

The Empty and Extended Self

According to Buddhism's four noble truths, we find our lives filled with anguished suffering because we habitually crave for life to be other than it is; and this habit of craving will cease only if we cultivate in our lives the Buddha's path of mental discipline, wisdom, and moral conduct. The goal of Buddhism is to cure craving. One aspect of the cure is the realization that the self is empty, that one has no core self with an intrinsic nature as a permanent changeless identity. One result of the cure is that one develops compassion for others who are stuck in the cycle of craving and anguish.

There is a model of the self that can be derived from the recent work of some philosophers in the field of cognitive science. In particular, I am thinking of Andy Clark and Daniel Dennett. Their writings suggest a model of the self that I would describe as spread out in space and time, or to use Clark's term, extended. On this view of

empty in the Buddhist sense can be usefully explained and elaborated if we assume that the mind is extended in Clark's sense. I will be appealing primarily to two texts: Clark's *Supersizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (2008) and Guy Newland's *Introduction to Emptiness: As Taught in Tsong-kha-pa's Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path* (2008).

1. A Brief Primer on the Empty Self

The founder of the Ge-luk sect of Tibetan Buddhism is Tsong-kha-pa, who in 1402 presented a synthesizing vision of Buddhism in his *Great Treatise*. Tsong-kha-pa is of the Madhyamaka tradition of Buddhist philosophy and relies heavily on the writings of Nagarjuna. Newland is an editor of the three-volume English translation of the *Great Treatise* (Snow Lion Publications, 2000-2004). Newland's *Introduction to Emptiness* is a distillation, summary, and restatement of Tsong-kha-pa's key ideas, aimed at a contemporary but educated audience.

Let me introduce a few key points using Newland's exposition. According to Buddhist philosophy,

we superimpose upon ourselves—and on things around us—a false existence, a self-existence of essential reality that actually does not exist at all. . . . [T]he ultimate truth is the sheer absence, the lack, of any such essence. This is emptiness. . . . The spiritual path to buddhahood involves balanced development of two factors: wisdom—which knows the emptiness of all that exists—and compassionate action for the welfare of other living beings. Wisdom destroys all reifications and penetrates ultimate truth, while leaving intact the conventional truths that allow us to exist, to make ethical distinctions, and to help those who suffer. (Newland 14 and 16)

they arise dependently. Soon I will suggest that the model of the extended self may offer a contemporary illumination of the empty, dependently arising self.

2. A Brief Primer on the Extended Self

Andy Clark thinks that we sometimes think *on paper*. When you use pen and paper to solve a complex equation,

[t]he loop through pen and paper is part of the physical machinery responsible for the shape of the flow of [your] thoughts and ideas. . . . [T]he outward loop [is] a functional part of an extended cognitive machine . . . [built] of extended cognitive circuits that are themselves the minimal material bases for important aspects of thought and reason. (Clark 2008, xxvii)

So your mind is supersized, spread out into the world. According to this view, the mind is not brainbound; human cognition does not depend directly on neural activity alone.

[T]hinking and cognizing may (at times) depend directly and noninstrumentally upon the ongoing work of the body and/or the extraorganismic environment. . . . [T]he actual local operations that realize certain forms of human cognizing include inextricable tangles of feedback, feed-forward, and feed-around loops: loops that promiscuously criss-cross the boundaries of brain, body, and world. (Clark 2008, xxviii)

Although the above summary is based on Clark's 2008 book *Supersizing the Mind*, he hatched the idea in a 1998 paper in *Analysis* co-

In such cases, the human organism and an external entity form a coupled system that is itself a cognitive process. Otto's notebook is the famous (in some circles) example elaborated in Clark and Chalmer's essay. Otto, who has Alzheimer's, always carries a notebook to write down new information, and then consults the notebook as needed to retrieve information, like: MOMA is on 53rd Street. The notebook is Otto's memory and its information functions like the information in an ordinary non-occurrent belief. Thus, Clark concludes, "beliefs can be constituted partly by features of the environment, when those features play the right sort of role in driving cognitive processes. If so, the mind extends into the world" (Clark 2008, 226).

In *Supersizing the Mind*, Clark et

an extended or enhanced agent confronting the (wider) world" (Clark 2008, 31).² Examples of such extended agents include all kinds of fluent tool use, as well as more surprising cases, like "a brain-machine interface . . . that allows a macaque monkey to use thought control to move a robot arm" (33) and Tactile-Visual Substitution Systems that allow blind people to recognize faces and to bat rolling balls (35). Of key importance for Clark, language too is a tool incorporated with extended agents like us.

Words on the page and speech sounds in the air are "material symbols" with which we form agent-world circuits. Language is "a form of mind-transforming cognitive scaffolding" enabling the discovery of abstract patterns (via labeling), the development of certain kinds of expertise (via verbal rehearsal), and the exercise of our capacities to reflect on our own thoughts and character and to guide our own thinking (via second order

Everything emerges from the surging and relentless complexity of innumerable interdependent conditions" (Newland 95). The extended model may help to enumerate at least some of the conditions that give rise to the empty self.

