

Meditation and Consciousness: can we experience experience as broken?

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Abstract: This chapter examines the philosophical value of one proposal arising out of a specific Buddhist meditative practice: the claim that we can and ought to experience experience passing away. I discuss problems with broad notions of meditation and mysticism as organizing concepts, and aim to demonstrate by example how engaging with a specific line of thought from a specific meditative tradition can help to advance debates in the analytic philosophy of consciousness.

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1. Introduction

What can practices and theoretical analyses of meditation teach us about consciousness? And what can recent philosophical and psychological investigations of consciousness teach us about meditation?

The terms “meditation” and “consciousness”, and related words in other languages, have each been used in many different ways. In order to begin to address the questions posed above effectively and in any depth, it is necessary at least initially to narrow the range of investigation. I will use “consciousness” to refer to “phenomenal consciousness” in the sense that that phrase has figured in debates in recent analytic philosophy (Block 1995; Chalmers 1995; Block 2007). In particular, Block (1995; 2007) has contrasted this notion of phenomenal consciousness,

meaning what it is like for a conscious being to have some vivid experience, with a different notion of consciousness that refers to the availability of information for recall or report – what he calls “access consciousness” or “cognitive access”. With a similar kind of specificity, among the many practices that might be called mystical or meditative, my focus here will be on mindfulness practice in the context of the Theravāda Buddhist tradition of the meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw of Burma.

One might expect that a review of literature on meditation and consciousness would adopt a broader scope, and include a number of different meditative and mystical traditions. There are principled reasons as well as practical ones for my narrow focus here, however. First, while the recent surge of empirical studies of meditation has included a few with direct relevance to philosophical work on consciousness (see e.g. Slagter et al. 2007; van Vugt & Slagter 2016; Manuello et al. 2016), little of this work itself engages directly and substantively with debates in the contemporary literature on consciousness. One notable series of papers by Berkovich-Ohana and collaborators does develop a model of consciousness (Berkovich-Ohana & Glicksohn 2014), apply this to categorize types of meditation (Berkovich-Ohana & Glicksohn 2017), and examine the same type of meditative experience of the cessation of experience that I focus on here (Berkovich-Ohana 2017); yet even here it is not easy to see precisely how this empirical work would help us make progress on the questions posed by analytic philosophers of consciousness. And while there have been a handful of interesting examinations of isolated philosophical issues in the relation of consciousness and meditation (e.g. Dreyfus & Thompson 2007; Davis & Thompson 2013; Thompson 2014; Chadha 2015), yet there is nothing like a developed field in the modern academic literature with sustained debates to be surveyed. There are, of course, sustained debates within the separate theoretical literatures that accompanied meditative

practices in various religious contexts. Drawing on these traditions, and putting them into conversation with each other and with contemporary philosophy, can I think have great benefits for all sides.

This point, however, brings us to a deeper problem with reviewing the literature on meditation, mysticism, and consciousness. The concept of “meditation” does not refer straightforwardly enough to be of use in organizing a field of research, and the concept of “mysticism” is even worse; this is true in the empirical realm (Ospina et al. 2007) as in the philosophical.¹ In practice, the framing of certain categories of experiential states or traits as meditative, mystical, or contemplative often appeals implicitly to the sense of those doing the framing about which sorts of psychological development are ethically desirable. In this way, even with the concept of meditation, which is arguably more specific than that of mysticism, asking about its effects on and relations to consciousness is somewhat analagous to asking about the effects of exercise on health: it all depends on what you are doing. A different analogy, perhaps closer to home in the present context, is that it would do little good to survey debates in the field of consciousness studies where that was understood to include historical consciousness as a topic alongside phenomenal consciousness; there are interesting debates about each of these, but they are not debates about the same thing. The fact that a diverse array of practices such as thoughtful reflection on death, developing focal attention to the point of quieting thought entirely, or developing increased moment-to-moment awareness of all experience including thinking processes are all regarded as “mystical” or “meditative” does nothing to show that their empirical or conceptual relations to consciousness share even a family resemblance.

Employing “meditation” and “mysticism” as organizing concepts, then has two problematic effects. First, it obscures aspects that *are* philosophically interesting about *specific*

ways of being and training one's mind. Secondly, it marks certain ways of being and training one's mind (and not others) as exotic in ways that evidently serve as an implicit justification for their neglect by the mainstream of analytic philosophy. It is in order to counteract both of these trends that, instead of offering a general review, I aim here to offer a concrete demonstration of the philosophical benefit of surveying literature relevant to one specific philosophical proposal about consciousness arising from a specific meditative practice: that we can (and should) experience experience passing away. A more general review, I fear, would fail to make clear how any such proposal arising from meditative practice could really help contemporary philosophy of consciousness make progress on its central questions.

