
A Cure for Mistaken Identity

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Throughout life, we see change. Everything is a succession of changes. Nothing, it is said, is permanent except change. Yet within us, something remains constant – not our mind, because that is an almost unceasing stream of thoughts; not our emotions, because they are as volatile as anything can be, and certainly not the body, as that grows, matures, ages and eventually dies. But who is it who sees these changes and experiences them? Who is it who looks in the bathroom mirror and sees the face that is not the same as it once was? Who hears the sound of the birds and the traffic? Who tastes the food and smells the fragrance and the stink of life? Who walks or sits, sews or paints, runs, works or practises t'ai chi? If we say, “I do” or “me”, we are missing something and have not thought or looked deeply enough.

Most people have various markers that they identify themselves with – name, family, appearance, education, work and so on – but those things have no permanence whatsoever. Until we were given our name soon after birth, we had no name. John was not John until he was named John. None of the markers that point to our identity can possibly say who we really are. Some people change their names in later life because they are not happy with the ones that

have been given to them. Of course, we should be happy with the name by which we are known but changing one's name cannot change one's *true* nature. If we identify ourselves with those things, those markers, then inevitably we will experience a sense of threat when any of them is in jeopardy. Sickness, ageing and death, loss of surroundings and of loved ones, loss of property or wealth and loss of status are things that many people fear because the comfortable familiarity of daily life and the sense of “I” are threatened. The biggest threat to all these markers of identity is death and so, in our culture at least, most people prefer not to think about it, less still to mention it. If society were able to address the issues surrounding death in more than emotional and financial terms, it would help all of us to overcome the many fears of loss that are so prevalent due to the conditioning that occurs from childhood onwards. Perhaps we might even come to realise that death is a significant event in the evolution of consciousness; if we did, we might value life and every moment in it much more highly.

If we continue with our mistaken identity, we will see life as something that both gives and takes away. When it takes things that we value or are attached to away from us, we will suffer in some way and, when it gives to us from its bounteous reserves, we may feel happy for a while. So our mental and emotional states fluctuate throughout life as our circumstances change. Sometimes things are good, sometimes not so good; sometimes we smile and sometimes a long face is our gift to the

world. Yet there is something decidedly illogical about this up and down outlook on life. It makes no more sense than it does for a football supporter, for example, to suffer the highs and lows of victory and defeat encountered in the games played by “his” or “her” team. There is a certain insanity in identifying ourselves and our happiness with events over which we have no possible control; yet that is what we do, day in, day out. Like hamsters, we tread the wheel of life and it goes round and round until we drop from exhaustion. What we have to do is regain our sanity by seeing who we *really* are instead of who we *think* we are. To do that, it is necessary to look beyond the obvious, the form, and see who it is who has the thoughts, feelings and perceptions that make up the personality we have assumed.

Actually, if we succeed in looking deeply into our true nature, we will see that there is no-one who possesses a personality or who has this quality or that. If we look beyond the body, beyond our feelings, emotions and desires, beyond our thoughts, perceptions and beliefs, the nature of “I” becomes pure and boundless. Instead of an individual “I”, there is simply reflective consciousness. Like a mirror that is pure and untarnished, appearances arise in it but consciousness remains consciousness. The mirror does not cease to be a mirror, no matter what reflections appear in it. As we look around our world, appearances arise in consciousness through the senses; thoughts arise in consciousness through the mind. No matter what arises, it does so in consciousness. Consciousness remains as it is.

If we watch a film or a play, intellectually we may know that what unfolds is not reality; but if the story is a good one, we may be drawn into it and for a while it becomes real. Story-telling is a great art and there is immense skill in captivating an audience so that the imagination of the listener or spectator is engaged. The writer, director or narrator knows that it is just a tale being portrayed but a child, and indeed an adult, may become totally lost in the story for a time. From one point of view, that of the limited view of the imagination of the spectator, there is a real world being lived out; from another, it is known to be artificial. But it is possible to enjoy what is being observed without being taken in by it. We may know that the conjurer is carrying out a wonderful illusion with his sleight of hand but we can still enjoy watching the trick. Knowing that a blazing red and pink sky is caused by the scattering of sunlight on particles in the atmosphere does nothing to limit our enjoyment, amazement or even awe at the beauty of a particularly spectacular sunset. Similarly, we can enjoy a tale even though we know it is a work of fiction but, if we are completely drawn into a story or any other work of illusion, our mind and our awareness become restricted. Instead of seeing things for what they really are – an appearance – we see them as though they were entirely real; we cease to be an observer of events because our focus has narrowed and we have become involved.

How is this relevant to consciousness and self-identity? Everything that arises in our consciousness can either be observed or it can take on an appearance

of reality. When our emotions are in turmoil, it is very difficult to be an observer because the currents are so strong that our awareness is almost entirely on the feelings that are arising. Instead of simply being aware that an emotion – anger or fear, for example – is arising in us, we tend to identify with the feeling: “I am angry”, “I am afraid” and so on. At other times, when the emotions are on an even keel, we still tend to identify with the traditional things that a person is associated with – “my house, my job, my car, my family, my status or lack of status, my body, my name, my needs” etc. – and our thought processes revolve around them. Like an avid reader of novel who has become totally engrossed, we have lost the real view. On the other hand, to be an observer of life, the awareness needs to be drawn out of the mundane so that we can see the wood instead of just the trees. This means that instead of being focused on a point and our awareness having collapsed to that point, we need to enjoy an expansion of consciousness so that we can also see the wider view. It is rather like walking a little further up the mountain and seeing a wonderful vista opening up. This is not to say that one should lose all touch with life – far from it; whatever we do should be done with mindfulness, but true mindfulness means being fully aware of what we are doing *and* maintaining awareness of body, feelings, thoughts and perceptions. To do this requires a considerable degree of inner stillness and to attain that demands much self-training and dedication.

We all have many things to do and most of us have been conditioned by life to do

as much as possible, whether that is in the home, at work, in education or socially. The tendency is to measure quality of life by how much is done or achieved rather than by how it is done. For quality of life and for our awareness to develop and ripen, we should perhaps be a little more bothered about *how* we do things. By bringing full awareness into what we do, we will evolve and go along with the stream of life. With practice, the awareness will quite naturally become clearer and steadier. As it becomes stronger, it will tend less and less to collapse into a point and, over time, there will come an increasing sense of identity with *wholeness*. That identification with wholeness produces inner strength, joy and a natural love for all life. Gradually, the sense of “I” and “me” fades into the background a little and we will more easily respond to the needs of others and our environment, not through any sense of duty but because we know through our entire being that it is just right to do so. Life becomes all-encompassing and not just an individual existence amidst a throng of others. As we assume this new identity through experiencing our true nature, we will enjoy a mind that is truly always at ease.

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