

You Contain Multitudes

January 27, 2023

We tend to think of our bodies as being unitary, as one us. Then we learn about all the parasites, the bacteria, and other beings that live in our body, in the bloodstream, in the digestive system, and how they're absolutely necessary for our survival. We're more like a colony. A large part of our body weight is taken up by these other beings in there. It's not always certain who's in charge. They say the bacteria in your gut can have a huge influence on your mood. Like those sea squirts: They're just basically a little tiny brain and a digestive system. They float around in the ocean until they find a spot that's going to be their place to stay for the rest of their lives. Then the first thing they do when they settle in is to digest their brains, which shows you who's in charge there.

Well, the mind is not much different from that. We tend to think of ourselves as having one mind, one self, but there are lots of minds in there, lots of states of becoming. It's not always clear who's in charge. What we're doing as we meditate is trying to put the mind concerned about your true well-being, your long-term welfare and happiness, in charge, and get everyone else to serve that particular mind. If we were totally unitary, we'd be stuck with whatever damage was done to that one unitary self. But the fact that we have many selves in there means that we can learn how to take advantage of their differences.

There's that saying that how you do anything is how you do everything, but it's not true. There are some people who are very together in their professional lives, but their personal lives are a mess. There was one person I knew who would come to the monastery and behave in a very self-indulgent way. Then I met her later, when I was teaching someplace else, when she had come straight from work. My first thought was that she did a really good impersonation of an adult. In her professional life, she was very much together.

Of course, this is what a lot of humor is all about: how inconsistent people are, very particular about some things, usually minor things, but very sloppy about major issues in life. Or making up their mind to do one thing but then they end up doing the opposite. But we can actually turn that trait to our advantage because of these various selves inside. Some of them are quite skillful. Some of them are less skillful. You want to put the skillful ones in charge. Learn how to recognize them for what they are and make use of them. As you use them, they get stronger and stronger.

So think of that. You contain multitudes, just like the famous poet. You can think about all the different roles you've played in this lifetime—and this is just one lifetime. Think about all the other many lifetimes you've been traveling through, the different identities you took on, like a hermit crab. You move into one shell. The shell breaks, well, you move into another one. That one breaks, you move into another one—the difference being that hermit crabs have a pretty limited range.

But the range of the human mind is immense. As the Buddha said, your mind is more variegated than the animal kingdom. It's capable of taking on all kinds of identities. So learn how to develop some skillful ones. You look at the motivational videos telling you that visualizing yourself doing something skillful, going through all the specific motions, helps to get over a lot of the difficulties the actual situation in which you'll be doing those things and how good you'll feel afterwards.

You can tune into whichever self you have that was involved in developing a skill, doing something honorable: all the good selves inside there. You can connect with them through this process of visualization. So think of yourself as someone who is capable.

This is a lot of what the Buddha's instructions are all about—his instructions on fabrication: bodily, verbal, mental. He's basically telling you, "These are different ways you can think, these are different ways that you can picture things to yourself, even different ways to breathe, different feelings you can cultivate inside the body, all to your advantage."

So you may have had a damaged childhood, but that doesn't mean everybody inside you is damaged. It's not that we're innately good or innately bad, or that we've been marked for life by events that have happened to us. If we were innately bad, we'd have to depend on somebody outside to come and help us. If we were innately good, then why are we suffering? We've got a mixture in there.

So have a sense of the range of possibilities that this opens up. The Buddha talks about perception as a mental fabrication, and that includes visualization: visualizing yourself as capable of following this path. Just think of the great ajaans in Thailand. They were born out in the countryside in the northeast. The people in the northeast were looked down on by everybody else in the country. If they had taken on other people's opinion of them, they wouldn't have amounted to much. But they decided that the Buddha's teachings were for everybody, and they could imagine themselves practicing the teachings, practicing them well. That's what opened the way.

So look inside. You've got good potentials. Some of them have been pretty well developed; others, not so well developed. But the well-developed ones can help the other ones along. And be confident that you do have many, many possibilities in there, good possibilities, so that the many-ness of your mind becomes a strength rather than a weakness, and all those multiple selves inside you can begin to work together.

After all, they're all based around the desire for happiness. It's just that they have lots of different ideas about what happiness is and how you can get it. The reason they all live jumbled up together at cross-purposes is because all too often we don't take the issue of happiness that seriously. It's strange: What we live for in life is a sense of well-being, but we're so casual in the way we pick up ideas about what well-being could be. Something strikes our fancy and we just run with it. We don't stop to think: Will this really help you along toward a long-term happiness?

Of course, that requires that you imagine that long-term happiness is possible—or even better, along with the Buddha, that something deathless is possible. When you're firm in that conviction, then you can get all the other selves gradually into line. Say, "Hey, we're looking for happiness." Some of them will say, "But I want happiness right now." This is what the concentration is for: Learn how to tap into a skillful sense of well-being whenever you need it so that you can show even the most impatient selves that "Yes, there is something good here."

Learn how to appreciate the happiness that comes when you're generous, when you're virtuous, and when you get the mind to settle down. Learn to take some delight in the path, for the sense of well-being that comes when you can just simply sit here and breathe and feel fully refreshed inside—and also in the sense that you've gained mastery. You begin to understand things you didn't understand before. There's a real happiness that comes with that.

That way, you can gather all your selves around the quest for happiness and make it more consistent—so that your multitudes can work together on a large project that gives large results. Rather than working at cross-purposes, get everybody inside in harmony. And as you can imagine, you can go far.