

Buddhist Shakespeare

An Address to the White Heron Sangha

February 5, 2023

[Zoom recording](#)

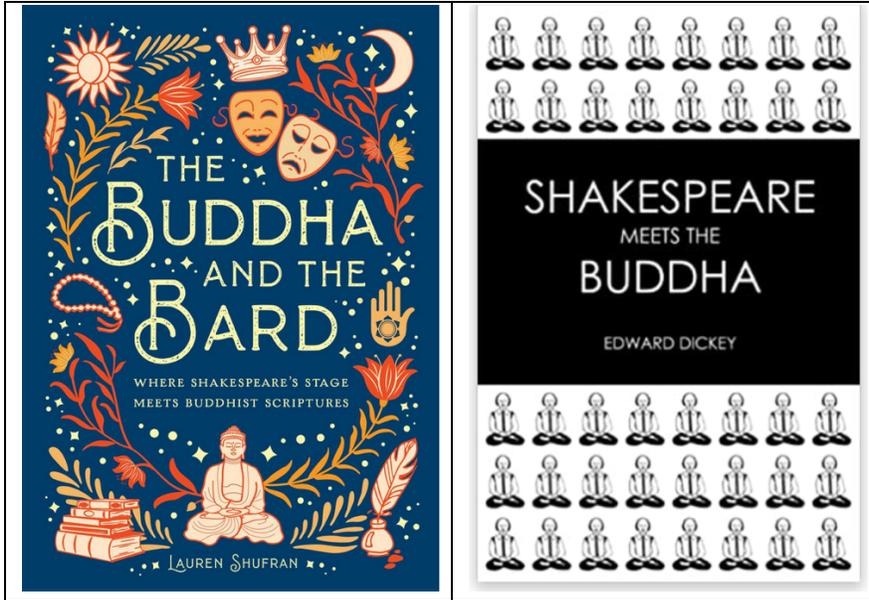
Good evening fellow White Heron Sangha members and visitors. Thank you for once again inviting me to give a Sunday night Dharma Talk.

In some previous ones I've explored ways that American literary writers I admire, specifically, Henry David Thoreau, Jack Kerouac and Leonard Cohen, were influenced by Buddhist texts and incorporated them into their own unorthodox experiences and writings.¹

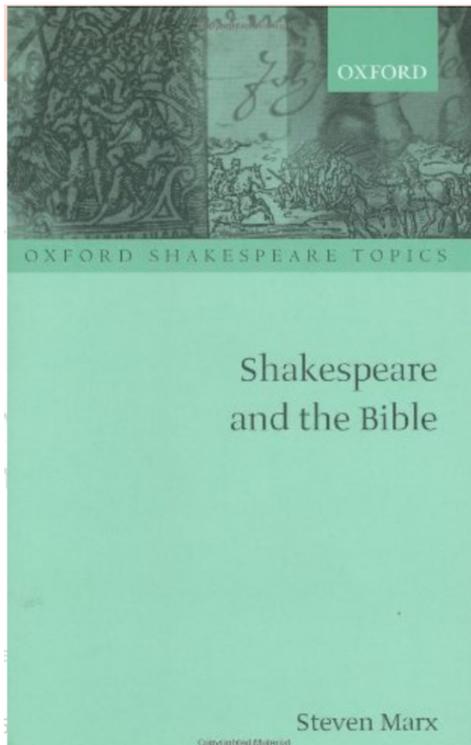
Tonight, I want to examine ways that the works of William Shakespeare connect with my understanding of Buddhist principles. There's no evidence that this sixteenth and seventeenth century British writer had any exposure to Buddhist teachings. Nevertheless, I find in his works many ideas in common with what's called "the Dharma," identifiable with what Joseph Campbell, the speaker of the last two Dharma talks, called The Perennial Philosophy.

A few weeks ago, fellow sangha member, Rosh Wright, presented a moving account to the White Heron Sangha of ways her work as an actor is informed by her Buddhist practice. Her personal reflections on the connections between theatre and practical Buddhist morality take a different approach from mine, but many of our topics converge.

In the immense body of Shakespeare literary criticism since 1948, I've found only two items, both quite recent, that treat this subject: *The Buddha and the Bard* by Lauren Shufan (May 2022) and *Shakespeare Meets the Buddha* by Edward Dickey (October 2021).



