REASON’S TRACES

Identity and Interpretation
in Indian & Tibetan Buddhist Thought

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5. The Sensualist, the Sage, and the Dancing Girl’s Brow: Personal Identity and Self-Cultivation

*The true mystery of the world is the visible, not the invisible.*
—Oscar Wilde

*It is clear now* that philosophical disputes in ancient and medieval India surrounding problems of the self and personal identity sometimes anticipated modern Western discussions. Locke and Hume had their counterparts among Buddhist thinkers who sought to explain apparent personal identity through time by treating persons as continuous streams of short-lived events, while the opposing non-Reductionist theories of the self were anticipated in the writings of the Buddhists’ Brahmanical opponents. Parallels such as these between the Indian and Western philosophical traditions rightly invite comparative inquiry, but this in turn seems generally to invite a question of great breadth that we have not yet succeeded in addressing with much clarity: if Indian and Western philosophy are in some respects so similar, why are they at the same time so very different? If the apparent similarities obtaining between the two traditions incline us to a strong version of anti-relativism, asserting that human thought is always and everywhere similar in its essential features, then we perhaps have reason to re-examine with some skepticism our own presuppositions and methods: just what, after all, ought to count as an “essential feature” of human thought? If we drop this qualification, we are left with a platitude (“human thought is always and everywhere similar”), and one that is—at least on some readings—likely false to boot.¹

The case of Indian philosophy is in some respects unlike that confronted by students of classical Chinese thought. It is sometimes argued that China offers us an intellectual universe largely diverse from that of the West, and that apparent resemblances between them should be considered with circumspection. China invites ruminations on radical incommensurability,
on the problems of interpreting and explaining an altogether alien realm on the possibility that something like the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis might be correct.\textsuperscript{2} India, on the other hand, beguiles us with an appearance of familiarity set in an alien landscape; and this, of course, leads us to wonder whether the similarities we thought we had perceived were merely imagined or were in some sense basic and "real." Assuming that this is not just an illusion, does the perceived conformity orient us to genuine universals of thought, or does it only reflect something peculiar about the Indo-European languages? (It has sometimes been suggested, for instance, that the Indo-European copula might be a factor here.\textsuperscript{3})

It will be urged that India developed sophisticated and critical approaches to epistemology and metaphysics, often resembling our own; but then why, given the close attention to conceptual analysis in those spheres, the conspicuous absence of sustained philosophical discussion in such areas as ethics and politics?\textsuperscript{4} Or that India elaborated advanced systems of logic and the philosophy of language; but in that case why are the modalities of necessity, possibility, and actuality seemingly neglected?\textsuperscript{5} India, to mention one specific example, produced arguments very much like the standard Western arguments for the existence of god (excepting of course their modal versions); but why is it that the philosophers drop these so quickly, to elaborate instead a series of arguments that turn on the revealed status of Vedic lore?\textsuperscript{6} Regarded from this perspective, Indian philosophy begins to look like a misshapen version of Western philosophy, like Western philosophy seen through a distorting lens.

Part of the problem we confront here stems from the relative lack of attention contemporary students of Indian philosophy have paid to the context of the development of Indian philosophy. I do not propose now to enter upon a lengthy digression on contextualization.\textsuperscript{7} Some, of course, will hold that when we are discussing philosophical arguments, consideration of context is to all intents and purposes irrelevant: we should focus just on the precise content of the argument, on the crispest possible formulation of questions bearing upon its soundness and validity, abstracting the philosophical meat from its contextual shell as perfectly as is possible. Issues of context just muddy the waters.\textsuperscript{8} I am willing to accept, for the sake of the discussion, that this sometimes may in fact be a legitimate position to adopt; I don’t think, for example, that reflection on the logical entailments of Leibniz’s Law requires us to worry overly much about the man Leibniz, or about his historical situation. But clearly this is not always the case: if I wish to inquire more broadly into the concept of identity in Leibniz’s thought, I
am inevitably going to delve into The Monadology and The Theodicy, and any non-superficial consideration of these will in turn force me to study seventeenth-century thought more generally. The topic for our present discussion, personal identity, is certainly an instance in which some measure of contextualization must be countenanced. It matters very much to our reading of Locke, for example, that we understand what he means when he insists upon what he terms the forensic character of the concept of the person. We cannot fully comprehend Hume’s real disquiet over his own conclusions about personal identity, if we do not grasp the manner in which that question is framed within Hume’s concerns regarding persons as moral and historical agents. Derek Parfit’s intriguing puzzles of identity seem mere brain-teasers, unless we take seriously their relevance to his ethical reflections. The point I am trying to make here has, of course, been very prominent in recent philosophical writing on personal identity, above all in Charles Taylor’s magisterial Sources of the Self:

As a student of Indian philosophy, this leads me to ask how we ought to frame the problem of personal identity in its Indian setting. What are the considerations in virtue of which we might understand how the problem was felt by Indian thinkers? In attempting to make some progress here, I offer in what follows not a sustained analysis of a single aspect of the Indian discussion, but rather three vignettes, which I hope will cooperate to suggest some of the broad contours of the larger picture, and so perhaps indicate something of the richness of the problem and of the sources that must be considered in relation to it. The three topics that I shall consider here are: the identity of persons as narrated in literature, in this case in a poem of the Buddhist author Aśvaghoṣa (first or second century C.E.); aspects of the debate between adherents of the Hindu Nyāya school and the Buddhists concerning the unity of consciousness, as exemplified in a peculiar trope, the “dancing girl’s brow,” which is discussed by the philosophers Uddyotakara (c. 600) and Śāntarakṣita (c. 750); and the implications of the Indian Buddhist interest in poetics for our conception of the formation of the educated person. What I hope to suggest is that, while there is indeed a correspondence between certain of the formal features of classical Indian and modern Western debates on personal identity, these common concerns are framed in interestingly disparate ways.
Beautiful Nanda

The figure of Nanda is well situated for us by the poet Asvaghosa. The handsome son of a royal family of great antiquity, glory, and piety, he is Siddhartha's younger half-brother, and it is Siddhartha’s return—long after renouncing the palace to become the Awakened One, the Buddha who has realized the peace of nirvana—that marks the beginning of a turn in Nanda’s own life. For Nanda has been up to now content to situate himself in the realm of the senses, and even as his brother preaches his message of spiritual liberation to their common clansmen, Nanda, in Asvaghosa’s words, “remained in the palace with his darling, with nothing to do but make love” (SN, 4.1).

