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CHAPTER ONE

The Self I Don't Believe In

"I do not know myself and God forbid that I should."

—GÖETHE¹

When Yossarian, the protagonist of Joseph Heller's novel *Catch 22*, speaks of God in an insulting way, the atheist wife of Lieutenant Scheisskopf springs to His defense: "But the God I don't believe in is a *good* God, a *just* God, a *merciful* God,"² she protests. Perhaps it's time for me to describe, if not actually defend, the kind of self in which I don't believe.

Throughout recorded history, and presumably for a considerable period of time before, philosophers and mystics have debated the kinds of selves that they do or don't believe in. The self has been seen as purely material and as immaterial. It has been seen as mortal and immortal. It's been seen as primary and as something derived from the world. It's been seen as a unitary phenomenon and as a "bundle" of perceptions. It's been seen as something aloof from the world and

as an activity inseparable from the world. It's been seen as illusory and as ultimately real. It's been seen as a problem to be solved and as the ultimate solution to all our problems. More recently, scientists—and particularly, neuroscientists—have added their voices to the discussion. They often use different terms from the philosophers, but they inevitably recapitulate the same positions. I could not even attempt to summarize all the competing theories, let alone evaluate them. But I do want to clarify what kind of self the Buddhist tradition doesn't believe in and in which I don't believe.

It bears repeating, because it's a point so often mangled, that the Buddha never denied the existence of the self. He did point out repeatedly that it is impossible to define the self in any way by saying that *this* is the self or *that* is the self. But saying you can't define the self is not the same thing as saying there is no self. He of course used the term "self" often, in a conventional sense, by saying things such as, "One truly is the protector of oneself," and, "Difficult, indeed, is self-control." This is an unproblematic use of the word "self," used simply because language requires that we talk about reflexive actions—that is, those actions where we are both the subject and the object. When we're talking about a conventional self, then, we mean one where the individual recognizes him or herself as an individual and acts in accordance with that recognition. In other words, there is some degree of reflexive recognition and reflexive action.

The recognition of a conventional self is found even in some animals. A common test for self-awareness is to surreptitiously place a mark (a splash of paint, for example) on an animal's face and then put the animal in front of a mirror—a test devised by Gordon G. Gallup Jr. in 1970. Elephants, magpies, dolphins, chimpanzees, and many other primates recognize that they have selves, according to the

mirror test. When they see themselves in a mirror they try to touch or remove the mark. Human babies, it turns out, are unable to recognize themselves in a mirror until they are several months old and will treat the mirror image as if it were a separate individual. Young babies do not have conventional selves. Dogs too, for all their intelligence, will either ignore the “other dog” in the mirror or will bark at it. (These tests, by the way, strike me as being rather chauvinistically fixated on the sense of vision. Perhaps an intelligent race of dogs would conclude that humans are not self-aware if the latter failed to recognize their own scent.) The conventional self revealed in the mirror test is simply a function of reflexive recognition and action. The animal can visually recognize itself as an individual, and it can act upon knowledge gained through that visual recognition. There’s no metaphysical or philosophical statement being made about the nature of that self beyond the fact of self-recognition.

Our assumptions about our selves, however, transcend mere self-recognition. The understanding of the self against which the Buddha argued vigorously, and which many contemporary scientists and philosophers also dispute, is the notion of a self that is unchanging and separate. We assume these qualities belong to the self, not so much as part of a thought-out philosophical standpoint arrived at after careful deliberation, but as an instinctual response. This response is at least partly based on the fear of acknowledging our existential situation as fragile and transitory creatures, but also based on a number of perceptual distortions that we’ll examine shortly.

In psychology, the term “self” can refer to those personal attributes we can’t imagine ourselves without—those things that represent, for us, the core of our being, or our identity. What is considered to constitute that core will vary from person to person. Gender or sexual

preferences or ethnicity may often be seen as intrinsic to the self—we can't imagine being ourselves if one of those things were to be magically changed. Other qualities, such as our occupation or our food preferences, may be seen as more peripheral. You can no doubt think of examples that you consider either core or peripheral to your own sense of self. If we identify certain attributes of the self as “essential,” then it stands to reason that the core self must be something unchanging. After all, if something is essential, it must be permanent. Although this kind of thinking predominated at the time of the Buddha, he disagreed that there was an unchanging core to the self. Instead he saw the self as composed of a number of ever-changing processes.