My own interest in the subject arises from an academic career that included teaching, directing and writing about Shakespeare—including a book which argued that Shakespeare read the Bible as literature and construed its varied depictions of God as personifications of the theatrical roles of author, director and actor.



In this talk I will align six Buddhist doctrines with recurrent Shakespearean themes

	Buddhist	Shakespeare
1	Emptiness and Form, <i>Prajnaparamita</i>	The World as Stage
2	The First Noble Truth, <i>Dukkha</i>	Tragic Suffering
3	Dependent Co-arising, <i>Pratityasamutpada</i>	Motivation and Causality
4	Impermanence, <i>Anicca</i>	Time
5	Delusion, <i>Avidya</i>	Error
6	No-self, <i>Anatta</i>	The Person as Actor

Separating, labelling and numbering these ideas is somewhat misleading, since they often overlap or blend. However, this kind of schematic analysis is typical both in Buddhist texts and in literary criticism, because it opens new ways of understanding.

1. Emptiness and Form, *Prajnaparamita* The World as Stage

A core Buddhist doctrine, the *Prajnaparamita*, or perfection of wisdom, is articulated in the Heart Sutra. That text is recited daily in East Asian Buddhist temples. At White Heron Sangha it is chanted by participants in the monthly Refuge Ceremony.

Form here is only emptiness, emptiness only form.
 Form is no other than emptiness, emptiness no other than form.
 Feeling, thought and choice, consciousness itself, are the same as this.
 Dharmas here are empty, all are the primal void.²

The Prajna's assertions that emptiness is form and form is emptiness can seem opaque. They have elicited differing explication for millennia. One popular interpretation is known as the "two truths doctrine": there is a "conventional" or "provisional" truth that applies to the world of phenomena, that is, the world of *samsara* or *sunyata*. And there is an ultimate (*paramārtha*) truth, "whose definition lies beyond mental understanding" and is comprehensible only by those who have reached the state of full awakening or enlightenment.³

Short of being able to reside in that state myself, I've found in the works of Shakespeare a way that helps me make sense of the idea of two truths and of the assertions that emptiness is form and form is emptiness. And I've found in these Buddhist utterances a way that helps me make sense of an overarching theme in Shakespeare's works—that of illusion and reality.

The audience of a Shakespeare play—along with audiences of any play or movie if it's successful—are held rapt by the performance they witness, suspending disbelief and responding to its events and characters as if they are just as real as what they encounter in daily life—sometimes even more real. They can be stirred to laughter and tears during the show and think, talk and write about it afterward. In that sense they experience emptiness as form. If they choose to, theatre audiences can keep in mind that what they see on stage is illusory, aware that it only exists while they sit in seats they've paid for and will end as soon as they leave. In that sense they experience form as emptiness. Shakespeare's scripts encourage this dual awareness of two truths with what are called *metatheatrical* references.

The second half of the Prajna states

emptiness no other than form.

Feeling, thought and choice, consciousness itself, are the same as this.

The performance circumstances of Shakespeare's plays advance the notion that the solid material, mental and spiritual world we inhabit is generated out of nothing by imagination. The London theatre where they were performed was named "The Globe," implying that it contained the whole world. That idea was reinforced by the latin motto inscribed over its doorway: '*Totus mundus agit histrionem*'—all the world's a stage--a motto recited in English by a character in the comedy *As You Like It*, which I'll return to later.

The only historical image of the inside of such a building--the Dewitt sketch of the Swan theatre--shows actors performing to a three-story, audience-in-the round on a stage with no sets and minimal prop



In this theatre, forms are created out of the emptiness of words and gestures. Shakespeare's scripts cue the audience to take part in that creation.

For example in the prologue to *Henry V*, an epic history play full of grand battle scenes, the actor asks the audience for help:

...can this cockpit hold
The vasty fields of France? or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?...let us, ciphers to this great account,
On your imaginary forces work.

...

Piece out our imperfections with your thoughts.
...Think, when we talk of horses, that you see them
Printing their proud hoofs i' th' receiving earth,
For 'tis your thoughts that now must deck our
kings...

“Wooden O” here refers to the circular shape of the theatre building, but also to the zero of the empty forms crammed within it.

Shakespeare’s scripts often include a play-within-the-play and an onstage audience. In these cases, the theatre audience becomes entangled with the onstage audience by responding to the embedded play’s story. But it has access to a higher level of knowledge by observing the onstage spectators taken in by an illusory world.

