

Losing What Self?

A Review of Jay Garfield's *Losing Ourselves*

Blaine Snow, Feb-2023



Philosopher Jay Garfield is one of the most knowledgeable and talented teachers one could possibly learn from. I've benefitted immensely from his many books as well as his online courses over the years. His recent book, however, is a bit of a disappointment for reasons I'll try to explain in this review.

The main objective of *Losing Ourselves* is to explain to contemporary audiences the age-old Buddhist answer to the human condition and why it's important. That answer, the doctrine of selflessness, goes like this: our default or naïve sense of self—the way we understand our self to be—is unknowingly and harmfully misconstrued. This sense of “I-ness”, this “me that things happen to” that we take for granted is, in fact, *the primary source of our eternal discontent as well as much of our immorality*. The Buddhist view is that to recognize and then “lose” or transform this mistaken sense of self, this self-illusion, to recast it into what Garfield calls a “selfless person,” can lead one to a happier life as well as improved moral and prosocial behavior. In ten short chapters, Garfield takes on a massive project and does a reasonable job in the space his publisher allows him.

In the first half of the book Garfield hits a home run, presenting selflessness, why it matters, and how our self-illusion is not only the primary cause of why foundational contentment is so elusive, but also how the separate self is unsupported by contemporary philosophy and research in cognitive science. Instead of a disconnected self that is set apart from all things and events, he offers a Buddhist view, the *selfless person*, a construction that is 100% OF the world, not IN the world, a difference he summarizes as:

The [mistaken] self is taken to be preexistent, primordial, unitary, and transcendent of the world of objects, independent of body, mind, and social context. [In contrast] The person is constructed; the person is dependent on the psychophysical and social network in which it is realized; the person is complex, embodied, and embedded. That is the difference between the actor and the role. We are roles, not actors. (42)

The language is critical: we are *living AS* our bodies, not *IN* our bodies – selfless persons don't *experience* conditions of the world, they *ARE* those conditions. In several places Garfield mentions **embodied mind cognitive science**, a multidisciplinary science which studies how the person is best understood as a mind-body system that exists because of its coevolution embedded in social and natural environments. All very down to earth.

By adopting this embodied-embedded selfless person view, what you lose is a mistaken and harmful idea of yourself as a thing disconnected from the world, something that “things happen to.” And with it gone, so Buddhism claims, your nasty egoism or self-centeredness gives way to true contentment as well as greater compassion for others. Garfield's first three chapters spell this out in detail with plenty of useful examples from classic Buddhist teachings, philosophers

such as Hume and Heidegger, as well as contemporary research.

Perhaps the most compelling part of the book occurs in chapters 4 & 5 where Garfield carefully refutes fellow philosophers such as Thomas Metzinger and Evan Thompson who both argue for some kind of preexistent self, either some kind of *transcendent* self or the so-called *minimal* self. These chapters contain a lot of philosophical hair splitting that, if you're not familiar with contemporary phenomenology and consciousness studies, can be hard to follow. But Garfield does an admirable job of walking us through the subtle distinctions, pointing out why neither of these of these claims to an independent self are valid from a Buddhist perspective.

Two things in the second half of the book (chapters 6-10) combine to limit the effectiveness of Garfield's effort, the first being that due to limited space allowances, he appears to venture outside his areas of expertise. He relies on an overly narrow set of facts to support his points and cites few prominent figures in these areas whose work is well known and regarded. Another limiting factor are shortcomings within Buddhism itself – such as unfamiliarity with contemporary psychology and social justice ethics, all of which reduce the effectiveness of Garfield's presentation. In what follows, I'll describe some of these shortcomings as well as other key aspects of the later chapters.

What Kind of Self Are We Losing?

It isn't Garfield's fault that Buddhism doesn't address many important insights that Western psychology has established or that many Buddhist writers remain unfamiliar with this research. This unfamiliarity is partly due to contemporary intellectual fashions which have in particular devalued and ignored developmental psychology and its vast trove of insights and research. The result is Buddhist writers making claims that can't stand up to what is known from these developmental perspectives. One important difference between Buddhist and Western psychology is how each tradition understands the self.

