

THE SELF ILLUSION

By

Anna Barma

Submitted to
Central European University
Department of Philosophy

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

Supervisor: David Weberman

Budapest, Hungary
2014

Abstract

The concern of this thesis is the possible transformation of subjective experience at a deep psychological and emotional level. The argument is that a particular feature of our experience is an illusion. This feature is what in Indian philosophy called *atman*, and can be translated as self. This self can be characterized as an unchanging, persistent, unified, substantial subject, or in terms of the experience of ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘mine’. The contribution of Buddhist philosophy is the claim that the self is an illusion inasmuch as there is nothing in our experience, if we pay very close attention to it, which in fact corresponds to this idea of self. I defend that the Buddhist denial involves not merely a refutation of a narrow and irrelevant conceptualization of the self, but a relevant aspect of our experience – which is what makes transformation possible upon losing the self. Furthermore, the Buddhist denial is not nihilistic, because it implies not an end, but an alteration of experience. This also makes it possible to speak more substantively about the kind of subjectivity ‘left over’ after losing the self – and I do this by drawing on the Daoist philosophy in the *Zhuangzi*, which can be characterized in terms of non-duality or losing the distinction between self and other. However, this does not undermine the need for engaging with the kind of self denied in Buddhism, because that is the very thing which stands in the way of realizing this subjectivity.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor David Weberman for encouraging me and taking an interest in my topic, and for our many meetings which helped me to clarify my position and over time get a deeper understanding of the subject matter. I would also like to thank Curie Virág for her great enthusiasm and taking such an active role in helping me with my thesis, for our many meetings, and for introducing me to other scholars who helped me with the topic. I'm also very grateful to Ferenc Ruzsa for his patience in answering my numerous emails over a period of a few months; Melinda Pap for taking the time to meet with me; Ken Holmes for explaining Buddha-nature to me over Skype; and lastly, Tamás Agócs for sharing with me his understanding of selflessness. I'm very grateful that I could work on this topic. It has been satisfying for me both academically and personally.

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INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I engage with *Theravada* Buddhist, and Daoist views in the *Zhuangzi* on the topic of no-self. Most of my attention is devoted to Buddhism and a large part of the thesis is concerned with presenting the Buddhist ideas. However, I am sympathetic with the claim that there is no self, so a lot of my efforts are directed towards defending and making this idea plausible. In order to defend this position I make a number of supporting claims. Firstly, I would like to defend the relevance of dealing with the particular notion of the self that the Buddhists are arguing against, not simply as a matter of a definitional debate over what kind of thing we should call a self, but as a relevant aspect of experience. That is, I think it would be inappropriate to easily dismiss the kind of self the Buddhist are arguing against as a narrow *concept* and replace it with other notions of the self, because this would be missing out on a key point they make about our *experience*. Furthermore, even if it is possible to characterize selfhood in other ways this does not negate the relevance of engaging with the kind of self denied in Buddhism because it is a minimal and basic experience and is presupposed by other notions of selfhood. That being said, the entire argument of course depends on this being an accurate description of experience. The Buddhist claim is that it is, and that this is the feature of our experience which causes suffering.

Secondly, the relevance of their argument is also that it is by losing this particular aspect of our experience that deep psychological and emotional transformation is possible. Lastly, the possibility of subjective transformation clearly indicates that Buddhism is not a nihilistic philosophy. To say that the self has been lost does not imply the end of experience. It implies a very different kind of experience. This also means that we can speak about this transformed experience more substantively and make claims about the nature of self-less human

experience. Again, however, this does not mean that the Buddhist notion of the self was from the beginning irrelevant, because it is only by losing that aspect of experience which they call a ‘self’ that this transformation is possible. I draw on the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* to further elaborate on the consequences of losing one’s self, touching on topics such as non-duality and the loss of the self/other distinction.

In Buddhist philosophy, the kind of self that is argued to be an illusion is the Brahmanical *atman*¹. The characteristics of such a self is that it is substantial, unchanging, persistent, unified and one’s essence. Although various psycho-physical properties change the *atman* is something which remains unchanging. The *atman* has further properties, like its being eternal and identical with the underlying nature of reality – *brahman*. However, the Buddha also argues against a kind of self which does not fulfill all the qualities of *atman*. That is, he is targeting something which is presupposed by our linguistic usage, ways of behavior, thinking and feeling which don’t go as far as affirming *atman*. According to the Buddha, this self is what is responsible for all our suffering, regardless of the cultural context or the specific religious theory we subscribe to.

Granting that this kind of self is indeed an aspect of our experience, the Buddha makes some arguments against the veridicality of such a self. Here it should also be emphasized that in arguing against *atman*, the Buddha is making not a metaphysical, but a psychological claim. Firstly, he argues that the self has to be something which is within experience – he is not interested in theoretical speculations about an ineffable self, because his purpose is to affect the way people experience themselves, thus helping to eradicate suffering. And in fact he thinks it *is* something we experience: it is the feeling ‘I am’. He then argues that in fact an unchanging self is not to be found within experience, because all of our feelings are

¹ As there are many Buddhist traditions and perspectives, I will focus on *Theravada* Buddhism and whenever I speak of ‘the Buddhists’ I mean the Buddhists of the *Theravada* tradition.

constantly changing. So the feeling ‘I am’ is out of place, because there is nothing within the flux of experience of which it is reasonable to say ‘this is me’.

Secondly, he argues that there is no substantial, independent self, because everything within our experience is causally conditioned. So, there is no place for a substantial and independent self ‘over and above’ the flux of causally interrelated psycho-physical elements, which are more fully explained as the five aggregates. Furthermore, he argues that the self is just an ‘idea’ arising, out of ignorance, within the activity of the five aggregates. The idea of self is also called a concept; a view – which is a claim that it is a way of apprehending the changing flux of the five aggregates; and a construct, because it is a ‘superimposition’ or a ‘projection’ on what is actually going on. The self, then, amounts to the feeling ‘I am’; the experience and corresponding belief that we are lasting, unchanging subjects, which despite all the changes remain the same person; and an idea arising out of ignorance within our psycho-physical constituents. For these reasons the self is claimed to be an illusion.

The Buddha, then, is arguing against a very particular notion of the self, which he claims is a part of our experience, present as an illusion. Of course, this is a very minimal kind of self and fuller and different notions could be explored. Doing that, however, would not replace the need to engage with the kind of self that the Buddha is arguing against because it is a part, and not an insignificant or irrelevant part of experience, since it shapes our way of being in the world. Furthermore, the minimal self is presupposed by any other fuller conception of the self. Thinkers in the Phenomenological tradition, argue that a minimal sense of self is an inherent structural part of consciousness. The Buddha thinks that the sense of self is dispensable, and furthermore, attachment to self brings about both suffering and greedy self-concern. Deep-seated concern for one’s self is a root of selfishness and strong desires which bring about suffering when unable to be satisfied.

This aspect of experience requires attention, then, even if other notions of selfhood can be used. Furthermore, it should then be clear that this is not a matter of a definitional or conceptual debate over what kind of thing deserves to be called a self, because even if other conceptions can be used this aspect of experience retains its importance. That being said, in Buddhist philosophy many aspects of what we might want to call selfhood are not negated. For example, the five aggregates are psycho-physical elements consisting of sensations, perceptions, desires and other psychological elements. Furthermore, various statements are made about ‘looking within’ or ‘searching for yourself’ and people are analyzed in terms of their psychological traits. By all means, then, it is not a nihilistic philosophy and not a denial of subjectivity, and it allows that we can speak about selfhood more fully. What is rejected is an aspect of subjective experience – that there is a personal locus of identity which is manifested as a persistent, substantial subject over and above experience: the ‘thinker of thoughts’ and the ‘doer of deeds’. And of course this is no small claim, and it challenges the way we experience and think about ourselves. However, the possibility of subjective transformation requires a fundamental restructuring of our experience.

In chapter one I will discuss the kind of self claimed by the Buddha to be an illusion, defending the priority of the minimal subject, and present the Buddha’s arguments against this self. I will defend the relevance of the Buddha’s arguments, discuss the distinction between relative and ultimate truth which allows the use of personal terms in certain contexts and engage with the psychological aspect of attachment thought to be a feature of the self illusion.

In chapter two I will emphasize the importance of ‘no self’ as an experiential realization rather than only a theoretical conviction; I will address ‘who’ it is that has the realization of ‘no self’, and present Miri Albahari’s theory of identification. The claim that a personal, bounded self is created by identifying with impersonal psychophysical elements is applicable

to the minimal self as much as it is also applicable to a narrative identity. So, we will see that there is nothing in experience of which it is reasonable to feel ‘this is me’. Here I will also emphasize the importance of ‘no self’ as an emotional transformation, claiming that the self is not simply a kind of thing in our experience, but a way of being. I will draw on the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi* for further elaboration on the psychological and emotional consequences of losing the self, briefly discussing boundlessness, non-duality and the erasing of self-other distinction as the antithesis of a central, bounded, personal self.

In the third chapter I will draw on the previous discussions to suggest why losing the self is a good thing. Finally, I will conclude by discussing the implications of this view for the possibility of pursuing meaningful projects and performing future directed actions, and briefly indicating the possibility of further study concerning Buddha-nature. My final conclusion is that self and no-self are psychologically and emotionally greatly varying perspectives or subjectivities.

1. THE SELF: WHAT IS LOST?

1.1 Atman

The view that the Buddha is opposing in his no-self argument is the Brahmanical notion of the *atman*. Rupert Gethin (1998) provides a concise characterization: *atman* is something unchanging which underlies the array of the constantly changing experiences we undergo; it is ineffable – “the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker”; it is an inner controller or agent; immortal; one’s essence; beyond suffering; and identical with the underlying ground of reality – *brahman* (pp. 133-134). Steven Collins (1982) expands on this characterization: in the Brahmanical tradition it is thought that the individual is made up of two kinds of components: the psycho-physical components which can be broken down into various elements, which are constantly changing and eternally reconfigure themselves in rounds of rebirth of *samsara*; and the underlying unifying self, or *atman*, the union with which is the aim of soteriological practice (p. 79). Importantly, the essential self is characterized as something “central” – it is “the central element” around which the transient psycho-physical components constantly re-arrange life after life (p. 80). In section 2.5 I will return to considering the consequences of the dissolution of this central self.

