

YOU ARE NOT YOUR MIND

Alan Zundel at the Q-Sangha, San Francisco CA, Oct. 10, 2005

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Last time I was here—I don't even remember quite when that was, sometime earlier this year, I think last February—after sangha had met, some people came up and talked to me afterwards and one person asked me a question—or he made a comment; we had a little conversation and he said something along the lines of, “I guess there's some things that you just can't know.” And my response was, “Hm”—they teach you that in spiritual teacher training school, “Hm,” when somebody says something—and then he went on to look at me and I said to him—I guess he said that, “Well, your mind just can't grasp some things.” And I said “You're not your mind.”

And that's what I want to talk about tonight: you are not your mind. I thought that was a pretty cool saying until shortly after that my wife had a copy of Eckhart Tolle's book, *The Power of Now*. I opened it up and there on one of the pages it said, “you are not your mind.” [*laughter*] That guy gets all the good phrases, and he doesn't leave any, right?

So, you're not your mind. I want to start out by making an analogy to your relationship with your body. We have an ambiguous relationship to our body, most of us. Sometimes you feel very much that you *are* your body, you feel very embodied. Other times you feel more like you *have* a body, and you're carrying the body around or traveling inside the body—somehow within it, and expressing yourself through it. This dichotomy—what are we, are we a body or are we in the body? What exactly is the relationship with the body? And what I want to suggest is that the relationship with your mind is something similar.

The times when you feel most strongly that you *are* your body—even that language is funny, isn't it? “Your body”—something you own, possess, like your car or your keys. The time you most intensely feel you are a body is times of pleasure and times of discomfort in your body. When you have a physical pleasure you very much feel your body and kind of lose any sense that you might be something other than a body. Your body becomes very important; all your attention becomes focused in the body and wrapped up in the body. And at times of discomfort—say when you've been injured, when your body's been injured, or when you're sick or nauseous, something like that—then you also feel very much a body, very much that this body is *you*. Times of pleasure; times of discomfort and pain.

Okay. Now turn to the mind. And first of all, the word “mind” isn't necessarily clear, because we mean lots of different things when we say “mind.” The kind of things I'm thinking about as the mind are the things that we usually call: thinking, thoughts; also emotions—anger, happiness, envy—also imagination, imagining things, pictures in your head; and closely related to the imagination is memories, things that you can picture that

you think happened to you. Sometime our memories aren't true to the past, I think, but often we have imaginations associated with our past history and call that memories. So these kinds of things: thoughts, emotions, imaginations and memory. And we very strongly identify with these things, usually. They feel like they *are* us, that we are actually thinking beings—that's what scientists often say, or philosophers, we're thinking beings. I don't think that's true [*laughs*], in more ways than one—sometimes we're *thoughtless* beings.

But we tend to sense ourselves as thinking, as—maybe emotions, there's a little distance there, *that* you can sense is a little more, not as much under your control. It's kind of like the body, you know, the body does what it will sometimes: digests and breathes and gets aches and pains, but little control over it—your emotions are a lot like that sometimes, they just come and go. They come up, you don't want them necessarily to come up, but they come, and they're there, and if you are attentive enough you acknowledge them. Eventually they simply pass out of existence; of course someone—it's not within your field of awareness anyway. So emotions are a little distant, you feel like you *have* emotions rather than you emote.

But thinking is very close to our sense of who we are; we feel like we have thoughts, that we can think, that we can direct our thoughts. Imagination is like that too; you feel like you can create pictures in your mind and direct it, and you're kind of the conductor conducting the orchestra here—or better, maybe the motion picture director, deciding what the pictures are going to be.

To counter that sense of control over your thoughts, that your thoughts and feelings and imaginations are actually you and something that is under direction; meditation, one of the first things you learn and it's continually repeated all through your experience—at least in my experience—is that you have very little control over your thoughts and imaginations. You'll sit there and, whatever your meditation practice is, it'll involve somehow bringing your attention back to something: a mantra, some phrase that you're repeating in your mind, you bring your attention back; or sometimes it's counting your breaths; or with mindfulness meditation just trying to pay attention to what's actually going on in your mind. But what you find out is those thoughts and imaginations, they just go off in any direction they want like they have a life of their own.

