

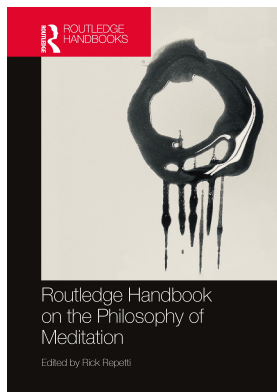
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### The self

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## THE SELF

## What does mindfulness meditation reveal about it?

*Karsten J. Struhl*

### 1 Introduction

Buddhism claims that the absence of any self, or no-self (*anattā*),<sup>1</sup> is one of the Three Marks of existence, along with impermanence (*anicca*) and suffering (*dukkha*), a doctrine central to all of Buddhism. Early Buddhism developed arguments to demonstrate this. However, these arguments are insufficient to prove that there is no self, as they assume premises which rely on the corroboration of the meditative experience, specifically on the practice of *vipassanā* (mindfulness meditation). That, in turn, makes another assumption, that *vipassanā* enables practitioners to see things *as they really are*. There is some truth to this, but it is not the whole truth. For while *vipassanā* does produce insight, it embodies an interpretation of experience that includes the idea that all phenomena are without self. *Vipassanā*, then, is not an epistemologically neutral practice. In this chapter, I explore this issue: What kind of insight can *vipassanā* produce, and can it verify the premises on which the arguments for no-self are based?

### 2 Arguments for no-self: Why they need the confirmation of meditation

Since the no-self claim is counter-intuitive, it is important to understand what type of self Buddhism denies. While there are a number of characteristics of the self that are being denied, I limit my analysis to five: (a) a *permanent* self that remains the same while all mental and physical properties change; (b) one that is the *essential core* of the person, which makes one who one is; (c) a *controlling, executive self* capable of controlling both its actions and mental processes; (d) an *ownership* self that possesses one's experiences and body; and (e) an *observing* self who observes one's experiences and body. The belief that we have any such self is, for Buddhism, a cognitive illusion. However, the illusion functions not just on the cognitive level, but on the phenomenal level, as a fundamental intuition, which may be called 'the I-sense'.<sup>2</sup>

The *Nikāyās*, a collection of texts in the Pāli Canon,<sup>3</sup> present two arguments against the existence of the self. These arguments constitute a *reductionist strategy*, because they reduce the person to five sets of psychophysical processes or aggregates (*skandhas*): material form (*rūpa*), all matter, but especially the body and sense organs; feeling (*vedanā*), sensations as pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; perception (*saññā*), the judgment that recognizes objects and categorizes them; mental or volitional formations (*sankhāra*), all mental constructions (thoughts, intentions, emotions, desires,

memories, wishes, etc.); and consciousness (*viññāna*), the awareness of physical and mental events. The Pāli Canon examines these *skandhas* separately and, in *criterion* arguments, argues that each cannot be a self. For something to count as a self, it must be permanent: This is the *criterion of permanence*. Careful examination of each *skandha* reveals that this criterion cannot be satisfied, since each *skandha* is constantly changing. Since each is impermanent, no *skandha* can be a permanent self.

The second criterion is the *criterion of control*. For the self to be a controller, it must be capable of controlling each *skandha*. Again, examination of each *skandha* reveals that none is in control. Thus, none can be a controlling self.

However, even if these arguments are valid, they cannot establish that there is no self, since the self could be something beyond the aggregates. In traditional Brahmanical thinking, the *ātman* (Sanskrit; Pāli: *attā*) or true Self transcends the aggregates and is their permanent observer and controller. Thus, to establish that there is no self, Buddhists must make an *exhaustiveness claim* – that every aspect of the person is accounted for by the five *skandhas*. If the exhaustiveness, impermanence, and non-control claims are correct, then that would establish that while there are persons, they are empty of, or lack, any self.<sup>4</sup>

How can we establish that no *skandha* is permanent or a controlling agent? We cannot do this by the logic of the argument itself, as the argument based on the criterion of permanence assumes that each *skandha* is impermanent, and the argument from the criterion of control begins with the assumption that no *skandha* is a controller. Thus, without something more, these arguments are unconvincing. Similarly, we cannot establish that each *skandha* is impermanent based on the doctrine of *annica*, impermanence; that would be circular. What we need, then, is something else that would support this doctrine, namely, a careful meditative attention to the *skandhas*.

The meditative attention that can observe these processes is *vipassanā* (insight meditation),<sup>5</sup> discussed in detail shortly. If through *vipassanā* one may observe these physical and psychological processes and *see* that they are impermanent, this would empirically verify the assumption on which the argument from the criterion of permanence proceeds. Similarly, if by subjecting each *skandha* to the careful attention of *vipassanā* one can *see* that no aggregate is a controller, this would empirically verify the assumption on which the argument from control is based.

