

How Early Buddhist philosophy and the Sensorimotor Paradox theory can connect

A Setting Bird

Undergoing a Buddhist practice is no mean feat. The impact on one's own daily life can be extensive, for it touches the very heart of what makes up for a human experience. The core of Buddhist philosophies, notably regarding the early texts¹, remains remarkably modern in the ways that it critically tackles the notions of Self or Non-Self and the conditional structures of our perceptions, understood as both sensory and mental. But it also offers a path in order to make peace with the inherent instability of lived experience. It gets there from the observation that everything is always changing to some degree, which fact is 'hard to face' – *dukkha*. According to American psychologist Mark Epstein², the etymology of the term *dukkha* (considered the first of the Four Noble Truths in early Buddhism³ and usually translated as 'suffering' or rather, as 'unsatisfactory', if we follow secular Buddhist scholar Doug Smith's position) notably offers us a reflection on the nature of trauma, that we already inspected earlier.⁴ Trauma would be in all the moments of everyday life that may be 'hard to face', for whatever reasons and to whatever degree, whether slight or large.

Likewise, the unsatisfactory nature of many of our daily experiences can apply of course to painful experiences as much as to pleasurable ones, as they are as well destined to end eventually. The key practice of Buddhist philosophy would then be precisely to acknowledge our tendency to cling on to and identify with things in the world as if they pertained to some stable and everlasting entity or Self – though it really is impermanent, as all things are according to the Buddhist stance. As such, they can only be situated experiences and serve as skilful means to connect, enact and find understanding with others within specific contexts of interaction. From the mindful awareness of the tendency that we may have to react to distressful situations by clinging on to some fixed representations of how things, including ourselves and our practice, are or should be, we can learn to restrain those kinds of reaction born from fear and calm ourselves down.

If at the time, around the 5th century BCE, the Buddha reportedly elaborated his analysis on whether a notion of Self was skilful and on mental states and ethics in contradistinction with Brahmanic beliefs, the way that it highlights complex and intricated notions of identity is still vivid and deserves consideration. We already, in earlier essays, suggested how the interpretation of *dukkha* connected with our definition of *trauma* as founding our growth and (self-)perception, as an agent of contrast, adaptation and interpretation, that would mostly vary in degree.⁵ It would also be interesting to consider how the central idea of Non-Self and the Buddhist recommendations about it, such as equanimity toward change and non-attachment can raise useful connections to the core of the theory of the sensorimotor paradox. (Let us note that non-attachment is not to be mistaken for *detachment* and not caring about the world and others. On the contrary, non-attachment would be about welcoming but not grasping, not identifying and adopting an attitude of *lovingkindness* toward things around and within us that are impermanent and that we cannot totally control.)

1 In their various recensions in Pāli, Sanskrit or Chinese, and claimed to be best represented today by the Theravāda tradition, though there seems to be controversies on the matter. You can find an introduction to the Theravāda in Walpola Rahula's book, *What The Buddha Taught* (1959, 1974).

2 See [Mark Epstein, MD - "Working with Trauma: Integrating Psychotherapy and Mindfulness" \(01/23/18\)](#), on YouTube.

3 We will lean very much on the introductory work by Doug Smith, Study Director at the Dharma Institute, notably as displayed on his YouTube channel *Doug's Dharma*. See, on the subject of *dukkha*, [« Buddhism's First Noble Truth »](#).

4 In « A Human Paradox », <https://threeparadoxes.com/2022/03/01/a-human-paradox/>

5 Read also Darian Leader, *Jouissance. Sexuality, Suffering and Satisfaction*, Stilus, 2020.

The theory of the sensorimotor paradox

As to the heart of the theory of the sensorimotor paradox, as we remind it, it is the evolutionary hypothesis that the development of human species' capacity for imagination might have been possible thanks to a sensorimotor paradox – first, the situation of gazing at one's own hand(s). Sensorimotor usual interactions would break down as the object of the gazing here is the very same one as the hand that I would have the impulse to react with in relation to any other object. Biologist Gerald M. Edelman's condition for self-consciousness would be satisfied, as the usual neural response to stimulation would then be 'delayed or lagged'⁶. This particular situation would produce a disconnection of the sensorimotor image then generated from the possibility of its enaction toward this very situation – frozen. (It is to be noted here that we understand the concepts of sensorimotricity and enaction as used and developed by Chilean Biologist Francisco Varela in his work, that was deeply inspired by Buddhism itself.⁷)

That means that imagination, as a first support for later collective elaboration of networks of symbolisation, would rely on a gap opened within our capacity to spontaneously and *compulsively* respond to a situation on the sensorimotor level. In this disconnection between situation and sensorimotor reaction, the working and relative autonomy of the mental image that we would find ourselves caught into, as well as the emotional effect of being frozen into that moment would act as an equivalent substitution, so to release the entropy of restraining and delaying the response that would have been otherwise given. We, in a way, *grasp* to that image as there is nothing else that we can grasp on to.

It gives a complex configuration where I become myself the object of a somewhat abstract scene and complicated feeling, as my own hand alienates from myself and becomes part of something seeming to belong to the outside world. My perception of the latter, of what it *is* and means to me shifts as well, as it seems to become, through the assimilation of my hand, a part of *me*, an ontological experience. So, we do tend to identify to our mental images and representations as they are the substitutes to a most vital and bodily need for sensorimotor interaction. The disruption of this elementary capacity produces a situation of distress, that needs an emergency alternative, found in the situation itself and its imaginary-like outcome. Any idea and perception of a self would be, from that point, a reconstruction from the ongoing and *traumatic* (in the sense mentioned above) generation of sensorimotor memory, which would later on articulate with social interactions, rules and conventions, looped within itself, its own narrative activity and constant work of anticipation and interpretation. Eventually, it locates all its effort and tension internalising non-expressed and then repressed possibilities within the body.

