Ritual, Self-deception and Make-Believe: a Classical Buddhist Perspective

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1 Introduction

Everyone, with the possible exception of those who are really good at it, is personally familiar with the phenomenon of self-deception. Anyone who has been conscious of struggling with a temptation to do what goes against her own better judgment and has then found justification for yielding to temptation is familiar with self-deception. So if I may be allowed to begin with the assumption that most of us have experienced a phenomenon that we would identify as some form of self-deception, what I shall try to do in this paper is to examine how one particular theory of personal identity can account for the phenomenon. Having done that, I shall look into the question of one of the mechanisms of self-deception and then into the question of whether there are occasions in which the mechanisms of self-deception may be regarded as producing more positive results.

2 The Buddhist view of a modular self

The theory of personal identity from which I shall examine this whole issue is the one provided within classical Indian Buddhism, which I shall refer to simply as Buddhism throughout the remainder of this paper.[1] In contrast to most of the other philosophical systems in classical India, the Buddhists argued for a modular view of personal identity. According to this view, there is no characteristic or set of characteristics that remains constant throughout the life of a complex organism. This being the case, a complex

[1]By classical Indian Buddhism I mean the period of about a millennium, roughly 100 B. C. E. until around 1000 C. E., during which time Buddhist thought became increasingly systematized in India. Most of what is presented here is characteristic of what one finds in Vasubandhu's *Abhidharmakośa*, Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimaggo*, Dharmakīrti's *Pramāṇa-vārttika*, Śāntarakṣita's *Tattvasaṅgraha*, Kamalaśīla's *Bhāvanā-krama* and numerous other writings in Sanskrit and Pali. Good accounts in English appear in numerous secondary sources; I would recommend both Collins (1982, 85–195) and Hirakawa (1990, 38–59, 127–219) for their clarity. Stcherbatsky's account (1923), though dated, is one of the most frequently cited accounts in English.

organism does not really have an identity, at least in the etymological sense of the word *identitas*, which literally means sameness; a complex being, at the end of its existence, need not have any parts that were present at the beginning of its existence. Insofar as an organism has any identity, it consists of no more than an agreement within society to regard a cluster of properties or an assembly of events as a single being—as in the apocryphal story of the museum that proudly displayed a hatchet that once belonged to George Washington, although the blade had been replaced twice and the handle three times since it had left Washington's hands. The Buddhist theory also does not regard an organism as an individual, at least in the etymological sense of the word, which indicates the fact of being indivisible. Rather, an organism is seen as an aggregation of distinct parts that may cooperate with one another and to some extent depend upon one another in order to function, but which are nevertheless, in principle at least, quite separable from one another. It might be more accurate, according to Buddhist anthropology, to call a person a party, that is, a group of individuals—in this case, individual simple properties—assembled for a particular purpose. In fact, for the rest of this paper, I shall borrow the legal term "party" to refer to what we intuitively take to be a single person; using this temporary convention will help serve as a reminder that in the theory under discussion, no person is really an individual.

Not only is the physical body modular, according to Buddhist theory, but so is the mind. Rather than speaking of a single principle of integrated awareness, Buddhist literature describes separate actions of awareness, such as an awareness of the color yellow, an awareness of the color red, or an awareness of differences in shade and other chromatic properties. Each of the five physical sense provides an entirely discrete channel of information, such that no two faculties of sense are capable of experiencing the same type of sensible property; the eye senses only colors, the ear only sounds and so on. Not only is all consciousness modular, say the Buddhists, but so is a party's character or personality. A party's character is the product of a great diversity of types of instruction and indoctrination, all of which leave at least some impression. Since these external influences come from a number of sources, it is to be expected that they should often be incompatible with one another. And as a result, the character or personality of a complex organism such as a human being is naturally full of contradictory opinions, incongruous desires and incompatible aspirations. Even the human memory is fragmented, for memories are usually triggered by sensations, so that one's sense of the past is constantly shifting. Not only do we have varying perceptions of who we are, but we also have continually changing perceptions of who we have been and who we hope to become.

