



BEYOND NO SELF

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The spiritual journey is a movement away from over-identification with the body and mind to the rediscovery of our true identity as infinite Being, and this can be two different movements. The first is dis-identification

with the body and mind. Since identification is simply a movement of thought, dis-identification is simply a movement away from thought. The ego identification that we experience most of the time is the result of repeated thoughts about "I", "me," and "mine." That is all there is to it, but while we are thinking these thoughts the sense of self is contained in them. And since most of our self-referencing thoughts are about our body, our thoughts, our feelings, and our desires, the sense of self is usually contained in the body and mind.

Dis-identification from the thought form of the ego can occur whenever there is a deep questioning of the assumption in most of our thoughts that we are this body and this mind. Inquiry using the question, Who am I? can naturally weaken the assumption that I am the body and the mind. In fact, any deep questioning of our thoughts and assumptions can loosen our over-identification with thought, since so many of them are not very true. Experiences of no thought can also weaken the identification because in the absence of thought, there is an absence of identification. We all experience this when we get so caught up in what we are doing that we completely "forget ourselves."

Alternatively, directly sensing the presence that is aware of the thoughts can also dis-entangle the tendency to identify with the thoughts. The second movement of the spiritual journey is this recognition, or realization, of your true nature as presence or limitless empty awareness. It is a wonderful surprise to discover that everything that really matters in life, including peace, joy, and love, is found in this empty awareness. This emptiness is incredibly full and rich. It has intelligence and strength and compassion. Whenever we experience a deeper quality of Being such as clarity, peace, insight, value, happiness or love, it is coming from this spacious presence.

The surprising thing is that while these two movements can occur simultaneously, they can also happen apart from each other. When this happens, the movement from ego identification to our essential nature is not complete. For example, you can question deeply your own thoughts until the false assumptions in them are seen through. The over-identification that results from constantly thinking about me and mine and my body and my problems can't survive closer examination. It can be a shock to see how completely we assume that I am this body and I am this mind, and an even bigger shock and relief to discover that it is just a thought, and it is not true. The identification is really just a thought. There is no actual equivalence between you and your body or your mind. You are that which experiences the body and the mind, but you are not contained in them.

Even though this is a profound insight and a huge relief (after all if I am not my body, then these are not my aches and pains; and if I am not my mind, then these are not my problems), by itself this insight only reveals the false assumptions. It does not reveal the underlying truth. And since the underlying truth of your nature is more of a heart-centered experience, it is possible to dissolve the ego without touching your true nature. In a sense, you can wake up in your mind, but not in your heart.

When this happens, there is both the sense of relief from all of the grief caused by the over-identification with the body and mind, and often a deep sense of meaninglessness. If "I" don't exist, then what is the point? It doesn't matter anymore what the fictional "I" does or what happens to it. In fact, nothing matters at all because it is so clearly all an illusion.

When seekers are led or just find their own way to a deep experience of no-self, they can then form a new more subtle belief that this absence of self is all there is. "I am not my body, I am not my mind, I do not exist" are seen as the final conclusions. From a purely logical perspective, what more is there to say, since there is no one here to say it or hear it! And while these conclusions are true, they are not the whole truth.

Underlying all of the activity of the mind is the non-conceptual reality of Being, or our true nature. Underlying the concept of apple, one can experience the reality of a sweet, red piece of fruit. However it is more subtle when it comes to our true nature, because the reality underlying our false identification with the ego is not physical. It is a pure empty aware space that is full of the subtle substance of presence in all of its essential forms: peace, joy, love, clarity, strength, value, and much more.

How can that be—empty space that is full of everything that matters? The mind cannot grasp it fully, as presence exists beyond concepts and even beyond its own forms; and yet, that is what you are. You can experience it with more subtle senses than the physical senses and the mind. Ultimately, you "sense" it by being it. You just are this full empty presence.

It is this second movement of realization of essence, presence, and fullness of Being that counteracts the belief that since I (as ego) do not exist, therefore nothing exists and all is illusion. It gives a heartfelt sense of meaning and purpose back to this relative life of the body and mind, not as a means of gratification to your idea of yourself, but as a pure expression of the wonder and beauty of this deeper reality. Instead of living a life in service to the ego's wants and needs, you can find yourself fulfilling the deepest purposes of a human life: to serve and express freedom, joy, beauty, peace and love. By itself the realization of no-self can end up dry and lifeless, but when the heart opens wide to the bigger truth of the true Self, life is anything but dry and lifeless.

