# A Mindful Bypassing: Mindfulness, Trauma and the Buddhist Theory of No-Self

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**Abstract**—This article examines the Buddhist idea of *anātman*, 'no-self' and pudgala, 'the person' in relation to the notion of 'self' emerging from contemporary cognitive science. The Buddhist no-self doctrine is enriched by the cognitive scientist's understanding of the multiple facets of selfhood, or structures of experience, and the causative action of a functional self in the world. A proper understanding of the Buddhist concepts of *anātman* and *pudgala* proves critical to mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions: this is as the 'person', as constituted by various structures of selfhood, including—the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, narrative, relational and conceptual selves—which may be disrupted by traumatic events which disorder one's experience of time, defence, relationality, memory, resource and agency. In the absence of this understanding, the no-self doctrine might encourage a sort of bypass, in which traumatic facets of selfhood are overlooked in the quest for spiritual liberation. With a proper understanding of the function served by the Buddhist concepts of no-self and 'person', psychotherapeutic work may be situated as a necessary 'preliminary practice' for meditative exploration of deeper transpersonal domains and soteriological goals.

**Keywords:** mindfulness, trauma, buddhism, no-self, *ātman*, *anātman*, *pudgala*

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## Mindfulness and no-self

In recent years a large number of studies have focused upon the scientifically demonstrated benefits of mindfulness in many different aspects of life—ranging from sex and eating to venture capitalism, workplace productivity and self-seeking. These currents of discourse are emerging rapidly and largely uncritically[1]. The world is now rife with conferences, courses and celebrity personalities promoting the notion that Buddhism is a unique spiritual exception to the rule, in that unlike other faiths it can be readily made secular, rational and profoundly compatible with science. Indeed, that Buddhism constitutes a well-formed science of the mind that may be adopted wholesale to the profitable transformation of Western culture (McMahan, 2008). Growth in recent years has occurred in the use of mindfulness practices not only in therapeutic contexts, but also in research within the cognitive sciences. It is in this context that we see the clinical applications of Buddhist metaphysical principles, such as no-self, adopted in a limited form.

In this work I examine the Buddhist concept of *anātman*, no-self, a doctrine according to which the 'self' is understood to be illusory. We examine this doctrine in relation to the notion of self that has emerged in contemporary cognitive science. We suggest that the Buddhist notion of *pudgala*, 'the person', is validated by the cognitive scientist's understanding of the multiple facets of 'selfhood', or structures of experience, which prove critical to the causative action of a functional self in the world. While issues at the personal level remain developmentally unaddressed, we contend that mindfulness-based therapeutic intervention, relying on a misconception of no-self doctrine, may lead to a mode of 'spiritual bypass'. As such, we suggest, a proper understanding of the Buddhist concepts of *anātman* and *pudgala* proves critical to mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions, in providing a lens through which to understand the disorganising effects of various developmentally connected forms of psychopathology. We argue that there is an imperative to intervene at the level of the causative frameworks underpinning experiential phenomena, particularly within the domain of 'personal identity' or selfhood. Such intervention would seem most salient in cases where structural disorganisation manifests as psychopathological conditions, notably in presentations such as trauma and developmental omissions; that is, various types of neglect or abuse experienced in the formative, developmental stages of life.

[1]Purser, 2019

## The personal and transpersonal

To begin with a terminological explanation: in the scholarly discourse surrounding the transpersonal domain, the term 'transpersonal' is conventionally understood to describe experiences wherein the locus of selfhood expands beyond the individualistic or egoic framework to incorporate broader dimensions of human existence, the natural world or even the cosmos itself (Walsh & Vaughan, 1993, pp. 199–207). Although William James was the first to employ the term, he did so in a circumscribed manner, his utilisation appeared solely in an unpublished course syllabus at Harvard University, specifically for an introductory course in philosophy (Vich, 1998). James' original intent was primarily to elucidate the philosophical conundrum of objectivity. In James' nomenclature, an object is deemed 'Trans-personal' when it is perceptually shared: 'when my object is also your object.' Importantly, following from James' use of the term in 1905, Carl Jung employed the term *überpersönlich* in 1917, a term later translated into English as 'superpersonal', and subsequently rendered as 'transpersonal' (Jung, 1917). Additionally, R.D. Laing introduced the term 'transpersonal' in a series of papers in 1966, later anthologised in his seminal work, 'The Politics of Experience' (Laing, 1990, p. 31). These concepts were subsequently developed by Stanislav Grof, who characterises the transpersonal as an experiential state where 'the feeling of the individual [is] that his consciousness expanded beyond the usual ego boundaries and the limitations of time and space' (Grof, 2016, p. 31). Hence, for the purposes of the ensuing analysis, we shall adopt the term 'transpersonal' to signify those experiences and epistemological stances that transcend the confines of individual psychology.

The altered or expanded, non-ordinary states of consciousness described as transpersonal may be productively contrasted against what may be termed the 'pre-personal' and 'personal' levels of experience (Dowie & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2022; 2023). The pre-personal refers to the developmental stages that occur before the formation of a strong, separate ego or self, and developmentally include features such as the attachment period. The personal, by contrast, may be understood as constituted by various structures of experience or selfhood—including, illustratively, the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, narrative, relational and conceptual selves. As we will contend in what follows, these organisational structures of 'self' may be disrupted through various psychopathological processes. This is particularly true of Complex or

Developmental Trauma. We will examine, the way in which trauma impacts these selfhood structures, by exploring the way trauma can disorder one's experience of time, defence, relationality, memory, resource and agency (Dowie & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023).

