

Critical Subjectivity in the New Field of Contemplative Studies

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Abstract: This article argues for incorporating “critical subjectivity,” developed within the emerging interdisciplinary field of Contemplative Studies, into academic scholarship in the humanities and the sciences. Drawing on the author’s intellectual formation through mentors in Chinese philosophy, Buddhist studies, and contemplative practice, it challenges the conventional ideal of purely objective scholarship and contends that all research is inevitably shaped by subjective perspectives. Rather than attempting to eliminate subjectivity, the article proposes a disciplined and self-aware approach that critically examines and refines it. The theoretical foundation for this approach is developed within Brown University’s Contemplative Studies program’s “integrative contemplative pedagogy,” which combines traditional third-person academic analysis with first-person experiential engagement in contemplative practices. Building on work in phenomenology, cognitive science, and contemplative traditions, the author outlines four complementary epistemologies: third-person, second-person, first-person, and a proposed fourth mode, “no-person” epistemology, derived from Chan and Zen traditions. This non-self-referential mode of awareness is supported by contemporary neuroscientific and psychological research. The article concludes that integrating these epistemological perspectives can foster a more rigorous, reflective, and less biased scholarship capable of addressing the complexities of consciousness and human experience.

Keywords: Critical Subjectivity; Contemplative Studies; First-Person Epistemology; No-Person Epistemology; Chan and Zen Buddhism; Nondual Awareness; Embodied Cognition, Consciousness Studies

Introduction

None of us arrives in the present moment without a rich array of influences and experiences. Looking back on a scholarly career of forty years, I am able to clearly point to the people and experiences that helped me develop as a scholar and a human being. However, as scholars we are taught that we should only express a purely objective point of view, completely free of personal subjective influences. What I will argue here is that while I agree that we should strive to eliminate personal biases and hidden agendas from our scholarly work, none of us can possibly have a purely objective viewpoint. It is therefore important to find ways to enrich the scholarship we do with a clearly articulated critical subjectivity. In the new academic field of contemplative studies, we have developed a rationale and method of critical subjectivity, which is the topic I will present in this article.

In late October 1981, as a newly minted Ph.D. without an academic position, I first came to England to interview a number of well-known scholars of classical Chinese thought for a four-hour radio piece I was putting together for the Canadian Broadcasting Company's *Ideas* program.¹ During that visit, I spent a wonderful ninety minutes interviewing famed scientist, Joseph Needham, "The Man Who Loved China."² Something he said in that interview struck me and has stayed with me to this day: "It is only because I've been a lifelong socialist that I was able to see the communitarian aspects of early Chinese societies." The reason this struck me as unusual is, of course, that I was trained as a scholar of classical Chinese religion and philosophy to never admit to any personal perspective from my own training or intellectual commitments. But it also seemed to me to be somewhat paradoxical because, as Needham stated, it was only *because* of these intellectual commitments

¹ The Ideas program on the radio network of the Canadian Broadcasting Company began in 1965. These programs on Chinese Philosophy were broadcast in February 1982. For further information see: <https://www.cbc.ca/mediacentre/program/ideas>.

² Needham began his monumental Science and Civilization in China series in 1954. It now numbers twenty-seven volumes. The Needham Research Institute in the history of science and technology in East Asia continues today on the campus of Robinson College at Cambridge University. See details in the biography of Needham in Winchester, *The Man Who Loved China*.

that he was able to see certain aspects of what he was studying, and that he would not have been able to see these aspects without them.

Two of the most important intellectual influences during my undergraduate days at Princeton were the pioneering Chinese Buddhist Studies scholar, Kenneth Chen, and Ming Dynasty historian, Frederick Mote.³ Neither of them revealed to any of us very much of their personal intellectual commitments nor discussed how those commitments influenced their research. I believe they drew a firm line between them. Indeed, though I discovered later that Prof. Chen was a Presbyterian minister, he never made any comments to indicate if his religious commitments had influenced his pioneering comprehensive studies of Chinese Buddhism (with no scholar in more than a half century since then having even attempted as comprehensive a survey of the topic as Chen).

One other mentor was of great importance to me in my undergraduate days at Princeton: Tu Weiming. His example had a great influence on me, which I was better able to embrace in the second half of my academic career.⁴ It was from Weiming that I learned about the entire idea of self-cultivation, which would become my main motivating interest and concern throughout my adult life. While self-cultivation for him was an academic concern, it was at the same time a personal commitment. This has been the great strength of his intellectual career, one with which he tirelessly worked to make a positive impact on not only the academic world, but the social and political world outside the academy as well.

It was through Professor Tu that, on one bright and sunny early October afternoon in 1969, I shared lunch at the Faculty Club and Prospect Gardens with the renowned Japanese Kyoto School philosopher, Nishitani Keiji.⁵ Even more

³ Kenneth Chen (1907–1993) is best known for two pioneering works: *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* and *The Chinese Transformation of Buddhism*. Frederick Mote (1923–2005) is known through his many books, including *The Poet Kao Ch'i, 1336-1374*; *Intellectual Foundations of China*; and *Imperial China, 900–1800*.

