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***Self as Ever Shifting Flow***

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What we call “I” is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale.

Shunryu Suzuki

Impermanence is the first mark of experience common to all human beings. The second one is what Buddhists call no-fixed-self. Like uncertainty and unpredictability, no-fixed-self is a corollary of the universal law of impermanence. But unlike those two corollaries, no-fixed-self was a concept unique to the Buddha’s teaching. He took the radical step of applying impermanence even to what we think of as our self. Twenty-five hundred years later, neuro­scientists are coming to the same conclusion; they’re finding multiple circuitry in the brain, but no fixed seat of the self. As Pema Chödrön noted in the quotation that begins the previ­ous chapter, “nothing is static or fixed.” That would include this notion of self.

This person I think of as a fixed entity, “Toni Bernhard,” is, in reality, an ever-changing combination of physical traits, thoughts, emotions, and actions. Where, then, do I get the idea of “Toni Bernhard”? As a result of past and current conditions in my life, this combination of physical traits, thoughts, emotions, and actions tends to come togeth­er in repeating patterns. The mind then abstracts from these patterns and assumes they make up an intrinsic someone called “Toni Bern­hard.” The mind, in effect, creates a story, starring a character it calls (drum roll, please . . .) Toni Bernhard! And so, I take that to be who I am—an entity with fixed, unchanging characteristics.

Here’s an example. When I was a teenager, I behaved in repeating patterns that society had identified as signs of depression. Quite understandably, this led my family to come up with this abstraction from my behavior: I was a depressed person. As a result, I took on that label and that identity: “Toni Bernhard, depressed person.” I thought that was who I was, and that “depressed person” was a fixed aspect of my being. But those emotional and behavioral patterns changed as soon as I moved out of the house to go to college. That notion of an intrinsic, fixed self—depressed person—turned out to be an illusion. It was just a passing identity based on the repetition of emotional and behav­ioral patterns in my life at the time.

Many years later, my idea of who I was became “law professor.” As I’d done with “depressed person,” now “law professor” became how I identified myself. When I unexpectedly had to stop working due to illness, the identity of “law professor” followed me from the classroom to the bedroom. Although I was clearly unable to carry out the duties of my profession, I would lie in bed and anxiously think, “If I’m not a law professor, who am I?”

It took me several years to see that clinging to the identity “law professor” had become a source of deep sorrow and suffering for me. It was then that I realized that “law professor” was an abstract idea, based on repeating patterns in my experience at the time: going to the same place every day where people called me “Professor Bernhard”; repeatedly seeing that very label in writing—on the name plate next to my office door, on my faculty mailbox, on written materials.

“Law professor” turned out not to be a fixed self any more than “depressed person” had been. Both were stories in my mind— abstractions from my experience that I clung to as an intrinsic quality of me. And even though the identity “depressed person” was one I didn’t like and the identity “law professor” was one I did, in both instances, when I let go of those identities, I felt a great sense of peace and liberation.

In the same way, the identity “Toni Bernhard” is a story. Of course, it’s a necessary one at times! After all, I can’t get a driver’s license unless I’m willing to say “I am Toni Bernhard.” And I’m using self-referential terms, such as “I” and “me,” throughout this book in order to communicate effectively. But even so, I’m working to hold the identity “Toni Bernhard” lightly, without believing it implies a fixed, nonchanging essence.

The Many Ways We’re Fixed in Identities

We humans are incredibly adept at identifying with our experiences and circumstances and then coming to assume they are part of who we are intrinsically. We can identify ourselves with a race, ethnic background, gender, and nationality. We can identify ourselves with a job title. We can identify with what we perceive to be our personality traits: smart, funny, trust­worthy, stupid, judgmental, foolish. We can identify with our bodies: short, tall, fat, thin, handsome, unattractive, healthy, sick. We can identify with our religious affiliation or with our political leanings: “I am a liberal”; “I am a conservative.”

Some of these identities are internalized during our formative years due to cultural influ­ences or to how we were treated by others. As we repeatedly recall those influences and experiences, we come to believe that they represent real qualities of ourselves, and this can become a deep source of suffering. For example, if a parent repeatedly told us that we didn’t try hard enough or that we were always in the way or that we couldn’t do anything right, we’re likely as adults to think of those characterizations as fixed qualities of ourselves—in­trinsic to who we are. If this is the case for you, my heartfelt wish is that this chapter will help you see that you need not define yourself by any of these identities.

If you’d like to experiment with the ways in which you’ve created fixed identities, make a list of all the identities you’ve been using to define yourself. My list includes sick person, hard worker, devoted parent, worrier, perfectionist, author. When you’re done with your list, reflect separately on each of the identities you’ve written down. Is it a source of joy for you? Suffering? A mixture of the two? Does it carry a judgment, meaning do you think of the identity as “good” or as “bad”? For example, if you listed “overweight” or “easily frus­trated,” a negative judgment might have arisen along with your self-characterization. If you listed “highly motivated” or “generous,” you may have noticed a positive judgment arise: “It’s good to be highly motivated”; “I’m proud that I’m generous.”

