

Who Am I Without “Me”?

The third seal among the four seals is that “all things are empty and lack a self.” The fourth seal is that “nirvana alone is peace.” The statement that all things are empty and without a self—that is, unreal, without true existence, or illusory—refers to the nature of all phenomena and what is to be realized on the path. This realization produces the result of nirvana, the transcendence of misery or true freedom. Thus, through discussing the third seal in more detail, we will automatically come to understand what is meant by the fourth seal, “nirvana alone is peace.”

A contemporary Buddhist teacher said in one of his talks, “Some people are afraid that, by following the Buddhist path they will lose their ego. That is true, but you can tell them that they don’t have to worry, it will come back!” This statement is surely good for a laugh, but at the same time it profoundly illuminates our most basic problem. Usually, upon first hearing about the Buddhist notion of the lack of a self or ego, most of us will say, “No way is this true!” It is only upon a thorough and repeated investigation of the notion of a personal self that we may come to think, “I cannot really find a truly existent, unchanging self anywhere in my body or mind.” But before we do that investigation, we will have all kinds of instinctive reactions and resistance to this idea. We may feel threatened and insulted by the suggestion that we have no self or ego, or that we should get rid of it. We may think that our sense of self is what makes us human and that, without it, we are annihilated as a person, becoming completely nonexistent; that we lose our unique personality with all its emotional richness and precious sophisticated character; that having no ego must be incredibly dull and meaningless, and so on. We all know what it feels like to have a self, but we cannot even imagine a life without a self or what that would be like. Frankly, most of us don’t even want to find out in the first place.

So, is it really frightening or maybe just boring if we realize that we have no ego? Did the Buddha want us to give up all of our individuality and become some lifeless enlightened zombie? We wonder how we could survive and function in the world without this ego. However, from the Buddhist point of view, we would be much better off if we realized selflessness. We would function more efficiently and survive with less struggle; we would be stronger and benefit others much more than we can right now. Realizing egolessness does not mean that we forget how to do things. Rather, it means that we acquire the clarity and precision of mind that sees every detail of our actions in the world. One reason why our actions are often not so effective is that we do not have such clarity or insight; we lack the wisdom that sees our

actions clearly in terms of cause and effect. When we realize the nature of selflessness, however, we see very clearly the subtleties of every movement of our body, speech, and mind.

Before we indulge in our usual reactions when we hear “no ego,” it is very important to open our minds and try to understand what the Buddha really meant by this. It is crucial to see that “lack of self” does not mean that we lose anything, especially once we realize that we never had any real solid and unchanging personal identity in the first place, and that there is a lot to gain instead. The only things we will lose are all our misperceptions, conflicting emotions, problems, and neuroses. However, if we don’t want to get rid of them, we can conveniently skip the Buddha’s message of “no ego.” The problem is that we are so used to our habituated mindset and its ensuing suffering and that we don’t really know anything fundamentally different or better. We hang on to all our complexities and problems for dear life. It is like in an intense love-hate relationship; it is very painful most of the time, but we cannot let go and end this relationship. Though we know better, we still cling to the hope that it may work out one day, and we are afraid of the unknown if we step out of this deeply ingrained pattern. Even if other people offer us a new residence, a truly loving partner, supportive friends, a great job in another city, and free therapy hours to process our pain, we still refuse. Why? Because we are afraid to step beyond what we know so well, even if it is ever so painful.

From a Buddhist point of view, the main and most important message of “no ego” is not one of loss but of tremendous gain, joy, and relief—freedom from all suffering—when we are able to let go of what ties us down and makes us suffer, which is our clinging and grasping to something that does not exist anyway. When we realize that there is nothing to lose and no “me” to be harmed or benefitted, we can relax and let go of the idea that we have something to lose. We can also let go of our attempts to hold onto or protect this something called “me.” Usually, we are afraid that without our sense of “me” and of real things we would not be able to live our lives in an organized or coherent way. In fact, such grasping to real things and a real “me” makes everything quite heavy, complicated, and clumsy. In addition, it uses up a lot of our energy that could be spent in more joyful and beneficial ways for both ourselves and others. In other words, when we stop this misguided use of our mental potential, we have free access to the whole scope of its dynamic vitality. The true qualities of the nature of our mind can shine forth in an unimpeded manner, and life may become a playful dance of appearances. At the same time, we don’t have to wait until we become a Buddha for this to happen. The true qualities of our mind show during all phases of the path in accordance with how much we loosen our tight grip on “me” and our solid world.

Our mind in its state of “ego-constriction” resembles a tightly closed fist, squeezing itself as hard as possible, inflicting pain on itself and being completely dysfunctional in that it is unable to do anything else. How can we relieve the pain that is caused by clenching our own fist in that way? In this case, leading doctors do not recommend taking painkillers or amputating the hand. We just have to let go and relax our fingers. This will not only remove the pain and the uptightness, but also allow us to do all kinds of wonderful things with our hand—writing a poem,

embracing a person in grief, playing piano, and even performing complicated hand gestures like in certain forms of Asian dance.

