The Mind’s ‘I’ in Meditation: Early Pāḷi Buddhadhama and Transcendental Phenomenology in Mutual Reflection

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Introduction

This essay provides a condensed introductory ‘snapshot’ of just a few of the many and profound correlations existing between early (pre-Abhidhamma) Pāḷi Buddhism and Transcendental Phenomenology, by focusing on what is arguably the most central and essential ‘philosophical problem’ in both traditions: the true nature and significance of the ‘I’ of subjective intentional consciousness. It argues that the Buddhist axiom of ‘not-self’ (anattā) is by no means incompatible with the fundamental phenomenological irreducibility, and necessity, of transcendental subjectivity – or, as Husserl also puts it, of the ‘pure’ or ‘transcendental ‘I’’ – a structure evidently essential to intentional consciousness as ‘consciousness-of’. On the one hand, Husserl recognises (and struggles with) the peculiar ‘emptiness’ of the ‘pure ‘I’’. On the other hand, a fundamental distinction must clearly be drawn between genuine intentional subjectivity – which even Buddhas and Arahants must of necessity possess – and the erroneous bases upon which the concept of ‘self’ (attā) that Buddhism rejects is constituted: the feeling of ‘I am’ (‘asmī’ti), the sense of ‘I am this’ (‘ayam-aham-asmi’ti), and the concept/conceit of ‘I am’ (asmi-māna) – all of which Buddhas and Arahants by definition do not possess. Hence, it is argued that, while the ‘pure I’ does not refer to some permanent ‘entity’ called ‘self’, nor is it merely an empty, non-referring, conventional linguistic marker: it has not merely a ‘use’, but a genuine meaning, which derives from the intrinsic, irreducible, and ‘pre-linguistic’ experiential structure of ‘consciousness-of’ itself. What is more, this meaning is not only recognised and admitted, but actively utilised, within the doctrine and methodology of early Buddhism, without any sense of contradicting the axiom of anattā.

1. Preliminary (1): The axiom of anattā

This essay aims to provide a very condensed and merely introductory ‘snapshot’ of just a few of the many and very deep correlations that exist between transcendental phenomenology (TP) and early Pāḷi Buddhadhama (EB); but the elements of this ‘snapshot’ are organized around what is arguably the most essential theme – one might even say, ‘philosophical problem’ – at the heart of both TP and EB. It is the intention of this essay not to contradict the fundamental EB axiom of anattā, ‘not-self’. In other words, the arguments presented here will not posit any essentially permanent subjective or objective entity or identity called attā, or ‘self’. Nor will they assert ‘asmī’ti, ‘I am’;

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1 I would gratefully like to thank Peter Harvey for his helpful and encouraging comments on and questions about the previous version of this paper. I hope that through my addressing his comments and questions, the clarity of this paper has been improved for the benefit of others. I would also like to register my respect for and appreciation of the great work accomplished by Bhikkhus Bodhi and Thānissaro: without their beautiful efforts, it would have required at least two more lifetimes for me to gain the understanding of early Pāḷi Buddhadhama which they have helped me to gain within a fraction of this lifetime. I also deeply and gratefully thank the International Association of Buddhist Universities for accepting this paper as part of its 2011/2012 conference program.
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or ‘ayam aham asmi’ti, ‘I am this’; or asmi-māna, the ‘I am’ concept/conceit; or again, ahaṅkāra, ‘I-making’, or mamaṅkāra, ‘mine-making’.

However, these arguments will propose the conclusion that ‘pure subjectivity’ is an inherent and irreducible property of intentional consciousness (i.e., ‘consciousness-of’), an essential aspect of the actual process of lived conscious experience; and that there is a definite phenomenological sense in which, when everything else has been ‘excluded’ and ‘reduced’, ‘pure consciousness-of’ remains as an absolutely irreducible principle. But neither pure consciousness-of nor its intrinsic subjectivity can constitute (or be constituted as) a ‘self’ of any kind: they are ‘transcendental’ facts, equivalent to ‘pure emptiness’. Moreover, if there were no phenomenon whatsoever for consciousness-of to be conscious-of, then, given that consciousness-of already apodictically demonstrates the irreducible nature of ‘being conscious-of’, it could be conscious-of nothing but its own consciousness-of. In other words, this would be a form of absolute cessation (niruddha).

For the sake of clarity and reference, the axiom of anattā will be summarized here in five items: a general premise and four arguments. 1. Whatever might be regarded as a personal ‘self’ (attā) or ‘I am’ (‘asmi’ti) will inevitably be just the five aggregates of clinging (pañcupādānakkhandhā) or some one of them. 2. The five aggregates are not ‘self’ because one cannot control them to prevent affliction. 3. The five aggregates are impermanent (anicca), painful (dukkha), and have the nature of change (vipaṛīṇāma); therefore, it is not befitting or proper (kalla) to think of them as a ‘self’. 4. It is not acceptable (na khamati) to posit a ‘self’ that is entirely separate from experience and the phenomena of experience. 5. Dependent co-arising is a sufficient and valid explanation of the continuity of temporal experience; therefore, there is no need to posit a ‘self’ in order to account for that continuity.

In Husserl’s TP terminology, this is Erlebnis, ‘lived experience’, ‘mental process’ (cf. also fn. 86 below). In EB terminology, this is viññāga as a conditioned, constituted, and temporal experiential life-process: i.e., as one of the five aggregates (khandhas); as a ‘tying down’ (nidāna) or ‘link’ in the continuum of dependent co-arising (patīcca-samuppaḍa); and thus also as the medium of ‘becoming-again’ (punabbhava). (Cf. also fn. 59 below for further aspects of viññāga.)

Here, ‘cessation’ (niruddha) should not be taken to imply a nihilistic sense of ‘annihilation’. Rather, it is intended more literally, in the sense of ‘stopping’. For a very similar understanding, cf. Harvey 1995, §11.8, pp. 184-185; §12.3, p. 199; §§12.7-8, pp. 201-202.

Items 2 to 5 have been adapted from the taxonomy of arguments in support of anattā in Collins 1990, §§3.2.2-5, pp. 97-110.

SN 22.47 (S III 46): ye hi keci . . . brāhmaṇa v brāhmaṇa v anekavihitam attanam samanupassamaṇa samanupassanti, sabbete pañcupādānakkhandhe samanupassanti, etesam v aṇṇataraṃ. The abbreviations DN, MN, SN, and AN will be used to refer to sutta numbers, while D, M, S, and A will refer to Pali Text Society volume and page numbers.

SN 22.59 (at S III 66): rūpaṁ, bhikkhave, anattā. rūpaṁ hidaṁ, bhikkhave, abhavissa, nayidaṁ rūpaṁ ābuddhāya svamvatteyya, labbhetha ca rūpe ‘evam me rūpaṁ hotu, evam me rūpaṁ mā ahosi’ti. (So also for vedanā, saññā, saṅkhāra, viññā.)

SN 22.59(atSIII67-68): yampanaṇiccam dukkhamviparināmadhammaṁ, kallanmutāsamanupassitum ‘etaṁmama, eso haṁmaṁ, eso me attāti?

Cf. the refutations in DN 15 (at D II 67-69), which will be discussed below (cf. §4). (Cf. also Bodhi 2010, pp. 42-48, for a detailed discussion of those arguments.) The arguments 3 and 4 above, taken together, constitute a nice dilemmatic argument in support of anattā.

The locus classicus is MN 38 (M 1256). I do not think that this argument can be treated as an independent one, as it only has decisive force in combination with the arguments of 3 and 4.

2 In Husserl’s TP terminology, this is Erlebnis, ‘lived experience’, ‘mental process’ (cf. also fn. 86 below). In EB terminology, this is viññāga as a conditioned, constituted, and temporal experiential life-process: i.e., as one of the five aggregates (khandhas); as a ‘tying down’ (nidāna) or ‘link’ in the continuum of dependent co-arising (patīcca-samuppaḍa); and thus also as the medium of ‘becoming-again’ (punabbhava). (Cf. also fn. 59 below for further aspects of viññāga.)

3 Cf. Section §2.3 below for a clarification of the terms ‘transcendental’ and ‘transcendent’.

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2. Preliminary (2): Pahāna and epokhē

2.1. Pahāna

In EB, the assutavā puthujjana is the ordinary, common person (puthujjana) who has either not heard or not understood (assutavā) the ‘transcendental’\(^\text{11}\) instruction of the Dhamma. Such a person is contrasted to the ariya sāvaka, the ‘noble hearer’ or disciple of the Dhamma. The Mūlapariyāya Sutta provides an apt ‘phenomenological’ definition of the assutavā puthujjana:

He perceives ‘earth’ from ‘earth’; having perceived ‘earth’ from ‘earth’, he conceives ‘earth’, he conceives ‘in earth’, he conceives ‘from earth’, he conceives ‘earth is mine’, he delights in ‘earth’.\(^\text{12}\)

This same formula is then applied to ‘absolutely everything’; even, indeed, to Nibbāna; as though to say: if a person gets this one thing wrong, they get absolutely everything wrong, even the ‘ultimate truth’.

The first essential ‘antidote’ to this problem is pahāna, ‘abandoning’. The Sabba Sutta and Pahāna Sutta teach, respectively, ‘the All’ (sabba) and the ‘Dhamma for abandoning All’ (sabba-pahānāya dhamma).\(^\text{13}\) The Natumhāka Sutta of the Khandhasaṅgutta and the Saṅyatanasaṅgutta\(^\text{14}\) also teach exactly this same Dhamma in terms of the five clung-to aggregates (pañc-upādāna-ikkhandhā) and the six sense spheres (saṅyata), respectively; but, as the title of these suttas, ‘Not Yours’ (na tumhākaṃ), indicates, they teach it with an especially interesting twist. The former sutta says:

Monks, what is not yours, abandon that. When you have abandoned that, it will be for your benefit and happiness. And what, monks, is not yours? Form . . . feeling . . . perception . . . consciousness is not yours, abandon that. When you have abandoned that, it will be for your benefit and happiness.\(^\text{15}\)

\(^{11}\) In this context, the term ‘transcendental’ could legitimately be understood as a translation of the term lokuttara (lit., ‘higher than, above, beyond [loka] the world [loka]’), as this sometimes occurs in the EB suttas (as distinct from the ‘technical’ sense that this term is later given within the Abhidhamma system). The term is also often translated as ‘supramundane’. Thus, e.g., MN 96 (at M II 181): evameva kho ahaṃ . . . ariyāṃ lokuttaram dhamman purissassa sandhānam paññapemi; “I . . . declare the noble supramundane Dhamma as a person’s own wealth” (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 2009, p. 789, §12); MN 117 (at M III 72): aitthi . . . sammādiṭṭhi ariyā anāsavā lokuttarā maggasī, “[T]here is right view that is noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path” (Ñānamoli and Bodhi 2009, p. 934, §5). It is quite possible and plausible to argue that, in connection with the Dhamma, the term lokuttara can be understood to have certain fundamental implications that it shares in common with the TP sense of the term ‘transcendental’; indeed, this point can already be discerned through the correlation between EB pahāna and TP epokhē that is outlined in this present section; but cf. also §2.3 below.

