

Dividing Existence – Duality Chapter 12 in 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 Gallestro Green.

## CHAPTER12

### Dividing Existence – Duality

*“ . . . the world is steeped in the notion of duality. It grasps either this end, or the other end. Hard it is for the world to understand the stance of the arahant couched in the cryptic phrase, 'neither here nor there nor in between the two'. The worldling is accustomed to grasp either this end or the other end.”<sup>1</sup>*

~ Bhikkhu K. Nānananda

*“We experience ourselves and the world as subject and object only through conceptualization and language. This dualism, however, is only mental and not real. Mind produces this subject-object dualism. The subjectivity of our mind affects our perceptions of the world.”*

~Tom Arnold<sup>2</sup>

*Awakening is the discovery that the  
apparently objective is in fact “subjective,”  
and the apparent entity has disappeared  
with the total appearance.*

~ Wei Wu Wei<sup>3</sup>

### **The dualistic perception: The separation of subject and object**

One of the Buddha's most significant insights created through his Awakening to 'Pure awareness' was that the *self* is developed by a complementary dualist perspective and this distinction between a subject and object is an arbitrary convention. Nonetheless, there is no denying that the belief of the innate substantiality of separation of subject and object is

extremely persistent. As professor A. J. Diekman suggests, “*In fact, our experience is fundamentally dualistic—not the dualism of mind and matter—but that of the I and that which is observed.*”<sup>4</sup> Yet, if the separation of subject and object is a fallacy, then why do people persist in viewing the world this way?

There may be several reasons why this is so. As we have seen in the Buddha’s analysis of the Khandhas and his six-stage theory of the perceptual process, one reason relates to the fact that once we begin to consciously discriminate our initial sense experience, we make a subject and object separation and differentiation; there is always a bifurcation, a dichotomy. In our perceptual experience, we cannot avoid dividing it into perceived object and perceiving subject because of the human mind’s predisposition to understand the world by breaking it into smaller, more manageable pieces. Perception can be understood as the process of sensing, categorizing, and labeling the world in order to make sense of it. For psychologist William James, this discrimination is the result of attention, which is a process of selection: “*Out of what is in itself an indistinguishable, swarming continuum, devoid of distinction or emphasis [...] Attention [...] picks out certain sensations as worthy of notice, choosing those that are signs to us of things which happen practically or aesthetically to interest us, to which we therefore give substantive names and to which we give the status of independence and dignity.*”<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, human attention has a limited capacity. The focus of attention is often described by psychologists as a moving searchlight which enhances or brings into awareness certain categories at the expense of others. For example, while scanning a crowd for a friend’s face, attention helps the observer to focus on the idea of their friend, including what they look like and so forth, while ignoring irrelevant features of the crowd. And as everyone knows, if one is not paying attention, we can easily fail to perceive people and objects right in front of our faces! This phenomenon is known as inattentional blindness<sup>6</sup>, and it demonstrates that it isn’t until a sensation is cognitively recognized, named, and interpreted that it moves into the realm of perception. It also highlights the fact what we see is very much influenced by what we expect to see, which in turn depends on how we categorize the world.

Applying the preceding analysis of attention and awareness to concepts of the self, one begins to see how the innate capacities and limitations of the human brain play a role in establishing the self as an entity separate from its environment—if we can only attend to a few features or objects at a time, this

tends to emphasize and highlight their separateness. A similar logic is applied when the mind turns its perceiving and categorizing apparatus back upon itself. As we have seen in the Buddha's analysis of the Khandhas and his six-stage theory of the perceptual process, once we begin to consciously discriminate our initial sense experience, we cannot avoid the further step of dividing experience into perceiving subject and perceived object. If there is something seen, then there has to be one who sees. However, we do not merely perceive external object: We simultaneously perceive ourselves in the act of perceiving the object! The object represents the content of one's knowing, while our perception of the subject (i.e. my perception of *me*) provides a clue about the underlying structure or schemata of one's knowing. There are then two aspects of this core, integral event—two poles (subject/object) with consciousness linking them together. After all, where there is an object of perception, there is a subject. Thus, in some sense the concept of self is implied by all of our sensory experiences.

