

term that the Upaniṣads use for the 'self' in its ultimate nature is *ātman*, which, although also employed as the ordinary word for 'self' in Sanskrit, may etymologically be derived from a word originally meaning 'breath'. For the early Upaniṣads such as the Br̥hadāraṇyaka and Chāndogya (sixth century BCE), the self in its ultimate nature is a mysterious, ungraspable entity; it is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the unknown knower; it is the inner controller; it is what is immortal in us.¹ Although it is much easier to say what it is not than to specify it concretely, certain quite definite things can be said of it. This ultimate metaphysical self is the unchanging constant underlying all our various and unstable experiences. As such it is indestructible and ultimately unaffected by any specific experience and quite beyond suffering.

The self is not this and not that. Ungraspable it is certainly not grasped; indestructible it is certainly not destroyed, without clinging it is certainly not clung to; unbound it comes to no harm, it does not suffer.²

Furthermore the immortal indestructible *ātman* that is the ultimate self is, according to the early Upaniṣads, to be identified with the underlying ground of all reality known as *brahman*. In the final analysis I am not something different from the underlying ground of the universe itself. This is the famous Upaniṣadic equation of *ātman* and *brahman*.³

This does not appear to be the only notion of the *ātman* known to Buddhist texts. In later Indian thought we find the concept of a plurality of eternal unchanging 'selves', each corresponding in some way to individual beings in the world. Such a teaching is characteristic of the Indian schools of philosophy known as Sāṃkhya and Yoga and seems to be adumbrated in the Upaniṣad of Śvetāśvatara.⁴ What we have, then, in the notions of both the universal and individual *ātman* is an assumption of an unchanging and constant self that somehow underlies and is the basis for the variety of changing experiences; moreover this unchanging self is to be identified as what we ultimately are and as beyond suffering. It is this general understanding of the self that early Buddhist thought seeks to examine and question.

No Self

Personal Continuity and Dependent Arising

The Buddhist critique of self as unchanging

The story of the journeying monk in the *Kevaddha Sutta* (see above, pp. 113–14) is in fact a very precise parable of Buddhist thought. To understand the nature of *dukkha* is precisely to reach the limits of the world. Ultimately the monk in the story is directed to the nature of the mind itself, for it is here that the secret of the arising of the world, the ceasing of the world, and the way leading to the ceasing of the world is to be found. Thus, although from a particular perspective the elaborate cosmology outlined in the previous chapter does indeed represent the complete Buddhist description of *dukkha*, nevertheless it is in the analysis of individual experience of the world—this fathom-long body with its perceptions and mind—that *dukkha*'s ultimate nature is to be penetrated. In this chapter I wish to turn to the basic principles of that Buddhist understanding of our individual experience of the world, and of consciousness and its workings.

The Buddhist critique of the notion of 'self' or *ātman* is rooted in a specific historical context and initially directed towards particular understandings of the notion of self. The evidence of brahmanical, Jain, and Buddhist sources points towards the existence in north India of the fifth century BCE of a considerable variety of views and theories concerning the ultimate nature of the individual and his destiny.

Among the questions the early brahmanical texts known as the Upaniṣads seek to explore are: to whom or what the various experiences and parts of a being belong; who or what controls them; what is the ultimate nature of a being's self. The standard

While this specific historical context dictates the terms of reference, it is none the less the case that the issues raised by the Buddhist critique of self touch on universal problems of personal identity. Our everyday linguistic usage of terms such as 'I' amounts in practice to an understanding of self as precisely an unchanging constant behind experiences. Thus when someone declares, 'I was feeling sad, but now I am feeling happy,' he or she implies by the term 'I' that there is a constant, unchanging thing that underlies and links the quite different experiences of happiness and sadness. Linguistic usage and no doubt certain emotional and psychological circumstances predispose us to an understanding of personal identity and selfhood in terms of an 'I' that exists as an autonomous individual and who has various experiences. In this way I assume—perhaps unconsciously—that although *my* experiences may vary there is something—*me*—that remains constant. In other words, it only makes sense to talk in terms of my having experiences if there is a constant 'I' that can somehow be considered apart from and separately from those experiences.⁵ It is in this conceptual framework that Buddhist thought begins to ask various questions about the nature of the 'I', the constant unchanging self underlying experience.

