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Buddhist and Christian Views of Self: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract: Buddhism is renowned for its adherence to the principle of "Anatta", yet it does not merely negate the self. Instead, Buddhism employs a flexible categorization and stratification of the self based on specific value orientations and practical objectives. Although Christian traditions present a variety of perceptions of the self, they align with Buddhism in terms of stratifying the self. In the practical path of self-cultivation, both religions adopt meditation as a spiritual exercise, aiming to manifest the true self. A comparative analysis of Buddhist and Christian meditation practices within the framework of naturalism not only enhances the profound understanding of the self-concept for both parties but also fosters the creative transformation and innovative development of the theories of self within these two religious traditions.

Keywords: Buddhist; Christian; self; meditation; naturalism

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1. Introduction

It is commonly held that Buddhism and Christianity exhibit pronounced differences in their conceptions of the self. Buddhism is renowned for its advocacy of the "Anatta (no-self)" doctrine, with the principles of "impermanence of all phenomena (Anicca), no-self in all dharmas (Anatta), and the tranquility of Nirvana (Nibbāna-santi)" serving as the fundamental criteria distinguishing Buddhist from non-Buddhist thought (the Three Marks of Existence, Tilakkhaṇa). Among these, the "no-self in all dharmas" is often regarded as the seal of the seals. In the Buddhist perspective, the concept of "self" is perceived as an illusion or a delusion, constructed from the Five Aggregates (Pañca-khandha): form (Rūpa-khandha), sensation (Vedanā-khandha), perception (Saññā-khandha), mental formations (Saṅkhāra-khandha), and consciousness (Viññāṇa-khandha). These elements are characterized by impermanence, Anatta, and impurity, and there exists no eternal and unchanging entity of a "self". Through spiritual practice and meditation, Buddhists can gradually realize the truth of "Anatta", thereby releasing attachment to the "self" and the suffering that arises from it. Indeed, while Buddhist schools are diverse and their views manifold, there appears to be no substantial disagreement among them regarding the fundamental principle of "Anatta". In contrast, Christianity posits that the "self" or "soul" is a creation of God, imbued with unique value and significance. Typically, in Christian theology, the individual soul is conceptualized as possessing an immortal quality, serving as a conduit for communication and communion with God. It is also regarded as the wellspring of inner morality and reason, and does not perish with the death of the physical body. The fact that the physical body is subject to death and decay is undeniable, and if the soul were to perish with the body, it could potentially undermine the authority of Christian doctrines concerning resurrection and final judgment. It appears that the Christian conception of the self, along with its associated views on the afterlife, seems to be in contradiction with the Buddhist principle of "Anatta". However, in reality, neither

Buddhism nor Christianity is about an unconditional negation or affirmation of the self; rather, both religions meticulously delineate the structure and hierarchy of the self based on their respective value orientations and practical objectives. Specifically, Buddhism does not adopt an undifferentiated negative attitude to eliminate the concept of self; rather, it maintains a dialectical stance that is both deconstructive and constructive. After critiquing the secular notion of self, Buddhism further constructs and establishes a unique concept of "I" within its doctrine. Typically, the Buddhist concept of "Anatta" can be subdivided into two levels: "personhood without self" and "dharma without self". Correspondingly, the "I" that Buddhism aims to "negate" or "dispel" also encompasses the distinction between "personhood" and "dharma". This process involves the dispelling of the "false self" to establish the "true self", which is not only a necessary path to a profound understanding of the essence of the human mind but also a key to achieving the ultimate value goals pursued by Buddhism. In Christian self-perception, there exist multiple traditional views, yet there is a similarity with Buddhism in the hierarchical division of the self. Christianity posits that the essence of the self originates from God's creation. Logically, this process unfolds in two stages: first, God creates a universal prototype of self-existence; subsequently, based on this prototype, God creates individualized selves with distinctive characteristics. Therefore, in Christian thought, individuals do not face the dualistic oppositions of soul and body, or mind and body, as discussed in secular philosophy, because the individual is not to be divided into such opposing components but rather exists in a singular relationship with God. This stratified understanding of the self in both Christianity and Buddhism provides a theoretical basis for the self-cultivation advocated by each tradition, objectively aiding their adherents in revealing the true self through practices related to mental discipline, thereby attaining happiness. Moreover, the processes of self-improvement within Buddhism and Christianity can be interpreted and analyzed with the theoretical contributions from the field of cognitive neuroscience. Within this naturalistic theoretical framework, engaging in dialog and exchange between Buddhism and Christianity not only enhances the profound understanding of the self-concept for both parties but also fosters the mutual learning, integration, and innovative development of self-theories within the two religious traditions.