Asvaghosa marks the complementarity and the opposition of the siblings early in his poem, soon after describing their birth. He metaphorically describes king Suddodana’s nurturing of them as resembling wealth (artha) that is used to uphold moral and religious obligations (dharma) on the one hand while nourishing the sensual pleasures (kama) on the other (SN, 2.60). There is perhaps no statement in the literature that indicates more concisely the core of classical Hindu value theory. We must by no means read Asvaghosa’s words at this point as involving any tacit condemnation of sensual pleasure, for, in the particular context of the ancient Indian ideal of kingship, Epicurean refinement was always held to be a virtue, one to be harmonized with the proper fulfillment of mundane and religious obligations in the life of the cultivated individual. It is only with Sakyamuni’s later rejection of his princely estate in order to achieve the freedom of buddhahood that we find a distinctive and destabilizing virtue introduced into that potential harmony of the values—specifically freedom (moksa) itself. For in Indian thought freedom was counterpoised to religious duty, as well as to both material prosperity and the cultivation of the senses, and thus was placed in an asymmetrical relationship with those goods as they were often traditionally affirmed. By leaving the palace, Sakyamuni had in effect issued a declaration of spiritual autonomy, a refusal to remain entangled within the radically heteronomous condition of ordinary worldly life. That condition, requiring an unending expenditure of energy in an inevitably futile effort to maintain or improve one’s station, was thought in the final analysis to be no more than a painful round of self-defeating desire and fear. All of the classical Indian systems of salvation agreed about this. Beautiful Nanda, however, is still happy to remain in the round, gleefully relishing imaginative love-play with his wonderfully beautiful wife. Asvaghosa
intended no doubt that in Nanda we should see ourselves, both in his affinity with the Buddha, and in his actual inability to comprehend the deeper significance of that affinity.
One of the games Nanda enjoys with his love, Sundarī, involves the mirror that he holds for her as she makes herself up (SN, 4.13–22). Her reflected beauty, both present and removed from its source, seems to be within his grasp but forever slipping away from it. The motif of the mirror, in Āśvaghoṣa's narration, is suggestive of the diaphanous and ephemeral quality of worldly enjoyment, as also of its capacity to entice us to unending distraction. The world glitters and sparkles, but it is not substantially real. So immersed in their mirror-game are Nanda and Sundarī, however, that they are caught entirely unawares when one day Śākyamuni arrives at their household in the course of his begging rounds (SN, 4.24–25). The servants, too preoccupied with preparing unguents and garlands and all that is required for the delight of their master and his lady, take no notice of the sage as he reaches the threshold, and he, perceiving at once that he is unnoticed, quietly departs and proceeds on his way. As he walks off, one of the servant-girls recognizes what has happened and runs to tell Nanda, who is dismayed that such a breach of hospitality toward his own brother, the spiritual mentor of his clan, should have taken place. Nanda, after all, for all his immersion in his own enjoyments, is nonetheless a Śākya prince, and his devotion to eros has by no means annulled his devotion to his family, and to the brother who is now well honored for his attainments on a path opposite to Nanda's own. He dresses in haste and takes his leave from Sundari, who agrees to let him depart "so long as you return before my make-up has dried" (SN, 4.34). Thinking of her words and at the same time of his need to make amends for the rude reception accorded the Buddha, he sets off, and suddenly finds himself torn by his own feelings, "seized by his lust, even as he was drawn on by a yearning for the Dharma" (SN, 4.44). It is precisely here that Āśvaghoṣa establishes the dramatic center of his poem: it is the story of a man who discovers to his dismay that, far from being the carefree playboy he thought himself to be, he is profoundly divided against himself.

Nanda catches up with the sage and, with considerable embarrassment, proffers his apology and prepares to return home before Sundari's make-up sets (SN, 4. 40–5.14). But the Buddha, knowing Nanda's mind, gives him his begging-bowl, that symbol of renunciation that is filled by the faithful to sustain the ascetic (SN, 5. 11). The empty begging-bowl, a sign of one's refusal to grasp, represents in Āśvaghoṣa's poem the mendicant's attainment of the only really substantial nutrition that is to be found, that of the enlightened spirit, and it stands here in implicit contrast with the mirror, which, though deliberately grasped, can hold only fickle reflections.
When the Buddha at last addresses Nanda, his gentle self-assurance establishes a counterpoint to the latter's confused state of mind. "The world," he tells him, "is no more satisfied with the senses than is a fire, stirred by the breeze, with oblations" (SN, 5.23). Beautiful Nanda is quite shaken by the impact his brother's calm presence makes upon him, and, thinking to change his ways, renounces the worldly life to become a monk in the order.

Conversions, though they may be decisive events, are seldom straightforward and untroubled. Having entered into mendicant life, Nanda continues to mull over what he has lost and grows despondent, finding himself immersed in memory and in longing. He craves to return to his beloved, and though outwardly a member of the order, in his heart he is "neither monk nor householder" (SN, 7.49). This is not to say that he is just caught between opposing roles; for Nanda's dilemma, though certainly brought to a head by the conflict between monastic and lay roles, is much less about the part he should play than it is about the condition of his self-understanding. Nanda's conflict is fundamentally a crisis not over role, but over his very identity.\(^{21}\)

Desiring nothing more than to reestablish his own equilibrium, he reflects on the sages and heroes of legend who sacrificed possessions, status, sanity, and sometimes even life itself for the women they loved (SN, 7.24–52). He concludes that his own course must be similar, that it is a sham for him to remain a monk. His state of mind becomes known to a fellow member of the order, who tries to convince Nanda to reconsider by lecturing him on the evil nature of women (SN, canto 8). Regardless of AsVaghosa's real intentions here, it is to his credit as a poet that this harangue does not have the desired effect.\(^{22}\)

The Buddha eventually comes to learn of his brother's imminent departure from the order and decides that he himself must intervene (SN, 10.1–2). He takes Nanda on a visionary journey during the course of which, among other things, Nanda comes to behold the beauty of the celestial nymphs. This vision inspires him to adhere to a chaste and virtuous life in order to acquire the positive \textit{karman} needed to ensure his rebirth in a heaven populated by such beauties (SN, 10.3–64). He becomes zealous in his religious practice, inspired by the expectation of future bliss. After some time, however, his hypocrisy is exposed, and it finally dawns on him that in both his former relationship with his wife and his aspiration for the pleasures of heaven, he was impelled by a passion for objects, a passion that inevitably brings loss, frustration, and pain (SN, canto 11). The Buddha, by granting him a vision of paradise, had not intended that Nanda should merely alter the objects
of his thirst, but that he should become aware of his own proclivity to indulge in self-defeating objectifications. It is the turn in Nanda’s inner trajectory, attending this discovery, that sets him upon the course that will
culminate in his attainment of genuine enlightenment. Nanda attains that realization in the poem’s seventeenth canto, and it is here that the normative doctrine of the selflessness of all conditioned things is at last underscored.

