

# The 'I' in the Storm

## An exploration of the concept of the Self

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### Preface

On the portal of the temple of Apollo at Delphi is the inscription "O MAN, KNOW THOU THYSELF". This injunction to self-knowledge has resounded throughout the ages, and with changes in human consciousness attempts to find a solution to the riddle of the Self have also changed. It seems that the 'winds of change never cease to blow' and at times they create a great storm. The Self, Ego or 'I' is invariably at the centre of the storm. But when the storm has passed, the 'I' remains. Events in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC in India and an important body of thought in the closing decades of the twentieth century are representative of stormy periods in regard to the concept of the Self. This essay explores the idea of the Self at the time of Buddha and in some 20<sup>th</sup> century Western thought.

The Introduction provides the context out of which this topic emerged and became personally significant. The first part of Section One outlines the Hindu concept of *atman* and contrasts this with the Modernist, primarily Liberal Humanist construction of the Self. The second part of Section One presents a deconstruction of the Hindu *atman* by the Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* (non-self). The two parts of Section Two deal with the post-structuralist analysis of the humanist construction of the Self. This section is the longer of the two and is the primary focus of the essay.<sup>1</sup>

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**Student:** Master, where is Tao?  
**Zen Mater:** Right before us!  
**S:** Why don't I see it?  
**M:** If you are so absorbed in the 'I', you can't see it!  
**S:** Well, if I can't see it, do you see it master?  
**M:** As long as there is 'you' and 'I', there is no seeing of Tao!  
**S:** Well, when you and I disappear, then can Tao be seen?  
**M:** When you and I disappear, who is there to see it?<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Initially it was intended to include a third section interrogating the Buddhist and Postmodernist deconstructions of the Self from the point of view of the activist epistemology of Rudolf Steiner. This intention remains to be fulfilled in the future.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the Zen koans and sayings in the text have been compiled by Salajan, Ioanna and published as *Zen Comics*, Charles E Tuttle Company, 1974

## Introduction

In connection with the theme of this essay I want to relate an incident that took place when I was an undergraduate ‘studying’ in the Barr-Smith Library of the University of Adelaide. I was surrounded on all sides by a five-story building full of books and journals, containing all the information to which one could possibly want access, and in this vast catacomb of knowledge, in the middle of a Philosophy assignment on logic, I wrote, or rather scrawled in a half dream..

### “Who am I?”

It was a fundamental ‘life-question’ and the Delphic injunction was kindled in my soul so that KNOW THYSELF became a quest that was to take me through many fields of research ...in religions, mythology, psychology, history and philosophy. The most profoundly satisfying study was the history of ideas, and the connecting thread was the idea of the evolution of consciousness.

How have human beings come to understand themselves and their relationships to their fellow human beings, to the world around them and the realm of the gods? How has this understanding changed over time? What is the present phase of this understanding, and what are the possible directions that lie ahead with regard to self knowledge? To personalise the process I asked... “How did I come to be conscious of myself as an ‘I’? What are the different aspects of this ‘I’? To what am I referring when I say ‘I am’?” This could also be put in another form. “Who (what agency of consciousness) is capable of posing questions and making observations about consciousness itself?” Strictly speaking, this has to be the first and perhaps the most important topic for philosophy and psychology and for every science that wants to understand itself, because this agency of consciousness—this ‘I’—establishes the very possibility of such a science.<sup>3</sup>

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<b>Student:</b>	<b>Master, who is Buddha?</b>
<b>Master:</b>	<b>Who is asking the question?</b>

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Having positioned myself well and truly in a pro ‘I’ discourse and, being aware that this is a powerful position because it is so dominant, it has been with deep interest that I have encountered the rather confronting propositions of some post-structuralist and post-modernist thinkers on this central topic of the ‘I’, ‘self’, or ‘subject’.

