A person is lying in a dark tent, looking out through a circular opening at a bright blue sky. The person's head and hand are silhouetted against the light. The tent's interior is dark, while the sky outside is a vibrant blue with some white clouds.

**what is this thing  
called self?**

**John Suler**

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## What is This Thing Called Self?

A presentation given at the 1998 conference on Psychotherapy, Spirituality, and the Evolution of Mind in Santa Monica

As a university professor, I've done quite a bit of public speaking, but it still amazes me how each new speaking engagement still has the potential to stir up some... anxiety. In fact, to make matters worse, last week when I did a dry run of this presentation at home, my dog Griffin got up in the middle of my talk and threw up all over the rug.

I'm hoping that doesn't happen here today. But even if Griffin hadn't disrupted me like that, I'm sure I'd still be experiencing some anxiety. Which reminds me of a quote from Steve Allen:

*The mind starts working the moment you are born, and doesn't stop until you stand up to make a speech.*



Actually, that quote is quite relevant to what I'll be talking about in a few minutes. But first, I'm wondering how many people here are clinicians, psychotherapists? (almost the whole audience raises hands). How many are meditators? (again, almost everyone). If, say ten years ago, we had asked a group of clinicians whether they were meditators, we probably see very few hands raised. I think it's great that eastern traditions have had such an influence on western psychology. I think THAT marks an evolutionary change in human mind.

So, to start off, I like us to try a very short, one-minute, guided meditation. Please get comfortable in your chair and close your eyes. Use whatever technique you prefer to clear your mind a bit... Just relaxing your awareness... Just being aware as you listen to my voice... I'm going to say a word, and in response to that word, let an image or sensation pop into your awareness... Any image or sensation... The word is SELF... notice what comes to your awareness when you hear the word SELF.

As you open your eyes, try to hold onto that experience... I like meditation techniques that use spontaneous images because they allow the unconscious to speak to us, not unlike dreams. Now I don't know what experience the word SELF created in any of you.

But whatever that experience was for you, please keep it in mind as I go through my talk today. Maybe write it down and later during the break talk to other people about what they experienced. Even if what you saw or felt seemed vague, trivial, or irrelevant. Even if you think you saw nothing at all. That's OK. There's probably something important there. Compare what you experienced to the ideas that I mention about This Thing Called Self. Use your experience to understand the self.

When I first spoke to Dr. Schuman about this conference, I suggested the possibility that I would talk about eastern and western concepts of the self. It seemed like a good idea at the moment. Then afterwards, when I thought about it, I quickly slipped into a state of panic. Isn't the "self" one of the central conceptual dilemmas of eastern and western philosophy? And here I am offering to tackle this encyclopedic task in 45 minutes. If the march of intellectual thinkers from the Greeks to the deconstructionists hadn't yet arrived at an answer to this Thing Called Self, what chance did I stand?

Then I calmed down a bit when I realized that I didn't have to cling to my compulsive scholarly self. I didn't have to be perfectly comprehensive. I could just mention a few ideas about this Thing Called Self. Maybe tell a few jokes or anecdotes... maybe a few stories. That helped calm me down too – especially the part about telling stories. I especially like Zen and Taoist stories. In fact, nowadays most of my work in east/west psychology is devoted to my web site, which I affectionately call *Zen Stories to Tell Your Neighbors*. What's interesting about the stories is how visitors to the site react to them.

So allow me to start off with one of those stories.

The Emperor was really into Buddhism. He read everything he could get his hands on, he talked with philosophers and monks about it, he even tried writing his own discourses and Haiku. One day he heard that a famous Zen master was visiting the city. So, naturally, being the Emperor, he requested that the Master come to visit him at the Palace. He offered the Master a fine meal and afterwards performed a truly elegant tea ceremony. The whole time, the master is pretty much silent and peaceful, as you might expect from a Zen master – but the Emperor is biting his tongue. He wants to pick this guy's brains about Zen. So finally, as they are drinking their tea, he breaks the silence. "Master, according to Zen, what is the Self?"

