

# Personhood, and the non-self.



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## Agenda

A view of the self through anthropology/ archaeology, and Zen Buddhism.

1) **Thoughts on the “first ever selfie” at El Castillo cave.**

2) **Personhood**, (30 minutes plus discussion)

What is in scope for this talk and what is not.

Not in.

Ethics, including right to life

Legal boundaries

In

The notion of the composite social self not the individual

Prehistory and in ethnography

3) **The non self**

An analysis and attempted explanation of Zen Buddhism’s approach to the self, namely its opposite the non-self.

Please note, I have quoted a lot of material here as the descriptions are very easy to get wrong if simply done through my own words.

# Timed agenda

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# Part 1. Thoughts on the self as experienced at El Castillo 40,000 year old cave in Cantabria.





Tito Bustillo horse's head. Circa 20.000 years ago.



*The first selfie*, and the Panel of Hands .  
El Castillo. The prehistory of the self ?



# The red, right hand of El Castillo.

Here in our glacial, lupine tundra,  
If we don't hunt we starve.  
If we starve we don't survive the winter.  
If we don't survive the winter, our family, our clan and species future is at risk.

40,000 years later,  
Far from the fakery of neo-Altamira, we entered the labyrinthine cave of El Castillo.  
The air grew colder.  
The light grew dimmer.  
The path grew fainter.  
The tites and mites soared and dived.  
The quarter light concealed the cavernous chasms of this hadean hinterland.  
Step by step, stumble by stumble, blink by blink down we descended until the palace of the paleolithic enclosed us in its dank, charcoal chamber.  
Horse, bison, aurochs, hind and stag loomed out of the angular profiles of the cave.  
A horse's head extended from the rock face.  
20,000 years of peering into the penetrating gloom.  
Now, face to face with the curious citizens of Reddenfield



The selfie, the ultimate expression of  
the self generated cult of the individual  
**self.**

Me, myself, I.

Is there an alternative ?

We, ourselves, us?



# The Self

- **The self**, in contrast to personhood, is a **subjective and experiential** concept.
- It refers to the individual's sense of being a **unique "I" or a private center of consciousness**.
- The self is the subjective and often **intimate feeling of who one is**.

Philosophical and psychological theories on the self include:

- **The Narrative Self:** The idea that the self is a story or a narrative that an individual constructs about their life, connecting past experiences, present feelings, and future aspirations.
- **The Self as a "Bundle of Perceptions":** As proposed by David Hume, this view suggests that there is no underlying, unchanging self, (like Zen Buddhism)
- **The Socially Constructed Self:** This perspective, prevalent in anthropology and some branches of psychology, argues that the self is not a purely internal phenomenon but is shaped by social and cultural interactions. **(Personhood)**.

Picture: Virginia Woolf 1939



# The Relationship between the self and personhood.

The relationship between personhood and the self can be summarized as follows:

- **Personhood is often the public, objective, or legal status, while the self is the private, subjective experience.** One might be a person in the eyes of the law and society, but their sense of self can be a deeply personal and internal journey.
- **Personhood is a prerequisite for a fully developed self in many views.** In this way, having a "self" in the philosophical sense is a crucial part of being a "person." e ie an AI robot or android can not have this (but consider Machines like me, Ian McEwan).
- **Personhood is not identical to the self.** A being could be a person without a fully formed self, or they could lose some aspects of their self (e.g., through amnesia), or in a post-coma unresponsive state, while still being considered a person with rights.

# Personhood

- We will consider how personhood is viewed through **ethnographic** and **prehistoric archaeology**.
- In this regard we will consider the notion that the self is a Western, modern invention in that other societies saw the primal social unit as being a collective (dividual) and not an individual.
- We will then consider whether this changes our perception of the self.
- Some quotes from Professor Chris Fowler's book **"The archaeology of personhood,"** 2004, pictured here on the Isle of Man at burial mounds.



# Fowler's definition of personhood.

- **Person** is used to refer to any entity, human or otherwise, which may be conceptualized and treated as a person.
- A person is frequently composed through the **temporary association of different aspects. These aspects may include features like mind, spirit or soul as well as a physical body, and denote the entity as having a form of agency.**
- **Persons are constituted, de-constituted, maintained and altered in social practices through life and after death.**
- **Personhood** is frequently understood as a condition that involves constant change, and key transformations to the person occur throughout life and death.
- **Personhood is attained and maintained through relationships not only with other human beings but with things, places, animals and the spiritual features of the cosmos.**
- **Personhood** remains a mutually constituted condition. (not an individual).

