

## IDENTITY AND PERSONAL FREEDOM

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Lisa is a woman in her mid-thirties who is vital, outgoing, loving and creative. She's a wife and mother who has written two books and has a third in progress. Her own paintings hang on the walls of her home, and although there is always something going on she is calm and cheerful, rarely losing her sense of humor.

She wasn't always like this. When I first knew her she was quite depressed and withdrawn. The change over the past six years, although gradual, has been remarkable. I asked her to describe this process of change as she experienced it.

I know that the change in me has taken years to work out and become real, but there was a central moment – one point in time – when something happened to me. I saw something about myself, really understood it, and from then on I had something that couldn't be lost. It has never been the same since.

My relationship with my husband had been really bad. He was not a very kind man, and had troubles of his own. He felt embarrassed and ashamed of me, and was always putting me down. My father, too, had been excessively critical of me in my childhood, and I guess I was trying to make up for not having won his love and approval by winning Ralph's, instead. As the years went by I felt more and more that I was a terrible, inadequate, wrong person. This hurt me deeply – I was always hurting so much during those years. I had to deaden myself, so I wouldn't feel the pain and could cope.

But I kept sinking into the pain and depression anyway. One day I began to think about suicide. That shocked me – like an electric shock. I remember that I sort of jumped back from myself and said, "My God, what am I doing? Where am I?" It was as if a veil had been lifted from my eyes. I could think clearly. I felt like I was waking up from a sleep. And then I had a sudden, striking realization: "I don't *have* to be like this. I can *choose* not to be this way!" ***That was it.*** That was the moment.

I saw that the problem wasn't that Ralph or my father or anyone else was causing me all this pain. ***I was allowing it to happen,*** playing right along, acting my role of "victim" perfectly. Oh yes, I was very good at it. I was sunk in this pattern of behavior, submerged in it. It was as if I were trapped. I truly believed that I ***was*** this "Victim."

But in that instant I realized that I was not a Victim – it was only a role, and ***I could choose to play any role I wanted.*** I understood that I, myself, was in some very profound way, distinct from all my roles and all my characteristics and possessions. It was as if I were stripped of everything that I had thought was "me." This was what I had imagined dying would be like, yet there I was, more alive and more awake than I had ever been in my life. I don't really know how to describe it. I was just "I," solid, whole, ***there.***

So that was how all these changes began. Now I have a deep sense of wholeness and OK-ness inside, and even when I feel hurt and confused I ***know*** that I'm really not these feelings – I am ***me!***

Of course I still have to work at remembering all this, that I am not a put-upon, put-down Victim. And it isn't always easy. At times, I get caught up in it again. But every time it is quicker and easier for me to come out from under. Since I've begun working on this, I've discovered all sorts of good things about myself, and it's exciting just to be alive, to be me.

Experiences like Lisa's, experiences of liberation or *disidentification* from a specific, restrictive state of consciousness, are not uncommon. Yet they often go unrecognized. Many people have had similar experiences, though they are usually less dramatic, and so less easy to understand for what they are. Because of this lack of understanding, many miss the opportunity of applying them and making such lasting changes in their lives as Lisa did.

Furthermore, when these experiences are not understood, they may be disturbing. When we are completely identified with any one thing, we think, feel, and act accordingly. We then believe that we *are* for example, "rational," or we *are* a "victim" or we *are* "strong," and we begin to feel that we are this *to the exclusion of all else*. The prospect of letting go of what we are so strongly identified with can then become frightening, even inconceivable. We feel as if it is our very self that will be lost.

For our sense of self, of "I-ness," of personal identity, is perhaps the most precious thing we have. So we often fight against ourselves and against our urge to grow in order to preserve this sense of self untouched, even if it is restricted by specific identifications.

Years ago, if someone had told Lisa that she was not really a victim, but had become identified with playing that role, she would have felt extremely threatened. Her identification with *being* a victim was so total and so complete that she could not see beyond it. She was submerged in "victimhood." She related to other people, to situations, to objects, as a victim. She felt and thought as a victim. One could say that, for all practical purposes, she *was* a victim – downtrodden, unfairly wounded, persecuted. Even her posture reflected it. And to a large extent her identity was self-perpetuating: because she looked and acted like a victim, people tended to treat her like one. This reinforced her self-image, maintaining the status quo.

Her perception of other people and of her environment was also limited by her identification. She gazed out at the world through "victim-colored" glasses, and all the data she gathered from her environment had to pass through this filter of victimhood. So the happenings around her became distorted and misinterpreted to fit with her identity as a victim, reinforcing that identity. And because Lisa's perception of the environment was distorted by her self-image, so too were her responses. She was not responding to what was really happening, but to the "victim's" perception of it.

While Lisa's situation was rather extreme, it applies to some extent to most people. One is often identified with something, and tends to respond to his or her own filtered perceptions, rather than to what is actually there. But we can become aware of

our identifications. And the more we are aware of what we are identified with, the clearer our perceptions of the world become. *Awareness of an identification is the first step to becoming free from its restrictions and distortions.* With this awareness, we can learn to choose at will, and according to our need, to identify with, or disidentify from the many inner and outer elements and qualities that surround our “I,” or personal self. This is the basis of real freedom, and of realizing our true identity.

## VARIETIES OF IDENTIFICATIONS

Identification with a variety of diverse elements occurs in everyone. It is a natural psychological process. According to Jung, “one or another basic instinct, or complex of ideas, will invariably concentrate upon itself the greatest sum of psychic energy and thus force the ego into its service. As a rule the ego (Although Jung’s use of the term “ego” is here synonymous with the term “I” as used in psychosynthesis, this is not the case in most psychological systems. Insufficient understanding of the phenomenon of identification has caused most of the confusion surrounding these various terms, for few Western psychological thinkers have seen through the identifications of the “I” to the “I” itself.

So one often finds that the word “ego,” or “self” is used to indicate a variety of theoretical constructs, and to it are attributed characteristics, needs, and qualities that actually belong to the personality which is organized *around* the self. Sometimes the word “self” is even used to refer to the specific personality element that one is identified with.) is drawn into this focus of energy so powerfully that it identifies with it...” In other words, we experience a variety of pulls on our awareness, originating from many different sources. And in general, as long as we are not aware of our identifications *we tend to identify with whatever has the greatest “pull” on our consciousness:* whatever we perceive as most interesting, most important, most central. This could be whatever makes us feel more alive, more ourselves – whatever best allows our energy to flow, or whatever fulfills our strongest desire, need or urge. Thus we can identify with objects, such as our house; with roles, such as being a mother; we specific psychological formations, such as the victim; or with one of our basic personality functions, such as the mind, or feelings.

Because these identifications are usually unconscious, we may identify with something that, if we thought about it objectively, we would *know* is not really us. For instance, I know a man in his late forties who almost seems to *be* his car. It’s a very expensive foreign model, and he spends most of his free time with it. He talks to it, tunes it, waxes and polishes it. Then he drives around town and shows it off.

One Sunday afternoon he came out of a friend’s house to find his parked car scratched on the outside front fender. He was very disturbed, and felt physically uncomfortable driving his car all that day. Not until he could take it into the body shop the next day did he feel at ease. And one time when the muffler became too noisy he was mortified. He felt ashamed, awkward and unpresentable. He felt that he couldn’t “go out this way,” he didn’t “look right.” He drove on the side streets to avoid being seen and took a taxi to a cocktail party. If the car is insulted, *he* feels insulted. And if the car is

praised, *he* feels praised. It's not clear to him where its boundaries end and his begin. (A conscious experience of change in boundaries as the result of a new identification is described in "fat Self, Thin Self," *Synthesis 1*, pp. 152-153.) He once said, only half-jokingly, "If anything were to happen to this car I think I'd be thrown into a full-blown identity crisis."