It is also worth mentioning that the opposite can occur: At any time, your awareness can move directly into pure presence and be filled with a sense of the essential limitless goodness of your true nature. And while any experience of true nature does to some extent loosen the identification with the limited idea of yourself we call the ego, since it doesn't compute to think of yourself as a limited body and mind when you are experiencing the bigger underlying reality, an experience of true nature by itself doesn't always dissolve the ego completely. Having a direct experience of deeper truth doesn't take away your inherent capacity to identify. It doesn't render you incapable of thought, so you can still return to thinking of yourself as a limited self, even if it is now a limited self that has tasted your true nature.

So if the habit of identification with the body and mind does continue, it can still be necessary to deconstruct the mistaken beliefs related to ego identification. There is a place for questioning and inquiring into the false beliefs and assumptions of our identification with the body and mind, and a place for questioning and inquiring into the underlying reality. The difference is that the inquiry into true nature is not a purely mental activity. Because of the subtle nature of presence, the inquiry itself has to be subtle and whole hearted. To discover what is really here in the truest sense requires subtlety, patience, persistence, courage, tenderness, compassion, curiosity, and ultimately everything you've got! The momentum of our usual identification with physical reality and with our purely mental thought forms shapes our perception to such a great degree, that it is a challenge to break through to the more subtle dimensions of perception.

It helps to pursue the inquiry into true nature both with the heart and also with the body. The mind's view is so easily distorted by belief and conditioning that the experience beneath the shoulders is often a more direct and open doorway into presence. What are you experiencing right now in your shoulders? In your heart? In your belly? What is the space around your arms and legs like right now? Is there energy flowing in your body right now? Questions like these can direct you to a more fruitful exploration, especially if you ask them with your whole heart and not just with your mind.

It is a saving grace that this deeper reality is always present. Sometimes it just touches us in an unguarded moment of deep loss or profound beauty. In the end, there is no escaping from the truth. Illusions come and go, beliefs come and go, and yet the underlying presence remains.

In words it can seem overly simple. Just stop believing in your thoughts and sense your being. It really is that simple, although it is not always easy. One of the things that make it a challenge is the sense of identity we naturally have. Inherent in our existence as true nature is a sense that we exist or that "I am." We do exist as true nature, and so of course, we sense that existence. While many might be confused about who or what they are, not very many doubt their own existence. In fact, existence and identity are aspects of our true nature.

So, even when we are caught in the mental world of thoughts, there is still this underlying sense of identity. We still feel like we exist. And since we are so strongly imprinted onto our physical bodies and our thoughts

and therefore our attention is on them most of the time, our sense of identity often moves into our body and our thoughts, feelings, and desires. We start to say "I am sad" instead of "I feel sad." We speak of our experience as if it is our identity.

Anytime we add something to the statement "I am," as in "I am scared" or "I am a bird watcher," our identity moves into that thought. This is what it means to identify with thought. A thought by itself has little power or significance. It may be relevant and useful, but it doesn't have much lasting impact. Most thoughts pass very quickly, so much so that often we can't remember what was said in a conversation just a moment ago.

However, a thought that begins with "I" or "I am" or a thought that is about me or my possessions or my experience evokes a bit of this sense of identity. It is as if our true nature or true identity moves into or tries on the shape and feel of the thought. Dissolving or deconstructing the thoughts that we identify with can free our essential identity from an assumption that it is somehow contained in our body or our mind. Seeing the falseness of those ideas opens the door for our deepest sense of our own existence to move out of the tight confines of our beliefs and ego identifications.

Often when the sense of self is set free from the structures of ego-centered thought, it naturally expands into a full experience of the underlying true nature. We call a sudden expansion into true nature like this an awakening, as it seems we have awakened to a whole new reality that is rich and full of joy, peace, and love.

However, again it is also possible for the sense of self or identity to move into a different belief or assumption of no-self. This often happens when the focus of a teaching or inquiry is on the negation of false identifications, without a counter-balancing emphasis on the underlying reality of presence. Some spiritual practices are specifically designed to negate false identifications, such as the practice of seeing that you are not this and not that until nothing is left. Some spiritual teachers and teachings emphasize the non-existence of a separate individual and go on to suggest that not only is the individual not real, but the world and everything in it is not real.

There is a profound truth in this perspective, as it penetrates the usual belief or assumption that the ego and all of its experiences are the most real aspect of our experience. Even those who have tasted deeper reality often return to a ego-centered perspective because of the momentum of our over concern with the physical and mental realms. Even in the face of profound experiences to the contrary, there is a habit of assuming that the most important things are your physical body and your ideas, beliefs, and thoughts, so much so that we think everything that pops into our heads is important. We will even use the argument, "That's what I think" to justify our position, as if thinking something makes it true. Since our most common thought or assumption is the assumption that I am the body or I am my thoughts, feelings, and desires, this pointing to the falseness or incompleteness of that most basic belief is vitally important to the loosening of the grip it has on us.

