

Thoughts on the Problem of Self and Conventional Language

by Anagarika Tevijjo

If we may be allowed some comments, based upon our own individual observations, once we take an experience to be “I,” we build upon this latent and inherent tendency and make the mistake of assuming a personal entity [rather than a mere agglomeration or aggregate of phenomenal experiences], and we make the mistake of building up an image of “I” and “self” (and eventually maybe even an idea of an on-going-soul-entity) and thereby create the delusion of a duality between conceiving what is going on outside externally and what is going on within experience on the inside, — conceiving them [falsely] to be two different and extant realms of existence.

And if we assume the continuity of internal experience to be self, we thus posit a sense of self, that is separate from the outside realm of phenomena, — in other words, we build up a belief in a “self” that is separate from the overall flow of phenomenal reality, forgetting we are just an integral part of it, as a relatively-related arising and ceasing flowing within all of the phenomena around us.

We think we are in the middle, but that is just a hypothetical standpoint and mere pretention of perception — which, then, becomes a supposed “viewpoint” which we give the name of “self.”

In actuality, there is no self.

There is just a phenomenal perspective which causally-relates to the functioning of experiencing moving, spinning, surrounding phenomena, all dependently and causally relative to one another.

This mistaken perception is only human and can, [when accepted as given and understood] be forgiven: it is based on latent tendencies which lead from contacts to images into false imaginings.

Men may be ignorant of the nature of false perception, but out of compassion, we can and must forgive all of them, and this means including ourselves.

It is human to err — and the Buddha knew this very well, — and so due to his deep compassion, he tried to set the matter straight, at least for “the few with little dust in their eyes” who might understand him and be able to explain to others.

In fact, if we know the true Dhamma, we should not to blame anybody for not understanding; instead, we should attempt [through loving-kindness] to bring them to right understanding. We should try to teach the way to right awareness (vijja) to replace wrong awareness and wrong understanding, based on the ignorance of not knowing (avijja).

If we accept that man has the latent tendency to be ignorant based on a misunderstanding of mentally distorted perceptions, we should ask ourselves, “What can we *say* about that? Or better yet, what should we *do* about that?”

The answer is to teach man to untangle his wrong interpretation of the “seeming” phenomena of experience which are due to his ignorantly “assuming” there is an individual, personal-will and view.

As an abstract analogy, the above may be compared to one individual atom wanting to stand still while watching and thinking: “All this moving around me belongs to me,” — while all other atoms are moving with interconnectivity relative to one another.

Such a thing does not happen with atoms — it is not possible — and it does not happen with people either, despite their persistently-positing of a separate individual view, — despite how insistently and doggedly they may want to hang onto it.

Hanging on to such a personal view is a way of grasping and holding onto something which a so-called, “assumed individual” does not want to give up, and it’s hard, if not impossible, to convince him of the opposite.

Some beings are even so stubborn as to want to resist and overcome the natural process of the overall cosmos in order to make things go “their way,” — but this is a long and losing battle in which they will keep burning-up all their energies, for as long as they keep fighting and resisting inevitable reality.

The puzzle is: “*How does one wish (intend) to avoid going with the flow of wrongly-interpreted awareness and resultant ignorance (avijja) and, instead, gain the right understanding to learn and to enable one to go with the flow of ultimate reality?*”

The Buddha explains it, and some people understand it:

Man’s wrongly-interpreted awareness is based upon inherent tendencies of the imagination to want to become and then be an entity. Similar to the way he may see a seed growing-up into a tree and use himself as a comparative analogy — there is a latent tendency present in man towards wishing for seeming subsistence.

This is an inherent urge imbedded within all living things as aggregates of nature to strive for continuing-existence. That’s what keeps things going.

Just as in micro-organisms or insect-eggs and ants, and clinging vines and plants, this is true of all other living organisms, composed of the four elements, but, to be reasonable, a tree, for example, does not grow-up thinking it is a fixed-entity or that it

is really “somebody.”

Trees have a passive existence as part of a process within a process within a larger cosmos, and so do people actually.

