**Losing Yourself:**

**How to be a Person Without a Self**

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**(Excerpts for BCBS short course:**

**only about 10% of the book is in this text.)**

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**In Memory of Sandy Huntington,**

**Friend, Colleague, and**

**Companion in Cross-Cultural Philosophy**

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**Chapter 1— Who do You Think You Are? What a Self is and why you think you have one**

**The object of negation: what we mean by *self***

In a memorable passage from Chapter 6 of *Introduction to the Middle Way* (*Madhyamakāvatāra*), Candrakīrti (c. 600-650 CE) introduces us to the target of any critique of the idea of the self. He argues that it is important to keep that target clearly in view, and for the importance of not confusing it with other ideas in the conceptual neighborhood. Candrakīrti tells the story of a man who is afraid that a poisonous snake has taken up residence in one of the walls in his house. In order to alleviate his fear, the man searches the house for an elephant, and satisfies himself that there is none there. He then rests at ease. (6.141 ff)

What is the moral of this odd Indian tale? Candrakīrti’s idea is that even once we recognize that a conception or a commitment is causing us problems, it is often easier and more tempting to confuse it with another idea, to refute that other idea, and to leave the problematic conception in place. The serpent in this analogy is the self. Candrakīrti thinks that even a little philosophical reflection will convince us that there is something amiss in our thinking that we are *selves.*

Candrakīrti also thinksthat the self illusion undermines any attempt to understand who and what we are, and that this failure to understand the nature of our own existence and identity can be devastating to our moral lives*.* I agree. For this reason, although the majority of this book is concerned to investigate the illusion of the self and to defend the idea that we are selfless persons, in the end it is really a book about ethics.

**That you really believe that you have such a self**

I now want to convince you that you understand your own identity as that of a *self.* I will do that by means of an easy thought experiment. The experiment proceeds in two parts. First, think of somebody whose body you would like to inhabit, maybe for a long time, maybe only for a short while. I won’t ask you for the details, or for what motivates your choice. Some things are better left private. But just to get the imaginative ball rolling, I will tell you whose body I would like to have: Ussain Bolt’s (of a few years ago). I only want it for 9.6 seconds. I want to feel what it is like to run that fast. Now, in developing this desire, I do not want to *be* Ussain Bolt. Ussain Bolt has already achieved that, and it does me no good. I want to be *me, Jay,* with Ussain Bolt’s body, so that I can enjoy what Ussain Bolt experiences. The very fact that I can formulate this desire or take this leap of the imagination shows me that, deep down, I do not consider myself to be identical to my body, but rather to be something that *has* this body, and that could in principle have another one.

Now for the second part: we can perform the same exercise with respect to our minds. Imagine somebody whose mind you would like to have, just for a little bit. Once again, whether this desire or act of imagination is coherent or not is beside the point. (I would love to have had Stephen Hawking’s mind for long enough to understand general relativity and quantum gravity.) When you develop this desire, you do not wish to become that other person. She or he is or was already that other person, and that does nothing for you. You want to be *you,* with his or her mind. And, just as in the case of the body, the very possibility of formulating this desire, or imagining this situation shows that you do not consider yourself to *be* your mind, but rather to be something that *has* that mind.

The very fact that you were able to follow me in this thought experiment shows that, at least before you think hard about it, you take yourself to be distinct from both your mind and your body, to be the thing that *has* your mind and your body, but that, without losing its identity, could take on another mind, another body, just like changing your clothes.

**Chapter 2— Why You Have No Self: The View from Buddhism, Philosophy, and Science**

**Buddhist Arguments**

In *The* *Questions of King Milinda (Milindapañha)*, the King asking the apparently innocent question, “who are you?” Nāgasena replies coyly that he is really nobody; that he is called *Nāgasena*, but that this is just a name, a designation, and there is nothing to which it really refers. The name *Nāgasena* refers not to his body, his mind, his experiences, nor to anything apart from these. If you seek the referent of the name, he argues, you find nothing.

The King replies that it seems to follow that there is nobody to whom to offer alms, nobody who wears the robe, nobody talking to him, and even nobody denying that he has a self. This appears to be an absurd conclusion, and one that undermines even the ability to assert the position: one can hardly at the same time speak and deny that anyone is speaking. So, the King concludes, there must be something to which the name *Nāgasena* refers, something that presumably constitutes his self.