The Buddhist response to this analysis of the ‘person’ is that the changing psycho-physical elements exhaust the ‘individual’, and that there is no central unifying self to be found. Whereas the aim of Brahmanical practice is to get closer to this inner self and

ultimately to the underlying ground of reality, *brahman*, the main Buddhist soteriological approach is to attain liberation by extinguishing desire and becoming free of the illusion of self (p. 84)². It is also important to notice here that although the self that the Buddhists are arguing against is characterized as permanent and unchanging, this does not imply that none of its characteristics change. As I say above, they argue against a central element unifying the changing psycho-physical elements. This kind of self could also be characterized as a substance with changing properties.

The Buddha then is arguing against a particular understanding of what it is to have a self. It is important to establish whether his argument has any relevance to anyone who is not committed to this notion. I think that whereas some of the Buddha's arguments target a *belief* in or a *doctrine* of *atman* and show that nothing of the sort really exists, he also, importantly, targets a certain widely-present feature of our *experience*. Regardless of whether we believe there to be an eternal essential self, it is true of our *experience* that we feel that there is an 'I' which is the thinker of thoughts, doer of deeds, which makes plans and performs all kinds of actions, which is unchanging and exists over and above or independently of experiences. The reason to say that the 'I' is unchanging is that even though I clearly recognize, for example, that I have changed a lot since primary school, I still identify with that person. I still think that it was *me* then. This is also the reason why the self is called persistent. It may not be the Brahmanical soul like denied by the Buddha, but nevertheless our self-experience has commonalities with that kind of self – unity, persistence, being the subject of experiences, the sense of 'I' and 'mine'. This kind of self is also substantial inasmuch as it is felt to be a *thing* persisting over time. As such, the denial of the self is primarily concerned with our subjective

² It should be noted that the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice, *nirvana*, is not to be equated with the loss of self. Whereas realization of no self is an important step towards attaining *nirvana*, the latter involves more than this. It is an extinguishing of desire which is much deeper even than the desire involved in being attached to a self illusion. Due to the limitations of my topic and the length of this thesis I will not be addressing the topic of *nirvana*.

experience and the possibility of it being altered, even more importantly than challenging commitments to certain *beliefs* about the nature of the self. It should also be added that the *belief* in *atman* is likely conditioned by this basic experience.

1.2 The Minimal Self

Galen Strawson (2008) thinks that what it means to be or have a self is determined by the phenomenology of selfhood. In answer to the question of how we should establish what we mean by ‘self’, he writes: “[t]he best answer seems to be that we should look to self-experience, because it is self-experience that gives rise to the problem, by giving us a vivid sense that there is such a thing as a self” (p. 40). Finally, he goes on to claim that an accurate rendering of our self experience is that of being:

- (1) a *subject of experience*, a conscious feeler and thinker
- (2) a *thing*, in some interestingly robust sense
- (3) a *mental* thing, in some sense
- (4) a thing that is *single* at any given time, and during any gapless or hiatus-free period of experience
- (5) a *persisting* thing, a thing that continues to exist across gaps or hiatuses in experience
- (6) an *agent*
- (7) something that has a certain character or *personality* (p. 42, his italics)

I think that Strawson is correct in, firstly, looking to experience in determining what a self is and secondly, in his description of self experience. As you can see it closely co-insides with the Buddhist idea that the self is a persistent, substantial, unified, unchanging subject of experience. However, this is a very minimal description of selfhood.

Zahavi and Gallagher (2008) also defend the need to engage with a minimal sense of self when they say that “although there are far more complex forms of self to consider” than then minimal self (minimal because on their view it doesn’t include much more than the sense ‘I’, ‘me’ and ‘mine’), “the experiential notion remains fundamental in the sense that nothing that lacks this dimension deserves to be called a self” and that “experiences and

actions must already be given as *mine* if I am to worry about how they hang together or make up a coherent life-story” (p. 204, 205, my italics)³. This is not to say that the fuller conceptualizations of the self are not important for our ability to navigate in the world and have a meaningful experience – I think they are. However, I think that in our experience of ourselves as selves, the minimal self is most fundamental. This also means that challenging this way in which we experience ourselves has very significant consequences.

1.3 The Buddha’s Arguments against Atman:

It is within this framework that I would like to introduce the Buddha’s arguments. The Buddha makes a number of arguments against the self, but I will focus on two which I find most relevant. One thing that should be made clear is that the Buddhist claims are psychological rather than metaphysical statements. Noa Ronkin (2009) writes that in the Pali *Suttas* the Buddha is not interested in answering metaphysical questions of the nature of reality. His main concern is to help people to become free of suffering (p. 13). Similarly, she writes that in the *Theravada Abhidhamma* the concern is epistemological rather than metaphysical: the preoccupation is with “the conditions of the psychological occurrences that arise in consciousness, and in this sense form one’s ‘world’, not with what exists per se in a mind-independent world” (p. 19). As I will argue in section 2.4, indeed ‘no self’ is a subjective transformation that involves a change in one’s psychological and emotional dispositions. As such, ‘no self’ is a claim about experience and a possible way of apprehending the world. In the following argument we will see that experience is what the Buddha is concerned with. Thus, any conclusions about the self stay in the realm of experience.

³ Zahavi and Gallagher’s description of the minimal self is different from Strawson’s because they commit themselves to much less. Minimal self-experience for them is first-personal phenomenological givenness of experience – that there is something it is like to experience things – in addition to experiences being given as ‘mine’. However, they do think that we experience ourselves as subjects on reflection.

i. *Empirical self*

The first of Buddha's arguments I would like to engage with consists of two claims. Firstly, that if there is a self, it has to be something which is experienced – it goes along with the feeling 'I am', and is not something simply presupposed by and beyond experience. Secondly, on such a view of an empirical self, there is no room in our experience for a permanent unchanging subject. This argument appears in the *Mahanidana Sutta*. The following is a translation of the relevant part of the *Sutta*:

In what ways, Ananda, does one who regards Self regard it? (1) Regarding Self, he regards it to be feeling: "My Self is feeling," or (2) "My Self is not feeling, my Self is without experience," or (3) "My Self is not feeling, but my Self is not without experience, my Self *feels*, it has the attribute of feeling."

(1) Now Ananda, one who says "My Self is feeling" should be told, "There are three kinds of feeling, friend: pleasant, painful, and neither-pleasant-nor painful [neutral]. Which of these three feelings do you regard as Self?" When a pleasant feeling is felt, no painful or neutral feeling is felt, only pleasant feeling. When a painful feeling is felt, no pleasant or neutral feeling is felt, only painful feeling. When a neutral feeling is felt, no pleasant or painful feeling is felt, only neutral feeling.

Pleasant feeling is impermanent, conditioned, dependently originated, subject to destruction, to passing away, to fading away, to cessation. The same applies to painful and neutral feeling. So anyone who, on feeling a pleasant feeling, thinks "This is my Self," must, at the cessation of that pleasant feeling, think "My Self has departed!" The same applies to painful and neutral feeling. Thus, whoever thinks "My Self is feeling" is regarding as Self something that in this present life is impermanent, a mixture of pleasure and pain, subject to arising and passing away. Therefore it is not fitting to maintain "My Self is feeling."

(2) But anyone who says, "My Self is not feeling, my Self is without experience" should be asked, "If, friend, no feeling existed, could there be the thought, 'I am'?" [To this he would have to reply] "No, venerable sir." Therefore, it is not fitting to maintain "My Self is not feeling, my Self is without experience."

(3) And anyone who says, "My Self is not feeling, but my Self is not without experience, my Self feels, it has the attribute of feeling" should be asked, "Well, friend, if all feelings entirely and completely ceased without remainder, could there be the thought 'this am I'?" [To this he would have to reply] "No, venerable sir." Therefore, it is not fitting to maintain "My Self is not feeling, but my Self is not without experience, my Self feels, it has the attribute of feeling."
(Harvey, trans., 2009, p. 271)

In this argument the Buddha firstly presupposes that having a self requires the feeling 'I am'. Arguably, he needs to defend his point because he is just directly contradicting the Brahmanical position that the self is ineffable. The fact that the Buddha is dealing with an

empirical self, however, is an indication that the goal of his philosophy is practical. All of his arguments are concerned with what we do and can possibly experience. Therefore, it is only around that which is within the scope of our experience that he is concerned to build his arguments. In our experience there is the ubiquitous experience of ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘mine’. Furthermore, in our experience there is nothing like a persistent subject. I think the way to understand the Buddha’s position here is that we have the experience ‘I am’, or the feeling ‘this I am’ which forms our self experience. However, if we attend to all aspects of our psycho-physical experience there is nothing to be found of which we could reasonably say or feel ‘this I am’. The self can be compared to a mirage, inasmuch as we can experience a mirage, but it is not the sort of thing that we experience it to be if we are tricked into believing that there is really an oasis in the distance. All there is, then, is the feeling ‘I am’, but no self to be found.

So, he argues that if we equate the self with any type of feeling – either pleasant, or unpleasant, or neutral – then the self would be going in and out of experience as the feelings change. On the other hand, if we said that the self is all of these feelings, then the self would be “a fluctuating mixture of opposites” which is not acceptable for a self (Harvey, p. 270). Furthermore, he claims that if the self is not feeling, but the thing which feels, then again such a view of the self is unacceptable because if all feeling were to cease there could not be the sense ‘I am’ required for there being a self (p. 270). This could either be because the sense ‘I am’ itself should be something experienced, or because there has to be something present in our experience in order for the illusion to arise that ‘this is what I am’. In section 2.4 I will discuss Miri Albahari’s account of identification in which she claims that a personal bounded self is created by identifying with the impersonal elements of experience. This analysis sounds similar to the Buddha’s claim here that the self is apparent in experience as

the feeling ‘I am’. However, Albahari’s analysis includes the narrative self, and not only the minimal self.

