

My favorite parts of Buddhist literature are the metaphors, similes and parables. Some are long and involved, like the Prodigal Son in the Lotus Sutra, and some are just one word, like “mirage.” These fingers pointing at the moon connect us to teachings that may be hard to understand, conceptually. Thus the literature has many metaphors for the self – how the self exists, or rather how it does NOT exist - ditto for “all conditioned things.” In early Buddhism the focus was on unpacking the belief in an inherent self, and in the Mahayana the study expanded to include the emptiness of all conditioned things. Like it says in the Diamond Sutra:

*As a lamp, a cataract, a star in space
a magical illusion, a dewdrop, a bubble
a dream, a cloud, a flash of lightning –
so we should view all conditioned things.”*

These metaphors, especially those that refer to processes in nature, are still alive for us 2000 years later. We can try them on, one by one.

Recently I’ve become a collector of old and inventor of new and updated Buddhist metaphors. It’s timely to point out how race and white supremacy are examples of things empty of inherent existence –there’s no better metaphor for our times. Check out this amazing Buddhist sentence by the scholar and historian Ibram X. Kendi; in *Stamped From The Beginning* he wrote, *Race is a mirage, but one that humanity has organized itself around in very real ways.* We could say the same about the self - self is a mirage, but one that humanity has organized itself around in very real and consequential ways. In fact, karma is a word for what we do and what happens when we organize ourselves around the mirage of self. We can use the way we think and feel about the race construct as a metaphor for how we think and feel about the self and all conditioned things, and vice versa.

My husband Hozan and I, during the first Covid year, read aloud the *Lankavatara Sutra*; it took that whole year to read it through from beginning to end. That sutra has another one of these lists of metaphors for emptiness, and one of them is, “a Gandharvan City.” The self, or all conditioned things, are like a Gandharvan City. It means nothing to me. Apparently it is a mythical location that everyone at the time knew about, and knew was imaginary. I pondered what is comparable in this day and age, and what popped into my mind was Santa Claus. (Much later it occurred to me that the Lost Continent of Atlantis is probably more similar to the Ghandarvan City.)

I had one of those lightbulb-going-on moments, and I said to Hozan, “Oh, yeah, it’s like, you can’t kill Santa Claus.” The sutra was saying something about how we’re not actually trying to get rid of the self – but rather to see through to its unreality; there’s nothing to get rid of. Santa Claus is a wonderful example of how the self does and does not exist. Santa – the one at the North Pole – does not appear nor disappear, is not tainted nor pure, does not increase nor decrease. Because there’s no one there! And as long as we fixate, as long as we strongly adhere, as long as we try to find or depend on a fixed inherent self – OR, until we study and see deeply into the emptiness of our self-construct – we’re like children who believe in Santa Claus.

One of the classic confounding sentences in the Lankavatara Sutra is something like, *It doesn’t exist, and yet it doesn’t NOT exist.* And that’s like Santa Claus, right? There’s no little old man at the North Pole making toys with a team of elves, who travels around the world on Christmas Eve on a flying sleigh pulled by magic reindeer.

On the other hand, around Christmas time, Santa is everywhere – you can’t say he does not exist. He’s on street corners and in department stores and at Christmas parties, with all different skin colors. But no matter how many Santas are embodied or depicted every year, for however many centuries, we’re never getting any closer to establishing that little old man living at the North Pole with bunch of elves.

These department store Santas – these selves of ours – are real ... ish. They are impermanent and subject to conditions. We each have many selves, or, we could call them different perspectives. Our roles within our families, our work places, our play places, our creative selves. Also our inner children and the other parts inside of us that are holding various feelings, memories, and beliefs. All are impermanent and subject to conditions.

These selves, these parts, can be more or less grounded or bewildered, more or less susceptible to bright, shiny objects and paper tigers – easily confused about what brings real nourishment and what are real threats.

These selves, these parts, are all benefited by kindness and respect, friendship and secure attachment. Also by trial and error, maturity, therapy, anti-racist consciousness raising, MBSR, communication skills training, and so on.

Just like Santa Claus, our “self” does not exist inherently. Even more importantly, it does not exist in the way it feels to us that it does, or the way it seems to. I’ve come to feel that our insights into emptiness – emptiness of self, emptiness of all conditioned things – are not the culmination of our practice, but rather a new beginning – the beginning of our exploration and understanding of how the self DOES exist. Because even if we do have some insight into how our self is a thing like Santa Claus – and that may give us some relief, a sense of lightness about the whole thing – we still have to figure out how to be with each other. We still have to get into the details of how to bring forth an enlightened way of dealing with mysteries of self and other.

So far so good, and if I had just stopped there, I think Santa Claus is a pretty good metaphor for something that does not exist, and yet does not NOT exist.

Over time, however, as I reflected on this metaphor, my mind and heart took a strange turn. I began to think about how, unlike race constructs, Santa Claus has potential for having a beneficial side. Of course, Santa has a problematic side – he has become a symbol of commercialism and consumerism, even patriarchy. However, he may also have a beneficial side – as an archetypal figure of giving. In the same way, the Self can be seen as having a problematic side and a beneficial side.

So I took a little dive into the origins of Santa Claus. St. Nicholas was a very early Christian mystic and miracle worker; he lived around 300 in the Common Era, in Asia Minor – what is now Turkey. At one point he was persecuted for being a Christian, and he spent time in prison. He was renowned for his generosity – in particular his “secret giving” – giving where the recipient doesn’t know who the gift is from.

