

Episodic memory and oneness

Jay Garfield
Shaun Nichols
Nina Strohminger

1. Oneness and No-self

The idea of oneness is that “human beings are intricately and inextricably intertwined and share a common destiny with the other people, creatures, and things of this world” (Ivanhoe, forthcoming). A central obstacle to achieving oneness in this sense is egocentricity, the focus on oneself. Buddhism promises a way of defeating this obstacle, by leading the practitioner to recognize that, ultimately, there is no self. The recognition that there is no self, many Buddhist philosophers argue, undermines egocentricity. But one must attend carefully to Buddhist accounts of just how that undermining occurs, and just what is required to achieve the kind of selflessness that is the goal of Buddhist moral practice. Perfection is not as easy to achieve as it might appear.

The *locus classicus* in the Indian and Tibetan Mahāyāna Buddhist tradition is *How to Lead an Awakened Life (Bodhicāryāvātāra)* by the 8th century Buddhist philosopher Śāntideva. The book is a detailed exposition of Mahāyāna ethics, with instructions on how to cultivate the moral attitude of *bodhicitta*. *Bodhicitta* is the central conative state in Mahāyāna Buddhist moral psychology. It is the aspiration to attain awakening in order to benefit all sentient beings. In successive chapters, Śāntideva presents more specific accounts of the nature and means of cultivating the set of moral perfections to be cultivated by the bodhisattva: generosity, introspective awareness; patience; effort; meditation and wisdom. This book is the most widely read and oft-cited ethical texts in Tibet, and is the subject of several important Indian and Tibetan commentaries.

Śāntideva distinguishes in chapter 1 of *Bodhicāryāvātāra* (on cultivating the moral attitude) between “aspirational” and “engaged” *bodhicitta*.

15. In brief, one should understand that
Bodhicitta has two aspects:
Aspirational *bodhicitta*,
And engaged *bodhicitta*.
16. The wise should understand these two,
Just as one understands the difference
Between one who desires to travel and one who has traveled,
Recognizing the differences between them and the order in which they arise.
17. Aspirational *bodhicitta* brings about great results,
Even as we continue to circle within *samsāra*;
Yet it does not bring about a ceaseless stream of merit,
For that requires engaged *bodhicitta*.

Śāntideva argues that moral progress begins with aspirational *bodhicitta*, the cultivation of this goal and resolve to attain awakening prior to having achieved a direct understanding of emptiness and selflessness. Since one who has merely cultivated aspirational *bodhicitta* (still a significant moral accomplishment), has not yet realized the emptiness of all phenomena and in particular the lack of any self in the person, such an agent's cognitive and conative states are still pervaded by an instinctive ego-grasping that s/he nonetheless knows—at a more reflective level—to be deluded. This aspirational *bodhicitta*, he argues, while ultimately deficient, is necessary at the beginning of the path.

When one achieves a direct realization of emptiness and selflessness—very late on the path—one generates engaged *bodhicitta*, which is a completely impersonal commitment involving an experience of the world that does not represent a self at its center. Importantly, the difference between aspirational and engaged *bodhicitta* is characterized neither by the *content* of the commitment nor by degree of understanding one has of selflessness, but rather by the *mode of apprehension* of selflessness. The difference is between an inferential, or merely cognitive understanding and an immediate awareness of selflessness that frames experience.

Śāntideva's elegant analogy is that aspirational *bodhicitta* is like the understanding one has of a place having read a guidebook, while engaged *bodhicitta* is like the experience of being there; so, he draws the distinction in terms of inferential knowledge, which is of limited effectiveness, and direct perception, which is cognitively more powerful.¹ But in any case, he argues that full moral effectiveness demands an attitude in which innate self-grasping is extirpated, but that that extirpation comes late in one's development.

In chapter 6 (on patience), Śāntideva connects the understanding of interdependence and the absence of ego to the ability to distance oneself from anger.

Consider these verses from chapter 6:

22. Although such things as bile cause suffering,
 One doesn't get angry at them.
 Why get angry at sentient beings?
 They are all completely governed by conditions?
24. One does not think, "let's get angry,"
 And thus intentionally cultivate anger.
 Nor does anger intentionally
 Arise in a person.

¹ Most Buddhist epistemologists distinguish two epistemic instruments: perception (*pratyakṣa/mngon gsum*) and inference (*anumāna/rje dpag*). Perception engages with particulars, and does so immediately and non-conceptually; inference engages with universals, and does so conceptually. Other Indian schools (and some Buddhist philosophers) add other instruments to the list, such as testimony (*śabda/gra*) and analogy (*upamāna/dpe*), but Dignāga and Dharmakīrti reduce these latter instruments to inference. Śāntideva has this dichotomy in mind when he distinguishes aspirational from engaged *bodhicitta* on the basis of the mode of its epistemic engagement with its object.