Nāgasena asks the King to consider the chariot on which he rode to the site of the dialogue. The King grants that he did ride a chariot, and so that the chariot he rode exists. But what, Nāgasena, asks is that chariot, really? He points out that the chariot is neither identical to its wheels, nor to its axles, nor to its poles, etc… To select one part as the *real* chariot would be arbitrary, as well as clearly false.

Nor, Nāgasena points out can the chariot be the sum of those pieces. After all, a pile of chariot pieces on the ground, delivered fresh from the chariot factory, but not yet assembled, is not yet a chariot. And it can’t even be identical to all of those parts suitably arranged or put together. If it were, then if we changed one of those parts, or changed their arrangement, we would have a different chariot. It is therefore neither identical with the collection of its parts, nor with those parts arranged in some particular way.

Nor is the chariot something different from those parts. After all, no chariot as the bearer of those parts remains when they are all removed. For this reason, we cannot think of it as a separate entity that possesses those Nor can we think of it as some mysterious entity located in the parts, but identical with none of them. So, Nāgasena argues, the words “the king’s chariot,” are merely a designation with no determinate referent.

But this is not an argument against the *existence* of the chariot. After all, we began by granting its reality. Instead, the chariot it does not exist as some singular entity that is either identical to or distinct from its parts. Its mode of existence is merely *conventional*. And this, Nāgasena instructs the King, is how we should think of the *person* who is called Nāgasena and his relation to that name. The self to which the King, as well as the reader of the dialogue, might have thought that the name *Nāgasena* refers is therefore nowhere in the picture. But we have not questioned *whether* Nāgasena exists, but only his *mode* of existence.

The second principal example is introduced to elucidate that mode of existence a bit further. The King poses this question in terms of rebirth, presupposing the cycle of rebirths taken by classical Indian Buddhists to constitute the world of cyclic existence. He asks what—if there is no self to which *Nāgasena* refers—proceeds from life to life when one is reborn. But rebirth *per se* actually has nothing to do with it, and the question and its answer can make perfect sense to us.

Given that I am ten minutes older now than I was ten minutes ago, and will be a further ten minutes older ten minutes from now, these three stages of me differ from one another in at least one respect (age), and certainly more besides. So, they are not strictly *identical* to one another, but only, like twins, very much *alike.* Since they are not strictly identical, why should we call them stages of the *same* person?

Nāgasena asks the King to reflect on the lamps that are lit in the evening. These small clay lamps did not last through the night. The practice was to use a nearly depleted lamp to light the next lamp, and so on until daybreak. Nāgasena asks, us to consider the flame by one’s bed that was lit at dusk last night, and the flame to which one awakes this morning. Are they the same, or are they different? In one sense, the flame of last night and the flame of this morning are different from one another: different oil is being consumed; they are burning on distinct clay lamps. But in another sense, they are the same: they are each stages of a single causal continuum, an uninterrupted sequence of illumination by florescent gas. It seems that the identity and continuity of the flame are constituted in part by causal continuity, in part by common function, but in the end primarily by the fact that we have a convention of talking that way.

This is how *The Questions of King Milinda* invites us to think our own personal identity. Just as there is no drop of oil or bit of incandescent gas that remains constant in the lamp from evening to morning, there is no self, soul, or ego that persists in me from day to day. My body and my psychological states are constantly changing, like the oil and lamps that support the flames. But, like those flames and those lamps, they constitute a causal sequence with a common function. And we have a convention of calling distinct members of such sequences by the same name. So, in one obvious sense, I am not *identical* to the person called by my name yesterday. We are *alike*, causally related, but numerically distinct. In another sense, though, we are the same person. We share a name, many properties, a causal history, and a social role; and that, while not involving a self, is enough.

In *Introduction to the Middle Way,* Candrakīrti adapts the chariot metaphor from *The Questions of King Milinda,* and reworks it slightly into what is called in the Buddhist tradition the *Sevenfold Analysis.*  (6.120-167)He argues that if there is a self, it must be either identical to or different from the psychophysical processes that constitute our lives. If the self were identical to those processes, it would have to be either identical to one or to several of them, or to them configured in a particular way. If, instead, the self were different, it would have to be either something that possesses the processes, something possessed by the processes, something entirely disconnected from the processes, or have some incomprehensible relationship to them.

Candrakīrti argues that none of these seven possibilities makes any sense. He psychophysical processes. argues that we are not selves, but *persons*. And the person, he argues, is neither identical to nor different from the psychophysical processes; but unlike the self, which is supposed to be an independently existent entity, there is no reason to believe that a person needs to exist in one of these ways. It is instead a socially constructed designation, posited on the bases of those processes, but not reducible to them.

