



PROJECT MUSE®

Comments on Waking, Dreaming, Being by Evan Thompson

John D. Dunne

Philosophy East and West, Volume 66, Number 3, July 2016, pp. 934-942 (Article)

Published by University of Hawai'i Press

DOI: [10.1353/pew.2016.0064](https://doi.org/10.1353/pew.2016.0064)

Philosophy East and West



A Quarterly of
Comparative Philosophy
Volume 66 · Number 3

University of Hawai'i Press

➔ For additional information about this article

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/626968>

Comments on *Waking, Dreaming, Being* by Evan Thompson



John D. Dunne

Department of East Asian Languages and Literature
University of Wisconsin–Madison
jdunne@emory.edu

Evan Thompson's *Waking, Dreaming, Being* is an outstanding work that richly deserves the widespread praise that it is receiving. The book exhibits exquisite balance between various poles: science and philosophy, "East" and "West," the accessible and the specialized, the physical and the emergent, and so on. It is also a remarkably readable book, and since academic literature is littered with many unreadable must-read tomes, I am grateful for the change of pace. In short, those who have not yet read *Waking, Dreaming, Being* should be heartily encouraged to do so. They will find the task a pleasant and edifying one.

Much more could be said in praise of *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, but the task here is to offer some constructive criticism. The comments below will come in two waves. They begin with reflections on method, and this will lead me to some issues in Thompson's articulation of nonduality and the way that his nondual project relates to his notion of the self.

On Method

Waking, Dreaming, Being boldly engages in a multidisciplinary, cross-cultural enterprise that has been emerging for a number of years in Thompson's work, but also in the larger context within which his work has unfolded. That larger context, whose most public manifestation appears in the meetings hosted by the Mind and Life Institute, involves conversations woven around a complex interaction of science, Western philosophy, and contemplative traditions, especially Buddhism. *Waking, Dreaming, Being* moves these conversations along effectively, but it also strays toward a methodological approach that is ultimately a dead end.

The problematic approach appears in various places, but it is perhaps most obvious in the discussion about the mental stream as occurring in discrete moments. Thompson says, "The Abhidharma philosophers agree that the mental stream is always changing, but they argue that it appears to flow continuously only to the untrained observer. A deeper examination indicates that the stream of consciousness is made up of discontinuous and discrete moments of awareness" (p. 35). This, then, sets off an examination of mental moments and their duration.

Methodologically, the role of the Abhidharma in this initial statement is to serve as an alternative model that raises questions about William James's view of the continuity of the mental stream. This in itself seems perfectly fine. In effect, we turn to the Abhidharma to shake things up a bit and to introduce a provocative perspective. The conversation becomes problematic, however, when we assume that

the specifics of the Abhidharma account are relevant to the process of “shaking things up.”

Thompson moves in this problematic direction most especially when he notes that, according to Vasubandhu’s *Abhidharmakośa*, “there are sixty-five [mental] instants in the time it takes a healthy man to snap his fingers” and that this measure “works out roughly to 1/65th of a second, or 15 milliseconds, for a mind moment” (p. 40). This then leads to an entertaining and informative account of Francisco Varela’s empirical attempt to examine the question of mind moments, especially with attention to the Abhidharma model. And it also includes an illuminating discussion of more recent work on the temporal phasing of experience. Thompson cites Szczepanowski and Pessoa’s study of fear perception,¹ which shows that some individuals (“high achievers”) can detect a target stimulus at only 17 milliseconds, which is a far cry from the usual 100-plus millisecond chunking that is currently assumed. And this research also provides, in Thompson’s view, a clear “yes” (p. 45) to the question of whether the Abhidharma’s estimate of about 15–20 milliseconds is correct.