In *A Midsummernight’s Dream*, this structure is complicated by the failure of the fictional actors to maintain the illusion and by the onstage audience’s critical conversation. The Duke Theseus and his new wife, Hippolyta, are introduced by the stage manager to the *Tragedy of Pyramis and Thisbe*, an amateur production by a group of

Hard-handed men that work in Athens here,
Which never labored in their minds till now.

The botched up performance by the “hempen homespuns” turns unintentionally from a tragedy to a comedy for both the stage audience and the theatre audience.

And it is nothing, nothing in the world,” warns the master of the revels. Hippolyta repeats his concern, “He says they can do nothing in this kind” and Theseus replies “The kinder we, to give them thanks for nothing.

Their repetition of “nothing” emphasizes that the *forms* to appear on stage are *empty*. With a sly reference to Shakespeare’s own script and productions—he was actor, director and shareholder as well as author--the Duke states

The best in this kind are but shadows, and the worst are no worse, if
imagination amend them.

The generation of form out of emptiness is also featured earlier in this scene. Theseus and Hippolyta are reflecting on what they have been told about events the theatre audience has actually witnessed: a wild night in the woods including the ingestion of pschoactive drugs, orgiastic partner switching, violent jealousy and dreamed encounters with lustful Fairies.

The Duke observes that these reported events are merely the product of imagination, just like hallucinations, romantic obsessions and literary fictions. His scepticism is based on unshakeable confidence in the difference between his idea of true reality, based on “cool reason,” and illusion

I never may believe
These antique fables nor these fairy toys.
Lovers and madmen have such seething brains,
Such shaping fantasies, that apprehend
More than cool reason ever comprehends.
The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
Are of imagination all compact.
One sees more devils than vast hell can hold:
That is the madman. The lover, all as frantic,
Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt.
The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
Doth glance from heaven to Earth, from Earth to
heaven,
And as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.

But Hippolyta counters that the confirmation of the account by all four of the young lovers involved shouldn't be so easily dismissed.

But all the story of the night told over,
And all their minds transfigured so together,
More witnesseth than fancy's images
And grows to something of great constancy;
But, howsoever, strange and admirable.

The theatre audience's witnessing of what happened in the woods confirms her perspective and demonstrates the limitations of Theseus' rationalism.

But what that audience has witnessed is itself *emptiness*, the "airy nothing" of the whole play's amalgam of lunacy, love and fiction.

The first statement of the Prajnaparamita, that "Form is only emptiness" is a more familiar claim than that "emptiness is form." It asserts that the everyday world in all its apparent solidity and complexity is only an illusion.

Shakespeare presents this proposition explicitly in *The Tempest* at the end of another play-within-a-play.

These are images of a year-2000 performance of that work in London's Old Globe, a faithful replica of the original building.



Prospero, the magician-protagonist here performed by Vanessa Redgrave, stages a theatrical masque to celebrate the wedding of his daughter, Miranda, the princess of Milan, to Ferdinand, the prince of Naples.

Both the stage audience and the theatre audience are captivated by his sumptuous operatic production, when Prospero suddenly drops the curtain and dissolves the illusion:

Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:

With a simile comparing the emptiness of the theatrical performance to the splendors of human creation and the whole of the natural world—the great globe itself and its theatrical representation—he declares that all of us are insubstantial forms, emptiness.

And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.

And yet this expression of a perspective beyond provisional truth, of the awakened, enlightened truth, is just a flicker. In the next moment, Prospero returns to the passing present and apologizes to the young couple for what he now regards as momentary insanity:

I am vex'd;
Bear with my weakness; my, brain is troubled:
Be not disturb'd with my infirmity:
... a turn or two I'll walk,
To still my beating mind.

A moment of insight into absolute truth is overtaken by the second truth of samsara.

Another way that theatre teaches that form is emptiness is by presenting contradictory representations of life as either happy or sad. Comedy celebrates the joys of human existence, especially sex and humor, and ends happily, usually with marriage. Tragedy portrays human existence as a spectacle of suffering, packed with violence and cruelty, ending with death.

Shakespeare's plays usually follow these conventions, which, since the origins of drama in ritual performances in the ancient Greek temple of Dionysius, are symbolized by comic and tragic masks. ⁴



A similar image appears in Buddhist iconography. ⁵



Comedy evokes laughter by revealing that what is taken seriously by characters turns out to be silly or deluded and eventually turns out well. Tragedy evokes pity and fear by revealing the inescapability of evil and pain.