We have seen that the human tendency to categorize and classify, combined with the limits of human perception and attention, naturally lead us to postulate a distinction between subject and object. Having established the psychological reality of this separation, what is the nature of this construct we refer to as the 'self'? If one rejects Cartesian mind/body dualism (as almost all modern scientists and philosophers do), one accepted view becomes that all cognitive processes, including those giving rise to the idea of the self, are emergent properties of lower level physical processes within our brains and extended nervous systems. When physical systems of certain type reach a certain level of sophistication, we gain the ability to think symbolically about the world, and this includes thinking about ourselves, i.e. developing a self-symbol. The self-symbol then becomes a belief or representation of itself as a unifying principle that links and is constant through all of an individual's experiences.

Another important aspect of our self-representation is its apparent status as a causal agent. With respect to the events inside our own heads, while thoughts seem to cause actions, but we cannot perceive the complex dynamics which cause thoughts to occur—they seem to spontaneously spring forth from our deepest inner natures. We postulate the self and its various properties in part to explain why we think and act as we do (e.g. I didn't run from danger

because I'm a brave person). Similarly, Rothstein conceptualized *I* experience as “*the self-representation as agent*” because it “*conceives of itself as existing actively to pursue and insure its well-being and survival.*”<sup>7</sup> Thus our sense of self is further bolstered by our sense of agency.

While our belief in self becomes fixed, the nature of our self-representation is not static. Recall the formula from the previous chapter: “*Dependent on the eye and forms, brethren, arises eye-consciousness; the concurrence of the three is contact.*” In this linking function, consciousness abides or dwells in the contact between the eye and forms until the focus moves on to something else. Another way of putting this is that because attention has a limited capacity, we can only be conscious of a small number of distinct objects or categories at any particular moment. The extent of the dwelling of consciousness then comes to depend on the strength of attachment and craving or aversion as applied by the self's volition. That is to say, objects, people, or situations which have previously been rewarding or useful and the opposite being aversive and harmful to our biological organism will tend to draw our attention towards them. These concepts become integrated into our self-concept by association. For example, one's preference for a favorite piece of music may feel like an important part of one's self. Notice that throughout this process, the self remains a purely hypothetical construct. There is no substantive reality to this self, but it remains useful shorthand. It's much easier to say ‘I love this piece of music’, postulating a self at the center of the experience, than to ‘This piece of music stimulated pleasure centers in the brain of the organism who is presently speaking’.

To summarize, we each represent many different concepts and categories in our brains. Of all these concepts, arguably the most developed and extensive is the concept of *I* or *me*, which is connected in some fashion to ALL of our perceptions. The concept becomes associated with countless other sensory impressions to varying degrees, such as the taste of one's favorite foods, the sound of favorite song, or the images of loved ones. However, despite its apparent centrality, the meaning of self remains difficult to pin down. Like all concepts, it only gains meaning in relation to other concepts.

### **The cognitive mirror: resonating with others**

In addition to thinking about the self, people also show the ability to entertain thoughts and ideas regarding other people, who are assumed to have internal selves analogous to our own. When we are aware of other people's actions, emotional expression and experienced sensations, we firstly recognize a given behavior through the senses, which is subsequently interpreted and logically analyzed with our cognitive apparatus. We perceive others' behavior as immediately meaningful because it is directly linked onto the neural assemblies which preside over our own lived experience of the same behaviors, (our actions, emotions, and sensations). With these 'mirroring' processes, we are somewhat neutral about the identity of the subject/object and, quite easily, through a shared functional state, the 'other' becomes 'another self,' a 'like-me', who yet still maintains his or her 'other' character. The degree to which we can imagine these other selves is quite clearly dependent on experience. For example, it is much easier to imagine what a close loved one is thinking or to predict how they will behave compared to a complete stranger.

