

Non-Self (*Anatma*) and Self (*Atma*)

The question was asked: How has your sense of identity been challenged by studying the Buddhist teaching of the two truths (relative truth and ultimate truth)?

This question about one's sense of identity deals with the basic, or most fundamental, question of existence: Who am I?

The Buddhist teaching of the two truths shows the relative reality of all that is not ultimate or absolute reality. In other words, there is no reality by the one Reality.

Let me use the example of "non-self", which is one of the three marks of existence. The Sanskrit word for "non-self" is *anatma* (in Pali, *anatta*). In examining the *self*, I have to conclude that there is not a self at all! What I term *self* (or ego) is "a reactive process and not a self", as Junpo Denis Kelly Roshi states in *The Heart of Zen* (p. 16). "My reactions [are] wholly conditioned and without a separate personal self" (p.17). Understanding relative truth shows me that the *self* is only a temporary process that is conditioned. A concept of *self* has arisen in my mind that has been shaped by biological, psychological, and spiritual conditioning in the stream of time. The self is only a process. (pp. 3-23.)

In contrast to my view of a relative *self*, there would have to be an ultimate Self that would in turn have to be deathless and timeless. This leads me to my second example – exploring this Self. I am further challenged by being led to a new understanding of the ultimate or absolute Self in Buddhism.

William Stoddart in his book, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism*, gives a famous incident when the Buddha met a group of people searching for a young woman (the symbol of *anatma*, or "non-self"). He says to them: "What think ye? Were it not better that ye sought the Self?" (*Vinaya Pitaka*, i, 23). Stoddart then states that the Buddha made many references to the Self (*Atma*). For example: "Make the Self your refuge" (*Samyutta Nikaya*, iii, 143). Also: "Be such as have the Self as your refuge" (*Digha Nikaya*, ii, 101). Further: "I have made the Self my refuge" (*Digha Nikaya*, ii, 120). Here we see ultimate Reality – the Self (*Atma*). Only *Atma* would have to be fully and truly real. Stoddart concludes by showing that since there can be no reality but the one Reality, this would be the same as stating that "there is no self but the Self".

This insight has indeed been challenging for me in that I am seeing that the teaching of *anatma* (non-self) is not a denial of *Atma* (Self) – as is so very commonly supposed! Rather, it means that those who are overcoming the "three poisons"(illusion, lust, pride) are establishing themselves in *Atma* – the ultimate Reality!

In my response to the question asked, I have drawn on two sources. (1) William Stoddart's book, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality* (Bloomington, Indiana: World Wisdom, 2013), pages 43-46. (2) Junpo Denis Kelly Roshi and Keith Martin-Smith, *The Heart of Zen: Enlightenment, Emotional Maturity, and What It Really Takes for Spiritual Liberation* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2014), pages 3-23.