Who am I: The Experience of Being Human

It is possible to be born, to grow old, and to die without ever engaging, in a sustained way, the question, “Who am I?” In the absence of serious reflection, the default answer will be, “I am simply the sum total of my conditioning.” This matters for if we are stuck for our entire lives with only a shallow understanding of ourselves, then our capacity to love ourselves will be correspondingly shallow, for the simple reason that it is hard to love someone lacking in substance, depth and authenticity. Absent robust self-love, our capacity to extend respect, acceptance and love to each other and to Earth—the planet that sustains us—is necessarily compromised.

As a way of exploring this question, “Who am I?” consider the words of the ancient Chinese sage, Wu Wei Wu:

Why are you so unhappy?
Because 99% of what you think,
And everything you do,
Is for yourself.
And there isn’t one.

Most people understand and go along with the first part of this text—i.e., it may well be that 99% of what most of us think and do centers on ourselves! But when they come to the final sentence, they often balk. Could it really be that what we normally take for the self isn’t the self at all?

As a starting point for exploring Wu’s proposition we invite you, dear reader, to simply make a list of all those things that constitute your personal identity. Begin with the open sentence: “I am______,” and then fill in the blank. And then do it again: “I am______,” and again: “I am______,” and again and again, until you have captured, to your satisfaction, all the facets of who/what you understand yourself to be.

Now, if what Wu Wei Wu says is true, then all of what you have written—i.e., all that you have been conditioned to believe you are, is NOT, in fact, who you are! Let’s dig deeper.

Are You Your Possessions? Children understandably identify with things—my toy, my bike. Over time, my toy becomes my car, my house, my boat. If we are not careful, we can end up mistaking our possessions for who we are. This is an easy trap to fall into because from childhood on we are barraged with messages that say, in one way or another, “The best way to ensure happiness is to have lots of cool stuff.” In the grip of this belief, it is tempting to try to fulfill our essential needs for community, love, relationship, participation, and meaning by acquiring more and more material possessions.

One way to explore if you suffer from this form of mistaken identity is to make a list of all of your significant possessions, and then to consider the following questions:

- Are there things on your list that you designate with the word “my”? For example, is it: “the” car or “my” car? “the” tools or “my” tools?
- In cases where the object is best denoted with “my,” how does the possession of that thing leave you feeling with regard to people who lack this possession—e.g., Important? Superior? Guilty?
• How are you left feeling in cases where someone else has a better version of something (e.g., spiffier car) than you?
• Finally, how would it affect your sense of self worth and well being if you were to lose one of your prized possessions (Tolle, 2005)?

Here is the point: When we speak in terms of “my” house and “my” car, (or even “my” clothes) we delude ourselves into thinking that these things are part of who we are. The reality is that these things, appearances aside, have nothing to do with who we are. You are NOT your possessions! If you allow this to really sink in, you will, very likely, experience a sense of expansion and spaciousness. This is the result of breaking free from a socially conditioned deception that keeps you from a deeper understanding of who you truly are.

Are You Your Body? From an early age, most of us were conditioned to believe that our body is the most essential element of who we are. In particular, we easily misidentify our outer appearance for who we are. For example, when you express unhappiness because you are having a “bad-hair day” or because your nose is too big, you are making the mistake of imagining that your hair or your arms are, in some measure, who you are. Wrong! In fact, your physical body—that form that is constantly changing and that will grow old and die—is in no way the sum of who you are.

Consider, instead, that the essence of your body is not a physical form so much as an intense energy field. At first mention, this may seem a bit odd, even New-Age. Yet, it is possible to experience this energy field and in so doing to move from your normal superficial outer-body awareness to a more genuine and substantive inner-body awareness.

If you’d like to explore this simply bring your attention to your hands. Sense the energy, the aliveness, in your hands. Then, hold your palms facing each other about one foot apart and slowly bring your palms together, alert to the energy field created by your hands as they draw together. After sensing the aliveness in your hands—feeling your “inner hands”—move your attention to your feet, sensing the energy, the aliveness, in both your feet and your hands at the same time. Continue in this way, allowing this sense of inner awareness, inner energy, to extend to your arms, neck, head, and chest. As you do this, you will come to experience your inner body not as your body at all but simply and profoundly as life energy, the bridge between form (the physical body) and formlessness (Tolle, 2005).

