

# The Sixth Sense

by William Waldron

We are used to thinking of ourselves as autonomous agents experiencing an objective world that is out there, separate from us in here. This is as natural to us as breathing. Unfortunately such a view of the self inevitably brings with it a great deal of suffering. The Buddha has shown us how to overcome this suffering by teaching us how to see our experience of self more clearly. Following his guidelines, we can learn to see how we construct a sense of self from the raw material of experience. We can see how the objects of experience arise—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touches and thoughts; how the categories of self and other arise, how these elicit even more thoughts; until, finally, anxiety about self and suffering arises.

All this shows how self is a relational notion. Rather than being an ontologically real “I” that underlies our various experiences, what we call “self” is a result of experience. Specifically, our sense of self arises in relation to mind, which Buddhists treat as a sixth sense, parallel with sight, hearing, and so on. Buddhist modes of analysis, couched in terms of the dependent arising of awareness, show how this sense of self occurs in the process of experience itself. This analysis of experience as dependent on sensory and mental awareness is also consistent with the basic approach of modern cognitive science. Both approaches help us to see how the sense of “I” is something added on to experience rather than underlying it.

In Buddhist analysis this sense of self occurs in relation to mental consciousness, *mano-viññāna* (Sanskrit: *viññāna*), one of six forms of cognitive awareness. Each of the first five forms of sensory cognitive awareness arises in response to something impinging upon its respective sense faculty (including the sense organ). As such, it is always disjunctive, that is, it only occurs when there has been a distinct change in its cognitive field. Moreover, it is the internal structure of the faculty itself that determines what is capable of impinging upon it; what is visible depends on

the eye faculty. Internal structure and external stimuli in this sense are strictly correlative, and together they co-determine the form (*ākāra*) of any cognitive object. Mental cognitive awareness is described in exactly the same way: it too only arises with certain causes and conditions.

Unlike sensory forms of cognitive awareness, however, mental cognitive awareness arises with two types of stimuli. The first is a previous moment of sensory cognitive awareness. For example, in one moment a visual stimulus impinges on the visual sense faculty and a form of visual cognitive awareness arises. That is not yet knowing, just a simple seeing. But in the very next moment, that first moment of visual cognitive awareness itself becomes the object of awareness by impinging upon the mental faculty so that a moment of mental cognitive awareness arises. We are now aware that a visual cognitive awareness has arisen. This relationship is described in a short passage from the teachings of the Buddha:

*Friend, these five faculties each have a separate field, a separate domain, and do not experience each other's fields and domains, that is, the eye faculty, the ear faculty, the nose faculty, the tongue faculty and the body faculty. Now, these five faculties, each experiencing a separate field, a separate domain, not experiencing each other's field and domain, have mind as their result, and mind experiences their fields and domains.*  
(M I 295; Ñānamoli 1995, p. 391)

To the untrained mind this is a simple, one-step process—we see such-and-such object. But the analysis in dependent arising sees this as having two distinct steps, in which only the second is the kind of self-awareness we usually mean by consciousness: “I’m aware I see a cup.”

A purely sensory cognitive awareness, however, is not very informative, and very difficult to actually experience without mental cognitive awareness. But it is very important because mental cognitive awareness is where our troubles begin.

The second type of stimulus for the arising of mental cognitive awareness is ideas or thoughts, treated as the cognitive objects of mental cognitive awareness. In the formula of dependent arising: “Mental cognitive awareness arises in dependence on mind and mental phenomena.”

### The sixth sense

Buddhists treat mind like a sense faculty, the sixth sense, if you will. Nowadays we would say mind is in the brain. In traditional Theravadin teachings, though, it's in a living heart. Indeed, throughout Asia people typically consider mind (*manas* or *citta*) to be in the heart.

As mentioned, a moment of mental cognitive awareness has the same characteristics as sensory cognitive awareness: It arises in dependence on certain conditions. First, there has to be a change in the cognitive field—in this case, the mental field—in relation to the mental faculty. Similarly, the cognitive structure of the mental faculty also determines what is capable of impinging upon it. For mental cognitive awareness, these structures involve what we could call implicit categorization.

