

SUUC Worship Service
May 3, 2020

Sermon:
Your True Self
(It's Not About You)

The Idea of a True Self

My topic today was suggested by an article in *Psychology Today* (9/17) by Art Markman, titled “The True Self.”

- According to Markman’s article, if someone rages at us, we might excuse them because we know they’ve been under strain. Or we might mistrust that person because he or she is frequently angry at **US**. Or we might think that – deep down at the core – this person is just always essentially an angry woman or a violent man.
- So, at times we think a person’s actions reflect a temporary state or situation. Other times, we think they reveal something permanent or essential, independent of the situation or of the others in the situation.
- We often express these different judgments about people’s actions in terms of a “True Self.” Sometimes, we think a person’s actions reflect “HIS OR HER TRUE SELF” whereas at other times we say that a particular action is “NOT WHO THEY REALLY ARE.” And we even say such things of our own actions.

Common Beliefs about “The True Self”

As Markman goes on to note, beliefs about the “TRUE SELF” show remarkable similarity across cultures. Here are two common beliefs:

1. “The True Self” of every person – or, at least, most persons – is commonly viewed as good and moral. People’s actions or even inner motives may be bad, but their True Selves are somehow basically good.
 - So, when people depart from their habitual actions, either temporarily or permanently, we are more likely to say the change reflects their true selves when they change from something bad to something good – than vice versa.
 - For instance, someone who STOPS abusing drugs or alcohol is often judged as allowing their True Self to surface or to gain control – while someone who STARTS abusing drugs or alcohol is viewed as losing or betraying their True Self.

2. A second common use of the True Self idea is to express a view that someone can change for the good over time, even if many – even ALL -- of their past actions have been bad. We’re reluctant to decide that someone is truly evil and prefer to believe that their “true self” is a sort of smoldering moral ember inside them that may somehow catch fire some day and lead them toward better outward actions.

TRUE SELF Just a Useful Fiction?

- So people use the idea of the True Self to express some admirable attitudes – being tolerant & forgiving, admitting complexity in human character & potential for good in everyone. But then the *Psychology Today* piece pulls the rug from the “True Self,” saying: “It is hard from a scientific view to think a ‘True Self’ actually exists inside each of us.”
- Instead, the article says that this idea -- that every person has a hidden inner True Self that is inherently moral and good, even despite all outer actions to the contrary – is considered at best as a “valuable fiction.”
- BTW, let’s NOT confuse this idea of a good, moral TRUE SELF with our UU 1st Principle. Affirming that every person has inherent worth and dignity does not mean that everyone is MORALLY good. We’re all capable of good or evil in every moment.
- Maybe I’m more Universalist than Unitarian in my interpretation of our 1st Principle. (There’s an old chestnut from our 1961 merger, about the difference between Universalists & Unitarians: Universalists say **GOD** is too good to consign them to an everlasting hell; Unitarians say **THEY** are too good to be consigned to an everlasting hell.)

Knowledge of the Self in Meditation?

- **So** there's no scientific basis for the True Self idea. But wait! Can't we obtain Direct Knowledge of a True Self in meditation or similar "Mindfulness" practices? In the common view of our society:
 - Meditation is a way to find, restore, or protect the True Self -- to reassert equanimity, self-sufficiency, self esteem, self confidence & command by a process of self-calming.
 - And we achieve this by disconnection from "the world of others" & its perturbing perceptions, thoughts, & especially emotions (emotions such as Shame, Guilt, Envy, Dread, Worry, or just plain Distraction).
- **However**, our current experience with anti-virus physical distancing shows that detachment as social isolation may have some serious drawbacks. Too much may be harmful – even for us introverts!
- Here's a less obvious but more difficult problem with the idea of finding the True Self by meditative disconnection and isolation: What if there are other interpretations of meditation? What if an interpretation **opposes** the idea of a TRUE SELF -- as an unchanging, permanent substance, unconnected/unrelated/unresponsive to other beings?

Buddhist Meditation is aimed at the Buddhist idea of No-Self

In fact, Buddhism is precisely such a skeptical critique of the “True Self” idea, both in theory & meditative practice.

- A focus on the nature of the self dominates the religious history of India. But the Buddha was a heterodox critic of the Indian orthodoxy of his day – somewhat like Martin Luther protesting Roman Catholicism nearly 2000 years later -- though it's hard to imagine the Buddha nailing the 4 Noble Truths & 8-Fold Path to the temple door.
- A key to Buddhism is its teaching about No Self (anatman or anatta in the Sanskrit or Pali languages used by early Buddhism): NO-SELF -- To realize that there is No True Self is the real aim of Buddhist meditation: not to find my True Self, but to escape the illusion that I have one.
- Note that the No Self idea doesn't deny human interiority/personality.
 - A Buddhist master to his pupil, “Do you understand that you don't really exist?”
 - The Pupil replies, “To whom do you think you are speaking?”
 - (The master responds: “I don't know.” Pupil: “That's right!” Master: “For now!”)
- What Anatman or Anatta DOES deny is the idea of a True Self as a changeless, self-sustaining essence or substance. Denied in 2 main ways.