As you experiment with this way of experiencing your body, it is likely that your sense of yourself will, again, become more spacious and free. That’s the point! We grow into a fuller understanding and acceptance of who we are by becoming free of the limiting ways we have been conditioned to see ourselves.

Are You Your Beliefs? As human beings, it is difficult to avoid identifying with our beliefs. After all, we have been conditioned to think that our beliefs define who we are. But consider this brief thought experiment: Think of something you believed in the past that you no longer believe today. Now, without that old belief of yours, are you still you—is the essence of your youness still present?

In truth, beliefs are nothing more than opinions about things that we are not able to know about through direct experience. For example, absent our ability to know whether life exists on other planets or if reincarnation occurs or if a supernatural being (e.g. “God”) exists, we can formulate beliefs about these things. But we don’t need to do this; instead, we could simply dwell in a state of not knowing.
Living in a state of not knowing, rather than adhering rigidly to opinions, leads to personal growth and freedom. If you doubt this, consider doing this mini-experiment. When you hear someone expressing an opinion (belief) that you disagree with, pause and catch yourself, and rather than reacting and defending, try simply responding with, “That could be,” and in so doing, letting go of your attachment to your particular viewpoint. There is freedom in this.

A related approach is to identify a strongly held personal position and then to ask yourself: “Would it be theoretically possible for someone to disagree with my position?” If it is possible, then you are dealing with a belief, one among several, perhaps many, other ways of seeing the world. Then, go further and experiment with literally letting go of your stance, taking note of the feelings—e.g., fear, frustration, freedom—that are evoked. Through these kinds of explorations, you will stop confusing your opinions (our stories) with who you are and, in so doing, enter into a less ego driven, and therefore more loving, relationship with yourself.

Are You What You Do For a Living? Many people today have been conditioned to believe that success in life is determined by such things as the amount of money one makes or the number of degrees one accumulates, or the prestige of one’s job titles. None of these things has any direct bearing on genuine success as spiritual director, Anthony DeMello, explains in the following vignette:

A small time businessman, 55 years old, is sipping beer at a bar somewhere and he’s saying, “Well, look at my classmates, they’ve really made it.”

The idiot! What does he mean, “They made it?” They’ve got their names in the newspaper? Do you call that making it? One is president of the corporation; the other has become the Chief Justice; somebody else has become this or that.

But who determines what it means to be a success? Being the president of a corporation has nothing to do with being a success in life. You become president of a lunatic asylum and you are proud of it, even though it means nothing. Having a lot of money has nothing to do with being a success in life. You’re a success in life when you wake up!

All the person striving for “success” is really worried about is what his children will think about him, what the neighbors will think about him, what his wife will think about him...

People who made it! Made what? Made asses of themselves. Because they drained all their energy getting something that was worthless. They’re frightened and confused, they are puppets... They are controlled and manipulated... They are constantly tense and anxious. Do you call that human? And do you know why that happens? Only one reason: They identified with some label. They identified the “I” with their money or their job or their profession. That was their error...

If I change my profession tomorrow, it’s just like changing my clothes. I am untouched. Are you your clothes? Are you your name? Are you your profession? Stop identifying with them. They come and go.

(DeMello, 1992, pp. 75-76)

DeMello might be judged as ranting but his words are a refreshing antidote to the myriad ways that our culture conveys a very narrow understanding to young people of what constitutes
genuine success.

Success, as commonly understood in our culture—e.g., making a name for oneself, coming out on top of the pack—often undermines self understanding and self acceptance for two reasons. First, the success seeker allows society, and not her own inner moral compass, to define success; and second, she defines success as a future event failing to realize that success is nothing more, nothing less, than successfully being alive in the only moment available to us—the present moment. In this vein, consider the social wreckage—the destroyed relationships, neglected children, unethical actions—that lie in the wake of so many so-called successful men and women. In the hot pursuit of success it is easy to forget a very important lesson—namely: that the ends and means are one and the same. So, if we don’t engender good will, health, happiness, and well being in the pursuit of success, then the end, too, will be devoid of these essential qualities.

The upshot of all of this questioning into our genuine identity is that we come to understand that, though we have possessions, bodies, beliefs, jobs, and so on, we are not our possessions, not our bodies, not our beliefs, not our job titles, and so forth. So, Friends, if we are not all these things that our culture encourages to believe that we are… then, WHO ARE WE?