

CHAPTER 13

Self and No-Self in Psychotherapy

Jack Engler
Paul R. Fulton

I know that I exist; the question is, what is
this “I” that I know?

—RENÉ DESCARTES (1641/1988, p. 82)

Modern psychotherapists use ancient concepts from Buddhist psychology selectively, naturally favoring those most compatible with our models of health and pathology and omitting others. The most vexing point of departure between these two healing traditions is the nature of self. According to Buddhist psychology, the self that we treasure and protect is significantly less substantial than it appears, and mistaking it as “real” is a major source of psychological suffering. Instead, our sense of self arises when conditions support it and disappears when conditions do not. The self has no enduring essence that stands apart from, or behind, experience—no consistent “me” to whom all experience happens. Therefore, from the Buddhist perspective, our fundamental reality is better described as “no-self,” or in Pali, *anatta*.

Although no-self is a relatively new concept in modern psychology and psychotherapy, understanding this idea, especially from firsthand experience, has great potential for alleviating suffering. For Buddhist meditation practitioners, discovering the evanescent nature of the self is the essence of wisdom, and it is accompanied by a profound sense of contentment and well-being. It seems natural, therefore, to consider how the concept of no-self may inform the theory and practice of psychotherapy.

In this chapter, we hope to show how an expanded understanding of the role of self in psychological suffering has direct, practical application to clinical practice. Although it is outside the scope of this chapter to provide a full account of the Buddhist understanding of self (see Olendzki, 2005, and Chapter 9), we attempt to render this elusive concept in experience-near terms and in relation to familiar therapeutic concepts. In the second half of the chapter, we illustrate the therapeutic potential of no-self by considering a relatively new treatment approach: internal family systems.

THE SELF IN PSYCHOTHERAPY AND BUDDHISM

Psychotherapy as a method of healing derives its power and meaning from shared, culturally constituted ideas of what it means to be fully human, healthy, and psychologically developed. Our therapy models contain detailed accounts of causality, such as how psychological suffering results from developmental arrest, failure to adapt, or trauma. How we understand suffering and its alleviation is inextricably bound to what we think is normal and healthy, and what it means to have a healthy sense of self. Whereas a sense of self appears to be psychologically universal, it is not always construed the same way.

In the West, the self is commonly understood as a natural developmental accomplishment dependent on adequate emotional nourishment in early life and ongoing interaction in the social world. In the ideal, healthy, mature individual, the self is viewed as relatively autonomous, independent, separate, and stable. We take these qualities of the self to be natural products of maturation rather than culture-bound products of folk psychology, where they originate. Western psychotherapy rests on our commonly held, cultural view of the self—that *we exist*, and that with optimal development we arrive at a self that is relatively impervious to interference from others, free to act, the locus of moral judgment and control, and of ultimate value.

Buddhist psychology also recognizes a separate self as a persistent category of experience. Indeed, the Buddha's contemporaries showed ample evidence of having psychological selves in our sense of the term. However, rather than taking an enduring and separate self as a hallmark of maturity, Buddhist psychology identifies the persistent *illusion* of a separate, enduring self as a primary source of psychological distress. As a system of healing, then, Buddhist practices do not seek to relieve suffering by improving self-esteem or rewriting personal narratives in a more self-enhancing manner. Rather, they seek to illuminate the self's ultimate

ephemerality, and how our restless grasping for pleasure and avoidance of pain reinforce this illusion and give rise to unhappiness. So, in sum, despite all the ways that mindfulness-oriented psychotherapy is consistent with the therapeutic enterprise, there may still be a fundamental, unrecognized conflict in the minds of practitioners regarding the status and role of the self.

In Buddhist traditions, the realization of *anatta*, or no-self, is usually considered an outcome of insight (“mindfulness” or *vipassana*) meditation at a relatively advanced stage of practice (see Chapter 2). In fact, *anatta* is an actual experience we have all the time. At its root, *anatta* is any moment of experience that is not organized around the representation of self as a separate, independently existing entity—any time I am not organizing myself as “me” or “mine,” or as any representation or identity at all. When we think of *anatta* this way, we can immediately recall many such moments in which consideration of self is absent. When we reflect on them, we notice that they are actually our *best* moments—the times when we felt freest, most in tune with ourselves, most in a flow with our experience, least anxious and conflicted, most spontaneous and creative.