The Master briefly looks up from his tea and says, "I do not know." Then he quietly continues sipping.

### **Consulting the self**

That's it! End of story! Now I wouldn't be surprised if the Emperor was a bit, shall we say, peeved. After all, this is a famous Zen master, a truly enlightened being. And he doesn't know what the self is? Come on! Now maybe he really wasn't all that enlightened. Maybe he really didn't know. At least he was being honest. Or maybe he did know, but he was doing the "Oh Humble" bit. Maybe that was the lesson for the Emperor – humility in the face of the Eternal Self. Or maybe his terse reply was intended to mean that no one

can know what the self is, because the self is fundamentally unknowable, a mystery. It can't be spoken about or intellectualized. That's very Zen. Or, if we think about what he actually said – "I do not know" – he actually IS telling us that he does know something. He knows "NOT." Aha! Maybe that's it. The path to the self is through "NOT" – the process of negating, of stripping away, of undoing attachments. That's also very Zen.

So, it looks like we have several possibilities about what the Master might have meant. Of course, being a typically tight-lipped, enigmatic Zen master, he doesn't tell the Emperor which possibility is the right one. He leaves it up to the Emperor. So that's another possibility, isn't it? "What is the self?" is a question you have to answer Your Self. It's purely a subjective knowing. Maybe it's one's asking the question One's Self that reveals the answer that is One's Self.

I don't know about you, but now my head is spinning. At this point, as I was preparing for this talk, I took an aspirin and convinced myself that I just needed to do a little research. If the question and answer about This Thing Called Self was up to me – as, I guess, the Zen master was suggesting – I should try to investigate it personally, experientially.

So first I tried sitting in front of a mirror and meditated on myself. Have you ever tried that? It got very weird, in a convoluted narcissistic sort of way. After about 5 minutes, I couldn't tell who was staring at whom, whether my self was sitting inside or outside the mirror. It was very disorienting.

### **Consulting the dog**

So I gave up on that, and as I was recovering, my dog Griffin – a border terrier – walked into the room. I suddenly remembered an old Zen koan. Does a dog have a Buddha nature? Which I guess is similar to asking if a dog has a self. "Griffin!" I called to him. He came and sat down in front of me.

"Griffin, do you have a self?" He looked interested, and stared right back at me.

"Griffin!" I said a bit more earnestly, "Do you have a self?" Now he was really staring at me intently, and I knew I was onto something.

"Griffin!!" I said, with excitement clearly showing in my voice, "Show me your self!" He barked, licked his lips, and ran to his bowl in the kitchen. Self, lunch, it's all the same to Griffin. So I followed him into the kitchen and poured him a bowl of kibble.



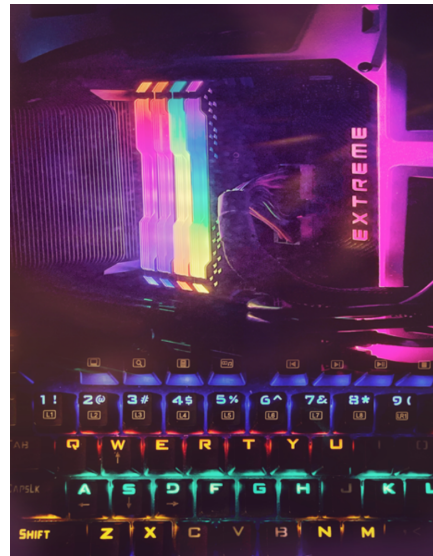


## Consulting the internet

Well, two strikeouts so far. The mirror, the dog. What's next? When in doubt, fall back on what you know. I do research in cyberpsychology. What is this thing called Self? Why not look it up on the internet, the information superhighway? I mean, you can find everything on the internet, right? Some people even think that the internet marks the next stage in the evolution of the human mind and self.

