

## Self as Construction

*“The truth is that all things are impermanent and there is nothing that can be characterized as the self!”*

~ The Buddha

*“Man, to the extent that he is able to construe his circumstances, can find for himself freedom from their domination. It implies that man enslaves himself with his own ideas and then wins freedom again by reconstruing his life”*

~ George Kelly<sup>1</sup>

### **What is the self, and how do we know it?**

What is the self, and how do we know it? Of all the categories and concepts in Western psychology’s mental lexicon, none are as well-known or as deemed so central to psychological well-being as the concept of I and me. Yet despite this centrality, or perhaps because of it, grasping the true character of our inner nature is a daunting task. Indeed, many theories have been proposed to explain the development of personality and to account for differences between individuals. The question has understandably preoccupied philosophers and psychologists for a long time, and most readers probably have their own ideas about the subject as well. The concept of the self often conjures up thoughts of an immaterial soul or essence of a person, a non-physical entity which generates mental activity. However, both traditional Buddhist thought and much of modern science reject this idea. In fact, a more nuanced objective view of the self-emerging in Western science is that it is a biologically based organizing principle expressed as an abstraction through meaning constructing psychological processes.

While the Buddha emphasized, more than most of Western psychology, the impermanence and process-nature of the human personality, he also admitted to a functional unity which is in reality what contemporary psychologists often refer to as personality. In this case a personality is something more but not independent of the parts: not the body, not the perceptual function, not feeling, etc., but the very special combination of them. In this chapter, we will examine the self as a dynamic process, drawing

comparisons between the Buddha's teachings and a selection of theories developed by psychologists in the Western empirical tradition.

## **Self-knowledge**

Since the self-construct is so pervasive in Western society and psychology, this raises a question of how people construct their story of a self. One possibility is that people have direct introspective access to all their mental states. However, this is obviously not the case, as much of the cognitive apparatus operates in the non-conscious mode and even conscious awareness is often based on self-deception. Another way possible way people develop stories about their self is, according to Self-Perception theory, which was developed by psychologist Daryl Bem in the late 1960's, individuals often gain insight into their attitude by observing their own behavioral responses to environmental stimuli: much as a third party observer would do. <sup>2</sup> For example, a person could be unaware that they hold biased attitudes towards certain groups of people until they 'observe' themselves performing an obviously biased action. Another source of information about the self is other people. For example, people often adjust their opinions of themselves based other people's reactions to themselves.

Social Comparison theory describes how people compare themselves to others to learn what characteristics make them unique. In 1902, Charles Cooley coined the term 'the looking glass self'<sup>4</sup> and theorized that a person's self grows out of their social interactions with others. In this case, our view of ourselves grows out of reflection on others' reactions to us. Therefore, our construction of our view of ourselves does not come directly from actual characteristics, but rather from how we believe others see us. People also evaluate themselves by comparing their lives with the lives of others. Naturally, these social comparisons have the potential to make us feel either superior or inferior. While cognitive biases (which will be explored later in more detail) may offer some protection to our self-esteem, it is often defensive and at the expense of more accurate self-knowledge. For example, people tend to attribute other people's behavior to enduring traits (e.g. Joe was late for the meeting because he is lazy) while believing that their own behaviors are primarily the results of external contingencies (e.g. I was late for the meeting because of a terrible traffic jam). This is known as social psychology as the 'fundamental attribution error'. Psychologists have identified many related self-enhancing strategies

which individuals often use to help cope with perceived negative self-relevant information. How the way information about the self is organized in memory also plays an important role in shaping self-esteem.

Another influential perspective on how we 'know' or define our self in modern thought is the notion of the narrative self. The narrative self can be thought of as the story of the self, a sort of autobiographical narrative by which we make sense of our lives. In his collection of neurological case-histories, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat and Other Clinical Tales*, neurologist Oliver Sacks describes it this way, "*To be ourselves we must have ourselves – possess, in need be, re-possess – our life-stories. We must 'recollect' ourselves, recollect the inner drama, the narrative, of ourselves. A man needs such a narrative, a continuous inner narrative, to maintain his identity, his self.*"<sup>5</sup>

Neuroscientist Michael Gazzaniga proposed on the basis of his clinical observations of split-brain patients (patients whose left and right hemispheres were surgically separated) that the left hemisphere of the brain may contain an "interpreter" whose function is to generate a narrative which makes sense of all the events in an individual's life, even if it has to distort stories in order to do so.<sup>6</sup>

The concept of the narrative self is closely related to autobiographical memory and therefore to our sense of possessing a continuous identity over time. With its close ties to memory, the narrative self is a dynamic process. In the process of recalling and constructing narratives to explain our lives, we can update our self-image. This brings the re-constructive nature of memory to the forefront. Although memories are ostensibly records of past events, recalling of past events often involves something more than simply bringing up an old record. When we remember past events, we also re-interpret and alter our memories in light of our present-day knowledge. In this way we are each both the author and editor of a continuously unfolding story called the self. The narrative self (not to be confused with the Gazzaniga's proposed interpreter) is notably abstract and may not correspond to any particular neurological process. Therefore, in a sense the narrative self may be viewed as a useful fiction as a personal narrative which over time helps us to organize our lives and predict human behavior. This practical perspective is entirely consistent with the Buddha's psychology.

Interestingly, although many of the psychological theories discussed in this chapter acknowledge that the self is a dynamic, evolving abstraction, most psychologists see no contradiction in discussing how to go about protecting and promoting a healthy 'self' as if it is a substantial presence. The fact that they are discussing a dynamic, evolving cognitive process as if it was a substantial entity is usually not discussed. This approach implies the underlying acceptance and belief in an authentic self. By contrast, Buddhist practices encourage people to bring their feelings in line with the intellectual realization that there is no real permanent "me", so that with time and practice the psychological belief of an innate sense of self greatly diminishes and, perhaps, is completely transcended and equanimity prevails.

