

The Supreme Sight: Looking for the Self and Not Finding It

By Peter B. Williams

A monk asked, "The mountains, the rivers, and the great earth-from where did all of these things come forth?"

Tiantai said, "From where did this question come forth?"

-- Chinese Zen tradition

There is so much Everything that
Nothing is hidden quite nicely.

- Wislawa Szymborska, Polish poet

According to the Buddha, the illusion of a separate self is the linchpin of our suffering. This illusion creates a gulf between us and everything else, and from this separateness comes all the troubling emotions – fear, anger, greed, jealousy, hatred, irritation, and so on. To see through this illusion uproots the cause of these emotions and penetrates to the deepest level of reality, where one can abide in a truly reliable happiness and well-being. This essay intends to help one see through this illusion of self, both experientially and conceptually. In Part Two, the experiential component beginning on page 6, I present a set of meditative exercises designed to help one have insight into not-self. In Part Three, the conceptual exploration beginning on page 14, I show that we cannot intellectually find a self in the sense of an essence, some core of our being that is independent, singular, and unchanging. I begin with an overview of the implications of insight into not-self.

Part One: Introduction and Overview

Not-Self and No Self: Experience Versus Metaphysics.

In the Pali Canon of the Theravada tradition, Buddha never made a categorical statement that there is no self. He only said that if you look for one you cannot find it. While this might sound like a picayune distinction, it has important practical implications. The Buddha was only interested in helping people solve their suffering. He was not interested in making philosophical points. While a metaphysical statement

that the self does not exist leads to argument and speculation, an experiential statement that you cannot find a self is an invitation for you to find out for yourself. It asks you to examine your experience to see if there is some unchanging, separate, and singular essence that is in control. If what you find fails any of these four characteristics, then it is not a self. The experience of not finding the self is the doorway to liberation and all its implications. Tibetan Buddhism calls this not seeing of the self “the supreme sight.” (The convention I employ here is to use “not-self” for the inability to experientially find a self, and “no self” for the philosophical assertion that a self does not exist.)

Not-Self as Unconditional Belonging

For some people, the notion that there is not a self can sound scary, as if realizing not-self fully would be some kind of annihilation. However, all that is given up is an illusion, and the suffering that the illusion promotes, while the mind and body and some aspects of the personality still remain. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition uses a helpful analogy. Imagine that you are walking at twilight and see what looks like a snake in the path ahead. You turn around in fear and find another way forward. The next morning you come by the same spot and see that what you thought was a snake was just a piece of rope. The illusion is given up and you feel relieved that you can frequent the path again. Other than the illusion and the fear it generated, you did not lose anything.

This is the way it is with realizing not-self. Although it can be unfamiliar to lose touch with the reference point of a personal self, this is usually outweighed by a feeling of great relief. The personal self can make us feel special, but the separateness that comes with it is a heavy burden. In an experience of not-self that I had on a retreat, I lost touch for a while with anything that I could call “Peter.” Rather than being uncomfortable, it was a deep joy. It was not like I spontaneously combusted. I had merely lost the most pernicious of illusions and in its place gained the entire world I had deemed myself separate from. Because I was the world, the need to gain something or protect myself dropped away.

Many teachers and masters have written about the deep sense of belonging that arises when the self drops away. Li Po, an eighth century Chinese poet, described it this way:

The birds have vanished into the sky
And now the last cloud drains away.
We sit together the mountain and me,
Until only the mountain remains.

Robert Aitken Roshi, in *The Ground We Share*, speaks of the experience of not-self in meditation practice: "Continue your sitting, and you'll find that only the song of the thrush and the cry of the gecko are sitting there. Only the scent of incense is sitting there." And I have to include my favorite lines about non-duality, composed by Rainer Maria Rilke (Stephen Mitchell translation):

Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner -- what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep
with the winds of homecoming.

To realize non-separation fully is to experience nibbana, which is the most reliable happiness one can experience. When you become the world, you are not afraid of losing anything.

You are More Like a River than a Self

It may be reassuring to know that when you realize not-self, you do not give up your uniqueness. You are still there as a different person than your partner or child or co-worker. When a co-worker bangs their elbow on their chair, they feel it and not you. While you are unique, you are not independent. It might help to think of yourself as a mindstream. It is easy to see that a stream is not a separate entity, but instead an expression of everything around it. What ever happens in the watershed of the stream, directly, happens to the stream, indirectly. If a watershed is heavily logged, its stream will fill with silt from the erosion caused by all the exposed dirt. Spill motor oil on your driveway and it will inevitably find its way to the stream of the watershed you live in. As an expression of ultimate interdependence, Boulder Creek is connected beyond its watershed to the global climate. Dry or wet spells in Rocky Mountain weather due to Pacific Ocean currents such as El Nino will shrink or expand the volume of Boulder Creek as it bubbles through downtown. To say that Boulder Creek is an interconnected element of a larger system does not mean that it is not different from other streams. Boulder Creek and Saint Vrain Creek are, of course, separate watercourses.

A mindstream is analogous to an actual stream. While we are all unique beings, we are all affected by everything that happens around us. Every step of your learning, growth and development from being a baby until this moment has been because of

your ability to be influenced by those around you. All the input from your parents, teachers, mentors, friends, and society has changed you to make you what you are today. Martin Luther King, Jr., in speaking of civil rights, pointed to this wisdom when he said, "We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."

This mutual influencing is not mysterious. You can see it operate in your mind quite readily. In a simple example, in my family we were never allowed to use the phrase, "Shut up!" Five years ago, my older brother married a woman from Brazil. At the wedding, I spent four days in the company of my new sister-in-law's lively and fun family. In her family, "Shut up!" was a perfectly acceptable rejoinder. I went on retreat right after the wedding and watched many times as this new element of my vocabulary popped up in my mind. "Shut up" had become a new way for my mind to reject thoughts it did not like. If you are as old as me, you can probably remember the 60s or 70s when we all said things like "Outta sight," and "Far out, man." Now the jargon is much more like "Talk to the palm, you're not the bomb" or "You go, girlfriend." Our culture influences us all to change together, not as separate selves but as interdependent fellow travelers. Not only do we need each other, we are each other!