One task that Buddhist thought attempts is a descriptive analysis of the nature of experience, or, to put it simply, of just what it is that seems to be going on all the time. This exercise is in fact one of the preoccupations of Buddhist thought and it offers a number of ways of analysing the nature of experience which are integrated in the complex Abhidharma systems of the developed schools of Buddhist thought. Perhaps the most important analysis of individual experience found in the early texts and carried over into the Abhidharma is an account in terms of the five 'aggregates' or 'groups' (*skandha/khandha*) of physical and mental events.

The list and description of the five *skandhas* represent a response to such questions as: what is a being? what is going on? what is there? In the first place I can say that I seem to have a body with five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. There is then the physical world, what the Buddhist texts call

'form' (*rūpa*). In the second place there is variety of mental activity going on, much of it in direct response to the various physical stimuli. Thus my experiences continuously produce in me pleasant, unpleasant, or indifferent feelings (*vedanā*). I am also continuously classifying and sorting my experiences such that, confronted by various sense stimuli, there can be recognition (*samjñā/saññā*) of something as an 'apple' or a 'cup of tea'.⁶ Furthermore, my experiences seem to provoke various desires, wishes, and tendencies—volitional 'forces' or 'formations' (*saṃskāra/saṃkhāra*); thus, if I perceive an apple when I am hungry, quite strong desires may arise which may lead to my being unable to resist reaching out and taking it; in fact, given a variety of circumstances, the emotions produced in response to my experiences may lead to all sorts of actions from self-sacrifice to vicious murder. Finally we can say that there is a basic self-consciousness (*vijñāna/viññāna*)—an awareness of ourselves as thinking subjects having a series of perceptions and thoughts. In this way my individual experience can be analysed as consisting of various phenomena that can be conveniently classified as forming five collections or aggregates: bodily phenomena, feelings, labelling or recognizing, volitional activities, and conscious awareness.

Buddhist thought presents these five aggregates as an exhaustive analysis of the individual. They are the world for any given being—there is nothing else besides. The question now arises whether any given instance of these five groups of phenomena can qualify as a 'self'—an unchanging, constant underlying experience. Steven Collins effectively identifies three arguments for the denial of the self in early Buddhist texts.⁷

One of the Upaniṣadic characterizations of the self was as the 'inner controller', and the first argument employed is that in fact we have no ultimate control over any of the five aggregates:

Body is not a self. If body were a self then it might be that it would not lead to sickness; then it might be possible to say, 'Let my body be like this, let my body not be like this.' But since body is not a self, so it leads to sickness, and it is not possible to say, 'Let my body be like this, let my body not be like this.'⁸

The same can be said of feeling, recognition, volitions, and conscious awareness. It is simply ridiculous to take things that are bound up with change and sickness, and over which we have no ultimate control as self.

A second argument against the self is to be found in the following exchange between the Buddha and his monks, which occurs frequently in the earliest Buddhist texts, sometimes buttressing the argument from lack of control. The Buddha asks:

'What do you think, monks? Are body . . . feeling . . . recognition . . . volitions . . . conscious awareness permanent or impermanent?'

'Impermanent, lord.'

'But is something that is impermanent painful or unpainful?'

'Painful, lord.'

'But is it fitting to regard something that is painful, whose nature it is to change as "this is mine, I am this, this is my self"?''

'Certainly not, lord.'

'Therefore, monks, all body . . . feeling . . . recognition . . . volitions . . . conscious awareness whatsoever, whether past, present or future, whether gross or subtle, inferior or refined, far or near, should be seen by means of clear understanding as it really is, as "this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self".'⁹

That something which is impermanent must be regarded as 'painful' (*dukkha*) follows, of course, from principles we have already found expressed in the second of the four noble truths: if we become attached and try to hold on to things that will inevitably change and disappear, then we are bound to suffer. This argument also seems to be aimed directly at the early Upaniṣadic notion of the self as an unchanging, eternal absolute that is free from all suffering; in the phrase 'this is not mine, I am not this, this is not my self' there appears to be a deliberate echo and rebuttal of the Chāndogya Upaniṣad's 'this is the self, this is what you are'.¹⁰

A third argument centres on the meaninglessness of the term 'self' apart from particular experiences.¹¹ There are three possibilities: one must regard the self as the same as experience, or one must regard the self as something apart from experience, or one must regard the self as having the attribute of experience.

