Empty Selves: A Zen Buddhist Analysis of the Dissociative Self

I. Introduction

Though often compartmentalized within academia, the psychological and philosophical disciplines periodically conjoin. In the field of metaphysics, it is rare that psychological discourse will yield philosophical innovation. When psychological discovery suggests an alternate way of conceiving the self, however, it is necessary to conduct a metaphysical inquiry. This is such an inquiry. In the pages to follow, I intend to examine the psychological state and psychiatric disorder known as Dissociative Identity Disorder (DID). I will contrast Clinical Psychology and the Western Metaphysics on which it is founded with Zen Buddhist thought in order to expose the fundamental and irreconcilable differences between them, and ultimately cultivate a Zen model of understanding DID. Thus, using Zen Buddhist philosophy, I will provide a novel means for psychologists, psychiatrists, philosophers, and laypersons to comprehend DID.

II. Diagnostic Criteria for Dissociative Identity Disorder

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV (DSM IV), published by the American Psychiatric Association, is the primary text used by clinicians in diagnosing mental disorders. Though it by no means provides the most comprehensive description of DID, its concise criteria provide a sound basis from which a thorough understanding of the disorder can be established. According to the DSM IV’s diagnostic criteria of DID, a patient must exhibit all of the following:

- The presence of two or more distinct identities or personality states (each with its own relatively enduring pattern of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about the environment and self).
• At least two of these identities or personality states recurrently take control of the person's behavior.
• Inability to recall important personal information that is too extensive to be explained by ordinary forgetfulness.
• The disturbance is not due to the direct physiological effects of a substance (e.g., blackouts or chaotic behavior during Alcohol Intoxication) or a general medical condition (e.g., complex partial seizures). Note: In children, the symptoms are not attributable to imaginary playmates or other fantasy play.

When examining the first of these criteria, it is important to define the term personality. It is tempting to interpret personality as being the sum total of the qualities and attributes specific to an individual self. To do so would suggest, however, that each of the parts, or alters, within a multiple constitutes an autonomous individual self; an assumption that I fear is drastically premature. Rather, here, personality can be most aptly defined as the integrated organization of relatively stable individual characteristics. This psychological definition includes no masked metaphysical projections regarding the existence and nature of the self. Furthermore, it helps to explain the first of the four criteria for the diagnosis of DID. Simply, for Dissociative Identity Disorder to be diagnosed there must exist multiple systems, each with its own more or less consistent way of perceiving, relating, acting, and thinking.

Still, the first of these criteria needs further explanation. Every person, after all, possesses a variety of ways of perceiving, relating to, and thinking about his or her environment. Dr. Deborah Haddock, author of The Dissociative Identity Disorder Sourcebook, states: "All dissociation results in an alteration in sense of awareness, whether it occurs in relationship to the individual, memory, or interaction with a given environment. Haddock tells us that the psychological explanation for this multiplicity of cognitive temperament within non-multiple persons exists because no person has "one totally integrated personality." Simply put, everyone dissociates to a certain degree. What distinguishes persons with DID is the degree of this psychological phenomenon. The boundaries that distinguish particular dispositions, or
personality parts, in the average individual are drastically more rigid within the mind of a multiple. According to Haddock, the boundaries between parts are so defined that at times a multiple’s modes of thinking, perceiving, feeling, and relating bear no resemblance to each other whatsoever.

The second criteria for a DID diagnosis involves the psychological phenomena called "switching." Dissociative Identity Disorder is believed by the majority of the psychological community to be the result of severe trauma experienced by an individual during early childhood. Hence, each of the alternate personalities is fashioned in order to cope, in some way, with this, or these, traumatic event(s). During generally unpredictable moments, a multiple will experience a trigger, that is, a person, object, or event that acts as a reminder of an aspect of his or her trauma. The person, in turn, switches, or changes from one personality state to another. This switch endows one particular personality state with motor and linguistic control over the body of the multiple. The switch in corporeal control from one personality state to another is always accompanied by a change in at least one of the following: "[The person’s] physical appearance, vocal patterns, mood, and/or level of cognitive functioning."

