

Who am I?

In Zen Buddhism, the question "**Who am I?**" is perhaps the ultimate [koan](#), a riddle meant to break through the intellectual mind rather than satisfy it.

[Maybe, like posing the question: what did my face look like before my parents were born?]

When pondering this doubt, I've already taken a profound and accurate step, by recognizing that I'm the **vessel and the observer** rather than the passing weather of my thoughts and feelings.

Zen pushes the inquiry even deeper.

If one asks a Zen master: "*If I am the observer, who is observing the observer?*" the answer unfolds in a few stages:

[I doubt this line of logic thinking. It is somewhat misleading and derailing us from the main path of wholistic feeling oneself.]

1. You are Not a "Thing" (The Mirage of the Self)

Zen points out that even the concept of a "gatekeeper" or a solid "observer" implies a separate entity sitting inside your head, watching life happen from behind a window. Zen calls this an illusion, a mirage. If you look closely into the mind to find this "observer," you won't find a physical object, a core identity, or a permanent soul.

Because this observer has no fixed shape, color, or boundary.

Zen describes our true nature as **Emptiness** ([Sunyata](#)).

This isn't a bleak, depressing vacuum; it is a pregnant, alive emptiness, like the space inside a bowl, a vessel that allows it to hold something new.

When you consider yourself as a 'form', you contain also the vast background of stillness against which all forms, thoughts, and sensations arise and fall.

2. The Observer and the Observed are One

In deep Zen practice, the artificial wall between "you" (the observer) and "the world" (the observed) completely dissolves. [The gateless gate](#).

- When I look at a cloud passing, there isn't "me" *plus* "a cloud"; there is simply the seamless experience of *cloud-passing*.
- When I garden, chop wood, hear birds' song, feel the breeze, or watch water flow, I drop the ego entirely and become the action itself.

[Even the spontaneous tagging 'I hear a bird's song', already broke the intimate being of the moment. This is just another cloud passing through. The mind is simply doing what it always does: making up a story to explain the unexplainable.]

Who are you?

You are the current of life, water, and wind.

You are not a static referee standing at the gate of your mind;
you are the entire field of awareness in which the gate, the thoughts, the body,
and the universe exist simultaneously.

3. "Not Two" (*Advaya*)

If you look at a wave in the ocean, it has a distinct shape, a beginning, and an end. It might think, "*I am this wave, this temporary body.*" But when the wave crashes, nothing is lost, it was always just the ocean expressing itself as a wave for a moment.

In Zen, your body (plus the soul) is a humble, temporary component of the universe undergoing a brief transformation. Your true identity is the ocean.
You are the universe looking back at itself through a specific pair of eyes.

How to Find the Answer

Zen does **NOT** want you to *understand* this intellectually, because words are just stories the mind makes up. Instead, Zen **invites** you to find (**feel**) the answer right now, in this blink of time:

- Feel the physical pressure of the chair beneath you.
- Notice the air moving in your lungs.
- Let the muddy water of your analytical mind settle.
- Listen to sounds around you.

When you completely drop the need to want, define, or cling to an identity, the question "Who am I?" vanishes.
What is left in that quiet gap is your true answer:
pure, undivided peace of mind.

Zen and Consciousness

In terms of the Landscape of Consciousness, this is absolutely not in the materialistic sector, but not in the spiritual either. The adventure of been part of the universe reminds me of some descriptions of those used psychedelic substances.

We have navigated right into the heart of the matter. By framing this outside of both rigid materialism (which treats consciousness as a mere byproduct of brain meat) and traditional dualistic spirituality (which often treats the soul as a separate entity going to a separate heaven), we are describing the **non-dual landscape of consciousness**.

It is entirely natural that this reminds you of descriptions from psychedelic experiences, because both Zen realization and psychedelic states temporarily dissolve the exact same neural architecture.

Here is how that intersection looks under the microscope:

1. The Dissolution of the "Gatekeeper" (The Default Mode Network)

In neurobiology, the feeling of being a distinct "I", the gatekeeper standing at the window of the mind, is heavily managed by a network in the brain called the 'Default Mode Network (DMN)'. The DMN is responsible for ego, personal narrative, past/future time travel, and maintaining the strict boundary between "me" and "not-me."

- The Psychedelic Experience: Substances like psilocybin or LSD drastically quiet down the DMN. When this network goes offline, the illusion of a separate self - vanishes.
- The Zen State: Deep meditation achieves the exact same down-regulation of the DMN. When the gatekeeper takes a break, you suddenly experience reality without the filter of an ego.