This is a wonderful illumination.

The problem is that people just do not get-it, [or they do not get-it easily].

The Bodhisattva finally achieved illumination and liberation sitting under a Bodhi tree, so a tree is a fitting image to use to stand for the essence of the Dhamma.

In contrast to a Bodhi tree, one might also explain that based upon ignorance, the living entity, “man,” develops not only a doctrine of “self” but also a firm conviction of the doctrine on “self-continuity.”

Man may be wholly ignorant of the workings of waves of psycho-physical phenomena in the mind, but he is, at the same time very clever and cunning in making-up tricks to fool himself into believing that he actually exists as a thing in the world, and he is so grasping, when it comes to this self-continuity, that he also has the inherent tendency to develop a doctrine of self which desperately wants and desires to carry on after death.

Clever creature this deluded fellow is! He actually wants and needs to prove he exists. Somehow, he inherently senses a potential danger in cessation and non-existence, so he mentally secures his defenses with ideas and doctrines of lasting forms and substances [substantiality].

Not satisfied with requisite nourishment just to live in the moment, he wrongly craves and believes that what he deems to be “his” self will exist forever in some form and possibly hypothetically, in some cases, even out-live his own idea of the cosmos itself.

We might ask: “Why can he not be satisfied with just being an organism within this present cosmos with the capacity to continue to thrive and exist?”

The answer is, [as we have already stressed], that the clever creature wants more than he actually needs: he wants to believe in his self as being much more important than the vast cosmos itself. That’s his deluded way of making him feel fully-secure and sure of himself.

Does he go too far? Most would say, “Yes. That’s madness!” but others would say, “Poor fellow, he is contending with the need to rationalize-away the idea of annihilation of self at the time of or after death.”

Others would contend that he is dependent on a basic latent craving, need and greed for continuing and lasting existence, as something which will never end. Others would say that this is just a conveniently built-in self-delusion which works as part of the natural process for survival.

However, this kind of greed can, indeed, put the existence of self before the continuing existence and well-being of social unity and the whole orb of the globe and the population of the world itself.

For example, if left unheeded and unchecked, unbridled greed and need can easily lead, to ignorant, hateful thoughts like:

“If I can’t get what I want, I don’t care if the whole world blows-up and is totally destroyed.” Sometimes, even children, adults, wives, husbands, world leaders and sovereign rulers, [who should know better], think and react like that.

There is a fiendish paradox in here somewhere, isn’t there?

The resolution is that individual craving is so end-less and insatiable that it could eat-up the whole world and still not be satisfied.

It is in the nature of greed never to be satisfied, but let’s not get side-tracked.

To reiterate our point, this is all based on our incorrectly assuming a perceptual flow of reality called “self” has continuity which will go on into an after-life, and we become so attached to this idea of self that it becomes our own separate individual territory, and we are prepared to defend it against what we feel may be predatory attacks, both literally and figuratively.

Here it may be beneficial to stress, once again, that the idea that the way we relate to any surrounding environment is the root of the paradoxical problem of the human predicament, because we take ourselves to be one thing in relation to the other, thereby positing a non-existent duality.

In actual fact, there are only phenomena flowing, and we are part of the process and not “apart” from it as the six senses, contact, perception and mind and experience would want to believe.

Incidentally, when we use the word “we” or any of the personal pronouns, it is only a mental construct which indicates a singular or plural point of perception in relation to its proximate surroundings. We may use “we” like this, [as a linguistic tool meaning only perception right here at the moment], but when the idea of “we” takes on permanence, “we” are using it in a conventional rather than an ultimate sense.

In terms of ultimate reality, the yogi needs to see that there is no sense of “we” and no “me,” which is not a part of a great

complex of mere, tiny energy particles, the motions of which flow into and make up a perceived-experience in a cosmic process which is wholly impersonal.

“We,” as sets of bundles of energy particles, are always part of the changing process and we are always changing with it. This is quite hard for the untrained mind to understand, and this is why we need and we have to have a conventional language.

