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On the Virtue of Not Knowing Who You Are

Philip C. Novak

■ I once heard Ram Dass, formerly Dick Alpert, tell a story about a matronly woman who attended one of his talks for no other reason than to “get the goods on him.” It seems she was convinced that he was a charlatan and wanted to unmask him. When she left the lecture hall that evening, she apparently went straight to the offices of the local newspaper, for the next day an exposé-type article appeared in it with the following headline: “Ram Dass Admits He Doesn’t Know Who He Is!”

I remember bursting into laughter at this, along with the rest of the audience, for the joke was clear. Far from being the sign of intellec-

tual bankruptcy or psychological confusion that the woman supposed it to be, Ram Dass’ admission seemed, on the contrary, a sign of wisdom. Ram Dass was well aware of the injunction to “know thyself” which exists, explicitly or implicitly, at the heart of wisdom traditions East and West. But like many in his audience Ram Dass also knew from personal experience that following this injunction often issues in a profound *unknowing* about the nature of the self.

Be that as it may, the problem of identity is an inescapable part of being born human and it is perhaps not an overstatement to say that the quality of our lives depends to a large extent on how we deal with it. In the following pages I will attempt two things: 1) to sketch the problem of identity in its universal characteristics and 2) to discuss the Buddhist approach to that problem.

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THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Let us begin by remembering that we are creatures of desire. There pulses in and through us and through all living forms a basic urge to be, to continue experiencing. St. Thomas Aquinas called it the *desiderium naturale*, Spinoza the *conatus*, and the Buddha *bhava-tanha*: the desire of living things to persist in and expand their being. This self-expansive urge which manifests naturally in the individuation of living forms is, for the human being, liable to serious complication. Unlike other life forms whose self-expansive project is confined to biological scenarios, human beings have psyches that require far more than mere sustenance and somatic satisfaction. The psyche renders us *symbolic* creatures, and so we pursue greater and more expansive life in symbolic ways: we hunger for identity, for worth, for self-esteem and for meaning. And because the domain of the psyche is virtually boundless, so is our appetite for these. Every human being born into this world longs to be special, a unique center of importance and value, a possessor of life's fullness. The task of responding to this ontic given is the problem of identity.

It is a *problem* because very early on in human life, the human child begins to receive disconcerting indications that s/he is not the center of the universe s/he feels him/herself to be. Psychologists suspect that, for a while anyway, the infant lives in a magical, self-enclosed world in which all surroundings are extensions of the child's own center. But all too soon the child begins to collide with real existential limits in a world where s/he is decidedly not the center. The die is cast. Here begins the agonizing struggle for a secure identity, for life-beyond-death, for inviolable self-esteem. Make no mistake: long before the child's mind ponders the nature of physical death, his viscera know the nauseating taste of death resulting from a blow to his identity. The bigger stick of candy given to one's brother; being chosen last in the choos-



PHOTO: JEFF GRESKO

ing of sides for a game; these and a thousand other indications hiss "You Dispensable Nobody!" searing his guts. Nor do these dread hints of one's insignificance diminish with the passing of time. William James saw how they continue into adult life and how their constancy must be thought to shape some of the psyche's deepest predispositions. James reflects:

Failure, then failure! so the world stamps us at every turn. We strew it with our blunders, our misdeeds, our lost opportunities, with all the memorials of our inadequacy to our vocation. And with what a damning emphasis does it blot us out! . . . The subtlest forms of suffering known to man are connected with the poisonous humiliations incidental to these results. . . . And they are pivotal human experiences. A process so ubiquitous and everlasting is evidently an integral part of life.¹

As I owe a debt to Ernest Becker in my setting up of the problem of identity² let us hear from him directly:

"... man ... is in an almost constant struggle not to be diminished in his organismic importance. ... This struggle ... is carried on on the most minute levels of symbolic complexity. To be outshone by another is to be attacked at some basic level of organismic durability. To lose, to be second rate, and fail to keep up ... sends a message to the nerve center of the organism's anxiety: "I am overshadowed, inadequate; hence I do not qualify for continued durability, for life, for eternity; hence I will die."³

