

Buddhism and the Theory of No-Self

There are various groups of Buddhists in recent times who subscribe to a belief in the "theory of no-self." They believe that the Buddha taught that the self is unreal, and therefore does not exist. They advocate practices by which we can get rid of the ego, and therefore stop wanting to get anything, stop grasping, and thus stop desire. The following description illustrates their general way of thinking:

"...This [belief in no-self] then helps you to comprehend stress and to chip away at attachment and clinging - the residual sense of self-identification - that cause it, until ultimately all traces of self-identification are gone and all that's left is limitless freedom."

This belief is a fundamental misunderstanding of Buddhist teaching, the roots of which can be traced back a long time, to even before the birth of Buddhism.

The earliest religious writings of the ancient Indian Aryan race are known as the Vedas. These are sacred spiritual writings laying out the basic beliefs and ceremonies of their religion. These were followed by the Upanishads, which were written in ancient India between the 8th and 4th centuries BC. They form the basic teachings of Hinduism, and set out the prime Vedic doctrines like self-realization, yoga and meditation, karma and reincarnation. Brahmins were the priests who taught that there is an individual self (atman) and a Universal self (Atman or Brahman). They acted as intermediaries between the gods and human beings. Yogic practices, especially meditative techniques (dhyana, or jhaana), enabled the practitioner (yogin) to achieve the highest levels of consciousness, where the individual self becomes one with the Universal Self. This state bestowed ultimate knowledge on the practitioner, along with a higher state of consciousness that included ultimate awareness, extrasensory perception, and yogic intuition.

The Upanishadic tradition denied change and impermanence as being a kind of illusion, and asserted that we have a permanent "self" (atman) that is eternal and unchanging. We can think of this as similar to the concept of a soul in modern spiritual religions like Christianity. The belief was that the self or mental essence continued on after death, and entered a new physical form, where it could continue development on its path to oneness with the Universal Self (Atman or Brahma). This was seen as salvation, and a state of bliss.

As a reaction against these metaphysical theories, several schools of materialistic thinkers developed. They maintained that sense perception is the only valid source of knowledge, and that therefore only the physical world is real. Consciousness is unreal because we cannot perceive it with the senses. The physical world works according to physical laws, and completely determines the pattern of functions. Morality and spiritual things have no meaning, and cannot influence the physical world. So we are at death completely cut off and annihilated. There is no life after death, and no soul or permanent self.

When Gautama Buddha explained his position on these traditional teachings, he said that his teaching took a middle course between these two views, neither believing in a permanent, eternal self, nor in the materialistic denials of the opposing schools of thought. According to this opposing theory, the self was the body. To others, to deny the existence of a permanent self was to deny that the body was substantial. In succeeding years, this denial of the substantiality of the body gave rise to a theory of non-substantiality (anatman),

which became part of the views of many Buddhist schools that came into existence after the Buddha.

There are, however, many misunderstandings as to what was really being denied by the Buddha, and what the middle way between having a self and not having a self can possibly be in practice. In order to clarify the teachings, I want to look at the theories of self and of no-self using Master Dogen's four views.

From the first viewpoint, I will look at the image of "self" that we all hold. This image, I will call the "constructed self", since it is a construction that we form from our memories of the past, and imaginings of the future. I was once a child, I then became a young man, and am now 60 years old. I was born in Yorkshire and lived in Japan for 25 years. These facts from my past give me an image of myself that spans the decades of my life. It is this image of myself, formed from my real experiences in the past, that I believe makes up who I am. I usually hold this image of myself, which I have constructed for myself, to be real and existing. When I believe that my image of myself is real, I am believing in a mental construction, since the "me" of my childhood is no longer present, and the "me" of next year has yet to materialise.

From the second viewpoint, my body is me. I am my body. I experience myself physically. My body is always here with me, and I can notice the passing of time from the changes in my physical appearance. My body carries marks of past experiences to remind me that I once fell from a wall when I was a boy, and that I have been eating too much in recent months, etc. When I die, there will be no more me, because my body will be no more. I define who I am when I look at myself in the mirror, when I feel my own body with its own unique form. This is certainly me!

From the third viewpoint, when I do something, in the present moment of acting, there is no time in which to reflect on the mental image of myself that I hold. In that sense, I no longer see my "constructed self"; it disappears. At the same time, there is no time in which I can reflect on my physical senses to grasp my physical self. This is my experience when I act. I lose the reflection of myself as a physical shape, and act in an unbounded space that has no edges. So from this third viewpoint, we can say that both constructed self and physical self disappear. There is no self separate from the circumstances in which I am acting. This is the "acting self". And we cannot grasp our acting self while we are acting.

From the fourth viewpoint, although the constructed self, and the physical self disappear in action, I am real. There is a real person acting in a real place. If I hit my hand, it hurts. If I trip, I fall. This is my real self, the me that really exists at this moment.

If we try to grasp our real self mentally, if we look for the self, we see a "constructed self." Whenever we look for this self, we find it. If we try to sense our real self physically, we sense the body, the "physical self." Whenever we use our senses, we find the physical self. But when we act, we experience oneness between self and circumstances. And in this oneness, we experience neither constructed self (permanent self) nor physical self (no permanent self) as separate. But to deny the existence of a real self at this very moment is a misunderstanding of what the Buddha taught. Master Kodo Sawaki said: "Grasp the self, the ultimate in ourselves, the true ego - whatever you call it. It is absolutely necessary to seize it, for as it is, it is the nature of Buddha."

