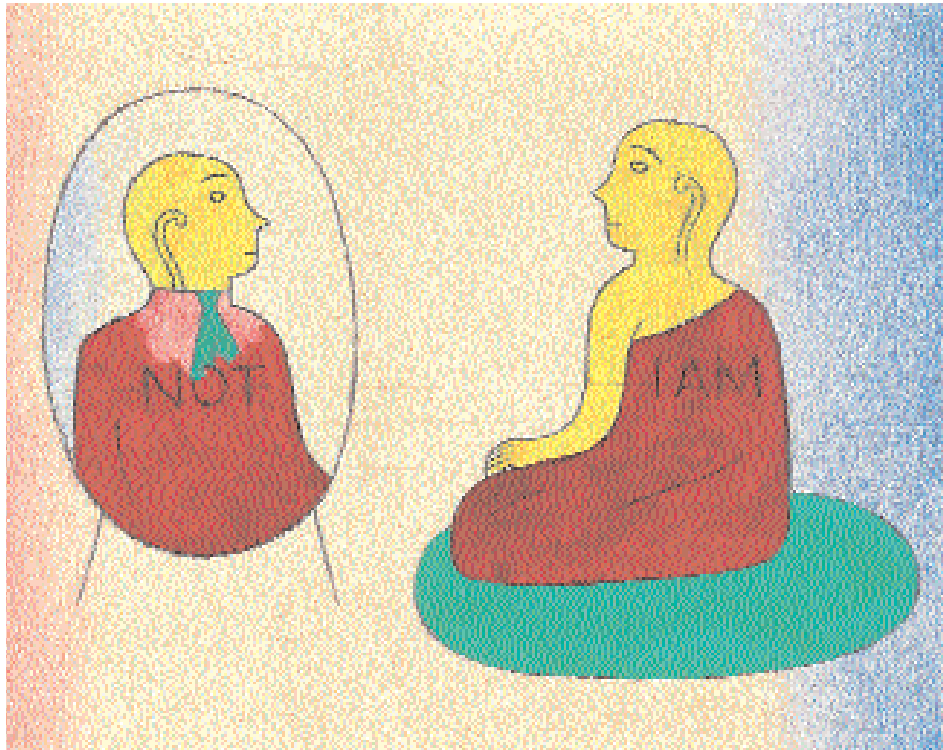


# Who Are You?

Understanding that your sense of identity is in constant flux can allow you to live more authentically.



This was a first for me. No yogi had ever communicated an inner struggle to me by evoking the image of Marilyn Monroe. But I was pleased by her question. It meant that she was ready to take the next step in using mindfulness and inquiry to explore her self-identity. Identity differentiation—learning what is *not self*—is fundamental in spiritual development, and it is one of the most difficult and confusing aspects of spiritual practice.

In previous retreats, the yogi had diligently worked with the mind-states that arose out of her fears and needs. During this retreat, she experienced the direct insight that her desires and concerns were unceasing and unappeasable; therefore, obsessively responding to one

ON THE FIFTH DAY of an annual weeklong silent meditation retreat I teach, a yogi who has attended for several years came to me for an interview. She was in her mid-30s, a vibrant, professional woman. When we first met, she had seemed tense and unforgiving of herself and was clearly contributing to her own suffering. Now there was a look of possibility on her face that I attributed partially to her work with mindfulness and the dharma. “I am definitely more at ease with myself now,” she reported. “I no longer get so identified with my struggles around career and relationship. But what do I do with what I call my Marilyn Monroe, my self-image that I’m the star?”

“I’m not talking about sex appeal,” she continued. “I am the admired one who can get everything done. It is how I view myself, and I work to have the world see me that way. My Marilyn Monroe wants to be worshipped for her competency. What do I do with her?”

after another would not bring lasting happiness. She realized that the only way she would ever experience freedom and peace of mind was to stop identifying with all of her desires as either *me* or *mine*. She was able to observe that desires and fears are ever-changing mind-states that arise whenever the necessary causes and conditions are present. This was the source of the new sparkle in her eyes. She was more at ease with life’s difficulties and no longer clinging to each outcome so intensely.

## You Are Not Your Public Persona

LIKE THE WOMAN at the retreat, you too may be ready to deepen your understanding of self-identity. The first phase in this process is to examine your relationship with your outer identity, or public face, then explore your inner identity, or what most people believe to be their *real self*.

Your outer identity is sometimes called your persona, which is the result of the interaction, or friction, between your inner and outer experiences. It includes an array of qualities that you present to others as being *you*. It's how you want others to see you—friendly, intimidating, modest, competent, helpless, nice, honest, powerful, sexy, wounded, and so forth. You select, organize, and present a certain package of these characteristics to others as though they were a you that is solid, consistent, and unchanging.

