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**S E L F ♦ N O ♦ S E L F**



EDITED BY  
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Inquiring Mind was delighted once again to interview Joanna Macy, Buddhist scholar and deep ecologist. In her workshops to empower creative social action Macy has emphasized unpacking the self as a way of moving people towards an expanded identity and into compassionate engagement with the world. Macy has shown imaginative genius in adapting and applying the teachings of the Buddha to contemporary social issues, designing workshops with titles such as *Despair and Empowerment in the Nuclear Age* and *The Council of All Beings*. Her books include *World as Lover, World as Self* (Parallax Press, 1991); *Mutual Causality: the Dharma of Natural Systems* (SUNY Press, 1991); *Despair and Personal Power in the Nuclear Age* (New Society Publishers, 1983); *Dharma and Development* (Kumarian Press, 1983), and *Thinking Like a Mountain: Toward a Council of all Beings* coauthored with John Seed (New Society Publishers, 1988).

In describing what she calls "the greening of the self" Macy writes, "Oh, the sweetness of being able to realize: I am my experience. I am this breathing. I am this moment, and it is changing continually, arising in the fountain of life . . . Far from the nihilism and escapism that is often imputed to the Buddhist path, this realization, this awakening, puts one into the world with a livelier, more caring sense of social engagement."

Wes Nisker and Barbara Gates conducted this interview in November 1994 in Oakland, California.

**Inquiring Mind:** In both your writing and workshops, you explore the teaching of no-self. Why is this teaching a key?

**Joanna Macy:** For me *anatta* is the feature of the dharma that cuts to the core of the suffering we create for ourselves and others, and points to the kind of liberation we can find: liberation to fully enter our transiency, our impermanence—and entering that flow, to be released into action. To *be* action.

**IM:** Yet, of course, *anatta* is an incredibly challenging teaching to grasp.

**JM:** The concept of no-self is indeed sticky. I'm teaching a course called "Spiritual Ground for World Engagement" at the Graduate Theological Union in which some of the divinity school students are encountering Buddhist teachings for the first time. When first presented with *anatta*, they protested, "Buddhism is soulless!" Dissolving the solidity of the self, as we do in Buddhist practice, struck them as cold and joyless.

**IM:** The Buddha came up against the same resistance when he told the Hindus, who believed in *atman*, that there was no soul.

**JM:** But the Buddha didn't put it that way! Scholars, like Edward Conze, point out that the Buddha *didn't* teach that the self is *not*, but only that it cannot be apprehended. To make a categorical

# The Incredible Exploding Self

brush painting by Kazuaki Tanahashi

metaphysical denial of the self would run counter to his reliance on experience. So, instead of denying the subjectivity of experience, he denied that the subject could be isolated. The key was the shift from substance to process. You are not a thing. You are not a substance or an essence separate from your experience of life. What you are is a stream of experiences, a flowing stream of being, *bhavasota, vinnanasota*.

But in teaching and writing about Buddhist practice, the juiciness of this process, the wealth of the flowing river, is often left unsung, unappreciated. So the teachings can seem rather unappetizing. Selflessness can be easily misunderstood to mean that we are being erased. In truth, we don't erase the self. We see through it. Throughout our lives we have been trying so hard to fix that "I" we have each been lugging around. So when we drop the endless struggle to improve it or punish it, to make it noble, to mortify it, or to sacrifice it, the relief is tremendous. It's a question of being liberated from false views, from imagining we have some private turf to take care of, separate from the life flowing through us.

**IM:** But of course, letting go of this myth of a fixed or solid "I" can also be terrifying.

**JM:** It certainly can. This was recognized in the early Mahayana sutras, where no-self was strongly emphasized and extended in terms of *shunyata*, emptiness. The Perfection of Wisdom,

Prajnaparamita, embodies this teaching. The Mother of all Buddhas, or Deep Space as she is also called, keeps saying, "Don't be afraid." In painted and sculpted forms, she holds her hand, palm outward, in the gesture that means, "Fear not." She calls on all beings to realize that they are bodhisattvas, and since we as bodhisattvas have no firm ground of-self to stand on, she says we can fly in her "deep space." And we fly on the wings of insight and compassion.

This understanding of no-self as spaciousness, rather than annihilation, is crucial. Many Westerners suffer from self-hatred, and an accompanying need to have the self—which feels so unworthy—affirmed. I find this particularly with women students whose sense of self has been deeply wounded by the misogyny of our society. The no-self teaching can strike them as one more assault. So let's make clear that the dharma brings *more*, not less, than what any self can offer.

Our goal is not so much to get others to subscribe to no-self as doctrine as to help them spring free from narrow identification with their own self image—what in the Buddhist context we call ego—allowing an expanded identification with the web of life itself and with all beings.