Recall the *exhaustiveness claim*, that every aspect of the person is accounted for by the five *skandhas*. If there was something more to the person, this would need to be established either by direct observation or inference. But Buddhism insists that we cannot directly observe the existence of the self separate from the stream of our experiences through ordinary introspection or even through the more careful attention of *vipassanā*. If so, only inference remains, with two options.

The first is that we have a strong intuition of self, but inferences predicated on intuition are weak, as many prove to be; e.g., I may have an intuition that someone is following me, but it may be nothing more than my fear in an unfamiliar locale. The second form of inference rests on the claim that we must assume a self to account for the apparent continuity of the stream of experiences. If there is no substantive agent behind the stream, what keeps the stream of mental and physical processes temporally continuous?

The Buddhist answer is the doctrine of *dependent origination* (aka *dependent arising* or *dependent co-arising*).<sup>6</sup> This doctrine maintains that all phenomena are dependent on other phenomena in *complex causal chains*. Therefore, each mental and physical process constituting the person arises as the causal result of other mental/physical processes. The stream continues by the causality of the processes themselves. However adequate this answer might be, its verification depends on the careful attention of *vipassanā*.<sup>7</sup> This brings us to the question: Is *vipassanā* really capable of doing this? More, generally, what, if anything, can *vipassanā* verify?

### 3 Vipassana as bare attention? What can it verify?

‘Mindfulness’ (*sati*) may be described as the mental faculty of being receptively attentive to and aware of whatever is happening, the capacity to be attentive and aware. One way to cultivate and enhance this faculty is *vipassanā*, a meditative technique developed in a variety of forms by Theravāda (“Way of the Elders”, aka “early”) Buddhism. The term ‘*passanā*’ means ‘seeing’ and ‘*vi*’ means ‘in a special way’, so ‘*vipassanā*’ literally means ‘seeing or perceiving in a special way’ (in a way that reveals insight into the phenomena observed). Thus, *vipassanā* is a way to cultivate the capacity to be fully attentive and aware, “aimed at seeing in a special way that leads to insight and full understanding ... [W]e train ourselves to see reality exactly as it is, and we call this special mode of perception mindfulness” (Gunaratana 2015, p. 27). Since *vipassanā* is often assumed to see reality exactly as it is, it is also translated as ‘clear seeing’ (Goldstein 2013, p. 35) and, because it aims at developing insight into the way the mind works, is often called ‘insight meditation’. Finally, since *vipassanā* is understood as a method of meditation for cultivating *sati*, or mindfulness, it is often used to convey ‘mindfulness meditation’.

It is important to emphasize that *vipassanā* is not like ordinary awareness, attention, or introspection:

All consciousness involves awareness in the sense of a knowing or experiencing of an object. But with the practice of mindfulness [*vipassanā*] awareness is applied at a special pitch ... [T]he mind is trained to remain in the present, open, quiet, and alert, contemplating the present event.

(Bodhi 1994, pp. 75–6)

However, the claim that *vipassanā* can verify the assumptions necessary to establish that there is no self rests on understanding *vipassanā* as bare attention that observes precisely what is happening moment to moment. “Mindfulness adds nothing to perception and it subtracts nothing. It distorts nothing. It is bare attention and just looks at whatever comes up” (Gunaratana 2015, p. 137). Those who characterize *vipassanā* as bare attention also claim that it is devoid of preconceptions or judgments and that it simply sees reality as it is in the present moment. “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present, and nonjudgmentally. This kind of attention nurtures greater awareness, clarity, and acceptance of present-moment reality” (Kabat-Zinn 1994, p. 4).

*Vipassanā* understood as bare, moment-to-moment, non-judgmental attention can take a number of forms, but I shall discuss only two. The first begins with attention to some object that will become the focal point of attention. Often the focal point is the breath, either at the nostrils or at the abdomen. With the breath as the focal point, we either maintain attention to our breathing in and out at the nostrils, noting when one is breathing in and noting when one is breathing out, or, similarly, to the rising and falling of the abdomen. One may decide to make something else the focal point, e.g., sensations at some specific part of the body, or a sound. When attention drifts from the focal point, one notes the processes to which it drifted – e.g., thinking, desiring, feeling, hearing, memory – and returns to the focal point. If some object other than the focal point demands more attention, one may remain attentive to it, examining it carefully, until it is comfortable to return to the focal point.

