In the formidable amount of literature within philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, and more recently within the neurosciences and psychiatry, one finds a plethora of different notions and approaches to the self. Whilst most researchers and scholars taking part in the discussion about the self can agree, minimally, that it is natural for us to have a ‘sense of self’, i.e. that there is something it is like to be ‘me’ or ‘I’, there is very little consensus when it comes to the nature and status of the ‘self’, ‘me’, or ‘I’ of which we have this ‘sense’. The questions posed and attempted answered by different approaches are questions as to whether the self has any real existence, i.e. is there something of ‘substance’ being referred to by the notions of ‘self’, ‘I’, and ‘me’, or is the self a mere narrative construction, a cognitive representation, or is the self a linguistic artefact, or a neurologically induced illusion?

Despite huge amounts of research effort, the present conundrum concerning the self seems not to have clarified, let alone solved, the problems concerning the self first encountered by the investigations by Descartes, Hume, and Kant. Thus, Descartes concluded from his meditations that the self we know indubitably to exist is a single, simple, and continuing consciousness, i.e. unchangeably the same throughout one’s awareness. This observation was challenged by Hume, who famously claimed that when looking within he could not find anything in his experiences corresponding to Descartes’ single, simple continuing or unifying self — and he concluded that our ordinary notions of self must be some kind of commonsensical ‘fiction’. Kant for his part argued, thus strengthening Descartes’ view, that the self as single, simple, and abiding, i.e. a pure unchanging and unifying consciousness at the centre of our experiences, is a

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precondition for the existence of any experiences whatsoever. However, he also argued, in agreement with Hume, that this necessarily inferred unitary self cannot have any experiential qualities of its own, and thus there is no possibility of having any experience, let alone any definite concepts, of it. In other words, Kant ends up with the paradox that the concept of a unifying, pure, and unchanging self is both absolutely necessary and entirely ungraspable — a paradox, so Kant puts it, which ‘mocks and torments’ the wisest of men (Shear, 1999).

It would be fair to say that, with very few exceptions (e.g. Zahavi, 2005; Strawson, 1997), current Western positions and theories about the self seem to favour — and to remain stuck within — one or the other ‘sides’ of the paradox pointed out above, however without providing any new or original suggestions; nor does there seem to be any clear breakthrough in sight that might attract unanimous agreement (Praetorius, 2009). The problems remain the same: granted that we do have an experience of or a ‘sense of self’, how then is this self and the sense of it constituted, how does it come about? What is its function, psychologically, mentally, or practically? Indeed, is the sense of self really a necessity for us humans to function and develop, and how come?

The current surge of interest in the self among Western philosophers, psychologists, and cognitive scientists has been central to Indian and Tibetan philosophy (within Buddhism and Hinduism) for the last two thousand years. Recently, a group of Western phenomenologists, analytical philosophers, and scholars of Eastern philosophy met to discuss the existence of the self and the reflexivity of consciousness, and in 2011 the results of the dialogues between the different views and philosophies on the self and consciousness was published in a book called Self, No Self? (Siderits, Thompson and Zahavi, 2011). As the title suggests, the dialogues among the various approaches concerning the self left the nature and existence of the self in the balance. While much of Western philosophy may be said to go along with and investigate our common-sense view of the self in an effort to more precisely describe what this self might be, and what its relation to consciousness and self-reflection is, and how it is structured, Eastern philosophical investigations of the self begin with the ‘suspicion’ that the sense of self that everyone seems to have might be importantly mistaken (ibid.). Indeed, despite numerous significant differences, there seems to be overwhelming consensus not just among different Buddhist traditions but also among other spiritual wisdom traditions (such as Sufism, Taoism, Christian contemplative
mysticism, and Jewish Kabbalah) that this sense of self is what causes, indeed is at the very root of, all human suffering. Nonetheless, it is a ‘self’ which, according to the view of these schools, has no real existence, nor substance; it is made up, as modern ego and object-relation theories would put it, of thoughts, self-images, ideas, and ego structures that we somehow come to identify with, and which consist of beliefs and stories about ourselves, our relations with other people, and reality at large, some of which if not most are of an unconscious and instinctual nature, formed when we were quite small children. Tragically, according to the views of most spiritual wisdom traditions, the structures, beliefs, and images we identify with as ‘me’ or ‘my self’, and hence what we take ourselves to be, are but barriers which separate us from our ‘true nature’, and which solidifies and limits our views of our selves and reality in ways that prevent us from experiencing the vast potentials and beauty of what we and reality really are. Consequently, it is the aim of the practices, studies, contemplation, enquiries, prayers, visualizations, renunciations, and meditations of students of these wisdom schools to work towards the resolution of these ego and self structures, either by transcending them, abolishing them, letting go of them, or understanding and seeing them for what they are — and thus to reach realization and liberation of our being, consciousness, and human potentials.