Here are some examples of naturally occurring moments of *anatta*: hearing one’s name called and responding without a second thought; the ecstasy of a child staying on his or her bike for the first time; losing oneself in the contemplation of a work of art; a pianist completely absorbed in the music, playing unself-consciously; a therapist listening in complete attunement with a patient. All of these experiences have at their core a feeling of being completely one with what we are doing. Actually, even that is inaccurate because there is no sense of “I” who feels “one,” no subjective distinction between subject and object. Awareness is “nondual”: There is just the activity and the awareness of it; the knower, the knowing, and the known are experienced as one. All these types of experience show us that being, feeling, and acting need not be organized around a sense of being a separate self—one who is doing or to whom experience is happening. Even “thinking” can happen quite nicely, and does, without a self or an “I” to do it. In those no-self moments, we tend to function more efficiently and wisely, with natural and spontaneous curiosity, compassion, and joy.

Just as the Buddhist conception of self is not as esoteric as it first seems, the pernicious consequences of holding a mistaken view of self are not hard to identify. With even a modest degree of introspection, we can see how much of our inner lives are concerned with ourselves: nearly constant defensive maneuvering, efforts to maximize our self-esteem, or the incessant tendency to compare ourselves silently (or not so silently) with others. Even the “healthy” narcissism characteristic of a

well-adjusted, mature individual is a cause of distress. When we relate to others through the perspective of self, we invite a subtle (and, at times, not-so-subtle) valuation of experience as good *for me*, or bad *for me*. Our likes and dislikes become de facto yardsticks by which all experience is judged, resulting in a degree of restlessness. We come to feel vaguely separate. Like a kitchen appliance running in the background, we may only notice this activity once it stops, however briefly. In these moments we can feel enormous relief; life becomes less complicated, and we begin to learn to rest in our experience without constant clinging to our complaints or opinions.

SELF AND NO-SELF IN CLINICAL PRACTICE

We can begin to understand what *self* and *no-self* mean clinically by imagining a continuum. On one end we have narcissistic disorders. In the middle we find “ordinary” nonclinical narcissism—the daily egocentrism common even in otherwise psychologically healthy individuals. At the far end we find the Buddhist ideal of awakening to the reality of no-self.

Narcissistic disorder Ordinary “healthy” narcissism No-self 			
	Narcissistic disorder	Ordinary narcissism	No-self
Object relations	Others exist as narcissistic self objects or “part objects,” as a part of ourselves. They are experienced primarily as providers or deniers of narcissistic nourishment and validation. There is an overvaluation of the self in association with an idealized object who validates and reflects one’s own (compensatory) specialness. There is a severely diminished capacity for empathy.	“Mature” object relations in which there is the capacity for empathy. Others are seen more in their own individuality and less through the veil of one’s own needs for recognition. Others’ own narcissistic needs can be recognized. Self is held with appropriate esteem.	Others come to be perceived as abiding in a state of suffering due to their own attachment to an illusory sense of self, allowing for greater capacity for empathy for others. Genuine compassion rooted in recognition of others’ fundamental likeness to oneself becomes a natural emotional response to others’ suffering.

	Narcissistic disorder	Ordinary narcissism	No-self
Perception	The world is perceived as a reflection of personal needs, highly filtered through individual preoccupations; experience is charged, personalized, idiosyncratic. The world is continuous with oneself, as it is perceived through the lens of one's own egocentricity. The world is populated with others who provide or deny validation of <i>my</i> value, <i>my</i> importance, and <i>my</i> needs.	More of life is experienced as impersonal, independent of self, though still often colored by personal desires and aversions. The world is no longer divided up so fully into suppliers or deprivors of validation and mirroring because desires and drives are no longer the exclusive organizer of experience. One experiences oneself as an individual <i>in</i> the world, <i>with</i> others.	As the self, its aggrandizement and self-interest abate as an organizing principle, the world ceases to be perceived as a source of nourishment or deprivation, simultaneously becoming impersonal and (because it is not filtered through need states), intimate as well as abundant. As the dualism of "me" and "not me" is abandoned, the self and the world are experienced as "not different," without separation or alienation.
Defenses	Much or most of experience is dominated by conflict, with little room for autonomous ego functioning. Primitive defenses include projective identification, denial, splitting, and idealization. There is highly limited self-awareness or insight.	Mature defenses, such as repression, suppression, sublimation, and altruism (as a defense) are engaged. Meaningful self-reflection and insight are possible.	With growing understanding of the illusory nature of self, the need to defend the self drops, one becomes increasingly less defensive, living with greater receptivity and willing vulnerability. This vulnerability is offset by the understanding that there is "no one" who is hurt, who gains or loses, or who needs protection.