Now begin to examine the effects of becoming attached to these identities. When I do this, two insights stand out for me. First, I notice that the identities that I judge negatively are sources of suffering for me. One example: the identity “sick person.” It’s a source of suffer­ing because the identity brings along with it stressful thoughts and emotions: “I shouldn’t be sick”; “I’ve been cheated out of a dozen years of my life”; “What if I get worse and worse?”

However, if I look more deeply at the identity “sick person,” I see that it has no intrinsic ex­istence. There is this body and there is this mind; there are physical sensations and mental sensations. There’s no reason to label either one as the fixed identity “sick.” In fact, there’s a lot this body can do that so-called “not sick” people can do: walk, talk, eat, pet the dog. And so I practice looking at the phrase “sick person” as an abstraction in my mind, with no in­trinsic existence. When I do this, I feel a sense of relief and freedom. There’s just this mo­ment—here, now—containing whatever physical and mental sensations I’m experiencing.

The second insight that stands out for me is that the identities on my list—even those I judge as “good”—make me feel separate from others. And when I look closely, I see that this is also a source of suffering for me. This sense of separation occurs because identities are often formed by comparing ourselves to others. If I think of myself as highly motivated, I’m separating myself from those whom I perceive not to be. The same would occur if I think of myself as generous. I’ve put myself into an identity box, so to speak, and then feel separated from those who I perceive don’t fit in it. But aren’t highly motivated people some­times also not motivated? And aren’t generous people sometimes also not so generous? I think so. Even identities we form around race, gender, religion, nationality, and political af­filiation can make us feel separate from others.

I joke with my husband about a test I’ve devised for deciding if an identity is worth defining myself by. I ask: “Does the identity pass my hound-dog test?” I spend a lot of time with my hound dog Rusty, so I figure he knows the real me. Does he think of me as a Buddhist? No! An American? No! A published author? Certainly not! You get the idea. I hope you’ll try this no-fixed-identity exercise.

One reason we seek the “real me” by holding on to these identities is that they provide us with a sense of security. But we know from the law of impermanence that there’s not much security to be found in this life. And so I work on shedding the identities I’ve come to re­gard as “me” or “mine.” Instead, I try to embrace the insecurity that comes from not being a fixed self at all.

Not Clinging to Identities Is Liberating

Thinking of myself as an ever-changing process rather than as a fixed person gives my life a feeling of fluidness and potential. In Buddhism Without Beliefs, Stephen Batchelor refers to himself as “an unfolding narrative.” When I’m able to see that the words appearing to fix me in an unchanging identity are simply abstract concepts arising and passing in the mind, I’m able to stop clinging to the idea of a fixed self. Then I can let that narrative unfold, and possibilities open up that I may not have even imagined.

For example, it was only when I let go of the identity “law professor” that I was able to be­gin writing my first book. This was partly because when law professors engage in scholarly writing, they don’t talk about their personal lives. And so when I was stuck in the identity “law professor,” it never occurred to me that I could write a book in which I could use my personal experience with chronic illness to illustrate the points I was making.

My favorite description of no-fixed-self comes from the eco-philosopher Joanna Macy: “I am a flow-through of matter, en­ergy, and information.” I like to consciously think of myself (or, my “self”) as nothing more than a constellation of causes and con­ditions that have come together at this particular moment in time. Indeed, many scholars think that this was what the Buddha was referring to when he talked about rebirth—rebirth moment-to-moment into ever-shifting identities, distinct from but related to the identities of previous moments. When I’m able to recognize that clinging to an identity is an attempt to freeze in time what is, in reality, part of the uninterrupted flow of life, I feel light and free.

It’s important to understand that thinking in terms of no-fixed-self is not a kind of reduc­tionism; it is not an attempt to explain away the complexities of existence by simply saying nothing abides. The concept of no-fixed-self is a pointer that is intended to inspire us to investigate the nature of the human condition. Why do we suffer? What can be done to al­leviate it? How does the idea of a fixed self contribute to suffering and unhappiness?

Perhaps you think of yourself as an angry or impatient or judgmental person. The lesson of no-fixed-self is that you need not feel stuck in any of these identities. They’ve arisen as a result of repeating patterns of thoughts, emotions, and actions in your life, and such pat­terns can change. Using the practices in this book, you can begin to change the inclination to be angry or impatient or judgmental. Like all phenomena, these mental states are imper­manent; they are not fixed characteristics.

Freedom comes from not clinging to any identity at all, whether we think of it as desirable or not. Not becoming attached to identities we perceive as undesirable—depressed person, for example— frees us to think of ourselves as multidimensional, as opposed to being lim­ited to a few painful characteristics. And not becoming attached to identities we perceive as desirable—law professor, for example—frees us from the suffering that will arise when those identities yield, as they inevitably will, to the law of impermanence.

Far from being nihilistic, the truth of no-fixed-self opens our hearts and minds—our very lives—to possibilities we might not have imagined before!

Toni Bernhard is the author of *How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and their Caregivers*. How to Be Sick won the 2011 Gold Medal Nautilus Book Award in Self-Help/Psychology and was also named one of the best books of 2010 by Spirituality and Practice. Her new book, *How to Wake Up: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide to Navigating Joy and Sorrow*, was just released. Until forced to retire due to illness, Toni was a law professor at the University of California—Davis, serving six years as the dean of students. She has been a practicing Buddhist for over 20 years.