Many Buddhist practitioners of later ages knew that the Buddha had denied that there was an eternal or permanent self/soul, and so believed that the self does not really exist. And this wrong view has continued until today.

In his *Mulamadhyamakakarika*, Nagarjuna wrote a chapter entitled "Examination of Self". In it, he steers a course between belief in a permanent self (constructed self) and no-self.

"The buddhas taught that beyond the views
that see self and no-self,

There is something ineffable that is
neither self nor no-self."

(Ch. 18, Verse 6)

This "something ineffable" that Nagarjuna points to here is our real existing self; our "existential self."

Nagarjuna points out that we cannot recognize ourselves in the moment of acting, when there is no time to watch ourselves acting, and thus it is not possible to grasp the existential self:

"It is not possible to recognize the state that is without me and without ego.
There is no observer to see the state that is without me and without ego."

(Ch. 18, Verse 3)

But he also denies the view that the self does not exist:

"If there is no self, how can anything be mine?"

(Ch. 18, Verse 2)

In the Uji (Time-Present) chapter of the *Shobogenzo*, Master Dogen describes the way that we construct our self at the moment of the present:

"This person I think of as myself is a "person" that I put together at one time-present. We can apply this thinking to everything in the Universe. This kind of intellectual analysis is the starting point of Buddhist practice."

Master Dogen also strongly affirms the existence of the existential self. One of the frequently used terms in the *Shobogenzo* is "jijuyozammai", which is translated as "receiving and using the self". This, for Master Dogen, describes the state of the self that is a balance between passive (receiving) and active (using). This state is the existential self, the self that is not constructed. He gives many examples to demonstrate that all Buddhist masters believe in the reality of the existential self. Here is one:

Master Gensa Shibi joined the order of Master Seppo Gison and practiced zazen regularly throughout the day in the time he was there. One day he leaves the temple in order to travel round the surrounding districts. But as he leaves, he stubs his toe on a stone. Bleeding, and in great pain, he is suddenly forced to reflect on his understanding: *"I understood that this body is not real, but then why am I in such great pain?"* He returns to Master Seppo who asks him: *"What's the matter?"* Master Gensa replies, *"In the end I cannot be satisfied by other people's experience."* Master Seppo thought this expression was exactly right, and said: *"Although we all know this inside ourselves, it is rare to come across someone who can express the fact!"*

In this short story from the "One Bright Pearl" chapter of the Shobogenzo, Master Gensa realizes that, although he has learned many theories about what is real and what is not real, his own real experience is the only thing he can rely on in the end. And his bleeding toe tells him that he is real, and the pain is real.

Here is another koan story that Master Dogen wrote in his Shinji Shobogenzo:

Master Sekitei asked his servant monk: *Where are you going?*

The monk said: *I would like to go to the Zazen Hall and finish my lunch.*

The Master said: *How could I not know that you will go to the Zazen Hall and finish your lunch!*

The monk said: *What else should I have said?*

The Master said: *I am asking you about your original self.*

The monk said: *If you ask me about my original self, I am just going to eat lunch.*

The Master said: *It is no mistake that you are my assistant.*

Since Master Sekitei's question was intended in the philosophical sense, he was disappointed that the monk answered in such a concrete way. When the Master pressed for a more philosophical answer the monk insisted that his concrete behavior was his original self. He refused to be drawn into an abstract discussion; he considered the question on the basis of reality.

The Master affirmed the monk's understanding, saying that he was pleased that the monk was his personal assistant.

Here is another koan story:

Temple Master Ryosui from the Jushu district became a disciple of Master Mayoku. When Master Mayoku, saw the Temple Master coming, he picked up a rake and started to rake up the grass. The Temple Master approached Master Mayoku as he was raking.

Master Mayoku purposely avoided looking at the Temple Master, and returned immediately to his own room and closed the door.

On the next day, the Temple Master went to the Master's room again. Master Mayoku closed the door again. In the end, the Temple Master knocked on the door.

Master Mayoku asked: *Who is there?*

The Temple Master said: *Ryosui.*

When he called his own name, he suddenly attained the truth. Then he said: *My Master did not deceive me. If I, Ryosui, hadn't come to prostrate in front of you, I would have wasted my whole life being largely deceived by sutras and commentaries.*

On returning to his own temple, he preached in the Lecture Hall: *What you monks know, I, Ryosui, know in general terms. What I, Ryosui, know is unknown to you.*

In the end he stopped preaching, and said goodbye to his disciples.

Master Jushu Ryosui's title in this story is "*Zasu*," which usually suggests a master in a sect that focuses on theoretical Buddhism (the "*sutras and commentaries*" referred to later) and which does not advocate the practice of Zazen. Master Ryosui went to the temple of Master Mayoku Hotetsu to receive his teachings, but strangely Master Mayoku seemed to be avoiding him. Master Mayoku even returned to his room and closed the door behind him.

Then Ryosui knocked on the door and the Master naturally called out, "*Who is it?*" Ryosui said his name; but at that moment he was able to realize the person without a name - his real self. The Master's question "*Who?*" refers to this unnamable person. After his realization Ryosui returned to his own temple, disbanded his disciples and disappeared. Master Ryosui recognized that the Buddhist truth is very simple, it is reality itself. There is nothing to explain - and so he decided to give no more lectures.

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