The problem of identity, then, is chronic. No one in the process of growing up escapes the little diminishments which deep inside echo an insidious reminder of our potential non-being. From the resulting anxiety comes a drivenness, admitting of infinite guises and degrees, to prove to oneself that one is a somebody and not a nobody, that one has a unique identity, a special gift to offer the world, and is a being of worth and significance. Society becomes a stage for identity quests, for the battle to win inviolable self-esteem and thus secure confirmation of oneself as a vital organism. It is an organized set of practices, games, and laws whereby each individual can try to find ways of confirming individual value and worth. Here then is the struggle of life against death, which for the human being, the symbolic animal, becomes primarily the struggle for identity and against contingency, the struggle of "I" for "I" against the threatening That.

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escapes diminishments, echoing inside.*

The child learns two basic strategies to enhance personal significance and these set the pattern for all future adaptations. One is to develop self-powers, both physical and mental, to experience the exhilaration of personal talents, and more importantly, to win with them the approval and acclaim of others. Let us call this self-assertive strategy. The other is to link oneself (via what psychologists call transference) to sources of life or power outside oneself. For lack of a better term, let us call this the self-subordinative strategy. No one

lives long without a terrifying glimpse of the paucity of one's self-powers and it is only natural to want to hitch your wagon to a star. The child's first stars are its parents, their great aura of power and invincibility dominating the childhood horizon. But soon the child, and then the adult, will psychically link himself to other Higher Powers and Sources of Life: authorities, movie stars, leaders and other *mana* personalities, religious credos, political causes, the Homeland, the Lover, the Bank Balance. By linking our identity to these, life can be enhanced, expanded, shored up against the threat of non-being.

Whether at any given moment the mode of the identity quest is that of self-assertion or self-subordination its single overriding dynamic is clear: the child (the father of the man, in Wordsworth's line) learns that it must deny or defend itself against those truths of thought and experience which emphasize its contingency while playing up those which enhance its identity-project. The myriad programs of the human biocomputer become linked by a fundamental theme: desire for and attachment to any loci of thought or experience which affirm the self and enhance its will to be, and defense against and aversion for those loci of thought and experience which impress upon it its contingency and mortality. The psyche becomes a multidimensional webwork of likes and dislikes, desires and aversions both gross and subtle, which manifest the personality in the same way that black and white dots can create the illusion of a face.

By the time one is old enough to even begin to become aware of the unconscious compulsions within one's identity-project, one is already deeply enmeshed in them with little chance to escape their automatism. The continuing need for secure identity unfolds into an egocentric (i.e., identity-grasping) system in which one's beliefs, feelings, experiences, perceptions and behaviors are automatically viewed and assessed around one's sense of value and worth as an individual.

Out of the egocentric whirlpool comes a troublesome precipitate we may call the self-image. It exists as a subsystem within the larger system of the psyche, a relatively stable eddy within the psychic stream. Following Washburn and Stark,⁴ we may define it as the set of all those features, whether real or imagined, in

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defend, the more is required.*

which the individual believes his/her identity to reside. Here we are at the nub of the problem. For, as we shall see, Buddhism does not object to having an identity and a sense of self-worth, but only to identity-grasping and to the wholly mistaken equation of identity with the self-image.

