties and is distinct from other things. It is an aspect of the overall movement that constitutes the world. As a movement, a process has an important temporal character: it involves a continuous passage of becoming from past to present to future. But ordinarily a process is not random: it manifests an ordered, lawful causal development. Moreover, on account of interconnection, processes involve other processes: a given process typically contains smaller-scale processes and is contained within larger-scale processes.

Now, according to the process conception, a self is not a substance, but an integrated set of processes. Specifically, a process-self is a structured nexus of continuous, interacting processes that are not ontologically distinct from other processes and that are in constant change in every respect. The specific processes that constitute the process-self are typically the aforementioned under-goings and doings of the self. But instead of describing these as necessary properties of a substance, the process conception says a self is nothing but a nexus of processes such as experiencing, remembering, imagining, feeling, desiring, thinking, acting, and so on. Moreover, since a process-self is not ontologically distinct from other processes, both what it does and what it undergoes are conditioned by other processes. (However, a distinction between doing and undergoing is still affirmed.) Finally, a process-self has false self-awareness: it mistakenly believes it is aware of itself as a substance-self (this feature may distinguish this account of the self from other process accounts; we will see momentarily why it is an important aspect of the Buddha's position).

In short, according to the process conception, a self is a process-self, a nexus of processes such as experiencing, acting and the like that is not ontologically distinct from other processes, that is in constant change in every respect, that is conditioned in what it does as well as what it undergoes, and that falsely believes it is aware of itself as a substance-self. On this account, a self is not a distinct substance with identity through time. Rather, it is an integrated set of ever-changing processes enmeshed in a world of other processes. Process understandings of reality are not predominant in Western philosophical traditions, but they have been accepted by a minority of philosophers from Heraclitus in the sixth century BCE to Whitehead in the twentieth century. Among persons in the West, the substance conception of the person is probably closer to the ‘common sense’ view than the process conception is, but it is a large question as to which conception is philosophically more adequate. As we will see in chapter 8, each account has its share of perplexities.

4 A coherent interpretation of the Buddha

We may now return to the teaching of the Buddha. A problem of interpretation arises because the Buddha speaks a great deal about the absence of any self and yet sometimes seems to refer to or presuppose a self. In my view, the resolution of this problem – the best overall interpretation of his teaching – is that he believed that substance-selves have no reality and that process-selves have no independent reality but do have a form of dependent reality. There are no substance-selves because reality does not consist of substances. When the Buddha speaks of the absence of any self he should be understood as meaning (in part) the absence of any substance-self. On the other hand, when he appears to presuppose selves in the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth, and more generally when he seems to refer to selves, he should be understood as referring to the dependent reality of process-selves. However, process-selves have no independent reality. Hence, in independent reality there are no selves at all. This is the Buddha’s not-self doctrine.

In order to understand this interpretation, we need to consider the distinction between dependent and independent reality. The reality or existence of some things directly depends on mental states such as beliefs, desires, or attitudes (understood here as processes). For example, the value of a monetary currency such as the dollar directly depends on the belief that it has value. If people stopped believing this (as tends to happen in times of severe inflation), then the dollar would lose its value. In one sense, the value of the dollar is obviously a real feature of the world. People make important decisions in their lives based on this assumption. But in another sense it is not real. For example, ordinarily we suppose that the existence of the moon does not directly depend on mental states such as what we think about it. In this sense, the moon has independent reality. The value of the dollar, by contrast, does not have independent reality the way the moon does.

Let us say that something has *dependent reality* if its reality directly depends on mental states, and that something has *independent reality* if its reality does not directly depend on mental states. According to the Buddha's teaching of dependent origination, ultimately everything is interdependent and thus nothing is completely independent. Nonetheless, only some things are directly dependent on mental states. By comparison, other things may be said to be independent, meaning not directly dependent on mental states. Hence, the distinction between dependent and independent reality as defined here is consistent with dependent origination.²

The distinctive idea of the Buddha is that the dependent reality of process-selves is the only reality of selves there is. Substance-selves have no reality. On the other hand, process-selves have no independent reality, but they do have dependent reality: they exist only insofar as there are certain beliefs, desires, feelings, attitudes, and so on. Specifically, a person's process-self exists only insofar as the person falsely believes it is a substance-self and hence is attached to its desires and feelings as properties of its substance-self, as features of the world it regards as 'mine.' The delusion that I am a substance-self maintains the dependent reality of my being a process-self. As long as this delusion and the consequent attachments to desires and feelings continues, the process-self referred to by 'me' will continue to exist (and suffer and be reborn and suffer again, and so on). But once the belief that I am a substance-self ceases along with the attachments to specific desires and feelings as 'mine,' the process-self that was me ceases – and *Nibbāna* is attained. Like the value of a monetary currency, a process-self exists because of what is believed. However, there is an important disanalogy in this comparison. Belief in the value of the dollar need not involve a mistake on our part (we might be correct in thinking it is worth a certain amount), but the belief that one is a substance-self is a mistake for the Buddha. In fact, it is the most fundamental error we make: it is what preserves the existence of process-selves and brings about suffering.

It is important to remember that the not-self doctrine is only part of the Buddha's teaching about the nature of human persons. His full teaching may be summarized as follows.

- (1) We are not substance-selves in any sense.
- (2) We are process-selves in a dependent sense and hence have better or worse, but always unsatisfactory, rebirths in accord with the morality of our actions.
- (3) We are that which has the opportunity to escape the cycle of rebirth and attain *Nibbāna*.

We are dependently process-selves because we mistakenly think we are substance-selves. As a result, we suffer through repeated rebirths. Completely liberated from this delusion, we attain *Nibbāna*, the highest form of happiness,

provisionally during life and fully after death. Our most fundamental reality gives us a genuine hope of this attainment; if not in this lifetime, then in lives to come. Emphasis on (1) and (2) alone may seem a depressing prospect. But this misses (3), and (3) is what really matters from the Buddha's standpoint. Our highest fulfillment is found in literally living selflessly.

The idea of *Nibbāna* raises its own perplexities (these will be discussed in chapters 12 and 13). For now, we need to consider the validity of (1) and (2) as an interpretation of the Buddha's not-self doctrine. An interpretation of this doctrine should strive to make consistent sense of everything the Buddha says or assumes concerning both the absence of self and the presence of self, and it should try to show how the doctrine could be thought to provide a cogent account of our lives. In the chapters to come, we will see to what extent the interpretation offered here achieves these goals. A key issue will be whether or not the ideas of *kamma* and rebirth can be understood solely in terms of the dependent reality of process-selves. Does it make sense to say, with reference to a process-self, that its morally good (bad) actions cause its future happiness (unhappiness) and that it has existed before this life and may exist again after this life? We will discuss this issue in chapter 9. Our immediate concern is to evaluate the rationale for the not-self teaching. What considerations did the Buddha put forward for believing substance-selves have no reality? Can the full not-self doctrine – that substance-selves have no reality and that process-selves have only dependent reality – withstand objections rooted in our ordinary beliefs concerning the self? We will discuss these questions in chapters 7 and 8.

SUGGESTED READING

Some standard expressions of the not-self doctrine are found in the *Mahāpunṇama Sutta* ('The Greater Discourse on the Full-moon Night'), M #109. See also the *Chachakka Sutta* ('The Six Sets of Six'), M #148. Additionally, see the suggestions in chapters 7 and 8.

The best works on the Buddha's not-self teaching are Collins (1982) and Harvey (1995a). Collins (1994) and Matilal (1989) are also valuable. Challenges to the interpretation defended here may be found in Conze (1967) and especially Pérez-Remón (1980). Hamilton (2000) tries to shift the emphasis away from the question of selfhood and toward how the person works in light of dependent origination. The philosophical idea of the self is examined in G. Strawson (1999). For interpretations of Buddhism as a process philosophy, see Hartshorne (1960), Inada (1975 and 1979) and Malalasekera (1964). A classic work in process philosophy is Whitehead (1929); a more introductory work is Whitehead (1925). For an accessible introduction to process philosophy, see Rescher (1996).

NOTES

- 1 This is the interpretation offered in the note to the text (M, number 39 on page 1170). However, it must be admitted that the text itself does not explicitly support this interpretation. On the other hand, since neither 'self exists for me' nor 'no self exists for me' are affirmed, the passage cannot be taken to show that the Buddha accepted some doctrine of the self.
- 2 Some later Buddhist traditions, such as the *Yogācāra* school, did move in an idealist direction, but this was not the teaching of the Buddha in the *Sutta Piṭaka*.

THE RATIONALE FOR THINKING THERE ARE NO SUBSTANCE-SELVES

The Buddha's not-self doctrine, as I understand it, is the view that there are no substance-selves and that process-selves have only dependent reality. The purpose of this chapter is to consider the rationale the Buddha offers for accepting the first part of this doctrine: that persons are not ontologically distinct substances with identity through time. After some preliminary remarks, we will focus on the three main ideas on which the Buddha relies to challenge the belief that we are substance-selves: impermanence, a conception of causality, and suffering. These ideas take us to the heart of the metaphysics the Buddha employs in articulating the practical concerns of the Four Noble Truths.

1 Some preliminaries

Stream-observers typically believe they are selves, and after some philosophical reflection they may think the best articulation of this belief is that they are substance-selves. That we are substance-selves certainly appears to be a common view. An underlying reason for this view may be the thought of many persons that, though there is much about me that may change (my body, experiences, opinions, feelings, and so on) there is something – the essence of *me* – that is always the same throughout these changes and is distinct from everything else in the universe. This essence, it may be supposed, is the substance that is my self. Perhaps some stream-observers do not think they are substance-selves. If so, they may not disagree with the Buddha's not-self teaching (though the Buddha thinks unenlightened persons ordinarily have some false beliefs concerning the self). But those who do think they are substance-selves might first reflect on *why* they think this before considering the Buddha's arguments to the contrary. Is it obvious that we are substance-selves?

One lesson the natural sciences have taught us is that much that may seem obvious about the world is not true. For example, it appears obvious that the desk in front of me is a single, distinct, solid, and unmoving object. But physics tells us this is not really so. In fact, the desk consists of a huge number

of incredibly minute atoms consisting of a nucleus of protons and neutrons (themselves consisting of up and down quarks) surrounded by orbiting electrons. Moreover, contemporary ‘string theory,’ a theory that promises to unify general relativity and quantum mechanics into a ‘theory of everything,’ says that even these particles are not the most basic features of nature. According to physicist Brian Greene: ‘The elementary ingredients of the universe are *not* point particles. Rather, they are tiny, one-dimensional filaments somewhat like infinitely thin rubber bands, vibrating to and fro’ (Greene 2000: 136). I am not sure whether the oscillating loops of ‘string’ that string theory postulates as the ultimate material of the universe are more like substances or processes (perhaps neither is an accurate model). But it is clear that the world as understood by modern physics is utterly different from the world of our ordinary experience. And if a desk is completely different from what we usually take it to be, then perhaps the same is true of what we call our selves.

It might be said that, irrespective of physics, just as it is pragmatically convenient to speak of desks and other substances in ordinary life, so it is useful to refer to substance-selves in ordinary human interactions: in routine circumstances, we assume that we can clearly distinguish one person from another and that a person at ages twenty, thirty, and forty is in some significant sense the same person throughout. Whatever the truth of the ultimate nature of the universe, it might be said, these assumptions are ‘correct’ for the purpose of everyday living. However, it may be that the idea of process-selves is sufficient to account for our ordinary interactions with one another (we will consider this in the next chapter). Moreover, if the idea of substance-selves is accepted as pragmatically useful without supposing it to correspond to anything real (according to the correct scientific account), then the Buddha has an important response: from the perspective of overcoming suffering, it would be even more useful to give up the idea of substance-selves.

Those who believe they are substance-selves usually take this fact to be central to the value they ascribe to themselves and other human beings: it is because we are substance-selves, people often think, that we are thought worthy of the special love, concern, and respect that is appropriate for human beings in contrast to what may be owed to animals, plants, and inanimate objects. Many people probably agree with Kant when he says: ‘The fact that man is aware of an ego-concept raises him infinitely above all other creatures living on earth’ (Kant 1798: 9). This suggests that our belief that we are substance-selves is intimately tied to our moral and religious values. But is this belief forced upon us by an unyielding reality that we ignore at our peril (as we might say about the force of gravity)? Or is it an interpretation of reality about which reasonable persons in different times and places have disagreed? According to Geertz, ‘Some conception of what a human individual is, as opposed to a rock, an animal, a rainstorm, or a god, is, so far as I can see, universal.’ But he adds that ‘the actual conceptions involved vary from one group to the next, and often quite sharply’ (Geertz 1983: 59).

