Presence:

Clear Awareness and How It Emerges in Meditation and the Brain

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Shadows in a Mirror: Constructing Selves

In chapter 12 we examined how the Buddha broke down the sense of self into five non-self "heaps," or "aggregates." In chapter 13 we saw how neural science untangled ten threads that contribute to consciousness and a sense of self. In this chapter we'll deepen these reflections by looking at how they can be woven back together into developmental stages that could be called:

- **Protoself** — the building blocks of selfhood
- **Core self** — the emerging sense of "me"
- **Autobiographical self** — the storyline of self
- **Multiple selves** — the many personalities we all have
- **Non-self** — self emerges from and fades into emptiness

The names for the first three come from the work of Antonio Damasio.[27] The fourth is from Eugene Gendlin.[28] And the last is from the Buddha's teachings.

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[27] Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind: Constructing the Conscious Brain* (Vintage Books, 2010).

[28] Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing* (Bantam Books, 1978, 1981).

These stages map loosely but not precisely onto the Buddha's khandha as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4. Developmental Stages of Self

Stages of Self	**Khandhas of the Buddha**
Protoself	1. Rūpa: sensation
Core self	2. Vedanā: feeling tone
Autobiographical self	3. Saññā: perception 4. Saṅkhāra: constructs
Multiple selves	5. Viññāṇa: dispositions
Non-self	Anattā: non-self

Notice that two of the khandhas — saññā and saṅkhāra — are both part the autobiographical self. Also notice that anattā or non-self is beyond the khandhas even though it's an important part of the Buddha's teachings. As we explore further, I think it will become clear that the differences between the stages of self and the khandhas are conceptual rather than substantive.

Since we've looked at most of the elements of the first two developmental stages in the last chapter, we'll do a quick review of how they come together. Then we'll take a longer look at the later stages with a special emphasis on the last: anattā or non-self. The Buddha contended that even though the phenomenon of self is real and socially useful, any sense of an enduring, independent self behind these stages is a figment of our imaginations. Ultimately, self and all its components are just shadows in a mirror: we can perceive them, but they are not substantial. In the end, the light of wise awareness dispels them all.

Protoself

Homeostatic Balance + Homeostatic Imbalance + Felt Sense + Complexity + Actions to Restore Homeostasis

The first stage is the protoself. It corresponds roughly to the rūpa khandha or raw sensations.

It is a precursor to a sense of self and consists of essential building blocks of a full self-sense. These include the first five components described in chapter 13: homeostatic balance, homeostatic imbalance, felt sense, complexity, and actions to restore homeostasis.

As we've seen (p. 99-105), complex creatures have so many homeostatic variables that several may go out of balance at the same time. The organism must decide which to deal with first. In simpler creatures, imbalances are handled by unconscious reflexes. In complex creatures these imbalances generate discomfort or pain in various forms. The important point is that these are felt as conscious experiences that motivate differing actions.

Core Self

Proto Self + Free Will + Internal Maps + Protagonist

The second stage is the core self. It is roughly similar to vedanā or the second khandha of feeling tone.

The protoself does not disappear as the more sophisticated stage emerges. Rather, the core self draws on the protoself and adds to it free will, internal maps, and a protagonist.

Because the brain resides in isolation inside the skull, we do not experience the world directly (p. 117-120). The brain receives highly coded neural signals through its Markov blankets (p. 120). We saw how the brain uses these signals to construct an internal map of the world. During construction of

those maps, the incoming signals are consolidated, edited, filtered, slanted by disposition, and so forth. The inner maps never match the external world precisely. They only have to be good enough for the organism to get around.

The protagonist is one of the objects on the internal map. But it is different from the other objects in that the act of perception affects the perceiver while the disposition of the perceiver affects the perception. This creates a unique feedback loop. The efferent copy (pp. 190-191) and other mechanisms add to this.

Autobiographical Self

Core Self + Memory

The third stage is the autobiographical self. It roughly includes both the third and fourth khandha: saññā or perceptions and saṅkhāra or constructs. Saññā is more than raw sensation. It includes a simple conceptual label used to name the experience. Saṅkhāra, as we saw earlier, are more elaborate constructs we use to create a map of the world and ourself in that map.

The autobiographical self draws on both the protoself and the core self. To these it adds memory: now the protagonist has a story line. Memory provides a past to ruminate on and a future to anticipate. From lessons learned it develops values and expectations of what's coming. This is a fully developed sense of self.

The autobiographical self is not always active. It can sit on the sidelines and let the core self have full sway. My time sitting on the patio with a mug of tea is an example of the autobiographical self sitting in the background even during my encounters with thirst and my cat. However, as I started to worry about emails and a crowded calendar, the

autobiographical self arose out of its slumber and settled into the driver's seat.

Multiple Selves

Autobiographical Self + Autobiographical Self + …

The autobiographical self can be a platform from which other selves arise with different personalities and inclinations. In the khandhas, these are called viññāṇa. Viññāṇa can be translated as "constructs." But in this case, they are not just any construct but the ones we carry around. They help shape how we see and respond to the world. This function is better captures by the English word "disposition." They could also be called "personalities" or "character structures.

