

A Way of Knowing In Search of Our True Identity

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A human being is a part of the whole, called by us "Universe," a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest--a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein.

How do we come to feel so separate from the world we know? How does a universe that is dynamic and whole come to be perceived as fragmented into separate *things*? How does it happen that we insist on a self – separate from all it knows?

During the thirty-five years I have been a psychotherapist, hundreds of people have come to see me because they wanted to "find themselves." Among all these sincere people not one found a self. Having practiced meditation for twenty-five years in search of my true identity, I too have not found a solid, permanent and separate self.

What I have found is that rather than being a *thing*, self is an opening or setting, a focus on life, a point of view, a way of knowing. Like a setting on a camera, this opening allows perspective and view point. All of our knowing is a consequence of the setting and outlook assumed.

Rather than being permanent and fixed, the "I" that we call our self is a setting that dilates, contracts and assumes different positions thereby altering experience and creating different view points on the world. Objects and things, people and places, happenings and events are all the consequences of a way of knowing. They have meaning shaped by the "I" that knows them.

There is an interaction between knower and known, a dynamic interplay between the knowing subject and the known object. This becomes even clearer when I analyze *how* I know. The five senses perceive data. The mind, under the influence of the prevailing culture, "makes sense" of this data, organizing and interpreting stimuli into objects, things, events and happenings. Therefore our perception of "the world" is not separate from the senses and mind that know them, but rather perception is a consequence of the operation of senses and mind.

Close examination reveals the following:

1. We only know the world through our experience.
2. Our experience is affected by our culture and personal history.
3. Variations in our moods and attitudes and energy levels all affect our interpretation and therefore what we know.

Let us examine this process a little more. We assume a setting or viewpoint. From this place we interpret events and give them meaning. We form attitudes, judgments and opinions about what we have perceived and react to the meanings we have ascribed. We live in a house of mirrors, in which each perception is a reflection of the position we have taken.

Ordinarily we fail to recognize that we shine the light of our awareness upon all we know and that what we perceive is largely a function of the light's hue. Unaware of the influence we bring to experience, we live out a life seemingly beyond our control. Yet our interpretation of our life situation and circumstance is under the influence of our own perception.

Scientists now mostly agree that the result of any experiment is in part a function of the theory they have, the questions they ask and the instruments they use – the result is a reflection of how they see, an echo of how they know. When studying light for example, scientists have found that light appears as particles or as waves depending upon how we measure it.

If the appearance of light interacts with how it is known, just imagine the effect of our perception on the people in our lives. What are the consequences of holding a person in contempt or fear versus holding them in an attitude of love and acceptance? A change in setting not only affects how we perceive others, but how they act as well. Emotionally constricted states of hurt, anger and fear reveal a different sense of self and a different view of the world than do the more open states of love, compassion and joy. We live in a dynamic and interactive world in which perception and meaning shape experience and influence events seemingly separate from ourselves.

Every way of knowing results in congruent and reinforcing “*tapes*,” an acronym I use for *thoughts, actions, perceptions, emotions, and sensations*. Each of these activities reinforces and perpetuates the perception of the world and the experience of the self.

Consider these two examples:

1. When a person is angry he can easily justify and thus perpetuate his anger by pointing to the “jerks” he perceives as incompetent, getting in his way or even dangerous. The *thoughts* inform his own aggressive *actions*, fueling the rightness of his *perceptions* and the continuation of his *emotions* and its bodily *sensations*.

2. When a person is depressed the *thought* “I am no good” influences the *action* of withdrawal and isolation in a person who *perceives* the self as worthless and the world as critical. The *emotion* is an anxious, heavy sadness and the *sensation* is of a churning emptiness.

These *tapes* are inherently consistent. They create an experience of a self along with a matching and complementary view of the world. Again notice the unity of the knower and the known. This identity of subject and perceived object perpetuated the sense of self and the world it knows, creating a convincing picture of “who I am” and “the way things are.” We are so entranced by this presentation that it does not occur to us that we are experiencing the consequences of the setting, a way of knowing.

Our characteristic ways of knowing give rise to our personalities, our usual outlook and ways of thinking, acting and feeling. These patterns become rigidified as we identify them as our self. They get perpetuated as we defend them as our identity. As long as we are identified with particular characteristic ways of knowing, we remain conditioned by a past and live a future of its consequences.

Recognizing that our mental setting affects our view of the world and our view of our self allows for change, we can now assume more responsibility for our outlook and its consequences. We know that the meaning and significance we give to an event has consequences on how we act and feel. If particular ways of knowing increase suffering, we do not need to be resigned to such an afflictive condition as ultimate or final. Our suffering can signal that a particular way of knowing is in force. Only as we mistakenly think our identity is a limited point of view and narrow range of experiences, we deny our birth-right and true identity.

Knowing Awareness: Our Authentic Identity

In search of our true identity, an identity prior to our name and characteristic views, we can explore our evolutionary and developmental sequence. We are homo sapiens (Latin for “knowing man”). At birth, before we organized forms into meaningful objects and before we had a self concept and world view, we were a knowing awareness. This awareness allowed and enabled perception to occur and meaning to take place. It is this essential knowing that links knower and known-- subject and object are unified in knowing (Tulku, 1987). This unified knowing is central and primary to all experience. Knowing or awareness (the terms can be used interchangeably) allows for viewpoint. It is the ground of all experience. Now here is the important shift. As we recognize awareness as our true nature we can relax our grip on self as identity. Self can then be seen as merely a vantage point, a position of knowing and all that is known can be understood as relative. In this recognition we can increase our degrees of freedom, expand our creativity and know in many complementary ways without a fear of losing who we are.

By embracing the knowing that we are, we can relax our identification with a separate point of view. We can recognize the unity of the knower and the known and be liberated from what Einstein (Eves, 1977. p. 60) called the “optical delusion” of separateness. We

can realize knowing as humanity's common ground and with this insight expand as he suggested "our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty."

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