However, your persona is not entirely within your control. It is a combination of those traits you deem appropriate and those you have been conditioned by your environment to have. In so far as you are able, you choose the identity you want to reveal to the world from the thousands of thoughts, impulses, and bodily sensations you experience daily. This filtering process never stops; therefore, your persona is constantly changing, even though you may not notice. As an adult, you do much of this filtering automatically, although occasionally you may experience a conflict within your persona when an unwanted emotion surfaces and gets acted out in the world. You may have certain traits in your persona that you wish were not there; if so, it means they were so strongly conditioned in you that you cannot prevent them from being part of whom you present to the world.

There is nothing inherently wrong with having a persona; it is a social and psychological necessity that develops automatically from childhood through adulthood. Everyone needs a public face in order to function. When yogis in my classes first begin to realize some of the misperceptions they hold about their outer identity, I gently caution them, "True, you are not your persona, but don't leave home without it!"

For the yogi with the Marilyn Monroe inner image, a major element of her persona was being seen as a star—a competent, emotionally unshakable accomplisher admired by everyone. Having achieved some distance from her desires and fears, she was now realizing that she was overly identified with this image. Over the years, she had unconsciously come to believe that

she was "the competent one," even though sometimes her inner experience was just the opposite.

Now she could see that she had repeatedly suppressed or controlled those parts of her emotional experience that did not fit this aspect of her outer identity. Her mindfulness practice was revealing the misperception in such an identity, but she did not yet feel it was safe to change. If she wasn't the exemplar of competency, then who was she? She relied on her persona to inform how she spoke and acted and to determine what her priorities should be. Without identifying with her public face, how was she supposed to act?

"You can gradually drop your identity as the star of competency," I suggested to her. "You will discover that you will keep the skills that make you competent. Others will continue to recognize your effectiveness, but you won't be stuck in neurotically wanting them to recognize and applaud you. And you won't feel so constantly threatened that you might fail."

She listened, but I was not sure she believed me. It can seem threatening and disorienting to distance yourself from your persona. "If you are in touch with your deepest values, you will know what you want to say and how to act," I told her. "When you start to have some distance from your persona, your effectiveness actually increases, because you are not constricted by your fears. This is how you empower yourself to live a truly authentic life."

The same is true for you. Only be concerned with changing your persona if it is causing you or others harm. Otherwise, just continually remind yourself that it is not you; it is merely a much-needed artifice for interacting with the world on a daily basis. As you learn to be less identified with your persona, you develop greater social flexibility and more ease with yourself, even in uncomfortable situations. Your life then has new possibilities.

Notice that I am not suggesting that you change or abandon your persona, only that you need not be so attached to it. But can you even accept that you have a public face and that while it is *an* identity, it is not your *true* identity? I am not referring

to the roles you play in specific situations, such as tough lawyer, helpful salesperson, or "you can't push me any further" parent. I mean the person whom others meet when you want to be liked, accepted, and respected—the self that others see when you are being genuine, not manipulative.

### You Are Not Your Private Self

ONCE YOU BEGIN TO understand the truth of your persona, it is then possible to become more mindful of your inner identity—how you know and experience yourself within the constant stream of subjective mind-body events that constitute your life. Your inner experience is unique from everyone else's, which is why it seems to constitute a solid self, the *real* you.

It is your inner identity that thinks it's you. It imagines itself to be in charge, and it reacts as you experience bodily sensations (touch, smell, taste, sight, and sound) as well as thoughts in the form of inner words and images. Your inner identity is both the *knower*, which recognizes and responds to stimuli, and the *object* of its own knowing. Confusing, isn't it?

Your inner identity has many traits and feelings that are not revealed in your persona, because they are more vulnerable and socially unacceptable. The inner identity often contains qualities that contradict qualities in the persona. It even has qualities that conflict with one another in itself! Yet despite all the contradictions of your internal experience, most of the time you persist in identifying with this ever-changing "knowing and experiencing" self as the *true* you, a solid self. However, when the inner identity is looked at more closely, it, like the persona, is also impermanent.

As the woman in the interview started to free herself from identifying with her persona, she also began examining her inner identity, one aspect of which was represented by Marilyn Monroe. It is not unusual for an image to arise that symbolizes part of your inner identity. Or you may know your inner identity as clusters of emotions that arise at different times based on stimuli, memories, and associations. Or it may take the form of an ongo-

ing story you tell yourself and continually update. The ways in which you imagine and organize your inner identity are endless, and by definition only you can truly know yourself at this level. Because your inner identity is unique and subjective, it feels precious; therefore, you feel more alive when you are being this more genuine self than when you are being your persona. Sharing your inner identity with another is what it means to be intimate.

When the yogi came to me with the question about her inner image, it meant that she was on the threshold of realizing the possibility of greater freedom of mind—the freedom that comes when you treat your inner identity with the same nonattachment as your persona. Her challenge is to empower herself to feel the desire for love, admiration, and connectedness in its direct and natural form without hiding behind her persona. As she learns to do this, her relationship with the energy of the Marilyn Monroe image will change. It may become more playful or a source of strength. Or it may become integrated into her whole being and disappear, so she need not do anything with the image other than be with it and whatever else arises along with it.