Antonio Damasio[29] talks about a *spiritual self* with refined sensing, a *social self* that focuses more on relationships, and so on. Each of us has a collection of selves specific to us.

One of the differences between the Buddha's teaching and some modern schools of psychology is that the Buddha talks about *a self* while some psychologies talk about *several selves* in the same person.

For example, the self that I experience when I'm playing with my grandchildren is very different from the self that talks with clients or meditators. That self is different from the self who delivers Dhammā talks, who is different from the self walking in the woods near my home, who is different from the self spending a quiet evening with my wife, who is different from the self in a march for social justice, who is different from the self grocery shopping. Most of us have somewhere between ten and twenty selves. Gendlin calls them "persona."[30] They are

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[29] Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind.* (Vintage Books, 2010).

[30] Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing*, (Bantam Books, 1978, 1981).

personalities with different sets of manners, desires, fears, agendas, and attitudes. Depending on the situation at any given moment, we may shift fluidly in and out of these to adjust to our circumstances.

Eugene Gendlin developed a style of psychotherapy based on getting to know these various persona.[31] These selves should not be confused with multiple personality disorder, which usually arises out of abuse or severe mistreatment. Rather they are quite normal in healthy, stable people.

Since the selves have different needs and tendencies, it can be helpful to become familiar with all of them so that we can know what they care about and we can take them into account. Deep contentment is probably not possible when one or more of them is neglected.

Exploring these different personas can be rich and rewarding, but it's beyond the scope of this book. However, for our purposes here, it's important to note that we do have many viññāṇa, not just one. Each arises and passes depending on our circumstances. We begin to notice that in the larger interdependent web of life, none of them last. They all dependently arise and eventually fade. None are permanent. As this becomes more obvious, we begin to realize that ultimately there is no lasting self whatsoever.

Non-Self

This brings us to the Buddha's core teachings on anattā or non-self. It may be one of the most confusing and misunderstood elements of his teachings. Part of the difficulty is that he was not trying to lay out religious doctrines or

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[31] While Eugene Gendlin was primarily a researcher rather than a meditator or clinical psychologist, his work has implications for the experience of selfhood in both meditative and clinical contexts.

philosophical constructs. Rather, he was describing a phenomenology of direct experience. He believed that by carefully examining our actual experiences, we could learn enough to free ourselves from suffering.

To get a feel for this, imagine a rainstorm. When clouds, moisture, temperature, and wind are in the right proportions, a storm ensues. When the conditions are not right, there is no storm. The weather gods did not hide the storm in an alternate universe and plan to drop it on us next Tuesday. The causes and conditions for the storm were not right, so it simply did not exist.

Or, to say it differently, "rainstorm" is just a label we use to point to a set of conditions. The rainstorm does not exist outside of its physical manifestations.

Under the right conditions, a particular sense of self is perceived to exist. With different causes and conditions, a different self is perceived. And under other conditions, not self is perceived. In this case, selfhood has not gone into hiding in an alternate universe. It has not gone to heaven or hell or been secreted away by the metaphysical forces or a mystical sleight of hand. It just doesn't exist.

The causes and conditions that give rise to a sense of self were described by the Buddha using the khandhas: tension, feeling tones, pointers and labels, a sense of solidity or continuity, concepts, stories, disposition to color our experience with a self, and so on (pp. 165-174). These factors are amplified by the nervous system through homeostasis, homeostatic imbalance, etc. (pp. 177-196).

But when we relax deeply enough, all those conditions fade and we are left with anattā: no self. It's the default — when the conditions aren't right, self doesn't go away: rather, it simply

does not arise. When we are immersed in lovely music, quietly enjoying a sunset, lying in a field gazing into a starry night, there may not be enough tension, stories, and so forth to give rise to a perception of selfhood. It's just not relevant to our flow of experience and doesn't come to mind at that moment. Under different conditions, a sense of self does arise.

Again, this is not a metaphysical argument. It is a phenomenological description.

The Buddha never said the self does not exist at all. It obviously does. Anything created to express an idea does exist. Whether it exists in the world of experience is another matter. But the idea of self is useful. The conventional designation of a specific body, personal history, legal entity, developmental stages, etc., are all useful in specific circumstances. The Buddha agreed with all of that.

No "Higher" Self

There are just two forms of self to which the Buddha took exception. One is a so-called higher self, as an entity, essence, or soul. He said there is no self mysteriously outside conventional time and space and outside natural physical and mental processes. Andrew Olendzki puts it this way:

> *Self might be a useful word for referring to a person's body, feelings, perceptions, behavioral traits, and consciousness, but it cannot be construed as something underlying or transcending these manifestations … [A] person is not something other than how he or she manifests in experience.*[32]

Agency

The other common understanding of selfhood that the Buddha rejected was agency. He said there is no centralized,

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[32] Andrew Olendzki, *Unlimiting Mind* (Wisdom Publications, 2012), p. 9.

consolidated, executive function that makes decisions and pulls the strings of physical and mental actions.

This rejection can be confusing because when we look inside, we can see thoughts, decisions, plans for actions, and other strategies. The Buddha agreed that all these are real and do happen.

