

## No one special to be

### Escaping the prison of your own self-image

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One of the main characteristics of a life of sleep is that we are totally identified with being a Me. Starting with our name, our history, our self-images and identities, we use each one of these things to solidify the sense that we are living in our little subjective sphere. We experience ourselves as “special”—not in the normal sense of being distinguished or exceptional but in the sense that we feel

unique and subtly significant. Interestingly, our feeling of specialness is not just from having positive qualities; we can even use our suffering to make us feel unique and special. Yet not *needing* to be special, not needing to be *any* particular way, is what it means to be free—free to experience our natural being, our most authentic self.

For example, we all have images of ourselves that we unconsciously carry with us throughout our waking hours. Our self-images are the conceptions or pictures of how we see ourselves. We can have a self-image of being nice, or competent, or deep; or we may have a negative self-image—seeing ourselves as weak, or stupid, or worthless. Usually we try to focus on our positive self-images, and we often try to shape our external life to portray ourselves in the most favorable way. We live driven by the vanity of trying to look a particular way, mostly to gain the approval of those whose opinion is most important to us. Whether it's our clothes, our hair, our body—our radar for approval is constantly running, mostly unconsciously. This is true even with the car we drive: whether it's a Cadillac or a hybrid or a pickup truck, when we sit behind the wheel, it defines who we are to ourselves and to others, and we are usually totally identified with that image.

Much of our life is spent trying to live out of our self-images, and we rarely have the inclination to look at them honestly. In fact, it is very difficult to be truly honest with ourselves, especially since we can simultaneously have both positive and negative self-images on board and may not recognize the inconsistencies. This is due to the fact that we all wear blinders—a psychological defense that doesn't allow one part of ourselves to see another part. For example, if we need to see ourselves as nice, we may ignore all of our harmful or self-centered qualities. Or, if we need to see ourselves as unworthy, we'll ignore all the positive data. This is actually quite common.

Closely related to our self-images are our identities—how we define ourselves according to the roles we play, such as mother, businessman, meditator, athlete, and so on. The identities we assume don't have to make sense. For example, even though I've written five books and many published essays, I still don't have the identity of being a writer. And stranger still, even though I've been severely limited in my physical activities for over 20 years due to a chronic immune system condition, I still see myself as an athlete. Actually it doesn't really matter whether our identities make sense; what matters is how attached to them we are in our need to define ourselves.

Our self-images and our identities alike become part and parcel of the stories we weave about ourselves. Almost always these stories are skewed versions of the truth concerning who we are—our history, our victimhood, why we're angry, and on and on. We are caught in a story when we tell ourselves, "I'm worthless," or "I'm depressed," or "People should appreciate me." We're particularly caught when we say, "I'm this way because . . .," and then assign blame to others—our parents, say—or to something that happened to us. We can also know we're wrapped up in one of our many stories if we have the thought "I'm the kind of person who . . .," or "I'm not the kind of person who . . ." For example, "I'm the kind of person who has to be alone." Or "I'm not the kind of person who can be disciplined." The point is, most of our stories are self-deceptions in that they are partially manufactured versions of the truth—truths we adopt in order to feel a particular way. But living out of stories prevents us from living more genuinely.

Another universal version of living out of stories is holding onto our beliefs, many of which are illusions. For example, most of us have the belief, the illusion, that we are in control or that we *can* be in control. We cling to this illusion because the fear of loss of control is one of our strongest fears. Even when we see all the evidence to the contrary, we still live our day-to-day life with the illusion that we're in the driver's seat. In fact, many of our personality strategies are based on this illusion. For

instance, we think that following the control strategy of trying to please others will keep us safe from disapproval. Or we may think that if we follow the control strategy of trying harder, we can make life go as we would like. The point is, each closely held belief, such as the illusion of control, defines us and limits us in many ways that we can't even see.

Another universal illusion, or story, is the belief that what we "know" is the Truth. We believe our thoughts and our opinions, usually without ever questioning them, forgetting that they are all relative, flawed, and limited. When we have an opinion about someone or something, we're rarely aware that it's just an opinion. The illusion—or self-deception—is that what we're believing is the Truth. Yet in spite of the basic insanity of believing our thoughts, we do it all the time. We firmly believe what we want to believe—we often won't even entertain other possibilities. In light of the fact that we can deceive ourselves about almost anything, honest self-observation is often a study in living free from illusions, particularly the illusions that narrowly dictate how we live our lives.