The construction of Nanda represents in crucial respects a fluid and open conception of persons. As the motif of his beloved’s mirror image suggests, the person is disclosed in its aspects, and these are tenuous and unsure. Likewise, Nanda, his wife, and his brother are all poetic constructions; tropes and figures convey their personæ in the mirror of Aśvaghosha’s words. In this reflected image of his spiritual and visionary path, Nanda changes and grows, and the person who had at first been restlessly immersed in sensual delight, in the end becomes a sage at peace with the truth of selflessness.

In Aśvaghosha’s telling of it, then, Nanda’s story may be read so as to accentuate the fragility and mutability of the self. A person may be rent by profound conflict, and may change in unanticipated ways. In such circumstances, to know a person means not to know some fixed and determinate thing, but to be familiar with some part of a narrative, to have followed crucial developments through time. Let us note, however, that this is still a very far cry from the negation of the person, or the denial of the self, which is frequently (and for good reason, as we know) regarded as the most characteristic of Buddhist philosophical doctrines. If Nanda’s tale is plausible to us at all, it is only because we understand there to be some person, Nanda, who is torn against himself and is the subject of the great changes he endures. Aśvaghosha’s poem makes sense, paradoxically, only on the condition that there are persons who are capable of realizing the truth of their selflessness.

The poet in fact deliberately emphasizes this apparent contradiction. For after Nanda describes his experience of enlightenment to his brother, the latter affirms Nanda’s realization, saying:

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Today you are a genuine renunciate, O conqueror of the self,
Who has mastered his own self;
For the fine renunciation possessed by the conquered self,
Is not found where the self is fickle, the senses uncontrolled
(SN, 18.23).
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The fact that the word “self” (ätman) is repeated four times in this verse is surely intended to fix our attention upon it, to highlight both the puzzlement that attends this term, and the Buddha’s resolution of that puzzlement
in a philosophical teaching of selflessness, which corresponds to a practical achievement of self-mastery. Passages similar to the one just quoted have been frequently seized upon by those who are of the opinion that the Buddha's teaching involved some sort of "hidden doctrine" of the self, but Āśvaghoṣa surely is more subtle than that. For numerous passages here and in his other great poem, the Buddhacarita, establish that, in perfect accord with the early Buddhist philosophical mainstream, Āśvaghoṣa will in fact countenance no objectification of the self whatsoever; and if the assertion that "there is a self but its nature is hidden" is not an objectification of the self, I am not certain what is. Relinquishing objectification entails not an esoteric doctrine, but genuine silence. It is in a spirit of gently ironic playfulness that one who has realized that peace and silence may now be spoken of as one who has "conquered the self."

The tale of Nanda thus may seem to have been contrived so as to propagate a peculiarly Buddhist message. Its emphasis on the primacy of Śākyamuni's teaching and the enlightenment to be realized through it undoubtedly impress upon the reader Āśvaghoṣa's own religious commitment. Moreover, Āśvaghoṣa's stated views on the self appear to be perfectly consistent with normative early Buddhist doctrine. Nevertheless, it is not at all certain that any fundamental difference divides Buddhist from Hindu narrations of persons. A consideration of David Shulman's wonderfully perceptive reading of the tale of Nala, an episode from the Mahābhārata, makes this at once clear. It is a tale "about a man who lost his 'self'—along with everything else that was his," in the course of episodes in which he finds himself quadruplicated by the gods, only to be later transformed into a dwarf, and at one point seized by the very spirit of Kali, the dark age in the history of the world, who is also the demon of defeat in the game of dice. In the space available here, it will not be possible to summarize Shulman's arguments in detail; some words extracted from his conclusions will have to suffice:

Nala stumbles, is possessed, goes mad, careens wildly and foolishly from one terrible mistake to the next...It is an internal process, characterized by conscious alienation, the perceived presence of alien being within.

The self, as Nala knows it, is a point of conflagration. Man, at his best, most knowledgable, is a self-consuming, hence self-transcending being. In this system, the words "not I" are the strongest possible affirmation.
For Nala, or for the poets who sang his story, the self itself is other; possession by Kali is not a moment to be reclaimed or integrated but an awakening, through intoxication and madness, to this fragmented alienness within us and to the process of self-consummation, in a double sense, that is felt to be constitutive of human experience.\textsuperscript{26}

Any attempt, therefore, to find a simple correlation between Hindu and Buddhist philosophical doctrines of the self and their narrations of persons is probably doomed to failure. In \textit{Aśvaghoṣa}'s poems, as in other Buddhist narratives, we discover that we must attribute some sort of personhood to the characters whose lives are narrated just in order to make coherent sense of the tale; and this despite the explicit affirmation of the philosophical doctrine of no-self. In the Nala episode, on the other hand, we find the entire notion of the self problematized to a frighteningly radical degree. The stories of Nanda and Nala are stories of liquid selves, selves that can shatter and break, if not in a Parfitian sense, then nonetheless to a degree that calls the receptive reader's own assurances of selfhood into question. To be sure, neither Hindu nor Buddhist poets were primarily concerned to generate metaphysical puzzles of personal identity. Both wished us to hold that the persons we meet at either end of a particular tale are in some sense the same—rake Nanda and sage Nanda, young prince Nala and old chief Nala. In either case, the integrity of the narrative is predicated upon the assumption that personal identity, though fluid, fragile and endlessly puzzling, is nevertheless part of the way in which we make sense of the stories we are told, and of those that we live.