At this point, things have gone awry, at least in terms of my own experience with this type of work. Over the last many years, I have been involved in a number of empirical attempts at examining not only Buddhist contemplative practices, but also Buddhist theories about these practices,² and I have come to believe that any attempt to translate Buddhist material directly into a scientific context is methodologically untenable and pragmatically pointless. One problem is that Buddhist accounts are not unified, and their diversity requires us to justify a starting point. Thompson himself notes that there are various Buddhist opinions about the duration of a mental moment, but he never clarifies why he would choose the *Abhidharmakośa* as his source. Indeed, for most other issues, he ignores the *Abhidharmakośa* in favor of other sources (such as the *Abhidharmasamuccaya* and the *Abhidhammathasangaha*) that provide disparate accounts on many issues. But no justification is given for the choice of one source over another on any given topic, and *Waking, Dreaming, Being* ends up offering a kind of blended Abhidharma stew to its readers. It would seem much more preferable to follow a particular Abhidharma interpretation, in that the disagreements among the various Abhidharmas may actually matter, such that their distinctive accounts of mental moments may be tied to other features that distinguish each version of the Abhidharma.³

Another way to understand this problem is to imagine what the parallel approach with psychological sources might look like. One would, in effect, tack back and forth between, for example, Freudian psychoanalysis, cognitive neuroscience, and classical Behaviorism without ever clarifying why one’s account of some issue is preferred over another. Thompson would never mix up the science in this way, and the Buddhist material should be treated with the same care.

The other issue here, however, is the simple question “what’s at stake?” That is, what does it matter if a Buddhist account of the length of a mental moment is true or false? Putting aside the problem of actually generating the number (is 1/65th the snap of a finger really translatable into 15 milliseconds?), it is not at all clear that this mental moment is operationalized by Buddhist theorists in the way that it is by

modern theorists. That translation—of what Buddhists actually mean by a mental moment, and how we would understand it in relation to Szczepanowski and Pessoa’s work—has been largely neglected. This is not a trivial question because it involves numerous thorny problems, such as operationalizing the distinction between access and phenomenal consciousness across divergent conceptualizations of what constitutes “consciousness” itself. And even if we were somehow able to get a number and adequately translate the notion of a mental moment between these systems, it is not clear whether or not it really matters that Vasubandhu (the author of the *Abhidharmakośa*) has it right. If the number turns out to be correct (as Thompson suggests), does this tell us anything? Could it be just sheer happenstance? And if it is wrong, does it mean that we should set aside the *Abhidharmakośa* as a source for ideas that will shake up our thinking?

It seems to me that nothing at all rides on the final outcome of this inquiry. If it turns out that the specific temporal interval we somehow derive from the *Abhidharmakośa* is correct, we might then falsely believe that we should turn to the *Abhidharmakośa* for a trove of correct empirical measurements generated long before our imaging technologies. Even the present Dalai Lama, however, has pointed out that the *Abhidharmakośa* is clearly not correct in many of its measurements.⁴ On the other hand, if the specific number we derive for the *Abhidharmakośa*’s minimal mental moments is disproved by our empirical measurements, we might falsely believe that the Abhidharma should just be ignored on all matters. Instead, it seems far more preferable simply to acknowledge the key points common to all versions of the Abhidharma: namely, that experience occurs in discrete moments, and that whatever might be the precise measure, it is clearly less than our current version of 100-plus milliseconds. This gives us enough to be inspired to examine the notion of mental moments, and to challenge our current assumption that 100-plus milliseconds is the threshold. Beyond that, what more could we ask of the *Abhidharmakośa* on this topic?

Along these same lines, the same methodological problem arises in the final chapter of Thompson’s book when, inspired by Jonardon Ganeri,⁵ he attempts to rework the Buddhist notion of the five aggregates. Here, we find an attempt at translation from some unspecified Abhidharma system into the language of cognitive science, but that translation essentially renders the five aggregates unrecognizable. If back-translated into Tibetan, for example, I doubt very much that one would find any Tibetan scholar who would endorse the interpretations given any of the aggregates. *Vedanā*, for example, is a kind of “appraising” for Thompson (and Ganeri), inasmuch as it includes the appraisal of pleasant, unpleasant and neutral sensations as agreeable, disagreeable, or indifferent (p. 337). This type of appraisal, however, suggests a level of conceptual processing that is explicitly excluded from *vedanā*, at least on the typical accounts endorsed by Tibetan exegetes.⁶ Without noting the ways in which this reimagining of the aggregates diverges from various Buddhist accounts, the potential here for generating confusing and idiosyncratic interpretations seems high.