The self-other distinction has long fascinated neuroscientists in addition to philosophers, and in recent times technology has improved to the point that we can directly observe certain brain processes corresponding to the self-other bifurcation process. Apparently, there are at least two large-scale neural networks that are involved in thinking about the relationship of self and other. The first network includes areas of the frontal and parietal cortex, which provides the basis for bridging the gap between the physical self and others through simulation mechanisms that show similar neuron activation when an individual performs an action or simply observes another person performing the same action. Neurons (i.e. brain cells) which behave in this manner have been dubbed 'mirror neurons' because the brain seems to be sympathetically mirroring the observed actions in a kind of mental simulation.<sup>8</sup> The second network involves cortical midline structures which engage in processing information about the self and others in more abstract, evaluative terms. Recent evidence of the significance of our brain neural structures in the bifurcation process is supported by the discovery of the mirror-neuron system. This indicates that the neural systems of midline structures and mirror neurons show that self and other are two sides of the same coin, whether their physical interactions or their most internal mental processes are examined.

The mirror system provides a basis for identifying and, to a degree, sharing the experiences of others. As the experiences of the other are shown to

be shared with the self, the previously clear separation between self and other appears less distinct. *According to my model, when we witness the intentional behavior of others, embodied simulation generates a specific phenomenal state of 'intentional attunement'*<sup>9</sup> his phenomenal state in turn generates a peculiar quality of identification with other individuals, produced by establishing a dynamic relation of reciprocity between the 'I' and the 'Thou.' By means of embodied simulation we do not just 'see' an action, an emotion, or a sensation. Side-by-side with the sensory description of the observed social stimuli, internal representations of the body states associated with these actions, emotions, and sensations are evoked in the observer, 'as if' he or she were doing a similar action or experiencing a similar emotion or sensation. That enables our social identification with others. To see others' behavior as an 'action' or as an experienced emotion or sensation specifically requires such behaviors to be mapped according to an isomorphic format. Such mapping is embodied simulation. Thus we see how private mental states can in fact be approximated.

In other words, the mirror system provides one pathway to understanding the mental life of others by simulating the experience of the other using one's own cognitive machinery. In this way, some of what we perceive of others' behaviors is immediately made meaningful because, by means of mental simulations, they are directly linked onto the same neural assemblies which preside over our own lived experiences of the same behaviors. At the same time, this helps explain why it is easier to relate to some people than to others. Although mirror responses are somewhat neutral about the identity of the subject, mirror responses are more robust when the observer has more experience performing the action in question. For example, in one study skilled basketball players showed stronger mirror neuron activity in their premotor cortex (an area involved in planning actions) compared to novices when they watched a video of another person shooting baskets.<sup>10</sup> This sits well with the intuitive idea that the ease with which we can step into another's shoes depends on their similarity to ourselves.

To summarize, when we are aware of the actions of others, including emotional expressions and the sensations they experience, we first start with a sensory recognition of a given behavior which must be interpreted and logically analyzed with our cognitive apparatus. The ease with which we

represent the other person as another self, a 'like-me', who yet maintains his or her 'other' character, seems to depend on our ability to reenact their experiences within our own action systems. Through this process, the subject or viewer then has the ability to simultaneously reflect upon the other as well as their own past actions as an agent with a certain amount of discernment. This ability to reflect on oneself through the eyes of another is very important. In the Buddha's Eightfold Path of meditation, the process of reflecting on our thoughts and actions is recognized as the starting point for behavioral changes. And without discernment, change would be impossible.