I fired up the computer, logged on, and immediately aimed my browser at the Alta Vista search engine. I entered in the keyword "Self" and hit the search button. In a matter of seconds, after furiously scanning all of cyberspace (well, actually maybe about 40%, but that's still a big territory), the engine came back with a reply... 2.5 million hits! Looks like the self is everywhere! Maybe that meant something. Or maybe I just needed to narrow my search. So I entered in the keywords "True Self." This time I got 11,000 hits. Better. I was on the right track. How about "Essence of Self?"

The search engine hummed away and returned 245 hits. Now I was definitely zooming in on the target. I could tell this was the right path because a lot of the hits included web sites devoted to philosophy, spirituality, and poetry – although it also turned up the American Legion Magazine and a web page called "Understanding Diarrhea in Travelers." No, really! In fact, maybe there was a connection here. After all, when asked what is the Buddha, a great Zen master once replied, "Dried turd." On the other hand, maybe those anomalous search engine results meant that the hunt for the self will lead to glitches and dead ends. But I wasn't going to let that stop me. Finally, I entered in the keywords "The True and Essential Self" and clicked the search button. Once again Alta Vista went out into the vast Netherland of global electronified knowledge and came back with... zero hits. Nothing! The void! The True and Essential Self was nowhere to be found, well at least not in cyberspace.



## Back to basics

So the internet quest was only marginally productive. To prepare this talk, it looked like I needed to go back to my original idea and try to summarize what I knew in philosophy and psychology about the self. What are the different ways the self has been conceptualized? How do those concepts determine how we think about psychotherapy and the evolution of the self? I'm not going to pretend that my summary of these concepts is comprehensive or definitive. What I'll say today is new and good, but what's good is not new and what's new is not necessarily good. These categories that I'll mention are just a few ideas about the self. And they're probably not even distinct concepts. They overlap

and intertwine with each other. They're different facets of that Thing Called Self. No matter how many ways you slice a pie, it's still a pie.

While thinking about these concepts, we should keep in mind Zen's warning about the limits of talking and intellectualizing about the nature of self and mind. Conceptualizing means drawing a distinction between this and that – a process that probably isn't the best path in understanding the self. Taoism states that once we take that first step in dividing the one into two, invariably more and more discriminations follow, resulting in 10000 things. In the world of intellectualizations, there are categories within categories, distinctions heaped upon distinctions, but ultimately they are all aspects of the same thing – whatever that thing is.

*A philosopher studied Zen intensely for many years. When he finally attained enlightenment, he took all his books out into the yard and burned them.*

Or here's another Zen story that's one of my favorites.

*A renowned Zen master said that his greatest teaching was this: Buddha is your own mind. So impressed by how profound this idea was, one monk decided to leave the monastery and retreat to the wilderness to meditate on this insight. There he spent 20 years as a hermit probing the great teaching. One day he met another monk who was traveling through the forest. Quickly the hermit monk learned that the traveler also had studied under the same Zen master. "Please, tell me what you know of the master's greatest teaching," he asked the traveler. The traveler's eyes lit up, "Ah, the master has been very clear about this. He says that his greatest teaching is this: Buddha is NOT your own mind."*

At any point we should be prepared to let go of even our most cherished ideas and concepts. We might even reverse those ideas, and reverse them again. This is probably also a wise thing to keep in mind when doing psychotherapy. Do it without memory or desire, as Bion suggested. Perhaps the evolution of mind and the transformation of the self require a breaking free of clinging and this-or-that thinking.