⁴ Tu Weiming (1940–) is best known for his scholarship on Confucian philosophy and civilization. His many works include *Humanity and Self-Cultivation*; *Confucian Thought: Selfhood as Creative Transformation*; and *Centrality and Commonality: An Essay on Confucian Religiousness*.

⁵ Nishitani Keiji 西谷 啓治 (1900–1990) was a leading Japanese philosopher of the post-WWII era. He was the principal disciple of the founder of the “Kyoto School” of philosophy, Nishida Kitarō 西田 幾多郎 (1870–1945), and the author of many important works, including *Religion and Nothingness* and *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism*.

importantly for me, that day I was introduced to a Rinzai Zen nun named Gesshin Cheney who accompanied Professor Nishitani and was setting up the first visit of her teacher—the Japanese Rinzai Zen Rōshi, Kyōzan Jōshū Sasaki (杏山承周佐々木, 1907–2014)—to the US East coast, a visit that came to include Princeton in November of that year.⁶ Many years of intensive Zen practice (*sesshins*) later, under Sasaki’s tutelage in the Chan/Zen tradition, I came to be his de facto literary executor. I have edited two volumes of his teachings and am collating several thousand more recordings of his *teishos* (master Dharma talks) and lectures from the “Summer Seminars on Buddhism,” an important academic institution affiliated over its thirty-five years of existence with UCLA, Cornell, and the University of New Mexico. It was through the responsibilities Sasaki gave me to oversee the “Summer Seminars” that I came to appreciate the importance of balancing serious academic study of Buddhism with equally serious Buddhist practice.

I would be remiss without mentioning one last significant mentor in my life and scholarship, whom I met through an entirely different route: the brilliant Welsh scholar Angus Charles Graham. I also became Graham’s literary executor of sorts, editing and adding to a collection of his essays on the classical Daoist foundational work, the *Zhuangzi*, to which I devoted a considerable amount of research of my own during my career.⁷ Angus was the most brilliant and eccentric academic I have ever met. Those who knew him would likely agree that he was not inclined to behave in ways that conformed to social conventions. Yet, I have never met anyone who could so quickly and spontaneously look at a segment of classical Chinese text and immediately get its meaning and translation, seeing simultaneously its details and its context. In two years of remarkable apprenticeship with him at the London University School of Oriental and African Studies on a post-doctoral fellowship from the Canada Council, I not only absorbed as much of his scholarship as I could, but also heard the most remarkable collection of his stories and broad-ranging interests, academic as well as nonacademic.

⁶ Sasaki, *About Tathāgatha Zen and Manifesting Zen: Master Dharma Talks from Mt. Baldy*.

⁷ A. C. Graham (1919–1991) was a renowned scholar of classical Chinese philosophy, grammar, and poetry. His works include, among others, *Later Mohist Logic, Ethics, and Science*; *Chuang-tzū: The Inner Chapters*; and *Disputers of the Tao: Philosophical Argumentation in Ancient China*.

Finally, I was further inspired in the mission of bringing what I have come to call “first-person epistemologies” into the academic study of religious experience by the pioneering 1976 work of Vedic scholar Frits Staal.⁸ In *Exploring Mysticism*, Staal argues that those of us who are engaged in the academic study of mysticism and mystical experience also have to engage in training in one of these traditions. Incidentally, this is a work that Angus Graham reviewed for the *Journal of Indian Philosophy*.⁹

The Myth of Scholarly Objectivity

While distanced analytical perspectives are essential to rational scholarship in the humanities and the sciences, they cannot be exclusively relied upon to render the best possible research outcomes. This is because these perspectives often labor under the pretense that they are purely objective, unbiased, and rational. Yet they are in essence created by the subjective minds of scholars who are pretending to have a totally objective “God’s-eye view,” a “view from nowhere” that Alan Wallace contends is ultimately derived from the Abrahamic ontology of a creator god who stands apart from his creation.¹⁰ Despite the desirability of this goal, scholarly objectivity is a slippery phantom, often falling victim to precisely the kinds of subjective biases it was intended to prevent.

In the humanities, this hidden bias can lead to passing off subjective agendas as scholarly truths. This occurs most certainly on an individual level; see, for example, Louis Komjathy’s review of Thomas Michael’s *In the Shadows of the Dao*.¹¹ It can also occur on the level of an entire academic field, as, for example, in the many ways unexamined assumptions based on Abrahamic religious beliefs have affected

⁸ Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: A Methodological Essay*.

⁹ Graham, “Frits Staal, *Exploring Mysticism: a methodological essay*.”

¹⁰ Wallace, *The Taboo of Subjectivity: Toward a New Science of Consciousness*, 44–48.