If Geertz is right, the idea that we are substance-selves may not be part of the universal 'common sense' of human beings. It may be that it is a controversial interpretation of human beings that requires some justification.

None of these considerations shows that we are not substance-selves, much less that the Buddha's not-self teaching is correct. But they do suggest that it may not be as obvious as we thought that we are substance-selves. With this awareness in mind, we may now turn to the rationale presented by the Buddha for supposing we are not. Three preliminary observations should be made about this rationale. First, the Buddha puts forward numerous pertinent considerations, but they all involve a single group of ideas: the rationale consists of a set of interconnected lines of reasoning. Second, though we can articulate an intellectual account of this rationale, for the Buddha full comprehension of it requires meditation. Third, the rationale is closely linked to the practical concern to overcome suffering. We will distinguish two metaphysical arguments based on impermanence and dependent origination respectively. But the Buddha never separates these from the practical context stressed in the last argument focusing on suffering.

2 Impermanence: the five aggregates

The Buddha regularly speaks of 'the perception of non-self in all things without exception' (N 177). Crucial to this claim is the contention that all things we experience in the world are impermanent (*anicca*). The connection between impermanence and the absence of substance-selves is as follows. If everything is impermanent, is in a constant process of change, then there are no substances and hence no substance-selves. On a substance account, there is a certain kind of stability in the world. It consists of substances that have identity through time: though they may change in some respects, in other respects they persist unchanged (so long as they exist). According to the Buddha, the world is not stable in this way. There are no things with identity. Everything is in a constant process of change in every respect.

It may be objected that there are features of the world that are permanent. For example, perhaps the scientific laws that govern the physical world, such as the law of gravity, are permanent. The Buddha does not deny that there are unchanging laws that govern changes in the world. In fact, the doctrine of *kamma* affirms such a law. But a law is not a substance; it is a regularity in the processes of change in the world. The stability of laws is not the stability of things. Hence, the fact that there are unchanging laws does not mean there are substances with identity.

It might also be said that God is unchanging. The Buddha denies that there is a god who is an unchanging and eternal substance. This is a fundamental difference between the Buddha's teaching and orthodox forms of monotheism. On the other hand, the Buddha's claim is that nothing in the world of ordinary experience is unchanging. *Nibbāna* is portrayed as beyond

the impermanence of this world. Though *Nibbāna* is not a substance, it is outside the realm of change. It may be suggested that the descriptions of God by theists and those of *Nibbāna* by Buddhists are efforts to understand the same transcendent reality (see chapter 13, section 1). Perhaps this is so. But orthodox accounts of God and *Nibbāna* are *prima facie* incompatible because God is ordinarily taken to be a self and *Nibbāna* is not.

In any case, what is directly relevant here is whether there are some permanent features of the world that could plausibly be considered our selves. Usually the argument from impermanence to the absence of selves is made by reference to the five aggregates (material form, feelings, perceptions, formations, and consciousness). The assumption is that anything that could be reasonably thought to be a self would have to be found in connection with one or more of these aggregates. Since everything associated with the aggregates is impermanent, no such self may be found. Here is a representative dialogue:

‘*Bhikkhus*, what do you think? Is material form permanent or impermanent?’

‘Impermanent, venerable sir.’

‘Is what is impermanent suffering or happiness?’

‘Suffering, venerable sir.’

‘Is what is impermanent, suffering, and subject to change, fit to be regarded thus: “This is mine, this I am, this is my self”?’

‘No venerable sir.’

The same exchange occurs concerning the other four aggregates. The Buddha continues:

Therefore, *bhikkhus*, any kind of material form whatever, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near, all material form should be seen as it actually is with proper wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’

(M 232)¹

As before, the same point is made regarding the other aggregates. The Buddha goes on to say that realization of this leads to disenchantment with the aggregates, and this in turn leads to enlightenment.

There is much involved in this passage. Its three principal elements – impermanence, suffering, and not-self – are described by the Buddha as the three conditions of existence in the world of everyday experience (see N 77). We will return to the role of suffering in this argument (see section 4 and chapter 11). What is important now is that the Buddha thinks enlightenment involves the recognition of impermanence and hence of not-self with respect to each of the aggregates.

In order to evaluate this argument, we first need to consider what the Buddha means by the aggregates (*khandhas*). These are intended to be an exhaustive account of everything we typically take to be involved in a person and hence to be candidates for what could be considered a self. Though the five aggregates are distinguished, it is clear that they interact with one another. Material form (*rūpa*) concerns our physical nature. It refers to our entire body and in particular those aspects of it that make possible the five senses. The remaining aggregates are all mental in nature. Feelings (*vedanā*) have to do with our sensations, whether originating from the mind or the body, and their quality as pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent. Perceptions (*saññā*) go beyond sensations and involve judgments about the world (for example, that there is a red book in front of me). Formations (*sankhāra*) refer to anything that moves us to act – desires, wishes, volitions, and so on. They are classified as being ethically good, bad, or neutral (and thus are related to *kamma*). Finally, consciousness (*viññāṇa*) concerns the general fact that we are aware, either of the world, or of ‘ourselves’ as having the other aggregates.

In part, the doctrine of the aggregates is an attempt to classify the various undergoings and doings of the self discussed in the last chapter. As such, it refers to familiar features of persons. For our present purpose, what matters is not so much whether this doctrine is exactly right, but whether it leaves out anything we might associate with a person that is permanent and hence could be a substance-self. If there were such an unchanging aspect, then there would be a flaw in the Buddha’s argument. According to the Buddha, every aspect of what we ordinarily regard as a person is encompassed by one or more of the five aggregates, and each of these aggregates is impermanent. Whether we consider the body or aspects of the mind such as feelings, perceptions, volitions and the like, all we ever find is something that changes: this sensation, that desire, this judgment, that feeling, and so on. Each of these particular elements changes constantly and there is nothing to be found that does not change.

It has often been observed that this argument resembles Hume’s well-known argument for the conclusion that what we call the self is ‘nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions.’ According to Hume:

When I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception.

(Hume 1967: 252)²

Though there is a striking similarity here, there are also important differences: the most important is that Hume’s argument is a corollary of an epistemological theory, with no practical implications anticipated, whereas the Buddha’s

argument is one element in a large program aimed at overcoming suffering and attaining *Nibbāna*. More recently, Parfit has defended a reductionist view of the person he claims is quite similar to the Buddha's (see Parfit 1984: 273). Moreover, Parfit believes his view of the self has significant ethical implications, a feature of his position that, in comparison with Hume, brings him closer to the Buddha. Nonetheless, it can hardly be said that Parfit embraces the Buddha's overall outlook.

To return to the Buddha, he maintains that, if we carefully observe what we call 'ourselves,' we will realize that all we ever actually observe are particular impermanent aggregates such as a red sensation. We do not observe an unchanging 'I,' a substance-self, that has this sensation. Here it may be objected, in the spirit of Descartes's famous line, 'I am thinking, therefore I exist' (Descartes 1985: 127), that, though we do not observe a substance-self, *we necessarily presuppose it* – that is, we cannot make sense of a red sensation unless we assume there is an 'I' having this sensation. Hence, we may infer that there is a substance-self even if we cannot directly observe it.

How might the Buddha respond? A later text explicitly denies the inference: 'There is suffering, but none who suffers; doing exists although there is no doer' (Buddhaghosa 1999: 521). On the face of it, this seems perverse. However, that sensations imply an 'I' who has the sensations is a ground for substance-selves only if this 'I' must be a substance-self. If this were true, then the 'I' that has a red sensation now is the same 'I' that had a blue sensation ten minutes or ten years ago (on account of identity), and this is a less obvious point. The Buddha could allow that in our ordinary experience sensations are thought to imply an 'I,' but insist that in fact there is nothing more to this 'I' than a process-self having only dependent reality. In this way, the Cartesian argument could be partly accepted. But it would also be partly rejected since in independent reality there are no substance-selves: in this respect, 'there is suffering, but none who suffers.'

For this response to be plausible, the Buddha needs to explain why we often suppose there is identity. For example, we usually think it makes sense to say that smoking in my youth caused me to have cancer in later life or that the man who is now president of the USA went to Yale several decades ago. Moreover, the doctrine of *kamma* presupposes that these may be reasonable things to say: it claims that my present state of happiness is the fruit of the moral quality of my past actions. If I am nothing more than an ever-changing process-self, there is no common element between me now and me earlier. So what sense is there in these statements? We will address this question in chapters 8 and 9. To anticipate, the answer is that there is no identity through time, but there is continuity. Just as a hundred-foot rope may consist only of overlapping strands none of which is longer than ten feet, so a process-self may consist of overlapping and ever-changing aggregates. In each case, there is no common element at the beginning and the end. But there is enough continuity to make identity statements intelligible. In the case of the rope, it makes

sense to say that you are pulling on one end and I am pulling on the other, even though there is no strand that we are both grasping. Something similar may be said about the aforementioned statements about persons. In another later text, *The Questions of King Milinda*, it is said that a child who becomes an adult is ‘neither the same nor another’ (Mendis 1993: 39). There is neither identity nor complete discontinuity.

Another objection to the Buddha is as follows. What is essential to selves is not particular sensations per se, but the capacity to have them (and similarly for other aggregates); though we do not directly observe this capacity, its existence is a reasonable inference from what we do observe; and, while particular sensations change frequently, the capacity to have them is an enduring property that presupposes a substance-self.

The Buddha might respond by denying the inference to capacities. However, this is a perilous move. It is hard to deny that we have a capacity to perceive that cannot be reduced to a set of sensations. A more plausible approach would be to explain the capacity in terms of the nexus of processes that constitutes the process-self. It is obvious that some capacities, such as the abilities to reason or remember, develop and decline over time. A process approach would understand all human capacities not as unchanging properties of substance-selves, but as ever-changing yet continuous features of process-selves.

There is a different kind of response to these objections. The observation that reveals the aggregates to be impermanent and hence to involve no substance-self is not the everyday observation of introspective experience (as in Hume’s argument), but the highly disciplined observation of insight meditation. In his advice to Rāhula, the Buddha says, ‘Develop meditation on the perception of impermanence; for when you [do so] the conceit “I am” will be abandoned’ (M 531). Ordinary observation is likely to be adversely influenced by our belief that we are substance-selves and the array of attachments to which this belief gives rise. Thus, we may be misled into thinking sensations necessarily imply a substance-self. The Buddha might regard the objections just considered as primary examples of the way the belief that we are substance-selves distorts our interpretation of the world. The aim of meditation is to purify the mind of these distorting elements so that we will see things as they really are. The key contention of the Buddha is that the observation of meditation reveals each of the aggregates to be impermanent and hence empty of self:

Bhikkhus, suppose that this river Ganges was carrying along a great lump of foam. A man with good sight would inspect it, ponder it, and carefully investigate it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a lump of foam? So too, *bhikkhus*, whatever kind of form there is, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior,

far or near: a *bhikkhu* inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to him to be void, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in form?

(C I 951)

The same point is made with respect to the other aggregates: with the proper inspection and investigation of meditation, no substance-self is found in connection with any of the aggregates. The force of this argument – and others in this chapter – obviously depends on the capacity of insight meditation to see things as they really are (see chapter 16). At this stage, we may regard this argument as presenting us with a challenge: is there anything about a person that is truly unchanging and could plausibly be regarded as having the identity required of a substance-self? If there is, this constitutes a significant objection to the Buddha's teaching. If not, in this respect the Buddha appears correct.

3 Causality: dependent origination

Though the Buddha thinks everything is impermanent, he does not think change is chaotic or random: there are unchanging causal laws that govern all change. Hence, there is a kind of stability in the world. It is the stability not of substances, but of law-governed processes. On this account, the basic ontological category is not a substance but a process. Processes are always in change in every respect, but these changes are governed by causal laws according to which the state of each process is dependent on, or conditioned by, other processes. The Buddha appears to think the processes that make up the world are often interdependent: they condition one another.