For example, think about a perfectly camouflaged bug. On the tree it is invisible to its predators—that's what it means to be perfectly camouflaged. Only its movement—its change in relation to the eye faculty—is a condition for the arising of visual cognitive awareness. But it must also fall within the visual range of that eye faculty; otherwise it would be invisible. So the appearance the bug takes for us also depends on the structure of our eyes.

Similarly, there must be some change in the field of mind, such as a thought or idea, that is capable of arising in relation to the mental faculty—and this depends upon its particular cognitive structure. Our mental faculty is structured by numerous categories that divide the world up into this and that. In the same way that the structure of our eyes determines the forms we can see, the structure of our categories determines the thoughts and ideas we can conceive. They function, in other words, as the internal conditions for moments of mental cognitive awareness to arise. Without this categorizing, these distinctions in terms of this and that,

we are not going to have any thoughts, and thus no moments of mental cognitive awareness.

If we think about this in terms of our sense faculties, it is more obvious. Sense faculties only respond to certain stimuli, not to others. But it is the same with thoughts or ideas, indeed all mental phenomena, which is how we are translating *dhamma* (Sanskrit: *dharmā*). In this context, *dharmā* doesn't mean the Buddha Dharma, the teachings of the Buddha, but all phenomena insofar as they are discernable aspects of our experience. The presence of discrete phenomena in the “field of mind” is a necessary condition for any moment of mental cognitive awareness to arise—and only certain phenomena arise in relation to our mental faculty. In a blizzard, for example, in white-out conditions, there are no distinctions visible to, or impinging upon, our particular kinds of eyes, so we cannot see anything at all. Similarly, without phenomena correlative to our implicit categorical distinctions, we cannot think anything at all.

The forms that mental cognitive awareness takes are thus strongly determined by our thought processes, such as reflection and thinking (*vitakka* and *vicāra*), which are typically considered functions of speech. The stimuli that impinge upon our mental faculty and thereby give rise to moment of mental cognitive awareness—that is, ideas or dhammas—have to be matched to speech, to language. These categories determine our experience because they reflect how our minds are structured, and that structure exists because we are linguistic creatures. We parse the world up in certain specific ways that reflect the categories of nouns, actions, selves, etcetera, in everyday speech.

### Conditions for the arising of our ‘world’

The above analysis challenges our usual assumptions about the relationship between subjects and objects, between our “mind” and our “thoughts.” Dividing the world up into categories is not something the mind actively does; in the syntax of dependent arising we would not say: “The mind divides the world up.” That expression would encourage us to think of mind or consciousness as an entity or agent which actively does something. Rather, mind and

## The problem is that the categorization most important to us is “I” as separate from “you.”

thought arise together and co-determine the range of our possible experience.

In this analysis, the implicit categorizations mentioned above are essential limiting conditions for the kind of experiences we can normally have, as cognitive scientists, Lakoff and Johnson (*Philosophy in the Flesh*; 1999, 18f) point out:

*Categorization is a consequence of the way that we are embodied.... we categorize as we do because we have the brains and bodies we have and because we interact in the world the way that we do... Categorization is thus not a purely intellectual matter, occurring after the fact of experience. Rather, the formation and use of categories is the stuff of experience.*

To reiterate, a thought or concept is not a simple object of thinking, existing independently of our cognitive structures. The implicit categorizations that allow specific thoughts to arise are necessary conditions for their arising. In effect, these categories draw lines around our possible cognitive worlds, just like our sensory faculties circumscribe other aspects of our “world.” This is clearly stated by the Buddha:

*In this fathom-long body, with its perception and thoughts, I proclaim the world to be, likewise the origin of the world and the destruction of the world, likewise the method leading to the destruction of the world. (A II 48)*