In all this instability and internal inconsistency, the human being mirrors the world as a whole. The totality of events is not, in Buddhist theory, a cosmos, for $\kappa o \sigma \mu o \varsigma$ means order. Nor is it a universe, for it does not move as a single whole. Rather, the totality of events is an unsupervised chaos that has no beginning and no single purpose. It is a noisy and random jumble of events caused by innumerable different and often irreconcilable volitions, over which there never has been and never could be a single-minded, intelligent superintendent.[2] This being the nature of the world as a whole, the only workable strategy for attaining contentment, according to Buddhism,

[2]An account of the arguments that Indian Buddhist adduced in favor of atheism appears in Hayes (1988).

is to relinquish all hope for the impossible and to learn to accept reality as it is and as it always must be. Among the impossible dreams to be abandoned by the wise are those for such things as personal and collective security, predictability, uniformity and harmony, for reality is characterized by constant and dangerously chaotic change.

This view of the human being and its place in the world that I have been describing is not the view of any one Buddhist thinker. Rather, it is a mosaic put together over the course of some fifteen centuries by scores of Buddhist philosophers from south and central Asia. These philosophers differed from one another in many respects, but they shared a preoccupation with the problem of change and transformation, and they agreed on the principle that modularity is the only way to account for such change. Like Charles Darwin and other nineteenth century biologists of Europe, who built their theory of evolution upon the ideas of modularity and dissociability and in so doing argued against the essentialism of anti-evolutionists such as the paleontologist Georges Cuvier, the Buddhists of India developed the idea that change is possible only in modular beings who are capable of replacing their various components at differing rates of change.[3] If there were such a thing as a being whose consciousness was simple rather than modular, such a being could neither learn nor think nor perform any kind of mental activity. And so any being who is capable of thinking about anything at all must be modular. And of course the more complex a modular being is, the greater the likelihood of internal inconsistency and other forms of physical and psychological chaos.

The Buddhist thinkers themselves explicitly made the point that the concept of a path or method of improving one's own character made sense only in the context of a doctrine of a modular and therefore inherently unstable self. In the second century C. E., for example, the philosopher Nāgārjuna argued that no changes of character would be possible if the self were of a fixed nature. Buddhist tradition already had a special term for the idea that a party has no fixed nature of its own; they called this condition *emptiness*. Nāgārjuna argued that empty beings are the only beings subject to change.[4] The aspect of emptiness that is unwelcome to most people, is that change is not only possible but inevitable, and that one of the many types of change to which every being is subject is the one known as death. The tenacious presence of premonitions of one's own death often has the effect of spoiling experiences that might otherwise be enjoyable. Sentient beings suffer because of their emptiness. But emptiness also has a more welcome consequence, which is that it is not necessary to suffer anxiety about one's own death and therefore not necessary to have one's pleasures spoiled by the lingering promise of the unavoidable dissolution of one's own body and mind. Death may be inevitable for empty beings, but uneasiness about death is a psychological state; like all psychological states, it has antecedent causes and conditions, and once those conditions are eliminated, then so is the dread of dying. Therefore, concludes Nāgārjuna, it is only a philosophy based on the doctrine of emptiness that is capable of accounting

[3]See Stephen Jay Gould (1992, 10–12) for a summary of Cuvier's essentialist definitions of biological species and Darwin's rejection thereof. As for the importance that the early Buddhists placed on the observations that modules undergo substitution at different rates of change, see Kalupahana (1975, 83, 103–104).

[4]Nāgārjuna's arguments that no change is possible except in beings that lack an essence or permanent structure can be found in, for example, his *Mūlamadhyamikakārikā* 24.16–20. See translations by Sprung (1979, 237–240) and Kalupahana (1986a, 339–342).

for the fact that people can achieve the great result of being liberated from the fear of death by making a number of small, incremental changes in their beliefs and attitudes.