### **The relationship of subject to object**

Approaching the issue from a cognitive science perspective, Scott Kelso and David Engstrom explain the dynamical nature of thought thusly:

*“Thinking – the creation of information in the mind – is a transient nonstationary dynamic process. It corresponds to a flow of converging ‘perchings’ (integrative phase-locking tendencies and individuation of brain areas) and diverging ‘lights’ (segregative decoupling tendencies and individuation of brain areas). Both tendencies are crucial: the former to create thoughts, feelings – information in general; the latter to release individual brain areas to participate in other acts of cognition and emotion. To be stuck in a phase-locked state is to be temporarily “trapped in thought,” to be depressed in affect, in one stationary state or another, the limited repertoire of either/or... [complementary] pairs are fundamentally dynamical. There is no attraction without repulsion, no stability without instability, no persistence without change, etc.”<sup>11</sup>*

The preceding passage highlights how closely the scientific explanation of complementary brain dynamics parallels descriptions based on the fact of dependent origination (nothing exists independently of other things) of the Buddha's teachings. Our cognitive apparatus depends on a variety of complementary processes. Attention, for example, is accomplished through a combination of excitation and inhibition of neural connections. Another example is the perception of bi-stable images. A famous example is “My Wife and My Mother-In-Law”, an ambiguous visual image which can be perceived as either a beautiful young woman or an old hag, but which is very difficult to see as both at once.<sup>12</sup>



Figure 1 “My Wife and My Mother-In-Law”, a famous bi-stable image showing how visual perception can be tricked.

It is important not to lose sight of the underlying unity of complementary psychological processes. In particular, let us focus on the sensation that the subjective and objective components of experience are somehow opposite or irreconcilable processes. The argument to be made here is that the subjective and objective are really two complementary sides or poles of a single process. As Hamilton explains, *‘The entire world of experience is one which is comprised of the polarity between subjectivity and objectivity. [...] The subjectivity and objectivity are mutually dependently originated [...] the subjective and objective aspects of our experience are in fact the linked “poles” of a single process.’*<sup>13</sup>

### ***I observing me***

As has already been noted, the act of observation immediately suggests a distinction between the observer and what is to be observed. Paradoxically, when one tries to observe the subjective self or *I*, it immediately becomes an object. Here we have a similar sort of observer effect as has been described in quantum mechanisms, where the act of observing a substance causes the substance to change behaviors, thus frustrating attempts at objective description. This may be one reason why self-knowledge is so difficult. In any case, the act of self-observation leads to an artificial splitting of the self into two components, the subjective *I* (self as subject) and the objective *me* (self as object). Of course, the subjective and objective self imply each other—that is, there could not be a ‘me’ without an ‘I’, yet though the acts of perception and verbal labeling we establish the subject ‘I’ and object ‘me’ as somewhat distinctive concepts.

Early in life, a child’s developing self-concept arises directly from this

bifurcated, dualistic view of the self, whose roots lie in the *I* and *me* distinctions which are embedded in the structure of the human language the child is acquiring. One way to characterize the observed *me* (self as object) would be to say that it is the idea we construct about ourselves as a result of our many interactions with the world. For example, if a young woman observes that a particular young man often smiles at her, this informs the woman about the young man's emotional state ('he likes me'), but also informs her about herself ('I am likeable'). While our idea of *me* may be more or less accurate within certain contexts, it is a fluid proposition at best. In any case, by interacting with the world, we come to form an internal model of the world, as well as an internal model of ourselves as we understand ourselves as situated in the world (Moeller, 2011). This system of interrelated observations constitutes a feedback loop of sorts. Not only by interacting with others, or even simply perceiving them, do we change them, also, in the act of changing others, we also change ourselves. One can see that the subjective self, far from being independent or cut off from the objective world, interacts with it continually. Kelso and Engstrom depict the concept of complementary relationships as follows:

*"The complementary aspects of a complementary pair (subject/object) are fundamentally mutual. They are distinguishable but coexistent. They are co-emergent, co-defining and complicated. Being mutually coupled, complementary aspects are also dynamic: they flow in and out of each other in subtle and seemingly mysterious ways. What one perceives affects what one does and what one does affects what one perceives. What we want influences what we think about and what we think about influences what we want."*<sup>11</sup>