Similarly, homemakers can become identified with their homes, collectors with their collections, artists with their creations, and so forth. Such identifications with material objects are often masquerading as "self-expression." True self-expression is valuable, of course. But when we invest much of ourselves in objects, when we feel in some way threatened at their loss or change, then there is something other than self-expression happening. When we seem to have an *inappropriate* amount of ourselves at stake concerning some object, we are likely to be identifying with it. Our boundaries may have begun to include it. And instead of expressing ourselves, we begin to express *it* – we become the servant of the object with which we identify.

Besides identifying with material objects, we can identify ourselves with the groups we belong to – whether cultural, racial, religious, ideological or political. We frequently identify ourselves with our functions and careers in life, such as being a parent or a doctor, a son or an accountant, and so on.

Lisa gave us an example of a more subtle kind of identification. For Lisa was identified with a developed, powerful, and highly energized *subpersonality*. (A full description of subpersonalities, including techniques to work with them, is the central topic of the WORKBOOK in SYNTHESIS 1.) She was consistently identified with this subpersonality, to the exclusion of all else. Like Lisa, people can be "stuck" in such an identification with a specific subpersonality. Depending on what that subpersonality is like, they can be dissatisfied and hurting, like Lisa was, or relatively content and free from conflict, although limited to only a part of what they can be.

Other people *shift their identification* among a number of subpersonalities. We all have experienced how, for example, "we are different" when we are with our children than when we are with our parents; or how we have been in some stressful situation where "we are not ourselves." When people shift their identification in this way, they often do so *reacting to the demands of the situation they are in*. They are drawn—largely unaware—into the subpersonality that is "suitable," that can best act "as is expected of them." Increasingly, they feel boxed in, powerless, controlled by the expectations of their environment and the demands of their personality, and caught in the ambivalence, confusion, and conflict that exist among their many subpersonalities. (See "Subpersonalities," *Synthesis 1*, pp. 55-56 and 61-62.) So the mere reactive shifting of identification can be just as restricting as a single identification – *until we learn to choose and shift our identities at will*.

## THE PROCESS OF IDENTIFICATION

We have seen that identification occurs as a largely unconscious response to the pull of a variety of needs and urges. And that any identification with only one aspect of

our personality is restrictive and possibly distorting. So an identification can be a source of difficulty; but depending on the circumstances, there can also be a useful aspect to it.

Because of the very fact that it is restrictive, *identification is specialized*. So it can help us stay focused in a particular direction, increasing our awareness and effectiveness. When we identify with any one part of ourselves, we are able to experience it fully, without being distracted. We feel the way it feels, see the way it sees, for it represents a particular, specialized state of consciousness. Our outlook on life changes, our perceptions and sensations alter. Our energy flows through it and this “feeds” it and makes it row. It is thus that – often without our awareness – specific facets of ourselves are nurtured and developed, as imagination through an artist subpersonality, or determination through a leader subpersonality.

Through specific identifications we can develop and refine a quality, or an attitude; we can learn when a certain behavior or response is useful, and when it is inappropriate. Each one of our identifications provides therefore, in some way, a *learning and growing* experience. In fact, a great deal of our early learning and growing takes place primarily through *an unconscious process of successive identifications*. For many people this unconscious or unplanned mode may remain the central means of growth throughout their lives.

But as long as this process is unconscious, it has a great drawback. For while the development of a new quality can *complement* the qualities we already have, leading to more well-rounded, more inclusive and effective personality, it can become *exaggerated* if we are caught for too long in a particular identification. Personality development is then lopsided, causing conflict, imbalance, and the inhibition of other important and useful qualities. So, depending on the circumstances and on its duration, any identification can be beneficial or harmful, growth-producing or restricting. Or, more precisely, at different times each identification helps and hinders personal growth in different ways and in various proportions.

For example, being identified with a “Conscientious Worker” subpersonality may help a person develop competence and efficiency, but could prevent him or her from developing playfulness and humor, compassion and sensitivity to fellow workers, calmness or the ability to relax when appropriate. On the other hand, being identified even with something as painful and restrictive as the Victim can eventually bring about positive results – such as greater understanding and empathy for the sufferings of others. So we need to learn first to become aware of our identifications, and then to choose, consciously and in the moment, which identification we believe to be most in line with our purpose and most useful to our growth. Once we have gained whatever is to be gained from a particular identification, it is time to move on: we must release ourselves from it in order to continue growing. Otherwise our identification will become restrictive and control us, limiting our father growth.

But releasing ourselves from an identification does not mean abandoning or rejecting it. For once we disidentify from something that we have full experienced and

mastered, it can be a most effective tool of awareness, expression and action, always available to us whenever we need it.

What we have said up to now implies *three stages* of growing awareness and skill in dealing with the aspects and elements of our personality.

In the first stage, the process of identification is unconscious and largely beyond our control. Our identification is with one or another personality element (such as a feeling, a subpersonality, a role) and will change responding to the pressure and demands of inner and outer conditions much more than to our desires and aims.

As we become aware of our identifications, we reach the second stage. We can now consciously *choose* to shift our identification from one personality element to another. As we have seen, this mode gives us a greater range of expression, and a more balanced development.

There is, however, yet a third stage that is possible. Lisa alludes to this stage when she speaks of her experience of a gradually emergent “sense of wholeness.” For we don’t always have to be identified with a subpersonality or other personality element. On the contrary, as will become clear further on, we can learn to disidentify from all of these, and to identify as the “I,” the personal self, our true center of identity and awareness. We now have an even greater range of expression available: we can choose when it is more appropriate to identify with any personality element, and when to be identified as the “I.” As the “I,” we not only have experience of personal identity and individuality, we can also be most objectively aware of our psychological life and our interactions in the world, and can therefore guide our actions and development with the greatest effectiveness.

In actual practice --- as is usually the case for psychological processes – the three stages are not discretely separate in time. For example, we can learn to disidentify from personality elements and also to identify with our “I” gradually and simultaneously. Progress in one stage reinforces further progress in the other. The following case study of “Mike” more extensively illustrates progress along these three stages, through Mike’s increasing understanding of the process of identification. Mike had been identified with a dominant subpersonality, the “Striver,” for most of his life. He was the only child of older parents who had great expectations of him. High achievement was presented to him as a prerequisite for parental love and acceptance, and his childhood was characterized by efforts to win their approval. He got good marks in school and became an award-winning boy scout. A youthful businessman, he was diligently earning money at age seven with a lemonade stand and a paper-route, and later with snow shoveling and gardening jobs. His parents’ attitude was that his efforts were good – but “could be better.” Their approval was promised as a reward for his future achievements, and became like the carrot that entices the donkey to move forward. So Mike’s striving pattern was firmly set early in life.

In adolescence, Mike strived for a high-grade average and athletic leadership, which were considered by his peer group to be signs of success. He achieved both, and

graduated from high school as valedictorian. He continued striving through college, and although the goals he set himself were reached one by one, they seemed to lose their meaning as soon as he attained them. He never felt satisfied. Eventually, this dissatisfaction and continued striving landed him in serious medical trouble (a difficult ulcer).

But there was a positive side to it too. From the time he was small, Mike's urge to strive stimulated the differentiation and development of many useful functions, traits and abilities. He had to learn how to be trustworthy and dependable, how to make himself get up on cold mornings, how to handle money, how to take initiative, and so forth. He exercised his intellect and his will and learned early about choice and values. He taught himself how to harness and direct his energy and how to persist in what he chose to do. Through his skill at evaluating situations, making decisions, and carrying them out, he earned the respect and trust of many people.