Although “we” can be broken-down into its tiniest parts, until there is nothing left but impulses, it is not easy for “people” to grasp the explanation of phenomenality, and this is why “we” need to use the tools of conventional language to communicate.

There is no problem with conventional words as indicators or signs and symbols, as long as they are not taken to stand for something which is extant and unchanging.

Conventional language is useful for being able to communicate with worldly “persons” who have grasped onto the concept of “self” and do not want to let go of their idea of identity.

Conventional language is useful for people who do not want to be part of an ultimate process but desire and crave to be individual entities.

[This means, you have to speak to conventional people in conventional language or you cannot talk to them.]

An alternative system, which might be used to talk about ultimate reality, as we have already indicated, would be to understand “person” as a complex mind-body organism, a living-being, as a functional, perceptual network of receivers of perceptions of countless and inestimable perceptual contacts with impulses within a vast and almost inconceivable process which picks-up and organizes incoming phenomena and dhammas and forms them into a composite image which the mind can cognize and work with, on both physical and mental levels, which would be analogous to trying to observe the movements of all moving bodies in particle energies in physics].

Realistically, to be quite honest, only a few seers and ascetics, philosophers, physicists, and monks and monastics can see and accept such an explanation [in terms of ultimate reality].

Monks know it through analysis investigation, observation and concentration, in which the mind reaches a point of clear perception of the impermanence and the phenomenality of “things.”

Their knowing comes gradually from growing understanding of subtle movements within the mind clearing away the rubble of common understanding. As is often said, the monk’s practice is a process of unlearning all of the common assumptions of the conventional world.

In the end of the contemplative process, there is no more any idea of monk; there is only knowing-knowing.

Rather than being one unified, solid body and unchanging form, the psycho-physical organism consists of millions and billions and trillions of particles [including even parts of particles] working within a process which is, so miniscule in its infinitesimal units and so vast in its reach that the human entity normally only has the capacity to simplify it [symbolically] to something it can understand, conventionally, and which acts in accordance with a process of continuing nourishment and dependent survival, although it is based on reference to invisible phenomenal signals, like waves and energy impulses, within its surroundings, which generate and keep it moving, causally and dependently related to all of the other elements and particles moving with and around it.

Does this sound difficult? It surely is, which is why there is no harm in approaching and repeating and explaining it the phenomenal world in different ways

If we take conventional language as being simply a capacity of designating something symbolically as more than it appears to be on the level of mere contact, form or image, it is easy for the untrained mind to conceptualize that the unity or entity has a posited-existence or even a posited-self, — which is, at least, convenient for talking, communicating and understanding on some levels, — although the truth is that the “posited-object” is only a useful hypothetical concept — a conceptualization which will fall apart again when broken down into its tiniest elements and units.

We are getting closer to explaining the difference in the two levels of language as, (i) conventional and (ii) ultimate, but, as we have said, there are very few who can actually understand it.

For the common, conventional man, it is easier to hook into the assumed-reality of seeming-existence and flow within the everyday-stream. It takes little effort to go with the human-flow of likes-and-dislikes and wants-and-needs. Indeed, this often feels comfortable, especially when one is momentarily getting what one wants and desires.

The problem is that, as things do not always go the way one wants, then, at that juncture, one will become frustrated and begin to come to feel dissatisfied. This problem arises because the world does not always do what one wants and, more often than not, one jealously sees someone else getting the object which one has coveted and desired for oneself.

As a consequence, this experience leads, instead of to pleasure, into displeasure and can easily grow into dislike, anger and hate and even worse.

The problem with going with the conventional flow is that although, on the one hand, we can experience much happiness in life, on the other, when our wills are thwarted, as they invariably are, we feel irritation, dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

Such arising unhappiness also often leads to the blaming other persons for taking what we wanted or to the blaming of someone for doing something which we didn't want him to do, because his actions oppose our wills and interfere with our ideas of what we have wished-for in order to enjoy the desired fulfillment of our own imagined needs.