### **Self-as-Structure**

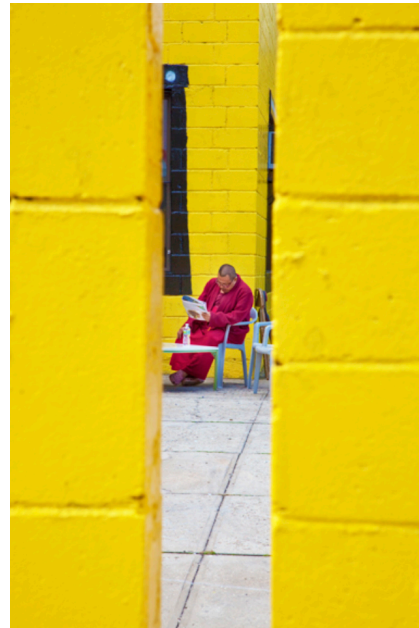
Having said that, let me mention the first concept of self – the self as a structure. When I was a kid, I had a Tinker Toy set – at least I think that's what it was called. It was a box filled with round wooden rods of various lengths and colors, and circular wooden wheels with holes along the edges and sides. You'd insert the rods into the wheels to make complex, interconnected structures of all different shapes, sizes, and colors. You could construct them into buildings and towers, or into abstract shapes that looked like molecules.

That's how I think of this concept of the self as a structure. The self is a complex constellation of interconnected memories, attitudes, ideas, representations – whatever

terms you'd like to use. It's a nuts-and-bolts model of the self that's been very popular model in western psychology, no doubt inspired by concepts of atomic and molecular structure in classical physics. We can think of the goal of therapy, as well as the evolution of the self, as the development of a more sturdy, elaborate, flexible, balanced, cohesive, and fully integrated constellation. The healthy self means its structure has UNITY.

One of the complications of this model of the self-as-structure is where to place emotion, affect. We could think of it as just another module embedded within the structure. On the other hand, some theorists like to talk about the "affective coloring" of the structure, as if emotion isn't really a unit within the structure, but rather an attribute or tone that is infused into the structure. It's the various colors of the Tinker Toy pieces, and not the structure of it. Then the goal of therapy and evolution is the positive valence of these affective qualities. Simply put: to feel good, to be happy. As the Dalai Lama said, the purpose of life is JOY.

The distinction between particles and qualities as the fundamental component of things actually is an age-old debate in physics dating back to the Greeks. Is reality composed of units (like atoms, electrons, neutrinos), or blends of qualities (like "charm" and "strangeness")? Maybe it's both. Maybe the self is composed of both structure and a melding of qualities. In an old Saturday Night Live simulated commercial, Gilda Radner and Dan Akroide are debating about this mysterious new spray can product. Is it a floor wax? Is it a desert topping? Surprise, Chevy Chase, the commentator says, it's both a floor wax AND a desert topping! Even though it may seem like a contradiction, maybe the self is both a structure and a blend of qualities. Sort of like how light acts both like a wave and particles.



Another complication in this concept of self-as-structure is that structures are really PROCESSES at a slow rate of change. Sure the Tinker Toy creation looks stable and fixed, but over time it will sag a bit, some of the connections will loosen and open, or someone might come along and rearrange, add to, or break it. Structures change. Trees and mountains change. People change. We never step in the same river twice. The eternal ebb and flow of things is the Tao. Structure and Form sit on the surface of formless process. Maybe the goal of therapy and evolution is to accept and ride along with these changes rather than fight them. To try not to cling to the illusion of structure.

A Taoist story tells of an old man who accidentally fell into the river rapids leading to a high and dangerous waterfall. Onlookers feared for his life. Miraculously, he came out alive and unharmed downstream at the bottom of the falls. People asked him how he

managed to survive. "I didn't struggle," he said. "I accommodated myself to the water and just went with its flow."

So the idea of a self-as-structure is complicated by the fact that these structures are really processes at a slow rate of change. But let me emphasize that there ARE structures and even under the best of circumstances – as in really effective psychotherapy – these structures (in the time frame of ordinary human consciousness) still change slowly. Deep psychotherapy takes time to remedy a pathological psyche. Excellent long-term psychotherapists possess spiritual qualities that enable such long change to occur – the qualities of respect, patience, and compassion.