You'll be sitting there, like you'll be having a meditation of, “peace to all living creatures.” So this is your mantra. “Peace to all living creatures, peace to all living creatures—oh my butt is sore—peace to all living creatures, peace to—that guy, they said he was meditating for thirty years. I wonder if his butt still gets sore? Peace to all living creatures—I'm hungry. Do we got anything in the refrigerator at home? Wait, wait, wait: peace to all living creatures, peace—there was some ice cream in the freezer. Ah, no, wait a minute, I ate that—I was supposed to go shopping this week! Dang it! Do I have that list with me?” And then you're off. You're just off somewhere, and it could go on for a long time and suddenly you come back to yourself and you say, “oh, I was supposed to be meditating, I was supposed to be directing my attention to something.”

So what is it, *that* which wants to come back away from where the thoughts are

taking it? It's not the thinking self; it's certainly not the thought. It's not the imagination, and it's not what is controlling the imagination because the imagination is going off in a direction of its own. Like when the body responds to the laws of gravity, things like that, it reacts in response to stimuli: if you step off a cliff, you'll fall. It's the same thing with the imagination, sometime something provokes it and it goes off in a predictable direction. The same thing with your thoughts. Your chain of thought is kind of cause and effect, and—another thing you can do when you're meditating is when you find yourself way out there somewhere and you suddenly realize it, you follow the train of thought and you say, "Wow, like this thing led to that thing, and this thing" like a chain of dominoes, and you had no idea it was going to go in that direction but it just goes in that direction.

So what is *this*, that wants to come back? That wants to redirect attention? If it's not your thinking self, and it's not your emotions, and it's not your imagination, and it's not your memory, and those things are off on their own and you're trying to come back from them, what is it that's coming back? And what are you coming back to?

You are not your mind. You are not your thinking. You are not your imagination. You are not your memories. So what are you? That question is an important one to wrestle with, but it doesn't have a satisfying conceptual answer. There's a lot of names given to what you are, to what you really are: Buddha mind, mind of Christ, Logos, Tao. Lot of different names for what people have discovered when they try to come back to what they really are, but those names don't do you a lot of good. What does you some good is coming back to it, and being able to access it. To live out of it. To live from it, rather than living from your thoughts.

So what's the key to coming back to that which you are? Now remember when I was talking about the body, I said the things that make you most intensely aware of your body are pleasure and discomfort. For your mind, the things that draw you out of your real self and into your mind are very similar. They have the properties of attraction on one side, and repulsion on the other side. Things that draw you toward them; things that push you away from them. In other words, thoughts that are pleasurable, and thoughts that are painful. Imaginations that are pleasurable, and imaginations that are painful.

And what's at the core of these thoughts and imaginations that are very pleasurable or very painful is a story. Particular stories, stories that make you—or I, whoever is having the thoughts—the star of the story. All kinds of stories. Stories having to do with things that are very pleasurable: our imagining great achievements, things we're going to succeed at; a relationship that's going to be successful, wonderful; a job prospect that we're going to get, that we're going to be great in and it's going to lead to bigger and better things. But then with all those there comes the other story, you know, the story that you're fearful of: what if it doesn't work out? what if I screw it up? what if I flub up—I *always* flub up, what's the matter with me, why do I do that? No, it's not going to happen; I'm going to do great, I'm going to be fine—but what if it's not?

And those stories are what hook you. They draw your attention into your mind the same way physical pleasure and pain draws your attention into your body, the stories about

ourselves that we find particularly attractive or that we find particularly fearful and upsetting or repulsive that we want to try to push away. Sometimes people have the thought—[laughs] another thought—that the way to break free of these cycles of thinking and—thinking pleasurable thoughts and fearful thoughts—is to somehow stop thoughts, stop imaginations, just make them stop. Somehow cease. And that's, in my experience anyway, possible temporarily, just like it's possible to make the body very still temporarily—you could even stop breathing, but long term it's not [laughs], a very good way to go.

