

Ten Reflections (5 of 10) Identity

April 26, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS spiritual caregivers, challenges, suffering, meaning, purpose, agency, autonomy, mirrored, respect, care, not self, integrity, harmonious, harming, fixated, attached, diminishes, wholeness, goodwill, holistic, opening, including, changing, rightness, wisdom, balance

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Hello, and welcome to the fifth talk on the ten reflections for spiritual life. These ten reflections are also orientations toward concerns that are activated as we offer spiritual care to others. Spiritual caregivers might listen for these themes in people's lives to see which one is challenging for people at any given time.

"Challenging" means that a concern could be a major challenge in their life. Something has ruptured or there's a loss. In offering spiritual care, it's important to recognize this and support people. Sometimes people know they're suffering but they don't know why. In a conversation with a spiritual caregiver, somehow this suffering can come out. "Oh, this is where it is."

What might need to be addressed are issues of meaning – the framing of our experience in relation to what is most important for us, and framing it in a way that brings forth our vitality and our inspiration. Maybe the person is lacking a sense of direction or a sense of purpose. They might be lacking a sense of agency – the ability to do and engage with what's important. Or a sense of autonomy is lacking: the sense that we're capable of standing up for ourselves, taking care of ourselves, or engaging as an independent person with what seems important to us.

Today's topic is identity. People have a lot of struggles with this one. There are what some people have called "identity wars" going on in the United States and other places in the world, where people's identities are denied by others – not only denied and ignored but sometimes there is active hostility toward who people are. It's phenomenally painful for individuals and society as a whole.

Some people never had parents or teachers who believed in them so who they were could flower and develop. Children, especially, take in the confidence others have in them. Others show us the way or open doors for us: "Yes, all of you can come here. You're capable of stepping forward here, as you are, as who you are." Maybe we haven't had people who mirrored who we are and helped us to recognize for ourselves the beauty of who we are as human beings. Everyone has beauty. Everyone is a marvel. To be seen with that kind of respect and care is one of the great gifts, especially for children as they grow up. When hostility, judgment, and criticism are mirrored to children, that can really distort how they develop as a person. One way this can happen is that they don't really grow into the fullness of who they are.

In Buddhism, there's often a tendency to dismiss the importance of identity. I think this was more true in the United States a decade or two ago when there was an overemphasis on the teaching of not self, which was often understood as a teaching of no self. We were supposed to let go of identity and have no identity – which is impossible, at least in the way that I want to talk about identity today.

Identity is who we are. I like to think of it as the sum total of all the different facets of who we are and how we show up in the world. We show up with our abilities, our capacities, our background, our conditioning, our ways of thinking, our belief systems, our biases, our hurts, and our joys. All these come together to create the integral whole of identity. This is also why identity is very closely connected to the topic of integrity.

Integrity is when we can come forward with all of who we are in a way that is harmonious and is not ruptured by any tendency to cause harm to oneself or others. Harming is a rupture in the wholeness of our identity. Some people create an identity around being aggressive, being a fighter, or even a destroyer. But then the integrity of the whole person is not there. From a Buddhist point of view, the identity has become fixated. Buddhist practice

shows us that fixed identity – when we get attached to a particular aspect of who we are – diminishes who we are.

In Buddhism, the idea is to have no fixed identity but to let who we are evolve and change over time, and, in some ways, be co-created by the events we're involved in. Different events call on different aspects of ourselves. It was wonderful to be in the monastery for many years. There, I was assigned to very different jobs that I never would have had if I had been working in the world. Each job that I took required a very different part of who I am. And so in a sense, my identity shifted and changed with the different jobs I had. Then I became a parent. My identity as a parent shifts and changes. As my children grew up, the fullness of who I could be and what was called for from me and called forth from me shifted and changed as my children got older.

We need to have the fluidity to discover who we are in the fullness of the moment and to realize that shifting and changing, and then to appreciate who we are. In Buddhism, who we are is phenomenally important – not who we are in terms of a fixed identity, but who we are as the sum total of what animates us, drives us, and inspires us to speak, act, and live in the world.

If we act from a place of goodwill, it's radically different than if we act from a place of ill will. Then who we are is a manifestation of goodwill. Who we are is a manifestation of being ethical and non-harming. Who we are is a manifestation of wisdom and patience. Who we are is a manifestation of joy and playfulness.

From a Buddhist point of view, the guideline I'd suggest is to be holistic. We want to bring all of who we are into the picture so there can be a sense of integrity. This includes ways in which things in us are difficult. If there's fear, that's part of our identity at the moment, the day, or the year we're afraid or have anxiety. We want to be honest about that, make room for it, recognize it, and let it be. If we have anger and resentment, there's an art to not pushing that away, denying it, ignoring it, or diminishing ourselves because of it. There's a way of opening up so that too is part of our wholeness. That too is nothing we need to be embarrassed about. But by letting that become part of our whole identity, the wholeness of identity, we can be honest about it with other people. We can take it in stride. We can work with it wisely and carefully.

Opening up to all of who we are is what having a healthy sense of identity means. All of who we are is shifting and changing every day. So there is a movement towards recognition and opening to that in mindfulness. We recognize how we have fixated on something, closed around something, or are shutting something out. We keep opening and opening: this too is who I am.

Identity can be the source of a lot of suffering for people. Sometimes people have some identity that they have relied on, and they lose it. Maybe they get ill, and they can't live that way anymore. Maybe there's a loss in their life. If the identity was tied to a particular person or people, and those people are not there anymore, then that identity is no longer present.

To keep opening to the fullness of it all is to not get stuck in that fixed identity, but to open and allow: this too, this too has to be included. If the opening involves grief, grief itself is a very special, almost sacred state. Including all of who we are – that integrity – is entering into a sacred way of being in this world. We open to and recognize areas in our life that are challenged, and that maybe ordinarily we would be embarrassed to show people, where we feel something is wrong with us. We just open to that too with a full, integral sense of identity. We do so without judgment, without a sense that it's wrong or shouldn't be this way.

We can discover a rightness, wisdom, balance, and a healthy way of being when all of it is taken into account. And we can shift and change with the ever-shifting, changing nature of who we are. Who we are is always changing. But I think we can trust who we are if we are honest and open to all of it – warts and all, as they say.

I hope that this gives you something to think about over the next few days. What are the identities that you have had? What are the different ways in which you have been caught in identity? What different ways have you learned to open up to more and more of who you are – being more inclusive in affirming your identities and making room for who you are? How have you become more whole in that process? How have you learned not to fixate on identity while at the same time not denying any of it? What are the challenges of identity you've had? What are the joys of it that you've had?

That's the reflection that I'd like to offer you for the next few days. Then we'll take this particular theme of identity and relate it to the topic of dignity. Identity and dignity go together. Thank you very much.