

Four Selves

This is a kind of review of my experience and reading, after 40 years of meditation and reading 220 books on nonduality. Mostly it comes from experience.

It certainly doesn't sound very nondual to say there are really "four selves." But I think there are, at least for me:

From the bottom up:

- 1) "Sense of self"
- 2) The Ego
- 3) "The Witness"
- 4) "Brahman, Self, Pure Awareness"

"Sense of Self" You will wake up tomorrow and recognize yourself as a living body/person. And you will know "who you are" in that relative world. Even if you never heard of Buddha or Eckhart, Ramana or Maharishi. Even if you are a fundamentalist Christian. Even if you are "enlightened," and passed as such by many gurus and spiritual teachers, and have universities named after you. John Welwood, PhD, counseling psychologist and prolific writer says, in *Toward a Psychology of Awakening*, "In everyday life, we are ... familiar with a part of us that is geared toward worldly function....we have a consistent sense of "I-ness."...[and later,] "...the continuity of a known, familiar sense of self, the belief that "I am consistently me."

I want to distinguish this "sense of self," for the moment, from the ego. The sense of self is that "personal" awareness of the living body/mind in the world. It is very basic. It is the identity who wakes up from sleep and recognizes the room, the body and familiar thoughts in the brain. As well, you remember your life. It is clear you are not "somebody else." Unlike the "ego" discussed below, this sense of self is not a fiction, and it is not conceptual, it is experienced. It is the primary experience of a "separate self". It may later become trivial and incidental to "who you are," but it is not something which will vanish, not to worry!

"The Ego" I think it is useful to emphasize that the ego is an artificial hardening of this sense of self into something which can "choose to take action." Adyashanti refers to ego as a verb, "Egoing." Many have spoken of the "I thought." Others have emphasized that the ego has many components, self-referential thoughts, "ego-states," an autobiography "understood" to some degree, habits and preferences, structure, content, style and many methods of functioning. Welwood again notes: "Ego, then, is a control structure we develop for purposes of survival and protection." But ultimately it is an incomplete identity, and, tragically, it masks our real nature and potentiality behind an elaborate belief system, shared by many other egos. It is based on images, memories, habits,

cultural imperatives and rituals. It is actually often nourished by introspection, and sometimes changes in appearance and affect as a result of discovery or psychotherapy. The egoic self has endless internal and external relationships, some in harmony, some in conflict. After many years an ego can be as complex as a Gordian knot. And it has an external "self-image," as well, which may or may not align with the internal one. Psychological stress arises from many sources, both internal and external...the ego has many "buttons" or triggers which produce a sense of conflict or threat. Awakening is one of them.

It is the egoic self which forms relationships with other people, with society, and often, with God, or "spirituality." "I am a fine Christian." "I am a great meditator." And even "I have an insurmountable problem – beyond help." Egos fall in love with each other. Yes, of course, there are biological drives at work, too. But egos thrive on stroking. Romantic love can be very intoxicating, even rapturous. And divorces are equally nourishing for the ego. "You will not dishonor me like that, I want a divorce." The ego is pathologically self-protective.

Regarding love and "stroking," the ego immediately co-opts the experience of love. Love, authentic compassion, is not a personal event. It is felt, yes, but frequently the experience of love, to the extent that it is felt to be "my love for ____" is a validation of an egoic self-image/belief...perhaps even one recognized as such. "Diana is so beautiful and she loves me; I am fulfilled." (subtext: "I have finally achieved what I'm supposed to, being loved by a beautiful woman and deserving that.") Shared romantic love, in each others' presence is very much felt and very intoxicating. We do loving things for our partner and they appreciate it and tell us, and do loving things for us. But "doing loving things" occurs in much smaller and very natural ways, too – even simply smiling at a stranger. And all those *shared* moments are noteworthy – do we feel proud or just warm? (There is a big difference.) What is the motivation for loving action? It is compassion, perhaps originating in empathy, perhaps without an identifiable source. It's natural, it's part of all of us, and it's very real by any measure. Moreover, it is a perfume, a backbeat, a melody which plays through all of life, and all forms of self. Awakening simply means that the rhythm and impulse of love penetrates everything you do. And, oddly, part of the stress of remaining "asleep" or unconscious comes from the separation from Self, felt in subtle and various ways throughout our days. Often that "separation stress" comes from disrespect of the needs of our own body. "Do I really really need this?" is a useful question. Authentic "self-love," is not egoic.