Because the root of the self-image is a monotonous dynamic of clinging and aversion described above, another of its effects is to split the world, again and again, into an I and an It, an I and an alien "other."⁵ A self-image, no matter how expansive, always sets up a boundary, a boundary between I and not-I. (From the Buddhist point of view this is always a mistake as the "self" has no boundary and is in fact non-different from and interdependently arising with the Total Field of Reality). Boundaries require defenses and defenses require energy. Spending too much energy on defense is another name for neurosis. In any case, the more we defend our self-image, the more brittle it becomes and the more defense it requires. The more we shore up our identity with material and psychological "possessions" the more their ephemerality excites anxiety about our ultimate security. To attempt to establish an identity by building up the self-image is like trying to solve a problem of *being* by some mode of *having*. The two are incommensurable. As the self-image arises from a false view of the nature of the self, the possibilities for change that are consistent with it only serve to aggravate the false views at its root. This vicious, self-perpetuating circle is known, in Buddhism, as *samsara*. The only way out of it is not some final possession or some ultimate defense, for there are none, but a life and practice that will promote the realization that self and Other are nondifferent, or to put it another way, that the self which one is trying to save from death is in reality but an interdependent flicker of light in Indra's shining net, a wave in the birthless and deathless ocean of being.

BUDDHISM AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

By the time one is old enough to be able to consciously adopt Buddhism as a way of life and thought, one already has the contours of the identity problem deeply etched into one's psyche. We are all aware that Buddhist practice is a means to eradicate false views of the nature of the self, and as such is primarily a *destructive* opus. It *destroys* the *kleshas* (i.e., hindrances); it *dissolves* the three poisons; it reveals the *anatma* (i.e., non-self) characteristic of reality. But the hunger for identity does not vanish overnight. Nor does one go from being bound up in identity-clinging to being free of such clinging in a day. The Buddhist path is a developmental one, and I want to suggest that Buddhism must offer "interim identities" to the aspirant so that as old, inauthentic self-images fall away, more authentic ones take their place as progress is made toward final liberation.

Buddhist practice, I am suggesting, has a *constructive* aspect that satisfies the human hunger for identity even while the causes of that hunger are being gradually eroded. Moreover, we must remember that even at the "end" of the Path, what is fully destroyed is not identity itself, but identity clinging. The mature Buddhist is not an empty shell, a virtual non-being, but a creative, responsive and vital individual: one look at the Buddha's post-Enlightenment life provides the prototypical image. Buddhahood, after all, points to an optimal mode of *human* being, or to use existentialist terminology, to truly authentic being-in-the-world.⁶

So we need to ask: How does Buddhism answer the basic human need for identity while avoiding the pitfalls of identity-clinging and the construction of a reality-distorting self-image? How does Buddhism destroy inappropriate notions of selfhood with one hand while the other hand enhances the self-powers of effort and determination needed all along the

Way? Or, finally: How does Buddhism root out compulsive ego-centeredness while simultaneously bringing to birth deeply human persons?

In the first section of this paper, I noted that identity is sought not only in self-assertive modes but also in self-subordinative ones. We learn to link ourselves to structures of power and significance outside ourselves in whose larger life and identity we can then share. Cultural "idols" (i.e., conditioned realities to which we look for unconditioned meaning) provide temporary refuge for the significance-seeking self. We want a share of the immortality and secure identity they seem to promise.

Implicit in the Buddhist aspirant's embrace of the Path as that alone which may be able to

satisfy her heart's longing, is the understanding of the unsatisfactoriness, inauthenticity and insufficiency of many of these cultural idols. But this does not mean that as soon as one has Dharmic intent that one is suddenly free of the deeply ingrained reflex to create idols, to link oneself to superior powers in one's quest for identity. Nor does Buddhism wish it so. Behold, it too offers refuge for the significance-seeking self, three of them in fact. The Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. What a rich field in which to assume a new identity! The aspirant's very will is fueled by images of personal greatness and nobility: "I want to be an Enlightened One. I want to join the holy company of arhats. I want to be a bodhisattva and give my life for the liberation of all sentient beings!" It is precisely such notions that form the nucleus of a general intentionality that will continue to exert a positive, constructive influence in the aspirant's life. For by weaning oneself away from the individualistic identity images afforded by culture toward more archetypal and transpersonal ones, the Buddhist taps rich sources of psychic energy and inspiration. Buddhism understands that the ongoing health of the personality depends upon sufficient self-esteem. The wearing of robes, the chanting of sutras, the taking of vows: wonderful *upaya* (i.e., skillful means) all. As old images of who one is fall away, these new identities sustain one. A bodhisattva is a nice thing to be.

