

Reflections about Identity: The Dangers and Importance of Self-Identities

A Zen master ringing the bell asks:

“Who hears the bell?

Are you woman or man?

Are you black or white?

Are you rich or poor?

At the moment of hearing -

Just hearing”!

What is the cause of violence in this world? Looking broadly at both personal and international events, I see that some kind of **limited, partial self-identity** is at the root of most violence. By identity, I am conflating a broad range of categories: those fixed at birth such as skin color and ethnicity, those imposed by family and culture yet malleable, such as religion, and those more freely chosen like friend groups, social affiliations, etc. In this rendering, identities can also be comprised of self-images and judgments such as smart, stupid, beautiful, ugly, kind, etc. as well as any of the roles that we identify with in life. Even rigidly held opinions, such as progressive or conservative views can become wedded to self-identity in destructive ways. All categories of self-definition are included.

It is crucial to distinguish between our authentic individuality – True “I-ness” - and our limited self-identities. In the evolution of consciousness, the arising of the capacity for personal self-reflection, *to “know” and know that we know*, is a radical happening. This awareness is the basis for creativity and human freedom. To have our own authentic, unique experiences of thinking, feeling and sensing and to be aware is a very high level of development.

This movement from our tribal, collective consciousness into individuality is a long, arduous journey. Navigating survival fears and our dreadful sense of separation from Source, we create partial identities that offer temporary solace and connectivity. When these identities: support our self-expression and are in service to life they can be helpful. When our self-worth is dependent on these partial identities, they often lead to destructive behaviors. We are each a unique expression of universal unfolding. When in harmony with life, we can bring our personal gifts in service to All. This is our direction: “I” and “We” in service to “All”.

Is it true that violence, when not in defense of life, only arises when a person or group is defending some kind of limited self-identity?

Religious crusades, ethnic cleansing, gang warfare, intolerant political ideology and fixed gender identities are obvious examples. Perhaps less obvious are the times when our immutable opinions of right and wrong become justification for casting others out. Standing up for our deep values without explicitly or implicitly questioning the essential worth of the other requires courage and clarity. For example, when witnessing the political discourse in the U.S. and much of the world today, I observe hateful, demeaning and dehumanizing rhetoric from all sides. Those of us who are very troubled by many Trump-ian views and actions need to stand up for our values without demonizing the “others”. This includes surrendering that temporary sense of affirmation that arises when those with whom we agree confirm our views.

What would you kill for, other than the protecting of life?

The whole spiritual path is a movement into broader and broader connectivity until one feels intimately connected to the totality of life. One sees that every life is as important as every other life. In Buddhism, this is the bodhisattva path. In Christianity, it is internalizing the hearts of Jesus or Mary. In secular humanism, it is called self-actualization. As one feels more authentically secure in self and world, the need for limited self-identities and thus limitations on one’s “field of caring” lessens. As consciousness evolves, one’s wholehearted caring widens and deepens until all of life is included as a part of self.

Holding Self Identities Lightly

For many years, I have been encouraging students and myself to hold ANY self-identities and social roles very lightly. It was clear to me that most of our suffering, along with our violence and judgments toward others, arises from fixed identities. When we perceive self and world through rigid “identity systems”, we evaluate every situation, person and happening through this manufactured filter. **Recently, I have been shocked to see my blind spots about the potential positive value of these identities.** In addition, I have been learning that my ability to question my identities and expand my field of care is implicitly connected to the social structures and privileges in which I have lived. More on this later, first a bit of background.

All self-identities are subsets of True Self thus are smaller and more confining than whom we truly are. For me this means identifying as a white, male, husband, father, 65 year old, wealthy, able-bodied, sexually normative, Jewish/Buddhist, teacher, Feldenkrais practitioner, etc. become relatively insignificant when seen in the light of awakened consciousness. If these partial identities become essential for my “self-sense”, they become obstacles. Most spiritual traditions point toward freedom from limited self-identities as essential on the path of realization. In fact, true freedom requires the experience: *At my core, I am not: this body, this mind, these memories, these plans, this gender, this history, etc. We can summarize this as “the True ‘I’ is not this, not that.”*

For example, as much as I enjoy being a father and assuming this role at times, when this becomes central to my self-identity, I notice my voice, attitude and even posture change. I move from freely functioning as a possibly helpful ally for my daughter to being something of a potential tyrant. Similarly, if I “need” my wife to see life as I do because I am identified with some point of view then we both lose our freedom and connectedness. This does not mean to cast aside strongly held views or values. Rather that they can be **both strongly and lightly held**. The same is true for other self-definitions. If I see myself as a “teacher” than I create inner and outer demands that severely limit the relationship with someone who might take the position of a “student”. Held lightly, these roles can be delightful, helpful and fulfilling. Taking all roles, views and limited identities as a kind of “serious play” can be helpful and liberating.

Empowerment by the Dominant Culture

I have come to realize that this view of identities as obstacles comes implicitly from someone empowered by the dominant culture. This does not mean that the observations about the limiting nature of identifications is wrong, rather that it is disturbingly incomplete and biased. People benefiting from the dominant culture already have our identities woven into society and therefore can have less need for the support of partial identities than other populations. I say, “can have” because these “identity systems” are so potent that letting go of these scaffoldings of self-identity is a great challenge for all of us. Still, because of this implicit weaving, holding these images lightly and letting them go is often easier for people empowered by the dominant culture. It has been said, “to let go of the ego one needs a strong ego”. I am saying that for letting go of non-helpful self-identities, one derives benefit, a bolstering of self-worth, from the messages of the dominant culture.