But from which set of interdependent conditions does the empty self arise? Tsong-kha-pa and Clark face a similar problem. If all things arise dependently, then how do you draw a line between empty persons and other empty things? If extended minds emerge from agent-world interactions, then how do you draw a line between interactions that constitute cognitive extensions and those that do not? I

Clark's flow of thought, but it not thereby a part of an extended cognitive process. This is "because the rain is not part of . . . any system selected or maintained for the support of better cognizing" (Clark 2008, 130). To become part of such a system requires "functional poise," a point that Clark returns to frequently (especially in chapter 5). A functionally poised resource, like Otto's notebook, must be reliably available and easily available as and when required (79). What matters is the way that information is poised to guide reasoning and behavior via the resource (96). Agent-world coupling "ensure[s] that a part is poised to play the kind of role that *itself* ensures its status as part of the *agent's* cognitive routines. . . . It is not the mere presence of coupling that matters but the effect of the coupling—the way it poises (or fails to poise) information for a certain kind of use within a specific kind of problem-solving routine" (87).

Agent-world couplings are dependent arisings. Some part of the world is a cognitive resource because of its functionally poised relation to the agent, and the agent is the extended mind that it is because of its tight link to the resource. A person, thinking and acting in the world, is a system of functionally designated parts, an empty self that dependently arises and an extended self whose circuitry is spread out into the world.

4. Empty and Extended: there is no core self

But surely, for a thinking acting agent, there must be some inner central locus of final choice and control. No. Empty persons do make choices and act in the

world, but, says Buddhism, there is no core self, no core chooser or controller—for the self is empty. Similarly, although Clark characterizes the extended self as an agent who chooses and acts, he suggests that we “reject outright the idea of an inner executive” (Clark 2008, 131). Clark’s reasons for rejecting a central executive can help explain why the Buddhist self is empty of a core chooser or controller.

Thus, to see the person as empty is to see the person as an agent. Here are the steps that establish this link. Emptiness and dependent arising, Nagarjuna argued and Tsong-kha-pa confirmed, are two w

Notice how this passage distinguishes the ordinary practical, conventional matter of

the self can contribute significantly to this investigation of causes and conditions and deepen one's appreciation that one's self really is empty. Understanding that and how one's self is extended as well as how one's agent-world circuits develop and work may also help one to develop strategies to short circuit cycles of craving.⁶

[The following final section is likely to be cut when presenting at conference.]

6. Toward a Twenty-First Century Buddhism

What appears to noninquisitive conventional consciousness can be mistaken and should be corrected by the careful empirically grounded analysis of more inquisitive experts. The earth might appear flat, but expert conventional knowledge has shown that this is not so. Likewise, I would argue, contemporary science should trump the empirical speculations of Buddhist writings from previous centuries.⁸

For example, although Tsong-kha-pa might explain my performance as an agent (in part) by appeal to karmic causes and conditions set into motion by actions in a previous life, twenty-first century Buddhists who realize that there is no room for a doctrine of rebirth in contemporary science, need not buy this explanation. According to Tsong-kha-pa, "the person lacks even a particle of intrinsic nature, but is the accumulator of karma and the experiencer of effects, and is produced in dependence upon earlier karma and afflictions" (quoted in Newland 97-98). I am not here trying to explain karma, or the person as "an accumulator of karma." But if a contemporary interpretation of karma is the less-metaphysically ambitious claim that past actions condition your future, then I think that the extended self model can add some interesting and useful insights about why this is so. As agent-world circuits are established, the extended person itself is changed, and the new

some persons or consciousnesses take for fact is actually completely wrong. For example, an ordinary conventional consciousness might mistake a rope for a snake or a mirage for water. One does not have to analyze emptiness in order to refute these mistaken conceptions and perceptions. Belief in a flat earth, and other hypotheses refuted by science, all fall into this same category. (Newland 49-50)

⁸ Here I am following the lead of Stephen Batchelor and his pragmatist approach to Buddhism. See for example Batchelor 1997 and Batchelor 2010.

couplings will guide future reasoning and behavior. Lesson for a twenty-first century Buddhist: Be mindful of that with which you couple.

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[FINAL NOTE: The essay might be just a bit too long for 20-25 minute

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ABSTRACT of "The Empty and Extended Self"

This essay is the first step in a larger project of mine to show how to use a contemporary model of the extended self to reinterpret the Buddhist model of the empty self, and to do so in a way that embraces and illuminates the aims of Buddhism: to stop the craving that causes suffering and to act with socially engaged compassion. The idea is to contribute to a twenty-first century Buddhism.

In this essay I will argue that the Buddhist claim that the self is empty is akin to Andy Clark's claim that the mind is extended. How and why the self is empty in the Buddhist sense can be usefully explained and elaborated if we ass 0.2 (s)s eldPubl