Learn to see yourself as a river. You are not a fixed object, somehow captured in a name such as Joan or Jonathan. You are changing and flowing all day long, learning with every new experience. What you say and what you do are influenced by everything around you. Sure, you have personality tendencies, but these do not make you a personal self. They are not even predictive of how you will act in any one moment. In any moment, you are actually capable of many different things.

You might say that although you can see yourself as a river, this does not change much because you can still try to protect and maintain a river. True enough, but it is much harder to protect a river than a personal self. To protect a river, you have to conserve not only its entire watershed, but the global climate as well. Acid rain has had profound effects on river life, as have other forms of air pollution and global warming. Likewise, to truly protect a self that is a mindstream, one has to protect all of society. Go ahead, be as selfish as you can possibly be and work for global change.

Not-Self and True Love

When one realizes nibbana, one also perfects the ability to love. Love cannot be unconditional when there is a personal self to protect and maintain. When no one is there to be attacked or nourished, true communion with others becomes possible. A heart/mind that has fully realized not-self is love in the way that empty space is love.

Space accommodates everything, a bucking bronco or two lovers on a moonlit stroll. That bronco cannot kick empty space! Space, as love, is true intimacy, meeting everything exactly as it is, pressing perfectly up against the boundaries of every phenomenon.

Realizing not-self creates a heart that is empty like space, and an empty heart is a loving heart. (Of course, I do not mean an emotionally empty heart, but a heart empty of a separate self). An empty heart is never lonely because it has room for everything that it comes into contact with. Its companions are birds and construction workers, conductors and crickets, dirt and clouds. The Tibetan phrase, "Om mani padme hung," is the mantra of the bodhisattva of compassion, Chenrezig. Tibetans believe the Dalai Lama is a reincarnation of this deity. The phrase can be translated loosely as "The jewel is in the lotus." My interpretation is that the mantra means that in a state of compassion, everything is in its right place. The jewel fits perfectly in the lotus, as love perfectly fills an empty heart. This interplay of emptiness and love was beautifully described by Indian spiritual master Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: "Love tells me I am everything, wisdom tells me I am nothing. Between the two my life ceaselessly flows."

Pure Love and Pure Action

The degree to which one realizes selflessness is the degree to which one loves purely and acts purely. When one has glimpses of selflessness, one sees that beings are not in control of their minds. They are at the mercy of the unfolding of their karma created by past actions. While this karma can surely be changed, it is only changed through awareness of one's present mind state leading to skillful actions that create positive future karma. A wise heart can only feel compassion for those who are not aware of such teachings.

A wise heart cannot help but be moved to act when it sees suffering. Buddhism is not quietism, or passive-ism, but, rather, an attempt to clarify inwardly in an attempt to make outward action more effective. When inner clarity is gained, the awakened heart acts spontaneously through compassion. Taoist sage Lao Tsu, sums this up nicely in the *Tao Te Ching*:

Do you have the patience to wait
until your mind settles and the water is clear?
Can you remain unmoving
until the right action arises by itself?
The Master doesn't seek fulfillment.

Not seeking, not expecting,
she is present, and can welcome all things.

Of course, one needs to take all sorts of actions long before one is awakened. If in the meantime one stays conscious to the effects of one's actions, then mistakes can do much to lead one down the path of awakening.

Part Two: Experientially Looking for the Self

For something to exist in any practical sense, it has to have at least the potential to be either experienced or conceptualized. Through some serious logical wrangling in Part Three we will see that we cannot find an essence for object that we can conceptually designate. Essences have to be singular, unchanging, and independent and all entities in this world can be broken into parts, will change over time, and are dependent on other entities. I will show that when we use even simple concepts such as tomato or CD case, there is nothing ultimately there that these terms are referring to. The same is true of the term "self." Our terms indicate not essences but temporary collections of parts that come together in dependence on other conditions. These collections exist in a relative, or conventional sense, but not in an absolute sense. Saving the conceptual debunking of a self for Part Three, I will focus on the experiential level here. Investigating the existence of a self through both approaches changes our perspective more thoroughly and makes it more obvious to us that we cannot find a self in any practical sense.

It is natural to assume that there has to be a self, a tangible something that is in charge of us in our lives. We might think, "There has got to be a self that is reading this essay right now and thinking these thoughts." To see if we can have an experience of this self that seems so obvious, we need to start with the basic assumptions underlying the belief in a self. These assumptions come from experiences of fundamental activities such as knowing, thinking, acting, deciding, etc. (Below is a diagram which should help with the exploration [Figure 1]). We can have tangible experiences of these activities, so they are represented by dark lines in the diagram. But we take each of these experiences and create the idea that there must be an entity that issues forth the experiences. For instance, we notice a thought occurring and we add the idea that there is a thinker who is originating the thought. This conceptualizing is represented by the line being an