In my reading of post-modernist ideas I have found the challenge to the supremacy of reason and the logic of materialism very refreshing, and the highlighting of the paradoxes and ambiguities, which are characteristic of post-rationalist thought, stimulating to say the least. I have also found myself becoming puzzled by the apparent inability of many commentators to see— what is, for me, fundamental—the reality of the Self. However, respecting their intelligence and scholarship, I was curious to know what aspects of the Self were being referred to when such phrases as “the death of the subject” or “the discursive production of the self” are used.

Having in the past grappled, in thought and feeling, with the Buddhist deconstruction of the Hindu notion of the Self, “the eternal *Atman*”, I now find what appears to be a similar scenario in a completely different socio-cultural setting twenty-five centuries later. I was interested in exploring this correspondence. The new context is the post-structuralist deconstruction of the modernist notion of the Self or “the individual” as a continuous, unified, rational and coherent identity.

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<sup>3</sup> Kuhlewind, Georg *The Life of the Soul*, Lindisfarne Press, 1990, pp 2-3

## Section One

### Part One

## The Eternal *Atman* and the Humanist Celebration of the Individual

### *The idea of the Self*

In nearly all the major religions and systems of thought, the question of the nature of the human being and his or her destiny centres largely on the doctrine of the soul or spirit, which is variously defined. Generally speaking it is conceived as an enduring entity, the permanent unchanging factor within the personality. It somehow unites and maintains a continuity of presence throughout the many changes of the human personality from childhood to old age. It has, in addition, a strong religious association and various further implications such as being independent of the body, immaterial and eternal.

### *The Hindu idea of the Self*

Very briefly stated, the old Indian religion was a kind of pantheism with Brahman (eternal, absolute, etc) as the first cause of the universe. The manifestation of Brahman was sometimes personified and called Brahma (God or the **Great Self**).<sup>4</sup> All human beings had within them a part of Brahman called *atman* or the **little self**.

In the Upanishads a doctrine of the self is formulated. Some theories state that the *atman* cannot be identified with any aspect of the personality, physical or psychological. In the ultimate analysis one could not distinguish oneself from the rest of creation, therefore it was said: “You **are** Creation, you **are** Brahma.”<sup>5</sup> Brahman and *atman* were one and of the same substance. Salvation consisted in *atman* entering into unity with Brahman. Thus the eternal *atman* lies behind and is independent of the phenomena of existence. The *atman* was eternal substance, exempt from the vicissitudes of change and incapable of entering into combination with anything but itself.

### *The modernist (liberal humanist) idea of the Self*

The concept of the person in Humanist theories focuses on the concept of *individual identity*. Any sane, adult individual has identity. This identity is continuous, unified, rational and coherent. Conscious and rational linguistic processes are used to dominate the irrational, emotional aspects of the self, which might otherwise disrupt claims to coherent adult identity.

The individual is socialised in the first instance by those collected around the child. Society’s norms and values are internalised and become part of the individual. Continuity of identity is understood as arising from early socialisation and internalisation of the values through which one was socialised.

These values vary from time to time and we could consider how, especially in relatively modern times, there have been marked changes in what being an *individual* has meant. We could contrast Rousseau’s ideas with J. S. Mill’s liberal tradition, and these again with Existentialism to see how, more and more, each individual has been ascribed the power to create for themselves their own identity.

Within the Humanist tradition is the understanding that each person has an obligation to take oneself up as a knowable, recognisable identity, who can speak for oneself and who accepts responsibility for one’s actions.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Malalasekera, G. P. *The Truth of Anatta*, Buddha Publishing Society, 1966, p. 14

<sup>5</sup> Menem, Aubrey *The New Mystics*, Thames and Hudson, 1974, p. 60

<sup>6</sup> Davies, Bronwyn “The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Post-structuralist Analysis” in *Social Analysis*, 1992, p. 42

### *A dualising conclusion*

With the Humanist tradition, the individual's own will takes predominance. As such it is a subjective solution to the riddle of the Self in the sense that it claims: "Ultimately, who I am is what I, as subject, have made of myself." The Hindu solution however is to make the Self objective, in the sense that it claims: "Ultimately, the objective divine spark of Brahman is the core of my being. My only responsibility is to seek union with the Divine in whom I lose myself."