### **The Self as Awareness**

Now let's take a look at another way to think about the self – how about the self as awareness? This is the idea that the true self is not a thing or object or structure, but the process of observing, pure awareness, consciousness, mindfulness. It's a phenomenon that is highly developed in eastern traditions, especially in meditation practices.



An interesting turn of events in evolution is that we humans seem to have developed a unique type of awareness: self-awareness. We can become conscious of ourselves. We have the ability to be self-reflective. The psychotherapist joins forces with that observing center of their clients' consciousness in order to help them explore their intrapsychic worlds. Psychotherapy is the broadening of the scope of self-awareness. It helps us observe what was previously unobservable. It makes the unconscious conscious. Because we can become aware of many, if not all aspects of the self-as-structure, some theorists believe that pure awareness lies beyond that structure. It transcends the nuts and bolts of the Tinker Toy self.

In this model of the self as an observing phenomenon, the goal of therapy and evolution is to become more fully and clearly aware – to brush away the dusty concepts, beliefs, and anxieties that obscure and distort our vision in order to really see. It's like waking up. Western psychology tends to emphasize interpersonal awareness – consciousness of others and ourselves. Awareness of oneself is a good thing, but we can carry it too far or in the wrong direction. It's like staring at yourself in the mirror for too long. Solipsism is a lonely dead end. You lose perspective. There's also awareness of others. Awareness of one's self as a relationship to others is what psychotherapy is all about, isn't it? And maybe the evolution of mind as well.



I like those eastern meditative traditions that point awareness in directions other than at that self within our skins or it's interpersonal field. What about things? Is mind there too?

After ten years of apprenticeship, a student achieved the rank of Zen teacher. One rainy day, he went to visit a famous Zen master in another city. When he entered the house, the master greeted him with a question, "Did you leave your wooden clogs and umbrella on the porch?" "Yes, master," he replied. "Tell me," the master said, "Did you place your umbrella to the left of your shoes, or to the right?" The visitor didn't know the answer, which made him realize that his awareness was not fully developed. So he stayed with the master and studied Zen another ten years.

Wouldn't it be interesting to try that on our psychotherapy patients? "Tell me, Mrs. Smith, on which hook did you hang your coat in the waiting room" or "What color is the bathroom down the hall?" It would be a tiny assessment of their mindfulness. It might reveal a lot about them.

One problem with conceptualizing the self as the process of "observing" is that it gives a distant, detached, almost alienated feeling to the self. It steps back and observes. It's not connected. I prefer to think of that observing or awareness as close up, intimate, even infused into the thing of which the self is aware. In meditation, we can become one with our breath, a mantra, a candle, or whatever it is that we have focused our awareness. That awareness or mindfulness of other people might be called empathy or compassion. It's a merging of selves.

The development of awareness and the observing self seems to be very different than the development of the self-as-structure. It doesn't involve the building up of a Tinker Toy construction, but maybe the process of taking it apart. Activating pure awareness may be a process of negation, stripping away, letting go, unclinging. It's a process of returning. The Tao Te Ching states this very clearly. Touching the Tao is the act of returning.

There's an interesting exercise that I first read about in Yalom's book on existential psychotherapy. It's called the "disidentification exercise." You draw up a list of, say, ten things that you are. Things that are important about you, about your self. "I am a wife... I am a mother... I am a professional... I am intelligent... I am ambitious...." etc. Then, one by one, you cross off each item on the list and try to imagine what you would be without that aspect of self. When all items are crossed off, what's left? Who or what are you when all aspects of your self-as-structure have been chiseled away. You return to pure awareness, pure mind. It's a self without content. Some would say it's "no-self." Maybe we arrive at the true self by passing through loss, grief, mourning, and, paradoxically, through the loss of self itself.

I remember reading a story once about a family in which one of the children, from birth, was severely impaired mentally. I don't remember the medical details of what was wrong with the child. But his existence consisted only of lying in bed with his eyes open. He seemed aware, but he couldn't talk or move at all. Just lying in bed with his eyes open.

