

WHAT IS THIS “I”?

By Howard Cohn

Rest in natural great peace this exhausted mind beaten
helpless by karma and neurotic thought like the relentless
fury of the pounding waves in the infinite ocean of
samsara. — Nyoshel Kempo Rinpoche

THIS PERSON CALLED “I”

When we meditate, doing the relatively simple task of noticing the sensations that arise from breathing, uninvited, an incredible display occurs. At times this mindscape is beautiful and harmonious, at other times chaotic or anxious or full of fear. Sometimes our experience is rapturous and wonderful and we are captivated by it. Other times we are so sensitive and vulnerable that we feel as if we have no skin. We become overwhelmed and want everything to stop. But whatever the feeling, the flow of change is continuous.

We start to see that we don't decide what comes into our minds. If we were in control we probably wouldn't choose 90 percent of our thoughts and images. But unbidden it comes — this miraculous fountain of creativity that forms our inner landscape. We create a world of concepts out of what we see before our eyes — the various colors and shapes in the room, the sounds around us — and we believe that these things are outside of us rather than arising within our own mind. Because of its forcefulness, we believe that this is what our life is.

The strongest concept that our minds create is the idea of the per-

son called “I.” We sculpt countless disparate thoughts and feelings into a solid image identified as “I.” Thought by thought, we build this “I” until it becomes a real person embellished with a past and a future. We reinforce the idea of this “I” further by adding an “How am I doing?” commentary. We compare ourselves to ideas of what we should be like, and either we're doing well and are worthy of praise or we're not hitting the mark and deserve criticism. For most of us, self-criticism is the most frequently heard refrain.

Most of the time we're so hypnotized by our thinking and our ideas, by the stories our minds weave about our identity, that we don't notice that they are just thoughts, like empty bubbles, and we miss the space of awareness in which all of this takes place. We don't examine where these thoughts arise from. The good news is that our mind has the capacity to examine itself — to watch the carnival it creates and, by doing so, to look into its own nature. It can become aware of itself. Because we get captivated by the story of our life, this present awareness is easily overlooked. What happens when we are momentarily free of



Photo: Carol Pratt

Howard Cohn

ideas and thoughts of this “I?” When simply resting in awareness, undistracted by our thoughts, the whole story of who we think we are vanishes. With the cessation of the series of thoughts of “I,” “me,” and “mine” there remains just awareness.

THE UNDELUDED MIND

This awareness is sometimes referred to as the undeluded mind. We might imagine that the undeluded mind is somehow beyond our ordinary mind, beyond our capacity to see. We tend to think that once we get rid of all the parts of ourselves we don't like — the greed, the hatred, and the ig-

norance — we have a chance to realize the undeluded mind. Most of us think that it is to be found in the future or in some far-away place. But I would like to suggest that this undeluded mind is really the nature of your own awareness. It is the indescribable substratum of the carnival, always right here and now. You need not lift yourself out of this instant to discover this natural wakefulness. In truth, we are always present; we only imagine ourselves to be in one place or another. While you are thinking about frolicking on the beach in Mexico, you may not be mindful but have you really gone anywhere?

Without closing your eyes, gently turn your attention to awareness itself. Let go of any compelling internal dialogue that your mind is spinning right now and look beyond the story to where it arises from—look directly at your awareness. Relax. Instead of letting your attention be drawn to the drama in your mind, turn to the awareness that recognizes the drama. Notice the natural wakefulness, the immediacy and freshness that being aware consists of. If you are focusing on your breath, besides noticing the sensations as they appear, notice the awareness that registers them.

Continue resting in this awareness, not looking for anything—just simply being aware of the spaciousness—being awareness itself. As you rest in this awareness, notice: Does it have any limit? Any shape? Does it have boundaries, or does it spread infinitely in all directions? Does it have walls? Can you find any edges? Some spiritual traditions speak of awareness as boundless and empty like the sky. But it *isn't* just empty — it has

the capacity to register whatever appears in it. This whole fantastic world appears in awareness.