Perhaps the most pivotal story we tell ourselves is the deep-seated illusion that we are one single, permanent self. Yet simple observation would show us that we are really a collection of many Me's, or personas. Which Me predominates depends on which self-image or identity we're believing in, and also on what other beliefs we're holding to in the moment. The mood we're in also determines how we see things—if we're in a good mood, other people may seem fine to us, whereas if our mood turns sour, the exact same people may seem to be irritating. Or a more telling example: We can see ourselves as trustworthy and upright, and firmly pledge that we won't engage in a particular behavior again, such as drinking or overeating. But two hours later we may find ourselves doing the precise thing we sincerely believed we wouldn't do. Often these versions of Me are not even in touch with one another, which shows once more that our psychological blinders don't allow one part to see another part.

Given that we have examples of similar situations every day, how can we continue to believe in the story of being a single, unchanging self? In fact, the whole notion that who we are is limited to the story of a single self is perhaps the main illusion that spiritual practice addresses. This is why one of the deepest teachings is that *there is no one special that we need to be*. In other words, to be inwardly free means that we don't have to live out of our self-images and identities; we don't have to feel a particular way; we don't have to believe the stories we tell ourselves—the stories that dictate who we are and how we live.

In order to experience the freedom of living a more authentic life, it is absolutely necessary that we drop our stories and illusions. This is certainly not easy to do, and it helps to know what it actually looks like to live authentically. First and foremost, living authentically means living with honesty—being willing to look at our own illusions and self-deceptions; questioning our self-images and self-limiting identities; examining the stories we weave about ourselves, including our stories about our past and who we are. Many of our convictions, ideals, and "shoulds" are just mental constructs, born out of our conditioning. Do we have the courage to see them for what they are? Can we experience the freedom of no longer using them as props?

We have to realize how our identities, convictions, and stories hold up our sense of purpose and importance in order to subtly make us feel special. We count on these props to give us a feeling of solidity and security. When we lose one of these props—losing our job, for example, or having a relationship failure—we naturally experience anxiety: without our familiar supports we are left with just ourselves, which is a frightening prospect. This is why we try to fill our lives with busyness and doing, as well as with our many diversions and entertainments—to guarantee that we are never left alone with ourselves. We don't want to feel that hole of emptiness. Some people even experience this

when they have no plans for the day. Upon awakening, instead of looking forward to a free day of relaxation, there's a feeling of being lost: "Who will I be? What will I do?" This means that the ability to be truly at home with oneself hasn't been cultivated.

As we see through our illusions, identities, and stories, they are less and less often able to dictate how we feel and how we live. This is what it means, in part, to live authentically—to no longer fool ourselves with illusions and self-deceptions. But in order to be free of them, we first have to see them with clarity and precision. What this requires more than anything is being open to our life: being willing to face the things we've never wanted to face. This includes our fears of rejection, unworthiness, and uncertainty. To be open, to be present, in turn allows us the possibility of no longer sleepwalking through life seeking comfort and approval—the chance to stop living with the illusion that we have endless time.

If we aspire to live more authentically, it's important that we don't set up unrealistic ideals—the ideal that we should always be present, or be able to drop all of our self-images, or never indulge ourselves in diversions. That would be a simplistic moral stance. A much healthier stance is that we at least need to *have the intention* to live more honestly and more awake. And also with more kindness toward ourselves whenever we falter, including when we don't look at ourselves with honesty, or when we waste time instead of meditating or holler at somebody just because we're in a bad mood. Feeling guilty when these things inevitably happen is unnecessary and not at all helpful. What is helpful, however, is to occasionally feel remorse for not living from our true heart, for turning away from our aspiration to live more awake.

On the long path of practice we move from living from our self-images and our many stories to living more from our deepest values, our most authentic self. When I reflect on the teachers I have most admired, the values that stand out the most are honesty in looking at one's life; not settling for complacency; living with presence, inner quiet, and inner strength; and living with appreciation and kindness—all of which contribute to true contentment. What gets in the way of this movement toward our authentic self, more than anything, is our insistence on identifying with the small self—preserving our narrow world of being special, of needing to look and feel a particular way.

Dropping our identification with our small self no doubt requires courage, because we will have to break free of the complacency of the familiar. One student described to me how she was very caught in her vanity, to the point where she thought constantly about what she would wear and how she would look. I suggested she devote one day a week to having a "bad-hair day," when she would consciously and purposefully make her hair look not quite okay—to help free herself from what others think. Naturally she had a lot of resistance, but after she tried it a few times, she found it so freeing she started doing an occasional "bad-clothes day" as well. Not *needing* to look a particular way gives us a direct taste of the freedom of no one special to be.