Although the Hindu picture of the Self and the modernist picture of the individual Self appear to be in stark contrast to each other, what is important is that both perspectives claim to have a Self. How justified is this claim? In the next section, both claims will be questioned.

## Section One: Part Two

### *Anatta: The Buddhist Deconstruction of Atman*

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**Student: Master, what is my self?**

**Zen Master: What would you want with a self?**

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The Buddha was well aware of the doctrine of *atman* and of the theories espoused by various thinkers regarding the Self. The Buddha accepted the definition of the *atman* without assuming its existence or non-existence. When the empirical investigation failed to reveal any such *atman*, he concluded that no such *atman* exists because there is no evidence of its existence.

The Buddha made no concession at all to the doctrine of 'Self'. He denied the view that there exists in the human being an *atman* or *self* that is permanent and unchanging. His teaching of *anatta* or *non-self* (also translated as egolessness) contradicted such a possibility.<sup>7</sup> His argument against the doctrine of *atman* is based on the identification of various aspects or qualities of the personality and the contention that none of them could be identified with *atman*; that is, that they were permanent and unchanging, possessed of bliss, and autonomous. Each aspect of the personality was interrogated in a way reminiscent of a Socratic dialogue.

Question: Is the body (physical personality) permanent or impermanent?

Answer: It is impermanent.

Question: Is what is impermanent sorrowful or happy?

Answer: Sorrowful.

Question: Of what is impermanent, sorrowful and liable to change, is it proper to regard it as 'This is mine, this I am, this is my soul.'

Answer: It is not.

The same procedure was repeated for the other aspects of the personality, of which, in addition to the bodily, there are a further four groups called *khandas*. All together the five *khandas* are a classification in which the Buddha summed up all the physical and mental phenomena of existence, and in particular those that appear to the ignorant as their ego or personality. The five *khandas* are:

1. Corporeality or the physical body
2. Feeling and sensations
3. Perception and ideation
4. Mental formations: tendencies, dispositions, character complexes
5. Consciousness, intellect, cognition

Although the Buddha rejected the existence of the Self of the nature of *atman*, his conception of the individual, the person, constitutes a quite definite theory which states that the individual

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<sup>7</sup> Malalasekera, op. cit. p. 9

consists of *nama* and *rupa*, name and form, mind and matter, and more usually is said to consist of the previously named five groups or aggregates: The first, corresponding to the body, and the remaining four, to the mind.<sup>8</sup>

The well-known story of ‘the chariot’ is worth reproducing as it clearly illustrates the distinction between the concept of the Self and its aggregate parts.

**When certain things we find combined,  
We speak of ‘chariot’, speak of ‘car’.  
Just so when all Five Groups appear,  
We use the designation ‘man’.<sup>9</sup>**

The Visuddhi Magga provides the following commentary to this verse.

*Whenever different parts, as axle, wheels, frame, pole, etc are combined in a certain manner, we use the conventional designation ‘chariot’. But if we examine one part after the other, we cannot in the ultimate sense, discover anything that can be called a chariot.*

*It is likewise with the Five Groups of Existence (khanda). If they are present, one uses the conventional designation ‘being’ or ‘personality’, etc. But if we examine each phenomenon in its ultimate sense, there is nothing that can form a basis for such conceptions as ‘I am’ and ‘I’. Hence in the ultimate sense only mental and physical phenomena exist.<sup>10</sup>*

I have emphasised the Buddha’s method of deconstructing the Hindu discourse of the *atman* and pointed to the doctrine of *anatta* or *egolessness of existence*, but this is not the end of what the Buddha taught about this issue. As he was in every respect a teacher of the ‘middle path’ it would be expected that he would not only reject the notion of an eternal self (in other words - absolute existence), but also its opposite, the impermanent self (or absolute non-existence).<sup>11</sup>

It seems to follow from this deconstruction that human beings live in ignorance and delusion regarding their own selves. Of the many delusions there are three which are considered as the most important: the illusion of seeing permanence in the impermanent, of seeing satisfaction in the unsatisfactory, and of seeing a Self in the selfless.

