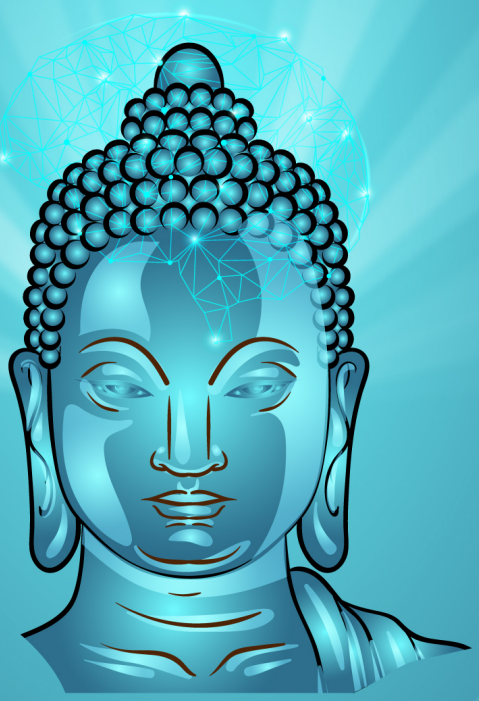
# SUMMARY

# NO SELF NO PROBLEM!

CHRIS NIEBAUER



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# Summary of “No Self, No Problem!” by Chris Niebauer

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Buddhism posits that there’s no such thing as one continuous self. No Self, No Problem (2019) draws on recent psychological research to show how modern psychology actually affirms this core tenet of Buddhism as scientific truth.

# Introduction

Everyone always tells you to “just be yourself.” But what if you don’t know who that self really is? More confusing yet, what if there’s no such thing as your “self?” If that strikes you as the wackiest thing you’ve ever heard, you’re not alone! Almost all of Western philosophy centers on the concept of the self, including such notable ideas as Rene Descartes’ seventeenth century assertion, “Cogito, ergo sum-- I think, therefore I am.” Descartes believed that humanity is defined by thinking and this in turn implies a stable, continuous self. Although the person we are may grow, develop, and change throughout our lifetime, we at least accept that there is one definitive sense of “I” rather than multiple shifting versions of ourselves.

But does that singular “I” really exist? Where Western philosophy explicitly affirms that it does, Eastern philosophy posits that there is no singular sense of self and that al; human suffering can be attributed to the illusion that there is. That might sound pretty trippy, so bear with me, because this summary will show you how modern neuroscience is actually affirming this tenet of Buddhist philosophy. Through the course of this summary, you’ll learn:

- What your “left” and “right” brains are and why they matter
- How yoga and meditation stimulate your right brain
- What would happen to the world if our left brains didn’t function

# The Self is an Illusion

How many times a day do you use the word “I?” If you’re like me, you probably talk about yourself all the time without realizing it. Because, let’s face it, we’re all secretly our own favorite subject; we love to talk about ourselves! But have you ever thought about who and what you mean when you use the word “I?” That probably sounds like a baffling question, because of course you haven’t thought about it; you know who you mean. When you refer to yourself by saying “I,” you mean the consciousness that it housed in the physical body belonging to you. You mean the person that is defined by your thoughts, tastes, preferences, and opinions. That’s the “you” to which you’re referring, because what other “you” could there be?

However, Eastern philosophy would say that that sense of self is only an illusion. A very well constructed illusion indeed, but a mirage nonetheless. That’s because Buddhists don’t believe in the sort of autopilot sense of self we believe to be located in our brains. Where we believe that our “self” simply is and that it exists in our own minds, Buddhism believes that self isn’t really up there. And although it might sound pretty freaky, neuroscience actually confirms this! Because scientists have mapped every part of our brains. They’ve identified our language center and our zones for processing compassion, love, facial recognition, and every other function that makes us a human being. But when you look for that little “self” control chamber we all imagine is up there, it simply can’t be found; there is no “self” component of our brain.

And right now, you’re probably thinking that’s ridiculous. Because at this very moment, you’re engaging with this text and having thoughts, thoughts that are probably something like, “I don’t believe that at all!” You’re also likely feeling confident that those thoughts are being processed by the same autopilot self you’ve always imagined up in your head. And honestly, even if you’re wrong, so what? What harm would it do to go on believing that? Well, according to Buddhism, the problem is that that illusion of self causes us long-term psychological damage. But before we begin to unpack that,

let’s go back and take a close look at how our illusion of self is generated and how our brains function.