At this point we can productively draw upon Ken Wilber's model of pre-personal, personal, and transpersonal stages of experience—a model Wilber utilises to identify the apparent similarities between regressive psychotic states (pre-personal) and experiences of mystical, transcendent union (trans-personal). Wilber explores these features through his notion of the 'pre/trans fallacy' (1982). According to Wilber the non-rational states (pre-rational and trans-rational) can easily be confused with one another (2001, p. 211). As a consequence, when organisational structures of the 'person' are disrupted, instances of the pre/trans fallacy may result; producing behaviours that are colloquially referred to as 'spiritual bypassing'. The notion of spiritual bypassing, introduced by Welwood (1984/2000) describes the various uses of spiritual practices to sidestep or avoid confronting unresolved personal or pre-personal issues—whether psychological wounding, unfinished developmental tasks or repressed emotional content. It is our contention that working psychologically with the structures of personhood—in Buddhist parlance: *pudgala*—proves necessary to preventing this misapplication of Buddhist-derived mindfulness techniques. With a proper understanding of the function served by the concepts of no-self and 'person' in Buddhist metaphysics, psychotherapeutic work may be situated as a necessary 'preliminary practice' for meditative exploration of deeper transpersonal domains and soteriological goals.

## Is the self an illusion?

As shall become clear, the Buddhist philosophical conception of no-self, the illusory self, and the cognitive scientist's understanding of self, vary significantly. While the cognitive scientist offers a scientific redescription of what it is to be a self, albeit a 'constructed' self—a useful, functional construction—the Buddhist metaphysician, describes a soteriological and normative belief that the sense of being an independent self is a problematic illusion to be abandoned in order to attain liberation from suffering.

The question calls for addressing: is the self an illusion? While modern interpreters such as Siderits et al. (2011) have reinvigorated debate within

Buddhist circles concerning the nature of self, the usual Buddhist position is to deny the existence of the self. This is the doctrine of no-self or ‘non-self’ (Pali: *anattā*, Sanskrit: *anātman*). To clarify this doctrine, we can say *anattā*, or no-self, is the view that nothing exists within one’s inner makeup that would qualify as an inner ‘subject’ or ‘agent’. Whilst the *feeling* of self can be said to exist, it does not map to any real, independent thing—the self is illusory. Buddhist modernists commonly assert that findings in the cognitive sciences corroborate the truth of no-self (Wright, 2017). Those who could be called ‘Neural’ Buddhists, for instance, may hold the brain generates the illusion of self, then draw upon evolutionary theory to describe the ‘functionality’ in terms of evolutionary fitness, of operating under this delusion (Thompson, 2020). Indeed, Varela et al. in *The Embodied Mind* offered perhaps the seminal cognitive scientific account in support of the no-self view (1993/2017, chapters 4 and 6).

This is, for many, an attractive line of argument. A Buddhist modernist may assert that cognitive science suggests that what we term a ‘person’ refers only to a causally interconnected collection of mental and bodily events. Yet we commonly act as if an abiding subject of experience, or an agent of actions, exists and that this ‘self’ is the source of our identity. According to the Buddhist view, the positing of the self arises not merely as a result of cognitive delusion but from ‘grasping’ for such a self. Indeed, self-imputing may be understood as synonymous with the action of grasping. Buddhist practice may undo this egocentrism through forms of mental cultivation that induce a recognition of the error of self-grasping. On this view, Buddhism provides the perfect supplement to cognitive science in that while one demonstrates objectively the non-existence of self, the other offers subjective means of experientially observing how self-grasping gives rise to this illusion of self.

There exist, however, compelling critiques of this no-self picture. From an historical perspective, we must attend to the coevolution of the Buddhist *anātman* view (no-self) and the classical Indian philosophical notion of *ātman* (self). The debate between Buddhist and Brahminical thinkers, concerning the self and no-self developed in South Asia over a number of centuries; a co-evolution in which insights and revisions occurred on both sides. For a detailed exploration of debates in India between Buddhist and orthodox philosophers regarding the existence of the *ātman*, see Watson (2017) and also Thompson (2020, p. 88). Importantly, as will be contended, many of the

Brahminical critiques of the Buddhist *anātman* position may be understood as anticipating important insights about perception that emerged in cognitive science. In particular, as will be seen, cognitive science provides reasons to believe not that the self is an illusion, but rather a *construction*—an important distinction, and case made by both Thompson (2020) and Garfield (2022). Before we get into this argument, let us begin by offering a contemporary rendering of the Buddhist no-self view.

The Buddha held that the five aggregates—body, feeling, perception, volition, and consciousness—are not fit to be regarded as a self, as these states of body and mind are transitory and impermanent (see e.g., the *Anatta-lakkhaṇa Sutta*; Harvey, 2009). In which case, turning to these aggregates to find any personal essence—the object of self-grasping—fails, as no personal essence will be found. This denial of self is made empirically by appeal to direct experience of the transitoriness of the aggregates. Indeed, many of the Vedic-Brahminical philosophers would have agreed with the Buddhist perspective that the 'five aggregates' are not-self; contending that the true self, *ātman*, transcends the aggregates. According to this view the true self lies beyond the body, feeling, sense perception, volition, sensory or mental consciousness (Thompson, 2020, p. 92). Brahminical thinkers identified *ātman* with an essence within a person—perhaps better understood as 'pure' awareness or pure consciousness—an awareness which lay beyond or *transcended* the aggregates, a quality that is eternal and unchanging, representing the individual soul. It is often described as beyond the physical body and the changing aspects of the mind. As such the existence of *ātman* was not necessarily in conflict with the Buddhist recognition that no self could be found within these transitory aggregates (Watson, 2017; Ganeri, 2012).

