

PERSON OF INTEREST

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I am Western, not Asian. Years ago I studied Western philosophy and psychology, and not just once-over-lightly. For example, I liked the author Dostoevsky so much that I read all 52 of his novels, and I then took the Russian language in school; that kind of study. I read almost of all of the philosopher Hegel, and so on. But there was something in Western literature and philosophy that I found to be confusing and this led me into Eastern philosophy and psychology, from which I have never returned. I want to tell you something about what that was. It has to do with myself.

Here in the West, the Ego or Self is a big deal, the big tar baby, something to wrestle with, try to overcome, and not get stuck in. Good luck! On the one hand we are told from early on not to be self-centered or selfish, not to think of our self so much and to think only of others. Then, on the other hand, we are told to love ourselves, to find and discover our self, and above all to always “be’ ourselves. Do you see the ambiguity in these two approaches?

If you think about it, these contradictory views pretty much sum up the problems with Western philosophy over the centuries. About as close to truth as Westerners come is the admonition to “know thy self.” That makes sense and sense leads to life and living.

This peculiarly Western dilemma (oxymoronic!), the excessive concern for and/or against the Self is not something Asians are so worried about. And the Buddhist view, if I understand it right, is not understood correctly here in America. It seems I am endlessly told by Westerners that Buddhists don’t believe in a self and claim there is no “Self.” However, this is not what the Buddhists say.

As I understand it, the Buddhists say there is, has been, and always will be what we call a Self; it is just that it has no permanent existence, but is simply a collection of our current attachments and interests. Attachment (desire) is the glue that holds the self together. And when I say ‘self’ here I am talking about your self and my self, our personalities.

I have blogged here many times that what makes up our self-interest at any given moment is not permanent, but is ever-changing. Our self might be concerned with that new bicycle as a kid, a new girlfriend as a teen, and a new wife or baby as an adult, and so on.

The whole point is that what we collect around us as a self (and personality) is real enough, but no part of it has any permanent or lasting existence and, like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, since no item in the Self is permanent, if you pick them all away, you are left with nothing lasting. In other words, pick your personality and self apart, item by item, looking for even one thing that is permanent, and you will come up empty. However, it doesn’t really work like that, even though every once in a while some major event (the death of a loved one, etc.) shatters

and scatters our self, bringing us face to face with the actual impermanence of the self.

At those times when our self-image is shattered, we are naked for the time it takes for us to scramble around and reassemble the shards of our shattered self until we have gathered a 'proper' sense of self around us once again – the cloak of personality. By all means observe this the next time your Humpty-Dumpty self falls off the wall and shatters. That is what the Buddhists are referring to when the Buddhists point out that while the Self is always with us, what comprises it is empty of any lasting permanence. That idea.

Our personal self, our personality, is made up of whatever we are attached to (hate or like), plus whatever personal choices we have made, and the resulting experience those choices have brought to us. That being said, let's have a look at how our personality (you know, the one that has no permanent existence) is formed. It is interesting.

Our personality, as the word suggests, reflects personal choices, and in fact is the sum-result of all the personal choices we have made. We have picked up that habit, but not this one. We cut our hair long rather than short. We have pierced our ears rather than not, and so on – personal choices.

All of these incremental choices add up to our total personality, the kind of person we are. But our personality also reflects more than just physical attributes. We are also the result of our actions, everything we think and do. And it all adds up to how we appear and come across, our 'persona'.

We are the sum result not just of how we look, but also of what we think and have done. Everything we are 'signs' us, gives us away, and displays our personality. Our body language and thoughts speak as well as the way we wear our hair.

And our personality is not fixed in stone, but endlessly changes as we do. This is why the Buddhists point out that the personality or self has no permanent existence. It changes with our every thought and decision. Is that hard to understand?

We each build our personality by the choices we make, and only time will tell if we have made the right choices or not. Most of us would like to have an attractive or at least an interesting personality, and the endless stream of popular magazines is testimony to the fact that imitating what is considered cool is the way many personalities are put together these days. We copy, big time. Monkey see, monkey do.

But real personal power, the actual power of the person, has little to do with imitation or copying what works for others, and has everything to do with the 'personal' choices we make in life. And this happens to be pretty easy to explain, so I will give it a shot. This is what makes the concept of the "Last Judgment" so important. And the last judgment is always the 'latest' judgment.

At any given time, like today for example, we are surrounded by a sea of choices, free to

choose so many different paths and directions. We can't travel all the roads that life offers us, at least not at the same time, so we must choose one and leave the others behind. In many cases, we won't know if we have made a good choice until much farther on down the road, until much later in our lives.