25. All of the misdeeds
And all of the various vices
Arise as a result of conditions.
None arise independently.
26. Collections of conditions
Do not think, “let’s produce something.”
Nor does that which is produced think,
“Let me be produced.”

Here Śāntideva is arguing that anger is fueled by the identification of an agent of harm; to the extent that we can see agency not as located in a personal self, but rather as the consequence of a confluence of causes and conditions, we can depersonalize the *objects* of our reactive attitudes, thus generating greater patience. He concludes this argument by remarking that to be angry at a person for hitting one with a stick is as irrational as blaming the stick; it suggests a centre of agency, but none is there, only an indefinite web of causes and conditions:

41. Instead of the principal agent, such as a stick,
I develop aversion to the one who wields it.
But it would make more sense to cultivate aversion
To aversion itself, since it impels him.

In chapter 8 (the meditation chapter), Śāntideva turns from the objects of our attitudes, to the subject side, exploring the consequence of realizing the selflessness of the person for ameliorating egoism. In verses 90-103 we find the central argument that egoism is irrational: in the absence of a self, there is no reason to prefer oneself over others, and indeed there is no self. The first verse states the conclusion, the irrationality of egoism:

90. “Self and other are the same,”
One should earnestly meditate:
“Since they experience the same happiness and suffering,
I should protect everyone as I do myself.”

Śāntideva then immediately connects this to the idea that insight into the lack of self should lead one to see oneself as part of a greater whole, and not an individual whose own interests are paramount:

91. Divided into many parts, such as the hands,
The body is nonetheless to be protected as a whole.
Just so, different beings, with all their happiness and suffering,
Are like a single person with a desire for happiness.
92. Even if my own suffering
Does no harm to anyone else’s body,
It is still my own suffering.
Since I am so attached to myself it is unbearable.

93. Just so, even though I do not experience
The sufferings of others,
It is still their suffering.
Since they are attached to themselves, it is hard for them to bear.
94. I must eliminate the suffering of others
Just because it is suffering, like my own.
I should work to benefit others
Just because they are sentient beings, as am I.

This point is important. Śāntideva emphasizes that the reason for eliminating suffering cannot be that it is *my* suffering *per se*, but that suffering is *bad*. And if suffering is bad *per se*, then it is bad no matter whose it is, and so there is good reason to eliminate it no matter whose it is. For this reason as well, the idea that there is a self is irrelevant to moral motivation. But attachment to self is a cause of suffering, and therefore is something to be eliminated.

...

98. The idea that this very self
Will experience that suffering is false:
Just as when one has died, another
Who is born is really another.
99. If another should protect himself
Against his own suffering,
When a pain in the foot is not in the hand,
Why should one protect the other?

In these two verses Śāntideva emphasizes the impact of the view of no-self on egoism. If I do not endure, what happens in the future to the personal continuum of which I am now a part should not be of special concern to me; and since I am as different from others around me as my foot is from my hand, I should show the same concern for others and lack of focus on myself that my hand shows to my foot when it reaches for a sore spot. Śāntideva develops this point further in the following verses. One should, he argues, abandon the habit of taking a personal continuum to be a unitary self; like an army or a forest, we are merely collections of constantly changing, causally interacting phenomena with no essential core; as a consequence, because suffering itself is what is to be abandoned, we should be equally concerned with suffering wherever it is manifested, and not concerned with our own well-being or suffering, *per se*.

100. One might say that even though it makes no sense,
One acts this way because of self-grasping.
That which makes no sense with regard to self or others
Is precisely the object you should strive to abandon.
101. The So-called continuum and collection,
Just like such thing as a forest, or an army, are unreal.
Since the sufferer does not exist,
By whose power does it come about?

102. As the suffering self does not exist,
 There is no distinction among anyone.
 Just because there is suffering, it is to be eliminated.
 What is the point of discriminating here?
103. “Why should everyone’s suffering be alleviated?”
 There is no dispute!
 If it is to be alleviated, all of it is to be alleviated!
 Otherwise, I am also a sentient being!²