2. Stratified Cognition of the Self in Buddhism and Christianity

Both Christianity and Buddhism have complex claims about the ontology of the self, some of which seem to contradict each other. In fact, historically Buddhist schools have not completely denied the existence of a subject or self. In Buddhist doctrine, the concept of "no-self" (anātman) is bifurcated into "the no-self of persons" (pudgala-nairātmya) and "the no-self of phenomena" (dharma-nairātmya). Correspondingly, the "self" (ātman) to be negated or deconstructed is also differentiated into "the self of persons" (pudgala-ātman) and "the self of phenomena" (dharma-ātman). Regarding classifications, various Buddhist schools diverge in their typologies of pudgala-ātman. For instance, Theravāda Buddhism categorizes the "self" into two types, Zongmi's Brief Commentary on the Sūtra of Perfect Enlightenment delineates four categories of "self", while the Records of the Source-Mirror (Zongjing Lu) proposes a sixfold classification (Cullman 1958, p. 10). Similarly, while Christianity generally maintains the existence of a continuous and unchanging self, it does not claim an existence of self without qualification (Silva 1979, p. 80). Buddhism is usually thought of as simply advocating the absence of self, just as Christianity is usually thought of as advocating the presence of self, as a kind of labeling of the two. The classification of Christianity and Buddhism in this manner is closely associated with their distinct perspectives on the temporal boundaries of the sustenance of the experiential self. According to Christianity, the history of the individual (the individual self) begins at birth and persists not only in present life, but also after death until the Kingdom of God. On

the other hand, according to the Buddhist concept of reincarnation, the empirical self is constantly changing in reincarnation—for example, the self can continuously lose its past memories; the change is so great that the self of this life and the life to come are not the same person. Such a different understanding of the duration of the experiential self is easily linked to theoretical postulations of the existence or absence of the self, and leads to the view that Christianity must assert the existence of the self and Buddhism must assert the absence of the self. This view has led to many misunderstandings in the past. For example, one might think that Christianity, in the Buddhist view, is a religion that has failed to break the ego (that is, to cling to the existence of the self). In the Christian view, the Buddhist doctrine of reincarnation is incompatible with its principle of no-self. But in fact, the negation of the self is not exclusive to Buddhism. Christianity also has the idea of negating the self. For example, early Christianity believed that a human being is made up of a physical body and other non-physical elements. Biblical scholars who compared Hebrew and Greek words related to soul, self, and spirit found that in the Hebrew Bible, individuals were considered as material beings created by God rather than incarnated souls (Burns 2003, p. 87). It has even been argued that one of the greatest misconceptions about Christianity is that it advocates the immortality of the soul (Cullman 1958, p. 15). What these claims have in common is a distinction between the attributes of the soul itself and God, a view that the soul is immaterial, and even acknowledging the continuity of the self in life after death. The reason for this continuity lies not in the power of the soul itself, but in the power of God. There is even an argument that Christianity is more radical in its denial of the self than Buddhism. The reason for this is that Buddhism believes that a person can achieve salvation through his own efforts. For example, karma in this world determines the state of life after death and life in the next life, but in Christianity, a person has no ability to generate life after death. Only by the power of God can we attain eternal bliss (Silva 1979, p. 85).

However, the simple denial of the self, whether Buddhist or Christian, is bound to encounter insurmountable theoretical difficulties, which prevents them from consistently claiming that there is a self or no-self. For Buddhism, a theoretical question that must be answered is this: if the self is denied and there is no self, then who is the subject of karma and the cycle of life and death? This theoretical question was raised by monks in the days of Ministry Buddhism before the rise in Mahayana Buddhism (Takakusu 1934, p. 29). In order to answer this question, various schools of Buddhism have made a lot of theoretical explanations. The basic idea is to classify and compare the "self" according to the relationship with the "Five Skandhas": the body and the feeling of the body are regarded as the Rupa, and all the other mental things are regarded as the aggregates of Vedana, Sanna, Sankhara, and Vijnana (Emmanuel 2015, p. 35). Therefore, the origin of "self" is closely related to "Five Skandhas", either "the Skandhas are me", or "I have Skandhas", or "there are me in the Skandhas", or "there are Skandhas in me" (Wang 2015, p. 88). According to this line of thinking, Buddhism does not simply deny the existence of the self, but opposes the idea that there is a self, on the one hand, and that this existing self has nothing to do with the Five Skandhas on the other. This kind of self, which is persistently believed to exist by ordinary people and can exist independently without the Five Skandhas, is exactly the object that all sects of Buddhism advocate to deny and destroy (Chen 2007, pp. 301–32). Buddhism refers to this kind of self as the "self apart from the skandhas", which is characterized by permanence, uniqueness, dominance, and unity. Buddhism also notes that personal pronouns related to "I" are inevitably used in People's Daily language and in Buddhist sutras. Such as, "Thus have I heared" in the opening words of Buddhist sutras, and "my phone" and "our school" in our daily life. If the existence of the self is completely denied, then what do the personal pronouns relating to "self"

refer to? Therefore, some schools of Buddhism, such as the School of Zhengliang Dhutika (Sammitīya), consider it necessary to establish a self, which is known as the "unutterable pudgala" (the unutterable self), an established self that can neither exist independently of the five skandhas, nor can it be equated with the unique, unified spiritual entity that dominates the five skandhas, as is commonly believed. Some other sects of Buddhism also have similar claims. According to these sects, "self" as a personal pronoun is merely an empty epithet, a false symbol set up by people for pragmatic convenience, with no truth in itself. But "false must be according to real", that is, a false sign is placed because there must be a real being behind the false sign. As for what is the real thing that this false symbol relies on, different schools have different answers, generally including "Saṃtāna-vijñāna", "Ālayavijñāna", and "Manovijñāna", and these things are considered by researchers as another way of saying self or subject.

