

It Has To Be ME: A Journey into Buddhist Psychology

I started my family at a very young age, as one did in the early 1970's – get married – have children, no planning required. I was a mother of two by the time I was 23 years old and by then, my own mother had died in a car accident.

What to do? I thrashed around in anger, grief, fear and frustration for years. Anger that my mother had been taken away (from ME) before her time and way before I was ready; fear and frustration at myself for not having a clue how to raise myself emotionally, let alone raise two children.

By the time my children were just starting school, I was lucky enough to be invited to join a Jungian dream interpretation group. I was a member of this group for three years, during which time I became fascinated by and curious about my own internal and nocturnal world. A journal evolved and I became acquainted and familiar with Archetypes, my "Shadow" side and the ideas of Anima and Animus which inhabit all of us ("Understanding Jung; Understanding Yourself" Dr Peter O'Connor Methuen 1985; "Looking Inwards" Dr Peter O'Connor Penguin Books, 2003; "The Invisible Partners" John A. Sanford Paulist Press, 1980).

If you believe in the (Jungian) idea of synchronicity, interestingly, one of the other group members happened to be a Yoga teacher and spiritual guide, just waiting for me to notice. I enrolled into one of her classes and although sceptical at first, became fascinated by the idea of a spiritual world beyond structured religion. At this time, I was still struggling with my confusion and anger about my mother's death, and in a way was trying to make sense of why she died. These classes opened up a whole new world for me, of making sense of the nonsensical, of finding out that there was more than one dimension to me, to the idea of the "I" that is me. I felt like I was coming "home".

And so my journey began.

Being taught about the Laws of Karma and the practice of meditation, allowed me, for the first time, to be able to stop and "be" in my own skin, attempt to stop reacting to situations that drew me in emotionally, attempt to stop judging myself so that I could stop judging others and realize that most of the difficult situations I found myself in were of my own creation. This has not been an uneventful journey, fraught with challenges to my own belief system, the pull of the obligations of my history and culture, and the desire to be comfortable but stagnant in the company of the familiar.

Knowing about the Laws of Karma did not shelter me or anyone around me from tragedy. Inevitably, bad things happen to us or people we care deeply about. World catastrophes happen all the time, famines, earthquakes, Tsunamis, floods and we inevitably come to the conclusion that random world events are not and cannot be the direct responsibility of their victims.

Beyond the facts of natural catastrophes, arbitrary accidents and crime there lies a world worth exploring, a world of our own making.

What do I mean? I mean that when a situation happens that is upsetting, involves strong emotions like fear, anger or sadness, it is actually within our own capacity to choose how to respond.

At this point, some of you may choose to stop reading these controversial ideas. However, I would ask those of you who are courageous enough to continue reading to ask yourselves these questions – “When I am angry (sad/fearful) who makes me behave the way that I do? Who makes me react, lash out or run away from the situation I am in? Who decides how I will behave?” There is, and can only be one answer. The answer is simple. It has to be ME.

Running away from challenging situations can mean many things. It can mean physically withdrawing from a situation that is distressing or overwhelming; running away by engaging in problematic behaviours such as abuse of alcohol, mind altering drugs, gambling to the point that it interferes with your social, work or personal life or being involved in extra marital affairs. Being angry or sad can also mean many things. It can mean taking the position of “victim” in your relationships, blaming someone else or turning your blame and anger or sadness inwards, thereby becoming vulnerable to the serious mental illness of depression. Running away can also be viewed from the perspective of blaming others, to avoid “seeing” ourselves as we really are, with all our bumps.

When we are acting from a position of reactivity, it is easy to blame, judge and criticize not only others but ourselves. We get caught up in the illusion that it must be someone else’s fault that we are feeling bad, sad, miserable, depressed or angry. These are the ideas and attitudes that most of us have been brought up with, so it must be true, right?