Some may wish to argue that \textit{Aśvaghoṣa}, as a Brahman seeking to present Buddhism in terms acceptable to the tradition in which he was raised, would naturally have assimilated the Buddhist story to Brahmanical models. This is no doubt in some respect true, but it remains nevertheless the case that Indian Buddhist and Hindu Sanskrit narratives belong to a single continuum, and that no decisive mark of separation, besides sectarian self-identification, can be found to set them apart. Indian tales, both Buddhist and Brahmanical, often seem to emphasize the surprising and frequently disquieting transformations to which persons may be subject—transformations requiring them to become somehow other, to become alien unto themselves—while at the same time challenging us to puzzle over just what it is that has endured such great change. It was left to the philosophers, not to the poets, to seek more perfect clarity and definition, to attempt to resolve the puzzles of our protean selves.
Indian philosophers were interested in the problem of personal identity in part because, as we have seen, the identity of persons was sometimes thought to be a problem in Indian culture more generally. This is not so glib an observation as it may initially seem, for many of the problems philosophers tackle, in India as in the West, appear to be problems for philosophers alone. It is possible to imagine, I suppose, a community in which roles are so well defined and life so harmonious that, except perhaps for a small number of specialized thinkers who are interested in the logic of identity, no one ever gives much thought to the question of personal identity. (The specialists, for example, may have discovered Leibniz’s Law in quite another context and then asked, “now, how does this apply to persons?”) In modern Western thought, however, as Charles Taylor has argued eloquently and at length, the puzzles formulated by Locke and by Hume have sustained our interest because they are profoundly intertwined with a rich network of questions about our identity, which ramify throughout our political and moral lives, and which are reflected throughout our literature, too. I would like to suggest that something similar was likely the case in India; in other words, that differing philosophical approaches to the problem of personal identity not only marked off, from a dogmatic perspective, the boundaries between diverse schools of thought, but also reflected deeply troubling concerns. These included questions of social status in relation to caste and lifestyle, of ritual purity, and of temporal and spiritual freedom or the lack thereof.

Literary and historical narratives may permit a way of ingress into the lived worlds of (spatially or temporally) distant communities. For the historian of philosophy they are valuable precisely because they permit us to assess, to some extent at least, the relationship between the topics addressed by the philosopher, and the issues confronting the world in which the philosopher lived and thought. Some familiarity with fifth- and fourth-century B.C.E. Athenian political life, and with the role of the sophists in the education of its elite, for instance, are crucial to our reading of Plato. From another perspective, however, it is the task of the philosopher to reduce a problem to its most simple and abstract terms; in this respect, it may seem unimportant to distinguish very sharply between, say, arguments concerning the logic of predication, and those focusing upon the rights of possible persons. The levelling that seems to occur here (“all p-s and q-s are created equal”) is, of course, a sort of philosophical illusion: all problems may be
equal to the extent that they share certain formal features, though we know that in real life they are not so. Abstraction of the sort I am referring to must, I think, be borne in mind in connection with our present subject matter; for when we turn from the problem of personal identity in the context of classical Indian narrative to some aspects of its philosophical treatment, we notice a distinct change of emphasis. In brief, we may characterize this by saying that, whereas the poets seemed to accept and indeed to accentuate the very problematic character of the issue, the philosophers wished to find a clear and, so they hoped, unproblematic resolution to it.

Let us recall now that Nanda, when we first met him, was subject to powerful and sometimes conflicting desires. Does it shed any light on the metaphysical problems we are considering to remark that whatever else we may be, we are subjects possessing desires? Among the Brahmanical philosophical traditions of India, as we have seen elsewhere, the Nyāya school of epistemologists certainly thought this point to be crucial. This emerges clearly among the arguments that are developed in the work of Vātsyāyana (c. 400 C.E.) concerning the proof of the self's existence. His remarks take the form of a comment on Nyāyasūtra (Aphorisms of Reason), 1.1.10, the locus classicus of the Nyāya attempts to prove the reality of the self. The aphorism in question reads:

Desire and hatred, willful effort, pleasure and pain, and knowledge are the marks of the self. (icchā-dveṣa-prayatna-sukha-duḥkha-jñāṇāny ātmanno liṅgam.)

Vātsyāyana's comment begins:

The self, having [previously] acquired pleasure through contact with an object of a certain type, desires to possess an object of that very type whenever it sees it. It is the mark of the self that this desire-to-possess occurs, because a single seer synthesizes (pratisamdhā-) the seeing. For even with respect to a determinate object, that [synthesis] cannot be based solely upon discrete mental events (buddhibhedā), e.g., [the discrete mental events associated with] different bodies. 27

The argument is then developed by substituting for desire various other sensations, volitions, and psychological states, in order to drive home the contention that the relationships holding among these states "would not be
the case if there were not one seer of the many [mental and perceptual acts] that synthesizes the seeing.” Vātsyāyana’s intuitions accord with those we have brought to bear in our reading of the Saundarananda—we found there that we had to imagine some one, namely Nanda, who both desired Sundari and renounced her. Nanda, as Aśvaghosa’s narrative center, was in this sense equivalent to Vātsyāyana’s philosophical center, the single seer.

For the philosophers of the early Nyāya tradition the existence of a unique, substantial self was thus established by the phenomenology of the individual subject’s synthetic experience of such states as desires and so on. Synthetic cohesion (pratisandhāna), that is, demonstrates not, as the Buddhists would have it, that there are some regular principles in virtue of which discrete events hang together to form what we conventionally label a “person,” but rather confirms that there must be some one thing, the self, causing the synthesized events to cohere. But just how is it, we may ask, that these states of the ego cause us to know of a substantial self with which we are not otherwise directly acquainted? Vātsyāyana’s commentator, Uddyotakara, thought that in fact we are each directly acquainted with our own unique self; hence, in responding to this question, he was attempting to establish that reason also confirms the existence of the self, independent of introspection. In adopting this tack, he was rebutting the objections of his Buddhist opponents, by whom an appeal to putative non-inferential self-knowledge would have been rebuked as an instance of petitio principii.

The attempt to adduce reasons that demonstrate the substantial existence of the self was, as we have seen, addressed by Vātsyāyana in arguing that singularity of agency is established because desire and other such states share a common orientation to the same objects as memory, and that this can only be explained by assuming them to be states of the same knowing subject. This synthetic cohesion would not occur were there a diversity of agents, corresponding to the diversity of objects and diversity of stimuli involved. It is here that, though taking as his point of departure Vātsyāyana’s argument, which concerns primarily the identity of consciousness through time, that is, the problem of personal identity, Uddyotakara subtly shifts the argument, asking us instead to consider the unity of consciousness at one time:

[If there were no singularity of agency] there would be no synthesis of diverse agents, diverse objects, and diverse stimuli. For the cognitions of form, taste, odor, and texture would in that case not be synthesized; for it would not be true [under that
description] that “what form I have seen, that is this texture, and what texture I have felt, that is the form I see.”

