

Selflessness 101 (Chapter 4, *Contemplating Reality* by Andy Karr)

Let's take a closer look at what "I" and "me" are all about. First, we will look at the way the self appears. Then, we can begin to see the way it actually is.

Consider the fact that sometimes we say, "I am sick," and at other times we say, "I have a headache." In the first case, it seems that the "I" itself is ill. In the second, "I" and the pain seem to be two different things, with the self possessing the pain of the headache. Sometimes we even say, "I was not myself the other day," as if "I" and "the self" are two separate things. The first thing to note is that while it seems completely obvious that there is such a thing as the self, when we try to pin down what the self is, the whole thing becomes completely elusive.

Once the great yogi Milarepa met a young shepherd boy who wanted to learn about Milarepa's teachings and asked him if people had one mind or many (which is like asking if there is one self or many selves). Milarepa told him to look at his own mind and find out. The next day the shepherd reported:

"Lama-la, yesterday evening I asked you how many minds there are. I have looked and seen that there is no more than one. As for this one mind, though, you can try to kill it but you can't kill it; you can try to chase after it and grab it but you can't catch it, and you cannot push it down either. If you put it somewhere, it doesn't stay; if you send it somewhere, it doesn't go; if you try to gather it in, it doesn't come; if you look at it, you can't see it; if you investigate, you can't find it; if you think it exists, it doesn't show itself, and if you think it doesn't exist, it flows out everywhere. It flickers here and there; it darts to and fro; it hops around bippity bop boop beep de beep bop bop de boop bop beep de boom! And sometimes it just spaces out and you don't know what happened. I have no idea what mind is."

What can we say about the elusive "I" and "me"? These words must refer to something—but what? Maybe we can't describe the self precisely, but most of us would agree that it seems to have four characteristics: it appears to be *one thing*; it appears to be *independent*; it appears to be *lasting*; and it appears to be *important*.

The first characteristic, that the self appears to be one thing, is often called *singularity*, meaning that we feel the self to be a single thing. Except perhaps when we experience extreme psychological states, we don't think that we have multiple selves that we cycle through or choose from. We don't get up in the morning and think, "Today I will be Jane, and perhaps tonight I will try out being Judy." We think we are the same person all the time. We might have different personalities in different situations, but this is like the self putting on different clothing, not changing selves. This is what the shepherd reported to Milarepa.

The second characteristic is *independence*. We think the self makes choices; for example, we can decide to do the dishes, or watch television, or go out to dinner and a movie. We don't think that what we do simply emerges from the ether due to causes and conditions over which we have no control.

The third characteristic, that the self appears to be lasting, is referred to as *permanence* because the Buddhist teachings generally define permanence as anything that lasts a second moment. The self appears to be lasting or permanent because it feels like we have had the same self all our lives. While our bodily appearance changes, and our knowledge and experiences change, the self doesn't seem to change. I vividly remember my father-in-law saying on his eighty-third birthday that he didn't feel that he was any different from when he was a child. He didn't really feel older. It was a very interesting comment and clearly illustrates this third characteristic.

The fourth characteristic is *importance*. Like the other characteristics, we might take this one for granted. Even if we don't go around thinking, "I need to look out for number one," self-importance is the undercurrent to all our activity. We only have to recall what we are like when we are stuck in traffic or cooling our heels in the doctor's waiting room to see how important we feel we are. Few of us think, "I don't need to get to work any more than the rest of the people stuck in this traffic jam." In fact, we are usually so absorbed in our own agenda that we can't even imagine anyone else having anything important to do.

THE ENEMY INSIDE

Here are two contemplations that you can work with to bring out what the self is like. The first contemplation is from Nawang Gehlek Rimpoche's recent book, *Good Life, Good Death*:

The true enemy is inside. The maker of trouble, the source of all our suffering, the destroyer of our joy, and the destroyer of our virtue is inside. It is Ego. I call it, "I, the most precious one."

"I, the most precious one" does not serve any purpose. It only makes tremendous, unreasonable, impossible demands. Ego wants to be the best and has no consideration for anyone else. Things work fine as long as "I, the most precious one's" wishes are being fulfilled. But when they're not, and Ego turns on the self, it becomes self-hatred. That self-hatred will eventually burn the house down.

First, Ego separates me from the rest of the world and sees "I" and "me" as the most important. Then "I" becomes "my," as in my friend, my enemy. I love my friend. I hate my enemy. I help my friend. I harm my enemy. That's where attachment and hatred begin. They don't come out of the blue.

Then the concept of "my" gathers strength. "My" becomes important to me. An ordinary cup, when it becomes my cup, is worth more. So, too, are my body, my country, my religion, or my sect.

The second contemplation is from the chapter on "Patience" in Shantideva's eighth-century classic *The Way of the Bodhisattva*:

This self, if permanent
Is certainly impassible like space itself.

And should it meet with any other factors,
How should they affect it, since it is unchanging?

If, when things occur, it stays unchanged and as before,
What influence has action had on it?
They say that this affects the Self,
But what connection could there be between them?

Singular, independent, lasting, and important: this is how we define the self. And as
Gehlek Rimpoche adds, it “does not serve any purpose” except as “the source of all our
suffering.”

In addition to the four characteristics of the self, we can also talk about two basic aspects
of this troublemaker. The first aspect—the *imputed self*—is the identity we attribute to the self
based on all the relational, philosophical, and religious concepts we have about who and what
we are. “I am...” a nurse, a geek, a human, a musician, a father, a child, a good writer, an idiot,
the boss, a bodhisattva, a child of God—whatever. The Judeo-Christian notion of a soul, or the
Hindu notion of atman are also examples of the imputed self. The second aspect is the
instinctive self. This refers to the grunt level of feeling “I exist!” before there are any words to
express that. These are the two main ways the self appears.

