Another parallel between the neuroscience of consciousness and Buddhist meditative practice is the investigation of the nature of the self and subjectivity. Both traditions make a distinction between the basic experience of subjectivity or “I-ness” and what is termed the narrative or autobiographical self, a distinction also familiar from Buddhist and Hindu traditions. The term “Ipseity” (meaning self or identity, from the Latin ipse, self) has been used to refer to the basic sense of subjectivity or I-ness, the minimal or core sense of self that underlies all experience. In the Hindu tradition of Vedanta philosophy, this is known as the Atman or Self, and is conceived of as pure consciousness, “I” without an object. In contrast, the narrative or autobiographical self includes judgments, emotions, memory of the past and anticipation of the future. This is the “I” with explicit contents or objects of experience. Both meditative disciplines and neuroscientific investigation suggest that the narrative self in some way depends upon the core sense of subjectivity; that is, the narrative of memories, hopes, dreams, is built upon the pure sense of “I” or subjective awareness.

It is true that the Buddhist tradition insists that there is no permanent “self”—no unchanging, essential identity that underlies all our changing experiences. Buddhists suggest that we derive our experience of “self” from the intersection of the various activities of our being. They analyze these as five bundles or aggregates of energy known as skandhas: bodily phenomena, feelings, labeling or recognizing, volitional activities, and consciousness. But we do have subject-object experience: visual consciousness arises with our awareness of a visual object; auditory consciousness with awareness of an object of hearing. Thus we can pay attention to our awareness of the present moment of experience and have the sense of being a momentary subject aware of an object, since every experience includes a subjective act of cognition as well as an object. What is illusory for Buddhists is the sense of an I or ego-self that has permanent, independent, autonomous identity.
Buddhist meditation can thus include a core sense of ipseity or being, the bare sense of being a momentary subject, having a fleeting and interdependent experience of an object. This is what gives rise to the narrative self, which is constructed from the nexus of interdependent events, but which Buddhists hold to be illusory. When neuropsychologists and phenomenologists talk about a core sense of being or subjectivity, this can be appropriate for Buddhist meditators, although the term “I-ness” seems to slide too close to reification as a substantial I or ego self. The Buddhist tradition is clear that one should not take the fifth skandha, bare consciousness or awareness of an object, for an abiding “I.”

Siegel notes that there is a clear difference between the narrative function of our mind—which relates our life story in words, to ourselves and others—and our direct sensory experience of the moment. When we tell ourselves a story, our hopes and dreams, as well as prejudices and prejudgments shape the way we see reality. Indeed, Ellen Langer highlights research showing that individuals always have the power to describe the environment in several ways; we create the reality that is “out there” by the way we view it. Likewise, we have the choice to construct the narrative of our self and our lives in many ways. Mindfulness meditation encourages us to observe the narrative function of the mind, while we identify with the essential self or “bare awareness.” This “essential self” is the basic sense of I-ness or subjectivity, without judgments, emotions, memories, or anticipation. At the most advanced state, meditators can even have an experience in which there disappear all distinctions between subject and object; indeed, all conceptual structures, including the categories of time and space, disappear.

Mindfulness meditation may give at least a hint or taste of this state. In the most common experience of the mindful state, meditators usually retain an awareness of the distinction between the subject and object of experience; One is aware of oneself as the observer of passing mental phenomena. However, by identifying with the essential or core self, we can maintain a sense of pure subjectivity, while also being aware of concepts, cognitive structures, and physical sensations. One may at times experience moments of non-dualistic awareness, in which subject and object merge and the self is not defined by the body, while at other moments, the practitioner of mindfulness meditation can be fully aware of bodily sensations as belonging in some sense to oneself.
Western phenomenology describes this notion of core subjectivity or ipseity in philosophical language. Phenomenological theory suggests that we discover in our experience both transitive and intransitive modes of consciousness. In our discussion of Epicurus and Aristotle, we mentioned the notion of the mind’s intentional objects of awareness. Any conscious experience has an intentional object to which it refers or "intends;" in this sense experience is transitive. At the same time, as Aristotle noted, we are always reflexively aware of our experience; in this sense, experience also has an aspect that is intransitive. According to phenomenological theory, the intransitive dimension of experience is a form of self-consciousness or reflexive awareness that is primary. Dan Zahavi and Josef Parnas argue that such self-consciousness is “primitive,” that is, it