Although this ego and self-less being is very difficult to realize, there are today quite a few so-called realized masters within a variety of existing wisdom schools, most of them living quite ordinary modern daily (i.e. non-monastic) lives with families and children, etc. Many of these schools one way or another draw on the insights and knowledge of modern Western psychodynamic theories in working through the ego and self issues of their students, an increasing number of whom have themselves attained no-self being. So although dialogues between scholars of Eastern Buddhist traditions, based on texts that are many hundreds of years old and which contain incredibly rich and detailed insights about consciousness and (no-)self, and Western phenomenological and analytical philosophers of the kind published in Self, No Self? are extremely valuable and inspiring, it would seem obvious to invite contemporary spiritual masters from a variety of spiritual traditions to present their knowledge, insights, and lived experiences concerning conscious, self, and the no-self states attained through their spiritual work and practices, and to exchange their knowledge concerning the origin, nature, purpose, and
development of the self with researchers within a variety of academic areas, engaged in research on consciousness and the self.

To this end six spiritual masters were first invited and, thankfully, agreed to take part in this joint research project. They are A.H. Almaas, founder of the Ridhwan School, Cynthia Bourgeault and Bernadette Roberts, both Christian contemplative mystics, Adyashanti, Zen Buddhist, John Welwood, Buddhist and psychologist, and Christopher Curtis Sensei, Aikido. With their contributions in place — and published on the project website www.the-self.com and in this special issue in ‘Part 1: Target Papers by Spiritual Masters’ — academic investigators and researchers from within philosophy, developmental psychology, psychoanalysis, psychiatry, the neurosciences, and anthropology, all of whom have contributed significantly to studies and theories within their areas about the nature and development of self, were then invited to present their research and theories, and to consider how the rich insights, experience, and knowledge made available by the spiritual masters about these matters might provide inspiration to look afresh and develop new approaches and research questions within their academic areas of research.

The academic researchers who — just as thankfully — accepted the invitation to join this project on the self, are, from philosophy, Shaun Gallagher, Wolfgang Fasching, Galen Strawson, Matthew MacKenzie, Joel Krueger, and Simon Høffding; from psychoanalysis, Gunnar Karlsson; from neuroscience cum psychiatry, Iain McGilchrist; from developmental psychology, Vasudevi Reddy and Nicole Rossmanith; from developmental psychology cum biology, Colwyn Trevarthen; from psychiatry cum neuroscience, Johannes Lehtonen; from anthropology, John McGraw.

We appreciate that this project is very unusual indeed, and that it has been challenging for all contributors to take part in, the spiritual masters as well as the academic researchers. The courage, dedication, enthusiasm, and willingness to venture into new and uncharted territory by everyone involved are acknowledged with deep gratitude and admiration.

It is customary in an editorial of a special issue to introduce and give a short summary of the content of each of the papers. However, the papers in this issue from both spiritual masters and academics are so unique and novel that a mere summary of the content without their broader background, purpose, and context would not do them any justice. We refer the readers to the contributors’ own abstracts, and
otherwise we leave their presentations as they are, ‘clean’ and in their own freshness.

That said, it is important to note — as we did in our ‘Instruction to Authors’ on the project website — that the texts from the spiritual masters are not the ordinary kind of ‘scientific papers’ usually published in scientific journals. This was not what the spiritual masters were instructed to contribute; rather, in order to appreciate the significance of the points being conveyed, it is important to read them exactly for what they are: accounts of the lived experience, knowledge, and profound insights — as opposed to theories or ideologies — about the self, its relation to consciousness, and self/no-self issues, universally encountered by spiritual masters in almost every spiritual tradition during their systematic work and practices towards realization, and on which build the centuries-old philosophies and texts of their tradition. In this sense they are the ‘experiential raw material’ on a par with the outcome of introspective enquiries and explorations being appealed to in traditional Western philosophical theories of the self from Descartes, Hume, Kant, and through to Zahavi and Strawson — albeit using entirely different methods and giving rise to very different insights and knowledge about consciousness and the self.

The main research question to be explored in this project, then, concerns the inspirational impact that these centuries-old insights, here conveyed by contemporary masters, may have for scholars and researchers within the invited areas of academic research to generate new and original research questions, designs, and models of the self and consciousness.

The dialogues and discussions in this issue between spiritual wisdom traditions and academia about consciousness and the self are just a beginning, and a modest one at that. There is no denying that they prompt more questions than answers. That’s fine. But they also help to discern more clearly the contours of huge unexplored territories, for academia and spirituality alike — and where they naturally meet. That’s even better. Therefore, we are planning to keep the project website www.the-self.com open as a kind of ongoing ‘online conference’, where contributors, both spiritual masters and academic researchers, are invited to comment on and further discuss the ideas in the papers already published in this special issue, and to invite other researchers and spiritual masters to contribute with opinion papers, commentaries, and suggestions for further research. The idea is to publish all the papers from this special issue and the best, most innovative of the contributions from the online conference in a book.
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