It may appear, at this point, as if Indian Brahminical philosophers and Buddhist metaphysicians are merely speaking past one another. However, it would be premature to assume consistency between the Buddha's teachings of no-self (elucidated in the Nikāyas) and the Vedic sense of Self (elucidated in the Upaniṣads). This is a deeply contested subject, and beyond the scope of our present work. Important to our purposes, however, is the fact that alongside the teachings of no-self the Buddha did allow for a sense of 'persons', or *pudgala*. He thus allowed that we may refer to the aggregates, an assemblage of parts, as a 'person', for convenience's sake. He held that in reality all that *is*, comes to *be*, and *falls away* are aggregates or transitory phenomena, and it

is the person (*pudgala*) that is the *bearer* of the burden of the five aggregates (Bhāra Sutta SN 22.22). Here is a well-known formulation in the Vajira Sutta, as translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi (2000, p. 230), in the *Connected Discourses*:

> Just as, with an assemblage of parts,
> The word "chariot" is used,
> So, when the aggregates exist,
> There is the convention "a being."
>
> It is only suffering that comes to be,
> Suffering that stands and falls away.
> Nothing but suffering comes to be,
> Nothing but suffering ceases.

On this view the person is not ultimately, but only *conventionally*, real—that is, the person is a useful conventional designation for a collection of parts, a short-hand in speech that ultimately refers to no genuine entity, object, or subject. The major problem for Buddhist Reductionism, however, raised by cognitive scientists, is that while it may be reasonable to say that a car is only 'conventionally' real—that is, it exists as an assembly of impersonal parts, is inanimate, and gains its meaning through the function in language it serves—the same is not true of a person. After all, a person is a sentient being with an inner life, and indeed is defined by the subjective experience of being a unique individual. This coherent, subjective experience is not accounted for by a conventional designation alone.

To describe any principle of identity as merely 'conventional' leaves us with an explanatory gap: how do we account for the apparent unity of memory, perceptual recognition, and agentive action? The apparent integration of memory, action, perception, and desire cannot readily be accounted for by a view of the self as purely illusory—where all that exists are impersonal yet causally-related events—as it is the 'personal' character that causally unifies these events. That is, given we take ourselves to be one and the same subject of various sense perceptions at any moment and across time—without a principle of identity, we cannot account for the apparent coherence of a person's experience 'from the inside', and we would not be able to determine which events belong in a particular 'individual psychological stream' from among the huge causal network of events.

As Thompson suggests, something more is needed to impart a unity and coherence to the series of events identified as 'me'. He contends that the Naiyāyikas, Vedic Indian philosophers from the Nyāya school, identify the twinned problems that confront the Buddhist no-self doctrine, these issues are described in contemporary philosophical parlance as the 'binding' problem and the problem of the 'unity of consciousness' (2020, p. 174). In brief, we may state these problems as follows: *binding* qualities together appears necessary in order to simply *perceive* qualities as belonging to a coherent object. Furthermore, in order to have distinct perceptions of any object, the perceptions need to be *united* in belonging to a unified subject (Holmes, 2019; Bayne, 2009). From a cognitive science perspective, failures to address the binding and unity of consciousness problems, are significant. This need not imply that the self that unifies experience and perception is substantive, but it does require the postulation of a 'self' that goes beyond the merely conventional; unity and coherence must be imparted to experience to allow for the experience of an external world, in itself.

It is for related reasons that contemporary Western philosophers of mind, such as Galen Strawson (1999; 2004), have been understood as offering counterpoints to the Buddhist theory of no-self. Strawson, while underscoring the temporally-limited nature of the self, also advocates for a 'realist' or 'naturalistic' view, positing the self as a concrete, albeit temporally restricted, entity. While Buddhist philosophers have challenged the existence of a stable, enduring self, Strawson argues for the reality of 'episodic' or 'momentary' selves. These selves, he asserts, are deeply rooted in our immediate phenomenological experiences. For Strawson, the self is not an illusion to be transcended but rather an immediate, lived reality, constituted by consciousness and mental states in the 'here and now'. This has been understood as offering a significant departure from Buddhist perspectives, affirming the self's existence albeit in a narrowly temporal context, which impels the need for the stabilisation of this process, not its avoidance. However, as will be seen in this article, Strawson's argument in no way countermands the Buddhist doctrine of *anattā*, no-self, *when it is understood in relation to its necessary correlate* pudgala*, the person.* Positing the self as an illusion or a transient configuration of *skandhas* (aggregates), we can see that there is no necessary inconsistency between arguments by Strawson and Buddhist metaphysicians.

We may conclude then, with a challenge to the Neuro-Buddhist and the Buddhist modernist: that it is simplistic to claim cognitive science 'validates' the no-self view. Rather the 'self', constructed in the 'unity of perception', is demonstrably required in order for the world of objects to be experienceable by the subject. Contemporary cognitive science draws upon principles of brain organisation and the interrelation between mental contents in order to achieve such unity. Metzinger's (2004; 2009) notion of the brain's 'self-concept' as a process not a substance, illustrates such a view. An idea expanded upon in my own work on the 'process metaphysics' that both emerges from a hemispheric understanding of brain function *à la* McGilchrist (Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023) and provides the stronger basis for understanding psychological practice and the process of therapeutic change (Tempone-Wiltshire & Dowie, 2023b). The self, from the contemporary cognitive perceptive, we suggest, can be broadly identified as a socially-embedded subject of experience—a *construction*, yes, but not merely an *illusion*. Albahari (2006) provides one such contemporary analytical account of how the 'person' is constructed; however, descriptions of the 'person' among Western scholars, as a developmental and social construction, are not new, dating back to William James' *Principles of Psychology* (1983/1890) and Herbert Mead's *Mind, Self and Society* (2015/1934).