The basic expression of causality is the doctrine of dependent origination (*paṭicca samuppāda*). Sāriputta says understanding this doctrine is equivalent to understanding the Buddha's teaching as a whole. In brief and abstract form, it says: 'When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be; with the cessation of this, that ceases' (M 655; cf. 927). A process is always in a state of becoming: from not existing it arises into existence, then ceases back into non-existence. Dependent origination says that, for whatever state a process is in, that state is conditioned by other processes. Hence, the state of every process has a causal explanation.

Though dependent origination has general application to all processes in the world, in this context the Buddha is interested in applying it to persons. Once again, the understanding of persons as process-selves comes to the fore: what we call the self is not a substance-self, but a nexus of interconnected processes referred to by the five aggregates. Moreover, in accord with dependent origination, the state of each process-self – or of each aspect of it – is conditioned by other processes (whether these originate in what we

customarily distinguish as the person, other persons, or nature). For example, 'each feeling arises in dependence upon its corresponding condition, and with the cessation of its corresponding condition, the feeling ceases' (M 1122).

Since process-selves are part of the ever-changing, interdependent network of processes in the world, they are not ontologically distinct in the sense of being distinct substances. Hence, there are no substance-selves both because nothing is permanent and because nothing is truly distinct. On the substance account, substances are separate from one another: here is one substance, here is another, here is a third and so on – as coins or chessmen appear to be. That substances are fundamentally distinct or separate entities is the primary ontological fact; the causal relationships among these substances is secondary. On a process account, by contrast, causal relationships are the primary ontological fact, and we cannot understand a particular process without understanding its place in the overall causal network of the world (think of drops of food colors in a bowl of water). Hence, there are no substances – and, in particular, no substances-selves – that are distinct. There are only interdependent process-selves.

This is not to say that process-selves are properties of other substances and thus are dependent on them in the way that, according to a substance account, properties are dependent upon their substances. For example, this might seem natural when speaking of my blue jacket: its property of blueness depends on the substance that is my jacket; if there were no jacket, then that particular blueness would no longer exist. On the process view, since there are no substances, the question as to whether something is a property of a substance does not arise. Process-selves lack ontological distinctness not because they are properties of substances, but because they are nothing more than causally interrelated processes.

It might be objected that we ordinarily have no trouble distinguishing one person from another, and also that it is typically clear that this sensation is mine and that one is yours. What makes me one process-self and you another, and this my sensation and that yours, if we are each a nexus of processes that is part of the network of processes in the world?

This is perhaps the most difficult question the Buddha's account must answer, and we will return to it in the next chapter. By way of a preliminary, it is clear that the particular aggregates that constitute each of us must be unified in some fashion so that we can observe that this is me and that is you, and that this is my sensation and that is yours. The unifying factor cannot be a substance. It must be a feature of the processes themselves. An analogy may help us understand this. We distinguish two neighboring sandbars by supposing that each is a unified nexus of processes that is part of the overall network of processes. It is not necessary to suppose they are distinct substances. Perhaps a person is just a more complex integration of processes. As already noted, for the Buddha the source of the unification of process-selves is the *belief* of each unenlightened person, manifested in multiple

attachments, that I am a substance-self (remember that a belief is understood as a process). Like a magnet, an ‘I conceit’ (*asmi māna*) brings a set of particular aggregates together as ‘mine,’ and likewise for you. Hence, our respective process-selves may each say, ‘This is my sensation,’ despite the fact that we are both part of the network of interdependent processes in the world. We are not distinct in the sense of being distinct substances, but we are not identical either.

Dependent origination in persons is often elaborated via a twelvefold formula of conditioning links. In a representative passage, Ānanda asks how a *bhikkhu* can ‘be called skilled in dependent origination.’ The Buddha responds:

With ignorance [*avijjā*] as condition [*paccaya*], formations [*sankhāra*] (comes to be); with formations as condition, consciousness [*viññāṇa*]; with consciousness as condition, mentality-materiality [*nāmarūpa*]; with mentality-materiality as condition, the sixfold base [*saḷāyatana*] (the senses and the mind); with the sixfold-base as condition, contact [*phassa*]; with contact as condition, feeling [*vedanā*]; with feeling as condition, craving [*taṇhā*]; with craving as condition, clinging [*upādāna*]; with clinging as condition, being [*bhava*]; with being as condition, birth [*jāti*]; with birth as condition, aging and death [*jarāmaraṇa*], sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.
(M 927; cf. 353–4)

Though the twelvefold formula is usually emphasized, other formulae with greater or fewer elements are sometimes given. The general idea is clear enough: ignorance conditions formations, these condition consciousness, and so on until we reach suffering. The origin of suffering is ignorance mediated by factors such as craving and clinging.

Sometimes the elements of the formula are presented in terms of cessations in order to show us how to end suffering. The passage just quoted continues (leaving out the middle steps): ‘But with the remainderless fading away and cessation of ignorance comes cessation of formations . . . with the cessation of birth, aging and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering’ (M 927–8). These two versions of the twelvefold formula, in terms of conditions and cessations, are obviously elaborations of the account of the origin and cessation of suffering in the second and third of the Four Noble Truths. Regarding such formulae, the Buddha says: ‘It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine that this generation has . . . [been] unable to pass beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin and the round of birth-and-death’ (L 223).

The twelvefold formula has been understood in different ways (see chapter 11, section 3). If we take it at face value, as a pair of linear sequences, we need

an interpretation of the causal conditioning between the parts. To simplify discussion, let us reduce it to three key elements: ignorance, craving, and suffering. It is obvious that these elements should be understood as processes rather than substances. Now, on the one hand, it seems that each element is a necessary condition of the element that follows. Thus, ignorance is a necessary condition of craving (if there is craving, then there is ignorance), and craving is a necessary condition of suffering (if there is suffering, then there is craving). Because this is so, the cessation of suffering can be achieved through the cessation of ignorance, craving, and the like – as stated in the cessation version. On the other hand, it does not seem that every element could be a sufficient condition of the element that follows (for example, that ignorance makes craving inevitable). If every element were a sufficient condition, then we could not bring about the cessation of suffering. Since unenlightened persons always find themselves already in ignorance, with craving, and so on, suffering would be inevitable if these were all sufficient conditions. Moreover, a fully enlightened person, an *arahant* who is still alive, has some of these elements (for example, mentality-materiality, a feature of any living person), but this would be impossible if each element was sufficient for the subsequent one. Hence, at least some of the elements must not be sufficient conditions of subsequent ones. Those that are not sufficient conditions still create a very strong propensity for the next element, such that the element ordinarily occurs, but this propensity can be overcome through the efforts involved in the Eightfold Path. That we can overcome the propensities that result in suffering is an important part of the Buddha's fundamental teaching

In this connection, we might wonder where the Buddha stands in the debate concerning free will and determinism. Insofar as this debate presupposes substance-selves whose actions may be free or determined, he obviously has no position. Even with respect to process-selves, it cannot be said that the Buddha recognizes and seeks to resolve a problem of free will and determinism. Nonetheless, in the Buddha's own terms there is an issue here, and up to a point it is possible to discern his position concerning it. Dependent origination, the twelvefold sequence of causal conditioning, and the doctrine of *kamma* all imply a conception of persons as enmeshed in causal relations. This might be thought to involve a form of causal determinism that precludes 'free choices' – that is, choices that are not strictly determined by antecedent states of affairs. However, the Buddha rejects this suggestion. As just seen, at least in some respects, causal conditioning brings about strong propensities where it remains up to us to decide how to act with respect to these propensities. The *Sutta Piṭaka* contains a tremendous amount of exhortation that appears to presuppose that it is not already determined whether or not we will attain *Nibbāna* (and more generally will have greater or lesser future happiness) and that present and future choices in some sense within our power are instrumental to achieving this. For example, my current character traits may be more or less conducive to attaining *Nibbāna* and these are the result of my

past choices. But my character traits do not strictly determine my present and future choices. Whatever my character, I am always free to choose to act in ways that will improve or worsen my future well-being. Similar points may be made about the ways in which other persons or the world as a whole may have conditioned my life (see the critique of the fatalism of the Ājīvikas at 94–5 and M 513– L 14).

The heart of the Buddha's position is that causal conditioning in the sense of creating powerful inclinations is consistent with choices and actions contrary to those inclinations. The Buddha does not articulate a defense of this position. He appears to rely on an assumption many of us make to the effect that, with respect to much human behavior, conditioning may be real without fully determining our actions or precluding free choices. For example, we often suppose that a person whose short temper is conditioned by his or her upbringing or genetic endowment is nonetheless able to learn to control that temper. We acknowledge that the conditioning factors are quite real. But ordinarily we do not think they are so overpowering that the person cannot learn to diminish the propensity to anger. With respect to a broad range of behavior, we usually suppose that human beings have a capacity to freely direct their lives despite the fact that they are conditioned in these familiar ways. In similar fashion, the Buddha thinks our ability to heed his exhortations to follow the Eightfold Path is compatible with the doctrine of dependent origination. In both cases, philosophical perplexities may be on the horizon. But it is not evident that they are more problematic for the Buddha than they are for us.

It might be objected that, in comparison with a process account, a substance account can make better sense of free choices because it regards substance-selves as ontologically distinct. However, in a substance account, distinctness *per se* does not guarantee freedom. If it did, chairs would be free. Moreover, though substances are distinct, they remain part of the causal structure of the universe. If we think substance-selves can make free choices, we have to show that this capacity is compatible with their place in the causal structure. Perhaps this can be established, but more needs to be said than that substances are distinct. Of course, on the other side, the Buddha's process account needs to reconcile causal conditioning and freedom without recourse to distinctness in this sense.

4 Suffering: the practical context

The contention that all things are impermanent and causally conditioned is central to the rationale for supposing there are no substance-selves. But the Buddha is not interested in these metaphysical considerations for their own sake, and he presents them only in the context of the practical concern to overcome suffering. We now need to return to that context. In the dialogue quoted on page 79, the Buddha argues as follows. Each aggregate is impermanent.

What is impermanent is suffering. Therefore, each aggregate is ‘not fit to be regarded thus: “This is mine, I am this, this is my self.”’ This argument may strike us as curious. Why suppose impermanence involves suffering? And why think that something that suffers cannot be a self?

With respect to the second question, it may seem obvious to Western stream-observers that a self can suffer. However, this aspect of the Buddha’s argument is addressed to those in his culture who held that our true self is identical with the ultimate ground of reality (*brahman*). As such, the self was thought to be both permanent and beyond suffering. According to this view, expressed in the *Upaniṣads*, what appears to be our self may suffer, but our true self cannot suffer. By showing that each of the aggregates is impermanent, and hence suffers, the Buddha thinks he establishes that this alleged true self cannot be found in connection with any of the aggregates. Since Western stream observers are not likely to think their true self is beyond suffering, this feature of the Buddha’s argument need not concern them. But the purported connection between impermanence and suffering is another matter. It plays a central role in the contentions concerning the origin and cessation of suffering in the Four Noble Truths.

Apropos these contentions, the Buddha makes two important claims about the connection between suffering and the belief that one is a substance-self. First, if persons accept this belief, then they have a strong propensity to suffer. Second, if persons truly give up believing they are substance-selves, then suffering will be overcome and *Nibbāna* achieved: ‘One who perceives non-self achieves the elimination of the conceit “I am” and attains *Nibbāna* in this very life’ (N 229).

We will explore these claims in Part 3. For now, recall that the Buddha thinks the belief that one is a substance-self distinct from others is the source of an orientation to the world in terms of what is ‘mine’ and what is ‘not mine,’ and that this orientation gives rise to anger, hatred, greed, desire for power and fame, and so on. He thinks these states naturally issue in forms of suffering. Again, the Buddha supposes that belief that one is a substance-self with identity through time is the origin of an unhealthy preoccupation with regrets about the past and worries about the future. These anxieties are forms of suffering. Throughout, the Buddha maintains, the belief that one is a substance-self gives rise to attachment to one’s desires as ‘mine,’ and in an impermanent and conditioned world, such attachment will only result in frustration. We see in these claims aspects of the connection between impermanence and suffering.

