

HUMPTY-DUMPTY SELF

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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall.
All the king's horses and all the king's men,
Couldn't put Humpty together again.

I sometimes like to think of my Self (or Ego) as Mr. Humpty Dumpty, sitting up there high on a wall. And every once in a great while that self of mine has a great fall and is shattered into a million pieces. Only here is where the poem ends for me. Every time my sense of self is shattered I move heaven and earth to put those pieces back together into a coherent self image. I don't like it when the image of myself is shattered and whatever is beneath it (what if there is nothing at all?) is exposed. Not at all.

The Buddhists have an interesting view of the self, that it has no true existence but is just something we have managed to pull around us to hide our inherent emptiness or nakedness. A common misunderstanding would have it that the Buddhist claim that the self has no existence, that the self does not exist, but that is not it. Buddhist teachings point out that not only does a self exist for each of us but that there never will be a time when we will be without a self. It not only exists but it is a permanent (in terms of time) part of each of us. The self is kind of our executive secretary, reminding us when we have a dental appointment, looking out for this, and looking out for that, and so on.

What the Buddhists do state is that the self has no 'true' or absolute existence in itself. This may seem like a play on words, but it is not. While the self is here with us 'permanently', what it is comprised of has no permanent or "true" reality in the sense that it is only a collection of attachments we have drawn around us. In other words, our concept of a self changes as we change.

As a child our self image may have centered around a new bike or wanting a new bike, or our favorite video game. In our teens our girlfriend or boyfriend may be central to us, and when we get older it could be a new car, house, or child that is at the center of what we consider ourselves. In other words, while the presence of a self remains the same (is always with us), what makes up that sense of self actually changes over time, thus the statement that what makes up that image has no true or permanent existence. Things change. To repeat: the fact that we 'have' a self is permanent, but what makes up that image of our self has no true or lasting existence, is not permanent, but is always changing. And here is what is interesting:

Every once in a while some event, challenge, tragedy, or whatever happens and the sense of our self is shattered. It could be as simple as an unflattering remark from someone we love or respect. It could be that we zigged when we should have zagged and caught a glimpse of our own hypocrisy in the mirror of our mind. Or it could be some life-threatening or life-changing event (like someone we love dies) and we suddenly are shattered. There are many ways to drop the self (or see through it), at least temporarily. To put this differently: our self image can also go void or become transparent at times.

When this happens the total self image we have drawn around us just falls away and we are left with what? Well that is my point. What is beneath all that veneer, all those attachments or identifiers we have endlessly collected around us?

When our sense of self is momentarily shattered and we are reduced to a quivering mass of vulnerability, we quickly struggle to put our Humpty Dumpty self back together again, and as fast as we can. Pronto! That sense of vulnerability and un-comfortableness is the last thing in the world we would choose to have happen and when it does, life as we know it pretty much stops.

We can't wait to pick up the pieces, slap them together into some kind of self, and get back to feeling more-or-less "normal," to draw that old familiar cloak of the self around use once again. We just hate feeling vulnerable and exposed like that. And now let's get closer to what the Buddhist teachings say about all of this.

Those moments of sheer nakedness and vulnerability, those moments when some event shatters our self image should rather be treasured than covered up as fast as we can. At those moments when the curtain of our self image is down we have a rare chance to actually see something about the true nature of our mind that is otherwise hidden the rest of the time.

Yes, it is very, very sensitive and it probably hurts to look, but these are some of the only opportunities we ever have to see beneath our own veneer, beneath the cloak of self secrecy we have drawn around us.

And a few additional remarks: The self is nothing to be ashamed of, whether it is our own self or the self as we see it in others. And yes, you can like or love yourself. It is your personal creation. Whether others love the self you have assembled is up to them, but it is not inherently bad or "wrong." It is natural to be selfish, but at the same time it is best not to take yourself too seriously, considering what it is.

It is OK to like yourself, but it is also important to get to know yourself, to know this self-image that you have created. Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, if you carefully pick through everything that makes up your self image, don't be surprised if there is nothing true or lasting underneath it all. It is a moveable feast, but one empty of true existence. In other words, knowing the self cannot but help reveal a sense of humor that you may not know you had.

IMO, western psychology, can be reduced to the seeming paradox: on the one hand I am told to find myself, to know myself, and to above all else "be" myself. Yet in the same breath I am also told not to be selfish or self-centered. Got that?

I hope that this brief introduction to looking at the self presented here has given you some tools you may need to solve this paradox and, at least sometimes, not to be in such a hurry to put Humpty Dumpty back together again. As the German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel said in his classic book "The Phenomenology of the Mind:"

"We go behind the curtain of the Self,
To see what is there,
But mainly for there to be something to be seen."