He just said there is no entity running the show. Modern neuroscience agrees. As unintuitive as it feels, there seems to be no consolidated inner executive. In the brain, intelligence is distributive rather than centralized. There is thinking but no thinker, deciding but no decider, worrying but no worrier, planning but no planner.

Remember the *C. elegans* nematodes (p. 187), who won't feed alone when there is a nearby threat? They seem to be making decisions. But with only about three hundred neurons, nematodes have no mind and no meaningful sense of self, just blind instincts. We humans have many billions of neurons, so our minds are more complex. But we still have no central director only directing, no adjudicator only adjudicating.

Again, to quote Olendzki:

> *One can discern an executive function of intention or will, but there is no one to whom this belongs and no one who is wielding it. … [W]e go well beyond the data of experience to conclude from this phenomenology that there is a discrete entity identifiable as the self who is somehow "making" all these decisions.*[33]

A Useful Fiction

Nevertheless, in a lot of practical situations, the temporary fiction of selfhood is useful for sorting out social relationships, ethical responsibilities, and the like. For example, if due to

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[33] Ibid, pp. 9-10.

inattention I run a red light and get a ticket, it is not legitimate for me to argue with the judge, "I am attentive now, therefore, that other self that ran the red light no longer exists. I should not be held responsible for what it did." To create a society that is supportive of deeper wellbeing, we have to start with behavioral norms that cultivate self-responsibility.

From a strictly biological perspective, people who believed they had a separate self to be protected were more likely to live long enough to pass on their genes. This is the "atta" or self view. Even if it is a delusion, evolution favors that view. It's been bred into us.

Cosmic Joke

Perhaps the universe has a sense of humor. Perhaps the Buddha did too, as seen in his famous half smile.

The goal of the Buddha's meditation seems to be to wake up completely through the cultivation of clearer and clearer awareness. As our meditation deepens, awareness does become purer and quieter. And then, just when it seems to approach perfect stillness, awareness disappears. The word "nirodha" or "cessation of awareness" refers to this. I call it "winking out." For a few moments (or maybe a long time) there is nothing. Not even a sense of the passage of time.

Perhaps invoking "clear awareness" was a joke because it seems to lead to no-awareness. From the outside, we look serene and often have the Buddha's half smile. But inside, there is nothing.

Another goal of the Buddha's meditation seems to be to see the self as it truly is. This is accomplished by clearing away misconceptions. As the last misconceptions fade, we expect that the true self will finally be visible. But when the last distortion dissipates, there is no self at all. Nothing. Anattā.

Were these some kind of joke? Were we supposed to know that clear awareness leads to non-awareness? And that finding our true self leads to non-self?

Or perhaps the Buddha had a different message in mind: these practices may not lead us where we think. If we truly show up, nirodha and anattā are not the end of the path. They are gateways to a whole different manner of unfolding. Rather than sitting in a noisy crowd of habits and gazing at peace in the distance, we find ourselves sitting in peace and watching the crowd of habits slowly drift away on their own.

Atta-Anattā: Self and Non-Self

In our efforts to understand the Buddha's teachings, we may inadvertently overshoot the mark. He was never promoting a metaphysical principle. He merely said that the ways we try to name and mentally construct a sense of selfhood are confusing and misleading and not really supported by careful observation.

Perhaps the question is not "Self versus non-self: which is right or wrong?" Perhaps a better question is "In what ways is each view helpful?" Perhaps, like so many of the Buddha's teachings, atta-anattā turns out to be a middle way. Selfhood or non-selfhood is less something the world brings to us and more a way of perceiving (saññā khandha) and thinking (saṅkhāra khandha) that we inadvertently impose on the world. It's not something we see as much as a way of seeing.

I wake up in the morning and hear the birds singing enthusiastically, see a few tiny ants crawling through the bathroom sink in search of water, hear a rat scamper across the roof, and feel a cool, soft breeze come out of an endless blue sky.

If I bring a self view to this, I perceive an array of creatures and flora. Some seem supportive of me and some seem like pests. But each just wants to live its life in peace and wellbeing. And so do I. Through the self-view each creature seems unique and special and deserves kindness and generosity.

If I bring the non-self view to all this, I know that life on this planet started over three and a half billion years ago. The web of life itself —sometimes called "Gaia" — continues to emerge and evolve slowly in her own way. All of us are emersed in the ocean of life that includes Gandhi's "satyagraha" (which literally means "love force") and Thich Nhat Hanh's "interbeing" (each of us exists because all of us exist, and all of us exist because each of us exists). Each of us is but a tiny node of interbeing. We are fleeting physical manifestations of the all-ness of life. We arise, shine, and pass away like fireflies on a summer night. Through the anattā view we sense the wisdom of surrender into the sea of everything.

In these and other ways atta and anattā are not things life brings to us but modes of perception through which we view life.

When we look around at the specific issues in our world today, it strikes me that we need both views. We need the heart of kindness and generosity that welcomes the specialness of each organism. And we need the wisdom of satyagraha and interbeing that allows us to surrender into the ocean of life.