In a way, as did psychoanalysis, for instance and to an extent with the freudian unconscious and the lacanian concepts of signifiers and the symbolic, early Buddhism aimed well at understanding how much any mental formalisation would come up as an attempt at grasping on to some safety resort, at rescuing oneself from distress, seeking a form of stability. As we saw, the state of paradox described in the theory that we developed before is a highly distressful one, as the very structure of sensorimotricity and capacity for the body to function is put at risk. In a passionating way, early Buddhist psychological analysis and the ways that it offers to heal and make peace with our disruptive sense of self are stimulating and encouraging, especially in dire times such as ours today.

6 In Gerald M. Edelman, *The Remembered Present*, Basic Books, 1987.

7 The last part of collective book *The Embodied Mind* (written with Evan Thompson and Eleanor Rosch, MIT Press, 1991) is dedicated to the influence on their work of late Madhyamaka Buddhism and its ecological touch.

What say 'me' ?

The second paradox that we discussed in the work that is being done here⁸ is the paradox of the word 'me'. When I say 'me', aiming at the reality of my lived and non-communicable sensorimotor and emotional experience, I have to step out of that experience in order to involve the participation of someone else, which I hope to get in order to testify of the existence of such a concrete object as a 'me'. We can see here how it connects with the Buddhist assertion according to which any permanent and everlasting 'Self' that we are expected to find by inspection is only seeming to exist within a conventional, relational and situated construct.

It also joins with the structure of the mirror phase, such as the one proposed by French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan since the 1930's, taking up from Henri Wallon's first observation : an 'I' can only exist within a dualistic structure where it would oppose a 'you' or a 'it' as a common and *outside* object of consideration. There, we need the outside gaze to give the object 'me' its *form*. As I say 'me', I also marvel at the possibility that such a space could open in-between me and someone else that would allow my own existence to become some object separated from my prime experience, which is so difficult to grasp. The word 'me', its fiction and narrative structure take me back into the circle of my relation to someone else that I wish to be supported by as the structure of a testified and ever-standing reality. So, there is a form of attachment, in the sense developed by psychologist John Bowlby in the 1960's. Saying 'me' may be an attempt at making contact again with someone else, even in the abyss of self-disruption, at recreating some stable bond though it is always unsure, because this 'me' reality needs the same relational structure to hold, beyond the security of a closer physical contact, which always ends eventually.

That is the same relational structure that we try to maintain on a moment to moment basis by compulsively diving into our constant stream of thought. We need someone to talk to and address just to maintain the formal representation and illusion of some self, that would exist and be expressed through speech : to talk is to exist within a bond to others that seems to guarantee a form of permanence, in a way by a relation of moral debt. By their name, we take debt from others to stay with us attached, for better or worse, even though that kind of permanence is but a wish that may overlap its possibility. Otherwise, we risk facing the gap that we mentioned before, this hole and lack of a possibility to respond, as we grew up as individuals integrating the codes of conduct and social behaviour that we intimately know rule our interactions with others and our capacity to be accepted and thus survive among them, should we feel safely that we can be loved. The theory of the sensorimotor paradox gives a possible way of understanding why the gap is inevitable as it would be founding our very capacity to think, to retain sensorimotor enaction within imaginary and symbolic processes.

The way of healing

On its side, Buddhism proposed very early efficient ways both to make peace with the non-existence of some self-evident Self that would exist outside of conventional and experiential structures and situations, and to encourage the development of a middle-ground between abandoning the implication of a self and still feeling concerned by what happens to the world around us and others – a centred ethics between desperate nihilism and morals. In a way, it joins with some concerns raised by English psychoanalyst Darian Leader in most of his work, about

⁸ Read Clémence Ortega Douville, *Three Paradoxes and Concentric Circles*, <https://threeparadoxes.com/the-book/>

indulging in some detached and looped-in theorisation on the nature of the mind, from the same groups of people which work should be of finding better ways of helping people in their own contexts of experience.⁹ The same distinction is made in early Buddhism, according to Doug Smith, between 'No Self' and 'Non-Self'.¹⁰ Indeed, the claim made by the Buddha would not have been to say that we should eradicate the Self, but to understand that any experience of something like a 'Self' is but momentary and conventional, that we should not get attached to it hoping that it would last and support us forever. On the evolutionary level, of course, we can also link that perspective to scholar in neuroaesthetics Ellen Dissanayake's suggestion that our aesthetic experience of the world is less about the semantic content of the forms that we create, for example in the arts, than the simple fact that we do have an unique and singular experience in which we find ourselves committed.¹¹

And that is the whole point of the sensorimotor paradox theory, that we find ourselves taken in a situation where we are forced to be spectator and witness to our own experience, that immediately creates a scene that comes to mediate our means to address that experience. Our imagination becomes the place where the 'I' can exist so long as we make it, but there is still to make this very scene exist as well for others so to make evidence that its potential reality would survive beyond its passing moment. We need others to believe ourselves that that moment, the memory from which we try to make sense would be passed on and live forever in the world, and heal beyond that hope.

9 Read, for instance, the late essay « Re-reading Little Hans », JCFAR, 2021.

10 Watch, for instance, « Did the Buddha Teach No Self ? », <https://youtu.be/wUDnPy6ACG4>

11 Read, for instance, Ellen Dissanayake, « The Artification Hypothesis and Its Relevance to Cognitive Science, Evolutionary Aesthetics, and Neuroaesthetics », *Cognitive Semiotics*, Issue 5 (Fall 2009), pp. 148-173. Available here : https://www.ellendissanayake.com/publications/pdf/EllenDissanayake_CognitiveSemiotics5.pdf