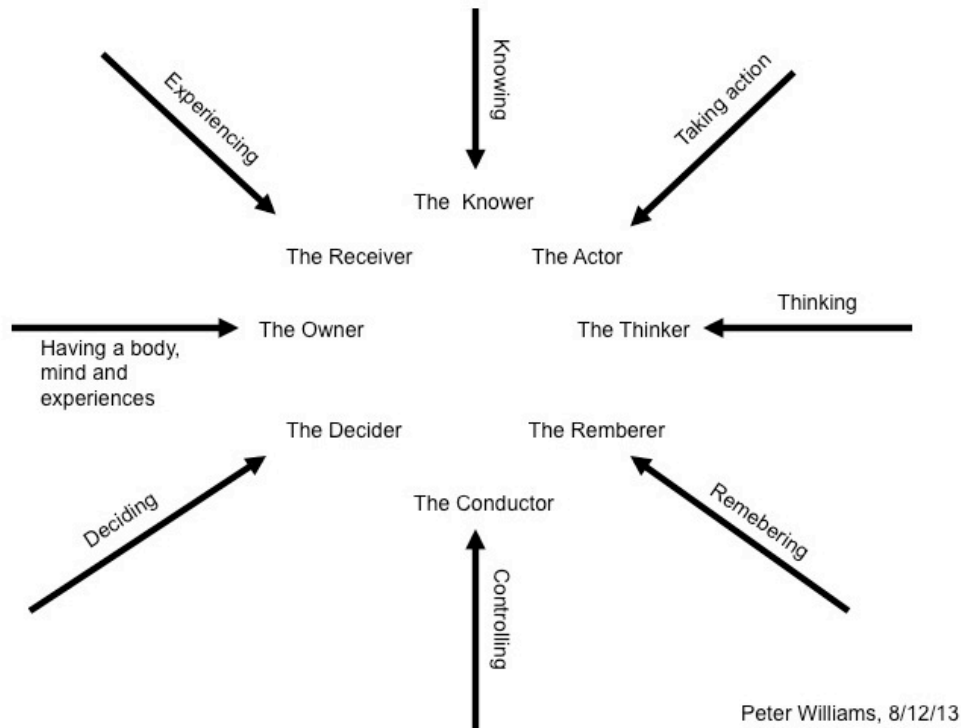


Figure 1. A Map of the Self

arrow that points at the aspect of self that we assume to be under the activity. The sum total of these fundamental features is what we take to be the self.

We see in the diagram that one arrow points at “The Conductor,” the belief that the self is in control of what is inside us. No one else controls what we think and do, so clearly it has to be the self. A second arrow points at “The Owner.” Look at your arm. Notice that, consciously or unconsciously, you identify it as mine. The self owns all of its parts – “My arm.” “My fear.” “My thoughts.” Another arrow points at “The Receiver.” The self receives our experience. Fear does not just happen. It happens to us. Another arrow points at “The Thinker,” which thinks thoughts about what it has received. Another arrow points at “The Decider.” (Sorry, George W. Bush, you are not the only one.) Based on one’s thoughts, the self makes a decision. You decided to read the essay to this point. Another arrow points at “The Actor,” the self executes the action required by the decision. And finally, underneath all this is “The Knower” - the self is conscious and aware of all of the above. In summary, we believe that to think and know and act there has to be a self to do it.

Now notice a second feature of the drawing. The arrows all point at a center area, which represents the self and its characteristics. The blank background in this area

symbolizes that any feature of the self is intangible and cannot be directly experienced apart from our concepts of it. We believe our tangible experiences all indicate the same thing, the self at the center of our being. But in the diagram nothing is there, symbolizing that the self is merely an assumption that has no direct experiential evidence. The fundamental perceptual error of our being is this taking of tangible experiences, like remembering, and turning them into intangible interpretations, like "The Remember," that bolster the belief in the existence of a self. The diagram symbolizes this essentially magical and erroneous process.

While we cannot find the self, we can find selfing, the activity of creating the self through thoughts and images. But since these conceptualizations are fleeting phenomena they cannot be the self. The exercises below are designed to give us insight into the unfindability of a self by investigating each of the assumptions of selfhood that the arrows in the diagram represent.

Before doing this, I want to answer the objection that looking for the self and not finding it is not proof of the lack of a self, but merely an epistemological limitation. One could argue that a subject, by definition, cannot know itself, much as an eye cannot see itself. If one accepts this premise, then we must rely on a conceptual affirming of the existence a self. But Buddhist philosophy has successfully debunked this possibility for centuries, as I will summarize in Part Three. Secondly, one can object to the premise with the fact that we can actually turn all of what we deem to be a self, or subject, into objects. We can take as objects of knowing all the things that subjects do – such as thinking, intending, and acting. Even the act of knowing, maybe the most subjective experience of all, can itself be known, and thus be an object. So, the features of a self can be known but the self itself cannot be known. But the most important answer to the objection is that this is a practical exercise that leads to the perception of the absence of a self. Such a radical new perception leads to great freedom and happiness and that is good enough for Buddhism, which is not ultimately a philosophical endeavor but a practical one, seeking to transform human suffering. With this objection out of the way, let us turn to the exercises.

The Conductor

The conductor assumption about the self is that the self is in charge and in control of ourselves. To put this to the test, take a meditation period and divide it into two parts. At first, pay attention to body sensations. Let attention go to wherever it is drawn. Notice if the sensation - heat, coolness, pressure, buzzing, pulsing, etc. - changes or stays the same. Then notice if you are making the change happen or if it is happening by itself. Secondly, see if you can watch thoughts. This is tricky. Make your

breath your anchor of attention and periodically turn your attention to thinking. See if you can stay out of involvement with the content. Notice whether thoughts occur because you decide what to think or whether they tend to react to each other in a kind of associative stream. If you get caught by thoughts, return your attention to the breath and begin again.

People who try this exercise can see fairly readily that body sensations come and go all by themselves. The self is not the conductor of the body. The heart beats, a foot buzzes, and a shoulder itches all by themselves. Of course, do not take my word for it. See if it is true for you. People are often surprised to notice that thinking is similar to body sensations in that they can come and go by themselves in a stream of association, that one class member called "dreaming while awake." This kind of thinking is clearly not a process one is in control of. Some of you noticed that you can also direct thinking with intention. One can choose a topic, such as a particular problem at work, and reflect on it in a concentrated, directed way. In either case, thoughts are clearly not self, but more of something one can choose to control or not. Of course, this choosing is one of the other assumptions of selfhood and we will explore below how intentionality can be seen to happen without a self (see "The Decider").