On the other hand, if a person fully gives up the belief that he or she is a substance-self, the person will no longer be a self in any sense. This will eliminate the separation from others that is the source of negative states such as anger, and this in turn will liberate the person’s capacity for universal compassion. Moreover, without the belief in being a self with identity, the person will no longer be obsessed with his or her own past and future. This will free the

person to focus on, and find goodness in, each present moment. Hence, the capacity for joy will be released. Liberated in these ways from attachment to desires as ‘mine,’ the person will achieve the state of ultimate tranquility the Buddha calls *Nibbāna*. These purported psychological truths stand at the heart of the Buddha’s practical teaching.

The Buddha’s overall rationale for denying that there are substance-selves may be summarized as follows. Since in the world of ordinary experience everything is impermanent and causally conditioned, there is no reason to think – and in fact every reason to deny – that there are substances-selves understood as distinct substances with identity. From a theoretical standpoint, the belief in substances-selves is thereby undermined. When we observe persons closely, all we find are process-selves. Thus, any good reason to think there are substance-selves would have to come from the practical standpoint, from our concern to achieve happiness via our moral and religious values. But when we turn to this concern, we find that this reason for believing there are substance-selves is also undermined. Belief that one is a substance-self promotes suffering, and abandoning this belief brings about *Nibbāna*, the ultimate form of happiness. Therefore, whether we consider the matter from a theoretical or a practical perspective, we have compelling reasons to give up the belief that we are substance-selves.

SUGGESTED READING

Important discussions of the not-self teaching are found in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* (‘The Simile of the Snake’), M #22. On the aggregates, see the *Khandhasaṃyutta* (‘Connected Discourses on the Aggregates’), C I 853–983.

The five aggregates are discussed in Gethin (1986) and Hamilton (1996). Free will in Buddhism is examined in Gómez (1975), Mitchell (1975), and Siderits (1987). Hume’s critique of the self can be found in Hume (1967: 251–63). For interpretations of Hume and the Buddha, see Bastow (1986), Conze (1963b), Giles (1993 and 1997: chapter 5), B. Gupta (1978), Jacobson (1969), Lesser (1979), Mathur (1978), and Richards (1978). Parfit’s major work is 1984; briefer presentations of his conception of the person can be found in 1987 and 1995. Parfit and the Buddha are compared in Bastow (1986), Basu (1997), Collins (1985 and 1997), and Stone (1988). For primary and secondary sources on causality, see chapter 11.

NOTES

- 1 A similar passage can be found in what is purported to be the second *sutta* of the Buddha. See C I 902–3.

- 2 In supposing that there is no direct perception of the self as something with identity through time, Kant agrees with Hume (for example, see Kant 1997: A381–2, B413, and B420). But it is mainly Hume who has attracted comparisons with the Buddha.

SOME PHILOSOPHICAL ISSUES: ARE WE SUBSTANCE-SELVES OR PROCESS-SELVES?

According to the Buddha, there are no substance-selves, but there are process-selves – at least as long as there are beliefs about being substance-selves and related attachments to desires as ‘mine.’ That is, though none of us is a substance-self, all of us – short of attaining *Nibbāna* – are process-selves. Despite the arguments of the last chapter, this teaching is likely to meet with considerable resistance among Western stream-observers. For many such persons, it may seem an obvious and overwhelming fact of everyday experience that we are substance-selves. In the face of this experience, the Buddha’s teaching can appear perverse.

The Buddha acknowledges that we experience one another as substance-selves. But he thinks this experience is a delusion. Moreover, he has an explanation of this delusion: our everyday experience is so permeated by our attachments that we perceive everything in terms of what is ‘mine’ and ‘not mine,’ and hence we do not see the world as it really is. Only meditation can fully overcome the distortions caused by our attachments and reveal the true nature of things. The difficulty for stream-observers is that they do not have the direct experience of meditation. They only have the ordinary experience the Buddha regards as misleading. However, the Buddha does have something important to say about our everyday experience of one another as selves. His implicit claim is that we can make sense of this experience by supposing we are process-selves rather than substance-selves. Meditation is required to completely comprehend this claim, but preliminary understanding is possible for those who have not yet undertaken the Eightfold Path. Hence, stream observers are encouraged to consider whether the substance view or the process view of the self is more plausible in light of their ordinary experience.

Recent philosophical debates about personal identity have much to say about this topic. They suggest that it is not obvious that the idea of substance-selves makes coherent sense of our ordinary experience. But they also raise fundamental problems for the idea of process-selves. Each view has its own perplexities. Let us first consider some difficulties for the substance view.

1 Problems for the substance view

A substance-self is an ontologically distinct entity with some essential properties that constitute its identity. These properties are necessarily present as long as the self exists. They are usually thought to involve regularly exercised capacities such as the capacity to experience, think, remember, desire, act, and so on. Are human beings selves in this sense? Is there something that constitutes our identity that is always with us? Let us consider some different approaches to these questions.

The content approach

We often suppose that a person's identity is constituted by some qualitative features that are distinctive of the person. For example, I am the specific person I am in virtue of the particular beliefs, memories, desires, hopes, and so on that I have, and likewise for you. It is by reference to such features that we are likely to determine whether someone physically unrecognizable who claims to be a long-lost childhood friend really is 'the same person.' This suggests that we think of a person's identity as constituted by the specific psychological qualities – the content – that are characteristic of his or her self. The relevant content might be specified in different ways, and it might be understood in mental terms, as features of the mind, or in physical terms, perhaps as features of the brain (or some combination of the two). However it is understood, the content approach has perplexing consequences.

It seems logically possible that a Self Recorder could transfer the content that makes up a self from one place to another (just as a VCR can transfer a movie from one tape to another). That is, all the particular thoughts, memories, desires, and so on that constitute myself on the content approach could be copied from my mind or brain to another one. Now, suppose the content of myself was transferred to another 'blank mind' and then my original mind was destroyed. Does myself still exist? According to the content approach it does, and we might be tempted to agree. After all, the second mind has *exactly* the thoughts, memories, desires, and so on that I had. But now suppose this was done twice. That is, the content of myself was transferred to one blank mind, then to another, and then the original was destroyed. Now there are two minds whose qualitative content is identical to what mine was. Does myself still exist? If so, which mind is it? The content approach suggests that myself is both new minds. But this is hard to accept. Myself would then consist of two distinct entities, and a substance-self is thought to be a single distinct entity. Yet it seems arbitrary to say that myself is one of the two new minds, but not both, since there is as much reason to say myself is one as the other. On the other hand, it does not seem correct to say that myself no longer exists, since each mind has the exact same qualitative content as myself before the procedure (hence, the temptation to agree that myself still exists in the first

scenario). Therefore, none of the possible answers to the question of whether myself still exists appear altogether convincing.

The bare particular approach

At this point, we might begin to doubt that the identity of the self should be understood in terms of qualitative content. The content approach suggests that reproducing a self is similar to reproducing a video in the following sense. If I make an exact copy of *Gone with the Wind*, and my original video is destroyed, I still have *Gone with the Wind*. In this respect, though the original and the copy were numerically distinct, nothing important has been lost. Likewise, according to the content approach, if an exact copy of a self is made, and the original is destroyed, the self still exists. Once again, though the original and the copy were numerically distinct, nothing important has been lost.

Many people think this comparison shows that the content approach is deeply mistaken. On their view, the copy of myself would not be myself. Something important would be lost. We might put this by saying that the copy would lack something essential to myself – namely, it would not be *me*. Hence, another self could have precisely the same qualitative content as I have (the same thoughts, memories, desires, and so on), but it still would not be me. It would be another self whose content is just like mine. In this case, numerical difference makes all the difference. The idea that the self cannot be reproduced in this way may seem to capture something correct and important about persons: each individual is valuable for being the distinct person he or she is, in contrast to any other actual or possible person in the world, no matter how similar.

But what does it mean to ‘be me’ here? And why is it important? If myself is not my psychological content, then it seems it must be something else that has or underlies this content, something that is itself without content and hence uncopyable. A consequence of this view – the bare particular approach (so-called because it says the self is a particular thing bare of content) – is that a person’s self is radically divorced from the qualitative content emphasized in the first approach. Thus, I would still be myself even if I were to have entirely different content, and likewise (as was just suggested) all my content could be transferred to another mind without that mind becoming me. The difficulty is that we typically identify and value people for being their particular selves precisely because of their specific features. But on the bare particular approach, however much we value these features, we value particular selves for something else that is independent of these features. For example, suppose that all of a man’s psychological attributes changed for the worse and that, at the moment before, all the wonderful attributes he used to have were transferred to another mind (associated with a body just like his, we may imagine). According to the bare particular approach, if his wife loved the now wretched man for his self, then in an important respect she would still have as much

reason to love him as before, no matter how terrible he had become, and she would not have any reason to love the other self who now has all the outstanding attributes her husband used to have (for example, *he* never forgets 'their' anniversary).

Intuitions differ about what to say regarding this scenario. The French religious thinker Blaise Pascal writes: 'Would we love the substance of a person's soul, in the abstract, whatever qualities might be in it? That is not possible, and it would be wrong. Therefore we never love anyone, but only qualities' (Pascal 1966: section 688). By contrast, McTaggart says: 'Love is for the person, and not for his qualities, nor is it for him in respect of his qualities. It is for him' (McTaggart 1927: 154). If we agree with Pascal, then it would seem that the bare particular approach is mistaken – for it implies that we value a self independent of his or her qualities. But it might seem that this misses something captured by McTaggart – for it is common to think that I am I and you are you, and that however similar we may be, this distinction remains crucially important. The problem with McTaggart's view, and the bare particular view, is that it does not capture the very large extent to which we think the qualities of a person do matter both to whom that person specifically is and to that person's particular value.

The fusion approach

If neither the content approach nor the bare particular approach is right, taken by itself, then perhaps the correct account would combine the two. On this view, both qualitative content and being one specific individual are essential to being a self. Myself is a particular – *me* – that has some psychological content as necessary properties. The properties, we might say, are fused into the particular that is me. As a result, myself would not continue to exist if I were destroyed and my necessary psychological content were copied elsewhere (if this were possible, that would create another self). Moreover, it would not make sense to suppose this content could be replaced with completely different content (since my properties are fused into me, such replacement is not possible). It seems that a plausible substance view of the self will need to say something like this.

But what psychological content is essential to me, is a necessary part of my identity? It would have to be something that is necessarily present as long as myself exists, presumably at least from the day I was born until the day I die. Nothing that I now think, intend, hope for, and so on was a feature of me when I was born. So nothing of this sort could be part of my identity. This is the Buddhist objection: these things constantly change. However, as we saw in the last chapter, a more plausible approach is to suppose that my identity consists of a set of capacities: not specific thoughts, but the capacity to think; not particular intentions, but the capacity to intend, and so on (where these capacities are common to well-formed human beings, but may take somewhat

varied forms in different individuals). On this view, though my thoughts and intentions may change, my capacities to think and intend persist throughout my life: they are necessary features of myself.

The difficulty is that the Buddhist objection can also be applied to this view. At birth, none of us had the capacities to think and intend, and as we become old and approach death we typically lose such capacities (sometimes radically, as in the case of those who have Alzheimer's disease). In general, all our capacities undergo constant developments of maturation and decline. Therefore, we possess no capacities that are the same throughout our lives and hence could be an essential part of our identity. The grid of identity, of sameness through time, cannot be made to fit an ever-changing world precisely any more than a circle can be made to circumscribe a square exactly.

To respond to this objection, a proponent of the substance view needs to identify something that is the same throughout these changes. One approach would be to say that we are selves only during a part of our lives – roughly speaking, between the time our capacities become fully mature and the time they begin to decline. But it is not obvious that our capacities are unchanging even through the middle portion of our lives. Moreover, it seems arbitrary to define selfhood in this way, and we do not ordinarily accept this limitation. For example, we typically think children have selves that develop, not that they develop from selfless beings into served ones. Again, we resist the idea that a person in the advanced stages of Alzheimer's disease has no self at all.

These considerations suggest that a more plausible approach would be to say that there is a sense in which our capacities are present in the same form throughout our lives from birth to death. Thus, we might say that as an infant a self has a latent capacity to think, as an adult it has an actual capacity to think, and as a victim of Alzheimer's disease it has a damaged capacity to think – but throughout it has the very same underlying capacity (perhaps corresponding to a portion of the person's genetic code).