The second form of *vipassanā* is an open-ended attention that allows the mind to move freely but maintains an awareness of whatever it is doing at the moment. This may be considered a “choiceless awareness ... cultivating one-pointedness of mind on changing objects” (Goldstein 2013, p. 22). What is important is to remain attentive to whatever is happening as the mind moves

freely from one mental process to another. “The task is simply to note whatever comes up ... riding the changes of events in the way a surfer rides the waves on the sea” (Bodhi 1994, p. 76).

Both forms of *vipassanā* can do many things. For example, it is not unusual that someone, first attempting meditation, experiences so-called ‘monkey mind’, “an especially agitated state where the mind jumps rapidly from one thing to the next, like an excited monkey” (Yates et al. 2019, p. 89). As most experienced meditators can testify, the sustained practice of *vipassanā* can significantly reduce monkey mind. It can also reduce mind-wandering: “what happens after we have forgotten what we were doing; the mind will wander from thought to thought, often for a long time, before we ‘wake up’ to what is happening” (*id.*, p. 80). Through continued practice, meditators more quickly become aware that this is happening and return to their object of focus or to an open awareness.

In the process of reducing the frequency of monkey mind and mind-wandering, *vipassanā* tends to reduce stress, can create a sense of deep relaxation and well-being, and may engender bliss. These, however, are side effects, and it is counterproductive to aim at them directly. In fact, depending on what is happening in one’s mind, *vipassanā* might even increase agitation or anxiety. What is important is that the meditator begins to see more clearly what is actually happening, the main benefit of which is to develop insight into the patterns of one’s own mental processes and, over time, into the nature of the mind.

Mindfulness works like an electronic microscope .... Mindfulness actually sees the impermanent character of every perception. It sees the transitory and passing nature of everything that is perceived. It also sees the inherent unsatisfactory nature of all conditioned phenomena .... And finally, *mindfulness sees the inherent selflessness of all phenomena*. It sees the way we have arbitrarily selected a bundle of perceptions, chopped them off from the rest of the surging flow of experience and then conceptualized them as separate enduring entities. (Gunaratana 2015, pp. 138–9; emphasis added)

This suggests that *vipassanā* examines these processes in minute detail, breaking them down in such a way that what might appear as one process can be seen to be a set of many micro-processes. What appears in ordinary introspection as a continuous flow is seen in *vipassanā* as a set of momentary causally connected events.

We might compare this illusion to a torch moving rapidly in a circle, creating the illusion of one continuous circle of light or, to use a film analogy, of creating the illusion of movement by running a set of individual frames rapidly. Thus, through *vipassanā* we can come to observe the gaps between momentary events and, therefore, to recognize each event as a separate occurrence, just as through the electronic microscope we observe spaces between molecules.

All of us think that a book is very solid, but if we look at this book under a microscope, it would appear full of holes, with empty spaces, like a sieve. *Vipassanā* is like using a microscope to see that all things are only elements and forces which are not unified by any kind of core, by any *atta*.

(*Silananda 1999, p. 49*)

The illusion of a single stream of events is dissolved, just as the electronic microscope dissolves the solid appearance of material objects.

Under the close examination of a concentrated mind .... [W]hat appears as an uninterrupted flow of continuous and coherent experience is actually a series of discrete sensory and mental events that arise and pass away in rapid succession.

(*Olendzki 2011, p. 56*)

Furthermore, we can observe that nothing connects these momentary processes other than the causality by which one mental process existing for a moment produces the next. Thus, the practice of *vipassanā*, understood as bare attention, can *verify* that the psychophysical processes constituting the person are impermanent, dependently arisen, and without a self.

Mindfulness practice ... [leads] the practitioner to obtain the heightened awareness required to observe and notice all mental activities. In this way, we can learn to see things or phenomena *as they really are* without excessive interpretations or attachment. Mindfulness also implies seeing that all phenomena in life are impermanent (*anicca*), lead to suffering (*dukkha*), and are not-self (*anattā*).

(Lee 2018, p. 21; emphasis added)

Returning to the arguments for no-self, the argument based on the criterion of permanence rests on the assumption that the *skandhas* are impermanent. What seems to verify this is what we observe through the continued practice of *vipassanā*.

Now we see how changeable reality is. Every time we feel a breath, we notice that it has a beginning and an end. Every sound we hear starts and stops. Every sensation we feel changes under our gaze. Every thought that arises also passes away. In fact as we observe sense objects again and again, we find that not a single one lasts.

(Armstrong 2017, chapter 3)

As *vipassanā* practice deepens, penetrates, and decomposes what was formerly taken to be a unified object of experience, there is a more subtle awareness of impermanence.

