

Jung's Empty Self: a Buddhist and Postmodern Perspective

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I would like to turn directly to Jung's 1938 definition of the archetype in preparation for my comments on the empty Self:

It is necessary to point out once more that archetypes **are not determined** as regards their content, but only as regards their form and then only to a **very limited** degree....**The archetype itself is empty**....nothing but a **possibility of representation** which is given a priori. ¹

Jung says clearly 'the archetype itself is empty.' What precisely does he mean by empty? We may infer that in the context of his definition, emptiness has something to do with the possibility of imaginal representation as it is filled out by the content of our human experience. The **content** of the empty archetype, or the image is not determined. It has infinite variety or a boundless quality. In other words it is **always changing**, as is the **form** but to a more limited degree. Implied in Jung's statement is the important distinction between the archetypal image that may be known and the symbol of the archetype that can never be known.² What precedes the image of the empty archetype, is a **movement** of energy out of what Jung describes as the psychoid³ character of the collective unconscious. And from this swell of energy emerges the fluid form that circumscribes the content of my human experience with all of its delight and anguish.

¹ CW 9.1 para

² for a discussion of the phenomenal and noumenal archetype see Walter Shelburne, *Mythos and Logos in the Thought of Carl Jung* p.55

³ see "On the Nature of the Psyche" CW 8 for Jung's explanation of the psychoid

Now, it is something of a coincidence to point out that Jung penned this definition of the empty archetype in the very same year that he traveled to India to visit the site where Buddha delivered his “Fire Sermon.” The message of the sermon is that we try to hold onto the ceaselessly changing nature of mental and physical experience to provide the illusion of security and stability, but it is precisely clinging to the illusion that is the cause of our dis-ease and anguish. The theme of the Fire Sermon moved Jung. In *Memories Dreams Reflections* Jung describes having been overcome “with strong emotion of the kind that frequently develops in me when I encounter a thing or a person or idea whose significance I am still unconscious....The intensity of the emotion showed me that the hill of Sanchi (where Buddha gave the Fire Sermon) meant something to me.” And then in the very same paragraph he proclaims, **“I grasped the life of the Buddha as the reality of the self...For Buddha self stands above all gods...Buddha became as it were, the image of the development of the self.”**⁴

Another important reference to the influence of Eastern thought on the self comes just a year before Jung's visit to India. In 1937, at the Yale Terry Lectures he declares, “ I have chosen the term self in accordance with Eastern Philosophy.”⁵ This remark refers, in part, to the important influence Richard Wilhelm had on Jung as they collaborated on the Chinese alchemical text, *The Secret of the Golden Flower*. For Jung himself exclaims: “It was only after I had collaborated with Wilhelm and reached the central point in my researches, namely the concept of self, that I once more found my way back to the world.”⁶ Here, Jung is alluding to the confusion he experienced after his break with Freud. *The Secret of the Golden Flower* unfolds around the principle of Tao or movement along the line of least resistance, and profoundly influenced his evolving understanding of self as “the goal of psychic

⁴ *Memories Dreams Reflections* p.278f

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development....” and paradoxically, as a “circle whose center is everywhere and circumference is nowhere.”

Then, in 1950, having assimilated the themes of impermanence and movement from the *Fire Sermon* and the *Golden Flower* he declares that: “The self furthermore, is not a static quantity or constant form, but is rather a ‘dynamic process,’ an active force’ whose essence is one of continual transformation and rejuvenation.”

⁷CW9.ii.411)

This Self, like the general definition of the empty archetype, is **not stable**. It is **not a substance** but a dynamic process; It has **no immutable essence** only active force; It **cannot be grasped** because it is both constantly transforming as it is transformed. This is the self that bears a striking resemblance to the Buddhist notion of emptiness or *shunyata*.