<http://ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/53454/1/58.Chris%20Fowler.pdf>



# Fowler definition of individuals

## Individuality and indivisibility.

- Individuality is our common conception of personal uniqueness, referring to the state of being a unitary, totalized and indivisible person.
- **Indivisibility is a predominant trend in our contemporary western mode of personhood, and individuality lies at the core of a constant, fixed self. ....where personal identity is stressed over relational identities.**
- **In recent years individual lifestyle choices and experiences have become an expression of our individuality** building up valued biographies of remembered events and experiences.
- **These biographies are selective and partial, though we present them as indicative of our individuality as a whole. The body is central to this project, and people continually reflect on their bodily appearance, movements and health .**

Yayoi Kusama, the inner world of infinite mirrors. “Fireflies on the water”.



David Bowie , Young Americans, a borrowed identity, always changing.



# By contrast, Fowler definition of *dividuals*.

Dividuals and dividuality.

- **A state of being in which the person is recognized as composite and multiply-authored.**
- People are composed of social relations with others to the degree that they owe parts of themselves to other parties eg a bear tooth necklace, allowing the wearer to assume the power of the bear.
- All of the elements of the cosmos may pass through dividual people.

(Compare to tooth implants at the dentist.)

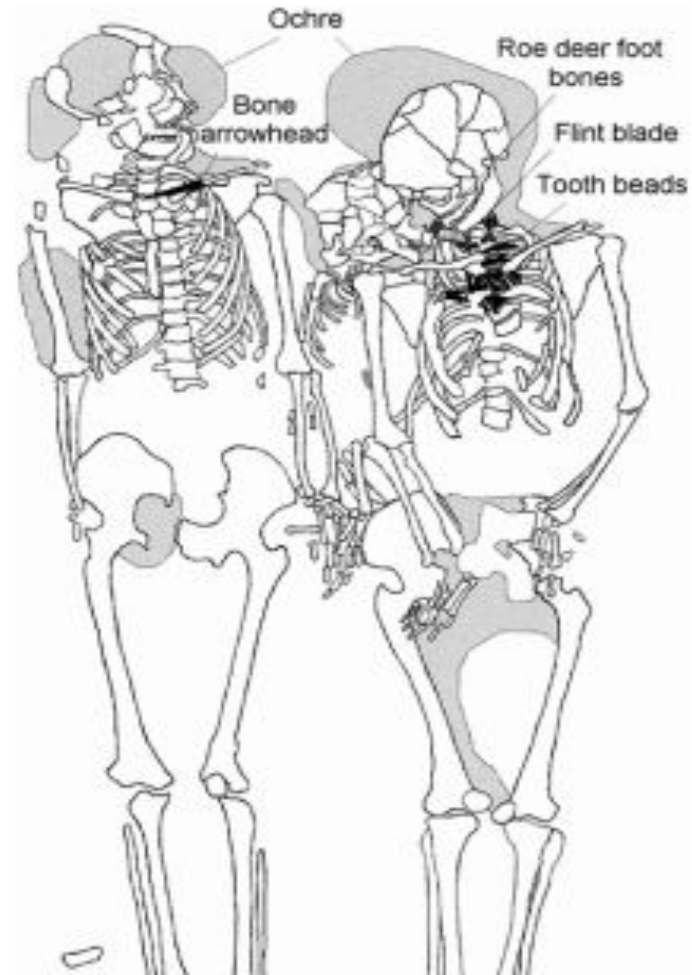


# Dave's dentures Grantham.



# Vedbaek Bøgebakken, grave 19. 7000 years ago, Mesolithic.

- Animal body parts utilized were in many cases the parts of animals which were instrumental in their relations with human beings and one another—the things they used to flee from or to fight other beings with. These animal body parts may also have conferred animal-like qualities into the person wearing them.
- Stone artefacts may also have incorporated a diversity of worldly parts and essences into the person. Any of these objects might have become persons and/or part of persons, and mediated in social relations with other beings including plants and prey.