But each new construction necessitates a destruction. Each new idol to which one clings for identity, no matter how noble or beautiful, must be undercut with an appropriate iconoclasm or the process of liberation is arrested. Even the Buddhist remains susceptible to transference (i.e., idolatry in the service of identity)—if not to the Master, then to the images and doctrines of the tradition. The Buddhist who finds a new identity as one-on-the-way-to-Buddhahood *can get stuck there*. Any new experience or new self-understanding can fall prey to the deep identity-clinging tendency and thus result in a premature closure of identity, a new hindrance, a new false view of the self. Thus the advice: if you meet the Buddha on the road, kill him.

I believe that there can be no psychic integration, no achievement of an optimum mode of human being, without a task that calls the identity-seeking self to heroic undertakings.

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*The Path does not destroy identity, but
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This' indeed Buddhism does. But how does the Buddhist path (and the contemplative life in general) differ from the path that leads to the boardroom of International Business Machines and the thousand other identity-seeking heroisms that culture affords?

The simplest answer I can give is that Buddhism is pervaded by a truly profound iconoclasm. Like some big machine, each and every part of which has a self-correcting mechanism attached to it, Buddhism seems to have idol-smashers everywhere. It fosters the growth of the personality, and then, at every turn, undercuts our clinging to it. It is as if Buddhism aims at making one a somebody by helping one discover that one is nobody. To see how Buddhism maintains this "gesture of balance," to see its subtle and pervasive iconoclasm, is to understand something about its consummate psychological genius.

Needless to say, what follows can only be the briefest and most incomplete of sketches. And straightaway I must separate two dimensions of the Path which in reality are closely interwoven and mutually reinforcing. I call these dimensions "Attention" and "Intention." "Attention" is a kind of shorthand for all the work that goes on within the framework of the body during formal periods of meditation. Intention is a similar shorthand for the guiding values and overarching aims which orient all one's life activities. Attention is crucial because it is the cornerstone of practice, but attentional practices take on meaning only in relation to and bear fruit only in accordance with a larger intentional framework.

ATTENTION AND THE IDENTITY PROBLEM

I must brush over the wide variety of Zen and Tibetan and Theravadin meditational practices and their many subtle nuances to focus upon a single common factor (which, I

would argue, is also the most important from a psycho-transformative point of view). It is the cultivation of ever subtler degrees of *sustained* and *nonreactive attention*.

Sustained and nonreactive attention takes Buddhism's iconoclasm to the innermost altars of the mind. To see how, we must recall a final time that the uncultivated mind which comes to Buddhist practice is a nest of *automatisms*. It is rife with predispositions, habit-determined patterns of thought, emotive reaction and imaginary elaborations which distort reality and skew behavior according to the needs of the identity-project. Each of us is constantly, and for the most part unconsciously, involved in what Carlos Castaneda once called a personal construction of reality.⁷

What allows psychic automatisms to function unchecked is, in a word, *identification*. Every desire, every feeling, every thought, as Gurdjieff once put it, says "I." Buddha expressed the same idea in the *Sutta Nipata*: "May the wise man break up every thought 'I am' which is the root of the associative chain."⁸ As long as one unconsciously identifies with the changing contents of consciousness, one goes with rather than against the conditioned flow. The automatic, associational patterns become more deeply inscribed.

Once automatism and identification are understood to be at the root of the process which sustains false notions of the self, we are in a position to see how the practice of sustained and nonreactive attention (over a long period) dismantles this process. To put it in a nutshell: Buddhist practice leads to *disidentification* (from the mental flow) and gradually to the *deautomatization* of the psychological processes which constitute our bondage. Let us spell this out.

When we sit still and attentively in the Buddhist mode, one of the first things we realize is that whatever our "self" might ultimately be, it is certainly not our thoughts, for the latter

The life of awakening is pursued against a universal ethical horizon, with deepening insight and compassion.

arise and pass away quite autonomously. By thus objectifying the associational flow of mental chatter, we begin to disidentify with it; in the Buddha's words, we begin to "break up the 'I am' at the root of the associative chain." A step is taken toward freedom.

