



Deconstruction (self-portrait), Jose Escarcega

Deconstructing the Self

The answer to all your problems is to see who really has them.

Nisargadatta Maharaj

A CENTRAL TENET OF BUDDHISM and other non-dualistic philosophies is that a proper understanding of the true nature of the Self is essential to living a life that is liberated, meaningful, and compassionate.

A sincere, attentive examination of the Self shouldn't be simply a detached, intellectual exercise, however. Nor is it something that can be imparted through books or instruction from others, even psychologists or learned spiritual teachers. It can only be fully appreciated and understood through direct personal experience.

What exactly is this illusive 'Self' that has such power over us, and which seems to direct virtually our every thought and action?

Which aspects of the Self are harmless, and which only bring suffering to ourselves?

It might be useful to examine the subject from several different angles, which may also break down the common misconception of the Self as a single, monolithic entity.

We can identify at least five interrelated aspects of the Self, which we might term **Consciousness**, **Self-awareness**, **Identity**, **Personality**, and **Ego**. While a dictionary might consider all of these essentially as synonyms, there are subtle differences.

Consciousness is obviously a prerequisite to any formation of a Self, although it doesn't guarantee it: Rather conveniently, we assume that most other animals are conscious but don't possess self-awareness.

Self-awareness follows, when a young child discovers that it is separate from the image in the mirror, and by extension, everything in the world apart from itself.

Identity is a natural response to this sense of separation, as the child begins to construct a personal identity in order to protect itself from the perceived chaos, danger, and uncertainty of the world outside of itself.

Personality traits are in this way gradually acquired and become part of this evolving personal sense of identity, as any individual needs to feel different from others of its kind.

None of these aspects of the Self are in and of themselves harmful, and in fact all are probably essential in order to operate in the world and live a full, meaningful life.

Finally, however, there is **Ego**, and this is where, we might say, all the problems begin.

At its essence, Ego is simply the sense that one is a *unique individual who persists through time*. It's the idea that there exists at the very center of one's being an overarching, unchanging soul, actor, or witness—a sort of master controller psychologists sometimes refer to as the 'Executive I.'

All the aspects of the Self noted above are mere concepts, with no inherent consistency or continuity. Nowhere within them can any independent 'I' be found, no one thing that could be identified as 'me.' But no aspect of the Self is more illusory or intangible than the Ego, which we somehow imagine exists separate and superior to all the others.

Still, Ego is just another mental construct, a 'security blanket' we weave in our minds, finding the groundless, open state of being we experienced upon first encountering the world intolerable and unacceptable.

Once we grasp hold of this despotic 'I' for security, our life gets immensely more complicated: No longer living in the present moment, we begin to have regrets about 'the past' and concerns about 'the future,' imagining that our enduring 'I' will suffer the consequences or reap the rewards.

Self-absorbed and perpetually anxious, this self-referential 'I' also becomes the subject of ever more complex and deep-seated narratives about our lives, causing us to constantly compare ourselves to others or to who we think we 'should' be.

Buddhism teaches that all suffering arises out of this unending struggle to grasp hold of a non-existent 'self,' and that meditation offers a way to deconstruct this illusion. As such, it may be one of the most powerful, life changing things a person can do.

The Ego is, of course, a good thing, when properly understood and managed. In fact, having no Ego at all would be pathological. The object of meditation isn't to annihilate the Ego, but simply to put it in its place—to see through the illusion that the Ego is really *who you are*, and instead to witness it as just another kind of sensory experience.

The Self is not an entity, but a construction built out of thoughts and feelings, and just as thoughts and feelings are always changing, so too is the Self. (Buddhists call this first realization *anatta*, and the second *anicca*.)

What we call 'enlightenment' is just the recognition that the 'person' that appears to be having all these experiences is itself just another passing experience, without which, there is only 'no-Self,' a kind of spacious awareness, with nobody at the center of it.

We actually experience this 'no-Self' all the time—in between the mentations which give the Self a false sense of substantiality and continuity—but we ignore it, because it's too simple, and perhaps too frightening.

Once awakened from this illusion, we still go on playing the game of being a 'person,' of course, but with more ease and joy, and a greater sense of invulnerability to life's problems—knowing that ultimately, there is no one who really has them. ■