Buddhism does not indiscriminately deny and destroy the self, but breaks down and establishes new understandings. That is, after refuting the concept of self that ordinary people possess, Buddhism also dialectically establishes the "self" that it recognizes. Generally speaking, the so-called "no-self" of Buddhism distinguishes between the "No-self of the Person" and "No-self of Phenomena", and correspondingly, the "self" that Buddhism intends to break down also has a distinction between the "Self of the Person" and "Self of Phenomena" (Takakusu 1934, p. 16). There are two reasons why Buddhism divides the self into such a hierarchy. First, although Buddhism believes that each of us does not possess the "false self" to which people cling, it advocates the existence of a "true self". This "true self" is common to all, but it is not easily recognizable. As an optimal psychological state, the "true self" manifests fully and authentically in the Buddha, as articulated in the Mahāsaṃnipāta Sūtra: "Thus, the Tathāgata truly and genuinely possesses a self. (Takakusu 1934, p. 9)". However, in ordinary beings (pṛthagjana), this true self remains latent and concealed. Instead, it is a reality that can only be accessed through Buddhist practices, such as meditation. Therefore, the establishment of the "true self" after the "false self" is not only the need for the true understanding of the human mind, but also the need for the realization of the value goal pursued by Buddhism. Second, blindly destroying the self without establishing the self will not only lead to many common psychological and physiological phenomena that cannot be explained, but also make the causal theory and nirvana theory advocated by Buddhism itself difficult to justify. The concept of "self" established in Buddhism essentially encompasses two meanings. Firstly, it refers to the self used by Buddhism to elucidate the virtues of nirvana and the nature of all things, also known as the "Great Self". This includes, for example, the self in the Four Virtues of Nirvana—permanence, bliss, self-existence, and purity—or the true self equivalent to the ultimate truth when distinguishing between truth and falsehood. Secondly, it refers to the self established for the convenience of linguistic expression, also known as the "Little Self". For instance, the "self" in the common Buddhist phrase "Thus have I heard" is of this nature (Mellor 1991, pp. 49–63).

Christianity has a variety of traditions about the self, but it is not different from Buddhism in its hierarchy of the self. According to Christianity, the origin of the self is God's creation. In terms of the process of coming into being, the self is derived from God's two creations(Ching 1984, pp. 31–50). Early Christian thought, influenced by Plato's philosophy, used "idealism" to explain the origin of the self. For example, Gregory of Nyssa, influenced by the Alexandrian School, distinguished between ordinary people and individual people. The general man is analogous to the Platonic idea of man, which was first created by God, and the individual man, which is created according to the idea of man. This means that each person's self is derived from God's creation, but this creation is not a one-time process, but a twofold process in which the general model of the self is created,

and according to this general model different individual selves are created. In terms of the relationship between creation and resurrection, the process of being created is the process of individuation of the general self, while the process of resurrection is the process of regaining the universal humanity of the individual self. Therefore, the original created self is the final destination of the redeemed self. From the point of view of composition, each person's self consists of two parts: soul and body. The Bible says in Genesis, "God formed man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living soul, and his name was Adam (Genesis 2:7 2011, NIV)". Christian thinkers generally agree that the self consists of body and soul together, but they dispute the relationship between soul and body. Early Christian thinkers such as Origen, influenced by Greek philosophy, believed that the soul existed before the body. This relationship of the soul prior to the body is expressed not only by the fact that the soul precedes the body in the chronological order of creation, but also by the fact that the soul has a higher priority over the body as a self-subject. Gregory of Nyssa, on the other hand, held that the soul and the body had equal status, and that no one part took precedence over the other. In The Making of Man, he pointed out that "In creating man, God did not put one component before another, nor the soul before the body, nor the other way round, and otherwise man would have been at war with himself if he had been divided into two parts at different times (Gregory of Nyssa 2013, p. 1)". Therefore, there is no such thing as a relationship between soul and body, or between mind and body, in the secular philosophical sense, for a person should not be divided into such two opposing parts, but only between man and God. It is in the relationship between man and God that one can be an active and free self-subject, for man has obtained freedom from God's creation, and this freedom reflects the essence of the self.

According to the different understandings of the ontological status of the constituent elements of man, early Christianity appeared about trichotomy, dichotomy, and monism (Cooper 1989, p. 8). Greek and Alexandrian Christians commonly believe that a person is composed of a body, soul, and spirit. The soul's function is to coordinate the body and the spirit, and the spirit is the core part of the self whose job is to communicate with God. Dichotomists, on the other hand, see the soul and spirit in the same category, arguing that they constitute man together as immaterial entities and as physical entities. This dualistic view was largely influenced by Augustine and has long dominated Christian theology. The emergence of Monism was associated with the rise in materialism in the 17th century. For example, Thomas Hobbes denied the existence of immaterial entities on the basis of materialism.