# Our Left Brain is an Interpreter

In the 1960s, neuropsychologist Roger Sperry performed a series of radical, experimental surgeries on patients with epilepsy. With the aim of treating their seizures, he severed the part of their brains called the corpus callosum. If, like me, you're not instantly familiar with this part of your anatomy, the corpus callosum is a thick bundle of nerves and fibres that connects the right side of your brain to the left side of your brain and allows the two to communicate back and forth. Sperry's procedure was a success in that it accomplished his original purpose; the severity of the patients' seizures was tremendously reduced. But it also provided an unexpected benefit by virtue of providing scientists with a focus group of people whose right and left brains were no longer in communication.

As they worked to understand what would happen when communication in the brain was interrupted, researchers found that studies conducted on "split-brain" patients enabled them to isolate and identify the different functions of each side of the human brain. They also discovered that a clear understanding of these different sides and their functions is crucial for developing an understanding of the self. One key insight their research revealed is that our right and left is sort of mixed up; all sensory information from the left side of our body is, in fact, processed by the right side of our brain and vice versa. So, what does our left brain do? Well, it turns out that its primary function is to act as an interpreter. But what's especially interesting is the fact that its interpretations are often straight out of left field! (No pun intended).

In one of the most famous split-brain studies of all time, the patient's left brain (so, their right eye) was shown a picture of a chicken's foot. The experimenter then showed the patient's right brain (their left eye) a picture of a snowy landscape. The patient was then asked to look at a series of additional random images with both eyes and pick out pick out the images that could be matched with the first two. The patient's right hand-- remember, the one controlled by their left brain-- correctly selected a

picture of a chicken to match the chicken foot. Likewise, the patient's left brain identified an image of a snow shovel and matched it to the snowscape. However, when they were asked to explain their choices, scientists were able to witness the true disconnect in communication between the left and right brains.

Because instead of saying something like, "That's funny, I can't seem to communicate with my right brain, I have no idea why I picked that image with my left hand," their left brain attempted to provide them with a plausible answer. In an effort to make sense of the images and their subsequent identifications, patients formulated such answers as, "Well, the chicken foot goes with the chicken and I chose the shovel because you need it to clean out the chicken coop." So, as you can see from this example, our left brain is an interpreter; its job is to provide us with plausible explanations for the things that happen to us, even if those answers are completely off base.

# Our Left Brains Use Language to Make Sense of Reality

Language is what gives depth and meaning to our world. It enables us to navigate reality, because definitive names for objects and concepts make it easier for us to communicate with others and make sense of the world. For example, if someone tells us to go sit in a chair, we rely on language to understand that "chair" denotes that thing with a seat, a backrest, and four legs. But have you ever stopped to think about what really makes a chair a chair? What definitive quality gives it its "chairness?"

Of course, if you pursue this line of questioning enough, you'll come to the realization that there really is no innate, specific quality that unites all chairs under the umbrella of "chairness." Rather, what connects them is the fact that humans have agreed upon some arbitrary criteria and affirmed that these can be categorized under the linguistic signifier "chair." So, while these signifiers are useful for making sense of the world, the truth is that they only exist in our minds as a type of linguistic construct. Outside of our heads and the social context which gives them meaning, there really is no such thing as "chair." And by now, you've probably guessed where I'm going with this. Because if we turn that same logic inward, we might find that the same thing applies to the question, "Who am I?"

Because if the definition of chair exists only as a construct in our minds, the same must be true for our sense of self. Just as we categorize "chair" by certain factors, so we define our understanding of ourselves through certain parameters like gender, personality traits, talents, relationships, and our role in any of a hundred other categories. But if we took those categories away, if you were no longer able to say, "I'm me because I'm a writer or an activist or a part of this community, or someone who's defined by their love of these things," how would you know who you are? Where would you go to get the answers about what constitutes your "self?" Indeed, if you stripped away these qualities, you might find that, just like the chair, your sense of self may be nothing more than a construct.