On this continuum, we can extrapolate from what is familiar—narcissistic disorders and healthy narcissism—to deep insight into the illusory nature of the self. It is a progression away from utter egocentrism toward its ultimate absence.

A clinical analogy might be the notion of "conflict-free" functioning. This term, developed by psychoanalyst Heinz Hartmann (1958), describes how individuals—or the same individual at different stages of

psychological maturity—have areas of functioning that are relatively free of conflict. For most of us, there are a number of areas in which psychic energy is tied up due to unresolved issues. Successful treatment can be described as expanding the circle that is conflict-free and shrinking the domain of the conflicted.

This process is similar to the movement from egocentrism to no-self. Imagine that we reside at the center of concentric circles, the innermost circle regarded as “me” or “mine”—highly personal, protected, and charged (see Figure 13.1). Outside that circle is what we experience as “not about me”—as impersonal. I may find myself highly possessive about matters in which my sense of identity is at stake, and not so possessive about things that I know are not about me. For example, if I were an artist and visited an art gallery, my experience would probably be colored by a tendency to compare my work to what I see. Growth in *anatta* could be described as shrinking the circle of what is “about me,” while simultaneously expanding the remaining space that is “not about me.” In the example above, I might learn to see another artist’s work with fresh eyes, without reference to my own egocentric concerns.

In treatment, patients may come to understand that something that was once taken highly personally (e.g., a boss’s scowling look) may not be about me at all (the boss had a fight with her husband that morning). Relief is found when we see events from a broader, less personal perspective. When insight into no-self grows, more and more of one’s experience is seen as impersonal, up to and including one’s own mortality. One need not feel that life is a personal oppression or insult; it is only what it is, and our experience can be received without excessive judgment based on whether it is desirable or undesirable *for me*. This perspective naturally leads to wiser behavior because we are holding elements of the entire situation in mind, *as they are*, rather than just our personal desires.

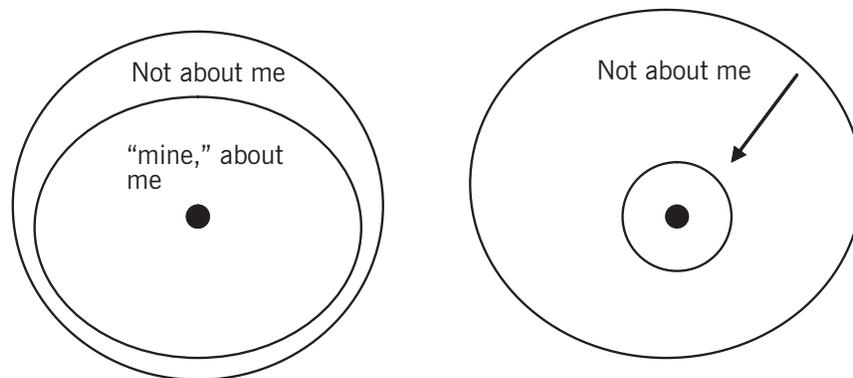


FIGURE 13.1. The movement from egocentrism to no-self.

A CLINICAL APPLICATION

The idea of no-self is beginning to find its way into psychotherapeutic theory and practice. Internal family systems (IFS; Schwartz, 1995, 2001) is a contemporary treatment approach in which accessing no-self is the key to therapeutic change. This approach also illustrates how the liberating experience of no-self can be accessed by specific interventions.

IFS starts from the observation that we have an *internal* family system that is composed of “parts” in complex and dynamic relationships with each other, very much like members of our external family. This means that the self, from the outset, is not a singular entity, a view shared by Buddhist psychology. The first challenge is to recognize these multiple aspects of myself as just parts—not who I essentially am. Normally we are identified with limited parts of ourselves and we take them to be who we are. The second challenge is to *unblend* from them. When I unblend, I am instantly in some degree of no-self or *anatta* and have less need to protect an illusory sense of self. The third challenge is to work with these parts to help them find constructive and preferred roles—ways to live and work in harmony. My parts will only collaborate and trust me to help them if they feel my concern and impartiality. And I can only truly act out of concern and impartiality from a state of no-self.¹

How does the IFS process work? If I take a moment to “go inside”—as I would be invited to do at the beginning of an IFS session—what would I find? I would find the same stream of thoughts, feelings, physical sensations, anxieties, desires, beliefs, and preoccupations that I would encounter in any type of mindfulness practice (see Chapter 2). Within the IFS model, however, I approach the thought or feeling as a communication to me from some part of myself that is asking for my attention, not just as a momentary event that arises and passes away. In other words, the thought or feeling may be coming from a part of me that has its own history, its own outlook and approach to things, its own idiosyncratic beliefs, its own characteristic moods and feelings, its own relationships with other parts, and most importantly, its own distinct role or function in my life. This is the assumption I am invited to explore.