But none of these ways of viewing the self is coherent. The first method, in failing to distinguish the self from changing experiences, ends up with a self that continuously changes as our experiences change; but a self, by definition, is something that does not change as experiences change, it is the unchanging thing behind those experiences. The second method makes no sense either since (in a kind of inversion of the Cartesian 'I think therefore I am'), apart from experiences, how can one possibly think of oneself as existing? So we are left with the third possibility, namely a self that is something different from experience, yet not without experience; a self that experiences or has the attribute of experience. Such a self must still in some sense be distinguishable from experiences, yet there is no basis upon which to make such a distinction, since it remains the case that apart from particular experiences it is not possible to think of oneself as existing.

The gist of the Buddhist critique of the notion of 'self' is then this. It cannot be denied that there is a complex of experience going on; this can be conveniently analysed by way of the five aggregates. But where precisely in all this is the constant, unchanging self which is having all these experiences? What we find when we introspect, the Buddha suggests, is always some particular sense datum, some particular feeling, some particular idea, some particular wish or desire, some consciousness of something particular. And all these are constantly changing from one moment to the next; none of them remains for more than a mere moment. Thus, apart from some particular experience, I never actually directly come across or experience the 'I' that is having experiences. It is something entirely elusive. This looks suspicious. How can I know it is there? For it is impossible to conceive of consciousness apart from all these particular changing details, and if we abstract all the particular details of consciousness we are not left with a constant, individual 'self' but a blank, a nothing.

The early Upaniṣads themselves acknowledged that the self was something of a mysterious, ungraspable entity, but—and here Buddhist thought lays down its challenge—perhaps its nature is actually so mysterious and ungraspable that it does not make

any coherent sense at all. Thus Buddhist thought suggests that as an individual I am a complex flow of physical and mental phenomena, but peel away these phenomena and look behind them and one just does not find a constant self that one can call one's own. My sense of self is both logically and emotionally just a label that I impose on these physical and mental phenomena in consequence of their connectedness. In other words, the idea of self as a constant unchanging thing behind the variety of experience is just a product of linguistic usage and the particular way in which certain physical and mental phenomena are experienced as connected.

An ancient Buddhist text, the *Milindapañha* ('Milinda's Questions') records the meeting of a Buddhist monk and the local Bactrian Greek king, Milinda or Menander. The monk introduces himself as Nāgasena, but then adds that this is just a convenient label, for in reality no 'person' can be found. The king is puzzled and accuses the monk of talking nonsense. Nāgasena then asks how the king came to this hermitage, and the king replies that he came in a chariot. 'But what is a chariot?', asks Nāgasena. Is it the pole? Is it the axle? Is it the wheels, or the framework, or the yoke, or the reins? King Milinda is forced to admit that it is none of these. Nevertheless, he persists, it is not meaningless to talk of a 'chariot', for the term is used as a convenient label in dependence upon pole, axle, wheels, framework, yoke, reins, etc. Just so, responds Nāgasena, it is not meaningless to talk of 'Nāgasena', for terms such as 'Nāgasena' or 'being' are used as convenient labels when all the relevant constituents—the five aggregates—are present, yet there is no such independent thing as 'Nāgasena' or 'a being'.¹²

Language and the fact that experiences are somehow connected fools us into thinking that there is an 'I' apart from and behind changing experiences—apart from the fact of experiences being connected. In reality, as we shall presently see, for Buddhist thought there is only their 'connectedness'—nothing besides that. The fact that experiences are causally connected is not to be explained by reference to an unchanging self that underlies experience, but by examining the nature of causality.

The problem of personal continuity: self as 'causal connectedness'

We have seen how Buddhist thought criticizes the concept of an unchanging self as incoherent; however, both ancient and modern critics have argued that to do away with the self in the manner of Buddhist thought in fact creates insurmountable philosophical and moral problems. How can the experienced facts of personal continuity—after all it is I who remember getting up this morning and going to the shops, not you—be accounted for? Again, central to the Buddhist world-view is the notion of rebirth, but surely for this to be meaningful some part of a person must remain constant and be reborn, which is precisely what the teaching of no self seems to deny. Furthermore, if there is no self, is not the whole foundation of morality undermined? If I am not the same person as the one who robbed the bank yesterday, how can I be held responsible? In fact does not the teaching of no self render life meaningless and is it not tantamount to a doctrine of nihilism? For its part, Buddhist thought claims that it has adequate answers to these questions and has always categorically denied the charge that it is a species of nihilism.¹³ The answers to these questions are all in one way or another to be referred to the particular Buddhist understanding of the way in which things are causally connected.¹⁴