We can ask, "What is the root and basis of these never-ending needs?" and the answer is that the root of the problem lies in the fact that everybody in the flow of the stream is fishing for the same thing, for his own happiness, although "unhappiness" inevitably happens when there are not enough fish.

What happens if some other person or persons has/have taken many-more fish than they need? We envy them and are also angry with them for frustrating our wishes.

We become angry with them because they have taken something we wanted, and this sort of situation, [when allowed to perpetuate], may, eventually, lead to smoldering-resentment breaking out into confrontation.

Confrontation often leads to insolence and offense and eventually, maybe even, as well, to the arising of violence and death.

Who could be happy in such a confrontational world?

Who would want to live in such a world which is based on getting the most first? The answer is "Nobody," — but if that is the level which you choose to live on, maybe you get what you deserve, — especially, when you secretly know that if you could have done so, you would have taken all the fish first.

The problem with seeing fulfillment of self-indulgence as the highest of goals is that it threatens one's existence, for three reasons:

One is that someone will want what you have got and may harm or even kill you to get it. This makes life, [instead of a simple pleasure-ride] an unending strenuous struggle to grasp what you want and to keep what you have got. It makes life confrontational rather than comfortable and compatible.

Nobody wants a life like that!

Second is the reason that if one merely considers survival of self and nourishment as the purpose of existence, one becomes just another predator in a forest or jungle which is already full of hungry animals which would just as soon eat you as allow you eat them, and, thus, existence becomes a life-and-death struggle for self-survival.

Third, quite ironically, if one were, indeed, unknowingly, delusively fighting for self-survival in a world where, instead of self being an abiding mental-construct, self is only an unsubstantial bundle of aggregates which has no concrete existence, one might, out of ignorance, be ready and willing to fight out of a paradoxical compulsion to preserve the survival of a posited self that doesn't even exist — which has no ultimate existence!

This is ignorance, isn't it?

What we must remember is that the world is not outside us, and we are not inside our self. There can be no inside and outside phenomena when every motion and action is part of a larger process.

Does this go against what you feel and believe?

It may well do, but it is part of the untangling process of unlearning everything that we have ever assumed and have been told to believe.

Most of us are unable to untangle the tangle.

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If we paraphrase a comment from Bhikkhu Bodhi's well-known lecture given on the Satipatthana Sutta at Bodhi Monastery, [MN059_MN-010.MP3], we also may examine some further related questions, summarizing his words as follows:

He asks which are the different aspects of experience [flowing phenomena] which we cling and grasp onto, with the idea: "This is me." "This is mine." "This is myself?"

And then he says:

"These are the three primary OBSESSIONS of the subjective way of thinking."

These are the underlying constructions of an imagined underlying personality, and the point of the Buddha's teaching is obtaining freedom or liberation from these three obsessions, which spontaneously arise in the mind, taking what we assume to be the arising of phenomena of "I," "mine" and "myself."

This notion arises spontaneously, as a part of experience, [arising process of point of view], as a part of the process of identifying,

as a part of the phenomenal process of nature, (which is an integral part of experience), we take on a point of view which could simply be called perception but which may be mistakenly taken and designated to be some sense of an “I” — a “being, in place with an actual identity” — but there is something wrong with the thinking here, isn’t there?

How could “identifying-with” mere experience of a larger and wider process come to be considered as “I”?

There is a jump in the perceptual process here which cannot be explained conventionally or logically.

We might ask, if this could this be taken to mean, “*I identify with I*” in the sense that the second instance of “I” means the totality of experience? We might ask if this could theoretically mean, “I am the world? Or “I am the totality of all of phenomena of experience, *but this would be nonsense.*

This cannot be, because man’s perceptual capacities and perceivable experiences are narrowly-limited only to what he needs to know to keep on moving and navigating and subsisting, within the range of his immediate and proximate environment.

To help to understand this paradoxical problem, we may explain that in conventional language, there always has to be something separate [as subject] to identify with the totality of the experience [as object], but in ultimate language, the paradox is resolved if the totality of experience excludes any point of reference within it as being a separate and non-participating entity.

