

First there Is a Santa, Then There is No Santa, Then There Is
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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 phrase— “form is like a glob of foam.” 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. As 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.

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 uses various metaphors for emptiness, including, “a Gandharvan City.” The self, or any conditioned thing, is like a Gandharvan City. That meant nothing to me, but 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.

Having one of those light-bulb-going-on moments, I said to Hozan, “Oh, yeah, it's like, you can't kill Santa Claus.” The sutra was not suggesting that we're trying to get rid of the self—there's nothing to get rid of—but rather that we can see through to its non-solidity. 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 or disappear, is not tainted or pure, does not increase or decrease. Because there's no one there! 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 statements repeated in the Lankavatara Sutra goes like this: *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 at the North Pole.

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

These selves, these parts, can be more or less grounded, or they can be bewildered--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, Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, communication skills training, and so on.

Just like Santa Claus, our "self" does not exist inherently. 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 beginning – the beginning of our exploration and understanding of how our self DOES exist. 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 – 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. If I had just stopped there, Santa Claus would have been a pretty good metaphor for something that does not exist, and yet does not NOT exist.

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 can be viewed in a positive light. Of course, Santa is problematic as a symbol of commercialism and consumerism, even patriarchy. However, he is also an archetype of giving. I believe the "self" can also be seen as having a problematic side and a beneficial side.

Thus, I took a dive into the origins of Santa Claus. St. Nicholas was an early Christian mystic who lived around 300 CE in Asia Minor – what is now Turkey. He was renowned for his generosity, in particular his "secret giving" – giving where the recipient didn't know who the gift was from.

St. Nicholas secretly gave a local farmer a big bag of gold coins, which enabled his daughters to have dowries and avoid becoming prostitutes. Born to a wealthy family and orphaned at a young age, St. Nicholas gave away all his family wealth and took up spiritual life, like the desert fathers. 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 European fables and folktales. In popular Italian folklore, a female figure called 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. People say that, being a good housekeeper, she sweeps the floor before she leaves. To some

this means sweeping away the year's problems.

The St. Nick legend also mixed with the story of Frau Holde found in northern Europe. She is a kind of mother goddess sometimes called Mother Winter. The custom was for children to ask Frau Holde for what they really wanted—their heart's desire—alive in our tradition of writing letters to Santa at the North Pole, or sitting on his lap and telling him what you want.

There's a wonderful Jataka tale about getting our heart's desire. The story centers on 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," realizing that the heart they really longed for was the heart of the Dharma, the heart of Truth.

Santa's story continued to travel north and 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 snow often 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.

In contemporary Buddhism, we don't have a Bodhisattva of Giving, do we? We don't seem to have a Bodhisattva of Generosity, even though it's a very important practice for us. Giving is love in action. Maybe there's room in our pantheon for a Bodhisattva of Giving, who would convey the power of secret giving, and also the idea of 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. It's not your cranky, overworked, underpaid parents who stood in line or drove all over town to buy these gifts. 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. 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, 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 some Buddhist texts refer to awakening as "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 interconnectedly in the present moment. This includes continually grappling with the mystery of how the self does not exist, and yet does not NOT exist.

The *Hidden Lamp* collection of stories about women teachers offers a *koan* 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 know, Hakuin is the one who brought up the sound of one hand. In this story, when Asan approaches him, he immediately raises up one hand. She says, "Even better than the sound of one hand, let's clap both hands and do some real business." And he says, "If you can do business by clapping both hands, then there's no need to hear 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. Only between separate beings does the mystery of giving and receiving come 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, through our practice, new ways to express.

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Laurie started formal Zen practice in 1980 at San Francisco Zen Center; she worked at Greens restaurant back in the day, and lived at Tassajara for three years. In 1989 she married Hozen Alan Senauke, moved to Berkeley Zen Center, and raised their two children. After several years of intense focus on child-rearing, she gradually returned to more involvement in formal practice. She served as head student (shuso) at BZC in 2003 and received lay recognition in 2006. In April 2018, she received priest ordination from Daito Steven Weintraub as Kosei Nyokai – Radiant Vow, Suchness Ocean – and received Dharma Transmission from him in September 2021. She practices hypnotherapy and has been co-leading "Write What You Don't Know" retreats at San Francisco Zen Center. Her writing has appeared in *The Hidden Lamp: Stories From Twenty-Five Centuries of Awakened Women*, and *Dharma Family Treasures*.