\(^{12}\) Unless otherwise cited, translations from the Pāli are by the present author. MN 1 (M I 1): pathaviṃ pathavito sānāṇāti, pathaviḥ pathavito sānāṇavr pathaviḥ māṇīti, pathaviḥ māṇīti, pathaviḥ meti māṇīti, pathaviṃ abhinandati. Bodhi (2006, p. 27) and Nānamoli and Bodhi (2009, p. 83, §3) translate this formula, in accordance with the interpretations of the commentary and sub-commentary, with interpolations, thus: ‘he conceives [himself as] earth, he conceives [himself] in earth, he conceives [himself apart] from earth’, etc. While this reading is certainly valid, I nevertheless prefer a quite literal translation of the text, as I believe that this makes good (phenomenological) sense, just as it is.

\(^{13}\) SN 35.23-24 (S IV 15-16).

\(^{14}\) SN 22.33 (S III 33) and SN 35.101 (S IV 81), respectively.

\(^{15}\) SN 22.33 (S III 33-34): yoṃ, bhikkhave, na tumhākaṃ, tam pahahatha. tam vo pahīṇam hitāya sukhāya bhavissati. kīccha, bhikkhave, na tumhākaṃ? rūpaṃ . . . vedanā . . . saññā . . . sañkhārā . . . viññānaṃ na tumhākaṃ, tam pahahatha. tam vo pahīṇam hitāya sukhāya bhavissati.
The latter sutta says:

Monks, what is not yours, abandon that. When you have abandoned that, it will be for your benefit and happiness. And what, monks, is not yours? Eye . . . visual forms . . . eye-consciousness . . . eye-contact . . . whatever feeling arises with eye-contact as condition, pleasant or painful or neither-painful-nor-pleasant: that, too, is not yours. Abandon that. When you have abandoned that, it will be for your benefit and happiness.\(^{16}\)

And so also for ear, nose, tongue, body, and mental faculty. The commentary explains that the imperative ‘Abandon. . . ’ should be understood to mean: ‘Abandon by means of the abandoning of desire and lust’.\(^{17}\) The Dutiya Chanda-ppahāna Sutta supports this, but it is also more exhaustive:

With respect to form . . . feeling . . . perception . . . constitutions . . . consciousness: whatever desire, lust, delight, craving, taking up and clinging, standpoints, adherences and underlying tendencies of the mind there are: abandon these. Thus that form . . . feeling . . . perception . . . constitutions . . . consciousness will be abandoned, cut off at the root, made like an uprooted palm tree, made without (further) becoming, not subject to arising in the future.\(^{18}\)

### 2.2. Epokhē.

In general, it seems true to say that not only human individuals, but human societies, cultures, civilizations – indeed, the human species, as such – are born into, live, and die within a certain ‘pregiven’ and unquestioned attitude towards and assumption about ‘the world’ and their relationship to ‘the world’. This is true not only in ordinary, ‘pre-theoretical’ life, but also in the case of the positive natural sciences; and even, for most people, in religion and religious life. Ordinary, everyday life; the life of science; the life of religion; all of them share and are grounded upon one and the same ‘natural attitude’ (natürliche Einstellung).

In this natural attitude, ‘the world’ is given as a self-evident objective and real fact: it exists in front of us, around us, and we live in it: we perceive it, experience it, and act in it. It is ‘simply there, ‘on hand’”.\(^{19}\) The ‘world’ was before each of us and will be after each of us; it is independent of us; it is just as it is, from its own side, not from ours; and we see it and know it just as it is – including its ‘illusions’ and ‘hallucinations’ – as though these were simply reflected in our minds as in a blank and passive mirror. The world is made up of objects; and we, too, are objects in the world. Yet the world exists outside of us: we each have our own separate, inner, private, subjective life, our mental life; but the real world is external, public, objective, and physical.\(^{20}\)

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\(^{16}\) SN 35.101 (S IV 81-82): yam, bhikkhave, na tumhākaṁ, tam pajaḥatha. tam vo pahiṇaṁ hitāya sukhāya bhavissati. kiṅca, bhikkhave, na tumhākaṁ? cakkhu . . . rūpā . . . cakkhuviññānam . . . cakkhusamphasso . . . yampidaṁ cakkhusamphassapaccayā uppayajjati vedayitaṁ sukhaṁ vā dukkhaṁ vā adukkhamasukhaṁ vā tampi na tumhākaṁ. tam pajaḥatha, tam vo pahiṇaṁ hitāya sukhāya bhavissati.

\(^{17}\) Spk II 265: pajaḥathāti chandarāgappahānena pajaḥatha.

\(^{18}\) SN 22.112 (S III 161): rūpe . . . vedanāya . . . saṁhāraya . . . saṁkhāresu . . . viññāne . . . yo chando yo rāgo yā nandī yā tanhā ye upapādānā cetaso adhiṭṭhānābhinivesāṇasayā, te pajaḥatha. evam tam rūpam . . . sā vedanā . . . sā saṁhāra . . . te saṁkhārā . . . tam viññānaṁ pahiṇaṁ bhavissati ucchinnaṁ uci tālayathukataṁ anabhāṁkataṁ āyatāṁ anuppādadhamaṁ.

\(^{19}\) Husserl 1982, §27, p. 51; Husserl 1976a, §27, p. ‘einfach da . . . „vorhanden“. . .’ This section begins with a nice ‘first personal’ description of the natural attitude.

\(^{20}\) Cf., e.g., Husserl 1982, §30, pp. 56-57; Husserl 1976a, §30, pp. 60-61.
When the scientific attitude says that ‘reality’ is what is really ‘there’ when our own merely subjective consciousness is not ‘there’, and then tries to posit and study that ‘mind-independent’ reality, it is simply intensifying the natural attitude. When the religious attitude says that one must be good and do good ‘in this world’, so that one can be granted access to a ‘better world’, perhaps a ‘heavenly world’, it, too, is simply practising the natural attitude. Something remains fundamentally unquestioned, fundamentally hidden from view, in this natural attitude. Husserl writes of the ‘natural attitude’:

Daily practical living is naïve. It is immersion in the already-given world, whether it be experiencing, or thinking, or valuing, or acting. Meanwhile all those productive intentional functions of experiencing, because of which physical things are simply there, go on anonymously. The experiencer knows nothing about them, and likewise nothing about his productive thinking… Nor is it otherwise in the positive sciences. They are naïvetés of a higher level.21

For Husserl, the first essential ‘antidote’ to the ‘natural attitude’ is what he calls the epokhē – an ancient Greek word meaning ‘check, cessation’; and in late Hellenistic philosophy, having the applied sense, ‘suspension of judgment’.22 For Husserl, the epokhē is the radical suspension or exclusion of the ‘natural attitude’ and all that it implies. He argues that the way in which we give ‘validity’ to our sense of the ‘world’ – with ‘ourselves’ as ‘objects’ within it – cannot be examined, let alone overcome, from within the natural attitude, because the natural attitude is always-already the effect of that bestowal of ‘validity’.23 We need to step back from, to step out of, that attitude, in order to see how it is constituted in the first instance, and what it obscures from view; in other words, to see what is really and truly ‘here’. He describes this as a shift from a ‘two-dimensional’ to a ‘three-dimensional’ perspective, speaking of the ‘antagonism . . . between the ‘patent’ life of the plane and the ‘latent’ life of depth’.24 ‘This is not a “view”, an “interpretation” bestowed upon the world,’ he says.25 All such ‘views’ have their ground in the pregiven world: but the epokhē frees us from this ground itself: we stand ‘above’ the world, which becomes for us a pure ‘phenomenon’.26

Husserl first describes the epokhē as a ““parenthesizing” or “excluding””, as a ‘refraining from judgment’,27 or ‘better, refraining from belief’;28 but all of this, he says, is perfectly compatible with an ‘unshakable conviction of evident truth’.29 More explicitly, he says: ‘We put out of action the general positing which belongs to the essence of the natural attitude.’ Thus,

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28 Husserl 1976b, p. 485: ‘besser: Glaubensenthaltung’ (Marginal note added by Husserl to his copy of the printed text.)
the phenomenological epokhē ‘completely shuts me off from any judgment about spatiotemporal factual being’. Husserl describes the epokhē, and the phenomenological or transcendental attitude that it awakens, as ‘a total change of the natural attitude, such that we no longer live, as heretofore, as human beings within natural existence, constantly effecting the validity of the pre-given world’. It is ‘by no means a temporary act’, but taken up ‘once and for all’. Thus, the epokhē is ‘a complete personal transformation, comparable in the beginning to a religious conversion’; but beyond this, he says, it ‘bears within itself the significance of the greatest existential transformation which is assigned as a task to humankind as such’.

2.3. A clarification of TP terms: ‘transcendental’ and ‘transcendent’

Never can the limit of the world be reached by travelling;
But nor is there release from the painful without having reached the world’s limit.

This cryptic passage from the Rohitassa Sutta elegantly captures the sense of the two mutually-related yet mutually-exclusive TP terms, ‘transcendent’ and ‘transcendental’. This correspondence is neither merely coincidental nor merely metaphorical: rather, it is not only philosophically, but phenomenologically, quite precise. Thus: in the quest to find an escape from ‘the painful’ (dukkha), even if one could travel forever, one would never reach the limit or end (anta) of the ‘world’ (loka). By its very nature, the ‘spatiotemporal world’ and all that it comprises is transcendent with respect to any ‘moment’ of experience, or even any indefinite ‘continuum’ of experience: it ‘exceeds’ the grasp of experience, and does so in an ‘objective’ and ‘necessary’ manner. This is the sense of ‘the limit of the world’ (lokassa-anta) in the first verse of the ‘riddle’. In the second verse, however,
the world’s limit’ (loka-anta)\textsuperscript{36} takes on a very different meaning. It refers to the attainment of that which is ‘absolutely beyond’ the ‘spatiotemporal world’ as such: that which the ‘world’, and all that it comprises, cannot ‘reach’ or ‘touch’; namely, of course, Nibbāna.\textsuperscript{37} In just this sense, Nibbāna is \textit{transcendental} with respect to all phenomena: its nature is such that it is absolutely non-phenomenal.\textsuperscript{38} The means to attain the ‘world’s limit’, and thus to transcend the world’s inherent and inevitable painfulness, can only be realized through the fully purified and fully liberated consciousness; for consciousness, too, by its very nature, necessarily partakes of the ‘transcendental’, as well as of the ‘transcendent’.