While in no way inconsistent with generally accepted clinical theories regarding the nature of DID, the DSMV IV’s third criterion for diagnosis is somewhat misleading. A dissociative individual’s inability to recall important information is not the result of the memory being repressed as such. This is because a repressed memory is inaccessible to the conscious mind. In Dissociative Identity Disorder, however, such important personal information "may be quite accessible to consciousness in that mind state." As opposed to being contained in the unconscious mind, as is the case with repressed memories, information is believed to be distributed amidst the various conscious dissociated parts, or personality states. Thus, a
multiple’s inability to recall personal information coincides with and results from switching from one personality to another. The generally accepted psychological explanation for the fragmentation of memories involves the onset of DID. Yet to develop a rigid sense of self, children typically between the ages of three and five are capable of entering into dissociative states in order to escape from, and therefore cope with, a particular abusive relationship. Memories are compartmentalized, thus shielding the primary self state and ultimately yielding the development of alternate personas, which, when triggered, engage in their own experiences and formulate further memories, both of which remain unbeknownst to the other personality(ies).

The final DSMV IV criterion for a diagnosis of DID requires little elaboration. Still, it is noteworthy that while memory disruption and erratic behavior cannot be attributed to the effects of foreign substances for DID to be diagnosed, certain personalities are more adept at functioning than others when in the presence of mind-altering substances.

III. Introduction to Zen Buddhism

*Dependent Origination* is an important metaphysical notion common to most schools of Buddhist thought. Moreover, it is the Buddhist doctrine on which the Zen Buddhist conception of the self is founded. According to the doctrine of Dependent Origination, the existence of a given phenomenon is the result of certain causes and conditions, whose existences are, in turn, the result of still more causes and conditions. In this way, all things rise and fall together in a perpetually fluctuating nexus of causes and effects. The logical conclusion of this metaphysical view is that phenomena are utterly relational. That is, the identity of phenomenon is not distinct from the rest of existence. Everything is mutually implicated in everything else and thus lacks intrinsic idiosyncratic identity. Everything is empty of essence.
Given that this Buddhist metaphysical truth is admittedly a difficult notion to begin to grasp, much less truly embody, East Asian philosophers have utilized several metaphors in order to explicate the notion of relational phenomena and its implications. Henry Rosemont and Roger Ames are two such philosophers. Their method for depicting the relationality of phenomena is called the Field-Focus Model.¹ According to the Field-Focus Model, individual human beings do not enter into relationships and thus produce societal systems. Rather, they “are abstracted from the same field of relations out of which these”² social systems have also been identified. Rosemont’s and Ames’ model for the Confucian understanding of the self is important because it depicts individuals as both constituting and being constituted by their relationships. The model is insufficient, however, with regard to the Zen Buddhist conception of the self. As Zen Buddhist scholar Peter D. Hershock says in his “Person as Narration: The Dissolution of ‘Self’ and ‘Other’ in Ch’ an Buddhism,” “[the problem with the Field-Focus model is that] persons are still seen extrinsically, as objectifiable ‘things’ arising on or out of a surrounding field of relationships.”³ It is true that it is conventionally appropriate to distinguish between the self and other. According to Zen Buddhism, however, a true understanding of the ultimate reality of the self can only be obtained once this distinction has been eliminated, once one realizes that there is no ultimate reality of the self.

A second metaphor for depicting the non-essentiality of phenomena, including but not limited to the individual person, is found in the “Simile of the Chariot.” This traditional Buddhist argument “in favor of the composite nature of the individual”⁴ is used throughout various Buddhist schools, including Zen Buddhism. In this account of a conversation between a Greek King named Menander and a Buddhist monk named Nāgasena, the esteemed monk asked

