**Starting out with a guided meditation**:

Hold up your right thumb in front of your face.

Spend a few moments studying the way it looks.

Try and commit this image to memory as well as possible.

Now, close your eyes and place the image of your thumb in your mind. With your eyes still closed and the image still present, ask yourself, what are the dimensions of this image, height, width and depth?

How much does this image weigh?

Where *exactly* in my head does this image reside?

Now ask yourself; are there two right thumbs of mine existing in this room? Or only one *real* right thumb and one mental *representation* of that thumb?

The thumb on your hand can act upon other things in the world. Its reality can be tested and verified by others.

If you then answer there is only one real thumb then what does it mean for the thumb in your mind to *not* be *real* and yet it *occurs* as a thumb representation in your mind?

The thumb representation in your mind occurs, phenomenologically speaking, but is it *real*?

While keeping your eyes closed.

Now, press your right thumb against your right index finger. You can feel this pressure in your fingers due to the parts of your brain that register stimuli from the nerves in your thumb and index finger. This is due to part of your brains somatosensory nervous system. The *sensation* of pressure ***seems*** to be located in your thumb and index finger. So in addition to your real thumb and the visual representation of a thumb in your mind you also have a representation of a thumb in the somatosensory areas of your brain.

**Now open your eyes** but continue to press your thumb and index finger together while looking at those fingers for a moment.

**Now again close your eyes** while continuing to press your thumb and index finger together and picture those fingers in your mind. In essence you now have THREE right thumbs occurring in this room. One real thumb. One visual representation of a thumb and index finger and one somatosensory experience of a thumb and index finger.

By now you might be realizing the actual topic of this meditation not is only about fingers, but how we come to *know of* the *self*, it-self.

**Open your eyes**

A nun named Chiyono was having trouble attaining the fruits of meditation for a long time. Until one evening she was carrying water in an old bamboo pail. The bamboo broke and the water drained out of the pail. In that moment Chiyono was set free. In commemoration she wrote the following poem.

In this way and that I tried to save the old pail.

Since the bamboo strip was weaking and about to break

Until at last the bottom fell out.

No more water in the pail!

*No more moon in the water!*

**Preliminary understandings:**

**Cognition:** is an all-encompassing process that is much larger than just thinking and conscious perceiving. According to a recent study, 99.44% of all mental processing occurs at the unconscious level. Awareness or the ability of the body to register stimulus and respond is mostly unconscious and determined by our ***embodied***and ***embedded*** cognitive structure.

What do we mean by **Embodied** and **embedded**?

**Embodied Cognition:** The entire body influences cognition. “The Five Aggregates” Body, Feelings, Perceptions, Mental formations, consciousness*.* There are actually neurons throughout our bodies, in our muscles and in our stomachs. Our nerves, neurons and endocrine system are in constant back and forth communication with our minds. *“We do not see the world as it is, we see the world as we are”* Anais Nin.

**Embedded cognition:** The entire universe and the world we inhabit both create and influence our cognition. Think of Buddhist “Dependent Origination”.

**Embodied Self**: So, where is the self? You have a body to be sure. But without a nervous system you could never *feel* its presence in your conscious and subconscious mind. Without the minds ability to represent your thumbs image, the worlds image and your body in this mind created world you would not even **“*know*”** that you were a body in a world.

*What you “know” of a “you” in a world is “all representation”* in your conscious experience*.* The representation of a self is a multi-sensory and transitory occurrence based on sense contact between a world, a body and a cognitive structure.

All we “*consciously* *know*” of our body and world is not *reality itself.* It is based on a real bodies senses and nervous systems interaction with a real world to be sure (well, almost sure). The very act of “Knowing” anything is essentially an act of *limited* representation. But the *knowing* of a “self” is not the body in its entirety nor the total influencing environment which the body inhabits.

**The Embedded Self**. Our bodies exist on a planet in a particular universe within a certain time period. This has resulted in our carbon based life forms that have very particular biological needs created in response to our specific environment.

