



No Self, No Problem

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The three characteristics of all experiences are impermanence, dissatisfaction and selfless nature. The latter, in my experience, is the hardest concept to grasp. While we all can experience for ourselves impermanence and dissatisfaction, we can realize the selfless nature of everything but ourselves! For example, take anger. We know that anger arises in us and will fall away. But what about the “us”? Who is experiencing the anger? A common way to explore this is when meditating to look for the “I”. Can you find it? Even if you can’t, it seems that the concept of self still lives.

Why is it so important to realize selfless nature, that we exist but that we are not who the mind thinks we are? The reason is that believing this mind generated self leads to stress and suffering.

In his book, *No Self, No Problem: How Neuropsychology is Catching Up to Buddhism*, Chris Niebauer, Ph.D. explores the nature of self and contrasts the Western view of cogito, ergo sum or “I think therefore I am” (Descartes) with the Eastern view “of this idea of “me” is a fiction, although a very convincing one.”¹

Niebauer goes on to note: “This book will explore strong evidence suggesting that the concept of the self is simply a construct of the mind, rather than a physical thing located somewhere within the brain itself. Put another way, it is the process of thinking that creates the self, rather than there being a self having any independent existence separate from thought. The self is more like a verb than a noun. To take it a step further, the implication is that without thought, the self does not, in fact, exist. It's as if contemporary neuroscience and psychology are just now catching up with what Buddhist, Taoist, and Advaita Vedanta Hinduism have been teaching for over 2,500 years.

This may be a difficult point to grasp, chiefly because we've mistaken the process of thinking as a genuine thing for so long. It will take some time to see the idea of a “me” as simply an idea rather than a fact. Your illusory self—the voice in your head—is very convincing.

It:

- narrates the world,
- determines your beliefs,
- replays your memories,
- identifies with your physical body,
- manufactures your projections of what might happen in the future, and
- creates your judgments about the past.

It is this sense of self that we feel from the moment we open our eyes in the morning to the moment we close them at night. It seems all-important, so it often comes as a shock when I tell people that based on my work as a neuropsychologist, this “I” is simply not there—**at least not in the way we think it is.**

On the other hand, this will come as no surprise to those who have studied Eastern religions and philosophical movements, since all of these take as a basic premise the idea that the self as we most commonly think of it does not exist. If this is true, one might then ask, what is left? This question is definitely worth pondering, and we will look at it later after we approach the idea of “no self” through the landscape of scientific findings that point to the unreality of the self and the possible presence of a different model of consciousness.”²

Anatomically, the human brain has two mirror halves connected by the fibers of the corpus callosum. Through the connections of the corpus callosum, the two sides of the brain stay in constant communication with each other. It was discovered through the severing of this connection either by surgery (to treat epilepsy) and by accidental severing due to injury, that each side of the brain specializes in different tasks which has led to the neuroscientific research on how the brain processes information inputted by the six senses of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling and thinking.

These discoveries have led to the findings that one part of the brain (the left) contains the **language center** (Broca’s area) and the other part (the right) contains the **spatial center**. (right temporo-parietal area). It is not important to understand more about the specific anatomy at this point; rather we will explore the differences of these centers and how our perception is depends on which center we are communicating with.

The language center

We will call the left center, the language center, because it directly communicates to us via thoughts.

What are its characteristics

- It is the dominant center for **language**
- It acts as an **interpreter** by comparing what is experienced with stored memories and beliefs.
- It **communicates** the interpretation to us

Dominant center for language

We communicate with each other via language either spoken or written. This communication is a form of map making. For example, when we read the words on a menu, the mind creates a map that allows us to visualize a dish and perhaps create a sense of taste and smell. However, what is being created in the language center is not reality (the real dish). In fact, if we were to order that dish, it might not look, taste, and smell as we had been led to believe by the mind created map.

While we may be aware that the menu is only a map and not reality, we can be easily fooled in other circumstances. For example, imagine encountering a person with whom you previously had an unpleasant experience. This time when your eyes made contact with this person, you may be seeing that person as they were in the previous encounter and thus may be expecting the same unpleasant

experience to repeat itself. The mind created a map of an unpleasant person; this image and perception are not who you are really seeing in the present.

The Interpreter

The second function of the language center, the interpreter, works like this:

When one of our sense organs makes contact with a sense object and our mind is conscious of this, we call this form (the pure experience).

What the language center does with the pure experience, using past memories and stored beliefs, is to condition it by:

- Adding a label
- Putting it in a category
- Trying to make sense of it by comparing to stored judgments and beliefs, and
- Making up a story to communicate to you via bodily sensations (feeling) and thoughts (perception)

Using the previous example of encountering a person, we can see that the eye made contact with this person (object) and the interpreter **labeled** it as John Doe and **categorized** it as a person. Comparing John Doe with the previous John Doe, it finds unpleasantness and makes up story that this encounter is going to be unpleasant as well.

The Communication to you.

In this example, the interpreter has created a perception and communicates it to you via unpleasant bodily sensations and thoughts. You may mistake the perception for the person in front of you rather than just see it as a story that the language center is telling you.

In summary, this process is a form of pattern recognition. Niebauer notes that the language center uses the tools of language, categorization, beliefs and judgement “in such a way that we could say it is really something of a pattern-making machine. In fact, I would argue that it is the most advanced pattern-perception machine in the cosmos.”³

Note that with pattern perception, the patterns only exist in the mind and not in reality. For example, when we read, we are using pattern recognition to distinguish the words. If you have ever played the popular game, Wordle, you can see that success is based on pattern recognition of incomplete strings of letters that the mind finally figures out the correct word.

The mind is always looking for a cause to explain why something happened even if it is not true. For example, let’s say that you see people talking behind your back. Based on past memories, the mind tells you that they are conspiring to do something unpleasant to you. As a result, you feel alienated when in fact, they are planning a surprise birthday party.

Similarly, the self that you think you are is just a pattern created by the language center based on memories and past beliefs. This “self” is a narrow concept because it is based on a finite number of characteristics. Who you really are is unknown. We do know that it is boundless.

While the language center is very beneficial to us in everyday life, it can be the cause of stress when we get addicted to thinking all of the time and not give the mind a rest. The language center wants to be thinking all of the time **because this is the only way that the self-concept can exist**. Its incentive to have us keep thinking is that it is stimulating.

In summary the language center creates the sense of self. To rephrase Descartes, “I think therefore I believe I am.”

Niebauer notes that the language center, the pattern machine, “is a biological function that is working all the time and virtually impossible to stop. That being said simply becoming coming aware of the left brain's propensity to see patterns, we can begin to take them less seriously. This has significant benefits for how we experience the world, including reducing our suffering.”⁴

In the next talk, we will explore the alternative: the spatial center and how we can access it to give the language center a rest.

¹ Niebauer Ph.D., Chris . No Self, No Problem: How Neuropsychology Is Catching Up to Buddhism (The No Self Wisdom Series) (p. xvii). Hierophant Publishing.

Note that in this talk, all quotations are from this book unless otherwise noted.

² Ibid pp xvii-xviii

³ Ibid p. 43

⁴ Ibid p. 55