As the training of attention progresses and nonreactive awareness of the automatized flow of mental contents deepens, the coiled springs of habit responsible for that very automatism begin to unwind. In other words, disidentification leads to *deautomatization*. One elaboration must suffice. The incessant discur-sion of the mind may be conceived as the result of the useless consumption of energy by the overlearned structures or patterns of the psyche. Associational thought-sequences which seem to stimulate each other in virtually unending series, may be thought of as the palpable record of this consumption. An increasingly quiet and disidentified attention would be able to catch associational sequences in their beginnings and thus forestall the automatic stimulation of still other sequences and some of the behavior that flows impulsively therefrom. As the integrity of the automatized processes depends upon reinforcement through repetition, the forestalling of associational sequences and the interrupting of habitual behavior would weaken that integrity. Unwholesome impulses caught by attention would be deprived of a chance to bear fruit in action or associational elaboration. Non-reactive attention—or mindfulness—may thus be thought of as depriving predispositional automatisms of their diet.

Buddhist attentional exercises are, in other words, strategies of "starvation." Every moment that available energy is consolidated in concentrative and nonreactive attention is a moment when automatized processes cannot replenish themselves. In the dynamic world of the psyche, there is no stasis: if automatisms do not grow more strongly solidified, they begin to weaken and dissolve. When deprived of the

nutriment formerly afforded to them by distracted states of mind, the automatized processes of the mind begin to disintegrate. Contemplative attention practiced over a long period of time may dissolve and uproot even the most recalcitrant pockets of psychological automatism, allowing consciousness to recollect the ontic freedom and clarity that is its birthright. In so doing, the egocentric system is undermined. The tangled web of desire and aversion that constitutes the self-image begins to unravel. The inner environment becomes emptier, lighter, freer of idols (ideas of oneself). Not that one floats completely free of any identity whatsoever; but now whatever identity remains is not so *solidified*, and not so desperately defended. In time, even cherished notions of oneself as a follower of the Buddha and Dharma, member of the Sangha, comprehender of Nagarjuna, and solver of *koan*, might have to be subject to the same iconoclasm, for in these too might the ego have found an anchor. What I said above bears repeating: Buddhist meditation is a subtle iconoclasm that eventually penetrates to the innermost altars of the mind, sweeping out all the idols we have made (and continue to make).

INTENTION AND THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

Sustained and nonreactive attention, we have suggested above, is the radiating core of Buddhist practice. But human transformation is effected not solely by isolated bouts of intense attentional training but only when such disciplines are linked to ordinary life by an *intention* that makes every aspect of a life a part of the spiritual work. Ordinary activity and formal practice must reinforce each other and between them sustain the continuity of practice that alone can awaken the mind and help it realize the *telos* adumbrated for it in the images and concepts of the tradition. And it is precisely

Buddhism's *Teloi*—as found in its doctrines, symbols and moral exhortations—which, by evoking the aspirant's deep intention, provide this continuity.

Moreover, if we see that the inner work accomplished by attentional training is largely *destructive* and *deautomatizing*, we can also see that Buddhist intentionality is the *constructive* power which complements it. As the conditioned patterns of the “old man” are deautomatized and the bonds of transference are loosened, the psyche's structures begin to be reshaped according to the underlying intention of the aspirant. The net of the psyche undergoes continuous reticulation; one discovers a new ecology of mind. Energy formerly bound in fear-and-desire habit reaction is gradually freed for use according to Buddhism's ethical ideals. As the aspirant's personal construction of reality is dismantled, it is replaced by ever subtler understandings of reality as presented by the tradition. The central difference between the reality-versions at the beginning and then well along the contemplative path is, of course, the ontological status of the ego: in the former the ego is the core of reality; in the latter it is empty or relatively nothing *vis-a-vis* the Dynamic Interdependent Totality in which it is situated.

