

**“WHEREVER I AM, THERE I’M NOT”**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**  
**Fox Valley Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**2600 E. Philip Ln.**  
**P.O. Box 1791**  
**Appleton, WI 54912-1791**  
**(920) 731-0849**  
**Website: [www.fvuuf.org](http://www.fvuuf.org)**

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Call to Gather from *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare

Be cheerful, sir:  
Our revels now are ended:  
These our actors,  
As I foretold you were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision  
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rock behind:  
We are such stuff  
As dreams are made of, and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep.<sup>1</sup>

Reading from Thich Nhat Hanh

If you are a poet, you will see clearly that there is a cloud floating in this sheet of paper. Without a cloud there will be no water; without water the trees cannot grow; and without trees, you cannot make paper. So the cloud is in here. The existence of this page is dependent on the existence of a cloud. Paper and cloud are so close. Let us think of other things, like sunshine. Sunshine is very important because the forest cannot grow without sunshine, and we as humans cannot grow without sunshine. So the logger needs sunshine in order to cut the tree, and the tree needs sunshine in this sheet of paper. And if you look more deeply, with the eyes of a *bodhisattva*, with the eyes of those who are awake, you see not only the cloud and the sunshine in it, but that everything is here, the wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat, the logger’s father—everything is in this sheet of paper...

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, “The Tempest,” Act IV Scene 1: <http://www.enotes.com/tempest-text/38430#wearesuch>.

This paper is empty of an independent self. Empty, in this sense, means that the paper is full of everything, the entire cosmos. The presence of this tiny sheet of paper proves the presence of the whole cosmos.<sup>2</sup>

### Sermon

The Buddha taught that the individual self ultimately is an illusion. He called this concept *anatta*, which is often translated as “No-Self.”

I’ve struggled with the meaning of No-Self for a long time. In some ways it makes sense to me—for example, I know that my body is a constantly changing, complex collection of cells. Old cells die, new cells come to be in a daily, never-ending dance—a dance that preceded my birth and will continue even after I die (in the guise of decomposition). On a bio-chemical level, I’m not at all the same person today I was seven or twenty years ago, or even yesterday for that matter.

I also understand that my soul will not always exist. Since I don’t really believe in an Afterlife where my soul goes on and on in some other place or some other state, I understand that my soul is finite. But does this therefore mean that my soul doesn’t exist right now? This is the logic of the Buddha’s No-Self doctrine. For me, it’s a bit of a leap to go from recognizing the changing nature and the impermanence of the self to the conclusion that it therefore doesn’t exist at all. This is one of my problems with the idea of No-Self.

I have other problems with this idea, too. For example, I embrace much of the contemporary talk about the importance of individuation and self-realization and feeling adequate pride in oneself. Stripping away the self as the Buddha taught seems so contrary to all of this.

Here’s another difficulty I have with the concept of No-Self: it’s frankly really hard to wrap my brain around it. I mean, it seems like a pretty basic assumption in my life that I exist, that this isn’t just all a dream or a fantasy. A Buddhist might respond to this observation by saying something like, “Well, you do exist at a superficial level; but at a deeper level, you don’t exist.” What? This kind of paradox makes my head hurt! I suspect I’m not alone in this: one Buddhist teacher warns, “If you try to understand (this idea) intellectually, your head will probably explode.”<sup>3</sup> This is partly why I chickened out on this sermon when I was scheduled to do it last fall. I’m really hoping today not to have any exploding heads in here—especially my own!

In our reading today, Thich Nhat Hanh suggests a better way to come at the concept of No-Self than with our intellectual guns blazing: instead, he says, approach it with the eyes of the poet. The poet can look at the sheet of paper and see the cloud floating in the sheet, and the logger, and the wheat that became the bread for the logger to eat, and the logger’s father and mother. The poet can see the whole of the incredible web of connection that lies within the single piece of paper. With the same eyes, the poet can see the same thing in the human self. If we can approach the doctrine of No-Self with the eyes of the poet, it can actually make some sense. At the least it can be a way to keep our heads from exploding.

So here’s how I make sense (poetically speaking anyway) of the concept of No-Self. See if you can follow me in this. Paradoxically, I start with the statement that there

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<sup>2</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh in Jack Kornfield, *A Path With Heart* (New York: Bantam, 1993), p. 201.

<sup>3</sup> Achaan Chan in Kornfield, p. 200.

is a self (with a small “s”). My self does exist. But it changes (constantly). And it is impermanent. Even more importantly, my self does not exist independently of the web of life, anymore than a piece of paper exists independently of the tree and the logger and the sunshine. My self only exists in connection with everyone and everything else in the web of life. As Jonathan Kabat-Zinn writes, “You are only you in relationship to all other forces and events in this world, including your parents, your childhood, your thoughts and feelings, outside events, time, and so on.”<sup>4</sup>

My self, then, is not a whole and indivisible entity. None of our selves are. In this sense, the self is not real—at least as a whole and indivisible entity. Thinking that my self is permanent and independent is a delusion, an arrogance. It denies the interconnection that is the real truth of existence.