1) does not require any subsequent act of reflection or introspection, but occurs simultaneously with awareness of the object; (2) does not consist of forming a belief or making a judgment; and (3) is passive in the sense of being spontaneous and involuntary.\textsuperscript{vii}

Note that Buddhist texts similarly speak of various modes of consciousness: vision will include visual consciousness; hearing will include auditory consciousness. For instance, when we consciously see an object, we are also at the same time aware of our seeing; similarly, when we visualize a mental image, we are also aware of our visualizing. We saw Aristotle detail this process in \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}, Chapter 9.9.\textsuperscript{viii} While Consciousness is thus reflexive – it is aware of itself – This reflexivity implies only a subject of experience; it does not imply a permanent abiding self.

Researchers have thus suggested that in order to understand consciousness from a neuro-scientific perspective, it might be most useful to study it in its most simple or basic form, the sense of “I” or subjectivity. Mindfulness practitioners and neuroscientists agree in describing the simplest form of consciousness as the basic sense of subjectivity upon which the narrative, autobiographical self is built. Thus, a research approach that has been suggested would be to study long-term practitioners of a contemplative practice such as the Tibetan Buddhist Open Presence meditation, which aims to cultivate an experience of pure subjectivity, with a minimal sense of the narrative self. The goal would be to
discover the neural basis for the experience of pure subjectivity. This might help us understand the most basic type of human consciousness. ix

John D. Dunne has likewise noted some rich Buddhist resources that might enhance a dimension of contemporary mindfulness training that has been variously termed decentering, reperceiving, cognitive insight, mindful awareness, or defusion. This is the ability to perceive a thought or feeling as simply a mental event that the mind has created, rather than as an accurate representation of reality. For example, if one recalls or anticipates a stressful event, one can recognize that this is simply a thought that the mind has created—a feature of one’s consciousness, rather than the event itself. One can thus defuse its negative impact through cognitive insight or mindful awareness. xi Through cultivation of non-dual states of awareness, one can overcome the tendency to approach or avoid objects, a feature of subject-object consciousness. One can also develop the capacity for monitoring one’s consciousness without concepts, and become aware of the non-dual reflexive awareness that is a feature of all our experience. Indeed, one Indian teacher of the Mahāmudrā approach, Maitripa (11th Century CE) teaches that one should cultivate “non-mindfulness” rather than mindfulness. Since classical mindfulness emphasizes retaining focus upon an object, it implies the subject-object dualism that Mahāmudrā practice sees as the cause of suffering. Tibetan interpreters interpreted the state of “non-mindfulness” (āsmṛti) as a “mindfulness of mere non-distraction,” without an object. xii

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The Abhidharma theorist Asanga and the Yogacara tradition allow for continuity of consciousness through something called the storehouse consciousness, an underlying repository of conscious experience. However, even the storehouse consciousness is momentary, although it exists at all times. It contains the habits and tendencies that the individual has accumulated and carries from moment to moment and life to life. See Dreyfus and Thompson, 97, who cite Rahula, *Le Compendium de la Super-doctrine de Asacga* (Paris: Ecole Fransis d’Extreme-Orient, 1980).


Siegel, 100.


*Nicomachean Ethics* 9.9 1170a 28 “Now someone who sees perceives that he sees; one who hears perceives that he hears; and one who walks perceives that he walks. Similarly in the other cases also there is some [element] that perceives that we are active.”. Buddhist descriptions are probably a response to the Hindu notion that consciousness is eternal and prior to experience; Buddhists insist that each form of consciousness arises together with the object. While Hindus identify this core consciousness with an eternal Self or Atman, for Buddhists there is no unchanging self behind the momentary conscious experiences. See Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, 23-24; Gethin, *Foundations of Buddhism*, 133-149.

Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson, 526.


Dunne, 20-21.

Dunne, 26-27.