The fact that this discussion is located in the meditation chapter of *How to Lead an Awakened Life* reflects the importance attached to meditative practice in the Buddhist tradition for internalizing this view, which is defended in more detail in chapter 9, the emptiness chapter. It is common in this tradition to distinguish between two sources of egoism or “self-grasping”: *conceptual self-grasping* is the view that there is a self developed as a consequence of philosophical reflection (say, taking Plato’s *Phaedo*, Descartes’ *Meditations* or the *Bhagavad-gītā* too seriously). As Tsongkhapa remarks, views caused by bad philosophy can be refuted by doing good philosophy. *Innate self-grasping*, on the other hand, is a deep cognitive reflex, an instinct for regarding ourselves as persisting unitary subjective centers. This innate self-grasping is a cognitive illusion, and like many illusions, not so cognitively penetrable; its extirpation, most Buddhist philosophers—Śāntideva included—think, requires extended meditative practice to reorganize one’s psychology so that one *sees* the world through the lens of selflessness, as opposed to the lens of self. Buddhist soteriology is hence achieved through a transformation of phenomenology, and Buddhist ethics is best seen as a kind of moral phenomenology. (Garfield 2015, c. 4,9). Buddhist ethical attitudes are hence grounded on a metaphysical theory of the self and of reality more generally; Buddhist ethical cultivation begins with the *aspiration* to see the world free of the cognitive illusion of self, but is thought to be only complete once one cultivates a way of *seeing* the world free of that illusion.

2. Episodic memory and egocentricity

Although the no-self view promises to facilitate oneness, there seem to be several psychological factors that persistently reaffirm to the individual that there *is* an enduring self. Perhaps the most obvious of these psychological factors is episodic memory – memory of experiences. It’s widely thought that when a person remembers an experience, she remembers the experience as having happened to *her*. Theorists in both Eastern and Western traditions maintain that episodic memory involves representing an event as having happened to one’s *self*.³ The memory has to present the experience as having happened to *me*.

We find an articulation of this in Reid:

The remembrance of a past event is necessarily accompanied with the conviction of our

² For more detailed discussions of this passage in *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, see Cowherds (Cowherds 2016, 55-76, Garfield (2010/2011) and Garfield (2015, 299-313).

³ The term “episodic memory” came into usage with Tulving. But it’s clear that the earlier philosophers had this kind of memory in mind in the passages to follow.

own existence at the time the event happened. I cannot remember a thing that happened a year ago, without a conviction as strong as memory can give, that I, the same identical person who now remember that event, did then exist (2002, 202)

We find it in James Mill:

I remember to have seen and heard George the Third, when making a speech at the opening of his Parliament. In this remembrance there is, first of all, the mere idea, or simple apprehension – the *conception* as it is sometimes called – of the objects. There is combined with this, *to make it memory*, my idea of my having seen and heard those objects. And this combination is so close, that it is not in my power to separate them. I cannot have the idea of George the Third, - his person and his attitude, the paper he held in his hand, the sound of his voice while reading it, the throne, the apartment, the audience, -- without having the other idea along with it, that of my having been a witness of the scene

We also find the view in William James: “Memory requires more than the mere dating of a fact in the past. It must be dated in my past. In other words, I must think that I directly experienced its occurrence.” (1890/1950, 650). Indeed, James even suggests that such memories are required for the sense of personal identity: “If a man wakes up one fine day unable to recall any of his past experiences, so that he has to learn his biography afresh... he feels, and he says, that he is a changed person” (1890, 336). The idea that the self is represented in episodic memory is also a staple of contemporary theorizing in cognitive psychology. As Harlene Hayne and colleagues note, the prevailing view is that an episodic memory “is accompanied by conscious awareness that the event happened to “me” or will happen to “me” that does not accompany retrieval of other kinds of memories” (Hayne et al. 2011, 344).

We also find the idea that episodic memory carries with it a representation of self in Eastern philosophers. For instance, Uddyotakara offers a “memory argument” against the Buddhist view that there is no self. Monima Chadha characterizes the argument as follows: my present desire and a certain past experience are unified insofar as they concern the same object; I recognise that the thing I desire now is of the sort I experienced to be a cause of pleasure in the past. Recognition requires a persisting unitary agent, the referent of “I” since that which does not have the same agent is never recognised. For example, I can never recognise my friend’s cognitions; therefore, recognition cannot be explained without postulating a persisting unitary agent, i.e., a self (Chadha 2014).⁴

Dignāga, in, *Encyclopedia of Epistemology (Pramāṇasamuccāya)* offers a related argument for the necessary reflexivity of awareness.⁵ As a Buddhist, he does not take this to be

⁴ In another context in that same commentary. Uddyotakara argues that the integration of information from multiple sensory modalities requires a unitary self: that if there were no unitary self, sight, sound, smell, etc might each be experienced, but could not be referred to the same object or integrated in the same conscious field. His argument anticipates Kant’s argument for a transcendental unity of apperception. This argument is criticized by the Buddhist philosophy Śāntarākṣita, who replies that all that is needed is an apperceptive consciousness, not a self to be perceived. (See Garfield 2015, pp. 102-104)

