

IDENTIFICATION & 'I'

In trying to know the nature of 'Real I' it soon becomes clear that we cannot remember ourselves except very briefly and not for long enough to learn very much. To go any further it becomes necessary to understand what it is that prevents us from remaining present to the feeling of "I" in the stillness of the moment.

The System is precise about the obstacles to self-consciousness and the first and greatest of these is called identification. This means that we actually become whatever catches our attention and so we continuously lose the awareness of our individual consciousness. This is similar to, but not exactly the same as the ancient idea of 'attachment', found in Vedanta and Buddhist teaching—the Sanskrit word is 'kashaya' which refers to the sticky resin found on trees and plants upon which unwary insects become stuck fast. The word 'identification' is used in a special sense to describe exactly what it is that becomes 'attached'. In the moment of 'identification' with a particular desire, or event, the feeling of 'I' goes out of us and imperceptibly becomes absorbed by whatever is the focus of our attention.

A detailed description of identification is found in the following from the *Philokalia*—from Vol III, St Philopheus of Sinai.

THE FOUR STAGES OF IDENTIFICATION.

'Attachment', or the opposite of attention.

1. **PROSBOLE** (Impact) Impressions are falling on the mind which is still free.
2. **SYNDYASMOS** (Uniting) The attention is caught by a particular set of impressions as a sticky fly-paper catches a fly. If a man is watching his attention, he can see this early stage and free himself; otherwise the rest is inevitable.
3. **SYNOUSIA** (Merging) (The word means sexual union) The attention has wholly merged with the object—the man has lost his identity—and he has become something else.
4. **PATHOS** (Passion) Suffering, or sin, or evil. Once the third stage has been established, a man returns again and again to the object of his identification; the process has become habitual and unconscious, it is now an addiction.

This sequential loss of attention may be seen neurologically in terms of the pre-frontal cortex and the limbic system, where information from all the major circuits of the brain is processed into the field of our attention. All the sense impressions received from the inner and outer worlds, all our thoughts and feelings, instincts and desires, all these whirl around a miraculous circuit of brain structures and pathways which constitutes the mechanism that provides our conscious existence.* The key concept is that continuity of experience is provided by mechanical repetition and so, unless we quickly make a conscious decision to turn away from any particular set of impressions, a 'reverberating circuit' is set up which will then repeat and repeat until it runs out of energy or is replaced by another. Once we allow an impression to repeat more than a few times in our field of consciousness we have little hope of controlling or denying it.

This can be likened to the whirligig at a fairground where the customers are hurled giddily around the outer limits of the centrifuge whilst the attendant lounges insouciant against the still pole at the centre. This impartial witness who remains still at the centre and watches all the fun with a kindly but disinterested eye is the 'observer' who can remind us to remember ourselves.

To use another example, one 'I' sees the lovely shiny item in the window, another opens the shop door, yet another pulls out the plastic and a month later quite a different 'I' reads the bill. Of course, to all of these 'I's, every step in the process is entirely real and convincing and yet they are all acting within the cloud of this terrible and pervasive state of identification.

One specific aspect of identification is known as 'inner considering'. We constantly lose touch with what we really think and feel because we so often become preoccupied by what other people think of us. We have a whole repertoire of roles and acts with which we habitually tailor our attitudes and gestures, our speech and our actions to create an impression that we imagine will elicit the response we desire.

Recognizing some of these things in ourselves is part of the preliminary 'self-knowledge' we are looking for—for at some level we have to get to know all the things we are 'not' in order to be able to come out of them and be what we are.

And there are still other obstacles to be observed. The whirligig of the limbic system also demonstrates the habitual dispersion of the mind which continually flits from one thing to the next, driven endlessly by the neurological conveyor belt of life. This continual fragmentation of attention and also the realm of 'imagination' which consumes so much of our energy must be the subject of further study.

The Shankaracharya says that to become free of identification is really not too difficult (!!) but that 'this dispersion of the mind is really terrible and very subtle'. He says, 'Only if mind is still and all ambitions and desires are discarded will this dispersion of attention lose its hold. Otherwise it keeps company in a very subtle way without being noticed. This is the field to work on.'

The understanding that our mechanical state on all levels is created in one way or another by a principle of repetition shows us not only the nature of the prison but also the means of escape. By attaching a conscious aim, such as the desire to be still and attentive in the moment, to any of the habitual actions we perform in our daily routines, we can gradually build up within us a repetitive circulation of desire which will direct us towards the centre rather than away from it.

But to have the power to use this principle of repetition to create a centripetal rather than a centrifugal direction to our inner life—to go against the flow rather than be carried along by it—we have to learn to use a triad which proceeds by a conscious and ascending octave rather than the unconscious and descending process which creates our daily mechanical existence.

All this can get to seem dauntingly complex and it is useful to have something simple to remember which can return us to a point of possibility. By selecting a certain habitual action, making a cup of tea, getting dressed, opening the car door etc., and attaching to this action a form of words such as "Who am I? Where am I? What am I doing?" we can begin to create a means to get back to the centre from wherever we may find ourselves.

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* Although in the last half century science has made huge advances in understanding of the working of the brain, it remains completely unknown how the electrical impulses and chemical messengers which largely constitute this working actually provide the substance of conscious experience which we take completely for granted from the moment we are born.