It all comes down to the basic question, “Who or what am I without me?” This seems truly inconceivable at first, but when we think about it, there actually are quite a few situations in ordinary life that might give us a glimpse that not grasping at some solid personal or phenomenal identity is not a dull nothingness, but a very joyful state of mind. Imagine we start to play a musical instrument. At the beginning, everything is very clumsy; we have to think a lot and coordinate our mind, our fingers, the instrument, and the notes, and they all seem separate and disconnected. But once we are trained to a certain degree, we might become completely absorbed in the process of making music, “losing oneself” in our playing. We don’t think of or experience ourselves as a particular person or a player; there is not even a sense of “me” anymore. Likewise, we don’t perceive the instrument, the fingers, and our mind as different or separate things. Still, or, from the Buddhist point of view, because of that, this does not mean either that there is nothing going on or that this situation is depressing. On the contrary, it is an alive and happy state of mind. Everything flows together in a playful and lighthearted dance. In fact, the less we think about ourselves, or anything else, for that matter, the better we can play, and the more the instrument, the melody, and the player become one. On the other hand, once we become “self-concerned” we lose this lighthearted flow and our play becomes clumsy again.

For all these reasons, in Buddhism gaining certainty in the view of selflessness is very important and necessary. If we want to find an expert who can fix the problems we face with our emotions and ego-clinging, we will find that expert right within us. No one knows our emotions and ego-clinging better than ourselves; we are the most expert person in the world to understand our own emotions and to lay out the plan of how to work with them. It is from this point of view that we should envision the building of our own enlightenment and the achievement of inner freedom and calmness. We have to come to a realization of what reality is and how it manifests, as well as communicating the message of enlightenment between each individual’s heart. Such communication can only happen from our own heart.

Tasting Our Own Ego

However, in the process of tasting the reality of enlightened mind, we have to experience a slight sense of negative mind; that is, we must truly experience our emotions and ego-clinging. Without that, there is no way we can taste pure awakening. When we experience anger, aggression, jealousy, pride, or ego-clinging, we may feel that such experiences are negative, painful, disturbing, or even insane in some way. At the same time, right within these experiences of emotions, there is a message of awakening and a taste of peace and enlightenment—if we are able to experience them. The question is, “Are we really experiencing our emotions?”

We usually have a whole list of complaints to discuss with our counselors, therapists, and instructors. We tell them, “I have a problem. I am experiencing some emotions. I am angry at this guy.” But are we really experiencing our emotions, or are we just experiencing the labels or concepts of those emotions? The *concepts* of anger, jealousy and passion have nothing to do with the actual nature of emotions. Genuinely experiencing one’s emotions is the best way to experience the nature of reality.

When we say “genuinely experiencing” an emotion, we are talking about experiencing emotions without labels or conceptual elaborations. Be who we are when we start a conversation. If we are feeling angry in that moment, be aware of it and be who we are in that moment. If we are feeling passion in that moment, be who we are. It is not a permanent state. Even if we wanted to be angry or passionate for a long time, we cannot, as we will lose track at some point. Thus, being who we are, discovering who we are, begins with discovering the reality of our experience in every moment. In that moment, we do not want to be someone else. We do not sit here and think, “I wish I were you.”

No True Reality Outside our Experience

From the Buddhist point of view, there is no true reality outside the set of experiences and emotions that we go through every day. At the same time, our ego itself wants to be free of these attacks of emotions. Our inflated ego wants to be the first to get out of this insanity. When we look at our mind, we all think the same way, we want to escape these problems of emotions and suffering. We want to be the first person out of here. No one really wants to be the last

However, when we look at our ego, there is a lot of positive energy there—positive flashes of awakening—right within our ego-clinging. We are not saying, “I want *you* to be free.” We are not saying, “I want to practice so that *you* get out of samsara.” Rather, we are sitting here saying, “I want to be free. *I* want to calm *my* mind a little and experience some peace. *I* want to experience some wisdom and insight.” That “*I*” is what is called “ego” or “self-clinging.” It is a “me first” attitude. Ego wants to be free from the root of suffering and emotions. But emotions and suffering arise from nothing but ego-clinging. In a sense, there is a catch twenty-two here; ultimately speaking, ego is searching for a way out of itself and for a path that leads to the realization of egolessness.

“Ego wanting to be free from ego-clinging” is already an awakening message. Can we imagine that? It is a crazy idea to think, “I want to be the best enlightened person.” However, the only way “I” can become the best enlightened person is by going beyond “me” or “I” or ego. Strangely enough, in a way, ego cherishes that thought. In some respects, there is a quality of selflessness in that, and ego does not mind the sacrifice. Thus, when we look deeper into this reality, emotions like anger, jealousy, and passion all are wonderful experiences if we can just experience them.

When we experience such a reality, there is tremendous value in being with that experience, because that experience never repeats. It is a once in a lifetime experience. When we have an attack of anger or jealousy, that attack does not happen twice. It happens only in that moment, and that moment is as precious as meeting the Buddha. Being *who* we are begins with being *where* we are. Being where we are is easy when the experience is pleasant. When we are in the Bahamas lying down on a nice beach or going for a swim, it is easy to say. “Oh yeah! I can be here—I don’t want to be anywhere else.” However, the most difficult point is to be where we are when we don’t want to be there. That is the time we have to try our best to experience reality and be where we are. That is the whole process of the path and spirituality.