When we look from the perspective of recent analytic philosophy, it may seem to us that the concerns with the workings of consciousness as they are framed in the Buddhist philosophical context are quite specific and idiosyncratic to those historical conversations. What needs to be appreciated is that the concerns with the workings of consciousness as they are framed in recent analytic philosophy will appear equally specific and idiosyncratic to that tradition to someone not immersed in that context. For many Buddhist philosophers, for instance, questions about materialism have not seemed nearly as central or important to the philosophy of mind or of consciousness as they have for contemporary analytic philosophers. Instead, much of the discussion of consciousness in the Pāli texts and in Burmese Buddhist meditation traditions is embedded in and responsive to a framework whose central questions have to do with which states of mind we ought to cultivate and which we ought to train away, a framework that analytic philosophers would recognize as ethical rather than metaphysical. This state of affairs need not put an end to conversation between the two perspectives. Rather, the fact that there are deep

philosophical differences between the respective background aims and assumptions of these two traditions is one of the most important reasons to cultivate such a conversation.

Regarding the metaphysics of mind and the ethical question of how to direct our minds, as in ethics more generally, really listening to and engaging respectfully with another, foreign, perspective can help us to see our own more clearly and to improve it (cf. Appiah 2010; Velleman 2015: 99). Such cosmopolitan conversations allow individuals immersed in each tradition to see more clearly where the blind spots of that tradition lie, to see how we might reframe and refine not only the answers we give to philosophical questions but also the questions we ask; and to refine not only the questions we ask, but also the habits of directing attention that give rise to certain sets of questions rather than others. This last point also brings to the fore the metaphilosophical significance of meditation, if we think of meditation as the intentional cultivation of habits of attention, and of habits of attention as giving urgency to certain sets of philosophical questions rather than others.

2. Experiencing Experience Arising and Passing

In order to contribute to the literature a concrete example of how rigorous and non-dismissive philosophical dialogue on meditation and consciousness might go, I have chosen to focus on a specific philosophical proposal. This proposal is drawn from a Burmese Theravāda Buddhist meditation tradition that is one of the most influential in the context of meditation in the modern West, both in its own right and through its impact on secular Mindfulness Based Interventions such as Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). In this Theravada context it is the term *bhāvanā* that is usually rendered as “meditation”. *Bhāvanā* refers to the intentional cultivation of specific types of mental states and character traits, in particular to the cultivation of wholesome qualities such as concentration of attention, goodwill of heart, and clear seeing of the

characteristic nature of all experience. It is this last type of cultivation that will be of particular interest here.

Perhaps the most central aim of mindfulness practice, as it is characterized in Theravāda Buddhist mindfulness meditation practices of Burma, is to become vividly aware of the moment to moment changes in subjective experience. This is referred to as the development of insight understanding (*vipassana ñāna*). In beginning stages of insight understanding, one is primarily aware of the moment to moment change of the *contents* of phenomenal consciousness, sensations of heat changing to sensations of cool, of experiences of hearing being followed by experiences of thinking (perhaps some thought triggered by the sound), and so on. To the degree meditators are paying attention, that is, cultivating mindfulness of these experiences, they are thus able to report on how experience changed; indeed this is how meditation teachers assess the development of students' ability to pay mindful attention. In the terms of the recent analytic debates indicated above, then, experiences of heat, cool, and so on are "access conscious" – they are available for recall, report, and so on – (Block 1995), but they are nonetheless only access conscious in virtue of being phenomenally felt. What is important and efficacious for the aim of mindfulness practice is not a recognition *that* one was previously feeling heat in the body, and is now is feeling coolness, or movement, or whatever other sensation. That kind of knowledge would require recall of and comparison with past moments. Instead, one sustains awareness of the texture and phenomenal feel of a sensation such as heat as that sensation fades and another takes its place; one is phenomenally conscious of what it is like *as* that sensation changes into to a different one rather than (just) thinking about that change.

More interesting philosophically is the further suggestion by meditation teachers and practitioners that as quietude of mind and discernment deepen over the course of dedicated

cultivation of mindfulness, one develops a fine-grained experiential awareness not only of the inconstant, changing nature of the *contents* of phenomenal consciousness, but also the inconstant, changing nature of phenomenal consciousness *itself*, the vehicle of that phenomenal content. This awareness, it is claimed, manifests with all modalities of phenomenal consciousness: seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling, touching, and also experiences of thinking, wondering, remembering and so.² One comes to consciously feel each of these experiences as oscillating and pulsating. As this awareness deepens, one comes to see this oscillating, pulsating, staccato-like nature of each instance of phenomenal consciousness on more and more fine-grained, subtle levels. At the deepest levels, it is claimed, it is possible to be experientially aware of discrete moments of phenomenal consciousness arising and completely passing away.