Where does this leave us regarding the true nature of self? For the Buddha, the interconnectedness that the previous examples demonstrate is all-embracing. To see the connectedness of all things is to see that no one thing has an independent existence. Thus, to understand *anything* (including the self), one must understand that every phenomenon is the result of a combination of conditions. The Buddha teaches that *pure experience* is the integral unit of awareness or consciousness. This preverbal awareness of our existence is prior to any concept or opinion about the self, and any attempt to conceptualize and integrate the insight using words comes later. In fact, the moment we attempt to put a label on our subjective or core experience, for example using the words "self", "I", "me", or "mine", we find that each of these

limited notions fails to capture the reality of our core experience. The self is truly not something that can be so easily defined, nor can it easily be identified with a particular brain structure or cognitive process. There are simply too many mutually dependent moving parts for an analytic understanding to be possible. Perhaps another way of putting this is to say that, to understand the nature of no-self, one must give up on labels and grasp the whole. At the moment of enlightenment the subject and object evaporate into nothing.

### **The stratification of *I* and *mine***

In this section, we explore some implications of dualistic perceptions, and explain how a dualistic perception can be self-sustaining. As Vitaliano (2000) cogently states, “*Dualism is the act of severance, cutting the world into seer and seen, knower and known [...]with the occurrence of the primary dualism, man’s awareness shifts from the non-dual universal consciousness (pure experience) to his physical body.*”<sup>14</sup> We normally function on this dualistic level, which means that we are continuously making complementary distinctions between concepts like tall and short, good and bad, hard and soft, subject and object.

In conventional ways, the dualistic level of thinking is absolutely indispensable. Distinguishing useful categories is a critical to progress in science, and by carving the world apart into different categories, deliberation and choices became possible as well as the pursuit of desires. Mental categories referring to (more or less) static concepts also help organize deliberate behavior. However, these things come at a cost. Our cognitive apparatus is so preoccupied with the belief of a self that stands separate (or above) the rest of nature that we become fixated with the illusion of a substantiality and static identity and existence. We miss the point that all of life is a dynamic process. That is, we live in a world of concepts and ‘I’ rather understanding the essence of ‘emptiness’ as a truth. This has numerous negative consequences. Due to our need to impose order on our environment, we seek and then often come to believe in causes for what are actually non-local. Worse, we may commit violence against others or against nature out of a desire to control and exploit for ‘self’ gain, forgetting that the self is a static illusion and instead the universe and world in which we are embedded in operates on an ecological,

interdependent mode so our selfish is always harmful, short sighted and extremely limited in scope.

Our sense of separation from the world is also intimately tied to expressions of desire. According to Buddha's psychology, once the self is identified, the prolific process of conceptualization with its complex ramifications takes hold. The concept of *I* along with its complementary notion, *not I*, leads to measuring, comparison and value judgment. As Bhikkhu Nananda explained in his collection of 33 sermons, *Nibbana - the mind stilled*<sup>1</sup>, we see in the Buddha's psychology how the intrusion of the self into the previously undifferentiated field of sense perception leads to expressions such as, 'delighted in', 'craving', 'asserting', and 'clinging to'. These cravings, conceits, and opinions further reinforce the distinction between subject and object. Already when one says, 'This is mine,' one has discriminated between the *this* and *I*, making them into separate realities. Only when there is an *I*, can something exist relative to that *I*, and that something, if it is *there*, is where *I* am not present, or is at a distance from *me*. If it is *yonder*, or over *there*, perhaps it is nearer to you who is in front of me. And if it is *here*, it is beside me. From these examples we can see how the original split between subject and object spawns a multitude of different points of view, likes, and dislikes. These feelings lead to cravings and aversions, and in this way we quickly divide up our existence.