Assagioli’s (1975) notion of “subpersonality” as a full-range inner personality and Jung’s (1969) notion of “complexes” both capture something

¹Following some of the great spiritual traditions, IFS uses the term *Self* with a capital S for the unblended state. Schwartz (2001) makes this connection explicitly, though he says he discovered it after developing the core of his system. The overlap between psychological and spiritual terminology can be confusing. The term *Self* as used in IFS denotes the same reality as *anatta* or no-self in Buddhist thought: a state that is not motivated by, or organized around, a sense of a separate, inherently existing agentic self.

of this idea. A “part” in this view is not just a temporary emotional state or habitual thought pattern; it is a discrete and autonomous mental system that has an idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, set of abilities, desires, and view of the world (Schwartz, 1995). This is the normal multiplicity of mind. We know this instinctively when we say, “A part of me wanted to do it, but another part of me didn’t.”

Now suppose I approach a part of myself that is self-critical, is stubbornly refusing to move forward, or is hurting, with an invitation to tell me or show me what it wants to communicate. The first thing I’ll discover is that this part of me, more than anything else, simply *wants to be seen and heard*. But the next thing I’ll discover is that, despite the urgent need to be seen and heard, like anyone else this part won’t reveal itself or engage with me if it feels me approaching it with preconceptions or judgments—if it feels that I want to fix it, change it, repress it, or get rid of it. On the other hand, if my approach is sincere, the part will often respond to my inquiry and show or tell me what it wants me to understand. This is not simply a “technique” or “exercise”—it is a real-life, real-time encounter in which I engage with parts of myself from the perspective of no-self.

The next thing I’ll discover is that this part of me *needs acknowledgment*, and more importantly, *appreciation* for its efforts. These steps are not simply passive, detached observations. I need to fully appreciate the problematic and unwanted parts of myself for them to come forth, as Rumi (1996) encourages us to do with “the dark thought, the shame, the malice” (p. 109) in his poem, “The Guest House.” Can I embrace those parts of myself that are in despair, mean, or selfish? That’s the challenge and possibility of no-self, where there is nothing to defend or promote.

What I will also discover is that each part has been playing a specific role in my life and has a specific function. Contrary to my everyday experience, no matter how bad the behavior of a part of me looks or feels, if I inquire sincerely, I will find it has *always* had my best interests at heart. Each part has been trying to protect me from further hurt or disappointment, or to help me manage some situation in my internal or external life. In this approach, “benign intent” is a crucial assumption that allows for sustained inquiry into the roles and functions of parts. Understanding the inherent good will of every part makes it possible to work with those elements of myself that other parts might find objectionable or intimidating.

Even with successful treatment, parts do not disappear. They remain part of me. The therapeutic goal of IFS, then, is not to fuse parts into a single personality, or to change, fix, or get rid of them, any more than it would be the intention of a conductor to throw individual instruments out of the orchestra when they aren’t playing well. Nor is the goal to “transcend” unwanted or “unwholesome” parts—a mistaken notion in some spiritual traditions. No instruments, no orchestra. Instead, the goal is

integration to help them learn to work together in finding a preferred role that contributes to the welfare of the system as a whole. Though parts may not disappear, they can find new roles for the skill sets they already have, providing I learn to unblend from them, approach them from a state of no-self, and provide leadership that is less conflicted and relatively free of judgment and agenda.

The Wisdom of Nonidentification

From the perspective of no-self, it is possible to relate to all parts of ourselves with genuine curiosity and compassion—to appreciate what each part has endured and how long and hard it has been laboring on our behalf. Care and compassion spontaneously flow toward the wounded parts of ourselves. Nothing actually needs to be fixed or changed; each part knows exactly what it requires to exist productively and peacefully in the internal family system.