**IM:** How can we go about teaching in this way?

**JM:** The ego likes to take itself seriously. So an effective approach is to have fun with the ego's pretensions. Take, for

example, a Tibetan ritual that I have adapted for use in the West. It is from the annual lama dances at Tashi Jong, a Tibetan refugee community in north-west India that I have been involved with for 30 years.

In the middle of the dance ground, the ego is represented by a small clay doll inside an open, black, triangular box. The three sides of the box, each bearing a painted skull, represent the three poisons—craving, hatred and ignorance—that hold the ego together. During the ritual, the forces which undo the ego are summoned and danced in full regalia. Insight and compassion take many varied forms to reveal that, in the last analysis, our self-centeredness, with all of its power to create suffering, does not exist as anything permanently, substantially real.

**IM:** What led you to adapt this ritual to a Western setting?

**JM:** Actually, I had never planned to do it. One day, after a trip to Tashi Jong, I was describing this lama dance at a Quaker retreat center. People responded, "Let's do it!" I didn't think it would work. After all, they hadn't studied Buddhist philosophy or practiced Buddhist meditation. But they not only wanted to do it; they insisted on making their own ego dolls. Praying that my Tibetan teachers and friends would forgive me for playing with their ancient ritual, I joined the others digging out clay from a river bank. So each of us made an ego doll. Mine looked a little

## An Interview with Joanna Macy

like Richard Nixon—jowly face, with a big mouth and a huge, pompously raised index finger. It portrayed and lampooned my own sense of self-importance as a teacher. It was tremendously satisfying to make.

IM: Then how did you translate the ritual?

JM: Carrying our dolls high like sacred offerings, we made a grand, loud procession to a blazing bonfire. By this time, it was dark. We put our ego dolls down in front of the flames, and danced with implements that we had prepared representing compassion and insight. Then each of us, in turn, danced alone and, in our own way, expressed compassion for all that had gone into making this ego, and gratitude for the comfort it had offered us over the years. Then, when ready, amidst shouts of support, each of us threw his or her own ego into the bonfire.

In subsequent years I adapted this ritual for various classes and workshops. One of these occasions was in Los Angeles in May 1992, right after the uprising that had burned and wasted vast sections of the city. This was an empowerment workshop for social change, designed to prepare us for effective action in the world.

The 70 people were racially mixed, with whites predominating. This particular ritual remains vivid in my mind because a number of the participants were employed in Hollywood's entertainment industry. They threw them-

selves into the process with contagious panache. "Taa-daa," someone would cry and leap forward with his precious ego doll, parade it in front of our noses and place it reverently in the center. "Presenting, in his first ever public appearance, the incomparable one and only smart-ass ego of mine. Many hands and many mouths to hide the hollow heart." And I remember my own that time, always a little different from my previous ego doll. It was a great-breasted earth mother, ever giving, ever self-sacrificing!

IM: And already, in the act of making the doll, you were beginning to free yourself of that ego.

JM: Yes! And also through describing it so flamboyantly to everyone else. Another one said: "Feast your eyes on this sensitive soul bent over by the woes of the world and afraid of getting her hands dirty." And another: "This brilliant know-it-all likes to sit real cool on the sidelines and pass judgment." And: "See how sweetly this dear little ego smiles hoping everyone will love her so she can have her own way."

IM: I hear how you all lambasted your egos, making fun of them. How did you show appreciation for this work of art, this personality you'd constructed?

JM: Actually, the attitude was quite appreciative, as people began to realize how much effort had gone into their ego-creation. "It's a custom-made suit, man, and it's seen me through a lot." As

we know, you've got to accept a thing before you can detach from it.

The ritual in Los Angeles was great because the people in the entertainment industry really got into the promotional aspect. We had a drum roll and applause as each ego was presented, along with extravagant expressions of appreciation. Egos like that very much. So we poured on the praise, sometimes laughing till we cried. Of course the praise was never enough. As we know, the ego is insatiable! You can never satisfy what doesn't really exist.

When all the crude little sculptures were in the center, we chanted from the Heart Sutra "*Gate, gate, paragate, parasam gate, bodhi swaha!*" (Gone, gone, gone beyond, completely gone beyond, far out!) It was a way of bidding goodbye to all the mental fabrications that had outlived their usefulness.

IM: Through enacting this ritual, the participants must have been transformed in some way. When you moved on to discuss strategies for social action, what had changed?

JM: The group was more relaxed and more attentive at the same time. People could really listen to each other because, for a while at least, they had dropped the need to prove anything. They tossed in suggestions without trying to "sell" them. Also, when assessing resources for a given action, people informed each other of the capabilities and assets they could offer in a straightforward manner, without self-consciousness.

IM: So, in your various classes and workshops, as in the Council of All Beings, for example, you develop exercises which expand the sense of identity. Meditation practice is also a way of seeing that there is no solid ongoing being, of coming into a larger self. I imagine that the exercises you develop are skillful means, perhaps a more direct pointing for some who might never explore meditation practice. How would you compare this work with a course in Buddhist meditation?

