

No-self in Zen Buddhism

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Is there an eternal soul, or an unchanging, substantial self? Is there such a thing in human beings, or in anything else, anywhere? Buddhism is concerned with uncovering the truth behind the experience of self. The Pali term for this is *anatta*, the Sanskrit is *anâtman*, and in Japanese it is rendered as *muga*: literally no-self, selfless, or without self.

Once Inside, No-self is Obvious

Speculating about no-self from the unquestioned standpoint of self may make it seem implausible, even bizarre, ridiculous, or downright self-contradictory. Viewed from the outside like this, as an idea or concept, perhaps that is inevitable. It's interesting how people, viewing no-self in this way, come to quite different conclusions about what this no-self supposedly is.

For example, some of us find it rather frightening or threatening. We feel it denies what is most precious in us. This attitude probably reveals more about the self's projections and insecurity than it reveals about no-self. Others consider it quite cold and sterile; if there's no self, they think, then there's no life, or at least no meaning to life. Such views result, as we will see, from misunderstanding what self and no-self actually are.

Whole books have been written about no-self from philosophical, psychological, linguistic and other points of view. But right now let's get directly inside no-self. Then we can clearly know it. To the extent that we directly enter into it, it becomes obvious. It's really nothing strange or mysterious at all; it only seems so when we keep ourselves apart from it.

We can waste a lifetime trying to see it from without. From the standpoint of self, we really can't even begin, for we immediately get stuck: If there's no self, who's talking now? Who's listening? Who realizes no-self? These questions may sound interesting; indeed, we could speculate about them endlessly. But we can only come to a conclusive answer through the actual realization of no-self. Then it becomes self-evident; there's nothing more obvious in the world. So let's stop beating around the bush and instead directly enter this truth.

The Seesaw of Samsara

Do you remember riding up and down on a seesaw when you were a kid? The exhilarating feeling of going up high, then coming back down with a bump! This is one simple way of depicting what the experience of self is all about: constantly riding the seesaw of *samsara*, going up and down between extremes.

But let's begin with one concrete example. As kids we couldn't wait for the school

year to end so that we could get out from under all our boring homework and other obligations to enjoy summer vacation. And how many days did it take before we find, with all that free time, there's nothing to do - we're bored.

And this is not just a problem with kids. Boredom, tediousness, or ennui is one extreme; the other extreme would perhaps be over-excitement, stress, or anxiety. In our ordinary life we're constantly going back and forth between these two: Experiencing a lot of anxiety or stress, we naturally, almost instinctively, seek to escape. We want to get away from it all. Maybe we're not really sick, but we call in sick. We may even have the luxury of spending some days resting up. From the state of extreme stress and anxiety where things are "too much," we seek the opposite. And for a time we really enjoy that. We turn off the alarm clock, sleep as long as we want. But what happens after a couple of days? The "too much" becomes "not enough." It starts to become boring. And so we start to seek for something to do, for diversion.

Our little seesaw actually includes everything: happiness-sadness, love-hate, birth-death, self-other, and so on. Up and down on the seesaw of *samsara*, with its endless instability and *dis-ease*. When will we realize that self cannot come fully to rest at any point on the seesaw? We're so busy riding up and down that we fail to realize the inherent instability of the whole self-complex.

But what about finding a balance? Remember how we used to stand atop the middle of the seesaw and put one foot on one side and one foot on the other side and remain balanced? That's the "comfort zone" the self seeks to maintain. Not too much stress or anxiety; but we don't want to be bored either.

So we seek a fulfilling and satisfying lifestyle, maybe a pleasant job with a good boss who really likes us, and coworkers who respect us and cooperate. And we should always get the interesting work and be appreciated by everyone. Maybe this creates stress for others, but...

As a matter of fact, as long as there is self, that self does need balance. This should not be ignored or denied. The point, however, is that the self can never find true balance because the seesaw it's balanced on is inherently unstable. If we look under our feet, it doesn't take long to realize that the anxious urge to be in the middle is itself part of the instability. It is itself a symptom of a deeper *dis-ease*. The so-called "middle" is itself unstable. How long can we maintain it before someone or something comes along and knocks us off balance - or we ourselves become disenchanted with it? Self is very erratic, vacillating, fickle and capricious, isn't it?