In his later writings, Husserl refers to what he calls ‘the transcendental problem’ (\textit{das transzendentale Problem}): a ‘universal’ problem which ‘arises from a general turning around of the natural attitude’.\textsuperscript{39} As we have just seen in §2.2, the natural attitude assumes that ‘the real world is pre-given to us as self-evidently existing, ever at hand’.\textsuperscript{40} To ‘reverse’ the natural attitude is, in one sense, ‘to put it out of play’:\textsuperscript{41} an allusion to the literal sense of the \textit{epokhē} as a ‘suspending’ of that attitude. But it is also, thereby, ‘to compel a new attitude’, which Husserl calls ‘the transcendental’.	extsuperscript{42} This emerges because the philosophical attention is now free to be directed towards ‘the life of consciousness’ (Bewußtseinsleben), which the \textit{epokhē} naturally and spontaneously reveals. One becomes aware that ‘the world’, previously taken for granted as simply ‘pre-given’, is in fact something that in every respect ‘appears in’, has meaning in, and is validated by, that same consciousness.\textsuperscript{43} Previously, ‘the real world’ had our complete and one-sided attention and concern, and ‘consciousness’ was barely – if at all – noticed, let alone investigated. Now, through the \textit{epokhē}, we are intimately aware of our own consciousness-of ‘the world’, and ‘the world’ is thus radically disclosed as a ‘pure phenomenon’ in our consciousness. But precisely herein resides the interesting ‘transcendental problem’. In his last major but unfinished text, Husserl writes:

The empty generality of the \textit{epokhē} does not of itself clarify anything; it is only the gate of entry through which one must pass in order to be able to discover the new world of pure subjectivity. The actual discovery is a matter of concrete, extremely subtle and differentiated work.\textsuperscript{44}

The ‘work’ to which Husserl refers, here, is the ‘transcendental reduction’, which is made possible through the attainment of the ‘transcendental attitude’ of the \textit{epokhē}: ‘a reduction of “the” world to the transcendental phenomenon “world”, a reduction thus also to its correlate,
transcendental subjectivity, in and through whose “conscious life” the world . . . attains and always has attained its whole content and ontic validity. The transcendental reduction clarifies and brings into sharp relief what Husserl had much earlier described as ‘the essential relationship between transcendental and transcendent being’: ‘this most radical of all ontological distinctions – being as consciousness and being as something which becomes “manifested” in consciousness, “transcendent” being’. This correlation engenders profound insights, but also profound questions. Even so, many of these profound questions are, in an important sense, merely secondary or derivative: they are rooted in, and can be traced back to, the truly fundamental ground of the ‘transcendental problem’, which reveals many layers of ‘ascent’ or ‘descent’.

[W]e have become aware of a peculiar split or cleavage, so we may call it, which runs through all our life-process; namely, that between the anonymously functioning subjectivity, which is continuously constructing objectivity for us, and the always, by virtue of the functioning of anonymous subjectivity, pre-given objectivity, the world. The world also includes within it human beings with their minds, with their human conscious life. When we consider the pervasive and unsuspendable relatedness of the pregiven and self-evidently existing world to our functioning subjectivity, humankind and we ourselves appear as intentionally produced formations whose sense of being objectively real and whose verification of being are both self-constituting in subjectivity. Also, the being of the objective . . . has now appeared as a meaning that constitutes itself within consciousness itself.

But even the task of further clarifying and comprehending ‘this correlation between constituting subjectivity and constituted objectivity’ is not yet the deepest expression of the ‘transcendental problem’. Rather, the fundamental matter is that this ‘constituting subjectivity’ in no sense whatsoever actually ‘appears’ within the ‘constituted objective world’. For, even our own bodies, our sensations, our emotions, and our thoughts are ultimately ‘constituted phenomena’ that ‘appear’ within, and as elements of, ‘the world’: that is to say, they, too, ‘appear’ to our ‘transcendental subjective consciousness’. However, ‘transcendental subjectivity’ does not itself ‘appear’; and, through reflection and analysis, it becomes quite evident that, in principle, it would be a sheer countersense to expect or to suppose that it could or should in any sense whatsoever appear.
appear’, as a phenomenon amongst phenomena. We see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think ‘the world’ and what we identify as our psychophysical ‘selves’ within ‘the world’; but that subjective consciousness-of in dependence upon which we see, hear, smell, taste, touch, and think can never itself appear as an ‘object’ or ‘phenomenon’. It is not itself anything ‘in the world’; yet, there would be no ‘appearing’ of ‘the world’ without it. For this reason, above all others, Husserl refers to it as ‘transcendental’: it is ‘beyond’ or ‘above’ all that ‘appears’ – i.e., the ‘physical’ and ‘mental’ ‘world’-phenomena – and yet it is also the ‘limit’ of ‘the world’: for, ‘the world’ cannot ‘appear’ without it, and is inseparably correlated with it. For these same reasons, however, ‘transcendental subjectivity’, or what Husserl also calls the ‘transcendental ‘I’’, is essentially empty, in itself, of all ‘phenomenal content’.

3. Intentionality and subjectivity: irreducible properties of ‘consciousness-of’

What the epokhē and the transcendental reduction reveal, first of all, is the apodictic (i.e., self-evident and self-proving) fact of consciousness itself; more specifically, they reveal that consciousness is inherently and fundamentally a consciousness-of… This quality of being conscious-of… is called ‘intentionality’.

The common sense of the word, ‘intend’, i.e., ‘to have a purpose in mind,’ is included within the wider and deeper phenomenological sense of ‘intentionality’, but only as one possible kind of ‘intentional’ mode or act. The essential sense of phenomenological ‘intending’, of intentionality as such, refers to the way in which consciousness is ‘turned’ or ‘directed’ towards what it is conscious-of; and, moreover, the way in which consciousness thereby gives ‘sense’ or ‘meaning’ (Sinn) to all that it is conscious-of, even purely through the act of being conscious-of it.

It is not accidental that Buddhaghosa, in explicating the compound nāmarūpa, defines the term nāma, which literally means ‘name’, as though it were derived from the verb namati, ‘to bend, to direct’: ‘[A]ll that should be defined as “mentality” (nāma) in the sense of bending (namana) because of its bending on to the object.’

This is not sound etymology; but I think it is fairly obvious that Buddhaghosa was trying to express and justify a sound phenomenological intuition through this word play. Voicing the same intuition, the commentary to this passage says: ‘Bending in the direction of the object means that there is no occurrence without an object; it is in the sense of that sort of bending…’

Here, ‘bending in the direction of the object’ is, in the Pāli, literally: ‘bending or inclining with the face towards the object’ (ārammama-abhīmukha-namanaṃ).

The words ‘transcendent’, ‘transcendental’, and the verb ‘transcend’ (doing service for both of the former senses) derive from the Latin trānsscendere: trāns, ‘across, through, beyond’ + scandere, ‘to climb’. A precise Pāli correlate would be atikkamati: ati, ‘over, above’ + kamati, ‘step, walk, go, walk, progress’ (cf. Cone 2001, p. 60.1-2); but the more usual form found in the EB suttas, with the technical sense of ‘transcending’ (in the context of the four higher meditative states, or arūpa jhānas) is samatikkamati (as a gerund, samatikkamma) where the prefix sam- functions as an intensifier, with the sense ‘thoroughly, fully, perfectly’ (cf. Rhys Davids and Stede 1998, p. 655.2; Monier-Williams 1993, p. 1152.1).

From the Latin intendere, ‘to stretch forth, give one’s attention to’, from tendere, ‘to stretch’.

This is very close in meaning to ceteti, ‘forms an idea in the mind; thinks about, is intent upon; has in mind (to); forms an intention (to); strives mentally for’ (Cone 2010, p. 167.2); and hence to cetanā, which could be translated as ‘volitional intent’ (cf. also Cone 2010, p. 164.2, 1.(ii)).
Of course, what is intended here is the sense in which consciousness is directed towards its ‘object’. This same essential sense can, I believe, be seen in a *sutta* passage such as: ‘See his concentration well developed and his mind well liberated – not bent forward [abhinatam] and not bent back [apanatam].’ Here, *abhinata*, ‘bent towards, inclined towards’ is a past participle formed as though from *abhinamati* (*abhi* + *namati*); and *apanata*, ‘bent away, disinclined, averse’, is the past participle of *apanamati* (*apa* + *namati*).

In revealing consciousness and its intentionality (consciousness-of), the *epokhē* and reduction also reveal, concomitantly, the sense in which consciousness-of is fundamentally characterized by ‘subjectivity’. The fact that ‘consciousness-of’ is consciousness directing – metaphorically ‘stretching’ or ‘extending’ – itself towards its object means that it is *not* its ‘object’; that it is, in a certain sense, *relating itself* to its ‘object’ from ‘within itself’; i.e., from within its own self-evident nature, which is precisely *to be conscious-of*. This inherent inflection of consciousness-of towards phenomena is precisely that property of consciousness-of to which the term ‘subjectivity’ implicitly refers. In fact, I believe that careful reflection and meditation will reveal that a ‘non-subjective’ consciousness is a phenomenological impossibility, because a consciousness that is not a consciousness-of would be no more than a pure ‘potentiality’ of consciousness.

A very important point that I would like to make clear is that ‘mental acts’ or ‘experiences’ such as ‘feeling’ (*vedanā*), ‘perception’ (*saññā*), or ‘thinking’ (*vitakka-vicāra; maññati*), and even advanced meditative states of being purely percipient or aware (*saññī*), are inevitably and irreducibly modes of consciousness-of, and are therefore *intrinsically* characterized by subjectivity. The term ‘I’ (*aham*) is problematic because it is very ambiguous and has several different senses and uses, the most important of which I shall discuss below (cf. §4). However, I argue that, ultimately, all of its various senses must derive from one fundamental and purely experiential fact, which is pre-linguistic: namely, the inherent subjectivity of consciousness-of. Therefore, it is very important to distinguish, on the one hand, between the *purely phenomenological* sense of the term ‘I’ as referring back to ‘pure subjectivity’, which is not a ‘concept’ but a (transcendental) property of conscious experience; and, on the other hand, the manner in which this phenomenological sense – a sense not noticed, let alone comprehended, within the natural attitude – can be turned into, or constituted as (*abhisaṅkhata*), concepts/conceits (*māna*) and underlying tendencies (*anusaya*) such as ‘I am’ (*’asmītī’*) or ‘I am this’ (*’ayam-aham-asmi’tī*). These are *ontological* concepts, which can only have ‘sense’ if they are taken to refer to something that ‘exists’, ‘manifestly’ or ‘objectively’. For this reason, such concepts/conceits can refer to nothing other than the ‘five clung-to aggregates’ (*pañc-upādāna-kkhandhā*), or to some ideal abstraction that is ultimately derived from these; this

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55 Bodhi 2000, p. 117. *SN* 1.38 (S I 39): *passa samādhīṁ subhāvītaṁ cittaṁ cittaṁ suvimuttaṁ, na cābhīnaṁ na cāpanatam...*


57 Husserl does use the term ‘subject’ (*Subjekt*) in its relation to the ‘object’ (*Objekt; Gegenstand*); and sometimes speaks of intentionality in terms of the ‘I-pole’ (*Ichpol*) in its relation to the ‘object-pole’ (*Gegenstandspol*) or ‘counter-pole (*Gegenpol*)’. (Cf., e.g., Husserl 1970b, §50, pp. 170-171; Husserl 1954, §50, pp. 173-174; Husserl 1989, §25, pp. 111-114; Husserl 1952, §25, pp. 105-107). The image of a ‘pole’ or ‘ray’ is significant, because it presupposes that the two ends of the ‘pole’ are inseparable from the ‘pole’ itself; and this is an important aspect of the concept of intentionality of which Husserl was well aware. In any event, I shall consistently avoid the term ‘subject’, for reasons that will become clear in the course of this paper; and will focus, instead, upon the property of ‘subjectivity’.

58 Cf., e.g., *AN* 11.7 (A V 318f.), apparently describing *animitta cetosamādhī* (Harvey 1986, p. 42, reaches the same conclusion). Of the meditator in this *samādhi*, it is said: *saññī ca pana assā ti,* ‘and yet he is percipient (aware)’. (For a translation, cf. Nizamis 2011, AN 11.7 (cf. also AN 11.8), forthcoming).
being the basis of the concept of a permanent attā (‘self’, ‘soul’), as an individual and ontologically independent entity. The phenomenological understanding of the term ‘I’ has nothing to do with such ontological abstractions and positions.

