

The Joy of No Self

by Lisa Hoffman

I admit it. I am addicted to compliments. And I can become absolutely intoxicated from public recognition.

It's a rather unseemly admission for a Zen priest-in-training, but not in the way you might think. And its relationship to "no self," a basic Buddhist teaching, continuously surprises me.

I was perplexed by the notion of *no self* for many years. As my friend Katia recently said, "I don't get this whole no self thing. I'm right here." She slapped her hands on her thighs to demonstrate her solid self.

No self is one of three truths of existence the Buddha realized when he became enlightened. The other two are *suffering* and *impermanence*. I couldn't argue with the reality of suffering. We all suffer at times, some of us more than others. And I knew impermanence from my own constantly changing life.

My first lesson about *no self* was connection. The Buddha taught that there is no separate self because we are all on this journey called life together. Every moment reveals our connectedness.

When I bite into a juicy organic apple, I hold a piece of fruit that has been touched by many others. Someone planted the tree; someone tended it. Someone picked the apple; someone packed it. Someone trucked it to the farmers market and sold it to me. My connection to the apple includes many other elements and beings: sun, water, fertilizer, worms, bees.

We can find this connection in every area of our lives. Each activity is an occasion for gratitude. The notion that we are separate is a delusion that causes tremendous suffering, from fights between loved ones, to wars between nations.

I liked this first *no self* lesson. I even found it inspiring. When I remember that we are all connected, everyday life and every person is sacred. It's much harder to tune out when vacuuming, or ignore a panhandler

The second lesson was mind-bending: there is *no self* because the characteristics we think of as "my self" change from moment to moment, and over time. How long does a feeling stay the same? We've all had the reeling experience of feeling happy, sad, furious, and contented in a five-minute span. Thoughts are just as fleeting.

Meditation provides evidence of the ever-changing self. I was humbled the first time I sat still for 10 minutes, following my breath while thoughts and feelings arose then passed away. My neat and linear mind was chaotic and irrational. I was swept away again and again by spinning thoughts and emotions.

Life itself reveals that many of the characteristics we call "my self" also change. It's easy to identify with our profession, with being a parent or an athlete. What about when a lawyer becomes a massage therapist? When our kids leave home? When we become too old to run, or ski, or even play shuffleboard? Who are we then?

I could concede that thoughts and feelings came and went. And that the identity that creates self also shifts, but I still came back to Katia's original point: "I'm right here." I felt that visceral self, and how that self is always on the move.

I was being literal -- *no self* must mean *no self*. And I just couldn't put the Buddhist puzzle together. Then I began to realize that could be the point. Maybe there was no need to put it together. Perhaps there is a self and *no self* at the same time. My orderly mind was reeling again. Soon I started to feel playful toward the abiding self I had always found rather absorbing. It was a self I took pretty seriously, and thought other people should as well. Now, such seriousness felt a little silly as a fluid self began to flow with the world.

Stephen Batchelor writes in *Buddhism without Beliefs*: "The self may not be something, but neither is it nothing. It is simply ungraspable, unfindable. I am who I am not because of an essential self hidden away in the core of my being but because of the unprecedented and unrepeatable matrix of conditions that have formed me." In other words, the self is forged and re-forged by the changing experiences of our lives.

Which brings me back to my addiction to compliments and love of public recognition. I once believed that when I had meditated and studied enough, I would become a good Buddhist: always modest, compassionate and generous. I envisioned a permanent self, an ideal of enlightenment. This was the self that would one day be ordained.

The truth is I am often an expansive self. But I am also, I find, an attention seeking self. It really gets interesting when I am both, and more, at once. I think this will always be my experience and is the *no self* that will eventually be ordained. The concept of *no self* means hold on lightly because it will all change, probably in the next moment.

In a way, *no self* may mean *whole self*. We get to dance with our ever-changing experience of who we are.

I'm finding that being a whole self—"good" parts and "bad" parts—is what connects me with other people. It's pretty hard to engage with someone who projects an ideal of enlightenment. Instead I've decided what's unseemly in a Zen priest-in-training is denying any part of this whole self. Which doesn't mean that I run around eliciting accolades. But when I am the focus of such attention, I can take it in and let it pass—just like a breath. Although I admit *occasionally* there is a bit of time between those two steps!

A woman I coach apologized to me recently about being quiet and withdrawn in a group situation. "I was so off-center," she said. "I hope you won't hold it against me."

We talked about the pressure she puts on herself to be in control and fulfill her ideal concept of self. I explained that while I usually cover up off-kilter times with my big personality, sometimes all I can do is be quiet.

She smiled and let out a huge breath of relief. "That's not really what I expected you to say. I thought you would give me strategies for remaining centered in every situation...!"

We sat quietly for a while, feeling an undercurrent of vulnerability and intimacy. I loved the shared experience of our imperfections, the changing mystery of who we were, how beautiful and unpredictable life can be. I felt the connectedness, the joy, of *no self*.

Lisa Hoffman is an ordained Zen priest through the Russian River Zendo. She is also a nonprofit consultant with 25 years of experience, and a cat lover, believing that all cats are reincarnated Zen masters. lisa@lisahoffman.net.