

## Chapter 4

### The notion of 'I'

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#### Discussion points

- **The genesis of the notion of "I"**
- **Is a child born 'Indian' / Hindu/ Brahmin?**
- **Anatta**

**I**n modern times when we write on l-pads, talk on l-phones and listen to music on l-pods to say that the notion of "I" is an illusion, sounds heretical. Recent developments in psychology, neurobiology and scientific studies on emotions and feelings enable us to get some insight into this.

Objectively speaking, we are all born as conscious entities—a combination of matter and consciousness. For the first two years or so, a child doesn't have any notion of individual 'self', different from others. (S)he is guided entirely by the pleasure pain principle (PPP) -- any discomfort and the baby is loudly crying to draw the attention towards its plight, discomfort removed and the baby sports a charming smile. The tendency to avoid pain is more dominant than seeking pleasure, because of its evolutionary significance, for the very survival of infant depends on this instinct. It is only when the child matures that she (hopefully) realizes the importance of 'tolerating' pain and delaying gratification.

The infant is not born with any sense of identity – of gender, race, caste, creed, religion or nationality. All these identities she acquires from the immediate environments-- the parents, siblings, other family members who repeatedly remind him: You are a girl, a Hindu, of Rajput caste, devotee of Shiva (not Vishnu), Rajasthani, Indian and so on. Clearly all these are mental conditionings, but often these form a part and parcel of our identity, which differentiate us from others. As the child grows and looks at the reflection in a mirror, she implicitly understands: This is me! She is taught to dress properly, so that 'she' looks nice. Any trouble with the body and people commiserate: Oh dear! Sorry to learn that you are ill. Thus slowly her identity with the body is reiterated by everyone. Though periodically she does become aware, the body is undergoing change ('Look mom! I have become

taller than you!), yet she is never encouraged to investigate the nature of association with the body. In college the biology teacher informs her; 'more than 98% of the cells of the body die and are replaced every year. In seven years the entire cells of the body are completely changed'. The environmental science teacher informs her that there is web of interconnectedness in nature, the molecules of oxygen and nitrogen that we breathe are shared by all animals, trees and human beings. While studying quantum theory she learns: matter consist of molecules and atoms, which in turn consist of fundamental particles. These particles are manifestation of energy and can also exhibit wave like characteristics. Yet, she is never encouraged to question: what does this imply regarding the nature of what I call as my body? As she grows, she acquires certain traits, opinions, preferences, apprehensions, desires, habit patterns which are partly genetic, partly picked up from the environs. All these traits, along with the body, become the core of her identity, the 'I' that she thinks she is. The faculty of memory adds further touch of 'reality' to this self-view. 'I am the same person who passed the school exams with distinction, but could not get through JEE and had to study in a second grade engineering college.'

This notion of individuality, the self-view, a persistent feeling of 'I', clearly puts 'me' in conflict with the 'others'. Those who are helpful in fulfilling my needs and desires, I term them as 'mine' and the rest are 'the others' who are competing with 'me' (or 'mine') in appropriation of various goods and services, in fulfillment of my desires. Failure in fulfillment of desires increases frustration and tension, and success leads to pride and whets the appetite for more, thus leading to exacerbation of various mental defilements like avarice, pride, stinginess, anger, jealousy, ill will, hatred etc. It is the invisible, but tenacious, chains of mental defilements which keep us in bondage by creating a perpetual sense of 'lack'<sup>17</sup> – lack of wealth, lack of knowledge, lack of technology, lack of fame, lack of friends, lack of power, lack of beauty, lack of security, lack of publications etc. It is this all-encompassing sense of lack that keeps us so busy in 'doing', 'achieving', 'progressing' and 'teaching lessons to others', that we rarely get an opportunity to confront the reality of our life. In the whole process the notion of individual differentiated entity, the 'I'--which fails or succeeds-- is continually strengthened.

The above analysis also shows that the roots of the ubiquitous sense of un-ease in humanity – the existential unhappiness -- lie in notion of individuality, the ego, what the Buddha terms as the *sakkāyaditthi*, [a compound Pāli word consisting of *sat+kāya+ditthi*, literal meaning: the wrong view that there is an essence in the body] -- the mistaken belief in the existence of a unique 'person' to whom 'belong' the five aggregates. Unless this notion is deracinated, all our attempts at eliminating

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<sup>17</sup> David R Loy: Money, Sex, War, Karma: Notes for a Buddhist Revolution, p16-17, p 19-21; Wisdom Publications, Boston (2008)

unhappiness are eventually bound to fail. At best, we can try to create a social order where socially responsible people try to 'accommodate' each other to minimize the cumulative sense of dis-satisfaction.