Realizing the Root

A genuine spiritual quest can begin once we realize this underlying *dis-ease* of the seesawing self, the instability and restlessness inherent in the whole self-complex. I don't think this is limited to Buddhism; this realization can be found in any genuine religion, in anyone seriously walking a spiritual path. Otherwise there would be no need for a religious or spiritual path in the first place.

A religious path can open up once we actually know from inside - in our very bones - the fundamental *dis-ease* of existence. If we're still beguiled by the charms and diversions of the seesaw, then in a sense we're not yet ready for a spiritual or religious path.

Don't take my word for it - or anyone else's. **See yourself:** The matrix of existence is inherently unstable. The entire complex, not just the "bad" or the "boring." "If only I had a better boss, then I'd be happy" - I think we can all see through that. Your boss may be a big problem. But he is not the ultimate problem. Once again, the entire matrix of self-existence is inherently unstable. Self cannot come to rest in it, or anything else.

Deep down, if we're honest with ourselves, we vaguely recognize this. But we don't know what to do about it. So we take ourselves, and others, for rides, often creating more *dis-ease*.

It's amazing how self deludes itself. Rationally this doesn't even make sense: We certainly can deceive another person - but how can we possibly deceive ourselves? How can self both deceive and be deceived at the same time? Makes no sense at all. Except for one thing: We do it everyday, don't we? Says a lot about what "self" really is.

Is there another way to be? Ordinarily we are so wrapped up with the bumps and grinds of the seesaw that we don't even consider such a possibility. As with Gotama Buddha, so with us: Clearly realizing the root of the *dis-ease*, a genuine religious or spiritual path can open up. Then we are no longer beguiled by the ups and downs on the way.

Once again, it is helpful if self first learns to become relatively balanced. Preliminary devotional and meditative practices can be seen in this way. The danger here is the tendency to get attached to the balancing act and stuck in its relative calmness; this is not no-self.

To break through the limits of simile, and self: Finally, with one leap the whole dizzying *dis-ease* dissolves as the seesawing complex is gone for good. There is no other way. As we shall see, this is precisely what Buddhism, and no-self, are all about.

The Dynamics of *Dis-ease*

Seems Gotama Buddha knew a lot about seesaws too. The first noble truth of Buddhism is that all things, all existing conditions, are *dukkha*, in a state of *dis-ease*. When we're suffering or in a state that we don't want to be in, or when we don't have what we want, then this truth is fairly obvious. It's immediately felt. But the first noble truth is not just speaking about that. Nor is it asserting that "everything is suffering," as it is often mistranslated. No! On the seesaw there is much happiness; no denying it.

But look into the bottom of that happiness and you will see it contains the seeds of its own destruction. Desiring and clinging to our happiness, we plant the seeds of discontent, both for ourselves and for others. Seesawing happiness is not the problem - or the solution. The real problem is the whole complex of clinging self-attachment that inevitably comes with it.

Either we cling to happiness and thus destroy it in the process, or we become anxious about losing it - and thus lose it. Happiness starts slipping from our hands the very moment that we grasp it. Self cannot come to rest on the seesaw: not at this end, not at that end, not in the middle. Please consider this truth deeply; it is the springboard to no-self

Being Bored

So far, so good. Nothing mysterious or esoteric. But let's make it even more concrete and unmistakable by seeing into the specific experience of boredom. What, after all, is boredom? What is the actual experience of boredom?

Boredom is only possible if there is self. Unless self expects or anticipates things to be a certain way, boredom is impossible. Boredom is one way the instability of self breaks out on the surface of consciousness. Boredom is only possible when we have projected that things should be a certain way, and they are not. Maybe we're not even fully conscious of it, but we have projected an expectation, an idea of what things should be like. I expect this movie to be a certain way, but it's not: Boring. I expect this person to be a certain way, but he does not meet my expectations: Boring. I came to a lecture on Zen Buddhism, but what a waste of time: Boring.