While I am not at all convinced by this way of speaking about the five aggregates, I do think it goes in the right direction, one that has been proposed by Larry Barsalou.

At a 2010 “Workshop on Exploring the Language of Mental Life,” sponsored by Stanford’s Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, Barsalou offered some strikingly insightful comments on the problem of translating between Buddhist and scientific accounts of mind. He suggested that our best option might be to allow a kind of deliberate “creole” to emerge as a product of the dialogue between the systems. This would be a deliberate hybrid that enables the two systems to communicate, but it would not be understood to constitute a new system itself. That is, as theories emerge in the creole language, one would not suppose that one should also create a hybrid investigative method to examine these theories. Instead, the theories are translated back into the respective systems, and the inquiry proceeds there, inspired by new hypotheses, new challenges, and even new methods that emerge through the translation process. If the combined efforts of Thompson and Ganeri around the five aggregates are understood in this spirit, then I see quite a lot of promise.

Finally, without going into depth, it may still be helpful to list three other largely methodological issues. The first is the way that Thompson apparently succumbs to the general tendency to fetishize the Abhidharma as somehow providing the most relevant Buddhist accounts of mind, cognition, and other such issues. By the sixth century C.E., however, the Abhidharma had ceased to develop, and Buddhist authors chose other venues to continue their work on the nature of mind, cognition, perception, concept formation, and the like. These latter materials—including especially the epistemological tradition—seem much more important for the topics that Thompson examines. Second, I would note that the epistemological revisions to Yogācāra thought are also especially crucial, and, to the extent that Yogācāra materials come into the argument, Thompson’s work is hampered by focusing exclusively on earlier Yogācāra. Finally, I will point to the many insights and implicit theories to be gleaned from later contemplative works, especially in the Mahāmudrā traditions, that often do not align well with classical Abhidharma approaches. Methodologically, these later traditions would be especially helpful for understanding the nondual account that Thompson seeks to generate.

Nonduality and the Self

One of the most striking claims in *Waking, Dreaming, Being* is one that Jay Garfield also notices.⁷ Thompson says, “We can never step outside consciousness to see how it measures up to something else, and consciousness never appears or shows up apart from some context of embodiment” (p. 100). In the scientific context, this “primacy of consciousness” (in the spirit of Michel Bitbol),⁸ means that “no concept of nature or physical being that by design excludes mental or experiential being will work to account for consciousness and its place in nature” (p. 103). Thompson’s brilliant articulation of all this is extremely important, and although it may be hard for many to listen closely, it is a message that desperately needs to be heard. In some ways the message here amounts to the very straightforward and undeniable observation that science necessarily emerges from embodied human cognition, and it is

performed by humans deploying their embodied cognitions. It is thus absurd to suppose that it is not a product of, contingent on, and limited by the features of human cognition. And this likewise means that, if we were somehow to generate scientific findings that truly transcended the basic structures of human cognition, we would need some non-human scientists to work with these findings, since these findings in themselves would necessarily be unintelligible to humans.