Your thoughts come. Your thoughts will always come back; if they don't then you're in trouble, really, because you know, because you can't relate to the world around you like a normal human being any more. So they come and they go. If the key is not stopping thoughts—although when your thoughts stop sometimes, it can give you a glimpse of your true self, kind of pokes its face out: “Surprise! Here I am!” And you're all, “What's that? I suddenly felt different; I felt like, gee, like this load taken off my shoulders.” But then it comes back; the thoughts come back and the stories come back and you're back to the same person you were before and you find yourself all wrapped up in these things all over again.

The way forward, really, is not by making those things stop; it's by *waking up* to them. Waking up to their nature as thoughts and imaginations, and being aware that you are what you are, at the same time you're aware that you're having these things, whatever they are. It's the same way you have this dual relationship to your body—I *am* a body, yet I *have* a body—you cultivate that relationship to your mind: I feel like I *am* a mind, it's very much part of me, yet I'm not a mind; there's something else there that's not my mind.

So you wake up to it; you become aware of it; you become more—what? Less *stuck* on it, less *stuck in* it. Meditation is a practice of doing that by calming your mind and allowing some distance to develop, so that the part of you that's not your mind—if you want to call it a part—I think that's maybe not the most accurate way to phrase it, but it's one way to think about it—that part of you that's not your mind, as your mind calms, becomes more aware of it as just thoughts yet something else is here, something else is present. Allow it little by little to become more aware of itself. So what meditation is, actually, is the calming of the mind and then paying attention to what the mind is. And you carry that over—or at least, you're supposed to carry that over—into your daily life.

Calmness; attentiveness. Calm mind; attentive *to* the mind. It's to some extent a matter of practice, but not entirely, because there's, like, spontaneous breakthroughs that happen. What those breakthroughs are related to is these same stories with you as the key actor. Your favorite stories, the stories that were somehow embedded with you at points in your life when you were very impressionable, and you take these stories on about who you are. Stories of identity. And the stories are composed of constellations of memories about who you've been, and imaginations about who you're going to be, and thoughts about what that all means. So it's an identity formed of a constellation of these things, these thoughts, these imaginings, and these memories, that aren't really you.

So here we're to those teachings that are often offered but are very puzzling, like the extinction of the self, nirvana. Or to find yourself you have to lose yourself. This sense of core identity—who we are, who we've been, who we're going to be, what we are now—are constellations of these mind phenomena that are not really us. And as you become more awake to the nature of these mind phenomena you suddenly become aware of part of your identity and see it as what it really is: not really you, but part of you or somehow you and not you. And it ceases to have as much *pull*; you don't get your whole attention drawn into it, sucked into it, and lost in it.

That's why they call it waking up, because it's just like—not just like, but it's a lot like—dreaming. Right? When you have a dream, you get pulled into it. If you were able to step back in your dream and keep aware of the sensation that, “wow, this is a dream,” the nature of the dream would be a lot different. It would be pretty cool, actually. You would be all the time just saying, “oh, wow, look what I'm dreaming now.” And you wouldn't have dreams that—you wouldn't have nightmares, for one thing, because you'd always say, “oh, this is just a dream.” And you wouldn't necessarily get all wrapped up in things that seem to be leaving you in strange places because you could just go, “well, okay, I'll go for the ride but I'm not going to buy into this.”

So you have the sense that the dream is a dream, and that's what they mean when they say you're waking up. You have a sense that the things that you took to be your life, the things that you took to be *you*, have the nature of a dream. There's stuff that has a life of its own, that pull you in strange directions, that seem to always have repeated themes until you somehow untangle that knot, you know, the dream, the repeated dream until you figure out what it's about, or you become aware of what it's trying to tell you about yourself. Same thing in your life: the repeated thought, the repeated pattern of behavior that's based on some sense of identity that you need to wake up to, that you need to become aware of.

Okay. To recap this a bit, you're not your mind just like you're not exactly your body. If you want to get closer to what you are, by paying attention to the phenomena of your mind, letting it settle, and gradually waking up to the stories that you tell yourself about who you are.

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