Our awareness itself—inseparable from its field and faculty—simply is our experienced world. As Lakoff and Johnson would emphasize, our implicit categorizations lay at the heart of this, as the very “stuff of experience.” These categorizing “formations” are wired into the structure of our sensory and cognitive faculties. In Buddhist analysis, this role is played by the *sankhāras*, one of the five aggregates in the Buddhist analysis of human beings. *Sankhāra* (Sanskrit: *samskāra*), as you may know, is one of the most difficult Pali words to translate. In the etymology of the term, *san* means “together,” while *khāra* is from the verbal root, *kr*, “to make or do” (the same root as karma). The term thus means a “construction” or “complex.” It is often translated as “karmic formations,” due to its close connection with intention and hence karma, but in this context *sankhāras* function more as conditions for the arising of a moment of awareness.

Remember, categorization is not a product of awareness, but a condition for the arising of awareness. This provides a more precise way of describing how language conditions the way that we experience the world. For language is also neurologically embedded; there is no language that exists in some purely mental sphere outside our physiological conditioning. We couldn’t use it, speak it, or comprehend it if were. That’s why thought processes are associated with the *sankhāras* of speech, *vaci sankhāra*. There really is no difference between categories and language.

When we learn other languages, for example, it becomes automatic to see things in terms of the categories we have learned. Many of the categories that you operate with in your professional lives are now, after many years, just automatic. But before you went to school to learn all those categories, there was a process of very conscious learning.

### I am a category

This becomes a problem, of course, because the implicit categorization that is most important for all of us is me and you—“I” as separate from “you.” This happens automatically and more or less unconsciously. One way we unconsciously experience a sense of self is called proprioception, the sense of ourselves in relation to our physical environment. You do not fall out of your chair right now; you have a sense of where you are, automatically, all the time. But sometimes when you are in a parking lot and the car next to you starts to move, you don’t know at once which car is moving. Suddenly we become aware of this implicit categorization of self-as-opposed-to-the-environment which is always operating. But we do not notice it most of the time.

Over time, using language embeds certain categorizations into our neurological structures so that they eventually become conditions for experiencing the world in terms of this, that or the other thing. When I hold this cup up, everybody sees it as a cup, and everybody sees its green shape—this is automatic, this process of visual cognitive awareness, because we’ve had the experience of seeing cups before, and we are able to discern shapes, which is also something we have learned. Newborns do not have the neurological wiring for this. They have not learned it yet. We also know this is a cup for drinking tea, because we are acculturated beings who know what cups are,

and the category “cup” is part of our social, cultural and linguistic experience.

Analyzing experience this way de-centers the notion of self as somehow the center and foundation of experience; we learn how to change the syntax from “I see a cup,” or “I think a thought,” which assumes the indispensable agency of “I,” to “a visual awareness of an object called a cup or a mental object called a thought, arises in dependence on such and such conditions.”

### Learning to “I”

Using the word “I” is something that children learn. When they are very young, about two years old, they do not say, “I want cookie.” They will use their proper names, because that’s what they are called by everyone else: “Anna want cookie.” Referring to oneself reflexively as “I” is a learned through further socialization; actually it is a very complex cognitive operation. It shows one’s ability to objectify oneself in the eyes of others. You know that you’re not just Anna, you are “I” in relation to other people. If children do not learn how to refer to themselves as “I” by the time they are four or five, they are sent to the doctor.

Only a few animals seem to have this ability: dolphins, gorillas, elephants. They can recognize a new spot on their foreheads when they first see it in a mirror. This shows that they have a kind of awareness of themselves as a separate object. Most animals cannot recognize themselves in the mirror like this. But we take it for granted.