According to the Mahayana philosopher Nagarjuna, who is considered the poet and primary exponent of Buddha’s teaching on *shunyata*, emptiness is not a bleak and nihilistic void, which is how *shunyata* has been misrepresented in the west under the influence of Shopenhauer and Neitzsche. Neither is it a mystical state, not another privileged religious object and not something sacred to believe in. Rather, emptiness is an experience of the **groundless movement of energy, and manifests in the momentary arising and perishing of all the forms of the phenomenal world.**⁸

The phenomenal world of emptiness is also a contingent world, which means that events are devoid of any intrinsic separate being or of existing in their own right. Whatever is contingent depends on

⁶ *Memories* p.208

⁷ Jung CW 9.ii para 411

⁸ Mu Soeng, *Trust in Mind*

something else for its existence—there are no isolated or permanent objects or subjects. Emptiness, therefore, simply describes an unfathomable matrix of relationships that are connected in and by a groundless flow of energy that has no discernable beginning and no divine power mysteriously directing it to a preordained end. Poetically rendered as the ‘fasting of the mind,’ emptiness is a fertile absence of the perceived fixed conditions, which denies the mutable nature of life.⁹

As emptiness functions as a symbol to describe the groundless movement of energy out of which the phenomenal world is born and dies; so the transformational self is a symbol that points to an undifferentiated mass of energy permeating the psychoid realm of psyche, out of which the particular form and content of our physical and mental life emerges.

But this self is not only transforming our life from moment to moment on the cellular level; it is itself being modified by the impact of its own dynamic activity as it influences our relationship to the world. Self then, is also a contingent phenomenon which means that it is empty—a ceaselessly moving conjunction between person and world, that cannot exist apart from the events it permeates and cannot be sought apart from the totality of all forms.¹⁰ Therefore, the empty self betrays the western idea of a theological first cause because in the Buddhist interdependent universe there are no metaphysical hierarchies. Nor, can the empty self be sequestered into the solitude of our interior reverie, or it’s opposite flights of activity, which bolster our value in the eyes of a society that worships material success. Although, both experiences surely belong to the province of the empty self because they are intrinsic to human existence; it is only at the point where all the faculties of body, heart and

⁹ Stephen Batchelor, *Verses from the Center*, quoting Chuang Tzu p.12

¹⁰ Mu Soeng, *The Heart Sutra* p. 34

mind converge to awaken us to the momentary sufficiency of life—just as it is – that we feel the empty self transforming and cleansing our perception of the ephemeral nature of all experience.

Roger Brooke has said it very beautifully when he explains that, “the self’s unfolding is the world’s disclosure,” and Jung writes, “psyche is simply world.”¹¹ This is also the meaning of the opening lines of Heart Sutra; “Form is emptiness and emptiness is form” and bears a striking similarity to Jung’s 1950 definition of self as a dynamic process.

But if in fact the empty self’s revelation is shaped by a reciprocity of transforming action, it is incumbent upon us to see this empty self by its very dependence on a world of change as characterized by limitation. Transformation implies impermanence, what Buddhist philosophy identifies as one of the three characteristics of existence.¹² Therefore, limitation must be intrinsic to self’s changing nature that circumscribes the duration of every conditioned pleasure and pain. These reflections may offer insight into why Jung has written, “[that] the greatest limitation for man is the self; it is manifested in the experience I am only that. Only consciousness of our narrow confinement in the self forms the link to the limitlessness of the unconscious.”¹³

And yet, it is precisely the limitation or impermanent nature of the transformational self as it is experienced in the groundless flow of events, that opens a life to endless permutations of loving and working and engaging the world. If I am able to feel the finitude of desire for the subject of my delight

¹¹ Roger Brooke, *Jung and Phenomenology* p. and Jung CW 9.1 para.291

¹² Buddhist psychology postulates that experience is characterized by stress, inconstancy and selflessness. For a complete discussion of the three characteristics see *What the Buddha Taught*

¹³ *Memories* p.325

and for that matter, what also repels me, as they empty into their ending; then perhaps I may be present to this very moment in a display of infinite possibility.

The empty self contrasts radically with the Freudian Id that is often conceived as a warehouse of frozen imagery from the personal past. The power of our belief in the fiction that I am locked into an image from a slice of history may be greater and more restricting to my individuation than the actual event, and may still the dynamic of an empty self that would restore our life to the current of the impersonal and groundless flow. According to Buddhist psychology, if I am insecure it is not because of faulty upbringing; rather, insecurity is the ground of my being because I belong to a contingent world that by its very nature is unstable.

