

Self & Soul, III  
Joan Sutherland, Roshi  
Cerro Gordo Temple ~ Santa Fe, NM  
February 11, 2010

Good evening, bodhisattvas!

We're in the midst of a conversation that I apparently can't wait to get back to about the Self and the Soul. Those are words that can obviously mean a lot of different things in different contexts, so just for anyone who hasn't been here, in this conversation in this way : by self we mean that part of our consciousness which is always telling the story of our lives, and always assigning meaning and value to things. So, it's simply the voice in our heads that's going all the time, and it's the thing we mostly tend to mean when we say 'I' or 'me'. The soul is another part of our consciousness which is a kind of repository for all of our experiences. So it's as if the soul is a pond or a pool into which flow streams of experience, of thoughts, feelings, karma, landscape, politics, and all the things that make us out. But the soul doesn't have a linear narrative, and the self is always trying to take the elements of the soul and make a story out of it. But the soul inherently doesn't have a story. It is a beautiful inflowing of experience, and it's a way of seeing the particular, very local, very time-bound bit of the universe you call yourself, that little bit of the universe that rises and falls for a little while, and you think of as you.

So, the difference between the self and the soul, in a kind of shorthand, is something like how you describe an experience or event from the perspective of the self : Today I got a lot of things done on my to-do list. From the perspective of the soul, it might be something more like : There was a list, there were checkmarks. There was a warm feeling of satisfaction and relief. But you can kind of feel the difference between those two things. I got a lot done on the to-do list; or, There was a list, there was a feeling of relief.

Tonight I want to take a look at some of the old Mahayana traditions. By old I don't mean outdated, I mean ancient, some 1500 to 2000 years old, ways of looking at human consciousness, and to see if there are things that are part of the Mahayana tradition that might correspond to how we're speaking about self and soul. And here's a spoiler : the answer is yes. So there seem to be some kinds of correspondences. But it's also true we are looking at them from the perspective of at

least 1500 years and least one big ocean away from when those ideas were formulated and elaborated.

So it's possible we bring something to it as well. It's possible that we have a way of looking at it that might be an interesting mix up. One of the old Chinese Chan teachers Huangbo used to talk about wise digestion of the tradition, and he said that if we read the books and do the practices and have the conversations and all of that, just with the aim of accumulating experience — *I've read so much, I've done so much, I've put so much time in on the cushion* — that will give us indigestion. But if we really eat the traditions, chew them up, swallow them, and make them our own, if we make them our own, that is wise digestion, and that will nourish and sustain us. So, let's see whether this looks like an exercise in wise digestion or not, and you can be the judges of that.

In the Mahayana, in the philosophies of mind that developed in the first centuries of our era, there were, in one formulation, a common formulation, eight layers of human consciousness. The first five layers corresponded with, related to the five senses. So there is the consciousness that arises with hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, and touching. So, that's easy. Then there was a 6th consciousness which usually gets translated as 'mind', but what's kind of interesting to me about it and for another time, but I'll just note it, is that mind was seen also as a sense organ. And psychic events, be them thoughts or other kinds of psychic events, were the objects of the sense organ that was called the mind. So that's a pretty different and maybe interesting way of thinking about mind, which we tend to think about as this sort of all-encompassing whatever, but actually it's a sense organ with thoughts as its object. And it has another job, which is to synthesize all of the information, the experience, that comes in through the five physical senses, and to make some kind of coherent sense out of them. So that's the first six, and it's the last two, seven and eight, that I want to focus on tonight and see about their correspondences with self and soul.

The 7th, the poor 7th, always has names like the 'deluded consciousness', the 'tainted consciousness', you know, it's the one that gets it wrong. It's the one that looks at the 8th consciousness, which I'll talk about in a second, and thinks it's a self and doesn't understand that it's not. So, I just felt bad about calling it deluded and tainted and all of that stuff. So I was playing around with it, and I finally came up with 'mistaken consciousness'. It's the mistaken consciousness. And then when I was making some notes I realized I was abbreviating it as 'm.c.' And I really like the pun of that : that this is the consciousness that is the emcee in our heads all the time.

Okay. Let me explain the 8th and then I'll jump back to the 7th. The 8th consciousness is called the 'storehouse consciousness'. And it is the place where all of our experiences accumulate, sound familiar? Everything falls into the storehouse consciousness like leaves falling from a tree, and they just pile up in there. That piling goes on for a lifetime, and other things happen. One of the things that happens is that as those experiences come into the storehouse consciousness — this is the words that's used in the texts — they 'perfume', the storehouse consciousness. So each event, each experience, perfumes the storehouse consciousness in some way. And they leave traces or impressions on the storehouse consciousness. And if those traces and impressions ripen in a certain way they become seeds. And those seeds eventually, at some point, sprout and give birth to new events in our lives.

