

# No-self, No Problem

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One of the cornerstones of the Buddha's teaching is that of no-self or no-soul.<sup>1</sup> In Pali the word describing this spiritual truth is *anatta* and in Sanskrit *anatman*. The Buddha propounded this teaching in direct contrast to the prevalent teaching at the time of *atman*. The teaching of *atman* stresses that there is an unchanging, self-existent soul or self in every being that exists *separately* from the Oversoul or Brahman.<sup>2</sup> And this "soul-thing" is embedded in a body of tainted corruption that it must be freed from so that it can be reunited with the Oversoul. Ascetics in the Buddha's time—and still today—believed that liberating this soul-thing could only be achieved through extreme practices that punish the body and mind.

The Buddha first tried this approach of extreme self-mortification, eventually becoming recognized as one of the premier ascetics of his time. He practiced it so well that he nearly died by starving himself to death.<sup>3</sup> Luckily for the world, he realized at that point that "by all these bitter and difficult austerities I shall not attain to excellence, worthy of supreme knowledge and insight, transcending those of human states. Might there be another path for Enlightenment!"<sup>4</sup> And the path that his great enlightenment illuminated is the Middle Way between extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification that the various schools of Buddhism strive to practice to this day.

One of the foundational discoveries of his enlightenment experience was the insight that there is, in reality, no soul entity *separate from* the compassion, love, and wisdom of Eternal Reality, Eternal Truth; that *everything* is *already* of the Eternal. And if everything is already of the Eternal, there is nothing to liberate and nothing to mortify. We simply need to "turn about in the seat of deepest consciousness"<sup>5</sup> and face It: we do not need to go anywhere, just turn around where we are *right now*. Turn around from the grey, phantasmagoric wall of greed, anger, and delusion that the egocentric self faces to see the grand, transcendent Reality of compassion, love, and wisdom of the Eternal only perceived with the eyes of non-self. The purpose of Buddhist training in meditation and Precepts is to effect this revolutionary transformation of consciousness

It is safe to say that the Buddha's teaching of no-self/no-soul is one of the more difficult for us to accept. No-self seems counter-intuitive: after all, *here we are*, in this body with its collection of thoughts and emotions, desires, joys and sorrows, its animal needs. It's *obvious* that we have a self, it's "common sense." But we know from

experience that much of what we deem obvious and common sense turns out not to be so in fact; that much of it is merely our projections based on mistaken assumptions. In the realm of the physical world,

Ever since we discovered that Earth is round and turns like a mad spinning-top, we have understood that reality is not as it appears to us: every time we glimpse a new aspect of it, it is a deeply emotional experience. Another veil has fallen.<sup>6</sup>

There is a sense that, in the personal realm, we can ignorantly think that “the earth is flat and the center of the universe and the sun revolves around it:” we can think that we are only physical beings and the center of the universe and everything that lights our lives revolves around us. And despite all evidence to the contrary, we still convince ourselves that we must live forever.

The resistance to the teaching of non-self no doubt crosses cultures, since every human is hard-wired by evolution to strive to survive, to maintain this package of body-and-mind at almost any cost. As Walpola Rahula puts it,

Two ideas are psychologically deep-rooted in man: self-protection and self-preservation. For self-protection man has created God, on whom he depends for his own protection, safety and security, just as a child depends on its parent. For self-preservation man has conceived the idea of an immortal Soul or Ātman, which will live eternally. In his ignorance, weakness, fear, and desire, man needs these two things to console himself. Hence he clings to them deeply and fanatically.

It is the mistaken notion of a separate self, a separate soul that must be protected against annihilation that is the principle source of our suffering.<sup>7</sup> Since its premise is mistaken, concepts based upon it are also erroneous, such as ideas of heaven and hells where a separate soul will dwell for eternity. The desire for the former and fear of the latter fills the background of our consciousness, whether we recognize it or not. Consequently, deeply *accepting* the reality of our mortality is our most important life’s endeavor, because that acceptance reveals the True, Eternal Reality that is the actual ground of our being.<sup>8</sup> In Buddhism, the Fifth Law of the Universe says, *The intuitive knowledge of Buddha Nature occurs to all.*<sup>9</sup> Unless we attempt to reconcile our intuitive knowledge of the Eternal with our limited mortal life, we will live divided lives. Uniting them in harmony alleviates our suffering, enabling us to live full spiritual lives and face death with equanimity. It is the source of wisdom and compassion, the blossoming of the lotus above the mud of mortality.