# Our Brains Create Patterns

Our brain's ability to identify patterns is the reason we're able to make sense of language. We need this understanding of patterns in order to figure out the rules of grammar and linguistics and to determine what constitutes a correctly spelled word. Without this understanding, we would lack the ability to realize that the letters "c-a-t" in that order means "cat," a word which we can in turn connect to a fluffy animal. Without the ability to identify patterns, we can't assert that "cat" is a real word which means something but that "adjks" is gibberish. And since our left brain is our interpreter, it's also the side of our brain that's responsible for identifying patterns.

That might seem to be all well and good, but what happens when our brains see patterns even when they're not there? And what happens when that pattern-making skill is directed inward, toward that concept of our self? One result is that takes it a jumble of likes and dislikes, memories and perceptions, and creates the pattern that determines our construct of "I." Your brain tells you that certain patterns make you who you are, that you will like this thing because you liked something similar, and supplies thousands of other tiny details to form your understanding of who you are. At best, this forms a relatively harmless mental construct. But in the worst case scenario, your brain's penchant for creating patterns can result in needless suffering.

Let's say, for example, that you repeatedly observe your coworkers-- people you've always considered friends-- clustering together and whispering. You often catch them casting sideways glances at you as they talk and sometimes, they stop talking altogether when you approach. Pretty much anybody would observe those patterns and assume that your coworkers are talking about you behind your back and that they're definitely saying unkind things. This would understandably leave you feeling hurt and left out or confused as to why they suddenly dislike you. But imagine how

surprised you would be to find out that you misread the situation entirely and that, instead, they were planning your surprise birthday party!

The confusion and anguish you felt arose only because your brain attempted to make sense of the behaviors you saw and converted it into an identifiable pattern to explain it. While there's nothing wrong with seeking to make sense of the world-- certainly, all people are trying to do that!-- it's important to be aware of how your brain can mislead you.

# Tap Into Your Right Brain's Consciousness

So, if our left brain helps us to make sense of language and patterns, what does our right brain do? And what would our lives be like if our choices were lead by our right brains? These questions can best be answered by taking a look at the life of Dr. Jill Bolte Taylor. Taylor is a neuroanatomist who, in 1996, suffered a stroke after a blood vessel burst in her brain's left hemisphere. This effectively disabled the entire left side of her brain and meant that, for awhile, she was unable to process language or access the internal monologue that categorized her sense of self. While that might sound catastrophic, it actually had a few surprising benefits.

Because Taylor was a very intelligent person with a highly active inner monologue, the constant chatter produced by her left brain often generated significant anxiety about her past, present, and future or resulted in overthinking. However, with her left brain disabled, she found her inner voice was silenced, removing all the anxiety she'd once felt. In its place was a sense of peace and connection to others, a type of one-ness with the universe and confidence about her place in it. Surprisingly, this stroke enabled Taylor to experience an exaggerated dose of the type of peace and concentration others strive to attain through meditation.

And although this experience drastically improved her life, Taylor knew she needed her left brain as well in order to be successful in her personal and professional life. So, as she sought a way to regain some use of her left and brain and bridge the gap, she found that there must be a type of "middle way," a means of existence that avoided relying too heavily on either the left brain or the right brain. And in so doing, she came to the conclusion that if she could find this middle ground, surely everyone else could too! She also determined that the world would be a better and happier place if more people cultivated the growth of their right brains.

So, how did she do it and how can we do the same? Let's answer those questions together in the next chapter.

# The Right Brain is Our Spatial Center

It's tough to talk about right-brain consciousness because it exists on a plane that's completely separate from language. In fact, the moment we attempt to categorize this experience in words, we've engaged our left brains and disabled the right. So, how can we attempt to unlock and understand our right brains? Well, the best and simplest way to articulate its function is to say that if the left brain is our language center, the right brain is our spatial center. Put simply, it controls our understanding of physical space and motor control; it's what guides us when we reach out our hand to take hold of an object. When we curl our fingers around the handle of a coffee cup, our spatial awareness is responsible for our accurate hold on that object.

But because we don't tend to think through that experience or say to ourselves, "Okay, I need to stretch out my hand at exactly the right space and distance to grab that coffee mug," the mechanics of this function exist outside our language sphere and thus become categorized as an "unconscious mental experience." In this case, however, "unconscious" doesn't mean the same thing as it does when we've passed out; it just means that it's an experience we don't actively think about in words. But unconscious tasks still require high amounts of complex brain activity, which means that our right brain is working overtime behind the scenes to execute tasks we don't even think about. That's why motion-based tasks like yoga and meditation are awesome for tapping into your right brain's consciousness.

