

WE HAVE A CHOICE

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By Michael Erlewine (Michael@Erlewine.net)

And we have it ten, 100, 1000, probably thousands of times a day, the choice of how to react. Our self is by nature reactive. It is a tight cluster of intense likes and dislikes, and also less-intense "druthers." Although the self is part of us, it is not the whole of us, and certainly not the boss of us, although many here may have forgotten that.

The self is something most of us have to work around, because it is not intelligent on its own. It is a dummy. Like the ventriloquist, believe it or not, we animate the self with our various attachments and then watch it dance.

Because the self is not an entity (a sentient being) like we are, but acts like it is, the likes and dislikes, bias, and prejudices of the self should not be allowed to make life decisions for us. I consider the self like an administrative assistant, much like a phone app we might download, very much a fabricated thing.

And while the existence of some kind of self is necessary to navigate the daily chores of life, it has no permanent existence or true being, but is a shell or a mask through which we work and peer. The self and our personality are pretty much the same thing.

The bottom line is that we each have to be aware enough of the self so that it does not get in the way of what is important, which is certainly not all the petty likes and dislikes that comprise most selves.

If I had to pick one word to describe the self, that word would be "reactive." The self reacts to almost anything and everything, like: all day long. And those myriad of small reactions are like an aperture on a camera, opening and closing constantly, often dimming out the light we need to see by.

Because we habitually identify with our self, it is easy to forget that we are not exclusively the self, but rather that we are sentient beings capable of being aware of the self. We embrace the self as part of us, and not the other way around. The self does not include the awareness part of us. We are aware of it. It is not aware of us. In fact, the self is only aware of itself, which is where the concept "selfish" comes from.

The sad part is that for many of us the lens of the self is like prescription eyeglasses, and this is what we are used to viewing our life through, at least much of the time. And most selves are a veritable agony of reactions, so many things the self likes and loves, or does not like or hates. Every one of those reactions is a visceral wince we have to survive, and at the same time is a

contraction or dimming of our awareness, the light of the mind. The reactions of the ordinary self through the day is a lot like a strobe light at a dance party – hard to see by.

Like the old game of Pick-Up-Sticks, the self is literally a pile of prickly reactions that rule us all day long. However, if we start with the small reactions and work upward, we can train ourselves to, first, be aware when we are reacting and, two, replace our knee-jerk reactions with responses that neutralize and eventually wear that particular reaction out of existence. Like a night-blooming flower, we gradually open until we are exposed to the whole sky and it feels great. We are liberated from this or that auto-reaction one at a time..

The wonderful thing about self-liberating our reactions, especially for those of us like me who are basically lazy, is that if we practice this every day, all day as best we can, we can feel the liberation happening. In other words, each day is lighter, brighter, and better. We can witness the progress of deactivating the reactive self, almost like one reaction at a time.

Because our reactions come from once-free energy that was bound and embedded by our attachments (our likes and dislikes), when an attachment is lessened or removed, that energy is freed and it lives again, literally; it walks the earth as we do. We are it.

Many dharma practices take a long time of doing before we see any results. This reaction-tonglen as described here is not one of those. If you will be diligent for even a short time (days and weeks) and do this practice as you go through your day, you will notice a change for the better.

As you clean up and clear up reaction after reaction, after you learn to respond to challenging reactions in a skillful way, your energy level will go up. You become increasingly aware and the energy curve is exponential, not linear. I don't know of any single beginning dharma practice that is as natural, easy, and effective as this one. It just works.

This short piece is just a kind of advertisement for the longer piece (Do-It-Yourself Dharma) I am posting here, day by day. You might just want to read the whole thing.

<http://dharmagrooves.com/pdf/articles/Dharma/Do-It-Yourself%20Dharma.pdf>

[Photo by Mihai Tamasila.]