The greatest illusion we suffer is when we perceive ourselves as self-contained egos, clinging to various ideas and images that we have formed of ourselves as the irrefutable truth of our own identity. Because we make the view of Self the lookout point from whence we survey the world, our minds divide everything up into dualities of ‘I’ and ‘not-I’, and what is ‘mine’ and ‘not-mine’.<sup>12</sup>

In his analysis of eight discursive thoughts, Asanga identifies the discursive thought concerning ‘I’ and the discursive thought concerning ‘mine’ as engendering the reifying view, and the root of all other views, namely: the root of egoism and the root of all other self-centred views.<sup>13</sup>

It follows, according to this view, that to free ourselves from all defilements and suffering, the illusion of selfhood that sustains them has to be dispelled, exploded by the realisation of selflessness. We may be justified, at this stage of our exploration, to say ‘goodbye’ to *atman* and ‘hullo’ to impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and selflessness?

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.* p. 14

<sup>9</sup> *The Three Basic Facts of Buddhism: Book III, Egolessness.* Collected Essays, extract from the Sanyutta-Nikaya dealing with *Egolessness*, p. 37

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.* p. 4

<sup>12</sup> Bikku Bodhi, *The Noble Eightfold Path*, Buddhist Publishing Society, Kandy 1984, p. 120

<sup>13</sup> Motilal Banarsidas, *On Knowing Reality: The Tattvartha Chapter of Asanga’s Boddhisattvabhumi*, Trans. Janice D Willis, Columbia Uni Press, 1979, p. 128

## Section Two: Part One

### Modernism and Postmodernism

#### From the '*Individual*' to the '*Subject*'

A student called Rinzo seeks to become a pupil of a Zen Master.

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ONE DAY:  
 Knock knock!  
 Who's there?  
 Rinzo!  
 Who?  
 Rinzo!  
 GO AWAY!

NEXT DAY:  
 Knock knock!  
 Who's there?  
 Rinzo!  
 Who?  
 Rinzo!  
 GO AWAY!

TWO DAYS LATER:  
 Knock knock!  
 Who's there?  
 Rinzo!  
 Who?  
 Rinzo!  
 GO AWAY!

NEXT DAY:  
 Knock knock!  
 Who's there?  
 NOBODY!  
 Ah! Rinzo. Come in!

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Where do we find a similar process of deconstruction of the Self in the present times? What has happened to our liberal humanist individual? Has he or she become, like Rinzo, a NOBODY, or a Self-less multiplicity of aggregates?

Starting from the thought that we, as human beings, have the power of transcendence, the capacity to stand off from and reflect on ourselves (which is basic to humanist and especially existentialist discourses) we come to the inevitable conclusion that everything we do or say takes on its relevance and point from our own existence (the very delusion decried by Buddhism).

However, we all share common existential experiences and therefore we share a common humanity. This Humanism of Existentialism, when applied to relationships, reveals that it is in relationships that we map out our own identity. When we contemplate this identity, we might reflect on it as though we were looking on a blank white wall (a *tabula rasa*?) and in our reflection we observe that as the years of infancy, childhood and youth pass, innumerable people scribble on it, some writing their own names, others slogans, yet others write abuse and even their favourite obscenities. In the end there is nothing of the white wall left, only a mass of

graffiti, one upon the other, scribbles on scribbles all made by others. With our power of transcendence we might stand back and survey this wall.

Perhaps we observe some new person advance upon it with the desire to leave his or her mark. Indeed, there are many who are anxious to leave their mark, to give us their advice, to tell us what to think, what to do. “All those people—relatives, friends, instructors, priests, politicians—conspiring so cleverly to make something which you have so thoughtlessly called *me* so long”<sup>14</sup>.