As a simple example – growing up I saw many images of white, male, able-bodied men on television as voices of strength, intelligence and worthiness. The textbooks in school and the magazines were framed with people who looked like me as the heroes and creators of destiny. People of color and women were usually given subservient images or not represented at all. Most girls are raised with oppressive images of what their bodies should look like to be beautiful and therefore valued. Boys have much more latitude for not identifying their self-worth with their physical appearance. The examples are almost endless.

I never seriously considered that my capacity for internalizing teachings about inner freedom and universal love was radically supported by my social position. I feel some embarrassment at not recognizing the power of these structures for enhancing this learning. While women, people of color, those of limited finances, differing physical abilities, etc., have equal internal capacity for self-realization, social structures can create significant obstacles.

Like the air we breathe, the security that comes from these cultural images, is hard to see. Paradoxically, while this security can give one greater confidence in letting go of these images, the opposite can also be true. People in power rarely give it up willingly. Those benefiting from societal structures can become obsessed in maintaining the positions that come from their self-identities. Sometimes those supported by the intrinsic empowerment are often unaware of benefits derived from the structure and our/their complicity in the devaluing messages given to many others.

A bit of Spiritual Philosophy: Absolute and Relative Truth

In various traditions, there is a distinction made between absolute and relative truth, though ultimately they are inseparable. From the point of view of **Absolute Truth** and Non-Duality, distinctions of gender, race etc. is **ultimately** irrelevant. All of the following: *We are all one, 'I am That, we are not bound to our historic self and prior conditioning* are genuine realizations that are confirmed through realization experiences.

From this perspective, our differences are superficial. We all arise from the same source. We all are born and die. We all breathe and eat. All life seeks to minimize pain and find fulfillment. We all depend on everything for everything. We are interdependent with the totality of life – without air there are no lungs, without light no eyes, our bones are made from the elements of the earth and the gravitational pull sustains our form.

Similarly, we form our sense of “self” through personal relationships and an interweaving with social contexts. Thich Nhat Hahn invented the term “inter-being” to convey this truth, in the words of Eugene Gendlin “we are interaction first”, that is, each moment our “self” forms out of interaction. Transcendent awareness brings the authentic experience that there is no fundamentally separate self, it is an illusion. Oneness is not simply a nice idea it is an actual experience. We all are interconnected. We function every moment as “inter-being”. Authentic experience of awakening brings the certainty that we do not exist as separate beings.

Relative Truth emphasizes duality, our differences and our individuality. This is the everyday world of this and that, you and me. As we grow up, we go through many periods of experimenting with our expression in the world; this is how we form our individual selves, our self-identities. Through our individuality, we can bring **particular gifts** into the world. **Appreciating our differences is part of the joy of living and the richness of the human family.**

As we individuate, we also develop our capacity for judging, labeling and categorizing others and ourselves. Through pain, fear and insecurity, our struggle for identity can lead to destructive mental habits. Seeing these thought patterns clearly, taking responsibility for them and developing alternatives is a significant part of spiritual growth. As we feel increasingly secure in self and world, we can hold identities and differences more lightly; they become less of a touchstone of “who I am” and more an expression of “how I am” in the world. We can value how lived experience arising from various identities – those that are chosen, those that are imposed and those that are inherent - help to create the diversity that deeply enriches our shared world.

Valuing Partial Self-Identities

As a teacher of awareness and freedom, I have been learning to value and respect the partial self-identities of my students. In the past, I saw these only as obstacles to our open-heartedness and self-realization. Now I can appreciate the need to engage in dialogue and to learn together about the potentially helpful and hurtful aspects of these identities. I am learning how identities impact experience and can, when approached with awareness, actually deepen and expand spiritual understandings. My previous certainty that these identities were obstacles has given way to the insight that both my students and I are deepened through learning

from these partial identities. Paradoxically, this in no ways minimizes the necessity for realization of Oneness that transcends all self-identities.

To be clear, I am NOT saying that:

1) People of the dominant culture can easily let go of limiting self-identities, 2) that many actually succeed in freeing themselves from these boxes or 3) that people of marginalized groups are less capable of freedom from limiting identities.

Rather that:

- 1) A person of the dominant culture has more implicit support and potentially less need for these identities as these are already woven into social norms.
- 2) People empowered by the system have rewards for holding onto their positions and thus need other kinds of encouragement to see through the negative effects of the power structure and to support those who are not benefiting from the system.
- 3) Limited self-identities can be both obstacles and helpful on the path toward more universal realization.
- 4) Sub-group identities can have valuable impact for all of us in expanding our collective experience.
- 5) Reflecting on one's own ideas of what behaviors, appearances and self-expressions we consider to be *normal or acceptable* and questioning their roots in dominance and power structures can be helpful in widening our individual and collective field of care.

Through insight and practice, I can often hold my various identities lightly because these have social currency. As these identities are rarely named due to their normalization, it is essential to intentionally attend to their influence in social situations. Recognizing the negative effects of this empowerment on all of us requires countercultural thinking.

Not-knowing is the first truth of Zen. We are reminded over and over to question and keep questioning all conclusions about EVERYTHING. Letting go of certainty is hard work. Similarly, the capacity to tolerate the **cognitive dissonance of paradox**, as emphasized by Moshe Feldenkrais, is essential on the path of freedom. Courage is needed to live in uncertainty.

For me this means, to live into the “truth” that limited self-identities are the main cause of violence, as well as the main obstacle to universal peace/love/freedom AND the “truth” that partial self-identities are often essential for growing the inner security to hold these self-definitions

lightly. **These identities can be both destructive and enrich our human experience.** As the great yogi Swami Sivananda said many years ago, it is “**Unity in Diversity**” that is the direction of consciousness evolution.

May we all distinguish between life-giving ways of holding our self-identities and those that lead us astray.

May we all realize the oneness that transcends all separate identities.

Russell