By themselves, they may not provide all the technical fixes for the issues of our time. But they generate the consciousness of atta-anattā that inspires new ways of engaging. This is not atta *versus* anattā, it is integration of selfhood *and* non-selfhood.

The self-only view sees each of us as arising and passing into oblivion. The strict non-self view sees the expanse of life but not individual creatures. The self-non-self view sees both at

once and feels no conflict between them. There may be a gentle tension, but no essential difference. After all, they are not what the world brings to us, they are ways of viewing the world that we bring to it. Wisdom and heart are perfectly comfortable living together.

May it be so.

Self is not directly experienceable. If we look for a tangible experience, we may notice a gentle or not-so-gentle tightness. If we relax that tightness (turn toward, relax into, savor/smile), the sense of self thins out or fades away. This can be disconcerting, but that, too, is just another tightness that can be relaxed.

Refuges, Precepts, and Aspirations

Each morning before my first sitting, I recite the Buddha's refuges and precepts as well as the aspiration I mentioned at the end of chapter 6. These embody much of what we've explored in this chapter and this book.

Refuges

I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dhammā.
I take refuge in the Saṅgha.
For the second time
I take refuge in my good heart.
I take refuge in the natural unfolding of the mind-heart.
I take refuge in the community of fellow seekers,
those who have walked this path before me,
and the interdependence of beings.
For the third time
I take refuge in the Buddha.
I take refuge in the Dhammā.
I take refuge in the Saṅgha.

Precepts

I cultivate the precepts:
to be peaceful and refrain from harming intentionally;
to be content and
refrain from taking what is not given freely
to be attentive and refrain from sensory entanglement;
to truthful and
refrain from deceit, gossip,
harsh speech, and idle chatter;
to be simple and refrain from heedless intoxication;
to be kind and refrain from speaking or acting with ill will;
to be generous to myself and all beings.

Aspirations

Knowing that one day this body will cease
I seek simplicity, clarity, and acceptance,
and observe the mind-heart without preference.
When sending and receiving kindness feel the same,
self dissolves in contentment,
yearning fades into timeless presence,
and eternity merges with this moment right now.

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Summary: Emerging Consciousness and Twilight Awareness

In the beginning was *not* the word. The Gospel of John got it wrong. Long before we had words, we had felt senses: hunger, thirst, loneliness, delight, ennui, pain, fear, joy, and more. From the perspective of evolution, words and language were a late development. Long before those arose in our ancient ancestors, there were feelings.

And in young humans today, feelings also arise long before words and language. Out of those feelings, consciousness surfaces. Consciousness and sense of self are like a wellspring that emerges from the depths that we can speculate about but not see.

Ideally, they evolve toward "twilight consciousness" — a quality of awareness I associate with being out in nature at twilight. It's more about feeling tone than words or language, more about mood than content, more about being present with

what is than in trying to dictate what is present. I'm gently drawn to the natural presence around me: stars, deep blue sky, sun floating on the horizon, fields, trees, birds.…

Twilight consciousness has neither self nor non-self. It's somewhere in between: a light self that I don't notice as it drifts into the distance. Similarly, a few thoughts float through, but I'm not paying attention to them either. They fade over the hillside.

This is no humdinger enlightenment, but simple contentment. The stars and sky and woods around me don't care whether I'm clear or deluded, feeling good or bad. And I don't care either. This is *not* the kind of not caring that turns away. Quite the opposite. It turns toward this moment with no urge to push or pull or direct anything. Things are just what they are, and that is enough. I notice a Buddha half smile at the corners of my mouth.

In preceding pages I've traced the complexities of how consciousness and a sense of self emerge from the unseen depths and, with a little presence, evolve toward twilight consciousness.

This concluding chapter is a short summary of this trajectory — a bird's eye view, if you will — of how consciousness and selfdom surface and evolve and some of their implications.

Consciousness Emerges

Consciousness and selfhood emerge from the necessity that living organisms must maintain homeostatic balances. Simple creatures do this reflexively — they rely on unconscious instincts. Complex creatures have more homeostatic balances to maintain, many of which will conflict with other homeostatic balances.

Rather than having built-in actions, we complex creatures have built-in feelings. They motivate us to move in various ways while giving us the freedom to choose which to act upon and in what order.

Consciousness is the internal space within which the various needs negotiate with one other in the context of the present environment. Sometimes we'll take advantage of opportunities that may not be at the top of the emotional needs list but are easy to meet right now.

This gives us free will: we can make choices. But our choices may be surrounded by feelings that push or pull us.

We can't choose whether or not these pushes and pulls are there. They are wired in. Emotions push us in various directions, so our choices are not purely intellectual. Competing drives play out in our feeling states. It's just that we have some choice as to whether to heed them or not — to succumb to their entreaties or to keep them at bay for the moment.

From the perspective of DNA reproducing itself in the coming generations, it doesn't matter if we're happy or depressed, wise or stupid, creative or destructive, generous or selfish, rich or poor. If those qualities help start the next generation, then they are more likely to live on. If not, they disappear from the evolutionary flow of life. Consciousness's prime purpose is to keep us alive long enough to create offspring with facsimiles of our DNA.