¹Though intended by Rosemont and Ames to depict the Confucian view of personhood, the Field-Focus Model is included in this work to help facilitate the shift from the prototypical Western notion of the self to the Zen Buddhist one.
the Grecian king to identify the essence of a chariot. After undergoing a rigorous barrage of inquiry, the King said that “it is on account of all of these various components, the pole, the axle, wheels, and so on, that the vehicle is called chariot. It’s just a generally understood term, a practical designation.” To this, Nāgasena replied “It’s just the same with me. It’s on account of the various components of my being that I am known by the generally understood term, the practical designation Nāgasena.” Thus did Nāgasena distinguish between the conventional and ultimate reality of his person. Though his name was “Nāgasena,” there existed no essence to which this title referred. Rather, it was merely a title for the sake of convention. Ultimately, however, Nāgasena’s presence before Menander was the result of a multitude of aggregates, each of which was in a state of perpetual flux due to its relationship with others, both within and without that which was conventionally referred to as the Buddhist monk Nāgasena.

Hershock elucidates this point even further, and in doing so, conveys the conception of the self held by Zen Buddhist philosophy. Hershock does this by comparing a person to a story. If a person is to be understood as “the ceaselessly dynamic interrelation of all of a story’s characters and actions into a recursively structured and constantly evolving whole,” Hershock claims that it is nonsensical to conceive of a person as existing with a given place or time. As personhood is analogous to a story, the person exists beyond individualized description, for he or she is not a character within the narrative, but rather the narrative itself. Thus, Hershock claims that personhood can be most aptly described, while working within this metaphor, as the coalescence of “all the characters, all the actions, all the places and events that occur in what we refer to as ‘the world.’” Thus, Hershock illustrates the profound relationality of the self as espoused by Zen Buddhism.

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2 It is important to note that these aggregates also exist only conventionally. The Zen metaphysical view is dissimilar from an atomistic metaphysical view as each of these aggregates lacks an idiosyncratic essence. Like everything else, they derive their identity from their relationships with the rest of existence.
Though Hershock’s metaphor seems indisputably consistent with the Zen Buddhist conception of the relational self, I am not without criticism. I am particularly concerned with his declaration that because the person is analogous to narration, “our distinction of inside and outside is purely dramatic.”

Naturally, Hershock’s utilization of the word “dramatic” is fitting given his literary analogy. Moreover, he rightly depicts the differentiation between self and other as not complying with the ultimate Zen Buddhist metaphysic. It seems that if the goal of this project were to present a Zen Buddhist metaphysic that concerns only this ultimate truth, my task would now be complete. Most simply stated: each alter is fundamentally at one with the other—as well as with a piece of parchment, a tennis shoe, or a drop of rain. For each of these is mutually implicated in the other. Still, it is important to bear in mind that the purpose of Zen, and all schools of Buddhism for that matter, is not merely developing a sound metaphysical depiction of the world, but more importantly, reducing Dukkha or “suffering.” Thus, I propose that instead of utilizing the word “dramatic” to describe the “distinction of inside and outside,” the word “conventional” should be substituted. This would not merely be constructive in depicting mundane experience but also the process by which a person achieves enlightenment, transcends the self, relinquishes his or her self from suffering, and achieves the fullest level of humanness.

In sum, though metaphysically there exists no distinction between the self and other, such designations are both important when speaking about Zen Buddhism philosophically and providing a model through which enlightenment may be achieved.

IV. What is the Problem with DID?

When considering the problem inherent in Dissociative Identity Disorder from the Zen Buddhist Perspective one must consider the notion of “wu-chi,” or no-mind. According to Zen Buddhism, the unenlightened individual engages in experience via an array of mental “filters.”
Rather than engaging in pure experience, the unenlightened live life vicariously through these constructs. In turn, these “conceptual filters, like any filter useful for some special effect, distorts the original image,”16 superimposing categorical distinctions on the world. The Zen Buddhist doctrine of no-mind is contrary to this depiction of mundane experience.