In the course of an exciting recent exploration of Buddhist meditation and the cognitive neuroscience of consciousness, Lutz, Dunne, & Richardson (2007) mention a Tibetan Buddhist practice similar to the Burmese Mahasi method of attentiveness to conscious experience discussed above. In that Tibetan Buddhist practice of “Open Presence”, as Lutz, Dunne, & Richardson describe it, one aims to attend not to the contents of consciousness but to the “invariant nature of consciousness” itself (2007: 514-5). While similar in this regard to mindfulness of consciousness in the Mahasi tradition as I have described it above, the Tibetan practice of “Open Presence” differs in important ways; most crucial for our purposes is that whereas the Mahasi tradition aims to see consciousness itself arising and also ceasing moment after moment; no such aim is evident in Lutz, Dunne, & Davidson’s description of “Open Presence” meditation. The proposal that consciousness is broken into discrete moments is mentioned, as a point of agreement among various traditions of Buddhist theoretical psychology (Abhidharma), in Dreyfus & Thompson’s (2007) excellent recent survey of Indian Buddhist

approaches to consciousness. As they also note, disagreements among Buddhist traditions on the exact time scale of these temporal units of consciousness suggest that these positions may owe more to theoretical development than to evidence from meditative experience. Nonetheless, the broad Buddhist position that consciousness can be experienced to be arising and passing on a momentary level is directly opposed with claims such as William James' that, "consciousness does not appear to itself chopped up in bits" (James 1981: 233, as quoted in Dreyfus & Thompson 2007: 95).³

In this and subsequent sections I will refer to two opposing positions on this issue as Unbrokenism and Brokenism. The former position claims that phenomenal consciousness is unbroken, at least for extended periods, such as while we are awake. Call this Metaphysical Unbrokenism. This has the implication that it is not possible to accurately experience phenomenal consciousness as broken into discrete momentary instances of consciousness. I will distinguish this latter claim as Epistemic Unbrokenism. An opposing set of views is held by certain Buddhist texts and teachers, to the effect that it *is* possible for a human being to accurately experience the arising and passing of phenomenal consciousness, that is, to be phenomenally conscious of phenomenal consciousness as oscillating, pulsating, having a staccato-like nature. Here too, we can separate two claims: first, the claim that phenomenal consciousness is broken in this way, Metaphysical Brokenism; and second, the claim that it is possible – through the attentional training of mindfulness meditation – to accurately perceive the brokenness of consciousness, Epistemic Brokenism. Interestingly, among these four positions, Epistemic Brokenism is the view most directly opposed to Metaphysical Unbrokenism, since the claim that it is possible to accurately experience consciousness as broken implies that consciousness is broken (but the converse does not hold), and the view that consciousness is

unbroken implies that it is not possible to accurately experience consciousness as broken (but the converse of this also does not hold).

If true, Epistemic Brokenism offers one of the most promising avenues for experiential evidence from meditation to generate philosophically important questions and to challenge contemporary claims about consciousness. To take one example, Tye (2003: 108) says that “a stream of consciousness is just one temporally extended experience that represents a flow of things in the world. It has no shorter experiences as parts”. And again, (97) “with each experienced change in things and qualities, there is an experience of the change. But this does not necessitate that there be a new experience. The simplest hypothesis compatible with what is revealed by introspection is that, for each period of consciousness, there is only a single experience...” But, if Epistemic Brokenism is true, then Tye’s hypothesis – however parsimonious – is not compatible with what is revealed by introspection. Moreover, Tye puts this view together with a transparency thesis to the effect that we cannot introspect experience itself, we can only introspect the properties of the objects experience represents. According to Epistemic Brokenism, however, while one can experience (successive) moments of seeing as themselves oscillating, pulsating, arising and passing in a staccato, discontinuous manner, this experienced discontinuity of consciousness is not experienced as representing any feature of the object being seen.

