

Who Am I, Really?

A Holistic Approach to Self-Discovery

by Michael Mongno Ph.D

We could begin with our country of origin, then our city, and our family and its generational roots. That would say something about the reality that shaped our perceptions of life, our language with which we express ourselves and our cultural mores. And although we may take this for granted, it has certainly influenced us to a large extent. But what we're really asking is "Who am I as a person with an independent will and some kind of unique destiny?" or "Who am I deep inside as a person living this life, my life, and is the life I'm creating one that I want and am happy with?"

The reason this question is really so profound is because it speaks to a desire to truly know oneself, our authentic self or true nature. Answering this becomes something more than just "I'm a person who [...fill in the blanks...]." It speaks to a desire to fully know the depth of who we are as an integrated being: body, mind, and spirit. Answering this can be the journey of a lifetime, a wonderful journey of coming in touch with our uniqueness from the inside out.

I grew up wondering this early in life, in my teens, and indeed it has become a lifetime process that's not over yet. I started with first wondering about happiness, where it can be found and if it can be maintained. This led me to embark on a spiritual path which in part was seeking

for a way to fit in or feel comfortable (due to the lack of my own socialization skills) in a world that was rapidly changing. After years of doing the classic spiritual by-pass I realized that I needed to face who I was as an emotional being. The problem was, like many men, I was so out of touch with my feelings that I really didn't know where to start.

It was quite daunting and I still remember sitting with my first therapist as she encouraged me to sit and try to tune in to whatever emotions I was having and where they might be in my body. This was hard, since I really didn't even know what they were much less where they might be located. But nonetheless this felt important so I persevered and ended up being able to extrapolate from the four basic emotions (mad, sad, glad, and afraid) whatever I was feeling in the moment. Of course it was only many years later that I learned why they were so important: emotions are the gateway to our needs (i.e. in order to know what you really need you must know how you really feel) and emotions are the all important connective avenue with another, which is empathy, and can only be experienced if you can feel someone's experience.

This path differed in many ways from the path of enlightenment that I'd been on for years. I had to learn to work with my thoughts and feelings and also to try to live in

my body, with all the stuff that goes on there -- very challenging indeed. It was almost enough to send me scurrying back to my meditation cushion for another week long silent retreat at the nearest Ashram. Emotions differ quite a bit from cognition; they are quite a bit messier, last a lot longer and are never as black and white. Also they seem to arise at the drop of a hat, as if from nowhere. This is where the use of the mind is helpful in analyzing their source and what got triggered to cause such a reaction. Most all of the dramas in relationships get triggered by some historical memory in the body (a container for all emotional experience) or some replication of family trauma that feels so real that we feel we must either run, fight, or shut down to protect ourselves.

Understanding our mind has become a province of the therapeutic realm for a hundred years and the analysis thereof has helped to make great strides in the understanding of the self. Over the past fifty years new, experiential modalities (Gestalt, Bio-Energetics, and Reichian therapies) have opened us up to realizing that the self we've been discovering is more than just thought patterns from historical imprinting but a body that has also been historically imbedded with emotional memory. This memory can be triggered in life situations often to deleterious effects but can also be therapeutically released and then healed in an emotionally corrective experience. Here both the body and the mind benefits and there is more freed up energy to be used by both.

Then we are free to come back to the spirit, actually where it/we all began. Knowing that we are spiritual beings having a human experience can be helpful in accepting or making sense of the slings and arrows of the world and all the suffering we see and have to endure. Having a spiritual practice, belonging to a religious community, or spending time in prayer and meditation can free our minds and expand our awareness of self so that we can perceive reality differently. Texts such as A Course in Miracles or books like The Power of Now teach us how to move out of the small egoic sense we have of ourselves to the realization that we're part of something much larger than we can even imagine, a supreme intelligence that is implicitly and unconditionally loving. The great religious texts also offer guidance in how to live a balanced life based on faith, trust and a caring for our fellow man.

We are thus more than just our histories, our thoughts and feelings, our bodies and our spirituality. In attempting to answer the profundity of the question of our essential identity we must explore the depth of everything that forms the integrated whole of who we really are. This search for the discovery of our authentic self or true nature can be wonderfully rewarding as well as profoundly exasperating depending on where we're at in our journey. But this is where our awareness of our different parts and the internal resources they each provide can help us stay centered and balanced and aligned with the highest and greatest that we as humans have to offer.



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