The point of reference of the place in experience could, indeed, be assigned the letter “x” and used in mathematical language, although referent “x” could, certainly and obviously, not be posited to have any personality.

Actually, the locational personal point of view could hypothetically be labeled as “*whatever you want to call it*” within the perspective of quantum physics.

This could also mean that, while such a point of view might be arbitrarily labeled “self” within the syntax of language, the idea — “experience identifying or interconnecting with” — clearly cannot be posited to have a separate personality independent of the totality it is considered to be part of and occurring within.

We might make a pragmatic compromise by saying that because of man’s limited perceptual capability, [to say nothing about his vulnerability], he, at least, has a cognitive set of tools to identify happenings within a certain perceptually-restrictive circle of points within the process of phenomenality.

To use a simile to illustrate: Conventionally speaking, a sailor cannot see the whole ocean, but he can navigate his course for his own security and safety with regard to certain proximate recognizable points of reference [using perceivable referents], using the tools he has available in order to calculate and locate and keep track of his present position.

Ultimately, however, the only referents which the psychophysical organism has to use for orientation within the overall cycle of life itself are mental awareness of perceptions of increments of change in regard to (i) body, (ii) feelings, (iii) mind and (iv) experienced phenomena, and these mental fields of awareness may be used to figuratively posit or “plot” a hypothetical position, based upon noted, momentary relationships between the referents within a moving overall mental environment, based upon evolving relations between the aforementioned four foundation of mindfulness.

The conventional view may be compared to making measurements within the field of physical geography, whereas the ultimate and wider view may be compared to plotting paths of elements and particles in the science atomic physics and sub-atomic units which do not yet even have names because they are so hard to locate and measure and research.

The conventional point of view is not much for common man to go on, but at least it enables the mind to establish some hypothetical points of reference, as we have said, for nourishment and defense.

We might additionally state that this capability is a sort of defense-system of physical referents which has naturally developed within the emerging and evolving process of the cosmos to protect man from danger and destruction in the face of threatening, approaching and co-incident factors and conditions.

Even the flowers fold-up at night, so why should man, [even though he is part of a part of a much larger evolving, ultimate process], also not have his own means of immediate protection?

He has the capability, because it is an essential part of a process of insuring on-going and continuing surviving.

To discuss (i) conventional language, with the help of metaphorical devices, we might say that such a system of identification is a trick or tool of nature which a man is able to use as a natural, navigational, protection device, [like a sailor being tossed in undulating seas], to locate the point at which he is figuratively “floating” in what might sometimes be calm and sometimes seem to be made up of big breakers getting bigger and bigger.

In terms of (ii) ultimate language, symbolically, the ocean may, on a yet a second level, be taken as a confluence of swirling and changing phenomenal elements within an ever-evolving larger process of whirling and changing elements, in which there is no entity, fixed-form or location at all.

No wonder man is confused. No wonder he grasps onto whatever potential safety-device he imagines might help him fight for his life — especially when the seas are beginning to build and swell-up and crash down upon him like falling walls in crashing waves

of water, becoming bigger and even bigger breakers.

Life is, indeed, as the idiom says, sometimes “harsh, brutal and short,” and we should feel compassion for any entity drifting afloat within any potentially dangerous waves of phenomenal seas, literally or figuratively designated.

On the common level our psychophysical radar may not reach very far, but, at least it reaches, far enough to protect us from most of the approaching and immanent dangers around in our environment.

The “fixed” floatation-device of “imagined-position” is just a trick of nature but it works in this situation.

This point of reference which is here designated as the “self” is something we naturally want to hang onto, just as a non-swimmer would desperately grasp onto a life-preserver.

When we use the analogy with reference to common language, it is easy to see how we get attached to the “floatation device as the idea of self”, and it is no wonder we might even, [ironically], want to fight for our “posited-existence” if someone attempted to make us let go of “it” or tried to take it away from us.

That our limited view depends on a need-to-know, narrow and limited range of perception would, in such a case, never occur to us.

This is a paradoxical irony, which only the wise would be capable of seeing.