Buddhism teaches us to be responsible, totally, in all situations and at all times for our own behaviour. Quite a burden. However, these ideas can also be enlightening and give us freedom. When we are solely responsible for how we behave in and react to situations, we can stop blaming, judging and criticizing, we become adults, we come “home”.

Can you imagine what your life would be like if you could stop blaming yourself when things go wrong, getting angry if your needs are not met, judging yourself harshly if you don’t meet your own expectations of yourself? Impossible? Read on.

In her book “Buddhism for Mothers” Sarah Naphtali writes “ By watching my thoughts I can learn about the unrealistic demands I place on (*myself and*) those around me...thoughts such as “the house must always be tidy” or “my family should be happy and grateful for all that I do for them...”. (Sarah Naphtali, Allen & Unwin, 2003).

When I take responsibility for myself, totally, it frees me to be myself. Who am I? I am the sometimes frightened person I meet in my dreams, the sometimes calm person I meet in my meditations, the clear person I am when I am watching myself watching myself, in noticing my thoughts, in essence, the “I” that is “me”.

This idea of being totally responsible for one’s own behaviour and actions can be frightening as well as liberating. Does it mean that I am always to blame for what I do? Absolutely. Except try replacing the word “blame” with “responsible”. Does being responsible for everything that I do mean that I’ve got it all wrong up until now? If you believe that, then you are judging yourself, if you are judging yourself you are buying into the idea that judgements are reality.

However, don’t we all have judgements all the time? Of course. We judge how we feel, probably how we look when we see ourselves in a mirror, how our day has been so far. Judging situations can also be extremely useful and are hard wired into our brains. If we could not discriminate (judge) between a dangerous situation and a situation which is not dangerous, we are at risk of being injured or worse. For example, when we get behind the wheel of a car, we judge safe distances between our own car and another vehicle, whether we need to brake or not, how fast it is safe to drive in a particular situation, and so on.

When I speak of not judging ourselves, what I mean is that we don’t need to get attached to our judgements. Judgements are really just thoughts and ideas about a situation or person or ourselves that we believe to be true, and therefore justified. A judgement has no substance, we cannot touch it, see it, smell it and yet somehow, we usually believe it to be true. However, when we can see a judgement as just a thought, and let it go, we are no longer “attached” to the idea that it is a truth but see it for what it is, just another thought.

For example, in our Western society, we talk about “good” foods and “bad” foods. The common belief is that “Good” foods don’t make us fat. Where and when did this idea evolve and become part of our vocabulary to the point that we don’t even question it? Who decided that having a piece of chocolate once in a while is “bad”? Who decided what the ideal dress size is for a grown, responsible, mature woman? This idea often leads us to feel guilty and “judge” ourselves for having eaten something which in itself, is extremely pleasant, tasty and usually harmless. In fact the Incas fought Wars over rights to the cocoa bean. Cocoa is what chocolate is made from.

When we take the idea of “good” foods and “bad” foods we can clearly see that judging a food as having a characteristic of good or bad is actually a nonsense, created by media in a society obsessed with self image. We judge ourselves and others by how much we have or don’t have; how we look or don’t look; what clothes we wear or don’t wear even what suburbs we live in, in comparison to those around us.

“The world we live in has turned us into creatures tormented by innumerable desires...to be somebody important, to be admired, to make our fortune, to have endless sources of excitement. We obsessively pursue our goals, telling ourselves we’ll be all fixed up once we achieve them, we collect masses of stuff because we yearn to be fashionable, tasteful, “up there” or “out there” anywhere but here...these desires make us overlook any potential for happiness in the present moment.” (Naphtali, p 20)

When we can accept the idea that I am responsible for myself, my thoughts, my behaviour towards myself and others, we can truly begin the journey towards “self” towards “home”.

How to begin?

The Thought Leaf

Start with a thought, any thought such as “I am too fat/thin/awkward/angry/stupid” (substitute whatever word you commonly use to denigrate yourself).