The Buddhist is committed to objecting that, if we observe carefully (through meditation), we will realize that even what purports to be this 'same underlying capacity' changes through time and hence cannot be part of the identity of a substance-self. For example, perhaps the apparent stability at the level represented by our genetic code conceals a deeper level of impermanence in the way that the apparent stability of a desk conceals change at the quantum level. In any case, we have followed this dialectic far enough to grasp the nature of the difficulty the Buddhist sees. We begin with some confidence that we know what it means to be a substance-self. As we attempt to elucidate this notion by locating something that has identity and distinctness, we formulate conceptions of the self that turn out to be distorted versions of what we ordinarily take a self to be. On the current view, something could be a self but have neither thoughts nor an actual capacity to think. In the search for identity, we have come a long way from Descartes's claim to be 'a thing that thinks.' The Buddha believes this search is futile: we will never find

identity and distinctness in a world of impermanence and interdependence. Worse, he believes, the need to find something that is the substance-self betrays an attachment to ‘what is mine’ that prevents us from seeing the world as it really is and results in suffering in our lives.

2 Problems for the process view

Let us now consider some difficulties for the process view. On my interpretation, the Buddha denies that we are substance-selves, but thinks we are process-selves until we attain *Nibbāna*. Hence, he is committed to the position that the process conception of the self can make sense of our ordinary experience of one another as selves (and of *kamma* and rebirth). But can it? According to the process view, the self is a structured nexus of continuous, interacting processes, both mental and physical, that are in constant change in every respect and are not ontologically distinct from other processes in the world. The processes that constitute the self are our beliefs, experiences, desires, hopes, and so on (what the Buddha calls the aggregates), and prominent among these is the false belief that this nexus is aware of itself as a substance-self. These processes are not properties of a substance that is the self. Rather, the self is nothing more than these processes unified in a certain way.

The process view avoids the aforementioned problems for the substance view because the process view does not suppose there must be an unequivocal answer to the question ‘Is this the same self as that?’ If selves are distinct substances with identity, then the answer to this question must be either ‘Yes’ or ‘No.’ But if selves are processes, then the answer may be ‘To some extent.’ For example, if we ask whether someone who has Alzheimer’s disease is the same person as the person who wrote a book twenty years ago, the answer may be ‘In some respects yes, and in some respects no.’ Strictly speaking, on the process view, a person over a period of time is always partly similar and partly dissimilar. Since there is no respect in which a process-self is immune to change, the extent to which a person is similar or dissimilar is just a matter of degree. Likewise, if we ask whether identical twins have the same self or whether a person with multiple personalities has more than one self, the answer on the process view may be ‘Partly yes, and partly no.’

The main problem for the process view is to make sense of the fact that *ordinarily* it is obvious that there is one self or more than one – for example, that I am the same person as the person who married my wife several years ago and am not the same person as my neighbor. If selves are constantly changing processes and are not ontologically distinct from other processes in the world, how do we account for these everyday observations? The Buddha recognized that typically we regard the aggregates as unified into particular persons. In a well-known passage, it is said: ‘Just as, with an assemblage of parts, the word “chariot” is used, so, when the aggregates exist, there is the

convention “a being” (C I 230). The parts of a chariot must be unified in a certain way for the chariot to exist. Only then can we say that this is the same chariot as the one we used last year, and that this chariot is going south and that one north. Likewise, the aggregates must be unified in a certain way for a being – that is, a process-self – to exist. Only then can we speak of my being the person who married my wife some time ago and of my being a different person than my next-door neighbor. We saw earlier that the Buddha thought the aggregates making up a particular process-self are unified, not by a substance-self, but by an ‘I conceit’ – the belief that I am a substance-self, as manifested in various attachments – that brings a particular set of aggregates together as ‘mine’ (and likewise for other process-selves). The main challenge for the process view is to show that this account of unity is coherent and sufficient to explain our everyday experience of one another as selves.

If the unity problem were solved, then several standard objections to the process view could be answered. First, it is said that the use of proper names and personal pronouns presupposes that there are distinct selves with identity over time. But the selves presupposed by our language need not be substances-selves if process-selves have sufficient unity to allow us ordinarily to speak of ourselves in these ways. Second, it is objected that, if a self is nothing but a nexus of processes, then if any one of my processes had been different (for example, if I had woken up at 8:35 rather than 8:30 this morning), I would have been a different person. However, the process view rejects the idea that I either am or am not the same person. All such statements are matters of degree, and in this case I would have been a different person only to a very slight extent. Third, it is claimed that the process view cannot account for our belief that some attributes are essential to who a particular person is, while others are not. But the process view rejects this belief: no single attribute is essential to being a particular self. Of course, some attributes are correctly thought to be especially important. When these change, we may speak of someone becoming a ‘different person’ (or hardly being a person at all). What this means, on the process view, is that there is a striking dissimilarity among other similarities.

The central objection to the process view is that a process-self does not have enough unity, or the right kind of unity, to make coherent sense of our experience of one another as selves. There are two aspects to this problem, both anticipated in the last chapter. They concern the *appearance* of identity and distinctness: we ordinarily think that the same person may exist over a long period of time and that one person may clearly be distinguished from another person. Not just any conception of unity can account for what is needed here. For example, it is not sufficient to say that my various processes are unified by membership in a set because there are many sets of processes that do not constitute selves (for example, the set of beliefs of left-handed persons). If we say that my processes are unified by membership in the set ‘processes of Chris Gowans,’ then we need to know what makes

something a member of this set. On the process view, it cannot be the fact that the processes are properties of the substance Chris Gowans. So how are these processes unified?

In one respect, it is not difficult to envision an answer. We can imagine examples that are clearly more process-like than substance- or thing-like, such as a tornado, where a pure process can give the semblance but not the reality of identity and distinctness. Though a tornado is fully interdependent with its meteorological environment, it has enough internal integration and unity of processes relative to this environment for us to speak as if it were one thing that may be distinguished from other things. Likewise, though a tornado lacks strict identity, through time there may be enough causal continuity of processes, and consequent similarities, to make it intelligible to say that the tornado that touched down here is the same one that touched down earlier over there. The Buddhist account of persons as process-selves bears some resemblance to this example, with the qualification that persons have more stability than tornadoes. Thus, the aggregates that constitute a person, though interdependent with their environment, have a high degree of internal integration and unity. Moreover, though they are in constant change, there are relations of causal continuity and consequent similarity through these changes. In this way, persons ordinarily appear to have identity and distinctness, though strictly speaking they do not.

On the Buddha's account, the relevant causal relationships are understood in terms of the ideas of dependent origination and, more specifically, *kamma*. The account need not deny that there are enduring features of persons such as capacities and character traits. But it understands these as continuously developing processes rather than as properties of substances with identity. It might be objected that capacities and character traits presuppose a substance that has them as properties. However, a tornado may have swirling wind as an enduring feature without our supposing this is a property of a substance. It might also be objected that there are some elements of sameness over an entire person's life – for example, it has always been true of me that I was born on a certain date. But according to the process account, the 'I' in this statement does not refer to something that is unchanging. Hence, all that can be said, properly speaking, is that this process-self ('me now') and that similar process-self ('me then') are causally related to one another in certain respects, and that both originated on the same date.

There is a further dimension to these issues that arises from the fact that we have an inner or subjective life. For example, I may feel warm or remember seeing someone last week. An important feature of these inner episodes is that they are felt as our own. Another person may have an experience or memory that is qualitatively similar to mine. But no one else can have my actual experiences and memories. Related to this, our subjective life seems to presuppose a distinction between experiences and the subject who has the experiences (and likewise for memories and other inner episodes). Hence, it

is hard to see how the self could be a bundle of inner episodes with no subject that has these episodes. Together these features of our subjective life are commonly thought to require a substance-self: a distinct entity with identity that has its own inner episodes. The process account needs to provide an alternative picture of the apparent unity of these subjective phenomena.

Since the Buddha denies that there are substance-selves, he cannot say that experience presupposes a subject that is a substance-self. But at the level of ordinary understanding, we take it as obvious that an experience requires a subject who has it and, relatedly, that there is distinction between one's own experiences and those of other persons. The process view needs to make sense of this understanding. On the other hand, it is important to remember that the Buddha considers this sense of an inner episode being 'one's own' to be problematic. Regarding something as one's own is a form of clinging or attachment that results in suffering. In order to overcome suffering, attachment must and can be eliminated. This is achieved by correcting the mistake presupposed by attachment – namely, the belief that we are substance-selves. What is required, then, is an account of the ownership-feel of subjective experience that shows it to be ordinarily experientially real and yet ultimately eliminable because it is rooted in a corrigible mistake. This takes us to the heart of the Buddha's philosophy.

In order to sketch such an account, let us imagine how the thought of being a substance-self might naturally but mistakenly emerge from a collection of processes. As an *entrée*, think first of a highly coordinated collection of organic beings such as an ant colony. Each ant has primitive correlates of forms of consciousness we call experience, memory, desire, and intentional action. But there is such a high degree of integration among the members of the colony that it becomes intelligible to speak of these primitive forms of consciousness in collective terms. For example, there is a rudimentary sense in which the colony as a whole experiences a source of food, remembers this, desires the food, and intentionally acts to bring it into the colony.

Next imagine a similar scenario, but with a much greater and more complex level of physical and psychic integration. Here too the parts have forms of these same elements of consciousness, but now the degree of coordination and unification is so high that the conscious aspects of the parts overflow into one another. Some parts begin to directly share the experience, memory, and so on of the other parts. A sense of a unified field of consciousness begins to emerge. At this stage, it becomes far more plausible to think that the entire collection of parts experiences, remembers, desires, and acts as one being. Perhaps in some cases an individual animal is just such a unified collection of organic processes.

Now we come to the crucial stage. Whatever may be said about other animals, those animals that are human beings consist of organic processes that are unified to an exceptionally high degree. Here a subjective unity of consciousness becomes quite apparent. In these beings, the belief naturally

but mistakenly arises that more is involved than being a tightly integrated collection of organic processes. It is supposed that for each human being there is a single entity, a substance-self, that possesses these processes, or their subjective manifestations, but cannot be reduced to them. The processes themselves are ever-changing and interdependent with their environment. But when highly unified with one another, a sense of 'I' emerges that is thought to refer to a distinct substance with identity. With this conviction, the belief that these are 'my' experiences and that there must be a subject – the substance-self 'me' – who has these experiences becomes inescapable. The process-self now exists. The ownership-feel of subjective experiences feels very real, even though it involves a mistake.

The Buddha has little to say about the origin of this mistake except that it is deeply ingrained within us. However, he has a great deal to say about its unfortunate consequences and how to overcome them. Belief in the substance-self dominates the activities of the entire collection of processes that makes up the human being: virtually everything is centered on protecting and promoting this supposed substance-self. It can hardly be denied that this self is closely connected with the processes actually constituting the person. After all, it is thought to possess these processes or their manifestations. Yet the processes undergo constant changes as they interact with the larger environment. The friction between these two creates the unsatisfactory nature of human life: the impermanence and interdependence of the processes inevitably destabilize whatever adjustments the substance-self seeks in protecting and promoting what it takes to be its essential features. For example, it may regard memories of certain events as essential to itself and suffer when these events begin to elude its best efforts at recall. On the other hand, in the fully enlightened person during this lifetime, the processes continue in many respects as before, but there is no longer a sense of ownership or attachment by a substance-self. In the absence of this, the friction disappears and suffering is overcome. Old age, disease, and impending death remain, as they did for the Buddha. This is the nature of the processes that constitute a person. But they are no longer regarded as a threat to 'myself.'

This is a rather speculative account and it is not the full story of the Buddha's teaching (*kamma*, rebirth, and *Nibbāna* need to be brought into the picture). But it may be enough to suggest what the Buddha might say about the ownership objection to the process account of the self. On this point, there is some parallel between the Buddha's position and Kant's claim that from the unity of consciousness we naturally but mistakenly infer a single, unified substance. According to Kant, 'The unity of a thought consisting of many representations . . . can be related to the collective unity of the substances cooperating in it (as the movement of a body is the composite movement of all its parts) just as easily as to the absolute unity of the subject' (Kant 1997: A353). Nonetheless, in addition to having a radically dissimilar philosophical framework, the Buddha differed from Kant in thinking that this mistake is the

source of suffering and its rectification enables us to overcome suffering. Kant's concerns here are primarily theoretical and only shadow the existential dimensions of the Buddha's teaching. Moreover, in his moral philosophy Kant affirms a substantial conception of the self at odds with the Buddha's not-doctrine self (see chapter 15, section 3).