¹¹ Komjathy, “In the Shadows of the Dao: Laozi, the Sage, and the Daodejing. By Thomas Michael,” especially, for example: “Michael’s translation of the *Daode jing* (contained in the appendix)... is tainted by mistranslations informed by the author’s idiosyncratic and untenable interpretation of classical Daoism” (Komjathy, “In the Shadows of the Dao,” p. 857).

the entire field of religious studies since its inception almost a century ago.¹² Most readers can probably come up with more than a few examples of well known academics in Buddhist Studies or Chinese Studies who pretend to objectivity without the slightest recognition that their work has been influenced by their own life experiences and intellectual commitments. Ironically, they are often the first to insist that it is absolutely crucial to have critical distance in their research area, and that such critical distance requires that one must entirely eschew any personal engagement with Buddhist or other contemplative practices. See, for example, the brilliant critique of this methodological stereotype in Buddhist Studies by one of the field's leading scholars and critics, José Cabezón, which he describes as demonstrating "falsehoods: racist, sexist and generally exhibiting the type of intolerance to which we as human beings are unfortunately heir."¹³ He characterizes this intellectual bias as claiming that:

critical distance from the object of intellectual analysis is necessary. Buddhists, by virtue of their religious commitment, lack such critical distance from Buddhism. Hence, Buddhists are never good buddhologists. Or, alternatively, those who take any aspect of Buddhist doctrine seriously (whether pro or con) are scientifically suspect by virtue of allowing their individual beliefs to affect their scholarship. Good scholarship is neutral as regards questions of truth. Hence, evaluative / normative scholarship falls outside of the purview of Buddhist Studies.¹⁴

This bias against perspectives that include the subjective experience of Buddhist—or any religious—contemplative practice occurs because it is assumed that *any* subjective perspective must *ipso facto* be biased. That is why the experimental sciences attempt to remove subjectivity completely from research. Nonetheless, even in the most "objective" of human enterprises—the experimental sciences—it is well known that researcher bias can skew the design and results of major, and often well-funded, research projects. For example, there is an annual list of

¹² Roth, "Against Cognitive Imperialism: A Call for a Non-Ethnocentric Approach to Cognitive Science and Religious Studies."

¹³ Cabezón, "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory," 243.

¹⁴ Cabezón, "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory," 243.

“misconduct” in government funded research projects reported by the Office of Research Integrity of the United States’ Office of Health and Human Services. It lists thirty three cases with currently “imposed administrative actions against them,” and over seventy five cases in the last ten years which charge that sanctioned scientists “intentionally falsified and/or fabricated the results in data by reuse and relabeling, duplication, and/or manipulation or selectively cutting, flipping, reordering, and reusing the same source images or non-correlated images to represent different results.”¹⁵ This is only the tip of the iceberg; how many more of these projects inadvertently skew their data and analyses because their researchers are unaware of their own subjective biases? Should we just throw up our hands and surrender to this obviously intractable aspect of human nature?

“Critical Subjectivity”

In his pioneering work, *The Taboo of Subjectivity*, Alan Wallace addressed the essential question of how to balance the need for unbiased research with the need for including subjective experience. Not only is it possible to use systematically trained human subjectivity to clearly and impartially examine itself, Wallace argues, it is *imperative* in cognitive science and psychology to do this. I would argue it is crucial in the humanities as well. When this is done, we not only develop a critical self-awareness of the biases we bring to the table, we also develop the ability to use rationality for its own sake and not in the service of an unexamined subjective bias. We also develop the ability to become more aware of the intuitive and creative processes that underlie many great scientific and humanistic discoveries.

How can we responsibly bring our unique subjective windows on the world into our research and teaching without bias? It is through developing what I would like to deem a “critical subjectivity” informed by the new academic field of “contemplative studies,” an area Brown University has had a significant role in establishing in North America. In the following sections, I will detail the unique

¹⁵ See http://ori.hhs.gov/case_summary. This is a small percentage of all those sanctioned because it represents only those penalties that are still in effect.

form of “integrative contemplative pedagogy” developed in our pioneering undergraduate program at Brown and how addressing the rationale for it led us to develop the four interrelated epistemologies that also form the basis for this “critical subjectivity.” I will then demonstrate how these intellectual foundations of critical subjectivity are informed by philosophies and practices found in the traditions of Chan and Zen Buddhism.

Integrative Contemplative Pedagogy

Over the past two decades at Brown University, we developed a pedagogy for integrating contemplative practices from a variety of the world’s major wisdom traditions into our coursework, while at the same time teaching the historical and philosophical contexts that foster critical distance. We call this “integrative contemplative pedagogy,” and it is founded on a number of important principles. First and foremost is the importance of experiential learning. As the famed Neo-Confucian philosopher, Wang Yangming 王陽明 (1472–1529), once stated: “If you want to know the bitterness [of the bitter melon], you have to eat a bitter melon yourself.”¹⁶ This principle is continued in the writings of John Dewey, who stated:

education, in order to accomplish its ends... must be based upon experience. There is no discipline in the world so severe as the discipline of experience subjected to the tests of intelligent development and direction.¹⁷

Fellow pragmatist philosopher, William James, extends these ideas to that of attentional training, which forms the very core of contemplative practices the world over:

¹⁶ Wang, *Instructions for Practical Living*, 82.