So the reality of interconnection lies at the heart of the No-Self concept. More than anything else, No-Self is a beautiful and poetic and radical statement of our interconnectedness. It’s a statement that fits perfectly with our Unitarian Universalist affirmation that we are part of the great interdependent web of all existence.

So we are nothing (at least by ourselves separate from others). But that’s not the whole story. We are also everything<sup>5</sup>—just as the piece of paper Thich Nhat Hanh writes about is both nothing and full of everything in the cosmos. Here’s where heads might start exploding!

Maybe a picture of this paradox will help explain it. There is a helpful metaphor in the ancient Hindu texts known as the Vedas. The metaphor was picked up and further explored later in a Buddhist text called the “Avatamsaka Sutra.” The metaphor is the net of Indra, the Vedic sky deity associated with rain, thunder and lightning. Indra’s net hangs above his palace, stretching out endlessly in all directions. The net is loaded with an infinite number of beautiful jewels. Each jewel is stunning on its own. And on the polished surface of each jewel, you can see the reflection of all the other jewels in the net. So you can see the whole not just in looking at the entire net, but also in looking at any one individual jewel. No single jewel exists independent of the entirety of the others. In the same way, every single entity in the universe—including us—reflects and reveals the whole universe.<sup>6</sup>

So there is no self independent of everything else. But also in every small self lies the whole of existence. We are empty and we are full. This is the great paradox. Wherever you go, there you are. And there you aren’t. And there the whole universe is. Each of these statements is true. Together, they express this great paradox.

As difficult as this idea is to wrap my brain around, I actually find that it’s familiar: the same paradox can be found at the heart of Ralph Waldo Emerson’s writings. Although we often think of Emerson as a devout and rugged individualist, he also believed that if we dig down far enough and find the essence of our soul within us, we will find not a uniqueness but a oneness.

Emerson sometimes called this oneness at the center of each of us the Oversoul. Another name he used for it is God. The word I like to use is the divine. It is that which is universal and eternal. It is at the heart of everything in the cosmos. The human soul,

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<sup>4</sup> Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Wherever You Go There You Are* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), pp. 238-239.

<sup>5</sup> Kornfield, p. 51, 321.

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.whidbey.com/parrot/moyers.htm>; <http://www.hinduismtoday.com/archives/1995/6/1995-6-06.shtml>; <http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node=Indra's%20Net>

he asserted, doesn't ultimately exist as an individual, unique entity; instead it's part of the overarching oneness that is the Oversoul. "Within us," he writes, "is the soul of the whole, the wise silence, the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal One."<sup>7</sup> The divine, then, is within each of us. It ultimately is who we are.

So what we have in Emerson is another manifestation of Indra's net. When you get to the center of each human soul, you will find every other soul, too. That idea behind Indra's net can be found in Emerson is no coincidence: Emerson and most of his other Transcendentalist colleagues drank deeply from the spiritual well of Hinduism and Buddhism. Indeed, there is a good chance Emerson was specifically familiar with the metaphor of Indra's net.

Okay, now we've waded through the doctrine of No-Self and explored its relative in the Transcendentalist wing of our own UU faith. Now it's time to ask several questions that may have occurred to many of you: So what? Who cares? And how does this matter? Well, like a lot of heavy-duty philosophical ideas in Buddhism, it can actually be incredibly and concretely helpful when we translate No-Self into our everyday life. Here are some ways it can help.

First of all, No-Self is a great reminder of the transitory nature of life—including most notably our own individual lives. It's tempting and easy to live in denial of the finite nature of our lives. Occasionally this may be a good thing, but generally I don't think such denial is very helpful. A Buddhist who includes awareness of No-Self in a meditation practice has a daily wake-up call that life is short. Since life is at least occasionally sweet, this daily wake-up call can help us notice and appreciate the sweetness. On the flip-side, No-Self also can give us a sense of perspective about the things that aren't so sweet in our daily lives: thankfully, those, too, are transitory.

No-Self also helpfully reminds us that all the things—the objects—in our lives are transitory, too. For crying out loud: if we don't even own our soul, then we certainly can't possess our home or our things or our land in any long-term sense. All of the things and all of the people and relationships in our lives are transitory. Again, living in denial of this reality is generally not a good thing.

The doctrine of No-Self also is beneficial because it's an important underpinning of the Buddhist practice of detachment. I have found detachment to be extraordinarily helpful in living my life. Detachment in the Buddhist sense doesn't mean apathy or indifference; it means understanding that our wills and our actions won't necessarily produce the ends we desire. Detachment is engagement without clinging and without expectations. The No-Self doctrine and its affirmation of our essential interconnectedness remind us that while we each have influence on the web, there's also a whole lot that lies well beyond our control. I find this sense to be helpful in practicing the art of detachment.