Of course, there are ample reasons to doubt the reliability of introspective awareness in general. So if the majority of human beings (including Tye, for one) do not feel their experiences of seeing, hearing and so on as having an oscillating, pulsating, staccato-like nature, when some (self-)selected group of people does claim to experience these commonplace phenomenal experiences in this remarkably different way, perhaps we are justified in eyeing Epistemic

Brokenism with suspicion. Interestingly, there is a way in which the general unreliability of introspection may actually help the case for meditators' claims to introspective accuracy. Schwitzgebel's (2011) recent raft of critiques, to take a leading instance, are directed at the "naïve" introspection of "most" people. And he points out (2011: 118) that some Eastern meditative traditions combine an endorsement of this general skepticism about conclusions from untrained introspection with an optimism about properly attentive kinds of introspective awareness. Indeed the Theravāda Buddhist claims for Metaphysical and Epistemic Brokenism employ a tactic closely parallel to Schwitzgebel's arguments from error. He notes that "through more careful and thoughtful introspection, [subjects] seem to discover — I think they really do discover — that visual experience does not consist of a broad, stable field, flush with precise detail, hazy only at the borders. They discover that, instead, the center of clarity is tiny, shifting rapidly around a rather indistinct background. Most of my interlocutors confess to error in having originally thought otherwise" (Schwitzgebel 2011: 126). Similarly, by developing mindfulness, meditators take themselves to discover that their phenomenal experiences do actually have an oscillating, pulsating, staccato-like arising and passing away nature, and take themselves along with most everyone else to have been in error in originally perceiving these experiences as an unbroken flow of experience. That is, they go beyond Epistemic Brokenism as I have defined them above – the claim that it is possible to accurately experience the arising and passing of consciousness – to make the further claim that through such experience one *corrects* the naïve and erroneous view that phenomenal consciousness is continuous.

The early Buddhist discourses describe perversions (*vipallāsa*) of perception (*saññā*), thought (*citta*), and view (*diṭṭhi*) that reinforce one another, and offer mindfulness meditation as a means to counteract these perversions at the foundational level of perception (such as seeing

consciousness as continuous) and to come to perceive rightly (such as seeing consciousness as discontinuous).⁴ Evan Thompson and I have drawn on such texts and on the fast-growing body of empirical research to offer a two-part model of mindfulness, as involving on the one hand increases in generalized awareness, and on the other decreases in affective biases of attention (especially in Davis & Thompson 2014; see also Davis & Thompson 2013). To bolster claims for the accuracy of experiences of the discontinuity generated through mindfulness practice, one might appeal to results demonstrating that mindfulness practice improves subjects' ability to detect and report on rapidly present visual stimuli (Slagter et al. 2007), predicts introspective accuracy (Fox et al. 2012), is correlated with more accurate first-person reports about emotional physiological response (Sze et al. 2010), is associated with decreased mind wandering (Brewer et al. 2011), and attenuates affective biases of attention and memory (Roberts-Wolfe et al. 2012; van Vugt et al. 2012).

Nonetheless, one alternative would be to suggest that rather than involving the correction of an error, the process of mindfulness meditation might instead serve to break up a stream of consciousness that was in fact continuous during an earlier period, and accurately perceived to be so. A different proposal from a generally anti-realist approach to consciousness would be to suggest that apart from the fact that things seem a certain way to me, there is no further thing "the seeming" whose continuity or discontinuity we could be correct or incorrect about (cf. Dennett 1991: 364). At its most charitable towards Brokenism, such a (broadly, anti-realist) view might allow that in the earlier period the ways things seemed to me (itself) seemed to me continuous, and grant that in the latter that the ways things seemed to me (itself) seemed to me discontinuous, but then insist that is all there is to say; there is no further question about whether conscious experience actually was continuous or discontinuous. Many, likely most, anti-realist

theorists would likely go further and hold that to talk of the way things seem to me as *itself* seeming a certain way (continuous, or instead arising and passing, or whatever else) is to fall into a confusion.

Meditative experience of arising and passing in mindfulness practice might have implications for these debates about the metaphysics of consciousness. For instance, if I take myself to have experienced phenomenal consciousness itself as oscillating, pulsating, having a staccato-like arising and passing nature, then I will likely be motivated to find a way of talking that makes sense of this possibility. For that reason, one might be compelled to reject any (including anti-realist) accounts that would not make sense of such an experience. Possibly, one might be compelled to go further and endorse the ontological independence of phenomenal consciousness from the experience or introspection of it. Of course, these implications could be resisted, for instance through various strategies of explaining away subjects' sense that they are indeed phenomenally conscious of phenomenal consciousness arising and passing.

3. Nonselself and Consciousness

It is often claimed that by mindfully investigating experience and finding no aspect of experience that lasts, meditators come to the realization that there is no lasting self. And this metaphysical conclusion, in turn, is often held to have ethical implications: if suffering is ownerless, then all of it ought to be avoided equally (see e.g. Goodman 2009, Siderits 2003). Yet a number of recent authors have appealed to philosophical considerations about meditation to reject this dominant interpretation.