2. The First Noble Truth, *Dukkha* Tragic Suffering

In tragedy, the characters' agony is caused by bad choices, the cruelty of others and misfortune or fate. That agony earns them fundamental realizations about life in general.

In Shakespeare's *King Lear*, a double plot reiterates those realizations. The King and the Duke of Gloucester, two octogenarians afflicted with the physical, mental and emotional weakness of old age, are tricked by treacherous children into casting aside their loyal, loving daughter and son. Both former rulers are stripped of their wealth and supporters. Lear is driven out of his mind and Gloucester's eyes are ripped out on stage. Each is ejected from his castle to wander in the wilderness among homeless beggars. Unprotected in the midst of a terrible storm they happen to cross paths.

During the deranged dialogue between the raving King and the blinded Duke, Lear declares,

I will preach to thee, Mark:
Thou must be patient.
We came crying hither;
Thou know'st the first time that we smell the air
We wawl and cry. ...

This tragic insight is later echoed in powerful words uttered by Gloucester's good son, Edgar.

...Men must endure
Their going hence even as their coming hither.
Ripeness is all.

The language of these realizations echoes the language of the First Discourse or *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* setting forth what Buddhists call the First Noble Truth:

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, aging is suffering, illness is suffering, death is suffering; union with what is displeasing is suffering; separation from what is pleasing is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering. ⁶

The second Noble truth in the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* reads

Now this, bhikkhus, is the noble truth of the **origin** of suffering: it is this craving which leads to re-becoming, accompanied by delight and lust, ... craving for becoming, craving for disbecoming.⁷

After realizing that suffering is intrinsic to life, Shakespeare's tragic characters awaken to the **causes** of suffering as the craving that stems from ignorance of the emptiness of samsara. Recapitulating Prospero's speech about life as theatrical illusion in *The Tempest*, Lear proclaims:

When we are born, we cry that we are come
To this great stage of fools.—

At the end of *Macbeth*, facing his own death, the murderous tyrant declares

Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

3. Dependent Co-arising, *Pratityasamutpada* Motivation and Causality

While Shakespeare often reminds audience members of ultimate truth with metatheatrical imagery like this, his plays enthrall them with vivid depictions of human behavior in the phenomenal world.

During a lecture to a group of actors, Hamlet states that

the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure.

Shakespeare's scripts give actors the ability to hold the mirror up to nature by providing countless **causes** to account for the words and acts of their characters. Drawing upon insights confirmed by physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, and history, the presence of those causal connections makes the stories instructive as well as plausible.

Juliet's love for Romeo, for example, is driven by her hormones, by her infatuation with Romeo's poetic wit, by her rebellion against her father's abusiveness and her mother's aloofness and her nurse's licentiousness. The tragic outcome also results also from the feud of rival families, the summer heat, the bad luck of a lost message. Shylock's murderous resentment of Antonio in *The Merchant of Venice* is driven by his subjection to humiliation and religious persecution. Cordelia's brutal frankness toward her father in King Lear is driven by her sisters' hypocritical flattery.

Such overdetermination of events illustrates the Buddhist doctrine of *pratityasamutpada*, which states that everything is connected to and conditioned by other things.

Thich Nhat Hahn refers to this network of causal connection as Interbeing.

All of existence is a vast nexus of causes and conditions, constantly changing, and everything is interconnected to everything else. All phenomena inter-exist.⁸

Also called Interdependent Origination, Co-Arising, Conditioned Genesis or Causal Nexus, this doctrine is set forth in the Pali text:

The Buddha explained,
When this is, that is.
This arising, that arises.
When this is not, that is not.
This ceasing, that ceases.⁹

4. Impermanence, *Anicca* Time

Another factor governing the provisional reality of Samsara is *anicca*, impermanence. Impermanence acknowledges that physical and mental things are always in motion, arising, transforming and dying. No thing or person or feeling has durable reality.