There are seven primordial affective emotions wired into mammals and birds.[34] They are the building blocks of all emotions and drives as well as of consciousness itself. When

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[34] *Ibid*, Panksepp and Biven.

scientists surgically or chemically remove all seven affective emotions, consciousness and selfhood disappear: we go unconscious. This is not theoretical speculation; it's an empirical fact that has been demonstrated over and over. Consciousness grows out of primordial emotions which, in turn grow out of drives to maintain the homeostatic balances that we need to stay alive.

This connection between homeostasis, drives, primordial emotions, and consciousness is a crucial piece of the consciousness puzzle. The way they are linked together — from homeostasis to consciousness — may seem a little mind-boggling. But it is scientifically verifiable. Whether we understand it or not, whether it makes sense to us or not, it holds up to scientific scrutiny.

These emotions and drives focus on objects "out there" that can help restore homeostatic balances "in here." They focus on food, water, warmth, companionship, or whatever is needed from our surroundings.

But an unconscious or quasi-conscious by-product of this is a sense of self. If there is motivation to get something, this gives rise to a sense of self that carries those motivations. If there is wanting something that's missing or not wanting something that's present, the sense of self emerges that either wants it or wants to get rid of it. Attention doesn't focus on the self that's looking for food, entertainment, friendship, shelter, or whatever. Yet self quietly arises inside. It flexes its muscles, so to speak, even as it stays in the background.

Notice that the self does not create these drives and emotions. The drives and emotions create the sense of self.

No Self, No Suffering

In Buddhist circles, greed, hatred and delusions are said to be the source of suffering. And there is some obvious truth to this. But there is a subtlety that is sometimes missed. Getting rid of greed and hatred, wanting and not wanting, desire and aversion is not an option so long as we live in an organic body that must maintain homeostatic balances. These drives keep us alive. If we stop taking care of them, we will die sooner rather than later. Remember Ava, Bea, and Cindy (pp. 87-90)? Our genes will be removed from the gene pool.

So the solution is not to get rid of the emotions and their attendant drives. The solution is much subtler: relax the identification with those emotions and drives. The feelings will still be there. There will still be flow of consciousness with feelings, images, and thoughts. But there will be no self that owns them. That self is a fiction created by the saññā khandha, the perception aggregate (see pp. 169-170). It's a metaphorically convenient way to talk about drives and needs.

So rather than focus on the needs and drives or their objects, we can focus on the sense of self itself — the supposed carrier of all those drives. And we do this until it becomes very clear that that self is just a metaphor — a poetic tool for conceptualizing experience. But it distorts perception when we hang on to it.

Self is an illusion created by strong (or mild) drives and feeling tones. When we look at it more clearly, it starts to evaporate like soap bubbles. The Buddha put it this way:

> *The body's like a ball of foam,*
> *And feeling is like a bubble,*
> *Perception is like a mirage,*
> *Constructs are like a pith-less tree,*
> *And consciousness is just a trick.*
>
> – Samyutta Nikaya 22.95

Again: *getting rid of* the emotions and drives is not an option as long as we are in living bodies and want to stay alive. Rather, it is the *breaking identification with* the emotions and drives and their proxy — the sense of self — that is helpful. That is where the deeper spiritual work bears fruit. If we don't identify with those feelings or sense of self, then there is no self to suffer.

Consciousness creates the space within which it is possible to see those feelings without identifying with them, a space in which the negotiations can take place. But it's the loss of identification with them that brings freedom.

Our identification can be strong. Relaxing it is not a simple or easy task. We can't will it away. Will just creates more density and identification with the self that seems to be doing the willing.

Rather, it is through the relaxation, opening, and seeing what is most deeply true that we realize there is no one holding those feelings. It's a flow of consciousness, not a flow of self. If there is no identification, there is no self.

It's like the weather — when the causes and conditions of a storm are not present, the storm does not exist. It doesn't hide away in some altered dimension. It just doesn't arise. Without identification, the causes and conditions of suffering get no foothold. They cease to exist. Without them there is no sense of self. And without a sense of self, there is just a flow of experience without anyone or anything to suffer.

The simple contentment of twilight consciousness is freedom for each of us.

The Energy Costs of Freedom

But that freedom comes with costs, some of which are hard to see.

In order to negotiate between the organism (us) and the outer world, it helps to be attuned to what's going on inside. It helps to be present and mindful. At the same time, to successfully negotiate, it helps to remember lessons from past experience about what has worked before. At the very least it helps to have a CliffsNotes summary of the most salient points.

So consciousness must negotiate between the present-moment reality and past realities. It must realistically assess "here and now" guided by "there and then." There can be tension between that which has been learned from past events as contrasted with current events.

Complex organisms such as humans and other mammals create inner models of the world around them and the world within themselves and allow these to interact in our thoughts and imaginations (as we saw in chapters 9 and 10). That allows us to be creative and to try new things mentally, with less risk of immediate demise if we miscalculate. We have a chance to work it out in our minds before committing to a course of action in the physical world. It helps us survive long enough to reproduce.