At this stage, it is useful to once again re-iterate the difference between the *belief* in a self, and the phenomenological experience of self. In this argument against the self, the Buddha is not willing to consider any notion of the self which could not be found in experience. The belief in a self (like the one postulated in the Brahmanical tradition) can be generated as a result of the sociolinguistic and religious practices of the society one lives in. This is a conscious way of conceptualizing one’s experience and Collins describes it from the Buddha’s perspective as “pointlessly speculative” (Collins, p. 102). On a different level, there is an ‘unconscious’ tendency to experience that there is an “I”, and that experiences are ‘mine’: there is an “automatic, spontaneous way in which the sense of self appears in the psychology of the unenlightened man” (p. 100). This experience, also re-enforced for example, by awareness of our physical individuality, contributes to the convincingness of the belief. For this reason, the path to enlightenment is described as a gradual progression of first losing the belief that there is a self, and with time finally losing the sense of self. Losing the belief in a self can be compared to revising a theory. On the other hand, the restructuring of one’s phenomenological experience requires a much deeper insight and is accompanied by “changes in all levels of mental life, affective and cognitive” (p. 94). So, in some sense, the Buddha’s argument against the Brahmanical view can be reconstructed as accusing them of forming a false theory based on some inherent features of our experience, features which can and should be lost, as they themselves are misguided.

ii. Dependent origination

In the translation of the *Mahanidana Sutta* above, the Buddha also says that all of our feelings are “conditioned, dependently originated”. Dependent origination is another

argument that the Buddha levels against the self. This is an argument against the possibility of an independent subject or self, since everything in experience is interrelated and causally conditioned and can be reduced to a list of “impersonal, conditioned elements” (Collins, p. 104). This is also an argument that the self is an idea or a construct, the origin of which can be traced back to the activity of the impersonal components making up the ‘individual’ – namely, to the fourth aggregate. There is a twelve-fold process (which is sometimes presented differently) of conditioned origination described in the following way:

1. Through ignorance are conditioned volitional actions or karma-formations.
 2. Through volitional actions is conditioned consciousness.
 3. Through consciousness are conditioned mental and physical phenomena.
 4. Through mental and physical phenomena are conditioned the six faculties (i.e., five physical sense-organs and mind).
 5. Through the six faculties is conditioned (sensorial and mental).
 6. Through (sensorial and mental) contact is conditioned sensation.
 7. Through sensation is conditioned desire, 'thirst'.
 8. Through desire ('thirst') is conditioned clinging.
 - 9- Through clinging is conditioned the process of becoming.
 10. Through the process of becoming is conditioned birth.
 - 11 . Through birth are conditioned (12) decay, death, lamentation, pain, etc.
- (Rahula, trans., pp. 53-54)⁴

We do not have to understand all the technical details of this account. The most important point is that the self (the cause of suffering in life) arises through the interrelated causal activity of a number of processes. This is also a reason why the self is said to be constructed. So the self is explained away by giving an exhaustive list of impersonal components which constitute the ‘individual’. These elements can be analyzed in a variety of ways: the five *khandas* (or aggregates) – “body, perception, feeling, mental formations and consciousness” all found in the account above; “the twelve *ayatana*, ‘bases’, which are the five senses (plus mind) and their objects; and the eighteen elements (*dhatu*) which are the senses, their objects, and the resultant sense-consciousness” (Collins, p. 112). In the quotation above you will notice all the five aggregates being mentioned. The reason these elements are

⁴ I leave out the Sanskrit translations of the terms in this passage.

said to be impersonal is simply the fact that they do not belong to a self or a subject. I think the claim is that what makes experience personal is the idea that *someone* is having it, while if we can get rid of the idea of that someone, then the remaining phenomenological givenness of experience can be said to be impersonal.

Walpola Rahula (1959) makes a helpful contribution in further clarifying the conditioned origination argument and explaining how the five aggregates making up a ‘person’ function to create the illusion of self. The five aggregates are matter, sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness (pp. 20-23). I will only provide a brief characterization of the fourth aggregate because it is the one said to be responsible for generating the self idea. I will not address the other aggregates because to gain a real understanding of them would require an indepth study. In addition, a strict characterization of the aggregates is not of highest importance here.

The self in Buddhism is often called a construction, a superimposition, or a “mental projection” (Rahula, p. 52). This mental projection originates in the fourth aggregate of volitional activities. The distinguishing point of volitional activities is that, fuelled by ignorance and desire they produce karmic effects – that is, they causally bring about consequences over which one has a degree of control through intentional action of body, speech and mind. This aggregate is described as “direct[ing] the mind in the sphere of good, bad or neutral activities” and as “mental construction, mental activity” (p. 22). There are 52 kinds of volitional actions – such as “attention”, “will”, “determination”, “confidence”, “desire”, “repugnance or hate”, “idea of self”, etc. (p. 22). The idea of self is classed amongst the volitional activities because together with other mental formations it is responsible for re-generating birth and the continuity of *samsara*.

Whether or not it is easy to make sense of the nature of these different aggregates, I think the first important and relevant point made by the Buddhists is that these components entirely exhaust what there is to ‘an individual’, and don’t include a persistent unchanging self. The second important point is that the self is an idea – it is an idea arising as part of the fourth aggregate, of mental formations. All that is going on is that the five aggregates continuously appear and disappear in constant flux and in a causal interrelationship with one another. This activity of the five aggregates as an interdependent psycho-physical happening convincingly creates the illusion that there is an ‘I’, not least because the aggregates appear in a fairly constant pattern (Gethin, p. 142). However, “this is only a false idea, a mental formation, which is nothing but one of those 52 mental formations of the fourth Aggregate” (Rahula, p. 26).

The difficulty is to understand how impermanence and interconnectedness lead to the conclusion that there is no *subject* of experience in the sense of a substantial entity, *someone* who has the various attributes of experience. For example Galen Strawson (2000), even though he is willing to give up the idea of a *persistent* subject nevertheless maintains that each momentary experience is had by a subject. On his view the illusion of a persistent subject is created because the subject of each moment appropriates something of the content of experience of the subject of the previous moment (p. 47). However, I think the reason that dependent origination is an argument against not just a changeless element in experience, but also a subject is that our experience of subjectivity is of something which is independent of the experiences it is undergoing. That is, we think of a subject, even if influenced by experiences, nevertheless as something which is independent of them. However, conditioned arising and the reduction of an ‘individual’ to the five aggregates show that there is no independent experiencer – that there simply is constant causal interrelationship which part of its activity creates an illusion of self.

Furthermore, I'm not sure how a substantial subject over and above experiences could be made sense of, particularly if we grant, as Strawson does, that experience is constantly changing. Then what could be this subject which is constantly re-generated and comes in and out of existence? What would be its relation to thought? A necessary condition for thought? The observer? The controller? Does it really *have* to be there in order for the thought to be there? The fact that there is consciousness or awareness – that is, that thought is phenomenologically experienced – does not yet imply the stronger conclusion of a substantial, if fleeting subject. It is of the nature of consciousness – one of the components of 'a person' – that things are phenomenologically given – unlike it is for insentient things. However, that is simply a peculiarity of consciousness. Why does that have to imply an independent *subject* of these experiences, a '*someone*' distinguishable from them? Is such a view really so difficult to give up, if we really reconsider our experience?

1.4 Relevance of the Buddha's arguments

Now, the Buddha offers an argument against a very specific notion of the self, and we may or may not agree with his arguments, but we may also not agree with his idea of what the self is. We might want to conceptualize the self in a different way and find the idea of a persistent, unchanging, substantial subject as a very narrow and limited idea of the self, and therefore naturally dispensable. Why is the Buddha going to so many efforts to deny it if it is not such an interesting idea of the self anyway? I would disagree with the assessment that the Buddha's understanding of the self is only narrowly applicable and that it is of little interest outside of a specific socio-historical framework and can be replaced by other conceptions. For one, at least in the Phenomenological tradition as I will discuss more fully in section 2.3 the minimal self is defended as the most basic structure of consciousness. Even though the

Phenomenologists do not emphasize persistence and the unchanging quality of the subject, they nevertheless emphasize the experience of ‘I’ and ‘mine’.

I would also add that we may want to conceptualize the self in many ways, through a number of sociological, psychological or philosophical lenses. However, regardless of the way we chose to think about the self the question is, as emphasized by Strawson, whether this would capture our self *experience*. Indeed, the self claimed to be an illusion in Buddhism is a very minimal self, but it is claimed to be the fundamental basis of experience. Even a broader lens of narrative identity depends on this fundamental aspect which shapes our way of being to such a great extent. I will give further attention to the way the self shapes our experience in sections 2.4 and 2.5, where I will also claim that it is precisely by losing this aspect of experience that transformation is made possible. In addition this self is precisely that aspect which is responsible for causing suffering, according to Buddhist philosophy which is another aspect of its relevance.