It should be evident from the above description of the arising of the notion of self after infancy that it is basically a consequence of mental conditioning. As David Loy<sup>15</sup> puts it concisely:

*Contemporary psychology... has also realized that the sense of self is a psychological-social-linguistic construct: psychological, because the ego-self is product of mental conditioning; social, because a sense of self develops in relation with other constructed selves; and linguistic, because acquiring a sense of self involves learning to use certain names and pronouns such as I, me, mine, myself which create the illusion that there must be some 'thing' being referred to. If the word **cup** refers to this thing I am drinking coffee out of, then we mistakenly infer that I must refer to someone in the same way.*

This description of "self-ing" is also corroborated by the recent scientific researches in psychology and neurobiology of emotions.

Terence Gaussen<sup>18</sup> gives a good account of some of these researches which have brought about a paradigm shift in developmental psychology. Quoting from Allan Schore's work<sup>19</sup> Gaussen points out that:

*Infant and caregiver interactions modulate infant affective<sup>20</sup> responses, which then produce changes in the infant's brain systems which become self-regulatory in the future. ...if the process goes well, the individual develops with balanced affect and basically a good sense of self. If the environment is mis-attuned, high levels of negative affect are generated, affect is poorly regulated and these characteristics are laid down in the 'wiring' of the (brain). .... development of pathway in the system is altered by the individual's experiences during the first two years of life...*

*The neurological pattern built up in the developing brain ..... form, so to speak, a set of 'emotional memories' --- which influence the individual for a lifetime. A particularly important part of this' emotional memory is the need for attachment since it was generated in the attachment relationship with the caregiver.*

*... the core of the sense of self lies in the patterns of affect regulation and this regulatory capacity is responsible for the maintenance of the sense of continuity of the affect of the individual.*

Need for attachment being an important constituent of the emotional memory of childhood, we can easily understand why, even after growing up, we continue to feel that need since we have never pondered over its implications.

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<sup>18</sup> Terence Gaussen : The Development of Personhood and the Brain, chapter 10 in 'The psychology of awakening – Buddhism ,Science and our day to day lives' Edited by Gay Watson, Stephen Batchelor and Guy Claxton, Rider, London, 1999

<sup>19</sup> Allan Schore: Affect, Regulation and the Origin of the Self: a neurobiology of Emotional development, Lawrence Erlbaum, New Jersey, 1994 quoted in [3] above.

<sup>20</sup> Affect is for an infant what an emotion is for an adult, i.e. sets of responses involving the facial muscles, the viscera, the respiratory system, the skeleton, autonomic blood flow changes, and vocalizations arising from stimulation impinging on him/her.

Extensive studies by Damasio on neuro-biology of emotions and feelings have also brought out that the sense of 'self' arises not just because of our ability to think-- as Descartes implied in his famous statement, 'I think, therefore I am'-- but arises from the brain's ability to sense the somatic sensations and the associated feelings. Since these sensations and feelings are changing incessantly, the sense of self also arises from moment to moment<sup>21</sup>:

*The self is a repeatedly reconstructed biological state; it is not a little person, the infamous homunculus, inside your brain contemplating what is going on. It doesn't help to invoke a homunculus doing any seeing or thinking or whatever in your brain, because the natural question is whether the brain of that homunculus also has a little person in his brain doing his seeing and thinking, and so on ad infinitum.*

*Early body signals, in both evolution and development, helped form a "basic concept of self"; this basic concept provided the ground reference for whatever else happened to the organism, including the current body states that were incorporated continuously in the concept of self and promptly became past state.*

*At each moment the state of self is constructed, from the ground up. It is an evanescent reference state, so continuously and consistently reconstructed that the owner never knows it is being remade unless something goes wrong with the remaking.*

*The continuity of background feelings befits the fact that the living organism and its structure are continuous as long as life is maintained. Unlike our environment, whose constitution does change, and unlike the images we construct relative to that environment, which are fragmentary and conditioned by external circumstance, background feeling is mostly about body states<sup>22</sup>. Our individual identity is anchored on this island of illusory living sameness against which we can be aware of myriad other things that manifestly change around the organism.*

*.... Our experiences tend to have a consistent perspective, as if there were indeed an owner and knower for most, though not all, contents. I imagine this perspective to be rooted in a relatively stable, endlessly repeated biological state. The source of stability is the predominantly invariant structure and operation of the organism, and the slowly evolving elements of autobiographical data. .... In brief the endless reactivation of updated images about our identity (a combination of memories of the past and of the planned future) constitutes a sizable part of the state of self.*

Thus, in accordance with these researches too, it is the predominantly invariant nature of the background feelings, the patterns of emotional behaviour coded in the developing brain, and the slowly changing 'autobiographical data', which are responsible for our mistaken perception of continuity of identity.

The doctrine of 'anattā' – body-mind complex is not self - which forms the core of the teachings of the Buddha can now be better appreciated in the light of these researches.

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<sup>21</sup> A. Damasio, *Descartes' Error—Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*, p 155,226,227,238-240, Avon Books, New York (1994).

<sup>22</sup> which are changing very slowly

Of course, to actually see through this trap of egoic identity and actually lead our lives in tune with the Truth, demands great inner transformation, which can be accomplished by following the teachings of the Enlightened One as explained in subsequent chapters.

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