

## EVERYDAY MIND AND LOVE 2018

Session 10 August 9

Lately I've been emphasising connectedness and co-regulation and how important it is for our mind to be consciously combining with other people, but what about the equally important task of **being ourselves**? Co-regulation is good, but our mind won't be healthy if we become so dependent on others that we have neglected ourselves. What is this thing called one's self? It's a huge subject in psychology and mind science and one very noticeable thing about it is that it's a subject that has close links to our experience of **suffering**. There are three Chapters in my book called *Too Much Self, Suffering and Courage to Change* that are relevant to this and I have some completely new material to introduce today as well.

How well do you know yourself? Are you the person that other people think you are? That would be unlikely because we are distinct individuals – autonomous unities – so we perceive things differently. And what about the supposedly wise saying from the oracle at Delphi in ancient Greece: *Know Thyself*? As I researched that subject I learned that it has always been mostly about knowing your place – knowing yourself in relation to gods of some sort or the universe as a whole – in my terminology, respecting the unknown.

I talk about three kinds of relationships – with other people, with oneself, and with the unknown. I put them in that order because I have found that the way you get on with others owes a lot to the way you get on with yourself, which in turn owes a lot to the way you relate to the unknown. With others it will be tricky at times and with the unknown it's another dimension of faith and belief, but you might think that the relationship with oneself would be the easiest part. In biological terms I am **autonomous** (self-governing) and **autopoietic** – that is, I recreate myself in each moment of my living according to the way I am connected at that time. The most important consequence of this is that the self that I am is never quite the same twice – it's always changing. We know that we evolve as we go through life, yet we also seem to remain the same person. That makes it challenging to know how to relate to oneself.

For simplicity I'm saying that our mind consists of Affect and Story, the **affect** or emotional part being essentially subconscious and the **story** being the thinking part that puts into language who we think we are, what we think happened to bring us this point, and where we think we might be heading from now on. Each of us creates our own **meaning** from both affect and story. The simplest version of that meaning is in our story and it is a very important contributor to our wellbeing. I have explained before that our story does not actually have to be completely accurate – in fact it couldn't be, we don't remember well enough and we fill in the uncertain bits from our imagination anyway. It does have to be **coherent**, to make sense, to have a certain semantic logic to it, that makes us feel comfortable. When we are feeling uncomfortable, anxious, or **suffering** in all the ways that humans suffer – shame, guilt, resentment, jealousy, envy, hatred, contempt (all those learned emotions) – there are things about our story that aren't quite fitting together. You and your 'self' aren't getting on as well as you hoped.

## Problems with self

In my book I described the difficult period earlier in my life when I did not feel comfortable. I did not seem to be in the right place, doing the right things, or earning respect, which boils down to not feeling that I was loved. I was lonely, alienated, miserable and unhappy. I later adopted a phrase to describe this improper use of my mind; it is **the bondage of self**. Eckhart Tolle in *The Power of Now* told how he wanted to kill himself at the age of 29 because he ‘could not live with himself.’ This brought him to discover the folly of what he called: ‘seeking yourself in your mind.’ The sense of ‘self’ that is created by the **ego** and told in our **story** contains so many half-truths or even outright lies that it leads us seriously astray. I needed to see through the unwitting **self-deception** that had led me to that dark place. This is a very gradual process that I believe is achieved by unlocking the bondage of self through relationships with other people and with the unknown that lead to an awareness of love.

Mark Leary wrote an erudite book some years ago called *The Curse of the Self - Self-Awareness, Egotism and the Quality of Human Life* in which he described many dangers of egotistical self-reflection. He says that a valedictory address for young students going out into the world should include the idea that you will encounter many problems in life – and you will be the cause of most of them. He thinks that the fundamental ability of our mind to construct ourselves in our story has a long evolutionary history from times when the world was much simpler. Now we have more complex long-term goals, delayed outcomes, suspended judgments and bewildering uncertainty, so our construct of self is generally too glib and simplistic – we settle for half-truths, jump to conclusions and make hasty decisions. Our behaviour is directed by subconscious biases and hidden influences that I described earlier so we find ourselves doing things we hadn’t quite intended and then everything we pay attention to and do becomes a part of who we think we are as we build our identity.