Rupert Gethin (1999) also defends the relevance of the Buddha’s arguments by saying that our linguistic practices betray belief in an enduring self such as what the Buddha argues against. We say for example, that it is the same ‘I’ or ‘me’ who went to primary school and high school and is now a university student. Even though my circumstances may have changed and many of my characteristics too, it is nevertheless the same ‘me’ who has the new characteristics. He writes:

Linguistic usage and no doubt certain emotional and psychological circumstances predispose us to an understanding of personal identity and selfhood in terms of an ‘I’ that exists as an autonomous individual and who has various experiences. In this way I assume-perhaps unconsciously-that although *my* experiences may vary there is something – me – that remains constant. In other words, it only makes sense to talk in terms of my having experiences if there is a constant ‘I’ that can somehow be considered apart from and separately from those experiences. (p. 135)

This aspect of our experience – of an unchanging persistent subject – is not the only thing which characterizes our self experience and is of relevance. Another one is egoism or selfishness – that is, strong attachment to this ‘I’ which makes us care very much about it, in the first place, and above everyone and everything else. With respect to this second point, Gethin writes:

[F]or Buddhist thought, to understand the world in terms of self is not only to see it wrongly but to be led by greed, desire, and attachment. One's sense of 'self' springs not only from delusion, but from the desire to identify and claim some part or parts of the universe as one's own, as one's possession, and say of them 'this is mine, I am this, this is my self'. To identify with the five aggregates, either collectively or individually, is a kind of conceit-the conceit 'I am'.
(pp. 146-7)

This attachment to self occurs at a very deep psychological and emotional level – and the range of attachment extends from our deep investment into being certain kinds of people and identifying with those personas, but also, even to existence itself (Gethin, p. 147).

The illusory self, then, is a pertinent aspect of experience which deeply shapes our way of being in the world. However, in denying the self the Buddhists do not negate subjective experience in its entirety. They only claim that a certain aspect of experience is an illusion, maintaining that it is possible for our subjective experience to be radically transformed. Before we turn to a fuller discussion of craving and attachment I would like to draw the crucial distinction in Buddhist philosophy between relative and ultimate truth. I think the purpose of this distinction is to accommodate our linguistic practices which make use of personal terms to their discourse which ultimately rejects the existence of ‘persons’. Buddhist philosophy is practically oriented, so it would make sense to embed it comfortably in our way of talking. Furthermore, it probably serves some real practical purpose to speak of ‘persons’ pursuing enlightenment as a tool in guiding their various practices.

1.5 Relative and Ultimate Truth

In Buddhist discourse a distinction is drawn between relative and ultimate truth. Relative truth is an adopted convention and relatively it is true to speak of ‘I’, ‘self’, or ‘person’. Ultimately, however, it is argued that there is no such thing⁵. Rahula quotes from the *Mahayana-sutra lahkara*: “A person (*pudgala*) should be mentioned as existing only in designation (*prajnapiti*) (i.e., conventionally there is a being), but not in reality (or substance *dravya*)” (p. 55). Similarly, Collins quotes from the commentary on the *Anguttara Nikaya*:

The Blessed One, the Buddha, has a two-fold teaching — conventional teaching and ultimate teaching. Thus 'person', 'being', 'woman', 'man', "*ksatriya*", '*brahmin*', 'god', 'Mara' [the god of death] — such is conventional teaching. 'Impermanent', 'unsatisfactory', 'not-self', 'categories', 'elements', 'sense-bases', 'the foundations of mindfulness' — such is ultimate teaching. (p. 155)

The distinction between relative and ultimate truth indicates that relative truth is true in virtue of its being an accurate representation of how things appear to people. Furthermore, because of this it is also practical to speak in relative terms.

To help distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable uses of ‘person’ Collins describes how the terms ‘self’ and ‘person’ are freely used amongst Buddhists in most contexts. It is only in specific contexts of “systematic philosophical and psychological analysis” that the veridicality of this terminology is rejected (p. 71). So, in certain contexts where the ultimate nature of experience is considered, expressing the belief in self would be thought mistaken. As long as it is not implied however that a theory of self is being invoked, it is ok to use reflexive nouns and personal terms.

For example, the Buddha’s statement that ‘to every person their self is the most important’ is acceptable because it can be rephrased as “each person is naturally concerned

⁵ The term ‘person’ should not be taken to mean the entire human being. Psychological and physical elements of experience are not negated. ‘Person’ here means the same as self. Ultimately, the Buddha is arguing against any ‘being’ posited existing over and above the constitutive elements.

with his own welfare” and does not require a commitment to a persistent, substantial self (p. 72). Other examples include “psychological analysis” where “concentration on oneself, either as the instigator of religious progress or as a particular character type” is deemed unproblematic (p. 73). So, for example, there are various instances of the Buddha teaching that “ones is one’s own refuge” or giving instruction “to search after yourselves” or claiming that Niravana is “to be realized by the wise within themselves” (Rahula p. 60, 62, 44). This is claimed to be acceptable and non-contradictory because all these instances do not require a belief in a persistent, substantial self. Part of the soteriological process is also coming to a better understanding of one’s character, or rather, as Collins puts it, the character “which [one] is” (in order to avoid implying that there is someone who has the character) (p. 74).

What also emerges here is that Buddhist soteriology engages with various aspects of the ‘person’ which may conform with our views of a broader notion of selfhood – character, looking within, searching for oneself all sound uncontroversially like dealing with what we would accept to be a self. Although a particular pertinent notion of the self is denied, some aspects of what we would normally associate with selfhood are seen as acceptable. And indeed, it is only the aim of Buddhist philosophy to deconstruct a certain aspect of our experience. Further substantive analysis of what happens within a ‘person’ can and indeed should be done, for the purposes of enlightenment, because what is required is a better understanding of psychological processes. However, arguments against a subject of experience are relevant and highly valuable none-the-less. The reason is that it is by becoming free of this kind of self idea that transformation is possible.

I think what can help us to make sense of the ultimate denial of self at the same time as affirming something that from our perspective would seem like pselfhood too, is the following elaboration in the *Visudhimagga*:

'Experiencer' is a convention, for the mere occurrence of the result; as one says 'it fruits' as a convention, when fruit appears on a tree. Just as it is simply owing to the occurrence of fruit on a tree, which are one part of the phenomena [*dhamma*, plural] called a tree, that it is said 'the tree fruits', or 'the tree has fruited', so it is simply owing to the arising of the result of action [the 'fruit'] consisting of the pleasure and pain called experience [*upabhoga*], which is one of the constituents of personality, which [together] are called 'deities' and 'human beings', that it is said 'a deity or a human being experiences or feels pleasure or pain'. There is therefore no need at all here for a superfluous experiencer.

(Collins, trans., p. 155)

The most important thing which is denied and analyzed away in Buddha's arguments is the subject of experience. The reason why this is nevertheless compatible with speaking of character traits, or looking within oneself is that even though there is no 'being' who *has* or *owns* these traits, the traits are nevertheless there. So the traits themselves are not a convention. In the ultimate analysis of things experiences are there. What is not there, however, and is only conventionally presupposed by the unenlightened ordinary 'person' (and we are allowed to speak of a person here as a convention because it really seems to us that it is a person who is making this faulty presumption), is the subject of these experiences. The difficult task is to explain how, if there is no agent behind experiences, it is possible to get to know a character which forms a part of this convention which is ultimately non-existent and how it is possible to 'look within' if no-one is doing the looking, and how the invitation to 'look within' can be taken if there is no-one to consider this invitation.

I think one of the obstacles to this is just our resistance to such an idea – because it is so engrained in our way of thinking that a deed has to have a doer. On the other hand, however, it is also a real puzzle. An initial hunch is that the denial of self does not mean that there is no coherence to experience. That is, perhaps there is a way to 'look within' or 'take action' etc. without there having to be the kind of subject which is denied. I will address this in section 2.2.

1.6 Craving and Attachment

Apart from experiencing ourselves as persistent changeless subjects, then, we are also very much attached to this self identity. In the *Mahanidana Sutta* discussed above the Buddha goes on to make a claim about the relation between the self and attachment:

From the time, Ananda, when a monk no longer regards Self as feeling, or Self as without experience, or “My Self feels, it has the attribute of feeling,” not so regarding, he clings to nothing in the world; not clinging, he does not tremble; not trembling, he personally experiences nirvana, and he understands, “Destroyed is (re-)birth, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done, there is no more for this state of being.

(Harvey, trans., p. 271)

The point being made here is that the self is created or constructed, or ‘super-imposed’ on experience by identifying with the five aggregates, claiming a part of the world as ‘mine’. This identification with the five aggregates is in Buddhism called “the conceit ‘I am’” (Gethin, p. 147). The term ‘conceit’ here is apt as it conveys our self-concern. Earlier in discussing the *Mahanidana Sutta* I said that the Buddha’s argument is that the feeling ‘I am’ cannot in fact be adequately matched to anything in our experience because everything is constantly changing. Attachment is the claim that despite this, the reason that this feeling arises is the greedy desire for existence. It may seem odd to speak of existence as something negative. Rahula quotes the Buddha: “O bhikkhus, this idea that I may not be, I may not have, is frightening to the uninstructed world-ling” (p. 56). The non-existence of the ‘I’, however, is not the total annihilation of experience, but of a particular *kind* of experience.

In the *Samyutta Nikaya* the Buddha says:

This construction, what is its cause, its arising, its ancestry, its origin? ... Desire, monks, arises in the ignorant ordinary man, influenced by feeling born of sense-contact; from that there is the construction. Thus monks, this construction is called impermanent, causally arisen.

(Collins, trans., p. 118)

Here we can also notice at work a portion of what was earlier discussed as the twelve-fold chain of dependent origination. Sense contact conditions feeling or sensations, which in turn

condition desire and desire conditions the idea of self. Walpola Rahula gives a fuller explanation of what is meant by desire and attachment. He writes that this desire “has at its centre the false idea of self arising out of ignorance” (p. 30). Desire or attachment can take different forms: “attachment to sense-pleasures, wealth and power, but also desire for, and attachment to, ideas and ideals, views opinions, theories, conceptions and beliefs” (p. 30). In its most basic form, however, this desire is for “re-existence and re-becoming” (p. 30). It is “the will to be, to exist, to re-exist, to become more and more, to grow more and more, to accumulate more and more” (p. 31). This is a primordial desire responsible for the existence of ‘beings’. That is, apart from having a special relation to the constructed self, this desire which is within the five aggregates is a primary driving force of conditioned arising – even the five aggregates themselves.