That is to say, assuming no identity of agency, there can be no synthesis of the diverse cognitions of form, odor, etc., into an organic whole—in what sense, then, could we understand ourselves to be both seeing and smelling the same rose? We would not be able to say that the very object I see is the very same object I feel, unless we can affirm that it is one “I” that does both the seeing and the feeling. To drive this point home, Uddyotakara sets out what must be one of the most colorful examples in the history of philosophy:

Devadatta’s cognitions of visible form, flavor, odor, and texture bear the mark of one and many; for they are synthesized by the cognition “I.” Similarly, the cognitions of many persons, who have previously entered into an agreement, [are linked together] during the single instant when the dancing-girl raises her brow.

Śāntarāksita’s successor Kamalaśīla, commenting upon Uddyotakara’s argument as a prelude to his master’s criticism of it, explains it as follows:

[Uddyotakara’s] meaning is this: just as many might enter into an agreement, saying, “As soon as the dancing-girl raises her brow let us all throw fine fabric [onto the stage as a gesture of our common approval],” so that the many agents and their many cognitions—“I have seen [her raise her brow], I have seen it”—are synthetically united because of the singularity of the sign, the raising of the brow; so, too, in the present case, cognitions with many different objects should be synthesized owing to the singularity of a sign, and that singular sign is the self. The synthesis, moreover, is of many cognitions, such as “I have seen, I have heard,” which are linked together by the characteristic of possession by a single knower. But in the case of the dancing-girl raising her brow, the cognitions [of the many spectators] are connected because they have a common object. In all these cases, a “synthesis” is spoken of whenever there is a relationship among cognitions, some single feature being considered the reason.

Uddyotakara’s fundamental intuition here clearly develops Vātsyāyana’s assertion that, whenever we have reason to think of many things as being
somehow unified, then those many things must all have some *one* thing in common. This intuition is a very ancient one in Indian thought, and informs many passages in even the earliest Upaniṣads.\textsuperscript{31} In the present instance, Uddyotakara seeks to stress in particular our repeating property of egoity—our punctuated consciousness of an “I”—which, he holds, may be interpreted as a *sign*, one signifying an enduring, substantial self. Besides the philosophical content of the argument, however, what is of interest here is also an implicit gesture made through the example of the dancer: in Uddyotakara’s philosophical ruminations, the play of sign and signification unfolds in the world of the theater. Philosophical reflection, like drammaurgy and poetics, finds its foundations in semiotics and its expression in the arts of performance. Through the dancing girl’s brow, Uddyotakara, the philosophical dramatist, appears to be winking at us.

Śantarakṣīta and Kamalāśīla, in their response, in fact do accept much of Uddyotakara’s argument. They affirm, as perhaps Hume did not, that at any one time there is indeed a single center of consciousness, and one that is conscious, all at once, of the various objects of the senses and of the intellect.\textsuperscript{32} In this Śantarakṣīta fully agrees with Uddyotakara: what the latter set out to prove, he says, is therefore accepted as proven.\textsuperscript{33}

Śantarakṣīta, however, in accord with much of Buddhist scholastic tradition, wishes us to imagine that at any time $t$, a given person-continuum may be subject to an instantaneous act of consciousness (the so-called “condition of immediate continuity”) by which the contents of immediately precedent sensory and mental acts are synthesized. When such an act occurs, its phenomenological character is one of unity and egocentricity, and thus, despite the ephemeral character of such consciousness-events, we are generally subject to an illusion of unified and enduring selfhood. As Kamalaśīla tells us:

Moreover, if what is proven is only that, generally speaking, there is a causal precedent, then what [Uddyotakara] has set out to prove is in any case accepted... Thus, from a single succeeding act of consciousness, which is the condition of immediate continuity, the [preceding] occurrence of the six consciousnesses of the eye, etc., are clearly known. So it is that what sees the dancing-girl’s figure also hears the sounds of the drum and other instruments, smells aromas like that of the blue lotus, tastes camphor and so forth, feels the breeze from the fan, etc., and thinks of presenting a gift of cloth. It is not correct to assert that this is
due to extreme rapidity of movement, as when one sees a circle formed by a whirling torch.\textsuperscript{34}

Thus, this is not a question of our somehow running together a stream of discrete events, as we do the frames of a film, for that would suggest there to be an enduring observer standing outside of the stream, who perceives objects blurred into apparent identity. For Śántarakṣita and Kamalaśīla, by contrast, \textit{phenomenal} identity is \textit{phenomenologically} as good as \textit{real} identity, and hence not blurred or fuzzy. Because self-consciousness, the subject’s apparent awareness of the “I,” is a unique property of all acts of intellectual consciousness, Śántarakṣita holds that there will be a phenomenal unity of consciousness whenever an act of intellectual consciousness occurs, but there will never be a \textit{real} unity of consciousness in time. Though there is indeed a conscious subject, there is no persisting self, and so no real personal identity through time. Kant provided a somewhat simpler model with his example of a row of billiard balls, each communicating its force to the one that follows.\textsuperscript{35} Uddyotakara’s charming example of the dancing-girl’s gesture, too, can be redeployed to illustrate Śántarakṣita’s case, for here it is a question of an atomic, ephemeral event, standing in a one–many relationship with the perceptions and responses that it arouses. There is neither real unity, nor real identity through time, to be exemplified in this way.

Śántarakṣita and Uddyotakara remain, nevertheless, participants in a common theater of discourse. Its dramatic conventions provoke varied interpretations of the reality they are presumed to disclose. But one cannot hold—as so often one imagines one can on reading philosophy as also criticism of the theater—that they were not even present at the same performance.