For that reason, unfavorable situations are valuable. When we can work with unfavorable situations, we really have the quality of path. At the same time, when favorable situations arise and we are somewhere we want to be, like Hawaii, we do not need to think about being somewhere else or try to stop that experience. When we are in situations of joy and pleasure, of appreciating the beauty of the natural world, we should be there as well. If we miss that moment, then we are missing another big opportunity.

Letting Go Too Fast

When we try to experience something other than what we are presently experiencing, then we are neither here nor there. We are lost in the middle. An example in the Buddhist texts speaks about monkeys swinging from one tree branch to another. It is said that the most skillful monkeys do not let go of the branch they are holding onto until they know they have a good grasp on the next branch. On the other hand, unskillful monkeys let go of the branch they are holding before getting a firm grasp on the next branch. As a result, they fall. Similarly, if we let go of our emotions and our present situation too fast before we fully experience awakening, then we will fall like those monkeys.

At this point, we have a good grip on one branch. There is no problem with that, because our grip on our emotions and ego is very strong within our daily experiences. In fact, there is value in these experiences that goes beyond conceptualizations of “good” and “bad.” At the moment we are experiencing intense emotions like anger, we do not have value judgments or a rational mind that tells us, “This is not good.” Rather, we are experiencing pure mental energy—it is just a vibration, a pure message of emotions in everyday life. Therefore, from the point of view of the Buddhist spiritual journey, it becomes necessary for us to go through the process of getting our hands a little bit dirty, and then we can go through the process of cleaning up. That is the process of accomplishing freedom.

What is Wrong with Ego-Clinging?

How does fixation on a self engender conditioned existence with all our problems and suffering? As soon as the concept of “self” arises, the projection of “other” also arises. When we project and cling onto our self as “I” or “me,” this fixation naturally creates the corresponding image of “others out there.” This is how self-clinging is the cause of duality. It creates a separation between “self” and “other.” Clinging to the self, we develop attachment, which results in cherishing the self. On that basis, we engage in all the mental afflictions to protect that self from others.

All the mental afflictions—aggression, jealousy, judgment, pride, envy, and so on—develop on this basis of self and other and the separation of these two. From the arising of mental afflictions comes our subsequent engagement in negative actions, and it is right then that we accumulate karma. We may accumulate the seeds of both positive and negative actions, but primarily negative ones. Through our involvement with such repetitive negative actions, we wander in conditioned existence.

It is clear how the fixation on a self causes suffering, how it becomes the root of all the suffering that we experience. We have many wonderful, beautiful illusions of the world, but when we do not realize that they are illusions and get caught in clinging to them as real and truly existent, we experience all kinds of suffering. On the basis of this self clinging, we create suffering not only for ourselves, but also for others. This is evident in our own immediate experience. For example, we can easily see how much suffering we experience when we have strong anger or when we have very strong attachment. We can see how much suffering we create as a result of the mental afflictions of jealousy or pride. We can also see that this doesn’t happen only once and then no longer occurs, rather it happens again and again. This is what we call conditioned existence, which has the connotation of a vicious circle.

Engaging in repetitive actions involving mental afflictions habituates us to these states of mind. It becomes so natural, so normal, to arouse anger. Certain environments create the conditions for us to give rise to strong anger. The first time we may experience anger as some slight irritation and feel just a little uncomfortable. The next time anger occurs, it becomes a bit stronger, like a small spark. Then it gets bigger and bigger and becomes like a flame to which the environment adds oxygen. The next time we find ourselves in this situation, our anger is very strong and we are ready to punch someone. The point is to see how the anger grows, especially over time when we become habituated to it.

Such habituation is our main problem because it creates a pattern. In fact, the main thing we are trying to transcend is our habitual patterns and tendencies. As for the mental afflictions themselves, there is actually nothing to transcend. They come and they go. What we actually have to transform is that which is hanging on to all these emotions and afflictions—our habitual tendencies. We have to watch out for the habit of self-clinging.

We can see how ego-clinging brings us a lot of suffering, but how does the self, or ego, come into existence? It is said that when we experience such habituation to self-clinging and the mental afflictions, it is like having a dream when we do not recognize that we are dreaming. The only difference is that the vicious cycle of conditioned existence is a very long dream. What we ordinarily call a “dream” is something much shorter, something that we wake up from every morning, while the dream of conditioned existence just keeps continuing. As long as we do not recognize we are dreaming, we see everything as very real and very solid; we experience many kinds of suffering and pain, as well as some happiness. Between these alternating states, there is so much struggle. Not recognizing that we are dreaming, there is no way to imagine awakening from that dream. Our experiences seem so real, just as our sufferings do now, and we do not see how we can free ourselves from such suffering. In the same way, we are all in conditioned existence right now, and our ego-clinging is so strong that it is very difficult to imagine how we could wake up, or what our experience might be like if we were to realize selflessness.

A Person Without Self, Things Without a Core

In order to wake up to our true identity or being, we need to look at our ordinary sense of “me” and “mine.” Having our basic feeling of “I” and then taking other things and persons to be real are just two expressions of the same clinging; we take whatever we experience as being solidly real, no matter whether it is ourselves or other than ourselves.