I should say ‘identities’ because we usually have more than one. We all play **roles** that become established as part of our mind. Common ones, like ‘manager’ or ‘assistant’ or ‘specialist,’ are created for our workplace and they will not function as well with our family and friends because the role of ‘parent’ or ‘confidante’ is quite different. Other roles arise from our attempts at ‘belonging’ by joining a club or a group, which may not necessarily suit us, but we do what everybody else does anyway. That may not be entirely a bad thing. The problem is that we often hide behind an identity that is partly false, which the poet John O’Donohue calls ‘the cage of frightened identity’ and ‘the refuge of false belonging.’ The most debilitating roles are ‘the victim’ or ‘the villain’ or even ‘the happy person’ if that is not how you feel.

Eckhart Tolle wrote about this kind of problem in a later book called *A New Earth*. When he says you cannot find yourself in your mind he raises a very important issue about our relationship with the unknown. He says ‘the voice in your head is not who you are.’ When you realise that fact you open the door to knowing yourself more deeply. To get free from the ‘bondage of self’ you don’t continue to think about the problem because the thoughts that comprise your story are too superficial to be very helpful. A friend of mine used to say: ‘when you know yourself and accept yourself you can **forget** yourself.’ You need a broader context for real meaning to come into your feelings. For me this included the feeling that I am loved. When that happens the **blind spots** that are causing confusion in your mind about who you are become absorbed into one big **unknown** that is the basis for **humility**.

There is often humour in noticing the blind spots of others. A few years ago, when we were subscribers to the Sydney Theatre Company, we saw the play *Pygmalion* by George Bernard Shaw. Henry Higgins sees himself as a gracious, fair-minded and cultured gentleman whereas he is actually full of selfish pride, misogynous, controlling, ill-mannered and crude. When his housekeeper, Mrs Pierce, chastises him for swearing and using his nightgown as a napkin, he says to Pickering: how could she? She said he ‘uttered swear words to his boots, the butter, and to the brown bread’ and he replies: ‘Oh that. Mere alliteration, Mrs Pierce, natural to a poet.’

### **Finding a stronger self**

Although you can’t define yourself adequately with your mind, there are many ways you can use your mind to strengthen the self that you already are in a natural and positive way. These stem especially from the primary emotions of **care**, **play** and **seeking** and they also involve an acceptance of the experience of **fear**, **anger** and **grief**. Martha Nussbaum explains in her great treatise called *Upheavals of Thought – The Intelligence of Emotions* that emotions in their natural state teach us about our the reality of our lives. They reveal our limitations, our neediness and our natural strength. As we learn and develop **defensive** emotions such as anxiety, guilt and resentment towards others, life becomes more complicated, which leads to suffering. She says our most fundamental problem is that our neediness becomes shrouded in **shame** which creates our **false pride**. I would add that this shame seriously hinders our ability to know that we are loved, just as we are. She thinks that, compared to other animals, we have difficulty accepting that we are needy so we create an artificial pride as an antidote to shame. I think of shame as the root cause of our suffering and essentially a spiritual problem because it’s such a deep and mysterious part of our mind.

Accepting ourselves and the unknown without judgment turns our mind away from pride towards **humility**. Without humility we find ourselves **seeking** in the wrong places, as I was doing in my ‘bondage of self.’ At the deepest biological level we are seeking to be **comfortable** with others, with ourselves and with the unknown. That is the natural biological state of our mind. I believe it derives from love. It does not require us to **be** anything other than exactly who we are, but it does require us to **do** things that we are suited to doing and that will be good for our state of belonging as well.

This relates to the **courage** we need in order to change any of our habits. We don’t change anything by thinking about it, even though that will be useful at some point. We only make changes as we take deliberate **actions** that are different from what we were doing before. There is a saying that it’s very hard to think your way into a better way of living, but you can always live your way into a better way of thinking. Because our mind is more than just superficial thoughts it will naturally change as we do things differently with our bodies; it doesn’t really change as we think about them.