1. No-Self because of impermanence

First, Buddhism says all is transient; nothing actual is eternal, unchanging

- Human individuals also are fundamentally changing all the time. NO SELF means that I have no set unchanging permanent essence, underlying all the temporary qualities of my personal flow of process.
- Granted, sometimes my life process shows connected action patterns – call them “instincts” & “habits” – that repeat or persist enough to be treated as if they were self-identical characteristics over some time. But these are not really fixed or permanent or unchangeable.
- The practical moral consequence of recognizing transience is -- to accept it. I should not try to cling to past perfection – nor to past injury. I should not live in dread of potential disaster nor demand a guaranteed future. I should just live -- without neurotic grasping for permanence. (Rev. Amanda, “Clinging to Timelessness”)
- BTW, impermanence is not all bad. Though life is perpetual perishing, impermanence or change also allows hope, novelty, adventure, life!
- As the Vietnamese Buddhist monk, Thich Nhat Hanh says: “It’s not impermanence that makes us suffer. What makes us suffer is wanting things to be permanent when they are not.”

2. No-Self because of mutual dependence

Perhaps even more helpful to realize in this time is the connection of the NO SELF with the Buddhist teaching of **Dependent Co-origination**. This teaching can get quite elaborated. Some try to simplify, saying, “Oh, that just explains karma.” But here is its general truth that I want to bring out: Everything that actually exists arises from other actualities, other causes. Nothing is entirely independent and separate, on its own, without relations.

- So NO SELF means I am not separate or independent from my relations. I am NOT absolutely self-subsistent, self-determined, self-derived.
- My true existence – what makes me who I am in each moment -- is created by what I make of all my unique experienced relations with a world of others -- created by how I decide to relate to them -- including even which others I pay attention to. These relations are not just external connections; they are the constituents of my life as an actual process.
- It's as if our 7th UU principle (the interdependent web of all existence) were not just about ecology, but everything, even human togetherness.
- To realize this is to turn from self-centeredness, self-absorption, self-obsession to attentive, curious, interested awareness of others.
- The moral consequence of enlightenment, of realizing the truth of No Self, is **compassion** for all fellow humans -- even for all fellow sentient beings.

Practical Implications of No-Self View

So the NO-SELF view preserves what is useful in the TRUE SELF fictions without their misconceptions. It is more realistic & more tough minded.

- It saves the ideas that everyone, no matter their past, can act in any moment to choose the good – or the bad! In each moment, I decide what to make of all that has affected me, my “past selves,” my habits of thought, speech and action. Thoughts make words, words lead to actions, actions to habits, habits to character, yet I can in any moment act partly “out of character” & make real change, a new direction.
- The No Self idea preserves my individual worth and freedom, but recognizes how I am interwoven in a web of all life. The interrelational nature of existence always holds, but I can overlook this for some distorting delusion.
 - It is a delusion that spiritual growth is purely self-directed with no relation to others. (N.B., Buddhists typically meditate not alone but with members of their Sangha.)
 - It is a delusion to view all events for their reflection on me, my status, my ratings.
 - It is a delusion if I make decisions for a collective of others from my own views, my desires, or “gut instincts” – without considering the others or conferring with them.
 - It is a delusion if I act out of self-aggrandizing and not kindness, empathy, compassion.
 - I should avoid making myself & those about me miserable by trying to force my will on them just because I think that I am more important or that I know what’s best for them.

So . . . Your True Self

- **It's not about you. Forget you.** Here's one summary of this sermon: "Be here now, with & for the others here now. At another time, be there later, with & for the others who are there then. (Pause) Remember, wherever you go, there you are. (Pause) Your baggage is a different story."
- In my view, the truth is not about finding my self; it's about losing my self. It's not about coming to self-consciousness; it's about becoming fully conscious – period. It's not about focusing on myself & my desires & preferences, it's about becoming compassionately aware of a world of fellow humans or sentient beings, with **their** desires & preferences.
- Buddhist mythology has these quasi-divine figures called bodhisattvas: persons who are underway to certain enlightenment. The bodhisattva, on the brink of Nirvana as a kind of heaven of final enlightenment, postpones entry to Nirvana & turns back in compassion to help others to enlightenment. The bodhisattva story says that more noble -- more true even -- than reaching solitary self-enlightenment to attend to others who need us. To me, the bodhisattva myth says that real Nirvana is HERE, this ordinary world of inter-woven relations with others, seen & treated with loving kindness, empathetic joy, & compassion.

Buddha's Metta Suta

May all beings be at ease!
Let none deceive another,
Or despise any being in any state.
Let none through anger or ill-will
Wish harm upon another.
Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all living beings;
Radiating kindness over the entire world:
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Outwards and unbounded,
Freed from hatred and ill-will.
Whether standing or walking, seated or lying down
Free from drifting inattention,
One should sustain this recollection.
This is said to be the sublime abiding.
By not holding to fixed views,
The pure-hearted one, having clarity of vision,
Being freed from all grasping or clinging
Is not condemned to repeat past mistakes.

Introducing Music for Meditation

We will now have a moment of meditation accompanied by Lucy's piano performance of Mompou's Prelude.