4. The problem

In Khemaka Sutta, the Venerable Khemaka says:

Venerable friends, I [aham] do not say “I am” [‘asmī’ti] of material form, and I do not say “I am” apart from material form. I do not say “I am” of feeling, and I do not say “I am” apart from feeling; I do not say “I am” of perception, and I do not say “I am” apart from perception; I do not say “I am” of constitutions, and I do not say “I am” apart from constitutions; I do not say “I am” of sense-consciousness,59 and I do not say “I am” apart from sense-consciousness. Nevertheless, with respect to these five clung-to aggregates, “I am” is found in me, but I do not regard (them as) “I am this”.60

He explains that, even though the five lower fetters may have been abandoned by a noble disciple (ariya-sāvaka), ‘with respect to the five aggregates subject to clinging, he has a residual “I am” concept/conceit, an “I am” desire, an “I am” underlying tendency not yet removed’.61

Khemaka likens this lingering sense of ‘I am’ to the scent of a lotus: one can’t say that the scent belongs to any particular part of the flower; rather, it belongs to the flower as a whole.62 However, when the disciple dwells constantly contemplating the growth and decay of the five aggregates, this residual sense of ‘I am’ is eventually uprooted.63 Indeed, at the end of the sutta we are told that Khemaka’s mind was freed from the āsava through non-clinging (amuppādāya).64 Thus, Khemaka’s problem was resolved. But ours now commences.

59 When the term viññāna is used specifically in the sense of viññāna-khandha, I sometimes translate ‘sense-consciousness’: this is in fact the specific definition of viññāna-khandha. Cf. SN 22.56 (at S III 61): katamañca, bhikkhave, viññāna? chaayime, bhikkhave, viññānakāyā, cakkhuviññāna, sotaviññāna, ghānaviññāna, jivhāviññāna, kāyaviññāna, manoviññāna. The same definition is given in SN 12.2 (at S II 4) of viññāna as the third link in the 12-nidāna formula of paṭiccasamuppāda. In other contexts of the paṭiccasamuppāda formula, however, viññāna is described in terms of the rebirth-process, in which case it cannot be active sense-consciousness, since nāmarūpa has not yet developed: cf. DN 15 (at D I 63). On this topic, cf. Wijesekera 1994, §17, pp. 198-200. The term viññāna also has at least two other senses and usages in the suttas: the viññāna of the ‘immaterial meditative states’ (arūpa jhānas), which need not be the viññāna of an Arahant, but which transcends the material (and hence bodily) sense-spheres; and the sense of viññāna anidassana ananta sabbatopabha (DN 11 (at D I 223); MN 49 (at M II 329)), which may be correlated with viññāna in the sense of appatīṭhita viññāna avirūpa anabhisaṅkhacca vimutta (e.g., SN 22.53 (at S III 53)) and: appatīṭhiten ca . . . viññāna . . . parinibbuto (SN 4.23 (at S I 122), SN 22.87 (at S III 124)). (On this topic, cf. Thanissaro 2011, DN 11, fn. 1; MN 49, fn. 9; MN 109, fn. 1. Cf. also fn. 80 below, for references to Harvey 1995.) These various inter-related senses of ‘I am’ may be understood as differing conditioned and unconditioned affections of ‘intentional consciousness’.

60 SN 22.89 (at S III 130): na khvāham, āvuso, rūpam ‘asmī’ti vadāmi; napi ahañatra rūpā ‘asmī’ti vadāmi, na vedāma... na sañña... na sañkhāre... na viññānam ‘asmī’ti vadāmi; napi ahañatra viññāna ‘asmī’ti vadāmi. api ca me, āvuso, pañcaheru upādānakhandhesu ‘asmī’ti adhihegam ‘avyamatasmī’ti na ca samamanipātim.

61 SN 22.89 (at S III 130): yo ca pañcaheru upādānakhandhesu anusahagato asmi’ti mano, asmi’ti chando, asmi’ti amasayo asaṁihatu.

62 SN 22.89 (at S III 130): ‘puppahassa gandho’ti.

63 SN 22.89 (at S III 131): . . . sopi samugghātam gacchati.

64 Along with the minds of sixty other elder monks: SN 22.89 (at S III 132): . . . saññhittāna therānaṁ bhikkhānaṁ amuppādāya āsavehi cittiṁ vimuccimsu, āyasato khemakassa cāti.
Let me imagine that I had the remarkable good fortune to meet Ven. Khemaka once his residual sense of ‘I am’ was finally removed. I would have liked to inquire, very respectfully, about the nature of his consciousness at that time. From the ample and unambiguous evidence of the suttas, I know that there should be no particular technical difficulty in speaking with an Arahant (if we speak the same language): he would be able to see me and hear me; he would understand my questions; and, out of compassion, he might even make an effort to answer them.

I would have liked to say to him: ‘Bhante, you have finally eliminated the residual conceit of ‘I am’ from your mind. But now, I am deeply intrigued by the fact that your senses and intellect continue to function perfectly. I also understand that your body is ailing, and that you are experiencing severe physical pain. These and many other facts demonstrate very clearly to me that you are subjectively and intentionally conscious. I really do believe that you have uprooted the residual concept and conceit of ‘I am’. But it is evident, from the way in which your consciousness is functioning, that when you use the word ‘I’, you are not using it merely as a meaningless token for the sake of not disrupting convention. Even though you know that this word ‘I’ cannot refer to the khandhas or to anything apart from the khandhas, and so cannot refer to any existing entity at all, nevertheless, it seems to me that the word ‘I’ still does have a genuine meaning for you: it refers to the pure subjectivity of your consciousness, your consciousness-of. . . You are clearly conscious-of me, of the meanings of my words, of the fact that I am asking you about the nature of your own present consciousness; just as much as you are conscious-of your bodily pain, and you are conscious-of the fact that your mind is fully and finally liberated. To be conscious-of truth, to be conscious-of bodily pain: in all cases, to be conscious-of necessarily implies to be subjectively and intentionally conscious-of... This strongly suggests to me that there must be a fundamental difference between the sense of ‘I am’, and hence also the sense of ‘self’ (ātā), which you no longer possess, and the meaning of ‘I’ as neither more nor less than the pure subjectivity of intentional consciousness; without which, there could be no consciousness-of whatsoever; not even for an Arahant.’

The common objection that an Arahant or Tathāgata uses the term ‘I’ merely in accordance with the linguistic conventions of the unenlightened is poorly formulated. But consider the following verses from the Arahant Sutta (which are not poorly formulated):

No knots exist for one with conceit abandoned [pahīna-mānassa];
For him all knots of conceit [māna-ganthassa] are consumed.
Though the wise one has transcended the conceived [vīvatta67 maññatāṃ],
He still might say, ‘I speak’ [‘āham vādāmi’ti],

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65 Cf. SN 22.89 (at S III 127). The suttas contain examples of Arahants experiencing severe bodily pain (e.g., if read literally, SN 22.87 (S III 120), SN 35.87 (S IV 55) = MN 144 (M III 263). The Buddha himself, of course, experienced severe bodily pain (cf. SN 1.38 (S I 27), DN 16 (at D II 100); Mil IV.1.8 (Mil 134) cites four cases of injury and illness).
66 Cf., e.g., MN 4 (at M I 23): tassa me evam jānato evam passato kāmāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccittha, bhavāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccittha, avijjāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccittha, avijjāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccittha, avijjāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccittha, avijjāsavāpi cittaṃ vimuccittha. ‘Then, knowing thus, seeing thus, my mind was liberated from the unconscious influence [āsava] of sensual desire, from the unconscious influence of being, and from the unconscious influence of ignorance. When it was liberated, there was the knowledge, “It is liberated”. I knew by direct experience [abbhaññāsina].’
67 vi + ati (emphatic form of ati, ‘beyond, over; through’: cf. Cone 2001, p. 59.1) + vatta (past participle of vattati in the compound ativattati, ‘goes beyond, escapes from’ (cf. Cone 2001, p. 69.1). Thus, Bodhi’s rendering, ‘has transcended the conceived’ for vīvatta maññatāṃ, is, from the TP perspective, an apt translation.
He might say too, ‘They speak to me’ [‘mamañ ṭi vadant ī’].

Skilful, knowing the world’s parlance [loke samañ ṃ],
He uses such terms as mere expressions [vohāra-mattena].  

These verses are spoken in reply to the question whether the Arahant, who is by definition khīnasavo, ‘one with unconscious influences (āsāvās) destroyed’, would still be able to speak and to understand the speech of others; and if so, whether this might be because ‘he has come upon conceit [māṇaṃ nu kho so upagamma]’, which is to say, because he has fallen back upon the conceit/concept ‘I am’ (asmi-māṇa).  

For, to be sure, in the suttas, Arahants are found to say such things as ‘I eat, I sit; my bowl, my robe’, and other such common, conventional talk.  

All that these verses entail is that the Arahant still uses words such as ahaṃ and mama as the ordinary world uses them, although he has ‘transcended’ their worldly sense. But the commentary’s explanation of the answer to this question takes a somewhat different slant:

Having abandoned talk that presupposes acquisition (of a ‘self’), he does not breach convention, but would speak (in terms of) ‘I and mine’. If he said, ‘The aggregates eat, the aggregates sit, the aggregates’ bowl, the aggregates’ robe’, it is a breach of convention; no one would understand.

This interpretation falls back upon the Abhidhamma-based theory of ‘two truths’, which posits two kinds of discourse, the ‘conventionally true’ (sammuti-sacca) and the ‘ultimately true’ (paramattha-sacca). On that view, the conventionally valid locution is ‘I eat’, etc., whereas the ‘ultimately true’ locution is the technical one, ‘The five aggregates eat’, etc.  

Unfortunately, this interpretation completely misses the truly essential point of the problem in question here: for it makes no difference whatsoever whether the Arahant says ‘I eat’ or ‘These aggregates eat’. The truly crucial point is that the Arahant (or, if one prefers, the five aggregates) can indeed still speak. Even in this one act itself the entire phenomenological import of subjective intentionality is immediately demonstrated. And since I am prepared to grant that the concept of ‘Arahantship’ is a phenomenologically valid and possible concept, this would entail that even an Arahant devoid of the conceit/concept ‘I am’ is nevertheless subjectively and intentionally

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68 Bodhi 2000, p. 102. SN 1.25 (at S I 14-15): pahīnāmāṇaṃna sa santi gantāha, | vidhiḥpita māṇaganthasa sabbe, | sa viśvatto maññāhaṃ sumedho, | ahaṃ vadāmāṃpi so vadeyya. | mamañ ṭi vadantāpi so vadeyya. | loke samañ ṃkusalo viditvā, | vohāramattena so vohareyyā ti. ||

69 SN 1.25 (at S I 14).


71 Spk I 51: The passage continues: ‘Therefore, having spoken thus, he expresses (himself) by means of worldly ways of speech.’ āttā-jupaladdhinissitakathāṃ hitvā vohārabhedam ākaroṇo ‘ahaṃ, mamā’ti vadeyya. ‘khandhā bhūjaṇti, khandhā nisīdānti, khandhānāṃ patto, khandhānāṃ cīvaran’ti hi vutte vohārabhedo hoti, na koci jānāti. tasma evam avatvā lokavohārena voharatī. Cf. Bodhi 2000, p. 360, n. 49. Cf. also MN 74 (at M I 500): evam vimuttacitto kho . . . bhikkhu na kencacīvavatī, na kencacīvavatī, yāccha loke vutṭhe tena voharatī, aparāmasan’ti ‘A bhikkhu with mind thus liberated does not agree with anyone, does not dispute with anyone; what is spoken in the world, that he expresses, without holding on (to it).’