Obviously he required constant and total care. He did grow physically, but his mental condition never changed.

When the oldest sister grew up and started dating, she would bring her boyfriends to meet the family – which, of course, included meeting her brother. The boyfriends typically acted very anxious and awkward, or just plain freaked out when they saw the brother. But one day, the young woman brought home a new boyfriend who reacted very differently. When he walked into the bedroom and saw the brother on the bed, he sat down next to him. He put his hand on the brother's hand, and just sat there quietly with him. The boyfriend seemed perfectly comfortable just being there with the brother. The sister fell in love with that man and later married him, in part because he understood how her brother was not a monster or some aberration in human development. He was a person, real, unique, essentially human as we all are, and loved by his family. The boyfriend understood something important about the self.

Revealing the self as awareness is a process of stripping away and returning. Some mystics sometimes take this idea to the extreme. They say: If I lose my arms and legs, awareness still exists. If I lose my arms, legs, and body, awareness still exists. If I lose my arms, legs, body, and this very thought and all thinking, awareness still exists... The self as awareness, mind, consciousness, may transcend the physical and mental self. And when we think of the self in this way, as awareness that transcends the individual, something good happens.

A few months ago I was watching the movie "The Spirit of St. Louis." There's a great scene where Jimmy Stewart, who plays the role of Charles Lindbergh, is talking with a minister. Looking a bit skeptical, but also uneasy, he asks the minister what would happen if his plane started to spin out of control and was going down. Would God intervene? Would God help him? The minister says, "I don't know if God would or would not intervene. But I do know this. God will know that the plane is going down."

The idea of God as witness is a powerful one. It's the observing self, the self as pure awareness that transcends the individual. It's BEING WITH. Quakers believe that if someone is suffering, no matter where they are, you can always "hold them in the light." You can always be aware of their suffering and hold them in the light of awareness and being with. As a psychotherapist, never underestimate the power of simply listening, being aware, being empathic, affirming the client's suffering. It's the healing empathy and compassion of the self that transcends the boundaries of individual selves.



## The Self as Transcendent

This idea of the self as transcendent has come up several times already, so how about we make that the third way to conceptualize the self. We have self as structure, self as awareness, and now self as transcendent. We can think of the self as transcendent in several ways. If we think of the self-as-structure, the transcendent self is the whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It's the superordinate glue or container that holds it all together, the fundamental organizing principle, the source, the ground that unifies all facets of selfhood. Evolution and psychotherapy is the actualizing of that greater holistic, transcendent self. We also can think of the transcendent self as the pure awareness or mindfulness that lies beyond the self-as-structure. Maybe that *\*is\** the superordinate glue that holds it all together.



One metaphor I always loved is that the self is like a wave on the ocean. It appears as a separate and distinct entity, but it is a form that arises from, passes through, and eventually returns to the larger, formless volume beneath it. Evolution of mind and psychotherapy involves the realization of that connection to the source. The word "religion" comes from the Latin "re-ligare" which means, "to tie back." There's an old Japanese saying,

*At times I go about pitying myself, when all the while I am being carried by great winds across the sky.*

To resist the realization that one comes from and returns to the transcendent self is a type of sickness. It's a splitting and fragmenting of awareness. Woody Allen said:

*I don't mind dying... as long as I don't have to be there when it happens.*

## Self as a Manifestation

With this idea of self-as-transcendent comes an interesting spin-off concept: the self as a manifestation. The individual self is a representation, a manifestation of the larger, transcendent self. The Bible tells us that God created human's in God's image. Zen masters ask us, "What did your face look like before your parents were born?" We can see the universe in a grain of sand. The transcendent self infuses or shines through the

individual self. Maybe the manifestation is a complete representation. And maybe sometimes only certain facets of the transcendent self shine through each individual self.