The more accustomed we become to the idea of ourselves as separate from everything, the more locked in this idea becomes. Because we feel estranged from the rest of the existence which constitutes all that is not *me*, we feel insecure. We desire permanence and hence security. This leads to futile attempts to establish permanent ideals as opposed to embracing continuous dynamic unfolding of life. Static concepts describe forms which are exactly defined because they are unchanging. This facilitates the records of memory through the repetition of mental processes. The record of the past tends to determine the present. Hence, the division of the world into categories is self-sustaining. Filtered through the self-matrix, by far the most virulent and crystallized of these static concepts are inflexible, dogmatic views.

Summarizing this section, the notion of an independent self, awakens at the stage of sensation awareness and the duality develops until it is fully crystallized and justified at the conceptual level. However, normally we don't

recognize it has an intrusion because we regard the subject-object relationship as the very essence of cognition. So, in an oversimplification, what begins as a complex, conditionally arisen physiological process, develops into abstract conceptions of subject and object. The concepts of *I* and *me* are then superimposed on the complex contingent process and serves as a convenient short-hand device. However, to repeat, there is nothing substantial corresponding to these concepts. They are, instead, cognitive constructions, albeit constructions with far-reaching implications.

### **The Vortex and the homeostatic dynamic**

Amid all this discussion of the illusory nature of the self-other distinction, it is important to recognize at this juncture that Buddha did not dispute the reality that humans are biological organisms possessing particular features and embedded in particular environments. Indeed, there is no denying the biological boundaries which separate the insides of an organism's body from its outside, and normal biological functioning requires proper maintenance of organisms' insides. Harkening back to the immunology discussion from chapter one, homeostatic processes are essential to all life, and some of these processes even require implicitly distinguishing the body of the organism from other types of objects. Interestingly, even plants have a primitive form of self-recognition, such that the roots belonging to related plants show fewer competitive interactions compared to the roots of two non-related plants<sup>15</sup> One might ask: If homeostatic processes are real, why is the self-other distinction considered to be an illusion? The answer is that homeostasis is simply a physical process. The plant which behaves as if it recognizes the roots of its kin makes no claims to be separate and independent from the rest! The Buddha's objection to dualist perspectives has little to do with the existence of physical boundaries, and more to do with the construction and propagation of a persistent, abstract self.

As another way of illustrating this point, let us consider a metaphor for the self. In Buddha's teachings, he describes how the belief of a self is comparable to a vortex or whirlpool. A whirlpool does indeed exist in the sense that it can be observed and certain measurements can be taken. It even has physical boundaries, as one can discern its edges. However, it clearly has no

existence independent from the medium (air or water) in which it manifests. Furthermore, the material of which it is made continually changes, as the water molecules flow in and out of the vortex. The same is true of biological organisms, as the cells which make up the physical substrate of our bodies are continually dying and being replaced.



Figure 2 The vortex, a metaphor for the everchanging self

The self-as-vortex metaphor also evokes the tension which comes about as a consequence of the subject/object duality. A vortex reflects a conflict between something *internal* and something *external*, a *tangle within* and a *tangle without*. Enlightenment brings about cessation of a vortex through insight into the false nature of the separation of duality. Release from this duality is at the same time release from grasping, attachment, and identification; hence, also selfishness, greed, and hate. When a vortex ceases, all those conflicts subside and a state of peace prevails. What remains is the boundless great ocean, with no delimitations of a here and a there. It is a solitude born of full integration. The insight and mental state of pure emptiness undercuts clinging attachments and suffering, and instead, compassion and happiness are able to be nourished and brought to bear. Thus the conflict between subject and object and the tangle in between is revolved.

All of this refers to a psychological process and is therefore clearly in the purview of understanding in psychology. Unfortunately, this is always a difficult topic for the untrained, because it creates a lot of confusion to say that emptiness is a state of mind. We are so accustomed to our dualistic thinking that it is not easy to transcend this characteristic of our existence. However, the ultimate goal of the Buddha's Eightfold Path is Awakening—to understand the workings of the subjective, relative basis of polarity and transcend to a non-dualistic experience or Emptiness. Thus we go beyond the normal boundary markers between self and other, opening ourselves to the reality of our profound interconnectedness with all that is.

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