

# ABOUT "AN-ATMAN," NON-SELF

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About 3,000 years ago, there lived Indo-European-language-speaking people in the east of the Caspian Sea. They moved to the region of the Indus River, invaded and settled in India, and established the Vedic religion.

The Vedic religion is based on two essential concepts. One is Brahman. Brahman means the supreme reality. At the same time, it means the absolute being, which is the source of the entire universe. So, Brahman is a concept similar to the Divine. The other one is Atman. Atman is a master of individual body and mind. And it is equivalent to a self. The Vedic religion has advocated that people can reach the ultimate enlightenment when they experience and understand Atman is identical to Brahman.

It is said that Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, was a fundamental reformer and had a theory of "non-self," which is called *an-atman* in Sanskrit. An-atman denies the existence of self. But obviously, this is an oversimplified perspective because we cannot help thinking a sense of self exists. As French philosopher Descartes concluded with *cogito ergo sum*, I think, therefore I am.

In fact, Buddha did not say that a self does not exist. Moreover, as some studies show, Buddha did not aim to create a new religion, at least in his early stage, but intended to faithfully convey the very essence of the Vedic tradition. One of the essences was a profound truth about the nature of self, which the Vedic masters and

Buddha had grasped. And that is the theme of this piece. As you know, nonviolence and compassion for all sentient beings are essential features of Buddhism. I believe there is a deep relation between these features and the profound truth inherited in ancient Eastern religions.

So, what is a self? Yājñavalkya, a master of Vedic religion in the eighth century BCE, said a self is a consciousness. More precisely, he said a self recognizes physical objects and mental objects. In other words, purely, a self is an observer watching material things and mental expressions.

Can a person recognize a self? Yājñavalkya said it is impossible. Surprisingly, to prove that is easy. Let us try. For the first step, assume you can recognize a self. Then, a question arises. "What recognizes the self?" The answer is "a self does" from the point of definition of self. Based on the assumption, the latter self should also be recognizable. Now again, a question arises. "What recognizes the second self which recognized the first self?" Now, we are in a contradiction called an infinite regress. That means the first assumption is logically wrong. Ultimately a self is unrecognizable.

The French philosopher of the twentieth century Jean-Paul Sartre agreed that a self is unrecognizable. In his book *Being and Nothingness*, he stated this is because of the duality in recognition. To recognize, you need both a recognizing doer and a recognized object at the same time.





*Yājñavalkya in the court of King Janaka, in a relief at the Sankara Mutt in Rameshwaram, India.*

So, when you say a self is unrecognizable, it means that you cannot recognize a self as an object. Yājñavalkya also pointed out that there are no words to express a self, because words always represent concepts, and concepts are always objects in your mind. He called this fact *Neti Neti* in Sanskrit. It means “not this, not that.”

Do you agree that a self is unrecognizable? If yes, what does the adage “Know thyself” mean? Does it require doing something impossible? I assume most Rosicrucians would not like to think this about this important adage in our tradition. But, in the context of the discussion so far, I’m pretty sure this adage requires us to experience our true selves. It requires us to transcend the subject-object duality of recognition, to free ourselves from the restriction of languages, concepts, and thinking.

In some groups of Zen Buddhism, there are questions called *kōan*. *Kōan* is a Japanese word and is a bizarre question made by a Zen master to provoke a significant question and inner awakening in the mind of their disciples.

The following *kōan* will help you experience the transcendence of duality in recognition.

First, place yourself in the traditional Rosicrucian position for meditation. With your back straight, feet flat on the floor, slightly apart from each other. And put your hands in your lap, palms down.

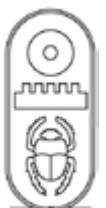
While in this position, close your eyes, breathe calmly and deeply, and feel completely relaxed.

Now, please breathe in and out as usual. Imagine you are diving into the deep sea. In the beautiful blue water, you go deeper and deeper and finally reach the bottom of the sea. You find a stone and take it in your hand. Then you go up to the water surface and return to the seashore. Now, you will be asked a question. What is the name of the stone?

To find the answer, let me remind you about one of our teachings: time and space do not actually exist, but are created by our objective consciousness.

Slowly, open your eyes halfway. Relax your eyes, and do not stare at anything fixedly. Just see all your surroundings vaguely as they are. Stop thinking and set your mind in silence.

Now let’s gather our courage to go one step further. Let go of attachment to your body and mind, as they are just a concept.



Instead, slip into a state in which there is nothing to see or to be seen.

What is the name of the stone you found at the bottom of the deep sea?

Now come back to your usual state of consciousness.

There are some possible answers to this question, but a classic answer by Buddhist masters is “a self.”

Zen masters often use a metaphor of an index finger pointing to the moon. The moon symbolizes the true self, and the index finger symbolizes the concept of self. They warn us of the mistake of mixing those two up.

All people on planet Earth live with instincts and desires. These are essential to survive. However, suppose you confuse the true self with the concept of self. In that case, your instincts and desires will be distorted, resulting in greed and selfishness within your mind.

In Buddhism, this confusion is called *avidyā*. In Sanskrit, this means a kind of fundamental ignorance. Many Buddhist schools teach that this fundamental

ignorance is the most significant cause of suffering in human existence.

Many Rosicrucians do not believe human beings can know or think of the Creator. Instead of the word “God,” we adopt “God of my Heart, God of my Realization.” This phrase contributes to our understanding of others with different views about the Divine. The Creator and a true self have a similar nature. Both of them are unrecognizable as an object. What we think of as a self is always just a concept. And if we forget it, an idea becomes dominant, namely a self exists like an independent object.

Thinking like this disturbs you from connecting with the Divine and keeps you away from Divine Reality. But, on the other hand, you would realize that you can set your mind free from languages and concepts when you meditate enthusiastically.

To conclude, I would like to confirm this – let us not confuse a true self with the concept of self. Be consistently aware that languages have a flaw of duality. And let us regularly engage in earnest meditation with our inner silence.