⁵ Buddhist arguments about reflexive awareness have a long history, and continue to the present day among Buddhist scholars and scholars of Buddhist Studies (and indeed among contemporary Western philosophers of mind). Things are complicated by the fact that there are multiple versions of the reflexive awareness thesis, and it is put to multiple uses. According to Dignāga, every intentional moment of consciousness has two intentional objects:

an argument for a self, but rather for the necessity of a kind of apperceptive consciousness in perception as a necessary condition for memory. Dignāga argues that when I remember a sunny day last week, and remember seeing a sunny day last week, that is the same memory. So, any memory of a sunny day is a memory of *my seeing* a sunny day, and since I can only remember what I saw when I see a sunny day, I see *myself seeing* a sunny day. Dignāga's argument is important in the Buddhist tradition, and initiates a long debate concerning whether, or in what sense, awareness is reflexive. (Garfield 2006; 2015, pp 135-149)

Not all Buddhist philosophers accepted the thesis of the reflexivity of awareness. Candrakīrti and Śāntideva in India and Tsongkhapa and his followers in Tibet, in particular, criticized this view, arguing instead for a higher order view of apperception. They each argue that Dignāga's introduction of reflexivity in awareness amounts to the claim that awareness itself requires the cognitive illusion of self-grasping, with an identified and re-identified ego as the subject of experience. Instead, they each argue that episodic memory can be explained simply as the veridical awareness at a moment of something that happened at a prior moment that is caused by a sequence of psychological events beginning with the initial perceptual experience.

Śāntideva, in the 9th chapter of *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, introduces the analogy of a bear who is bitten on the foot by a rat while hibernating, and awakens with a septic wound. The bear comes as a consequence of noticing the painful bite to believe that he was bitten by a rat in the past. Śāntideva draws the analogy as follows: the bear was not aware of being bitten at the time of the bite, but nonetheless, because of the sequence of events intervening between the bite and the formation of the belief that there was a bite in the past, forms a belief intentionally directed upon the past bite. Similarly, he argues, I can, without having been aware of my seeing a sunny day in the past, as a result of a sequence of events intervening between some past perception of a sunny day and the formation of belief now that there was an experience of a sunny day in the past, have a state intentionally directed upon that very day, caused in the right way, and so have episodic memory of that sunny day without any reflexivity. So, there are within the Buddhist tradition conceptual resources to understand episodic memory in the absence of self or of self-consciousness, even in the minimal sense suggested by the reflexive awareness doctrine.

3. Experience memory without self-representation

As we saw in the previous section, philosophers from both Eastern and Western traditions maintain that episodic memory involves self representation. While it is true that episodic memory often involves self-representation, there can be experience memories without explicit self representation. For experience memories are likely present in animals that lack a concept of self like rats (see, e.g., Crystal et al. 2013). Neuroscientists who work on rat memory often characterize episodic memory without explicit representation of self [e.g., Hasselmo 2011].) In this section, we want to explore this in more depth. Ultimately, we think, the suggestion from Śāntideva in the previous section – that memory doesn't require a representation of self – is

the object on which the act is directed, and the act itself. So, for instance, when I think about Dignāga, my thought is necessarily directed not only to Dignāga, but to the thought itself. For more on this see Garfield (2006, 2015), Mackenzie (2007, 2008), Thompson (2014) and Williams (2000).

sustainable.

3.1 Egocentric spatial memory

Although rats presumably lack an explicit concept of self, it's plausible that at least many experience memories in rats are egocentric in an important way. For instance, rats deploy egocentric spatial memory in maze tasks. If a rat is put in a Y-maze several times (with different start points) and repeatedly experiences reward when it goes left and no-reward when it goes right, the rat will soon start going to the left. Plausibly, the rat remembers the experience: *going left led to pleasure*. What counts as "left" is obviously egocentric – it depends on the position of the organism having the recollection. But this kind of egocentricity doesn't require a representation of self. To see the point, consider how one might use a prominent kind of AI programming – production systems – to model the cognition. Roughly speaking, production systems are made up of conditional statements, such that the consequent is an action, and if the antecedents is represented as satisfied, the program generates the act specified in the consequent. Thermostats provide a familiar example (e.g., Newell 1990). A partial production system for a thermostat could include the following:

If the temperature is below 64 degrees and heater is off, then turn on heater.