JM: First, this work is no substitute for a meditation retreat or regular sitting practice. But because it encourages spontaneity, it delivers unexpected jolts of truth. Also, the communal, interactive nature of this work lets us be directly enriched by the participation and contributions of others. Understanding erupts, and love, too.

I really want people to take joy in the gift of life. To realize and experience that one is a stream of being instead of a permanent, solidified ego is cause for celebration! So this work involves celebration: Let's each enjoy the riches of his or her particular stream, with its cultural and geographic flavor, and its idiosyncrasies.

IM: Maybe this will be a strength and uniqueness of Buddhism as it takes its Western form. We can honor our individual differences without seeing ourselves as solidified entities.

JM: Exactly. Your stream is different from mine. It is enriched by everything that ever happened to you and all the stories you ever heard. Our spiritual journey is not about evaporating into nothing. It's about moving beyond the fetters, the poisons, the hindrances—everything that closes us off—and moving into vaster, more conscious participation in reality.

IM: How does our individual karma affect the character of this flow of personality?

JM: By the choices we make. We are constantly making choices in what we think, say and do—and that's what we become. The Buddha stressed intention as the key determinant of karma. That is what shapes our identity, or you might say, the character and consistency and direction of our stream of being.

So waking up to the stream-like quality of our self does *not* mean we just "go with the flow." On the contrary, we become aware of how that flow is affected by the choices we make moment by moment. In the midst of the flux, we must be as mindfully alert as a surfer. It is rather exhilarating. The opportunity for choice and change is there in every instant. The way we exercise that opportunity is who we are. As scholars point out: where other teachers said self or *atman*, the Buddha said *karma*. And the original meaning of karma is action.

IM: In the evolution of your own insight into self as process were there key experiences which opened up your understanding?

Continued on page 14

since it is beyond concepts and words. Some would say that it is the highest teaching and therefore also the most difficult to apply. It is beyond effort, even beyond method. *Dzogchen* stands on its own as a practice because it is not about renunciation or transformation; it is about all experiences liberating themselves. Awareness itself transforms awareness, so there is nothing to do.

At the same time, there are also skillful means in *dzogchen*, certain methods and practices which dissolve our self-clinging and point to our true nature, which is the body of light. There is the "dark retreat," sometimes called the bardo retreat, which is a whole series of practices done in complete darkness. Special buildings are built where it is so dark that you can't see your hand in front

of your face. There are also practices of "sky-gazing," or gazing into space, which involve exact sitting postures and certain belts and sticks.

Another *dzogchen* practice is to integrate with the elements. If you find yourself by the ocean, a river or a fire, you can merge your energy with the fundamental energy of that part of the phenomenal world. Each of the elements is associated with a color of light: the water element is white light; the fire element is red light; the earth element is yellow; and so on. By doing the practice of integration with the elements, you begin to dissolve the solidity of this body into its true nature, which is light. The whole focus is on understanding what you are, which is a body of light, or the rainbow body.



## JOANNA MACY

*Continued from page 7*

JM: When I was sixteen, I had a powerful experience in the Christian context in which the crucifixion had great personal meaning for me. Jesus on the cross meant that you could lay down the burden of trying to always take care of number one, the burden of self-seeking. There was something greater than the self that allowed relinquishment of the self.

But I couldn't sustain that understanding for long, and worries took its place: Am I faithful enough? Do I love enough? Am I sacrificing enough? I began to see the cycle of Christian humility. You give away the self and you become humble. Oh boy, do you be-

come humble! Then you get proud of your humility, so that you keep tripping yourself up.

Years later when I encountered the dharma and the *anatta* teaching, I heard it say: Oh honey, you don't need to sacrifice or crucify the self—or do anything with it—because it is not there anyway! That was a pivotal moment for me in my life. I remember I was traveling alone on an overnight train from Delhi to see my Tibetan friends in the mountains (the same ones whose lama dance inspired the group exercise I just described). I was in a third class carriage and it was so crowded I almost lost an arm getting aboard. I was trying not to panic. I scrambled to the topmost of the three-tiered wooden berths and put my nose in a book. It was by Huston Smith, and he was

talking about *anatta*. To show how we are all ridden by self, he asked: Whenever you look at a group photograph, whose face do you search for first? Without fail, it is your own.

As I read, huddled up on this shelf, in a noisy coach packed with humanity, I experienced a mental explosion, similar in intensity to the one I had when I was sixteen. I felt like a kernel of popping corn. What was inside burst outside, and what had been outside was now inside. I sat there for the longest time gasping and the whole world was transformed. Here I had always been wrestling with this huge question: what do you do with the self? In Buddhism, I saw now, this was essentially a non-problem. When I was able to think again, I knew: this is release into action.



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