### Self as proliferation

But this ability to objectify ourselves comes at a great cost, as we see in this poignant passage from the Pali canon:

*And how, monks, is there agitation through clinging? Here, monks, the uninstructed worldling... regards bodily form [feeling, perception, volition, consciousness] as self, or self as possessing bodily form [etc.], or bodily form [etc.] as in self, or self as in bodily form [etc.]. That bodily form [etc.] of his changes and alters. With the change and alteration of bodily form [etc.], his consciousness becomes preoccupied with the change of bodily form [etc.]. Agitation*

*and a constellation of mental states born of preoccupation with the change of bodily form remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is obsessed, he is frightened, distressed and anxious, and through clinging he becomes agitated. (S 22:27)*

And it does not end here. While one result of objectifying our “self” is this constant concern with change, another is the constant chain of self-referential thoughts running uncontrollably through our minds. Here is the Buddha again:

*Depending upon eye and forms, eye consciousness arises. The meeting of the three is contact. With contact as condition, there is feeling; what one feels, that one apperceives; what one apperceives, that one thinks about; with what one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, apperception and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a person with respect to past, future or present forms cognizable through the eye, sounds cognizable through the ear ... mind objects cognizable through the mind. (M 18)*

In other words, based on what one has mentally proliferated as the source, further thoughts, further perceptions, occur, in relation to past, present and future experience. Have you had this experience while meditating? I know I have.

So, dependent upon such-and-such conditions, sensation arises, perception arises. In response to perception, thoughts arise, and those thoughts then stimulate further run-away thoughts. This is the great term, *papañca* (Sanskrit: *prapañca*), conceptual proliferation.

And what gives rise to yet further conceptual proliferation? What are we most obsessed about? Ourselves, of course! This is a no-brainer for my college students. This tendency to construct a sense of “I am” is the root of the chain of proliferation. So, the texts declare: “I am this” is a proliferation; “I am that” is a proliferation; “I have been this” and “I have been that” are proliferations (SN 915-16). Then, of course we start thinking: “I’m going to be this;” “I’m going to be that;” “I should have, could have, would have been such and such, and so on.

## ***Aham iti, the Pali “I am,” in the earliest texts, is a vocalization, a form of direct speech.***

“I am” is in quotation marks here because in the original phrase, *aham iti*, the second word *iti* marks direct speech in Pali and Sanskrit. So “I am” is itself, even in the earliest texts, a vocalization, a form of direct speech. That is, it is a function of language; it is not an ontological entity that underlies experience. It is a product—arising through a complex chain of causes and conditions resulting in the notion of “I-ness”—that is added to our experience. This is the “conditioned genesis,” as Dependent Arising is often translated, of our sense of “I-ness” based upon which the runaway train of proliferation begins.

### **From pragmatic to problematic**

Of course we need some sense of “I” to function in everyday life. Even simple organisms have to distinguish between self and environment if they are going to survive. But our sense of self has evolved for complex social interactions, and even then it only becomes fully operational in each child as they are gradually socialized. The notion of “I-ness” is thus a function of interaction in two ways: first through human evolution itself and then through child development. But we typically take it to be uncaused and unchanging, the first and last refuge of our true identity.

Thinking that this “I-am” is who we actually are is, of course, the core problem. The point of all this analysis is to help disclose the causes and conditions through which our complex, reflexive, and discursive notion of self comes into being—all to answer the key Buddhist question: How does our sense of self arise?

In the Buddhist view, creating and maintaining our sense of “I-ness,” through repetition and proliferation, is an ongoing project, one the Buddha called “selfing” (*aham-kāra*). In the same way that we generate habits through repeatedly drinking coffee, or folding our arms this way or that, for example, the habit of thinking of ourselves as something separate, of thinking “I am this” and “I am that,” gets strengthened, cultivated and refined through constant repetition. We respond to the five aggregates, that is, to bodily form, feelings, perceptions, volition, consciousness, by thinking these are who we really are.

### **“I” just happens**

But there is a silver lining to this cloud. When we disclose the complex conditions through which this notion of “I-ness” arises, we can see that it’s just another dependently arisen phenomenon. “Oh! I-ness occurs.” Some object impinges on the sense faculty, and some awareness or thought impinges on the mental faculty. Mental awareness arises as a response, and concepts like the notion of “I” arise, in the same way that clinging arises in response to attractive objects—but it is just something that happens. You know, stuff happens. I-ness happens. It just happens.