As I mentioned earlier, over the past several years I've been doing a lot of research and writing on cyberspace. It's fascinating to think about the internet as a representation of the collective human mind and as a place for the individual to manifest him or herself. Cyberspace is an infinitely complex, interconnected constellation of information and ideas that shows no limits in how much it is expanding. Will it be a complete manifestation of the collective human mind, or partial? Is it a new stage in the evolution of human consciousness? And how does the individual person choose to manifest him or herself in that collective cyberspace consciousness. In the new multimedia communities on the internet, you can present yourself in any way you want, with any identity or personae you want. You can even choose any visual appearance you want, a picture or icon to represent yourself – whether it's Bugs Bunny, the Mona Lisa, the moon, a triangle, anything you wish. That self-icon is called an "avatar," which is the Hindu term for the appearance Gods choose to represent themselves on earth. Perhaps in cyberspace, we see a playing out of the divine process of striving for a transcendent self while also finding new ways to manifest the individual self.

### **Self as Doing (willing/being)**

OK, we've sliced up the self pie four ways so far. Let's add in just one more. What about the idea of the self as doing, as motivation, the initiation of action. It's the force or energy that moves us along our path in life. Sounds good, but a problem comes up when we start to think and behave as if the self is an internal doer, as an entity or center inside us that makes us go. Where inside the individual can we locate this initiator of action? Is there a tiny homunculus that sits at a control panel inside our head? Psychology can't find it.

Perhaps, instead, the self *\*is\** the doing of something. There are actions and thoughts without hidden internal actors or thinkers. In fact, the evolution of the mind and psychotherapy may be the ability to set aside that illusion of an internal self-entity that makes us do, think, and feel. The Zen master Dogen said that to study Zen is to study the self, to study the self is to forget the self.



Two monks were talking. One of them bragged about how his teacher was so spiritually developed that he could float in the air while meditating. The other monk said, "My teacher also is very spiritual. When he's hungry, he eats. When he's tired, he sleeps."



The development of the self-as-doing is simply to do – to act fluidly and spontaneously according to the moment, to act fluidly and spontaneously according to one's basic nature. When I asked my dog Griffin to show me his true self – and he licked his lips and ran to his bowl – he did indeed answer my question. Psychotherapy and the evolution of mind involve freeing the doing-self from the superfluous baggage of the self-conscious, over-controlling homunculus. They involve freeing the doing self from the anxieties, worries, doubts, and second-guessing that stands over us with a club and blocks spontaneity. "The mind starts working the moment you are born, and doesn't stop until you stand up to make a speech." Here's one of my favorite Zen stories.

A distraught man approached the Zen master. "Please, Master, I feel lost, desperate. I don't know who I am. Please, show me my true self!" But the teacher just looked away without responding. The man began to plead, but still the master gave no reply. Finally giving up in frustration, the man turned to leave. At that moment the master called out to him by name, "Hey Joe!" "Yes!" the man said as he spun back around. "There it is!" exclaimed the master.

I've been taking piano lessons for about two years now. It's one of the hardest things I've ever attempted. My hands are too tight. I tend to try too hard and am overly self-conscious. But sometimes there are moments – jazz musicians call it "flow" – when I'm just playing, fluidly and easily. It's the doing piano self. It's wonderful. Unfortunately, in the middle of that flow, a tiny voice will speak out from the back of my head. "Hey! You're playing piano!" And that ruins it. The same sort of thing happens in meditation. The tiny voice says, "Hey! This is bare awareness!" In the evolution of the self-as-doing, that tiny voice fades away.

I don't want to overemphasize the idea of "doing" too much. In our western culture, we are overly ambitious about doing and achieving. Maybe a better term is "WILLING."

