



**BEYOND THE  
MASQUERADE**

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Hidden, as though secreted away in an invisible wardrobe, a formidable collection of masks is in our possession. More impressive than anything to be found at a masked ball, we use them to negotiate our way through life, intending to protect and benefit the individual that lies behind them. Rather like actors, we don different personas to fit the different scenes and acts that the play of life presents to us. Unlike actors, though, we often fool ourselves into believing that the various faces we present to the world are real. Sometimes they can be helpful, such as when we have to summon up courage that we don't feel so as to get us through difficult circumstances; at other times they can cause ourselves and others needless problems because our words and actions lack sincerity.

Insincere, we are incomplete and manifest weakness. Sincerity is about developing inner strength, about tapping into our true potential and gradually becoming fully realised human beings. To do that while wearing a mask isn't easy. Although there are countless stories of enlightened teachers deliberately presenting different personas to meet the needs of their students, for us it is necessary to learn to know when we are using a mask and why. As we are not enlightened yet, the challenge facing us ordinary mortals is to overcome the tendency to put on false

appearances without thinking. In other words, we have to be true to ourselves and not simply protect a vulnerable ego. That means we have to develop complete awareness of our internal reactions - of our thoughts, feelings and the beliefs that condition how we think, speak and act.

What is a mask? How do we know we are wearing one? When we act in a way that does not reflect our thoughts and feelings and instead conveys an untruth, we are wearing a mask. It is, or can be, a combination of language, tone of voice, bodily or facial expression and action, and there needn't be a deliberate intention to deceive. Using words such as, "I'm fine," when we are not because we want to keep our feelings private is a common example; whether that is good or not depends on the circumstances. It's the sort of thing we all do from time to time, perhaps to conserve energy rather than talk about things we would rather not, or maybe to save causing someone else concern. On the other hand, the circumstances may allow, and even demand, a more truthful response - to a close friend, for example; so for us to be able to be sincere depends to a great extent on trust, the feeling that it is safe to expose to someone else what is on our mind and in our heart.

Pretending we haven't heard a question and changing the subject is a tactic we might use when we feel threatened by the direction a conversation is heading. That is a deliberate act adopted even by children - we learn the art of masquerading early! But perhaps the saddest type of false face, which we may be totally unaware of

putting on, is that of paying attention when we are not. Most of us are not brilliant listeners – but will wear the countenance of one even when the mind has wandered off. It is sad because the greatest thing we can give to another person is ourselves, our full presence; when we are not listening, we are absent. We are faking the gift of listening.

However, as we are, by and large, emotional creatures in whom desire, anger, attachment, pride and so forth can arise and colour our thinking and behaviour, to go around completely unmasked towards all and sundry could lead to disastrous consequences. The world might well be a place of learning and experience but although we are all in the same school, we are not all in the same class - we have different needs and varying levels of understanding. Being sincere is not about exposing all our warts to the world.

Our journey through life necessitates using many personas and sometimes keeping things private is as important as baring our soul. But where does that leave sincerity? It is not quite the same as honesty, which implies ethical thinking, words and action that are necessary for the right-thinking person throughout life. Sincerity has more to do with how we convey meaning and feelings, and as that type of communication depends on the relationship that is involved, inevitably there are degrees of sincerity. From the standpoint of inner growth or spiritual realisation, the most important person with whom we must always be fully sincere is ourselves.

Going beyond the masquerade means facing up to ourselves fully and completely. That requires great courage because we all have aspects of personality with which we are not entirely comfortable. Our patterns of thinking and habitual reactions, the deep feelings and fears which we would rather remain buried, the tendency, perhaps, to procrastinate or to be impatient - such things and many more lurk below the surface and it is far easier, or so we may think, to avoid dealing with them and cast our attention elsewhere. But we all know in our heart of hearts that continual avoidance is a mistake and that eventually we have to face up to who we are. That is the reality of being sincere, so how do we do it?

There are two essential principles that have to be grasped. One is the necessity of slowing the mind down so that the incessant stream of thoughts that prevents us from focusing clearly is abated. The second is to pierce through the layers of veneer that we cover ourselves with and find the real person that lies beneath. The first of these principles is to bring about clarity so that we are aware of what is going on in us and around us – this is a fundamental aspect of the practice of mindfulness; the second, penetrating the veneers, requires a combination of understanding and looking into the nature of mind. If we are willing to embrace these two approaches, we can take on the challenge of becoming complete.

*"Piercing through"* is normally achieved through meditation, although there are

many instances of realisation coming about through the practice of devotion. They are not separate paths because at some point the process of meditation results in spontaneous, sometimes blissful, experiences of the heart; and devotion requires one-pointedness of both mind and heart so is in effect a type of meditation. But the Western mind generally finds it difficult to undertake the necessary practices that lead to realisation. It is no use attempting a deep, introspective meditation until the mind is ready for it. If we did, it would be like applying paint to a flaky surface - nothing would stick. Because we are all so busy, if we are going to embrace sincerity we have to learn to calm the mind first.

Increasing numbers of people are showing genuine interest in learning how to calm the mind and body. Simple meditations, yoga and t'ai chi are more popular in the West than they have ever been. Part of the reason for this may be that we have become far too busy being busy. Being overwhelmed by thoughts and emotions leads to a feeling of being out of touch with oneself and as a society we have, sadly, excelled at that. So perhaps there is a growing sense of distaste with a mode of life that requires a continually switching from one mask to another. Maybe we have an inkling that life is passing us by whenever we are not completely at ease in the present moment.

Sometimes we may recognise the need for sincerity but are not yet willing to come out from behind our various masks because we can always do that tomorrow. But there is no tomorrow; there is only

now. And if we learn to live in the present moment, engaging fully in it and not wishing we were somewhere else or doing something else, the masks will drop away by themselves.

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Andrew Marshall is the author of a number of articles that are published on [www.joyousness.org](http://www.joyousness.org) and [www.fieryheart.org](http://www.fieryheart.org). The articles may be copied for private use provided they are copied in their entirety and that no charge whatsoever is made for them.

Andrew has written two books – [The Great Little Book of Happiness](#) was published in 2008 and [Awakening Heart](#) was released on 1st June 2011. Both are available from bookshops and from [www.radiantsunbooks.com](http://www.radiantsunbooks.com).

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