

You Are Not Your Mind

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<http://www.heartawake.org>

I had just finished giving a talk when someone came up to me afterward. While chatting he made the comment, “I guess there are some things that your mind just can’t grasp.” I responded, “You are not your mind.”

I thought I had come up with a pretty good phrase until I found out later that Eckhart Tolle had already used it in his book, *The Power of Now*. Oh well. It is still a good phrase, only now I might owe him royalties.

But what does this mean, you are not your mind? I want to start by making an analogy to your relationship with your body. We have an ambiguous relationship to our body: sometimes we feel very much that we *are* our body, and other times we feel more like we *have* a body and are somehow traveling around inside of it. This puzzle—are we a body or are we in the body?—is very similar to your relationship with your mind.

The times when you feel most strongly that you *are* your body—even that language is funny, “your body,” as though it is something you own and possess, like your car or your house—the times you most intensely feel you are a body are times of physical pleasure and times of physical discomfort. When you have physical pleasure you very much feel your body and lose any sense that you might be something other than a body. And at times of discomfort—for example when your body has been injured, or you are sick and nauseous—again you very much feel that you are a body, that this body is *you*. Times of pleasure, times of discomfort and pain.

Now turn to the mind. We could mean a number of different things when we use the word “mind,” but what I am referring to now includes thinking, having emotions, and imagining and remembering things. Usually we very strongly identify with these functions. They feel like they *are* us, especially thinking. Thinking is very close to our sense of who we are; some people would describe humans as thinking beings—even though we are often thoughtless beings, in more ways than one! But thinking seems like a core aspect of our being, a function that expresses who we are. Imagination is similar, in that we feel like we have control over what we choose to picture in our minds the same way we feel we choose what to think about.

Emotions are perhaps a little different. Often we get caught up in and totally identify with emotions, for example, we say “I *am* angry,” or “I *am* happy,” rather than “I *am feeling* angry,” or “I *am feeling* happy.” But emotions feel like something that happens to us that is not under our control. They come up—you don’t necessarily want them to—but they come up, they’re there, and then they pass out of existence. So emotions are a

little distant from our identity, you feel like you have emotions rather than that you deliberately ‘emote.’

Meditation counters that sense that you have control over your thoughts and imaginings. In meditation, one of the first things you learn and then continually re-experience is that you have very little control over your thoughts and imaginings. Whatever your meditation practice is, it will likely involve bringing your attention back to a focal point: a mantra, or counting your breaths, or with mindfulness meditation just trying to pay attention to the here and now. But what you find is that your thoughts and imaginations just go off in any direction they want, like they have a life of their own.

Let’s say you have a mantra, “peace to all living creatures.” So you are sitting there, repeating in your mind, “Peace to all living creatures, peace to all living creatures,” and then your mind starts to wander: “Peace to all living creatures, peace to—I’m hungry; do we have anything in the refrigerator? Peace to all living creatures—there was some ice cream in the freezer. Ah, no, I ate that—I was supposed to go shopping this week! Dang it! Do I have that shopping list?” Then you are off mentally cataloguing the contents of your kitchen, and it could go on for a long time before you come back to yourself and suddenly remember, “Oh, I was supposed to be meditating, I was supposed to be directing my attention to my mantra,” or whatever your focal device is.

So what is *it*, that which comes back from where the thoughts are taking it? It is not the thinking self; it is certainly not the thought. It is not the imagination, because the imagination goes off on its own just like the thoughts. The chain of thoughts and imaginings is cause and effect, like dominoes tipping in a chain reaction. When you suddenly realize you are way out there somewhere you can follow the train of thoughts backwards and see how this thought led to that thought and then the next thought, touched off by some random sensation or memory or something.

Again, what is *it* that wants to come back from where the thoughts and imaginings are taking it, that wants to redirect attention? If it is not your thinking self, or your imagination, or your memory, or your emotions, as those things are off on their own and you are trying to come back from them, what is it that is coming back, and what is it coming back to?

You are not your mind. You are not your thinking. You are not your imagination. You are not your memories. You are not your emotions. So what are you? There are a lot of names given to what you really are: pure consciousness, the image and likeness of God, Buddha mind, the Higher Self, a lot of different names for what people have discovered when they try to come back to what they really are. But naming it does not do you much good, what does you good is coming back to it, being able to access it. To live out of it. To live from it, rather than living from your mind.

What is the key to coming back to that which you are? Recall that the things that make you most intensely identified with your body are pleasure and discomfort. In a very

similar way, the things that draw you out of that which you are and into your mind have the properties of attraction on one side or repulsion on the other. Things that draw you toward them, things that push you away from them: thoughts that are pleasurable, thoughts that are painful; imaginings that are pleasurable, imaginings that are painful.

At the core of these pleasurable or painful thoughts and imaginings are stories, stories with you as the star. Stories that give you pleasure: imagining great achievements, a wonderful romantic relationship, winning the lottery. Stories that give you pain: failing at something important, screwing up, embarrassing yourself. 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. Stories about ourselves that we find particularly attractive or that we find particularly fearful and upsetting.