\textit{Authoring the Self: Literary Composition and Hyper-refinement}

In the study of ancient and medieval India, whose are the names we know? Whose \textit{identities} are in some sense recalled? It is not difficult to list the main types who have escaped the obliteration imposed by time: there are the sages and kings, the poets, philosophers, and grammarians. Enduring identity was won in India through imposing deeds of worldly or spiritual conquest, or through surpassing mastery of language—the Sanskrit language above all. Āśvaghoṣa, in singing to us of the Buddha, his family, and his disciples, recalls for us the identity of a sage, and those glorified by association with him, but we recall Āśvaghoṣa himself thanks to his poetic virtuosity
alone. Similarly, Śāntarakṣita and Uddyotakara are enduring presences in the domain of Indian philosophy, thanks to the skill with which they articulated their thought upon the shared stage of the Sanskrit language. These observations suggest, then, one further dimension to the problem of personal identity in the Indian Buddhist context, which we shall explore briefly here. In addition to the construction of the person in narrative, and the deconstruction of the person in philosophical analysis, we may speak of the refinement of the person through the *hyper-refinement* of language, the field within which both narrative and philosophy unfold.

The word “Sanskrit” (*saṃskṛta*) literally means that which is “refined.” It is opposed to what exists in its natural or unrefined state (*prākṛta*), for which reason common, vernacular speech is called “Prakrit.” The mastery of Sanskrit is an achievement through which the individual himself is refined and comes to participate in an ennobling and even divine sphere of being, for Sanskrit is also the tongue of the gods. I speak of this mastery as a “hyper-refinement” in order to suggest a domain of activity in which an excellence is cultivated far beyond the demands of ordinary social convention, and certainly beyond any obvious utilitarian requirements. All societies probably value hyper-refinements of one kind or another: they are exemplified by virtuosity in the arts, in sports and games, in learning, ritual, social etiquette, and cuisine, among many other things. The hyper-refinements valued by a particular culture tell us much (though certainly not everything) about the goods it cherishes overall. Persons who are thought to exemplify a given culture’s hyper-refinements to the highest degree similarly disclose to us important aspects of the construction of personal identity within the communities in question. Such persons frequently become exemplars who are admired to the point of awe, and they are often emulated.

Hyper-refinements generally involve a peculiar feature that, superficially at least, appears to be paradoxical. The exemplification of a hyper-refinement is felt to be the achievement of an *objective* excellence, and so in an important sense hyper-refinements are impersonal. But at the same time their exemplification confers upon the person exemplifying them a unique personal identity, to which special honor is accorded. Michael Jordan’s antigravitational jump-shots represent an attainment whose excellence is thought to be judged according to an objective and impersonal standard, but Jordan is unique in our eyes for possessing such excellence. This is no doubt the case in part because we delight in the manner in which hyper-refinements are always made personal by their possessors: no two great
basketball players make their moves in quite the same way. Improvisational skills and art forms, including many sports, accentuate this personal appropriation of impersonal excellence, but the case is similar even where performance is stipulated to an exceptionally high degree: we might consider the performances of a single violin concerto by, say, Gil Shaham and Itzhak Perlman, or the practice of the tea ceremony by different masters. It is as if the distinctive character of the person were brought into sharpest relief as she or he draws closest to an ideal that is thought to stand apart from any particular individual.

In our present context, it is not difficult to find evidence in Sanskrit literature for the assumption of a fundamental relationship between education emphasizing the refinement of language and the formation of the morally refined individual. Accordingly, there was a remarkably high valorization of cultivated speech in the cultural world that produced this literature. The famous collection of fables, *Hitopadeśa*, which identifies itself as a pedagogical text, tells us at the outset that its study offers “skill in the Sanskrit language and brilliance of speech,” in addition to the knowledge of polity, which is nominally its proper subject matter. To mention a text that was popular among Buddhists, we may note Daṇḍin’s stipulations regarding poetic excellence in his *Kāvyādarśa* (*Mirror of Poetics*), above all his assertion that the arts of composition, of the “brilliantly varied pathways of speech,” were intended for the formation of cultivated persons.

Because we have often understood the Buddhist conception of *anātman*, “non-self,” to be a teaching of abnegation, the Buddhist participation in, and indeed commitment to, the Indian culture of personal aesthetic refinement has sometimes seemed counterintuitive. But there can be no doubt that Indian Buddhist thinkers were thoroughly engaged in this culture of the self. An illustration may be found in Jñānaśrimitra’s *tour de force*, the *Vṛttamālāstūti* (*Metrical Garland Hymn*), a praise-poem eulogizing the bodhisattva Mañjuśrī in 154 verses exemplifying 150 distinct metrical forms, the name of each being embedded in the verse which exemplifies it. As an example, consider verse 80, in the meter Vasudhā, whose name refers to the earth as the “store of riches”:

If one contemplates you even in part, mind unwavering,
Respectful in every way, with powers well-bound,
Before long this person will certainly by himself bind
This Store of Riches, adorned with her belt of seas.
Jñānaśrimitra here stresses an isomorphism holding among the mind well-bound in contemplation—cultivated by the devotee, but epitomized in the figure of Maṇjuśrī—the king who binds the earth under his rule, and, implicitly, the poet, by whom language is bound in well-formed verse. Bodhisattva and aspirant, prince and poet, here partake of, and indeed instantiate, a common order of moral discipline, of refined self-control. The culture of selflessness is here fully harmonized with the cultivation of the self. As two rivers that mingle in the sea surrounding the well-bound earth, ascesis has here merged with poesis.

**Philosophy and Self-Cultivation: The Whole in the Center**

The juxtaposition here of three approaches to the question of personal identity—in relation to narrative, philosophical discourse, and the educational formation of the refined individual—leads us to ask further how these three are connected with one another. There should now be no question but that there are deep connections among them; our task, rather, is to accentuate those that seem most pertinent in the present context. It is clear, to begin, that educational systems are very strongly linked with ideal narrative constructions: we imagine (or, at least, in earlier generations we imagined) the individual who succeeds brilliantly in the challenges of classroom and playing-field, and goes forth, well-rounded and affirming of life, to succeed with equal brilliance in the challenges of family and career. The picture is so simple that it can be evoked in just a few words, even if projected into cultural and historical frames far removed from our own: a fine example is Herman Hesse's characterization of his youthful hero in the opening paragraph of the novel *Siddhartha*:

Shadows passed across his black eyes in the mango grove during play, while his mother sang, at the holy sacrifices, while learning from his learned father, when conversing with the sages.39

Similarly, consider the impression one derives from the opening of the Häthigumphā inscription of the Orissan king Khārevala, composed over two millennia ago:

[Khārevala,] who has a handsome brown complexion, played childhood games for fifteen years. Thereafter, being proficient
in writing, coinage, arithmetic, law and procedure, and skilled in all arts, (he) ruled as the Crown Prince for nine years.\(^4\)

The relationship between the narration of a life and an ideal pattern of development grows more interesting, of course, when we take account both of the idiosyncratic ways in which the ideal may be in some sense actualized, and the numberless deflections whereby its actualization may be frustrated or defeated: divine or human opposition from without, personal failings from within, willful determination not to accord with the ideal, bad luck, the inevitability of decline and death, and endless twists on these and other themes. Hesse’s Siddhartha becomes intriguing to us when this perfectly virtuous heir to the brahmans moves in with his courtesan, likewise Āśvaghoṣa’s Nanda when he finds himself rent between the opposing values of erotic pleasure and spiritual freedom. In both of these stories the hero’s detour becomes part of the path whereby he realizes an ideal end; such tales are attractive no doubt in part because so many of us, if we are to realize our highest aims at all, must likewise do so via circuitous and often tortured paths.