72 Cf. Nārada 1975, p. 7, for a classical modern representation of this Abhidhamma view. There may be a certain basis in the suttas for an absolute distinction between a singular and absolute truth, transcending speech and thought, on the one hand, and, on the other, all forms of ‘speech and thought’, even the ‘technical speech and thought’ of the Dhamma itself. (Cf. the simile of the raft: MN 22 at M I 134-135; MN 38 at M I 260-261; cf. also, e.g., Sn 4.12 (Sn 172): ekānhi saccaṃ na dutiyāmaṭti, ‘The truth is one; there is no second.’) But there is arguably no basis in the suttas for a relative distinction between an ‘absolute technical conceptual truth’ (the ‘real truth’ of the reductionist categories and concepts of the Abhidhamma) and ‘worldly, conventional truth’ (which by comparison becomes no ‘truth’ at all).
Another possible objection might be that this purely subjective sense of ‘I’ – as distinct from the ‘I am’ conceit – is somehow merely a natural by-product of the activity of mano, the ‘mental faculty’, sixth of the six sense faculties (indriyas). This might seem plausible, since mano is defined as the ‘refuge’ (paṭisaraṇa) of the five bodily senses: ‘Mano is (their) refuge, mano experiences their field and range.’\(^{73}\) In addition, mano experiences its own field and range of purely ‘mental’ or ‘ideal’ objects (dhāmmas). Mano thus functions as the unifying synthesis of the six sense-consciousnesses constituting viññāna-khandha. Might not the sense of the ‘I’ be a mere by-product of this synthetic function of mano?

There are perhaps several reasons why this hypothesis cannot be sustained, but I need mention only one of these reasons here because, even by itself, it is as fundamentally decisive as it is simple and self-evident: namely, that the synthetic functions of mano would not even be possible unless intentional subjectivity is already presupposed. The functions of mano include, on the one hand, ‘simple’ acts of feeling, perception and conception; and, on the other, more ‘complex’ acts of cognitive synthesis (e.g., judgments such as ‘The proposition ‘All phenomena are impermanent’ is demonstrably true’).\(^{74}\) Both of these types of activities presuppose a mental structure of intentional subjectivity as their unifying principle: that structure cannot be derived from the acts themselves; rather, the acts are only possible if that structure is already in place. Every kind of mental act (or noesis) has a definite structure of intentional subjectivity directed towards its ‘objects’; and, in that sense, a noetic act also constitutes its ‘objects’ through specific kinds of ‘object-meanings’ (noemas). There is a strong correlation, here, with the function of manasikāra,\(^{75}\) which may be

\(^{73}\) SN 48.42 (at S V 218): mano paṭisaraṇaṁ, mano eva nesam gocharaviśayaṁ paścamūbhohi. (So also MN 43 (at M I 295).)

\(^{74}\) Such rational judgments must surely belong to the functions of mano. Although they clearly presuppose an intuitive sense of ‘truth’, they are conceived and expressed linguistically and logically, and can thus be distinguished from purely immediate and immediate recognitions of ‘truth’, which in EB are ascribed to ‘wisdom’ (paññā) and the ‘wisdom-eye’ (paññācakkhu). Thus in MN 43 (at M I 293), it is asked, ‘What can be known by purified mano, released from the five sense faculties?’ (nissatthena… pañcāñi indriyevi pariṣuddhena mano, released kiṁ neyyantī?). The answer is the first three of the four higher meditative states (which the commentaries call arūpa jhānāni, ‘immaterial meditative states’). Mano is implicitly contrasted to the wisdom-eye: ‘A dhamma that can be understood, friend, is (clearly) known by the wisdom-eye. …Wisdom, friend, is for the purpose of direct knowledge, for the purpose of full knowledge, for the purpose of abandoning.’ (neyyantī kho, āvuso, dhammaṁ paññācakkhunā pariṣuddhaṁ pañjātīṁ… paññā kho, āvuso, abhiññāthathā pariññathā paññānathā ti.) I would argue that any ‘intuition of truth’ whatsoever – whether via mano or via paññācakkhunā - is necessarily a mental act presupposing intentional subjectivity, and that no ‘intuition of truth’ (no ‘intuition’ of any kind at all) can occur independently of such a structure of subjectivity. This, then, might also serve as a second argument against the hypothesis that the ‘I’ might be a by-product of manindriya; for, according to EB, ‘intuitions of truth’ can occur at a level of consciousness (e.g., the level of paññācakkhu) that is supposed to be beyond the scope of mano.

\(^{75}\) Literally, manasikaroti means ‘doing or making (karoti < /kṛ) in the mental faculty (manasi), and manasikāra is an abstract neuter noun of action formed from the same root (manasi + kāra < /kṛ). It is often translated as ‘attention’, but I think that it (also) more strongly implies a sense of ‘intending towards’, and even, in some contexts, of ‘intentionally constituting’. Thus, e.g., in the formulaic clause, sabbavimittānaṁ āpajamikāraṁ cetosamādhīṁ upasampajjā viharati (SN 41.7, at S IV 297), I think āpajamikāra is not mere ‘non-attention’, but implies a conscious meditative inhibition, withdrawal, or suspension of intentional functions (i.e., of intending towards ‘objects’, and of intentionally constituting ‘object-meanings’). I do not believe that mere ‘non-attention’ would be sufficient for attaining an ‘objectless’ (‘non-noematic’) concentration of mind, which the suttas identify as subsequent to the ‘sphere of neither perception nor non-perception’ (cf. MN 121, at M III 107-108), and thus second only to the ‘cessation of perception and feeling’. Indeed, this would explain why it is said (in the same passage) of a bhikkhu experiencing animitta cetosamādhī: so evam pajānāti: ‘ayampi kho animitto cetosamādhī abhisankhato abhisāññetayito’. ‘He (clearly) knows thus: ‘This objectless concentration of mind is [sc. intentionally] constituted and volitionally intended.’ These matters are discussed in detail in other texts that I am currently in the process of writing.
directed towards (or away from), and also constitute (or not constitute), its ‘objects’ and ‘object-meanings’ or nimittas.\textsuperscript{76}

At this point, it may be helpful to clarify further the ‘problems’ underlying the sense and usage of the term ‘I’. An example from Wittgenstein may serve as a starting point. Wittgenstein noticed what he called ‘two different cases in the use of the word ‘I’ (or ‘my’), which he called ‘the use as object’ and ‘the use as subject’:\textsuperscript{77}

Examples of the first kind of use are these: ‘My arm is broken’, ‘I have grown six inches’, ‘I have a bump on my forehead’, ‘The wind blows my hair about’. Examples of the second kind are: ‘I see so-and-so’, ‘I hear so-and-so’, ‘I try to lift my arm’, ‘I think it will rain’, ‘I have a toothache’.\textsuperscript{78}

Wittgenstein takes the ‘object sense’ of the word ‘I’ to refer to the body: that particular body that each of us calls ‘my body’, and which other people can also see, hear, and touch, for example. He goes on to say that this ‘object sense’ of ‘I’ is fallible: it is quite conceivable, for example, that I could, under some peculiar circumstance, visually mistake someone else’s arm for my own. In this way, he illustrates a distinction between the ‘object’ and the ‘subject’ sense of ‘I’. For, it seems nonsensical to suppose that I could mistake a feeling of pain in my arm to be someone else’s pain; or for someone to ask me, ‘Are you sure it’s you who feels the pain, and not someone else?’\textsuperscript{79} But what does this distinction really imply?

Even though Wittgenstein says (correctly) that it is conceivable that I could mistake an objectively appearing part of someone else’s body as my own, one must point out that it would be just as nonsensical to doubt that it is I who see that body – whosoever it might be, or even if it happens to be a hallucination – as it would be to doubt that it is I who feel a pain. Wittgenstein’s distinction is useful, but misleading, because it crosses unwittingly between three phenomenologically distinct categories: subjective consciousness-of; subjective or immanent phenomena (e.g., what I actually see, what I actually feel); and intersubjective ‘transcendent’ objects (e.g., my body and the bodies of others, as ‘objects’ in the ‘objective’ world). But at least Wittgenstein was alert to a certain interesting distinction within the ordinary sense and function of

\textsuperscript{76} In the context of EB, the term nimitta is usually translated as ‘sign’, and in some contexts as ‘ground’, ‘reason’ or ‘cause’. Cf., e.g., Nānāmoli and Bodhi 2009; Bodhi 2000; Nānāmoli 1991. Thanissaro translates as ‘impression’ or ‘theme’, depending on context; cf., e.g., Thanissaro 2011, SN 8.4 (S I 188), SN 22.3 (at S III 10). For a useful survey of its range of meaning, cf. Harvey 1986, §V, pp. 31-33. Harvey (p. 33) concludes: ‘\textit{Nimitta} is a delimited object of attention, that may, or should be taken as indicating something beyond itself or the general features of that to which it belongs.’ In my own work, the term nimitta has been correlated with the TP concept of noema (a correlation that requires a fairly detailed explanation and, no doubt, justification, which are provided elsewhere); that is why, for example, I sometimes refer to animitta cetosamādhi as an ‘objectless’ or ‘non-noematic’ concentration of mind.

\textsuperscript{77} Bischof-Köhler points out (1991, p. 253, referring to W. James [1892] 1961, \textit{Psychology: The Briefer Course}, Harper and Row, New York) that James had already written of this distinction in 1892, contrasting the sense of the ‘Me’, in which one experiences oneself as an ‘object’ (of experience), and the sense of the ‘I’, in which one experiences oneself as the ‘subject’ (of experience).

\textsuperscript{78} Wittgenstein 1958, pp. 66-67. This distinction is phenomenologically valid and useful. As we shall see, Husserl effectively makes just the same distinction, but from the perspective of TP, which differs in very important ways from Wittgenstein’s perspective upon and analysis of this distinction.

\textsuperscript{79} Cf. Wittgenstein 1958, p. 67. Wittgenstein thinks of this distinction in terms of the rules of a ‘language-game’. From a TP perspective, however, we must examine the ‘pre-linguistic’ aspects of subjectivity and intentionality, for which Wittgenstein’s ‘language-game’ theory cannot really account. Furthermore, an interesting and phenomenologically important question is raised by the possibility of ‘knowing another’s mind’ (cf., e.g., SN 16.9, at S II 213).
the word ‘I’: sometimes, we use it to refer to a particular body, namely, the one we think of as ‘our own’; and sometimes we use it to refer to our subjective consciousness-of whatever we are conscious-of.

