

Who am I? Self or self-less?

Larry Culliford

As human beings we are each invited to fulfill expectations. We are asked to prove ourselves, to achieve, and we are encouraged in strong allegiances to family, community and culture. We identify with and take pleasure in, or alternatively dissociate ourselves from and dislike, certain people, places, possessions, and later theories, philosophies, even what we call 'facts'. Thus we form strong (but in the final analysis relinquishable) attachments and aversions.

In addition to the attributes of our physical selves, this is how we tend to define ourselves: according to our likes and dislikes. As social creatures we are particularly schooled towards 'worldly' values: values of wealth, position, physical prowess, of accomplishment and of knowledge; values associated in particular with the ethic of competition. We want to win, to be the best.

Philosophies of the East for the most part respect and support these values. Nevertheless they offer an additional perspective, postulating a hierarchically higher level of truth. This absolute level of truth is faithfully acknowledged to be at continual and constant work.

The higher level depends not on worldly but on non-materialistic, or 'spiritual' values: values of compassion, generosity and tranquility; values of renunciation, of insight and wisdom; values associated in particular with the ethic of co-operation. It recognises that, essentially, we are all in the same boat. "Everyone's blood is red. Everyone's tears are salty."

How often is it that we can identify a struggle, within ourselves or others, between worldly and spiritual values, between self-seeking and neighbourliness?

In the East it might be said to be the 'illusory' nature of self that is both the fuel and fire of this struggle. The illusion is of a genuine boundary between self and others, between self and all creation. Thus it is that a doctrine of 'no-self' has evolved, common to Hindu and Buddhist ideologies.

The teaching has less to do with intellectually denying the existence of self, more to do with discovering its true nature. And it is in the sense that this is ever-changing, subject to conditions which are themselves in constant flux, that the self may come to be experienced as like-an-illusion, not as something in any way fixed.

It is, one might say, a matter of expanding one's consciousness, increasing the 'permeability' of one's ego-boundaries, to the extent that the illusion-like experience of self is manifest.

This experience may feel strange, even threatening, and be resisted at first. Eventually, however, it is not only accepted equably, but it is also identified with a profound sensation of freedom. The main method of training to do this is through the regular practice of meditation.

The doctrine of 'no-self' refers to an experience rather than a belief. Implicit in the teaching is the invitation to penetrate the enigma (of selfhood) that each human being shares. The blessing for the psychiatrist who even begins to make these concepts come to life is the early recognition that we do all share in this mystery.

Thus the true, impermanent, paradoxical illusion-like self is not, and can not be, affected by the presence or absence of symptoms, by whether or not a person is or ever has been mentally ill. However much the mental state is changing, or however disordered, this in quality (if not in degree) is how it is for all of us. Within that, the person, the self is whole and indivisible. A glimpse of this serves to change one's whole attitude to one's work.

This insight into the true and universal nature of self facilitates the process of empathy. One no longer fears the dissolution of one's own mind through coming into contact with the disturbances of another. Understanding, tolerance and compassion not only emerge but communicate themselves spontaneously to others. The heart stays open and, by and large, the head remains clear. Esteem develops for one's patients, and one

comes to value them, in many cases at least for their endurance. At best one turns them into teachers, learning from them the truth about one's own (and psychiatry's) limitations, learning also how best to work towards accepting these limitations. ("What cannot be remedied must be endured".)

In patient–doctor relations an atmosphere of honesty and trust prevails. One learns from the cream of patients better ways of managing human problems: both restlessness of mind (observe quietly and don't disturb it; be patient) and the sweet/bitter vicissitudes of life (don't complain, no shame, no blame, move on, go with the flow).

[One can learn, of course, how not to deal with these problems from anyone.]

Consciousness is reborn and dies in each instant. Nothing is permanent. No thing is self. What we think of as self is not independent but inter-dependent. No separate or permanent entity, the self, can be said to exist.

To achieve an inkling of this is to allow one's discord to begin to settle. Worldly and spiritual values, apparently in conflict, become reconciled within the thoughts, emotions, words and actions of those who see into this mystery.

If you want to set out on this journey (which in the early stages carries a peace of mind health warning) simply ask yourself, "Who am

I, really?" and keep asking. Ask yourself, "Who am I?" at this moment and, "Who am I now?" at another.

You may not be inclined to this search. But if you are, you will find yourself challenged as your cherished assumptions, and those of your family and society, inevitably get called into question.

This is not simply destructive, especially since it is not the assumptions or beliefs in themselves alone which are being challenged, but more particularly the strength of the attachment with which they are each held. Often one comes to value the same views as before but less defensively, with more confidence.

It helps to remember that there is no need for fear, anger, blame or shame. These come to be seen for what they are, transient phenomena of the mind belonging to no self (except the self who clings to them). In such relentless self-examination one is advised always to be kind, gentle and generous to oneself. It is possible to accept a little disquiet, doubt and bewilderment, even sorrow with patience. Have confidence, persevere. It is worth it.

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