As Padmasambhava states in *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, “When you seek your mind in its true state, it cannot be seen. In its true state mind is naked, immaculate, transparent, empty, not realizable as a separate thing, but as the unity of all things. Your own mind is not separate from other minds. It is originally as pure and empty as the sky.”

We don't have to create awareness — it is always here. It has no limits; there's no inside or outside. Awareness exists prior to thinking, before we give a name, a feeling or a memory to something that appears in our mind.

When we rest in this awareness, before adding thoughts or ideas about who “I” am, there is simply a gap between our memories from the past and our ideas about the future. Then we rest in this awareness — staying in the present moment — which is a kind of razor's edge, a dimensionless point between the past and the future.

In this space right here in your present awareness, where is your suffering? In this instant of awareness we are not consulting our memory to remind us of our suffering. We are free of the past. There may be physical discomfort or even intense pain, but in this instant of awareness where is the mental suffering?

As you continue to rest in your natural awareness, are you lacking anything in this moment? When you don't refer to the past, or to ideas of how things should be different from what they are now, what is lacking? When we are aware, we are not bound by the limited notions we have about our-

selves. Ordinarily we define ourselves by our thinking. This fly-wheel of thoughts that arises based on our memory forms a picture we call ourselves, and we make it real by being unmindful. We fail to see that the thoughts are momentary and that they could never capture our true nature. We miss what Thich Nhat Hanh has called our “inherent completeness” in just this moment.

So how do we forget this? We've all had moments when we are not lost in the story of “me,” when we're just here. These simple moments of being fully present are nourishing, complete, free.

ATTACHMENT TO “I”

We turn away from this simplicity and look elsewhere for peace and



I can't over emphasize the importance of planning and goal setting in achieving your long range objectives.

freedom. We devote ourselves to that which appears and disappears — that which is moving and changing — rather than the natural spaciousness of mind that is ever present, ever available. Although this kind of language suggests a backdrop apart from things that come and go, all experiences arise in awareness and are inseparable from it. But we tend to grab at that which arises and vanishes — our thoughts and feelings, our bodies and our identities — overlooking the refuge of awareness itself. And as a result we know no real lasting peace. Jack Kornfield often quotes a woman named Jocelyn King who said, “I don’t understand why most people prefer the quicksand of somethingness to the firm ground of emptiness.”

Out of our natural open awareness arises our story made up of thoughts and feelings that produce the sense that “I am so-and-so.” The moving picture we call by a name: “I am Howie.” We complete the picture by identifying with this name.

But the idea that “I am this body” and the thought that “I am so-and-so” are just fabrications. We construct this sense of self and then set out to comfort, secure, give pleasure to, heal and of course enlighten this mythical “I.”

For most people, it seems that the most familiar refrain of this “I” is “I am not okay as I am.” “I” am too fat, too skinny, too poor, too weak, too ugly, too tall, too short, unworthy, and so on. In some form or other, we repeatedly think, “I am separate,” and we thoroughly believe that this view and the feeling that accompanies it are the absolute truth. Like a wave that says, “I am lost and separated from the ocean and I need to find my way

back to my true home,” not realizing that all along it is already at home, that the wave has never been separated from the ocean. It is immersed in what it has been seeking. Our notions that “I am this” or “I am not OK as I am” are similar. A thought arises and we believe that it is true. From years of conditioning, this becomes one of our most practiced beliefs. But this notion of “I” is simply a thought.

We refuse to acknowledge this impermanence and identify with this illusory entity called “I.” We devote ourselves to improving it,



enlarging it, satisfying it, defending it. Most of our lives are occupied in this manner, and yet no matter how much time and energy we spend fortifying our sense of ourselves, it is a flimsy structure that can fall apart under the slightest attack.

Occasionally, immersed in an activity such as meditating, watching a sunset, having a romantic encounter, we drop our story line, but then pick it right back up again. We have grown attached to this small sense of ourselves and even though our attachment causes pain, we choose the familiarity of the “I” over the ease of being open and spacious.