3. The Naturalization of Meditation and Self-Improvement

The ontological hierarchy of the self in Buddhism and Christianity lays the foundation for their respective methods of self-improvement through meditation training. Both Christianity and Buddhism have a hierarchy of the self and an emphasis on the practice of the no-self. In terms of purpose, both early Buddhist and early Christian discussions of the self were experiential expressions aimed at helping followers understand the means through which salvation comes. For Buddhism, the process of self-improvement is the process of pursuing the state of no-self, that is, the process of ascending from the false self to the true self. Similarly to the Buddhist conception of the levels of the self, Christianity holds that there is a so-called true self, which is what a person really is. However, access to such a true self is not easy, but by means of certain means. In Christian traditions, a person's true (or ultimate) self is received through God's action and grace in baptism (Bidwell 2008, p. 3). Allegorical exegesis, as advocated by the early Christian thinker Origen, is about making the self manifest in the process of continuing to interpret the Bible. In Origen's view, the

Bible is completely different from the ordinary text that we read, but has a self-revealing meaning, that is, using the wisdom contained in the Bible to reveal one's true inner self, which is completely independent of the phenomenal world. The Bible contains three levels of wisdom that evolve from low to high: Wisdom of the Flesh, Wisdom of the Soul and Wisdom of the Spirit. The transition from the second to the third level is a leap forward in which the self is completely freed from the constraints of phenomena, and thus a pure self, the self in Christ, is attained (Torjesen 1982, p. 141). In other words, allegorical exegesis is the means to salvation, a means of similar utility to meditation. Both Christianity and Buddhism have tried numerous methods for self-improvement that are functionally similar, but it is undeniable that meditation is the most effective of these methods (Forman 1998, pp. 185–201).

Buddhism originated in the Eastern tradition, and there is no single term in the Eastern tradition that corresponds to the Western word "meditation". But this does not mean that there is no meditation practice in the Buddhist tradition. Buddhism not only has a large number of meditation practices, but it has also created a number of conceptual terms related to meditation based on meditation practices. The word "meditation" comes from the Latin meditari, which means "to think" or "to deliberate". In the Middle Ages, the word was used to describe a constant contemplation of something related to a spiritual theme, and it then came to refer generally to the discussion of a particular subject. For example, Descartes' Meditationes de prima philosophia used the term meditation in this sense. In the modern Western context, meditation refers primarily to a solitary, highly focused mental activity performed by a person. The word dhyana, as used in the Yoga Sutras, is most closely related to the Western meaning of meditation. Early Buddhist texts include "bhavana", which refers to mental development and concentration, and "jhana", meaning zen, which developed from "bhavana", which refers primarily to the stage of concentration. From the Sanskrit word dhyana came the Chinese word chan and the Japanese word zen. In Tibetan Buddhism, the equivalent of meditation is the Tibetan word "sgom", meaning "to familiarize", which clearly conveys the Tibetan Buddhist meaning of the word, which is to see "sgom" as a training process through which the mind can habitually settle into certain favorable mental attitudes, states, and modes of being (Fontana 2007, pp. 154–62). It is reasonable to assume that the Eastern tradition has a sustained interest and deep understanding of meditation, which has not only created a wide variety of meditation techniques, but also has a relatively clear and coherent continuity and inheritance of these techniques. The question to be asked here is whether the practice of mental training described in the numerous Buddhist terms related to meditation is the same as the practice of Christian meditation, or to what extent are they consistent? On the one hand, meditation and the inner experiences that go along with the practice of meditation are primarily things that have to do with a first-person perspective. On the other hand, the elements of meditation, its methods of operation, and its value goals are necessarily influenced by factors such as the customs, language, and culture in which the meditation practitioner lives. As a result, it seems difficult to judge whether meditation practices are consistent across cultural traditions. For example, there are differences between Chinese, Japanese, and Indian meditation practices and between them and Christian meditation practices. Tibetan Buddhist meditation also varies greatly in its approach. So, is there any reason to classify so many different things as meditation?

The answer to this question depends on two principles. The first principle can be called the signature feature principle of meditation. Although there are different types of meditation in both Buddhism and Christianity, there may be some common signature features that, if identified, could establish a common criterion for meditation practice. Although there are many forms of meditation, some characteristics stand out among the