A thermometer provides data for the antecedent in this case, e.g., by broadcasting when it registers a temperature 64 degrees. Notice that this system doesn't explicitly specify *whose* temperature is being registered or what heater is being turned on. There is no mention that the thermometer is measuring "my temperature" or that the heater to turn on is "my heater". Why is that? Because it's hard coded into the system that it is only measures the ambient temperature, and it's hard coded into the system that it only controls one heater. Now consider a production system for egocentric navigation in the rat (cf. R. Byrne 2000 *How Monkeys Find Their Way* in S. Boinski & P. Garber, *On the Move*. University of Chicago, pp. 491-517. p. 513). Her decision making might be partly model with the conditional:

If going left produced pleasure, then go left.

Just as in the thermostat case, there is no need to specify *whose* pleasure or *whose* left is at issue. Egocentric directions like Right and Left can be dedicated to the organism so that self-representation isn't necessary. That is, there might be a hard-coded connection between Left and the organism. The system doesn't need to specify "My Left" since the default for Left will just be the organism navigating the maze. So, while there is probably not a self-representation here, there is still an important kind of egocentricity.

Note that, without this egocentric spatial memory, rats would be severely impaired in navigation (indeed, lesions to Medial PFC regions produce this deficit [Kesner et al. 1989]). Humans of course plausibly have this egocentric navigation system as well. And any individual will fare worse if this system is damaged.

Although there is a kind of experience memory that is inevitably egocentric, Buddhist philosophers have argued that this kind of egocentricity does not interfere with the view that there is no self. For the egocentricity here is tied to the *organism*, and Buddhists, like those in many other philosophical traditions, reject the idea that the organism is the self. Indeed, in *Introduction to the Middle Way (Madhyamakāvātāra)* Candrakīrti, in his famous sevenfold analysis (Garfield 2015, 111-116; Huntington and Wangchen 1989, 171-177) argues directly that we do not regard the body as the self. We talk instead about *having* bodies, and we imagine having *different* bodies. Indeed, when we imagine having different bodies we can easily imagine that the egocentric spatial relations switch – that in the new body, the food is to the *right* –

without this having any important effect on one's personal identity. Thus, the *kind* of egocentricity at issue in spatial memory is very different from the kind of egocentrism that threatens oneness.

The real problem posed by experience memory (and the memory argument section 2) is that when we *reflect* on our experiences – something rats can't do – we naturally represent the experiences as having happened to the self. Indeed, this is true even when we reflect on the kinds of navigational experiences that we share with rats. If I had an experience of going left and getting food, and then I reflect on that experience, it seems like I am bound to think of that left-going experience as an experience that happened to *me*.

As we emphasize above, Buddhist thought about the self and about self-consciousness is grounded in the idea that we are subject to profound cognitive illusions, and one of those is that we are distinct selves. That illusion grounds our instinctive conative orientation to the world, and a rational conative and ethical orientation to the world, Buddhists argue, would be one freed from that illusion. If Buddhist philosophy had evolved in the context of evolutionary psychology, we could imagine Candrakīrti or Śāntideva arguing as follows: just because some cognitive process contributes to our fitness doesn't mean that the process will track the truth.

Instead, we evolved to have quick strategies to keep us alive long enough to reproduce and to raise our young. Sometimes those track truth; sometimes they do not, and generate cognitive illusions (like the tendency to misidentify objects as guns in situations of high threat, or to distrust those perceived as outsiders—adaptive, but not truth tracking). The Buddhist can allow that the cognitive illusion of self is adaptive—it leads us to act to preserve ourselves as organisms and to raise our young. But, if Buddhists are right, it is hardly truth-tracking, and, like the illusions better known to modern psychology that underlie implicit bias, it is neither an unalloyed good, nor easy to transcend.

3.2 Reflection and self-representation

Buddhists maintain that there is a cognitive illusion of a persisting self, and they recommend that we rid ourselves of the illusion. But to what extent is this possible? This is an empirical question, of course. And we propose to apply empirical conditions to the question.

In section 3.1, we saw that even though rats have egocentric spatial memories, this doesn't yet generate a problematic (from a Buddhist perspective) sense of identity with a past self. The problem emerges when one reflects on one's experiences. Because when I reflect on a past experience had by this organism, it seems inevitable that the result is the sense that *I – my self* – had that experience. This sense of a persisting self is, of course, exactly what the Buddhist wants to claim is illusory. So we first want to ask whether it is possible for an organism to reflect on the past experiences of that organism *without* having the sense of identity.

Neurology provides several cases that indicate that it is indeed possible to recall an experience without having the sense of identity. The most extensive description comes from the case of R.B., who suffered head trauma from a bike accident at age 43 (Klein & Nichols 2012). After the accident, R.B. could still recall experiences from the past, but he said that the recalled experiences didn't seem like they were experiences that happened to *him*. Here is RB's

description of one such memory:

I could clearly recall a scene of me at the beach in New London with my family as a child. But the feeling was that the scene was not my memory. As if I was looking at a photo of someone else's vacation.