Desire and attachment, then, work on a number of levels. There is the primordial desire responsible for the existence of the five aggregates and furthermore for the generation of the self-construction. Perhaps the self construction is the most developed form of the primordial desire’s manifestation. Furthermore, our attachment to the constructed self is another form of attachment and a further expression of our wish to exist. This attachment gets expressed in many ways – for example the importance that we have for ourselves, the indignation we feel if someone insults us or the pride we feel if we receive a compliment, the separation we feel between ourselves and others and so on. Our life experience is filtered through this self perspective and guides our manner of existence and action in the world. As will become more evident in my discussion of Miri Albahari’s idea of identification and also the *Zhuangzi*, this attachment is not limited to a minimal self, but also what could be called narrative identity.

Collins discusses another aspect of this attachment to self which in Buddhist philosophy is understood as a ‘view’. A view is a “conceptualization”, a certain way of “regarding the

relationship between self and the constituents of personality [the five aggregates]” (p. 113, 117). A conceptualization is equivalent of a mental construction or a mental formation. As we saw in the discussion of the five aggregates, mental formations are one kind of aggregate. In our psycho-physical ‘machinery’ then, conditioned by other elements, the *conceptualization*, or *mental formation* or *construction*, or *view* or *idea* – to add to the list of terms – of self arises. Not all conceptualizations are misleading, like the *illusion* of self. The self is a misguided conceptualization or “wrong view” (Collins, p. 87). The highest aim in Buddhist practice, however, is to go beyond preoccupations with all conceptualizations. Nirvana is “unconditioned” and “susceptible neither to conceptualization nor grasping” (p. 113).

However, importantly, the right view itself should not become the object of attachment. The “enlightened sage holds no views of self” – neither that there is a self, nor that there is no self (p. 120). The realization of no-self amounts to letting go of any view of the self whatsoever. One way in which this can be illustrated is in the *Majjhima Nikaya* where Vacchagotta asks the Buddha whether an enlightened person exists after death (Fink 2012, p. 303). The Buddha’s response is that he can’t say either that the enlightened person exists, or that he doesn’t, or that he both exists and doesn’t, or that he neither exists nor doesn’t exist. The point being made is that this is a meaningless question to ask, because it presupposes the term ‘self’ can actually be applied to something. On another occasion when Vacchagotta asks the Buddha whether there is a self, the Buddha remains silent. When the monk asks again whether then there is no self, the Buddha again remains silent. This is, again, because “the terms in which the question is couched are not accepted” (Gethin, p. 161). Becoming free of attachment to the self, then, requires letting go of any preoccupation with this category and the affective dispositions associated with this attachment, because one realizes that it does not really apply to anything.

2. WHAT IS LEFT?

As I already emphasized, losing a sense of self as a persistent subject of experience does not imply the end of experience. It only means that experience is greatly altered. The more one's experience changes with realization of no-self, the more the manner of one's engagement with the world is altered, which is something I would like to emphasize in this section. I will focus here just on some aspects of self-less being. These will be what Miri Albahari (2010) calls "ownerless consciousness" – letting go of identifying with various aspects of experience as belonging to a personal, bounded self; the emotional aspects of losing the self; and the loss of self/other distinction and the experience of non-duality and boundlessness as expressed in the *Zhuangzi*. First, however, I would like to emphasize the importance of practice and clarify 'who' it is that has the realization of no-self.

2.1 The importance of practice

The attachment to self, then, is a deluded perspective on our experience which, as I will argue in this chapter, bears consequences for our way of being in the world. The correction of this deluded perspective is not achieved only by conceptual re-evaluation but also, since the sense of self arises fundamentally out of desire and attachment, through "a change of character" (Collins, p. 119). And, the result is a corresponding revised way of being in the world. The realization of no-self and the accompanying liberation is said to arise out of wisdom. Wisdom and concentration, developed in meditation, are said to work hand-in-hand in the gradual process attaining insight into no-self (Collins, p. 111).

In *Theravada* Buddhism the meditation practice is largely of two kinds – tranquility (*samatha*) and insight (*vipassana*) (Collins, p. 111). Tranquillity meditation is a training in concentration. One learns to keep attention directed at a certain object of experience – for example, one's breath. The purpose of this is to learn to be aware of one's experience –

something which is a prerequisite for *vipassana*. In *vipassana* meditation, the practitioner observes his or her experience keeping in mind some of the Buddhist conclusions – such as impermanence, or the impersonal nature of experience. By regularly learning to concentrate the mind and carefully pay attention to experience, the practitioner gradually comes to first-hand realization of what they have up until that point only understood conceptually. Through this process, slowly, their experience of themselves, and their relation to the world and people around them changes.

So, the Buddhist doctrine then is not simply to be intellectually analyzed, but brought to bear on one's experience. Impermanence, conditioned arising and so on are to be apprehended through one's experience in order to bring about real psychological and emotional change. In this gradual process one gains a clearer and more insightful understanding of the way one's psychological processes function. Like coming to understand the workings of an intricate mechanism, this comprehension of how things work slowly dissolves desires and attachments as one realizes what is actually going on – and exactly why there is no point in being attached. Ultimately, one's experience is analyzed in terms of impersonal constituents. That is to say – elements not belonging to a personal self, and consequently, also not having the kind of *value* attached to a personal self (Collins, p. 113).

2.2 Realization of no self

Rahula writes, against a subject of experience, “[t]here is no other ‘being’ or ‘I’, standing behind these five aggregates” and quotes Buddhagosa – “mere suffering exists, but no sufferer is found; the deeds are, but no doer is found” (p. 26). He continues: “there is no thinker behind the thought. Thought itself is the thinker. If you remove the thought, there is

no thinker to be found” (p. 26)⁶. This issue becomes particularly important when we ask ‘but who is having the realization of no-self, or realization of nirvana, or an ever increasing sense of freedom and compassion?. Rahula’s answer to this is:

We have seen earlier that it is the thought that thinks, that there is no thinker behind the thought. In the same way, it is wisdom (*patina*), realization, that realizes. There is no other self behind the realization. In the discussion of the origin of *dukkha*⁷ we saw that whatever it may be—whether being, or thing, or system—if it is of the nature of arising, it has within itself the nature, the germ, of its cessation, its destruction. Now *dukkha*, *samsara*, the cycle of continuity, is of the nature of arising; it must also be of the nature of cessation. *Dukkha* arises because of ‘thirst’ (*tanha*), and it ceases because of wisdom (*panna*). ‘Thirst’ and wisdom are both within the Five Aggregates. (p. 42)

In further elucidation of this process he writes:

When wisdom is developed and cultivated ... it sees the secret of life, the reality of things as they are. When the secret is discovered, when the Truth is seen, all the forces which feverishly produce the continuity of *samsara* in illusion become calm and incapable of producing any more karma-formations, because there is no more illusion, no more ‘thirst’ for continuity. It is like a mental disease which is cured when the cause or the secret of the malady is discovered and seen by the patient. (pp. 42-43)

I think there are a number of important points to take away here. Firstly, I think the claim that that which has the nature of arising also has the nature of cessation, points to the dynamism of existence. What we call a ‘being’ is made up of processes, which are constantly appearing and passing away. The fact that the components are impermanent means that there is no one identifiable ‘thing’, but a relation between processes. Secondly, an interesting claim is that both the root of arising and the root of cessation are within the five aggregates themselves. The fact that everything within the five aggregates is conditioned and interdependent rightly fits the description of *samsara* as a cycle – because it is self-perpetuating⁸. So, what is interesting is that the breaking out of the cycle is nevertheless achieved from within the cycle itself. Wisdom or insight is one of the aggregates and it is

⁶ I wouldn’t interpret this to mean that thought is the subject of thought. Rahula clearly says that there’s no subject of experience. I think what he means here is that there is just simply the occurrence of thought without there being a substantial thinker over and above the thoughts.

⁷ *Dukkha* can mean various things – most commonly suffering. The meaning of it here, however, is the dependent arising of the five aggregates – so, a ‘being’ (Rahula, p. 19).

⁸ Very briefly, *samsara*, as has already partially been pointed out is the continuous cycle of birth and death of the five aggregates.

wisdom appearing within the cycle of existence of the five aggregates which causes non-attachment to the aggregates and ultimate liberation.

It seems to me, however, that there needs to be some kind of inspiration in order for the wisdom to become activated. True, perhaps it is the wisdom within the five aggregates which instigates detachment and the end of ‘thirst’. However, the wisdom needs to be somehow activated. This is also implied by Rahula’s words that wisdom needs to be “developed and cultivated”. So as much as there is the blinding force of illusion binding ‘beings’ to cyclic existence, there also has to be something within the five aggregates that is drawn to wisdom. And if we accept that the aggregates are impersonal and that there is no subject of this activity or *anyone* who is motivated towards wisdom, we have to accept that some element within the five aggregates is disposed towards exiting the illusion.

In answer then, to the question of ‘who’ it is that has the realization of no-self, it should first be said that it is a misguided question motivated by convention, as was discussed in section 1.6. Furthermore, the five-aggregates make up a coherently functioning mechanism of psychological and physical processes with conscious awareness of experience. To say that it is realization that realizes is to say that at some point in this causally interrelated flow of psycho-physical processes there occurs an insight into the nature and functioning of these processes. Again, as I have already emphasized, no-self does not mean that psychological experience ends, but that it becomes greatly transformed. So, the realization occurs but the transformed psychological experience implies that there is no feeling that this realization has occurred to *someone*. It is simply the experience of realization without this extra ‘layer’ of the subjective experience. The difference between the two subjective experiences is that the one is an experience of something actually happening, and the other is a synthesis of what is actually going on in experience into an idea, or a mistaken mental projection which glosses

over the experience of constant flux and out of greed and attachment wants to establish a centre as the pivot of experience.