We have seen how Buddhist thought breaks down an individual into five classes of physical and mental events known as *skandhas* or 'aggregates'. But the list of five aggregates represents only one of various possible ways of analysing the constituents of a being. An alternative analysis sees the individual as comprising twelve 'spheres' (*āyatana*): the six senses (five physical senses and mind) and the six classes of object of those senses; a variation of this talks of eighteen 'elements' (*dhātu*): six senses, six classes of sense object, and six classes of consciousness.¹⁴ For Buddhist thought the physical and mental events that comprise a being and his or her experiences can be analysed, grouped, and viewed from a number of different perspectives. But whatever the perspective, the concern is to show that physical and mental events

occur in various relationships to each other. As such, physical and mental events or phenomena are termed *dharmas* (Pali *dhamma*). This is a term whose full discussion must be reserved for Chapter 7, but it can be defined in the present context as an ultimate 'event' or 'reality' that, in combination with other ultimate events or realities, constitutes the basis of reality as a whole. The occurrence of physical and mental events is not just arbitrary or random; on the contrary there is a deep and real relationship of causal connectedness between events or phenomena. And it is the concern with the nature of this causal connectedness that lies at the heart of Buddhist philosophy and which is seen as validating all Buddhist practice.

A story has it that the wanderer Śāriputra's introduction to the teaching of the Buddha was in the form of a summary verse recited to him by the monk Aśvajit:

Of those dharmas which arise from a cause, the Tathāgata has stated the cause, and also the cessation; such is the teaching of the Great Ascetic. Hearing this verse, Śāriputra immediately gained a profound insight into the Dharma, although he was not to become an awakened arhat for another fortnight.¹⁵ The verse thus encapsulates the Buddha's teaching and as such states the secret of the cessation of suffering—if we could but understand it. Later Buddhist tradition regarded this verse as possessing an almost magical potency, and in ancient times, throughout the Buddhist world, it was inscribed on bricks, metal plates, and images to make a protective amulet that might be worn or enshrined in stūpas.¹⁶ Another succinct formula states the principle of causality (*īdama-pratyayaṭṭā*) as 'this existing, that exists; this arising, that arises; this not existing, that does not exist; this ceasing, that ceases'.¹⁷ But the most important statement of the Buddhist understanding of how causality operates is in terms of the twelve links (*nīdāna*) of the chain of 'dependent arising' (*pratītya-samutpāda/paiṭicca-samuppāda*):

Conditioned by (1) ignorance are (2) formations, conditioned by formations is (3) consciousness, conditioned by consciousness is (4) mind-and-body, conditioned by mind-and-body are (5) the six senses,

conditioned by the six senses is (6) sense-contact, conditioned by sense-contact is (7) feeling, conditioned by feeling is (8) craving, conditioned by craving is (9) grasping, conditioned by grasping is (10) becoming, conditioned by becoming is (11) birth, conditioned by birth is (12) old-age and death—grief, lamentation, pain, sorrow, and despair come into being. Thus is the arising of this whole mass of suffering.¹⁸

The verse and the succinct formula state baldly that the secret of the universe lies in the nature of causality—the way one thing leads to another. The chain of twelve links goes rather further; it attempts to reveal the actual pattern and structure of causal conditioning. And we are told in the ancient texts that he who sees dependent arising—this pattern of conditioning—sees Dharma itself.¹⁹

According to Buddhist analysis a person should be seen as five classes of physical and mental events that arise dependently at any given moment in time and also over a period of time. What this means then is that the causal connectedness of events is such that events occur in certain quite specific clusters and patterns. From this perspective a 'person' is a series of clusters of events (physical and mental) occurring in a 'human' pattern, as opposed to, say, the canine pattern of a 'dog'. Furthermore, causal connectedness is such that the patterns in which events occur tend to reproduce themselves and so are relatively stable over a period of time. Thus it does not happen that a man is a man one moment and a dog the next, rather over a period of time a baby becomes a child, and a child an adult. So although I am not now the same person as I was when I was 3 years old in that there is no single part of me that is the same as it was, there is nevertheless a continuous causal connectedness between the clusters and pattern of physical and mental events that occurred thirty-five years ago, and those occurring now. The 'person' that is me thus subsists not in some entity remaining constant for thirty-five years but merely in the fact that certain clusters of physical and mental events are linked causally.