No-mind is not to be conceived of as the discontinuation of thought, as such. Likewise, it is not “a withdrawal from the world through the exclusion of all involvement without perceptions,”17 nor an entirely mindless state. No-mind is a state in which discriminatory conceptual constructions cease to be. The following quotation, as relayed by T.P. Kasulis is one of the best explanation of no-mind to date:

The so-called no-mind is not like clay, wood, or stone, that is, utterly devoid of consciousness; nor does the term imply that the mind stands still without any reaction when it contacts objects or circumstances in the world. It does not adhere to anything, but is natural and spontaneous at all times and all circumstances.18

In addition to remaining non-attached and perpetually spontaneous, it is important to recall the third quality of no-mind: the perceptual unity of subject and object. Within the mental state of no-mind, all bifurcation ceases. It is a non-dualistic state. There exists no differentiation. All is one.

According to Zen, this state is not a phenomenological abnormality. It is not a paranormal mental state. Rather, no-mind is considered the natural state of the human mind before “we put on the first filter.”19 It is to this state that “the Zen Master…advises us to
Thus, the problem with Dissociative Identity Disorder from the Zen Buddhist perspective is that it deviates from the state of no-mind.

For the sake of clarity, I must momentarily digress. I am not, as of yet, proposing a Zen model for understanding DID, nor am I presently making a metaphysical declaration regarding the nature of the self in the dissociative individual. I am merely making a declaration regarding the catalyst for the dis-ease. Whether or not the dissociative individual is metaphysically one self or many selves, his or her deviation from the state of no-mind is the conventional cause of suffering within the dissociative individual. Consider, for a moment, if the dissociative individual is to be metaphysically construed as many conventional selves within one body. If this were to be the case, it is clear that each self has yet to return to a state of no-mind, as is evident by the persistent differentiation between various selves. Conversely, consider if the dissociative individual is, from the Zen Buddhist perspective, conventionally one self with multiple, fragmented modes of experience. In this case, each personality would be equivocal to a series of coalesced “screens,” which likewise deviates from the Zen-revered state of no-mind. The fact that the dissociative individual so deviates, and does so exponentially more than an individual without DID, renders Dissociative Identity Disorder problematic, no matter the conventional metaphysical account of the dissociative self.

From the Zen Buddhist perspective, DID’s deviation from no-mindedness is problematic for two primary reasons. First, it inhibits the quality of relationships, and thus the welfare of the self. Second, it is a form of attachment, and thus promotes suffering. I shall presently explore these concepts, beginning with DID’s inhibition of eminent relationships and subsequently the self-attachment associated with DID.

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3 It is important to bear in mind that according to Zen Buddhist philosophy, there exists no ultimate, essential self. Thus, the self must be perpetually understood as conventional.
In *Zen Action, Zen Person* Kasulis elucidates the relationship between the relational self and the doctrine of no-mind. According to Kasulis, the acceptance of conceptual distinctions and characterization of reality induce the classification of “persons into various categories (man/woman, white/black, I/you), for example, letting them obstruct our relationship with others.” Conversely, the elimination of these categorical distinctions enriches one’s relationship with others. The degradation of relationships is clearly exhibited by the dissociative individual.

The development of alternate self states serves the practical purpose of augmenting one’s ability to cope with childhood trauma. As a consequence, “Adults with DID are very skilled at assessing their surroundings and becoming whatever they believe is expected of them.”

Unfortunately, these adaptive skills create only the appearance of genuine relational intimacy. While this “protective coloration” undoubtedly aids in ensuring the survival of the child, it does so at the expense of the formation of more intimate relationships.

From what has been said, we can discern the following concerning the relational self, and the dis-ease associated with DID: Given that no-mindedness enhances the quality of one’s relationships, those relationships endow the individual with “function and significance,” and that the dissociative individual deviates from the state of no-mind, it necessarily follows that DID results in the degradation of the self and consequently induces dis-ease.

It is important to note that the Zen Buddhist critique of conceptual distinctions and characterizations is in no way limited to the dissociative individual. From the Zen Buddhist perspective, this problem also resides within integrated minds. These minds’ conceptual distinctions also inhibit the formation of qualitative relationships, and thus, induce dis-ease. In this way, the difference between the integrated and dissociative individual is merely a matter of
degree. From the Zen Buddhist perspective, the problem with the dissociative individual is akin to that of the integrated individual. In both cases, conceptual distinctions induce superficial relationships. DID is simply the most chronic and severe form of this problem.