But it also uses up a lot of energy. As noted in chapter 9 (p. 119), the human brain uses about 20 percent of the body's energy while comprising only about 2 percent of its weight. The brain is expensive. We must also spend years maturing such a complex nervous system. It takes longer for humans to reach adulthood than it does most other animals. That means we need even more energy to support our survival until we can grow up and reproduce.

Other organisms use less energy creating these complex neural pathways. They survive using more unconscious instincts and less processing of present and past memories. We trade all this in for flexibility — the capacity to adapt more quickly to rapidly changing situations. It gives us more freedom.

For the most part, we like our big brains. While we think we are the best the world has produced, it's humbling to realize that homo sapiens have only been around for a few hundred thousand years. Our ancestor hominids got started a few million years earlier. Cockroaches, on the other hand, have been around for 280 million years. They predate the dinosaurs. They were crawling around as dinosaurs arose and passed away. From the perspective of evolutionary survival, it will take us hundreds of millions of years to catch up with cockroaches.

I came of age during the 1960s. I'm a white, slightly overeducated, middle-class American. Among my peers there was a belief that liberal democratic values and ever-more-sophisticated science could move us onward and upward forever.

More recently, doubt has begun to seep in: the threat of ecological collapse, political gridlock, blatant wars of aggression, degradation of the value of speaking the truth, and more. Some now worry that we humans might destroy the world.

Rest assured, we can't. We can make it incapable of supporting human life. But nature and the world can get along without us. The cockroaches are likely to still be here even if we kill ourselves off. Life in some form can go on without us.

Be that as it may, most of us humans would like to use our complex, self-reflective consciousnesses to do more than

survive and breed. We'd like to feel better, happier, wiser, and more content. We have a deepening understanding that our wellbeing is intimately tied to the survival of other humans and other species. We'd like to use our brains and hearts and imagination to evolve a world where health, happiness, contentment, and wellbeing are part of the mix. To do this we need a consciousness that is more inclusive.

This is where meditation and other spiritual practices can lend a hand. They help us to see beyond baseline survival by realizing how deeply the fates of all of us are tied together. In the collective contentment of emerging twilight consciousness is freedom for all of us.

Appendixes

Appendix A

The Six Rs

While meditating, sooner or later, a distraction completely hijacks our attention. These distractions are called "hindrances" (nīvaraṇa in Pāli). We may not even see them coming: one moment we're peaceful, the next we're rehearsing a conversation, planning our day, reminiscing about yesterday, or attending to something other than this moment.

The drifting mind is a symptom of tension. This side of enlightenment, we all have many tensions. The distraction points to where the tightness resides. The trick is to release it wisely. Self-criticism creates even more tension, as does buckling down and trying harder.

A better approach is a six-phased process called "the Six Rs," which was developed by Bhante Vimalaraṁsi and his students.

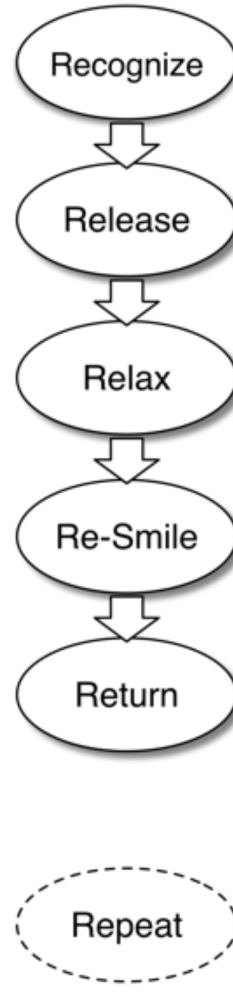
Another good approach is the Three Essential Practices, as described in chapter 5 (pp. 57-64). These are a practical implementation of the first three of the Buddha's so-called Four Noble Truths.

The advantage of the Six Rs is that they are hardy and can be used anytime the mind is disturbed, no matter how chaotic. The advantage of the Three Practices is that when the mind is peaceful, the Six Rs can feel clunky and

distracting. The Three Practices and the Six Rs are completely compatible. They both skillfully guide the mind-heart back to its natural peacefulness.

I mostly use the Three Practices. But the Six Rs are a good backup for those times when the mind-heart is particularly stormy.

Recognize



The first step in the Six Rs is Recognizing that our attention has moved away from the primary object of meditation. The ability to observe how the mind's awareness shifts from one thing to another is crucial. In time it will be clear that something specific drew us to that particular distraction, though the reason may not be clear now. That's fine. If a thought drew us away, there's no need to get involved in its content. If the content of a thought could wake us up, we would have awakened a long time ago. Instead, we notice the feeling in the mind-heart. There will be some tension: worry, curiosity, aversion, fear, desire, doubt, or some other attitude.

Recognizing this tightness on its own terms is very helpful. We want to recognize sensations as sensations, feelings as feelings, and thoughts as thoughts rather than confusing a thought or label with a sensation or feeling.

Release

The second step is to Release the hindrance. Our culture has a bias toward fixing things or getting them under control. The Six-R practice is the opposite. We just let the distraction be without trying to change it. If we're upset, we don't indulge the turmoil or try to squelch it. We just notice, "Ah, there is a lot of hurt and anger in my system." If we notice daydreaming about an imagined vacation, we don't go off into the fantasy or try to shut it down. We just notice that daydreaming is happening.

