

5. A Vote for Kindness: No Unchanging Self

Does this path have a heart?

– Carlos Castaneda

Following a path is a common metaphor for maturing spiritually. The further we go, the wiser we become. The wiser we become, the more contentment we enjoy. The destination is enlightened well-being. The image of the path is one of a traveler on a journey to a goal. It assumes there is somewhere to go and someone to go there.

Carlos Castaneda's teacher, Don Juan, critiqued this metaphor. He said contentment is found in how we travel, not in where the travel ends, because the path has no particular destination.

The Buddha agreed: how we experience each moment is more important than an imagined endpoint. But his analysis is more basic and perplexing: the problem is not the path but the assumption that we have an independent self-essence that walks it. The Buddha said that ultimately we have no separate self.

This teaching is captured in a single word, *anattā*. In Pāli, the language of the earliest records of the Buddha's talks, "attā" means "self," and "an-" is a negation. So *anattā* literally means "no self" or "non-self." In English, this sounds like nonsense: if I have no self, then who or what is the self who experiences this self I don't have?

Richard Gombrich is a Buddhist scholar who suggests that the confusion arises out of an incomplete translation.¹² *Attā* (or *atman* in Sanskrit) means more than the English word "self"

¹² Richard Gombrich, *What the Buddha Thought* (Sheffield, United Kingdom and Bristol, Connecticut: Equinox, 2013), 8–11.

implies. It refers to an eternal, unchanging, higher self that is our true, absolute essence. The goal of the spiritual path for the Buddha's contemporaries was finding this unchanging attā.

What the Buddha meant was that we have no *unchanging* self (no attā). To the Buddha's contemporaries, "no unchanging attā" would have been redundant. But in modern English, this nuance is lost unless we insert "unchanging" into the phrase so it reads "no unchanging self."

The Buddha didn't say that we don't have a self. In the relative world we obviously do. My self is typing these words. Your self is reading them. But in absolute reality, we have no enduring self.

After we've put so much time and energy into a spiritual path, the news that we have no lasting self-essence may be discouraging. The Buddha responded by recommending kindness, compassion, joy, and equanimity. Carlos Castaneda did too when he shifted the focus from where the path leads to how it feels to walk it: does this path have heart? Kindness is all that matters. Kindness is not a destination; it's a way of walking.

Self As Time

Still, the distinction between having a relative self and not having an absolute self can be confusing. One way to sort this out is to consider self in the context of time. As a reified concept, self can be said to exist or not. But when placed in the context of time, self is relatively real but not absolutely real.

Here is a thought experiment to illustrate:

Imagine that you lived for a hundred years. Every day a few pictures were taken of you. The pictures were made into a movie that shows a hundred years of body changes in twenty minutes.

To make this more interesting, imagine the film starts several decades before your birth and continues a century beyond your death. What would we see?

At first there would be nothing – or perhaps your mother and father. Then your mother becomes pregnant. Her body swells rapidly, and out you come. During the next few film moments, that tiny body

does little but nurse, pee, poop, sleep, and gurgle. Nevertheless, as food flows through, it stretches, swells, and grows. Over the next several minutes of the movie, the body gets up, straightens out, fills out musculature, and grows hair. As the film goes on, the body matures sexually. Its frame, eyes, and skin become vibrant with youth and young adulthood. It comes into full stature.

Then the growth slows down. The hair thins a little. A few blemishes appear. The skin sags here and there.

A dozen minutes into the film, the shoulders slump. The eyes are clear but some of the body tone is gone. There is a little extra fat.

Then the body shrinks. The parts don't line up as smoothly – the symmetry is gone. The hair loses its color. The skin is uneven and blotchy. The frame becomes frail. The eyes turn watery.

Suddenly, the body is lying down with closed eyes and no sign of life. It's dead.

The film continues. We watch the skin dry out and shrivel. It wastes away. In a few film moments, there is little but bones. Over the next several minutes, the bones dry out, crumble, and blow away.

During the last long minutes of the movie, there is nothing on the screen. Even the bone dust is gone.

The film ends with a question stretched across the screen, "Do you exist?" The question fades into another, "What matters?"