We might ask ourselves: ‘Who am I really?’ and in the hope of discovering the answer we try to wash the wall and free it from the graffiti. Perhaps then we would see our own true selves ~ but alas this “individual”, of which modernist discourse is so proud, is not to be found. What is done stays with us. We remain multiple layers and multiplicities of self. The white wall will not come clean! The structures are built. It is only when we experience them as unsatisfactory that we ourselves begin the process of deconstructing and reconstructing.

It is interesting that a beginning has been made within modernist psychiatry. I will take one example where the Buddhist doctrine of egolessness finds a reflection. The psychiatrist, Sigmund Freud, an exemplar of the modernist tradition, in grasping the significance of the concept of **narcissism** or **self** love, paved the way for an understanding of a certain kind of ego disorders. Erich Fromm, a post Freudian existentialist psychiatrist, developed the idea of narcissism and gave it a more comprehensive interpretation. In *The Heart of Man* (London, 1955), he wrote:

*It is the goal of man to overcome one’s narcissism. Perhaps this principle is nowhere expressed more radically than in Buddhism.*<sup>15</sup>

Fromm makes a clear reference to the doctrine of *anatta* when he states that only when the human being sheds “the illusion of his indestructible ego” can he or she be totally open, awake and fully related to the world.<sup>16</sup> Narcissistic persons are not only proud of their bodies, continues Fromm, but have an exaggerated and inflated image of all aspects of their personality: their intelligence, honour, wealth, social standing, etc.

*Just as the narcissistic person has made his ‘self image’ the object of his narcissistic attachment, he does the same with everything connected with him. His ideas, his knowledge, his house, but also his ‘sphere of interest’ become objects of his narcissistic attachments.*<sup>17</sup>

Karen Horney points out (in *The Neurotic Personality of Our Times*) that at the root of this narcissistic self image is found a kind of self inflation rather than self love, with a need, not for love but the admiration of others.<sup>18</sup>

This diversion into psychopathology was not to demonstrate, as Buddhist discourse on the Self would insist, that any concept of the Self is bound to be unhealthy, but rather to show that one may develop a concept of the self that is not healthy. When self-inflation becomes personally and socially destructive, we would not only support, but welcome its deconstruction. But is it only to the crazy self-inflated narcissism that post-structuralists and post-modernists are reacting, or is there more to this wave of deconstruction of the Self?

Even the term “Self” is considered problematic and so the individual Self, in the process of being done away with completely, is variously replaced by the terms ‘agent’ or a ‘discursive position’, but is most commonly referred to as the ‘subject’. The image arises of this ‘subject’ turning into the ‘accused’ and waiting, like Joseph K—in Franz Kafka’s novel *The Trial*—for the inevitable sentence of death.

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<sup>14</sup> Menem, op. cit. p. 43

<sup>15</sup> Padmasira de Silva, M.W. *The Spell of Narcissism and the Anatta Doctrine*, in *Collected Essays* (see note 4), page 29.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.* p. 32

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.* p. 33.

<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

## Section Two: Part Two

### The Death of the Subject

What follows has to do with how, in the Postmodernist sense, our sense of ourselves, our subjectivity, is constructed. The very assumption that our subjectivity is constructed, however, implies that it is not innate, not genetically determined, but socially produced. That is, we are dealing with, what has been called above, the scribbles on the wall. Although this contention has yet to be established we will nevertheless continue to explore the deconstruction of the humanist discourse of the individual.

The conception of a unique self and private identity, a unique personality and individuality which can be expected to generate its own unique vision of the world may be, very rightfully, investigated. What has been called by Foucault the ‘death of the subject’ points to, what in less dramatic language, would be described as the end of individualism as such. Frederic Jameson has been in the forefront of post-modernist thinking and expresses this idea as follows:

*...today, from any number of distinct perspectives, the social theorists, the psychoanalysts, even the linguists, not to speak of those of us who work in the area of cultural and formal change, are all exploring the notion that that kind of individualism and personal identity is a thing of the past; that the old individual or individualist subject is ‘dead’; and that one might even describe the concept of the unique individual and the theoretical basis of individualism as ideological.<sup>19</sup>*