Neither Nāgārjuna nor any other Buddhist philosopher that I am aware of made any explicit comments about self-deception. It can be argued, however, that the doctrine of emptiness, being merely another way of expressing the modular view of the human being, has the potential to provide a reasonable account of the phenomenon. What follows is an attempt at a brief sketch of how a Buddhist theory of self-deception might look.

2.1 A possible Buddhist account of self-deception

First, it will be recalled that the human character is regarded in Buddhist psychology as the product of innumerable impressions that have been experienced virtually at random. A number of attitudes that one forms early in life are the result of the kind of training that one receives as a child from parents and other family members. Given that mothers and fathers are only rarely in perfect harmony with one another, a child usually acquires and cultivates traits that are at least slightly different and perhaps even incompatible. As the child grows older and comes into contact with an ever greater circle of influential friends and mentors, it becomes ever more likely to acquire conflicting patterns of thinking and behavior. By the time one is a young adult, the odds are probably in favor of one's having at least mildly conflicting sets of desires, aspirations, attitudes and beliefs.

At this stage of the description, two further suppositions of Buddhist psychology come into play. The first is that basic attitudes can be classified into two categories: those that are competent and those that are incompetent at producing a feeling of well-being.[5] According to most systems of classification, for example, hostility and mental rigidity are among the basic emotional and mental traits that impede contentment in the world, whereas sympathy and mental flexibility are among the traits that generate feelings of happiness or enhance already existing pleasure. The second supposition is that at any given moment, all one's basic attitudes are either competent or incompetent; hostility and mental flexibility cannot occur in the same mentality at the same time. At any given moment, then, a party's mind is supposed to be driven by attitudes that are propelling it either towards or away from satisfaction, but never towards both satisfaction and dissatisfaction at the same time. There can, however, be oscillation between these two polarities, and the mental continuum in which this oscillation occurs normally regards itself, and is regarded by society at large, as a single being, even though it is in fact not.

Now among the mental traits that can be classified as either competent or incompetent, according to Buddhists, there are various kinds of belief. Believing in one's own individuality and believing that one's own needs and desires are any more urgent or important than the needs and desires of other sentient beings are two stock examples of incompetent mental states. Now given the modular nature of the human character,

[5] The Sanskrit terms in question here are *kuśala*, which has connotations of competence, skill, health, wholesomeness and general goodness, and its negative *akuśala*, which indicates the absence of all those properties. Competence is regarded by Buddhist systematists as a second order property, that is, a property belonging to primary mental properties such as kindness.

and given that beliefs are acquired from a variety of sources, it is possible for a human being to hold different beliefs at different times. It is possible, for example, to believe in some situations that when one's desires conflict with the desires of others that it is preferable to satisfy one's own desires even though this may entail making others unhappy; and in some other situations, one may believe just the opposite, namely, that satisfying one's own desires at the expense of causing another being's displeasure is less likely to make one truly happy than modifying one's desires. There may very well be situations in which a party's mind oscillates quickly between these two beliefs, until one of them finally becomes strong enough to overpower the other. If it should turn out that the incompetent set of beliefs had overpowered the competent set of beliefs, then the Buddhist would say that the party had become a victim of self-deception. It would be a deception in the sense that the party had become convinced to act in a way that did not conduce to its optimum well-being, and it would be *self*-deception in the sense that the victorious set of false beliefs and the defeated set of true beliefs both belonged to the same party, that is, to what is conventionally considered to be the same person.

It should be apparent from all that has been said up to this point that a Buddhist account of self-deception is a species of a genus of accounts in which the principal strategy is to see the deceiving agent and the deceived patient as two different and relatively independent subsystems of a single system. Presumably, the Buddhist account is liable to all the criticisms of the whole genus.[6] Rather than trying to answer those criticisms, let me now move on to the issue of one of the mechanisms for self-deception that seems to have been recognized by the Buddhists.