The Buddha called this attachment to the concept of “I” the most deep and subtle attachment. We assume that an abiding self or agent is behind our intentions, perceptions, actions, and thoughts. In our ordinary language, we refer to this agent when we say things like, “I’m feeling bad today”, “I’m feeling enthusiastic”, “I’m concerned.” We speak this way naturally, as though we really knew who is being referred to. What is this “I”? That’s the big question that we’re often not ready to tackle. As one of my friends put it: “We’re circling the wagons, not really ready to go inside and see what’s there.”

The attachment to the concept of “I” naturally leads to the next big attachment, the idea of “mine,” which further supports the concept of “I.” Goenka-ji, the Indian Insight Meditation master, says. “There would be no problem if what one called ‘mine’ were eternal and the ‘I’ remained to enjoy it eternally. But sooner or later, ‘I’ is separated from ‘mine.’” My pain, my zafu, my body, my thoughts, my memories are all impermanent.

Many years ago, I practiced in both Burma and the United States with a very challenging teacher, U Pandita Sayadaw. He was the successor to the Venerable Mahasi (who is largely responsible for the accessibility of Vipassana meditation to lay people throughout the world). It seemed to me that to some people he was very friendly but toward me he was quite stern. At the time, I thought I was a hot-shot yogi and I think he saw me coming. Perhaps he thought that I was arrogant and needed to be shaken up a little bit. My interviews with him were very different from those I had experienced in the West.

The outward purpose of the interview was to report to him exactly what had been happening to me during meditation — just the bare facts of my experience—no elaboration, no interpretations. He wasn't interested in my analysis of what was happening or what it meant about my practice. Here's an example of a report:

When observing the rise and fall of the abdomen I notice stretching and contracting. After two breaths the mind wanders. I notice the wandering after a little forward jerk of the body. I then notice a smooth vibration throughout the body.

And so on. This style of reporting was actually a wonderful training to see the extent to which I embellish experience.

When I entered his room, he would often pick up a book and start reading. Or he would just ignore me. Other times he would question my every word. Naturally, "I" didn't like this. As this went on, day after day, I noticed that I was getting more and more enraged. Often, I would spend the days between interviews planning my revenge. How easily "I" crumbled under his scrutiny and indifference.

It's hard to believe that we are, as one of my teachers says, "neck deep in grace." This story of self, this sense of "I", is unreliable because it's tethered to ideas and beliefs. It's tethered to the body, which won't stay the way we want it to. It's tethered to time, which is always running out. It requires a projection — the creation of a picture of ourselves as a static person moving forward into the future, and this picture is reinforced by the

habit of waiting for the future to occur.

It's useful to notice the subtle quality of our waiting. On retreat, we wait for some expected experience, for the bell to ring at the end of a meditation, for the end of the walking period, for lunch, or for the retreat to end. We wait for our experience to improve. We are obsessed with what is next. Waiting is a trick of the mind to look away from this moment for peace. It reinforces our sense that the present is not enough as it is, that "I" am not enough as "I" am. We wait for a future that will never arrive be-

FROM WEI WU WEI:

Why are you unhappy?
Because 99.9 percent,
Of everything you think, and
Of everything you do,
Is for yourself —
And there isn't one.

— quoted by Ken Wilber,
No Boundary

cause the future is just a thought in the present. There is no actual future. Has anyone seen a future? It's a creation of our mind.

It's the same with the past. We define our sense of self from past experiences. We remember our families, our parents, our childhood experiences. We take these memories to be reality, and we have feelings about them. Some make us happy and some make us suffer. It's sometimes difficult to remember that we are *thinking* of the past in the present. As the famous *Advaita Vedanta* master Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj said, "Reality is what makes the present so vital, so different from past and future which are merely mental."

Our attempt to secure a sense of "I" leaves us exhausted. We find

ourselves tired of wanting, of impatience — waiting for that moment when we feel peaceful, when "I" feel satisfied. We suffer from pain, grief, boredom, loneliness, and fear — all perpetuated by this cherished belief in "I." Our minds and bodies become weary searching for security for this "I." We are tired of wanting to be seen and to have our needs met. This is what the Buddha called *dukkha* or unsatisfactoriness — the truth of our conditioned existence.

MOVING TOWARD FREEDOM

At some point, in the midst of our suffering, a thought arises — something like: "I want to be free. I want to wake up. I want peace." And it is likely that the one whom you take yourself to be, even as you listen, longs to be free.