Humility is another thing No-Self helps with. If I don't really have a self that is distinct and indivisible—let alone permanent—well, there's a whole lot less reason to brag about "my" accomplishments! That's because "my" accomplishments really are not just mine; they're the result of the whole web and the Oversoul. As Jonathan Kabat-Zinn writes: "(This) means that you can stop taking yourself so damn seriously and get out from under the pressures of having the details of your personal life be central to the

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<sup>7</sup> *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), Reading #531.

operating of the universe.”<sup>8</sup> I’d say this is a pretty helpful realization—especially for those among us who are plagued with grandiosity or what 12-Step programs call “terminal uniqueness.” No-Self totally and wonderfully deflates such self-centeredness.

No-Self also helps me take things less personally. I mean, it is hard to take things personally if you have an understanding that at a fundamental level you have no self.

Finally, the doctrine of No-Self can help lead the way to compassion. Understanding the interconnectedness of all “kindles the fires”<sup>9</sup> of our compassion. It reminds me that I am related to the destitute, struggling family at the homeless shelter—even if I’ve never met them. It reminds me I am related to the American soldiers in Iraq and to the insurgents and to the civilians dodging the bombs and the bullets. It reminds me I am related to the baby seals in Canada and the panda bears in China. It is easier to be compassionate toward those to whom I am related.

Assuming I’ve adequately answered the “So what?” question, it’s time to move on to the “How to?” question. How can we take this helpful concept of No-Self and make it a reality in our lives?

But first, let’s talk for a minute about how NOT to make No-Self a helpful reality in our lives. These ways include self-denial and self-torture. One of the great insights of the Buddha is that life-denying, ascetic practices like beating your body or crawling for miles on your knees are not really good paths to enlightenment and illumination. Instead—and here we’re going into the land of paradox again—it’s important to spend time learning about your self. It’s important to value yourself, in Kornfield’s words “to develop a healthy sense of self.”<sup>10</sup> It’s through mining deeply into your own self that you will truly comprehend your self’s finiteness and incompleteness. It’s way down deep where you will discover the Oversoul and the truth of interconnection. So you have to know yourself before you can discover that there is no independent self. The Buddhist teacher Jack Engler puts it this way: “You must be somebody before you can be nobody.”<sup>11</sup>

There are other ways besides “Know Thyself” which can help us understand and utilize the concept of “No-Self.” One such way is spiritual practice. For Buddhists, the regular practice of meditation is an essential part of taking the hard-to-comprehend idea of No-Self and making it a real, everyday part of their lives. To understand and act on No-Self takes practice—the practice of meditation. Meditation takes the Buddhist out of the intellectual and philosophical realm into the realm of doing.

I believe there are lots of other spiritual practices that can help us get in touch with No-Self and the fact of our essential interconnectedness. One such practice is generosity. Generosity is a concrete act of letting go something that you could erroneously think is your possession—your time, a physical object, your energy and skills, your love, or your money, for example. Generosity helps us hold onto these things lightly, recognizing that none of them really are ultimately ours. Every time we give something away, we also acknowledge our interdependence.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kabat-Zinn, p. 240.

<sup>9</sup> Robert Thurman, *Infinite Life: Awakening to the Bliss Within* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1004), p. 57-58.

<sup>10</sup> Kornfield, p. 198.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 217.

Like any spiritual practice, generosity also requires repetition and practice to get good at it. This is part of why I look at the Fellowship's requests for your gifts of energy, time and money as an opportunity for spiritual practice rather than a burden. Teaching in our Religious Education program, volunteering in our office, serving on a committee, putting money in the offering plate or transferring money to the Fellowship each month by electronic funds transfer: all of these are powerful ways to practice generosity and remind ourselves of the truth of No-Self and interconnectedness.

I want to close by sharing the picture I have of No-Self. It is not Indra's Net, but rather a cluster of statues of the Buddha I saw in Sri Lanka. These gigantic statues emerge spectacularly from cliffs in the ancient city of Polonnarua. They are eight or nine hundred years old. I imagine they're similar in scale and beauty to the Afghan statues of the Buddha that the Taliban so callously destroyed.

The statues at Polonnarua depict the Buddha standing, in meditation, and, most exquisitely, lying down at the moment of his death and final nirvana. The Catholic contemplative Thomas Merton aptly described these statues as "almost alive." He wrote in his *Asian Journals* that he sat and stared at "the silence of their extraordinary faces, the great smiles, huge, and yet subtle, filled with every possibility, questioning nothing, rejecting nothing. The great smiles of peace, not of emotional resignation but a peace that has seen through every question without trying to discredit anyone or anything—without refutation."<sup>13</sup>

Like Merton, I sat transfixed by these statues for a very long time. There were many pilgrims studying and honoring the statues. All of us were quiet, absorbed in the statue's beauty and the insights they revealed. Here, movingly depicted in a stunning way, are pictures of one who understands that when we find ourselves, what we find is not an individual self. What we find is everyone and everything in the great web of life. What we find is interconnectedness. For a shining moment, the insight of this enlightened one traveled from the rock and the loving hands that sculpted it so long ago into the depths of my soul.

All I need to do is remember that moment from time to time. All I need to do is live as if I believe the insight from Polonnarua.

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<sup>13</sup> Kornfield, p. 38.