Seeing “I-ness” as “something that happens” in this way dethrones it from the center of our universe, first implicitly and slowly and then explicitly and clearly, as we practice more and more. Eventually, the self that is implicit, ubiquitous and nearly unconscious can be made conscious and directed towards dismantling itself. One can choose a path that leads away from suffering by analyzing the causes of suffering. Gradually, as the causes and conditions for a sense of “I-ness” become more and more clear, even the notion that there is some “one” who is doing that choosing becomes weaker and weaker.

### **How do you get there?**

So, certainly there needs to be conscious intention to do Buddhist practice. On the one hand, Buddhists are always deconstructing notions of self and agency, because this is what we get attached to, this is what causes suffering. On the other hand, they are also emphasizing agency, because it is necessary to be ardent, diligent, mindful and resolute.

We could think about this apparent paradox in the way we develop other complex skills, like sports or music. In practice, you constantly monitor yourself while you are learning: “I have to do it this way; I have to do it that way.” At this stage, you are still involved in intentionality, still depending on a sense of “I-ness.” But to become a virtuoso, to play in a spontaneous and free fashion, you have to stop saying “I am doing this.” As my students would say, when you’re in the zone and you start to think “I am going to do this,” then you’re out of the zone.

## The illusion of self dissolves as we see impermanence more clearly.

But this is a subtle process, using agency to let go of agency. They talk about this in the meditation texts; if you still have the notion, “I am meditating,” at a high level of meditation it is going to be an obstacle.

In classic text, The Four Establishments of Mindfulness, the elimination of self-view is couched in the terms of dependent arising we have been discussing. It depicts the process of undoing what naturally occurs all the time.

*How does a monk dwell contemplating phenomena in terms of the five hindrances? When there is sensual desire ... he knows ‘There is sensual desire in me.’ When there is not, then the monk knows ‘There is no sensual desire in me.’ He also understands how unarisen desire arises, and how arisen desire is abandoned, and how abandoned sensual desire does not arise again. (M 10)*

In this view, desire is just something that arises. We see the conditions for its arising, we see what led to its arising, and we can see how it stops arising. This is mindfulness meditation, bare attention, which watches the arising of all these various phenomena and the various ways in which we respond to them.

*How does a monk dwell contemplating phenomena in terms of the five aggregates affected by clinging? He understands, ‘Such is bodily form [etc.], such is its origin, and such is its passing away.’ (M 10)*

The things we cling to and identify as “I”—our bodies, our thoughts, our feelings, etcetera—we see them arising, we see them passing away; they arise under certain conditions, and they pass away under certain conditions. They are not an unchanging self, they are just things we grasp onto in our attempt to preserve some permanent refuge in the world, some unchanging, secure self.

### Seeing is disbelieving

So it is our view of self that most gives rise to *papañca*, to conceptual proliferation. But it can be stopped:

*How should one know and see so that, in regard to this body with consciousness, and in regard to all external signs, I-making, mine-making and the underlying tendency to conceit, no longer occur within?*

In other words, how shall we look at things so we no longer engage in I-making and mine-making?

*Any kind of bodily form [etc.] whatsoever, monk, whether past, future, or present, internal or external, gross or subtle, inferior or superior, far or near—one sees all bodily form [etc.] as it really is with correct wisdom thus: ‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’ (M III 19).*

The illusion of self dissolves as we see impermanence more clearly, because a process, something that is dependent on causes and conditions, cannot be an unchanging, unitary thing. Moreover, it is something over which we have very little control. In that sense, it does not have the character of the unchanging self that we typically imagine.

*When a noble disciple has clearly seen with correct vision as it really is this dependent origination and these dependently arisen phenomena, it is impossible that he will run back into the past, thinking, ‘Did I exist in the past? Did I not exist in the past? What was I in the past?’... Or that he will run into the future thinking... Or that will he now be inwardly confused in the present thus, thinking...*

Why is the noble one not caught by this?

*Because the noble disciple has clearly seen with correct wisdom as it really is this dependent origination and these dependently arisen phenomena. (S II 27)*

“I” happens. It is just another dependently arisen phenomenon. It’s no big deal, is it?

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