What we are or how we respond to the world we inhabit is determined by the physical forces present within this larger context. We have only a small range of possible responses to our context, most of which is determined subconsciously or without conscious awareness. ***I am not the author of “me”, the universe is.***

***“The lust-ridden shrouded in darkness, do not see this dhamma, which goes against the stream”***Buddha

So why do we normally experience and ***believe*** this “dream of a self”? Why do we **not** normally experience the Buddhist truth of “no-self” without specific training or fortunate happenstance?

Because immediate survival is evolutionarily more important than long term happiness. We need only a narrow range of the representational cognitive functions in order to navigate a world of many dangers.

We need to be able to represent a world, and a self in it, to *know* where *we* are and what is happening around *us*. We need a map of us in a world to plan for the future and learn from our experiential past.

Through our inherited cognitive structures our minds will *experience a conscious self* internally verbally deliberating our circumstances and feeling the positive or negative valence of emotions that percolate from our bodies.

The inherited cognitive structures that create a conscious experience of a self in a world is collectively called the “Default Mode Network”. Our personal cognition is primarily about us *as individuals*. As such the **integrity of this self-representation experience is paramount to its mission of the integrity of the body**.

How our self-representation *and feelings* are doing is the only information gauge of how an otherwise non-conscious body is doing. Because of this**, the self-representation does not *want* to be experienced as *insubstantial* and thus, vulnerable to change, lack of control and death.**

Dissolution of this ego dream is seen by the ego as death itself! Ego death is often described as the only death you will ever *know* and be *aware* of.

Once we ***experience*** the unreality of the self-representation our still functioning cognitive awareness opens to **what is both before and beyond** the construction of the representative-self.Simply “***awareness itself***”.

**Recognition of Selflessness and actual death.**

*There becomes an awareness that is wise to causes of attachments. Wise to constructed ego demands, desires, aversions and fears of the inevitable.*

*An awareness that knows of the eventual death of experience* (Nirodha Samapatti) *and as such the death of all fears and attachments.*

*There in establishes a wisdom that knows fear is temporary and only somewhat useful while alive.*

*Once your individual wisdom firmly knows it will one day cease, your experience and perspectives change for the better and becomes;*

*An awareness that is fully cognizant that experience is still occurring.*

*An awareness that is fully present for the miracle of* ***any*** *experience, Good, bad, fear, all of it.*

*An awareness that is less prone to waste precious time on temporary endeavors based on fears or support of the ego delusion.*

*You become more focused on what matters beyond “****you****”.*

*Love and kindness to others becomes your primary motivation and energy source.*

*A desire to help others fully live while they are still alive.*

*To help them understand that only love of life,* ***any life****, is all that continues beyond us as individuals.*

*An awareness that is comforted by the knowledge that life in general will continue beyond your own.*

*A wisdom that says that the* ***way*** *you live your life, though temporary, matters a great deal both to the world in general as well as to us as individuals facing the end.*

***It really is an immeasurably great solace to know that you faced your own worst fear and in response, decided to live your life with the abandon of a truly selfless love.***

From the movie *American Beauty* (1999) Written by Alan Ball. Directed by Sam Mendes.

Lester Burnhams’ character (Kevin Spacey) lets us know through opening narration that he will be dead in a few days. During the closing narration he says:

“I guess I could be pretty pissed off about what happened to me, but it’s hard to stay mad when there’s so much beauty in the world. Sometimes I feel like I’m seeing it all at once, and it’s too much; my heart fills up like a balloon that’s about to burst. And then I remember to relax, and ***stop trying to hold onto it***. And then it flows through me like rain, and I can’t feel anything but gratitude—for every single moment of my stupid, little life. You have no idea what I’m talking about, I’m sure; but don’t worry…. you will someday.”

Discussion notes on after death:

Epicurus "When I am, death is not, and when death is, I am not,"

Anesthesia, Syncope/ getting knocked out and Nirodha Samapatti

Willam James & Nitrous oxide.

Tibetan book of the dead "Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State".