How you answer the first question depends on the time period we are talking about. In some timeframes you obviously exist as an infant, a maturing young adult, a middle-aged person in the prime of life, a frail sage. The self looks different at different times. It feels differently, thinks differently, and views life differently. Still, it's clearly there.

Yet ultimately, the self doesn't exist. It has no essence. It has no core that goes on for eternity. The sense of self arises out of various conditions. Its nature is to fall apart.

If we are anything, we are like a sand castle on the beach. When the tide washes over, nothing essential is lost. Every grain of sand remains somewhere. But the configuration is gone. We have no permanent configuration apart from everything else. There is no eternal self-essence.

Weird

Intellectually we all know this. But it's hard to hold the thought that we arise out of nothing and that in not too many decades we'll be dust blowing in the wind or absorbed by the earth.

The reality of this first touched me when I was seven and then again as a teenager.

When I was seven years old, my mother told me where babies came from: the sexual act, eggs, sperm, the whole business. I had a normal seven-year-old response to this information: "Oh Gross!"

But later that night as I lay in bed gazing at the ceiling, I thought, "What if my mom and dad had not gone to the University of Michigan at the same time? They might never have met. I would not have been conceived. I would not exist." Nonexistence was pretty weird for a seven year old to think about.

"What if they had met but not fallen in love? What if they had not decided to get married? What if they had not been in the mood to start a baby on a particular summer day in August of 1947? What if a different one of the 50 million sperm had reached the egg first?"

I could think of millions of ways by which I would not have come into existence!

Maybe my parents would have had a different second child. They might have even given it my name! No one would miss me. No one would know anything about me. No one would even notice that I didn't exist because ... I didn't exist.

We may think we're part of a larger plan. But I saw no evidence of that. Life itself may be inevitable, but our particular organism is a mathematical improbability. Our individual existence is a fluke. That's what I thought. Pretty weird.

Flash forward eight years:

During my junior year in high school, something happened that I had never experienced: a guy in my circle of friends ceased to exist.

Larry was smart and thoughtful. One morning Paul told me Larry was dead – he'd been killed in a car crash.

Four days later an even stranger thing happened: we had our French midterm exam right on schedule. Larry used to sit up front on

the right side of the classroom. During the test I looked around and wanted to yell, "Has anyone noticed that Larry has vanished? Does his life make any difference?" I wanted to write across my test, "Laurence est mort! Laurence est mort!"

But I didn't. It had begun to sink in that when I die, 99.999 percent of the billions of people on Earth will not notice. Yes, a few will mourn my passing for a few months. But in the following days, they will probably eat breakfast, read books, go to movies, complain about politics, and go on with their lives. The sun will rise each morning, the birds will sing each spring, clouds will continue to float in the sky. Five or ten years after I die, the traces of my existence will dissolve into the larger flow of life as if I had never existed.

Kindness

I'm not trying to bum us out. But it's wise to have a sober perspective to reflect on what really matters in life.

Given the millions of billions of creatures on the planet, given the over 13.5 billion years this universe has been growing, given the incredible expanse of time and space, our individual lives are less than a single flash of a lightning bug on a summer's night in a field of billions of fireflies. Our existence is a statistical fluke that vanishes so quickly.

What difference do our lives make? Perhaps nothing matters.

But if there is anything that influences the arc of life toward the good, I think it is kindness: simple, ordinary, unpretentious kindness. Perhaps nothing is more important than being gentle, clear, and kind to ourselves and one another. This sends ripples of healing kindness into the world with everything we do.

So I agree with the Buddha and Carlos Castaneda. There are paths we can travel. And they all lead to our dissolution. But if the way there is suffused with heart, kindness, and friendliness, then it's okay.

I vote for kindness.

Does this path have a heart? If it does, the path is good; if it doesn't it is of no use. Both paths lead nowhere; but one has a heart, the other doesn't. One makes for a joyful journey; as long as you follow it, you are one with it. The other will make you curse your life. One makes you strong; the other weakens you.

– Carlos Castaneda,
The Teachings of Don Juan

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