For much of classical Indian thought, internal conflict betokened the heteronomy of the will and the dispersion of one’s energies in a deceptive and ephemeral world. The cultivation of the person was intended to counter the entropic tendencies this involved, by harmonizing one’s energies, leading to conscious mastery of them, and by arousing a continuous vigilance to the dangers of succumbing to illusion. Such cultivation, of course, found its most extreme articulation in yoga and soteriological practice, but similar themes surround the formation of scholars and kings. Not for nothing was the grammatical science of India thought to have represented the grace of Śiva, or the great poet Kālidāsa to have been a bumpkin blessed by the goddess, or the king the deity’s living presence. For that which was well-ordered was divine, and the individual who had attained self-mastery, or had mastered the rule-bound grammar of the Sanskrit language, or the laws of poetic meter and ornament, or the principles required for the governance of a pacific and prosperous kingdom were all isomorphic in this regard. Buddhism, despite its doctrinal differences with the Brahmanical schools, and its ambivalent ties with aspects of Indian social structure, was nevertheless a paradigmatically Indian tradition in these respects. Neither Āśvaghoṣa’s narration of Nanda, nor the pedagogical ideals embodied in his and other Buddhist Sanskrit poetry incline us to any other conclusion.

We are left then to question the role of philosophical conflict here,
particularly that of the conflict about the metaphysics of our identity. I should like to suggest that the foregoing observations provide at least part of the answer. For conflicted thought, like emotional conflict, represents the failure to achieve a perfect harmony and self-integration. The philosophical impetus thus parallels the soteriological; as later Hindu thinkers would have it, thought itself becomes a kind of yoga. The resolution of intellectual conflict, however, cannot for long be a matter of purely internal contemplative practice, for thought has its home in shared language, and so must itself be shared. The conflicts that inevitably arise are engendered by and thus belong to an entire community of discourse. The notion of a perfectly harmonious philosophical doctrine remains an unactualized ideal of reason so long as persons are themselves subject to conflicting impulses of whatever kind. So it was that, even after Vedānta had successfully established its hegemony in the domain of later Hindu philosophical thought, it found itself eventually shattered into a plurality of contentious sub-schools. And not very surprisingly, in the light of what has been said, the problems of the self would loom large in their disputes.

It is sometimes thought that the ancient Buddhist teaching of selflessness undermined concern and care for the self, except perhaps insomuch as it supported a negatively construed ideal of freedom. I have tried to suggest here that things in fact were not nearly so simple, for the Indian Buddhist discourse of the self was multivalent, informed by a variety of complementary goods. The doctrine of selflessness, by refusing to countenance any objectification of the self, by accentuating our fluidity and our capacity for change, and by encouraging us therefore to attend to the task of self-formation, played a central role in that discourse. Clearly, therefore, we would err, were we to reduce all this to the negative proposition alone.

The teaching of selflessness according to the readings suggested above begins perhaps to appear as a vortex theory of the self: metaphysically speaking, there is *nothing* there. There is a vacuum, an absence around which the person is configured. In this regard we remain close to the observations articulated with reference to the tale of Nala by Shulman. For the person who inhabits the world that we have sought to explore here in its general contours, one’s supreme task is to be stationed at once in the emptiness of self and in the fullness of being. The fortunate individual may achieve this by pursuing a clear and well-defined path leading to an optimal level of harmony and self-integration. Such individuals, however, are few. The rest of us, alas, are condemned to fight terrible battles, self against self, before we can enter that sure sphere of peace.
Notes

1. On the question of relativism generally, see Hollis and Lukes 1982; and in connection with comparative philosophy in particular, Larson and Deutsch 1988, and Biderman and Scharfstein 1989.

2. For a judicious survey of this question in relation to both its philosophical and philological aspects, see Graham 1989: 389–428 (app. 2, “The Relation of Chinese Thought to the Chinese Language”). The so-called Whorf-Sapir hypothesis to which Graham refers was summarized by Whorf (1956: 213) in these words: “We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages. The categories and types that we isolate from the world of phenomena we do not find there because they stare every observer in the face; on the contrary, the world is presented in a kaleidoscopic flux of impressions which has to be organized by our minds—and this means largely by the linguistic system in our minds.”

3. Refer to comments on words for “being” and “truth” in chap. 8 below.

4. Of course, ethics and politics are indeed very much discussed in the literature of ancient and medieval India. What we do not seem to find, however, is the philosophical investigation of ethical and political concepts along lines similar to those that are evident in the Indian treatment of matters pertaining to logic, epistemology, philosophy of language, and metaphysics. It is striking, for instance, that in an encyclopedic work of markedly philosophical character like Śāntarakṣita’s Tattvasaṅgraha (for the contents of which see the introduction, n. 17), no specifically ethical topics are treated (though, as I have argued earlier, there is a discernible ethical orientation governing the work as a whole).

Dasgupta 1961, still one of the fullest explorations of Indian ethics, takes as her point of departure that, in Indian thought at least, “morality implies a system of practical rules of conduct of a man in the light of his religion” (p. 4). And many writers (e.g., Potter 1963, Matilal 1982, and Ganeri 2001) emphasize the ethical dimensions of soteriology in the Indian framework. For recent treatments of specific ethical issues in Hindu and Buddhist thought, see now Coward et al. 1989, Perrett 1998, and Harvey 2000. See, too, Raju 1985, chap. 2, on Mīmāṃsā thought in relation to Indian ethics.

