

Who Am I? The Nature of Our Essence

by Dirk Gillabel, 2001

"Before enlightenment chop wood and carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood and carry water."

Ancient Chinese Proverb

Sooner or later, if you have not done it already, you will ask yourself "Who am I?" When man comes out of his slumber, and becomes aware of himself, he asks this most important question. One becomes aware of his body, of other people just like him, his environment, of life itself, the role one plays in it all, and what it is all about. More important, what is this 'I', this 'me'? We like to give fancy names to philosophical questions, like existentialism, but this will not take away the root of the questions. The awareness of being alive and all the questions that go with it remain the same over space and time, and one will have to find the answers for himself.

My search for answers started with a dramatic and profound spiritual experience for which I was not ready. Life sometimes decides otherwise and makes you undergo what is in the plan. When I was around ten yours this experience would change my life.

I was lying in bed not yet asleep when my consciousness shifted and I became aware of another reality. The sense of being in my bedroom and even of being in my body disappeared. I expanded in a spherical way and finally found myself in an unlimited space. Imagine yourself being somewhere in the universe. You can see the stars all around you. Then take the stars away, that was the space I was in. Just me and unlimited space. It impossible to describe it accurately. I have to resort to our mundane language to give you some idea what it was like. The vastness of that space is beyond description. My perception was spherical, and there was a strong sense of duality of me and that infinity. There were no directions, there was nothing else. Nothing to grab on to. That made me extremely afraid. I desperately wanted to get back to my body. At least that was something I could grab on to. I needed limitations, I could not deal with unlimited emptiness. It was a long and hard struggle, requiring all my will power to get to my body.

This experience repeated itself the next couple of evenings. In the initial phase I sometimes felt like a big expanding balloon. The more I expanded the stronger the sense of unlimited infinity. Because of the fear I managed to break off the experience sooner and sooner. Finally I was able to stop it from in the beginning. After some evenings it did not happen anymore. My parents did not know what to think about it. They did not want to deal with it, and that was that. I guess yogis might have understood what was happening to me but they were not around. Although the experience stopped, it did change my consciousness profoundly.

Every time I was back into my body, I literally felt the walls of my room, the physicality of it and the enclosure they formed. This was a tremendous, strong feeling. I became aware that I was locked up in my physical body for the rest of my life. It felt like a prison term. I was in a physical body and I could not liberate myself from it whenever I wanted. I had to accept "my time" here on Earth until the moment of death whenever that might come. From that moment on I was different. For the first time in my life I became conscious of myself, an "I" as a single unity, in contrast to the unlimited universe. It was deeply felt. I could not understand the duality of the two. Furthermore I could not understand that there were other "I's" around, other people who also have a central "I". Why was I "me" and why was I not somebody else? Questions, but no answers.

From that moment on there was a new Dirk. He looked at the world with a new consciousness. He stepped out of the dream of life in which most people live. He began to watch the people around him, what they were doing and why they were doing it. He became sensitive to the energies of people, looked behind their masks.

Because of this change in consciousness and the many questions I had about life, I became religious. When I was sixteen I happened to pass by the occult section in the public library. Books about parapsychology and reincarnation drew my attention. This was the start of my exploration of everything alternative.

In search for answers I studied everything that had to do with life, and who we are: the world religions, esoteric doctrines, occult teachings, Wicca, nature religions, psychology and so on. I learned that the essence of all the different religions is the same and that many people before me had tried to find out who we are. I found the most appealing, the most instructive, the most clear, and the most comprehensive explanation in Tibetan Buddhism. I am not a Buddhist, nor a monk, nor am I associated with any Buddhist monastery and I have not read all the Tibetan scriptures. However, what I learned from Tibetan Buddhism is far reaching and very comprehensive. Tibetan Buddhism is the top of the tree of different Buddhist teachings. Even on the top of that tree there are some differences in how they view the teaching, but this does not matter, as the ultimate truth can be looked at from many different angles. I will give you here an overview of what Tibetan Buddhism has to say about who we are, that is, how I understand it. What follows is quite different than what we, Westerners, think reality is and who we are. So, you will have to stretch your mind and extend your limits.

The first concept you need to have a good understanding of is 'mind'. Forget about the Western concept of mind as being the intellect. In Buddhism 'mind' is like a primal thing out of which everything that exists came and comes forth. The nature of mind is empty and without foundation whatsoever. It is unobstructed and therefore there is a continuous arising of appearances out of itself. Thus it is the source, the origin of the diversity in the universe. Mind is primordial, self-arisen, spontaneous and transcends space and time. Mind is the basis of everything in the universe, including you and me.

So, first we have mind, and then out of mind thoughts arise. Thoughts is another important concept, because it is thoughts that create all the forms in the