Once we see the self as static, it then becomes a kind of *thing* separated from other things—the various inanimate objects, plants, animals, and of course other selves that exist in the world. And we tend to see *things* as being separate. You have your self. I have my self. My self perceives this thing called the world, and sees itself as being separate from the world. How could it not, since it considers itself to have an unchanging core? If the self has an immutable core, then the self must be in some way untouched by and independent of the world. But the self, the Buddha explained, is a process that arises entirely in dependence upon things that are non-self. The physical self arises in dependence upon things that are not-self, and our inner experience also arises in dependence upon things that are not-self.

Often this perspective is talked about in terms of interconnectedness or interdependence—terms the Buddha never used but that are useful nonetheless. In the Six Element Practice, we're reminded that each Element is not divided into a “me” element and an “other” element. There is, for example, no “me” Earth Element as opposed to an “other” Earth Element. There is just one element, which is in a certain

sense “borrowed” from the outside world in order to constitute a self. The self, however, mistakenly taking itself to be something substantive and separate, confuses borrowing with ownership, much like the person who keeps a borrowed book for so long that he regards it as his own possession and resents having to return it to its true owner. A large part of the effect of the Six Element Practice hinges upon cultivating the recognition that we cannot truly own anything. We observe the elements flowing from the outside, non-self, world, through our selves and back into the outside world again. The entire self is made, then, of stuff that is non-self. What composes our self is not some separate collection of “stuff” owned in any way by the self—we can’t hold onto any of the matter that flows through us. In fact, we can’t even hold onto any of the experiences that flow through our minds. So in effect we own nothing, and therefore nothing that constitutes us can be seen as constituting a self.

So this is the kind of self I do not believe in. I do believe I have a conventional self, which right now is busy typing words on a keyboard. I see my body and recognize it as me rather than you. I experience a flow of experience that is unique to me. But what of anything beyond that? I do not believe that I—or you, for that matter—have a self that is permanent and separate. And when I talk about belief and non-belief I am not talking about “blind faith.” I mean to say that my *experience* is that I do not have a self of this sort.

The Kind of Self I Do Believe In

So what kind of self *do* I believe I have, or what kind of self do I *experience* myself as having? Whenever I turn my attention to my sense of self, what I find is nothing but an ever-changing stream of

experiences. This stream changes so rapidly that I fear it would be misleading to call it a self, so loaded is the word “self” with notions of permanence. When I observe my experience, for moments it appears that I do indeed have a (static) self—much as when you glance at a clock with a second hand you may momentarily be convinced that the clock has stopped until that hand takes another tick around the dial. But the moment passes and so does the sense of having a self. I can see my experience as being an endless succession of selves, each of which exists for a few moments, but frankly it seems more like there is no “real” self there. It’s hard to describe the quality of this experience, but it’s generally delightful to notice the ever-changing constellation of experiences that never quite seem to constitute a self. There’s a sense of freedom that accompanies this perspective.

I should point out that I didn’t realize the extent to which I used to believe I had a static, separate, self-owning self until finally my sense of having such a self evaporated. In fact, I think that it’s often the case that we don’t fully realize how limiting a view is until we abandon it. I don’t in any way mourn the loss of my belief in a self—in fact it had the delightful quality of the laying down of some kind of burden and an expansive feeling of liberation. The notion of a self that is static and separate is a source of stress and even misery.

Blind to Change

There are several reasons, I believe, why it seems natural for us to assume the self is static and permanent when in fact it is not. The first of these is that we’re simply not very good at detecting change. Imagine this: you walk into a university building to be interviewed as part of a psychology experiment. At the reception desk, a young

man takes the consent form you hand to him and tells you you'll need to receive an information packet and then go to another room to be questioned. He ducks behind the counter, picks up the packet, hands it to you, and gives you directions. It's just an ordinary encounter. Nothing unusual. You glance at the information you've been handed and go on your way. The bizarre thing is that the person who ducked beneath the counter and the person who stood up to hand you the form were two different people! They looked completely unlike each other. They were different heights, had different hairstyles, and wore different clothing of different colors. They spoke in different voices. And you didn't notice—or at least the vast majority of people don't notice. This was a psychology experiment carried out by Dan Simons and Christopher Chabris at Harvard University.³

In an earlier experiment, Simons had another experimenter stop passersby on a university campus to ask for directions.⁴ Mid-exchange, two men carrying a door would rudely walk between the two people. Afterward, the passersby were asked if they'd noticed anything unusual. Half did not notice that the person they'd been talking to had been switched for another person who had a different appearance, build, and voice, and who was wearing different clothes. That's a lot of change not to see. But these experiments, which illustrate what's called "change blindness," have been repeated in many different forms, and change blindness is our default method of perception, or of non-perception.