Can you imagine doing this? Would you be willing to allow the inner you—who is afraid, uncertain, and wanting—to just be itself? In therapy, you develop an understanding of the inner identity by exploring the roots and contents of its images, stories, or clusters of emotions. Although this is a valuable process that usually increases self-acceptance, it does not necessarily lead to the freedom that comes from insight meditation, which doesn't concentrate on the content of the image or story but rather on the nature of its existence. In mindfulness meditation, you practice simply being with the image and seeing it clearly. First you have the insight that the image exists and that it is a central part of your inner identity. Then comes the realization that while it is *part* of you, it is also *not you*.

As with the persona, if your inner identity is not causing harm to you or others, there is no need to change it. Instead, you can practice mindfulness to see that it has

been formed by causes and conditions. The insight then arises that when you cling to this identity, you create a solid self that separates you from others. It is this creation of a separate self that the Buddha said is the source of all of our suffering.

Keep in mind that I am not suggesting that your inner experience is not real. Nor am I saying it is not personal. It is quite genuine. But your sense of its separateness is a mistake. Your inner identity is part of the co-arising, ever-changing reality that is all around you. It is a personal, subjective, and unique interpretation of life as it unfolds. No one else can ever have even one single moment of your experience, but that does not mean you are separate.

### The Real You

THE BUDDHA taught that the phenomenon of identity is created moment by moment in the mind when five factors come together—bodily sensations, feelings of pleasantness and unpleasantness, perceptions of whatever is stimulating the experience, mental formations around the stimulus, and consciousness that experiences the entire show. The stimulus may come from outside the body, from within the body, or from the mind.

Regardless of its origin, you are aware of the stimulus and respond to it as either pleasant or unpleasant. This is natural, but when you identify with wanting the feeling to continue or to go away and start to grasp at the desire, you give birth to a separate, solid self. Really all that is happening is that you are reacting to something that is either pleasant or unpleasant. You can witness this in daily life. Watch how many times you become caught in winning an argument, receiving recognition, or fulfilling a certain desire. Does any of this lead to lasting happiness? Isn't each desire simply replaced by yet another one, which may or may not ever be fulfilled?

At first you may think, "Well, I must be that response," even if it is temporary. But then you quickly see that your responses often contradict one another or are constantly changing, and that many times what you say, think, or even feel

does not seem like the *real* you at all. Even more troubling is that it can sometimes be painful and disheartening to be you. Life often does not work out according to your plans. It is filled with struggle and uncertainty, and in the end the *you* that you identify with gets physically sick, mentally feeble, and dies. It is a relief to know that your sense of identity is part of the *not self*, or what the Buddha called *anatta*.

Understanding the truth about your identity comes with an unexpected benefit: You gain the ability to let your persona gradually become a more complete and honest reflection of your inner experience. This means that you feel sufficiently clear, confident, and secure in your inner identity to let go of the need to screen out so much of you or to package yourself in the world. Many yogis experiencing this benefit, like the woman in the interview, report feeling more authentic in how they meet the world. They often describe this change as, "I've shed a burden" or "I feel freed from a constant tension that's always been part of me."

As you mature spiritually, you gain a capacity that is even more astonishing. You learn to carry both levels of your identity so lightly that at times, others will experience you as simply an "awakened heart." In those moments, you are not identified with either the persona or the inner you. You feel as though you are directly experiencing life without fear or wanting. There is a distinct feeling of being alive, connected to life. These moments are the fruit of mindfulness practice, arising spontaneously.

In gaining nonattachment to your outer and inner identity, you are not forsaking the sense of your life as being precious and sacred. It is fine to experience the personal—just don't take it personally! You are blessed to be human. You possess consciousness and awareness, which allow you to experience oneness with the Absolute—what some call God, or Brahman, or Emptiness.

You also have the ability to know the Absolute as it manifests itself in nature and all else that is of this world. Yet to fully realize either of these blessings, you

must accept the pain of your experience of separateness even though you know it to be an illusion. Then you can realize that your sense of a separate identity actually serves a purpose—it allows you to know yourself as part of the Oneness in its manifest form.

Marilyn Monroe was once married to Joe DiMaggio, who was one of the greatest baseball players in history and who was known for his modesty. Upon returning from an overseas tour of military posts, Monroe reportedly said to DiMaggio, “It was so wonderful, Joe. You never heard such cheering.” “Yes, I have,” he quietly replied.

In the Absolute, veneration, admiration, and love are all just energy. Each of us has moments when we get a large or small taste of it. As Marilyn Monroe’s tragic life and death teach us, happiness and freedom are not based on how much we receive but on how we experience whatever life presents. This is the identity of the awakened heart. ■

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*Phillip Moffitt is a member of the Spirit Rock Teachers’ Council in Woodacre, California, and teaches vipassana meditation at Turtle Island Yoga center in San Rafael, California.*