In other words, Buddhist thought understands change not in terms of a primary substantial essence remaining constant while its secondary qualities change, but solely in terms of the causal

connectedness of different qualities. There is no primary substance to remain constant:

There is neither identity nor difference in a sequence of continuity. For if there were complete identity in a sequence of continuity there would be no curds produced from the milk; if there were complete difference the owner of the milk would not own the curds. This is the case with all conditioned things.²⁰

What is more, this causal connectedness of events does not suddenly cease at the death of a 'person'. In fact death from the perspective of the Buddhist understanding of the causal connectedness of events is simply the breaking up of a particular configuration of those events. As I have said, the stability of particular configurations of events is only relative; eventually it must break down. But the nature of the causal connectedness of physical and mental events is such that as soon as one particular configuration breaks down events begin to build themselves into a new one. This then is 'rebirth'. The new pattern of events, although certainly connected with the old, may be of a different kind. A man may be reborn as an animal; a god may be reborn as a man.

Although I have been talking in terms of physical and mental events, one should note that in the breaking down of a particular configuration of events that is death, it is the mental events that are crucially determinative of the nature of the new pattern of events, for as we saw in the previous chapter, the workings of karma, of action and result, are essentially a matter of intention. We have now returned from the microcosm of a person consisting of patterns of events arising and ceasing to the macrocosm of the universe of beings passing through cycles of birth, death, and rebirth.

Let me sum up the Buddhist response to the questions I posed at the beginning of this section. The basic experienced facts of personal continuity are to be explained not with reference to an enduring substantial self, but with reference to the particular way in which the phenomena that make up a being are causally connected. And just as this causal connectedness is the basis of

continuity within a particular life, so it is the basis of continuity between lives. Just as no substantial self endures during a lifetime, so no substantial self endures from death to rebirth. None the less there is a causal connection between the phenomena that constitute a being at the time of death and the phenomena that constitute a being at the start of a new life. This linking (*praisandhi/paisandhi*) of different lives into a causal series, such that we can speak of someone being reborn as someone else, is understood as a particular function of mental phenomena (rather than physical phenomena); death is then not an interruption in the causal flow of phenomena, it is simply the reconfiguring of events into a new pattern in dependence upon the old. Thus, when asked whether the one who is reborn is the same or different from the one who died, the Buddhist tradition replies that strictly he (or she) is neither the same nor different.²¹

The way in which phenomena are causally connected is also seen as sufficient to account for moral responsibility. The monk Nāgasena put it as follows to King Milinda. Suppose that someone should steal some mangoes from another man's trees; if he were to claim in his defence that the mangoes he stole were not the mangoes the other man planted, we would point out that the mangoes he stole nevertheless arose in dependence upon the mangoes that were previously planted. Similarly I cannot, by appeal to the teaching of no self, claim that it was not I who robbed the bank yesterday but some other person who no longer exists, since the teaching of no self states quite categorically that the 'I' who exists today only exists by virtue of its dependence upon the 'I' that existed yesterday; there is a definite causal connection.

Properly understood the principle of the causal connectedness of phenomena is sufficient, claims Buddhist thought, to answer critics of the teaching of no self and redeem Buddhism from the charge of nihilism. Of course, philosophers, ancient and modern, Indian and Western, need not necessarily accept that this is the end of the matter and that Buddhist thought has dealt with the problems of the theory of no self once and for all. Throughout its history Buddhist philosophy has continued to try to refine both its treatment of these problems as well as its own critique of the

notion of enduring substances, but this is as far as we need pursue the matter at present. I shall, however, mention two further dimensions to the teaching of no self here. The first concerns the notion of 'the middle way' and the second the notion of two kinds of truth.