There are websites that give you the opportunity to test your ability to notice change.⁵ Typically, two photographs alternate, with a brief moment of blankness between them. The two photographs have what you might expect to be obvious differences—in a scene of an aircraft at an airport, for example, a building has been Photoshopped

out of one version of the image—but it can take many, many attempts to note the change. Once you see the change, it seems obvious. But until that point when the difference comes to your attention, you'd swear the two photographs were identical. And remember, unlike in the college-campus studies mentioned above, you *know* that changes are taking place and you're actively looking for them. The change is there, and it almost seems as if our brains resist seeing it.

A large part of the explanation for change blindness stems from the fact that the brain can only deal with so much information at one time. In the reception area where the participants largely failed to notice one receptionist being replaced by another, a lot was going on. There was furniture. There were signs, the sound of the air conditioning, the exchange of pieces of paper, verbal instructions to process, textures and colors on every surface, smells—and of course part of your brain is already taken up with thinking about things like, “Am I on time? Will I enjoy this interview? When will I get paid? Did he say the waiting room was the second door on the left or on the right? I wish I'd been listening more closely. I never pay attention.” The average person can only keep about seven things in conscious awareness at one time, and only about four things in visual short-term memory. We're so busy selecting the few things absolutely crucial to the task we're involved in that there's not much attention left for other things—like noticing that the person staffing the reception desk is now taller, dressed in different clothes, and has different facial features.

The most famous change-blindness experiment involved showing a video of a basketball game. Participants were asked to count how many times one team's members passed the ball to each other. The participants were so busily involved in this task that they failed to

notice someone in a gorilla costume walk slowly across the basketball court, right between the players!⁶ More than any other, this experiment highlights the limited processing capability of the human brain.

Self, Interrupted

Have you ever experienced going upstairs to get something, but having forgotten the purpose of the trip by the time you arrived? I'm sure you have. Another reason for failing to notice change, and one that is related to change blindness, is that our consciousness is inherently discontinuous. Think again of the change-blindness experiment where the person behind the desk is switched. Each time there's an interruption to our stream of consciousness—having to answer a question, checking that you have the invitation letter in your pocket, the disappearance and reappearance of the desk clerk—your mind has to regroup. The mind focuses on the same subject—the desk clerk, for example—that it was perceiving a few seconds earlier, but you find that you're no longer paying attention with exactly the same mind. The new mind—the one that's recovering from the disappearance of the desk clerk and that has probably dealt with several stray thoughts in the moments before his replacement appeared—is not the same one that saw the first desk clerk. When you find yourself upstairs, wondering what on earth brought you there, you've almost certainly brought about this peculiar form of amnesia by interrupting yourself with a train of thought about another matter entirely. To remember why you went upstairs, you may have to return to the place where you originally had the thought to fetch something. In effect you're reconstructing the self that existed before the interruption—the self that knew why going upstairs was necessary. Interruption is

an important factor in many change-blindness experiments. In the experiments that involve switching between images, the brief flash of a blank screen seems to be an important component of our inability to detect even quite major changes in the photographs—in a sense, a different consciousness looks at each picture.

The point here is that if we don't even notice that a person we've been talking to has been replaced by someone else, or if we can't notice a missing building as we repeatedly flip between two photographs, how are we going to notice that our selves are changing? Just as we look at two different receptionists, one after another, and assume they are the same person because we detect no change, so too we see different "selves" emerging one after another within ourselves, and assume that this is the same person. Even though there has been change, we assume that the self is unchanging. Moment by moment, our perceptions, thoughts, moods, and emotions are changing, reconfiguring, and creating a new self. Continue the process of change—accompanied by change blindness—for years or decades, and we start to assume that there has in fact been no change, or that the change has been purely superficial.

Wired for Belief

A further reason for tending to assume that the self is unchanging hinges on our inability to "think outside the ontological box," for want of a better term. Since we experience something that we call a self right now, we tend to assume that this entity will continue to exist in the future and has always existed in the past. Jesse Bering, director of the Institute of Cognition and Culture, at Queen's University Belfast, in Northern Ireland, suggests that humans suffer "the unshakable