2.3 'I' and 'Mine'

In this debate about the conditions for selfhood and whether there is anything like a self, I would also like to set the Buddha in opposition to thinkers in the Phenomenological tradition, who happen to hold that a sense of self is integral to consciousness. That is, they think that in having any kind of experience, there is the sense that this experience is 'mine'. This goes precisely in opposition to the idea that thoughts, feelings, experiences, etc. could be had without the simultaneous experience that someone is having them.

Zahavi and Gallagher (2008) describe the relation between consciousness and self-consciousness as being "constitutive" (p. 47). Self consciousness is described in various ways – for example, "the first-personal, subjective manifestation of one's own experiential life" (p. 47). This is also captured by the fact that "experiences have a subjective 'feel' to them, a certain (phenomenal) quality of 'what it is like' or what it 'feels' like to have them" (p. 49). In addition, "all of these phenomenal experiences involve a reference to a subject of experience" (p. 49). That is, "they necessarily feel like something *for somebody*" (p. 50, their italics). This first-personal givenness is something which remains the same throughout the changing experiences and the experiences are given as "*mine*": "all of my experiences are characterized implicitly by a quality of *mineness*, that is, as having the quality of being experiences *I* am undergoing or living through" (p. 50, their italics). Lastly, this mineness is not given as the "what" of experience, but the "how" – that is, this observation about our experience is a claim about the structure of consciousness, rather than a claim that the self is present as an object or content of experience (p. 50). I take it that the sense of 'mineness'

which they describe matches what the Buddhists describe as the “automatic feeling of I which is necessarily part of psychological functioning before enlightenment” (Collins, p. 119).

2.4 Ownerless consciousness

The question then, is whether consciousness can exist in a manner that is not egocentric – that is, without the quality of ‘mineness’ and the sense that *someone* is having the experiences. If it can, this conclusion would also amount to the Buddhist claim that experience can be analyzed in terms of impersonal constituents, as not belonging to a self. In the *Samyutta Nikaya* a story is told of a monk Khemaka who says that although he realizes that there is no self, he still “has the feeling ‘I AM’” (Rahula, p. 65). The aim of Buddhist practice is then, not only to be convinced by arguments that the self is an illusion, but also to lose this sense of self, and the feeling of ‘mineness’. Apart from resistance to this view from a general reader, in the phenomenological tradition, as we have already seen, consciousness is thought to always be structurally self-consciousness. So, it has to be explained how the sense of self can be lost and merely impersonal experience remain.

I think a good place to start in this analysis is the claim in Buddhist philosophy that consciousness, one of the five aggregates, exists in dependence on other conditions – such as the appearance of the other aggregates (Rahula, p. 25). I think consciousness is the most likely candidate to be mistaken for one’s essential individual self and the substantial persistent subject which is now under question. As we saw, Galen Strawson for example, defines the phenomenological self as a “mental thing” (p. 42). In the *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta* the monk Sati expresses the mistaken view that consciousness is “that which expresses, which feels, which experiences the results of good and bad deeds here and there” (Rahula, p. 24). The Buddha replies:

To whomever, you stupid one ... have you heard me expounding the doctrines in this manner? Haven't I in many ways explained consciousness as arising out of conditions: that there is no arising of consciousness without conditions. Consciousness is named according to whatever condition through which it arises: on account of the eye and visible forms arises a consciousness, and it is called visual consciousness; on account of the ear and sounds arises a consciousness, and it is called olfactory consciousness ... on account of the mind and mind-objects (ideas and thoughts) arises a consciousness, and it is called mental consciousness. (Rahula, trans., pp. 24-25)

The Buddha goes on to compare consciousness to a fire that burns sustained by one or another material. When it is sustained by straw it is a straw fire, sustained by wood it is a wood fire, and so on (Rahula, p. 25). I take it that this account of consciousness re-iterates the fact that within the five aggregates everything is interdependent. There is no independent 'mental thing' over and above experience because consciousness, or the fact that experience has phenomenal feel to it is something which is dependent on and conditioned by the other elements. It is not something over and above – more aptly, it is something *amongst*.

Another answer is given by Miri Albahari (2010) who argues, more specifically, that a sense of 'mineness' is not a necessary part of conscious experience. The illusion of a personal self is created by taking the aspects of experience to be 'mine'. So, it is a particular way of regarding experience. Drawing on the origin of the self 'idea', it could be said that through the interaction of the five aggregates an 'extra' feature is created, which is an 'idea' of self. The idea of self is contemporaneous with the experience that the various elements are 'mine'. And it is the point at which something personal enters what otherwise is an impersonal experience. The way that Charles Fink (2012) puts this is, "I am present *as myself* only *to myself*" (p. 298, his italics).

One thing I'd like to point out is that when Zahavi and Gallagher write that 'mineness' is an integral feature of experience, they do not speak about the emotional implications of this sense of self and 'mineness'. However, I think that the emotional implications of this are very important. When it is said that there is no self, and no sense of

‘mineness’, I think this refers to an emotionally laden experience. So, if we only try to make sense of ‘subjectless’ experience without considering the emotional implications I think it wouldn’t capture the whole picture. Therefore, I would like to emphasize that when a sense of ‘mineness’ is lost it is a particular kind of emotive experience, which should also help us to understand how experience can be had ‘without a subject’. Furthermore, such an experience of course does not imply the loss of a perspective. It is nevertheless a perspective from a point of view, but when the sense of self is lost this point of view itself is radically altered. The minimal point of view is not just a ‘place’, it’s also a way of looking. As we will see, Albahari contrasts a bounded constructed subject with presumably a boundless witness consciousness. She doesn’t write much about what it could be like to experience that witness consciousness, but I assume it would have strong emotive implications.

Before I share Albahari’s account I would also like to set some things aside. In fact she gives a “two-tiered” account of consciousness in which she describes the perspectival consciousness as “an unbroken and unified witness consciousness which, as *modus operandi* of the (minimal) subject, stands apart from and observes the stream of experience” (p. 88, pp. 98-99). The fact that consciousness is two-tiered refers to the unconstructed witness consciousness and the constructed sense of a bounded self (all the unfamiliar terms will be explained in the next passage). I think that such an account quite clearly presupposes a subject of experience, something which stands apart and is furthermore unchanging. Even though it is not a personal, as she calls it, subject; not bounded or constructed, it is nevertheless a subject which stands apart and observes. For those reasons I think her account would not be accepted by the Buddhists and she would be responded to as the monk Sati above. However, what I find useful is her account of non-identification.

So, Albahari begins her paper with the questions: “what is the most likely relationship between the sense of self and the ubiquitous feeling of ownership (or ‘mineness’)

had towards one's thoughts and experiences? Could any form of consciousness survive the possible destruction of these ownership-feelings? Could ownerless consciousness be an underlying feature of everyday mind?" (p. 86). She thinks that this is indeed possible, on the following terms. According to Albahari we can distinguish between *perspectival* and *personal* ownership of experience. She agrees with Zahavi and Gallagher that there is an aspect of self-consciousness which is the "first-personal givenness" or "for-me-ness" of experience (p. 89-90). This she calls *perspectival* ownership of experience which she also calls a "witness-consciousness" and "nothing but seeing itself" (p. 89). This access to experience is still ownership in the sense that it is 'mine', but in a very minimal way. This kind of ownership is congruent with speaking of "my headache", or "my body", or "my actions", because it can indeed be attributed to a locatable perspective (p. 90). It is a stronger sense of ownership which Albahari argues is a constructed sense of mineness and which is dispensable. This sense of ownership she calls *personal* as opposed to *perspectival* and the explanation she provides for its occurrence is the identification of the perspectival owner of consciousness with various roles which create a sense of a unified, invariable, unconstructed and bounded self – an agent, a thinker, and an experiencer (p. 92-93).

What is responsible, then, for this sense of a bounded self, on Albahari's account, is identification. Identification is explained in the following way: "certain ideas (such as gender, race, character traits, basic roles) are appropriated to a subject's perspective, such that the world seems approached through their filter" (p. 90). This sounds like identification with one's narrative or autobiographical identity, and indeed I think the Buddhists would also support not identifying with one's narrative identity. However, the primary identification is very basic. To start with, one identifies even with the role of the perspectival owner: one "does not merely approach the world and its objects from an impersonal psycho-physical point of view (through whatever sense modality); [one] deeply *identifies* with that viewpoint

as a concrete place where *I, the self*, am coming from” (p. 91). Other roles that the perspectival owner identifies with are agent and thinker. In the capacity of an agent one takes oneself to be the initiator of actions, and in the capacity of the thinker, one takes oneself to be the generator of thoughts.

What Albahari argues then, is that experience is ownerless in the sense that it does not belong to a unified, bounded, seemingly unconstructed subject – this kind of subject is created through identification. I take this to mean that one is a perspectival owner of experience in as much as one is privy to certain experiences. However, it is when conscious experience is misconstrued as belonging to a particular subject that the fabrication emerges. How this identification happens could, for example from our earlier discussion, be through the driving force of greed and attachment – the desire for existence and to claim a part of the world as ‘mine’. What I would add to Albahari’s account is that identification can be characterized as what I earlier, in section 1.3.i, spoke about as the feeling ‘this is I am’. So, it is a feeling that this whatever constituent of experience is ‘me’, which feeling on the Buddha’s account in fact fails to be justified. In the process of disidentifying from these roles during meditation, one trains the witness consciousness to realize the degree of change which is in fact constantly occurring in the objects with which it identifies, such that it can no longer identify with anything it had formerly identified with, because of its transience (p. 109-110). Transience, again, is drawn on Albahari as a good reason for non-identification. What is left over is a perspectival awareness without a sense of ‘mineness’.