Early in his life, the striving urge became the nucleus, the *partial unifying center*, around which these many important elements of Mike's personality came together, developed, and were integrated. And the Striver subpersonality was born. As Mike grew, the complexity of organization around the Striver kept increasing. Eventually it evolved into a complex psychological structure, which included a large number of personality elements and systems.

But although the Striver had helped Mike develop many valuable and useful abilities which he otherwise might never have learned, we have already seen that Mike was at its mercy. He could not control the Striver. In fact, the Striver was in control of Mike and was limiting him.

Where were Mike's feelings, for example? Where were his receptivity and gentleness? Humor was only present as cynicism, and his higher values were being ignored. Such functions as imagination and intuition were stunted, and his inner life was altogether barren. Mike knew little of beauty, love, serenity or peace.

Mike's identification with the Striver began to be restrictive during his mid-twenties. He ceased to grow and fell into stasis. He was unaware of his gradually increasing crystallization at the time, and was at a loss to understand the anxiety and sense of futility which he began to feel. He had reached the limits of the Striver, which instead of being a vehicle for growth, was now becoming a trap.

The core of the Striver, as of all subpersonalities, was a drive, urge or need—in this case, the urge to strive. Mike was aware of this urge, but he assumed it was an intrinsic personality trait, an unchangeable part of his nature. And he was not at all displeased with this "trait" because, as the Striver, he felt in control of himself, capable, and with a strong sense of personal identity.

But behind the Striver subpersonality, pushing to be recognized, was a deeper, earlier need that Mike had lost touch with. This was the need for acceptance and approval – a vitally important need which had not been sufficiently met in childhood.

Long before the Striver subpersonality came into being, this need controlled Mike's life. It had itself become the core of an even earlier subpersonality with which Mike had been identified. This subpersonality Mike later – in the course of therapy – came to call the “Rejected Child.” As the Rejected Child, Mike had tried many different ways to be accepted and win love, attention and approval – such as being good, being helpful, manipulating, pretending to be sick, to need help, as well as striving for various achievements. Because of his family environment and his own specific talents, striving turned out to be by far the most effective way of being accepted. So it was striving that became his habitual behavior. And it was in this way that Mike's striving urge, in turn, became the core of the Striver.

After its formation, the Striver became Mike's major channel of expression in the world, his main subpersonality. And Mike became more and more identified with it. The earlier subpersonality, the Rejected Child, soon was repressed, as its qualities, particularly the need for acceptance, were quite incompatible with the strong, self-sufficient style of the Striver.

From then on, although Mike was given a great deal of approval for striving, it never reached him. For it was given to him while he was identified with the Striver, who could not receive it. Because ironically, the Striver, which was originally formed to fulfill the need for acceptance and approval, now obscured that very basic need and actually *prevented* its satisfaction. The Striver subpersonality was organized and unified around the urge to strive, and its very identity depended on striving. So its deepest fear was that if it ever reached the original goal of its striving – To have Mike feel accepted and approved of – its very reason for being would be threatened. (But in reality if the goal could have been reached, the Striver would not have disappeared nor have been destroyed. Mike would have simply disidentified from it. To the limited awareness of the Striver this was seen as tantamount to death.) Speaking with the voice of Mike's parents, the Striver would say, “You can do better.” And with this it invalidated all approval from the environment and any lasting gratification for having achieved a goal – forcing Mike to turn immediately toward the next goal to be reached. It became impossible for Mike to feel anything but constant dissatisfaction while he was identified with the Striver. And not only did the Striver shut *itself* off from approval, more importantly, it prevented any approval from reaching the Rejected Child, who was now in a worse situation than before the Striver came into being. Not only did it feel rejected by the environment, but it was rejected by the Striver as well.

This created a double-bind situation for Mike: he couldn't stop but he couldn't win. The only way he knew to get approval was through striving, but the more he strived the more approval became distant and empty. What Mike really needed was to accept the Rejected Child within himself, whether successful or unsuccessful, irrespective of any achievement.

Though his personal growth had largely ceased in his twenties, and though anxiety troubled him, Mike had continued striving. Or, more accurately, the Striver had kept Mike diligently moving forward. By the time Mike reached his early thirties he was a highly promising junior vice-president in a large corporation – with an ulcer that refused to heal. He strongly resisted slowing down, feeling that if he took any pressure off himself, he'd collapse. His invalidating of all approval, combined with the constant fear of lack of inner worth, gnawed away at his achievements.

Mike had not been consciously aware of the deep conflicts within him – though he experienced the resultant pain. The situation was becoming critical. If he had continued in the same way, he probably would have brought a serious crisis on himself – a major crisis of identity, with the likelihood of severe physical side effects.

## INTEGRATION

Instead, Mike decided to seek help. In the course of therapy, he learned about disidentification. Gradually he was able to disidentify from the Striver, and uncover and temporarily identify with the Rejected Child. He became aware of the deep pain, sadness and anger at having felt rejected, and was able then to let himself express these feelings within the therapeutic setting. He was also able to recognize his need for acceptance, and to understand what had happened to him. At the suggestion of the guide, he began practicing self-identification. While doing so, he disidentified from the Rejected Child as well. Like Lisa, he began to cultivate the sense of his personal existence, unhampered by any activity, any desire, any identification. As he put it in those first days of discovery: “I was just myself, a person, Mike.” In this way, he gradually freed himself from his overwhelming need for acceptance from others, realizing that while it was an important and deep part of his personality, *he was not it*. It still needed to be satisfied, of course, and now he was in a more effective position to do this. So Mike *himself* learned to give to the Rejected Child within him the full and unconditional acceptance that it needed and had been unable to find in the world.

As Mike was increasingly able to direct his own growth process, the deep need for acceptance was becoming satisfied and the Child began to grow and transform. Its latent traits and qualities blossomed, and it became an adult subpersonality, complementary to the Striver – creative, relaxed, playful, funny, with a great deal of empathy, affection and warmth toward other people. Mike called it, “Mellow Mike.”

Mike saw that it was important not only to express the newly available qualities of Mellow Mike, but also to combine them with those of the Striver by fusing the two subpersonalities. This would bring him far greater personality integration. And he wanted his life to reflect and facilitate this synthetic process. At this point he began to feel that his job held him back and was no longer satisfying. After considering the issue for several months, he left his firm and returned to school. He is now working toward a doctorate in education, relying of ten on the considerable talents of the Striver in his studies, while teaching in a creative environment where Mellow Mike can find ample

opportunities for expression. The fusion process is well on its way. He said recently that his long-term goal is to contribute innovations and improvements to the educational system.

Through Mike's experience we have seen the process by which we can move toward a more inclusive state by freeing ourselves from restrictive identifications. But this experience also suggests an internal mechanism which pushes aside experiences and aspects that are not compatible with such restrictive identifications. This mechanism can be described as *disowning*.

## **DISOWNING**

When we are strongly identified with something, such as a major subpersonality, most of our energy flows through it. And our energy is filtered by it as well. In other words, only energy of a quality compatible with the basic quality of that subpersonality will be allowed to flow. This means that whatever we are identified with controls the acceptance and rejection of our experiences. For instance, suppose a businessman is identified with a "Loser" subpersonality – one which has acted as a unifying center for negative experiences, feelings of inadequacy, and so forth. And let us say that something positive happens – the boss congratulates him on a project he's just completed. Does he hear him and believe him? No. He distorts ("He was being sarcastic"), or invalidates ("He was just trying to build my morale"). Or he immediately "forgets" it happened, and blocks it out of consciousness.