There is no such a thing as boredom. Do you realize how radical this is? Without the delusion of self, boredom is impossible. (And if you're not yet convinced, at least consider it a good excuse for giving a boring lecture like this!)

There is no such a thing as boredom, there is nothing boring, nor is there any self to be bored. The experience of boredom is a self-delusion based on the delusion-of-self. An illusion is created then lived out, causing suffering.

What about zazen? Sitting there doing nothing - what could be more boring than that? Again, viewed from the outside, zazen appears to be self doing something - or nothing. Such misconceptions are unavoidable. Authentic zazen, however, is nothing of the sort. Zazen can only be boring if self enters into it. Nothing can ever be boring - but zazen is perhaps the most extreme proof of this. In genuine zazen the whole universe is coming to form at every moment, completely fresh. At every moment, the whole world is being born anew. How can that ever be boring? It can't. Give yourself up fully to zazen or whatever religious practice you do and find this out.

On the seesaw, boredom is impossible to alleviate. Off the seesaw, boredom itself is impossible. And this is not just true of boredom. The same is true for anxiety and

for all the other *dis-eased*, ego-tainted emotions that self is entangled in.

Ego-tainted Emotions

This does not mean that no-self feels nothing. On the contrary, the feeling is pure, untainted by self. That's why there is no boredom; boredom is an ego-tainted emotion. Nor is there anxiety; that's also an ego-tainted emotion. Without the delusion of self, there can be no self-defilement, as *The Heart Sutra*, *The Diamond Sutra*, and so many other Buddhist texts reveal.

The amazing thing is that to some extent we already know this. Although we may have never thought it through, intuitively we know the difference between pure feeling and ego-tainted emotion. Look and see: Is there anyone here who has ever been in love?

Love is perhaps the most wonderful human experience between people. It's so wonderful we don't even have to speak. Look in the eyes of your loved one and you're not looking in the eyes of another. The problem is we can still be the same jerk with everyone else. It may be really good between the two of us, but it doesn't work the same way with everyone and everything. Very simply: No-self is being that way with all. Because the root-delusion of self is gone.

We know the wondrous experience of love. We also know exactly what happens when self rears its ugly head. Love turns into the hell of jealousy, possessiveness, fighting, and so on. At its worst, we end up destroying the person or thing that we love. "She's mine!" "It's mine!" "*My little precious!*" We don't need to be hobbits - or poor Gollum - to know the dangers.

Love can be wondrous indeed; but as long as the delusion of self persists, love provides at most a temporary lull, a partial transcendence of the self-complex. The amazing thing is that love can happen at any time because there is no self to begin with; self is not real.

However, that delusive matrix can be very stubborn! Merely understanding this does not put an end to it. Anyone who has actually struggled with this knows there is no greater "opponent" than self. **Thus it's essential to give oneself fully to a religious path and actually follow it to the very end.** Otherwise we're just whistling in the wind - dreaming on the seesaw as we continue to cause suffering to self and other.

Once again, there's nothing wrong with pure love; it's the most wondrous experience. What is the problem? The matrix of self-clinging.

And we all already know this, to some extent. Nothing mysterious here. Buddhism has been making it clear for the past 2,500 years.

As it Arises

Let's briefly return to the experience of boredom. There is no such a thing as boredom. But what if we actually experience boredom? Rather than trying to run away from it or becoming engulfed in it, let it be our teacher at that moment. See into the self-delusion that breeds boredom. Then the experience of boredom can be most interesting.

But the only way to see into the boredom or other ego-tainted emotion is to do this **the very moment it arises**. What do we normally do, though? We normally only experience it after it has already arisen in self-entanglement, when it has already taken on form as an emotion or a thought that self has. And then what do we do? Justify it, rationalize it, and then it all makes perfect sense, doesn't it? We find an explanation, a reason, someone or something to blame for our boredom, anxiety, frustration, and so on.

See it the moment it arises, then there's no being enslaved by it. We actually think we create our thoughts, but it doesn't take a psychoanalyst to show us that there's a lot more going on. Seeing clearly the thought or emotion **as it arises** is essential here. This takes some patience and practice, but it is entirely possible.