## 'The person' in Buddhism: self as structure of experience

While the Buddhist doctrine of no-self challenges the notion of the self as an unconstructed personal essence, we must ask: are they attacking a strawman conception of self? Do human beings intrinsically, in fact, hold such a view of self? Merleau-Ponty claimed to the contrary, not that we experience ourselves as unconstructed personal essences, but rather that we habitually experience ourselves as *living bodily subjects* who are *dynamically attuned* to the world (Henry & Thompson, 2017). Evidently, this is not the same thing as viewing the self as a substantive unconstructed owner of experience. We ought to conclude that the Buddhist theory of no-self, then, is not a reality empirically verified by cognitive scientists, as Buddhist Modernists may claim, but rather a normative and soteriological conceptual apparatus; that is a set of technologies for liberation. Yet soteriological concepts, as demonstrated when considering the contemporary quest for a neural correlate of 'awakening', are by their nature not subject to scientific verification (Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023, forthcoming). Furthermore, there are complex subjects that call for resolution yet remain

untouched by the clinical sciences, such as, for instance the nature of an enlightened being's epistemic processes. Does a Buddha, upon awakening, retain cognitive processes and warrants by which they perceive the world? Seeking neural correlates for soteriological projects like awakening, is a problematic undertaking whilst such questions remain unresolved (Thakchoe & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2019).

We are left then with a phenomenological sense of self as a 'structure of experience' whereby one experiences one's self *as* oneself. Evidently then, certain concepts of self are not merely illusory, but serve constructive, causative, and functional ends. Yet it is important to note, that the Buddhist conception of *pudgala*—the person—may be conceived as capacious enough to include these self-structures of experience. Buddhists metaphysics acknowledges the difference in kind that exists between a *chariot* and a *person*—in that, as opposed to the chariot, the construct of the 'person' possesses explanatory power beyond the merely designatory. The 'person' should be conceived then, as not merely a useful conceptual designation for an amalgam of parts, because the construct of the person proves necessary to explain the emergent behaviour, or downward causal action from higher levels within the system—such as the mind. The necessity to work therapeutically directly with the 'person', i.e., the structures of selfhood disrupted by trauma, arises precisely form the causal, functional action of the person.

These self-structures of experience can be said to be real on this view, and the 'person' said to exist, in that they do real causal work. In particular, for our purposes, what could be called the 'selfhood structures' of experience are causally relevant in that emergent neurobiological research demonstrates the manner in which they structure experience, and the manner in which trauma can disrupt their structuring of experience. They are consequently crucial concepts for mindfulness-educators, and mindfulness-based clinicians interested in developing a genuinely trauma-informed practice.

It can be concluded then, that when describing the various forms of selfhood identified as existent in the cognitive sciences—including narrative selves, constructed selves, social selves, enacted selves, and embodied selves—the selves being identified are not the target of the Buddhist no-self doctrine. These forms of selfhood can be encapsulated within the Buddhist concept of *pudgala*, or personhood. It is the notion of self as a *substantive entity* that is the object of negation in Buddhist metaphysics. It is important to keep

the 'substantive', or essentialist, conception of self and the 'structures of experience' notion of personhood conceptually distinct. While adherence to belief in a substantialist self has pernicious ramifications for our psychology, by contrast the 'person' is ultimately a necessary set of structures without which we would be incapable of experiencing anything. This necessity is demonstrated by the binding and unification problems. We contend that when selfhood, as structure of experience, is distinguished from the substantialist account of self, contemporary cognitive neuroscience may be said to be in congruence with the classical Buddhist doctrine of no-self.

## Cognitive science and structures of selfhood

As illustrated, the Buddhist notion of *pudgala* is capacious enough to include aspects of selfhood that are not merely conventional designations but, rather, causative. We consider in what follows the 'structures of experience' associated with the concepts of ecological, interpersonal, extended, private and conceptual 'selfhood', as outlined by Ulrich Neisser (1988). While we might also include further dimensions of selfhood; such as the neurological-self, narrative-self, core-self, etc., for our purposes here we will focus upon Neisser's categories. The *ecological* self describes the experience of the environment and is connected to the phenomenological idea of *bodily* self-awareness; the *interpersonal* self, describes the experience of the self in relation to others, and is connected to *intersubjective* self-awareness; the *extended* or *temporal*, self describes the experience of having a recollected past and anticipated future, and is connected to *narrative* self-awareness; the *private* self refers to one's own inner experience, subjectivity and pre-*reflexive* awareness; and the *conceptual* self describes the mental representation of oneself and *reflective* self-awareness.

