

## **Surrendering the Self**

*“A knowledge of the existence of something we cannot fully penetrate is the manifestation of the profoundest reason and the most radiant beauty.” - Albert Einstein*

You lay down on some smooth boulder in the desert and look up at the night sky. The rock's surface feels cool beneath you, offering that kind of stability seldom found outside of natural formations. From this point of support the seemingly infinite expanse of twilight and starlight reaches out to you with newfound immediacy. Yet you feel helpless to it all, your feeble attempts at existence seem to pale in comparison to what has always been and what will continue to be long after you're gone. It is overwhelming, this sense of insignificance. It's as if staring too long at this incomprehensible sky would cause you to become paralyzed in awe and wonder. You have to get up eventually though. You know that you have to get up and keep moving because you will never be able to pay enough visual homage to all of it, you will never reach a satisfying understanding of its universal meaning. To get up and stop looking at the stars so that you may continue living the life you have created for yourself, means to engage in an act of repression (Becker 49). We must suppress the truth of our small existence, of our reality that is beyond control, because succumbing to its omniscience could mean a descent into madness (Becker 55). This repression of emotional perceptions manifests itself as the fear of life's absoluteness and the subsequent fear of death's finality. For one to find peace and reconciliation within this paradox of existence, they must relinquish their ego that has created arbitrary identifiers -- the establishing of an ego being an anxious attempt at finding some semblance of stability and self-worth -- and accept the true nature of interconnected being. This means an exploration of the middle path between zero-repression chaos and the anxious awareness of one's existential

inadequacy; it means to cease denying the fullness of life and the certainty of death so that you may accept your infinite consciousness.

The concept of ego-death can be explored through a variety of mediums, some chemical, some natural, and some being of your own committed and mindful practice of Buddhist meditation traditions. For those within the Tibetan Buddhist canon of thinking, ego-death may be too strong a phrase and one which problematically presupposes that something is lost (Rinpoche 120). According to Rinpoche and the teachings of his masters, the ego is never truly present in the first place. Rather, it is fabricated by the individual so that they may deny their true nature of mind and hide within safe stagnation. Once a person surrenders the idea of their arbitrarily derived individual ego they will see what has been there all along: their inherent universal interconnectedness. It is like what Thich Nhat Hanh said in his discussion about the idea of birthdays and their specific assignment to a time and place (Hanh 12). He argues that the date and time that you have been told to interpret as your first moment of conscious being is misleading and ultimately false. The day you were born only indicates the day that you emerged from your mother's womb, it does not take into account the nine months you spent within the warm safety of your little baby suite. He then takes it further to argue that you existed even before the moment of conception between your mother and father. Before that, parts of you existed in your grandparents and your great grandparents and so on until the infinitude of your existence is revealed. You have always been a part of the symbiosis of the universe, although at times in miniscule proportions. Long before you developed a sense of individual essence and ego you were floating along with the flow of eternity. With all of this in mind, the benefits of surrendering one's ego seem to far outweigh the irrational fears of losing oneself. Quite the contrary, you see who you truly are without the blinders of constructed automatism. You can be

at peace with the everything of existence. When you see life and your place in it in this way, as being connected to something greater, the idea of death doesn't seem much more daunting than that of birth. Just as your birth certificate only indicates the time at which your mother labored to push you out into the physical world, your death certificate says nothing more than the time at which you will be pushed back into the metaphysical realm once again.

The common confusion that one feels as a being endowed with consciousness is often aimed at the "existential paradox" of the human condition (Becker 26). As posited by Kierkegaard, this conflicting duality spars across extremes of conceptual awareness of the body's limiting confines, and that of being completely helpless to its strict natural borders. One is "out of nature yet hopelessly in it," condemned to be free yet abiding by the unflinching stoicism of natural arrangements (Becker 28). It is a terrifying dilemma that can break even the strongest person into anxious submission. No one is ever completely safe from the looming truth of reality's infinite scale, although we have surely all made valiant attempts at building up our defenses. We erect walls of cement that reach to the sky around our little castles of denial. We fill these centers with two-ton anchors, afraid that we'll float away as soon as we admit vulnerability.

