



A way of knowing in search of our true identity

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ABSTRACT

How do we come to feel so separate from the world we know? What is the interrelationship between what we know and our mental setting at the time of knowing? Self is presented here as an opening that allows experience. This opening enables many aperture settings through which the light of awareness shapes and illuminates all that we know. With self as a variable opening, there is no 'thing' to protect, maintain, and perpetuate. Increased degrees of freedom and ease can be attained as an ever-present, knowing awareness is recognized as our true identity, thus liberating us from a fixed position and point of view.

A human being is a part of the whole, called by us 'Universe', a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

—Albert Einstein (from Calaprice 2005)

How do we come to feel so separate from the world we know? How does a universe that is dynamic and whole come to be perceived as fragmented into separate *things*? How does it happen that we insist on a self – separate from all it knows?

During the 45 years I have been a psychotherapist, hundreds of people have come to 'find themselves'. Among all these sincere people, not one found a self. Having practiced meditation for 35 years in search of my true identity, neither have I found a solid and separate self-entity and identity.

What has become apparent, however, is *an ever-present active knowing awareness that illuminates all that is known*. Self appears not as a thing, but rather as an opening through which the light of knowing flows. So focused on the content of the known, we overlook the presence of this knowing dimension. Due to this inattentiveness, we have not discovered new ways of knowing that can perceive the harmony of the whole.

Today we can witness the consequences of a divided whole in which separation and delineation have put countries, religious sects, communities, and family members at odds and in conflict. In the world, and in our homes, what we see reflects the consequence of the point of view assumed. These viewpoints become our identity – who we think we are. We therefore erroneously must protect, maintain, and perpetuate our perceptions, as though our very self-existence was at stake.

Rather than being permanent and fixed, the 'I' that we call our self is an opening that dilates and contracts, assuming different settings, thus allowing varying experience. Both the world 'out there' and the self-concept 'in here' are shaped by how they are known. Objects and things, people and places, happenings and events are all the consequences of a way of knowing. When we recognize the 'I' that sees as an opening that can dilate, allowing more light, broader perspective, and more options, we can enjoy greater degrees of freedom and ease.

We all know the constricted experiences of hurt, anger, resistance, depression, and despair. We also recognize how we tend to account for those experiences by pointing to the situation or circumstance in which we find our self, and to which we attribute cause of these reactive states. However, when we explain our mental and physical state by what we perceive in that state, we are operating in a self-perpetuating loop. What is perceived reinforces the constricted way in which it is known. An explanation justifies, but does not solve or dissolve a situation. Instead, we get stuck with whatever we can explain.

While our experience is vivid, what is less apparent is the relationship between the knower and the known. Since *what* is perceived is related to *how* it is known, knowing can be free to find new expression. The bodily experience of tension and constriction, the mental experience of agitation and confusion can all signal that a particular setting or way of knowing is in play. Our own discomfort and suffering can be the alarm that awakens and signals the presence of a narrow, constricted way of knowing. As we recognize our experience to be a consequence of an aperture setting, and not some immutable fact, we can learn to open or dilate the 'I' that sees.

We live in a dynamic and interactive world in which perception and meaning shape experience, and influence events seemingly separate from ourselves. Every way of knowing results in congruent and reinforcing '*tapes*' – an acronym I use for *thoughts, actions, perceptions, emotions, and sensations*. Each of these activities reinforces and perpetuates the perception of the world and the experience of the self.

Consider these three examples and note how *tapes* contour and perpetuate experience.

- (1) In the constricted state of anger, *thoughts* are judgmental, critical, and demeaning; informing aggressive *actions* as others are *perceived* as incompetent or dangerous; *emotions* are contracted and resentful; and *sensations* are constricted, hot, and tense. One can easily justify and thus perpetuate anger by pointing to the 'jerks' one perceives as incompetent, getting in the way, or even dangerous. The *thoughts* inform aggressive *actions*, fueling the rightness of *perceptions* and the continuation of *emotions* and their bodily *sensations*.
- (2) In the contracted state of depression, the *thought* 'I am no good' influences the *action* of withdrawal and isolation in a person who *perceives* the self as worthless and the world as critical. The *emotion* is an anxious, heavy sadness and the *sensation* is of a churning emptiness. The story of the self dictates the actions reinforcing the perceptions of the self and the world, maintaining the emotional collapse and sensations of weak helplessness.
- (3) In the more open position, when a person is in love, the world is their oyster: the future is bright and freedom emerges, *thought* tends to have a positive valence, prompting

action that is extending, engaging, kind, and generous; *perception* seems vivid and bright; *emotions* are joyful and happy; and the *sensations* are of an energetic openness and lightness. The state of love is an open condition with a sense of expressive energy and aliveness.

These *tapes* are inherently consistent and a consequence of the aperture setting. They create an experience of a self along with a matching and complementary view of the world. Again, notice the unity of the knower and the known. This identity of subject and perceived object perpetuates the sense of self and the world as known, creating a convincing picture of 'who I am' and 'the way things are'. We are so entranced by this presentation that it does not occur to us that we are experiencing the consequences of the aperture setting, and are oblivious to an ever-present light that allows for all ways of knowing.

Our characteristic ways of knowing give rise to our personalities; our customary and practiced outlook and ways of thinking, acting, and feeling. These patterns become rigidified as we identify them as our self. They get perpetuated as we defend them as our identity. As long as we are identified with particular characteristic ways of knowing and interpretative tendencies, we remain conditioned by a past, and live a future of (conditioned by?) its consequences.

We know that ascribed meaning and significance have consequences on actions and feelings. If particular settings or positions and ways of knowing increase suffering, we do not need to be resigned to such an afflictive condition as ultimate or final. Our suffering can signal that a particular way of knowing is in force.

We deny our birth-right and true identity as we mistakenly think our identity is limited and defined by a point of view and narrow range of experiences. As we challenge our habitual and characteristic identity, we can be less attached to, and shaped by, particular interpretations of reality. We can open our stance to new possibilities and an increased sense of aliveness.

In search of our true identity, an identity prior to our name and characteristic views, we can recognize our evolutionary lineage. We are *homo sapiens* (Latin for 'knowing man'). At birth, before we organized forms into meaningful objects and before we had a self-concept and world view, we were a knowing awareness. This awareness allowed and enabled perception and meaning to occur. It is this essential knowing that links knower and known – subject and object are unified in knowing. This unified knowing is the central and primary ground of all experience.

Now here is the important shift. When we recognize the vitality and aliveness of a knowing presence as our true nature, we can relax our grip on self as identity. Self can then be seen as merely a vantage point, a position of knowing, and all that is known can be understood as revelation of knowing presence. In this recognition we can increase our degrees of freedom, expand our creativity, and know in many complementary ways without fear of losing who we are.

By embracing the knowing that we are, we can relax our identification with a separate point of view. We can recognize the unity of the knower and the known. We can realize a knowing awareness as humanity's common ground and with this insight be liberated from what Einstein called the 'optical delusion' of separateness.

Notes on contributor



Dr. Fox has been a psychotherapist for 47 years, facilitating over 60,000 interviews and learning of our human struggles. A major influence in his thinking has been Time Space Knowledge Vision by Tibetan Lama Tarthang Tulku. He currently lives with his wife Cynthia in Tucson, AZ, where he continues his psychotherapy practice and his teaching through the Tucson Community Mediation Center. Video clips of his seminars are found at www.haywardfox.com.

Reference

Calaprice, A. (2005). *The new quotable Einstein*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.