Miri Albahari, for one, has offered a novel and creative interpretation on which the descriptions found in the early Buddhist Pāli suttas support a view on which the *contents* of

consciousness that we identify with *are* impermanent, but the witness consciousness which directly experiences these changing contents is impersonal and ownerless, and also ever-present and unbroken. “When the Pāli sutras speak of consciousness as being impermanent, I take this to mean that the intentional content of consciousness – that to which consciousness is directed – is constantly changing,” she writes (Albahari 2011: 95). The proposal that the notion of *viññāṇa* employed in the Pāli suttas amounts to an unbroken witness consciousness would, if correct, reveal an underappreciated convergence with Advaita-Vedanta claims about the understanding that emerges from meditative experience, as Albahari (2002) notes. Secondly, the considerations she raises would move us away from the standard reductionist, “bundle-theory” interpretation of non-self (*anattā*) in the Pāli Buddhist texts as a metaphysical denial of the self, and towards an understanding of the claims for *anattā* as a practical strategy for reducing identification with the contents of consciousness.

Albahari notes that on standard Theravada Buddhist interpretations of the Pāli suttas, such as that of the meditation master Mahasi Sayadaw mentioned above, meditators must be experientially aware of the arising and passing nature of consciousness itself (Albahari 2011: 94-5). Indeed, it is by seeing even consciousness itself arising and passing that meditators are said to arrive at the conclusion that there is no self. Yet, interestingly, she charges this Brokenist proposal with incoherence. As she puts the point in an earlier manuscript (Albahari 2007: 45), if the discerning mind were impermanent, “such a mind, in order to directly experience (and hence know) its own impermanence, would have to be percipient of its own fleeting nature. That means it would have to be present while it directly discerns its own fleeting moments of absence (as well as presence). But then if present to its own absence, it cannot actually be *absent* during those moments; we arrive at a contradiction.”

Moreover, Albahari contends that even if we were to allow numerically distinct moments of consciousness, there would be no phenomenological way to discern between the condition in which consciousness is unbroken and that in which it is broken.

...the observational component, which renders each moment of non-reflexive consciousness to be *conscious*, is qualitatively invariant, leaving no marker by which the contiguous numerical transition could be experientially discerned (it's not as if there will be a little jolt at each transition). The observational component to each conscious moment will thus seem, from the first person experiential perspective, to be unbroken – regardless of the underlying ontology. (Albahari 2011: 97)

If Albahari is right about this, Epistemic Brokenism fails even if we grant Metaphysical Brokenism.

Traditional Theravada Buddhist proponents of Metaphysical and Epistemic Brokenism have some responses in store, however. First, they suggest in effect that – contra Albahari – there *is* “a little jolt” that will be experienced as advanced meditators become aware of the passing of one moment of consciousness, and the arising of another. This is precisely because, it is said, one directly experiences the cessation of (a momentary instance of) consciousness. This is experienced as a type of cessation that has been happening all along, in each moment, rather than something newly brought about by the meditative observation. And this is why, although consciousness is qualitatively invariant, one no longer regards it as an unbroken witnessing self, even an impersonal one. It is because we are not normally phenomenologically conscious of this cessation that we can correct our views by experiencing it through the training of mindful attention to more and more precise awareness.

Secondly, the classical commentarial manual *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification) suggests that after comprehending the impermanent (*anicca*), uneasy (*dukkha*), non-self (*anattā*) nature of physical phenomena (such as heat and cool in the body), the meditator comprehends that consciousness too (the one that had been contemplating the physical phenomena) as itself impermanent, uneasy, and non-self, *by means of a subsequent consciousness*.⁵ Moreover, one can comprehend this second consciousness itself as impermanent, uneasy, and non-self by means of a third instance of consciousness, the third by means of a fourth, and so on.⁶ So an initial response to Albahari is simply to question her use of the term ‘it’ to subsume multiple numerically distinct moments of consciousness into a single substance ‘mind’, thereby generating the paradox of the mind being aware of *its* own passing. Once we distinguish preceding and succeeding instances of consciousness, there is no incoherence in supposing that the latter can take as its object the absence of the preceding moment of consciousness.