The most basic, instinctive sense of self-clinging is what all sentient beings are born with. This is an innate sense of “me”-ness or “I.” This innate self-clinging is not conceptual or even conscious most of the time. It is the fundamental sense of a reference point that is always there. We all experience this basic reference point of being at the center of the universe, around which everything else revolves. We think that everyone should be looking at us and listening to our good opinions.

On top of that basic reference point, we develop many different levels of conceptual overlays in terms of who and how we are. This starts with ordinary mundane labels, such as, “I am Heather; I am an American; I am a lawyer,” and then we may add some deeper philosophical, scientific, or religious labels.

Just as we have the basic reference point of innate self-clinging, we also have such reference points outside of ourselves, the basic reference points of “objects.” We have such reference points in relation to our sense perceptions, thinking, “There is really something or somebody out there.” On this basis we add many other labels, such as “a visual object,” “red,” or “a person.”

Whether we are dealing with our self or other phenomena, the first layer of labeling is still somewhat neutral, but the secondary levels of labeling become judgmental. They involve

ideas such as good and bad, sacred and profane, and other more subtle concepts. The judgmental process that constitutes the secondary labeling process becomes deeper and more extensive once it is supported through religion, philosophy, or science. We also try to justify this labeling process by saying that things exist definitively in the way that we have defined or labeled them.

The whole process boils down to these two fundamental fixations: innate and imputed self-clinging. In dealing with these two fixations, it is important to first recognize them as the basic problem or target and then tackle them through investigating their true nature. Otherwise, it is like shooting an arrow in the dark, we will miss our target and we might even hit an innocent person. No matter what investigation or contemplation we use or how well we use it, if we do not clearly identify its object or target, we are not likely to accomplish much. Here our target is everything that we cling to as truly existent and real. We are looking at how we think, how we perceive, and how we conceive of this.

In terms of our clinging to what we think is “me,” on the basis of our innate vague sense of “me,” we generate several wrong ideas. These can be summarized as three incorrect ways of perceiving our assumed self: clinging to it as being **permanent**, **singular**, and **independent**. Each of these three types of clinging is associated with a corresponding type of ignorance. Clinging to the self as being **permanent** arises due to **ignorance about time**. Clinging to the self as being **singular** comes from **ignorance about the objects that are mistakenly regarded as the self**. Clinging to the self as being **independent** arises from **ignorance about causes and conditions**.

Of course, when asked specifically, most of us would agree that we are not permanent or completely independent. However, when we are reminded of our impermanence in ways that we cannot ignore, such as getting gray hairs, falling ill, being in a car accident, or facing death, we usually become very upset. Likewise, if asked, we would surely say that our left big toe is not our personal self, but when it hurts or when we even lose it, we do not at all regard ourselves as separate from this toe. Thus, a very effective contemplation on our sense of “me” is to consider how it affects our individual sense of our identity to imagine losing, one by one, all our body parts. In addition, we can ask ourselves, at what point in this process of losing our limbs do we still feel like the same person whom we believe we are now, in full possession of all our body parts. Do we change in our existence as John or Mary when we lose one finger, or does it take several limbs? What if just our torso and head were left? And when do we cease to exist as a person altogether? The same contemplation can be applied to losing our relatives, our friends, our possessions, and certain features of our mind, as with senility. Such contemplations may sound strange, but in practice, they are excellent and powerful tools for learning something about ourselves and our attachments in a personal way that is quite different from mere theoretical speculations about a hypothetical self. At the same time, they also work on our concepts of regarding our body and mind as well as all other phenomena as real and distinct entities, such as seeing the collection of many body parts as a single “body”; taking the diversity of our

momentarily changing feelings, thoughts, and perceptions to be one “mind”; or regarding an assemblage of various wooden or metal parts as a “chair” or a “car.”

In more detail, the first incorrect notion is that we see ourselves as being **permanent**. Of course we never say to others in so many words, “I am permanent,” but we basically think of our self as being something lasting and definitely not as being momentarily changing. **This comes from ignorance about past, present, and future.** Not seeing the nature of our momentary existence, we **lump** all three times together as one and then say, “This is me. I am the same person I was yesterday, the day before, last year, twenty years ago, thirty years ago...” In this idea that “I am the same person,” there is a sense of permanence. This also extends into the future when we say, “I will do such-and-such next month. I will retire in ten years. I will travel around the world.” We do not see that the future is made up of moments that are yet to come; that every moment we live is a separate, independent moment; and that there is not a single unchanging self that exists throughout all these moments. **All of this arises from our ignorance with respect to time and the momentary impermanence of everything conditioned.**

The second incorrect notion is that we cling to the self as being a **singular** entity. When we say “I,” we think of it as one, we see ourselves as one distinct person. But what is this “self” or “I,” when we actually look at it? When we look at the object of self-fixation, we find that the self is not singular but multiple. For the basis of self-clinging consists of nothing but all the many different elements of our psychophysical existence. Therefore, the self is not singular, but is composed of our body, our thoughts, our perceptions, our emotions, and so on. In brief, we can say that **there are two objects of self-clinging—body and mind.** This means that the self is not singular; it has at least two objects. And when we examine these two, we find that they too consist of many parts. **Our body has different parts and also the mind has many moments and functions; neither is a single entity.** Nevertheless, though the self cannot be singular, we have this ignorance with respect to the singularity of the self.