Now we can begin to investigate what the self really is. One way to pin down this vague
and elusive appearance is to ask some simple questions; for example, “Is the self the body or is
it the mind? Is it both of these, or is it neither of them?”

Most of us would say that the self is both the body and the mind. Yet, the body is
something tangible and substantial. It seems to be made of physical matter, however we would
like to describe that—for example, as cells, as molecules, as atoms, as subatomic particles, and
so on. The mind, on the other hand, seems to be immaterial. It is not made of particles. Even
though scientists can now correlate mental activity with changing electrical activity in the brain,
no one proposes that thoughts, emotions, consciousness, and the other mental phenomena are
material substances.

How could the self be both material and immaterial? We are not discussing some
machine with different components, some of which are made out of metal and some of which
are made out of plastic. We are asking how one thing—the self—could be made up of two
things that have *no common basis*? How could that possibly work? How could they be
connected? If something is not made of any matter, what could possibly attach to it? What
could hold it together? As Mr. Spock would say, “That is not logical.”

If we accept that the self cannot be both the body and the mind, we need to explore the
possibility that it is just one or the other of these. What if the self is just the mind? That leads
to the absurd conclusion that an immaterial mind could possess a material body. How could
something immaterial possess something material? Again we have to ask, how could they be
connected? A further problem with this idea is that if the self is just the mind, how would you

know when you stubbed your toe? The body would be something separate from the self, like a piece of furniture.

Next, we need to ask whether the self could just be the body. This leads to the absurd conclusion that a material body could possess or connect with an immaterial mind. Also, if the self is just the body, how could you know anything, since it is mind that knows? If the self is just the body, it follows that a corpse would be a self! Mr. Spock?

By the way, at the time of the Buddha, some Indian philosophers said that mind arose from the elements. Around the same time, Greek materialists held similar view. Many contemporary western scientists seem to have similar beliefs. These scientists say that mind is just “an emergent property” of the brain. Emergent properties are said to be phenomena seen in complex systems that are not properties of any of the parts of the system, and not produced by merely adding the parts together.

Nobel laureate Francis Crick, codiscoverer of the double helix structure of DNA, wrote, “You, your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behavior of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.” In other words, he asserts that the subjective sense of “you,” meaning mind or consciousness, is just an emergent property of matter.

However, this view does not give an answer to the question of how immaterial mind could arise from a material brain. The brain is visibly observable. It has shape, color, and mass. It can be touched. Mind has none of these visible or tactile properties, but it is that which knows. How could the entity of mind arise from the entity of the body, with which it shares no common properties?

There is one more possibility that we need to look at. If the self cannot be both the body and the mind, or just the mind, or just the body, can it be something that is neither the body nor the mind? If such a self really exists, it should be observable in some way. Can you find such a self? How could such a self possess both a material body and an immaterial mind?

At this point, you might start to dismiss this whole investigation as a silly word game that is both irritating and ridiculous. However, before you do, consider the possibility that vagueness and elusiveness form ego’s outer layer and that ego uses irritation and indignation to fortify itself when any attempt is made to look into what the self actually is. These reactions help maintain the illusion of the self, even when the unreasonableness of that illusion is clearly pointed out.

You might wonder how such intangible qualities as vagueness, elusiveness, and irritation could perform such powerful functions, but that is the secret of ego’s whole system. The self is not made of any substance at all: it is just a kaleidoscopic display of empty imagery, intangible, like a self in a dream. As Chogyam Trungpa explains in *Transcending Madness*:

These experiences....are space, different versions of space. It seems intense and solid, but in actual fact it isn’t at all. They are different aspects of space—that’s the exciting or interesting part. In fact, it is complete open space, without any colors or any particularly solid way of relating.

Here is another contemplation that might help clarify this. It is probably the shortest text you will ever contemplate, but I have found it to be one of the most potent. I come back to it again and again. It is one of “the four mistaken conceptions”:

“We have taken what is not a self to be a self.”

To do this contemplation you need to take a close look at what “me” feels like and ask, “What do I take to be a self? What is that like? Is there anything there other than just some vague changing sensations?”

We can come at this investigation of a self from a different angle by looking at Rene Descartes’s famous conclusion to his own investigation of the self: “I think, therefore I am.” There is a traditional Buddhist image that is relevant here. Imagine walking into a pottery studio and seeing a spinning potter’s wheel with a half-finished vase turning around on top. Looking at this scene, you would instinctively feel that there must be a potter nearby. This is also what happens when we observe our thoughts and imagine that there must be a thinker. Yet whenever we look, we can’t find any thinker. We never see thoughts *and* something producing thought. We just see more thoughts.

You could ask yourself, “What is this thinker like?” If the answer is that it is the self, then you might be going around in circles like the potter’s wheel! Can you perceive the thinker? Is it one of those animated machines inside your head like the ones they show in pain-relief commercials? Is there a little man or woman in there? Is it the brain? If you think it is the brain, try to imagine how a mass of gray matter can produce the thoughts you experience. Where do they come out?

To conclude this chapter, here is one more verse for you to contemplate. This is from Chandrakirti, the seventh-century author of one of the most profound Buddhist texts, one that is still intensively studied, called the *Madhyamakavatara* or *Entering the Middle Way*. This is a good verse to contemplate because it both presents the essence of ego clinging and expresses the aspiration to help all beings who are suffering from this delusion.

First thinking “me,” they cling to self,
Then, thinking “this is mine,” attachment to things develops.
Beings are powerless, like buckets rambling in a well—
I bow to compassion for these wanderers.