Thus, we have bodily, intersubjective, narrative, pre-reflexive, and reflective modes of self-awareness, tethered to these corresponding selfhood constructs. These aspects of selfhood are important conceptual tools which complement interpersonal neurobiological research concerning the disordering effects of trauma. As an introduction to this interpersonal neurobiology a reader may consider the literature on: affect regulation, mentalisation and the development of the self (Fonagy et al., 2018); the formative role of relationship in shaping selfhood (Siegel, 2020); and the emergence of the person through developmentally formative intersubjective experiences of

nonverbally communicated attunement and mutual regulation (Schore, 2021). Interpersonal neurobiological research offers not only a substantiation of the causative structures of experience that constitute the person, but also the disorders of selfhood produced by trauma. These prove essential to ensuring the clinician possesses an expansive understanding of the client's subjectivity. For instance, such research provides understanding of the interpersonal basis for the development of personality disorders, and the need for relationally grounded mentalisation approaches to treatment (Bateman & Fonagy, 2016). Such research is apparent also in the understanding offered by Porges (2018), through polyvagal theory, of the role of the autonomic nervous system in perpetuating inaccurate, trauma-shaped, schema by which we experience a projected hostile or unsafe environment. This, relates also, to MacLean's (1990) *Triune Brain*, or the Limbic theorists' attempt to establish the existence of another precognitive mind inhabiting the individual. Evidently then, these various constructs of selfhood, awareness and agency existing within the 'person'—and reinforced as they are through interpersonal neurobiological findings—prove critical to developing a genuinely trauma-informed approach to mindfulness-based psychological practice. Yet they in no way commit one to a substantialist notion of self as 'personal essence'.

## Traumatisation and structures of selfhood

Trauma may be understood as inducing disorderings of the mind, and thus disruptions to structures of our experience, or selfhood. Trauma, as contended by Dowie, may be understood as involving the disordering of one's experience of time, defence, relationality, memory, resource, and agency (Dowie & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2022). All of these are configured around and through the five aggregates, as subjective experiences of being a 'person', *pudgala*. Trauma is, in essence, a disruption to these subjectivities within mind, thus trauma happens to an individual at the subjective level of their experience of themselves as a 'person' and needs to be repaired at the level of the personal, not bypassed or avoided through the misconstruing of Buddhist no-self doctrine.

To understand the importance of working clinically with structures of selfhood, drawing upon the work by Dowie and myself (2022), we will briefly elucidate the way in which trauma may be understood as a disorder of the following six domains of experience: namely, an individual's experience

of time, defence, relationality, memory, resource, and agency. As will be suggested, without engaging these facets of selfhood, no integrated or unified approach to trauma practice is possible. As such, a set of unifying principles for treatment depends upon a cohesive working model of trauma, and the manner in which trauma disrupts the causative facets of selfhood. This is important as incomplete thinking at foundational levels must also manifest at the level of applied practice, either explicitly or implicitly.

Firstly, we might begin with a definition of trauma. In simple terms, we might describe trauma as a response to experiences, with certain features of violence, risk, and danger, which disrupts the structures of selfhood. Importantly, in disrupting these causative facets of selfhood, trauma threatens one's identity and subjectivity; disrupting how an individual occupies their own lifeworld. This is true whether the trauma is single incident or chronic, a consequence of 'omission' or 'commission', acts of abuse or neglect (Courtois & Ford, 2009). The absence of safety, nurturance, or care in early life, alongside invasions and violations, may disrupt a child's developing immature sense of personhood. The developmental impacts of the absence of care—soothing and restorative experiences, was established first in the psychoanalytic literature, particularly in the area of object relations and attachment theory (Bowlby, 1979), whilst within Western philosophy this has been explored by Axel Honneth in his work on the 'struggle for recognition' and '*Selbstvertrauen*', or 'trust in oneself' (Honneth, 1995).

Trauma has, since the time of Charcot, Janet and Freud, been understood as a ubiquitous problem in mental health; whilst in contemporary research, too, it can be highly correlated as comorbid with a range of severe mental illnesses (Felitti et al., 1998; McCloskey & Walker, 2000; Van der Kolk, 2003; Read et al., 2005; Van der Kolk et al., 2005; Felitti & Anda, 2010). While trauma as a psychological process is often described by its neurobiological qualities, it should also importantly be described in more nuanced ways which pay careful attention to the interiority of the experience and the implicit meaning complexes bound up in such experience. Our contention here is that trauma plays an important role in psychological disturbances precisely because of the way it disrupts the phenomenal domains of *time*, *defence*, *relationality*, *memory*, *resource* and *agency*. We will demonstrate how these phenomenal domains, too, are intimately linked with the structures of selfhood identified in the preceding section.

## Trauma and temporality: the narrative self

One key register common to the interiority of traumatic process is disruption to the temporal features of selfhood. Trauma can aptly be defined by its temporalised characteristics, or perhaps more accurately, its de-temporalised form. The traumatic process has a quality of repetition. In psychoanalytic language, trauma may be framed as an event that is locked into a recursive pattern and process within the person's lived or narrative experience (Terr, 1984). In this de-temporalizing sense, the narrative-self or temporal process of selfhood are adversely impacted by trauma.

In this sense, trauma has a quality of the never-ending; generating feelings of inescapability, absorbing an individual within a world of horror and fear; where tragically, the ability of the person to form new horizons or new ways of living free from the past, is profoundly compromised or non-existent. The temporal-self is ruptured and through this rupture of time, the experience of one's relationship to the world is brought into question (Fraser, 1981). This is as time is the quality that adds a unifying thread to one's experience and one's world, and because human beings by nature are historical beings—humans comport themselves into a future through a past (Heidegger, 1962)—a traumatic process that is unable to be placed into the past fully, due to sensate and affective disruption, is unable to be absorbed into the present, and therefore, by definition, discontinues and disallows the possibility of a future. In this way trauma shapes the temporal self—the self that owns its past, present, and future. Such a self is impossible, for the traumatised, as the horizon of trauma never collapses into the past.