At one point in my training as a monk I intuitively realized that I was going to have to open myself up to this teaching if I were to go deeper spiritually. I grasped the concept, but I needed *proof of concept within myself*. One avenue that is very helpful in this effort is the *Diamond Sutra*, which essentially describes the condition of *shunyata*, or emptiness of an ego-self. The very first thing the Buddha teaches his disciple, Subhuti, in the *Diamond Sutra* is, “No one can be called a bodhisattva who creates the perception of a self or who creates the perception of a being, a life, or a soul.”<sup>10</sup> Another critical tool in the effort to realize no-self is the teaching of Dependent Origination.<sup>11</sup>

As I contemplated the teaching of no-self it occurred to me that a fundamental mistake we make when viewing ourselves is perceiving ourselves as an independent, self-contained *entity*. Although we go through life experiencing a constantly changing flow of thoughts, emotions, likes, repulsions, fears, joys, sorrows, and so on, we somehow convince ourselves that that ephemeral, ever-changing experience of action and reaction is *who we are*, is our *personality*, is our *self*. And we compose an ongoing narrative in which we are the central *subject* and everything else is external *object* and hence we live in duality, in tension. We spend the precious energy of our lives promoting and defending the hero (and sometimes, antihero) of our narrative: the fictional self.

The more we reinforce the unreal image of the self the harder and more self-protective it becomes. It is as if we secrete a calcified “shell of self,” metaphorically like this:



And the more we exercise habits of self-protection and self-aggrandizement this impermeable, calcified self grows larger and harder with time. But the sea shell’s superficial protection is only temporary, and so is the shell the self secretes. Death ultimately claims both.

Instead of a solid self, rigidly bounded by a projected personality, we are in truth an ongoing *process*, like this:



This graphic image of an amoeba is a nice visual metaphor for the actual workings of our pscho-physical self. Although it is a single-cell organism and therefore a discrete entity, its boundary is nevertheless in flux and constantly moving and shifting, as can be seen in this video clip. It responds to its environment, altering and adapting as it interacts with conditions and forces outside itself. It is *dynamic*, and thereby more accurately reflects our own ever-changing state. And, it is vulnerable: there is no hard shell to provide it temporary protection from physical demise.

For purposes that will be clear later in this essay, it is important to note that the cell operates within a liquid medium, without which it could not survive. It can be said that although the cell is not the medium it is operating in, there is nothing in the cell that is not of the medium; that everything that makes up the cell comes from the medium. And when it dies, it dissolves back into the liquid medium and its elements recycled.

As with verbal metaphors a visual metaphor like this has its limitations, and can only ever be a “finger pointing at the moon,” since the Eternal is a Reality that exceeds all our words and concepts. Nevertheless, it can help us “perceive outside the box of self” and begin to apprehend that greater Reality.

If we are not a solid, impervious, “shell” of self with an eternal soul, then what are we?

Great Master Dogen says that “the kingdom of death must be entered by oneself alone with nothing for company but our own good and bad karma,”<sup>12</sup> and that is what we bring with us into this life from past lives. This life of ours is an ongoing *process* of interacting with the world, driven by our inherited karma and the making of new karma based on our volitional actions of body, speech and mind.<sup>13</sup> The karma is “bad” when our actions arise from the three poisons of greed, anger, and ignorance-delusion, and “good” when we act from compassion, love, and wisdom. (Instead of “bad” and “good” I tend to think of the qualities of karma as “negative” and “positive.”)

