

Creating and Clinging to Our Selves: Identity at the Intersection of Science and Spirituality

The purpose of this guided meditation is to help the listener gain a non-conceptual, experiential understanding of anicca/impermanence; one of the three marks of existence seen in Buddhist teachings (the other two being dukkha/suffering and anatta/non-self). Buddhist meditation practice, and its accompanying Eastern philosophical schools of thought, approach the idea of impermanence in a very different manner to the largely Western scientific disciplines such as neuroscience, psychology and cognitive science. These different disciplines unsurprisingly also have different approaches to the concept of identity, and how it relates to impermanence and the self. However, despite the purported disparity between these approaches, there is a surprising amount of compatibility to be found, which has led to the development of interdisciplinary theories of mind that account for both spiritual and scientific understanding of impermanence, self and identity.

It is important to note here that the Buddhist notion of non-self doesn't argue that we should do away with the concept of people altogether; it is useful and necessary in life to be able to relate to my personal history, so that I might be able to remember what I ate for breakfast; or to be able to distinguish between myself and others, so that I might not bump into them when walking along the street. What non-self is arguing for is instead the dispelling of the feeling in each moment that 'I' is a distinct, persisting entity rather than a dynamic process with impermanent constituents[1].

The three marks of existence are one of the core doctrines in Buddhism, and relate to identity in its most fundamental form: identification with an unchanging self, which acts as a base upon which to form all other identities (social, personal, etc.). When viewed closely, as in the guided meditation, we can see that the experience of one's self is made up of what are known as the 5 skandhas/aggregates; form, sensations, perceptions, mental formations and consciousness (in the meditation we look at 3 of these aggregates: sensations [bodily sensations], perceptions [sounds] and mental formations [thoughts]). One can then investigate into the nature of each aggregate in experience, and see that each one is impermanent. It follows then, that if the constituents of the self, the 5 aggregates, are impermanent, then the self is impermanent, and so the unchanging sense of continuity, or permanent self that we identify with in every moment, is merely a construction of the mind[2]. In this way, impermanence and non-self, two of the three marks of existence, argue that one's identity as a continuous self is an illusion, which gives rise to all other identities one may feel, such as 'I am a liberal/conservative/etc.' or 'I am a male/female/etc.' (interestingly, the impermanent nature of sex/gender/sexuality fluidity makes these views more compatible with the Buddhist worldview than a fixed notion[3]). The third mark of existence, suffering, also plays a role here through the second of the Four Noble Truths, which is regarded as the Buddha's first teaching, in that the root cause of suffering is clinging and craving; including clinging to permanent identities from impermanent experiences[4].

In my chosen medium, I have tried to demonstrate this Buddhist philosophical view of self-identity as it is demonstrated within the tradition itself: through meditation and contemplation. I chose to tackle the project in this manner as this is how I was first introduced to critical analysis of identity, which I believe complements well the concepts I have learnt throughout the module, such as the multiplicity and performance of identity, as it takes a different approach to this analysis (through non-conceptual understanding of identity, rather than the discussion-led conceptual understanding gained in the module), giving me a more comprehensive view of identity than one single approach can provide. Due to the time constraints of the meditation, and my own lack of ability to clearly explain impermanence and non-self to a beginner, I have aimed this guided meditation at someone who has some previous meditation practice, and so is able to be mindful of the 5 aggregates with little need for direction, and so I may hope to give them pointers for insight into two the three marks of existence (which then leads to experiential understanding of the nature of identity, as described in the previous paragraph).

While meditation practice provides a detailed first-person framework for understanding the mind, it is not without its limitations. Due to the non-conceptual nature of these insights into mind and identity, they by their very nature defy expression through language, which relies on concepts[5]. This is evidenced by the difficulty I have faced in trying to explain my understanding of these insights in both the guided meditation and this accompaniment. Indeed, the problem of relating conceptuality and non-conceptuality is a central theme of many Buddhist philosophical texts[6], and I have used the conceptualisations seen in the Buddha's teachings (the three marks, the four truths, the five aggregates) here to help me explain these insights. I have also struggled to conceptualise my meditative experience at earlier points in the module, such as in the week 1 session when I attempted to describe my understanding of non-self, and in my critical response where I mention my interest in the illusion of identity, but don't explore it much further for fear of not being able to articulate my point successfully, which ultimately led to me assuming that it was futile to try and reconcile my non-conceptual and conceptual understandings. As such, creating this project has pushed me to develop my understandings, through scientific and philosophical research, to be able to discuss them with at least some coherence (although admittedly I would still struggle to formulate these thoughts with any coherence if asked to on the spot).

In contrast to the first-person approach adopted in meditation practice, the scientific disciplines take a third-person view of the self and identity, as is done for all other objects of scientific investigation. These concepts have long been a cause for debate within the field of cognitive science, which occupies itself with an interdisciplinary study of the mind that incorporates neuroscience, psychology, philosophy, anthropology and a range of other disciplines[7]. Historically, mainstream thought in cognitive science has paid little attention to the notions of impermanence and non-self, largely agreeing on the presence of a self, but arguing on the exact qualities of this self, leading to theories such as the "narrative self", and the more stripped-back "minimal self"[8]. However, there have also been theories that don't allow for the existence of a self at all, such as Minsky's "Society of Mind" theory, developed in the 1970s which, in very brief terms, describes the workings of the mind as consisting of interactions between mindless 'agents', and so ultimately arrives at the conclusion that there can be no self as a cognizing, free-acting entity. However, this conclusion is given the caveat that despite the findings of his scientific theory that the free-acting self is an illusion, "we're virtually forced to maintain that belief [in the self], even though we know its false"[9]. This caveat highlights an important issue inherent to scientific study of the mind, as it can often fail to connect with our first-person experience of the world, leaving us with a conflicting view of the mind; however this conflict can be overcome, as will be explained shortly.