Working with ourselves this way has its psychological equivalent in Tibetan Buddhist tantric practices. Instead of trying to extinguish “unwholesome” mind states (*akusala citta*) and replace them with “wholesome” (*kusala citta*) ones, tantric wisdom informs us that all mind states are valuable energies that can be transformed into wholesome qualities: anger into kindness, greed into generosity, delusion into insight. Any troublesome part of ourselves can become a benefactor. Any enemy can become an ally. The parts of myself that are self-defeating, anxious, and traumatized, or violent and destructive, can discover new and more constructive roles for themselves.

Remarkably, even the three traditional Buddhist “poisons” of greed (*lobha*), hatred (*dosa*), and delusion (*moha*) (see Chapter 9) that lie at the root of all unwholesome mental states can be regarded and treated as parts of myself that are actually trying to help me in their own way. Again, the goal is not to get rid of unwanted parts, as it was in early Buddhist practice and often still is in many practitioners’ minds today. It is also not to transcend them. It is to integrate them into the internal family by learning how to work with them and appreciating the great power for potential change and good they embody once I stop avoiding them. Greet them, welcome them, treat them as honored guests, Rumi (1996) says. *All parts are welcome.*

Unblending from parts of ourselves is what accesses *anatta* and makes working with these different parts possible. This process is very similar to Adyashanti’s (2006) invitation “to wake up from . . . this trance state of identification” (p. 46). Parts are often so insistent—again, with good intentions—that they tend to take over, hijacking us before we know it. And then when we speak or act, we are unwittingly speaking or acting no longer *for* that part, but *from* that part. I say, “I am angry” or “I feel guilty” or “I

feel ashamed.” Actually, it’s a part of me that is feeling angry, another part that is feeling guilty, and probably still another that carries shame. As long as I am merged with a part, I can’t engage with it, have a relationship with it, or work with it. So the first step is always to acknowledge the presence or activity of a part, then separate or step back from it, or ask it to step back—not to reject or abandon it, but to engage with it. That’s the paradox. I ask it to step back a little bit, and this shift allows us to notice each other.

What do I discover when a part steps back and I no longer identify with it as “me”? As the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi was fond of saying, “Let come what comes. Let go what goes. See what remains” (as cited in Adyashanti, 2006, p. 65). What remains? Something that is completely different in nature from my parts.

As we mindfully observe and unblend from the many different parts of ourselves and gradually unblend from them, we’re likely to discover that who we are at our core is not an enduring me or self, but simply awareness itself, without any judgment or agenda. This is not a passive state. Neither is it a transcendent realm of consciousness or a spiritual state without the pain and challenges of life. Living in no-self really means interacting with all parts of myself in creative and healing ways, being an active member of my internal family, encouraging the different parts to be seen and heard, nurturing more constructive roles, and helping them communicate and collaborate with each other. In this state I can be either a witness or an actor, whatever the situation calls for.

As I unblend from my parts, I’m likely to find that my core, my essence, my truest nature, my natural state, is already, will be, and always has been a state of wholeness, not identified with any specific representation of self. This is precisely what Buddhist thought calls wisdom (*panna*)—not just “being wise” as an elder or mentor may be wise, but the very specific realization of being no-thing *in particular*, and therefore capable of compassion toward all things without discrimination (see Chapters 4 and 9).

Inherent Compassion

In a state of no-self, I’m also likely to discover that positive qualities flow more spontaneously within me. I don’t actually *become* compassionate and peaceful, for instance; I *discover* that compassion and peace are already there. I discover that wholesome qualities don’t come from anyone or anything outside myself either—from a therapist, for instance. They are the same wholesome, healing, and creative qualities that manifest in everyone when we unblend from the parts of ourselves that have unwittingly held us hostage to limited self-images and beliefs. IFS uses a mnemonic of eight C’s to identify a core group of wholesome qualities: calmness, clarity or wisdom, curiosity, compassion, confidence, courage, creativity, and connectedness (Schwartz, 2001). But IFS points to additional

positive qualities as well: joy, humor, acceptance, forgiveness, and gratitude (Schwartz, 1995). Note that these qualities are similar to those identified in Buddhist psychology as the “perfections” (*paramis*) or “factors of Enlightenment” (*bojjhargas*): mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration, and equanimity. These are the qualities of mind considered necessary for awakening and for truly wise action (Nyanatiloka, 1972). They are like the sun—ever shining. I can add nothing to this state; take nothing away. The problem is only the cloud cover. Part the clouds and I will see the sun. When there is an opening—when I can help a part that has taken me over to step back—the sunlight of *anatta* begins to pour through. At this point, even the sense of being an observing witness drops away. There is just witnessing, just awareness, just connection, with these qualities streaming through.