This "I," this sense of self, wants its own destruction. It wants to stop getting in the way of the fullness of things. But at the same time it guards its existence, cherishing its survival. We seek peace and then quickly run from it when it arises. So we're dealing with these two forces in our minds. We need to be kind to ourselves when we see this all-too-common battle.

You might notice this when you begin to experience some quiet in your own practice. What happens? What starts to disappear? Probably the sense of self. However, in that moment, as the body and mind harmonize and we experience the moment very simply, we often begin to feel afraid and excited at the same time. Frequently, a subtle creeping thought starts — "Wow, I'm really getting deep now. I'm really close." The "I" will create an identity around any experience — even silence. Many

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years ago, on retreat, I noticed that my mind had become quite silent. Just when it felt as though I was going to vanish into thin air, I began to think, "Hmm, I'm a pretty good yogi, am I not?" I described to the teacher what was happening and she said: "Mind is a tricky bastard." It seeks its survival as a continued sense of "I."

Mindfulness helps us to wake up, to discern the difference between our concepts and the reality of the moment, which is indescribable. A power grows in our practice when we observe the magical display of experience over and over again. As our concentration and mindfulness become stronger, we deepen our direct, intuitive understanding of what the Buddha described as the three characteristics of all experience: *anicca* impermanence (*dukkha*), unsatisfactoriness, and selflessness (*anatta*). As we sit in silence we begin to clearly understand that thoughts, physical sensations, and feelings arise and pass away. They are constantly changing. Because everything reveals itself to be impermanent, we realize that there is no reliable refuge or lasting fulfillment to be found. There is no one experience that will make

"me" happy. We come to realize that everything is happening by itself. The thoughts think themselves. There is no thinker. Physical sensations change constantly by themselves. Feelings are out of control. They don't arise or pass according to anyone's will or wish.

In the midst of this profound drama, the question may arise: "If 'I' cannot be found in the body and there is no 'I' to be found in the thoughts and feelings, well then, who am I?"

I can say with some confidence that when you find the answer you will have found that which you have been seeking all along. And with the cessation of seeking comes the cessation of our ideas of being bound, separate or incomplete — and our ideas of freedom. What is left is what we started with — our own natural awareness. Awareness is ever present, timeless, not dependent on comings and goings, thoughts, images, sensation, moods, or memories. It is an empty presence that embraces all things.

When we sense this right here and now, we fall in love with this awareness, this fullness of mind. We *are* this awareness. We recognize that each moment of mindfulness is a moment of returning to this innate freedom. And when

we are honest with ourselves about how often we fall into delusion or forgetfulness, we recommit ourselves to remember this wakefulness as much as possible.

I'd like to close with something from one of the great Tibetan meditation masters of the 20th century, Kalu Rinpoche: "You are the Buddha. Then why do you not feel it? Why don't you know it utterly, through and through. Because there's a veil in the way, which is attached to appearances, such as the belief that you are not the Buddha, that you are a separate individual, an *anatman*. If you cannot lift this veil at once, then it must be dissolved gradually. If you've seen through it totally, just once, even one glimpse, then you can see through it all the time. Wherever you are, whatever presents itself, however things seem to be, simply refer to that ever-present, inherent spaciousness, openness, and clarity." □

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that." We're constantly looking and are absolutely ready to seize on any reason for delaying. We want to travel, not arrive.

For some people the seeing can be immediate and for others it might take a longer time.

Well, yes, but I do think the great message of Ramana for me is that it's available now, just as we are in full strength. Of course people say, "Well, Douglas, you're misleading people because you're giving the impression that it's too darned easy." Well, I'm not, I hope,

because I always add that practice is essential. You have to practice it. But it is not the practice for achievement of some future goal. The practice lubricates the wheels of one's life. It's not practice for some remote end; it's for the adjustment and living of one's life now. The practice is to make stable and effective in your life what you see to be the truth, the central truth of who you are. Of course, Ramana says this in many ways. This immensity, this imperishable luminosity, this clarity, this immobility, it's totally obvious when you turn around and look. □