Part of Thompson's message also points to the history of science, and the way that an objectivist urge within science seeks to bracket whatever is particular, subjective, or contingent about any individual scientist. By the twentieth century, the goal is for science to deploy a method that takes the individual scientist out of the equation altogether, such that the particulars of a Canadian scientist working in Vancouver and the individual characteristics of an Indian scientist working in New Delhi will be completely irrelevant to the kind of knowledge that they produce. The problem is that this project of bracketing out the "contamination" of individual subjectivities shades into a project that assumes it can bracket out even the features of human cognition itself, such that it produces a kind of knowledge that is no longer contingent upon the vagaries of the human organism, including human consciousness. This type of objectivism, which Mark Johnson and others have eloquently critiqued, contains a contradiction at its heart: that it wishes science to be inhuman, but science itself only exists through embodied, conscious humans.⁹

All this leads Thompson to call for a new approach—not some new vitalism or panpsychism, but rather a new, nondual framework. Thompson says that "such an understanding would replace our present dualistic concepts of consciousness and physical being, which exclude each other from the start, with a nondualistic framework in which physical being and experiential being imply each other or derive from something that is neutral between them" (p. 105). I wholeheartedly support the quest for such a framework and hope to play some small part in its development. I was also hoping to see that framework articulated in *Waking, Dreaming, Being*, but that hope seems largely unfulfilled.

The project to develop a nondual framework that moves beyond a stultifying Cartesianism is most promising, and it is the last chapter of the book that should be the locus of that project's emergence. In the end, however, the project remains largely unrealized. It is true that there are, for example, some intriguing speculations about bioelectrical emergence as relevant to this nondual account (pp. 342–244). The bioelectrical approach, however, appears to leave a more-or-less untouched version of the physical in place, and consciousness emerges from that physical stuff. To the extent that there is nondualism here, it seems to amount to just a reduction to the physical, specifically the bioelectrical. This is perhaps overly dismissive of Thompson's attempt at articulating emergence as a species of nondualism, but it does seem that, overall, the project of articulating a nondual framework remains only nascent in the book, perhaps because there are some underlying assumptions that hinder its articulation.

If there are obstacles in the book to the emergence of that nondual framework, they may be Thompson's attempts to use Buddhist sources to articulate a particular

account of the self provided in the last chapter. Thompson argues that the self is best understood as a process, and, *pace* some Buddhist accounts, he argues:

To say that the sense of self is a mental construction—or rather that it’s a process under constant mental and bodily construction—doesn’t logically imply that there is no self or that the sense of self presents an illusion. (p. 359)

He further argues that

the minimal notion of self that’s crucial for “I-Me-Mine” thinking is that of a subject of experience and an agent of action, not that of a substantially existent ego. Thinking of myself in this way—as a subject and agent—enables me to think of some experiences and actions as mine and not yours, and of some experiences and actions as yours and not mine. This provides a perfectly legitimate and valuable notion of self and doesn’t require thinking of you or me as substantially existent entities. (p. 361)

Thompson continues by claiming that the Buddhist philosopher Candrakīrti would be sympathetic to this approach, inasmuch as he, too, does not want to deny the self altogether. However, as Jay Garfield also points out, Thompson’s account of Candrakīrti here is extremely problematic. In this context, Thompson cites the critique of the self in the eighteenth chapter of Nāgārjuna’s *Mūlamadhyamakārikā*. Candrakīrti, in his *Prasannapadā*, offers extensive comments on the chapter, and at one point he approvingly cites Nāgārjuna’s *Ratnāvalī*:

The aggregates arise from ‘I’-making (*ahaṅkāra*); ‘I’-making is ultimately unreal. How can anything whose seed is unreal be ultimately produced? Seeing that the aggregates are thus unreal, one forsakes ‘I’-making. And since it has been forsaken, the aggregates do not arise again. (*Ratnāvalī* 1.29–30)¹⁰

In his comments on this verse, and indeed throughout the chapter, Candrakīrti makes it clear that the endpoint here is most definitely the cessation of I-making. Thus, inasmuch as a certain kind of ‘I’-making is what Thompson wishes to preserve, he will not find an ally in Candrakīrti.

