

***TOWARD A SYNTHESIS OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND DIALOGUE:  
AN INTRODUCTION TO THE SPECIAL ISSUE ON  
DIALOGICAL AND EASTERN PERSPECTIVES OF SELF***

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Abstract. In this introduction to the special issue, we first discuss the inspiration for and relevance of bringing together Dialogical and Eastern perspectives of Self. The possibility of refining and advancing the dialogical self theory by seeking inspiration from the profound insights on ‘self’ offered by the Eastern philosophies is explored. Five key features that most distinguish an Eastern conceptualization of Self from other philosophical perspectives or approaches to understanding ‘Self’ provides a framework to facilitate a discussion on where dialogical self stands with regard to these features [that also represents core questions on ‘self’]. This is followed by a brief introduction to the papers in the special issue along with an overview of the perspectives, theoretical possibilities and challenges of integrating DS and Eastern approaches as presented in these papers. We conclude with the hope that this special issue will inspire more wisdom and insight as we contemplate on consciousness and dialogue towards expanding and advancing the dialogical self theory.

Keywords: Self, Consciousness, Dialogical Self, Eastern philosophy, mindfulness

When Prof. Hubert Hermans first discussed the possibility of guest editing a special issue on Dialogical and Eastern Approaches to Self, it was a proposal that reignited our long-held interest to work on a paper bringing together Dialogical Self Theory (DST) and Eastern approaches to Self. So, we did not have to think twice before accepting the proposal realizing well that it would not only echo our thoughts and reflections but would also be a great opportunity for like-minded scholars who are well aware of the scope and relevance of bringing together DST and Eastern approaches.

As we began with our initial preparations, we recognized that a special issue of IJDS with the theme of Eastern approaches to ‘Self’ was just timely given the growing interest in Eastern philosophical traditions (e.g., Buddhist Psychology and mindfulness approaches; see Hirst, 2003 and Kabat-Zinn, 2003) and approaches to self. With the proliferation of literature on such perspectives and themes, there seemed to be a greater

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readiness to understand and explore a consciousness based 'self' towards facilitating comparison or insights on possible integration of essential features inherent in the eastern and contemporary approaches to self. In our announcement for the call for papers to this special issue of IJDS, we asked for submissions that would consider the possibility of refining and advancing DST by seeking inspiration from the profound insights on 'self' offered by the Eastern philosophies. As examples, we mentioned topics such as

- Similarities, contentions and possible resolutions regarding the different features of self(multiplicity, unity, continuity, stability, agency etc) in DST and eastern approaches of self.
- The ideal state of self as expounded in DST and Eastern approaches of self.
- The transpersonal feature of self in DST and Eastern approaches.
- The construal of self-other nexus in DST and Eastern approaches.
- Possible integration and synthesis of Eastern and Dialogical assumptions of self.
- The interface of dialogue and consciousness in psychotherapy and counseling.
- Comparative understanding of Eastern and Dialogical assumptions of self in the milieu of different socio-historical contexts.
- The central assumptions of Dialogical and Eastern self and the implications they hold for wellbeing and sense of harmony.

In order to stimulate some thought on these topics, we sketched a brief background on the rise and progress of DS theory as well as the potentials of Eastern philosophy in addressing profound questions about self and human nature. This introduction is an extended discussion of the same with the hope of consolidating a variety of both insightful and novel perspectives that we have received as papers as well as further stimulating interest in the synthesis of consciousness and dialogue.

### **The Strength of Eastern Approaches of Self**

What reserves of knowledge in 'self' can we consider as the compass by which DST can set its direction for contemplating higher potentials of the 'self'? What keys are needed to unlock the potential of DST, allowing for greater insights into the 'self'? Can the resulting reserves of knowledge be of value to DST as it seeks to broaden its theoretical possibilities and applications? Contemplate these questions further and it is very likely that one calls to mind the time-honored 'Eastern' traditions of self that offer a radically different perspective on selfhood and existence, and yet provides profound insights that has inspired many a contribution to the field of psychology.

Collectively referred to as Eastern Philosophy, they comprise different schools of thought including Upanishadic, Buddhist, Taoist, Jain, Confucian, Sufi and Zen

teachings that have prevailed throughout thousands of years and continues to have far-reaching influences on the way of life and existence for people in societies on which they have left a mark. While these schools vary in their position on the essential question of ‘permanence’ of self, they collectively allude to common themes such as the trans-cognitive feature of self; a worldview of universalism; the mind-body continuum and its implications in therapeutic applications; the possibility of expanded awareness and its relevance to self-knowledge and self-realization; liberation or emancipation as the ultimate destiny of self; the ethical dimension of self-implicating cosmic ethical interdependence; the healing potential of the self and the sacred interaction of a patient-seeker and healer-teacher, etc.