A positive experience is simply not acceptable to the "Loser" because its quality is different from, and inconsistent with, that of his self-image. But it goes even further: a positive experience is actually threatening. What if he were not really a Loser? Who would he be then? As we saw earlier, this fear of loss of identity, of a deep void or inner emptiness, if not correctly understood is often too overwhelming to be faced. In such a situation it frequently seems less painful to have a negative sense of self than no sense of self at all. So as in the case of the man identified with this Loser, positive experiences are excluded from consciousness and become invalidated, distorted or repressed. More precisely, the energy content of a positive experience is of an *opposite quality* to the energy that makes up the core of the Loser subpersonality. So if the experience were accepted by the Loser, the incoming energy would neutralize an equal amount of energy in the subpersonality core, thus *reducing its intensity*. This would be experienced by the Loser as a diminished sense of self, as something directly threatening to its own identity and existence. Therefore it is unacceptable.

But when energy that is opposite to the dominant subpersonality develops within ourselves, and is repressed, where does it go? What happened, originally, to Mike's emotions, humor and intuition? What became of Lisa's inner strength, self-assertion, and ability to nourish herself? These qualities, as well as many others, being incompatible with the qualities of the identifications – the Striver, the Victim – were disowned. By disowned we mean *unconsciously repressed, consciously suppressed, ignored or*

**otherwise discounted.** And to the extent that there is disowning, personality development and integration will be held back.

But we cannot really get rid of portions of ourselves. Whether repressed or suppressed, they do not go away; they remain with us at some level. Their energy accumulates in the unconscious and emerges in various forms – often disguised – such as dreams, symbolizations, sudden urges and desires, various “neurotic” manifestations and so forth. As Abraham Maslow writes, in accordance with Freud’s formulation, “those portions of ourselves that we reject or repress...do not go out of existence. They do not die, but rather go underground. Whatever effects these underground portions of our human nature have...tend to be unnoticed by ourselves or else felt to be as if they were not a part of us, e.g. ‘I don’t know what made me say such a thing.’ ‘I don’t know what came over me.’” (A. Maslow: *The Farther Reaches of Human Nature*, Viking Press, NY 1971, p. 158.)

As time goes on, disowning takes ever increasing energy to maintain. Eventually this becomes a vicious circle: the more one is troubled by unwanted parts of oneself the more forcefully will they be rejected, and the more forcefully one rejects them the more trouble they will be.

Frequently these disowned qualities and experiences “feed” a subpersonality that is opposite to the dominant one – or, if such a one does not exist, they create it. As this opposite subpersonality grows and develops, it gains access to more and more energy. Eventually it may come into real conflict with the dominant one. Usually the conflict is unconscious at the beginning, and the emerging subpersonality expresses itself indirectly – perhaps even somatically, as in the example of Mike’s ulcer.

But such a conflicting subpersonality is not a hindrance, something undesirable, to be avoided – although it may appear so at first. Because it is opposite, it is also **complementary**, and through it we gain access to a broad range of valuable qualities not before available.

In other words, the disowned emotions, thoughts, desires, and experiences which make up such a subpersonality are not necessarily harmful or “bad.” On the contrary, many of these disowned ideas or urges can be towards growth, or towards altruism and “sublime” qualities. Maslow describes our “unconscious fear and hatred of the true, good and beautiful” in his theory of our defense against our own growth, which he terms the “Jonah complex.” (ibid.) Frank Haronian, in his article, “The Repression of the Sublime,” (Synthesis 1, p. 125) discusses the tendency to repress the goodness, nobility and beauty of human nature as well as the sexual and aggressive drives. Thus, contents of our consciousness are usually disowned not on the basis of their actual value, but because whatever that content is, it is incompatible with our – often unconscious – sense of who we are. And, as we have seen, the sense of who we are is determined, in each moment, by whatever we are identified with.

RELEASE

When we are identified with something that has become restrictive, how do we manage to release ourselves? Mike's identification with the Striver was only broken after the resulting inner conflicts and tensions caused much pain, anxiety, and even an ulcer. And it was only after considerable suffering that Lisa spontaneously "stepped back" from her identification, experienced her "I," and became aware of the Victim.

People often maintain an identification until it becomes too difficult, too painful, or impossible to do so. But a *permanent* identification with any function, subpersonality, or other personality element is jeopardized sooner or later by the simple process of life and time. Eventually it will be impossible to maintain, and the individual's life situation may become precarious. He or she may experience a sense of loss, futility and despair, as might a student who must leave school, a businessman who must face retirement, or a spouse whose partner grows steadily beyond where he or she was when they married.

The same crisis also comes to people whose identifications have become too restrictive because of inner growth, even though their external life conditions remain the same. We have seen examples of this in Mike and Lisa.

Although this crisis is quite common, its real nature is seldom understood. Many go through it blindly and powerlessly, while with a clearer understanding they could deal with it less painfully, and use it as an opportunity for growth. For a crisis is a message that says: "Let go! You are identified with something that is now too small for you." So the first step to surmount a crisis is to look for the restricting identification that one needs to let go of. In this way the crisis is seen suddenly as an *opportunity* rather than a setback. And this crucial insight points the way to the resolution, showing the means to reach it with greater effectiveness and far less struggle.

Yet disidentification need not be precipitated by crisis. *It can be achieved through a conscious, deliberate act of will.* Nor must one fear that achieving disidentification will *lead* to a crisis. If the need for it is recognized in time, disidentification can be calm, smooth, painless, and will bring about increased harmony and freedom.

However, recognition of our restrictive identifications can be difficult because we often do not realize that we are identified with anything. An exploration of our personality can bring to light many of our identifications. Another – and complementary – approach is to disidentify "en masse" from the three main aspects of the personality: body, feelings and mind. This will eventually release us from our more specific identifications, (While identifications with objects, roles or even subpersonalities are often not difficult to recognize and deal with, the identification with a basic personality function – such as the mind, or the feelings – is deeper, and can be more elusive. It is often expressed through identifications with one or more corresponding subpersonalities, such as those, which have primarily of an intellectual or emotional nature. Examples might be respectively, "the scholar" or "the frightened child.") and give us the freedom to

identify with our true center, the “I.” This latter approach is the basis for the Identification Exercise presented in the “Practice” section of this WORKBOOK.

But recognizing an identification is only the first step. For we may recognize an identification but not the need to let go of it. For instance, we may be identified with a strong and evolved subpersonality which helps us to be very one-pointed, focused and effective in some particular purpose. To others and to ourselves, we may seem “centered,” actualized and integrated. There is little conflict in us; we seem calm and strong. And we *are* centered, but only around a *partial* unifying center. As we have seen, such a center is partial because only the parts of our personality which are consistent and compatible with the basic quality of that center can be integrated around it.

If, after freeing himself from the Striver, Mike had not proceeded to identify with his “I,” he might have been drawn instead into a permanent identification with Mellow Mike, and eventually would have become restricted again. He would have owned what he had previously disowned as the Striver, and developed whole new areas of his personality – and this would have been good and valuable for a while. But, in turn, as Mellow Mike *he would have disowned the Striver* and all that made it up. He would have disowned much of himself that was skilled, capable and effective. Instead, by accepting that he had *both* the Striver and Mellow Mike within him, that he had many different qualities which were not mutually exclusive but rather complementary, he prevented another crisis in the future. And not only was this preventive, it was also constructive and integrative. For he laid the foundation of a higher order subpersonality, one that will include both the Striver and Mellow Mike.