But how does Buddhism assure the unfolding of this process while preventing the evolving identity from getting hung up on its achievements and current status?

First, the Path has no end. This is perhaps a somewhat outlandish assertion. But it seems to me that Buddhists who are so astute at pointing up the mythic dimensions of other religious traditions often have a blind spot with regard to their own. My own studies and conversations with both Theravadin and Zen teachers have led me to believe that the goals of the Buddhist tradition, enshrined in the images of Buddhahood, the Bodhisattva career and Arhathood must *necessarily* exceed our grasp.

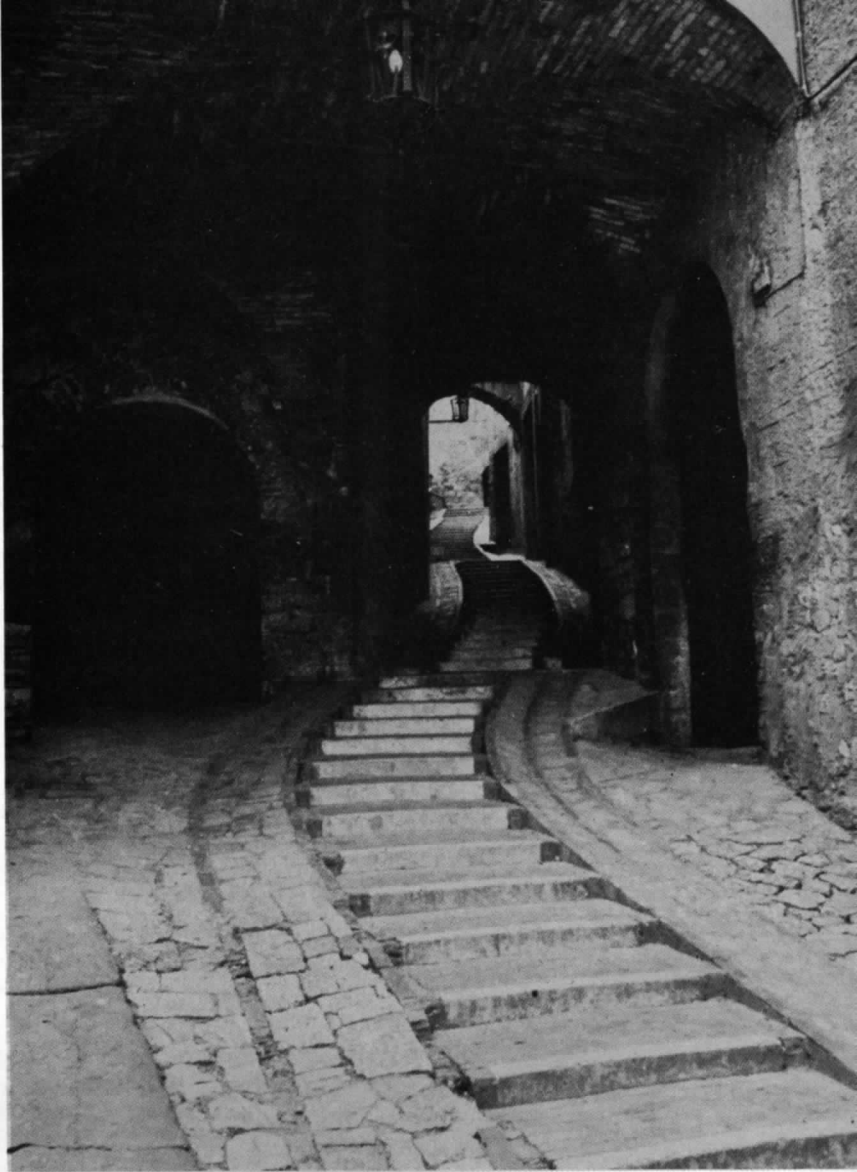


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Why? Because in their inspired wisdom the Buddha and the tradition understood that if there's something to grasp it will be grasped.