One of the bases for comparing DST with the Eastern approaches is the importance of self-understanding and self-inquiry in pursuit of wellbeing that Eastern approaches have always emphasized. Various environmental, socio-cultural and historical factors have a significant bearing on this emphasis of self-inquiry, which is often reflected in features mentioned below. These five key features, considered as strengths (Cherian & Ahammed, 2011) most distinguish an Eastern conceptualization of Self from other philosophical perspectives or contemporary approaches to understanding Self.

- i. Consciousness based self
- ii. The ultimate destiny of the self and the path to it
- iii. Sacredness of self
- iv. Extension of self to other levels of consciousness
- v. Ethical dimensions of self

This provides us with a framework from which a discourse on where the DS stands with regard to these features of strength can be facilitated.

### **Self-based on Consciousness**

Common to nearly all Eastern perspectives on Self, is the assumption that the experience of self is ultimately a manifestation of consciousness. Obviously, this is not a very widely accepted contention among psychologists, even though legendary scholars such as William James have frequently observed the futility of separating the concepts of self and consciousness. The notion of such a self, rooted in consciousness was already in place as presented in ancient Indian scriptures exploring the nature of self, such as the Vedas and the Upanishads (Paranjpe, 1984). Currently, there is a trend in theoretical frameworks for the connection of selfhood and consciousness; terms such as subjectivity, awareness, the ability to experience or to feel, wakefulness, having a sense of selfhood, and the executive control system of the mind are becoming more familiar in the scholarly literature (Farthing, 1992). Those theoretical and philosophical

perspectives that liken self to consciousness often consider cognition, volition and affect as the consequences of consciousness and not vice versa (Paranjpe, 1984). It is important to note that Psychology's resistance to accept a self-rooted in consciousness goes back to the classical mind-brain debate and the discipline's stance in the debate (Mathew, 2001). As to DS theory's position on 'consciousness-based' self it is unclear whether it shares or denies the assumption although many of its features such as self's multiplicities and pluralities, the de-positioned 'I', integrated self, etc. presume a framework of consciousness.

### **The Ultimate Destiny of the Self and the Path to It**

Most Eastern perspectives on the Self, do not merely seek to explicate its nature and function. They are not value-free understandings of the notion and often expound an ideal or ultimate goal of the self, and prescribe a path or means towards that goal. The ideal self or the perfect self from these traditions, often beyond the reach of people with normal lives, is nonetheless a possibility open to all. The ideal often acts as a central motivating factor towards self-investigation and self-explorations, not just at a theoretical level but also at the personal level. For example, in Buddhism the ultimate goal or the perfect state of being is living in Nirvana (enlightenment), which can be seen as the final attainment of liberation from pain and suffering. This acts as a motivating factor towards taking this path towards final liberation.

With regards to DST, the 'ultimate goal' as above is not explicitly stated. It can be argued that this goal is the establishment of a dialogical relationship between the elements in the internal and the external world. Another may be the need for a broader conceptualization of this relationship, which categorizes its establishment as a "learning process" which contributes to "[a] high level of integration" (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Indeed, high levels of awareness and integration of the self are of great value at an individual as well as social level. At an individual level, it contributes to one's wellbeing and personal growth. At a social level, it facilitates harmony and peace. The incorporation of 'awareness' and 'integration' into the theory implies the possibility of expanding it to include the ultimate destiny of the self and the path to it (Cherian & Ahammed, 2011).

### **Sacredness in Self**

Sacredness is now a more acceptable term in the field of psychotherapy, as opposed to the previous decades where the word was strongly eschewed due to its perception as alluding more towards esoteric and religious systems. If we further explore the various definitions of sacredness, we may see the word may imply the qualities of reverence, depth, wonder, perfection, and transcendental goodness (Pargament, 2007). There are various approaches that have incorporated the important of sacredness in the therapeutic alliance. The authentic search for the sacred was always

a core concern in person-centered psychotherapy, and one of the foremost in addressing the sacred in theory and practice (Leijssen, 2008).

Sacredness can be seen as an essential feature of the Eastern conceptualization of self. The elements of ideal, perfect and transcendental aspects in the self can be considered as the contributing factors of sacredness in this concept. The realization of the relevance of sacredness in self stems from a growing body of research showing that sacredness is an important aspect in spirituality as a potent predictor of health and well-being (Lippman Ryberg, Terzian, Moore, Humble, & McIntosh, 2014). This relevance is also due to the impact of sacredness on the subtler aspects of self, and the effect of its absence, i.e. that some critical aspect of the self is 'missing' (Pargament, 2007). Sacredness may impart a sense of wonder and respect on the concept of self and is a feature that is missing in most of the current conceptualization of self-related theories and practices. It has the potential to highlight the importance of self-inquiry and mutual respect, especially if we also integrate the themes of wonder and respect into these.