Rendered graphically, this admixture of karma in our experience of life might look something like this:



In this graphic the “membrane” of the self is shown irregular to evoke, as in the amoeba above, the nonrigid and constantly shifting, constantly changing boundaries of the self. It is also shown as porous and not impermeable and self-limited. This represents the phenomenon that the karmic energies of different selves can affect each other when they come in contact and interact with each other. The dark-blue background of the cell of self—the “medium” it exists in—represents the compassion, love, and wisdom of the Eternal Buddha Nature; it has no border to indicate that it is infinite in space and eternal in time. Although it cannot be shown in a two-dimensional graphic, it should be understood that this is not static and passive, but is a dynamic, flowing, unlimited, unconditioned “energy” that is always available to us to “plug into” through meditation and acting on the Precepts.

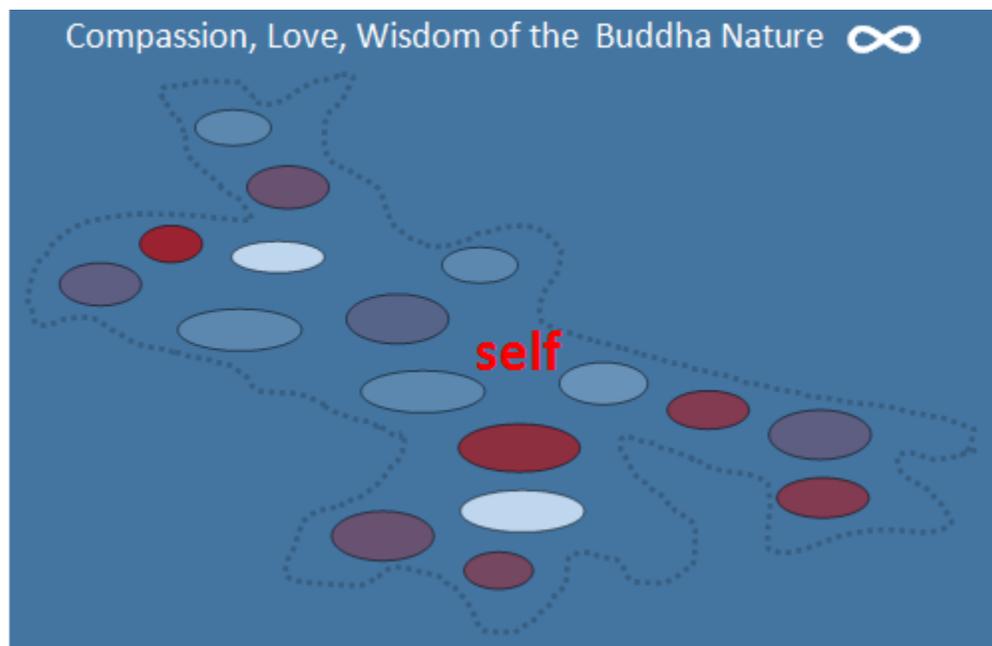
Since red in our culture is often used to represent danger or warning, and heat or burning, negative karma is shown in red “bubbles” recalling the amoeba’s organelles. Positive karmic “bubbles” are shown lighter blue, since they partake of the qualities of the Eternal and yet are filtered through our humanity. However, both the negative and positive karmic bubbles exist in the medium of the Eternal. I am told that Rev. Master Jiyu-Kennett used to often say, using western terminology, “I am not God, and there is nothing in me that is not *of* God.”<sup>14</sup> Even our negative karma is not separate from the Eternal, it is just that we give it temporary relative reality by indulging aspects of greed, anger, and ignorance-delusion.

We are each unique only in our particular collection of karma, not the essence of Buddha Nature it exists in. If we reflect on ourselves we can each fill in the karmic bubbles with

our own specific karmic proclivities, and specific regretful episodes of indulging them. Within the broad parameters of greed, anger, and ignorance-delusion, one may be dominant over the others in an individual. And some people have an apparent preponderance of negative karma, while others manifest more positive karma. Most people in the “normal” range seem to have a balance.

How does this relate to our Buddhist training? As shown in the graphic the opacity of the karma obscures the background of the Eternal, and the more karmic bubbles we have the more obscure the background. When we train in meditation and [the Precepts](#), the karmic bubbles begin to dissolve back into medium of the Eternal and our actions of body, speech and thought begin to more manifest the compassion, love and wisdom that is our essential Self.