Bronze Age composite burial people of Cladh Hallan, South Uist, Hebrides.





# Questions this raises.



- Are we actually fundamentally social composite people, with a socially defined self, and not individually defined?
- How do we view personhood and its relationship with the self?
- Is this composite social self a complement to, or an alternative to the individual unchanging self?
- What can we learn from this?



# Discussion

# Zen and the non self.



# From Personhood to the non self.

- Zen Buddhism is a religion which denies the primacy/ existence of a self in favour of an ephemeral, ever changing non self.
- The language is very difficult indeed here as I am about to demonstrate!
- I am now going to share some learning from a course on Japanese philosophy at CityLit. They relate to both Buddhism in general and in particular to Zen.
- **Absorption, not instant comprehension.**

# A Koan (enigmatic paradox)

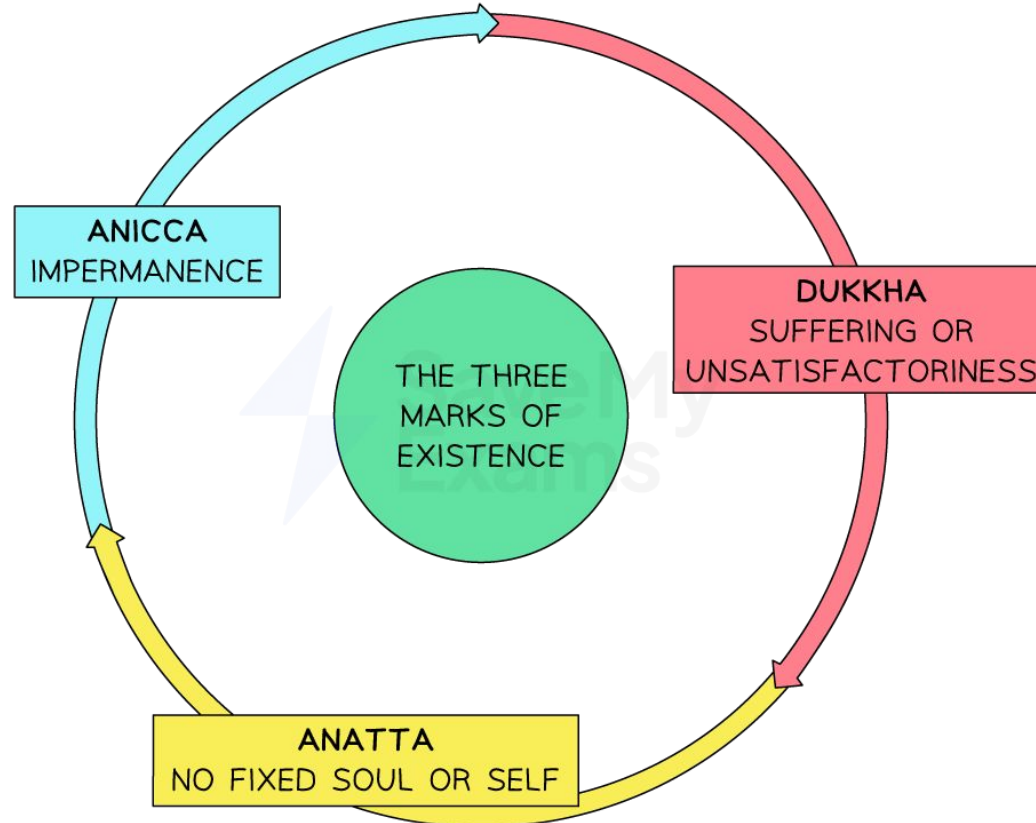
A powerful quote that illustrates the concept of non-self (anatta) comes from the modern Zen master **Thich Nhat Hanh**:

**"The wave is a part of the ocean, but the ocean is not a wave. The wave is made of water, and the ocean is also made of water. If the wave looks deeply, it sees that it is made of non-wave elements. So a wave can be a wave, and it can also be the ocean."**

- This saying, often attributed to the Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh, is a philosophical metaphor for the relationship between the **individual** and the **whole**, specifically in a Buddhist context.
- It illustrates the concept of **interbeing**, which posits that nothing exists independently and everything is interconnected.
- This is the opposite of the notion of "essence".