Otherwise we're stuck in an endless cycle of trying to see into the source of something that has already taken on a form of its own. From one end of the seesaw we just keep seeing others and other conditions arise and fall at the opposite end of the seesaw; we cannot see the entire dynamic at work - we fail to see that self also is rising and falling.

Actually see the source of the thought or emotion arising, then it can just as easily dissolve. Or work with it, respond to it, if necessary. A recurring thought or emotion may be showing that something needs to be done. For example, maybe we need to talk to our boss, tell him that something is wrong. Maybe we need to work harder. Maybe we must quit the job. **Seeing it as it arises doesn't mean that we can't do anything about it.** No, a response may be necessary - but a response from the source itself. Not from our own self-centered standpoint, which only causes more problems and entanglements.

The Sickness of No-self

Being free of self, we still feel. We don't feel self-conflicted, though. The total depth of human feeling is there, but without self-entanglement. Far from being cold or unemotional, no one cares more than a Buddha does! There's no greater warmth than being without self. So much for the mistaken notion, mentioned in the beginning, that no-self is somehow cold and sterile. Could it be, rather, **self** that creates the cold hostility in the world?

Being without self is the source of genuine human warmth, whether toward a child, a parent, a friend, a loved one, a stranger, or an enemy. But Buddhas don't cling; there's the difference. They don't strangle what they love - or "hate."

The Vimalakirti Sutra reminds us how parents feel when their child falls ill. They

themselves are ill with their child's sickness, and they feel better when the child feels better. Does anyone not know what the sutra is saying? The parent is not well until their dear child recovers. That's a kind of love.

The sutra then explains that a Bodhisattva or a Buddha loves all beings as if they were his own children; when they are ill, so is he. When they recover, so does he. And what is the cause of this marvelous "sickness"? Great compassion. In other words, love. See how this differs completely from the sickness, the *dis-ease*, of self?

A Buddha shares in the suffering of others. He'll jump right onto our seesaw and ride with us, through thick and thin. Not just to suffer with us, but to show us that at bottom we are free of suffering. Because we are, at bottom, free of self. Sometimes a loaf of bread, or therapy, is needed. But the most helpful thing, whatever we do, is to **be without self with others**. That's being helpful in the Buddhist sense. It may not even be necessary to speak.

Sometimes all that is needed is simply to be with another person, for example someone who is dying, allowing them to see that it's okay, they can let go. Often when people are dying, the truth of no-self comes naturally. Though it's a shame to wait until the end of life, isn't it? And some people, even at the end of life, have difficulty letting go.

Pure Practice

Letting go of the whole, delusive matrix is a delicate matter. We may trip over our own feet in the process. Practice must be pure and thoroughgoing. There's a wonderful story that illustrates this from the Chinese master Lin-chi, known as Rinzai in Japanese, the father of Rinzai Zen.

When regional governor Wang met master Lin-chi in front of the monk's hall, he asked the master if the monks here at his monastery read the sutras. Of course they do, but the master said no, they don't. Then do they learn how to do zazen? No, they don't do that either. "If," continued the governor, "they neither read the sutras nor learn zazen, what in the world are they doing?"

They are all being made into Buddhas and patriarchs!

There's nothing more valuable than carving real Buddhas and creating authentic patriarchs - realizing the pure gold of our selfless nature. In this sense, even sutra study and zazen **as self-practices** are already beside the point. This was the precious point Lin-chi was trying to impress on the governor.

However, governor Wang responded:

Gold dust is precious, but in the eye it blinds.

A wonderful Chinese expression. Gold dust is valuable. But we must take great

care so that not even a speck of it gets in our eyes. We must be careful not to turn no-self into something, anything. Thus governor Wang's trenchant reply.

Many an encounter with Lin-chi ends: The master hit the monk, or the nun, or the master gave a shout. This dialogue is one of the very few where Lin-chi, in a sense, admits defeat. His final response to governor Wang:

And I thought you were just an ordinary fellow!