Being mindful of the Precepts and manifesting them in our daily lives moderates the effects of existing negative karma and prevents new bubbles from arising. Pure meditation works at diminishing the bubbles’ karmic energy and dissolving them into the Buddha Nature:



In this version of the graphic the effects of pure meditation on the karma is reflected by showing the bubbles diminished with more space between them, revealing more of the Buddha Nature behind the self.<sup>15</sup> The bubbles are also shown in varying degrees of transparency to indicate that while some of them resolve fairly quickly with training, others take more time and work to resolve. And, it is prudent to remember that at any time we can generate more karmic bubbles, which is why the Precepts are so important.

When we meditate we let the thoughts and memories and emotions of our karmic bubbles simply arise and pass away: we deny them the energy to affect us and we begin to see their essential unreality. Our perception of the Eternal clarifies as the karmic obscurities shrink and dissolve, and our mistaken sense of the karmic bubbles *being who we are* also diminishes. As we engage an ongoing meditation practice our entire orientation towards the world begins to change as the influence of the karma lessens and the Buddha Nature begins to show through in our lives.

It is also important to note that, paradoxically, *even the positive karma must be released and dissolved*, because it is also generated by the self. As that great classic of western spirituality, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, puts it: “Hide all created things, material and spiritual, good and bad, under the cloud of forgetting.”<sup>16</sup> And that “forgetting”—letting go—of *all* created things reveals the Eternal. This is what happens in deep meditation, when it is as if our spiritual “eye” can see through the gaps between karmic bubbles—both negative *and* positive—to perceive that True Reality behind them.

As mentioned above, the letting-go process of meditation unblocks the energy of the Eternal and allows It to flow into the self and counter the energy of the karmic bubbles. The Precepts describe actions that give negative karma energy and influence and so are to be avoided. Taken together they work to dissolve these karmic bubbles and reveal the wonderful purity and clarity of the essence underneath. At death, the karmic bubbles that have not been resolved are released back into the Eternal to be reabsorbed by another being at their time of birth.

An essay about no-self would not be complete without reference to [\*The Scripture of Great Wisdom\*](#) (the *Heart Sutra*). This scripture is the most beloved of all the Mahayana schools of Buddhism because from beginning to end it is saying, “Don’t worry...don’t worry...don’t worry: *in essence* you are not the limited self you think you are and there is no-thing to protect and no-thing to lose.” Virtually every Zen temple around the world begins its day by reciting this scripture, and what more uplifting and encouraging way could there be to step off into a new day of training?

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<sup>16</sup>“Apart from mind and matter which constitute this so-called being, which we know as man, there is no immortal soul, or eternal ego, with which we are either gifted or have obtained in a mysterious way from a mysterious being or force.... The forms of man or animal are merely the temporary manifestations of the life force that is common to all.” Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., *Zen is Eternal Life* (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, Fourth Edition, 1999), p. 8. (Available for downloading at: <http://www.shastaabbey.org/pdf/bookZel.pdf>.)

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<sup>2</sup>“What in general is suggested by Soul, Self, Ego, or to use the Sanskrit expression Ātman, is that in man there is a permanent, everlasting and absolute entity, which is the unchanging substance behind the changing phenomenal world. According to some religions, each individual has such a separate soul which is created by God, and which, finally after death, lives eternally either in hell or heaven, its destiny depending on the judgment of its creator. According to others, it goes through many lives till it is completely purified and becomes finally united with God or Brahman, Universal Soul or Ātman, from which it originally emanated. This soul or self in man is the thinker of thoughts, feeler of sensations, and receiver of rewards and punishments for all its actions good and bad. Such a conception is called the idea of self.” Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, Chapter VI (New York: Grove Press; Revised edition, 1974)

<sup>3</sup> “And I, intending to touch my belly’s skin, would instead seize my backbone. When I intended to touch my backbone, I would seize my belly’s skin. So was I that, owing to lack of sufficient food, my belly’s skin clung to the backbone...”. Narada Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, p. 17 ([http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/buddha-teachingsurw6.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/buddha-teachingsurw6.pdf))

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Chapter IX of the Lankavatara Sutra, “The Fruits of Self-Realisation,” in *A Buddhist Bible*, by Dwight Goddard, p. 128. (Boston: Beacon Press: 1970)

<sup>6</sup> Carlo Rovelli, *Seven Brief Lessons on Physics*. (New York: Riverhead Books), 6.