Unlike the physical body, however, we cannot point to our subjective consciousness-of, or make it appear or manifest itself in any other way. In this sense, by definition, it is properly ‘transcendental’: i.e., it is not anything phenomenal, something that could ‘appear’, whether to ourselves or to others. What ‘appears’ is just what ‘manifests’ itself, what we are conscious-of as a ‘phenomenon’ in any of the modes of the ‘six sense spheres’ (saṅg āyataṇa) of consciousness (viññāṇa). On the other hand, we also cannot doubt that we are subjectively conscious-of; so, this ‘transcendental’ consciousness-of is something that we just know, immediately and apodictically, because, in any final analysis, when it comes to our own consciousness-of, what we know is just the fact that we know. This is the one thing about which, in principle, no conscious being could possibly be mistaken. This, in effect, is the result of the epokhē and of what Husserl calls the ‘transcendental reduction’.

Husserl says that the epokhē and reduction lead us back to ‘absolute intentional consciousness’, and to the function of the ‘I’ as the pure subjectivity of that consciousness. He recognizes that this pure subjectivity is phenomenologically distinct from all that it is conscious-of: that includes, of course, the body, but also all sensations, thoughts, and emotions that appear as phenomena or experiences of that consciousness-of. For this reason, he distinguishes between what he calls the ‘empirical I’ and this pure, transcendental subjectivity. The ‘empirical I’ is that ‘objective’ or phenomenal ‘self’ constituted out of the appearances of ‘my own body’, ‘my thoughts’, ‘my feelings’, and so on, which, as a complex psychophysical ‘entity’, belongs within, and is an inextricable part of, the ‘objective’ and intersubjective ‘world’. We can see, then, that Husserl’s concept of the ‘empirical I’ is similar to Wittgenstein’s ‘object sense’ of the ‘I’, but it is much more inclusive: it includes all those phenomena, ‘physical’ or ‘mental’, which are taken to constitute the psychophysical person who lives and acts within, and as part of, the ‘world’. Of course, what Husserl has distinguished in this way is, in fact, the five clung-to aggregates (pāñc-upādāna-kkhandhā), which the ‘ordinary worldling’ (assutavā puthujjana), the person in the ‘natural attitude’, assumes to be their ‘self’ (attā).

Correlatively, Husserl also recognizes that the pure subjectivity of consciousness-of is utterly non-phenomenal: there is nothing about it that could possibly ‘appear’. Therefore, it is not a ‘thing’, nor even remotely like any ‘thing’. It is more like a ‘no-thing’, a ‘nothing’. Indeed, it

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80 As is perhaps well known, in its Greek philosophical origins, the phainomenon is that which is caused to appear or which reveals itself (phainesthai) in the light (phaos); and this means, fundamentally, that which appears in the light of the mind. (Cf., e.g., Heidegger 2001, ¶7, pp. 49-63 (1993, ¶7, pp. 27-39) for a thoughtful account.) The common Indo-European root of these Greek terms is ḫbā (cf., e.g., Hofmann 1994, pp. 464-465, 467), a root which appears also in Sanskrit and Pāli (as both ḫbā and ḫbāśa), with the same meaning: ‘to shine, be bright; shine forth, appear’, etc. (cf. Monier-Williams 1993, pp. 750.3-751.1, 755.3-756.1). This root is evident in EB descriptions of citta, ‘mind’, as pabhassara, ‘brightly shining’ (e.g., pabhassarata idān . . . cītata, AN i.49-52, at AI 10); and, still more importantly, in the descriptions of viññāṇa anidassana, ‘non-manifestive consciousness’, as sabbato pabha, ‘shining or luminous all round (in all directions)’ (D1223; M1129). (For more details on pabhassaracitta, see Harvey 1995, §§10.20-25, pp. 166-170, §§10.31-35, pp. 173-176; on viññāṇa anidassana, cf. ibid., §§12.3ff., pp. 198ff.)

81 The significance of this result should be understood in the sense of Husserl’s TP, rather than in the incomplete and flawed sense of Descartes’ cogito. For Husserl’s lucid and important exposition of why Descartes’ came so close, yet failed to recognize the true (properly phenomenological) meaning and implications of the cogito, see Husserl 1970b, §§17-18, pp. 75-81; Husserl 1954, §§17-18, pp. 76-83.
really is like a kind of ‘emptiness’\(^\text{82}\) — except that it is evidently a consciousness-of, and therefore also a source of mental acts. It is for this reason that Husserl calls it the transcendental or ‘pure I’ (\textit{das reine Ich}). In German orthography, the ordinary first-person pronoun \textit{ich} is clearly distinguishable from the noun-form \textit{Ich}; and Husserl virtually makes a technical term of the noun, \textit{das (reine) Ich}, to name the fact of the pure subjectivity of consciousness-of. But Husserl is aware of a difficulty here, when he writes:

The ‘I’ [\textit{das Ich}] that I [\textit{ich}] attain in the \textit{epokhē} . . . is actually called ‘I’ [,\textit{Ich}’] only by equivocation — though it is an essential equivocation, since when I [\textit{ich}] name it in reflection, I can say nothing other than: it is I [\textit{ich}] who practice the \textit{epokhē}, I who interrogate, as phenomenon, the world. . .\(^\text{83}\)

This ‘essential equivocation’ is in fact an essential \textit{indication} pointing towards what is truly at the basis of the problem of the ‘I’.

On the one hand, pure subjectivity — which Husserl calls, by way of a certain inevitable equivocation, the ‘pure I’, also ‘the experiencing I’\(^\text{84}\) — apart from its nature as consciousness-of, and as a source of acts, ‘is completely empty of essence-components, has no explicable content, is undescribable in and for itself; it is pure ‘I’ and nothing more’.\(^\text{85}\) As pure, subjective consciousness-of, it is phenomenologically quite distinct from all phenomena of which it is conscious, including those constituting the ‘phenomenal person’ through which it ‘lives and experiences’ (\textit{erlebt}).\(^\text{86}\) On the other hand, if it were somehow possible to sever the apparently inseparable unity of this subjective consciousness-of and the phenomena of which it is conscious, that consciousness-of would

\(^{82}\) Cf., e.g., Husserl 1982, §80, p. 191; \textit{ibid.}, §57, pp. 132-133 (where he likens the phenomenological ‘I’ to ‘a transcendent nothing [\textit{einem transzendentalen Nichts}]’); Husserl 1980, §24, p. 110; \textit{ibid.}, §24, p. 111; Husserl 1970b, §43, p. 155; \textit{ibid.}, §55, p. 187.


\(^{84}\) Husserl 1976a, §80, p. 179: ‘das erlebende Ich’.

\(^{85}\) Husserl 1982, §80, p. 191 (translation modified); Husserl 1976a, §80, p. 179: ‘. . . ist es völlig leer an Wesenskomponenten, es hat gar keinen explikabeln Inhalt, es ist an und für sich unbeschreiblich: reines Ich und nichts weiter.’ Note that, in all quotations from English translations of Husserl, wherever the term ‘ego’ occurs in the translation, I have modified it to ‘I’ or ‘the ‘I’’, corresponding to ‘Ich’ and ‘\textit{das Ich}’, wherever the latter occur in Husserl’s original German text. The term ‘ego’, which is of course just the first-person pronoun in Latin and Greek (\textit{egō}), in modern English connotes something ‘objective’, rather than ‘subjective’; it does not really evoke a \textit{first-person} sense, as does the word ‘I’. Moreover, the term ‘ego’ has attracted many connotations (e.g., from popular psychology and psychoanalysis) that are quite irrelevant to TP.

\(^{86}\) The transitive verb \textit{erleben} means ‘to experience’, and is formed by the prefix \textit{er-} (which has no meaning in itself) added to the intransitive verb \textit{leben}, ‘to live’. The connection between \textit{leben} and \textit{erleben} can be expressed in English: as when someone might say, ‘I know exactly what it was like: I lived it!’ Here, ‘lived’, of course, means ‘to experience directly, personally’. The noun \textit{das Erlebnis}, ‘experience’, formed by adding the suffix –\textit{nis} (designating the result of an action) to the verb stem of \textit{erleben}, becomes a technical term for Husserl. He specifically thematises the relationship between ‘pure consciousness’ (\textit{reines Bewußtsein}) and its ‘pure correlates’ (\textit{reinen Bewußtseinsskorrelaten}) as a temporal process. Thus, Kersten (Husserl 1982) has translated \textit{Erlebnis} as ‘mental process’, while Cairns (Husserl 1970a) translates it as ‘subjective process’. Husserl writes: ‘In itself, every mental process is a flux of becoming . . .; it is a continuous flow of retentions and protentions mediated by a flowing phase of originary itself in which there is consciousness of the living now of the mental process in contradistinction to its ‘before’ and ‘after.’ Husserl 1982, §78, p. 179. (‘Jedes Erlebnis ist in sich selbst ein Fluß des Werdens . . .; ein beständiger Fluß von Retentionen und Protentionen vermittelt durch eine selbst fließende Phase der Originarität, in der das lebendige Jetzt des Erlebnisses gegenüber seinem „Vorhin“ und „Nachher“ bewußt wird.’ Husserl 1976a, §78, p. 167.)
lose all possible definition; so, too, correlative, would the phenomena, because a phenomenon is, by definition, what appears to consciousness-of, in the way that it appears. Thus, we would apparently end up with two virtual ‘nothingnesses’.

Even so, there would still be one fundamental difference here. The phenomenon ultimately depends on consciousness-of for its appearance, although this does not mean that consciousness-of creates the phenomenon. A phenomenon is, in effect, an essential aspect of an act of cognition; and that cognition may be of something that ‘transcends’ (‘extends beyond’) any momentary subjective act of consciousness-of: e.g., a ‘physical object’ in the intersubjective ‘physical region’, or a ‘mathematical object’ in the ‘ideal region’. Consciousness-of constitutes the phenomenon precisely because the phenomenon is inseparable from the intentional act cognizing the ‘object’. But the phenomenon is not merely an image ‘representing’ an ‘object’ hidden behind it: rather, it is the direct but intentionally constituted cognition of the ‘object itself’. In fact, it follows from this that the ‘object’ can have no ultimate, hidden, non-phenomenal ‘essence’ of its own: what the ‘object’ is is only ever expressed through the modes of its appearances to consciousness-of.

By contrast, consciousness-of does not depend upon the phenomenon for its own intrinsic property of ‘being conscious’ or ‘being aware’. It ought to be apodictically evident, in reflection, that the phenomena that appear to consciousness-of cannot be the cause of the consciousness-of that cognizes them. On the other hand, one may certainly ask whether a consciousness-of deprived absolutely of all phenomenality would still be any kind of ‘consciousness-of’.

In the Mahānidāna Sutta, the Buddha provides a neat refutation of the notion of ‘self’ (atta) as relative to the experience of ‘feeling’ (vedanā). Three ways of regarding ‘self’ (atta-samanupassanā) are defined; but, for our purposes, we can legitimately reduce these down to two mutually exclusive ideas: (1) feeling is the self (the self is identical with feeling); (2) feeling is not the self (the self is separate from and independent of feeling). The first notion is denied on the basis that all feeling is ‘impermanent, constituted, dependently co-arisen, subject to destruction, decay, fading away, and cessation’.