Jameson identifies two positions that have been taken on this ‘death of the subject’. The first is to say ‘once upon a time...there was such a thing as individualism...but today that older bourgeois individual subject no longer exists.’ The second position is more radical. One might say that it is the post-structuralist position:

*...not only is the bourgeois individual subject a thing of the past, it is also a myth; it never really existed in the first place; there have never been autonomous subjects of that type. Rather, this construct is philosophical and cultural mystification which sought to persuade people that they ‘had’ individual subjects and possessed this unique personal identity.<sup>20</sup>*

This sounds like a contemporary Buddhist-like deconstruction of a unique personal identity. If it is, does it—like the Buddha—have a theory of personality?

In her book, *The Concept of Agency*, Bronwyn Davies explores some of the problems with the humanist discourse on agency and proceeds to “...[unhook] the concept of agency from humanist versions of the person and redefining it in feminist poststructuralist terms.”<sup>21</sup>

*...the subject itself is the effect of a production, caught in the mutually constitutive web of social practices, discourses and subjectivity; its reality is the tissue of social relations.<sup>22</sup>*

In this model, says Davies, our existence as persons has no fundamental essence. We can only ever speak ourselves, or be spoken into existence within the terms of available discourses. We are thus multiple rather than unitary beings, and our patterns of desire, that we took to be fundamental indicators of essential selves, signify little more than the discourses—and the subject positions made available within them—to which we may have access.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Jameson, Frederic “Postmodernism and Consumer Society” in Brooker, Peter (ed) *Modernism/Postmodernism*, Longmans 1992, p. 168

<sup>20</sup> *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> Davies, Bronwyn “The Concept of Agency: A Feminist Post-structuralist Analysis” quoting Henriques et al 1984, p.117 in *Social Analysis*, 1992, p. 42

<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> *ibid* p. 46



A central question then becomes: In what sense am ‘I’ spoken into existence through these discursive practices? What is the ‘I’ that is thus spoken that is the ‘agent’ of this most modern theory? Is it just a fragmented, discontinuous series of positionings through which we simply become that which various discourses make possible, or do we each, in some sense, take control of the ‘I’ and the words through which it is spoken into existence?<sup>24</sup>

Davies then goes on to develop what, in a poststructuralist framework, *authority* or *agency* would be. Agency is never freedom from discursive constitutions of self, but the capacity to recognise that constitution and to resist, subvert and change the discourses themselves through which one is being constituted. It is freedom to recognise multiple readings such that no discursive practice—or positioning within it by powerful others—can capture and control one’s identity. And *agency* is never autonomy in the sense of being an individual standing outside social structure and process.<sup>25</sup> This capacity [for agency or authority] does not stem from the essence of the person in question but from the positions available to them within the discourses through which they take up their being.<sup>26</sup> Davies and Harre put it lucidly when they write: “One lives one’s life in terms of one’s ongoingly produced self, whoever might be responsible for its production.”<sup>27</sup>

Does the Postmodern conception offer a vision of the individual as a free agent within a multiplicity of possible selves? Is this the Self living in the NOW taken to the limit?

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SELF AWARENESS IS NEVER HIDDEN  
BUT YOU CAN ONLY FIND IT NOW.  
RIGHT NOW!  
IT’S ONLY NOW!  
JUST NOW!

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### **Another dualising conclusion!**

When Buddhist thought confronted and deconstructed the overarching discourse of the eternal Self of Hinduism, it was out of an impulse to liberate human beings from suffering, and of being caught in the recurring cycle of rebirth. With the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path the Buddha brought a way by which each person could realise the unsatisfactoriness, impermanence and egolessness of existence. The reality of the doctrine of reincarnation was an integral fact of life and the cessation of the necessity of rebirth, by disciplining oneself to achieve a sublime state of consciousness (nirvana) was available for anyone who chose to pursue it.