**Chapter 3—What are You? Recovering and Discovering the Person**

So, we are not selves. Does that mean that we do not exist at all, as King Milinda suspected it would? Of course not. “So,” we should now ask, “if we are not selves, what are we?” Once we put aside the fantasy version of our self-understanding, how can we create a more realistic sense of who we are? We are persons.

By distinguishing the self from the person, we can separate what we are from what we naively take ourselves to be; we can distinguish the reality of our existence from its appearance. But more than that, we can come to see just how powerfully cognitive instinct can shape our sense of who and what we are. Think about the difference between a role and an actor playing that role. When Benedict Cumberbatch plays Hamlet, the role of Hamlet is realized on stage. Hamlet—not Cumberbatch—is among the *dramatis personae*; Cumberbatch is but a member of the cast. And there are truths about Hamlet: he is a Dane; he has a troubled relationship with Ophelia; he wants to expose a murder, etc… Cumberbatch has none of these traits. And Hamlet is *not* a British actor. If Cumberbatch is tired of the role, and it is taken over by Al Yankovitch, everything true of Hamlet remains true, and it does *not* become true that he was American and born in California in 1959, even though those things are true of Yankovitch. In short, even though Hamlet is entirely fictional—and so there is no fact of the matter regarding precisely where or when he was born, or how tall he is, etc—he is a *real character,* a *persona,* and there are both truths and falsehoods about him that are independent of any facts about the actor who plays him in any particular production of the play.

Moreover, what makes Hamlet the person he is—what constitutes him as a character—is determined not by facts about the actors who play that role, but by what Shakespeare wrote, and by how his play has been received and discussed in the centuries following its composition. We cannot, for instance, ask what Hamlet was *really* like, outside of the context of the play. There *is* no Hamlet outside of that context, and if the play had never been written, even if Benedict Cumberbatch somehow recited all of those lines on a stage, he would not have been playing Hamlet.

**Chapter 4—The Self Strikes Back I: The Transcendent Self**

In classical India, both Nyāya and Vedānta philosophers took the unity of consciousness both as a datum and as explicable only if we suppose the existence of an *ātman* that serves as the subject of all experience. They argued that this self has to be distinct from both mind and body on the grounds that it is the subject of both physical sensory experience and of introspective experience of our own mental states. Since it is the subject of both kinds of experience, and subjects are distinct from their objects, the *ātman* can be neither mind nor body. Moreover, they argued, all of our experiences are present in a single subjectivity. So, they argue, the self must be not only distinct from body and mind, but it must be unitary.

They also argue that our identity over time demands a self: we have experience of ourselves as extended over time. If we were not aware of ourselves as extended over time, we could not be aware of ourselves as existent at all. For even to be aware of oneself as existing at a moment of time requires representing that moment in relation to other moments of time at which one existed. That is, to experience myself as existing *now* is to experience myself as existing at *this* moment, which is later than *another* moment at which I existed, and prior to another in which I may exist. So, they argue, we must have a self that exists over time.

Thinking about corporate, or institutional states and processes can help us to refute these arguments. We speak easily about institutions acting, or being aware of things without supposing that they have core selves that are aware or act, and of “institutional memory,” where that memory is carried by a company, or a college, or even a family, without its being carried by any single member. Such memory may extend over many generations, in fact, passed from one individual to another, sometimes orally, sometimes in a written archive, sometimes as a pattern of charges on a silicon wafer.

But this hardly implies that each complex institution must have a persistent self to act, or to make its persistence through time and its institutional memory possible. To be sure, it is important for an institution, when it remembers an event in its past, to have been involved in that event, and institutional planning requires the assumption of the continued existence of that institution in the future. After all, an organization can know things, can act, can persist through time, can retain records of its past, and can plan for the future without there being any single component or core to its being that persists, that retains its institutional memory, or that forges its plans.

The same can be true regarding our own temporal extension. Recall the important distinction we drew in the first chapter between the person and the self. The memory and anticipation argument is a good argument for the existence of the *person* in the past and the future. But that kind of identity does not presuppose the identity of a *self* that persists through change; it only presupposes psychophysical causal connectedness, that is, the identity and persistence of a *person*.