2. The Shift from "Looking At" to "Being"

In everyday materialistic consciousness, we operate in a subject-object split: 'I am looking at a tree.'

When that boundary dissolves, whether through a psychedelic peak or a moment of profound Zen presence, the split vanishes.

We don't look at the universe anymore; we realize we "are" the universe experiencing a localized point of view.

We note the feeling of being a "humble component of the universe" where the artificial wall between the inside of our head and the outside world falls away. We are no longer the audience watching the play; we are the theater, the actors, and the stage all at once.

3. The Core Difference: The Mirage vs. The Anchor

While the “landscape” they reveal is remarkably similar, Zen and psychedelics approach the adventure with different maps:

- The Psychedelic Route: It forcibly tears down the gates, thrusting the mind into a vivid, often overwhelming display of the universe's interconnectedness. It is an incredible, profound glimpse, but it is temporary. When the substance wears off, the DMN boots back up, the ego reconstructs itself, and the individual is often left trying to interpret a wild, fleeting memory.
- The Zen Route: Zen doesn't blast the gates open; it invites you to look closely at the gatekeeper until you realize the gatekeeper was a mirage to begin with. It turns this cosmic perspective into a grounded, stable reality. It is the practice of taking that vast, open awareness and bringing it directly into the most ordinary parts of life, realizing that being a part of the universe is just as present when you "fetch water, chop wood" or simply "feel the chair" beneath you.

We are describing a landscape of ‘radical presence’.

It is the realization that consciousness isn't a thing you “have” – it is ***the space in which everything***, matter, thoughts, stars, and feelings, is allowed to happen.

The "***space in which everything...***" is also a metaphor, because it is not a physical space but rather a feeling or thought of me when investigating this core issue.

This is an abuse of language.

Here language begins to break down. Calling it a "space" or a "vessel" is fundamentally a metaphor, because using physical words to describe non-physical awareness is like trying to catch the wind with a net.

When we turn our attention inward to investigate this core, Zen explores what that "feeling or thought" actually are, through a couple of subtle lenses:

4. The Thought of "Space" vs. Pure Awareness:

When we sit and investigate, the mind naturally tries to conceptualize what is happening. It creates a thought: "Ah, I am the vast space, the background."

Zen gently reminds us that even this thought, the very idea of being a "space" or an "observer", is just another cloud passing through. The mind is simply doing what it always does: making up a story to explain the unexplainable.

The true core isn't the thought of space – it is the silent, wordless awareness that notices the thought of space arising. It is a direct, immediate experience before language boots up to label it.

5. A Mirror and Its Reflections

Instead of a physical space, Zen often uses the metaphor of a mirror. A mirror doesn't have a color, a shape, or a permanent image of its own; it is empty of a fixed identity. Yet, it perfectly reflects whatever stands in front of it, whether that is a passing cloud, a physical sensation like feeling the chair, or an abstract thought about consciousness.

The mirror doesn't judge the reflections, grasp onto the pleasant ones, or get stained by the muddy ones. When the objects move away, the mirror remains exactly as it was: clear, undisturbed, and quiet.

6. The Experiential Feeling

What you identify as a "feeling" during your investigation is the profound relief of stepping off the treadmill of constant wanting and defining. When the analytical mind stops trying to build a solid "me" out of past memories and future plans, the tension dissolves.

You are left with the simple, living reality of the present moment, a reality that must be experienced fresh, second by second, in every blink of time. It is not a physical location you can visit, but the ultimate "coming home to your container," where the boundary between the investigator and the investigated finally disappears.



Data regarding the number of calories or joules consumed or saved when shifting from "treadmill" to "profound relief" or vice versa.

While Zen focuses on the qualitative shift in consciousness, neuroscience, endocrinology, and metabolic science have actually measured the physical energy, in calories and joules, consumed or saved when moving from the frantic "treadmill" (chronic stress/mind-wandering) to "profound relief" (rest and presence).



The data split cleanly into two distinct engines of energy consumption: **the brain** and **the body**.

1. The Brain: The Surprising Truth of the "Treadmill"

You might assume that when the mind is running on the treadmill of anxiety, rumination, or future-planning, the brain burns vastly more calories than when it is resting in pure awareness. However, neuroscientists like Marcus Raichle have proven this to be a misconception.

