

15/04/2020

## Is There Really a Self?

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If somebody were to call me an idiot in the presence of others I would feel humiliated and insulted. My sense of who I am, my place in society, my self-esteem... all of this would be put in question. But if I were to reflect a bit, instead of merely reacting, I might realise that I was taking things too far. Who was actually being insulted? Was it a false 'me', full of self-importance? Was there a possibility of a 'real me' who could rise above other people's opinion of me and take at least a modicum of distance from both reproach and praise?

This raises a larger question of whether there is a 'me' at all. Put differently, is there a self at all?

On the face of it the question might sound absurd since our daily experience shows that all over the world people take the self for granted. We are not able to get by without notions like 'I', 'me', 'mine'. Usually the self is seen as separate and threatened by other selves. I hurt others in so many ways and feel hurt in return. And then I hurt people who are different, who belong to other religions, races, castes and ethnicities. One might persist with the question: Is the person who dislikes/hates the 'other' a real person, stable and coherent, somebody who innately believes in what she is doing? Or is she largely unreal, a merely constructed one?

According to Peter Harvey our choices, decisions and intentions are influenced by several factors. Some of them are:

- Biological influences: one's genes, but also the effect of illness, tiredness, or drugs
- Social influences: from parents, peers, education, and the media, especially advertising
- Personal history: one's life events
- General history: the times in which one lives
- Psychological influences: fears, complexes, inclinations, strengths and weaknesses, and mental illness

Thus one's choices, however 'free' they might appear, are made under the influence of a range of factors we may not even be conscious of.

David Loy argues that the constructed self is unreal and merely encompasses habitual ways of perceiving, feeling, thinking and acting. Contemporary psychology today realizes that the sense of self is a psychological-social-linguistic construct: "Psychological, because the ego-self is a product of mental conditioning. Social, because a sense of self develops due to social interaction with other constructed selves. Linguistic, because acquiring a sense of self involves learning to use certain names and pronouns such as I, me, mine, myself, words which creates the illusion that there must be something being referred to."

When this constructed 'I' repeats actions, habits are consolidated. Actions that lead to habits could be not only addiction to alcohol or tobacco but also mental attitudes and perceptions. The French philosopher Giles Deleuze stated that the self is "nothing but habits." These habits are firmly anchored in our psyche and lead to closed ideologies, fixed dogmas and numerous prejudices. So much of our 'thinking' is along these lines. As William James famously said, "A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices."

Mental attitudes can lead to more serious consequences when they become part of a collective psyche. Thus, for example, disliking or hating a particular religious or ethnic community has serious social consequences, even leading to civil war in extreme cases. Deconstructing this dislike or hatred at a personal and collective level needs ongoing mindfulness practice that leads to behavioural change. Buddhism would suggest that practice of mindfulness and meditation could help a person to become aware of prejudicial attitudes she may be unaware of. Mindfulness could help the person begin to deconstruct these negative practices and values and create conditions for transformative change.

The larger question would be, if the conditioned and constructed self is not 'real' then how does one acquire another self. Can de-conditioning help in ridding oneself of the unreal self with its habits and prejudices and discover the real self? If the unreal self that hates, dislikes and judges is merely the product of psychological conditioning is there another self, a real one, that some might call Buddha nature? Or Christ nature?

Some Buddhists might argue that the self does not exist. A more appropriate understanding is the view advocated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu who looks at the no-self notion as a strategy: "In this sense, the *anatta*

teaching is not a doctrine of no-self, but a not-self strategy for shedding suffering by letting go of its cause, leading to the highest, undying happiness.” For Thanissaro Bhikku the doctrine of *anatta* (non-self, substanceless) is only a practical strategy that guides one to let go of attachment to conditioned phenomena and thus to achieve liberation. From this it is clear that nirvana is not complete annihilation, but the annihilation of the conditioned self.

In the Pali Canon the Buddha frequently describes nirvana in positive terms:

... the subtle,  
the very-hard-to-see,  
the ageless, permanence, the undecaying,  
the surface-less, non-objectification,  
peace, the deathless,  
the exquisite, bliss, solace,  
the exhaustion of craving,  
the wonderful, the marvellous,  
the secure, security,  
*nibbana*...

Suffering (*dhukka*) happens when we hold on to the delusion of the unreal self, the conditioned self. But *dhukka* can also mean ‘affliction’, ‘unsatisfactoriness’ or ‘stress’. If we dislike a person, or another religion, race or ethnicity then we are merely responding to our own conditioning, merely reacting out of habit. Thanissaro Bhikku asks:

“Am I suffering stress because I’m holding onto this particular phenomenon? Is it really me, myself, or mine? If it’s stressful but not really me or mine, why hold on?’ These last questions merit straightforward answers, as they then help you to comprehend stress and to chip away at the attachment and clinging — the residual sense of self-identification — that cause it, until ultimately all traces of self-identification are gone and all that’s left is limitless freedom.”

In the Hindu tradition of Advaita we see that ignorance leads to a deluded understanding of the self. This deluded self becomes greedy and grasping and inflicts suffering upon itself and others and degrades nature. The deluded self finds liberation when it sheds its ignorance and realises its unity with the larger Universal Self that is Brahman. The scholar Anantanand Rambachan gives a fresh and invigorating interpretation of Advaita when he writes: “Liberation is the seeing of one’s own self as the self of all beings, a vision that frees from hate... expressing itself as love”. The liberated Advaitin is compassionate and sheds hatred, greed, patriarchy, homophobia and develops a symbiotic relationship with nature.

Jesus Christ underlines the absolute importance of love to liberate oneself from the trap of the self-referencing individual, selfish and uncaring in many ways. Christians are familiar with his commandment: “You must love each other, just as I have loved you.” If we are to find fulfilment we must deny this false self, a product of self-love. Jesus makes this abundantly clear when he states, “If anyone would come after me, they must deny themselves,” and, “Whoever loses their self for my sake will find it”. Clearly, the false self in Christianity is the self that lacks love. Denying one’s false self and losing oneself in Christ is the burgeoning of true love.

Nichiren Buddhism has made things simpler by suggesting that we should move from the lesser self to the greater self. Clearly the lesser self is the conditioned and constructed self and the greater self is the reconstructed self, devoid of negative conditioning. A Nichiren text from the Soka Gokkai tradition states:

“The greater self could be described simply as a sense of self that can fully identify and empathize with the suffering of others and is thus motivated to alleviate that suffering; an open, expansive character broadened by an empathy that extends not only to other people but to all life, and thus to the natural environment. It is self-grounded in a deep respect for the dignity of all life—including one’s own—and the wisdom that perceives the inextricable interdependence of that life.

This type of expansive life condition could be contrasted with the more limited ‘lesser self’ (Jpn *shoga*) defined by egotistical concerns and desires.”

In conclusion we may add that the conditioned and constructed self is unreal. It is a creature of dead habit and is plagued by greed, hatred and ignorance. On the other hand, the de-conditioned and reconstructed self is marked by generosity, compassion and wisdom.