The Owner

Let your attention wander freely throughout the body, tuning into sensations. As above, your meditation object is tactile experience - heat, coolness, pressure, buzzing, pulsing, etc. Each time your attention rests in an area of the body, notice if you label the sensation with the body part it is in, such as "knee," and whether you create a mental image of the area. Both labeling and imaging the body part are conceptual overlays of the bare tactile experience. Do not try to prevent this from happening. It is perfectly natural. Conceptualizing at this simple level is not usually problematic.

While you can notice buzzing or pulsing as obvious experiences, can you have an experience of the owner of the sensation? There is pulsing and the knowing of pulsing, but is there anything you can notice that you could call "The owner"? While you can notice the creation of the "me" to which the knee belongs, this is conceptual. Thoughts can never be self because they change all the time. Thoughts symbolize reality and can only take it one bit at a time. For example, take a moment and think about some foreign country. While you thought of it, where were all the other countries? And, more importantly, where was the self? Since it was not being thought of it was obliterated in the symbolic realm of concepts.

The Receiver

To see if you can experience the self that receives experience, do a simple meditation on breath. As you breathe, see if you can notice who is “receiving” the experience. While you can notice the tangible rise and fall of the belly or chest with every breath, what is the tangible experience of the person receiving the breathing to which you can point? There is just breathing and the knowing of breathing.

In another exercise, bend your index finger back with the opposite hand until it feels mildly painful and hold it there. Notice the sensations. Find the boundary of the sensations. Notice if the sensations change as you continue to apply pressure. Just rest in the knowing of this for a while. Now notice if the pain moves up the arm and shoulder and then into wherever you think the self resides (e.g., heart or brain). Is there a self that is lit up in pain? It does not seem so. There is just discomfort in a location and the knowing of it. You can experience the pain, but can you have an experience of the receiver of it, the self who is in pain?

The Thinker

Here is a simple exercise to look for “The thinker,” the self that thinks your thoughts. Below is a bunch of white space. See if you can scroll your screen so that you can see only white space below this paragraph. Now focus on your breathing for a bit. Then open your eyes and notice that you are seeing. Scroll down and notice a word in caps that is on a line by itself. Notice the first thought after you see the word.

MARCO

What was your first thought?

Did you decide what to think, or did it just pop out by itself? When I did this in class something like 25 out of 28 of you had the same thought - Polo! - and you all said that it just popped out. This is because of conditions, the fact that we played this game as kids enough times that our minds are strongly habituated to couple "Marco" together with "Polo." This is a simplified demonstration of the associative process of thinking. Our thoughts tend to spill out of each other in an associative stream. If I say "basket" an association will likely arise immediately. And then something in response to that. When you become mindful you see just how associative and automatic the process of thinking is. Thinking is just a much more sophisticated and complex version of the "Marco Polo" exercise. Thoughts do not need a thinker there to think them. In summary, the best experiential answer to the question - "If there is not a self, then what thinks the thoughts?" - is that it is thinking that thinks thoughts.

The Decider

You may be willing to accept that thoughts can happen by themselves. But surely something is in charge of your decisions. No decision can be made unless there is a me inside that is weighing the options and making a choice, right? Believe it or not, if you really watch your mind, you will see that decisions get made not by a "decider" but in response to stimuli. On retreat, I was walking to lunch and passed the path to the construction site of a new building at the retreat center. Without any conscious "decider" experienced, a decision was made to walk to the site after lunch and view the work. The stimulus was the pleasant memory of the last time I had been there and the thought that it would be cool to see the progress.

Here is an exercise where you can watch yourself making decisions. After meditating on the breath a bit, make a decision to bring some object to mind. Say to yourself, "I will now think about _____." Watch what happens to the process of the

blank getting filled in. Repeat the exercise four to six times. Did you actually decide what to think or did something just pop in? If you witnessed the latter, then you saw deciding happen without a decider. It was the mind's habit of associating that chose the object. Maybe you saw or heard or felt something just before deciding and that was the stimuli for filling in the blank. It can be very spooky to see that the blank gets filled in by all sorts of objects you could not have imagined beforehand. This is true creativity. And there is no one there deciding to do it! It is just an ability of your brain. When "you" make more complex decisions, "you" are going through a similar process as this one, although in a more sophisticated way. But it is just as impersonal.

As I explicate in Part Three, what really runs us is not a self but a vast cascade of conditions running infinitely back in time. What pops objects into the blank is past conditions coming to bear on this moment. Such interdependence can seem a bit scary, like you are completely out of control of your life, like you are just a puppet on the string of your karma. But karma is not a concept that says everything is predetermined. There is free will. One of the past conditions coming to bear on the present is that we are endowed with an ability to make choices.

However, we have limited control. We can only make choices in the present. We cannot change the past or control what happens in 20 minutes. But we can decide how we respond to this moment. So to access free will, you have to be present to this moment. This is why present-based awareness, or mindfulness, is the most powerful tool there is for making choices and building a life conducive to happiness. In a relative sense, there is a "you" that is the decider, but the decisions you make will be influenced by your past actions. So make sure to do actions now that will condition future happiness. Today is tomorrow's yesterday, so take care of this moment as wisely as you can!

The Actor

Once you make a decision, action happens. Surely, someone must be doing my actions. Actually, actions take place much the way you made decisions above. There is a moment-to-moment sequence of stimuli and response that makes decisions and takes action. You can think of memory as a kind of action. Decide now to remember something in response to seeing this prompt: **BLERF**. I will insert this nonsense word somewhere below. When you see it, have the memory that you just decided to have. I will return to this later.

The Knower

The last bastion of belief in self is awareness, or knowing. This seems to be something that is constant. While the objects of knowing change, the knowing always seems to be there. Here is a three-part meditation where you examine this belief.