The understanding that sees a 'person' as subsisting in the causal connectedness of dependent arising is often presented in Buddhist thought as 'the middle' (*madhyama/majjhima*) between the views of 'eternalism' (*śāsvata-/sassata-vāda*) and 'annihilationism' (*uccheda-vāda*).²² If we understand a 'person' as subsisting in an unchanging, constant self that underlies different experiences, then, since we have postulated something that endures without change, we have fallen prey to the view of 'eternalism'; if on the other hand we understand that there is no real connection between the person at one point in time and another point in time, then we have fallen prey to the view of 'annihilationism'. In other words, if we deny that there is a real connectedness between events this is annihilationism, but if we understand that connectedness in terms of an unchanging self this is eternalism; the middle way is that there is only the connectedness, there is only dependent arising.

Part of the Buddhist critique of the concept of self involves the claim that language predisposes us towards and indeed confuses us into thinking that an enduring self does in fact exist. Sentences such as 'I am going to London tomorrow' suggest that there is something constant to which the term 'I' refers, namely, my 'self'; yet in reality, claims Buddhist thought, such a self is not to be found. However, this does not mean that the terms 'self', 'I', and so forth are to be systematically removed from all truly Buddhist discourse. Indeed, such terms are perfectly normal in Buddhist discourse. Developed Buddhist thought articulates what is involved here in terms of a distinction between conventional (*samvṛti/sammuti*) and ultimate (*paramārtha/paramattha*) truth. From this perspective the Buddhist denial of self is not an absolute denial of self as such, but a quite specific denial of self as an enduring substance. As we have seen, for Buddhist thought terms like 'self', 'being' and 'person' are conventional labels for

what in reality is a mass of constantly changing, causally connected physical and mental phenomena. The problem is not with the words in themselves but with what we understand by the words; we are misled by their conventional usage into thinking that selves, beings and persons have an ultimate existence in their own right. The Buddha, on the other hand, makes use of such words without holding on to them and being led astray.²³ Thus when a Buddha, or any other awakened being, says 'I', he or she merely uses the term as a matter of convenience, rather than saying 'this particular group of five aggregates'—just as a nuclear physicist will refer to a 'table' rather than 'a mass of subatomic particles'. So it is not that it is not *true* to say that I exist, but that it is only conventionally true; from the ultimate point of view there are only five aggregates of physical and mental phenomena.

Ignorance, attachment, and views of the self

The Buddhist critique of the notion of a self rests on the claim that we never in fact experience an unchanging self, and that there is therefore no reason to posit an unchanging self underlying experience. In other words, the idea that one exists as a permanent, unchanging self is born of faulty reasoning based on the failure to perceive the world as it actually is. This notion of self is born of delusion (*moha*) or ignorance (*avidyā/avijjā*). But there is another strand to the Buddhist critique of the notion of self which sees it as intimately bound up with craving (*trṣṇā/taṇhā*) and attachment (*upādāna*).

A passage from the early Buddhist scriptures that I referred to earlier concludes by stating that someone who succeeds in neither regarding the self as the same as experience, nor as something that is apart from experience, nor as something which has the attribute of experience is thereby one who 'does not grasp at anything in the world, and through not grasping he craves no longer, and through not craving he effects complete nirvāṇa'.²⁴ Thus for Buddhist thought, to understand the world in terms of self is not only to see it wrongly but to be led by greed, desire, and attachment. One's sense of 'self' springs not only from

delusion, but from the desire to identify and claim some part or parts of the universe as one's own, as one's possession, and say of them 'this is mine, I am this, this is my self'. To identify with the five aggregates, either collectively or individually, is a kind of conceit—the conceit 'I am' (*asmi-māna*).

As a function of both ignorance and greed, the belief in self is something that we construct, not only at a conscious and intellectual level, but also at a deep psychological and emotional level. We continually crave to be particular kinds of person. In so far as they are entangled with craving, the notions of self and of personal identity can, from the Buddhist point of view, only lead to suffering—for both ourselves and others. The appropriating of some part or parts of the universe as mine, as opposed to yours, the desire to construct my 'self' or personal identity, must lead inevitably to self-*ish* concerns. It drives me to accumulate 'possessions'—both physical and psychological—that define and reinforce my sense of my own selfhood as student, teacher, banker, lawyer, politician, craftsmen, Buddhist monk—as some kind of person as opposed to some other kind of person. And when I feel that what I regard as my self, that what I regard as my rights mine, is in danger of being taken from me, I become angry, frustrated, fearful; I may even be driven to violence and kill. And yet disease, old age and death for sure will take from me all that I have regarded as mine—body, feelings, ideas, volitions, mind. Indeed an ancient image compares our identifying ourselves with any of the five aggregates to trying to grasp at various kinds of grass, reeds, and rushes as we are being swept along in a river's fierce current: they all slip from our grasp or break away from the bank.²⁵ My continued grasping at self in the face of this fact sets my self over and against others' selves. We all become rivals in the fruitless struggle of trying to find something in the universe which we can grasp and call 'mine'. Selves thus cause problems for all concerned, and the aim of Buddhism is therefore to realize selflessness, both metaphysically and ethically; or, to borrow the title of Steven Collins's comprehensive study of the teaching of no self, the goal of the Buddhist path is to become a truly 'self-less person'.