## DISIDENTIFICATION

What did Mike do to bring this about? First of all, he deliberately practiced disidentification. Disidentification is an experience which most people have had at one time or another; it is an empirical fact which you can probably recall or observe in your own experience. Have you ever been alone in a thunderstorm and felt a little frightened and found that fear “disappeared” and courage took its place when one of your children ran in to seek reassurance from you? Your *identification* shifted from a frightened-child part of you to a protective-parent part. Or you may have had the experience of talking to one person and feeling that you are – indeed, have always been – confident and sure of yourself. Then you talk to another person and you feel that you are – and have always been – inadequate and unsure. Again, your identification shifted between two parts of your personality.

So we all know something about disidentification, yet many of us have never thought of it as a deliberate practice, as something we can consciously *decide* to do. As we have seen earlier, many people – perhaps most – shift their identifications in this way, unconsciously; it just seems to happen to them. They go through the day shifting from one identification to the next, in response to outer conditions and inner processes, like a boat adrift on a stormy sea. They are not in control of the shifting, and often not even

aware of it. But they can learn to be; they can train themselves to choose, to *direct* their identification at will.

A person who has – and uses – this directing ability takes increasing responsibility for him or herself in actions, words, thoughts and feelings. Such a person will begin to truly live in accordance with his or her values. Choosing our identification in this way is *an act of will*, just as is where to turn our eyes, what sound to listen to, or what to think about. We can exercise this power of choice, or we can let our awareness – and then our “I” – wander toward what attracts it most. This choice is extremely simple in principle, although in practice we are limited by how developed and strong our will is, and by our skill in using it. (As we said earlier, each context of our consciousness – anything that we are aware of – exerts a pull, a ‘magnetic attraction.’ And we tend to identify with whatever has the greatest pull. To prevent this automatic identification from happening, we need to use our will to neutralize that attraction. Let us say that a certain subpersonality has the greatest pull. If our will is strong enough – stronger than the subpersonality – we can apply it directly, freeing ourself from the subpersonality’s influence, and remaining identified with the “I” or choosing any other identification.

But if our will is not strong enough to do this, we can still disidentify, by using the *technique of substitution*. (This technique is described in Assagioli, *The Act Of Will*, Viking Press, NY 1973, pp. 57, 67-68, and 75.) In other words, we choose another subpersonality that has a fairly strong pull, and is more in line with our needs than the first subpersonality. Then we use our will to identify with it. This is possible provided that the pull of this second subpersonality and the strength of our will *combined* are stronger than the pull of the first subpersonality. It is this combined strength that makes shifting identification between our main subpersonalities easier than identifying with the “I.”)

While the core of a subpersonality is an urge, desire, or drive, that has a specific quality, or color, the “I” – which is the core of the whole personality – is a spark of pure being, without qualities in the ordinary sense. But though it has no qualities, it has functions, and its two main functions are *consciousness* and *will*. Through *self-identification* – or identification as the “I” – we gain the greatest freedom to use that consciousness and that will – or more exactly, we re-own what are in fact *our* consciousness and *our* will. When we use our consciousness while remaining identified as the “I,” we take the attitude of *observer*. Similarly, when we use our will, we take the attitude of *director*.

The observer and director are not subpersonalities, and as such they are not colored, but *clear*. They are limited in how far they reach, but, in their pure form, they are not biased and do not distort. They are attitudes we take, or functions we use when we are identified as the “I.” Accordingly, they can be distinguished from subpersonalities such as the ‘Dictator,’ or the ‘Critic,’ which at first can be confused with them. As observer, we are disidentified from all elements of our personality, and are simply looking at them. From this position, we are able to see ourselves and our environment objectively, without distortions, or “colored glasses.” This is the stable place from which we can look at ourselves without self-criticism, with full acceptance

and clear perception. As director, drawing on our awareness as observer, we can use our will to express ourselves according to our values and our purpose, and to effectively harmonize and bring together the many elements of our personality into one coherent unit.

It was as observer that Mike became aware that the Striver was only a subpersonality and not his real self. And it was as director that, later, he was able to bring the Striver and Mellow Mike together as parts of a larger whole.

The following report of “Jane” is a good illustration of a person who disidentifies from personality elements and acts both as observer and director at the same time.

Jane is a middle-aged wife and mother who recently returned to college to work towards a Master’s Degree in Art History. She reports here the results of her use of the Identification exercise.

Let me tell you about an experience I had that will perhaps best illustrate how I use disidentification. I had been practicing the exercise for several months, even though I didn’t really understand it at first. When this incident occurred, I felt that I finally knew what it was all about.

It was a hot summer night and I am at the airport checking in for one of those cheap midnight flights to New York where I will make a connection with my long-awaited charter flight to Europe. I have arranged my entire summer so I can have three weeks to visit museums and cathedrals.

There is only one airline clerk on duty and a long line ahead of me. Time is running out. The clerk is tired and irritable. When I reach him, he tells me that the airline has no record of my reservation and that the flight is full. He already had to turn a few people away.

He says there are no other flights to New York until the morning. I check those out but they will arrive too late. All those months of anticipation, saving money, plans and charter club dues are about to be lost. The fate of my entire trip appears to rest with this irritable clerk.

Now I have many subpersonalities which have conflicting ideas about what I should do. The strongest subpersonality at this point is “Queen Jane,” who wants to imperiously demand her rights and tell the clerk off. Next strongest is “Baby Jane,” a helpless feminine girl-child who manipulates through fluttery weakness.

Recognizing the familiar pull of these subpersonalities, I try to disidentify from them as much as I can, and take the attitude of observer. From this angle I survey the situation and I can imagine the consequences of expressing either of those subpersonalities. As observer, I can also keep the most important aspect of the whole situation clearly in mind: how can I get to New York in time?

I know that Queen Jane would probably only further irritate the clerk, who then won’t be disposed to help me at all. In fact he might even pass over possible alternatives just to get rid of me. Baby Jane might work, but I am not sure. The clerk is so grouchy he might well be disgusted by a show of helplessness, and there may have been so much of this sort of thing in his career of dealing with people that he can see right through it.

And even if it worked, I would be making “bad vibes” and manipulating, which I don’t want to do. In the past, I would have automatically become Queen Jane first, and if that didn’t work I would have fallen into Baby Jane. This would all have been unconscious; I used to think it was “just me” and that I was simply responding to a situation. These subpersonalities used to control me so completely that I didn’t even realize I was being controlled.

So I decide to steer away from an emotional appeal, as the clerk seems to be so identified himself with his negative feelings. I decide instead to appeal to his best nature as objectively as possible.

I tell the clerk in a calm way that I am sad and upset. That the trip to Europe has been planned for many months, and if I miss my charter flight I will not be able to go. I made reservations a long time ago for this flight to New York, and perhaps in the space of months in between my reservation was misplaced. I understand *he* is not personally responsible, but the trip really means a great deal to me, and I would very much appreciate any alternative the clerk can suggest.

The clerk, listening to me, has spontaneously disidentified a bit from his grouchiness. There is still irritation in him, of course, but now he is paying attention to another part of himself, the reasonable and good-willed part I appealed to. Now he and I are working together toward a common goal. Eventually, he manages to reroute me through Chicago in time to make my connection.

This incident showed me something important. When I disidentified from my panicked subpersonalities, I was able to calm down and get some perspective. I saw that I had a choice between two things; venting my frustration and pique at the clerk, or honing in on getting myself to New York. Venting my feelings probably wouldn’t have worked and wouldn’t have been fair. I feel really good about the way I dealt with this.