¹⁷ Dewey, *Education and Experience*, 89-90.

the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will.... An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.¹⁸

James, largely unaware of Buddhist contemplative practices at the time of writing these words in his pioneering *The Principles of Psychology*, was pessimistic about this possibility. But we have been able to incorporate this important desideratum of James as a foundation of our unique pedagogy.

The emerging academic field of contemplative studies examines the underlying philosophy, psychology, and phenomenology of contemplation; focuses on the many ways to concentrate, broaden, and deepen conscious awareness as a gateway to leading more ethically responsible, fulfilling lives; and identifies the varieties of contemplative experience and engages scientific and philosophical discussions about them, cultivates first-person knowledge of them, and assesses their meaning and significance. At Brown, we define “contemplation” as the focusing of attention in a sustained fashion, leading to deepened states of concentration, tranquility, and insight; to a broadening of awareness; and to self-contextualizing experiences that are the basis of other-regarding virtues (such as empathy, compassion, and love), and which provide a crucial foundation for social engagement.

Contemplation occurs on a spectrum: from the rather common spontaneous experiences of absorption in an activity to the most profound experiences deliberately cultivated in religious traditions. Hence, contemplation includes intentional practices that are deliberate attempts to attain states of focused attention and clear insight into human experience in order to fully realize our nature and potential as human beings. It also includes nonintentional practices that lead to deeply focused attention that are done for their own sake, e.g., chess, sports, rock climbing, etc. These are practices studied by psychologists, often falling into the areas they call “flow” and “effortless attention.”¹⁹

¹⁸ James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 463.

¹⁹ See, for example the pioneering work of Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*; and Brian Bruya’s innovative edited collection, *Effortless Attention: A New Perspective in the Cognitive Science of Attention and Action*.

The academic field of contemplative studies is further based on the idea that the intellectual silos that the modern academy has imposed on scholarship have to be overcome in order to advance human knowledge. That is what we attempt, both in theory and in practice. Contemplative studies thus includes the sciences, in particular the study of human consciousness and contemplative experience found in neuroscience, cognitive science, and psychology, as well as the clinical applications of contemplative practices in medicine and public health. It also integrates the humanities, in particular the study of contemplation in the religious and philosophical traditions of the world and in the great varieties of world literatures, as well as the creative arts, including the study of contemplation in the creation and appreciation of fine arts, writing, and the performing arts.

Brown University's undergraduate major in contemplative studies is the first of its kind at a major research university in North America and has enabled similar programs to develop at more than twenty-five other institutions of higher learning. Since we began in the autumn of 2014, we have graduated eighty students and have another fifteen or so in the pipeline. The innovative pedagogy we developed in this program is illustrative of the methods I believe will facilitate the development of "critical subjectivity," which I would like to now explain in detail.

Integrative Contemplative Pedagogy (ICP)

In our contemplative studies program, we created a series of courses that examine deliberate contemplative practices and their results as they have been contextualized in various religious traditions. We do this through combining traditional "third-person" study of contemplative practices in their philosophical and historical contexts with innovative "critical first-person" methods, in which students empirically experience and critically examine contemplative techniques without any required commitment to their efficacy. The prioritization of independent, first-person empirical examination of contemplative practices is an important tenet of our pedagogy because, in an academic context, it is essential that

we do not coerce anyone into accepting on faith the intellectual framework in which any such practice is embedded. This includes, of course, various religious doctrines that help provide a sense of meaning and an interpretation of contemplative experiences. This following example from the syllabus of one of our courses, “An Introduction to Contemplative Studies” illustrates how we do this (see figure 1).

In this course, we combine what one would expect in any humanities course, the “at-a-distance” study of texts and their historical and philosophical contexts, with the experience of a contemplative practice that is directly related to the readings for the week. In this case, I use the example of what I call “reconstructed meditations” that I contend are the basis of some of the most important ideas of the classical Daoist tradition. We also use the *Ānāpānnasatisutta* [Foundations of Mindfulness] text when we study normative Buddhism in India, and zazen practices when we study the *Zazen wasan* 坐禅和讃 [In Praise of Zazen] of famed Zen master, Hakuin Ekaku 白隠 慧鶴 (1685–1768). The “Meditation Labs,” which usually last fifty minutes, include an introductory stretching practice, often yoga or qigong to help students prepare for cross-legged sitting. The actual practice of the day is followed by a short question and answer session. Students are also required to write down a short comment or question about the practice in an online forum. Over the more than a quarter century during which we have used and developed these methodologies—in courses now taken by more than two thousand students—we found that students develop a much greater understanding of the contemplative texts we study as a result of having the opportunity to explore the related practices first-hand. In addition, an added benefit is that students often develop the ability to bring the positive effects of a contemplative practice into their lives. There have been many scientific studies about the benefits of regular meditation practice, and a few of these have been published based on work with our own students.²⁰ Our innovative pedagogy, then, has a two-fold benefit: it gives