But Jung offers a different story that is more in tandem with the empty self. For does he not insist that “the psyche creates imaginal reality every day?”¹⁴ If psyche is creating reality everyday, then the image itself is an empty phenomenon and is dependent upon the way I perceive the influence of the unconscious on the daily events of my life. True imagination would be a constant releasing, letting go, shedding and refining of one image as it turns into another. Therefore, the images through which psychological life are structured and empowered are de-literalized. What this means is that the empty self finally offers freedom from the host of memory that previously haunted us. Personal history is no longer isolated but is part of a continuum—a flow between past, present and future that is all mixed, all the time. The relativity of time is one of Jung’s unique contributions to penetrating into the mystery of psychological life. This perspective belongs to his understanding of the transpersonal transference, his synthetic method of psychotherapy rooted in the healing power of the symbol, and perhaps most

¹⁴ Jung CW 6 p.

powerfully, in his idea of synchronicity which confirms that events may be transformed when meaning breaks into history from a timeless world.

When Jung declares in his visit to India, that he **grasped the life of the Buddha as the reality of the Self** perhaps he had an experiential knowing into the emptiness of the phenomenal world. It is what we in these post-modern times might recognize as an experience of the sublime —a mixture of terror and fascination which stills the rational mind. However, the origin of the Buddhist sense of sublime is not in nature but in the impermanence or emptiness of human life that led Buddha to see anguish and its origins, cessation and its path.

When the rational mind fails to penetrate into the mystery of the groundless flow, which I am suggesting may be compared to the psychoid unconscious, it may respond either with despair or relax into a state of quietude. The plenum of conceptual proliferation and the linguistic gods into which we have encapsulated the empty self may dissolve, as the constant change of all physical and mental phenomenon is felt and experienced. Then, perhaps all we are left with to hold on to is what Joseph Campbell poignantly calls the “symbol without meaning” – a fitting metaphor for Jung’s empty self. The anesthetic comfort of metaphysics and the protection of a supreme being loose their allure and we know the sublime wordless depth, antecedent to symbol, to which Jung’s Empty Self points the way. I sense this is what Jung is referring to when he writes, “**for Buddha self stands above all gods.**”

So what remains to orient our life with value after the empty self takes away the traditional protection of the symbol? I suggest there may arise a sense of concern for a world from which one is not

separate, and care for humans who would replace the impersonal reality of the empty self with the personal illusion of the essentialist self

The notion of care and concern are central to Buddhist psychology. **Buddha** himself chose the Pali word 'metta' to describe cultivating an intention of kindness, protection and well-being for all creatures.¹⁵ **The Heart Sutra** fosters the ideal of the Bodhisattva, one who is reborn into this fragile world out of compassion for all sentient being. The eighth-century Indian monk Shantiveda, author of *A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*, describes an explosion of feeling as the heart abruptly opens to the anguish of others. **Shantiveda** makes clear, emptiness does not eliminate this 'me,' but transforms it. Contrary to expectation, an empty self turns out to be a relational self.¹⁶

In our time the philosopher Emanuel **Levinas** speaks of the radical call from the 'other' expressing the imperative not to hurt. **Heidegger** insists that care is the only response we can have towards the inevitable limitations that beset *dasein* or existence in the world. Here, Heidegger is not referring to the care of a sympathetic nurse but to care as presence. "It is the call of the *self as care* which awakens one to the manifold and pregnant presence of beings."¹⁷ And finally, **Jung** echoes the theme in his statement that "Individuation [which is the goal of the empty self], does not shut one out from the world, but gathers the world to itself."¹⁸

¹⁵ Samyutta Nikaya, 22

¹⁶ Bachelor p.33

¹⁷ Brooke p.106

¹⁸ CW 8 para. 432

The empty self may turn out to be a self infused with love. But not love as desire, or hunger or lack; rather love as kindness, care and presence. This may offer a novel meaning to Jung's familiar injunction that an "experience of the self is always a defeat for the ego."