However, in the absence of a pointing to and experiencing of our true nature, there is this danger of the sense of self simply landing on a new belief in no-self. Your sense of self moves from a limited and painful identification with the mind's idea of yourself to a more open and freeing idea of emptiness and non-existence. While this is relatively a relief, it can eventually be just as limiting as the original ego identification. When our identity or sense of self has moved into or identified with nothingness, or at least with the idea of emptiness or no-self, it can become stuck there. This is often reflected in a kind of defensiveness of this new identification. Anytime someone challenges you, you deflect the criticism or conflict by retreating more fully into the idea of no-self. Or you can turn the tables on them and try to convince them that they do not exist so their concerns are not valid. This new identification with no-self can be flat and uninvolved. Life has no meaning or value. So, what has been a helpful and freeing dissolving of limiting structures can then become fossilized into a new limiting identification.

Because it is your essential identity or sense of self that moves into or identifies with the concept of emptiness or no-self, it is a very convincing new identification. Whenever identity moves into an experience, it does not

just experience it, to a degree it actually becomes it. When your sense of self is firmly planted in the body and mind of the ego, it feels like that is who you are. And when instead of just experiencing emptiness, your identity or sense of self moves fully into emptiness or no-self, it also is very convincingly felt as who you are. When you move so fully into identification with something that it doesn't feel like just an experience but rather who you really are, the experience becomes more global and convincing.

This is the power of identification to make a specific perspective or experience seem more total and real than it is. If a particular identification is limited and is a place of suffering, then this power of identification to make it more all encompassing and real makes the suffering more all encompassing and real. The power of identification can also make the dry emptiness and meaninglessness of no-self seem more all encompassing and real. They are ultimately both illusions, but it is through the process of identification that we make the illusions seem real. Being or consciousness itself is ultimately the one that is identifying, and when limitless eternal Being identifies to create illusion, it does a good job of it!

However, no matter how powerful the illusion of suffering or emptiness is when we are identified with it, identification is still simply a movement of thought followed by a movement of our sense of self into that thought. Since thought is always a temporary phenomenon, no identification is ever permanent. In fact, every identification only lasts as long as the thought triggering it. We become "stuck" in identification by repeating a lot of similar thoughts. The sense of an egoic self or no-self are both created by a pattern of repeated thoughts that identity moves into.

Because this movement of thought is always temporary, there is always in every moment the possibility of touching the deeper reality of our true nature as presence and Being. Even more amazing is when, with repeated experiences of true nature, our identity or sense of self moves into the realm of essential reality. Eventually it becomes obvious that the expanded spaciousness of our inner presence is actually who we are. When our identity moves into true nature, there is no suffering and no dryness or emptiness. We simply are all of the peace, joy, and love in the universe.

There is nothing specifically you can do to move your true identity or sense of self into the expanded dimensions of your true nature. Identity is not something you do; it is what you are. However, the sense of identity follows your awareness, and since you are ultimately everything, it can and will identify with whatever is in your awareness. This is the danger of a teaching that doesn't point to or convey the existence of true nature. If something is not even talked about or considered, it is much less likely that awareness will notice it, and also much less likely that identity will ultimately shift into it. This is why it is important to teach and explore the nature of all of the qualities of presence such as joy, peace, and love, so that awareness begins to touch them and eventually identity shifts to the underlying truth of Being.

A subtle distinction needs to be made between your true identity and the sense of self you have in any moment. Your true identity has and always will be the infinite spaciousness of Being, including all forms, both physical and subtle, and all of the formless emptiness of pure space. But your sense of self is a flexible means for this limitless Being to experience itself from many different perspectives. By having this quality of identity that can move in and out of all kinds of experiences and temporarily appear to become them by identifying with them, Being gets to try on all of these different experiences or illusions from the most contracted and limited to the most expanded and blissful. Without this capacity, Being would be a static existence of infinite potential that is never expressed. By moving its identity into and identifying with the myriad perspectives of limited experience, this potential becomes experienced in form and movement.

So while mis-identification is the root of all of your "problems," it is not and never has been a mistake. Being has very purposefully shifted its identity in and out of infinite apparent selves to try them all on for size. Being stuck in identification is itself an illusion, since all identification is temporary. So while it is helpful, from the perspective of a limited self that is suffering, to explore and discover the other capacities of your identity to move out of the ego and into true nature, ultimately all of the spiritual teaching pointing to other possibilities

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