different types of meditation. For example, all meditations are aimed at calming the mind. They all use various methods to pull the mind back from intentional activity with various objects, in other words, to put the mind in a state where it is not directed at any object. To bring the mind into this state of being directed at nothing is, in effect, to change the usual way of being of the mind, which is perpetually directed at and filled with objects. According to Buddhism, the human mind is typically characterized by a monkey-like tendency to constantly cling to things, so the purpose of meditation is to conceptualize this clinging quality of the mind. The grasping mind is a sign of the false self, and the process of breaking up the false self and making the true self manifest is also the process of suppressing the grasping mind. Every human mind is characterized by this kind of attachment, and attachment is the mode of existence of the mind in general. The point here is that people who practice meditation are trying to change the way their mind is, for example, getting rid of the way it is entangled with various mental contents. Therefore, to focus on an object in meditation is not to better study the object, but to fix the mind by focusing on such an object to eliminate the interference of other objects in the mind. There are also meditation practices that take the opposite approach; that is, rather than placing no restrictions on the activities of the mind, they completely allow all mental activities to drift, insisting on observing, without any choice, whatever passes through the mind. But this practice of allowing the mind to point to the object is the same in principle as the practice of suppressing the mind so that it does not point to the object, or points to the object as little as possible, and is a way of withdrawing the self from the mental activity. So, meditation is an attempt to keep the mind from doing anything (Fasching 2008, p. 463). If a practitioner of meditation can make his mind do nothing, he will enter a special state of mind, a state of pure conscious experience (The Upanishads of India deal with the issue of pure consciousness and relate it to consciousness). A purely conscious experience is characterized by its complete absence of any experiential content. Thus, any inner mental state without any experiential content is a purely conscious experience regardless of the type of meditative practice in which it is achieved. Thus, having a purely conscious experience is the hallmark of the practice of meditation. J. Hill examined a large sample of Eastern and Western cultures capable of producing pure conscious experiences, including the Chinese chan, the Japanese zen, Ancient Indian Mandukya Upanished, modern VedantanTM, and medieval European Christian mysticism (Pseudo-Dionysious) (Gallagher 1999, p. 412). While each of these traditions claims to enter its intended state of experience only by following its prescribed procedures, in practice their operational ideas are highly consistent and not difficult to understand. That is, to find a way to withdraw one's attention from all the content of awareness, even the awareness of the means employed themselves, so that when all the phenomenal objects have disappeared from the subject's awareness, the subject itself will remain awake, and then only awareness or consciousness itself will remain. By doing this, on the one hand, the subject describes an experience that is completely devoid of any phenomenal content. On the other hand, they associate this experience with an underlying self that they believe to be real.

The second principle may be called the naturalization principle of meditation. The "naturalizing" tendency exhibited in meditation practices not only aligns with the liberal, secular, and pragmatic philosophical inclinations within contemporary Western mainstream thought but also constitutes a new form of expression for Buddhism and Christianity within the context of modernity. This trend reflects a deep integration of religious practices with modern societal values, exemplifying an evolution towards greater secularization and liberal openness in the context of globalization. Such research methodologies have garnered significant interest from scholars in the fields of analytical philosophy and naturalistic philosophy. The conceptual origins of the "naturalization" of meditation can be traced back

to the writings of Dale S. Wright. Wright advocates for the abandonment of traditional notions of "reincarnation" in the context of contemporary Buddhism, suggesting instead the adoption of "the Naturalization of Karma" as an alternative (Wright 2005, p. 78). Indeed, both Christian and Buddhist accounts of meditation contain a great deal of mystical, supernatural, and even superstitious elements. To insist on the naturalization of meditation means to take specific analysis and different treatment of various factors involved in meditation; eliminate mysterious, supernatural, and superstitious factors involved in various types of meditation practice; and explain and express meditation practice with naturalistic concepts and terms as much as possible. For Christianity and Buddhism, adhering to the naturalization of meditation means explaining the practice and the value goal it aims to achieve without the consideration of God or Buddha. In this naturalized explanation, there are no such things as life after death, the six paths of rebirth, heaven and hell, or the last Judgment, which religions regard as central elements. According to the principle of naturalization of meditation, the true self claimed by Buddhism and Christianity can be explained. In many cultural traditions, frequent and prolonged meditation has led meditators to claim to have experienced unique states of experience that are not usually seen, that is, deep experiences, commonly known as "enlightenment". An analysis of the psychological mechanisms that arise from these deep experiences from the naturalized standpoint of meditation reveals that these deep experiences or enlightenments are not mysterious and do not involve any supernatural elements. Deep experiences are typically characterized by a shift in the structure of knowledge: a change in the experiential relationship between the self and the object of awareness. Owen Flanagan advocates the naturalization of Buddhism and analyzes zen meditation from a naturalistic standpoint (Flanagan 2011, p. 3). Drawing from the perspectives of cognitive science and the natural sciences, Flanagan advocates for the excision of those elements in Buddhism that are considered supernatural from its epistemological and ethical systems, thereby defining Buddhism as a philosophical framework centered on ethics and metaphysics. Within Flanagan's theoretical framework, scientific naturalism and analytical philosophy serve as the two pillars of his research: the former focuses on the empirical verification of factual evidence, while the latter emphasizes the effectiveness of logical analytical methods (Flanagan 2011, p. 21). His ability to integrate Buddhism into this framework stems from the fact that Buddhist epistemology is rooted in an empirical tradition, as opposed to the faith-based declarations or mystical experiences relied upon by other religions. Examining the evolution of the human mind and self from the perspective of cognitive neuroscience is essentially an analysis of the dynamic process of self-awareness at the biological level. Flanagan further posits that Buddhism is inherently aligned with ancient Greek philosophy, particularly with the teachings of Plato and Aristotle, in their collective endeavor to unravel the mysteries of life, explore existential dilemmas, and delve into profound issues of meaning and human well-being. For example, greed, hatred, and delusion are called the "three poisons" in Buddhism, which are three fundamental afflictions; if a person can overcome the "three poisons"; accept that all things, including the self, are impermanent; and lead an unselfish life, then that person will be free from the attachment and suffering that are detrimental to the body and mind. According to Flanagan, this understanding of Nibbana is a naturalistic understanding (Flanagan 2011, p. 36). According to this understanding, nirvana as the ultimate goal of Buddhism is meant to free one from the attachment and suffering that are detrimental to the body and mind. According to this naturalistic interpretation, either meditation and enlightenment are themselves nirvana or can lead to nirvana (Flanagan 2011, p. 84). This means that one can, through effort, be freed from attachment and suffering that are detrimental to one's mind and body. Moreover, this release is the best one can achieve, akin to a kind of "rebirth". Owen Flanagan's naturalized treatment of Buddhism can also be applied to Christianity.