I have a number of things to say about Albahari’s account. Firstly, like Zahavi and Gallagher, she does not recount the emotional implications of taking aspects of experience to be ‘mine’. The emotional aspect is important because what this emphasizes is that the bounded subject is not just a *kind* of thing which is brought into experience, but also a particular *way* of being. The implications of this bounded subject are, for example, fear when

this subject is threatened, anger if it is humiliated, the propensity to greedily hoard possessions, the juxtaposition of self and other with favouring protecting feelings towards the self and often less favourable feelings towards others, unless they prove to be of benefit to the self, etc. Similarly, becoming free of that constructed self would have emotive consequences that Albahari doesn't discuss. That is, apart from being a particular minimal perspective it nevertheless shows the view through a particular 'prism', as Albahari calls it. And 'mineness' then is also a particular way of looking at things from this point of view, which portrays things through particular parameters of self and other, boundedness, greed and so on.

Secondly, of course, saying that being the generator of thoughts and the initiator of deeds is a construction, has a number of implications. One of them is that things just happen, without one's control. In support of this idea, for example, Fink writes that if we take agency as an example, through meditation it is supposed to become apparent that perceptions, sensations, emotions, thoughts, etc. arise without one making them arise. In his words: "the practice of mindfulness lays bare the impersonal nature of all experiential phenomena, revealing ... 'an infinity of interrelated non-personal phenomena, which are conditioned and ever-changing'" (p. 294). This realization is extended to all kinds of activities which we take to be brought about through our agency:

In mindfully reaching for a book, I am aware of the *desire* for the book, the *volition* to grasp it, and the *reaching* that follows. The desire is not something I do but something that happens; the volition is not something I do but something that happens. In mindfulness, the desire, the volition, and the reaching present themselves as impersonal events, as events conditioned by other events, not as the actions of an agential self. (p. 294)

I would not like to begin addressing the question of agency because it is a large topic. I would just like to say that I don't think that every kind of agency is denied in Buddhism. I think that only the appearance of control over some things is denied – perhaps a large part of what is happening, but not everything. Furthermore, I think that ultimately the lack of such control is not a bad thing at all, and the realization of not having this control is perhaps part of

part of the liberating experience. However, without committing myself to a position on this, I also think that if we accept that at bottom all there is are causally interrelated psycho-physical phenomena appearing to a large extent without control, there should be some kind of governing principle or order that keeps things going – because otherwise it is difficult to imagine how things could continue to function. This idea is not foreign to Daoist philosophy, to which we turn to next, in the idea of Heaven as the source of “the patterns found in the natural world” (Berkson, 2005, p. 311).

2.5 Process philosophy and the Zhuangzi

Earlier, in section 1.1, I characterized the kind of self the Buddhists are arguing against as a central element unifying the impersonal psycho-physical components. What happens when this central self is dissolved? And in what way is it really central? At this juncture I would like to draw on the philosophy of the *Zhuangzi*. Noa Ronkin (2009) calls the Pali Suttas “process metaphysics” (p. 14). In process philosophy the dynamic nature of being is emphasized and events and processes, as opposed to substances, are considered as primary. On such a view, “the guiding idea is that processes are basic and things derivative, for it takes some mental processes to construct ‘things’ from the indistinct mass of sense experience and because change is the pervasive and predominant feature of the real” (Ronkin, p. 15). Although Zhuangzi and the Buddha are reacting to different conceptions of the self in their no-self philosophy I think they have a lot of common ground in emphasizing continuous change, and so, both being process philosophies, and arguing against the conceptualizing activity of the mind in categorizing things. In addition, I think the *Zhuangzi* does a better job than Buddhist discourse in conveying the emotional tone of the no-self experience.

Zhuangzi’s philosophy as Wang (2000) points out, is practically orientated, just like Buddhist philosophy (p. 346). The main goal of soteriological practice – liberation – is

achieved through subverting the conceptualizing activity of the mind which keeps us from being present to the continuous changes (p. 354). By being present to continuous change the self becomes dissolved in the “transformations of all things” (Zhuangzi, 4:11/Ziporyn, p. 27). The dissolving of the centre, or becoming free of the illusion of a central unifying self, can also be compared to connecting with boundlessness. This is expressed in Zhuangzi’s words: “Harmonize with them all by means of their Heavenly Transitions, follow along with them in their limitless overflowing, and you will be able to fully live out your years. Forget what year it is, forget what should or should not be. Let yourself be jostled and shaken by boundlessness – for that is how to be lodged securely in the boundlessness!” (Zhuangzi, 2:45-6/Ziporyn, p. 20).

I think that one way then to characterize the self as central is as limiting one’s experience within certain peripheries and creating the sense of boundedness, as discussed by Albahari. On the other hand, when the self is lost a sense of boundlessness is experienced which can further be characterized as an experience of non-duality and erasing subject-object distinctions. In this section, what I would also like to emphasize is that it is only when the self is lost, that the alternative subjectivity emerges. That is, the relevance of the self is as the bridge to this alternate experience, because it is only when the self is lost that this subjectivity emerges.

i. Dissolving the centre

Chapter two of the *Zhuangzi* opens with the words:

Ziqi of the Southern Wall was reclining against a low table on the ground, releasing his breath into Heaven above, all in a scatter, as if loosed from a partner.

Yanchen Ziyou stood in attendance before him. “What has happened here?” he said. “Can the body really be made like dried wood, the mind like dead ashes? What reclines against this table now is not what reclined against it before.”

Ziqi said, “A good question, Yan! What has happened here is simply that *I* have lost *me*. Do you understand? You hear the piping of man but not yet the piping of the earth. You hear the piping of the earth but not yet the piping of Heaven.”

(Ziporyn, trans., p. 9)

I think what this passage indicates is that the loss of self implies a greater embeddedness in and connection with a greater context. That is, it involves understanding ‘how things work’, and by extension, a greater sense of connectedness with this broader picture. The reason I say this is that Ziqi tells Yan that he can ‘hear the piping of earth and Heaven’ which implies that he has gained a greater understanding of the world at large. Furthermore, Yan describes a real change in Ziqi. In the very least, Ziqi now has a very different experience of his mind and body. Ziqi exclaims that he has lost his self. That is, a certain element of his experience has been erased and thereby he has gained a greater attunement with a larger overarching principle. The self is relevant here not just as a dispensable notion, but as the key to a greater realization.

According to Mark Berkson (2005) The ‘greater context’ can be characterized as the workings of nature. Nature can be understood by relying on concepts of *tian* and *zi ran*, indicating both the broader context of the activity of the world, and also the way that this is manifested in humans as “a given endowment, what we receive from *tian*” (p. 311). *Tian* can be translated as Heaven and signifies “the impersonal, amoral source of *tianli*, the patterns found in the natural world” (Berkson, p. 311). *Zi ran* is “that which is ‘so of itself,’ the spontaneous movements associated with nonintentional, effortless action (*wu wei*, action without the intervention of the conceptualizing, consciously intending mind)” (p. 311). Attunement with nature then, amounts to a resonance between one’s way of being unobstructed by conceptualizations and the overarching principle of nature. This harmonization is made possible when the self is lost.

Of course we have to have a clear picture of what kind of self is lost in the *Zhuangzi*. One way to do this is to understand what kind of conception of the self Zhuangzi is reacting to. Berkson argues that Zhuangzi is reacting to the “Confucian ‘narrative’ picture” of the self (p. 305). What such a reaction to the Confucian picture amounts to is the claim that “all narratives are based on constructions given to us by society – for example, about the appropriate time to do certain things, about which roles should be occupied when, etc.” (p. 305). According to the *Zhuangzi* “these are not natural, but constructed overlays on top of, and often obstructing, what is actually there: a ceaseless flow of life that can be experienced in its immediacy at any time” (p. 305). So, one way to understand the kind of self Zhuangzi is reacting to is a self constructed through social conventions according to the requirements of society.

Another way is to look at some characteristics of the sage who has lost the sense of self. Cook Ding describes his experience of cutting up an ox: “I encounter it [the ox] with the spirit rather than scrutinizing it with the eyes. My understanding consciousness, beholden to its specific purposes, comes to a halt, and thus the promptings of the spirit begin to flow” (Zhuangzi, 3:4, Ziporyn, p. 22). The “understanding consciousness” is contrasted here with the “spirit”. I have already mentioned that the self in *Zhuangzi* is closely linked with the conceptualizing activity of the mind. In another example following the discursive mind is contrasted with listening with one’s *qi*: during “the fasting of the mind ... if you merge all your intentions into a singularity, you will come to hear with the mind rather than with the ears. Further, you will come to hear with the vital energy rather than with the mind” (Zhuangzi, 4:8 /Ziporyn, p. 26). The activity of the mind, of making judgments, having preferences and likes and dislikes, stand in the way of being in harmony with the *dao*: “affirming some things as right and negating others as wrong are what I call the characteristic inclinations. What I call being free of them means not allowing likes and dislikes to damage

you internally, instead making it your constant practice to follow along the way with each thing is of itself, going by whatever it affirms as right, without trying to add anything to the process of life” (Zhuangzi, 5:22/Ziporyn, p. 38).

Upon losing the self, then, the sage is led by the spirit and by *qi*, rather than the discursive mind or the conceptual categories provided by society. Being lead by *qi* or spirit can be compared to effortless action in harmony with nature. Why this should result in boundlessness I think is that one no longer draws distinctions between self and other, because this is an activity of the conceptualizing mind. By being present to the continuous changes of things one is not concerned with the thought ‘I’. As Albahari writes, identifying with experience as ‘mine’ creates a bounded subject. However, when the conceptualizing mind is no longer the governing modality experience is greatly altered. There is a realization of “nonduality, where the boundaries between self and world, subject and object, disappear (Berkson, p. 324). This establishing of connections with a greater reality and subverting of the subject/object distinction is what reflects the dissolution of the central bounded self and it is one further consequence of giving up the priority of the conceptualizing mind and the idea of self it creates.