It might be more problematic to insist that the subsequent consciousness comprehends not only the absence of the former, but also the process of its *passing*, or to say that the subsequent consciousness directly experiences the qualities of the preceding one – for instance experiences the preceding instance of consciousness *as* impermanent, uneasy, and non-self. To feel the ‘jolt’ of the cessation of one instance of consciousness or the arising of another would seem to require one instance of consciousness being aware of another, with both existing in some sense at the same time. This would be problematic if we were also to take on a strong form of another commitment that these traditional authors do subscribe to, namely the idea that there can only be one distinct instance of consciousness at a time. However, this particular notion of momentariness is not explicit in the Pāli suttas to which Albahari refers, and it is not clear philosophically that the account ought to be committed to such a principle. This commitment is

present in the later commentaries on these early suttas, and Mahasi Sayadaw (2016: 364-5) does follow the commentarial commitment to this principle. He also follows the *Visuddhimagga* in suggesting that one apprehends a moment of consciousness by means of a subsequent one. He notes that the paradox generated by these two commitments (roughly the one Albahari raises) is also mentioned in the commentaries as a topic of debate. But Mahasi suggests that this paradox can be resolved by a further suggestion he finds in the commentaries to the effect that the experience of the immediately preceding moment of consciousness remains vivid enough to be the target of the present moment of consciousness. So there are multiple avenues open that each would resolve the worry Albahari raises. If we understand mindfulness practice as involving an impermanent instance of consciousness taking as its object another impermanent instance of consciousness – either a concurrent instance in the process of ceasing, or else (as the Mahasi tradition suggests) the still vivid experience of the moment of consciousness that has just ceased – then the contradiction Albahari points out does not arise.

For the reasons given above, I think that neither practical experience in mindfulness meditation nor textual evidence from Pāli suttas offer us reason to take phenomenal consciousness as unbroken – both suggest, on the contrary, that we ought to take phenomenal consciousness as discontinuous and thus impermanent.⁷ For that reason the convergence Albahari sees between Buddhist and Advaita-Vedanta accounts is, I think, illusory. Nonetheless, these points should not distract us from what is right about Albahari's overall approach to the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*). Albahari and I share an aim of respecting and incorporating the epistemic value on direct experience over mere reasoning, a value found in various Buddhist practice traditions. Indeed, my overall strategy, like Albahari's, is to appeal to considerations from meditative practice and from the early Pāli suttas to show what is wrong with the kind of

abstract, metaphysical approaches to the doctrine of non-self (*anattā*) arguably adopted later Theravada Buddhist commentators, and more explicitly by recent analytic philosophers. In particular, I have agreed with Albahari that in the context of the Pāli suttas, *anattā* is better understood as a practical strategy for not taking experience personally than as a reductionist metaphysical claim about persons. The gist of my argument (see Davis 2016) is that the *anatta* doctrine amounts to the claim that every aspect of experience can be seen to be impersonal and out of our control. Crucially, this is a perspective we can – and can only – take up from within our own subjective perspective.

In order to establish the further, metaphysical claim for reductionism or eliminativism about persons, later Buddhist interpreters (e.g. Nāgasena in the *Milindapañha*) and recent analytical philosophers (e.g. Parfit 1982) take up perspective on persons from the outside. It is only from that sort of a perspective that we can regard pleasure and pain, perceptions and consciousness as objects in the world that could make up persons. But this is not the perspective that is cultivated by mindfulness meditation, as it is described in the Pāli discourses or as it is taught by contemporary practitioners such as the Mahasi Sayadaw. Rather than abstracting away from one's individual perspective, I take the Pāli discourses and the Mahasi Sayadaw to be encouraging each of us instead to inhabit *more fully* our own subjective experience of the world (Davis 2016). My point is not that one *cannot* adopt a third person perspective on consciousness as such. Rather, I want to argue these traditions are suggesting that we *should not*, at least for the purposes of understanding non-self. Instead, we are to understand the *anattā* doctrine as a claim that by inhabiting our experience more fully we come to see each aspect of experience – including consciousness itself – as transitory, uneasy, and impersonal. And that is all that needs to be done.

One might adopt the further premise that that is all there is to a person, metaphysically, and thereby conclude that ultimately there are no persons; as I understand the doctrine of *anattā* in the Pāli discourses, however, no stand is taken on either issue this further premise or this further conclusion. Rather, seeing each aspect of experience – including consciousness itself – as transitory, uneasy, and impersonal is all that there is to be done, ethically. The project of the Buddha in the Pāli discourses requires no more than this – and also no less.⁸

4. On the Very Idea of Experiencing Arising and Passing

Central to my discussions above has been the possibility that one can be phenomenally conscious of phenomenal conscious arising and passing. I have noted that the Mahasi tradition of mindfulness practice takes its goal to be experiencing the momentary cessation of phenomenal consciousness, along with its contents. And I have detailed how the claims made in this context for the possibility of such experiences – what I have called Epistemic Brokenism – has a number of philosophically important implications for the metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology of consciousness.