“What good is a goal if one can reach it?” we once heard Zen roshi ask during a *teisho*. Should we object that complete enlightenment is quite reachable, we would ask “for whom?”—suggesting that any answer to this question will involve false views of the nature of the self. The desire to save all beings is but the Buddhist portrait of the universal ethical horizon against which the life of awakening is *endlessly* pursued.⁹ To reach complete Buddhahood, or to enlighten *even the grass*, are the infinitely distant horizons against which the aspirant patiently wends his/her way, deepening insight and compassion, as inappropriate notions of selfhood fall away. In one sense, the goal that is reachable is the *Path*, the continued and ever

The pursuit of Wisdom, said Socrates, is the practice of dying. Unless we learn to die, it will be a problem.

more subtle treading of it, in which its fruits are increasingly enjoyed and more widely shared. Thus do the master images of Buddhism share one of the essential characteristics of all sacred cosmologies: they are inexhaustibly evocative, and hortatory. Buddhist "strategy" demands that the self leave itself no satisfaction in beyonds that are reachable.

Second, the doctrine of *anatta* reminds the aspirant that s/he alone can do little. Along the full length of the Buddhist path one is asked to exert one's will, to work out one's salvation. But one is also asked to realize that one's whole self is but a wave on an ocean of interdependent causation, wholly implicated in and subordinate to the Order of Things called *Karma* and *Pratitya-Samutpada* (i.e., dependent arising).

Only when complemented by a surrender and gratitude to a more inclusive Order can the exertion of the "individual" will bear wholesome fruit. Otherwise it too easily turns to attachment. Work out your own salvation, yes. But in the final analysis, ripeness is always beyond one's control.

Anatta is the means by which Buddhism warns its students against reifying the self which is moving so energetically toward the goal. In the Zen tradition there are numerous stories of masters undercutting disciples' strenuous efforts by reminding them—perhaps the famous tile-polishing story¹⁰ is prototypical—that ultimately there is nothing to do nor to attain. Anyone who has tried to sit still more or less constantly for sixteen hours a day at a Zen *sesshin* and yet amidst these agonizing efforts read each day the passage from the *Heart Sutra* that asserts that there is "no path" and "nothing to attain"—this person knows the subtle balance of will and will-lessness that Buddhism tries to achieve.

If we hear less in Theravada Buddhism about "other-power" or the awareness of one's dependence on a larger Order, it is perhaps because few have written with the eloquence of

Sangharakshita. In his *Survey of Buddhism* this English monk writes:

Only at the preliminary ethico-meditative stages of the path is it helpful to speak of spiritual attainments as depending on . . . the will of the disciple. Should this mechanistic and individualistic manner of speaking be too literally understood self-reliance will harden into self-sufficiency and . . . the disciple will be threatened by difficulties and dangers largely of his own creation. In the sublimer realms of spiritual experience the ego-sense becomes attenuated to such a fineness, transparency and luminosity, that the terms "self" and "non-self" lose their ordinary meanings, and it becomes no less difficult to speak of the spiritual life in terms of self-effort than to speak of it in terms of reliance upon divine grace, sometimes more difficult in fact.¹¹

CONCLUSION

The pursuit of wisdom, said Socrates, is the practice of dying. And so it is with Buddhism. "Dying" seems a strange approach to the problem of identity until one realizes that unless one learns to die, it will always be a problem. The search for secure identity, for personal significance that death cannot take away, is doomed as long as its vehicle is fixation on, identification with, or attachment to conditioned realities. Conversely when one practices dying through letting go of all forms of fixation, identification, and attachment, as is the ideal on the Buddhist path, one finds life. When one's activities are no longer based on proving, justifying, and extending or immortalizing one's personal identity, one rests in the realization that one is none other than the Interdependently Arising Totality. It is a paradox as old as religion itself: die and you shall live. Be empty and find fullness. Give up attachment and identity and you will find an identity that no one can destroy, for in Reality (and in Ken Wilber's apt phrase) there is no boundary.