3. WHAT'S SO GREAT ABOUT LOSING YOUR SELF?

The claim made in the Buddhist and Daoist philosophies I have discussed is that dispelling the illusion of self has liberating consequences. Even though the Buddhist and the Daoist ideas of self are not directly comparable, they are similar because they emerge out of not being cognizant of constant change and as conceptualizations. Even though Zhuangzi does not emphasize a persistent self, this is to an extent presupposed by his emphasis on constant change. A good question to ask, then, is why it is that losing this particular kind of experience should be liberating. What is it about the experience of this particular kind of self that brings about suffering and liberation from which brings about happiness? I'd like to suggest some answers to this question from what has been discussed in the thesis with respect to self-experience so far. The self, again in the particular sense of the word, which I argue does in fact shape most human experience, is psychologically and emotionally a burden. This only postpones the question – why should it be that this self-experience is a burden? I think the answer is that:

- 1) It is a centre of attachment. Attachment is a problem because when our desires with respect to this self are frustrated this brings unhappiness. Of course, some desires and needs are vital to satisfy – not all of them can and should be ignored. However, some desires, if we accept that this self is illusory, are redundant and unnecessary. For example, the opinion of other people about the illusory 'I', beyond satisfying the need for social cohesion, can bring unnecessary troubles and limitations by trying to fulfil certain expectations with respect to this 'I'. Furthermore attachment to self brings about a great amount self involvement which prevents one from paying greater attention to others and the world and can reduce empathy.

- 2) If we accept that the illusory 'I' prevents us from feeling a greater connection with others and the greater scheme of things, this is also a big limitation. In addition, if we agree with Zhuangzi that it prevents our true nature from manifesting, this is a detriment to our potential way of being in the world.
- 3) The illusion that we have control over many things that are actually not under our control – like thoughts and emotions arising – creates attachment to these thoughts and emotions. Furthermore, I think it makes us feel 'bounded', in Albahari's words, because we feel like it is a self that is creating them. On the other hand, if lack of control over many of these things is realized then I imagine it would bring a feeling of expansion, not least because it would bring the question of where these thoughts and feelings are coming from then. In turn, this would again locate us in the greater scheme of things.
- 4) The self/other distinction encourages selfishness, whereas if that distinction is erased I think that it would result in greater empathy, which is a good experience in itself. An immediate question arises – if the self/other distinction is erased – then how can we speak about greater empathy for others? I think the answer is that the self/other distinction presupposes individuation in a particular way in association with particular experiences of selfishness etc. Once that kind of experience is lost I think it is still possible to individuate, but in a different way and, as I discussed earlier, with different emotional presuppositions. 'I', 'me', 'mine' are not just thoughts, but attitudes which have emotional consequences. So, in rejecting the self/other distinction it is an attitudinal change although one can still clearly individuate people, even if only perhaps as a convention.

In Buddhist philosophy it is thought that it is the self which is the cause of suffering. For various reasons discussed in this thesis the self illusion which so greatly structures our experience brings about limitations, unpleasant emotional responses and often conditions our

interaction with others in a detrimental way. The particular notion of the self the Buddhists target, then, is a significant aspect of experience with far-reaching consequences – an aspect that they argue can and should be lost. The relevance of the particular idea of self the Buddhists target is that it has these consequences and also that by losing this self, many positive results follow.

CONCLUSIONS

Facing problems

Edelglass and Garfield rightly point out that on giving up the notion of the self the Buddhists face some challenges in accounting for some things which this notion of self was thought to help in explaining. Without having the notion of a substantial self, the Buddhists have to find alternative answers to questions such as what, if anything, individuates people, what accounts for personal identity over time, why we experience ourselves as unified subjects, how we can make sense of personal responsibility and so on (p. 262). One question which I would like to address briefly is how we can make sense of pursuing personal projects if there is no self. For example, what could motivate one to master a musical instrument, or devote one's life to humanitarian efforts, or choose to take care of oneself or not, or build a career, etc.

I think by now the answer to this question should be beginning to take shape. The realization that there is no substantial self is a radical alteration of our subjective experience. It is the loss of attachment to anything as 'mine' or belonging to a unique subject. Simultaneously, it is a greater awareness of the perpetual flux of these impersonal elements. It may also, as our glance at Zhuangzi has shown, imply a feeling of greater connectedness and boundlessness. However, lacking this substantial subject does not imply an annihilation of psychological and emotional states – rather, a different perspective on or attitude towards them. I think that no consequence should follow that without a subject of experience 1) meaningful activities should not be possible to pursue, and 2) one couldn't find the motivation to pursue them. As we have seen, much of the psychological elements we generally associate with personhood are left unchallenged by the Buddhists and Zhuangzi. In addition, gaining a realization of ultimate reality does not deprive the enlightened person of the human relative perspective on the world. This legitimizes the use of personal pronouns

and various references to persons. However, the insight into ultimate reality also contributes to a fuller understanding of how our relative illusion is created. And lastly, if our ability to pursue projects remains unharmed, the kinds of projects we are tempted to pursue may be affected. The realization of no self and the interdependence of things motivates one to act for the benefit of others.

Another issue which could be addressed here, and one that relates to the problem of pursuing meaningful projects, is how one could care about one's future states if there is no persistent subject. Since, according to Buddhist philosophy, there is no persistent subject how and why could one be motivated to care about something that might happen in the future which is not linked to the present state by a persistent subject? One answer to this is that, as we have seen, continuity is not denied in Buddhist philosophy. Even though there is no unchanging subject, various psycho-physical elements are connected to form a continuous chain. So, down the line, you will be faced with the experiences that you are setting up for in the present moment. Even if there is no *persistent* subject, there is nevertheless continuous phenomenological experience. Another answer, is that here again, we could draw on the conventional truth that it will be 'you' who has the experience at a later stage. Finally, as I have argued, 'self' and 'no-self' are psychologically and emotionally laden ways of approaching the world. So, even if one is acting with future states in mind, depending on one's mental framework, there would be a difference in the way one would approach the activity and the sort of activity one would engage in.

Buddha-nature and further study

A later Buddhist tradition – the *Tathagatagarbha* tradition – expands on the *Theravada* doctrine of no-self and makes further claims. While accepting that the self is an illusion they make a further claim about the nature of all sentient 'beings'. The claim they make is that

each and every ‘being’ has Buddha-nature, or that they are all already Buddhas (Takasaki, 1966). To say that they have Buddha-nature is to say that they have the pure and compassionate qualities of the Buddha. This Buddha-nature is not apparent to most of us because of negative mental states which obscure it. However, if the mind were to be purified it would become manifest. The claim is not that the Buddha-nature would be attained, but that it is already there and it would be discovered. Furthermore, at this level there is the experience of complete non-individuation of ‘beings’, similar to the state of non-duality I discussed in the section on the *Zhuangzi*. Some critics think that the idea of Buddha-nature contradicts the claim of no self, because Buddha-nature is also described as the true nature of ‘beings’. The response to these criticisms is generally that *atman* is nothing like the Buddha-nature. *Atman* is personal, a centre of attachment and it individuates people. Buddha-nature is the same for everyone, does not individuate, and is not associated with attachment.

This is only a brief comment on the Buddha-nature. However, I think it is worthwhile to mention and to consider for further study because it can point to further interesting explorations of the subject. I would maintain that Buddha-nature is not comparable to *atman* and does not contradict the no-self argument. Furthermore, what I hope to have show in this thesis is that ‘no-self’ does not stand in opposition to speaking about subjective experience more substantively. The self is only one aspect of subjective experience, it is dispensable, and losing the self implies subjective transformation. Therefore to speak of one’s true nature should not be in conflict with claiming that the self is an illusion, as is also illustrated in the *Zhuangzi*.

In Summary

The Buddha’s argument is against a particular notion of the self– a permanent, unchanging subject of experiences. This is both a *belief* in a particular kind of self, or a particular kind of

conceptualization, and an ingrained part of our experience. The experiential content of this self is the feeling ‘I am’ and the sense that experiences are ‘mine’. This feeling ‘I am’ is ubiquitous in our experience, claims the Buddha, yet there is nothing in reality matching to this experience. Everything we undergo is constantly changing. Furthermore, there cannot be an independent substantial subject of experiences, because everything within the purview of our experience is interdependent and conditioned. There is nothing substantial and independent.

Despite the fact that the Buddha denies that there is any kind of self matching to this feeling, nevertheless many aspects of subjectivity are preserved on his view of a ‘person’. Even though there is not a subject of experiences, nevertheless there are desires, volitions, ideas, sensations, perceptions and so on. Simply, he is suggesting a significant re-evaluation of our experience – a closer observation of what is going on, and a better understanding. This re-evaluation is nothing short of a psychological and emotional transformation, and it is difficult to achieve. However, it is a step towards liberation from attachment and delusion which bring about suffering.

Another perspective on this acute realization of perpetual flux, coming from Zhuangzi, emphasizes that the abandoning of conceptual attachments to the illusory self brings about a sense of boundlessness. Since nothing is picked out as ‘mine’ the distinction between self and other is erased. All of this is a subjective transformation and deals with subjective experience. This both indicates that, for example, non-duality is a ‘state of mind’, and that by no means is the Buddha denying the importance of private experience. Many aspects of what we would call selfhood are preserved on the Buddhist account, both before and after the realization of no-self.

I have argued that the Buddhist argument against the self engages a significant aspect of our experience, and not simply a narrow and dispensable conception of the self. The relevance of the self experience is that it structures our way of being in the world, both psychologically and emotionally. By apprehending experience either through the view point of self, or no-self, different emotive and behavioural consequences follow. No-self is the experience of psycho-physical constituents as not belonging to a subject, a particular ‘someone’ who is the owner of these experiences and with whom we identify. Correspondingly, it is an experience of boundlessness since the self/other distinction is erased, and also a sense of connectedness with a greater context. The self is pivotal in this, as the aspect of experience which has to be lost.

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