Take at least a 20-minute period to do this practice. After being with the breath for a few minutes, let awareness bounce around to whatever objects it is called to notice, maybe a breath, then a sensation in the foot, then a thought, then a sound, etc. Your object of meditation as this happens is the knowing itself. Notice that objects are known. It may be helpful to make a mental note of “known” when you notice the knowing. If this gets confusing, resume mindfulness of breathing, and then try the exercise a bit more.

In the second part of the meditation, notice not just knowing but that the knowing is effortless. Knowing is automatic if you are not distracted. Every time you come back to awareness from being distracted, notice that you are already aware. You can mentally note “already aware” if it is helpful. This insight is at the thought level, so do not rest attention in only that. Keep your attention mostly on the knowing, as in the first period, and tune into the effortless quality periodically.

In the third part of the meditation, we will do something quite radical - give up all effort at meditating. Just sit in the posture and let whatever happens happen. This may seem weird and unfamiliar and it is. See if you can just allow your experience to be exactly as it is, whether you are mindful or not. End the session with a few minutes of mindfulness of breath.

This exercise is designed to show you that even mindfulness does not require a self behind it. In the second part, you may have noticed that “you” do not have anything to do with being mindful, it happens on its own and you can notice this if you are not caught in thought. If in the third part you had even one moment of mindfulness, then you had this insight.

While mindfulness with effort is ultimately an illusion, it can be a very skillful one. The illusion that there is a meditator is very useful as it helps you stay undistracted. The effort we make in meditation is not so much to be mindful, since it is always happening all by itself, but to not be distracted. And a good way for many people to not be distracted is to have an object to focus on such as the breath. I do not recommend this completely effortless approach unless you find it helps you be more

mindful than you are when efforting. If it does, then more power to you! Seeing effortless awareness that happens without a self is a glimpse of enlightened mind.

(BLERF - Did you have your memory? Did you decide to do the action of remembering or did it just arise as a response to the stimulus of seeing the nonsense word? This exercise may have shown you that actions happen without a self; they are triggered by something in your experience.)

Part Three: Conceptually Looking for the Self

Practically speaking, for something to exist, it either it has to be able to be experienced or to be conceptualized. Because our senses are limited, plenty of things exist that we cannot experience. For instance, we cannot see infrared light or perceive nuclear radiation. While radiation can poison us and we can feel its effects that way, we cannot have a direct experience of the radiation itself. But we can conceive of it. A class member mentioned a third possibility, that of the unknown. Things can exist that we cannot perceive or cannot conceive of, for instance some specific life form in outer space. We can think of extraterrestrial life in general, but not that exact life form. However, such an unknown entity has the *potential* to be both perceived or conceived of. So, to refine the initial statement, for something to exist, it has to have the potential to be experienced or to be conceptualized.

If one cannot find the self either through an experience of it or through being able to conceive of it, we cannot say that a self exists. This is a practical statement that does not comment upon the ultimate existence of a self. It just says that you cannot find it. And this not finding is the key to liberation, as it penetrates the illusion that is at the root of suffering. I use the conceptual approach in this section, not to establish a philosophical viewpoint but simply to offer another tool to gain insight into not-self.

The Three Features of an Essence

We think of the self as the essence of us, the “mini-me” that has always been inside of us and has never changed. An essence, by definition, says the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, must have three features: it must be independent, unchanging, and singular. In this section, I deconstruct all three propositions. The purpose of doing so is to help you see yourself as impersonal. The more you see yourself as changing, comprised of parts, and dependent on and conditioned by everything else, the less personally you will take yourself. You may begin to see yourself more like weather. While weather affects us and we can adapt to it, we do not blame ourselves for a rainy

day and feel something is wrong with us. Taking oneself impersonally in a similar way will dramatically reduce one's suffering.

The Self as Independent

If the self is an essence, then it has to be independent. If something depends on or is conditioned by other phenomena, then it has no intrinsic existence, no essence. When the conditions that it depends on disappear, then it disappears as well. Thus, an interdependent phenomenon is not intrinsically, or inwardly, controlled.

If you consider a cloud, it is easy to accept that it has no independent existence. A typical cumulus cloud is a product of 1) the moisture level of the air, 2) the temperature of the air, and 3) the ability of land to be warmed differentially by the sun (because of different patches of land cover) so that warm pockets of air can rise into cooler air and condense. The sky can be crystal clear on a summer morning, cloud up in the late afternoon, and be clear again by nightfall. Because a cloud is controlled by the conditions of sun, sky, water, and land, it has no intrinsic control over its existence.

Concepts and language obscure this interconnection. The word "cloud" is merely a concept that represents a patch of color seen by the eye. The mind notices this patch is different from the sky around it, designates the patch "cloud," and plucks it out of its interconnection with everything else. This is the simplest cognitive error and we do it in every moment of thinking and communicating. Anytime we use a noun – child, bagel, book, monkey, tuba, or self – we are separating something from everything else.

Dependent origination, the bedrock Theravada Buddhist view of reality, asserts that all entities arise dependent on other entities. Tibetan Buddhists embrace the same view while emphasizing its empty aspect, asserting that phenomena are empty of intrinsic existence. A key aspect of correctly understanding emptiness is to see that while no phenomenon has ultimate existence, phenomena do have relative, or conventional, existence. A cloud is not ultimately independent, but it does have a boundary. Material reality is different inside a cloud than outside of it. We agree on the convention to name distinct but dependent entities as nouns. The conventional designation "cloud," is useful in a practical sense. However, we must not let the conventional definition of anything obscure its ultimately dependent nature. The cloud may have a boundary, but this boundary is fuzzy, permeable, and temporary. The Buddhist view of emptiness does not mean that things do not exist. It means that they do not exist as independent entities, as essences. Another way of saying this is that conceptually designated entities exist conventionally but not ultimately.