My experience with this feeling of meaningless agency in the world, like many others, ebbs and flows in its influence. About a year and a half ago, I was just getting into a new relationship and experiencing that feeling that comes from discovering a new version of yourself in someone else's subjective perception of you. It was rather disorienting because at the time I felt like he wasn't on the right track to reach me, nor I him. We started watching the show *Westworld* and, oddly enough, the show's depiction of artificially intelligent beings gaining consciousness and an awareness of their situational position sent me into a spiral of existential

frustration and anxiety. This coupled with my current relationship's unknowns, my defenses for denying uncertainty were down and I was vulnerable to reality. These AI characters, through accessing their memories of their past lives in the Westworld game, were met with the terrifying truth of their created inferiority under the control of 'real' human puppet masters. These so-called revories cohered the pieces of their being into a whole self. I started thinking about what this all meant for the definition of consciousness. Can it be created? Can it evolve within artificial intelligence to the point of making humans insignificant? I started lucid dreaming almost every night and became obsessed with the idea of subconscious world creation, whether it was any less real than the reality we experience when we are awake (Castaneda). I was searching desperately for answers but none felt sufficient to explain the question of existential purpose or its complicatedly interconnected parameters and functions. I just felt so stuck in my own body, which I now understand to be a result of clinging to my sense of individual ego. I wanted to fly above it all so that I could get a bird's eye view of the world's scope in relation to the universe. I dreamt about flying almost every night only to always wake up still confined to gravity's planar regulations. In *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* Rinpoche describes what I was searching for in that "to see through the eyes of a mountain eagle, the view of realization, is to look down on a landscape in which the boundaries that we imagined existed between life and death shape into each other and dissolve" (Rinpoche 341).

I decided to try something that I never had before, to find something new, so that I could come to terms with this consciousness-related anxiety that had caused me to lose so much sleep. I tried psychedelics for the first time, shrooms more specifically. I went into it with the intention of understanding my individual existential predicament to find some sort of resolution. What actually happened was rather unexpected but absolutely cathartic. I sobbed hysterically for about

three hours, going from laughing to crying with the immediacy and randomness of a crazy person. I allowed myself to be seen in all my issues and flaws so that I could reach some sort of forgiveness. I listened to what my essence had been informed by all my life, I stopped trying to deny the “true nature” of my “hidden spiritual being” (Rinpoche 120). I “let go utterly of myself” and it felt like releasing a vice grip on some branch in a river so that I could finally flow downstream with the whims of the current (Rinpoche 124).

The constant flow of this river can be scary and without room for hesitation once you surrender to its movement. After all, who knows what lies downstream or down even further to its eventual union with a larger ocean. Avoiding this all-encompassing mystery of existence, holding onto any rock or ledge that you can get your hands on along the riverbank, is avoiding “too much life” at the risk of the infinity swallowing you whole (Becker 53). It is avoiding the ocean at the end of the river’s run that is akin to avoiding the bodily death at the end of your own timeline. We move down the river slightly at times, dipping our toe in its current but rarely do we trust ourselves enough to survive should we dive all the way in. From a young age we are conditioned to harbor this “fear of life and fear of death that work in tandem” to help us survive (Becker 55). We build up these defenses, these protective dams in the river so that we can feel “a basic sense of self-worth, meaningfulness, of power” (Becker 55). We are then forced to “avoid the death that rumbles behind and underneath every carefree activity, that look over your shoulder” as you find temporary safety in various distractions from the truth of reality (Becker 53). But this is all so exhausting and it never seems to satisfy our longing for truth and peace. You kick yourself for not doing it right, wondering what it is you’re missing. Trying to quell the “anxiety *about* being-in-the-world and the anxiety *of* being-in-the-world” from the vantage point of a constructed ego is the “grasping of self” that ends up being “the root cause of all your

suffering” (Becker 55, Rinpoche 121). Rather, as taught in the Buddhist tradition, spiritual actualization should be pursued on the patient “path of wisdom” that is paved with love for all of one’s interconnected beings (Rinpoche 127). This egolessness releases you from the feeling of bodily confinement, as well as from the self-imposed expectation that you have for yourself to figure everything out. You know you can’t do it alone. The letting go is not as scary if you are holding onto someone else’s hand as you both flow down together.

All of this is of course easier written about than it is to put it into practice. It takes the committed discipline of a being who truly wants to change. Throughout my life I have learned that people don’t change unless they want to change, and that change is only possible if you trust yourself enough to trust the teachings of others. Reaching spiritual unification of being, finding stability in the state of egolessness, is a journey of “continuous learning and purification” (Rinpoche 126). As you venture on this path, as you become friends with your “death-as-an-advisor,” there may come times when you think there is nothing left to do, that you have scaled the highest peak (Castaneda). In these moments of hopeful naivety, “do not mistake understanding for realization and do not mistake realization for liberation” (Rinpoche 126). Applying this to my psychedelic exploration, I have realized that there is more than one truth and truths can have expiration dates. My relationships with existence as a concept, with my own created essence, and with others in the world all require honesty to survive so that they do not descend into chaotic contradictions. Being honest with the limits of my control in reality rather than denying my reliant place within a greater interconnected system, means looking at death with open eyes. It means seeing death as a transition of pure awareness that leads to my next place in the universal entropy. At the moment of my death, I want my “absolute nature and

relative nature - how I am and how I have been,” to reveal a being soaked to the bone with the saturation of life’s flowing stream (Rinpoche 259).

### **Sources**

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