

A simple question, you say. Well, how do you answer it? With your name? With your family pedigree? With your job? At some point, you see that nothing you say really answers the question and you stop — at the edge of a vast open space. “This can’t be who I am,” you say, and turn away.

*Won't you please,
please tell me what we've learned
I know it sounds absurd
but please tell me who I am.*
— Supertramp, *The Logical Song*

Let's start again. Who are you? Every time you fill out a job application, work up your resumé, fill in your information on an online dating service (one of the many new forms of hell created by the Web), or meet someone socially, that “simple” question has to be answered.

In the world of social conventions, the answer is a story. Lots of things may go into this story: interests, history, quirks, talents, achievements, background, likes, dislikes, successes and failures. And the story we tell changes according to the circumstances.



We don't stop there. We reflect, refine, and even create such stories, not only to navigate in the world, but also to understand why we do certain things or to prepare for a new stage in life. The stories are always evolving. They are not fixed. They take on new dimensions, reveal connections we hadn't seen before, or seem to explain things about our lives in a different, perhaps even useful, way.

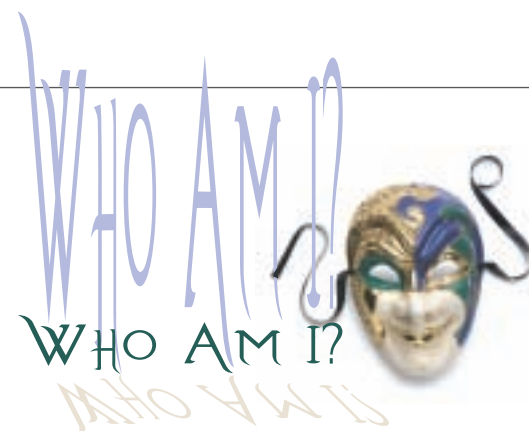
But none of the stories, not one of them, not even all of them, answers the question “Who am I?”

*I'm a million different people
from one day to the next...*
— The Verve, *Bittersweet Symphony*

Perhaps we can answer this question by looking at how we behave. Many things affect our behavior, but here we'll consider just two — feelings and roles.

When angry, we see the world in terms of opposition. Anyone, even our partner or our child, appears, at least for a moment or two, as an enemy, and we treat them as such, though we may well regret doing so afterwards. When needy, we see the world as not providing what we need, and we grasp and hold onto things, sometimes quite unnecessarily. The same holds for pride, or jealousy, or love, compassion, or devotion.

How we behave also depends on our role in any given situation. We tend to behave one way when we are giving orders, another way when we are receiving them, and yet another when we are mediating between those who give orders and those who receive them. We have one personality when we are accepted members of a group and another personality when we are



outside or new to a group. We behave one way with our parents, and another way with our children and still another with our siblings. Who we are, even in the context of family, seems to change according to our role.

All we can conclude from this is that we are a million different people, every day.

*“What is the highest truth?” the emperor asked Bodhidharma.
“I have no idea.”
“Then who is standing before me?”
“I don't know.”*

The more we look into this question, the more mysterious it becomes. And that, right there, opens another possibility. Who am I? Could I be a mystery?

In spiritual work, a mystery is something that cannot be put into words, but can be known in experience. Can we know, experientially, who we are?

Instead of trying to describe who we are, let's look right at our experience and keep in mind something John Audubon once said, “When the book and the bird disagree, always believe the bird.”

Look at “I”. What do you see? All sorts of thoughts and ideas may come rushing in, but don't be distracted. Keep looking. At some point, we see that when we look at “I”, we don't see anything. Actually, it's more accurate to say we see no thing. Initially, we don't trust this “not seeing”. Something must be wrong, we feel, and we quickly shift back to thinking about who we are or trying to figure out what we are doing wrong. In effect, we don't believe the bird and are consulting the book.

If we keep coming back to the looking, if we trust this “not seeing”, we gradually develop the capacity to rest in seeing no thing, and we come to know that we are not a thing: there is just awareness aware of awareness.

That may be all very well, but how does this help us negotiate life?

*Nasrudin was visiting a friend one afternoon. They became so engrossed in their conversation that they didn't notice the passage of time.
Night fell, and the friend said, “Nasrudin, it's dark. Why don't you light a candle?
You'll find a candle and matches in the drawer to your right.”
“What!” shouted Nasrudin, “How do you expect me to know my right from my left in the dark?”*

First, let go of all absolutes. Since everything is a story, regard everything as a story. Stories change, and our relationships with people and things change, too. Some people have such elaborate stories about things — flowers or stamps, or computers or cars — that they interact with them as if they were people. Conversely, most of us have experienced at least one

relationship, be it in our personal or work life (tech support, perhaps?), in which we were treated as a thing. Peopleness or thingness aren't absolutes: they are qualities defined by how we interact with our experience.

In other words, pay attention to relationships. The Buddhist word for this is interdependence: everything exists and is defined only in relation to other things.

Second, let go of fixed positions, inside or out. When we take a fixed position, saying, “This is how it has to be,” we create conflict — this against that, right against wrong, black against white. We see only two mutually exclusive possibilities and we are in a zero-sum game. In any conflict, the two poles are expressions of a deeper principle, expressions of a world that our fixed position prevents us from seeing. Black and white, for instance, are both expressions of the world of color. How many possibilities are there in a world of color compared to a world of black and white? When we see the underlying principle, we have a whole spectrum with which to work. In Buddhism, this approach is known as the middle way, not falling into an extreme position, but always including both poles in awareness.

Third, touch the awareness that is always present, even in the worst of times. As noted above, we carry stories about who we are and stories about who others are and, in the moment of interaction, we regard the stories as facts, as how things are. They aren't facts. They are only ideas and projections arising in the moment. They distract us from what we are actually experiencing. To stop the projections, we drop the stories about who we are, who they are, how we are meant to be, or how they are meant to be. We drop everything and open to what we actually experience, the play of physical and sensory sensations, emotions and feelings, and thoughts and ideas. We open to the whole ball of wax, the whole mess, until we can rest in the clear empty awareness in which the whole mess arises. It's there. It's always there, just as silence is present in sound, and space is present in form. When we touch it, we know what to do and how to do it.

*You live in confusion and the illusion of things.
There is a reality.
You are that reality.
When you know that, you know that you are nothing,
and in being nothing, are everything.
That is all.*
— Kalu Rinpoche (1904-1989)