The third incorrect notion is that we think the self is **independent** and that we are in control. We believe that it is not dependent upon anything while, in fact, **the very existence and notion of a self is dependent upon many causes and conditions coming together.** This is the ignorance about such causes and conditions.

Thus, our many wrong ideas about the self can be summarized in these three incorrect notions, or mistaken ways, of fixating on a perceived self. However, when we analyze these different ways of clinging, we see that our fixations are based on a very coarse understanding of the self. Through our analysis, we begin to develop a more subtle understanding. **We begin to see how we cling onto the self as permanent, while it is impermanent; singular, while it is multiple; and independent, while it depends on many causes and conditions.** In this way, we discover that our original assumptions do not reflect reality. Moreover, when we look at this personal self; **we find two elements, the object that we misconceive as our self and the mind that fixates on them as a self.**

The Screen onto which we Project Ourselves

When we look at our **body** and **mind**, we see that they are the basis upon which we think, “This is me.” So it is important to relate with these two objects and analyze each one to see exactly *where* this “self” is located. Our sense of “I,” of “me-ness,” is so strong and seemingly obvious that we should be able to find this self, if it truly exists. Therefore, **in the first stage of our analysis, we should try to pinpoint the location of our self**. Is it located in just our body or our mind? Or does the basis of the self consist of body and mind together?

Once we have reached a conclusion about the rough location of the self, **in the second stage of our analysis, we look into exactly *what* this self is**. What is it that we cling to as our “self,” as “me”? If we think that the self is in the body, for example, then we would ask, “Is the self the whole body, or one of its parts? Is it the brain? Is it the heart?” If we have gone through all body parts and conclude that none of them is the self, that there is not a self within any of them, then we apply the same line of investigation to the mind. If we think that the self is most likely to be located within our feelings, we would ask, “Is the self the totality of feelings, or is it just one particular feeling? If it is one feeling, which one is it?” Then, we continue in the same way with our perceptions, thoughts, and all other mental events.

If we say that the self is our body, then it would follow that our body is permanent, singular, and independent of other causes and conditions, because this is how we perceive our self. But in that case, it would follow that the self, which is singular and is the body, could not include any of the aspects of mind. Therefore, our self would exist as the body alone and lack any attributes of the mind. The reverse applies if we think of our self as being just our mind. If we think that body and mind together are the self, we would have at least two separate selves, or many more, if we consider all the different parts of body and mind. However, this clearly contradicts our experience and shows that the self is neither singular nor permanent, because when we think of the self, we think not only of our body, but also of all the many things that are going on in our mind.

When we examine in this way, the question is where we can find our self and the clinging to it. Sometimes we perceive the sense of “I” or “me” as being our body. For example, when we have a headache, we say, “I have a headache.” We don’t say, “The body has a headache.” In this situation, we perceive our body or our head as the self. Similarly, when we cut ourselves in the kitchen, we say, “I cut myself.” Again, we see ourselves as our body. There are many more examples that show us how we often perceive the body as the self. However, when we experience mental suffering, we say, “I’m unhappy. I’m depressed.” In this case, we are regarding our mind as the self—our fixation has switched over to a different object. In everyday life, we constantly alternate between fixating on our self as being either the body as a whole, or

certain parts of it; the mind as a whole, or certain of its aspects. Much of our confusion and suffering comes from not seeing this clearly, which is why we don't really know who we are.

Therefore, we should analyze and gain some certainty about where and what the self is. Is it the body or is it the mind? If the self is the body, then, from hair to toes, where is it? If the self is the mind, is it in our feelings, discriminations, perceptions, thoughts, or any other mental impulses? If it is within our consciousness, then which one is it? We have many types of consciousnesses—our five sense consciousnesses and the thinking consciousness. It is important to analyze the objects of fixating on the self in this way.

The Mind of Fixation

When we look at the self of person, as mentioned earlier, we find **two elements—the object of self-clinging and the subjective mind that clings in this way**. These two, object and subject, exist only by way of their interdependent relationship. If we have thoroughly analyzed and found no self in any or all the parts of our body and mind, then it naturally follows that the mind that fixates on that nonexistent self must actually also be nonexistent. In other words, the mind of fixation (the subject that seems to observe and cling to a nonexistent object) cannot exist really either, it is just a fixed idea holding on to a phantom. Once we have determined that there is no self anywhere in all these objects that could be its possible location, we can be certain that the self simply does not exist. As a consequence, we can also be certain that the mind that clings to that notion has no independent reality either. Therefore, there is absolutely no existence of both a self and the clinging to it.

The Interdependent Self

From the Buddhist point of view, the self exists only on the level of relative reality and only as a conventional imputation on the basis of our body and mind. That is why it is called interdependent. We can illustrate this with the example of five matchsticks standing upright, leaning together to form the shape of a tent. Any one of these matchsticks could not stand up without relying on the support of the others. In the same way, the illusion of our self can only be supported on the basis of all the elements of our body and mind coming together. However, this means nothing other than that whatever is dependent on causes and conditions has no true existence of its own.