As Suzuki Roshi put it, "The best way to control a cow is to put it in a large pasture." Release means giving the distraction some space. It may wander across the pasture and out of our lives. Or it may come back and stare us in the face with big brown eyes. Either is just fine.

Releasing isn't pushing the distraction away. It's just letting go of our grip on it. To truly let something be means it can do what it wants. We no longer hold it close or hold it off. The best way to control a cow is to Release it into a large pasture and let the cow be a cow.

Relax

The third phase is to Relax. The first two phases are passive: we Recognize the distraction and Release it or let it be. In this third phase, we start to act. This action is directed inward — soothing our stress by softening the tension in it. We aren't trying to change the hindrance or our thoughts or feelings. We aren't trying to Relax the distraction; we merely Release it to do what it wants. We look inside, notice any physical, mental, or emotional tensions, and Relax them. That's all. The term the Buddha used was dramatic: he said "abandon" the tension. Walk away from it. We don't have to

search for tension like an enthusiastic detective. Just Relax. That's enough.

There's no need to force relaxation. It is just a gentle invitation — like a sigh. Yet this opportunity to Relax physically, emotionally, and mentally is very helpful!

Re-Smile

The next phase is to invite a lighter state of mind. One way to do this is to smile — not a forced smile but a gentle, sincere one. A frown takes more energy and results in tension. So, as we Relax, smiling comes easily.

It's called "Re-smile" because we do it over and over (and because we needed an "R" word). But in truth, Re-smiling refers to any uplifted state — lightness, kindness, joy, ease, gratitude, spaciousness, or any quality with little tension in it.

Sometimes this lightness comes by acknowledging, "Boy, that situation sure has me by the throat. Cool." It helps to take ourselves lightly.

The smile may be on our lips, in our mind, in our eyes, or in our heart. If no uplifted state comes on its own, we raise the corners of the mouth slightly. Even if we do this mechanically, it neurologically encourages the brain to lighten up. Having a good sense of humor about how the mind drifts is helpful.

Return

Now we take the relaxed mind-heart and this brighter, lighter quality back to radiating happiness and wellbeing or just resting in equanimity. We Return our attention to our base meditation practice.

Repeat

The final phase is to Repeat the process whenever it's needed and as often as it's needed. This step does not flow automatically from the preceding Rs. But it is included as a reminder that we may need to use the Six Rs a lot. During meditation, if distractions keep grabbing our awareness, it is not a problem if we Six-R each time. Meditation is not about sustaining any particular state. States come and go. Meditation is about seeing how attention moves. By six-R'ing, we see the mind-heart's movements more and more clearly.

If one or several uses of the Six Rs didn't release all the tension, it will let us know by arising again. We Recognize, Release, Relax, Re-smile, and Return again, perhaps going a little farther each time.

That is the beauty of this process. We don't have to do it perfectly. Doing it just a little is good enough. As we Repeat, it gradually works itself out.

Rolling the Rs

The first five Rs are not separate from one another. As we learn this process, the Rs begin to merge together. Rather than remaining isolated steps, they become a dynamic flow of energy.

To Recognize a hindrance clearly, we naturally step back from it a little. "Let's have a look at this," implies getting a little distance so we can see it clearly. Stepping back is part of the Release. As we Release, we tend to Relax. As we Relax, our mood brightens. From this brighter place, we naturally Return to radiating wellbeing or resting in peacefulness.

Think of this as "rolling the Rs." Don't push for this flow, but don't be surprised if the stages start to flow together naturally into a single process with multiple phases: Recognize-Release-Relax-Re-smile-Return.

Appendix B

Spectrum of Awareness

The Spectrum of Awareness charts the transformation of the mind-heart as it expands and relaxes. Consciousness shifts from the objects or contents of awareness to the field of awareness itself and beyond. The sense of self evolves from feeling like a solid entity to feeling like a mist evaporating in the morning sun. The Spectrum was introduced in chapter 4 (pp. 47-56). Table 4, below, and offers specific references to complete descriptions of each phase.

Table 4: Spectrum of Awareness

Phase	Examples (and references to fuller descriptions)
1 Content	Plans, stories, ideas, problems, friends, foes (see “Content Fades into Process,” p. 74).
2 Processes	Thinking, worrying, storytelling, figuring, planning, arguing, daydreaming (see “Process Fades into Qualities of Awareness,” p. 75).
3 Qualities of Awareness	Clear, foggy, agitated, calm, fast, sluggish, sticky, spacious, open, tight (“Qualities Fade into Field of Awareness,” p. 75).
4 Field of Awareness	Noticing awareness apart from its content, process, qualities, or textures (see “Blank Spots,” p. 79).
5 Nothingness	Emptiness, ”winking out,” nirodha, nibbāna.

Appendix C

Awareness, Intelligence, and Consciousness

It is helpful to distinguish between three different terms: "consciousness," "awareness," and "intelligence." They are often used interchangeably. But I use them to distinguish three distinct faculties.