This philosophical point bears greatly on our suffering. Because we take ourselves to be an essence that is separate from everything else we are afraid, greedy, and aversive. The trick to dissolving this suffering is to see ourselves as conditioned by everything else. We are much like clouds, with little intrinsic control over our existence. Did any of us ask to be born? Mystery of mysteries, we started as insubstantial as the gleams in our parent's eyes. Without that lust you would not be reading this today. You grew from the merging of a sperm and egg cell completely dependent on the nutritional habits of your mother. It is highly likely you that were not a baby with fetal alcohol syndrome. If this is true, it is because your mother did not drink alcohol during pregnancy. This fact was completely out of your control. You grew as a baby due to the care of your caretakers. You learned to read and write because of the patience and effort of your teachers. And on and on it goes. Who you are now is completely dependent on all the input that you received in every moment of learning of your entire life. The saying "you are what you eat" is true on all levels - physically, mentally, and spiritually.

You may think, "So I am not an independent self, but I am unique and different, the same way a cloud is distinct from the sky." Fine. You, of course, have a relative existence. For instance, no one but you can feel the sensations that arise in your body or look out of your eyes. However, you would behave very differently if you saw yourself as both distinct and dependently originated. A stream is a classic example of a dependently originated entity. It has no existence apart from its watershed and from climate. How would you protect a stream? You cannot find its essence, put it in a Plexiglas box, and forever preserve it. Instead, you can only protect the conditions that foster a healthy riparian system. You have to protect its watershed - the soil, plants, and animals that condition the stream - as well as the global climate. At the watershed level, the more of a watershed you pave, the less rainfall soaks into the ground and therefore the more quickly the precipitation pours into watercourses. This intensifies the flood regime of a stream, which can affect the ability of fish to spawn in backwater pools. At the global climate level, acid rain has profound effects on river life, as do other forms of air pollution and global warming. Likewise, to truly protect a self that is dependently arisen one has to protect all of society. Go ahead, be as selfish as you can possibly be and work for global change!

The Self as Unchanging

If the self is an essence, then it has to be unchanging. This is because if the self changes from one state to another, there is the problem of deciding which state is the real self? When a young man ages into an old man, it is not like some part of the young man stayed young while the rest aged. The young man is completely replaced by the

old man. So which one is the real self? The wiser, older man, or the younger, more energetic man? Which is the real you – you as a fertilized egg in a womb, you as an infant, you as an elementary schooler, or you as an adult? What is the essence inside of you that has not changed since you were that gleam in your parent's eyes?

You may respond something like, "Sure everything about me has changed except for one little thing. And that's the essential me!" But you will find it hard pressed to find a definition of yourself that does not include all the properties that changed. If the properties change, then the self changes too. If the self does not change but its properties do, then the self is separate from its properties, which means the properties do not truly belong to it. And it defies common sense to say that the aspects of us that change - our personalities, bodies, and mental habits - are separate from the self. That means they are not ours and that is not the way we feel.

I find it interesting to look at obituary pictures in the newspaper to see which age is used to represent the person. It is almost never the person as elderly or very young. It typically is the age at which they made an impact on society, or the age at which family members most want to remember them, or maybe the prettiest picture the family could find. My grandmother died a few years ago at the age of 99. For the obituary, my Mom and her two sisters and I searched Granny's home for the best picture of her. My favorite was a sepia-toned photo of her sitting on a lawn at age five, looking almost exactly like her great granddaughter Annabel at the same age today. I got outvoted. No one would recognize her, said the sisters. We found scrapbooks filled with pictures of Granny soaring over hedges on a horse and winning equestrian events as one of the pioneer women in the U. S. horse world in the 1920s. We found pictures of her with each of her three husbands. And there were many shots of her hunting quail, her favorite pastime, with her beauty salon curls spilling out of a camouflage hat. We finally all agreed on a picture of her when she was about 72, because she just looked so darn pretty! I was spooked that none of the pictures could capture the essence of Granny, the supposed thing that had lived continuously from since before cars were common to the age of the iPhone. How many lives she had lived in that century! How many selves she had been!

The Self as Singular

If the self is an essence, then it has to be singular. The word self is singular and therefore must refer to something singular. In addition, we act like there is a self inside of us that is singular and in charge of everything. We feel as if there is a single "me" that cried as a baby, partied as a teenager, went to college, got a job, is reading this text.

When we remember something cruel we did at age 11, we cringe because we feel it is the same me that is now having the memory.

It is best to deconstruct this notion by starting simple. I will use a tomato to aid our exploration. Even as simple a thought as “tomato” is very hard to pin down. What is a tomato? Ponder this a bit. How would you define it? You might say, “The tomato is a vegetable with a particular taste and it is red and round.” But that is too simple. It is not always red, or round. It changes with time, going from green to ripe to rotten. It is also curious that we treat it as a singularity, even though it is comprised of parts - skin, seeds, pulp, juice, a particular smell, a particular taste, a particular weight, etc. Clearly, the tomato is not a single, undifferentiated thing. It has many parts and characteristics. But since it has to be one thing to be an essence, then maybe the tomato is really one of its parts. This seems counterintuitive - we use the word for the whole thing, not for a single part such as skin, juice, or a seed.

Since we cannot find a single thing that is tomato, you may still think the essence is somehow in the parts. Might tomato be the word for all of the parts put together? Let us consider. What if one takes away the skin? Is it still a tomato? What if one slices out a wedge? Is it still a tomato? What if one de-seeds it, but leaves all the other parts in? Clearly, the tomato cannot be all of its parts.

So might the term “tomato” refer to a minimum set of parts? Then one has to decide which parts. Not everyone would agree on what this minimum set should be. A farmer may say it has to have seeds so new tomatoes can be planted the next season. But restaurant goers can easily accept the idea that tomatoes need not have seeds.

