



Sense Of Self Is An Essential Skill Of Mind, by Paul Fleischman

Many articles in the Western press have confused the Buddha's idea

of *anatta*, the absence of an eternal soul, with the idea that meditation should rid you of your ordinary sense of self. Then the press has utilized neuropsychology to confirm this point. Psychologists like Bruce Hood, in his book, *The Self Illusion*, have encouraged people to look upon their sense of self as something to be discredited and abandoned.

All of this is dismaying to a psychiatrist who spent much of his professional life helping disorganized, fragile, and wavering people to develop a firm and coherent sense of self. Let me emphasize it in one clear sentence: our sense of self is a creation, an essential skill of our mind. Our minds collect the information contained in our body sensations to fabricate an integrated and continuous identity. This gives us greater memory, consistency and flexibility - you could say *character* or *personality* - than we would have if we were limited to immediate reactivity.

There is an enormous difference between understanding that our self is created, versus devaluing it. After all, clothes, cars, and houses are created things, and we don't try to live without them. Our body is a created thing and we can't imagine trying to live without it. Our sense of self is an integrative, psychological system that we must have to live a focused, directed and self-consistent life. In the psychological sense, the Buddha had a powerful sense of self that gave him continuity and consistency across a lifetime of teaching and leadership.

There are many people who have difficulty creating a consistent, flexible, responsible internal executive. Their problems may be due to many reasons, either neurological and/or environmental. These neighbors and family members of ours suffer excessively, because they are unable to generate around themselves a world of goals, loves, people, and tasks. We should not weaken the executive function of confused people by implying that their psychologically constructed sense of self, which they need in order to function, should be abandoned, simply because all of their being is ultimately ephemeral.

When we absorb the wisdom of meditation, we see our selves as chimera, and when we take care of our daily business, we count on ourselves, to be effective, just as the Buddha was. We are the world, using all the laws of science and running on the energy of the Big Bang. We are a

fabrication, created by our brains as they integrate and portray ephemeral body sensations. And we are people, born to eat, meditate, make friends and hold jobs. All of these dimensions co-exist and express aspects of a bigger truth.Â

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