3 Ritual as a mechanism of self-deception

At the very outset of this section of the paper I must make it clear that what I am presenting here is not a recapitulation of explicitly stated Buddhist doctrines. Rather, I am offering some speculations on the kind of thinking that may have been behind Buddhist doctrines that were explicitly stated. Let me begin from the safety of a brief recapitulation of those doctrines before venturing onto the more hazardous ground of speculation.

3.1 The stages of progress towards competence

As has already been pointed out, Buddhist theory portrays the human mentality as an unfortunate aggregation of conflicting desires, beliefs and attitudes, in which competent mental states contend with incompetent mental states; the result is inconsistent behavior and frustration. A very important factor in determining which kind of mentality prevails, according to Buddhist theory, is the company that one keeps. Comrades tend to exert a strong influence on how one behaves, and their influence extends to such forms of behavior as what one believes and which values one gives top priority. It is important, therefore, to make company with salutary friends, people who encourage one

[6]Rorty (1988) presents a nicely argued defense of another species of this genus of account of self-deception.

always to cultivate competent mental habits and attitudes.[7] If one is fortunate enough to have such friends, then the odds are much more in favor of gradually developing good habits and eliminating bad ones. The ultimate goal, of course, is to eliminate the bad habits altogether, to eradicate them so thoroughly that they can never again arise. Only at this final stage of progress can one be said to be fully integrated, thus a person of integrity (wholeness, unity). A person who reaches this final stage is called an *arhant* in Buddhist literature, a term that means a person worthy of respect.[8] Now on the way to becoming an arhant, it is said that a person passes through several stages of development. It is not necessary for our purposes here to examine these stages in detail. Suffice it to say that at each stage of development a person is said to eliminate a certain set of psychological traits that act as obstacles to complete and imperturbable happiness, and that the closer one gets to being an arhant, the more subtle and difficult to eradicate these obstacles are. Rather than focusing on the subtle end of the scale, let me focus in this essay on just the first two obstacles, elimination of which marks the first stage of progress towards health and respectability.

The first of the two obstacles that Buddhist literature says must be removed before any further progress is possible is called *sat-kāya-dṛṣṭi* in Sanskrit. This term literally means the belief that collections are real. Generally speaking, this term refers to any belief that a collection or set or group of things has any reality over and above the members of the group. More particularly, the term refers to the belief that a party, who is a complex of dissociable physical and psychological characteristics, has an existence of its own, apart from its components. Given that the belief in the separate existence of the complex wholes is one that should be discarded, according to early Buddhism, we can say that early Buddhism is anti-holistic (as well as anti-individualistic, atheistic and acosmic); holistic thinking is seen as standing in the way of genuine happiness. The second of the two obstacles that must be removed if one is to make any further advancement towards being an arhant is called *śīla-vrata-parāmarśa* in Sanskrit. This term literally means addiction to customs and rituals, especially devotional (or what we might today call 'religious') rituals. As Buddhism grew as an institutionalized religion, this term naturally came to be interpreted as addiction to customs and rituals of any religion other than Buddhism, but there is evidence to suggest that in its earliest usage it referred to the addiction to rituals of any kind.

[7] The importance of companionship is found, for example in Dhammapada 328–330: "If on the journey of life a man can find a wise and intelligent friend who is good and self-controlled, let him go with that traveler; and in joy and recollection let them overcome the dangers of the journey. But if on the journey of life a man cannot find a wise and intelligent friend who is good and self-controlled, let him travel alone, like a king who has left his country, or like a great elephant alone in the forest. For it is better to go alone on the path of life rather than to have a fool for a companion. With few wishes and few cares, and leaving all sins behind, let a man travel alone, like a great elephant alone in the forest." (Mascaró, 1973, 82) More recent translations of this popular Buddhist text are by Carter (1987) and Kalupahana (1986b).