This is a trick of nature, which ironically, in this case, works for man’s benefit.

Normally, a trick looks like something which cannot be, done, — but when we see it we believe it. The root of ignorance is that we believe what we see.

Though the self-protective trick of false perception may not be “true,” we may say again that a man in a dangerous-position cannot be blamed for the ignorance or non-awareness which prevents him from seeing a broader perspective beyond the [beneficial] deception behind a protective trick of nature.

Later on, if someone explains how the trick is done, man is no longer ignorant of the true facts — the way they really are. Then, it will no longer be a trick, and there is no longer any deception, at least not in the eyes of those with right view, who can see through deception into the true situation.

To reiterate, seen in this way, the figurative picture or image we get of a fixed-point location on the navigational map is helpful in so far as it is beneficial. There is actually no problem in man’s using the tool pragmatically as a survival device, as long as he does not identify with it or get wholly carried away by believing in it as having a personality.

To stress the point, man’s limited range-of-view gives him a limited sense of self-security, but, he does not and cannot see wider dangers approaching from outside the scope of this practical but limited and three-dimensional range of view.

Addendum

Analogy of a Multi-Dimensional Ocean of Phenomena

Before concluding, let’s take some time to expand upon our ocean image for the sake of illustrating how limited and inflexible and stubbornly ignorant man is:

One might ask: “If we find we are, figuratively speaking, a speck somewhere within a swirling sea of phenomena all around us, and we do not know what kind of mental or physical waves will be coming next, [or from where], what would we normally do?”

Would we continue hanging-onto our *life-ring of self-identity*, — which would mean hanging onto a “self with a suppositional location,” in space — as we were being, probably fearfully, swirled and hurled around and about within stormy waves of undulating and unfathomable seas in an ocean of gathering impulses, giving the appearance or experienced as “ spinning mental phenomena, lacking any sense of place?”

What would most of us do in such a case?

We, would most likely, “as supposed individuals,” instead of understanding the wider phenomenal truth of ultimate reality of the figurative and phenomenal vastness of the ocean, [i.e. the impermanence of all phenomena continually arising and disappearing], we would probably self-centeredly and frantically be grasping and “hanging-on-tight” while asking:

“Why is this happening to me? Why to me?” As though we were a real person and nature was threatening us with immanent self-annihilation.

As in all distressing situations in life, we would, most likely, quickly become distressed and even angry — because things were not working out the way they were “supposed-to-be,” according-to a preconceived-plan, which we had laid-out within our “own” limited and tightly-encircled, mundane point-of-view.

Most of us would feel an extreme anxiety in the face of such trouble, even though the root cause of our agitation would be “our” own limited range of narrowed- perception, which is a field of wrong view, because it does not include everything possible, [outside our security box] within a much-wider and ever-changing, totally unimaginable, vast process of endless numbers of arising radiations and waves of fleeting phenomena.

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Wrong view depends on ignorance, which is always the proximate cause of unnecessary anxiety, insecurity and suffering.

We may also note that there is a considerable difference between, what is at first, (i) a “simple, point of perception” within a range of seemingly on-going continuum of phenomena — a spark which could potentially grow and evolve into an over-inflated view, which could even go so far, for example, to proclaim: (ii) “I am the preceptor and perceiver of all things.”

“Self” is so greedy, that it might, indeed, want to make itself a personal god, although, even if it could, the hungry and insatiable “Self” would still not be satisfied.

This becomes a problem during an evolving process in which so-called “self” is allowed to inflate itself into a big bubble unknowingly nearing the final pressure-point of bursting and breaking-up. Here, we see how the preliminary, weak oxygen-spark of life might grow, uncontrolled and unhindered, [like an ever-expanding self-inflating balloon] to the point of outrageously imagining itself as being omniscient and wanting to know and control everything, while at the same time being unaware it is in the process of breaking-up and wholly ceasing.

Quite paradoxically, there is no total omniscience in Buddhism, and the Buddha has investigated and explained the problem of “Self” in close detail in his analysis of the Five Aggregates and the Six Sense Bases.