The conclusion is: ‘Therefore, here, because of this, it is not acceptable to consider: ‘Feeling is my self’.’ The second notion is denied by means of two expressions of the same argument, framed as rhetorical questions: ‘Where feeling altogether is not, could there be, there, (the thought) ‘I am’?’ Of course, the answer is: ‘Certainly not, Venerable Sir.’ And again: ‘If all feeling were to cease completely in every way, without remainder, then with the complete non-being of feeling, because of the cessation of feeling, could there be, there, (the thought) ‘I am this’?’ Again, of course, the answer must be: ‘Certainly not, Venerable Sir.’ These refutations of both (1) and (2) constitute an exhaustive dilemmatic refutation of a permanent, independently existing ‘self’ (atta), given that ‘self’ cannot be identified with feeling, but nor can it be identified with anything other than feeling. The Buddha concludes with the following deeply significant statement:

87 I have argued elsewhere that the expression ‘to constitute intentionally’, can be very closely correlated with concepts such as saṁkhāroti and abhisaṁkhāroti in EB, especially when these are comprehended from a TP perspective.
89 DN 15 (at D II 67): tasmātha . . . etena petam nakkhamatī ‘vedanā me atta’ ti samanupassītum.
90 DN 15 (at D II 67): ‘yattha pana . . . sabbaso vedayitaṁ natihi api nu kho, tattha ‘asmītii siyāti?’ ‘no hetam, bhante’.
91 DN 15 (at D II 67): ‘vedanā ca hi . . . sabbena sabbam sabbathā sabbam aparisesā nirujihyeyum, sabbaso vedanāya asati vedanānirōdhā api nu kho tattha ‘ayamahasmītii siyāti?’ ‘no hetam, bhante’.
When a bhikkhu does not consider feeling as self, and does not consider self as without experience of feeling, and does not consider ‘My self feels; for my self is subject to feeling’ – then, being without such considerations he does not cling to anything in the world. Not clinging, he is not agitated. Not being agitated, he personally attains Nibbāna.  

5. The ‘I’ (ahaṃ) in meditation: a prolegomenon

The removal of the concept/conceit ‘I am’: that, verily, is the ultimate bliss!

In the Vivekaja Sutta, Sāriputta says to Ānanda: ‘I [ahaṃ] entered and dwelt in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by thought and examination, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion. Yet, friend, it did not occur to me, “I am attaining the first jhāna”, or “I have attained the first jhāna”, or “I have emerged from the first jhāna”. Ānanda thinks: ‘It must be because I-making, mine-making, and the underlying tendency to conceit have been thoroughly uprooted in the Venerable Sāriputta for a long time that such thoughts did not occur to him.’

Once we recognize that the phenomenological sense of the term ‘I’ can, and must, be radically distinguished from constituted ontological senses such as ‘asmī’ti, ‘ayam-aham-asmī’ti, and attā; and once we thereby also recognize that the phenomenological meaning of the term ‘I’ is grounded in the pre-linguistic intentionality of consciousness, and therefore cannot be dismissed as a mere linguistic convention; then, it becomes decidedly unproblematic to focus upon an inquiry into the question of the sense of the ‘I’ (ahaṃ) in meditation. For, what we are now focusing upon is the question of the intrinsic subjectivity of consciousness-of, an apodictic fact that is entirely unrelated to asmi-māna-anusaya, ahaṅkāra and mamāṅkāra, and thus does not in any sense conflict with the EB axiom of anattā. These are recognitions that are most effectively accomplished in the transcendental attitude of the epokhē or pahāna; and, in particular, by means of the methods of reflection and meditation. It is from within this perspective, and with the aid of these methods, that an inquiry into the ‘I’ of meditation really must proceed.

92 Bodhi 2010, p. 70. DN 15 (at D II 68): yato kho . . . bhikkhu neva vedanāṃ attānaṃ samanupassati, nophi appaṭṭasamvedanā attānaṃ samanupassati, nophi ‘attā me vedyati, vedanāḥhammo hi me attā’ti samanupassati. so evaṃ na samanupassanto na ca kīcī loke upādāyati, amupādyāṃ na paritassati, aparitassam paccattaṅgheva parinibbāyati. . .

93 Ud 2.1 (Ud 10): asminānassa yo vinayo, etam ve paramanam sukhanti. This statement is uttered by the Buddha after his emergence from what seems to have been nirodha samāpatti. Cf. also AN 9.34 (A IV 414): ‘This Nibbāna is blissful, friends. This Nibbāna is blissful, friends. . . . Just that, here, friends, is blissful: where the felt is not (where nothing is felt)!’ sukhamidam, āvuso, nibbānam. sukhamidam, āvuso, nibbānam . . . etadeva khetvātha, āvuso, sukham yadettha naththi vedayitam. Note that such ‘bliss’ is supposed to be ‘known’ or ‘experienced’ as a result of the erasure of the ‘I am’ conceit/concept and of the cessation of ‘the felt’ (vedayita). Again, I must reiterate the irreducible principle that, where there is any ‘knowing’ or ‘experiencing’ of any kind at all, there is also (necessarily) ‘subjective consciousness-of’ (these being two aspects of one and the same fact). On the other hand, however, the terms ‘subjectivity’ and ‘subject’ definitely do not have the same meaning and implications. (This point is further clarified in the concluding Section §6 of the present paper.)


‘tathā hi panāyasamato sāriputtassa dīgharattam ahaṅkāramamaṅkāramānānasaya susamākhatā. tasmañā āyasmato sāriputtassa na evaṃ hoti . . . ti.
The *epokhē* or *pahāna*, combined with reflective or meditative reduction, reveal (1) the apodicticity of awareness, (2) of intentionality, (3) of subjectivity, and (4) the intuitional nature of ‘truth’; they disclose (5) the true origin and meaning of the sense of ‘being’; (6) they awaken the phenomenological recognition that the ‘pure ‘I’’ and the pure ‘Now’ are really but two aspects of, or two ways of focusing upon, one and the same structure, thus opening up the problem of the relation between the ‘I’ and temporality in a radically potent and profound way; and they also disclose (7) the basis of the possibility of ‘volition’ and ‘agency’. Within the limited space of this present paper, only the first three of these themes have been touched upon, all too briefly; the fourth has been referred to in passing; the fifth, sixth, and seventh themes are to be discussed in other writings. However, a brief word, here, concerning the seventh theme might be useful for the present discussion.

Although I have not, so far, explicitly mentioned the question of agency, it is in a sense already implicit within the basic concept of the ‘mental act’; and in fact explicit in the capacity of intentional subjectivity to turn its intentional attention toward or away from its ‘objects’, and even to suspend its intentional attention from such ‘objects’.95 ‘Agency’, too, is a phenomenological property of intentional consciousness; and just as subjectivity does not entail ‘a subject’, so, too, agency does not entail ‘an agent’. Rather, agency is effective, just as subjectivity is effective, precisely because the intentionality of consciousness-of imbues the *khandhas* with experienced meaning, and thus makes their dependent co-arising possible. If the *khandhas* lacked the unifying phenomenological ‘I’-sense, they *could not intend and act*; hence *there could be no kamma*; and therefore no *paticcasamuppāda* and no *punnabhava*. To put it in quite another way, the *khandhas* are *not* merely a mindless, robotic, deterministic componentry; if they were, enlightenment and liberation would be logically impossible, not to mention literally ‘meaningless’. Rather, it is the constitutive experience of ‘meaning’ – which is another way of describing intentional consciousness – that makes craving (*taṇhā*) and clinging (*upādāna*) possible, as it also makes possible dispassion (*virāga*) and abandoning (*pahāna*). It also makes the fundamental contrast between binding ignorance (*avijjā*) and liberating knowledge (*ñāṇa*) meaningful and consequential.

We should keep in mind that the doctrine of agency or action (*kiriya, kriyā*) is fundamental to EB.96 One of five themes set down for frequent reflection by men and women, lay and ordained, is the following:

I am the owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related to my actions, taking refuge in my actions. Whatever action I perform, good or evil, of that I shall be the inheritor.97

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95 Cf., e.g., MN 121 (at M III 108): ‘And beyond that, again, Ānanda, a bhikkhu, by not intending in *manas* to the perception of the sphere of no-thing-ness, by not intending in *manas* to the perception of the sphere of neither perception nor non perception, intends in *manas* to the oneness (or essence) [ekattaṃ] dependent on the ‘objectless’ (or ‘non-noematic’) concentration of mind.’ pūna caparam, ānanda, bhikkhu amanasikarivā ākīkhaṇāhāyatanasaññā, amanasikarivā n eva saññāsahāhāhāyatanasaññā, amitasamādhiṁ pacchimati saññānaṁ karoti ekattaṁ.

96 Cf., e.g., AN 2.35 (A I 62), where the Buddha says: ‘I am one who teaches action (what ought to be done), brahmin, and non-action (what ought not to be done).’ *kiriyavādī cāhaṁ, brāhmaṇa, akiriyavādī cāti*.’ (Cf. also Vin III 2, D I 15, D I 132, M I 483, M II 167.)

97 AN 5.57 (at A III 72): ‘kammassakomhi, kammadāyādo kammayonī kammabandhu kammapaṭisaraṇo. yam kammāṁ karissāmi, kalīyanaṁ vā pāpakāṁ vā, tassa dāyādo bhavissāmi.’ Cf. also AN 10.216 (A V 288); MN 135 (at M III 203).
The agency of the ‘I’ is fundamental to Dhamma practice and to the path to liberation. It begins with self-reflection upon and self-disciplining of one’s own mind: ‘A monk himself should reflect upon himself thus. . .’ 98 ‘Constantly one’s own mind should be reflected upon. . .’ 99 For an especially unruly mind in meditation, the following example is given: ‘He beats down, constrains and crushes mind with mind.’ 100 In brief: ‘A bhikkhu wields mastery over his mind, he does not let the mind wield mastery over him.’ 101

These descriptions are all in the third person, but one need only transpose them into one’s own subjective practice in order to confirm their first-personal phenomenological sense. That sense is quite explicit in other examples, which are expressed first-personally: e.g., it is said that one who, through the arising of vision (cakkhupāda), abandons desire and lust for the pañc-upādānakkhanda, might think: ‘For a long time, alas, I have been deceived, cheated and seduced by this mind [citta].’ 102 It should hopefully be clear by now why such a use of the term ‘I’ (ahaṁ) is phenomenologically meaningful and important, why it cannot be ‘reduced’ to a meaningless linguistic marker or to a mere congregation of atomic components, and why it is doctrinally quite unproblematic because it does not contradict the anattā axiom. To the contrary, the sense of ‘I’ is inseparable from the acts of insight and volition without which the path to liberation could not be practised. As we have seen, 103 ‘abandoning’ (pahāna) is itself a foundational act of the path; and this very act of abandoning is itself an act of decision and will motivated by understanding. When the Buddha admonishes the abandoning of the five aggregates because these are ‘not yours’, the question ‘Who abandons the five aggregates?’ would be ill-formed and ultimately meaningless; 104 but the question ‘How can the aggregates be abandoned?’ would be quite meaningful, and may be understood, and practised, precisely through the recognition that neither the subjectivity nor the agency of intentional consciousness, nor intentional consciousness itself, constitute a ‘self’. Thus, ‘abandoning the All’ is no paradox at all.