The particular interpretation of Candrakīrti adopted by Thompson appears to be heavily influenced by Tsongkhapa or other Gelugpa philosophers,¹¹ and perhaps Thompson has been misled by these interpretations. Setting aside the details, the main point of the Gelugpa approach is to preserve the conventional—in which one can legitimately speak about ‘I’ and about subjectivity and agency—in the face of those heretics who would maintain that the conventional is *saṃsāra*, the world of suffering.¹² As *saṃsāra*, the conventional is produced by ignorance, and it must be left behind if we are to transform it into *nirvāṇa*. This soteriological impulse is obvious in the verse from *Ratnāvalī* cited by Candrakīrti, and it represents a call to a radical reconfiguration of personhood.

More specifically, Thompson’s account seeks to preserve the validity of subjectivity and agency as features or products of ‘I’-making. Attention to later Yogācāra materials (including Yogācāra Madhyamaka) and to Mahāmudrā, however, would have shown that for those Buddhist thinkers consciousness can persist in the absence

of subjectivity and agency. Their paradigm of action in the world is one in which the givenness of subjectivity and agency must be attenuated, with the eventual goal of engaging in action without any sense of subjectivity or agency at all.¹³

Of course, we might find this proposal outlandish. How can one be active without agency or subjectivity? Certainly Tsongkhapa could make no sense of this idea, and his philosophy thus firmly grounds itself in a realist account of the conventional, where subjectivity and agency are robustly preserved. And as with Tsongkhapa, many non-Buddhist Indian philosophers found this proposal too radical. One need only turn to the Pratyabhijñā philosophy of Kashmiri Śaivism to find an account of the self that closely resembles Thompson's—one in which the self is envisioned as a process involving the dynamic and reflexive creation of subjectivity and agency.¹⁴ Indeed, during the death meditation that Thompson vividly recounts (p. 279), the figure he saw was Śiva, the lord of the dance. Perhaps this is an omen that Thompson's strongest allies in his philosophical project would not be Candrakīrti, but rather the Śaivas of Kashmir. They, too, sought an account in which a thoroughgoing non-dualism was fully compatible with agency and subjectivity. Whether this project can succeed is another question.

Notes

- 1 – Szczepanowski and Pessoa 2007, pp. 1–17.
- 2 – See, especially, Lutz, Dunne, and Davidson 2007; Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, and Davidson 2008; and Lutz, Jha, Dunne, and Saron 2015.
- 3 – An interesting case in point is the disagreement around the ethical valence of mindfulness. See Gethin 2015 and also Dunne 2015.
- 4 – Dalai Lama 2005, pp. 79–80.
- 5 – Ganeri 2012.
- 6 – For a typical and widely accepted Tibetan account, see Ye Shes rGyal mTshan 1988.
- 7 – See Jay Garfield's "Reflections on Reflectivity" in this issue of *Philosophy East and West*.
- 8 – Bitbol 2014.
- 9 – Johnson 1990; Lakoff and Johnson 1999.
- 10 – *Ahaṃkārodभवāḥ skandhāḥ so 'haṃkāro 'nrto 'rthataḥ / bījaṃ yasyānṛtaṃ tasya prarohaḥ satyataḥ kutaḥ // skandhān asatyān dīṣṭvaivam ahaṃkāraḥ prahīyate / ahaṃkāraprahāṇāc ca na punaḥ skandhasambhavaḥ //* (Nāgārjuna 1982).
- 11 – This influence likely comes through the work of James Duerlinger; see Duerlinger 2012.

- 12 – For an especially clear account of Tsongkhapa’s view, see Jinpa 2002.
- 13 – See, e.g., the *Tattvadaśaka* of Maitrīpa (otherwise known as Advayavajra) and the commentary by Sahajavajra. Both are translated by Karl Brunnholz. Brunnholz 2013, pp. 140–190.
- 14 – See especially Ratié 2010 and 2011.