All conditions are impermanent (anicca)
Body (rupa) is impermanent,
feeling (vedana) is impermanent,
perception (sanna) is impermanent,
mental conditions (sankhara) are impermanent,
consciousness (vinnana) is impermanent.¹⁰

Shakespeare refers to impermanence as **Time**. Time is the principal theme of his 154 sonnets, where it is always associated with suffering. Sonnet 60, for example, grieves for the impermanence of the Body in youth (rupa)

Like as the waves make towards the pebb'l'd shore,
So do our minutes hasten to their end;
Each changing place with that which goes before,
In sequent toil all forwards do contend.
Nativity, once in the main of light,
Crawls to maturity, wherewith being crown'd,
Crooked eclipses 'gainst his glory fight,
And Time that gave doth now his gift confound.
Time doth transfix the flourish set on youth
And delves the parallels in beauty's brow,
Feeds on the rarities of nature's truth,
And nothing stands but for his scythe to mow:

Sonnet 129 explores the impermanence of feeling (vedana), and mental conditions (sankhara) in a dramatization of the moment-to-moment alterations of sexual passion from violent lust “till action” to orgasmic seizure “in action” to post coital self-loathing once “had.”

Th' expense of spirit in a waste of shame
Is lust in action; and till action, lust
Is perjured, murd'rous, bloody, full of blame,
Savage, extreme, rude, cruel, not to trust,
Enjoyed no sooner but despisèd straight,
Past reason hunted; and, no sooner had
Past reason hated as a swallowed bait
On purpose laid to make the taker mad;
Mad in pursuit and in possession so,
Had, having, and in quest to have, extreme;
A bliss in proof and proved, a very woe;
Before, a joy proposed; behind, a dream.

All this the world well knows; yet none knows well
To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

Not only do the speaker's emotions change between before, during and after, but as his outburst proceeds, his attitude toward all three stages of desire shifts from disgust to nostalgia to ironic detachment.

From such fine-grained investigations of impermanence, *The Winter's Tale*, zooms out to a single interval of change lasting sixteen years. At the midpoint of the play a character named Time comes on stage to leapfrog the story forward:

I, that please some, try all—both joy and terror
Of good and bad, that makes and unfolds error—

Now take upon me, in the name of Time,
To use my wings. Impute it not a crime
To me or my swift passage that I slide
O'er sixteen years, and leave the growth untried
Of that wide gap, since it is in my power
To o'erthrow law and in one self-born hour
To plant and o'erwhelm custom. Let me pass
The same I am ere ancient'st order was
Or what is now received. I witness to
The times that brought them in.

So shall I do
To th' freshest things now reigning, and make stale
The glistening of this present, as my tale
Now seems to it.

Rather than dramatizing impermanence, this startling device personifies it. Time, the speaker, adopts a position outside of time.

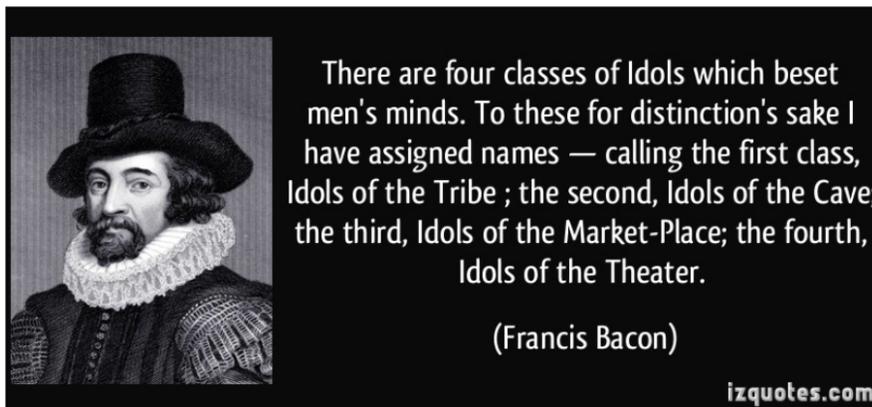
Through joy and terror, Time brings everything that leads from action to consequence to trial. Impermanence is responsible for **making** mistakes, misperception, and confusion, but also for **unfolding** or revealing and correcting error as it passes. The first half of the play depicts its protagonist the King *making* tragic errors. The second half will *unfold* or bring to light those errors and allow for a happy ending.

Time itself has the power to override what we might think are the limitations of time. Subjectively, in imagination, it can make the remote future present. In memory, it can make the remote past return. Objectively, Time can demolish the most solid of structures. We expect law—whether natural or civic—to offer stability with unchanging rules. But law too is subject to *anicca*, either by revolution or evolution. Even the longer-term stability of customs is destroyed by time, which also creates new customs to replace them.

Time concludes his interlude with the boast that he makes bright new things go stale. Then in a self-mocking break of frame, he admits to the audience, eager by now for more action and change, that it's time to end his long speech and get on with the story. In that closing aside, Time suggests that we crave impermanence as much as we fear it.