In his article, “Dogen’s View of Authentic Selfhood,” Zen Buddhist scholar Francis H. Cook writes: “The mind in its bifurcated form comes to think of itself as ‘self,’ a self being defined as having characteristics of unity, discreteness, endurance through time… and perhaps even permanence.” Cook’s progression seems all together logical. A self-other distinction obviously accompanies the bifurcation of experience. Likewise, an autonomous sense of self, or ego, develops as a result of the self-other distinction. As the self is in perpetual opposition to the myriad things, it is perceived to be unified and constant. Still, Cook’s quotation, and indeed the whole of his article on the Zen Buddhist conception of selfhood, seems incomplete. Though he aptly contrasts the Zen Buddhist conception of authentic selfhood and inauthentic selfhood, he does not indicate why adopting the prior is better than maintaining the latter. As this is the current purpose of this investigation, I will attempt to expound upon his explanation.

The ego about which Cook writes is necessarily accompanied by attachment. The perception of a discrete unified, and enduring self testifies to this fact. According to the second noble truth common to all sects of Buddhism, attachment yields suffering. The reason for the causal relationship between attachment and suffering rests on yet another tenant of Buddhist philosophy: impermanence. Recall that the Buddhist doctrine of Dependent Origination dictates that all phenomena exist dependently on each other and do so in a perpetually fluctuating network of causes and conditions. It follows from this doctrine that each and every phenomenon is constantly changing, and hence, impermanent. Naturally, this includes the self. We, too, are continuously changed via our relationships with other phenomenon and are ultimately transitory.
Zen Master Dōgen, the venerated founder of the Sōtō Zen School in Japan, exemplifies this notion in “Actualizing the Fundamental Point,” in which he writes:

> When you are riding in a boat and watch the shore, you might assume that the shore is moving. But when you keep your eyes closely on the boat, you can see that the boat moves. Similarly, if you examine the myriad things with a confused body and mind you might suppose that your mind and nature are permanent. When you practice intimately…it will be clear that nothing at all has unchanging self.\textsuperscript{xiv}

\textit{Dukkha} arises when individuals cling to others, ideas, and most importantly, themselves as permanent.

When considering the dis-ease associated with Dissociative Identity Disorder, it is clear, that as in the case of relational degradation, the ego is not specific to the dissociative individual. Rather, DID is the most chronic and severe form of the problem universal to all non-enlightened beings. This cause of suffering is merely compounded by the presence of a multitude of egos.

\textbf{V. A Model of the Dissociative Self: A Comparative Analysis}

It may seem merely dramatic, to use Hershock’s words to produce Zen Buddhist models for discerning the origin and nature of DID. I have said, after all, that from the Zen Buddhist perspective, the individual (dissociative or otherwise) lacks an essential nature. I have further affirmed that the ultimate Zen Buddhist truth regarding the self is that there is no ultimate essence of the self. From a purely metaphysical perspective, this objection is sound. I have also asserted, however, that the primary purpose of Zen Buddhism, and indeed of all Buddhist sects,
is to alleviate dukkha. As dukkha is conventional itself, I am compelled to continue in my endeavor to construct a Zen Buddhist model for the dissociative individual in the hope that such an inquiry will erect a foundation by which novel therapies may be cultivated in order to alleviate this manifestation of dukkha.

The clinical psychological community is of overwhelming accord that Dissociative Identity Disorder is a “post traumatic disorder of childhood onset,”xxxv that is, that traumatic experience, particularly in the form of physical or sexual abuse, is the catalyst for the disorder. Given the overwhelming body of empirical evidence that supports this theory, it will be accepted for the sake of this inquiry, but accepted with much qualification. While empirical evidence is qualified to discern correlations between events (i.e. between childhood trauma and the development of DID), it is not, at this time, qualified to determine the precise manner by which multiple personalities develop.