Thus, the definition of tomato is arbitrary and user-defined, with no objective reality. If a tomato is neither one thing, all of its parts, or a unique, minimum set of parts, then the term tomato actually does not ultimately refer to anything at all! It is sort of like Dr. Seuss nonsense language - jibberly dibbledy glop! The Madhyamika (Middle Way) view of Tibetan Buddhism codifies this insight, saying that objects do not have intrinsic, independent existence because they: 1) Depend on their parts and we just debunked the intrinsic existence of this poor tomato based on this insight, 2) Depend on their causes: the tomato is not independent of the plant that bore it, and the air, sunlight, water, and minerals that formed it, and 3) Depend on our conceptual designations (There are many ways to classify and name objects – shape, color, taste, function, etc. A tomato is a fruit because it makes seeds, but is a vegetable because it does not taste sweet.)

With the help of a CD case, we went further with this exploration in a recent class. Many of participants agreed that one could boil this case into a minimum set of parts, a back and a front, that, when joined, performed the function of carrying a CD. The being joined means that a CD case is not just two parts, but two parts in a certain configuration. I separated the two parts and then slowly snapped them back together. “what point does the CD case magically emerge,” I asked? With just one hinge attached no one agreed there was a CD case there. With the second hinge part way in, a few of you said “Now.” It was not until the second hinge was all the way in, that most of the class said “Now!” But it was not like some third thing appeared as the CD case. It was just the two parts being put together. And how put together is a matter of opinion and caused disagreement. We could even put it together too much by gluing the case shut. Then it would cease functioning as a CD case.

So, “CD case” is a concept for two plastic parts put together in a very precise way. You may say this is a concept representing an essence. But such a concept casts the CD case as a dependent object. It depends on its parts (point #1 above). There is no third entity - “case” - that is independent of the parts. The case, without a front and a back, and without them being joined together in the correct way, does not exist.

Might CD case refer to the relationship between the parts? This is problematic. It is just a conceptual convention to say that the joining of parts creates a singular whole. The fact that we use opposite convention - physically separated parts can comprise singular wholes – reveals that the relationship among any set of parts and its whole is purely conceptual. For instance, we can take a collection of physically separate parts, baseball players, and create the singular whole “team.” The most extreme example of this is that we take wildly separated parts - planets and stars and galaxies - and conceptually bind them into a singular universe. The arbitrariness of the convention is further illustrated by the fact that we often separate wholes that are physically joined. We break apart a physically continuous tomato plant into roots, vines, leaves, stems, and tomatoes.

There is a further problem with our concept “CD case.” In reality, we use the concept primarily as a functional term. As long as the two parts are joined in the correct way, it performs the function of carrying a CD. This is the famed idea of emergent properties in systems thinking: the whole is more than the sum of its parts. Might the essence of the CD case be the emergent property of its ability to carry a CD? While this function has conventional truth, it has no ultimate truth as an essence. This emergent property is simply a concept about how the case is used. Put the case over a tomato sprout on a cold spring night, and it functions as a vegetable frost guard. One cannot

find the essence of the case as a function. Yet, we cannot leave function out of our definition. “Two plastic parts joined together” does not define CD case.

A final problem with the relationship between an essence and its parts is the fact that parts that are joined together will eventually come apart. The parts of any CD case will either break or be separated at some future time. On this grounds alone, the CD case - and all other wholes comprised of parts – is disqualified from having an essence.

In summary, in defining the CD case, like the tomato, we ultimately come up empty-handed. There is nothing the term “CD case” reliably refers to. The case is not singular, is not its parts, is not the relationship between the parts or a function the parts perform. Yet the CD case is not separate from the parts either. It cannot exist without the parts. While we cannot find a CD case in an ultimate sense, we can find it conventionally as a collection of parts that are temporarily arranged in a particular way. The Tibetan Buddhist tradition says that the best way to think of any object is as a “transitory collection.” When we understand the CD case in this way, we capture both its conventional and ultimate nature. While it is not an essence, it does exist in a temporary way to perform something humans find useful.

Applying This Logic to Ourselves

You may be thinking, “What’s the big deal, it is fine to relate to CDs and tomatoes as essences.” True enough. We do not suffer much when tomatoes reveal their true nature as temporary collections by rotting and falling apart. The real problem is when we make this cognitive error of reification about ourselves and take ourselves to be an essence that is somehow independent of everything else.

Consequently, all this logical wrangling assumes its full usefulness only when we apply it to ourselves and try to find our essence. When doing so, the basic question is: What is the reality of a person, a self (read: essence) or a transitory collection? When we investigate, we immediately see that a human being is comprised of many parts, so we are right into the tomato and CD case territory, just a temporary collection of parts.

One way of categorizing our parts is on the level of experiencing what we take to be self, which the Buddha broke down into five basic parts, which he called *skhandas*, or aggregates. I will present an analysis of the self based on these five parts, recognizing that it is just one way of breaking down the self. The logic I use here can be applied to any other scheme that deconstructs the self.

In the aggregates, one of the five parts is a person's physical aspect, the body, and the remaining four are mental: the feeling tone of every experience - pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; perception, which is the recognition of objects based on memory, e.g., simple thoughts such as "bird" or "box;" more elaborate thinking about objects; and consciousness.

Might one of these parts or some collection of these parts be a self? I'll start with individual aggregates and then consider their collective aspect. The first aggregate of the body means the physical totality of a person, including the brain, which is the physical basis for mind. Clearly, our perception of what a person is encompasses more than just a body; there has to at least be some form of subjective experience. However, even if we were to consider just the body, we can see it is full of parts. Which of these is essential? To be alive, you need a brain, heart, lungs, digestive organs, immune system, skin, and senses. That is a lot of parts! We probably think of the self as some emergent property of all those parts being together in a certain way. Yet this self is dependent on its parts and their interactions so it is not really an essence. Interactions are processes, not entities, and we cannot be satisfied with the self as a process. We think of it as a thing. In addition, we feel our self to be very concrete, with a personality and habits and unique tendencies. The self as an emergent property is very abstract!