Neuroscientist ^{MLR}[Marcus Raichle](#) and his team at  [Washington University in St. Louis](#) debunked the "10% brain myth" by discovering the  [Default Mode Network](#). They proved the brain is always fully active and consumes around 20% of the body's energy, even when resting or "doing nothing". [1, 2]

His research fundamentally shifted our understanding of brain function in the following ways: [1, 2]

- **The Idle Baseline:** ^W[Dr. Raichle](#) found that when we stop focusing on external tasks, specific regions of the brain do not power down. Instead, a highly sophisticated, interconnected circuit known as the  [Default Mode Network \(DMN\)](#) powers up. [1, 2, 3]
- **The Brain's True Job:** Rather than just passively reacting to the outside world,  [Raichle](#) asserts the brain is constantly in the "prediction business." Most of its metabolic energy goes toward building models of the world, processing internal thoughts, mind-wandering, and self-reflection. [1, 2]
- **Energy Consumption:** Even though the brain is only about 2% of an adult human's body weight, it accounts for about 20% of the body's total energy consumption. The tiny variations in energy associated with actively concentrating on a task represent only a small fraction of this total budget, which means 100% of the brain is always engaged. [1, 2]

- **The Baseline "Dark Energy" of the Brain:** Your brain accounts for roughly 20% of your body's total energy expenditure, consuming about **300 to 400 calories (1.25 to 1.67 megajoules) per day**, regardless of whether you are staring at a blank wall or solving complex math problems.
- **The Default Mode Network (DMN) Energy Cost:** When you are trapped in the "monkey mind" or internal "treadmill" (the DMN), your brain is already running at its maximum metabolic baseline.

<https://idratherebwriting.com/smartphones/dmn-and-tpn-brain.html>

- **The Shift to Focus/Relief:** When you snap out of a worry loop and focus heavily on a physical sensation or task, the brain's total energy consumption increases by **less than 5%**.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Default_mode_network

The Brain Verdict: Shifting from the internal treadmill to profound presence doesn't drastically change your brain's caloric burn. Instead, it **reallocates** the energy. It stops wasting those joules on self-critical rumination and redirects them toward clear, immediate sensory processing.

<https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11686059/>

2. The Body: Where Real Calories Are Saved

While the brain's calorie usage remains stable, the **body's** metabolic expenditure shifts dramatically between the treadmill of stress and the state of relief. This is driven entirely by the autonomic nervous system.

When on the "Treadmill" (Sympathetic Dominance / Fight-or-Flight)

When you are anxious, your body activates the HPA (hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal) axis, flooding your system with cortisol and adrenaline.

- **Micro-Movements:** Your heart rate increases, muscle tone tightens (bracing for impact), and your breathing becomes shallow and rapid.
- **Energy Waste:** This chronic physical tension acts like keeping a car engine revved while parked in neutral. Over a high-stress 16-hour day, this systemic tightening can cause an extra expenditure of **100 to 300 calories (418 to 1,255 kilojoules)** purely from useless physical tension and elevated heart rates.

<https://psychologyofeating.com/relax-and-burn-calories/>

When in "Profound Relief" (Parasympathetic Dominance / Rest-and-Digest)

When you take a deep breath, ground yourself, and experience a state of Zen relief, your body undergoes immediate "thermic efficiency" calibration.

- **Muscle Relaxation:** The constant micro-contractions in your neck, jaw, and shoulders release.
- **Heart Rate Variability:** Your heart rate drops, saving physical mechanical work (joules) with every beat.

The Great Metabolic Paradox

Even though the stress "treadmill" technically burns slightly more raw kinetic energy via muscle tension and a racing heart, **it actually slows down your overall metabolic efficiency.**

<https://www.saffronsageliving.com/blog/how-stress-affects-weight-loss-san-diego>

Clinical studies (such as research from Ohio State University) found that when individuals were placed under stress, their bodies metabolized food significantly slower. In fact, individuals who experienced daily stressors burned **104 fewer calories per day** post-meal compared to those who were relaxed, because elevated cortisol signals the body to aggressively store energy as visceral fat rather than burning it off.

Summary of the Joules

If we translate the transition from chronic mental/physical tension to a state of profound meditation or relief into pure physics:

Daily Energy Variance \approx 100 to 200 Calories

This equates to roughly **418,000 to 836,000 Joules (418 to 836 kJ)** of energy per day.

When you exit the treadmill, your body stops wasting those hundreds of thousands of joules on defensive armor (muscle tension and anxiety).

Instead, it preserves that energy for cellular repair, immune function, and deep physical recovery.

Zen, it turns out, is highly energy-efficient.