RB also described a memory from college:

I can picture the scene perfectly clearly...studying with my friends in our study lounge. I can 'relive' it in the sense of re-running the experience of being there. But it has the feeling of imagining, [as if] re-running an experience that my parents described from their college days. It did not feel like it was something that really had been a part of my life. Intellectually I suppose I never doubted that it was a part of my life.... But that in itself did not help change the feeling of ownership.

Thus, R.B. seemed able to reflect on memories of past experiences had by that very organism, but his reflection on the experiences did not bring with it the sense of personal identity (Klein & Nichols 2012). As Monima Chadha has argued, this kind of case suggests that it is in fact possible to have experience memories without running afoul of the no-self doctrine (Chadha 2014).⁶ The original discussion of R.B. (Klein & Nichols 2012) was quite explicitly informed by questions about the sense of personal identity. But there is a broader disorder – *depersonalization* - that shares important features with R.B.'s cases. One symptom of depersonalization disorder is “The subjective feeling of not being able to recall things (e.g., memory episodes) or having the feeling that the person was not part of the episode.” (Sierra and Berrios). One patient with this symptom is described as follows: “When he recalled events in his life, he felt as though he was ‘not in them’” (Sierra and Berrios 2001, 631). This kind of symptom is incorporated into the diagnostic measures, reflected in the following item: “I feel detached from memories of things that have happened to me - as if I had not been involved in them.” (Sierra & Berrios 2000).

4. Combating egocentrism

4.1 Buddhist strategies

The Buddhist tradition comprises two classes of strategies for extirpating the illusion of self: analytical and meditative, and we see each in place from the very beginning of the Buddhist tradition. We see the analytical strategy developed in the earliest strata of the Pāli suttas in which the person is decomposed into five *khandhas* (Skt: *skhandas*) or *heaps* of phenomena: material form, sensation or hedonic tone; perception; dispositions or personality traits; and consciousness. Siddhartha Gautama—the historical Buddha—and his followers repeatedly argue that there is no more to the person than these constantly changing, causally interacting aggregates of phenomena which themselves can be decomposed into sub-heaps, and so on and on. When one strips the person of these heaps of phenomena, we find nothing left—no owner, no core.

As the Abhidharma (advanced doctrine) develops, the person—and especially the cognitive aggregates—is further decomposed into a complex classification of momentary mental states and mental processes: we naively take ourselves to be directly aware of our mental life as it is; but

⁶ Roache (2015) offers a competing interpretation.

many Buddhist philosophers argue that the mind and mental life with which we take ourselves to be so intimately acquainted is in fact an illusory construct grounded in countless evanescent processes far too subtle to introspect. None of these is enduring; none of these is a self; and there is nothing to us beyond these. These strategies ramify in the Mahāyāna tradition through analyses such as Canrakīrti's sevenfold analysis.

Meditative strategies are also present from the beginning. From early suttas like the *Greater Discourse on Mindfulness* (*Mahasatipatthana-sutta*) to the Mahāyāna meditation manuals such as the 9th Century philosopher Kamalaśīla's *Stages of Meditation* (*Bhāvanākrama*) we find a range of techniques for directing introspective attention to our psychological processes and finding only states and events, no substance in which they inhere or subject to whom they appear. Repeated practice is intended to settle the view that there is no self at all, and to undo the cognitive habit of positing one.

In the work of Śāntideva, particularly in the eighth chapter of *How to Lead an Awakened Life*, this meditative practice is given an ethical direction, with an emphasis on making the transition from meditation on selflessness to meditation on the ethical consequences of selflessness with the goal of the transformation of our ethical perception of the world. One can see this as an attempt to undermine a natural implicit bias in favor of self and to replace it with an equanimous attitude of care for all.

4.2 Retrieval strategies

The Buddhist strategies for eliminating the illusion of self are philosophical in nature. But psychologists have been exploring more practical ways of combatting self-focus. These techniques do not promote the view that there is no self. But they do encourage resistance to a certain kind of egocentricity. And the effects of these techniques resonate with some of what Buddhism seeks. They all seek to circumvent a *first personal* orientation in recollection (and prospection).