When I was an undergraduate, I took a course on religion with Thomas Altizer. He was very prominent in the 1960s for his philosophy of Christian Atheism, and once was almost lynched by the audience at the Merv Griffin show because talked about God being dead. He was quite charismatic and eccentric – with fiery eyes and greying hair that always looked windswept, as if he just stepped in from a metaphysical windstorm. One afternoon I went to his office to discuss my term paper. The discussion turned to Nietzsche, who was one of Altizer's favorite philosophers. He talked so fervently about Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" that even a hardcore skeptic would waver. Being a bit oppositional by nature, I decided to challenge Altizer a little bit. Drawing on my background as a psychology major, I mentioned the fact that Nietzsche became schizophrenic during the last ten years of his life – which was the result of untreated syphilis. How can you reconcile Nietzsche's philosophy with this fact? How do you take into consideration the fact that he was completely mad?

Altizer looked me straight in the eye and said, "Maybe he willed it."

Now what was that supposed to mean? Isn't that like willing what Dan Rather says on the news, or that there's a tornado in the next county, or the fact that you were born? How do you will such things? Maybe the self as doing is, at a deeper level, the self as the force or energy of willing. The willing of oneself. The willing of life and being. It's a choosing and affirming of what you are – even if what you are or do isn't always pleasant. While driving home from work one day, I heard on NPR an interesting poem, which is from a published collection all of which are written in the voice of Barbie – you know, the doll. Here's Barbie's poem (loosely quoted):

Buddha says that existence is emptiness and there is no self.  
I agree, but I wonder why a man with such a fat belly  
would pose for a picture with no shirt on.

Barbie understands the nature of self. She's also a bit vain. But that's Barbie. That's what Barbie does and is. It's her nature. One's self is one's Buddha nature, and to question whether that nature is good or bad may not be a relevant question.

Two monks were washing their bowls in the river when they noticed a scorpion that was drowning. One monk immediately scooped it up in his hand and set it upon the bank. In the process he was stung. He went back to washing his bowl and again the scorpion fell in. The monk saved the scorpion once again and was again stung. The other monk asked him, "Friend, why do you continue to save the scorpion when you know its nature is to sting?"

"Because," the monk replied, "to save it is my nature."

One internet visitor who read this story on my web site emailed me and said, "Geesh. I guess the monk's nature didn't include a lot of intelligence. Why didn't he use his bowl to scoop the scorpion up!"

## **Conclusion (?)**

So that's it. Those are some ways to conceptualize the self – as structure, awareness, transcendence, manifestation, doing, being. The concept of self is a bit like the concept of energy. We talk about it all the time, we see the effects of it all around us, we try to manipulate it. But no one is exactly sure what it is. It's the bedrock that we can't pass through or completely wrap our minds around. One day at the university I met one of my colleagues, a physicist, in the bathroom. "So, George," I said while we stood at the urinals, "What exactly is energy.?" He thought about it for just a few seconds, and said with a wry expression, "The ability to do work." And then he zipped up and walked out.

George is a bit of a pragmatist. But maybe there's something to that. What is energy? The ability to do work. What is the self? When tired, sleep. When hungry, eat. Freud might say "To work and to love." So maybe the answer to the riddle of the self is pretty simple. It's our concepts that get complex, like a big Tower of Babel where we're all speaking in

different tongues and can't fully understand each other. We need a Star Trek universal language translator of some kind. We need the tower to come tumbling down.

The concept of self is like the ultimate projective test. What it is is what we make it out to be. It's a reflection. It's like staring at yourself in the mirror. And the reflection will vary across people, cultures, and history.

What is it about us humans that draws us to this projective test, that makes us search for the self, that makes us do silly things like probe mirrors, dogs, and computers to find it. The only True Self you'll find at the top of a mountain is the True Self you bring there. But that's OK. We humans ask questions. We search. It's our nature. It's what we need to do to finally realize that we don't need to do it.



In that short meditation we did at the beginning of this talk, your experience – what you saw or felt – was a finger pointing. Maybe it pointed at something that I talked about. Maybe it pointed somewhere else. Wherever it pointed, that direction was more true for you than anything I've said today.

So let's go full circle, back to that cup of tea offered by the Emperor... What is this thing called self?

**I do not know.**