²⁰ Rojiani, Santoyo, Rahrig, Roth, and Britton, “Women Benefit More Than Men in Response to College-based Meditation Training”; Roberts-Wolfe, Sacchet, Hastings, Roth, and Britton, “Mindfulness Training Alters Emotional Memory Recall Compared to Active Controls: Support for an Emotional Information Processing Model of Mindfulness.”

Classical Daoist Contemplative Practice in China	
Weekly Seminar 1/28: “Scientific Materialism,” the Disappearance of Introspection and the Rise of Contemplative Studies <u>Primary Texts</u>: Early Daoist Wisdom Poetry on Meditation: Roth, OT, pp. 35-118 <u>Secondary Works</u>: Wallace, TS, pp. 3-56; Roth, “Against Cognitive Imperialism” 2/04: Combining Third and First-Person Perspectives in A New Science of Consciousness <u>Primary Texts</u>: Roth, OT, 125-71 <u>Secondary Works</u>: Wallace, TS, pp. 57-122; 177-88	Meditation Lab Reconstructed Daoist Meditations from <i>Guanzi’s</i> “Inward Training” 1/26: Unfocused Awareness of Breathing: “Coiling and Uncoiling” 1/28: Coiling and Uncoiling 1/30: Focused Awareness of Breathing: Revolving the Breath 2/02: Revolving the Breath 2/04: The One Word as Mantra: Dao 2/06: The One Word as Mantra: Dao
Weekly Seminar 2/11: The Anatomy of Consciousness and the Nature of “Flow” <u>Primary Texts</u>: Early Daoist Wisdom Poetry: Lau, LZ, chapters 1-56 <u>Secondary Works</u>: Csíkszentmihályi, <i>Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience</i>: pp. 1-116 REC: Littlejohn, xv-24 2/18: Spontaneous Attunement <u>Primary Texts</u>: Graham, CT, 43-99 <u>Secondary Works</u>: Roth, “Bimodal Mystic Experience”; Bruya, “The Rehabilitation of Spontaneity” <u>STW</u>: Thompson, WDB, Intro + pp. 1-20 <u>REC</u>: Littlejohn, 25-64	Meditation Lab Reconstructed Daoist Meditations from <i>Laozi</i> 2/09: “Bellows Breathing” 2/11: “Bellows Breathing” 2/13: “Centered Observation” 2/18: “Free and Easy Wandering” 2/20: “Fasting of the Mind”

Figure 1: Example Syllabus from “An Introduction to Contemplative Studies”

greater insight into the contemplative practices and traditions being investigated, and has positive personal effects on students, who report improved concentration and a greater sense of well-being.

Epistemological Foundations of Integrative Contemplative Pedagogy

The epistemological foundations of our distinctive pedagogy derive from a group of cognitive scientists and philosophers I call the “Varela Circle,” namely, those who trained with or were inspired by the Chilean philosopher-scientist, Francisco Varela (1946–2001). In their writings, we find the following epistemological perspectives:²²

- *Third-Person*: Traditional “objective” investigations within the humanities, sciences, arts, and social sciences;
- *Second-Person*: Focused intersubjective communication;
- *First-Person*: Subjective experience.

To these I would like to add a new fourth perspective derived from the *Zhuangzi* 莊子, from Buddhist texts of the Theravada tradition such as the *Ānāpānnasatisutta*, and from Chan tradition works such as the *Linjilu* 臨濟錄 [The Sayings of Linji]. Such works provide foundations for the practices of “self-forgetting,” “mindfulness” meditation and zen sitting meditation or *zuochan* 坐禪, from which we have derived this “no-person” (*wu ren cheng* 無人稱) perspective. It is an immediate nonintentional experience not processed through a sense of self identity. In other words, it is non-self-referential cognition: experience not processed through the ego or self. Some traditions call this nondual experience.

Of course, we are all familiar with “third-person epistemologies.” Experimental science follows this general approach, as do the humanities and the social sciences.

²² See, for example, Varela and Shear, “First-Person Methodologies: What, Why, How?” and Zahavi, “Beyond Empathy: Phenomenological Approaches to Intersubjectivity,” 166.