As well as investigating the notion of non-self, scientific study has also elucidated how other identities might play a role in the creation of a permanent-feeling self-identity. This was brought to my attention in a recent neuroscience lecture I had, titled “The Neurobiology of Consciousness”, part of which described a study performed on split-brain individuals, who have had the left and right hemispheres of their brain surgically separated (usually done in patients with severe epilepsy). As the hemispheres are disconnected, and the left-brain controls speech, it is possible to set up an experiment where only the right-brain is instructed to do a task (e.g. by showing instructions in the left side of the visual field, which is only accessible to the right-brain) and then to ask the left brain why they responded in such a way. As the left-brain is unaware of the instruction received by the right-brain, it cannot know the real reason the right-brain acted as it did. Nonetheless, the left-brain will construct a contrived narrative explanation through a process known as “left-brain interpretation”[10]. This interpretation process could be how identities are constructed: as narratives made to fit with the felt sense of a permanent self; this would explain how, in dispelling the illusion of a self in meditation, it follows that our various identities come under scrutiny as being insubstantial, as they are essentially mere fictions.

As demonstrated by Minsky’s “Society of Mind” theory, many cognitive scientists have had no choice but to disregard well-evidenced and potentially revolutionary research into self-identity simply on the basis that it is incompatible with our lived experience. One can view this dilemma through three lenses: first, this lack of compatibility is due to a flaw in the third-person-based theory, and so it must be adjusted to match our first-person experience; second, one’s view of first-person experience is flawed, and so it must be examined with closer scrutiny; or third, both the third-person and first-person view must be scrutinised in tandem to reach some middle ground. This third view is held by the authors of the 1993 book “The Embodied Mind”, which attempts to amalgamate the seemingly incongruous third- and first-person views of self-identity into a new approach, dubbed “The Enactive Approach”. This interdisciplinary undertaking uses complex cognitive theories such as Minsky’s “Society of Mind”, the discoveries of mindfulness meditation and Buddhist philosophy, and even incorporates some Western theories of first-person experience such as Husserlian phenomenology, in order to make their argument[11]. Part of this argument entails that a major drawback of cognitive science, its lack of compatibility with lived experience (as previously described), needn’t be an issue any longer thanks to the insight gained from meditation practice. This also helps compensate for the drawbacks of the spiritual approach described earlier, as it allows conceptualisation of meditative insights into scientific terms; in recent years this has made these insights into identity remarkably more accessible to a Western audience, many of whom have become disillusioned with religion, and so are much more receptive to a “science-based spirituality”, especially when endorsed by well-known figures such as Sam Harris (which is how I was more formally introduced to the Buddhist worldview)[12, 13].

As well as indirectly promoting the migration of Buddhist practice to the west through the vehicle of science, the Enactive Approach has also directly influenced the relationship between science and spirituality through organisations founded in its wake such as Mind & Life Europe (MLE). Founded by Francisco Varela, one of the authors of “The Embodied Mind”, MLE is a non-profit organisation with a mission “to alleviate suffering and promote human societal flourishing by integrating science with contemplative practice and wisdom traditions”[14]. I was introduced to the Enactive Approach through an online seminar series hosted by MLE, and I’m considering a career working in some area relating to it in the future, so being able to organise my thoughts into a formal piece of writing such as this marks a first step towards critically engaging with that content.

Various sources of knowledge, from the Forms of Identity module, my own interest in Buddhism, the MLE seminars, and my disciplinary expertise in Biomedical Science from my degree, all acted as inspiration for me to create a project that looks at identity at the intersection between science and spirituality, with the guided meditation acting as a non-conceptual view into the topic, and the accompanying piece placing the meditation within a contextual background. Ultimately, with this project I hope to have demonstrated that the differing viewpoints of science and spirituality on self-identity and the various identities that may arise from it, are far more compatible than it may seem at first, and their marriage can give rise to new and productive interdisciplinary viewpoints on the topic of identity, such as the Enactive Approach.

References

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Appendix

Guided Meditation Transcript:

Welcome to this guided meditation on the nature of the self.

So if you'd like to sit upright on a chair or a cushion, or anywhere else you'd like to sit, and just get comfortable and relax.

You can close your eyes, or keep them open if you'd prefer.

And we'll begin by noticing the sensations of the breath; so just observe wherever you might feel it the strongest, whether that's the tip of the nose, the chest, the abdomen.

And the body knows how to breath all on its own, it does it every second of the day; we just have to notice the in breath, and the out breath.

Don't worry if your mind wanders, when you realise, just simply return your attention back to the breath.

Notice any sensations that arise in the body, maybe an itch on the neck, or a bit of discomfort in the back.

Notice how these sensations simply arise, and then pass; the itch will go away, even if we do not scratch it.

Now listen out for any sounds that you might hear.

Notice that these too, simply just arise and pass, all within experience; trying to prevent a sound right now, like stopping the birds from chirping, or making them chirp any longer than they usually do, would be a fruitless task.

Now relax the mind, and notice any thoughts that might arise within it.

Notice how these thoughts too simply arise, and then pass shortly after; a new thought might take the old ones place, but that too will soon fade.

Notice that everything that arises within conscious experience, will also pass; any physical feelings, sensory perceptions like sounds or visual objects, and even our own thoughts and feelings are impermanent.

To cling to these passing thoughts, feelings, sensations is to endlessly attempt to create a permanent self out of impermanent components, which is as fruitless as trying to keep the birds singing forever.