Practice must be pure and thoroughgoing. Do not turn practice or experiences into something. Practice doesn't need to be painful; don't fall into martyr-like states. Nor does practice need to be pleasant; don't fall into blissful states either.

Such experiences are not what Buddhism is about. In a very radical way, Buddhism is not about **having experiences** at all. Don't misunderstand me: Buddhism emphasizes the importance of actual experience as opposed to simply reading, speculating, or even understanding it.

But Buddhism is not interested in having experiences. Why? Because experience is something that the self has. However wondrous or momentarily freeing, all such experiences can still be corrupted by the seesawing self. Thus Buddhism is not concerned even with experiencing the extremes of the seesaw. And, if you really want to know, **Buddhism is not even interested in turning self into Buddha.**

Just Leap Off

As radical as it sounds, it's true: Real practice is the actual dissolving of the whole matrix, just leaping off the seesaw altogether. In a profound sense, practice begins, and ends, here. Thus, we spend the rest of our lives working it out in every aspect - which includes freely jumping on the seesaw of others in need.

But how do we actually leap off the seesaw? Only no-self can leap off. Might as well ask how we fall asleep every night or wake up every morning. As a matter of fact, at a retreat in the Netherlands there was a woman who complained that when she sat zazen she kept falling asleep. She wanted to know how to practice. So I asked her: How do you fall asleep?

We all do it every night. How? Self can't fall asleep. Try it: Fall asleep right now. Why can't you? Thus we speak of **falling** asleep. Sleep is entered precisely by letting self go. Anything mysterious here? Yes, and no!

Practically speaking, there are things you can do to stay alert during sustained zazen: check your posture, at break time drink tea, splash cold water on your face, get your heart pumping by running a bit or walking briskly, and so on. As practice deepens and strengthens, this problem should naturally disappear. If it doesn't, see a medical doctor; there could be something that needs attention.

Previous lectures on the basics and principles of Zen practice have already detailed

the practical matters of zazen, entering samadhi, and maintaining it in daily life, so I won't repeat here.

Just to give the essentials: Pour yourself patiently, moment by moment, into practice. No expectations, no hopes or desires, no fears. Don't be swayed by insights and experiences. They can inspire and show us a genuine direction. But they can also misguide and confuse. And live a proper, wholesome life.

Then, when the fruit is ripe, it naturally drops from the tree. The moment of its dropping is not foreordained, or forced. And when it drops, what happens? It simply becomes nourishment for others.

Can't Get There From Here

Let me end with an anecdote from about 180 years ago called The Arkansas Traveler.

A city slicker in his fancy horse and carriage - let's say he's a smart Philadelphia lawyer - has gotten lost. Spotting a boy playing the fiddle on the front porch of a ramshackle shack, the man says:

Hey boy, come here! Listen, I'm in a hurry, I'm on my way to Little Rock. Can you tell me how to get there as quickly as possible?

The boy puts his small hand to his bony chin, slowly looks up the road, then looks down the road, then looks the man in the eye and says:

Sir, you can't get there from here.

Well, the man thinks, there has to be some way to get there from here. Maybe I have to go back a little bit, but there must be some way. The boy said I can't. Okay, he's an idiot, the lawyer thinks, so let me make it a little easier for him. Pointing at the road stretching out in front of them, he asks:

Can you at least tell me where this road goes to?

The boy gives the road a good, hard look and replies:

It don't go nowhere. Every mornin' I get up and it's just settin' there.

Finally the man has had enough:

You must be the dumbest kid I've ever met!

The kid replies:

Maybe so sir. But I ain't lost.

We all are that smart Philly lawyer, trying to "get there" - preferably as quickly, cheaply, and easily as possible. All the while remaining with butts steadfastly glued to our seesaws. Therefore making it quite **impossible**.

And at bottom we all are that boy: Knowing nothing, having nothing, being nothing. A most direct and pure path:

You can't get here from there.

Self cannot realize no-self. Just let all of it go in constant, sustained practice. All of it: The good, the bad, and the ugly; illusion **and** enlightenment. Then it will be confirmed, just as it was for Lin-chi when he finally hit solid ground and exclaimed: "There's nothing to it!"

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