In other words, **whatever is based on a collection has no self-existence**. This can be further illustrated by the example of a car. What we call a “car” is nothing but a collection of many different components: four tires, a body, an engine, a steering wheel, gas and brake pedals, seats, windows, and so forth. If we look at it in this way, there is no separate entity called “car” beyond the coming together of these parts. But we cannot find the car in any one of the individual parts or mechanisms either. The parts have their own designations, such as “tire,”

“seat,” and “steering wheel.” Each one has a different name and is clearly not the car. Thus, our illusory notion of a “car” only appears as the result of the coming together of many causes and conditions. In the same way, **just as there is no inherently existing car, there is no independently existing self.** The self that we experience conventionally has the nature of interdependence. Accordingly, in its own nature, it is devoid of anything permanent, singular, or independent—in fact, of anything truly existent.

We can also say that the self that we experience as coming from a past moment into the present moment and continuing on into a future moment is like a reflection of the moon in clear water. This reflection appears so vividly and clearly, yet it has no solid existence. It appears due to the coming together of certain causes and conditions: clear water, an absence of wind, the moon above, and a sky that is free of clouds. In the same way, the self, which appears to us so vividly and clearly, is just a hollow form. When all its causes and conditions come together, we have the seeming appearance of a self that continues from the past and into the future. However, that self is as illusory and ungraspable as a reflection of the moon in water.

How Body and Mind Exist

When we analyze the two main aspects of our existence, body and mind, we must address the question of how they exist. When we look at the body, we are starting with physical matter. Conventionally speaking, we usually accept that matter exists on a subtle level as countless, infinitesimal, particles or atoms, which represent the building blocks of larger forms. However, according to Buddhist analysis and also modern physics, when we analyze these atoms using logical analysis or experiments, we cannot find any solid matter of physical substance that truly exists. Regardless of how deep and refined our analysis may be, we will not be able to find any particles of which coarser objects are composed. TVs, telephones, newspapers, and our own bodies, all of them are forms that can be broken down to an atomic level. But when we arrive at that level, we find that these subtle particles are not solid entities either. They are not “the last remaining” thing, because they can be further divided. We cannot find anything that is, in itself, “partless.” Thus, if we analyze thoroughly and do not find any truly existing particles on the most subtle level, what is the basis for the tangible forms that we see and use every day?

We can combine our understanding arrived at through reasoning with the insights of scientists working in the field of contemporary physics. Many of these scientists are suggesting that the basic make-up of existence goes far beyond the atomic level; whatever it is that exists as a creative force is not solid matter, but exists more as constantly changing energy fields, to which names like “quarks” or “strings” are given. Giving names to such energy fields makes it all sound a little more substantial than if this were just identified as “nothingness” or “emptiness.” Emptiness scares people, but “quarks” and “strings” are somehow more comforting. They may

be nicer words, but in the end, they come down to the same thing, emptiness. So modern science arrives, but its own means, at the same conclusion as reasoning and logical analysis.

When we look at mind to see how it exists, we see that, like the body, the mind has many parts, and each part is momentary. When we look very carefully at this momentary nature of mind we can isolate a single moment of thought, and this single moment can be regarded as the smallest unit of mind, akin to the atom. However, when we look further, we find that this single moment of thought still has three parts, a beginning, a middle, and an end. Put another way, thoughts momentarily arise, abide, and cease. Each thought goes through this three-stage process, but when we examine what we actually mean by “a thought,” we find that we are usually talking about the second stage, which is abiding. For most of us, that is the only perceptible moment. However, when we look carefully at this abiding moment of thought, we find that it, too, has three parts, one that is just arising, one that is abiding, and another one that is just ceasing. Finally, we begin to see that this very subtle moment of thought actually cannot be found. This is the same for all moments of consciousnesses, regardless of whether we deal with a moment of feeling, perception, or thought. Therefore, when we look at the mind and try to find some true existence—a solid existence that is permanent, singular and independent—such a nature of mind cannot be found.

In brief, all bases of self-clinging (body and mind) are nothing but illusory forms, appearing yet not to be found. Unanalyzed, these forms seem quite real and solid, but when we analyze them, they are like mirages. Sometimes, when you are driving on a highway, you may see water on the road ahead. You may even see the reflection of the lights of other cars in the water. But when you get closer, there is nothing but asphalt and hot air. In the same way, body and mind seem very real, and the world seems very solid, when we don’t analyze them. However, when we look closely at our experiences, we find only the arising, abiding, and ceasing of selfless, ungraspable, and transitory states, be they states of happiness or suffering. This may be bad news if you have a happy mind, but it’s good news if you have a suffering mind.

The Truth is Not Out There

At some point in our analysis of our self, we may say, “Okay, I cannot really find a truly existent unchanging self anywhere in my body and mind, but I don’t believe that everything is simply empty and unreal.” Of course who would believe right away that their own bodies, friends, houses, and cars are complete fictions and just illusions? At that point, it is time to investigate all other phenomena in the same way as we did ourselves. When we do so, we may initially develop doubt that everything is as solidly real as we think it is. Continuing the analysis, we may arrive at the thought “Probably all this is actually unreal and empty.” The end

of our analysis is reached when we have developed unshakable certainty that all phenomena are unfindable and lack any inherent existence or nature of their own.