Meditation through naturalization is concerned only with the well-being of people in the real world, such as a healthy state of mind and body, and the satisfaction derived from lessening selfish desires and increasing compassion.

4. The Creative Transformation of Self-Concept in Buddhism and Christianity

Buddhist–Christian dialog, conducted by focusing on the natural sciences, is a well-established method in the current comparative study of religions. As a result, it can lead to the innovative transformation of some religious ideas through comparative study. Paul Ingram believes that "the purpose of interdisciplinary and interreligious dialogue is mutual creative transformation (Ingram 2008, p. 130)". According to Paul Ingram, creative transformation is possible as long as both parties involved in the religious dialog, such as Buddhism and Christianity, contribute to this dialog related to the natural sciences. Natural science can provide a relational framework for the discussion of mind–body issues, ego issues, consciousness issues, and other issues related to religious dialog. Gregory Peterson has systematically studied the dialog between theology and cognitive sciences. He argues that "the content of the cognitive sciences can attect the way we go about doing theology (Peterson 2003, p. 12)". For example, linking emergentism to "Buddhist–Christian dialog" holds the promise of resolving the traditional debate about self and no-self. Gregory Peterson argues that both the spirit of the Christian tradition and the human selfhood of the Buddhist tradition are best understood as an "emergent reality" (Peterson 2003, p. 12). The difference is that the so-called spirit of Christianity is related to the brain and body, but it cannot be reduced to the brain or body; Buddhism's so-called human selfhood is related to the five skandhas but cannot be reduced to them.

The transformation of Buddhist and Christian notions of self from a naturalistic standpoint is a necessary preparation for the effective dialog between Christianity, Buddhism, and natural science. The self is a complex system with many interrelated aspects. There are aspects of the self that Buddhism and Christianity are concerned with and explain with different goals, and there are many things that are valuable and worthy of further study by natural science, but there are also many things that are superstitious and cannot be found in natural science. With regard to the latter, we can take a case-by-case approach, reinterpreting and elaborating those parts that may be included in natural science, and abandoning those parts that are not (Fontana 2000, pp. 193–212). Christianity and Buddhism, for example, both see the complexity of the self and express this complexity in their own ways. These expressions can then be restated from the standpoint of naturalism and modern philosophy. Buddhism considers the self to be related to the five skandhas, but at the same time, it is noted that the description of the self by the five skandhas alone cannot explain all aspects of the self. Therefore, in addition to the "false self", Buddhism has also established the concept of the "true self", and in addition to the "human self", the concept of the "dharma self". From the very beginning, Christianity considered the self to be something related to body, soul, and spirit, but these elements alone could not explain all the aspects of the self, so Christianity took God as the source of the self. The symbolic significance of God as the source of the self is far greater than its practical significance. Because what it really means is that Christianity believes there are elements of the self that we do not know about. God represents those unknown elements of our self-knowledge. So the knowledge of the self is not closed, but open. There can, of course, be no place for God in a naturalized account of the Christian idea of the self. For example, the naturalized account of Christian second creation means that the self is not a creation of God, but we can divide the creation of the self into two interrelated parts. The self itself is sufficiently individualized that it is impossible to produce the self without sufficient individual differ-

entiation; individual diversity, therefore, is a necessary component of the self. But there are also things in the structure of the self that are common to different individuals, which can serve as the basis for the emergence of an individualized self. In this sense, the self can also undergo secondary creation, but without the involvement of God.

There is a lot of scientific research on the self these days. The Buddhist and Christian ideas of the self can be incorporated into the framework of the natural sciences mainly because their knowledge of the self has some unique value in some respects. For example, both Buddhism and Christianity focus on aspects of the self in the form of meditation that cannot be replaced by other methods, such as regular introspection (Clarke 2002, pp. 97–100). Combining the various aspects of self that we gain through meditation can help us to creatively transform Buddhist and Christian ideas of self based on cognitive neuroscience. This approach is consistent with the "Pattern Theory of Self" advocated by Shaun Gallagher and Daniel Dennett, among others. In meditation, almost all the aspects of the self are touched upon. For example, the pure conscious experience resulting from meditation involves at least three aspects of the self: minimal embodied aspects, minimal experiential aspects, and psychological/cognitive aspects. Positive or negative psychological feelings and religious experiences resulting from meditation relate to the affective aspects of the self, the situated aspects, and the narrative aspects. The advantage of Pattern Theory of Self is that it allows various accounts of the self to be compatible, such as the Christian naturalized account of the self and the Buddhist naturalized account of the self. Such an account has the potential to provide a theoretical model for our account of the self that is neither reductionist nor dualistic.