When we pay careful attention, we see that everything is disappearing and new things are arising not only each day or hour but in every moment .... As mindfulness and concentration get stronger, we more clearly and deeply see impermanence on microscopic levels. We see for ourselves that what appears solid and stable is really insubstantial and in constant flux.

(Goldstein 2013, p. 31)

It may be more difficult to observe what is necessary to support the argument based on the criterion of control, however, because it runs against a deep intuition at the phenomenal level – of an agent-self as an executive control center. Indeed, *vipassanā* is a self-regulative activity. We make a resolution to focus on the breath and, with continued practice, we are increasingly able to do so for extended periods.

However, *vipassanā* also reveals how often various thoughts, desires, emotions, and other mental activities intrude on our resolution. They come without warning, jump about, are not subject to our command, and tend to proliferate before we can regain concentrated attention; and whatever control we can exercise comes about not from the force of a single will, but through a whole set of conditions which come together in the moment.

The closer we look at the mind, the more it seems to consist of a lot of different players, players that sometimes collaborate but sometimes fight for control, with victory going to the one that is in some sense the strongest.

(Wright 2017, p. 77)

Summing up so far, the three main assumptions on which these arguments for no-self are based – the impermanence, non-control, and dependent origination claims – require some confirmation in experience, and *vipassanā* seems to provide a way to verify these claims experientially. Since we can observe no other phenomena that would require us to infer the existence of the self, the exhaustiveness claim also would seem to be verified.

In all that collection of mental hardware in this endless stream of ever shifting experience all you can find is innumerable impersonal processes which have been caused and conditioned by previous processes. There is no static self to be found; it is all process .... the house itself is empty. There is nobody home.

(Gunaratana 2015, p. 168)

Whether *vipassanā* can verify these claims rests on the assumption that *vipassanā* is bare, present-centered attention without pre-conceived assumptions of any kind. But there are reasons to reject this assumption.

#### 4 *Vipassanā* is not bare attention and presupposes Buddhist philosophical doctrines

The understanding of *vipassanā* as bare attention may be called the ‘bare attention’ claim. This claim incorporates three ideas. First, it enables us to see whatever arises and passes in the present moment (the ‘present-moment awareness’ premise). Second, it is devoid of judgments and conceptualizations (the ‘non-judgmental and pre-conceptual awareness’ premise). Third, we can see whatever arises exactly as it is without distortions (the ‘epistemological reality’ premise). Recall the electronic microscope analogy, which suggests that *vipassanā* can penetrate surface appearances and discover what is going on at a micro-level. However, all three premises may be incorrect.

I begin the examination of the bare attention claim by returning to the term ‘*sati*’, mindfulness. Its root meaning is not awareness as such, but remembering, which presents a challenge to the present-moment awareness premise. As Jack Petranker put it,

Buddhist scholars regularly point out that the word translated into English as “mindfulness” (*sati* in Pali, *smṛiti* in Sanskrit) has “remembering” as its fundamental meaning. This is “mindful presence” – presence that remembers. And to be clear, “remembering” here does not just mean remembering to be mindful: it refers instead to remembering what has value, what matters most.

(2014)

Thus, being mindful of the present moment requires remembering what came before that moment, since otherwise the present moment is drained of meaning, and it also means remembering the aim of this meditation.

If, say, the *vipassanā* practice employs breath as focal point, we need to remember the previous in-breath in relation to the out-breath presently occurring. When attention drifts away from the focal point, we need to recognize that it drifted, and to return to the breath. For mindfulness to develop insight requires that we remember the various mental processes that occurred in the past so we can see their causal patterns and recognize their impermanence.

With a high level of concentration and alertness, one needs to keep remembering the in-breath each time one breathes in or out .... In the process of remembering, the practitioner pays attention to how past experiences arise and shape current experiences.

(Lee 2018, p. 222)

Furthermore, mindful awareness requires us to understand constantly how what is happening currently is infused with our remembering the past and anticipating the future.

Mindful presence ... requires us to rethink what goes in that moment. As human beings, we do not live in a point-instant present, even if experience does change from one moment to the next. Instead, we live in a present that draws on the past and the future.

(Petranker 2014)

Finally, the process of being mindfully attentive involves recollective attention, and this involves a metacognitive monitoring process that connects present to past.

Mindfulness as recollective attention includes attentive observation of your body, monitoring your thoughts and feelings, and continually remembering to do these things from moment to moment so that you can bring your mind back to them when it wanders away to something else. In cognitive science terms, exercising these mental skills requires being able to integrate awareness, attention, memory, and metacognition.

