



As the Heart Sutra put it, *emptiness*, one term for Reality-such-as-it –truly-is, only exists as specific forms. The universe only takes shape in particular forms such as you and me. Our uniqueness comes from our specific relations to others and from the qualities we have as individuals. Our uniqueness does not involve our being some ghostly soul-things. That would separate us. That would make the universe split into meaningless multiplicity. That would disappoint both Sakyamuni Buddha and John Lennon. We certainly would not want to do that.

I deliberately close on this light note. My friend, the late Dr. Leslie Kawamura also emphasized that the self and the individual are not denied in the Buddha-dharma. He said in a lecture one time: “To worry too much about this issue is, itself, a sign of selfishness.” No need to obsess over this. Perhaps you could put on the Beatles Revolver album and have John advise you to “turn off your mind, relax and float downstream.” [“Tomorrow Never Knows” – Lennon/McCartney 1966]

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# No Soul and Being Reality Itself

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Buddhists can be very ‘soulful.’ However, we know that we don’t, other people do not, and, in fact, no one has a soul. No person, place, object or event has the sort of essence-thing called a “soul”. No real person has or is a soul. “Soul” is an abstract concept. It does not name a reality that exists. A soul is not the proper explanation for the unity of personal identity.

### What is Denied

What was specifically denied by Sakyamuni Buddha and all of his most discerning disciples over these past 2,500 years is the *atman*. This soul theory of Brahmanical tradition, what is now called Hinduism, is pretty close to what is usually meant by a soul in Western religious and philosophical traditions as well. The *atman*/soul would be: permanent, unchanging, subject of experience, non-physical, uniquely one’s own, and the true center of and explanation for the existence of one’s personal identity. This is not the correct explanation of the nature of our identity. It is not a description of anything that actually exists.

### What is not Denied

Neither Sakyamuni nor any of his great disciples ever denied the *purusha* (the Self), nor the *pudgala* (the individual). We are each individuals and we are, each our own selves. The self is not permanent or unchanging, and it may not be uniquely self-same. Still neither the self nor individuality is denied in early or classical Buddhism. A basic objective for Buddhists is to overcome our selfishness. If there were no self, in any sense, how could we worry about being too selfish? As the Buddha-dharma is taught to individuals in specific

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uniquely your own. My identity  
is not uniquely my own.  
As John Lennon once put it,  
in charmingly simple fashion,  
“I am he, as you are he, as you  
are me, as we are all together.”*

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contexts you may find otherwise competent teachers saying that there is no “self”. In such cases, we must attend to what they are specifically meaning by “self”. It is usually the concept of a soul lying behind and giving unity to a self that they mean to deny. Obviously, you do exist [*purusha* is not denied]. You are an individual [*pudgala* is not denied].

### What is Implied by the Rejection of Soul theories

What is implied about your identity and mine, by denial of the soul theory, is that we are not, each of us, uniquely self-same. Your identity is not uniquely your own. My identity is not uniquely my own. As John Lennon once put it, in charmingly simple fashion, “I am he, as you are he, as you are me, as we are all together.” [Lennon/McCartney 1967] In other words, we are each the big thing. We are each Reality Such-as-it-truly-is. We are each unique presentations of Buddha-nature. We are each unique appearances of the one Universe. This could not be true if the basis for our personal identities consisted of having or being a soul.

### Who and What We Are in Truth

Each of us is a way in which the universe expresses and knows itself. This is what John Lennon was saying in “I am the Walrus,” quoted above. It is also the thrust of Mahayana Buddhist teachings which address identity. Each of us is a way in which the Universe expresses itself. You are we being you and I am we being me. In the final analysis, there is only this one great life we share together, but it does not swamp our individuality.

Our identities are like roles we have in a grand narrative. This time I play Laertes and you play Hamlet. Next time out, one of us may be Ophelia. Great actors can play all the roles. Greatly awoken persons know that they have played all the roles. After Enlightenment they choose which one they will play from there on out. For now we must play the role we have with great sincerity, all the time knowing that we must eventually play all the roles. In Texas, about a hundred years ago, Hamlet was being performed. At the point in the play where Laertes approaches from behind and cuts Hamlet with his poisoned sword, a guy in the audience stood up and shot the actor portraying Laertes (not fatally).

The actor playing Laertes that evening must have really been into the role. The audience certainly took him seriously. We, too, should take the persons we are now portraying quite seriously. All the time knowing, nonetheless, that we are all the characters, in all the plays. Those already written as well as those yet to be composed.