So you've got experience falling in, permeating the storehouse, perfuming the storehouse, leaving their traces; if the traces persist or are strong enough or a bunch of similar ones accumulate, they sort of coalesce into seeds. The seeds grow, and they're the source of karma, of new events, new things that happen. I always think of something Jung said which was so brilliant. He said anything that we force down into the unconscious, anything that we refuse to deal with but just push down, anything we force down into the unconscious returns as fate. So, it will go out into the outer world and come right back walking towards us if we don't deal with it on the conscious level. So that seems very much like this idea of the *alaya vijnana*, the storehouse consciousness, and the seeds that ripen and give rise to events.

It also provided a kind of handy way for dealing with the problem of reincarnation. If there's no persisting self, how do you get reincarnation? And that was held in the storehouse consciousness that those seeds persist, they are the things that were passed from in this sort of stream of consciousness from one life to the next, and that's what connects one life to another. Anything that we don't sort of ripen and get all the way through and let go of will persist into the next life.

So that sounded pretty soul-ish, right? Pretty kind of similar idea. And so, jumping back up the 7th level of consciousness, the mistaken consciousness. The mistaken consciousness looks at all of that and sees something that is coherent, that continues, that is a solid and existent self. That's the mistake. And then it does all this stuff based on that mistake, and that's all the stuff that we have trouble with about the self. Is that roughly clear?

So then there's a kind of elaboration of this map of consciousness, that comes in a little bit later in the Mahayana, and all of a sudden people started talking about this storehouse consciousness as being the location in us of the *tathagatha garbha*. Tathagatha garbha is the inherent buddha nature in all of us. Tathagatha is a name for the Buddha that means 'thus come' or 'thus gone' — it means both things at the same time. And 'garbha' is a womb. It's also the embryo inside the womb. It's the innermost thing. It has a whole sort of cloud of meanings that speak to the possibility, the inherent capability of all human beings to become enlightened. That's what it is. And this was located in this storehouse consciousness. So that's interesting. The soul is the place where the possibility of awakening, actually the surety of awakening resides. And then, another move gets made where that womb of the tathagatha, womb of awakening, is identified with awakening itself, the awakened state. So by a couple of steps you've got storehouse consciousness equals complete enlightenment. So that's interesting, because here we have, we're looking at the same thing, and we're seeing it from different perspectives. Sometimes it's the storehouse consciousness, but simultaneously in some mysterious way, it has the potential to become enlightenment itself.

These ideas came to idea and influenced Chan strongly, and then in China with the koans you get this further development where you drop away words like 'become' and 'will transform into' and 'is inherently' or 'latently', and you just get it's the soul, and it's enlightenment, and it's all there simultaneously at the same time. But I think sometimes it can be helpful to look at it in its two aspects because I think that sense that speaks to a way in which we experience our consciousnesses a lot in life which is, you know, on some days if enlightenment is a latent event that is sounding pretty good, you know, because it ain't so apparent. And, on other days we can feel like we have these moments where we see it all, we are experiencing it all, and we tend to move back and forth along that spectrum. So, although the koans would say, *you know, it's all one right here right now*, there's a certain human truth about something that sometimes feels one way and sometimes another.

When I look at this and consider this teaching from a very long time and distant way away, one of the things I notice about it is a kind of soul event, so I want to talk about soul in terms of how we work with this material. And the soul event I mean is that the thing that lights up for me in all of this, the thing that catches me, is 'perfume'. That's just, oh, what's that? I want to know about that. There's a door.

Perfuming is a door, and I want to walk through that door and find out where it wants to take me. When we bring that kind of idea in, we're bringing in a sense of the soul that is more natural in some western poetic traditions and other kinds of traditions. The description of the levels of consciousness and the alaya vijñana and the tathagatha garbha and the *dharmakaya* and all of those things that make up the Mahayana teachings are brilliant, clear, and precise. But one thing they aren't so much is warm. And when something happens like you're caught by a word like perfuming, there's a possibility of bringing in warmth and that's something we can, from our vantage point now, digesting this beautiful material, bring to it and see what happens.

So, let me give a quick example of what I mean by this different perspective on soul as opposed to storehouse consciousness. When we say someone has soulful eyes, what do we mean by that? Something like deep, full of feeling, and full of experience of all different kinds. What else does soulful evoke in that sense?