### **The dynamic character of personality**

A common psychological construct of personality assumes that individuals are characterized by traits that are relatively consistent across situations and over time. Indeed, consistency is part of what defines a trait. More or less stable personality traits such as how extroverted, or outgoing, a person normally behaves have some utility in describing social interactions. Although there are obviously regularities in the characteristic thoughts and patterns that define a personality, recent research abundantly demonstrates that individual's features show considerable variability across situations, and personality continues to evolve over the lifetime. Psychologists have also begun to pay closer attention to more 'situational' personality characteristics<sup>7</sup> and what they have discovered that personality changes over time, it also highly situational. For some, personality is assumed to have a genetic basis, for this reason, prominent personality theories like the five-factor theory postulate that traits should develop through childhood and stabilize following maturation.<sup>9</sup> However, a more recent large-sample study of personality in adults (aged 21-60) contradicted the hypothesis that personalities are set by genetics. Researchers found that characteristics of conscientious and agreeableness increased throughout early and middle adulthood, and that neuroticism in women (but not men) decreased with age.<sup>10</sup>

By conceptualizing personality as a learned, adaptable system which mediates how the individual selects, construes, processes information and generates behaviors, it becomes possible to account for both the consistency and the flexibility of personality. For example, Cognitive-Affective Personality

System (CAPS) theory provides a comprehensive unifying view, similar to the Buddha's, that accounts for both the variability in the behavioral expressions of personality and the stability in the personality system that generates them.<sup>11</sup> According to CAPS theory, behavior does not result directly from global personality traits, but rather from an interaction between a person and situation. Personality is conceptualized as an organization of cognitive-affective processing structures that become activated when the individual encounters relevant stimulus features. Mischel and Shoda identified five 'cognitive-affective units' which enable people to interact with their environments in fairly stable, yet dynamic ways: encoding strategies, competencies, expectations, goals, and emotional responses. Each of these components can vary across individuals and situations, but the system can generate situation-specific regularities. These regularities within individuals can be represented as an if-then profile. However, the system is also dynamic: Individuals' behaviors generate consequences that in turn affect the psychological features of situations that are subsequently encountered. For example, strategies for encoding or getting information into the memory system for storage and later retrieval can be influenced by the outcomes of past behaviors. Developmentally, the organization of the relations among the cognitive-affective units reflects the individual's learning history in interaction with environmental and genetic-biochemical factors. The System is activated both in reaction to situations as they are experienced, but also receives continuous activation via internal feedback. This may include processes such as reactivation of old memories, long-term planning related to sustained goal pursuit, and mental imagery or daydreaming. This type of internal stimulation can influence how we react to future situations just as surely as external stimulation. In this way, continuous internal and external feedback helps to shape and stabilize the personality system over time.

A particularly interesting feature of CAPS theory from a Buddhist perspective is the realization that personality cannot be understood by studying the individual in isolation from the environment. Instead, the personality, or self, is best understood as an emergent property of an organized system of interacting parts. The description of processes which produce changes in cognitive-affective structure and hence one's reactions to the world (Kamma) is largely compatible with Buddhist teachings. For example, verses 1 and 2 of the Dhammapada scriptures claim that all the mental phenomena are

an outcome of the quality or state of the mind. Each thought or action not only influences the environment but reverberates in the individual's cognitive structures and therefore has potential implications for their future actions. If the mind is occupied with angry, negative thoughts, then that mind experiences suffering, and sorrow and any unguarded actions will reflect the mindset. This is similar to the idea from CAPS theory that reactivated memories and judgments influence how we encode (perceive) and act in future situations.

To summarize, the view of the self as a solid static entity is both precarious and inaccurate. Rather, the self may best be understood as a dynamic cognitive construction. Although the self is insubstantial, the concept has utility in that through its cognitive structure it allows us to make sense of our experiences and generate predictions regarding our own as well as other people's behaviors. We can gain understanding of the empirical self by mindful observation of our internal physical and cognitive processes as well as by mindfully observing our responding to other people and situations. While an individual's personality can be defined as regularities in that individual's thought and behavior, it is not strictly a matter of global dispositions, but is also situation-specific and learns and adapts over time.

Buddhist psychology agrees with many contemporary cognitive approaches to the study of the self with respect to its dynamic structure. Indeed, a central pillar of Buddhist psychology is that the personality does change and with a specific goal-oriented program (the Eightfold Path) we can develop more wholesome and skillful habits of thought and action. However, Buddhist practices diverge from the western tradition in terms of the goals of expanded self-awareness. Whereas western culture and many psychologists traditionally seek to promote a stronger, positive, healthy, and adaptive sense of self ('nothing is more important than a healthy sense of self-esteem and loving yourself'), Buddhist practices prescribe a transformative seeing through the ignorance of believing in the normal worldly invention and expansion of the self which is promoted by identifications.

Instead, in Buddhism one purposefully directs the mind to gain control over one's thoughts, attitudes and desires through mindfulness meditation and other practices. With correct effort and perseverance, these practices lead to positive changes not only in monitoring and altering conscious thoughts, but also unconscious processes which ultimately are the platforms which influence

thoughts and behavior. The end point of this process is awakening or the release from craving, desire, judgment, and dis-ease, at which point the self becomes explicitly known as insubstantial and fictional and with that insight a great burden is lifted from our psychic shoulders. Or as the Buddha is reported to have joyfully exclaimed immediately after Awakening, “*O house-builder, you are seen! You will not build this house again. For your rafters are broken and your ridgepole shattered. My mind has reached the Unconditioned; I have attained the destruction of craving.*” House-builder in this case represents our cognitive tendency to construct a representational self.

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