

Chapter 11. Agency Mistaken as Self in the book *The Buddha's Radical Psychology: Explorations*. Copyright Rodger Ricketts, 2015. All rights reserved. Protected by international copyright conventions. No part of this book may be reproduced in any manner whatsoever, or stored in a retrieval system or transmitted, without express permission of the Author-publisher, except in case of brief quotations with due acknowledgement. Published through Callisto Green.

## **Agency Mistaken as Self**

A basic premise of Buddha's psychology is that to be alive requires an organism to not only have the capacity to be continuously aware of itself, it must be monitor and respond to internal and external environmental changes. Humans, and perhaps some primates and dolphins to a lesser degree, have the capacity of metacognition, defined as "the monitoring and control of one's thought." To do this requires us to stand back from the process of thinking and with the use of language we represent and objectify it. With this, we create the subject/object split and one particular representational object we create is a "self." A major consequence of this dualism is our believing in a separation of an innate "self" from both our objectified internal and external world. As cognitive scientist and philosopher Thomas Metzinger has said, "We mentally represent ourselves *as* representational systems in phenomenological real time." Metzinger calls the process of self-construction as the Phenomenal Self Model (PSM), which he describes as "an efficient way to allow a biological organism to consciously conceive of itself (and others) as a whole," enabling the organism "to interact with its internal world as well as with the external environment in an intelligent and holistic manner" (Metzinger, 2009, pp. 4-5). Through the process of conceptualization, we can objectify and therefore think, monitor, and evaluate our thoughts, and anticipate the thoughts of others. The Buddha clearly understood and accepted the experience or sense of agency along with its convenient representation of the whole experience as a self. What he did object to is the belief, identification with and attach to

the belief in a self that is substantial and inherent. Instead, the Buddha saw the impermanence and fallacy of that belief and let it go with all the accompanying consequence that led to the anatta or no-self doctrine. What the Buddha found in his intensive meditational investigation is that everything is impermanent- everything. Our thoughts, affects, body, and external environment are always in a constant dynamic flux. Even consciousness is impermanent because it has its basis in the physical. However, he understood and experienced through living a sense of agency; that he and others have a certain capacity to steer the 'rudder of the boat' to arrive where we want. Through cognitive interventions within our cognitive apparatus we can alter and choose wholesome vs unwholesome thoughts and hence, behaviors. We have the ability through metacognition to monitor and develop our cognitive apparatus in ways that can allow us to purify our mind and attain awakening. The Buddha knew this and proceeded to teach from that perspective.

### **Unity of Intentionality**

While the Buddha did know the body with the cognitive apparatus as the matrix of our experiences, he did not specifically speculate on the biological origins of agency. Nevertheless, one can ask that if there is no substantive self that is the CEO like boss of all our personal activity, what is the unifying cause of our being. Biological science has theorized that our awareness and ability of freedom to act, of agency, originates in the core of our biological being. Let us then suggest that an organism's spontaneous organizing tendencies give rise to agency, and that the awareness of pure subjective experience springs spontaneously from this ground of organized biological activity. In other words, agency arises from an organism's innate processes of using the environment to meet its current or projected biological needs. The sense of a self arises from the early awareness

of environmental feedback associated with automatic, self-organized behaviour. The abstracted self, the representation of “I” and “I do,” as the broader sense of “I can do” is based on the awareness of such feedback. “I-ness” originates from volitional spontaneity, and this abstracted, conscious “I” later confers a measure of freedom or choice to human action. To more specifically explain this process, biochemist Mae-Wan Ho of the Institute of Science in Society has proposed that *“quantum coherence is the basis of living organization, and can also account for key features of conscious experience - the ‘unity of intentionality’, our inner identity of the singular ‘I’, the simultaneous binding and segmentation of features in the perceptive act, the distributed, holographic nature of memory, and the distinctive quality of each experienced occasion.”* To live means to be capable of self-generated movement with intention. With further development of cognitive sophistication and ability, we can consciously perceive the intentions that accompany our actions, and our later responses are shaped by the memory of what we intended to do and the results obtained.

Recent developments in cognitive neuroscience emphasize the role of the acting body and of sensory-motor systems in shaping our cognitive schemas, thereby determining the way our mind represents reality. Our body is a highly interconnected and intercommunicating organism at all levels, from the intracellular to the sociological. It is an active participant, constantly responding to and transforming its inner and outer environment. An intuitive appreciation of our body’s coherence is to think of the imagined “I” or self as our own essential nature. We know that our body is a multiplicity of organs and tissues, composed of billions of cells and vast numbers of molecules of many different kinds, all capable of working autonomously. And yet, amazingly, all of these elements coalesce into a singular being creating our singular private experience. Or, as the Gestaltists point

out, the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Metaphorically, it is like a very large jazz band where every player is doing his or her own thing while being perfectly in step and in tune with the whole. In other words, the parts are not quite independent, and the whole is not absolutely coordinated.

Thus, the inappropriateness of the questions, “where is the self?” or “does the self exist?” is clear. These questions are meaningless when one understands what it is to be a coherent, organic whole where part and whole, global and local are so thoroughly enmeshed as to be indistinguishable, with each part as much in control as it is sensitive and responsive. What we have abstracted and called the “self” is, instead, a coherent state that permeates the whole of our being with no definite localizations or boundaries - a “pure experience” of inseparability. Therefore, this integral state of existence and experience implies the presence of an active whole agent that is ultimately free to act. To not have a degree of freedom to respond and act dooms any organism to death since flexibility and appropriate response is sine qua non to life. Dualistically and egotistically, the idea of freedom becomes perverted when it is understood only as it’s possible expression - with “my-self” arising only in opposition to others. The enlightened understanding of the representation called “self” is that it is only a fictional character that we believe necessarily participates in creating one’s existence. Biochemist Mae Wan-Ho describes this state of freedom as such follows: “I venture to suggest, therefore, that a truly free individual is a coherent being that lives life fully and spontaneously, without fragmentation or hesitation, who is at peace with herself and at ease with the universe as she participates in creating, from moment to moment, its possible futures.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ho M. W. (1996). The Biology of Free Will. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 3, 231-244.