[8] Rorty (1988, 13) states "If the self is essentially unified or at least strongly integrated, capable of critical, truth-oriented reflection, with its various functions in principle accessible to, and corrigible by, one another, it cannot deceive itself. According to the classical picture, the self is oriented to truth, or at least directed by principles of corrigibility that do not intentionally preserve error." Although the classical picture that Rorty has in mind is no doubt that of classical Greece, what she says applies equally well to the portrayal of the ideal person in classical India; the prototypical arhant in Buddhism is, of course, the Buddha himself who was said to be incapable of uttering a falsehood, even in jest. A rather humorless fellow perhaps, but wholesome to the very core.

3.2 Why must rituals be abandoned?

Now at this point I must leave the safety of description and march into the more perilous terrain of unwarranted speculation. The question that I should like to try to answer is this: Why are these two obstacles always presented together as a pair? Are they simply two separate impediments to be overcome one after another, or is there some organic relationship between them that would enable us to regard each of these obstacles as an aspect of the other, or at least as a reflection of the other, such that overcoming one requires also overcoming the other? I shall argue the latter. More particularly, I shall argue that the belief in one's own individuality can be seen as the ultimate form of self-deception and that customs and rituals can be seen as one of the most powerful mechanisms by which this deception is sustained.

First, it has already been established that the Buddhist tradition regarded as an error the belief in individuality. A party cannot be an individual in the sense of being an undivided whole, since such an entity would be incapable of action or change. Since a party does act and change, it cannot be an undivided whole. But neither is a party an individual in the sense of having an identity that makes it distinct from other beings in that way that would warrant a preferential treatment of itself over others. Moreover, according to a Buddhist way of looking at things, the erroneous belief in personal identity is not a harmless error. On the contrary, it is believing in oneself as an object of warranted preferential treatment that is said to serve as the root cause of modes of behavior that ultimately work to one's own disadvantage. To cite just one obvious example, theft is a form of behavior that is warranted only by the assumption that one's own desire or need for a piece of property is more important than the desire or need of the being who is currently in possession of that property. But acting as a thief is to alienate the person from whom the property is taken, and to alienate others is at best to lose their cooperation; at worst it is to provoke them into some form of unpleasant retaliation. There is a Buddhist adage: "Abuse always has two victims: the abusive party and the party abused." Therefore, theft is an incompetent method of taking care of one's own interests. And since theft is motivated by a belief in one's individual identity, it can be said that this belief is also a form of incompetence.[9] Now as we also saw earlier, in a Buddhist context, when an incompetent set of beliefs and attitudes prevails over a competent set within the same party, the party can be said to be a victim of self-deception. Therefore, the belief in personal identity can be regarded as a form of self-deception.

For the discussion that follows I shall use the word "individualism" to mean the belief that a party has in its own uniqueness. Let me now make a distinction between degrees of individualism. The limiting case of individualism would be the belief that one is radically isolated from all other parties in such a way that one's own personal needs and desires are justifiably taken into account in preference over the needs and desires of all other parties. Let me take advantage of the fact that the Greek word for private or separate is ιδιος and call this view of oneself as radically separate from all others *idiotic individualism*. And let me distinguish this from what we could call *semi-idiotic individualism* or *partisanship*, namely, the conviction that one belongs

[9]Incidentally, this line of argument about theft can also be made *mutatis mutandis* about ownership of property, but it is considered rude to make this argument outside monastic circles.

to a group of other individuals and that this group as a whole is uniquely privileged over all other living beings in such a way that the needs of this group justifiably take precedence over the needs of all other groups. Common expressions of partisanship would be ethnocentrism, racism, nationalism, sexism, and what biologist David Suzuki calls "speciesism" (the conviction that human needs and wants count for more than the needs of all other forms of life in the biosphere). Now if individualism as a genus is a form of self-deception, then both idiotic individualism and partisanship are forms of self-deception as well.