Traditional Buddhism is more concerned with the self-illusion *per se* rather than with *what kind of self* is being deluded. It doesn't differentiate between kinds of selves in the same way Western psychology does. Even though Buddhist *Abhidharma* theory is a sophisticated system of understanding phenomena, causation, mind, experience, perception, feeling, and consciousness, it does not address **how minds develop over the lifespan**, or how minds differ with regard to **gender, race, culture, or class**; it has no theory of **power and privilege**, no **personality or type psychology**, and it has an antiquated view of **psychopathology**. We cannot expect Buddhism to be like Western psychology, but in contemporary applications of Buddhist teachings such as this book, a lot of insights into human behavior that have been realized in the past hundred years are overlooked, conflated, or assumed, and they should not be. From a Western perspective, it really matters what kind of self or mind is being deluded and what kind of self is in need of recasting into a "selfless person," but Garfield, following in the Buddhist tradition, does not address these things.

Buddhism's lack of recognizing types of selves goes together with its lack of recognizing *types of otherness*. This can be noted in the language Buddhism typically uses when referring to otherness: "all beings," "sentient beings," or just "others" without specifying *what kinds of others* are under consideration, again with regard to culture, race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion-faith, age, sexual orientation, etc. There's just a mashing together of the various types of

“others” into one undifferentiated, amorphous category, without regard to culture, race, gender, class, etc. When referring to otherness, Garfield also uses generalized non-specific references such as “they,” “others,” “people,” “other beings,” “other selves,” etc. Why does this matter? *Because what kind of self you “lose” has everything to do with what kind of selfless person you will become.* In other words, an immature selfless person is not much better than an immature separate self. Transforming your mistaken sense of self as Garfield and Buddhism teach here is *only part* of becoming a fully developed social-justice and eco-justice informed ethical person. It’s clear from psychology that within adults there is a vast range of psychological capacity with regard to perspective taking, moral span, interpersonal skill, reflective judgment, personality type, etc. It ranges from less mature to more mature, more narcissistic to less narcissistic, and less empathetic to more empathetic. Just read the news.

The distinction between losing the self in one sense and maturing it in another sense has also been referred to as the difference between **waking up** -v **growing up**. These are useful terms that summarize two differing paths of human development that are often conflated. One path is concerned with transforming a mistaken self-sense to reduce suffering and increase true contentment, while the other is concerned with growing in maturity through learning and exposure to otherness narratives, acquiring greater knowledge and empathy for varieties of suffering that are different from one’s own. Just because you’ve acquired a new selfless personhood doesn’t mean you’ve heard and internalized the specific ways in which marginalized people suffer, that is unless you’ve also spent ample time heart-listening to their narratives. Learning how to “lose yourself” doesn’t accomplish the same thing as learning social justice ethics. Greater perspective-taking occurs in each type of development but acquiring awakened selfless person perspectives is not sufficient for acquiring mature social justice perspectives. For more on this, see my paper *Waking Up and Growing Up* on my Academia.edu page. Of course, for those who are already well established in mature social and eco justice perspectives, adopting Buddhist practices greatly enhances their capacity for care and compassion.

It is telling that social and eco justice ethics are not discussed in Garfield’s presentation here, nor are they part of his much longer book [Buddhist Ethics: A Philosophical Exploration](#). This is not surprising because we cannot expect Buddhism itself to adequately address 21st century multicultural psychosocial issues even though many Buddhists think otherwise. Garfield makes many good points in the latter chapters, but such issues pervade the rest of the book. Much of what he presents is simply too abbreviated and overlooks important research that is pertinent to his project.

Individual/Collective Conflation (chs.5&9): Garfield is aware that one of the consequences of adopting the situated-person view is the questions it raises around **agency or free will**. That is to say, if there is no separate thing that wills or acts, how are we to understand agency, and how are we to distinguish between individual and group agency? What he doesn’t explain is that the Buddhist no-self/situated person view has contributed to a widespread contemporary **conflation of groups-as-individuals** whereby all manner of group phenomena is likened to individual behavior: ant colonies, tightly grouped schools of fish, flocks of birds, groups of meditators. All are said to be acting like single organisms – even corporations!