Julia Short, who wrote *An Intelligent Life*, recommends two ways of being and doing that I think are excellent words of advice. They are **kindness** (for our connectedness) and **dignity** (for our autonomy). Dignity is a lovely word to describe being self-confident in a humble rather than a prideful way. **Self-esteem** does not come from judging yourself in a positive way – it is a way of relating to yourself kindly, a comfortable feeling that comes from doing things that you believe are worthy and worthwhile. **Self-confidence** is entirely different from

pride. It does not come from celebrating past achievements, but from being in the present moment with a feeling of faith and trust.

**Pride** heads the list of a well-known catalogue of human imperfections known as the Seven Deadly Sins. A lovely book by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham called *The Spirituality of Imperfection* details the origins of these ‘bad habits of the mind.’ They say an Egyptian monk originally identified them as the most common ‘enemies of the soul.’ Gluttony was his own downfall, apparently, to which he added anger, avarice, envy, fornication (now called lust) and acedia (now called sloth). These all stem from the selfish nature of pride. The opposite of pride is **humility**, which requires an enlarged (more kind and dignified) relationship with one’s self and an awareness of the unknown.

Our **strength as individuals** lies in knowing the difference between that false kind of pride based in selfishness from which much of our suffering derives and the unmistakable inner **confidence** that comes from experiencing **love** at all levels of our being and all levels of our relationships.

### **Alfred Adler’s Individual Psychology**

In the history of psychology there are many different schools of thought, but three of the most influential and fundamentally different approaches originated in Vienna and are attributed to Freud, Adler and Frankl. Freud (1856 -1939) was indisputably the father of psychoanalysis. In the early 1900’s, two younger psychologists, Alfred Adler (1870 -1937) and Carl Jung (1875 -1961), also a giant in the field, were with Freud in Vienna, but they both went completely separate ways after a few years and distanced themselves from Freud’s ideas. The much younger Viktor Frankl (1905 -1997) came later and founded a more existential psychology called **logotherapy** – from *logos*, the Greek word for meaning. His way of thinking is the branch of psychology that most obviously underpins my Course because I am emphasising the way we make **meaning** as the most crucial element of our mind’s work. He used the phrase ‘will to meaning’ to describe what he said is the primary task of our mind and to distinguish it from Freud’s ‘will to pleasure’ and Adler’s ‘will to power.’ I will return to Frankl’s ideas in more detail later in the Course.

Today I want to add some information about Alfred Adler’s psychology, which is known as **Individual Psychology** and is about **being yourself** and taking responsibility. I always thought that the ‘will to power’ sounded less useful than the ‘will to meaning’ but my eyes were opened as I learned more about it. I am drawing from a book called *The Courage to be Disliked* by Japanese philosophers, Ichiro Kishimi and Fumitake Koga. Its format of question and answer between a youth and a philosopher is as old as philosophy itself, but I found it refreshingly different to read from many psychology books of today. The youth is unhappy and wants to know how to change, which the philosopher says is quite possible, but will require **courage**.

To begin, the youth wants to know why the philosopher says that the world and one’s life are simple – much simpler than we often make them out to be. The answer is that we try to explain things **aetiologically** (as cause and effect – determinism), whereas **teleological** reasoning (the idea of present **goals**) will serve us better. He says that too often we blame what has happened in the past instead of taking responsibility for our future goals. I would

add that the left-brain bias that affects many of us today is what gives complex determinism priority over a simple faith in creativity and the unlimited possibilities of love.

The philosopher goes on to say this: We are not determined by our experiences, but by the **meaning** we give to them – which becomes self-determining in that it limits and directs our goals. If we think we are driven by past causes we are not free to move towards the goals that we ourselves have set. The important thing is not what one was born with or what has happened, but **what use one can make of that** as we move forward.

Adler's speciality was the 'inferiority complex' in which he says we actually choose not to change because we lack the necessary courage in the present moment. We dislike ourselves, noticing mainly our shortcomings, and it seems too risky to change. We need a lot of **encouragement** if we are to do this. Feelings of inferiority are **subjective assumptions** that are born out of what he says is our most basic will – the '**pursuit of superiority**' or some kind of **greatness** in ourselves. This means hoping and trying to improve, pursuing a more ideal state and making an effort to move towards it. Feelings of inferiority are really only motivators to this end. This makes me think of our **seeking** instinct.