Relatively few people, aside perhaps from psychopaths and sociopaths, adhere to what I am calling idiotic individualism. Considerably more people partake, at least occasionally, in partisanship of one kind or another. When people collect themselves into groups which in turn come to regard themselves as somehow distinct from the rest of society (or from the rest of life itself), they must first find a way of maintaining a sense of group solidarity, which involves overcoming the tendency towards idiotic individualism that prevails among the parties in the group so that the members come to regard the common needs of the group on a par with or more important than their own private needs. And the group must also find a way of helping its members feel that the group itself is distinguishable from all the parties who do not have membership in the group. One of the most effective ways that human beings have found to maintain cohesion within a group and separation of the group from the outside is ritual action. Some piece of behavior that is performed in exactly (or nearly exactly) the same manner by all members of the group serves to cement them into a whole on the principle that however different the members may be from one another, they have in common at least this set of actions that they all do in the same way. But this piece of behavior is really effective to bond the group together only if it also excludes everyone who does not perform it in the prescribed manner. It is not at all difficult to come up with examples of ritual behavior that bonds those who perform it against the rest of the world. There are patriotic rituals such as singing national anthems and saluting flags; political rituals such as staging massive rallies, chanting slogans in unison and attaching pithy aphorisms to one's automobile; religious rituals such as reciting creeds, going on pilgrimages, and venerating consecrated objects; military rituals such as saluting, wearing uniforms and insignia, and marching in unison; athletic rituals such as keeping mascots, displaying trophies and cheerleading; academic rituals such as giving students examinations and then dressing them up in funny hats when they have passed through a requisite number of such ordeals; and family rituals such as the celebration of birthdays and wedding anniversaries. When one begins to think about all the rituals in one's life, the list is seemingly endless.

Given that in the Buddhist view individualism is a form of self-deception, and given that partisanship is a species of individualism, and given that ritual behavior is one of the most effective mechanisms of partisanship, I would argue that it is no accident that individualism and ritualism are always paired together in standard Buddhist lists of obstacles to genuine contentment.

4 Self-deception and make-believe

On the basis of what has been said so far, it might be expected that a Buddhist attitude towards ritual would be uniformly negative, since ritual can be seen as an instrument of self-delusion. But if one observes the actual practice of Buddhists throughout history, one finds that there is anything but a disdain for customs and rituals. This discrepancy between what the theory predicts and what one actually observes could be accounted for in one of several ways. It could be the case that Buddhists have historically tended to have a rather poor understanding of the principles that once stood as the foundation of their practices. Or it could be that in this presentation, it is I who have seriously misrepresented the theoretical basis of Buddhist attitudes towards ritual. Let me assume that the latter is the case and try to make suitable adjustments in my presentation of Buddhist theory.

Fortunately, the amount of adjustment necessary in order to salvage this theory is not too extensive. Recall that the point was made earlier that it is considered very important to keep company with people who encourage one to cultivate a competent mentality. Indeed, the ideal situation for a person is to be within a community of people whose sole interest is to cultivate skill in themselves and to help others do the same. Insofar as rituals and customs within such a community help it to stay together as a community, they would not be seen as entirely negative. But this is still far from saying that ritual could be seen as playing a positive role in a party's endeavor to become more virtuous. What remains to be seen now is whether ritual, and the self-deception that accompanies it, can ever been seen as something wholesome, as opposed to being merely not entirely insidious.

Let us begin by considering the case of a party who has just recently embarked on the venture of becoming more virtuous. One in this situation, it will be recalled, is normally still vulnerable to influences that draw one away from a competent mentality. While a party is in a state of indecision about whether or not to yield to those incompetent influences, it is usual to begin to doubt whether it is even possible or indeed desirable to have a skillful mentality. It is at just these moments when rituals can be effectively used to restore a party's belief in the possibility of being skillful. By fingering a string of beads, for example, or by reciting a memorized formula, or by recalling a vow that one has made, the party may overcome the doubt about whether there is really any point in being judicious in one's behavior. In a case such as this, the ritual has been instrumental in doing two things. First, it has reminded the party of his or her membership in the community of wise people; this feeling of membership in a community, it will be recalled, is from a Buddhist point of view a kind of self-deception. Second, the ritual has helped to make the party believe once again in something about which for a moment there had been doubt. By being made to believe in skill once again, the party actually acts competently and thus rejoins the community of the wise.