Jane’s account illustrates how effective and practical disidentification can be. It also illustrates the valuable ability to disidentify from *feelings* and *moods* such as hurt, frustration or impatience, and purposefully identify as observer. This can refresh us, enabling us to gain a clear perspective. It can also enhance our creativity. “Shelley,” a research scientist in her mid-thirties, writes: I believe I have been disidentifying most of my life. It’s become automatic, like focusing my eyes. When I experience myself as confused, troubled or hurt, or when I have been analyzing a problem to death, I step back, and from this quiet place I can begin to see what’s going on. I find access to deeper and broader awareness, and there is a different kind of creativity or problem-solving ability which becomes available. Afterwards I feel both serene and energized.

Many people use the same approach as Jane and Shelley. They have learned to disidentify from troublesome or confusing subpersonalities, identify as observer, then, as director, carry out the most appropriate course of action. They can shift identification and express various subpersonalities at will. They know how to step out of painful, destructive or overpowering moods and feelings so that other, more positive states become available. They have attained a sense of perspective, and can act in the most effective and rewarding fashion. This is possible because identification as the “I” brings freedom. It gives us the freedom to choose at any moment to become fully identified with any part of ourselves – an emotion or habit pattern or subpersonality – to be

involved in it and experience it deeply. Or, on the other hand, it gives us the freedom to observe and to act while remaining fully disidentified from it – or to choose any intermediate degree of identification between these two extremes.

## THE “I” IS NOT REPRESSIVE

Sometimes people resist the idea of identifying as the “I” because they fear that with such “detachment” the richness of life will fade away and be lost. They fear that both strong and subtle emotions, such as passion and aesthetic appreciation, will give way to a dry and impersonal attitude; that spontaneity and merriment, harmless mischief and pleasure will be eliminated. But the loss of these would be signs of a repressive, critical subpersonality at work. The “I” within is never moralistic. Therefore, it does not eliminate. As observer it accepts, as director it regulates, transforms and harmonizes.

It is important that the “I” not be confused with any kind of repressive agent. As the “I,” we are able to accept ourselves, including all our faults and limitations, all our negative and immature subpersonalities. (Accepting our limitations does not mean accepting the status quo. On the contrary, recognizing and accepting what is in us is a necessary prerequisite to changing it. The function of acceptance as a stage of personality development is presented in “Subpersonalities,” SYNTHESIS 1, pp. 78-81. ed.) The following report by “Ron,” a graduate student in Eastern Philosophy, illustrates the difference between the activity of the “I” and that of a critical, repressive subpersonality.

For many years I thought I was centered when I was able to achieve a spiritual, flowing, idealistic state of consciousness. I thought I had identified with my personal self and even my Transpersonal Self. When I was into this state, I felt a gap between the usual, daily me and this higher me. And I was very critical of what I believed to be my shortcomings toward attaining enlightenment. For instance, I wasn’t meditating regularly, or keeping a pure diet. In fact – and you may laugh at this -- I really loved hot fudge sundaes. I had to be very hard on myself to prevent myself from “slipping” and eating one. When I did slip, I berated myself for it for weeks afterwards.

Doing the Identification exercise the first time amazed me. I moved fairly easily to what I had believed was “my center” and then found I could disidentify even from that. What I had thought was my center turned out to be a spiritually oriented *subpersonality*. I saw this subpersonality clearly for the first time in my life.

Now I use disidentification frequently, especially when I feel that spiritual subpersonality telling me that I *should* live up to its demands. I disidentify from it and for me that means realizing that I have a choice to follow its urgings or not. That I’m free to choose and won’t necessarily be struck by lightning or denied grace if I decide not to do what it says at any given moment. So, I’m eating those hot fudge sundaes now – not just eating, but *enjoying* – though I don’t seem to want them so much anymore. My “center” used to tell me I was too attached to sundaes. But now I know that what I was too attached to was my “center.” Anyway, the effect of all this on me has been a lessening of anxiety and the beginning of a more clear-headed and, I think, more genuinely spiritual life.

Often, as in Ron's case, once we take the attitude of observer, we recognize that many tendencies we had considered to be undesirable are in fact harmless, or even valuable, and can be freely expressed. But what about impulses that are truly harmful, dangerous, or otherwise inappropriate? As observer, we do accept them, as we would accept any other element in us. This does not mean, of course, that we will freely act them out.

We know that often strong urges and emotions which are deemed potentially hurtful and destructive (e.g. rage) are suppressed and repressed. As we have seen, repressed urges do not disappear, but remain active in the unconscious, becoming a source of difficulty. Sooner or later they emerge in semi-disguised form, expressing themselves indirectly or becoming somaticized, and in general causing much conflict, discomfort and pain. There is a widespread belief that the only other alternative to repression is to "act out" these disowned elements. It is true that acting out may at first give substantial relief, particularly if the repression was a deep and severe one. But this is seldom enough to clear the problem, and may be unnecessary. When we act out a feeling, or urge, we usually identify with it. We are then dominated and controlled by this identification, and feed it new energy as we release the old. So it becomes very difficult, if not impossible to work the problem through completely. Rather than either blocking the energy of an inappropriate feeling, or acting it out, we can, from the vantage point of the "I," regulate and guide that energy toward a more appropriate purpose, thus utilizing it and, at the same time, transmuting and gradually refining it. The *transmutation of energies* is an important technique with a broad range of applications – another powerful tool that becomes available to us through disidentification and self-identification. (The principles and practice of transmutation of psychological energies are described extensively by Assagioli, *Psychosynthesis, A Manual of Principles and Techniques*, Viking Press, NY 1971, pp. 267-277.)

## THE "I" AS THE UNIFYING CENTER OF THE PERSONALITY

As we learn more and more to identify as the "I" and to act as observer and director, we become increasingly able to coordinate and integrate our subpersonalities. We can use the clarity of our awareness and the power of our will to effectively harmonize the many elements within our personality into one coherent whole: the *integrated personality*. So the "I" has a synthetic effect upon the personality, and becomes its unifying center: the focal point around which a new, all-inclusive organization is created. This process is not merely the formation of a "bigger and better" subpersonality, but is a major step forward in personal unfoldment. It is a *higher order* process because the "I" is of a different nature than the *partial* unifying centers which are the core of each of our subpersonalities.

Let us look at this in terms of energies. We have seen that in a subpersonality the urge or drive that constitutes its core has a certain quality or "color." Therefore it will attract, and act as a unifying center for, all that is compatible with that quality, but it will repel anything that is not. The Strive for example attracts diligence, power, efficiency, and repels sensitivity, compassion and so forth. The "I," on the other hand, has not quality as such: its "color" can be compared to white light, which contains all colors and

is the *synthesis* of all colors. Therefore it can act as a unifying center for the *whole* personality. There are no elements of the personality which are of a quality incompatible with the “I.” For the “I” is not *of* the personality, rather it *transcends* the personality, just as it transcends the limitations of specific qualities. Thus all personality elements, all functions and all qualities can be brought into integration around it. Once we are able to identify as the “I,” we can express ourselves through a personality composed of many interrelated elements, and any inner sense of limitation and fragmentation is increasingly replaced by variety, richness and wholeness.

It would be unrealistic to expect, however, that identifying with the “I” will produce “instant integration” or our personality, or even “instant harmony” between any conflicting parts of ourselves. It is true that no element of the personality is incompatible with the “I.” Yet a personality element may well be incompatible with another such element, or with that portion of the personality already integrated around the “I.” We have seen this incompatibility between two personality elements in the case of Mike, where the Rejected Child was, at first, incompatible with the Striver. From the vantage point of the “I,” however, we can understand the causes of such incompatibility within ourselves, see what changes are needed to resolve it, and then guide our inner processes towards a fruitful resolution. But the actual integration of that particular element will be possible only *after* the necessary changes have taken place.