5. Illusion, *Avidya* Error

What Shakespeare's Time calls Error corresponds to another core Buddhist teaching, *avidyā* translated as Delusion or ignorance, the opposite of knowledge. *Avidya* is a product of the belief that what we perceive and think is a true representation of reality rather than a product of our own cognitive limitations, biases and projections.¹¹



Error is an urgent concern among philosophers during Shakespeare's time, when the expansion of scientific inquiry begins to reveal the erroneousness of much that was traditionally thought to be known: that the sun circles the earth, that the body is composed of four humors, that heavier things fall faster than light ones. Francis Bacon, Shakespeare's contemporary, wrote a treatise classifying those errors as four kinds of Idols of the Mind



Shakespeare's first play, *The Comedy of Errors*, depicts the hilarious confusion created by the indistinguishable appearances of two sets of twins. On a deeper level it shows how confusion is driven by fear, desire and prejudice, linking delusion to the other negative factors of hatred and greed or aversion and attachment. The characters' speech, heavily loaded with puns and other wordplay, also demonstrates how the imprecision of language, through which we derive much of our understanding, continually misleads. When the true identities of the twins are revealed and the compounded errors are unfolded in the last act, the play's network of biblical allusions identifies the running out of a clock with the end of time at the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation, when all things are seen as they truly are.



Twelfth Night, another comedy employs the mechanical device of twinning to explore other webs of error. A woman masquerading as a man tricks another woman into falling in love with her and also induces the man she loves into secretly falling in love with her despite his assumption that she's a man. In this play, error is manifested in the illusory nature of sexual desire and in the very perception of gender.

In a subplot, Malvolio, a pompous servant, is so deluded by ambition and vanity that he falls for the practical joke of a forged letter suggesting that the Countess, his employer, has fallen in love with him. As a result, he becomes the butt of teasing and humiliation.

At the end of the play, when the truth is disclosed by the removal of error-producing disguises, the text hints that these comic unmaskings unveil even deeper truths:

One face, one voice, one habit, and two persons,
A natural perspective, that is and is not!
...Most wonderful!
Do I stand there?
Nor can there be that deity in my nature,
Of here and every where.

A spirit I am indeed;
But am in that dimension grossly clad
Which from the womb I did participate.

These comic revelations go beyond the plot device of coincidental discovery and hint at the Buddhist idea of “awakening.”

Making and unfolding of Error plays a crucial role in Shakespearean Tragedy as well as in Comedy.

Undermined by his own insecurity as the black husband of a white noblewoman and victimized by the racial hatred of his lieutenant Iago, Othello is erroneously convinced that his saintly wife Desdemona has been unfaithful,

Succumbing to a declining old man’s need for flattery, King Lear makes the error of empowering his two rapacious daughters and banishing the honest and loyal one.

6. No self *Anatta* The person as actor

Actors endeavor to become other selves, or at least to appear that way. For performer and audience, that transformation illustrates the Buddhist idea that self or coherent personhood is an illusion.

Shakespeare’s plays have large casts of characters, often necessitating actors to switch costumes offstage and reappear as someone else. In some productions the costume changes take place onstage, forcing the audience to collaborate and “deck them out” with the forces of their thoughts, following the prescription of the prologue to Henry V.

For Buddhists, one major error that clouds people's understanding is the idea of a coherent self, or Anatta. According to Gil Fronsedale,

The most common metaphysical "Self" against which the Buddha was arguing is implicitly defined in his Anatta Lakkhana Sutta, The Discourse on Anatta. For something to be atta, according to this view, it needed three components. It had to have complete control over the body, feelings, thoughts, impulses, intentions, consciousness, or perceptions. It had to be permanent. And it had to be blissful. In this discourse, the Buddha makes it clear that nothing in our psycho-physical experience has these three qualities and is therefore fit to be regarded as an atta or self. ¹²

That meaning is explicitly taught in a speech from the comedy *As You Like It*. which ties all the doctrines referenced so far into the overarching metaphor of theatre.

All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms;
And then the whining school-boy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress' eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honour, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon's mouth.
And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lin'd,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slipper'd pantaloon,
 With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
 His youthful hose, well sav'd, a world too wide
 For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
 Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
 And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
 That ends this strange eventful history,
 Is second childishness and mere oblivion;
 Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Self at any time is mere performance, *annata*, dependently co-arising from costume, gesture, and voice--*pratyasamutpada*. Self is impermanent, *anicca*, always undergoing physical, mental, and social transformations. Self is driven by erroneous illusions of love, heroics, reputation, wisdom—*avidya*. Self is emptiness, ultimately ripening into decay and oblivion, “sans everything”—*prajna*.