It is when trauma is made into suffering that it becomes re-temporalised, and thus experienceable. It is through gradual, steady, slow, and repeated exposure in order to temporalise experience that traumatic process can be resolved (Siegel, 2016). And it is only through this process that feelings may begin to free themselves of their defensive enclosure so that memory may be processed, and understanding may occur so that the individual is able to retrieve some sense of a fluid narrative of self.

## Trauma and defence: the temporal self

When discussing failures of 'selfhood' associated with trauma, the subject of 'dissociation', and other defensive organisations, are obvious and important features for understanding trauma as a process. Early in the theorization of dissociation, Breuer and Freud, (2009/1893) advanced the position that dissociation is the result of 'defence hysteria'; that is to say, that dissociation occurs when the ego actively represses memories of a traumatic event to protect itself from re-experiencing the painful effects that can be associated with the retrieval of such memories. It is interesting then, that in discussing the causative value of selfhood structures, that we come to understand the basis of repression and dissociation as the attempt to protect the 'ego' or sense of 'self' from material that is viewed as too dangerous for the psyche to consciously experience.

The defensive phenomenal process of the avoidance of experience, alongside the failure of defensive structures to ensure unintegrated experience of trauma, in many cases leads to traumatic material emerging slowly over years; often through indirect means, as symbol and symptom—traumatic experiences rushing in and engulfing the present (Liotti, 1999). In this way the 'relational' self, the self-in-the-world and the self-with others, is profoundly impacted as the trauma process can generate memories and experiences that possess the individual with a disorganised flood of negative affect, sensations, and projected experiences from the past, overwhelming and shaping their relationship with the present. Thus, when defensive structures fail, trauma process can generate memories and experiences that in effect possess the individual, rather than a series of contiguous events that the individual possesses as their history.

## Trauma and relationality: the relational self

Trauma processes generate an affective rupture that makes being in relationships with the world almost, or completely, unbearable. The disruptions to relationality and communicability are the product of the past continually invading the present. Trauma by its nature is a process whereby positive, creative, and imaginal acts of the body are limited, and the body is forced to respond to the catastrophe of the world through a more passive state of symptom creation and psychological defence formation. As the past continues to invade the present, trauma can render important facets of relationship, *unbearable*. The traumatised may develop, and *carry forward*, rigidified psychological defence structures, and fixed models of the self-in-relation to the other and the world. This can produce both a brittleness or rigidity in the trauma sufferers' relational sense of self. These relational communicative disruptions are responsible for trauma sufferers' characteristic polarised responses of either affective blandness or over-reactive and unregulated affective qualities (Agorastos et al., 2019).

## Trauma and Memory: the embodied/affective self

The dilemma of how a client reconciles their past and future can become a story of a kind of double memory, where clients, particularly those with dissociative and personality disorders, often demonstrate a profound split between who they are and the victimised, violently violated, and traumatised individual they have been, and perhaps feel themselves to secretly remain. In this way, trauma's impact on memory occurs alongside impacted embodied and affective selfhood structures. From a neurobiological perspective, it is hypothesised that the brain's memory retrieval pathways are not reinforced for experiences that are life-threatening or destructive (Staniloiu et al., 2020). The implications for this in the clinical treatment of trauma seem significant, as this suggests that the capacity of cognition to connect with affect and sensation may be radically reduced in trauma presentations, and it is this process that seems crucial in treatment. This is to say: that the way in which trauma impacts memory has consequences for structures of selfhood such as embodied self, and affective self.

Embodied selfhood, in cognitive science, describes an emphasis upon the formative role the environment plays in the development of cognitive processes.

While affective selfhood, refers to the emotional spectrum of experiences in relationship—a dynamic multidimensional continuum which makes up an individual's interpersonal world. Unfortunately, the disorganisation of the memory system may arise in tandem with metacognitive ruptures which ensure that an individual's reflective function, or capacity to relate their affect, to their sensations, or to cognitions is significantly impaired (Allen, 2018). This might speak to the way in which the traumatised inhabit their body; their bodily awareness; both proprioceptive, interoceptive and relational. Impotently this relates also to the awareness of the emotional life's connection to the bodily experience. Damage and disorganisation of implicit and explicit memory systems is an enduring feature of trauma process and comes in parallel with a range of malformed structures of selfhood (Dowie & Tempone-Wiltshire, 2023, p. 18).

## Trauma and resource: the agential self

The agential facet of selfhood is the perception of one's own capacity to act in and on the world effectively; it is this structure that is perhaps most profoundly impacted by the experience of trauma. Trauma is definitionally a crisis; in that it is a manifestation of a lack of resources to deal with experience. It is for this reason that the degree of resourcing is often the best indicator of whether an individual will be traumatised by an experience or not. As described, those who have lacked the resources to face an experience, or later integrate an experience, tend to repress, dissociate from, and 'experientially avoid' what is overwhelming and impossible to confront (Nijenhuis & Van der Hart, 2011). The de-temporalising impacts on memory, relationship and defence are all products of the crisis of trauma—the individual's foundational lack of resource to be with the traumatic experience. It is for this reason that the individual is at root rendered powerless by trauma; not only were they powerless to prevent commissive or omissive events from happening to them, but they were powerless also to prevent the resurgence of the memories of those events, or the destructive surfacing of symptom and symbol of the events. In this way they have lost the capacity to act as a sovereign being in the world. As such, trauma creates a continual sense of lacking in sufferers. It often carries with it the subjective feeling of 'I can't', and this lack leaches into all registers of the trauma sufferer's world and experience. For this reason, one of the foundations for trauma recovery is the establishment of resources in the initial phase of treatment. Trauma, then, radically disrupts an individual's sense of their own agential capacities.