Although we usually remember experiences from a first-person perspective – from the original perspective of the experiencer – classic experiments show that experiences can be recalled from a third person perspective (Nigro & Neisser 1983; Robinson & Swanson 1993; McIsaac & Eich 2002, 2004; Libby et al. 2005). Third person recollection is characterized as follows: “In your memory, you imagine the scene as an observer might see it. Such an observer would see you as well as other aspects of the situation” (Nigro & Neisser 1983). In fact, some kinds of experiences tend to be recalled from the third-person perspective, e.g., when people recall an episode of swimming laps they often recall it as from above, seeing their body in the water rather than the original perspective which might have experienced a blurry distant pool wall. The fact that we can recall from the third person perspective does not contradict the claim that experience memory is naturally from the first person perspective. Rather, the fact that it's possible to have a third person perspective on a past experience is taken to provide evidence of the reconstructive capacities of memory (see, e.g., Loftus & Palmer 1974). It is because reconstruction is implicated in memory that we can come to have a memory as-of from an observer perspective even though, of course, the actual experience was not from that perspective (e.g., McIsaac & Eich 2004, 248).

One way to lead people to adopt a third-person perspective is by telling people to recall the past event as if they were viewing the scene as a detached observer (McIsaac & Eich 2002,

147; see also Mischkowski et al. 2012). People who are given this instruction are more likely to mention personal appearance and less likely to use first-person pronouns (McIsaac & Eich 2002, 148). So the manipulation seems to work. More importantly, taking the detached perspective has emotional benefits.

People suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) were instructed to recall a traumatic event either from the third person or first person perspective; those who recalled the event from the third person perspective found the recollection less anxiety provoking (McIsaac & Eich 2004, 250). Even for a very recent event, using a third person perspective reduces anger and aggressive behavior (Mischkowski et al. 2012).

5. Empirical results on attitudes on the self and death

The previous sections provide some reason to be optimistic that episodic memory does not provide any kind of insuperable obstacle to egocentrism. While reflection on episodic memories typically brings with it a sense of personal identity, this is not inevitable. Moreover, there are Buddhist strategies and practical techniques for reducing self-focus.

It was with this optimism that we conducted studies on attitudes about death among monastics in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. We wanted to examine whether the inculcation of the doctrine of no self would have the beneficial effects advertised by Buddhist teachings.

On all of the explicit measures regarding the no-self doctrines, we found strong agreement among the Tibetan monastics. They almost uniformly maintained that there is no core self and there is no person that stays the same across time. On these questions they differed dramatically from Christian and Hindu samples. In addition, the Tibetan monastics showed a significantly reduced essentialism, as compared to Christians and Hindus. Finally, we asked whether one strategy they used to cope with death was thinking that there is no self that persists anyway. On this question, almost every single monastic said Yes, and almost every single Christian said No.

Our primary interest in the study was whether the monastics would exhibit less fear of death of self. One of the primary outcomes of extirpating the illusion of self is that it will reduce fear of death. Thus, we had participants indicate the extent to which they feared the death of self. To our great surprise, we found that the Tibetan monastics reported *greater* fear of death of self than the other participants. In addition, the monastics showed greater selfishness than Christians and Hindus in decisions about whether to sacrifice part of their life so that another person could live longer. Thus, despite the explicit commitment to the no-self doctrine, we find evidence that the monastics still exhibit considerable egocentricity (Garfield et al. 2015, Nichols et al. forthcoming).

6. Tibetan autobiographies

Our results suggest that the Tibetan monastics have not extirpated the sense of personal identity that is rejected by Buddhist teachings. In the terms of the tradition, they seem not to have overcome innate self-grasping. Thus, it turns out to be harder than one might have thought to uproot this sense of personal identity, harder to evade this key obstacle to achieving oneness.

Why is it so difficult to uproot this sense of personal identity? We think part of the answer is the insistence of episodic recollection. While it is possible to reject or blunt the sense of personal identity that episodic memory generates, this likely requires considerable effort. Insofar as episodic recollection is naturally from the first person perspective, it will take cognitive resources to recode it from a detached perspective. Instead, one's natural reflections

on one's past experiences will tend to trigger the sense of personal identity. That's our current speculation in any case. Although we don't have any experimental evidence on this issue, we do think that there is a very suggestive source of evidence provided by Tibetan autobiographies, which are a major genre in Tibetan literature. Autobiographies are written by individuals who have reached a high level of high spiritual attainment (e.g., Gyatso 1998, 103). It might seem paradoxical for an enlightened Buddhist to produce an autobiography – how can one compose an autobiography while maintaining that the self is an illusion? The explanation is that one can speak of the self in a conventional way without endorsing the idea that there is an enduring ultimate self.