Normally we don't say, "This *real* table over there," or "The table that truly exists," or "Can you bring me the table that truly exists?" Nor would we say, "Please call that person who is truly existing in such-and-such a form." If someone asks us, "What is this?" we will simply respond, "It is a table." What they are really asking us is, "What is appearing in your mind? What do you think is out there that appears in your mind?" When we answer, "A table," what we actually mean is that the table appears out there and that it truly exists outside of our mind.

What we call "a table" no doubt appears in our mind, but does it really exist out there, outside the mind? And if so, how does it exist out there? How did it come to appear to be out there? How can we tell that there is a table? We can see it, we can touch it, and it can support books and flowers. When we try to walk through it, we hurt our legs. That is how we think about a table. No matter how many labels we put on top of that, no matter what scientific, religious, or philosophical reasonings we apply, we always begin with the notion that a given object has some real existence outside of our mind.

Reality is Consensus

We might also reason that all of our friends have the same experience as we do; they see it, touch it, put things on it, and trip over it. We conclude that if all our friends experience the table in this way, then there must be a table out there. If we reason this way, we imply that the existence of an external reality can be determined through majority vote. If only one person sees something out there, something other than what most people see, we question that person's perception. Or, if somebody sees something in the space right in front of us, something like "Lucy in the sky with diamonds," everyone thinks they are crazy. There is no Lucy out there and no diamonds. We all constantly vote on what kind of existence there is. Furthermore, we also vote with our senses. We think, "My eye consciousness agrees with my ear consciousness, which agrees with my body consciousness; my eye can see these things, my ear can hear them, my body can touch them, and my nose can smell them." If all our senses agree that the object is out there, then we conclude that it has an existence outside of the mind.

Accepting such "majority confusion," we agree on what is real and what is not. However, even if millions of people have gone crazy, that does not change the nature of things. No matter how many crazy people agree on a crazy idea, it is still a crazy idea. From the point of view of someone who sees things as they actually are, no matter how many ordinary beings mistakenly agree about the nature of existence and what is real, that does not change what is truly the case.

When we look at our senses, with which we decide what is real and how it is real, we find that they are rather low tech when compared with most animals. Also, if our eyes were not set horizontally as they are, but vertically, we would see the world quite differently from how we see it now. So which seeing is the correct seeing? We humans see the world one way and other beings, dogs, cats, ants, grasshoppers, fish, and other creatures, see it very differently. Scientists tell us that dogs do not see colors the way we do and that cats see shapes differently from us. If the matter of true existence were put to a vote, the human perception of “reality” would undoubtedly lose.

All of our experiences of what we take to be actual color or actual shape are, in fact, a mix of constructed and confused thoughts and perceptions. All of them come from the basic cause of delusion and ignorance, clinging to our self and real phenomena. At present, we are extremely well trained in seeing phenomena as real and nonempty. When engaging in Buddhist analysis, we basically retrain in seeing phenomena as being empty of real existence. In other words, over a long time we have managed to be completely and effortlessly accustomed to imagining the real existence of ourselves and all phenomena. In the contemplative analysis that we do here, the point is to grow equally accustomed to the complete lack of our self and real phenomena, which is only possible through repeated familiarization with such analysis. The Sanskrit term for “meditation” (*bhavana*) literally means “to perfume.” Thus, meditation can be understood as perfuming our mind with the insight into emptiness until the scent of this insight becomes inseparable from and a natural part of our mind’s fabric.

Understanding Selflessness in the Context of the Two Levels of Reality

It is important to remember that the analyses described here are presented from the point of view of **ultimate reality**, not from the point of view of relative truth or **conventional reality**. From the perspective of the ultimate or absolute nature, we say that things do not have true existence but are empty in nature. However, from the relative or conventional point of view, things do have interdependent existence. Things exist, but in a state of interdependence. There is the interdependent arising of self and the interdependent continuity of self, that is a sense of self that continues from the past into the present and on into the future.

Because there is this sense of continuity in relative truth, the Buddha presented the teachings about karma (cause and effect) and how individuals can transform their mental afflictions and achieve freedom. However, any sense of continuity still refers to relative and interdependent existence. Ultimately, nothing exists solidly; there is nothing other than the vast web of constantly changing and interdependently existing causes and conditions. Relatively speaking, there is a world, but its nature is entirely contingent. Therefore, when we study this view of egolessness, we must separate the relative truth and the ultimate truth. If we mix them, we will become confused. Once during a teaching on emptiness, someone asked “If everything

is empty, then isn't your chair also empty?" I said, "Yes, of course, my chair is also empty." The student continued, "Then how can you sit on it? Why don't you fall to the floor, if it is empty?" What this person was trying to do was put a relative, solid person on an absolute, unreal and empty chair, thus mixing the two truths. You must see that when the chair is empty, the person is empty too.