Even this speech has no real self. It's uttered by the character Jacques, a self-obsessed melancholic posing as a wise man. The stages of human development so cleverly evoked derive from a rhetorical topic for set pieces used to display the speaker's eloquence. Here is a late medieval German visualization:¹³



And here a present day Buddhist version ¹⁴



The mystery of self shrouds the person we refer to as the author. The enormous collection of stories, characters, political and moral eloquence found in his writings provides no evidence of that person's opinions or traits, of any individual self. Other than records of baptism, marriage and death, tax records, lawsuits and real estate transactions, no letters, journals, or manuscripts by William Shakespeare have survived.

Hence, the identity of the author has been disputed for over a hundred years by reputable and dubious authorities--scholars, actors, directors, even the present King of England. Was the lower-middle-class man from the small town of Stratford-upon-Avon a disguised stand-in for Edward De Vere, Earl of Oxford, or for Christopher Marlowe, or Francis Bacon, or Queen Elizabeth, or any other of 80 candidates?

Four portraits have been proposed as plausible images of Shakespeare:



The one on the left appeared in the First Folio, the complete collection of his plays published seven years after his death recorded in 1616. The one to the right of that is an image of a bust placed in the Stratford Church that houses “his” remains. The two at the far right are thought by some scholars to have been painted from life. I cant find a convincing unity of appearance among them.

My last words on egolessness—*anatta*-- and Buddhist Shakespeare come from a book called *Zen In English Literature and Oriental Classics* by RH Blyth, published in Japan in 1942. This book had great influence on Gary Snyder, Alan Ginsberg and other members of the 1950’s Beat Generation. I came across it as a graduate student in English in 1966.

This is Shakespeare's Zen, his religion; his nature, his self, is subdued to what it works in, in men and women, in Nature, in all this mighty world of eye and ear.

...

Shakespeare is so fluid that he takes the shape of the human vessel he is poured into, and yet remains himself all the time;

...

When we have some understanding of Zen, ordinary phrases of Shakespeare become full of meaning, and profounder ones almost intolerably deep.¹⁵

¹ <http://www.stevenmarx.net/2013/06/excerpt/>, <http://www.stevenmarx.net/2013/10/beatnik-buddhism-in-jack-kerouacs-the-dharma-bums-2/>, <http://www.stevenmarx.net/2014/03/leonard-cohen-buddhist/>

² https://thebuddhistcentre.com/system/files/groups/files/heart_sutra.pdf

³ *Thakchoe, Sonam (Summer 2022). "The Theory of Two Truths in Tibet". In Zalta, Edward N. (ed.). Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. The Metaphysics Research Lab, Center for the Study of Language and Information, Stanford University. ISSN 1095-5054. OCLC 643092515. Archived from the original on 28 May 2022. Retrieved 21 January 2023.*

⁴ <https://images.metmuseum.org/CRDImages/gr/original/DP367987.jpg>

⁵ Phra Phrom the Four-Faced Buddha (四面佛, *Sìmiànfó*) or Four-Faced God.

⁶ <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi?reference=none&highlight=false>

⁷ <https://suttacentral.net/sn56.11/en/bodhi?reference=none&highlight=false>

⁸ <https://www.learnreligions.com/interbeing-3866931>

⁹ <https://www.learnreligions.com/interbeing-3866931>

¹⁰ http://www.faculty.umb.edu/michael_lafargue/104/204/budd/rdngs/palicanon-xrpts.htm

¹¹ <https://corneliusndubuisi.files.wordpress.com/2016/08/quote-there-are-four-classes-of-idols-which-beset-men-s-minds-to-these-for-distinction-s-sake-i-have-francis-bacon-208516.jpg>

¹² <https://www.insightmeditationcenter.org/books-articles/anatta-and-the-four-noble-truths/>

¹³ <https://voynichportal.com/2019/12/10/stages-of-life-revisited/>

¹⁴ <https://www.buddhisma2z.com/content.php?id=229>

¹⁵ https://archive.org/stream/dli.ernet.2464/2464-Zen%20In%20English%20Literature%20And%20Oriental%20Classics_djvu.txt