5. On the treatment of necessity in Indian logics, see especially Matilal 1982, chap. 7, and Mohanty 1992: 118–22. Of course, necessity is often expressed in Indian arguments, for instance, through the use of the gerundive, but what is in question here is whether it was theorized as a feature of logical operations. Similarly, we do find, on occasion, informal remarks on possibility and probability, e.g., Pramāṇavārttika, Svārthānumana chapter, 8ff., on results born of causal aggregations, and Tattvasaṅgраhapaṇḍiṭā, p. 4. As Matilal (1982: 150) remarks, however, “Possibility as a modal notion had a very limited use in the whole of Indian philosophy.”

6. See, in particular, Chemparathy 1972, on Udayana’s Nyāyakusumāṅjali; and on Mīmāṃsā approaches, D’Sa 1980.
Scharfstein 1989 offers a thoughtful and perceptive study of this issue.

Or as Rorty, Schneewind, and Skinner (1985: 10) put it: “No matter how philistine the historian of philosophy may want to be, he will need translations of what Spinoza wrote which will let him get a handle on the truth-value of Spinoza’s sentences. This will require him to examine present translations critically to see whether they are infected with the philosophies of some intervening epoch, and eventually to work out his own translations. He will become a historical scholar...whether he wants to or not.”

See above, chap. 2, n. 25.


Taylor 1989: 34: “To ask what a person is, in abstraction from his or her self-interpretations, is to ask a fundamentally misguided question, one to which there couldn’t in principle be an answer.”

Throughout the present section I refer to Aśvaghoṣa’s Saundarananda by the abbreviation SN, followed by the number of the canto and verse as given in Johnston’s edition.


As the photograph of Cave 3 at Kanheri, reproduced here, demonstrates, this conception of the complementarity of values was iconized at Buddhist monastic settlements.

Krishna 1991, chaps. 2 and 3, usefully calls into question the role of mokṣa in classical Indian thought. In SN, however, it is certainly more than a rhetorical gesture.

See Dumont 1970 and 1980 for a thoroughgoing analysis of the contrast between renouncer and householder in traditional India.

As Matilal 1982 puts it, the achievement of freedom from worldly pain is “the most common theme of all Indian religions” (p. xi).

As suggested by the miniature painting illustrating this chapter, the mirror offered an enduring trope in Indian art. In relation to Buddhist meditation, too, it is a frequently employed metaphor for the mind, as is underscored in Mahāyāna gnoseology by the concept of the buddhas’ “mirror-like gnosis” (ādāraśajñāna). The contemplative and erotic resonances of the mirror motif are beautifully combined by the great Tibetan Rdzogs-chen master Klong-chen Rab-byams-pa (1308–63) in his Sems nyid rang grol, pp. 5–6: “Like a small child seeing a mirror, an infantile person refutes or proves outer objects. Like his mother who sees [the child playing with the mirror] and then wipes it clean, the causal vehicle seeks to transform the external. But when the coquette gazes [in that mirror] she uses it to make up her face; so, too, one who knows just what is, looks to the mind alone.”
21 Compare, for instance, the conflict of roles and individuation in Greek thought, above all in Sophocles’ *Antigone*, on which consider especially the insightful comments of Nussbaum 1986, chap. 3.

22 The topic of misogyny in *Saundarananda* is a complex and interesting one that merits full and separate treatment. Aśvaghoṣa’s treatment of the character of Nanda’s wife Sundari is probably more important in this regard than is the sermonizing text of canto 8.

23 Among recent authorities, one who seems to argue that early Buddhism held some sort of theory of a real individual self, is Pérez-Remón 1980. But on this book see Collins 1982b. Collins sees Pérez-Remón as arguing that “the real but hidden teaching of the Buddha was equivalent to that of the Śāṃkhya school of Hinduism, such that the denial of self only refers to a ‘lower,’ psycho-physical or phenomenal self, and not to the ‘higher’ real self, which is taken to be an individual, monadic soul or ‘person’ (*purusa*).” However, I do not think that Pérez-Remón’s thesis is so clear-cut as Collins here makes it out to be. On p. 7, for instance, Pérez-Remón says: “The ‘soul’ is supposed to be wholly involved in all bodily and mental processes, vivifying the body and constituting the substrate of all intellectual and emotional phenomena. It is obvious that this kind of *attā* or ‘soul’ is emphatically rejected in many a passage of the Nikāyas.” Does he mean that the “real self,” then, is involved only in some bodily and mental process, or in none whatsoever? I suspect that he holds the latter view, in which case one wonders whether Pérez-Remón really thinks it to be the “individual, monadic soul” which Collins attributes to him, or something more like the Upaniṣadic *ātman-brahman*.

24 On objectification, compare chap. 13, par. 1.4.4. below.

25 Shulman 1994: i.

26 Shulman 1994, from pp. 25, 26, 27, respectively.

27 *Nyāyabhāṣya*, in *Nyāyadarśana*, pp. 185–87; see also chap. 14 below.

28 *Nyāyavrāttika*, in *Nyāyadarśana*, p. 186; see also chap. 14 below.

29 *Nyāyavrāttika*, in *Nyāyadarśana*, p. 192; see also chap. 14 below.


31 Refer to chap. 2 above.

32 Hume 1888: 634, is rather ambiguous: “I never can perceive this *self* without some one or more perceptions…”

33 *Tattvasaṅgraha*, v. 198.

34 *Tattvasaṅgrahapañjikā*, pp. 110–11.

35 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, third paralogism of pure reason, “Of Personality” (1965, p. 342 n.): “An elastic ball which impinges on another similar ball in a straight line communicates to the latter its whole motion, and therefore its whole state...(similarly) we can conceive a whole series of substances of which the first transmits its state together with its consciousness to the second, the second its own state with that of the preceding substance to the third...The last substance would then be conscious of all the states of the previously changed substances, as being its own states...and yet it would not have been one and the same person in all these states.”
36 Hitopadeśaḥ, Prastāvikā, v. 2.
37 Kāvyādarśa, chap. 1, v. 9. For the role of Sanskrit poetics in Tibetan Buddhist thought, see further Kapstein 2002.
40 Sahu 1984: 332–33.
41 The notion of jñānayoga seems in large measure derived from Bhagavadgītā, chap. 4, where the acquisition of soteriologically valued knowledge is explicitly tied to the resolution of indecisiveness and doubt.
42 Hulin 1978 well illustrates the variety of theories of the ego that arose within the Advaita traditions alone.