Stephen E. Braude is a philosopher of the mind who, in his recent philosophical accounts of DID, attempts to dispel what he deems invalid conceptions of the onset and nature of the dissociative self and substitute them with more plausible and philosophically sound theories. Braude’s model hinges, however, on the Western conception of the self. As it is my intention to deviate from this conception of the self, it is my present objective to describe, evaluate, and dismiss Braude’s psycho-philosophical notions.

In the fifth chapter of First Person Plural: Multiple Personality and the Philosophy of Mind, Braude examines the principle of compositional reversibility (CR-principle), a notion which, he tells us, “has been widely accepted, at least tacitly, for over a hundred years.”xxxvi Braude begins by distinguishing between two manifestations of this principle: Type and Token CR-principle. The prior “holds that there is a correlation between the particular clinical entities
produced in dissociation and the components of the pre-dissociative self;”\textsuperscript{xxvii} while the latter “asserts a correlation between the \textit{kinds} of clinical entities produced dissociatively and the kinds of things composing the pre-dissociative self.”\textsuperscript{xxviii} Though the two differ in the degree to which the dissociative self relates to the pre-existing facets of the “pre-dissociative self," both posit a particular model of the self.\textsuperscript{xxix} It seems that according to this model, the self is analogous to a jigsaw puzzle. According to the CR-principle, the self is composed of a variety of personality fragments normally assembled to form a unified whole. In the case of Dissociative Identity Disorder, however, the various parts are disbanded via traumatic experience(s).

Braude charges this perspective with committing the Humpty Dumpty Fallacy. He rightly states that there is no evidence whatsoever that “things always divide or split along some pre-existing grain, or that objects divide only into their historically original components.”\textsuperscript{xxx} Moreover, he identifies as fallacious the inference that the forty fragments of shell to which Humpty Dumpty was reduced following his fall comprised Mr. Dumpty prior to his tumble. Braude states: “It would be a mistake to infer that he had previously been assembled and united out of forty parts, much less those forty parts.”\textsuperscript{xxxi}

Instead of this jigsaw model of the birth of the dissociative self, Braude advocates a model that embraces teleology and the evolution of the self while maintaining the self’s singularity as portrayed by the CR-principle. Though he rejects the contention that “any of the many alters ‘existed’ before their emergence,”\textsuperscript{xxxii} as the CR-principle maintains, Braude believes there to be a singular self present in the pre-dissociative and post-dissociative individual.\textsuperscript{4} According to Braude, the alternate personalities present in this one self are created out of a necessity to “deal” with particular situations to which the primary personality was ill equipped or

\textsuperscript{4} It is important to note that the utilization of the word “individual” is not meant to imply that a so-called multiple consists of a singular self.
maladapted. Using this same teleological perspective of the self, Braude argues against the conception of the self as a static entity. Braude writes: “A multiple’s inventory of alters often evolves over time in response either to therapeutic intervention or to day-to-day difficulties of life. Multiples might integrate (perhaps only partially) and then split again, but along novel functional lines.” Braude’s model for the onset and development of DID seems analogous to the growth of a willow tree. Though the tree begins with a solitary trunk, it births, out of necessity, a multitude of branches, each bearing particular groups of leaves. Obviously, the trunk in this metaphor is analogous to what Braude terms the “primary personality,” or the first personality from which alters grow. Likewise, the branches represent each additional personality, and the leaves, the “certain functions [that] make sense of the alter’s role.”

Each of these branches, complete with their leaves, are needed to sustain the vitality of the willow, or the singular self of which the trunk, branches, and the myriad leaves are a part.

Braude’s conception of a perpetually evolving, nonessential self differs from the CR-principle in a way that transcends the prototypical Western conception of a more or less static essential self. Braude’s description of the philosophically-grounded origin of DID, however, is not homogenous with a truly Zen Buddhist conception. I posit that this is because Braude’s model, not unlike the CR-principle, is founded on the metaphysical belief that the self precedes experience. As I will presently illustrate, this principle is in direct opposition with the Zen Buddhist conception of the self.