Interdependent existence is the nature of the relative truth, which we call "mere appearance," or "mere existence." Everything merely appears to be real, much like in a dream. For example, in a dream when you see fire and put your finger into it, it gets burned. But when you awaken from that dream, you realize that there was no fire, no person, and no action of burning. None of that existed in actual reality. In the same way, when we are confused about the appearances of relative reality, we may have many vivid experiences, just as we do when we are dreaming, but when we realize the actual nature of reality, it is like waking up from a dream, we are no longer confused about relative appearances. Therefore, distinguishing between the relative and ultimate levels of reality is very necessary. We must understand that, when we are talking about selflessness or emptiness, we are speaking from the perspective of absolute truth.

Resting in Certainty

When we have thoroughly practiced such analytical contemplations, have reached the point where we have looked deeply and extensively into both body and mind, and have been unable to find the existence of a self, we will experience a sense of a **gap**. That is the beginning of certainty in selflessness. Certainty comes not only from hearing or reading words about selflessness, but primarily from our personal experience of searching and analyzing, through which we reach our own conclusions. This is very important. So, when we reach that level of certainty, we should rest in it without any concepts. Simply relax and let go of everything, all your thoughts, including the thought of the observer. That is actually the point when the observer and the observed merge. They come together and there is no more separation. It is like rubbing two wooden sticks against each other to create a fire. The fire that is produced will burn both sticks, not just one. In the same way, when you have realized selflessness, the fire of that wisdom will transcend both subject and object. Thus, we should relax and rest freely. Whether we feel we have achieved a complete experience of selflessness or only a glimpse, it does not matter. We just rest in that nature of groundlessness.

This is the first stage of the meditation on emptiness, not finding the self and then resting in the certainty of its nonexistence. We reach this point through analysis. *Look* at your body, *look* at your mind—where is the self? Then *rest* in the very moment of not finding the self. It is crucial not to miss that moment. Sometimes we may get lost in the analysis. We don't find anything and we think, "Oh, I'll just go back over it again and maybe find something." Instead, at the point where we don't find anything, we should rest as much as we can. At other

times, when we have come to the point of resting, we find the experience so beautiful that we want to hold onto it. Then grasping arises, and the thought process resumes. At that point, we should return to our analysis.

The importance of repeatedly alternating our analyzing and resting minds lies in its leading us to greater and greater certainty. The certainty that is grounded in such direct experience is much stronger than the confidence we might have in someone else's experience. If we merely believe the words of gurus or other meditators who say, "Yes, it is all empty," then our meditation becomes very shallow. At some point, we may be forced to acknowledge that we actually have no idea what we are doing.

But if we reach certainty through our own analysis, then that certainty will be much deeper, because it is our own conclusion. When our own conclusion and the Buddha's words come together, we gain a much deeper and more valuable experience.

Finding the Middle Way

As our practice of meditation on selflessness matures, eventually we will be able to rest free of grasping at either existence or nonexistence, which are regarded equally as extreme beliefs. On the one hand, if we solidly believe in the inherent existence of things, then we are denying their ultimately unreal nature. On the other hand, if we entertain a solid belief in the utter nonexistence of things, then we are denying conventional appearances, which do have interdependent existence on the level of relative reality. No matter which extreme we fixate on, they are equal in their power to obscure the direct experience of utter mental openness, which is beyond all such conceptual fabrications.

In order to arrive at the middle way beyond these two extremes, it is necessary to first go to the extreme of nonexistence. This means that, **in our meditation here, we should emphasize the empty or ultimate nature of mind and phenomena, and de-emphasize the relative appearing aspect.** This is because right now we have such a strong clinging to existence in general, in the existence of the self, to the existence of our mind, to the existence of our body, and everything else. Because our clinging to existence is so intense and predominant, we should first throw our mind all the way to the other extreme of nonexistence. We should go in that direction as far as we can. However, no matter how far we go, our mind will always be pulled back toward existence and never become completely stuck in the view of nonexistence, because there is a kind of gravity that naturally pulls us back. That gravity is the force of our clinging and grasping at solid existence. So when we find ourselves drifting back in that direction, we again throw our mind toward the extremes of nonexistence. It is like a pendulum swinging between two opposite points. We do this over and over until, at some point, we find the middle way beyond the extreme points of solid existence and utter nonexistence. Thus, at the beginning,

in order to counteract our deeply ingrained tendency to take everything to be really existent, resting in a sense of nonexistence as the complete opposite of existence is very important.

Once we are able to stabilize our certainty in nonexistence and rest within that for a long time, we should change the focus of our practice. We may find that we have become attached to the view of nonexistence, which is also a fault. Then we should begin to dismantle the idea of nonexistence too and try to transcend that fixation as well. In the beginning stage of our practice, however, we do not have to worry about that. We should simply rest in the nonexistence of our personal self and all other phenomena as much as we can.

Freedom, nothing left to lose and nothing more to gain

After cutting the root and fundamental cause of all our suffering, pain, problems, and neuroses, the clinging to our ego and real things, there are no more results of that cause. This is called **nirvana** or true freedom and mental peace. When we reach the level of no more ego, we reach the level of no more suffering, which ends all our basic fear and also the fear of any further suffering in the future for good. However, the state called “nirvana” does not just mean the sheer absence of suffering and mental afflictions, but represents the final manifestation of mind’s innate Buddha qualities unobscured by anything whatsoever. Thus, there is nothing to lose in terms of ignorance and suffering, and there is nothing more to gain in terms of inner space, openness, wisdom, and compassion.