I remember when one of my daughters, who was around 5 at the time, became very enthusiastic about dressing herself. She would put on four or five outfits at a time, each one layered on top of the other so you would see just parts of each blouse or dress. The problem, from my small-minded point of view, was that she looked so strange, and at first I was a little embarrassed. But she was so excited about her outfits that I started to look anew and I saw that she had her own aesthetic, which was actually quite pleasing. The point is, on a very simple level, she was living authentically—not according to the convention of how she was supposed to look but according to her own inner sense. What's so sad is that we lose this naturally open mind as we grow older and we become more and more concerned with fitting in, with looking "right." Our self-image becomes our master.

One of my favorite aphorisms goes, “Dropping our facades, our identities, our stories—what remains? The answer: just being.”

Where this gets difficult is when it gets close to home. An example is from John Lennon’s song “Imagine”: “Imagine there’s no countries . . . / Nothing to kill or die for / And no religion too.” He was describing the freedom of giving up our fixed views, even on the things we take most for granted, such as our patriotism or our religious views. Or our most cherished facades and self-images. Or the stories we cling to as “our truth”—such as the story “I need someone to take care of me,” or “Life is too hard,” or “I’m worthless.” An excellent question to ask ourselves is “Who would I be without this story? This belief? This identity? This fear?” The question takes courage, because we have to look beyond the safety of the familiar. But living just for safety is dangerous—dangerous to anyone who wants to live authentically!

It also takes honesty and precision to look at ourselves deeply, because we are identified with these views, stories, and self-images as the unassailable truth. These things serve as a subtle barrier to experiencing our natural being, our most authentic self. This is why so much emphasis has to be placed on objective self-observation. Especially when we’re in the midst of discomfort, we need to ask, “What is my most believed thought right now?” Once we see the thought clearly, our identification with our emotional state begins to lessen. To help diminish this identification with the narrow subjective experience of being a Me even further, we can label our experience and thereby make it more objective. For example, if we find that we’re hurt or afraid, instead of thinking, “I’m hurt” or “I’m afraid,” we can say, “There is hurt” or “There is fear.” In so doing we are no longer equating “I” with hurt or fear. We can even use this technique with physical discomfort. Instead of saying, “I have a headache” or “My back hurts,” we can say, “There is pain.” By using this simple approach, we can begin to free ourselves from our intense identification with our emotions and even with our body. Sometimes just repeating the phrase “No one special to be” can break our identification with whatever emotion or story we’re caught in.

Once we have objectified our thought process, in order to free ourselves even more completely, we must bring awareness to what it feels like, physically, to be caught in Me. We ask ourselves, “What is this?” or “What is this experience?” We then focus like a laser on the subjective experience of living in the narrow inner sphere of Me-ness. What does it actually feel like, very specifically, to be holding onto an opinion, or to be caught in a self-image or an emotion?

When we do this repeatedly, the sense of who we are, with all our stories, loses its substantiality, its heaviness. There is a transformation out of the narrow subjective sphere into a more open experience of reality. When we bring awareness to our cherished self-images, such as our need to be special, they begin to lose their power over us. No longer puffing ourselves up or trying to stand out means we’re coming closer to living like a white bird in the snow. That is, we no longer feel the inner compulsion to see ourselves or be seen in a particular way—there is no ulterior agenda. The result is true humility—no one special to be.

To be no one special means we are psychologically free of the illusion of I-as-a-Me—we no longer see ourselves as a unique self, independent of the world around us. Not holding onto any particular view or opinion, or the stories about our past and who we are, or the many self-images and identities we use to define our Me—what remains? The presence of just being. This gives us an experiential taste of our most authentic self, with the inner knowing that who we truly are—our basic connectedness—is more than just our self-images, our stories, our body.

We can then begin to relate to the clouds of Myself as just clouds. We don't have to try to stop the clouds any more than we have to try to stop our thoughts. They don't go away, but there's a vast difference between identifying with the clouds and identifying with the vast sky within which the clouds appear. Identifying with the presence of just being, rather than identifying with I-as-a-Me, is like identifying with the sky, and from that awareness the clouds are never as real or as substantial as they appear from the inside. As awareness opens up, the objective fact of our basic connectedness becomes more than just an intellectual understanding.

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