It's possible to treat persons as a merely conventional notion, but when we consult the autobiographies, it often seems otherwise. Not surprisingly, the autobiographies recount past experiences. But the important point for us is that these recollections do not seem to present a distanced perspective of the sort associated with the view that there really is no persisting self. Rather, the recollections often suggest a robust identification with the past experiencer. Consider first, the most famous work in this tradition, *The Life of Milarepa*. At one point the author describing a scene from years earlier in which there was an experience of walking into a building and finding human bones among a heap of rags. He writes,

“When I realized they were the bones of my mother, I was so overcome with grief that I could hardly stand it. I could not think, I could not speak, and *an overwhelming sense of longing and sadness swept over me*” (emphasis added).

How different this is from a detached reportage of there being some previous set of experiences. Nor is this kind of emotion-ridden episodic memory unusual in this literature. Indeed, in every major autobiography that has been translated into English we find these expressions. Several more examples follow:

“Because my relatives rose up as enemies against us, mother and son were separated in misery while I was still young, and we never met again. *This filled me with immeasurable sorrow*. I called out the names of my mother and sister and wept. When I awoke my pillow was damp with tears. Thinking this over brought my mother to mind. I shed many tears and resolved to do whatever I could to see my old mother again.” (Milarepa)

when I turned twenty-one I thought, “Now I must begin to practice Dharma right away, and do so in a perfectly pure way. In order to urge those who cling to permanence to do spiritual practice, even my most kind root guru Jamyang Gyatso Rinpoche has shown the passing into nirvana of his physical manifestation. Someone like me is bound to die soon, needless to say. Abandoning concern for my native land, for my family and friends, and for this life's affairs, I must go to some place far away, and practice the Dharma truly [27b]. I must do this, and it is already late.” *An unbearable sadness arose in my mind*, (Shabkar)

When I crossed the door of the tent and looked up at his face, seeing it filled with tears, *I couldn't bear to go any farther*. (Shabkar)

When I arrived at Ngamong plateau, I saw that the camp fires of other travelers had set the grass afire. Scattered over the plateau were perhaps a hundred fires, resembling

hundreds of smoke-offerings [85a]. Curious, I walked around and discovered that these were anthills that had caught fire. Flames were consuming the ants; the ground was aglow with burning embers. *Seeing this, I felt great compassion.* There was no water on that vast plateau, but I stayed there for the whole day, doing everything I could to accumulate merit and purify obscurations—taking refuge, generating Bodhicitta, making the seven-branch offering, and so on. Visualizing a rain of purifying nectar, I prayed to the guru and the Three Jewels, “May you guide these dying ants to the Pure Realms.” (Shabkar)

There I was, *in a state of unbearable veneration.*
 How the waves of tears flowed from my eyes!
 Remembering Father Orgyan, I don’t stand it.
 “If only I could get to that place right now.” I thought (Jigme Lingpa in Gytaso 2001)

....
 I thought, in my residual fleshly form’s mind,
 “The unreal mind is without such designations as ‘birth’ or ‘death.’
 Since I’ve seen the truth, bliss and sorrow are false....”
At that moment, I awoke from sleep,
and was absorbed in a state of bliss-clarity (Jigme Lingpa in Gytaso 2001)

On the evening of the either day of the ninth month, I had a dream in which I experienced something very much like actually dying, *which saddened me greatly.* (The autobiography of Jamgon Kontrul)

On the fifteenth day of one month, there appeared to me in a dream one who was in essence a *dakini* of enlightened awareness, but in form was a flesh-eating *dakini* with the body of a human woman; *she gave me an unshakeable experience of great bliss* (66) (The autobiography of Jamgon Kontrul)

I awaited the day of departure with a mix of anxiety and anticipation. On the one hand, I was very unhappy at the prospect of abandoning my people. I felt a heavy responsibility towards them. On the other hand, I eagerly looked forward to traveling. (Dalai Lama 59)

We were all exhausted. But I felt a tremendous sense of excitement (Dalai Lama 1990 60)

In 1948 Washington had welcomed trade delegation [with China], which even had a meeting with the Vice-President. So they too had obviously changed their minds. I remember feeling great sorrow when I realized that this really meant: Tibet must expect to face the entire might of Communist China alone (Dalai Lama 60)

So although it might be possible to have experience memories without the sense of personal identity, this seems to be a remarkably difficult feat to accomplish in an enduring way. Although this might seem antagonistic to Buddhism, we have already seen that the Buddhist tradition has the resources to explain it. Śāntideva notes that one can acknowledge the truth of the no-self view, and aspire to lead others to recognize it as well. But this is not enough to actually have a

truly engaged recognition of no self. That engaged form of the no self view is opposed by a deep force – instinctive self-grasping. Episodic memory, we’ve argued, provides one powerful and persistent basis for such self-grasping, and thus a powerful and persistent obstacle to achieving the kind of Oneness at which Buddhism aims.

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