References

- Bitbol, Michel. 2014. *La conscience a-t-elle une origine? Des neurosciences à la pleine conscience: Une nouvelle approche de l'esprit*. Paris: Flammarion.
- Barsalou, L. W. 2010. Discussant on attention, mindfulness, and memory. Workshop on Exploring the Language of Mental Life, Center for Compassion and Altruism Research and Education, Telluride, CO.
- Brunnholz, Karl. 2013. *Straight from the Heart: Buddhist Pith Instructions*. Boston: Snow Lion.
- Dalai Lama, His Holiness the [Dalai Lama XIV, Bstan 'dzin rgya mtsho]. 2005. *The Universe in a Single Atom: The Convergence of Science and Spirituality*. New York: Morgan Road Books.
- Duerlinger, James. 2012. *The Refutation of the Self in Indian Buddhism: Candrakīrti on the Selflessness of Persons*. New York: Routledge.
- Dunne, John D. 2015. "Buddhist Styles of Mindfulness: A Heuristic Approach." In *Handbook of Mindfulness and Self-Regulation*, edited by Brian D. Ostafin, Michael D. Robinson, and Brian P. Meier, pp. 251–270. New York: Springer.
- Ganeri, Jonardon. 2012. *The Self: Naturalism, Consciousness, and the First-Person Stance*. Oxford University Press.
- Gethin, Rupert. 2015. "Buddhist Conceptualizations of Mindfulness." In *Handbook of Mindfulness: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 1st ed., edited by Kirk Warren Brown, J. David Creswell, and Richard M. Ryan, pp. 9–41. New York: Guilford Press.
- Jinpa, Thupten. 2002. *Self, Reality and Reason in Tibetan Philosophy: Tsongkhapa's Quest for the Middle Way*. New York: Routledge.
- Johnson, Mark. 1990. *The Body in the Mind: The Bodily Basis of Meaning, Imagination, and Reason*. Chicago: University Of Chicago Press.
- Lakoff, George, and Mark Johnson. 1999. *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Lutz, Antoine, John D. Dunne, and Richard J. Davidson. 2007. "Meditation and the Neuroscience of Consciousness: An Introduction." In *The Cambridge Handbook of Consciousness*, 1st ed., edited by Philip David Zelazo, Morris Moscovitch,

and Evan Thompson, pp. 499–551. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.

- Lutz, Antoine, Amishi P. Jha, John D. Dunne, and Clifford D. Saron. 2015. "Investigating the Phenomenological Matrix of Mindfulness-Related Practices from a Neurocognitive Perspective." *American Psychologist* 70, no. 7:632–658. doi:10.1037/a0039585.
- Lutz, Antoine, Heleen A. Slagter, John D. Dunne, and Richard J. Davidson. 2008. "Attention Regulation and Monitoring in Meditation." *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 12, no. 4 (April): 163–169. doi:10.1016/j.tics.2008.01.005.
- Nāgārjuna. 1982. *Nāgārjuna's Ratnāvalī*. Vol. 1, *The Basic Texts*. Edited by Michael Hahn. Bonn: Indica et Tibetica.
- Ratié, Isabelle. 2010. "The Dreamer and the Yogin: On the Relationship between Buddhist and Śaiva Idealisms." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 73, no. 3 (October): 437–478. doi:10.1017/S0041977X10000406.
- . 2011. *Le Soi et l'autre: Identité, différence et altérité dans la philosophie de la Pratyabhijñā*. Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers.
- Szczepanowski, Remigiusz, and Luiz Pessoa. 2007. "Fear Perception: Can Objective and Subjective Awareness Measures Be Dissociated?" *Journal of Vision* 7, no. 4:1–17. doi:10.1167/7.4.10.
- Thompson, Evan. 2014. *Waking, Dreaming, Being: Self and Consciousness in Neuroscience, Meditation, and Philosophy*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ye shes Rgyal mtshan. 1988. *Sems sems 'byung gi sdom tshig nor bu'i phreng ba dang de'i 'grel ba blo gsal mgul rgyan*. Peking: mi rigs dpe skrun khang.