In his *An Inquiry into the Good*, contemporary Zen Buddhist philosopher Kitarō Nishida explains, “it is not that experience exists because there is an individual, but rather that an individual exists because there is experience.” This single philosophical proclamation illustrates the fundamental differences among the foundations of the CR-principle, Braude’s

Diagram 1
The Principle of Compositional Reversibility

Diagram 2
Braude’s Model of the Self

\[5\] This diagram, while applicable to the CR-principle, has been adopted from Masoa Abe’s introduction to Kitarō Nishida’s *An Inquiry into the Good* where it was meant to depict the philosophical postulation that experience exists because of the individual.
As is illustrated in Diagram 1, the CR-principle is founded on the notion that experience is a faculty of the self. From this perspective, it is the self that engages in sensory perception, accumulates friendships, and falls in love. It is the self that experiences. Without the self, there exists no experience. Moreover, according to this model, the relationship between the self and experience is fundamentally unidirectional. As it is considered a faculty of the self, the self engages in and shapes experiences. Experience does not, in any substantial capacity, change the self. In both the Type and Token CR-principle, traumatic experience only alters the unity of the metaphorical puzzle pieces, rather than their essence, which is considered to be fundamentally continuous and unchanging.

It is clear that Braude’s model rejects the uni-directionality of the CR-principle. For Braude, the CR-principle “…would imply that the historically original pre-dissociative personality components can have functions specific to things that did not exist at the time of birth

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6 This diagram has been adopted from Masoa Abe’s introduction to Kitarō Nishida’s An Inquiry into the Good where it was meant to depict the philosophical postulation that the individual exists because there is experience. Within the body of this inquiry, it is utilized in a similar capacity.
or during early childhood.” Still, Braude’s contention that there exists one unifying self both pre-dissociatively and post-dissociatively suggests that, for Braude, the self precedes experience. There remains, however, a drastic difference between Braude’s model and the CR-principle. His critique of the CR-principle suggests that Braude holds a circular view of the relationship between experience and the self. While the self engages in experience, it is also changed by the experiences in which it engages. This is illustrated by Diagram 2. The self engages in experience, which in turn, changes the self. For Braude, it seems that a comprehensive model of the self and experience would consist of a series of concentric circles alternating between the two and continuing ad infinitum.

In contrast with the previous two models and the vast majority of psychological and philosophical thought, Nishida holds that the self exists because of experience. Removed from experience, the self ceases to be. Initially, Nishida’s ideology does not seem to coalesce with traditional Zen Buddhist philosophy. As was noted in the previous chapter, the self is considered profoundly relational. As Kasulis writes in his *Zen Person, Zen Action*, Zen Buddhists “…typically believe that relationships precede any determination of the person.” These relationships are what endow a person with “function and significance.” When considering the nature of experience, however, this complication is easily resolved. It is absurd to consider experience sans relationships and vice versa. Without relationships with other living beings, inanimate objects, and one’s own thoughts, feelings, and desires, it is nonsensical to speak of experience. Because relationships are necessarily experiential and experience is necessarily relational, the two are fundamentally indistinguishable.

Given the dynamic of Nishida’s model, the question of whether the dissociative individual consists of one or multiple selves must be reconsidered. Unlike the CR-principle and
Braude’s philosophical assertions, Nishida rejects the notion that the self originates with the birth of the body. Rather, Nishida holds that experience endows the self with identity. This begs the question of whether extreme experiences or relationships (as the two necessarily coincide) may indeed birth different selves at different times within a singular body. A Western adaptation of Nishida’s notion would suggest this to be the case. As I have illustrated, there are two concepts that are central to the Western conception of the self: egoistic singularity and a static amalgamation of personality traits. Each of these facets of the Western conception of personhood applies to a singular alter, rather than the dissociative individual as a whole. Thus, if Nishida’s model were to be integrated with these Western conceptions of the self, it would have to be conceded that, in the case of DID, many selves exist within a singular body.