One time St. Nicholas secretly left for a local farmer a big bag of gold coins, which enabled his daughters to have dowries and avoid becoming prostitutes. St. Nicholas himself had been born to a wealthy family and orphaned at a young age, and he gave away all his family wealth and took up spiritual life, like the desert fathers. One miracle he performed was when he was traveling by sea and a huge storm came up; the sailors were sure they were going to die, but St. Nicholas was able to calm the waters. He is considered the patron saint of sailors, merchants, repentant thieves, prostitutes, children, brewers, pawnbrokers, unmarried people, and students.

As the story of St. Nicholas moved north and west it mixed with fables and folk tales throughout Europe. In popular Italian folklore, the “Befana” visits all the children of Italy on the eve of the Feast of the Epiphany to fill their socks with candy and presents if they are good. Being a good housekeeper, many say she will sweep the floor before she leaves. To some the sweeping meant the sweeping away of the problems of the year. She is usually portrayed riding a broomstick, covered in soot because she enters the children's houses through the chimney.

In another of its pre-Christian roots, St. Nick mixed with the story of Frau Holde – a kind of mother goddess sometimes translated as Mother Winter. It’s said that when snow falls it’s Frau Holde shaking out her feather pillows. Frau Holde carried another quality that our present-day Santa Claus has, which has to do with asking for our heart’s desire. The custom was for children to ask Frau Holde for what they really wanted, alive in our tradition of writing letters to Santa at the North Pole.

There’s a wonderful Jataka tale about getting our heart’s desire. The story centers on a being, a royal being, who asks for the Buddha’s heart on a platter, so to speak. They want to eat the Buddha’s heart. And so their lover – who was committed to fulfilling their heart’s desire – travels around the world, eventually meeting up with the Buddha. The lover says, I’m really sorry but I need to kill you so I can bring your heart to my beloved to eat. When the Buddha hears the full story, he says, bring me to them, and I’ll let you take my heart. So they fly back to the royal being, whereupon the Buddha starts to preach the Dharma, and the royal being “wakes up” – they realize that the heart they really longed for was the heart of the Dharma, the heart of Truth.

To conclude Santa's transformation into the full story we have today, he or she continued to travel north and finally reached what used to be called Lapland, the home of the Sami group of indigenous people, herders of reindeer. The Sami had some mythology too, tied to their use of psychedelic mushrooms in rituals and spiritual practices. These particular mushrooms make you feel like you are flying; the reindeer also ate the mushrooms, hence the flying reindeer. Furthermore, the Sami shamans were known to travel around in the winter months, visiting community members. Since often snow covered the doors of their homes, the shaman would come down the chimneys for these visits. All these compelling images and stories can be alive for us in our present day Santa Claus.

I've been thinking, in contemporary Buddhism, we don't have a Bodhisattva of Giving, do we? A Bodhisattva of Generosity? Even though it's a very important practice for us. Giving is really love in action, one way to express love in action. Maybe there's room in our pantheon for a Bodhisattva of Giving. A Bodhisattva of Giving would include this idea of the power of secret giving, and also the idea of our heart's desire – asking for and receiving our heart's desire, which Shunryu Suzuki Roshi called our "inmost request." Your heart's desire might not be what you think it is.

Even though there's no Santa Claus at the North Pole, children around the world get presents on Christmas morning, and part of their excitement and joy is related to the story of Santa Claus. The story is part of it. It's not your cranky, overworked, underpaid parents who stood in line or drove all over town to buy these gifts, but rather they appeared magically, secretly.

Enlightened moments are those when we realize or remember or accept that there's no old man living at the North Pole making toys. And we don't NEED there to be, even if we want to include Santa in our winter season celebrations. There's no inherently existing self as such, and we don't NEED there to be.

Further, our experiences and perceptions of the world are based much more on cognitive processes than on external events. And yet, we still have everything we need to live meaningful, wholehearted lives.

That's good because this story of our "self" is written in our cells, our neurons. That's where it is. The belief that the world we perceive is "out there" is written on our neurons. For many years of practice I thought that Buddha was implying that the self is an overlay, a mistake, an added mix up, which we could have somehow avoided, perhaps with better parenting. Yes it's a mistake, and it's a mistake that starts with that one-celled amoeba who could only move towards nourishment and away from threat. The "self" is a metaphor written on the neurons of living beings. That's why they call awakening a revolution at the base.

Fundamentally, we're wired to "believe in Santa Claus," until we investigate very carefully, very sincerely, very open-heartedly, what is actually going on. This investigation is an important part of our practice, and the more we see through the mirage, the magical illusion, the dewdrop, the greater our opportunity to live fully and inter-connectedly in the present moment. This includes continually grappling with the mystery of how the self does not exist, and yet does not NOT exist.

There is a koan in the *Hidden Lamp* collection of stories about women teachers. This one is about a student of Hakuin's, an enlightened laywoman named Asan. (Here I always think, you had me at "enlightened laywoman.") There are three stories about Asan in the *Hidden Lamp*. As you may well know, Hakuin is the one who brought up the sound of one hand clapping. In this story, Asan comes to him and he immediately raises up one hand. And she says, "Even better than the sound of one hand, let's clap both hands and do some real business." And he says something like, if you can really clap both hands, then you don't need the sound of one hand.

It's only as separate beings that we can meet each other. It's not as one but rather as two that we connect. It's in our meeting that our differences – our selves – can make sense, can dance, can harmonize with or complement each other; it's only as separate that our giving and receiving comes alive. (Of course it's also as separate beings that we are driven to harm each other.) This more mysterious "self" is related to creativity and to love. Love connects us across our separateness, but it doesn't permanently obliterate our separateness. Rather there's a rhythm, a pulse - self, no self, self, no self – that we discover together and keep finding new ways to express.