Many questions could be raised concerning this process account of the self. Does it provide an adequate explanation of our ordinary understanding of one another as selves? In particular, does it render intelligible what we find natural to say about the identity and distinctness of selves? Also, is the account coherent? For example, does it make sense to say that the ownership-feel of subjective experience and the belief that experience requires a subject involve an illusion? These important questions are not easy to answer. However, it must be admitted that, though they have concerned some Buddhist philosophers, they did not much exercise the Buddha himself. To the extent that there are answers, they would have to be drawn from the doctrine of dependent origination and the depiction of the twelvefold series of conditioning links (see chapter 7, section 3 and chapter 11, section 3). But the discussion of these ideas primarily concerns the details of what maintains us as process-selves and how we can bring these selves to an end. This practical perspective is primary, and further philosophical reflection is discouraged. We might also ask how the illusion of a substance-self arose and why it is so deeply ingrained within us. Here little is said beyond a cosmological account of the cycles of the world (see L 409 ff.).

3 Buddhist approaches to debates about the self

The purpose of this chapter has been to probe the Buddha's teaching concerning the self by exploring some philosophical issues involved in the claims that we are respectively substance-selves or process-selves. Each view has its own difficulties and these suggest that, whatever our view, our understanding of one another as selves is more involved and problematic than we might have thought. The Buddha thinks we are not substance-selves and are only provisionally process-selves. Hence, with respect to the issues raised in this chapter, he is committed to believing that the process view makes better overall sense of our ordinary experience than the substance view. Yet we do not find a detailed, theoretical defense of this position in the Buddha. Why not? Three answers may be given: each is partly correct, and together they tell us something about the complexity of the Buddha's teaching and the diverse ways it might be developed.

First, it may be observed that the Buddha accepted significant philosophical theses. He believed that the fact that all things are impermanent and causally conditioned undermines the substance view and supports the process view. Moreover, he did not see anything problematic about the process view. Hence, the implication of his position is that the debate just outlined can be

resolved in favor of the process view. However, since this debate reflects the perspectives of contemporary philosophers of personal identity, it cannot be expected that the Buddha himself would have directly addressed this debate in these terms. Nonetheless, defending the Buddha's position vis-à-vis this debate remains an important task for contemporary Buddhist philosophers, a task rooted in the Buddha's own commitments.

This interpretation correctly emphasizes the Buddha's philosophical beliefs, but it might be regarded as misleading in suggesting that the Buddha thought abstract, philosophical reflection was needed to achieve enlightenment. A *second* answer stresses the importance of meditation in coming to a proper understanding of the Buddha's not-self teaching. The Buddha clearly thought meditation was essential to achieving enlightenment and overcoming suffering. Moreover, though meditation requires intellectual and moral preparation, in its highest forms it takes us beyond intellectual activity. However, there are two ways of understanding the relationship between meditation and intellectual inquiry. One is that, though intellectual reflection by itself is insufficient and must be complemented by meditation, the reality revealed by meditation cannot contradict our rational understanding. Hence, the understanding of the absence of self achieved by meditation must be coherent even if it cannot be fully grasped intellectually. The second way is that the reality revealed by meditation is not coherent from the standpoint of intellectual comprehension. Hence, intellectual reflection can be harmful and must be transcended. The first reading leaves an important place for intellectual thought, while the second discourages this. Each reading has found followers in Buddhist traditions that have developed since the time of the Buddha. The first, represented in much of the *Theravāda* tradition and elsewhere, finds support in the fact that there is a great deal of intellectual articulation in the teaching of the Buddha. The second, followed especially by Chinese Ch'an and Japanese Zen Buddhists, finds a basis in some depictions of the enlightenment experience produced by meditation. These approaches pursue two rather different strands implicit in the teaching of the Buddha.

A *final* response emphasizes the practical orientation of the Buddha's teaching. His primary aim was to teach us how to overcome suffering, not to provide a philosophical theory. This was the point of the story of the man wounded by the poison arrow: his main interest should be in healing the wound, not figuring out who shot the arrow or why (see chapter 3, section 2). In view of this, it might be said that our focus should not be on resolving metaphysical perplexities about the self, but on attaining *Nibbāna*. However, if this means that what matters is that we accept the not-self doctrine in order to overcome suffering *irrespective of the truth of this doctrine*, then this is a misunderstanding of the Buddha. He plainly understands enlightenment as an understanding of reality that enables us to attain *Nibbāna*. Though he leaves questions about some philosophical issues unanswered, the not-self doctrine is not one of them. Hence, the Buddha's practical orientation does not permit

us to be indifferent to whether or not there really are substance-selves. By whatever means, he thinks we can come to recognize the truth of the not-self teaching.

However, in view of the perplexities concerning both the substance view and the process view, the Buddha's practical orientation might lead a follower of the Buddha to propose the following *revision* of his thought. On philosophical grounds there is currently no resolution of the dispute between these views. On account of this, it is reasonable to set aside the theoretical debate and resolve the dispute on practical grounds. In particular, we are entitled to decide which view to accept by considering the practical consequences of holding each view, specifically with respect to suffering. When we do this, we will discover that the belief that we are substance-selves only leads to more suffering, whereas the belief that we are not substance-selves and are process-selves only insofar as we believe we are substance-selves enables us to overcome suffering. Hence, on these pragmatic grounds, we should abandon the belief that we are substance-selves and accept the belief that we are (dependent) process-selves.

This is not the Buddha's position because he did not think the dispute between the substance and process views was theoretically unresolved. But a contemporary Buddhist with an understanding of current philosophical issues might accept this revision. If she did so, she would be departing from the Buddha in one respect, by asserting theoretical uncertainty, but she would be following the spirit of the Buddha in another respect – for the Buddha was not interested in pursuing theoretical questions as such, and he warned against the dangers of becoming preoccupied with them. Instead, he was primarily concerned with the practical issues regarding suffering. Hence, the effect of this revision would be to emphasize the practical context that was always the Buddha's center of attention.

SUGGESTED READING

A dialogue on the not-self teaching can be found in the *Cūlasaccaka Sutta* ('The Shorter Discourse to Saccaka'), M #35.

For some classic discussions of personal identity, see Perry (1975) and Rorty (1976). For examples of defenses of substance accounts of the self, see Chisholm (1976: chapter 1), Lowe (1991), and P.F. Strawson (1963: chapter 3). Under the label of the bundle theory, the process view of the person is defended by Brennan (1994) and critiqued by S.L. Anderson (1978). Recent personal identity debates are related to Buddhism in Kapstein (2001: part 1), Kupperman (1984) and Siderits (1997). Critiques of Buddhist views of the self may be found in Nozick (1989: chapter 13) and Yandell (1999: chapters 12 and 13).

KAMMA, REBIRTH, AND THE NOT-SELF DOCTRINE

We now need to consider two additional features of the Buddha's understanding of human nature: *kamma* and rebirth. After reviewing the essentials of these ideas, we will evaluate two questions. Are *kamma* and rebirth consistent with the not-self doctrine? And what may be said in support of these ideas, both from the Buddha's perspective and from our own? Finally, we will discuss two qualifications of the Buddha's theory of human nature, and we will survey some critical responses to his teaching that may appeal to stream-observers at this stage of our inquiry.

1 The nature of *kamma* and rebirth

A central teaching of the Buddha is that each person lives a series of lives extending indefinitely into both the past and the future (until *Nibbāna* is attained), and that the moral quality of a particular life of a person causally influences the happiness of the lives of that person that follow. These are the basic notions of rebirth and *kamma* respectively. In a representative statement, the Buddha says: 'It is by reason of conduct not in accordance with the *Dhamma*, by reason of unrighteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell.' On the other hand, 'it is by reason of conduct in accordance with the *Dhamma*, by reason of righteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world' (M 380). As examples of the kinds of unrighteous conduct that will lead to an unhappy destination, the Buddha refers to killing living beings, stealing, engaging in sexual misconduct, speaking falsely, maliciously, harshly, and uselessly, being covetous, and having wrong views. Forms of conduct contrary to these are righteous and lead to a happy destination. In general, the roots of unrighteous conduct are 'greed, hatred, and delusion,' while the roots of righteous conduct are the opposite of these (N 49).

The importance of *kamma* and rebirth is indicated by the fact that they are said to be an essential part of the three forms of knowledge the Buddha

attained at the time of his enlightenment. The last was the Four Noble Truths. The first two were 'knowledge of the recollection of past lives' and 'knowledge of the passing away and reappearance of beings' in which those who were ill-conducted 'have reappeared in a state of deprivation' while those who were well-conducted 'have reappeared in a good destination' (M 105–6).

The doctrine of *kamma* concerns the effects of our actions (the word '*kamma*' means action). At first glance, the idea is straightforward conceptually: insofar as a person's actions are morally wholesome (*kusala*) they will improve the person's well-being in the future, and insofar as a person's actions are morally unwholesome (*akusala*) they will diminish the person's well-being in the future. The future effects of our actions may be in this life or in future lives. The most important factor in determining the moral quality of actions is the person's intention. For example, it is intentional honesty that brings about happiness and intentional theft that results in unhappiness. It is tempting to see this idea as a form of the common belief that morally good persons deserve to be happy while morally bad persons deserve to be unhappy – with the important addition that the universe is causally constructed to ensure that desert is always correctly allocated. However, the Buddha does not present *kamma* as a doctrine of desert per se, much less as a theory of cosmic reward and punishment. Rather, *kamma* is a central instance of dependent origination: it is understood as a law of nature, similar to the principle of gravity, that dictates the causal effects produced by morally good and bad actions. Sometimes the moral quality of an action is compared to a seed that will naturally grow in a happy or unhappy direction. *Kamma* is not administered by an agent such as God. It is an impersonal feature of the causal relationships in the world, and there is no prospect of deviation from the causal effects of *kamma* on the ground of mercy.

Kamma is not a form of determinism about actions. Though a person's current state of well-being is always a causal function of his or her past actions, what a person does at a given time is not determined by past actions. As we have seen, the Buddha thinks we are always free to choose the morally better or worse course. Since these choices affect our future well-being, it is always in our power to improve or diminish our future happiness, and to achieve ultimate happiness through enlightenment. To some extent our character may be determined by past actions, but our character never fully determines our actions.

The cycle of rebirth is described by the Buddha in vast cosmological terms. The universe is said to be arranged in a hierarchy of thirty-one planes of existence, understood to involve higher and lower degrees of well-being. The human level is found among eleven planes of the sense-sphere realm. Below us stand the progressively worse levels of titans, ghosts, animals, and hell; above us are the six levels of the lower gods (*devas*). Above the sense-sphere realm are the sixteen planes of the form realm in which the higher gods dwell, and above these are the four planes of the formless realm: infinite

space, infinite consciousness, nothingness, and neither-perception-nor-non-perception. Hence, each human being may be reborn at a lower level (for example, as an animal) or at a higher level (for example, as a god). Animals, humans, and gods belong to a single cosmic framework of rebirth. Depending on the moral quality of our lives, each of us may be reborn above or below our current human level, or at the human level in better or worse circumstances. But no rebirth is a final destination. We are all involved in an ongoing process of rebirth called *samsāra* ('perpetual wondering'). This process extends indefinitely into the past and will extend indefinitely into the future until one escapes the cycle of rebirth altogether and attains *Nibbāna* (understood as a state beyond the thirty-one planes from which no return is possible).

No account of the ultimate purpose of this cosmic scheme is offered, but it is obviously intended to show that our well-being will be improved as we move to higher levels of existence and ultimately attain *Nibbāna*. For our purpose, the details of this cosmology are not important. We are interested in the basic rationale for the ideas of *kamma* and rebirth.

2 The consistency objection

Among the oldest quandaries in the teaching of the Buddha is the question of whether or not the notions of *kamma* and rebirth are consistent with the not-self doctrine. If I am not a self, then in what sense can my morally good actions now increase my happiness later? And if there are no selves, then what does it mean to say we will be reborn? On my interpretation, the basic answer to these questions is that the dependent reality of process-selves is sufficient to render the ideas of *kamma* and rebirth intelligible. In fact, one of the main reasons for accepting this interpretation – that the Buddha denies any reality to substance-selves, but grants dependent reality to process-selves – is that it reconciles these ideas and his not-self teaching.

