

PERSONA NON GRATA

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According to the Buddhist view, our personality and "Self" is nothing more than a composite image or montage of attachments, all our personal likes and dislikes. I mean, it's right there in the word "persona" if I would just read the dictionary, often defined as social facade or mask, but masking what? And what is behind the mask?

I sometimes think the mask of personality (self image) is like those old view cameras where the photographer holds up a little stuffed bird and calls out "watch the birdie" while he snaps away. Anyway, that's what we seem to do with the self, focus on the personality or self image surrounding a person (or ourselves), rather than what is inside or behind it. We see the cover and not the book. What is inside?

While we may gradually get over our own self (as in "get over yourself"), we socially watch each other's selves twist and turn with what seems like rapt attention. No wonder cocktail parties were often so barren of depth for me, not that I have been to one in 40 years. We seldom look beyond the veneer, much less behind the mask. Or is it that with the self, there's no wizard behind the curtain?

And the Buddhists don't claim that there is no self image (that the self is not real), but rather simply that the image is not permanent, but changes with our wandering interests. The bottom line here is that the self is not an entity, not who we actually are. It may serve as our front man, who we think or wish we are. Perhaps the self is what we show (make socially visible... what others see) to the outside world, but it indeed is a mask or façade, just as the dictionary says.

And we can learn to see through the mask of the self, both in the sense that with mind practice it becomes more transparent to us (not important), and also in the sense that we can easily mistake it for 'the' vantage point or peephole through which to view life. It is this second meaning that most fascinates me in this particular blog, the idea that we adopt this montage we have collected around us, this mask, not only as something to be seen by ourselves in the mirror and by the world (our self), but also as the vantage point from which 'we' view the world, as the entity that we like to think we are. Talk about science-fiction.

Is it no wonder that many of us fear death, because deep-down, we must instinctively know that when we leave this world, the self we cherish (and all its components) will not be traveling with us, but the clinging and attachment, that does go with us. In my opinion, western philosophy got closest to looking at this 'self' concept when Hegel wrote in the "Phenomenology of the Mind" this one sentence.

"We go behind the curtain of the Self to see what is there, but mainly for there to be something to be seen." That is pure Buddhism speaking. And who is the "we?"

And we are surrounded by other selves doing just the same, and this is never more apparent than at social gatherings, especially stuffy ones where all we see (and show) is the veneer we have painted on our personal masks. Give me one-to-one communication, any day.

The Buddhists are spot on in telling us that these social masks (these selves) that we wear are not entities, and have no permanent existence in themselves, but like the layers of an onion, they have no actual core. But don't stop there. That is only half the story, only half of what the Buddhists are pointing out here. The other half is that we each have (beyond the mask) what is called Buddha Nature, and that behind the personal self is a mind that does not yet know that it is a 'Buddha in waiting', a fully enlightened mind waiting to be discovered by each one of us.

And the Buddhist view is not Platonic in that we once-upon-a-time were enlightened but somehow fell into our current obscurations (i.e. original sin). The Buddhists don't really have a Cosmo genesis, and I have been very careful to ask the Tibetan rinpoches about just this concept. In their view, it is not that we originally fell from grace and are now somehow trying to recover that state. They say that we (you and I) have been ignoring the true nature of our mind, call it our inner nature or whatever, for eternity up until now, this present moment.

In fact, my dharma teacher says that we are the "stragglers," the ones who, in all the time there has been up to the present, never managed to "get it." He actually said that we are, and I quote, the "hard cases." What about that?

So the bottom line here, at least for me, is this concept of transmigration. And I am not talking about transmigration as in death, dying, the bardo, and rebirth, although there certainly is a parallel there. Instead I am talking about the transmigration of "view" here in our life right now, in particular, our starting to do the homework needed to vacate our belief that the ordinary self is a viable vantage point to experience life, much less solid grounds for future lives.

The Buddhists emphatically tell us that it is not and that the self as we know and love it will be jettisoned down the road when we die, so best to be packing out of there now or soon. We would do well to gradually transmigrate from the view of ourselves as the self to identifying with the awareness and clarity of our mind itself.

I understand that perhaps this concept of not depending on the self that I write here about probably reads a bit "heady" or theoretical to many of you, but it is worth a serious second look by all of us. The process of gradually moving our vantage point away from self-dependency is what much of meditation (and mind training) is all about.

However, the self-exodus we here in the West face was taken long ago by the Buddhists, so we are in good company. All we have to do is to follow the breadcrumb trail or method, which is called the "Dharma."