In contemplative studies, this epistemological perspective means that we consider contemplative topics and texts from the distanced approach of the so-called neutral or objective observer who stands apart from the topic being studied. This has led to an avalanche of scientific research on the full range of contemplative experiences, from deliberate meditation practice in religious contexts to the fully absorbed athlete or musician. Second-person epistemologies involve intersubjective communication that can include focused communication and attentive listening between two people or more, and a full appreciation of the perspective of the “other.” This elaboration of what has been called the “I-you hypothesis” asserts that human beings are fundamentally and biologically social animals deeply drawn to communicate with other human beings, something we also see, I would add, in the Confucian tradition in China and throughout East Asia from classical to modern times.²³ Cognitive philosopher, Evan Thompson, avers that individual human consciousness is formed in the dynamic relationship between self and other.²⁴

First-person epistemology is grounded in the experiencing subject. It is direct, immediate, and empirical, and forms the basis of the experiential field in which “critical subjectivity” is developed. Another way to think of it is as the constant flow of subjective experience.

Taking a closer look at first-person epistemology, and drawing from traditional Chan and modern Zen thinkers, I would like to propose that human subjectivity is a process of the constant flow of experience, in which the subject apprehends some aspect of its world in one moment, completely independent of self-identity, and then in the subsequent moment objectifies this prior moment of experience and relates it to the vast web of perceptual and conceptual categories out of which the self creates its world of experience. This means that, for an instant, conscious experience has no object. For this reason, I propose a fourth epistemology: an epistemology of “no-person.”

²³ Wallace, “Intersubjectivity in Tibetan Buddhism,” 217. Wallace defines this relationship as essentially dialogical in that one subject truly engages with the subjective reality of another person. He mentions that one of the inspirations is the classic work by Martin Buber, *I and Thou*.

²⁴ Thompson, “Empathy and Consciousness,” 1.

“No-person epistemology” constitutes an important challenge to the Cartesian view that consciousness is always “consciousness of something,” be that an object in the external world, an idea, or a perception. It is derived from the Chan and Zen epistemology that rejects the primacy of a fixed sense of self identity as foundational to the construction of subjective experience. This idea is exquisitely epitomized by the famed Kyoto School founder, the philosopher Nishida Kitaro, when he states, “it is not that experience exists because there is an individual; but that an individual exists because there is experience.”²⁵

For Nishida, individuality emerges from a continuum of non-self-referential experience. To him, this “pure experience” is both pre-reflective and immediate. It transcends both “self” and “other” in such a way that it does not contain any specific individual or personal content. Thus, “no-person epistemology” involves immediate experience in the present moment. It is non-objectified by the first-person experiencing subject. It is cognizant without judging. It can involve implicit subject-object distinctions, but not self-other distinctions. It is, first and foremost, “embodied”; that is, experienced as a momentary integrated wholeness of mind and body from which the sense of self-identity and individuality arises only in subsequent moments.

No-person epistemology in the classroom, in the meditation hall, or in the privacy of your own home involves the immediate momentary experience of in-breathing and out-breathing. It can include awareness of sound, vision, or other direct perceptions, and often can incorporate the feeling of the body as a whole without objectification. It directly apprehends whatever sense stimuli are present, including thoughts, without the interference of processing them through one’s self-identity.

In our classes at Brown, we have developed a method to empirically investigate all these epistemologies in a manner that emphasizes direct experience. We call it “Zen-Based Embodiment Training.” It is a consistent experiential method for exploring contemplative practices that is not primarily intellectual/third-person; instead, it is interoceptive, intuitive, and enactive. It involves focusing on what the

²⁵ Nishida, *An Inquiry into the Good*, xxx.

great Zen philosopher Dōgen calls the “body/mind” (Jp. *xinjin* 身心; Ch. *shenxin*)²⁶ in space and time, as well as simultaneously developing an awareness of all four dimensions of one’s experience: height, width, depth, and time. It is a method to investigate many still and moving contemplative techniques, as well as an empirical method based in Chan and Zen practice. In addition, I have drawn inspiration for this method from the great Chinese Chan master Linji Yixuan’s 臨濟義玄 (d. 866?) concept of the “True Person of No Fixed Position” (*wuwei zhenren* 無為真人),²⁷ and from the modern Japanese Zen master Kyōzan Jōshū Sasaki’s idea of “the dwelling place of the self” (Jp. *jibun no sumi basho* 住み場所).²⁸

Linji describes his “true person of no fixed position” in the following manner:

It is this very you, the formless one standing distinctly before me, shining alone—just this can expound the Dharma and listen to it! Within your body-field of the five skandhas there is a true person of no fixed position splendidly manifesting itself without being separated from you by even the width of a fine hair.²⁹

²⁶ Dōgen Kigen, Waddell and Abe, trans. and annots., *The Heart of Dōgen’s Shōbōgenzō*, 100–01. This contains a detailed discussion of the condition of “body/mind falling away” (Jp. *xinjin datsuraku* 身心脱落). Dōgen consistently sees the body and mind as unified throughout this groundbreaking work.