## Buddhist exceptionalism and the science–Buddhism dialogue

We have explored the nature of the self, from the perspective of classical Buddhist thought and modern cognitive science, and its bearing on mindfulness-informed therapeutic practice. It is important, however, to contextualise this exploration in relation to the broader subject of religiosity meeting clinical science. The intersection of Buddhism and science is elucidated well by Evan Thompson in his 2020 book *Why I Am Not a Buddhist*. This work offers a provocative challenge to the emergent current of Buddhist Modernism within academia and society more generally. In his critique of what he terms 'Buddhist Exceptionalism', Thompson (2020) raises the question: what could the science–Buddhism dialogue look like were it not characterised by attempts to use science to legitimise, or even merge with, Buddhism? In this paper we have demonstrated one way it might look, by considering the Buddhist conception of no-self as it is utilised in mindfulness-based therapies and Buddhist-informed meditation practices. Our purpose has been to demonstrate that while both Buddhist teachers and mindfulness educators utilise the conception of no-self as a pedagogical and soteriological tool for insight, this comes with significant dangers for both contemplative practitioners and therapeutic clients, when failing to recognise the important role of the person, that is, the structures of experience which constitute selfhood. These include the threat of potential re-traumatisation alongside the inducement of breakdowns, dissociative conditions, and psychotic episodes.

Eastern philosophies have long utilised exercises of consciousness in the aid of self-development. Indeed, it is for this reason that many in the Western tradition are seeking a more extended cross-cultural dialogue across psychological traditions. Meditation, as a special form of contemplative consciousness, is thought to allow for a reworking of mental schemata in a unique and potentially enduring way. The theoretical crossing of these domains is in flux, however, with no specific integrative approach considered generally valid. Indeed, mindfulness in its extraction from Buddhist traditions as it has been exported to the West, has been divested of its cultural and religious trappings. This has had problematic implications for the possibility of spiritual bypassing, as will be illustrated.

## Developmental models and spiritual bypassing

We attend here to the dangers of spiritual bypassing present when the no-self doctrine is taken out of context without awareness of the role of *pudgala* or the function of the *preliminary practices* for working with unaddressed *developmental* issues at the personal level. However, before turning explicitly to preliminary practices we might provide a basic sketch of the role of developmental models in clinical science. Developmental models offer various theoretical frameworks for understanding human psychological growth surrounding the pre-personal, personal, and post-personal nexus. These developmental frameworks can be broadly divided into *developmental* theories and *trait* theories. While the latter, like Five Factor Model, provides insight into psychological attributes, developmental theories offer a more dynamic understanding of human cognitive evolution. Thus, these developmental theories find partialised resonance in Buddhist thought.

Structural developmental theories can be attributed to the pioneering work of Piaget. Piaget's four-stage model—sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete-operational, and formal operational stages—still today underpin much of the theory of development in Western educational models. In Piagetian and neo-Piagetian structural theories of development, each developmental stage signifies a self-organising system, characterised by distinct cognitive operations. Maturation is seen as an integrative reorganisation of preceding cognitive frameworks, resulting in more complex capacity of mind.

Michael Commons (2008) develops upon the earlier work of Piaget and introduces post-formal stages that extend beyond formal operational stages. Commons' model has emphasised the increasingly complex systems of thought capable as the mind develops and complexifies. While these structural theories have been well-established, they are augmented with constructive developmental theories which have emerged in parallel. Researchers such as Loevinger's (2014) work on ego development, and notably Cook-Greuter's (2004) use of post-conventional stages of development, have enriched the developmental field in a manner that further augments our understanding of the development of self. Ken Wilber's (2007) AQAL Integral Theory model attempts to synthesis both the features of various Eastern models of developments with the Western psychological accounts of the development of self. Wilber's model offers a holistic account and understanding of adult development. The intersection of Buddhist and

Western accounts of development forms an alignment across traditions pointing to a profound insight into the nature, function, and form of the self. The collective understanding of these models may be summarised as recognising development as a pattern from the pre-personal to the personal, to the post-personal—and from the exterior to interior, with recursive elaborations from the coarse to the subtle.

We ought to understand Buddhist traditions as similarly oriented by developmental modelling. To illustrate: within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, avoiding the danger of spiritual bypassing when striving towards the soteriological goal of 'awakening' has required *Ngöndro*, or the 'preliminary practices', which are thought to prepare the mind for the deeper dive into transpersonal realms (Rabten, 1974; Wilber et al., 1986). Insufficient scholarly attention has been given to the subject of developmental maps in Buddhist traditions. However, the work of Wilber, Engler and Brown (1986) stands out as seeking to develop cartographies that map the stages of contemplative development. These cartographies describe incorporation of the disciplined use of meditative practices at a 'transpersonal' developmental stage; that is, once issues at the pre-personal and personal level have already been redressed. In this way the authors attempt to articulate a 'full spectrum' model of human growth and development—that is, one inclusive of the Western stages of development investigated within conventional psychology, integrated with those stages of development evident and explored in the world's contemplative traditions. Such developmental models, highlight the need for the preliminary stages of personal development to be worked through to differing extents, prior to drawing upon non-ordinary state meditative practice technologies. Brown and Wilber (1986) contended that a comprehensible and integrated view of human development could be achieved by bringing the major religious traditions together in a mutually enriching fashion. Forty years after these initiatory attempts to bridge conventional and contemplative maps of development, mindfulness in the West is practiced in a haphazard fashion, and little attention is given to stages of development, or mapping how one may work at both personal and transpersonal stages.

