

Zen and Internal Family Systems

Self

What is Self? A hint: it is not a better, kinder, more wise part. I think a major contribution of Buddhism more generally to IFS is to help people realize that Self is not personal, that Self is not even a thing, but the vast creative intelligence of the universe, pure presence, clear awareness, manifesting in everyone.

The best description I've found so far is from a 14th Century Tibetan Buddhist teacher:

All that is has me—universal creativity, pure and total presence—as its root.
How things appear is my being.
How things arise is my manifestation.
Sounds and words heard are my messages expressed in sounds and words.
All the capacities, forms, and pristine awarenesses of the buddhas;
The bodies of sentient beings, their habituations and so forth;
All environments and their inhabitants, life forms, and experiences;
are the primordial state of pure and total presence.

And,

Listen: the pristine awareness of the creativity of the universe is non-judgmental and free from all discursiveness.
Serene and unsubstantial, like the sky,
We call it unborn.
Without stirring from the unity of self-refreshing pristine awareness,
The details of experience are clearly differentiated without being contrived.
Whoever fully comprehends and actually experiences this is called *a child of the majestic creativity*.

From *You are the Eyes of the World*, by Longchenpa

An Architect Reflects on Relationships:

Further, it is very puzzling to realize that the “elements,” which seem like elementary building blocks, keep varying, and are different every time that they occur.

For among the endless repetition of elements we see almost endless variation. Each church has a slightly different nave, the aisles are different, the west door is different. . . and in the nave, the various bays are usually different, the individual columns are different; each vault has slightly different ribs; each window has a slightly different tracery and different glass. . . .

If the elements are different every time that they occur, evidently, then, it cannot be the elements themselves which are repeating in a building or a town: these so-called elements cannot be the ultimate “atomic” constituents of space.

Since every church is different, the so-called element we call “church” is not constant at all. Giving it a name only deepens the puzzle. If every church is different, what is it that remains the same, from church to church that we call “church”? (84-85)

Let us therefore look more carefully at the structure of the space from which a building or a town [or a person] is made, to find out what it really is that is repeating there.

We may notice first that over and above the elements, there are relationships between the elements which keep repeating too, just as the elements themselves repeat. . . .

Beyond its elements each building is defined by certain patterns of relationships among the elements.

When we look closer, we realize that these relationships are not extra, but necessary to the elements, indeed a part of them. . . .

when we look closer still, we realize that even this view is still not very accurate. For it is not merely true that the relationships are attached to the elements: the fact is that the elements themselves are patterns of relationships.

For, once we recognize that much of what we think of as an “element” in fact lies in the pattern of relationships between this thing and the things in the world around it, we then come to the second even greater realization, that the so-called element is itself nothing but a myth, and that indeed, the element itself is not just embedded in a pattern of relationships, but is *itself* entirely a pattern of relationships, and nothing else. . . .

And finally, the things which seem like elements dissolve, and leave a fabric of relationships behind, which is the stuff that actually repeats itself, and gives the structure to a building or a town [or a person].

Christopher Alexander. *The Timeless Way of Building*.

What do the parts really want?

They want what you want:

They want to be seen and appreciated for who they are

They want to be comforted when they are in pain

They want to be unburdened from unwanted roles so they can be free

They want to make a contribution that is valued

They want to be warmly connected to others and

They want to end the conflicts with other parts

They want to learn and grow

They want someone to understand what they've been through

They want reassurance when they are afraid

They want companionship

They want a sense of belonging

They want liberation so that they can play, create, rest, explore, and collaborate

They want to feel part of a whole that is much larger than themselves

They want to be able to communicate all of this to the Self, and to the other parts. But sometimes it is hard for them to be heard, seen, and appreciated. Writing is an ideal medium for that because it makes visible what has been operating invisibly. The computer screen or the blank page is just an expression of Self: boundless, luminous, non-judging, non-punishing, open to whatever comes across it, infinitely ready, and able to reflect absolutely anything. It is a space of vast possibility and an invitation to expression of whatever is arising in this moment.

Fortunately, also, this does not need to be a huge undertaking, or a laborious burden. As Pennebaker showed, as little as 15 minutes a day of writing *for four days* had remarkable benefits.