However, what he is calling superiority is not over other people. He emphasises that it is not a competition, nor is it based on a comparison with other people. He advocates thinking of other people as **comrades** whom you can help and who can help you to achieve your goals. Thinking that other people are the problem is what he calls a serious **life-lie**. To achieve self-reliance as an individual along with cooperation within society you need to believe in two things – one is your own ability and, secondly, that people are your comrades. This is where **self-confidence** comes from. The need for recognition from others for yourself only acts against this. We do not live to satisfy the expectations of others, but we do live to become better ourselves and to help make a better place for all.

A suggestion he makes that I think is very helpful is that we learn to separate the different **life tasks** because we often take on other people's tasks thus hindering their efforts and our own. Discarding other people's tasks is an important step forward, but you also need the courage to face and take up your own tasks wholeheartedly. This includes the courage to be disliked. **Taking responsibility for what you alone can do** is crucial.

At the same time you need to know where **the centre of the world** is – that it's not you! This individual psychology only works because of **community** and vice versa. Individual means indivisible – the smallest possible unit, which is a single mind-body combination within a larger whole. Inter-personal relationships actually benefit from a sense of individual responsibility rather than social entanglement – a little distance between people makes all of them stronger.

The goal of interpersonal relations is a personal feeling of community, which includes the sense of others as comrades, but is also more than that. **Community feeling** is a sense of belonging to a universe of everything other than yourself and what you know. We often favour **self-centred interest** over **social interest** because (1) we fail to separate tasks, (2) we desire recognition and (3) we worry about what others think of us. But your self will always be only a tiny part of a much larger world – never its centre. **Social interest** – an active commitment to serve the community as a larger whole – is what gives us a true **sense of belonging**.

When we rebuke or praise others it is a **vertical** relationship and we are not treating them as comrades. We thrive on **horizontal** relationships of equals that practise encouragement. Words of **gratitude** are the best encouragement. The feeling of being of use to someone or something is our true **value and self-worth**. This occurs only in the **present moment**. When you make **proper use of yourself** you are not being controlled by other people's behaviour. Self-consciousness is the main obstacle to happiness.

Believing that I have the ability and other people are my comrades – that is the best way to approach our life-tasks with **self-confidence**. The essence of the main task of work is **service to the community**. Happiness comes from **the feeling of contributing** – even if it may not be written up in lights for anyone else to see. Even though he uses the word, goal, he also says that trying to reach a destination is **kinetic** whereas living as if you're dancing is **energeial** – the process is the outcome. This means that the greatest life-lie is not to live here-and-now. If you shine such a bright spotlight on the **here-and-now** that you can't really focus on what's in front of you or behind you, your **story** will also be a **dance**. I would add that it will be a **song** as well because life sings and we are all invited to sing along.

## **Personality**

In summing up I guess we come back to the point that each of us is different and that is a wonderful thing! One of the most common ways of exploring this difference is to talk about **personality**, which is taken to be a reasonable stable aspect of one's self and one's behaviour that we can use to talk about who I am and who you are. It's a huge subject, again, that can be confusing to study.

That's the reason I brought along a very readable book by Brian Little called *Me, Myself, and Us – The Science of Personality and the Art of Wellbeing*. Over the years the science of personality has taken many twists and turns and tried its best to box us into types and categories. Like me, you may have done various personality assessment tests such as the Myers-Briggs set of questions to see if you were extrovert or introvert, thinking or feeling, sensing or intuitive, judging or perceiving. This test has been enormously popular, but also extensively discredited, so it is an example of how changeable personality can be and how difficult it is to pin down.

Professor Little's message is that the best personal constructs that we make about ourselves are those that allow us many 'degrees of freedom' so we can work flexibly with our thoughts and feelings at all times and apply ourselves productively to whatever we are doing. We learn about ourselves from doing whatever it is. He also uses the metaphor of **dancing** together with all the other personalities there are.

He emphasises the importance of 'personal projects' that are ways of operating that feel comfortable for us because of who we are, but at the same time stretch us and develop us so we can become more of who we are. That will help to make our 'story' more fun to be a part of and allow full expression to at least two of our primary emotions – **seeking** and **play**. That natural state of mind that feels really comfortable with others, with ourselves and with the unknown, but never stops trying to advance towards something better, is a great blessing for which we can be very thankful. You don't have to know what yourself is to do that. You just have to trust in something greater than you can understand.