This invites the question: is the DS sacred? No explicit statements directly referring to sacredness of the self can be found in DST. However, a theory of self, with the element of sacredness, may be perceived as more 'richer' and 'profound' and may direct a person for self-inquiry at a personal level. It is worth exploring the stance of DST on the importance of sacredness in future theoretical development and integration.

### **Extension of Self to Other Levels of Consciousness**

A fair majority of Eastern traditions includes and emphasizes the importance of other states of consciousness in the theoretical conceptualization of self (Paranjpe, 1998). Their consideration of the self-framework is not limited to the wakeful state of consciousness and often includes the trans-agentive and trans-cognitive aspects of self in explaining and providing the basis of self-conceptualization. For example, the eastern concept of the ideal or the perfect condition of self, such as 'Nirvana' in the Buddhist traditions, 'Brahman' in the Advaita Vedanta of Shankara or 'Fana' in the Sufic tradition of Islam are all trans-cognitive and trans-agentive phenomenon.

How may DST include and account to the experiences of peak experience, mystical or flow experiences? As pointed out early on in the development of DST, the de-positioned 'I' can be considered as a trans-cognitive and trans-agentive aspect of self. "We will argue that, in the present era, there are strong reasons to attribute to the 'I' not only an appropriating function but also a *receptive* one. We will show that the self has potentials that cannot be sufficiently understood by the notions 'appropriation' and 'ownership' because they assume the existence of a *possessive* self. We will demonstrate that the receptive function makes experiences possible that are inaccessible to the appropriative function of the self (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p. 140)".

DST thus acknowledges the limitations of the agentic and cognitive based self-frameworks, while providing the possibility to incorporate the possibility of the incorporation of other states of consciousness.

### **Ethical Dimensions of Self**

The eastern perspective of self is intimately related to ethics and morality. In fact, providing a framework to people in making ethical and moral choices in their day-to-day life was as equally important as establishing a framework of self. They assumed the self, as a notion fundamental to human experience in its entirety, couldn't be separated from the ethical dimension that constitutes its very essence, i.e. agency. With few exceptions, most traditional perspectives have acknowledged the ethical dimension of the self. However, this has not been the case with modern psychological perspectives of self, which has always refrained from a prescriptive understanding of moral conduct. Although moral development and moral reasoning have been topics of extensive theoretical and empirical analysis for a long time, a normative understanding of what constitutes the differentiation of right and wrong has always been considered as outside the confines of the discipline.

In light of this, it is surely of significance to note that DST does not overlook the moral dimension of the self and proposes 'dialogue' as 'representing a moral and developmental purpose' (Hermans and Hermans-Konopka, 2010, p.174). The theory expounds in great detail the notion of a 'good' dialogue, once again affirming the moral aim of dialogue. Indeed, dialogue, apart from being a structural and functional unit of self, is also the ethical basis of self.

### **Contributions to the Special Issue**

A total of seven submissions was received, five of which were finally accepted for this special issue. Each accepted paper has gone through two to three rounds of review, with at least two reviewers. Out of the five papers selected, the first four offer practical insights when integrating DST and eastern traditions of Self, whereas the fifth is a reflective discussion on the theoretical possibilities and the challenges of integrating DS and Eastern approaches. The following discussion takes a closer look at each of these papers.

As readers will note, mindfulness and DST is a central theme in most of the papers. One of the reasons for more mindfulness-based chapters may be due to the way in which the theoretical and practical aspects of the two approaches complement each other. Let us briefly review the more central of these. From the scholarly articles we could see that the word 'mindfulness' seems to generally signify three different aspects of its meaning. First, it is used as a theoretical construct, second as an experiential phenomenon and, thirdly, to signify a practice that helps to facilitate mindfulness. As a theoretical construct, it is commonly accepted as a tool for the subjective exploration

and understanding of one's self. It is often considered as a practice out of the Buddhist school of thought, and therefore as the subjective inquiry of self within the framework of Buddhist conceptualization of self (Fulton, 2005). It is in the theoretical conceptualization of self that DST complements the Buddhist frame of self. This introduction does not provide an opportunity for in-depth analysis, but the central aspects that bridge these two perspectives could be found in the theoretical framework of self. Both frameworks assume that there is nothing that provides permanence to self as the content of self is constructed and continuously changing. In this sense, both the frameworks deny the existence of any permanent self. From the Buddhist perspective, DS can be considered as a framework to investigate and understand the ever-changing, dynamic, multiple aspects of self. From the DS perspective, mindfulness can be considered as a practice to understand the different 'I'-positions and the dialogical relationship between them. This is our understanding of how two theoretical frameworks complement each other.