(Thompson 2020, chapter 4)

*Vipassanā* is not just neutral, present-centered, bare awareness, not just ‘seeing’ what is really there in the present moment. “In essence, ‘seeing as’ is far removed from a neutral, unbiased ‘mindfulness.’ Rather, ‘seeing as’ is more connected with an implementation of memory: one sees according to an *understanding* developed in the past” (Shulman 2014, p. 118; emphasis added).

There is another problem with the bare attention claim, since it presupposes that it is also pre-conceptual awareness. As suggested above, *vipassanā* involves metacognition, and metacognition contains a conceptual component. Metacognition involves actively monitoring and controlling these “cognitive processes to achieve cognitive goals. Monitoring, regulation, and orchestration can take the form of checking ... selecting ... self-interrogation and introspection” (Kuan 2012, p. 43). Self-interrogation and introspection require cognitive understanding of what one is doing, and the resultant insight is also cognitive.

Thus, *vipassanā* does not passively observe phenomena pre-conceptually but, rather, requires active intervention and some level of conceptualization at both ends of the process. Reflecting on the Buddha’s analysis of mindfulness in the Pāli Canon, Bhikkhu Anālayo writes,

mindfulness is not a given of any experience, but much rather requires intentional cultivation. During such cultivation, mindfulness can coexist with the use of concepts; *in fact the input provided through the wise use of concepts is of crucial importance* for satipaṭṭhāna meditation.

(2018, p. 39; emphasis added)<sup>8</sup>

And Bhikkhu Bodhi recognizes that this use of concepts in *vipassanā* presents a direct challenge to the bare attention claim: “Instead of allowing thought to drift at random, governed by defiled



emotions, habit patterns, and practical survival needs, the meditator deliberately uses thought and concepts to keep the object before the mind” (2011, p. 28).

There is another reason to reject the bare attention claim. Recall that Jack Petranker highlighted that remembering in mindfulness practice is not just “remembering to be mindful: it refers instead to remembering what has value, what matters most” (2014). What has most value for the Buddhist practitioner is the *Dhamma* (Dharma: in short, Buddhism), which contains the core philosophical concepts of Buddhism. Unsurprisingly, then, mindfulness meditation, one of the essential practices of the eight-fold path,<sup>9</sup> presupposes some fundamental claims of Buddhist philosophy.

In fact, on the basis of his investigations of the relation of early Buddhist philosophy to meditation, Eviatar Shulman argues that what the *vipassanā* practitioner ‘sees’ depends on how her observations are organized through the lens of Buddhist doctrine. “This is anything but naked attention and is more concerned with seeing things as they are defined by Buddhist thought than with seeing them ‘as they really are’” (2014, p. 114). What is really happening, Shulman claims, is that the “meditator is intensely engaged in the observation of current mental events while being aided by a complex conceptual map to guide his observation” (*id.*, p. 123).

Thus, “the practitioner is not observing naked events but is rather seeing mental objects as specific instantiations of the Buddhist categorization of experience” (*id.*, p. 124). Bhikkhu Bodhi makes a similar point:

In the practice of insight meditation, the meditator clearly comprehends the nature and qualities of arisen phenomena and relates them to the framework defined by the parameters of the Dhamma [Pali; Sanskrit: Dharma], the teaching as an organic whole. The expression ‘clearly comprehending’ thus suggests that the meditator not only observes phenomena but interprets the presentational field in a way that sets arisen phenomena in a meaningful context.

(2011, p. 22)

Consider what is often taken as a clear example of how bare attention provides proof of the doctrine of impermanence: observing the arising and passing of various mental processes. But these observations alone would *not* be convincing proof of the doctrine of impermanence. What is needed to transform these observations into a recognition of impermanence is not just noticing the changes, but the instructions to the meditator to ‘see’ how change from one sound, sensation, thought, or other mental process to the next occurs so rapidly that each phenomenon can be taken as existing only momentarily, to ‘see’ how much of what we think is something that continues for a period of time – perhaps the sound of a bell which is taken as one sound, from start to finish – is a set of micro-sounds, each arising and passing only for a moment, and to “see clearly” that this is happening in each of the *skandhas* (aggregates). Shulman makes this point explicitly with respect to Buddhist concepts.

When a person with no familiarity with Buddhist teachings sits down to meditate, he surely does not see – or, at least, is not aware of seeing – “the arising and passing away of the aggregates” .... Once he has become acquainted with Buddhist doctrine, he may indeed view his experience in terms of the concepts he has come to know and see.

(2014, p. 122)

What is really happening, then, is that the meditator is being trained to see things not ‘as they really are’, but according to Buddhist doctrine. “Sati is a method of meditation that is designed

to patiently teach the mind to spontaneously experience reality in accord with Buddhist philosophical positions” (*id.*, p. 112).