For an extended period, meditation was dismissed as mystical and pagan. It was not until psychological research began to explore meditation that it gradually gained reluctant acceptance, albeit primarily as a mystical experience. However, it was still perceived as an escape from reality, with little recognition of its intrinsic positive effects. In the last century, with the introduction of a large number of Eastern meditation methods and practices to the West, the Western concept of meditation changed greatly, and the mystery surrounding meditation began to gradually disappear. Philosophers and scientists began to see and evaluate meditation in a positive light. Changing attitudes toward meditation led to it becoming an object of study in psychology, philosophy, and science, and the way researchers viewed it changed. Scientific research into the meditation experience began in the 1950s, and there have been thousands of studies on the subject. For instance, neuroscientific research, informed by psychological theory, has gained insights into the state of the zen mind. Tomio Hirai posits that the zen mind is a phenomenon that persists within individual internal experiences and can be regarded as a cognitive activity that operates flexibly to adapt to various specific situations. Cognitive activities that lack a transformation of self-awareness are, in essence, equivalent to a hollow state or a mere manifestation of human nature (Hirai 1974, p. 75). In the last decade or two, meditation has been linked to studies of consciousness and self with the use of techniques such as electroencephalography (EEG). Some scholars believe that studies such as these are bringing together the knowledge of Eastern meditation with the sophisticated biological and medical data of the 20th century (Crook and Fontana 1990, p. 13). Still, little is known about the neurobiological processes involved in meditation and its possible long-term effects on the brain. The difficulty with specialized studies of meditation practices is that these studies require practitioners to have a detailed description of their meditation techniques and states, whereas the descriptions of their own meditation techniques and states that many practitioners are able to provide often have metaphysical or theological elements. These factors are not tolerable for the neuroscience of meditation. So, a key part of the scientific study of meditation, they argue, is to "separate the highly refined and

verifiable aspects of knowledge about meditation from the metaphysical and theological context of that knowledge (Lutz et al. 2007, p. 499)". In studies utilizing EEG technology to monitor human meditative states, researchers have observed that meditation can induce a unique functional state in the brain, characterized by a continuous flow of mental activity, which aligns with William James' concept of "stream of consciousness". James H. Austin emphasizes that such phenomena have not been revealed in previous investigations of psychological states. Indeed, advanced research techniques have now confirmed that the normal brain operates in a highly dynamic mode, with numerous unique EEG changes recorded every second, which is considered a typical feature. Further analysis of EEG data, particularly when using traditional recording methods, reveals a series of random and varied waveform configurations. The findings of EEG research not only confirm the essence of brainwaves as a continuous stream of consciousness but also, to some extent, support the Buddhist theoretical understanding of the meditative process as a temporary slowing or halting of the stream of consciousness within the brain, reflecting its scientific rationality.

Knowledge regarding the neurobiological processes associated with meditation and their potential long-term impacts on the brain is still limited. According to James H. Austin, as scientists strive to correlate data across different levels, they remain uncertain about the specific neurophysiological microstates to which these brief EEG recordings correspond, and how these recordings relate to the ever-present patterns of consciousness in our subjective mental environment (Austin 1998, p. 297). The challenges of investigating meditative practices within the scientific domain are primarily evident in two aspects: Firstly, the science of meditation seeks to integrate objective observations of brain activity with the subjective experiential content of Buddhist consciousness, aiming to contribute novel perspectives to the analytical framework of human cognitive processes and value assessment. In other words, the science of meditation endeavors to transcend the boundaries of consciousness studies, philosophy of mind, and cognitive science, forming an innovative interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research paradigm. This paradigm imposes stringent requirements on researchers, who must not only possess expertise in neuroscience but also be well versed in the meditative practices of Buddhism and Christianity, capable of comprehensively engaging with and deeply understanding the knowledge systems of multiple related disciplines. On the other hand, these studies require meditators to provide detailed descriptions of their meditation techniques and states, yet many meditators' descriptions are often intertwined with metaphysical or theological elements. These factors are intolerable in the neuroscientific study of meditation. Therefore, for the scientific study of meditation, it is considered crucial to distinguish the highly refined and verifiable parts of meditative knowledge from their metaphysical and theological backgrounds.