However, as I have noted in passing, many anti-realist approaches to phenomenal consciousness emphasize that while there are ways things seem to us, the idea that there are thus *seemings* is a mistake. On such a view, it would seem to make little sense to speak of phenomenal consciousness as a thing of the sort that we could be phenomenally conscious of arising and passing. Perhaps the most interesting, rigorous, and sustained critique of this kind in the context of Buddhist meditation has been by Robert Sharf. In earlier work, Sharf (1995; 2000) charged that modern presentations that cast mindfulness as a type of bare attention leading to discrete, replicable, experiential realizations – he notes in particular the experience of cessation

claimed in the Mahasi tradition – are problematic on a number of historical, sociological, and philosophical levels. Sharf claims that the emphasis given by Mahasi Sayadaw and others to rapid progress through meditative experiences, without study of Buddhist theory or deep concentrative practice, is a novel innovation not evidenced in premodern Asia. However, this point rests on an equivocation about historical periods. Even if such an emphasis on meditative experience over theoretical study is not attested to in the centuries immediately predating the modern meditation movement, this possibility is attested to in the early Buddhist texts in the *Pāli* Nikāyas and Chinese Āgamas not only in theoretical discussions of insight without deep concentration and also in stories of individuals attaining the goal rapidly and without theoretical study.⁹ Secondly, Sharf notes sociological evidence that there are debates within and between traditions over whose experiences of cessation are the ‘real’ ones. This, I think, does present a more serious difficulty. Yet in Sharf’s argument this point serves merely as circumstantial evidence for what is really a philosophical conclusion, that while different meditators may take themselves to be referring to the same discrete experience as each other when they make these claims, these claims may in fact be operating not referentially but instead performatively, in the service of legitimizing particular authority structures.

Sharf ties his critique of such claims for discrete shared meditative experiences – such as the experience of experience ceasing – to a more general philosophical critique, that the notion of bare attention as accessing conscious experience independent of conception and judgment requires the type of problematic picture of the mind that Dennett calls the “Cartesian theater” and Rorty calls “the mirror of nature”. Noting these philosophical inspirations, Sharf gives a nod as well to Nietzsche, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, Sellars, and Derrida. In recent work Sharf also locates a line of critique within early Chinese Buddhist tradition that is closely aligned with his

own. Describing the general position of the “subitists” in early Chinese Buddhism, who argued that enlightenment is sudden, Sharf (2014: 951-952) writes that these thinkers “reject any articulation of the path and any form of practice that takes the terms “mind” and “mindfulness” as referencing discrete and determinable states or objects or meditative experiences. For the Chan subitists, like the modern antifoundationalists, the image of the mind as mirror epitomizes a widespread but ultimately wrongheaded understanding of mind, cognition, and our relationship to the world.” The metaphysical implication Sharf’s version of this critique is that while modern meditators might take their experiences – such as of experience arising and passing – to be presenting the way consciousness really is, independent of any socially conditioned theoretical framework, this is a misconception.

Here again, I think the Mahasi tradition has resources to respond with. First, the evidence for the Mahasi tradition being committed to the mirror analogy, as Sharf conceives of it, is weak.¹⁰ Nonetheless, it is plausible that the Mahasi tradition and the Theravāda more generally are committed to a philosophical distinction that Sharf would reject, between phenomenal consciousness itself and conceptualizations through which it is interpreted. I have elsewhere raised the possibility that the distinction between *viññāṇa* and *saññā* in these Buddhist contexts might map closely the distinction that analytic philosophers such as Block (1995; 2007) draw between phenomenal consciousness and cognitive access. Mahasi himself was obviously committed to some distinction between *viññāṇa* and *saññā*. However, it is less clear that his characterization of mindfulness was predicated on this. On the other hand it might be that in their characterization of bare awareness, modernist interpreters of the Mahasi tradition do assume some distinction along the lines of Block’s phenomenal versus cognitive. If so, and if Block’s opponents were to establish that this distinction is a mistake, that might count as well against

such modernist presentations of mindfulness. However, the debate between realism and anti-realism about phenomenal consciousness is very much a live controversy, and if modernist interpretations of mindfulness cast their lot with Block, it is hardly clear that they have chosen the losing side. Secondly, although on an anti-realist view it would make little sense to speak of consciousness as a thing that can arise and pass away, this implication may be turned against the anti-realist. Thus one might suggest, in light of meditative experience, that since we evidently *can* be phenomenally conscious of phenomenal consciousness ceasing, this serves as evidence against anti-realist views of consciousness, if they cannot make sense of this possibility.

5. Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to demonstrate by example the value of bringing into conversation different traditions of investigating consciousness. I have focused especially on the philosophical interest of one claim found in the Mahasi tradition, among others, the proposal that it is possible for a human being to be phenomenally conscious of phenomenal consciousness as broken, arising and passing on a momentary level. Even in this area of focus, many, many questions remain. I do not hope to have demonstrated that the Mahasi tradition is correct in making this claim, much less that the questions raised in such an attempt are easy ones. On the contrary, my aim has been to show that the attempt to make sense of this aspect of meditative experience forces us to confront deep and difficult philosophical questions, and is capable of bringing fresh perspectives to bear on contemporary philosophical debates about the nature of consciousness. Indeed, I see the engagement between Buddhist meditative traditions and contemporary debates in academic philosophy, if it is done with mutual respect and with (what may amount to the same) a mutual willingness to question foundational assumptions, as capable of bringing immense benefits for both.

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¹ Indeed, perhaps the singlemost relevant, sustained debate in the existing literature is on the viability of mystical experience as a organizing concept; as detailed below, Sharf (2000) not only raises skeptical worries of this sort in regard to mysticism and meditation in general, he also expresses skeptical doubts as to whether there are discrete meditative experiences shared even among meditators in a single tradition.

² I intend this characterization to be entirely neutral on the question of whether there is *distinctive* cognitive phenomenology.

³ In another recent article on “meditation and unity of consciousness” Chadha (2015) primarily discusses synchronic unity of consciousness, rather than diachronic unity as I do here, and (perhaps for this reason) draws mainly on the Yogācāra Buddhist tradition. For these reasons, the question of meditative experience of the cessation of consciousness, and the philosophical implications of this diachronic disunity, are not a focus of her discussion.

⁴ See e.g. *Vipallāsa Sutta*, Aṅguttara Nikāya II 52, in the Pali Text Society edition.

⁵ *Visuddimagga* XX 79.

⁶ *Visuddimagga* XX 80-81.

⁷ A note on exegetical approach: The Pali texts contain passages that leave room for multiple interpretations. Arguably, this leaves room for tying the nature of (some aspects of) *viññāṇa* closely to the nature of *nibbāna* along the general lines that Albahari suggests, and from which she moves to the conclusion that *viññāṇa*, like *nibbāna*, is unconditioned, and therefore not impermanent. Nonetheless, there is at least as good textual and philosophical reason to move in

the opposite direction, from the premise that *viññāna* is conditioned and impermanent, to the conclusion that it cannot be equated with *nibbāna* in the ways Albahari suggests.

⁸ Indeed, the path of practice outlined in the Theravāda requires the cultivation of a certain kind of broken heartedness that arises through seeing Metaphysical Brokenness. In technical terms, this is the disenchantment (*nibbidhā*) that arises through being phenomenally conscious of the arising and passing of every aspect of experience – including phenomenal consciousness itself. By seeing each of these aspects of as arising and passing and out of our control, the tradition maintains, one abandons the implicit and misguided hope that any aspect of experience will give us lasting pleasure, and thereby finds a relief and freedom unavailable through pursuit of any kind of *content* of experience. The tradition thus takes a position in value theory that builds on and moves beyond Metaphysical Brokenism (the claim that all aspects of experience, including consciousness itself, are rapidly arising and passing) and further, beyond Epistemic Brokenism (the claim that is possible to accurately experience this broken nature of consciousness and all other aspects of experience), to an ethical claim that we might call Heart Brokenism: the claim that we *ought* to experience the arising and passing away of consciousness itself because of the emotional release that that brings from the psychological causes of suffering.

⁹ See for instance the story of Bāhiya Daruciriyo (at Udāna 6ff,a in the Pali Text Society edition), among others.

¹⁰ Sharf (2014: 951) notes versions of what he takes to be the mirror analogy as illustrating “the essential and unchanging nature of mind on the one hand and the transient, ephemeral, and ultimately unreal nature of what appears in the mind on the other. The reflections that appear on the surface of the mirror, whether beautiful or ugly, defiled or pure, leave the mirror’s true nature

unsullied.” The Mahasi tradition takes the opposite position on both of these points, however. The mind is neither originally pure nor unchanging. As we have discussed in detail above, the Mahasi claim for Epistemic Brokenism, to the effect that we can see all aspects of mind, including consciousness itself, passing away moment after moment, is precisely to be free of the mistaken perception of consciousness as unbroken.