How, then, can *vipassanā* verify the doctrine of no-self, since this requires a verification of a set of philosophical claims that are already packed into and presupposed by the meditative practice? If, for example, the meditator was to structure her awareness through the categories of Vedānta philosophy, she might be able to ‘verify’ that while there is no self *within the changing phenomena*, there is a true Self, the *Ātman*, which transcends the changing phenomena. Depending on how our awareness is structured by the meditative procedure and the philosophical presuppositions built into it, we can ‘verify’ that there is an *ātman* (through Vedānta-informed meditation) or we can ‘verify’ that there is no *ātman* (through Buddhism-informed *vipassanā*). Is there another way to understand the function of *vipassanā* in relation to the no-self doctrine?

### 5 Buddhism as a research program and verifying the doctrine of no-self

Another way to state this problem is that attempts to verify core Buddhist philosophical doctrines through *vipassanā* fail the test of Karl Popper’s ‘falsifiability’ principle (1963). This principle insists that for a theory to count as scientific, there must be some kind of evidence which, were it to be forthcoming, could falsify it. Thus, Popper claims that genuine scientific theories are tested primarily by performing experiments that attempt to refute the theory, and, only to the extent that these experiments fail to show that the theory is false, is the theory considered confirmed or verified. Strictly speaking, no theory is ever completely verified, and its truth status is always recognized as provisional.

Buddhism is neither a natural nor a social science, and *vipassanā* is not a controlled scientific experiment. Nonetheless, Buddhists do claim that, through the continued practice of *vipassanā*, we can come to see what is really happening and that these experiences provide empirical support for the core doctrines of Buddhism. If Popper is correct, then if it is possible for some experiences to empirically support the doctrines of Buddhism, then there ought to be some experiences which in principle could count against them. However, since the core doctrines of Buddhism are presupposed by this meditative practice, there are no possible experiences which could count against them. And if no possible experiences could count against the no-self doctrine, or the assumptions on which it is based, how can *vipassanā* verify that doctrine?

One way to proceed is to challenge Popper’s falsifiability principle. That principle was first directly challenged by Thomas Kuhn (1970), who argued that ‘normal science’ works within the framework of a paradigm, a matrix of guiding theories based on using some example of scientific practice as a model for further scientific research, e.g., Copernican astronomy or Newton’s laws of motion. In ‘normal science’ various hypotheses are developed within the paradigm, and predictions that follow from a given hypothesis are experimentally tested. When the predictions fail to occur, it is the specific hypothesis that is falsified, not the guiding theories of the paradigm. When certain anomalies occur that challenge the guiding theories, they are ignored or explained away by reinterpreting what has occurred or by developing *ad hoc* hypotheses.

Only when a certain number of disturbing anomalies occur that cannot easily be explained away does the paradigm face a ‘crisis’, and even then it is only when a new paradigm is constructed that can explain some of those anomalies that scientists consider exchanging the old paradigm for the new, e.g., exchanging Newtonian physics for Einstein’s theory of relativity. This exchange constitutes a ‘scientific revolution’. However, the exchange does not occur because there is any definitive falsification of the guiding theories of the old paradigm. What happens in actual scientific practice is that, over time, more and more scientists develop a consensus in favor

of the new paradigm and various extra-scientific social and psychological factors play a role in developing this new consensus, and are often the deciding factors.

If Kuhn is correct, then, even in science, falsifiability does not apply to the core tenets of the framework within which the practice and observations occur. Thus, that the core doctrines of Buddhist philosophy embedded in *vipassanā* are immune from falsification does not necessarily count against their epistemological value. Nonetheless, we still need to understand in what sense *vipassanā* can function as a verification procedure.

To do this, consider another philosophical conception of science developed by Imre Lakatos (1970). This conception challenges Popper's attempt to demarcate science from non-science by arguing that science is best understood as a 'research program' consisting of a set of hard-core theories, which are refutation resistant, and a variety of 'auxiliary hypotheses', which, in conjunction with the hard-core theories, generate predictions subject to empirical tests. If the predictions are disconfirmed, the auxiliary hypotheses are given up, while the hard-core theories are retained. So far, this does not sound so different than what Kuhn says about 'normal science'.

However, for Lakatos, if exchanging one paradigm for another were largely the result of non-scientific factors, this would undermine the rationality of science:

For Kuhn scientific change – from one “paradigm” to another – is a mystical conversion which is not and cannot be governed by rules of reason and which falls totally within the realm of *the (social) psychology of discovery*. Scientific change is a kind of religious change.

(Lakatos 1970, p. 93)

While Lakatos does seem to be overstating the point, he is correct to insist that scientific development needs a more rational and empirical grounding. So too, I think, does a 'religious' soteriological project like Buddhism that relies partly on the experiential evidence of its meditative procedures.