A process-self is a unified nexus of continuous, interacting processes (the aggregates) that are in constant change in every respect and are not ontologically distinct from other processes in the world. We saw in the last chapter that, in order to account for our ordinary understanding of one another as selves, the process view needs to be able to explain the appearance of identity and distinctness: that I am the same person as the person who married my wife several years ago, and that I am a distinct person from my neighbor. The heart of the solution is that this appearance may be explained in terms of the causal continuity and consequent similarity of the processes constituting the person over time, and the internal integration of these processes at a given time. Let us suppose for the sake of argument that this solution is adequate. If it is, then it is relatively unproblematic for the process view also to make sense of *kamma* and rebirth.

Consider *kamma* first. The issue here may be understood by thinking about a single life in which I perform a morally good action now and this results in

greater happiness for me next year. The objection is that this makes sense only if I am a substance-self, a distinct entity with identity that both performs the action now and gains the benefit later. The response is that this also makes sense if I am a process-self. As long as there is sufficient causal continuity and similarity between my process-self now and my process-self later, the idea of *kamma* is coherent. If we restrict ourselves to a single life, the notion of *kamma* raises no issue beyond the problems raised in the last chapter. If the process view can make sense of ordinary cases in which we speak of identity over time, then it can also make sense of *kamma*. Of course, it is another question whether *kamma* is true.

A related objection is that process-selves are not adequate to explain our beliefs concerning moral responsibility – for example, that we hold persons accountable, and praise and blame them, for what they have done. We should remember that *kamma* is not put forth as a doctrine of moral responsibility. It is an account of the causal relationships between the moral quality of our actions and our subsequent well-being, and it does not refer to our practices of holding people accountable. Nonetheless, we might reasonably think that, in order to be adequate, the process view should be able to make sense of these practices. According to the process view, it does make sense of them. Once again, all we need is causal continuity and similarity, not identity. As long as my process-self now stands in the right causal relationships to my process-self in the past, it is reasonable to hold my current process-self accountable for the actions of my past process-self.

Let us now consider the consistency of the idea of rebirth and the not-self doctrine. The objection is that I could be reborn only if the substance-self that is now me were to exist in a later life. The response is that rebirth would also make sense if I were a process-self and not a substance-self. A dialogue with the *bhikkhu* Sāti suggests that the Buddha accepted this view. Sāti wonders whether ‘it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the round of rebirths, not another.’ The Buddha replies: ‘Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the *Dhamma* in that way? Misguided man, in many discourses have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen, since without a condition there is no origination of consciousness?’ (M 350). The Buddha rejects the claim that ‘this same consciousness’ is reborn. That is a version of the substance view. Instead, the Buddha says we should think of consciousness in terms of dependent origination. This refers to the process view, and it suggests that rebirth should be understood in terms of a causal continuity between a process-self in one life and in another life that is its rebirth.

There is an obvious complication here. Suppose I die and am reborn as a person in a subsequent life. There is no *physical* continuity between me and this later person. At death my body disintegrates, and there is no evident causal connection between that disintegrating body and the physical beginning of the life of the later person. But on this account there has to be some causal continuity between me and the later person if he or she is to be the

rebirth of me. Hence, the causal continuity must concern my *mental* attributes, and this mental continuity must be understood as not depending on physical continuity. In short, the Buddha thought that in rebirth my mental process-self now stands in a relationship of causal continuity, and presumably consequent similarity, with the later mental process-self that is my rebirth (this would obviously have to be the case if I were reborn as a god). He assigned consciousness (*viññāṇa*) the role of conveying this continuity (see L 226). In this way, the process view can make sense of rebirth. Moreover, as long as there is mental continuity, the effects of the morality of my actions in this life can be felt in the experiences of a successor life. Hence, both *kamma* and rebirth may be reconciled with the not-self doctrine.

This reconciliation presupposes that the physical world is not the whole of reality. But it is obvious for many reasons that the Buddha accepted this presupposition. The distinction between mentality (*nāma*) and materiality (*rūpa*) is pervasive. Moreover, any account of rebirth would need to accept it as well, since it is difficult to render rebirth intelligible in a strictly physical framework (given what we know of the physical world). Hence, this presupposition is not problematic in showing the consistency of the idea of rebirth and the not-self teaching. Of course, it is a further question as to whether this idea is correct.

A final word about the consistency objection is in order. Early in the history of Buddhism a distinction was drawn between ‘ultimate truth’ (*paramattha sacca*) and ‘conventional truth’ (*sammuti sacca*). It is sometimes said that this distinction may be employed to answer the consistency objection as follows. When the Buddha says there are no selves, he should be understood as expressing ultimate truth, and when he speaks as if there are selves, as in the doctrines of *kamma* and rebirth, he should be interpreted as referring to conventional truth. The distinction between ultimate and conventional truth is not explicitly drawn in the *Sutta Piṭaka*, but it has such a long history that it is commonly regarded as an implicit feature of the Buddha’s teaching.¹ However, despite its long lineage, the use of the distinction in the response to the consistency objection is misleading. The problem is not merely that the Buddha speaks as if there are selves. It is that the ideas of *kamma* and rebirth require that there be some intelligible notion of a self that has some kind of reality. Hence, the consistency problem can be resolved only by supposing there are process-selves that have dependent reality (or selves in some sense). We might express this by saying that, though in ultimate truth there are no selves in any sense, in conventional truth there are process-selves. However, this is misleading at least insofar as the English phrase ‘conventional truth’ implies conventions people have agreed to for the sake of convenience, such as the division of the week into seven days. The reality of process-selves is more fundamental and stubborn than a mere convention: though it does depend on what we believe, it is deeply rooted in our entire way of living, and it can be overcome only by the rigorous program of the Eightfold Path.

3 Why believe in *kamma* and rebirth?

Western stream-observers are likely to approach the ideas of *kamma* and rebirth with skepticism. These notions are foreign to the mainstream of our culture and probably appear to many of us to defy our common sense. Moreover, as we will see, their rationale in the Buddha's teaching is likely to disappoint. In any case, our present task is to consider what may be said for and against these ideas.

It might be thought that the Buddha was simply following the customary beliefs of his culture in accepting *kamma* and rebirth. However, though many in his society did accept similar ideas, there were others such as the materialists and the skeptics who rejected such notions. Hence, the Buddha was aware of alternative positions, and he thought he had a sound basis for accepting the ideas of *kamma* and rebirth outlined on pages 104–6. In fact, in several texts, the Buddha or one of his followers engages critics of these ideas, and it will be helpful to consider three of these.

On one occasion, Prince Pāyāsi declares that 'there is no other world, there are no spontaneously born beings, there is no fruit or result of good or evil deeds' (L 351). Pāyāsi offers several reasons for these denials, and to each Kumāra-Kassapa, a disciple of the Buddha, gives what is supposed to be a convincing reply. For example, Pāyāsi says he asked persons to report back to him if they discovered some form of existence after death, but he has received no such message from those who have died. To this Kassapa responds that, if these persons had gone to a 'place of woe' they would not have been allowed to return with such a message, and if they had gone to a 'happy state' they would not have wanted to return. In a different argument, Pāyāsi says there is no evidence that a soul departs the body at death (for example, no soul is seen departing, and the body weighs no less after death than before). To this Kassapa declares that Pāyāsi is 'looking foolishly, senselessly and unreasonably for another world' (L 361). He points out that we should not assume that something does not exist because we are unaware of it, and he refers Pāyāsi to those in meditative states who 'see both this world and the next' (L 356). We will see the importance of this advice shortly. For now, whatever might be said about this exchange, it clearly does not provide us with a reason for believing in *kamma* and rebirth. At most, it puts into question reasons for disbelieving.

Something similar may be said about the Buddha's response to the objection that sometimes morally good lives appear to result in unhappiness and morally bad lives seem to result in happiness. For example, suppose someone 'kills living beings . . . and holds wrong view,' but 'after death, reappears in a happy destination.' According to the Buddha, 'Either earlier he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or later he did a good action to be felt as pleasant, or at the time of death he acquired and undertook right view.' On the other hand, since he has killed living beings and held wrong view,

‘he will experience the result of that either here and now, or in his next rebirth, or in some subsequent existence’ (M 1064). In short, any apparent mismatch between morality and happiness may be explained by reference to a broader perspective: if there has been moral wrongdoing, then at some point – later in this life, or in the next, or in a subsequent life – unhappiness will result; and if there is now happiness, then at some previous point there must have been some morally correct action. This shows how *kamma* could still be true in the face of recalcitrant experience. But unless we can directly observe the broader perspective, the series of lives, we cannot verify or falsify that *kamma* is correct. Here we have only the word of the Buddha that direct observation in meditation substantiates his position. Without corroboration of his observation, the doctrine is in danger of being consistent with any experience we might have – always a ground for epistemological suspicion.

Finally, the Buddha gives an argument, somewhat similar to Pascal’s ‘wager argument’ (Pascal 1966: section. 418), for believing in *kamma* and rebirth. We are given a choice between:

- (1) being an immoral person who rejects *kamma* and rebirth, and
- (2) being a moral person who accepts *kamma* and rebirth.

The Buddha argues that, whether or not *kamma* and rebirth are true, (2) is a better choice than (1). Suppose someone chooses (1). If there is no other world, ‘this good person is here and now censured by the wise as an immoral person, one of wrong view.’ If there is another world, then the person ‘is censured by the wise here and now, and . . . on the dissolution of the body, after death, he will reappear in a state of deprivation’ (M 508). On the other hand, suppose the person chooses (2). If there is no other world, ‘this person is here and now praised by the wise as a virtuous person, one with right view.’ If there is another world, then the person ‘is praised by the wise here and now, and . . . on the dissolution of the body, after death, he will reappear in a happy destination’ (M 509).

We might wonder why we have to choose between (1) and (2). Obviously there are other choices. In any case, it is easy to see why (2) is a better choice than (1) if *kamma* and rebirth are true. But if they are not true, then (2) is the better choice only because ‘the wise’ censure one who chooses (1) and praise one who chooses (2). If this is to give us a reason for choosing (2), we must already have reason to think ‘the wise’ really are wise in their allocation of praise and censure. However, surely they are wise in the relevant respect only if *kamma* and rebirth are true. Since the point of the argument is to convince us of this, we are no better off knowing that such persons would praise and censure us in this way. We still need to know why this should matter to us. In the end, the argument appears to rest on an appeal to authority.

The three texts we have considered may show that the Buddha was not simply dogmatic with respect to *kamma* and rebirth, but they do not give a

skeptical stream-observer any reason to accept these ideas. On the other hand, this may not be their main purpose. They are probably meant to assuage the doubts of persons already inclined to follow the Buddha who have heard criticisms of his views. In general, on this topic the Buddha does not give evidence or arguments that are intended to convince an outright skeptic. He believed in *kamma* and rebirth as the basis of his enlightenment experience and not mainly, if at all, because of ordinary empirical observation or philosophical argument.

To a large extent, *kamma* is implausible without rebirth. As the Buddha recognized, in this lifetime sometimes good persons suffer and immoral persons prosper. This would be a decisive refutation of *kamma* in the absence of rebirth. Some other objections to *kamma* also depend on the rejection of rebirth. For example, it is sometimes said that *kamma* is cruel because it requires us to believe that a young child suffering from cancer deserves his or her fate. But we probably would not think this cruel if the child was the rebirth of Joseph Stalin. It might be said that it is still cruel since we do not know this. However, aside from saying we could know, the Buddha may have responses to this. First, the *kamma* teaching is not a doctrine of desert at all. Second, its emphasis is less retrospective, seeing people as having brought about their current status, and more prospective, seeing people as having an opportunity to gain future happiness. We might think of it as a form of individual empowerment. *Kamma* could be used as an excuse for cruelty, but this would run contrary to the Buddha's stress on compassion (see page 167). In any case, evidence for rebirth is a crucial issue. *Kamma* could be true only if there was rebirth (or some life after death).