²⁷ The standard translation of *wuwei zhenren* is “true man of no rank.” I prefer less gendered language and, further, substitute “no fixed position” for the literal “no rank” because this is what is implied by the phrase. It is meant to not just challenge traditional hierarchies but, rather, intended to convey the idea that the fully actualized manifestation of true selfhood cannot be limited to specific time and space. This “true person” is really no person at all; it is the impersonal and transpersonal foundational consciousness shared by all sentient beings: the Buddha-nature. Partially in contrast to the abstract formulations of “Consciousness Only” or “One Mind” prevalent during his day, Linji emphasized the direct experiential aspects of this all-pervasive power or force. In verse seventeen of *The Record of Linji*, he clearly states:

Your minds and Mind are not different. This is called the “living patriarch.” If your mind was different (from Mind), its nature would be differentiable from its manifestations. But since your mind (and Mind) are not different, its nature and its manifestations are indifferentiable (adapted from Kurcher, ed. and Sasaki, trans., *The Record of Linji*, 220).

爾心心不異，名之活祖。心若有異，則性相別。心不異故，即性相不別。

²⁸ See Sasaki, *Manifesting Zen: Master Dharma Talks from Mt. Baldy*.

²⁹ Jingde chuandenglu 景德傳燈錄. T 2076.51: 447a. My translation. The received versions of this passage descend from one of two distinct textual recensions during the Song dynasty. They

是汝目前歷歷孤明。勿形段者解說法聽法。所以山僧向汝道。五蘊身田
內有無位真人。堂堂顯露無絲髮許間隔。何不識取。

Linji is here emphasizing the immediacy of selfless, nondual present-moment experience. This is the foundation for “Zen-based Embodiment Training” and can be accessed through “no-person” experience.

Sasaki Rōshi most vividly continues this emphasis on direct and immediate experience within the body/mind of the practitioner:

All of you are doing practice here. However it seems that a lot of you have forgotten, you do not know your dwelling place (*sumibasho* 住み場所). Fundamentally there is no practice divorced from the dwelling place. There is no Zen practice in which one practices apart from or separate from this dwelling place. When you appear, space appears with you. When you disappear, space disappears too. Your dwelling place goes away with you.... As I always teach you, though, you mustn't look at this two-dimensionally. You must realize that when you sit there in the Diamond Posture or the full lotus, you're acting three-dimensionally.... Don't get stuck in that two-dimensional standpoint.³⁰

Sasaki directly ties his idea of a dwelling place to Linji's concept of the “true person:”

This True Person of No Fixed Position is someone who dwells in this no position place. Each and every person has a place of dwelling. Your place of dwelling exists in opposition to that of other people. Now the dwelling place—that is the place of no fixed position—need not stand in opposition to other dwelling places. No position, no opposition: this place of no position and this person of no position need not stand in opposition to anything. This

replace the phrase “within your body-field of the five skandhas” with the much more vivid and now much better-known phrase “...on your lump of red flesh” (赤肉團上 Ch. *zhiroutuan shang*). Just because it became more popular does not mean it is the original or correct phrase. I choose the more descriptive “within your body-field of the five skandhas” because it makes clear that this true person is not located in the heart, the frequent interpretation of “lump of red flesh,” and instead pervades the entire body/mind complex. In my opinion, this popular variant reading has led to untold numbers of misinterpretations of this passage.

³⁰ Sasaki, *Manifesting Zen*, 24

one True Person of No Fixed Position pervades the world regardless of nationality – French, German, Chinese, Egyptian.³¹

For the Japanese Zen tradition as it developed in the twentieth century through Nishida, Sasaki, and many others, conscious experience is a constantly flowing continuum. This continuum alternates between a fully embodied, three-dimensional, non-self-referential, non-dual experience, and the immediately following objectification, as well as the further objectification during subsequent seconds of time. In these subsequent seconds, further categorization of experience occurs and helps to provide the rich context of our experiential worlds. In the Cartesian universe, such a vision of consciousness does not make sense. But it is time to see that Cartesian epistemology is not the only epistemology. Doing this enables us to gain a clearer perspective on precisely the types of egotistical attachments that facilitate the biases that prevent subjective perspectives from being fully effective contributors to the advancement of human knowledge. Hence, no-person epistemologies are important for the development of what we have been calling “critical subjectivity.” This not only emerges from Chan and Zen foundations; it is also substantiated by recent scientific research on Zen meditation and the experience of nonduality.

Scientific Research and No-Person Experience

There are a number of recent scientific research studies that support “no-person epistemologies.” I will present summaries of three such important investigations: the work of theoretical neuroscientist, James Austin; the cognitive neuroscientific studies by the Richard Davidson group at the University of Wisconsin-Madison; and the innovative new clinical mindfulness research at the University of Utah led by Eric Garland.

Austin describes how contemplative practices, particularly zazen, shift the adept from egocentric neurological pathways to less self-referential allocentric ones.

³¹ Sasaki, *Manifesting Zen*, 106–7.