**Chapter 5—The Self Strikes Back II- the Minimal Self**

**Minimal Selves: *For-me-ness***

Some argue that every experience must be *owned* by subjectivity. That subjectivity or sense that my experience is *for me,* is the self. The property of *for-me-ness* is supposed to distinguish my own experiences from those of others. But that can’t be. For, if this were even close to correct, *your* experiences have this property as well; from *your* perspective those experiences are *for me,* just as from my perspective, *my* experiences are *for me.* If all experiences have this property *essentially,* then it can’t distinguish among them. Moreover, if this is really the property that distinguishes my own experiences from yours, I should be able to compare my experiences with yours, find *for-me-ness* in mine, but not in yours. And that makes no sense whatsoever.

**Chapter 6—Immersion: Selfless Spontaneity and Skillful Living**

**A Daoist Perspective**

Let us begin with a justly famous passage from the Chinese classic the *Zhuangzi*:the story of Butcher Ding, a story that illustrates nonduality and selflessness both in the domain of subjectivity and in the domain of philosophy.

Butcher Ding was cutting up an ox for Lord Wenhui. As every touch of his hand, every heave of his shoulder, every move of his feet, every thrust of his knee — zip! zoop! He slithered the knife along with a zing, and all was in perfect rhythm, as though he were performing the dance of the Mulberry Grove or keeping time to the Ching-shou music.

“Ah, this is marvelous!” said Lord Wenhui. “Imagine skill reaching such heights!”

Butcher Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now — now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and following things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less a main joint.

“A good butcher changes his knife once a year — because he cuts. A mediocre Butcher changes his knife once a month — because he hacks. I’ve had this knife of mine for nineteen years and I’ve cut up thousands of oxen with it, and yet the blade is as good as though it had just come from the grindstone. There are spaces between the joints, and the blade of the knife has really no thickness. If you insert what has no thickness into such spaces, then there’s plenty of room — more than enough for the blade to play about it. That’s why after nineteen years the blade of my knife is still as good as when it first came from the grindstone.

“However, whenever I come to a complicated place, I size up the difficulties, tell myself to watch out and be careful, keep my eyes on what I’m doing, work very slowly, and move the knife with the greatest subtlety, until — flop! the whole thing comes apart like a clod of earth crumbling to the ground. I stand there holding the knife and look all around me, completely satisfied and reluctant to move on, and then I wipe off the knife and put it away.”

“Excellent!” said Lord Wenhui. “I have heard the words of Butcher Ding and learned how to care for life!” (trans Burton Watson 1964: 50-51)

This is a story about skill acquisition, and about the transformation of subjectivity as one moves from novice to virtuoso. When he begins carving oxen, the butcher sees only oxen. This kind of perception, the kind we experience in much of our lives, presents objects to us. Inasmuch as it does, this kind of perceptual experience invites us to see ourselves as the subjects to whom those objects are presented, and to take ourselves to be distinct and removed from all of our objects of knowledge. In this mode of awareness, we experience ourselves as *selves*. As he matures in his skill, the oxen disappear.

When true virtuosity is achieved, though, “perception and understanding have come to a stop,” and Ding cuts with “pure spirit.” This may sound mystical, but it is not. And it should be familiar to anyone who has developed a complex perceptual-motor skill set, such as a musical or an athletic skill, or a skill in a martial art. These—like ox-butchering—are domains in which improvisation is necessary, and in which one must be able to perceive and to act with great accuracy and responsiveness to one’s environment at great speed, without the luxury of continuous reflection and calculation.

In one of his best-known essays, *Actualizing the Fundamental Point (Genjōkōan),* the Zen philosopher Dōgen (1200-1253) writes,

To study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things. When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly. (trans. R. Aitken and K. Tanahashi in Dōgen 1995: 70)

Dōgen here connects the recognition of the absence of self with a kind of spontaneous engagement with reality, one that neither reifies nor consciously denies the reality of subject or object.

Let us consider this passage with some care. “To study the self is to forget the self.” That is, the more one understands one’s own mode of existence, the more one understands that one is not a self. “To forget the self is to be actualized by the myriad things.” To understand one’s selflessness is to understand not that one is nonexistent, but that one is a real *person* in constant interaction with everything else in one’s environment, a causally interdependent sequence of psychophysical processes. And it is to understand that the identity we do have—our personal identity—is not achieved alone, but instead is achieved only in immersed interaction with the rest of the world we inhabit.

“When actualized by the myriad things, your body and mind, as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away.” This kind of spontaneous skillful interaction in the world results in the cessation of the reification of subject and object: one is not conscious of one’s own body and mind as constituting a subjective pole of experience; nor is one aware of external phenomena as constituting an objective pole of experience.