Though this reasoning would seem cogent from the Western perspective, it is not so from the perspective of Zen Buddhism. This Western interpretation is founded on a deficient understanding of Nishida’s philosophy as a whole. While the outer two concentric circles depict the relationship between experience and the individual, the innermost circle, labeled “Experience 2,” depicts “experience that is experienced by a presupposed self.” For Nishida, it is not the self to which the above two concepts are incumbent, but rather this fundamentally egoist secondary experience which impedes pure experience. Nishida’s notion of the true self and the manner in which it relates to DID will be considered in a moment. For now it is simply important to recognize two truths regarding Zen Buddhism and the dissociative self. First, from the Zen Buddhist perspective, the self exists as the result of experience, rather than an amalgamation of static traits or the existence of a singular ego, which engages in experience. Second, by adhering to this notion, Zen Buddhism rejects the foundation by which Western philosophy of the mind deems the dissociative individual one, as opposed to many selves.
I have said that for Nishida, the self is grounded in pure experience (“Experience 1” in *Diagram 3*) and that the self, in turn, yields subjective, indirect mental phenomena (“Experience 2” in *Diagram 3*). What is the nature of this pure experience from which the self, along with all cognitive activities, is derived? Nishida tells us that pure experience is the complex construction assembled “out of past experience and can be analyzed later into its single elements” (Nishida 5). From this, we can discern that present pure experience is the coalescence of all past experiential moments. These moments, it would seem, constitute the building blocks of present pure experience, along with the self. The precise manner in which moments of pure experience yield the self is explained by Nishida as follows:

A moment of consciousness is not simple—it contains complex elements that are dependent on each other, for they have a kind of meaning in their relation to others. Consciousness at a given time and also over a lifetime is organized into such a system, and the ‘self’ is the name for this unity of this whole.

Nishida’s first sentence suggests a sort of experiential Dependent Origination. He depicts a complex nexus of relational moments of experience that rise and fall together and thus derive meaning from each other. The self, it would seem, is a particular experiential locus in this nexus. As this is undoubtedly a daunting concept, I have provided a simplified pictorial representation of Nishida’s conception of the self.
Every arrow in Diagram 4 is representative of an experiential moment. Each of these moments of pure experience is dependent on those that precede it⁷. For Nishida, the self is comprised of the unity of each of these moments of experience, beginning with the arrow labeled “Λ”—the experience which first produced this locus of consciousness. From this unified locus of pure experience comes indirect, egoistic experience, which manifests itself in particular patterns of thought, modes of perception, and ways of relating to the environment, each of which superimposes meaning on experience. Such cognitive phenomena inhibit the self from realizing pure experience, which Nishida says, “has no meaning whatsoever.”⁸ That is to say, pure experience lacks “deliberative discrimination.” In its pure state, experience is unadulterated by thought.

Given Nishida’s description of the self as the unity of non-subjective pure experience, it follows that the dissociative individual consists of a single conventional self. Thus, it follows

⁷ Note that these moments of pure experience, too, are contingent on both prior moments of pure experience and myriad causes and conditions.
that alters are mere manifestations of indirect experience created by the self in order to cope with traumatic experience(s). In contrast with Braude’s model, which I have compared to a willow tree, Nishida’s model is analogous to a pine. The true self is a trunk of pure experience that extends from the ground and constitutes the body of the tree. Conversely, the branches represent the various manifestations of secondary experience. Though originating from the trunk, each branch can hardly be deemed “a pine tree.” They are, rather, various egos, each possessing their own leaves which once again symbolize “certain functions [that] make sense of the alter’s role." Unlike a pine tree, however, it is important for the health of the dissociative individual that all of the branches be removed in order that pure experience might be unhindered.

XI. Conclusion

Throughout the body of this article, I have applied Zen Buddhist ascriptions to the psychological abnormality, Dissociative Identity Disorder in an attempt to provide a novel model for understanding this cognitive ailment. I have done so in the hope of illustrating how Zen Buddhism might aid clinical psychology in understanding and treating the mental disease. It is my hope that DID not be the sole subject of such an inquiry. It is my hope that individual suffering may be diminished if a continued dialogue between the aforementioned disciplines is fostered, if psychological discourse continues to yield philosophical innovation, and vice versa.

Ibid.


Ibid. p. 687.


Ibid. p. 23.


Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.


Ibid. p. 7.