The Buddha himself, of course, uses the term aham to refer to his subjective ‘consciousness-of’. That he is indeed subjectively conscious and that his experience is intentionally constituted is necessarily demonstrated every time he hears and understands others who address him and every time he addresses others. It is necessarily evident every time he picks up his outer robe and his alms-bowl and goes to the village on his alms-round; 105 or when he surveys the saṅgha

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98 E.g., MN 15 (at M I 98): bhikkhunā attanāva attānam evam paccavekkhitabbaṃ. . . The syntax of the Pāli could be rendered more literally: ‘by a monk himself the self should be reflected upon thus. . .’, which of course does not imply that the monk has a ‘self’ (attā), but that he reflects upon ‘his own mind and body’.
99 SN 22.100 (at S III 151): abhikkhaṇṇaṃ sakāṃ cittaṃ paccavekkhitabbaṃ. . .
100 Nāṇamoli and Bodhi 2009, §7, p. 213. M 20 (at M i.121): . . . cetasā cittaṃ abhinigghanatho abhinippīlayato abhissatāpayato. . .
102 MN 75 (at M I 511): ‘dīghatattāṃ vata . . . aham iminā cittena nikato vañcito paluddho . . .’
103 Cf. section 2.1 above.
104 Cf. SN 12.35 (at S II 60): ‘A certain monk said this to the Blessed One: “. . . For whom is there this aging and death?” “Not a valid question”, the blessed one replied.’ ānātarā baṁkhe bhagavaṇṇaṃ etadavoca: ‘. . . kassa ca panidam jārāmarāṇaṃ? ’ no kallo paṁho li bhagava avoca. Similarly, SN 12.12 (at S II 13): ‘Who, then, Venerable Sir, feeds on consciousness-food?’ “Not a valid question”, the Blessed One replied.’ ko nu kho, bhante, viṁcānāhaṁ āhārati li? ’no kallo paṁho li bhagava avoca.
105 E.g., MN 18 (at M I 109): ahaṁ bhagavaṇṇaṃ pubbaṇṇhasamāyaṃ nivāsetvā pattaevāramādāya kapila-vatthuṃ pindāya pāvīsī.
silently meditating and is pleased with the progress of the monks. But perhaps the most striking example is the Buddha’s first-person description of his attainment of the three knowledges (tissö vijjä) on the night of his enlightenment and liberation. Attaining the first knowledge, he says: ‘I remembered my various previous abodes [i.e., lives]...’ This knowledge raises the question, from the first-personal perspective, of the relation between the ‘I’ and the temporal continuity of subjective experience, both within and between different lifetimes. Attaining the second knowledge, he says: ‘With the divine eye, which is pure and transcends the human, I saw beings passing away and reappearing... and I understood that beings proceed [sc. after death] according to their actions.’

This knowledge again raises the previous question, but from a third-personal perspective, and imbued with the recognition of the constitutive power and ethical value of subjective volitional intent and action. Finally, by attaining the third and ultimate knowledge, he automatically attained liberation: ‘I recognised directly, just as it actually is: ‘These are the unconscious influences [āsavā]... ‘This is the arising of the unconscious influences’... ‘This is the cessation of the unconscious influences’... ‘This is the path leading to the cessation of the unconscious influences’. Then, knowing thus, seeing thus, my mind was liberated [sc. from the ‘unconscious influences’]...’

From this moment on, Gotama was enlightened and liberated; with the extinction of the āsavas, the sense of ‘asmī’ also forever vanished. It is important to recognise that ‘liberation’, here, is not merely an external ‘result’ of the ‘third knowledge’, but is ultimately identical with it: the direct recognition and understanding of the ‘unconscious influences’ is itself the liberation from them. This liberation itself is also an act of knowledge: ‘When liberated, there was the knowledge: ‘Liberated.’ Here, then, in the Buddha’s description of the crucial act of ‘knowing’ that is the essential final goal of EB, we cannot but recognise the evident irreducibility of intentional subjectivity. Where there is ‘knowledge’ there is certainly an ‘act of knowing’: there is certainly a subjective consciousness-of, even though there is no ‘self’, no ‘subject’, no sense of ‘I am’ or ‘I am this’.

106 E.g., MN 118 (at M II 79): atha kho bhagavā tuṇhībhūtāṁ tuṇhībhūtāṁ bhikkhusaṅgham amūvilo ketvā bhikkhū āmantesi: ‘āraddhósomi, bhikkhave, imāya paṭipadāya; āraddhacittosmi, bhikkhave, imāya paṭipadāya...’

107 MN 4 (at M I 22-23).

108 MN 4 (at M I 21-22): so kho ahaṁ... pāṭhamam jhānam upasampajja vihāsīṁ... catuttham jhānam upasampajja vihāsīṁ... so evaṁ samāhi te citte parisuddhe pariyodāte... pubbenivāsānussatiṇāya cittaṁ abhinimminēsiṁ. so anekavihītaṁ pubbenivāsaṁ anussarāmi. (I have begun this elliptical quotation of the Pāli text with the first words of the Buddha’s extended report, where the pronoun ahaṁ occurs.)

109 MN 4 (at M I 22): so dibbena cakkhuṁ visuddhena atikkantamānasakena satte passāmi cavamāne upapajjamāne hīne paṁhe suvaṁne dubbamme sugate duggate yathākammupāgā satte pajānāmi...

110 MN 4 (at M I 23): ‘ime āsavā ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ, ‘ayam āsavasamudayo ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ, ‘ayam āsavanirodho ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ, ‘ayam āsavanirodhagāminī paṭipadā ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ. tassa me evaṁ jānato evaṁ passato... cittaṁ vimuccitthā...

111 The formula expressing the direct recognition of the āsavas is of course identical with the formula expressing the direct recognition of the ‘Four Noble Truths’ (but cf. Harvey 2009); thus MN 4 (at M I 23): so ‘idaṁ dukkhan ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ, ‘ayam dukkhasamudayo ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ, ‘ayam dukkhirodho ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ, ‘ayam dukkhirodhagāminī paṭipadā ‘ti yathābhūtāṁ abbhaññāsīṁ.

112 MN 4 (at M I 23): vimuttasmiṁ vimuttamiti ṇāṇaṁ aho. (Cf. also fn. 66 above.)
6. Conclusion: Not ‘thing’, but ‘quality’; not ‘the pure ‘I’’, but just pure ‘I’-ness

My point of conclusion, then, will be to propose a decisive terminological shift. Throughout this discussion, I have never made philosophical use of the term ‘subject’, but only of the term ‘subjectivity’. The distinction between these two terms is perhaps self-explanatory, precisely because their two senses (especially in the present context) are so radically different. Although they are both nouns, they belong to fundamentally different categories: the former readily suggests the notion of an ‘independently-existing individual being’, a kind of ‘thing’ or ‘entity’, and so can readily tend towards the concept of attā. The latter, however, can only really mean a property or quality of consciousness, and so can be readily dissociated, conceptually, from any notion of a ‘subject’ as an ‘independently-existing individual being’. ‘Subjectivity’ can belong to ‘consciousness-of’ without having to belong to ‘a subject’, as such; in fact, ‘subjectivity’ is virtually synonymous with the very sense of ‘consciousness-of’. What has already been discussed so far should hopefully make this point evident.

Perhaps it is also already clear that Husserl’s use of the noun-term ‘I’ (Ich), i.e., ‘the pure ‘I’’ (das reine Ich), ‘the transcendental ‘I’’ (das transzendentale Ich), is problematic. If one understands what Husserl is referring to as the ‘residuum’ of the epoikē and of the transcendental reduction, then one also understands the reason why Husserl says, quite rightly, that this use of the term ‘I’ is really ‘an essential equivocation’.113 But the equivocation can easily be avoided. Just as the word ‘subjectivity’ arguably indicates the actual nature of ‘consciousness-of’, whereas the word ‘subject’ obscures and even deforms it, so too, a term such as ‘I’-ness’, which would name a quality or property of consciousness, would be preferable to the term ‘the ‘I’’, which can easily be misunderstood and reified, once again, into the notion of an ‘independent entity’. In effect, I am suggesting that ‘I’-ness is ultimately a synonym for ‘subjectivity’;114 and that this is, after all, the necessary TP meaning of Husserl’s term, ‘the pure ‘I’’. Looking at the matter in this way perhaps helps to clarify why that which Husserl called ‘the pure ‘I’ was necessarily a kind of ‘emptiness’. After all, he himself recognised that what he called ‘the ‘I’ was no kind of ‘positive entity’.115 If we see that ‘the ‘I’ is in fact just the ‘I’-ness’ – the pure subjectivity – of consciousness-of, then its ‘emptiness’ is not surprising, but quite natural. It is an apodictically knowable property of an apodictically knowable transcendental: namely, the consciousness-of-consciousness-of.

The first-personal pronoun, ‘I’, ‘aham’, is thus not an empty, non-referring linguistic marker used merely according to worldly convention; but nor does it refer to some permanent, independently-existing entity. This term has not only a ‘use’, but a genuine ‘meaning’: the intrinsic

113 Cf. fn. 83, and its main text, above.
114 However, the term ‘I’-ness expresses something that the term ‘subjectivity’ may not express so clearly or vividly; for, the latter term is somewhat conceptual and theoretical, whereas the former term evokes the same property of consciousness in a more directly experiential (‘first-personal’) sense; a more robustly phenomenological sense.
115 Cf., e.g., Husserl 1980, §24, p. 111: ‘Everything which ‘appears’, everything which, in whatever way, presents and manifests itself can also not be; I can be deceived by these things. The ‘I’, however, does not appear, does not present itself merely from a side, does not manifest itself merely according to discrete determinations, aspects, and moments. . . As pure ‘I’ it does not harbor any hidden inner richness; it is absolutely simple and it lies there absolutely clear.’ (‘Alles „Erscheinende“, alles irgendwie sich Darstellende, Bekundende kann auch nicht sein, und ich kann mich darüber täuschen. Das Ich aber erscheint nicht, stellt sich nicht bloß einseitig dar, bekundet sich nicht bloß nach einzelnen Bestimmtheiten, Seiten, Momenten. . . Als reines Ich birgt es keine verborgenen inneren Reichtümer, es ist absolut einfach, liegt absolut zutage. . .’ (Husserl 1952a, §24, pp. 104-105.)) Cf. also fn. 82 above for further references.
and irreducible pure subjectivity – the “I’-ness’ – of intentional consciousness. If there were no intentional consciousness, with its inherent property of pure subjectivity, not only would the pronoun ‘I’, ‘aham’, have no meaning: it could not exist. Yet, it does exist, and the Buddha had no qualms about using it in the same breath with which he preached the principle of anattā, because he understood, much more deeply than we, its true meaning and nature. Indeed, without that meaning, there would be no ‘path’ (magga) and no ‘escape’ (nissarana). If we confuse and conflate the root error of ‘aham-asmi’ti with the true but hidden meaning of ‘aham’ – namely, the intrinsic “I’-ness’ of consciousness-of – then I believe that we lose sight of the genuine possibility of the path and the gateway of escape.

By you the effort must be made. The Tathāgatas are (but) teachers.117

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116 MN 7 (at M I 39): ‘there is an escape beyond this whole realm of perception.’ atti imassa saññagatassa uttariṁ nissaranam.

117 Dhp 20, §276a (at Dhp 40): tumhehi kiccamātappam akkhātāro tathāgata.
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