**Chapter 7—Ethics: Abandoning the Self to Abandon Egoism**

The alternative to understanding our mode of existence as that of selves is to understand ourselves as persons, that is, as beings who come into existence in open causal interaction with the rest of the world, and whose identity is constituted by the collectively constituted narrative in which are *dramatis personae.*  To see oneself that way is to locate oneself in a decentered universe, in which one’s location is no more special than that of anyone else. That is to see oneself as a character in a play with no special protagonists, being performed and written on the fly by a vast improv collective. This universe gives one no reason for special self-regard, or to distinguish between the moral standing of others in virtue of their relationships to oneself. This understanding of an ethical outlook is articulated in Buddhist theory through the four *divine states (brahmavihāras*) as *friendliness, care, sympathetic joy,* and *impartiality.*

An attitude of friendliness is one in which we wish well for others and strive to benefit them. It is an attitude of wishing well for their sake. That is to say, it is a disinterested benevolence. It must therefore be distinguished not only from its obvious antithesis—hostility—but also from its *near enemy*, partial affection. To adopt this latter attitude in which one is a good friend to those one likes, but not to others, or in which one’s motivation for wishing for another’s good because it is pleasant for oneself, might feel good, and might even feel like being a good friend, but it would be to reinscribe the egocentric understanding of the moral world to which this alternative vision is meant to be an antidote.

Just as to be friendly is to wish for good things for others, to be caring is to act to strive to alleviate others’ pain and suffering. It is to wish to alleviate it just because it is suffering, not because of the other’s relationship to oneself. That is, like true friendliness, true care is disinterested. And so, like friendliness, it must be distinguished both from its antithesis—callousness—and from its near enemy, pity, or sloppy sympathy. When we respond to another’s suffering with pity or sympathy, we suffer a contagion of suffering, and consequently are impaired in our ability to act with real care. You don’t want your surgeon to *feel* your pain, but to *care* for you unimpaired by that pain. Care thus requires and reinforces a non-egocentric view of the world.

Sympathetic joy is the ability to take pleasure in the success of others. And once again, distinguishing it from its near enemy allows us to understand the way in which it both emerges from and constitutes a non-egocentric comportment to the world. The near enemy in this case is partiality, or jingoism. This is the attitude in which we rejoice in the success of those with whom we associate, or those who we take to be our friends, or to be “on our side,” while being indifferent, or even dismayed by the success of those we perceive as more distant from us in the moral landscape. Once again, that is an attitude that takes our own location to be special, and that assigns degrees of moral concern to others in terms of their proximity to us. That assignment of a special role to ourselves at the moral origin is part of the self-illusion, and sympathetic joy is inconsistent with that orientation.

This brings us naturally to the fourth of these characteristics, impartiality. That is an attitude that we can now see both as important on its own and also in virtue of the fact that it informs and is reflected in the three attitudes we have just discussed. To be impartial is to adopt the same moral attitude, and to extend the same level of friendship, care, and sympathetic joy to all in one’s environment, regardless of their relation to oneself, regardless of whether one sees them as close to one, or distant, supportive or hostile. It is to forego revenge, and partiality. It is not a refusal of affection or goodwill to one’s intimates, but to be willing to extend that natural fellow-feeling indefinitely, and so to assign a kind of homogeneity to the moral world.

Together these attitudes encapsulate a complete abandonment of egocentricity in moral experience. The egocentricity they undermine is the moral side of regarding oneself as *a self*. To see things from the egocentric perspective reflecting the view of a self is to remove oneself from *membership* in the world and to adopt the position of an *experiencer* of the world and *agent* acting on it. Its inevitable consequence is—at best—the adoption of the near enemies of these four virtuous states as one’s mode of comportment, substituting rationally defensible, beneficial attitudes with irrational, and ultimately destructive ones, made all the worse because they can masquerade so effectively as virtue.

To the extent that we recognize these divine states as constituting a moral ideal, and as reflections of a rational way to understand our own place in the moral world, we see that is both rational and morally important to shed the self illusion.

**Chapter 8—Affirmation: Becoming and Being a Person among Persons**

**Fact and Fiction**

Although in a literary fiction none of the characters are real outside of the scope of the text, fictions do make facts. Sometimes, even in the case of literary fiction, those facts even transcend the literary work itself. It is true, for instance, that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were executed in Norway*,* and false that Hamlet was. It is even true that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are characters both in *Hamlet* and in Tom Stoppard’s Ro*sencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,* a fact that Shakespeare could not have created.