In many cases, this may take relatively little time and energy. But occasionally considerable work or time may be required before a particular element can find its place within the integrating personality. We may need to transform that element so that it will fit the existing personality pattern (This is the essence of *Coordination*. See “Subpersonalities,” Synthesis 1, pp. 82-84.), or we may need to *wait* until the personality itself is transformed so as to be “ripe” for it – until other needed elements have been added and are themselves sufficiently integrated. So we see that personality integration, like any other form of synthesis, proceeds according to a specific pattern and a specific sequence. Therefore the needed elements must come together according to a specific order, or “plan,” which is unique for each individual. (**Note to professionals:** This explains why, at times, unusually high resistance on the part of a client is best dealt with by the guide’s “backing off,” rather than by trying to have the client achieve a breakthrough. Resistance of this kind may be an indication that things are not yet “ripe” in that particular area, and that the best course of action is for the guide to allow life experience and the client’s higher nature to continue fostering the process at their own pace, trusting that the opportunity for resolution will come at the appropriate time. In the meantime, the guide can be just as effective assisting the client’s growth in other, more open areas.

In general the basic dichotomy between “directive” and “non-directive forms of guidance can thus be bridged through an approach that is directive, but which follows the direction and patterns of growth and integration produced by the influence of the client’s own higher nature. As we understand more and more that this higher nature is the fundamental agent – the prime mover – of growth and integration, it will become increasingly clear that the most effective guidance is done by paying attention to the natural process of growth and to the higher emerging trends of the individual, by

fostering this process and cooperating with those trends, rather than by attempting to impose an external model of what the individual should become.

## THE EXPERIENCE OF IDENTITY

When we identify as the “I” and take the attitude of observer, we can gain much useful awareness about our personality. Taking the attitude of director enables us to bring our personality into harmony. But, even more important, the “I” is self-conscious: it can “look at itself.” And it is then that we can realize our true personal identity – our individuality.

This experience of identity is not cognitive in the sense of grasping a concept or understanding a principle. It is an immediate, direct, *supra-rational* knowing.

So the nature of the “I” cannot be fully described, but must be experienced. Sri Aurobindo writes: “There is something beyond to be known, and it is when the knower of the field (the “I” in its observer function) turns from the field itself to learn of himself within it... that real knowledge begins, the true knowledge of the field no less than of the knower.”

**Guide:** Close your eyes....relax....take some deep breaths....(pause)....What are you aware of right now, Natalie?

**Natalie:** I’m aware of my whole body, especially my back, and my breathing. I’m aware of my feet and how they feel...my legs...all the parts touching the chair. I’m aware of my face and some tension around my eyes. I’m aware of my hands.

**Guide:** Okay. Focus on all these awarenesses...(pause)...now tell me, who is aware?

**Natalie:** The middle of my head.

**Guide:** Tell me more about that.

**Natalie:** It’s a big space. I think it’s empty. (laughs)

**Guide:** Can you tell me more about that space?

**Natalie:** Yes....it’s white. The main thing about it is that it seems empty.

**Guide:** Okay. Now, who is aware of that space?

**Natalie:** The part that notices everything.

**Guide:** What is that part like?

**Natalie:** I don’t know. It’s not like anything else.

**Guide:** How do you know it’s there?

**Natalie:** When I’m aware, there’s always something that is the same. And it’s this something that is perceiving – knowing.

**Guide:** And who is that?

**Natalie:** (pause) Wow, (laughs), I can’t say.

**Guide:** You are aware of it, though...Can you get in touch with it now?

**Natalie:** Yes....I like just accepting that it’s there. It’s hard for me to understand – just intellectually, it’s hard for me to believe.

**Guide:** What the mind says is important, but now it gets in the way of your awareness. Let’s come back to it later. Now just go back to your awareness of the one that notices everything.

**Natalie:** (pause) Yes...

**Guide:** Who is aware?

**Natalie:** I ...I can't describe it...it's just awareness....It's....It's me! I am this! *I* am aware.

**Guide:** Stay with this awareness....Have you experienced yourself this way before?

**Natalie:** Yes, it's familiar. But I didn't realize it was me ...and that I could make it happen.

**Guide:** You can always come back here.

**Natalie:** Yes, and I will. I just need to remember to come back here...(pause)...That was beautiful.

The process of “turning inward” described by Aurobindo can be clearly recognized in Natalie’s experience. It is realized in two phases. The first is to take the attitude of observer. A simple way to begin is to observe objectively what we are aware of in the moment. (Observing what we are aware of is different than “thinking about it” – although it can include the observation of one’s thoughts.) It is useful to try this with eyes open and with eyes closed, to see which way is easier. We then ask ourselves, “Who is observing?” and, avoiding any intellectual construct but rather focusing on direct experience, we can become aware of *being* the observer. Then we can distinguish the *observer* from the *contents of consciousness*, the “Knower” from the “Field of Knowledge.”

At times it may take several steps to do this. In Natalie’s experience, the first “observer” was the “space in the middle of her head.” But it was the observer of that “observer” who turned out to actually be the “I.” We can conceive of this sequence of observers as stepping stones, by means of which we can travel “upstream,” along the river of our awareness, toward its source. When we eventually reach the source – the “I” – the second phase of this process occurs. This is the *reorientation of our awareness toward its source; it is consciousness turning back on itself and becoming self-aware*. It is when consciousness is reflected back on its source – thus becoming true *self-consciousness* – that we can finally realize our individual identity – “It’s me...I am this...*I* am aware” – and become one with it.

This fundamental reorientation of our awareness becomes perfectly natural, and also extremely simple – once we realize how to do it and practice it. Some people have found out gradually, on their own, how to achieve it. Others are able to do it, but don’t practice it because they do not know that it *can* be practiced, or do not recognize the value of doing so. Others still – probably a majority – can learn after a certain amount of practice with appropriate exercises. In actuality, it often turns out that learning how to identify with the “I” is more elusive than difficult. In other words, for many people it is a matter of understanding *what* to do rather than *developing the capacity* to do it. It is true that focusing our awareness toward the “I” requires an act of concentration – an effort of will – and if one’s will is not sufficiently strong, it needs to be developed. (A broad range of techniques and exercises for developing the will can be found throughout Assagioli, *The Act Of Will*, Viking Press, NY, 1973.) But for many people the will is already capable of the task, and all that is lacking is knowing how to use it. This is because from birth we are impelled to turn our awareness away from our center toward

the *contents* of consciousness – inner as well as outer – and we have become used to this, accepting it as the only possible mode of awareness. (With rare exceptions, this is in fact the only mode of awareness we are capable of up to the time of adolescence. After age 15 or 16, self-identification becomes increasingly possible, and can be practiced advantageously. Until then, children and adolescents can learn to shift their identification at will among their subpersonalities and other personality elements.) To experience the “I,” however, we must reverse direction. So it is not surprising that this re-orientation may seem strange at first, even unnatural, and that we may not know quite how to proceed. Using the metaphor of the river of our awareness, when we first begin traveling towards its source, we do so while looking backwards. We face downstream while we paddle ourselves upstream. We perceive our movement as *away from* where we are, from the familiar, and don’t yet see where we are really going.