There is an important argument to be made that in a Western context it is psychological practice that constitutes the 'preliminary' practices for the deeper dive into Buddhist meditative traditions. The work outlined here,

however, offers an important elucidation of the role of working with the causative structures of experience such as the various aspects of 'selfhood' that comprise *pudgala*, the person, before exploring transpersonal registrations of experience. Mindfulness practice, without attention to the disordering of these selfhood-structures resulting from unaddressed trauma, may readily constitute a means of spiritual bypass.

## No-self and groundlessness

In what follows, in a related vein, we suggest that the conventional/ultimate distinction, arising from the Buddhist 'two truths' doctrine (*dvasatya*), can be understood to offer further caution against modes of spiritual bypass. Importantly, this is as if structures of selfhood (*pudgala*) are understood as part of conventional reality, then they are real and functional which cannot be simply dismissed in the search for liberation. The two-truth doctrine is crucial when engaging with the Buddhist notion of 'emptiness' (Sanskrit: *śūnyatā* or Pali: *suññatā*).

Nonetheless, as with the principle of no-self, a parallel problem has emerged in terms of the Western uptake of the Buddhist notion of 'emptiness'. *Śūnyatā*, whilst commonly translated as emptiness, may also be translated as groundlessness, vacuity or voidness. It is a central concept in Buddhist philosophy with multiple meanings depending on the doctrinal context within different traditions. It can be variously understood as an ontological feature of reality, a meditative state or a phenomenological analysis of experience. While in Theravadan Buddhism, *suññatā* sometimes merely refers to the notion of no-self, in Mahayana tradition *śūnyatā* refers to the tenet that all things are empty of intrinsic existence and nature (*svabhāva*), while in the Dzogchen tradition it refers to *primordial* or *empty* awareness. Naturally, complexity arises over the various understandings of emptiness/groundlessness in the tenet-systems of these different philosophical schools.

As with the subject of no-self, it is valuable to examine the relationship between the Buddhist understanding of *śūnyatā* and the sense of groundlessness emerging from the cognitive sciences and Western philosophy. Western scholars in recent years have attempted to establish parallels between *śūnyatā* and findings in contemporary cognitive research, arguing scientific findings have validated the sense of groundlessness as the lack of stable foundation for meaning or knowledge; or in order to demonstrate that human cognition

is better understood not as the grasping of an independent, external world by a separate self, but rather as the *bringing forth* or *enacting* of a dependent world through embodied action (Thompson, 2020). Similarly, the Western phenomenological tradition—inaugurated by Husserl, and continued by Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty—has been put into fruitful dialogue with the Madhyamaka conception of groundlessness (Garfield, 2011).

As with the no-self doctrine, however, spiritual bypassing is a danger when groundlessness too, is misperceived such that there is a failure to acknowledge the distinction drawn in Buddhist metaphysics between conventional and ultimate reality. In Buddhist philosophy both the conventional and ultimate level of description possess a certain sense of truth or are understood as 'real'. As such *śūnyatā*, misconceived, can lead into a nihilistic dismissal not just of the self or person, but of the world entire, with clear clinical dangers (Keiji & Seisaku, 1971). Further work is required in order to examine both the best clinical application of the Madhyamaka sense of groundlessness, and its purported convergence with aspects drawn from cognitive science and the Western phenomenological tradition.

## Conclusion

Mindfulness-based psychological interventions require a deeper understanding of, and engagement with, the metaphysical intentions out of which Buddhist meditative practices emerge. At present the superficial uptake of mindfulness within the clinical sciences is mirrored by a superficial engagement with the Buddhist notion of no-self. As illustrated in what has preceded, such an engagement proves not only distortive of Buddhist metaphysics and contemplative practice, but may also cause harm when applied clinically, through providing justifications for the bypassing of unworked-through personal material.

In this work we have drawn attention to the significant divergence that exists between contemporary scientific understandings of 'the self' and the Buddhist conception of no-self, *anātman*, and *pudgala*, the *person*. While contemporary cognitive science offers a redescription of the 'self' as a functional construction, the Buddhist doctrine of 'no-self' offers a metaphysical account according to which the independent self is a problematic illusion which ought to be abandoned in seeking liberation from suffering. We contend, however, that the Buddhist notion of *pudgala*, 'person',

may be understood in relation to a variety of 'selfhood' notions or structures of experience identified within cognitive science, which proves more than illusory—and, rather, serves constructive, causative, and functional ends. This provides an important metaphysical counter to the popularised understanding of the Buddhist conception of self as *merely* illusory—a belief which may frequently be utilised to justify modes of spiritual bypassing, and thus when applied therapeutically, may result in a failure to account for the disorganising effects of trauma on the various structures of experience.

A subtler understanding of the Buddhist apparatus of *anātman* and *pudgala* is of critical importance to mindfulness-based therapeutic interventions, as it provides a lens through which to understand the disorganising effects of trauma. The 'person' is constituted by various structures of experience including; the ecological, interpersonal, extended, private, and conceptual—organisational structures of selfhood that may be disrupted by trauma, which frequently involves the disordering of one's experience of time, defence, relationality, memory, resource and agency. We have contended that working psychologically with the person, *pudgala*, proves necessary to preventing this misapplication of Buddhist-derived, mindfulness techniques. With the proper understanding of no-self and the 'person' in Buddhist metaphysics, therapeutic work may be situated as a necessary 'preliminary practice' for meditative exploration of deeper transpersonal domains and soteriological goals.

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