What Lakatos substitutes for Popper's emphasis on the falsifiability principle and Kuhn's idea of the paradigm shift is the idea that a research program can be *rationally* judged as 'progressive' or 'degenerate'. A research program is 'progressive' when it has more empirical content available than its predecessors, when it can predict new facts that can be tested experimentally, when it is capable of taking account of new observations, and when it is capable of solving certain anomalies. A research program is 'degenerate' when it can no longer do this.

Reference to the philosophy of science is relevant here because I think the best way to understand the epistemological significance of the core doctrines of Buddhism and the use of *vipassanā* as a tool of experiential investigation is to think of Buddhism as a 'research program', although not in a strictly scientific sense. Understood in this way, it would not count against *vipassanā* that the core philosophical principles guiding it are not subject to falsification. We can determine their epistemological worth by considering whether using them in *vipassanā* practice would enable insight toward Buddhism's soteriological goal and whether, in conjunction with the eight-fold path, they can provide a genuine guide to the progressive overcoming of suffering (*dukkha*) and to the progressive overcoming of the attachment to the illusion of self.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, as a research program, Buddhism would not directly attempt to verify the core philosophical principles themselves, but then what is being verified? I think the answer is that, by using these core philosophical principles as a guide, *vipassanā* practitioners can 'verify' that their mental activities are impermanent, that what arises and passes in their experience is part of a causal network of psychophysical activities, that how these mental activities are organized creates suffering, and that all phenomena that they encounter within *vipassanā* are empty of self. This

‘verification’ involves the internalization of the guiding principles through continued *vipassanā* practice, an internalization that transforms and reconditions the practitioner’s way of ‘seeing’ what is happening.

Buddhist methods of observation were meant to be practiced until they are woven into the perceptual apparatus. What was initially a mechanical effort to categorize and understand experiences according to Buddhist schemes of analysis, eventually becomes a way of seeing. This mature form of Buddhist perception next stimulates emotional and cognitive attitudes that facilitate liberation.

(Shulman 2014, p. 152)

There is no seeing without some guiding principles, so the question is not whether this way of seeing is ‘seeing what is *really* happening’, but whether this way of seeing contributes to the reconstruction of our affective and cognitive attitudes in a progressive direction, a direction that can significantly reduce suffering. To the extent that *vipassanā* and the whole of the Buddhist path can do this, the Buddhist research program is progressive.

## 6 Conclusion: Arguments, their verification, and a soteriological research program

What is the point of the arguments for the no-self doctrine? I presented the arguments as attempts to prove there is no self. These arguments were shown to be insufficient without a way of verifying their underlying assumptions. That *vipassanā* is a method of verifying these assumptions seems plausible if understood as bare attention. However, I argued that the bare attention claim is incorrect and that *vipassanā* presupposes the very assumptions in need of verification. This suggests that no possible experiences could arise in *vipassanā* that could falsify the no-self doctrine, but I proposed a possible solution if one thinks of Buddhism as a research program, in Lakatos’s sense. As such, the core assumptions of Buddhism would not need to be falsifiable to be progressive.

I recast the idea of its being progressive as whether *vipassanā* in conjunction with the other components of the eight-fold path enables Buddhist practitioners to move toward Buddhism’s soteriological goal. The arguments for the no-self doctrine would not, strictly speaking, be arguments to prove the no-self doctrine, but rather would function as guides to create a new way of ‘seeing’, which, through internalizing these arguments and their conclusions, reconditions and reorganizes our cognitive activities and affective attitudes.

The argument from the aggregates has a practical role .... Following the argument requires that we actively look at the aggregates so as to discover that there is no self to be found among them .... The primary bearing of looking closely at the aggregates is to help overcome the attachment to self, and only secondarily to coming to believe in No Self (for the primary objective is to overcome suffering, and its affective attachment, not belief, that is the key impediment). An argument that relies for its persuasion on our active looking and participation has more scope for affective influence ... than an argument that proceeds strictly deductively or without need of observation.

(Panjvani 2014, p. 122)

Thus, the realization of no-self through *vipassanā* is not a ‘verification’ of the doctrine as such, but a strategy to help overcome the cognitive and affective attachment to the idea of the self.