The Buddha’s methods were clearly taught. The problems experienced in earthly life were directly related to the physical and mental conditions of the human being. These conditions were intimately connected with the human senses, and this came about in two ways: in how knowledge was gained and in how they influenced moral behaviour.

Firstly, what the senses reveal is *maya* or illusion. Ultimate reality is something other than what the senses reveal to our normal consciousness. Secondly, the senses can tempt to indulgence, egoism, excessive attachment to the pleasures of this world—which we are repeatedly told are vain, illusory, and divert the soul from the true path, which should be to seek the Divine.<sup>28</sup>

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DON’T LOOK FOR FISH ON THE TREETOPS  
APART FROM YOURSELF THERE IS NO BUDDHA

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<sup>24</sup> *ibid* p. 51

<sup>25</sup> *ibid* p. 52

<sup>26</sup> Davies, Bronwyn and Harre, Rom “Positioning: The Discursive Production of Selves” in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, Vol 20, No 1, March 1990, p. 45

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*. p. 48

<sup>28</sup> Davy, John *Hope Evolution and Change* (Selected Essays), Hawthorn Press, 1985. From “On Coming to our Senses” p. 154

Postmodernist thinking, in interrogating the overarching discourses of Modernism and deconstructing its grand narratives, has also led to certain liberation from some habitual thought forms. Emancipated human beings can freely choose to create or select their own discourses and not be compulsively driven by the discourses of others.

What a Buddhist teacher might have called ‘excessive attachment’ to self and to earthly illusion; the postmodernist might call ‘addiction’. Under the guise of improved standards of living we consume quantities of food, goods and services far greater than we need for sufficiency. Our enslavement to sensations and appetites, instead of nourishing and supporting us, make us dependant and ill.

The veil of *maya* or illusion has reappeared in a new guise in science and philosophy. We have been led to believe (eg. Kant’s “thing-in-itself”) that ultimate reality is something other than what our senses reveal to our normal consciousness. Indeed we are led to believe that ultimate reality is an illusion (eg. Foucault). In contrasting Modernism and Postmodernism, Hassam<sup>29</sup> identifies paranoia as the modernist condition and schizophrenia as the disorder characteristic of postmodernist times. Thus we are described as existing in a schizophrenic condition; divided, fragmented and alienated beings without a central organising self.

As a companion to the problem of growth and excessive consumption there is a wider social problem—that of alienation or neurotic detachment—which impinges on moral responsibility. When the postmodern ‘subject’ is constructed, he or she is merely a heap of fragments or ‘discursive positions’ often bereft of any self consciousness regarding the contradictory nature of his or her experience, and therefore leaving open the possibility of bearing no responsibility or agency.

Alienation, on the one side of a continuum, points to a kind of dream-like state of disconnected imagery persisting in daily life, characterised by an inadequate “coming down to earth” upon waking up. On the opposite extreme is greed and addiction, in which we become frantic consumers of sense experiences to feed insatiable drives and desires. In other words, we become too “earth-bound”. Where, how and by what aspect of the ‘self’ is a balance to be found?

Both the Buddhist and postmodernist deconstructions have sought to do away with their concept of an ego or individual, and each has a positive motive—human liberation from illusion. However, Buddhism has provided a clearly articulated and methodical path of inner development towards the achievement of this liberation.

Postmodernist discourses are often penetrating analyses of the conditions of the present times, and their insights have had application in cultural analysis, social theory and politics, in art, architecture, language and even fashion! But its fruition is relatively new and still in the process of development. Under these conditions it is too early to make definitive judgements about its significance to philosophical and cultural life.

One thing is clear. The challenge to the supremacy of the Self has created a storm among those whose experience and articulation of the Self fits more comfortably within the discursive practices of Modernism. But within the storm, the ‘I’ remains.

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Student:	Master... What is the way of liberation?
Master:	Show me your chains.
Student:	I don't have any chains.
Master:	Then why are you seeking liberation?

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<sup>29</sup> Brooker, Peter *Modernism/Postmodernism*, Longman 1992, p. 12

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