# The 3 marks of existence in Buddhism





# The three marks of existence in Buddhism

The **Three Marks of Existence** are fundamental Buddhist concepts that describe the nature of all things (phenomena). They are: **anicca** (impermanence), **dukkha** (suffering or unsatisfactoriness), and **anatta** (not-self).

## 1) Anicca (Impermanence)

**Anicca means that everything is in a constant state of flux and change.**

Acknowledging impermanence **helps to reduce the suffering that comes from clinging to things that are inevitably going to change or end.**

- 2) **Dukkha (Suffering/Unsatisfactoriness)** Dukkha is often translated as "suffering," but it also encompasses a broader sense of dissatisfaction, stress, and unease. (Angst). The Buddha taught that **all life is characterized by this dissatisfaction**. This includes not just physical pain or emotional grief, but also the **subtle unease that arises from the fact that even pleasant experiences are temporary and can't provide lasting happiness.**

Picture: Weeping Cherry and Bullfinch, Hokusai, 1834



The connection with the Self theme, and the route to Zen Enlightenment.

### 3) Anatta (Not-Self) present in Buddhism generally and especially Zen.

- **Anatta is the teaching that there is no permanent, unchanging "self" or "soul" at the core of a person.** Instead, what we call a "self" is a collection of five constantly changing aggregates: form (body), sensations, perceptions, mental formations, and consciousness.
- **The illusion of a permanent self is considered a primary cause of suffering, as it leads to attachment, craving, and ego-driven actions.**
- **An understanding of these three marks is central to the path to enlightenment, as it helps practitioners to see reality as it truly is and to let go of the attachments and delusions that cause suffering.**

# Four noble truths of Zen and suffering (Dukkha).

## What are **Four Noble Truths of Buddhism**

The Four Noble Truths are the core of the Buddha's teachings, **both generally and in Zen**. They are presented as a framework for understanding and resolving suffering.

Here are the Four Noble Truths:

### 1. The Truth of Suffering (Dukkha)

This first truth states that life is inherently characterized by suffering, dissatisfaction, and unease. This isn't just about physical pain, but also the more subtle forms of suffering that arise from impermanence. **Even when we are happy, that happiness is not permanent, which leads to a form of dissatisfaction.**

### 2. The Truth of the Cause of Suffering (Samudaya)

The second truth identifies the origin of suffering. The Buddha taught that **the cause of suffering is craving (or "thirst") and attachment**. This includes craving for sensual pleasures, for becoming, and for not becoming (avoidance). This craving leads to a cycle of dissatisfaction.

**Picture Dr Faustus , Marlowe, 16th Century.**



# Four noble truths of Zen, and suffering (Dukkha).

## 3. The Truth of the Cessation of Suffering (Nirodha)

The third truth provides a message of hope: suffering can be ended. **The cessation of suffering, known as Nirvana, is achieved by letting go of craving and attachment. It is a state of complete peace and liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.**

## 4. The Truth of the Path to the Cessation of Suffering (Magga)

The fourth and final truth provides the practical guide to ending suffering. This is the **Noble Eightfold Path**, which is the way to Nirvana. The eight parts of this path are: Right Understanding, Right Thought, Right Speech, Right Action, Right Livelihood, Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration.