Ritual can be seen as a kind of make-believe in two senses of the word. First, in a literal sense, it can have the effect of making one believe in something that one had momentarily doubted; it is an action of faith rather than an action of knowledge. Second, in the usual idiomatic sense of the term "make-believe", ritual very often is make-believe in the sense of a kind of pretending or a suspension of reality. In order to illustrate this second point, let me use the concrete examples of two rituals that are in

fact commonly performed among Buddhists.

One ritual that exemplifies the element of make-believe in both of the senses described above is one that is virtually universal within Buddhist communities. This is the ritual of bowing respectfully to an image, usually a representation of the Buddha; it is often accompanied by making an offering of incense, flowers, fruit or some other food. This ritual is obviously an act of pretending in that one is acting *as if* one were in the presence of the living Buddha, even though one is obviously not actually in his presence. One is offering beautiful flowers as if the Buddha could see them, fragrant incense as if the Buddha could smell it, and delicious food as if the Buddha could eat it. These ritual gestures of generosity are also a kind of play acting; since the custom among Buddhists is to eat food after it has been presented to an image of the Buddha, one is not really giving anything away at all in the final analysis, but rather one is enjoying eating the food as if it had never been given to anyone, and smelling the incense as if it had been ignited solely for one's own personal sensual pleasure. To get the full benefit of performing the ritual requires that one suspend one's sense of reality, in about the same way that getting the full benefit of watching a cinema or a dramatic presentation on stage requires that one forget that one is actually the spectator of a portrayal of events rather than the direct spectator of the events themselves.

A second ritual that is very common, but by no means universal, among Buddhists is that of sitting in meditation. When performed with a group, this ritual involves sitting on the ground in a posture approximately like that in which the Buddha is supposed to have sat and staying in that posture for a prescribed period of time. Sitting in this way re-creates a rough resemblance to the Buddha's external appearance when his mind was serene and calm and free of desires, aversions and delusions. As anyone who has participated in this ritual is aware, adopting this posture is very often a form of play acting, in much the same way that making an offering of food to an image is a kind of play acting. Very often the mind of the meditator is anything but calm and serene, and it is free from desires and aversions only for a few seconds at a time. And yet the meditator struggles to maintain every outward appearance of having the psychological traits of a Buddha. It is a ritual in which one makes believe that one is either a Buddha or someone on the way to becoming either a Buddha or an arhant. Like the ritual of making offerings to a representation of the Buddha, the ritual of sitting in meditation also requires that the practitioner be willing to suspend reality and enter into a realm of make-believe.

In addition to the element of pretense that I have already indicated, both of the two rituals described above have in common that they reinforce the participant's sense of belonging to a community, namely, the community of Buddhists. Bowing and making offerings to an image is something that all Buddhists have in common; bowing to an image specifically of the Buddha differentiates this community from those who venerate other images and from those who pay homage to no images at all. Moreover, within the Buddhist community there are many different styles of performing devotional rituals. The particular manner in which one bows serves to cement one's relations to a given Buddhist sect and to exclude those who belong to other forms of Buddhism. The ritual has, in other words, the effect of increasing the participant's feelings of membership in a group. Moreover, this group is seen as a special group, for it is part of the community of the wise, who are elevated above the level of ordinary beings. Believ-

ing oneself to be a member of a privileged group, as we saw above, is partisanship, which we argued was a kind of self-deception. Therefore, the rituals that we have been describing can be considered instruments of self-deception.