A notable similarity between Buddhism or Christianity and science lies in their shared approach of using systematic methods to elucidate the understanding and cognition of the world, which is further extended to the interpretation of self-awareness. Specifically, both Buddhism and Christianity propose a multitude of testable hypotheses and theories concerning the mind. Consequently, scientists can replicate meditative practices derived from these traditions through appropriate technical methods. The fundamental divergence between science and Buddhism is that science strives to exclude subjective experiences from the external world, adopting a materialist stance that rejects "first-person experiences", thereby limiting the scientific exploration of self-awareness. Two opposing dimensions have been recognized in the study of the self in the philosophy of mind: the so-called "internalist position", which remains within the subject, and the "externalist position", which is concerned with grasping the knowledge of the self at a public level. How to study the self is not only a methodological question, but also involves fundamental metaphysical questions. The method of studying the self essentially characterizes the way in which

we have access to the self. And, the question of how to access the self is fundamentally connected with the question of the nature of the self. Christianity holds that I am a soul, a bodily soul. This concept exhibits the characteristics of the embodied self. The existence of the self is different from the existence of the human body, which does not require any means of bodily access in order to constitute its existence. For example, we do not need to be aware of the body by sight, touch, etc., to form our body. However, the existence of the self is different, and access to the self such as meditation is actually a prerequisite for the formation of the self of the meditator. In other words, access to the self is one of the constitutive aspects of the self. There are two ways to access the self. One is the first-person path from within, and the other is the third-person path from without. These two paths, while giving us self-knowledge, are also constantly reconstructing the self itself. Meditation provides favorable conditions for us to acquire self-knowledge through the first-person method, and thus to know the elements, structure, function, and essence of the self. The natural sciences, represented by cognitive neuroscience, help to combine the first-person and third-person approaches. For example, we can use technical methods to observe what is going on in the brain of a meditation practitioner while they meditate.

5. Conclusions

Neither Buddhism nor Christianity offers an absolute affirmation or negation of the concept of self, but rather, they meticulously differentiate the constitution and hierarchy of self based on their unique value systems and practical objectives. This stratified interpretation of self provides a solid theoretical foundation for the self-cultivation advocated by both traditions, objectively aiding adherents in revealing and manifesting the true essence of self through a series of thought-related practical trainings, thereby achieving spiritual fulfillment and happiness. Furthermore, the paths of self-improvement within Buddhism and Christianity can be situated within a naturalistic theoretical framework, allowing for in-depth analysis and elucidation with the assistance of academic achievements in related fields such as cognitive neuroscience. From this naturalistic perspective, engaging in dialog and exchange between Buddhism and Christianity not only deepens the understanding of self-concept for both sides but also promotes the mutual borrowing, integration, and innovative development of self-theories within the two religious traditions. However, the author posits that special attention should be given to the following issues: First, does the naturalizing tendency potentially harbor the risk of "scientism"? Second, are there limitations in the neuroscientific research on meditation and self?

The first issue does not focus on the direct conflict between religion and science. Specifically, Buddhism does not confine itself within the categories of religion or science, nor has its traditional system strictly demarcated the boundaries between religious and scientific truths. Scientism constitutes a cognitive paradigm that extols science as the supreme norm of knowledge and criterion for judgment, superior to all the other interpretations of life phenomena. In reality, for mainstream Buddhists and Christians, they do not entirely reject the central role of rational logic in human cognition, but they also do not agree that rational cognition and logical reasoning alone can penetrate the essence of things and achieve spiritual liberation. After all, the concerns of Buddhism and Christianity extend beyond the objective material world. They regard rationality and scientific judgment as valuable, but not as ultimate values. Whether it is "nirvana" or "salvation", neither can be attained solely through reason or science. However, the tendency toward "naturalizing" religious studies harbors a scientistic bias, attempting to reveal the causal mechanisms behind cognition through a scientific lens. This scientistic characteristic is evident in the "disenchantment", "demystification", and elimination of all the supernatural and non-modern elements from religion. The contents that cannot be "naturalized" are often neglected or discarded, yet

the process of "naturalization" tends towards "de-religionization", reflecting a certain cognitive bias against religion on the part of some scientists.

Regarding the second issue, the author believes that natural scientific technologies such as neuroscience have significant potential but also their limitations. The positive effects are mainly reflected in the rapid development of related technical research, which heralds the future possibility of a deep or even comprehensive decoding of the human mind and brain. Specifically, within the experimental architecture of brain–computer interface technology, researchers externalize internal mental states or brain activities through technical media, making the quantitative analysis and real-time decoding of the human spiritual world during meditation feasible. Integrating brain–computer interface technology into the study of self-awareness helps to objectify the data and information of subjective experiences, merging first-person and third-person research perspectives, thus ensuring objectivity while aiming for comprehensiveness and bridging the gap in studying consciousness. On the other hand, contemporary psychological and cognitive neuroscience research findings are insufficient to encompass the full meaning of the human spirit and religious culture. It is undeniable that natural science has technically made the mind more transparent, providing a reliable path to explore its mysteries, but this does not justify reducing the freedom and happiness of all individuals to mere codes and symbols. Modern natural science research tends to discuss the mind only within the physical and objective worlds, focusing on truth-seeking questions such as the nature and mechanisms of consciousness during meditation, while neglecting the value-related aspects of the mind, and the exploration of human value and the cultivation of happiness as discussed in Buddhism and Christianity.

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