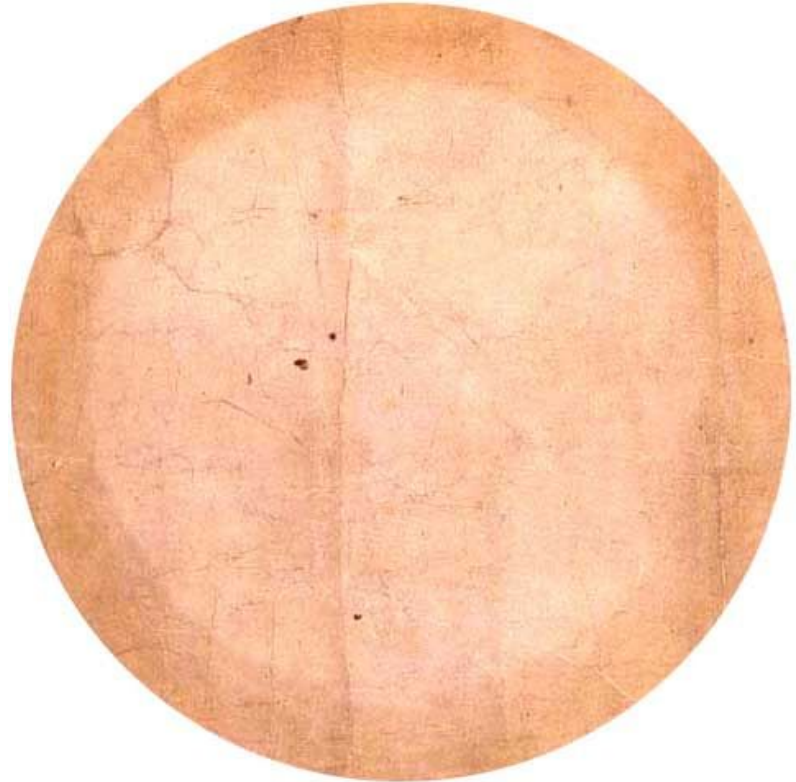


# Sunyata and emptiness

**What is Sunyata buddhism, a tradition from Mahayana Buddhism, and central to Zen**

**Śūnyatā (Sanskrit for "emptiness" or "voidness"), is an often misunderstood concept that is not a nihilistic belief that nothing exists or has meaning, but rather a profound insight into the nature of reality.**

- **Empty of Intrinsic Existence (svabhava):** The core of the concept is that all phenomena, including ourselves, are "empty" of a permanent, independent, or self-existent nature. This is in contrast to the idea that things have an inherent "essence" or "soul" that makes them what they are.
- **Dependent Origination (pratiṭtyasamutpāda):** Because nothing has an independent existence, everything arises in dependence on other causes and conditions. For example **a chair exists only in relation to a carpenter, a tree, and our mental concept of what a "chair" is.**



# Sunyata Buddhism.

- **The Rejection of Extremes:** Sunyata is often described as the "Middle Path" between two extremes:
  - **Eternalism:** The belief that things have a permanent and unchanging existence.
  - **Nihilism:** The belief that nothing exists at all, or that existence is meaningless.
  - **Sunyata** avoids both by stating that things do exist, but not in the way we typically perceive them—as solid, independent, and lasting entities.
- Sunyata is ultimately a realization that is said to be **beyond intellectual understanding. It is a direct, intuitive insight gained through meditation and practice.**
- **ABSORPTION**, (John Goff).

# My conclusions?

## **Zen is about**

- Accepting suffering
- Accepting impermanence
- Rejecting the notion of a self (individual), separate from the rest of the world, in favour of connectedness.
- Use of meditation to find enlightenment.
- Achieving nothingness (not nothing).