The idea of belief in self as something conditioned by greed is stated as the fourth of the four kinds of grasping mentioned in the previous chapter: grasping at the doctrine of self. There are then these two complementary aspects to the Buddhist critique of self: the claim that the notion is based on a faulty understanding of the world; and the claim that it is a function of deep-seated greed and attachment. Conditioned by these two things the notion of self brings only suffering into the world.

The Buddhist critique of self is directed at all theories or views of the self that imply some sort of unchanging self whether that self is conceived of as eternal, immortal, or merely subsisting unchanged for the duration of a particular lifetime, or any period of time. As Professor Norman has shown, the refutation of the Upaniṣadic identification of the *ātman* with the world is the primary focus of the critique of self contained in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* ('discourse on the simile of the water-snake').²⁶ Elsewhere Buddhist texts attack a whole range of views concerning the self. We saw above (pp. 137–8) how three specific ways of regarding the self are dismissed. In another extremely important and famous text, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* ('discourse on the supreme net'), the Buddha gives an account of sixty-two different views, fifty-four of which concern ways of perceiving the self.²⁷ Many of these views involve the misinterpretation of meditation experience: someone experiences some subtle and sublime level of consciousness in meditation and takes this as the unchanging self underlying other experiences. Another often repeated passage gives four different ways of constructing a view of self based on each of the five aggregates, making twenty varieties of the view that the individual exists (*sattkāya-dṛṣṭi/sakkāya-diṭṭhi*): one regards the body as the self, or the self as possessing body, or body as in the self, or the self as in body, and so forth.²⁸ Yet another passage describes how someone, tortuously preoccupied with understanding the nature of self, falls prey to one of six views about the self:

Thus someone reflects inappropriately, 'Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past? How was I in the past?

... Will I exist in the future? Will I not exist in the future? What will I be in the future? How will I be in the future?' Or he is uncertain about himself in the present, 'Do I exist? Do I not exist? What am I? How am I? From where has this being come, and where will it go?' To one reflecting inappropriately in this way one of six views occurs. The definite and firm view arises, 'I have a self' or, 'I do not have a self' or, 'By the self I perceive what is self' or, 'By the self I perceive what is not self' or, 'By what is not self I perceive what is not self' or, 'That which is my self here, which speaks, feels, and which experiences at different times the results of good and bad deeds, will become permanent, constant, eternal, not subject to change.' This is called being lost to views, the grip of views, the jungle of views, the turmoil of views, the commotion of views, the bond of views. Bound by the bond of views the ignorant ordinary man is not freed from birth, old age and death, from distress, grief and suffering.²⁹

In this way Buddhist thought sees us as being seduced by greed and ignorance into constructing all manner of views, opinions, and beliefs about our selves. Sometimes the view is founded on elaborate but, from the Buddhist perspective, faulty reasoning; for some it is everyday experiences that mislead them into believing in a self, for others it is the more subtle experiences of meditation that mislead.

The elaboration of the teaching of dependent arising

I introduced above the notion of dependent arising and the formula of twelve links that most commonly describes it. In the earliest Buddhist texts there are a number of variations on this list, some omitting links, some changing the order. This has led some modern textual scholars to speculate as to the possible stages in the evolution of the formula. These problems need not concern us here. Whatever its history, it is clear that the twelvefold formula became standard early in the development of Buddhist thought. But curiously, apart from stating the formula and using it in a variety of contexts, the earliest texts give very little explanation of how the formula is to be understood. For that we must turn to the later manuals of the fifth century CE such as Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* and Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*.³⁰