When you practice yoga, you're not really doing a lot of thinking that involves language. Although you're thinking a lot about how to move into the correct positions and focus on your breathing, you're fully present in the moment and in your body, free from the illusion of language and self. Concentrating on the practice of unconscious activities will help you to free up your right brain and access the clarity and peace that can only be achieved by temporarily disabling your inner monologue.

# Your Right Brain Controls Your Intuition

How many times have you "just known" something, even when you lacked tangible evidence to support that feeling? Those moments when you get a strong feeling about something, be it the sensation that someone is bad news or that someone you love might be hurt, are driven by your intuition. Your intuition is controlled by your right brain's sense of "nonverbal knowing" or "nonconscious thought." And although neuroscience hasn't yet found a way to explain how intuition works, that doesn't mean it's not real. Rather, it just means that it doesn't make sense to our language-centric left brains. What makes intuition an especially interesting facet of your consciousness is that, although neuroscience can't explain it, studies have not only proved that it exists, but that it's also better at making certain types of decisions than your left brain is!

One such study asked participants to play a card game. They were provided with $2,000 and two decks of cards. One deck offered both large financial gains and losses while the other deck offered small wins and losses. The players were told that the object of the game was to win as much money as they could. Interestingly, it took players between 50 and 80 draws for their left brains to understand that their chances of winning were much greater if they drew primarily from the second deck. However, the right brain figured it out much faster. Scientists were able to determine this by observing that after only ten draws from the first deck, the participants' palms started sweating in response to the fluctuation of great gain and equally great loss. This indicated that participants were aware of the risk on some nonconscious level that outmatched their thinking left brain.

What made this experiment even more fascinating was the fact that, although most participants never consciously acknowledged that the game was rigged, their hands appeared to sweat or tremble when drawing from the risky first deck, further indicating that they were experiencing trepidation on a nonconscious level. This study proves what we've been saying about the split brains all along; our right brains process information

on a faster, nonverbal plane. But when it tries to relay this information to our left brain, the left brain can't put it into language and thus struggles to accept the information. So, if we could only get our left brain to listen to our intuition, we might all be a little safer and a little more successful!

# Compassion is a Workout For Your Right Brain

By now, you know that physical exercises like yoga and meditation can stimulate your right brain, but what about emotional exercises? Niebauer posits that practicing compassion can actually strengthen our right brain and that Buddhists have understood this all along. That's because Zen Buddhism acknowledges something called "prajnaparamita," a form of knowledge that exists outside the boundaries of language and literally translates to "the perfection of wisdom." It therefore follows that this type of wisdom is something only your right brain can understand. So, how do we cultivate that perfection of wisdom? Well, for starters, we can practice compassion.

Compassion is also a central tenet of Buddhist philosophy and it's defined as "the ability to see another person as potentially ourselves." It's even connected to the right brain because, in fact, there's a portion of our brain called the "right temporoparietal junction" (or RTPJ) whose literal job is to help us put ourselves in others' shoes. So, when you practice compassion, you're actually exercising your right brain and becoming more zen at the same time! The same is true of practicing gratitude, which is also a core pillar of Buddhist ideology. That's why Niebauer suggests flexing your gratitude muscles, even when you feel like complaining about the traffic on your way to work or a seemingly needless inconvenience.

When we train ourselves to see the world through a lens of gratitude, we reduce our stress and suffering and give ourselves the gift of a positive worldview. We're also engaging the peace, focus, and intuition of our right brains and disconnecting from the left. It's also important to remember that our interpretation of events as "bad" or "good" is merely a construct of our left brain.

# Final Summary

The left side of our brain is responsible for language processing and interpretation. We need it because it helps us make sense of the world. However, it can also conjure up patterns that don't exist-- like the concept of a stable, continuous self-- and these miscommunications can generate real mental pain and suffering in our everyday lives. When we accept the idea that our "self" is a construct, we can free ourselves to tap into our right brain's energy through practicing meditation, compassion, and gratitude.