4.1 Rituals that make believe; rituals that deceive

What is it, then, that distinguishes these rituals from the kinds of rituals that Buddhist theory condemns? Let me suggest something along the following lines as a possible redeeming virtue. Although it can be said that one is only pretending to be generous when one offers food to an image, and pretending to be serene when one sits in a meditation posture, at least one is pretending to do the right sort of thing. That is, one is pretending to do something that would be competent and skillful and conducive to the happiness of oneself and others if one were really doing it. Moreover, going through the motions of doing an action, even if one is not really doing it, is said to reinforce certain habits. Make-believe, in other words, can be seen as a kind of rehearsal, like the preparation that an actor goes through in learning to play a dramatic role convincingly, or the practice that an athlete undergoes in preparation for a real competition. When the well-rehearsed actor steps onto the stage, or the well-trained athlete into the arena, the real performance seems natural, spontaneous and effortless, because the performer has gone through the motions so many times that the motions require very little conscious effort. Similarly, when disciples perform the ritual of pretending to be generous hundreds or even thousands of times a year for several years, then when they step out of the world of make-believe and begin to act with real sentient beings, their generosity is spontaneous.

Given what has been said about Buddhist views on the capacity that repetitious actions have in the formation of competent and incompetent mental attitudes, it should be clear that no ritual is ever purely empty, for it always bears at least the power to reinforce a habit, whether good or bad. Make-believe actions performed countless times become second nature, and because of this, good teachers think carefully about the kinds of rituals they recommend that their disciples perform. Care must be given to consider not only the intended results of the ritual, such as the cultivation of habits of generosity and other competent attitudes, but also the possible secondary results, including negative side-effects such as the inadvertent reinforcements of incompetent habits. Given that some attitudes are said to be competent and other incompetent, one can make a similar distinction between kinds of ritual, according to whether they have the effect of reinforcing good habits or bad. A ritual that has the effect of reinforcing competent mental habits such as generosity, for example, would be classified as a healthy ritual, whereas a ritual that merely has the effect of reinforcing a party's tendency to partisanship would be an unhealthy one. Generally speaking, then, a ritual that makes the performer believe in the advantages of being virtuous is a positive ritual, while one that enables the performer to reinforce forms of self-deception such as the belief in individuality and a sense of solidarity with a group is a negative one. It is predictable, therefore, that Buddhist teachers would tend to avoid having disciples perform rituals as a group and would prefer instead to suggest particular ritual practices to particular disciples only after having time to become acquainted with their present mental habits.

5 Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to arrive at an approximation of how Indian Buddhist thinkers might have treated the issue of self-deception, given what is known about the psychological categories with which they dealt. It has not been my aim to try to defend the Buddhist theory as the best available account of the phenomenon, although I hope to have sketched out roughly how a defense of the theory might be conducted by those whose assumptions were similar to those of the classical Indian Buddhists. In general the theory that I have presented is a member of the class of theories that attempt to account for self-deception by offering an account of a fragmented self, or what I have called a modular self. Here the collection of modules is called a self only in casual and informal everyday language, but not in any rigorous sense of the term. Deception may be regarded as the act of one intentionally causing another to believe what is false or detrimental to the other; under this theory it is one module that persuades another module to act on a false belief; and it is only insofar as both modules in question are intuitively, but mistakenly, regarded as belonging to a single self that the deception can be regarded as self-deception.

After sketching out this Buddhist theory of self-deception, I have tried to show that two common forms of deception recognized by early Buddhists were individualism (believing in one's individual uniqueness) and partisanship (belief that one belongs to a social group that is unique). On the basis of the observation that rituals can be a strong mechanism for promoting partisanship, I have argued that a possible reason behind the Buddhist rejection of ritualism was their insight into the potential that rituals have for creating a false sense of group solidarity. It has also been argued that ritual behavior in general is not a kind of action but rather a form of pretending to act. But then, noting that Buddhists in practice do quite frequently resort to rituals, I have suggested that some rituals can be seen as promoting, under carefully monitored circumstances, confidence in the advantages of cultivating what are regarded as healthy attitudes. It is only under these special circumstances that ritual behavior can be called something other than a form of self-deception.

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