Suppose, in fact, the Buddha did learn in meditation that *kamma* and rebirth – especially rebirth – were real. What evidential value could this have for contemporary stream-observers? How would *we* know he had this knowledge? The Buddha claimed that, in principle, each of us could gain this knowledge for ourselves. But on his own view we can do this only with great difficulty. The situation is not at all comparable to the way each of us could verify that a famous restaurant across town, or for that matter in Singapore, has reopened under a new name. Moreover, if the Buddha were correct, it would seem that among the millions of his followers there would be many persons who have acquired such knowledge. Indeed, it is sometimes claimed there are such persons. But do they provide the quantity and quality of evidence that would properly provide a skeptical stream-observer with reason to accept *kamma* and rebirth?

If I claimed I found your long-lost brother living in Alaska, I might be able to provide enough evidence to convince you that the person I met in Alaska is in fact your brother. Do we have comparable evidence for instances of rebirth? Given that rebirth is said to be pervasive (everyone has been reborn many times), it would seem that there ought to be many cases in which it can convincingly be shown that, for example, this person here is a rebirth of

John F. Kennedy or writer Jack Kerouac. It may be said in response that there are various difficulties in showing this. However, if this is the extent of the response, then we may have reason to think rebirth could be true, but we have not been given a reason to think it actually is true. In short, an obvious objection to the Buddha's claims concerning *kamma* and rebirth is that there is inadequate confirmation.

Another objection is that it is unclear how these claims relate to what we know about the world from the sciences. Can rebirth be reconciled with the contention of evolution that human beings have gradually evolved rather recently from nonhuman species? Is it consistent with the fact that the human population has grown immensely during recorded history? Is it compatible with what genetics tells us about heredity? Can it be squared with the apparent fact that our mental life depends upon a properly functioning brain? Regarding *kamma*, how is the causal relationship between morality and happiness coordinated with known scientific laws of the universe? An adequate defense of *kamma* and rebirth would need to confront these questions.

Finally, it may be objected that it is unclear exactly what rebirth would mean. The basic claim is that one person is the rebirth of another if there are sufficient causal continuities and consequent similarities between the two persons. For example, if this person here is the rebirth of musician John Coltrane, then there must be some continuities in the mental attributes of the two persons. But which continuities? Dispositions and memories are the most likely candidates. Does this mean Coltrane's successor would play the sax or remember appearing at the Vanguard? Again, it is said to be possible that a person will be reborn as an animal such as a llama or a skunk. But what would it mean to say, for example, that this skunk is the rebirth of Richard Nixon? What would the particular continuities and similarities be? As before, responses to these objections may be given. But if they are to convince a skeptical stream-observer, they would have to show more than the possibility that *kamma* and rebirth could be true. They would need to provide some plausible evidence that they are true.

These objections are enough to suggest the intellectual obstacles that face someone considering whether there is reason to believe in *kamma* and rebirth. These ideas have received some attention in the West in recent years, and we may conclude by briefly looking at two prominent arguments thought to support them. The first is a *moral* argument: justice requires that a person's happiness be proportionate to his or her moral goodness; plainly this does not happen in this life; hence, there must be other lives in which this proportion is brought about overall. For this argument to be sound, an additional premise is required stating that what happens in the world is just. Without this, there would be no basis for the inference to other lives. The Buddha may have accepted something close to this premise, and in fact he hints at this argument without actually endorsing it (see M 1053–7). In any case, the question is why we should suppose that the universe actually is just in this way. That it is was

said to be apparent to the Buddha in meditation. But if this argument were to provide an independent ground for accepting *kamma* and rebirth, there would have to be another reason for accepting this premise. Also, even if the universe were just, it would have to be shown that rebirth is a superior explanation to other forms of life beyond this life. Moreover, it seems that for justice to prevail it would have to be established that everyone begins the cycle of rebirth in a position of equality.

The second argument is an *empirical* one. It has been claimed that there is scientific evidence establishing that some children can remember the details of the lives of persons who existed in the past (for a recent example, see Stevenson 1987). If this were true, it would provide some grounds for rebirth (though not necessarily for *kamma*), and this kind of argument has gained the support of some Buddhists (see V.F. Gunaratna 1980). However, various objections have been raised concerning this research. First, it is contended that there was often contact between the families of the child and the deceased person that could explain the apparent memories without rebirth. Second, questions have been raised about the techniques employed to gather evidence about the memories – for example, whether leading questions were asked. Third, most of these cases are from a culture (India) in which belief in rebirth is widespread; hence it is possible that this belief helped to construct these apparent memories. Finally, in some cases the children or their families had something to gain from their purported memories, since they recalled the life of a person of a higher caste; hence, there may be reason to suspect fraud in these cases. If rebirth were the pervasive phenomenon the Buddha takes it to be, and if it rendered the recollection of past lives likely, then it would seem that it ought to be possible to find cases in which objections such as these could not be raised. The question is whether the amount and quality of the evidence concerning the recall of past lives provides any real basis for rebirth.

4 Two qualifications

The doctrines of not-self, *kamma*, and rebirth are central themes in the Buddha's teaching about human nature (an additional theme, our capacity to attain *Nibbāna*, is still to come). We may conclude by recalling two important qualifications of this teaching.

First, the Buddha did not claim to give a complete account of human nature. As we saw earlier (chapter 3, section 5), he refused to make a declaration about the truth of the following ten propositions: 'the world is eternal,' 'the world is not eternal,' 'the world is finite,' 'the world is infinite,' 'the soul [*jīva*] is the same as the body,' 'the soul is one thing and the body another,' 'after death a *Tathāgata* exists,' 'after death a *Tathāgata* does not exist,' 'after death a *Tathāgata* both exists and does not exist,' and 'after death a *Tathāgata* neither exists nor does not exist' (M 533). These are often referred to as the 'undetermined questions.' The last six plainly concern human nature. Two

reasons are commonly given to explain the Buddha's silence concerning these propositions. First, knowing whether they are true or false does not enable us to overcome suffering: this is the explicit point of the simile of the man wounded by the arrow (see chapter 3, section 2). Second, the last six propositions contain a false presupposition – namely, that a substance-self or soul now exists that stands in some relationship to the body and that, once enlightened, either will or will not exist after death. Just as a yes-or-no answer to the question 'Are you still married?' would be misleading if you had never married, so such a declaration concerning these propositions would be misleading given the not-self teaching. We will discuss the propositions concerning the fate of the *Tathāgata* when we consider *Nibbāna*-after-death in chapter 13, section 2. Here we may wonder why the Buddha does not speak about the propositions regarding soul and body. Though on his view they contain a false presupposition as they stand, these propositions nonetheless point to a topic about which the Buddha plainly has commitments: the doctrine of rebirth shows that he does not think the process-self is entirely a physical entity. In this respect, the Buddha does have a view about the mind–body problem, as it is usually called in Western philosophy, despite his silence concerning these propositions. Moreover, coming to a correct understanding of this topic would appear to be important to the enlightenment needed to overcoming suffering.

Second, though the Buddha often stresses the importance of holding right views and rejecting wrong views, he also warns of the danger of attachment to any view, right or wrong. The message of the simile of the raft is that enlightenment involves non-attachment to all views, including the Buddha's own teaching about not-self, *kamma*, and rebirth (see chapter 5, section 3). What could this mean? We are all familiar with persons who are primarily interested in being praised for their superior knowledge or who continue to hold views in the face of contrary evidence because they regard the presentation of the evidence as a threat to themselves. Persons such as these are less concerned about knowing the truth than protecting their own self-esteem. Their attachment to views is a form of self-assertion that presupposes a self that is to be compared with other selves. The Buddha's teaching is that we should accept the truth, but not be attached to it in the sense of regarding it as a personal possession that enhances our comparative worth. Hence, in seeking, holding, or speaking of the truth, I should not be attached to any views as 'mine.'

5 Preliminary responses to the Buddha: where do we go from here?

We are now ready to focus on what the Buddha considers most important: his practical teaching about overcoming suffering and attaining *Nibbāna*. By now stream-observers may be formulating some preliminary conclusions about

the Buddha's teaching, and it might be helpful to survey the more obvious options. Some persons may be inclined to provisionally accept what the Buddha teaches (on his own view, full understanding would require a long-term commitment to the Eightfold Path and ultimately enlightenment). But I suspect few Western stream-observers are prepared to take such a step at this point. At the opposite extreme, some persons may believe the doctrines of not-self, *kamma*, and rebirth are so wrongheaded that there is no point in looking further. For example, those committed to a scientific and secular worldview might regard the idea of rebirth as absurd, while theists such as Christians, Jews, and Muslims might find the not-self teaching disturbing. It might be thought that any practical teaching based on these bizarre doctrines could have no value. However, it is possible that skeptical stream-observers will revise their assessment of the Buddha's teaching once its full practical dimensions have been explored.

Many stream-observers may find themselves between these two extremes. They may suspect that there could be some truth in the teaching of the Buddha, but be hesitant to fully endorse it. This response might take different forms. First, some persons may be attracted to some aspects of the Buddha's teaching, but feel troubled by the problems raised earlier concerning the doctrines of not-self, *kamma*, or rebirth. As a result, they may set out to resolve these problems by philosophical reflection, empirical research, Buddhist meditation, or some combination of approaches.

Second, some stream-observers may be drawn to some features of the Buddha's teaching, but believe the aforementioned problems arise from mistakenly taking these doctrines literally. If they were understood figuratively or symbolically, they could be seen as embodying some important truths about human nature, morality, and happiness. For example, perhaps the not-self doctrine should not be understood as a literal denial of the self, but merely as a prescription for living selflessly. As an interpretation of what the Buddha intended, this would be a mistake. But it might be acceptable as an expression of something valuable that could be distilled from the Buddha irrespective of what he intended.

Finally, some persons may think that some, but not all, aspects of the Buddha's teaching are correct taken literally. Little that is distinctive in his teaching would survive complete rejection of the not-self doctrine. Any affirmation of the Buddha must accept this in some form. But perhaps modified versions of Buddhism are possible that reject *kamma* and rebirth as he understands them. *Kamma* expresses the conviction that there is moral order in the universe. However, there are weaker conceptions of this order than the Buddha's. For example, Aristotle says that 'activities in accord with virtue control happiness, and the contrary activities control its contrary' (Aristotle 1999: 1100b10–11). He adds that a person's happiness may also be affected by fortune. But his basic point is that, in this life, living virtuously tends to make a person more happy. This might be accepted as a less striking, but more

plausible, understanding of the moral order the Buddha thought he discovered – an order that has more to do with psychology and sociology than cosmology. Another more defensible revision would regard *kamma* in collective rather than individual terms: perhaps the morality of persons as a whole promotes the happiness of persons as a whole. (By rejecting the distinctness of selves, the not-self teaching might encourage a move in this direction.) With respect to rebirth, unless interpreted non-literally (for instance, as expressing hope that enlightenment is always possible), it is not obvious what a weaker but more defensible version would be. However, perhaps substantial truth could be found in the Buddha's teaching without the idea of rebirth – for example, in its guidelines for achieving happiness in this life. This would be a serious modification of his teaching. But for some stream-observers his teaching so modified may be the only truth to be discerned in the Buddha.

SUGGESTED READING

Rebirth is discussed in the *Mahātaṇhāsankhaya Sutta* ('The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving'), M #38. *Kamma* is explained in the *Cūlakammavibhanga Sutta* ('The Shorter Exposition of Action'), M #135. See also the *Kukkuravatika Sutta* ('The Dog-duty Ascetic'), M #57 and the *Mahākammavibhanga Sutta* ('The Greater Exposition of Action'), M#136.

For discussions on rebirth, see Gunaratna (1980), Inada (1970), W.L. King (1994), and Siderits (2001). *Kamma* is examined in Griffiths (1982 and 1984), Smart (1984), Varma (1963), and White (1983). On the relation between the mental and the physical in the Buddha, see Griffiths (1986) and Harvey (1993). Stevenson (1987) gives an empirical defense of rebirth. For critical evaluations of rebirth, see Edwards (1996) and Hick (1994: chapters 18–19). Edwards (1997) is an anthology of writings on life after death.

NOTE

- 1 The distinction is thought to be implied by a passage in which the Buddha, after speaking of the self, says 'These are merely names, expressions, turns of speech, designations in common use in the world, which the *Tathāgata* uses without misapprehending them' (L 169; see also C I 230). For discussion of this distinction, see Jayatilleke 1963: 361–8.