



# PLUM MOUNTAIN NEWS

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## The Doctrine of No-Soul: Anatta

Over the years many people have asked me about the Buddhist concept of “soul” or “self.” In addition, many people have asked me to say something about the Buddhist idea of reincarnation. What follows are my most recent musings on these subjects.

Various Buddhists believe that upon death we either “enter the pure land” and then cycle back to save others, or enter some level of hell and return to life via our karmic baggage to learn the lessons of salvation. Others would say that upon death we return unconditionally to the “Void” from which the Universe is born and returns moment to moment and eternity to eternity. Still others believe that nothing is separate, and nothing excluded; therefore, there can be no separate soul, no enlightenment, no salvation, and no suffering, no birth, no death, or re-birth. Some Buddhist’s hold all these views at once, and feel no contradiction.

According to Walpola Rahula, who wrote the book *What the Buddha Taught*, the Buddha held that the “idea of self is an imaginary, false belief which has no corresponding reality, and it produces harmful thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine,’ selfish desire, craving attachment, hatred, ill-will, conceit, pride, egoism, and other defilements, impurities and problems. It is the source of all the troubles in the world from personal conflicts to wars between nations. In short, to this false view can be traced all the evil in the world.... For self-preservation man has conceived the idea of an immortal Soul or Atman... [Yet, in reality,] everything is conditioned, relative, and interdependent.”

D. T. Suzuki, in his book *Zen and Japanese Culture* says: “The philosopher according to whom cogito ergo sum [I think therefore I am] is generally weak-minded [according to the Zen perspective]. The Zen master has nothing to do with such dialectical quibbles, he straight-away gives his final irrevocable pronouncement: ‘I sit here all by myself!’ He does not ‘think’; he is, in fact, where the thinking has not yet started. If he begins to do it, he is too late.... ‘I sit here all by myself’ may be compared to Luther’s ‘Here I stand,’ or to Christ’s ‘I am before Abraham was,’ or to Yahveh’s ‘I am that I am.’”

In January (1997), I led a half day workshop on “awakening” from the Buddhist perspective for an organization called Still Point. If there is no “soul” or “self” then who is awakened? During the workshop I focused on Zen Master Rinzai’s statement: “The one now here listening to this discourse is none other than Buddha.” In other words, when we are awake, then we can consciously partake or commune with universal Mind which is also known as Buddha Mind and is sometimes referred to as No-Mind because it has no location in time or space; it has no form, yet is not separate from form. From the Buddhist perspective, each individual is like a wave on the surface of the ocean. Each wave has its own identity as a wave, yet a wave is not the ocean, it arises from the ocean, is never separate from the ocean and quickly returns to the ocean. This is a good metaphor for our individual relationship to Buddha Mind. When we experientially glimpse our connection to the ocean then we come to understand that our basic nature is not dependent on what we do, where we were born, who our parents were, what name we are given, what talents we have, or rank we achieve.

Each wave has a surface form, we call this our “body,” but this is just a name. Each wave has an interior form, and we call this our “soul,” but this is just a name we give to our interior waters. Each wave is connected to the broader ocean, we call this our “Buddha Mind” or “Spirit,” but these too are just names. After the workshop a woman who attended wrote to me and asked, “Is your soul just like mine? What is its nature? Who is it? Is it a unique part of the individual? Or is the soul the seeing of the unlimited One? Is my soul my own? Can I know its characteristics? Such questions! I suppose since the wave is the ocean and the ocean the wave, these are foolish questions. Yet, I yearn to know the nature of my soul. I haven’t gotten my mind near to the answer so I struggle to form the question. Can you tell me more?”

I wrote back: “The one who observes one’s own life and death without fear or regret is as close as I can come to explaining my experience of “soul.” I believe you and every human has both a unique and shared observing soul. It is my belief that “soul” is a natural emergent quality of the universe that becomes apparent in creatures with enough consciousness or awareness. It is both personal to the creature aware of it, and as universal as gravity permeating everywhere. It is the seeing of the “unlimited one” and the seeing of the “uniquely alone, but not separate, individual.” Your soul has a different flavor from mine, yours is a different mix of body, dreams - archetypes, and mind - spirit; therefore, your soul is as unique as any flower, none identical to another. Your unique mix of these ingredients, in addition to your unique personal history, determines the characteristics of your soul that you can know and come to care for. You can become the “father” and “mother” of your own “soul!” This may seem contra-

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dictory or otherwise unsatisfactory. Yet, your own deep inquiry will result in a personal experience that can explain it far better than words ever will."

You may ask "what then of the soul after death?" Well, for sure nothing is lost or destroyed, but I do believe that we melt or disintegrate into our constituent parts of body, dreams - archetypes - soul, and mind - spirit. It is my experience that the "voices" of those long "dead" are not really dead at all. It seems to me that I can regularly communicate with my deceased father, and with many old Zen priests of long long ago. This is not magical thinking or some kind of weird psychic phenomenon, just a subtle, yet profound, impression. Am I fooling myself? Perhaps, yet what's important is that the dialogue is real and informative to me.

Are we ever "re-born?" Let's say our inner light or "soul" is like a flame atop a candle. In this metaphor, the candle is our body with a limited lifetime. Just before the candle goes out imagine transferring the flame to a new candle, i.e. body. Is it the same flame or a new one? Is a flame ever the same flame? Or is the word "flame" or "soul" just a name for something that is always new and changing and never possessing a unique fixed existence. To know our timeless nature we just sit and open our minds to what is.



With gassho,

*Genjo Marinello*