<sup>7</sup> In writing of the Buddha’s Second Noble Truth, Narada Thera in his classic text [\*The Buddha and His Teaching\*](#), says that one of the three aspects of clinging and therefore suffering is the attachment to existence (*bhavatanhā*) (p. 61). (The other two are “simple attachment to all sensual pleasures” and “attachment to non-existence.”)

<sup>8</sup> “What people usually think of as their ‘self,’ ‘soul,’ or ‘spirit’ is actually an impermanent combination of several components. Some components, such as the ego, the sense of self, the body image, and the like are personal and individual but are continually changing and do not survive death. Another component, the Buddha Nature, because it is one with the Buddha Essence of the Universe, is unchanging and eternal and yet, for the very same reason, is neither personal nor individual...”

“The Five Laws of the Universe,” footnote 2, in [\*An Introduction to the Tradition of Serene Reflection Meditation\*](#).

<sup>9</sup> “Cosmic Buddha. The Buddha Shakyamuni said, ‘There is an Unborn, Uncreated, Undying, Unchanging.’ A term for the Dharmakaya, Eternal Nature, Buddhahood or

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Amitabha Buddha. The Buddha who appears in every place and time and in all beings; also called by various other names such as Vairocana Buddha, Amitabha Buddha, Dharmakaya, Buddha Nature, Lord of the House, That Which Is. It can be revealed by genuine training but It cannot be explained as existing or not existing or in any other dualistic way.”

“The Five Laws of the Universe,” footnote 1, in [An Introduction to the Tradition of Serene Reflection Meditation](#).

<sup>10</sup>Red Pine, *The Diamond Sutra: The Perfection of Wisdom* (New York: Counterpoint, 2001), p. 3.

<sup>11</sup> “The teaching of Dependent Origination is a magnificent tapestry within which both the causes of suffering and the causes of spiritual conversion are displayed.” Rev. Master Koshin Schomberg, *Dependent Origination*. This booklet is recommended as a clear and insightful teaching on Dependent Origination and is available at:

<http://northcascadesbuddhistpriory.org/DepOrigination/DependentOrigination.PDF>

<sup>12</sup> “Shushogi: What is Truly Meant by Training and Enlightenment,” Great Master Dogen, translated by Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., in [Zen is Eternal Life](#), op. cit., p. 95.

<sup>13</sup> “The Pali term Kamma, literally, means action or doing. Any kind of intentional action whether mental, verbal, or physical is regarded as Kamma. It covers all that is included in the phrase: ‘Thought, word and deed’. Generally speaking, all good and bad actions constitute Kamma. In its ultimate sense Kamma means all moral and immoral volition.”

Narada Thera, *The Buddha and His Teachings*, p. 265

([http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf\\_file/buddha-teachingsurw6.pdf](http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/buddha-teachingsurw6.pdf))

<sup>14</sup> “There is a great difference, you know, between thinking you *are* God and knowing that what is in you is *of* God. ‘I am not God, and there is nothing in me that is not of God’ is the way in which one has to think about it. The reason for Zen practice is to find the Eternal.” Rev. Master P.T.N.H. Jiyu-Kennett, M.O.B.C., *Roar of the Tigress, Volume One* (Mount Shasta, CA: Shasta Abbey Press, 2000), p. 22. (Available for downloading at: <http://www.shastaabbey.org/pdf/bookRoar1.pdf>.)

<sup>15</sup> “In Buddhism, since there is no separate soul, the persons concerned cleanse themselves of all past karma to such an extent that that which belongs to the Eternal may be seen in them and it is not theirs....” “Having cleansed one’s karma one merely exhibits the Eternal without being conscious of exhibiting the Eternal and without caring whether one exhibits it or not since it is the natural and right thing to do.” [Zen is Eternal Life](#), op. cit., pp. 64 & 65.

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<sup>16</sup>Carmen Acevedo Butcher, *The Cloud of Unknowing, With the Book of Privy Counsel* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 2009), p. 19.