For example, I look out the window and see a clear sky and a man in shorts walking a dog down the street.

Awareness

Awareness is the faculty that knows what I'm seeing: the sky, a man in shorts, a dog, and so forth. Notice that without memory, moment-to-moment awareness is not helpful. If, when I look back inside, I've forgotten all that I just saw, awareness is useless.

Intelligence

Intelligence goes beyond awareness. It is the capacity to deduce things I have not perceived directly. I deduce that it is a warm day, that I don't need a jacket when I go out, and so on. Intelligence helps us figure things out.

Intelligence also relies on memory of facts that are considered "common knowledge." For example, people wear shorts when it's warm and jackets when it's cold.

High-speed computers can have more memory capacity and faster calculation speed than humans. Artificial intelligence depends on these expanded capabilities. But they are not conscious.

Consciousness

Consciousness is more difficult to pin down. It's easier to say what it's not: it's not awareness nor is it intelligence. These play a secondary role in consciousness, but it's neither of those.

Consciousness seems to have something to do with self-awareness, or awareness of being an object in the world. But it's more than that. In 1974, the philosopher Thomas Nagel wrote an article called "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" He argued that we can recognize consciousness in a creature when we can say what it might be like to be that creature. This harkens back to my childhood musings of wondering what it would be like to view the world through the eyes of my cat, a bird, or another person.

The scientist and philosopher Anil Seth suspects that consciousness is not even possible without at least a dim sense of self. This rings true to me. But suspicions, "ringing true," and answers to the questions of what it's like to be something are fuzzy, imprecise, and not very satisfying for me.

Another approach to the question is to ask, "What's consciousness made of?" "What are its ingredients?" This is where we started in chapter 2.

Appendix D

The Hard Problem Revisited

When we meditate, we are in the soup of awareness and consciousness. They seem to arise out of the gray matter inside our skulls — out of our brains. But how do brains do that? How does awareness arise out of neural activity? How does consciousness emerge from anatomical structures?

It's a simple, elemental, and totally baffling question. For hundreds of years, scientists and philosophers have pondered: How does objective physical matter create subjective, immaterial experience? As I mentioned in chapter 11, in the early 1990s the Australian philosopher David Chalmers dubbed this "the Hard Problem." At that time we didn't have a clue about where to start answering it.

In contrast, we've made great progress with the so-called "easy problem": how do physiological processes correlate with subjective experience? We can insert probes deep into the brain and give tiny electrical shocks to various regions. If the patient is conscious, she or he will report the image of a butterfly, the memory of a childhood pet, the awareness of an upwelling of fear or anger, or other pictures or emotions.

We have mapped the various kinds of experiences that arise in various parts of the brain. We can show correlations between objective stimuli and subjective experiences.

But why this works — why specific areas of the brain give rise to specific experiences — has been a confoundingly hard problem to address until recently. Today we are closer to answers. We may have most of the pieces in place for tracing the origins of consciousness to biological processes and back even farther to fundamental laws of physics.

The Hard Hard Problem

Behind the Hard Problem is what could be called "the Hard Hard Problem," which is "How does a subjectively 'solid' sense of a self arise out of nothing?"

The assumption behind that question — that there is no solid, enduring self — may seem obscure or as esoteric as asking, "How many angels can dance on the head of a pin?" But it has a very practical context.

The Buddha was interested in alleviating human suffering. He solved the problem not by eliminating suffering but by eliminating "the sufferer" — or at least identification with a self. If there is no sufferer, then there is no suffering. So these inquiries have practical, nitty-gritty applications, even if they do not solve the Hard Problem or the Hard Hard Problem.

Acknowledgments and Bibliography

They say it takes a village to raise a child. Yet it may take more than that to write a book. As I look through these pages and see all the obvious and subtle influences on my understanding, I am humbled and grateful for the interdependent web of colleagues, students, and friends who have shaped its contents. This writing is an inadequate representation of their collective wisdom. To the extent that my understanding has fallen short or been in error, I apologize and hope that you, dear reader, have been able to separate the wheat from the chaff.

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- Tara Brach, *Radical Acceptance* (New York: Bantam Books, 2003)
- Ben Connelly, *Vasubandhu's "Three Natures": A Practitioner's Guide for Liberation* (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2022)
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- Eugene T. Gendlin, *Focusing* (New York: Bantam Books, 1978, 1981)
- Donald Hoffman, *The Case Against Reality: Why Evolution Hid the Truth from our Eyes* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2019)
- Kumāra Bhikkhu, *What You Might Not Know about Jhāna and Samādhi* (Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs (CC BY-NC-ND) 3.0 Unported License, 2022)
- Andrew Olendzki, *Unlimiting Mind: The Radical Experiential Psychology of Buddhism* (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2012) and *Unlimiting Mind: The Radically Experimental Psychology of Buddhism* (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2010)
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- Anil Seth, *Being You: A New Science of Consciousness* (New York: Dutton, 2021)
- Mark Solms, *The Hidden Spring: A Journey to the Source of Consciousness* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2021)
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Topic Index

Note: **bold page numbers indicate primary entries**.