Q1 : ancient and timeless

Q2 : warmth

Q3 : bright and clear

Q4 : having a certain weight

Okay, so that's the sense of soul I'm interested in exploring in relationship to storehouse consciousness. I'm pretty sure that we're never going to be in danger of saying *She has really storehouse consciousness eyes*. It's just a kind of different way of looking at the same thing. So, over the next little while I want to explore if we bring those two things together, if we bring the warmth of — for shorthand I'm calling a kind of poetic tradition of the soul — if we bring the warmth of that with the clarity and brilliance of the traditional Mahayana teachings, what happens there? What can we understand about our own natures? That's one direction I want to move in. And the other is getting back to the poor tainted, defile consciousness, the mistaken consciousness.

I'm interested in redeeming [the mistaken consciousness], and I'm beginning to see a way forward for that. If the storehouse consciousness is the seat of the tathagatha garbha, if it is the place where buddha nature and awakening are inherent and possible, we can look at that in one of two ways. We can say either that is going to come like a bolt from the blue, this flash of enlightenment and it's all going to be alaya vijñana before that and dharmakaya after that. You know, that there's going to be this moment that separates the nature of the storehouse consciousness. Um, could happen, might happen. But we don't have to wait for that because that

inherent awakening is always happening. It's always happening in us. It's a process that goes on throughout our whole lives. And it seems to me that if that's a process that's going on throughout our whole lives, there's the poor mistaken consciousness looking at it and seeing it incorrectly. But if it changes, if it becomes more and more awake, might the mistaken consciousness not be capable of noticing the change, might it not be capable of awakening along with the storehouse consciousness? And with that, we don't have to wait for a bolt from the blue because we can get right in there and work with the mistaken consciousness. In fact, that's what a lot of our practice is about, trying to clear away the errors of viewing, the errors of judgment so that, in the same way that the storehouse consciousness can realize its true nature as awakening, the mistaken consciousness can realize its true nature as the self.

And so that's another direction I want to go towards. How does that happen? And here's a question I'm very interested to see if it strikes you the same way as it struck me when I thought of it. We talk so much about the deluded, defiled, mistaken, tainted nature of the self. How much time do we spend talking about what a good self is? What's a good self? What's a self that is not mistaken? What's a self that has moved into its proper role? It's realizing its own self nature, the self nature of the self, and is really living from that. What's that like? We don't spend so much time talking about that, right? We're sitting here talking about what's wrong. So there's another direction I want to go in in the time to come. What's a good self? What's a self that's in the process of realizing its true nature and acting from that?

I will leave it there for tonight and would welcome any comments or questions you might have.

Q1 : Would a good self be like good self-esteem? Or how would you define self-esteem?

JIS : I don't know what self-esteem is. I'm really being honest. Can you tell me what it is?

It just seems like an idea to me. You know? It seems like an idea that reinforces the mistaken self in a way. Which is not to say that I think the self needs to be annihilated or gotten rid of, or...I think that's a tremendously mistaken notion. The self just needs to find its proper place, which involves a certain kind of strength, confidence, and capability, but I don't know inherently what strength, confidence, and capability have to do with self-esteem. Self-esteem just seems to be an idea about that. It's like stepping into another level and having it an opinion about strength, confidence, and capability rather than just being strong, confident, and capable. Is that responding?

Q1 : Mmm Hmm.

JIS : Okay.

Q2 : Can I take a step back and ask a question about number six? You said that thoughts are the, and this is my word for it, inputs to mind. Are these thoughts are the individual self's thoughts? Are they collective thoughts? Are they both?

JIS : Could be both. Could definitely be both. And I'm sort of tending now to use psychic events rather than thoughts, because it might be like a surge of adrenalin, or it might be a message the body is sending to the mind about something. Those can be psychic events that are the objects of the mind as well.

So to go back to the kind of previous series of talks, that's what I meant when I said the mind is just a viewpoint like any other viewpoint. The mind is a viewpoint like the body or like the soul or like the spirit, or...It's not special. It's the viewpoint of that consciousness which synthesizes sensory experience and takes as its objects psychic events.

Q3 : I guess I'm confused a little bit because it seems to me that the first [inaudible] of the senses in your mind is just symbols and just 'hot', 'warm', 'loud', you know, whatever it may be, 'bright'. And that your mind is creating a thought about it, but the thoughts aren't there til the mind processes it, and then passes it on to the self or the mistaken self?

JIS : Um, yes and no. That's why there's a kind of dual nature to the mind. That it is doing that synthesizing of sensory input and having an opinion, you know, having a response to it — hot, cold, bitter, all that — but I think the radical thing to consider here is this idea that psychic events can also just be objects of the mind, that they're not necessarily generated, I mean obviously they take place within the neural circuitry of the brain, but they're not necessarily the result of sensory input. They might have another kind of arising, and it's almost like the thought is first and then the mind's relationship to the mind is second, which is really different than how we think of it.

We think of it as you're saying. So they had a different way of looking at it. It's kind of interesting to think about, actually. It tends toward the emptiness of thoughts, you know.

Anything else? Thank you.