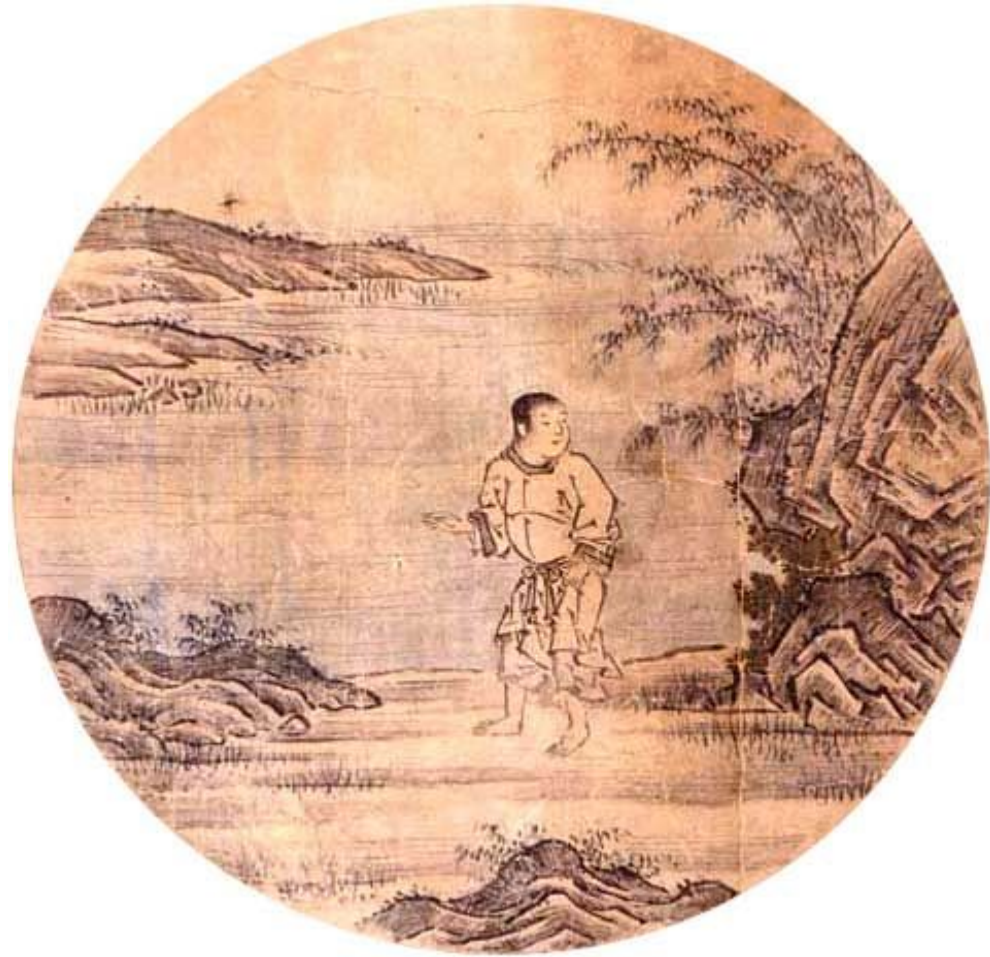
## **Zen is not about**

- Society
- Social interaction
- Moral codes
- A permanent sense of me.
- Western nihilism

The Ten Ox herding pictures, by Rinzai Chán (Zen) master: 12th Century. China and Japan.

**1. In Search of the Bull /  
Searching for the Ox**

In the pasture of the world,  
I endlessly push aside the tall  
grasses in search of the Ox.  
Following unnamed rivers,  
lost upon the interpenetrating  
paths of distant mountains,  
My strength failing and my vitality  
exhausted, I cannot find the Ox.





## 2. Discovery of the Footprints / Seeing the Traces

Along the riverbank under the trees,  
I discover footprints.  
Even under the fragrant grass,  
I see his prints.  
Deep in remote mountains  
they are found.  
These traces can no more be hidden  
than one's nose, looking heavenward.



### 3. Perceiving the Bull / Seeing the Ox

I hear the song of the nightingale.  
The sun is warm, the wind is mild,  
willows are green along the shore –  
Here no Ox can hide!  
What artist can draw that massive head,  
those majestic horns?



#### 4. Catching the Bull / Catching the Ox

I seize him with a terrific struggle.  
His great will and power  
are inexhaustible.  
He charges to the high plateau  
far above the cloud-mists,  
Or in an impenetrable ravine he stands.





## 5. Taming the Bull / Herding the Ox

The whip and rope are necessary,  
Else he might stray off down  
some dusty road.

Being well-trained, he becomes  
naturally gentle.

Then, unfettered, he obeys his master.



## 6. Riding the Bull Home / Coming Home on the Ox's Back

Mounting the Ox, slowly  
I return homeward.  
The voice of my flute intones  
through the evening.  
Measuring with hand-beats  
the pulsating harmony,  
I direct the endless rhythm.  
Whoever hears this melody  
will join me.