This usually happens because we don’t know what the source is—our “I” is like, how to recognize it, in what direction it lies, or even, sometimes, that it exists at all. And understandably so. Because the “I” being transcendent to the personality, cannot be fully or accurately described. So it can only be truly known when it is experienced. That is why reading about it, for example, is no substitute for actively and steadfastly seeking to reach it by means of such methods as we have indicated here.

### THE “I” AND BEYOND

If, as we travel towards the “I,” we try to imagine it, we are likely to be led astray. Yet enough can be said about the “I” and how people have experienced it to help us recognize what it is *not*. With this knowledge, we are able to step back from anything that is not the “I,” and thus proceed towards it, so to speak, “backwards.” Eventually, by this process, when we reach the “I” we will be able to recognize it for what it truly is.

One of the first things people say about their experience of the “I” is that it is permanent and unchanging. Natalie said, “When I’m aware, there’s always something that is the same.” This is very much in contrast to the constant state of change and flux of our personality elements, and of the contents of our consciousness. While the life of the personality – the myriad thoughts, emotions and sensations – go on, the “I” is changeless: it is experienced as “a stable point,” “always there,” “immutable,” “permanent.” (Although the experience of the “I” can change in *intensity* – from strong to very faint – at different times, this is a change of our awareness, not of the “I” itself.) Some people have been able to identify with the “I” simply when asked to “be aware of whatever within you is always the same.” In the words of Clark Moustakas: “The individual self, or being, is an ultimate core of reality which remains unchanged throughout changes of personality qualities or states.” (C. Moustakas, *The Self*, Harper & Row, NY, 1956, p. 272.) The “I” is like the hinge of a door: the door remains open and closes or swings back and forth, while the hinge remains stable – and, at the same time it sustains the door itself.

There is another aspect to the experience of the “I” that many people find remarkable. The “I” is self-conscious, aware of itself, and in this awareness *there is no*

*duality*. In normal consciousness, one is aware of something which is other than oneself. In other words, there are three elements to normal awareness: the one who is conscious; the object or content of consciousness; and consciousness itself, which is the bridge that links the two. But in the experiment of pure self-awareness there is no object, or content. There is no observer-observed duality. There is only *undifferentiated consciousness* – consciousness which is not restricted to the awareness of any specific feeling, sensation, process, pattern or quality of any kind. So people who have fully identified with the “I” often try to describe its nature through paradox: “empty but full,” “nothing but everything,” “one moment but eternity.”

Perhaps one of the most beautiful portrayals of both the permanent nature and the transcendence of duality that are characteristic of the “I” is given by T.S. Eliot in his poem, “Burnt Norton.”

At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor fleshless;  
Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the dance is,  
But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement from nor towards,  
Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still point,  
There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
(T. S. Eliot: *Four Quartets*, Faber & Faber, London, 1972, pp.15-16.)

The initial experience of the “I” may come as an intense flash lasting only an instant, or it may be a slow change, so gradual that we do not recognize it for quite a while. Occasionally, it comes as a spontaneous realization, as was the case with Lisa. This occurs most often when a deep and long-standing identification is suddenly released.

However, one does not need to wait for a spontaneous experience. Many people have discovered the “I” as the result of deliberate introspection, or by practicing appropriate techniques of self-development. The Identification exercise in this WORKBOOK is a modern presentation of a technique which has proven fruitful through the ages.

The discovery of the “I,” and even a very brief moment of identification with it, can have a profound effect. In the realization that *we are* that “permanent core of reality within” lies our true humanness, our sense of identity, of individuality, our power to become masters of our lives. While we are identified with the “I,” we are no longer immersed in a current of emotions, a stream of thoughts, or the loud clamoring of subpersonalities. The sense of inner conflict and fragmentation ceases. Feelings and moods which many had to learn to live with, such as guilt, fear or semi-conscious anxiety are dissipated the way frightening figures in a wax museum lose their power when the lights are turned on – for we realize that we have been seeing things out of proportion.

So the “I” becomes a source of perspective, of peace, of absolute security – the unshakable ground that underlies our existence. A writer tells the story of his experience in the Los Angeles earthquake some years ago which illustrates this quite literally. In his

life he had difficulty trusting people and his environment. But somehow, he had experienced a certain reliable grounding in the earth itself. He always “trusted” the earth to be there underfoot – reliably solid and real and safe. But he was on the sixth floor of a large hotel in downtown Los Angeles the morning of the earthquake, and was shaken to the core by the realization that not even the earth was “real and safe.” What could he trust? Was there nothing, then, to rely on? That experience led to an extended crisis. And then a year and a half later, while meditating, he experienced “that there is something inside me which can’t be touched, maimed or destroyed. There is no exact way that I can give voice to this experience because it was at once perfectly soundless and yet it implied all sound. It can be described – in an imperfect way – as an experience of endless restfulness combined with vast dynamic power. Thus a profound dynamism, coexistent with perfect calm. One seeks for poetry, for a language beyond the precision of language. It was the experience of my absolute being and, at the same time, of the absolute being of everything. Like a funnel which we enter from below: inside is outside; thou art that. It was this realization of my own absolute being that made me realize the absolute being of everything else. And it gave me a kind of serenity, and a confidence that things will work out. And, at a deeper level, a confidence of eternal being.”

In this experience, he reached the “I” and went *beyond* it. For identifying with the “I” is not the final goal: like every culmination, it is a new beginning. It is like awakening from a dream and opening our eyes for the first time. With our eyes open, we see the world in a new and clearer light, and can begin to live our lives accordingly.

Eventually this fuller life, lived as the “I,” leads to a greater culmination: the experience of the *Transpersonal Self*. Robert Assagioli refers to “...the direct awareness of the Self, which culminates in the unification of the consciousness of the personal self, or ‘I,’ with that of the Transpersonal Self. (R. Assagioli: *The Act of Will*, Viking Press, NY, 1973, pp. 121-122.) The Transpersonal Self can be reached from the “I” because the “I” is in fact a projection, a spark, an intrinsic part of the Transpersonal Self. It is as much of the Transpersonal Self as we are able to experience at the time.

Reaching toward the “I” gives us a true sense of our identity, uniqueness, and *individuality*. As we reach toward the Transpersonal Self we experience *universality* – yet at the same time, paradoxically, the sense of “I-ness” – of identity and individuality – is enhanced. Eventually, individuality and universality blend, into the true experience of *Being*.

While maintaining such a state at will is a very, very distant goal for the great majority of people, a first glimpse of the Transpersonal Self – as can be seen in “Burnt Norton” and, more clearly in the writer’s earthquake experience – may occur at times spontaneously, or while following certain types of meditation, and especially as the result of practicing self-identification.

The experience of the self – whether personal or Transpersonal – has been often compared to returning to our true home. It is as Assagioli has noted, a joyous experience:

“...the realization of the self, or more exactly of **being a self**... gives a sense of freedom, of power, of mastery which is profoundly joyous.” (*ibid*, p. 201.)

Such a realization may be lasting or it may remain for only an instant, but the knowledge of it always stays with us at some level. In the course of daily living, we may be drawn away from it and may even “forget” that it exists; yet if we were to sit down to recollect the experience and even to relive it, we would find it present, fresh, real. But how often do we remember to do so?

For this reason, the **practice** of self-identification is of the greatest value. Through practice, we learn to disidentify from the field of our awareness and identify more and more with our true nature. It is a gradual, sometimes slow process. Yet it is through this gradually increasing self-identification that we can fully actualize ourselves in everyday living.

And here is the paradox again. For it is only by realizing our unique individuality that we can begin to take our places as fully functioning, effective **parts of the greater whole** – be that our family, a group, a community, a nation, or the larger life and destiny of the planet itself.

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