universe. In essence, forms by themselves do not exist, they are actually composed out of thoughts. When Buddhism say that everything is 'maya' or illusion it does not mean that it is not there. It means that what we perceive and what we think the world around us is, is not what it is in reality. Everything in the universe is a thought form. We perceive objects as being solid and made of matter, but that is because we have been accustomed to looking at it in this way. Quantum physics will also tell you that matter does not exist. The so-called quantum particles out of which all matter is composed of, are actually energy packets, and even with those energy packets we can not really put our finger on it. For example, a quantum particle can not be defined in space and time at the same time. They are kind of elusive. This is what our present state of science is telling us. Spiritual masters have always told us that there are many more subtle particles/energy forms that make up the universe, but underlying it all is the concept of thought forms. Thoughts are created out of mind and then take shape by creating subtle and gross particles, which we eventually perceive as 'matter'. Take the thought away and the form will cease to exist. We presently live in a physical world, and our consciousness has to adapt to the experiences within this world. So it 'forgets' about the thought forms and looks at the world as being 'solid'. It is just a matter of perception, and we have become accustomed to it. Where does this all tie in with who we are? Well, in essence we are all thought forms. This thought form comes out of (our) mind and takes shape into a physical body. Buddhism teaches that everything does not exist by itself. Everything is a manifestation of that all-encompassing universal mind. When mind is compared with an ocean, then everything and everyone is a wave on the surface of that ocean. A wave arises up out of the ocean, travels along the surface for a while and dissolves again in the ocean. The wave seems to be a separate unity, seems to have a separate individuality and seems to move independently, but it actually is part of the ocean and defined by the ocean. It is a temporary manifestation. So it is with a human being. What you call 'you', the totality of your body, emotions, thoughts and so on, and the name which you are given so we can identify you by a personal name, is actually a temporary thought form that came into being, lives here for a while, and will cease in the future. Here we refer to the being of this incarnation, because Buddhism teaches reincarnation. So, if the wave dissolves into the ocean and then rises up again in another form (another incarnation), what is it that has remained the same and caused another wave to rise up again? This is called the Dharmakaya, the body of reality, the essence, the absolute. This is the essence of our being, it is always there, it will always be. Dharmakaya cannot be expressed in words as it transcends everything. Nevertheless Buddhists have described it in many words, but one has to take into account that these are only approximations. Dharmakaya is not an abstract concept, it can be experienced here and now at any time because it is always here. They reason why people do not experience their true essence is because they are habituated to the thought forms that make up this world. People are preoccupied by their bodily needs, are swept away by their emotions and constantly following their thoughts. All this has become such a strong habit that it takes a lot of time to change this habit and start experiencing the true essence

again. So how do Buddhists describe Dharmakaya? It is beyond mind, and it is void. It is often called empty, but this does not mean that there is nothing there, on the contrary it is the totality of all knowledge. It is all-encompassing, and lucidly clear. It is without any conceptions or conceptual limitations. One might think it is clear consciousness, but even consciousness is a temporary thing. Dharmakaya is clear, unceasing awareness. It is self-originated and spontaneously present. It always has been clear and luminous, from the very beginning, and is unceasing.

Is Dharmakaya, the true essence, the clear awareness, or is it the ego, the self, or the higher self? Well, it is none of them, and this is hard to grasp for most people. We identify so much with our ego, and the stronger the ego the better, we think. The ego or self, Buddhists say, is nothing but a construct of the mind, to give us a sense of a unity, of a self, of being different from others, something that makes us feel separate from others. It does not even exist, it is an idea, a concept, a label in which we believe. The most we can say about an ego is that it is the sum of all your personal characteristics. The ego by itself does not exist, nor does the idea of a self. This is one of those paradoxes that have to be experienced because the intellect by itself might not be able to grasp or understand it. The fact that we see ourselves as separate from others makes us believe we must have a self, a self that is unique and different. But when you look for this self, it cannot be found. Buddhism is strongly based on meditation and experience, and this has revealed, and everyone can experience that for himself, that there is no ego, no self to be found in oneself. It is just not there. Not even a higher self.

So, when one meditates and tries to figure out what one is made of, what the true essence of one is, what does one find? Meditation is a gradual process of stilling the bodily energies, the emotional ebb and flow, and especially the continuous flow of thoughts. Now, there are many ways to approach meditation and we are not going to go into this here. The biggest obstacles are the thoughts. They come and go and distract us continuously. When we break through the habit of following the thoughts we experience mind directly. The mind is the basis of our manifestation, or our incarnation, here. Can we say it is 'my' mind. Yes and no, you could say it is as you are experiencing it, but it is not 'your' mind as the ego or self does not exist and thus cannot even be experienced. So what you experience within yourself is not 'your' mind but just mind. We already gave a description of what mind is in its universal aspect, but the same applies here. You could also say we all share the same mind. When thoughts no longer hinder us, then we experience empty mind. Like we said before empty does not mean that there is nothing there, it is an experience of emptiness, it is unlike anything we experience in our daily world.

When we have attained this state of consciousness in which we experience the emptiness of mind, and when we are able to continuously dwell in it while continuing our daily life, one is called enlightened, an often misunderstood word. An enlightened being does not float around on clouds, but is still an ordinary being living an ordinary life, however, he has found the inner peace and tranquility that goes with the attainment of the inner emptiness of mind. The

experience of emptiness goes together with clarity of awareness and the feeling of unlimited inner space. At this point one is free from the karmic cycle of birth and death. But there is one more step to take, and that is liberation. Most Westerners think that enlightenment is it, the ultimate, but it is not. Liberation is the final step. As long as the enlightened person holds on to the idea of emptiness or clarity, he is holding on to a thought form, and thought forms belong to the manifested universe. It is a question of dropping any conceived ideas and then transcending them to experience directly the Dharmakya. Then one is completely liberated. There is not much we can say about liberation because it transcends everything we know.

If you have not given up reading this article by now, you have shown great courage. The nature of being is not easy to explain or to understand. What I wanted to give you here is a little compass that you can use on your life path to steer you in the right direction. It takes a whole lot more than this article to understand what it is all about, and then you need to experience it yourself, otherwise it is just dry intellectual material. If you feel attracted to concepts explained in this article I recommend you read more about it.