Sit down, make sure you won’t be disturbed. Challenge yourself to turn off your phone so that you can be still.

Imagine you are in a place that is peaceful, comfortable, safe and warm. Don’t try to empty your mind, accept the fact that minds like to think, and that your mind is no exception. Imagine your thoughts as words in a cartoon bubble. Place each thought bubble on a leaf and place each thought leaf on the gentle waters of a stream you are watching. So, every time you recognize that you are having a thought, place your thought bubble on one of the leaves and allow it to float gently down the stream. Your stream. The stream of enlightenment.

Now take the judging thought that you identified about yourself (I am too fat/stupid etc) and place it on another leaf and watch that too, float gently away down the stream.

If your thoughts start to wander, as that’s what thoughts like to do, just lovingly and gently bring your thoughts back to the stream, back to the leaves on the stream, back to placing each thought in a bubble on a leaf, one at a time, on the stream of enlightenment and watching them float away.

Try not to judge yourself for doing this exercise “wrong” if you can’t get into the rhythm of it just now. There is no right or wrong way of doing this, just close your eyes and give it a go.

Try this exercise for two minutes, and then try to extend it next time for five minutes. Then experiment with five minutes twice a day.

Give it a go. Give yourself a go. Notice that your judging thought is no different from any other thought in your mind. If you notice yourself thinking things like “I’m so stupid I can’t even do this exercise properly” or “I can’t stop thinking” – just thank your mind for having

that thought, notice that in fact it is just a thought and then place that thought bubble also on a leaf on your gentle stream, your stream of enlightenment and watch it, too, float away.

Just because you are having a thought, any thought, does not make it wrong or right, it is just a thought.

Next time you are in a situation and you begin to recognize that the thoughts you are having about yourself or others are judging, blaming or criticizing, experiment with mentally putting the thought in a bubble on a leaf, place the leaf on your gentle stream, your stream of enlightenment and watch the thought just float away gently.

How would your relationship be with yourself if you no longer accepted that your judgements were “true” but just another thought? Imagine your relationship with yourself if you no longer felt guilty, embarrassed, furious or sad about the thoughts that you are having, or thoughts about the way your life is panning out just now, but just accepted them as thoughts instead of reality.

Noticing the process of thinking about and stepping away from the thoughts you are having is the beginning of developing an “I” consciousness.

How would your relationship be with your partner or significant others be if you could step away from judgements, criticisms or blame about them being “stupid, crazy, reckless, thoughtless, unhelpful etc etc”?

Noticing and stepping away from the judgements, criticisms and blame we place on others for emotions and behaviours that we ourselves are having is the beginning of developing a “you” consciousness. The “you” that is separate from “me” and that is not responsible for me or for my behaviour or feelings. The “you” that has your own feelings, dreams, frustrations, expectations and needs. The “you” that is separate and unique and perfect already as an individual “you”. Noticing and stepping away from the judgements, criticisms and blame we place on “you” for being different to me, for having different values, different cultures, different religions, different skin colours and different beliefs is the also about developing a “you” consciousness.

Imagine your relationship with everyone around you, your relationship to your neighbour, your community, your country, your planet.

Noticing and stepping away from judgements about our differences and recognizing that we are all part of the collective human race where we are all brothers and sisters is part of developing a “we” consciousness. In times of natural disasters or national threat, we come together in the collective sense of the “we” to help and support each other, neighbour with neighbour, suburb with suburb whole countries and whole nations together in spite of our

individual differences but in awareness of the realization of the commonality of our humanness and of our oneness our “we-ness”.

In another sense, noticing the space “you” and “I” the “we” that is “us” inhabit together, the space where you belong and I also belong, where we can move and “be” together even without verbal communication, where comfort and loyalty reside, where we protect, nurture and support each other, that is also the realm of the “we” consciousness in relationships.

So here we are. The “I” that is me; the other that is “you”; the “we” that is all of us together; works in progress.

Welcome to the world of Mindfulness.

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