SEEING FROM NO-SELF

We can know when we are in this state of no-self. I am in this state when I am fully present, but without the accompanying sense I usually have that there is an entity within, a “me” or “I” who is aware. In the state of no-self, odd as it may sound, I am just aware, without any self-consciousness of being or of having a self who is aware. Awareness itself is not just another part of me, as we may be inclined to think of it. It is also not an experience. It cannot be represented as “this” or “that.” Rather it is the *condition* of all experience—what makes experience possible. There is a clear awareness of parts of myself and an ability to engage with them, without taking them to be “me” or “mine.” Any image or belief I have about myself, on the other hand, can only be a part of me, never who I truly am. When I do not refer my seeing or thinking or doing back to a “me,” I am thinking and perceiving from no-self. In IFS terms, when I unblend from any part of myself, partially or completely, there is seeing but no seer, thinking but no thinker, doing but no doer.

IFS PATH EXERCISE²

- Find a comfortable position and take a few deep breaths.
- When you feel ready, gradually let your attention turn inside and visualize yourself in a clearing at the start of a path. Invite your thoughts and feelings, your body and physical sensations—all your parts—to gather in the

²Slightly modified from the original “Path Exercise” in Schwartz (2001, p. 61ff).

clearing. Let them know your intention is to take a walk on the path by yourself, and you want them all to remain here while you are gone.

- If they are anxious about letting you go, let them know you will return, that you won't be gone long, and that this will benefit all of you. Have any parts that may still feel anxious looked after by parts that are less anxious. If the anxious parts are still afraid to let you go, talk with them about their concerns. Once you sense it is OK to proceed, begin walking out on the path.
- As you go, if you find you are watching yourself walking, you are still blended with some part of yourself—perhaps with a watcher or a witness part that still doesn't trust you to be on the path by yourself. When you are truly experiencing from no-self, you will not see yourself because you are the seer, and the seer cannot see itself. Find that part that is afraid to let you be on the path by yourself and ask it to return to the others. If it won't, then take some time to talk with it about why it is afraid.
- As you continue walking, open to all your senses. What is it like to just see, just feel, just hear, just touch, just taste? If you find yourself thinking, ask those thoughts to return to the clearing also, so that more and more there is just pure awareness, pure presence. As each part goes back, notice the space that opens up in your body and mind. Notice the increased flow of energy. What is the core of you like when you are not blended with your parts? (This is a glimpse of no-self, *anatta*.)
- When it feels time to return to your parts, go back to where your parts are gathered. See if you can remain open to the unblended spaciousness and energy as you approach your parts again. When you get back, notice how your parts greet you when you arrive with this energy. Talk with them and see how they did without you. Ask them if there is anything they need from you. Offer to share the spaciousness and energy you have experienced with them. Notice the effect on the parts that are willing to receive it.
- Finally, thank the parts that let you go. And thank the parts who did *not* let you go, for letting you know they were afraid. See if you can bring the spaciousness and energy of no-self with you as you return to your day.

The state of nondual selfless awareness is as important to the IFS model of therapy as it is to Buddhist mindfulness practice. An interesting difference between the two healing paths is that no-self plays a more explicitly interactive role with our inner parts in IFS. No-self not only witnesses, it provides emotional leadership. It not only listens, it conducts. When we are in no-self, we spontaneously bring curiosity, compassion, and wisdom to hear and care for whatever is going on within us. This kind of emotional leadership is trustworthy and effective, coming as it does from a natural, spacious, benevolent state of mind.

Buddhist psychology describes behavior originating from no-self as *asankarika citta*, or action that is “unmotivated.” There is action, but little or no sense that “I” am doing anything. My actions are not experienced as originating in or by “me.” They simply occur as a spontaneous response to the situation and need of the moment. Unlike actions initiated and driven by limited parts of myself, no-self is unbiased, impartial, not needing events or outcomes to be this way or that, expressing only interest and concern, compassion and wisdom.

Psychotherapy appears to be on the threshold of a wider understanding of self and no-self. This broader understanding of self may inspire innovative therapeutic models such as IFS and inform psychological interventions of all kinds that might be used to guide patients to an appreciation of no-self that frees the heart. An intuitive realization of no-self is what Buddhist psychology calls wisdom. Such a realization must necessarily inform our understanding of freedom from suffering, which will in turn challenge us to revisit how we practice psychotherapy.