The former rely on a conscious structure of self-identity and ask the question: “where is an object in the external world in relation to me?” Touch and proprioception are essential aids to this process. The neurological pathways run from the upper portion of the occipital lobe, through parietal lobe and into the upper frontal regions. Allocentric pathways are other-referential, asking “where is the object?” and utilize vision and hearing. This contrasting neurological pathway runs through the lower portions of the brain, from the temporal-parietal junction to the interior frontal cortex. The egocentric network utilizes voluntary focused attention and top-down processing, running through the intra-parietal sulcus and the frontal eye field. The allocentric network makes use of involuntary reflexive attention and “bottom-up processing,” and includes the brain regions known as the temporo-parietal junction and the inferior frontal cortex.³² For Austin, Zen practice shifts our predominantly egocentric pathways to allocentric pathways, hence facilitating what I have herein called “no-person experience.”

In an important field overview article, Cortland Dahl, Antoine Lutz, and Richard Davidson present a number of major methods of meditation, dividing them into three categories: attentional, constructive, and deconstructive. The latter category is most relevant to our inquiry. Its non-dual-oriented practices are designed to elicit a shift into a mode of experiencing in which the cognitive structures of self/other and subject/object are no longer the dominant mode of experience.³³ Non-dual-oriented practices often emphasize the importance of releasing attempts to control, direct, or alter the mind in any way, and also serve to undo the reification of a witnessing “observer” who is separate from the objects of awareness. According to these authors, the goal of all practice in the deconstructive family is not simply to maintain awareness of different aspects of experience, as we find with the attentional family, but rather to gain direct, experiential insight into the nature and dynamics of experience.

Finally, the Garland Research Team at the University of Utah (and now at the University of California-San Diego) has done important research into experiences

³² Austin, “The Thalamic Gateway: How Meditative Training of Attention Evolves toward Selfless Transformations of Consciousness.”

³³ Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson, “Reconstructing and Deconstructing the Self: Cognitive Mechanisms in Meditation Practice.”

of “nondual awareness.” Individuals who report more frequent non-dual awareness show a pattern of personal characteristics that include a greater capacity to decenter from experience. They report that decentering may loosen the boundaries of the self by encouraging a metacognitive perspective in which one disidentifies from self-referential cognition, and thereby de-reifies the self as the subject of experience.³⁴

This short summary shows that relevant scientific research accepts the plausibility and, further, supports the veridicality of “no-person epistemologies.” It is possible to have subjective experience that is not biased by the sense of self-identity or egotism of the individual person. This can be possible through the kind of epistemology, grounded in the practice of “Zen-Based Embodiment Training,” that we developed in the contemplative studies program at Brown, and through traditional Buddhist and non-Buddhist contemplative practices.

Conclusion: Critical Subjectivity Revisited

Through “Zen-Based Embodiment Training,” it is possible to develop a consistent method to investigate contemplative practices that can serve as the foundation for a truly critical subjectivity. As discussed, we can add a fourth epistemic aspect to the study of conscious experience, the “no-person” perspective. Through it, we gain insight into important aspects of the moment-to-moment flow of experience that is immediate and non-self-referential. I suggest this non-self-referential and immediate experience is the empirical foundation of the Chan and Zen idea of the “true person of no fixed position”: an unbiased flowing cognition constantly aware of what Davidson calls the “dynamics of experience.”³⁵

Yet this experience, which by its very nature is non-dual and non-objectified, does not depend on the idea of the “true person.” That is, although it is the

³⁴ Hanley, Nakamura, and Garland, “The Nondual Awareness Dimensional Assessment (NADA): New Tools to Assess Nondual Traits and States of Consciousness Occurring Within and Beyond the Context of Meditation.”

³⁵ Dahl, Lutz, and Davidson, “Reconstructing and Deconstructing the Self,” 519.

quintessential Chan/Zen experience, one can have such experiences without any knowledge of Chan or Zen. This “true person” can be systematically developed through deconstructive, allocentric contemplative practices from any tradition that enable the development of a “no-person epistemology.” This no-person epistemology can then be the basis for a complete first-person integration of all four epistemological aspects of human conscious experience, to form a critical subjectivity that enables consciousness to study itself through direct experience in the present moment and analytical objectification in the moments that follow.

Most importantly, this includes the historical and philosophical contextualization of contemplative experiences within their cultures of origins. This is an essential complement to the scientific research that deracinates and then “reracinates” contemplative practices in order to study their effects on consciousness and improve human health and wellbeing. The deconstructive, decentering allocentric practices I have discussed are extremely valuable to us as scholars, researchers, and as human beings. They facilitate the engagement of subjective experience while minimizing the biases that have delegitimized the value of subjective epistemologies in the sciences and humanities. The time has come to reincorporate these important perspectives in a new “critical subjectivity” that will help us navigate the challenges we face today at this critical juncture of the twenty-first century.

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