The first paper in our special section, "From Reified Self to Being Mindful: A Dialogical Analysis of the MBSR Voice" by Michelle Mamberg and Thomas Bassarear, demonstrates how DST is theoretically and methodologically applicable to studying MBSR discourse. They observe that MBSR has a Buddhist ideological lineage which conceives self as relational, and that the critical aspect that induces change is in reducing the individual's self-reification process. They propose DST as an appropriate framework to study this process, as it is based on a relational and dynamic self-conceptualization. They further demonstrate the usefulness of the DST framework by conducting an investigation in exploring the de-reification process among MBSR practitioners.

With the second paper titled "Dialogical and Eastern Perspectives on the Self in Practice: Teaching Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction in Philadelphia and Seoul" Donald McCown and Heyoung Ahn use 'dialogue' to explore and broaden their understanding of self-changes in both participants as well as the tutor during MBSR training. They present their observations and thoughts in a form of dialogue, a novel approach which is far from the conventional way of idea presentation. The paper provides the theoretical assumptions of self from an MBSR perspective and how they are explored in MBSR teaching. They also explore through dialogue the various differences, similarities and challenges in the participants and in the tutor during the training within both of the different cultural environments in which the authors apply MBSR.

In the third paper, "How Creating A Living Pause *Ma* in Landscape of the Mind: The Wisdom of Noh Theater" the author, Masayoshi Morioka, looks mainly at the drama theory of Zeami Motokiyo and related concepts from Japan such as *ma* that leads to a richer understanding of the space in dialogical self. Zeami was a Japanese actor and playwright in the Noh theatrical tradition and his works are considered the oldest known

works on Japanese literature on drama. Moreover, Zeami incorporated several Zen Buddhist themes into his treatise, thus creating a theoretical interest in the exploration of these works from a dialogical self-perspective. Accepting the fact that exploring this literature in full is impossible, the author focuses instead on certain concepts that lead to a deeper understanding of the significance of dialogical space.

In the paper titled “Children as Carers for Their Siblings in Indian Families: Using Dialogical Self Theory To Examine Children’s Narratives,” the authors, Shipra Suneja, Nandita Chaudhary and Bhanumathi Sharma, look briefly at the issue of self-sameness towards exploring how the prevalent religious traditions in India deal with this question. The prevalent view in India on Self assumes an unchanging transpersonal aspect of self, which is the foundation for their sense of self-sameness or a sense that one is the same person from birth until a certain point in life. This view of self is not limited to a philosophical understanding but is a literal guide to making decisions in day-to-day life. These views on self can be seen as the reflections carried into the hearts and minds of people from the treaties of the Vedas, Upanishads, Advaita Vedanta and the epics of Mahabharata and Ramayana. Interestingly there is also another contradicting view from the Buddhist tradition to this perspective, which explain that there is nothing that provides stability and continuity to self and everything is changing. At a theoretical level the Islamic view holds that the self is permanent with relation to *Allah*. These three could be seen as the prevalent perspective on the issue of self-sameness from the Indian cultural context. The authors also discuss how useful DST is in understanding the self and identity issues as Indian views on self are observed to be embedded in a socio cultural context that entails plurality and coexistence of conflicting thoughts. Drawing on their ethnographic studies, they explain how DST can be an excellent tool to investigate and understand self in children.

In the final paper “Buddhism, Dialogical Self Theory, and the Ethics of Shared Positions” by Basia D. Ellis and Henderikus J Stam, the reader is reminded of the challenges or pitfalls in comparing or contrasting perspectives that have different cultural, historical or social bases, or of making inferences or conclusions from those. As this collection of papers fall into a theme that shares the challenges as above, this paper provides a fitting final reflection. The authors first examine the central purposes of DST as a bridging theory with distinct and opposing theoretical approaches with respect to Buddhism. This is conducted by first briefly studying the historical and theoretical context of their respective central assumptions and objectives. The authors thus draw a conclusion that it is not possible to bridge these two traditions in their own terms, as they are grounded in different cultural milieu and that attempting to do so will surely lead to compromising the meanings of Buddhist concepts. They also demonstrate how misleading and unproductive it may become if the ideological underpinnings of these theories are sidelined. Taking the above into consideration, the authors closely look at Buddhist and DST moral assumptions and makes very insightful inferences from

their exploration. The authors' inquiry was perceived as honest and open, and passes through moments of desperation and insight in the course of their explorative journey.

In closing, we would like to thank the authors for their valuable contributions to this special issue. We would also like to thank the reviewers [Angela Uchoa Branco, Henderikus Stam, Nina Kavita Heggen Bahl, Olga V. Lehmann Oliveros, Paul H. Lysaker, Pete Giordano, and Rens van Loon] who provided thorough and thoughtful reviews of manuscripts – we appreciate their great support and feedback without which this issue would not be possible. As editors we hope that this special issue will inspire more wisdom and insight that will continue to expand and build on our timeless pursuit of ‘self’

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