## 7. The Bull Transcended / The Ox Forgotten

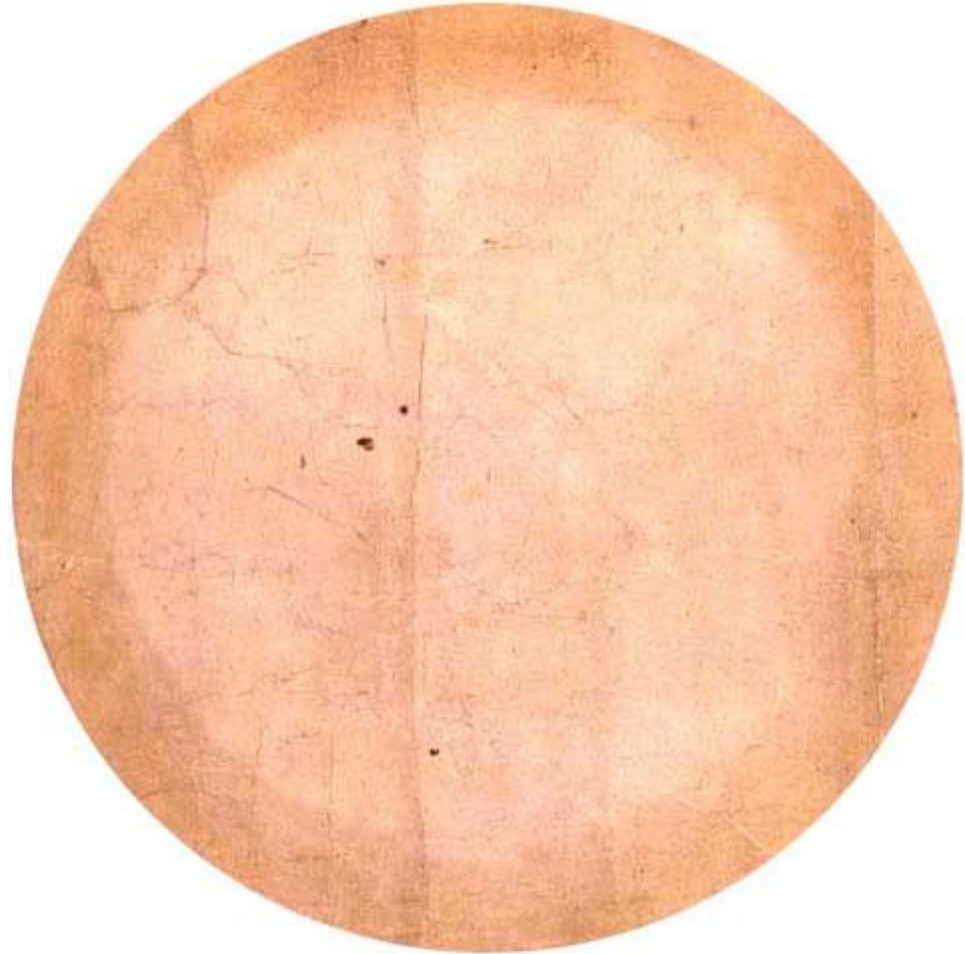
Astride the Ox, I reach home.  
I am serene. The Ox too can rest.  
The dawn has come. In blissful repose,  
Within my thatched dwelling  
I have abandoned the whip and ropes.





## **8. Both Bull and Self Transcended / The Ox and the Man Both Forgotten**

Whip, rope, person, and Ox –  
all merge in No Thing.  
This heaven is so vast,  
no message can stain it.  
How may a snowflake exist  
in a raging fire.  
Here are the footprints of  
the Ancestors.



## **9. Reaching the Source / Returning to the Origin, Back to the Source**

Too many steps have been taken  
returning to the root and the source.  
Better to have been blind and deaf  
from the beginning!  
Dwelling in one's true abode,  
unconcerned with and without –  
The river flows tranquilly on  
and the flowers are red.





## **10. Return to Society / Entering the City with Bliss-bestowing Hands**

Barefooted and naked of breast,  
I mingle with the people of the world.  
My clothes are ragged and dust-laden,  
and I am ever blissful.  
I use no magic to extend my life;  
Now, before me, the dead trees  
become alive.



SO WHAT DO YOU MAKE OF ALL THAT?

CAN YOU RESPOND TO IT AS AN ACT OF ABSORPTION?



*The first selfie*, and the Panel of Hands .  
El Castillo



# CONCLUSIONS ON WHOLE TALK

I have presented 2 different approaches to the self in the Western tradition of the self.

- Personhood, a sociological approach in which the self is comprised of multiple external factors with little emphasis on the individual, rather than the clan.
- The non self from Zen which rejects any unchanging immutable essence of the individual, in favour of the end of suffering through seeing yourself as simply a part of a greater whole That whole is nothingness