The egoic self is a product of the mind. Eckhart Tolle refers to the ego as a "...false self created by unconscious identification with the mind." It emerges from a series of thought-streams and images, which have a variety of sources, including genetic predisposition, family-of-origin belief systems and messages, schooling, and life experiences in general. Its hallmark is a continual thought-stream – maybe 60,000 thoughts per day. The ego, aligned so closely with the mind, is uncomfortable with even a brief period of "no thoughts at all." The empty mind is not a relaxing place for most people...it's actually scary. Before that shift, it is the only self experienced and is very

real, very familiar, very assuring and very assertive. It is fully supported by 95% of society, too. The ego is only false, and seen and felt to be false when an alternative “me” is experienced at sufficient depth and for a sufficient period that it becomes a familiar and comfortable “new me.” As alternative “selves,” (the witness or Brahman, below) arrive, they become the “new normal” over time, and in that passage, the capacity and frequency of watching the autopilot ego both increase. Some people, however, get bumped very suddenly into the experience of authentic unity. Eckhart Tolle, Susan Segal, Gary Weber, and Jac O’Keeffe are examples. That experience may not be pleasant, without a foundation in the concepts of Advaita or Zen.

But the Gordian knot of ego is actually made of gossamer, quickly cut through by the “breath of the Absolute.” (Mooji) While a functional unit in society, and not something to be hated, it is not our ultimate identity. The person ruled by an ego is the doer, believes it is a doer, and appears to be the master of its life. That condition merits examination – the self-inquiry of “Whence cometh I?” Forms of self-inquiry and the results of that search are a topic for another essay.

The Witness: This is an intermediate state, but far closer to Brahman or Self than the ego. In my usage, it is more than just listening to yourself (which is useful in its own right.) From Nisargadatta’s “I am That” (Chetana, 1992):

Abandon all ideas about yourself and you will find yourself to be the pure witness, beyond all that can happen to the body or the mind. (p. 226)

There is the identity of what you are, and there is the person superimposed on it. All you know is the person. The identity, which is not a person, you do not know, for you never doubted, never asked yourself the crucial question: "Who am I". The identity is the witness of the person, and sadhana consists in shifting the emphasis from the superficial and changeful person to the immutable and ever-present witness. (p. 442)

Discovery of the witness likely varies for each individual. For some it is utterly unplanned and very disorienting. For others, it is a natural result of spiritual practices. Deconstructing an egoic identity built up over decades, fully encouraged by society is unlikely to happen in a flash, but, as mentioned, it can. Recognition of the witness can be uncomfortable or it can be a great relief, depending on the structure of a person’s egoic identity.

For me, it was both gradual and sudden. ‘Gradual,’ because 35 years of meditation had prepared the neurophysiological ground, but ‘sudden,’ because all the final veils fell at once. The experience of the witness was at once familiar and new. ‘Familiar,’ because it is our home, and ‘new,’ because I had not been there for a long time.

There is a distinct timelessness to the witness state. It is not so much an “out-of-body” experience as a “nobody” experience. There is just a simple sense of “I am.” And that is a very diffuse identity, not restricted to the body. It is more the experience of “am-ness,”

rather than “I am-ness.” And guess what...it is not scary after all, in fact it is very peaceful!

Brahman, Pure Awareness: This condition is one which is full of enigmas and paradoxes when discussed in language. It is a non-mental, or perhaps “trans-mental” experience. The sense of “I am” is replaced completely by “Am-ness.” Any sense of an authentic distinct separate self is completely absent. The ego has become the “personality,” or as David Carse says, “this David thing.” The first self mentioned here, “sense of self” is not so much discarded as seen for what it was: a simple recognition that, in form, there is a separate organism, or as Adyashanti says: “a point of awareness.”

There is a subtle difference between witnessing and pure awareness. The transition from witness to this pure state has to do with the difference between subject and object and the merging of that distinction. The witness witnesses something outside of itself, suggesting duality. But you cannot bite your own tooth.

Pure awareness is the substrate and the totality of all existence. It is the Source of all thoughts, feelings, energy and perception. It is unchangeable, yet contains all that is. It is a refuge yet also ruthless...there is no room for delusion. After a time, it lends a fragrance to all experiences, and that fragrance grows in intensity.

There is no doer in Pure Awareness, there is no one to do anything. I will conclude with words from two others, first, from Gary Weber: *“Virtually every day there is a new discovery, a new opening, a new “yes”, until that practice completes itself and on “its own”, it falls away, and another arises, unsought, to learn within itself, about itself. It is an amazing dance; there is no “after”, only “endless enlargement” and more deepening and stilling beyond what was previously imagined possible.”*

And finally, from Jean Klein: *“You are not the doer, the thinker that rejoices and suffers. Take this for a fact and do not try to be a spectator, to be detached. The fact that you can recall your previous acts proves that you were a witness to them. So above all do not try to be a witness -- this would only be projection, and would keep you in the frame of ideas and expectations. If you accept this, a change will come about within you, probably without your even realizing it at the time it occurs.*

The witness is only a crutch to bring you to understand that you are not a doer. Once you are free from doership there will be a change of axis and the energy once directed towards the object will shift to the subject aspect, to the witnessing. In the end all residues of subjectivity dissolve and the witness with them. You discover yourself as that in which the object and subject exist, but you are neither one nor the other. Then there is only living silence.”

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