

THE MAN IN THE MIRROR: Who am “I”?

“I’m starting with the man in the mirror, I’m asking him to change his ways...” Michael Jackson “The Man in the Mirror” (1988)

When we look at the “...man in the mirror”, who do we see? Often we don’t see anyone at all, just a quick glance can be enough to check makeup, hair in place and then out the door. But who IS the man in the mirror? If we actually take the time to look at the “me” in the mirror, we often don’t like who we see. Why? Humans are hard wired to judge situations, and our reflections are no exception. However, judging is a normal and often appropriate response to a situation. We judge situations constantly and instantly for their safety, such as the speed at which I will drive my car on a wet dark night, whether I need to attend a medical appointment, what is good for my body when it comes to meals and self care etc.

It is when we “attach” to our judgements and thoughts about ourselves “I’m stupid/lazy/selfish/irresponsible” etc that the “man in the mirror” becomes someone to avoid or neglect.

Daniel Siegel (Author; Clinical Professor of Psychiatry; Co-Director UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Centre) teaches a Mindfulness exercise which coaches the student to get in touch with what Siegel terms the “hub” of the mind (the “I” that is “me”). The “hub” is that point at the depths or centre of the mind, a space behind the eyes. From this vantage point, where everything is deep, peaceful and calm, like the depths of the ocean, students are instructed to look upwards towards the rim or surface of the mind, the surface of the sea of our mind. The surface of the mind is where all mental activity happens. Thoughts, feelings, memories, beliefs, attitudes, worries, planning. Being able to visualize the rim of the mind, the surface of the mind as just mental activities is a succinct and eloquent way to visualize a separate “I” that is actually doing the looking up. So instantly it becomes clear that “I” am separate from my thoughts, feelings and beliefs.

What does it mean to acknowledge that “I” have a core, a “me” and am not just an organism who reacts to what is happening around me? Being able to obtain a sense of who “I” actually am, even momentarily, can have a very positive spin off effect. It can allow me to step away from intense situations, the rawness of my vulnerabilities, my attachments to thoughts and self effacing judgements. I can allow myself the luxury of reflection, consideration, distance from my (sometimes) primitive emotional states which are NOT the sum total of who “I” am, but only a collection of thoughts, feelings, reactions and sensations that I am experiencing in that moment. This recognition can mean I can now easily access a sanctuary inside of myself, a place of refuge, a relief in this “hub” of my “self”.

In terms of client education, this knowledge can be a valuable tool. Clients often complain that they “don’t have time” to look after themselves. Designing focussed Mindfulness exercises to work with clients who tend to be reactive, attribute blame, deny responsibility or lack insight can have powerful and immediate benefits for the client.

When we support clients to be more in tune with themselves, to notice the “I” that is the “me” in the mirror, clients can begin to develop the capacity to listen to themselves. “The capacity to listen to ourselves is the foundation of the capacity of listening to others. The capacity of loving others depends on the capacity to love ourselves.” Thich Nhat Hanh “Teachings on Love” CD, 1996

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