

Excerpt from *The Tibetan Yogas of Dream and Sleep*
Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche

From Part Six: Elaborations, Chapter 6: “Self” (page 200-202)

The word *self* has been defined differently by various religions and philosophies from ancient times to the present. Bon-Buddhism places a great emphasis on the doctrine of no-self or emptiness (shunyata), which is the ultimate truth of all phenomena. Without understanding emptiness it is difficult to cut the root of the egoic self and to find liberation from its boundaries.

However, when we read about the spiritual journey we also read about self-liberation and self-realization. And we certainly seem to be a self. We can argue to convince others that we do not have a self, but when our life is threatened or something is taken from us, the self that we claim does not exist can become quite afraid or upset.

According to Bon-Buddhism, the conventional self does exist. Otherwise no one would create karma, suffer, and find liberation. It is the inherent self that does not exist. Lack of an inherent self means that there is no core discrete entity that is unchanging through time. Though the nature of mind does not change, it should not be confused with a discrete entity, a “self,” a little bit of indestructible awareness that is “me.” The nature of mind is not an individual’s possession and is not an individual. It is the nature of sentience itself and is the same for all sentient beings.

Let us again refer to the example of reflections in a mirror. If we focus on the reflections, we can say there is this reflection and that other reflection, pointing to two different images. They grow larger and smaller, come and go, and we can follow them around in the mirror as if they were separate beings. They are like the conventional self. However, the reflections are not discrete entities, they are a play of light, unsubstantiated illusions in the empty luminosity of the mirror. They exist as separate entities only through conceptualizing them as such. The reflections are a manifestation of the nature of the mirror, just as the conventional self is a manifestation that arises from, abides in, and dissolves back into the empty limpidity of the base of existence, kunzhi.

The conventional self with which you normally identify and the moving mind which gives rise to it are both fluid, dynamic, provisional, substanceless, mutable, impermanent, and lacking in inherent existence, like the reflection in the mirror. You can see this in your own life if you examine it. Imagine filling out forms with information about yourself. You list your name, gender, age, address, job, relationship status, and physical description. You take tests that describe your personality traits and I.Q. You write down your goals and dreams, beliefs, thoughts, values, and fears.

Now imagine all those things taken away. What is left? Take away more—your friends and home, your country and clothes. You lose the ability to speak or to think with language. You lose your memories. You lose your senses. Where is your self? Is it your body? What if you lose your arms and legs, live with a mechanical heart and a lung machine, suffer brain damage and lose mental functions. At what point do you stop being a self? If you keep peeling away layers of identity and hierarchies of attributes, at some point there is nothing left.

You are not the self you were when you were one year old, or ten. You are not the self you were even an hour ago. There is nothing that does not change. At death, the last remnants of what seems to be an unchanging self are gone. When reborn, you may be a different type of being altogether, with a different body, different gender, different mental capacity. It is not that

you are not an individual—obviously you are—but that all individuals lack inherent, independent existence. The conventional self is radically contingent, existing as a moment-to-moment fabrication like the stream of thoughts that endlessly arise in the clarity of the mind, or the unceasing manifestations of images in the mirror. Thoughts exist as thoughts, but when they are examined in meditation they dissolve into the emptiness from which they arose. It is the same with the conventional self: when deeply examined, it proves only to be a concept ascribed to a loosely defined collection of constantly changing events. And just as thoughts continue to arise, so do our provisional identities. Erroneously identifying with the conventional self and taking oneself to be a subject surrounded by objects is the foundation of dualistic vision and is the root dichotomy upon which the endless suffering of samsara is founded.

From Part Six: Elaborations, Chapter 7: “Paradox of the Essenceless Self” (page 203)

But how, if the base of the individual is pure, empty awareness, can a conventional self and a moving mind exist at all? Here is an example based on experiences we all have: when we dream, an entire world manifests in which we can have any kind of experience. During the dream we are identified with one subject, but there are other beings, apparently separate from us, having their own experiences and seeming as real as the self we take ourselves to be. There is also an apparent material world: the floors hold us up, our body has sensations, we can eat and touch.

When we wake, we realize that the dream was only a projection of our mind. It took place in our mind and was made of the energy of our mind. But we were lost in it, reacting to the mind-created images as if they were real and outside of ourselves. Our mind is able to create a dream and to identify with one being that it places in the dream, while disidentifying with others. We can even identify with subjects that are far different than we are in our daily life.

As ordinary beings, we are, in the same way, identified right now with a conventional self that is also a projection of mind. We relate to apparent objects and entities that are further mind projections. The base of existence (kunzhi) has the capacity to manifest everything that exists, even beings that become distracted from their true nature, just as our mind can project beings that are apparently separate from us in a dream. When we wake, the dream that is our conventional self dissolves into pure emptiness and luminous clarity.