Even if we get thoroughly reductionist and boil the self as body down to a brain we are in trouble. Is the whole brain the self? You can clearly lose parts of it and still be alive and functioning, as brain injuries show. Might there be a single essential part that we cannot lose? As neuroscience advances it has failed to find it. Descartes thought the self was in the pineal gland, a pea-sized pinecone looking thingy in the center of brain. Since he lived at a time when the common belief was that everything in the universe revolved around the central point of earth, it seemed logical that the center of the brain would be the seat of the soul. Science now reveals that this gland does little more than make melatonin, which regulates sleep and seasonal rhythms.

The computer also provides a center-point model for looking at the brain. Computers have a central processing unit (CPU) that receives data, sends out instructions to analyze that data, and then responds with actions. But neuroscience has been unable to find any CPU in the brain. It turns out that a moment of consciousness does not happen in a single part of the brain, but is distributed throughout many parts that are somehow coordinated in an exquisitely timed sequence by nothing that any neuroscientist can find! The brain performs all its amazing feats without a conductor in charge, an essence of the brain that is the basis for a self.

So what is in charge of the brain if a self is not? Let us go back to the computer. In fact, even a CPU is not really in charge in a computer. What makes it work is the set of instructions that it has been encoded with. Computers function as the pulsing of 0s and 1s in a highly organized and complex way through the programs that run its behavior. Similarly, what is really in charge of brains is not a self acting as a conductor, but rather “programs” that are the result of past conditions going all the way back to the Big Bang. The universe differentiated into galaxies and solar systems and planets, and on the particular planet we inhabit, life flared forth 3.5 billion years ago. Evolution has continued since then for so long that consciousness organs as complex as our brains were able to appear. Evolution endowed you with an amazing brain at birth. This brain then got further conditioned in the experiences of childhood that organized your brain in a very unique way. Your brain has continued to be shaped by all your adult experiences. The brain’s amazing abilities belong not to you as a self, but to the entire history of the universe!

We can now deconstruct the four remaining aggregates, which are all aspects of mind (mind being subjective experience, whereas the brain is the physical basis for it). Which of the aggregates is self? Is it one of the three feeling tones of the second aggregate - pleasant, unpleasant or neutral? If so, then the self would last only for as long as a particular feeling tone lasted. Is it the third aggregate of perception? If so, then a person with severe dementia or Alzheimer’s does not have a self. Is the self the fourth aggregate of thinking? If so, then a person who is pre-verbal and pre-conceptual, like an infant, does not have a self. Is the fifth aggregate of consciousness the self? If so, then a person in a coma does not have a self. Since all of these conditions violate what common sense deems a self to be, none of the mental aggregates alone can be the self.

Then might the collection of the aggregates be the self, an emergent property of all of the aggregates working together? In this case, we run into the same problems that we encountered with the tomato, the CD case, and the body. In addition, the interaction of our parts is a process and a process is not a self. The life force that makes the parts function is not a self either. Do you order your heart to beat or your lungs to breathe, or your bladder to fill after drinking? No, the life force behind all your organs makes this happen. Your fire was lit at the moment of conception and you had nothing to do with it. And that conception came because of the conditions of your parent’s lives, and their parents before them, and back it goes unstoppably to the Big Bang.

Okay, so maybe the self is not body or mind, but the soul or the spirit. While we all have spiritual abilities, what can you point to in your experience that is spirit or soul as the essential you? Intuition happens, psychic powers happen, the ability to know about past lives or other realms happen. But these are mental processes, ways of

knowing. Many people on the spiritual path feel that knowing itself is their essence. It is the thing that is truly reliable, always there. However, on the experiential level, this pure knowing does not feel personal. It has no characteristics. It feels blissful to rest in pure presence, but that is not the same thing as an essence. It is still a process, a flow.

So what is the self? Our analysis above suggests that it is not an essence, but a concept we assign to a transitory collection of parts. Because the concept does not refer to anything experience-able it is a deeply abstract concept. This concept, although referring to something vastly more complex in structure and function than a CD case, is still just as impersonal. The history of the universe made you. Nature made you, society made you, your family made you, and your ability to exercise free will and a lifetime of choices made you.

The point of all this analysis is to get to the place where you feel it is weird to protect a self that cannot be known. This not finding of a “you” helps you see that every aspect of you is impersonal, that all parts of you are a product of all that has come before. Such a realization is a true blessing that obliterates your suffering. Thinking that you are a self that is separate from all the conditions that made you is actually a kind of sacrilege against the reality, mystery and beauty of existence.

So give yourself back to everything.
You are clouds and sun and gravity
and sidewalks and chain link fences
and love and bread and complications,
childbirth and death and enlightenment.
Suffering and joy have no boundaries.
Walk around and let them spill into you.
Then you will know what to do.

The Upshot

In this essay, we have seen through both hard-core logical thinking and through a bunch of experiential exercises that we cannot find a self. As you start seeing that you are not a self, you begin to feel that you are impersonal, which is just another way of saying that you become everything. You might feel to yourself to be more like a cloud or the wind or an oak tree. You do not argue with clouds so much. You just let them be the way they are. You start to accept yourself more, with all your foibles, when you see how much you have been shaped by everything. These insights can be unfamiliar and uncomfortable,

because we have all along cherished ourselves as so personal and special. But as you get used to it, it becomes joyful.

It is this not finding of the self that is the “supreme sight,” says the Tibetan tradition, because it eradicates suffering. Not finding the self helps us rest in pure being, which is when the heart finally finds the fulfillment it has searched for so long and hard. Life becomes so rich and moving when we become fully transparent and insubstantial. We simply join with everything and that provides a profound rest and peace. Our meditative path heads towards this deep happiness. These lines capture our journey of first inquiring and then waking up:

I took off petal after petal,
as if you were a rose,
in order to see your soul,
and I didn't see it.

However, everything around –
horizons of fields and oceans –
was filled with a perfume,
immense and living.

– Juan Ramon-Jimenez, <http://rzc.org/html/library/zenbow/onelove.shtml>