As an analogy, consider the ‘I-sense’ as the result of the way our experience is organized in something like the way a computer program organizes data. What this program does is to organize our experiences and cognitive and affective responses to what we experience into forms of self-cherishing and self-grasping. The former distinguishes our interests from the interests of others, and gives my interests a central priority. The latter entails that I take the primary object to which I am attached as *me* and must defend it at all costs.<sup>11</sup>

What *vipassanā*, guided by the core principles of Buddhism and especially by the doctrine of no-self, can do is to begin to dismantle this program. The arguments for no-self in particular direct our attention to the absence of self in each of the *skandhas*. By doing so, we ‘verify’ the absence of self *in our own experience*, and begin to see how we construct the I-sense through the program of self-cherishing and self-grasping. We begin to see how we are constantly involved in the activity of ‘selfing’, through which we construct the illusion of self,<sup>12</sup> and seeing this is the first step toward dismantling the program.

## Notes

- 1 ‘*Anattā*’ (Pāli) is ‘*Anātman*’ in Sanskrit: respectively, the negation of ‘*attā*’ (self, soul) in Pāli and of ‘*ātman*’ in Sanskrit. Because my focus is on these concepts as they occur in early Buddhism, which is inscribed in Pāli, I generally use the Pāli terms here, except when referring to Sanskrit terms that have been adopted in English, such as ‘nirvana’.
- 2 For further discussion of this topic, see Struhl (2020).
- 3 The Pāli Canon – the early Buddhist canon – consists of three large sets of texts, the *Tipitaka* (“three baskets”). One of these, the *Sutta Pitaka*, contains verses (*suttas*) grouped into five large collections of discourses (*Nikāyas*), which purport to record the dialogues between the historical Buddha and others, often his disciples, and sometimes between his disciples. They are generally regarded as the most authoritative record of the teachings of the historical Buddha.
- 4 The point of saying that the person is empty of self is that (a) the psychophysical processes that constitute the person cannot be a self, and (b) there is no additional entity beyond them to which the term ‘self’ could accurately refer. Cf. Friquegnon (this *Handbook*, Chapter 4) and Marinoff (this *Handbook*, Chapter 14), for analytic arguments from Buddhist and Western philosophy, respectively, in support of the no-self theory, but where both Friquegnon and Marinoff emphasize that meditation is not appealed to as evidence of the truth of the no-self claim in order to experience it and integrate it into one’s psyche. Cf. also Gowans (this *Handbook*, Chapter 10), for an alternative approach to the no-self doctrine according to which the reliance on meditation is not geared towards the realization of the truth of the no-self claim, a form of propositional knowledge, but rather towards a practical knowledge about how to reduce suffering.
- 5 ‘*Vipassanā*’ literally means ‘insight’, but informally names the meditative practice, mindfulness (*satī*), leading to insight.
- 6 These are the usual translations of the Pāli term ‘*paṭicca samuppāda*’.
- 7 That there is an alternative answer to what keeps the stream of experiences continuous (functioning like a self) does not tell us which answer is preferable. However, according to the Indian philosophical ‘principle of lightness’ (‘Ockham’s razor’ in Western philosophy and science), we should posit no more entities than necessary to explain a phenomenon. Thus, that the apparent continuity of experiences can be explained without positing an undetectable self makes this the preferred alternative.
- 8 In the *Satipatthāna sutta* (*Majjhima Nikāya* 10), “The Foundations of Mindfulness Discourse”, the Buddha identifies four foundations of mindfulness: of the body, feelings, mind, and *dhammas* (phenomena, mind-objects). This *sutta* is generally acknowledged to be the scriptural basis for *vipassanā*.
- 9 The eight-fold path is a set of practices prescribed by the Buddha as necessary to attain nirvana, the soteriological aim of Buddhism. Mindfulness, whose development requires *vipassanā*, is one of the components of the eight-fold path. The others are right concentration (which is the other meditative discipline and also a component of *vipassanā*), right effort, right view or understanding (the philosophical discipline), right intention, and the practices of good ethical conduct which are right speech, right action, and right livelihood.
- 10 For Buddhism, the central problem is the problem of suffering. The proximate cause of suffering is craving, attachment, and aversion, and these are rooted in our attachment to the illusion of self. Nirvana,

the soteriological goal of the Buddhist practitioner, is the extinguishing of suffering, which, therefore, requires recognizing and extinguishing the illusion of self. See Kachru (this *Handbook*, Chapter 5), who offers additional reasons to think there is a problem with circularity regarding appealing to meditative experience as evidence of Buddhist claims, as well as additional possible ways to respond to the problem (although his chapter is not restricted to this topic).

- 11 I am indebted to Jessica Locke (2018) for pointing out the implications of these concepts.  
 12 As Guy Armstrong puts it:

We engage in I-making (Pali: *ahaṃkāra*) when we take the “I” to be something, and we engage in my-making (Pali: *mamaṅkāra*) when we take something to be “mine”. Together we could call I-making and my-making the activity of selfing.

(2017, chapter 5)

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