

Mindfulness Meets Psychoanalysis: Inquiring Deeply About "SELF"

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The experience of being a "self", being "someone", is a given in ordinary experience. We all have some sense of "who we are", some sense of coherent identity in the core of our being. This **psychological self** can be defined most simply as this subjective sense of *being me*. The psychological self is the center of subjectivity, inclusive of personality, thoughts, beliefs, motivations and emotions.

Although each moment of subjective experience is a one-of-a-kind constellation of sensations, thoughts, and feelings, through the repetition of many such moments the psychological self comes to be known in a way that is unique for each person. Somehow, the human brain/mind is able to construct a sense of continuity out of this ongoing stream of kaleidoscopically changing subjective experience. The flow and continuity of experience may be considered to be the subjective core of the **true self**. The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott referred to it as the experience of **going-on-being**.

Because the psychological self is equated with subjective experience, it can be conveniently abbreviated as **self-experience**. However, this is a somewhat misleading designation because, as mindful self-reflection readily reveals, self is not a specific experience at all. The self cannot be seen, heard, tasted, smelled, or touched. It cannot be located anywhere. An evocative simile used in dharma teaching¹ is that self is like a rainbow; something that emerges as a perception out of constituent elements of experience.

in order to have a clear understanding of self it is useful to differentiate between self-experience (subjectivity) on the one hand, and the functional organization of

¹ Dharma = Buddhadharma; the teachings of Buddhism.

self-experience, on the other. Important self functions include the capacity to regulate affect, consolidate cohesive self-experience, organize a sense of personal agency around intentional plans and actions, and form a sense of identity, among others. Self-experience can be understood from a variety of psychoanalytic perspectives, but in any event, it is clear that there is no one singular psychological self, but rather a multiplicity of selves, functionally organized.

One last idea that is useful in clarifying what we mean by “self” is ***self representation***. As we interact with others, we form concepts of ourselves— How we think about ourselves, who we take ourselves to be— and we identify with these. Our self-representations shape the way that our experience is constructed. Although we can never entirely disentangle experience from its underpinnings in self-representation, we can bring mindful awareness to how we think of ourselves and become more aware of how these representations shape our experience. This is one of the most valuable applications of mindfulness in psychotherapy.

Many of the confusions surrounding “self” come about as the result of the way language is constructed. To speak of *the* self (noun) confers the idea that self is a *thing* and reifies the experience of selfhood. In contrast, in action language *self* becomes a verb, “*selfing*”, which conveys the more accurate idea that self is an activity of mind. *Selfing* invites us to consider both the process nature of mind and the way that our concepts of ourselves are grounded in our implicit or explicit autobiographical narratives. As the psychoanalyst Roy Shafer put it, self is a story; it is the story that there is a self to tell a story to.

It is illuminating to personally investigate the narrative construction of self by inquiring into your own experience. Take a day or a week to systematically notice the sentences you speak (or that are spoken to you) in which the pronoun “I” is used. Consider, for example, what you might be inclined to say to someone who says “tell me about yourself”. You may refer to yourself as a particular individual, in distinction from others. You may refer to your attributes: psychological traits that you have, qualities you identify with, or social roles you play.

Conceptual clarity about “the self” is essential to our understanding of the process of psychotherapeutic change. In “inquiring deeply” – the name I use for my signature clinical approach – emphasis is on the use of mindfulness practice to amplify and unpack psychological experience. Inquiring Deeply invites deliberate investigation of problematic aspects of experience, including representations of Self and Other. As needed, self-reflective awareness practices are created and “prescribed” for use as adjunctive therapeutic strategies to clarify those aspects of experience that need to be seen more clearly.

This clinical approach is described in my book, “[Mindfulness-Informed Relational Psychotherapy and Psychoanalysis: Inquiring Deeply](#)” (Routledge Press, 2017) <https://www.amazon.com/-/e/B01N24V17T>.

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