Let us now consider a fiction of a different kind: the fiction that underlies the value of money, an example we introduced earlier in a different context. Consider a $20 banknote and a $1 banknote. The paper and ink that constitute them have no real intrinsic value, and that in the $20 note are certainly not twenty times the value of the paper and ink in a $1 banknote. The value of each note value is entirely manufactured by the United States banking system, and the marketplace in which it is accepted. Their value depends upon the willingness of others to accept them in exchange. If we stopped treating these pieces of paper as valuable, they would lose all value. They are effectively characters in a collectively narrated fiction.

That fact, however, does not make these banknotes any less valuable. It only reminds us that their reality as money is constituted by and has no reality outside of a set of stories we tell. In this respect, they are just like Hamlet, Ophelia, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. But money and its value, unlike those Shakespearean characters, are definitely real in another sense. Exploring this sense shows us that fictional facticity is our own mode of existence. We are fictional, but also factual. We are brought into existence as persons through the complex interplay between our biology and our interactions with one another in the context of the social structures that make persons both possible and necessary. That origin renders us fictional, or constructed; it means that our reality as persons is not primordial, or independent of human activity. But this tale of origins does not render us *unreal.* Persons are also factual. We are real parts of the natural and social world, with biological, psychological and social properties. That is what genuine, empirical reality is; the kind of supernatural reality that would attach to a self is no reality at all.

**Chapter 9: Being in the World: Embedded, Embodied, Enacting our Personhood**

Why do we value one another? Why do we and our fellows merit respect, rights, consideration, and kindness? That is another way of asking the question, “what is special about people? We care about one another, take one another’s desires and welfares seriously, respect one another’s rights, and treat one another with consideration to the degree that we embrace one another in a moral and social community. That is, moral valuation depends on seeing one another as *together* in a shared world*.* This does not require that we agree about everything, or that our projects are the same. We can respect and honor those with whom we share little in the way of beliefs, values, or way of life. But moral respect and recognition does require that we see one another as potential fellows in a larger sense: as playing analogous roles in the human world.

Our ability to care about others, including distant others we have never met, arises from our ability to see others as sharing in this grand project. For if the project in which we see ourselves as agents—the project of life—is sufficient to give meaning to our own lives, it is also sufficient to give meaning to those others who join us in that project. Just as Hamlet gains his significance in *Hamlet,* so to do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, and they matter to one another precisely because they are part of the same drama. When we recognize each other in this sense, we recognize our *interdependence,* not our *independence*; our roles and commitments, not our subjectivity; our participation in a shared world, not our spectatorship of a world of which we are independent. In short, this kind of moral and political recognition is the recognition of *persons,* not of *selves.*

When we adopt this attitude, we do not see ourselves and others as isolated, independent selves who happen to find one another in a featureless abstract landscape, and then have to figure out whether and how to relate to one another. Instead, we see one another as persons who share a world pregnant with the meaning; meaning that we collectively create, and which in turn shapes our lives. In seeing one another in this way, we come to appreciate the way we co-constitute one another, and the ways in which we are responsive and responsible to one another.

Selves could never facilitate our moral or collective lives; they could only get in the way. That is why Dōgen writes that “to study the self is to forget the self; to forget the self is to cast of body and mind; to cast of body and mind is to be affirmed by all things.” This affirmation is, and can only be, the affirmation of our shared personhood.

**Chapter 10 Getting Over Yourself: Drawing this All Together**

One might have thought that the discovery that we have no self, no *ātman,* no ̛*psyche* would be the discovery that we are somehow less than we thought we were. But we have seen that this is wrong. Our lives are better for the fact that we are self-less persons than they could ever have been were we selves.

When people first hear about the idea of selflessness, they often think that this is the idea that we don't really exist. But that only makes sense if you think that to exist is to be a self. Once we see that the self is illusory, though, we see that that can't be right. The fact that a dollar is not a piece of paper does not mean that dollars don’t exist, and the fact that we are not selves doesn’t mean that we do not exist. Instead, for beings like us, to exist is to be a person—a socially constituted being embedded in a rich and meaningful world. To deny that we are persons would be to deny that we exist. So, the self illusion, although it seems to confer a greater reality on us than would mere conventional personhood, in fact undermines the very reality that makes us who we are. To accept that you have no self is not to reject your identity; it is to reclaim your humanity.

The finer the hair, the more important it is to split it.

Sandy Huntington