PERSON OF INTEREST: PART 2

June 21, 2012

Choosing what everyone is choosing for a personality, as shown in the popular media of the day, copying what others look like and do does not guarantee that these personal choices will result in a personality that reflects how we really feel inside ourselves, or even what is good for us, what we really need. Using what is current or popular, what is (by definition) now peaking or has already peaked will probably not be very useful down the road of time.

Not choosing what is popular at the time, holding out for something better or more true for us, may also, by definition, be unpopular and very risky. We may go against the grain, against what is conventional. How will we know if we have made the right choices?

We will know later on, down the line, for better or for worse. Let's take an example, someone living in the 1960s, where there was so much flux, and so many alternatives to choose from.

Future-Oriented Choices

Here are some choices I personally (personality) made: Back then, my wife and I chose to home-educate some of our children instead of sending them to public schools. We chose to have home births, rather than hospital births. We chose to eat more whole and organic foods, as opposed to eating more processed foods. I preferred self-education rather than pursuing a more formal course of study. I chose to experiment with alternative states of mind and spirituality rather than the expected religions of my times, and so on. You get the idea. These are choices I made back in the day.

At that time, way back then, these choices were not all that clear. I know, because I was there. These choices did not stand out because everything was all mixed together in the present moment, and there was more like a haze of confusion than a list of clear choices to make. We had to go by our gut feeling in making choices. We had to choose. Unconventional choices were just that: not conventional. They went against the grain or trends of the time. Some (many in fact) even carried penalties imposed by society, like my choosing to not finish high school, or choosing to educate myself rather than get a degree. It took guts for me to make those hard choices and there were few rewards other than personal satisfaction. Not a single person told me it was a wise choice to not go to college. Now, let's jump ahead some 30 years and look at the personalities that result for these different choices.

Most Significant Subset

Today, a person (personality) that chose (way back then) to self-educate themselves, to home educate their children, to have home birth, to learn about whole foods, and alternative religions, would at least (today) be very distinct and probably more interesting to some aspects of society than a person who chose to follow a more conventional route. Simply copying the popular conventional personality from the media is not the same as building one yourself. Why?

Because, as time changes, certain qualities are found to be more useful or interesting to society, and these are sought out and promoted, and those persons who have these qualities have a personality of more interest (or use) to society at large, than one without these qualities. Both types have personalities and as personalities go, neither is more or less a personality. Why is one more interesting and useful?

The process of time and change naturally selects the qualities most needed for the present time, and if a particular person happens to be composed of the most significant subset of these qualities, that personality will be interesting, perhaps even scintillating. Everyone wants to learn more about what it takes to be that way, because today some of those attributes are considered useful. Ecology and clean air are good examples.

I grew up in an era when almost everyone smoked, in planes and trains, buses and cars. There was no apology for blowing smoke where I breathed. You just had to suck it up. Those who did not smoke, like those who never touched a drop of alcohol were frowned upon - teetotalers. Ugh. They were no fun. But today, all that has changed, thanks to one person at a time giving up those habits and daring to defy convention.

Another example: If in the 1960s, for some reason, you had decided to learn the Chinese language, your skills would be in great demand today. English speaking Americans who know Chinese can get a job anywhere. Who could predict that China would become so powerful, although, if you think about it, this should have been a no-brainer. Do the math.

A Stellar Personality

The point here is that one way of looking at our personality is as the result of a series of choices we have made in the past. Someone who, for whatever reasons, has managed to make five or ten really good choices in their past, will appear as a most valuable and fascinating "person" today. Others may kick themselves for not having made the same choices, and try to imitate those choices now, but this is usually just a little too late to bring about the same effect for themselves. The die has been cast.

In other words, there are real practical rewards for developing our instinct for making good choices. What I am pointing out here is that a stellar personality, one filled with many points of light, was made long ago (just like stars in the sky were), not just by natural talent, but also through a process of making careful useful choices.

We may not all be Leonardo DaVinci material, but we each can learn to use our own mind and intuition to make choices that will bring forth a destiny worth living. Choices that we make today, which may seem very unpopular now and even separate us from acceptance and popularity, can in time result in a personality that is key or crucial for the society of the future, even precious. This is the idea of the last judgment, personified. It is the judgment (and needs) of the future that will decide which personality is interesting.

That Fascinating Person

When you meet a really fascinating person, take note of what about them is so fascinating, and you may end up with a short list of the significant choices they made, choices that others did not make. They invested their time and energy in ways that have proved useful to society today, although at the time, that choice may not have raised any eyebrows, or even seemed like a waste of time. This is called having the courage of our convictions.