Notes

1. William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, p. 119. Quoted in Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil*. New York: Free Press, 1975, p. 12.
2. Though Becker misunderstands Buddhism, no one I know of has sketched the dynamics of the human psychological predicament—to which Buddhism and other contemplative traditions alone offer an adequate solution—better than he (*Denial of Death, Escape from Evil*). No matter how strongly one disagrees with his prognosis, his diagnosis is a gold mine for psychologists and philosophers of religion.
3. Ernest Becker, *Escape from Evil*. New York: Free Press, 1975, pp. 11–12.
4. M. C. Washburn and M. J. Stark, "Ego, Egocentricity and Self-transcendence: A Western Interpretation of Eastern Teaching," in *The Meeting of the Ways*, J. Welwood, ed. New York: Shoken Books, 1979, p. 79.
5. Transpersonal psychologists J. Welwood and K. Wilber note that "Jung described this same split in terms of an inaccurate self-image which he called the *persona*, and an alienated, cast-out, projected It, which he called the *shadow* . . . [a] dualistic splitting of a unified field of experience and a subsequent fixation upon a limited part of the whole field as constituting the "I." This leaves us with an impoverished self-sense, always under threat and subject to attack from an alien "other" which we refuse to accept as part of ourselves." From "On Ego Strength and Egolessness" in *The Meeting of the Ways*, pp. 99–100.
6. Stephen Batchelor has recently reminded us of this in a unique little book, *Alone With Others*. New York: Grove Press, 1983.
7. The Pali terms most closely connected with what I am describing here are perhaps *anusaya*, *asava*, *papanca* and *sankhara*, all of which may be construed as ways Buddha used to describe the psychological consequences of *kamma*. *Asava* seems to point particularly well to the idea of a personal construction of the world, an unrealistic superstructure built on sense impression, wrong habits of thought and mistaken views of one's own nature. *Papanca* seems to point quite clearly to what is here described as the prolific tendency of the mind for association and imaginary construction related to the identity-project. Cf. R. E. A. Johannson, *The Dynamic Psychology of Early Buddhism*. Oxford: Curzon Press, 1979, pp. 106–110, 177–183, 190–196, 41–56.
8. *Sutta Nipata* 916, quoted in Johannson, p. 96.
9. Winston King has noted "... a contrast between the Buddha's day and our own: *then* there were hundreds, perhaps thousands of monks who had achieved arahantship; now there are few *if any* [italics mine] arahants" (*Theravada Meditation*, University Park: Penn State University Press, 1980, p. 118). I once asked Nyanaponika Thera if in his sixty years as a Theravadin contemplative he had ever heard of anyone claiming to be or declared (by whom?) to be an arahant. He said he was not aware of any such cases. Whether these contemporary indications cast doubt on the arahantship attainments of the past or whether they indicate modern degeneration, I think we can say at least that arahantship and Buddhahood are extremely rare attainments. It follows that what we have in the vast majority of Buddhist lives are not final "attainments" but closer and fuller approximations of the final goal and increasing degrees of ripeness on a scale of virtually infinite degrees.
10. "Ma-tsu was then residing in the monastery continuously absorbed in meditation. His master, aware of his outstanding ability for the Dharma, asked him, 'For what purpose are you sitting in meditation?' Ma-tsu answered, 'I wish to become a Buddha.' Thereupon the master picked up a tile and started rubbing it on a stone. Ma-tsu asked, 'What are you doing, Master?' 'I'm polishing this tile to make a mirror,' Huai-jang replied. 'How can you make a mirror by rubbing a tile?' exclaimed Ma-tsu. 'How can one become a Buddha by sitting in meditation?' countered the Master." Heinrich Dumoulin, S.J., *A History of Zen Buddhism*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963, p. 98.
11. Bhiksu Sangharakshita, *A Survey of Buddhism*. Bangalore: Indian Institute of World Culture, 1966, p. 132.