This is critical because there’s nothing more dangerous to modern democratic structures than the conflation of groups and individuals that happens when people become blind to their essential

differences – how they are constituted, how their agencies differ, how they make decisions, how they act. A king is not the state; A corporation is not an individual. Groups cannot have the rights of individuals. To conflate them is to lead to “Citizens United,” corporate personhood, corporate rights, and in reverse, the idea that a single individual IS the group – *l'état, c'est moi*. I get that Garfield is trying to explain how agency works within a situated personhood, but am alarmed by the way he flirts with danger in these quotes:

If this is the case, awareness can be present—a person can be aware—without there being any single thing that is aware, just as a nation or corporation can act without there being any singular entity that performs that action. (5)71

And this is why it makes sense to think of organizations or natural phenomena as persons, as grounds for treating them with respect, or as grounds for the conferral of rights, even though it would make no sense whatsoever to assert that they have selves, even if we were thought that we do. (9)168

Ch.7 – Ethics, Abandon the Self to Abandon Egoism: Here Garfield claims that abandoning the self-illusion together with cultivating key Buddhist moral principles (*the four brahmaviharas*, 121-124) and teachings by Shantideva on moral agency can vanquish what he calls “moral egoism,” a view that sees morality as concentric circles of social distance centering on “me and my own interests.” He’s not wrong that this moral egoism is widespread but he should also know that it is a simplistic component of a more complex picture.

The study of human morality and ethics has numerous schools of thought that would be impossible to summarize in a single 14-page chapter but Garfield seems comfortable not mentioning all of that and, instead, suggests that pursuing these Buddhist teachings is all one needs in order to abandon egoism and find a true moral compass, presumably one that works in almost any context. There is, however, plenty of evidence to the contrary suggesting that even the most accomplished spiritual practitioners can remain riddled with unexamined issues around power and privilege, such as sexism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, or spiritual teachers who abuse their position for sex or money. Examples abound. One complex example from history is Brian Victoria’s [Zen at War](#), but ongoing contemporary teacher scandals continually demonstrate that waking up is not the same as growing up and does not lead to the same results. There’s no questioning the profound value of the *Brahmaviharas* or Shantideva’s gorgeous poetic teachings, but the biggest failure of the second half of the book is that Garfield seems to be suggesting that these in combination with losing the self-illusion are all that is necessary to create an all-encompassing contemporary multicultural morality. This is simply misleading.

Ch.8 – Affirmation: This chapter sets out to explain “what a person is, how persons are constituted, and how we become persons” (131). Although this chapter presents complex topics in abbreviated form, it manages to get many of its points across successfully. The subsection “Many Levels” (134) is the weakest part of this chapter as it tries to situate the person in the language and framework of **systems theory** - including physics, biology, psychology, and sociology – by drawing on the work of a single individual, Edward Chace Tolman. Having been a student of systems theory since 1982, I’d never heard of Tolman, so I was surprised that a single, obscure theorist was Garfield’s choice. Also, the points this seven-page mini-summary makes are either vague, obvious, or too abbreviated to do justice to a proper systems theory view of the person.

In contrast, Garfield's reliance on the work of a single psychologist, Vasudeva Reddy, manages to make some excellent points regarding the critical importance of second persons, social interactions, and systems of norms, intersubjectivity, and narrative to explain the complex development of a human mind over the lifespan. However, some of the subsections in chs.8&9 on **human development** are less than satisfying, again due to their abbreviated presentation. That Garfield ties this development to embodied mind cognitive science (157-9) is remarkable. But if you're familiar with the 80 years of literature and research done in developmental psychology, you can't help but come away from these chapters feeling that they contain only a minimal representation of the facts.

Final Thoughts

Buddhism is both a diagnosis of and a solution to the human condition: it addresses why humans "suffer," our "existential dissatisfaction," in profound ways. Losing the separate self-sense and coming to live as a person in the world are significant aspects of the Buddhist solution and are central to the topic of this book. Garfield does a commendable job presenting this Buddhist teaching, explaining why it matters and how it helps but, due to abbreviated treatments of topics, the absence of social justice perspectives, and the inherent limitations of Buddhism itself, more is attributed to the benefits of losing ourselves than is supported.

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