Today we are the most significant subset of all the choices we have made, and if most of those choices are now relevant, then our person appears almost unique. You get the idea. That is how personalities of note are made. If you believe that the truth will win out in the end, then this helps in making and standing by good choices.

PERSON OF INTEREST: NEGATIVITIES

June 23, 2012

In the last couple of blogs we took a look at personalities and how they might be formed from the various attachments we have, and the fact that we change our personality like styles of clothes over the years. Nothing we are attached to is permanent, which includes our personality. What we didn't say anything about are the negative aspects of our personalities and what to do about them.

Personalities not only contain what we like and dislike, but also the impact of what befalls us in life. We all have a personality, but we may lack confidence in it, or perhaps we have experienced abuse or tragic events that leave what appears to be a permanent stain or scar on us. This too we carry with us as our personality. These shroud-like parts of our person can be heavy baggage to cart around. What about these negative imprints?

These deeper negative imprints or stains also can change, but often much more slowly. Lady Macbeth's "Out, out black spot!" is not the way to remove them, but is just another example of the tar-baby response -- the more we struggle, the deeper we are mired. Attachments stick equally through love or hate, so you can't hate away a bad experience. You can't "try" to remove it. That just further imprints it.

The Tibetan Buddhists have a way of removing these stains called "looking at their true nature," but that is way above my pay grade to explain. We can take an alternate but more

understandable route for now.

As mentioned, loving or hating something only deepens the attachment. Being neutral toward it would be better. The best advice I ever got about the things in my personality I would like not to have attached to me any longer is to just be aware of them.

You can be aware of something without attaching a value judgment of love or hate to them. Just note that they are there and leave it go at that. Drop it. That is a first step toward disempowering an attachment: just be aware of it. Don't think or not think about it; just be aware it is there.

Bringing a bad experience to mind over and over again only deepens its groove or track in our mindstream. Whether we are thinking we like it or we don't like it (and want it to go away) give the same result, deeper imprinting. These vulnerable areas of our person only get stronger by being touched on or (like a sore tooth) even checked. A further and more powerful approach is to create a new past. Here is how:

The past is always a product of the present moment, as is the future. By creating positive and self-confirming actions in the present we gradually create a new past, a personality that we can be confident of to have a good future, giving us: self-confidence. In time, with enough care about the present moment, the new past we create through the present becomes more substantial than the negative imprints we would like to let go of, and we do let them go. We begin to forget them and they slide toward oblivion.

Negative imprints are perhaps most easily forgotten by replacing and identifying them with new positive experiences. Hating and shunning something in our self that we want to remove does not work, just as struggling with Satan only legitimizes him and gives him strength. Christians know how strong Satan is.

Now, if we are still both on the same page, then please consider the following, which I have presented so many times before. Open ears please.

You can try as you will to create new and positive experiences, but there is a traditional way that works well if you can step around the onus connected to it, and that is "meditation."

I know... I know. Meditation is a catch-all word that covers everything from relaxation therapy to levitation, and you have every right to ignore the term on sight, but please don't. The exact kind of meditation I refer to is that taught by the Tibetan and Zen Buddhists for centuries. In Sanskrit it is called Shamata, in Tibetan Shiné, and in Japanese Zazen. They are all basically the same practice, which is simply learning how to let the mind come to rest naturally.

Of course this is easier said than done, but if you want my opinion, all things considered, this is 'the' shortcut to the kind of awareness we need to confirm (or add) what is positive and to let go of what is negative in our personality. A lot of other methods may look like more fun or seem faster, but practicing meditation properly is the quickest way to progress that I know of. If I knew

of a better way, I would tell you.

It is far easier to create a new past than it is to do endless therapy on the old past, trying to get the stubborn stains out. As mentioned, wrestling with the devils of our past only makes them stronger. Trying to create a better future by rejiggering the past is like driving backward into the future using the rear-view mirror. It is very, very hard to do and, moreover, just not necessary.

Learning Shamata meditation from an authorized source and practicing it properly until it becomes a habit builds a new past, which of course becomes the future, and at the same time allows our negative past to self-liberate over time. Liberating negativities (which may have a long half-life, like uranium isotopes) is the way to go, and once that is started, the negativities only become weaker and weaker as time goes by. We eventually ignore the negative and even if someone points them out in us, they no longer matter to us. We don't identify with them and therefore don't react. They dissolve.

It is that simple or complex. Our personality is something we will, by default, always have. It can be groomed by accentuating the positive and eliminating (not by attack) the negative. Our negativities are eliminated by planned obsolescence. Meditation is the key. Any questions?