Sometimes people think that the way to break free of the mind is to somehow stop the thoughts and imaginings. In my experience that is possible temporarily, just like it is possible to make the body very still temporarily—you could even stop breathing for a time, although long term it is not advisable! Thoughts will always come back; if they do not then you are in trouble because you cannot relate to the world like a normal human being any more. Thoughts and imagination and memory and all that mind stuff is necessary and useful.

The way forward is not by making those things stop; it is 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 are aware that your mind is what it is. Like the dual relationship you have with your body—I *am* a body, yet I *have* a body—you cultivate that relationship with your mind: I feel like I am a mind, yet I am something other than my mind.

You wake up to the mind and become less stuck in it. Meditation helps you do that by calming your mind and allowing some distance to develop, so that the part of you that is not your mind—if you can call it a “part”—can become more aware of itself. Meditation cultivates calmness and attentiveness: calm mind, attentiveness *to* the mind. Eventually the awareness grows and spills over into the rest of your life.

To some extent it is a matter of practice, but there are also sudden breakthroughs related to your “favorite” stories, the stories that were embedded in your mind at key points in your life when you were very impressionable, stories of your identity. These stories are composed of constellations of memories about who you have been, imaginings about who you are going to be, and thoughts about what that all means. It is an identity formed of a constellation of thoughts, imaginings, and memories that are not really you.

Here we arrive at those teachings that are very puzzling, like the extinction of the self in nirvana, or that to find yourself you have to lose yourself. The sense of a core identity—who we have been, who we are now, who we are going to be—is composed of a constellation 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 that this identity is not really 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 is why they call it waking up, because it is like waking up from a dream. If you were able to step back in your dream and maintain the awareness that it was a dream, the nature of the dream would be a lot different. It would be pretty cool, actually, and you would not have real nightmares because you would always know that it was only a dream. So you have the sense that the dream is a dream, and that is how it is when you wake up to your real self. 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.

Therefore if you want to get closer to who you are, question the stories that you tell yourself about who you are.

Questions & Answers

Q: Are there good stories you should tell about yourself and bad stories you should avoid?

A: That assumes you have the power to control the stories you tell about yourself. My experience has been that whenever you engage yourself strongly in one type of story, the opposite story will suggest itself just as strongly. Like if you work at having thoughts about material success, eventually the thoughts about possible failure will arise. So stories present themselves. And the 'you' that wants to control the story is itself a story, the story of the person who is going to control their destiny—which is a pretty implausible story because our destinies seem to be fairly unpredictable, except in that they all end in death. If you can control the story so it doesn't end in death that would be a great story, but good luck with that.

Q: Should we try to analyze our stories?

A: That's a double-edged sword because it can get you more deeply engaged in another story, which is 'the story of my past life and how I got to where I am.' But if analyzing it means becoming more aware of the nature of it, seeing the pattern more clearly, then the analysis can be fruitful. One technique that is helpful when you become aware that you are telling yourself a story is to ask yourself, 'Is that true? Do I *know* that that's true?' If you are honest the answer is usually, 'No, I'm not completely sure it's true.' That clues you in to the fact that you are spinning a story.

Q: Are bad stories then stories that are delusions?

A: All stories are delusions, that's their nature. It's not so much that they are good or bad as that they have different properties of either attracting or repelling our attention. A story sucks you in because it is either so appealing or so fearful that it engages your attention. There's nothing wrong with the stories except you can get really sick of

them, which makes you feel stuck in a rut. This is usually when people start getting interested in spirituality and meditation, because they are looking for a way out of that feeling of being stuck in a dissatisfying state.

Q: Should we have empathy and compassion for people who are stuck in their stories? My mother is really stuck in her story, and I get angry with her.

A: This assumes again that you have some kind of power to control your responses, which is for the most part not true. What blocks empathy or compassion toward a person who is stuck in their story is that they engage one of your own stories. Your mother's being stuck in her story hooks into your story about all you've had to suffer from her over the years. You've got your own story which clouds over your real self, a self that is innately compassionate and empathetic. The awake self sees other people struggling with these illusory stories and can't help but feel compassionate and respond out of that, not through the mind but through your true nature. It comes through when your story's not getting in the way.

Q: I don't understand what you mean by "true nature." How would you define that?

A: Defining it doesn't do a lot of good, because definitions come from thoughts and refer back to different concepts you've learned during your life. If most of your life you've been enmeshed in stories, you don't have a reference point for the concept of true nature so you just kind of imagine what it's like. But if you've experienced states, which most people have to some degree, of just being in the moment, that state is close to what I mean by responding out of true nature. It's not clouded over by all these stories; when the stories come, it recognizes them as stories and it acts out of its own wisdom, its own course to follow. It expresses itself more as less attention is going toward these illusory stories, so in a way you become more yourself. That's usually why people are attracted to meditation or spirituality, because they sense they could experience life somehow more fully, engage it more fully.

Q: So you don't get rid of the stories?

A: That's right, it's not a negation, it's becoming aware. A good metaphor is watching a movie and getting so caught up in the story that you forget you are watching a movie. Another way of enjoying a movie is to be aware that you are responding to a movie so you can appreciate the artistry of it; that's a different level of enjoyment.

The HeartAwake Center

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