

Through these events I came to understand how the indefinable, almost unconscious, personal sense of subjective energy and life was the nucleus, the tough core around which the affective system was built; a system that not only belongs to the self, but *is* the self. This feeling of personal life is like a seed within that branches out to permeate every aspect of our being. So to be without a self means to be without this seed, this gut-level feeling of personal being, along with all its branches, the entire affective system. In the second event of the journey then, this seed and all to which it had given rise was uprooted in one full sweep, like a tree that had suddenly been felled. Life goes on, but it is a new life, one that is neither personal nor impersonal—it is simply life without a self.

So this is what I discovered: that self is the entire affective emotional network of feelings, from the most subtle unconscious stirrings of energy, to the obvious extremes of passionate outbursts. Though separate from the cognitive system, the affective life so infiltrates the mind and all its processes that we can never separate our energies from the cognitive faculties as long as the reflexive mechanism remains intact.

Ordinarily we do not realize the extent of this infiltration because we like to believe we can be purely objective at times, when in fact we cannot. Subjectivity and objectivity are two sides of the same coin—the same type of consciousness—and though the cognitive structure remains intact when the affective system disappears, it then functions in a different way, a way that I have tried to describe in the last chapter.

To account for the rise of the affective system, we need only remember that the child *feels* long before he *thinks*. It is only gradually, with the development of the brain, that he discovers a separation exists between the seer and the seen, and with this discovery he becomes self-conscious. And once this takes place, his feelings become inseparably fused with his knowing. Thereafter both the knowledge and the feeling of self are all but indistinguishable. When the self disappears, this *knowledge* and *feeling* of a self disappear together like twin systems of a single circuit.

Because feeling precedes self-consciousness, it should be noted that the mere acknowledgement of self as an object of consciousness is insufficient to account for the self's existence. Without a sense of personal energy or feeling to back it up, such knowledge is so lifeless and meaningless, it is no more than a mental construct as easily dispelled as a child's belief in Santa Claus. The self is more than a knowledge of its own existence, and what more this is, is a gut-level feeling of personal energy, drive, power, and of a will that, when linked with the cognitive faculties, becomes the subjective certitude "this is me." This energy permeates our thoughts, words, and deeds to such an extent that we have come to believe these feelings are part and parcel of what it means to be human—a belief I now see is a great mistake.

Although this feeling of personal energy—which, in the early years, is indistinguishable from the sensation of simple *physical* energy—precedes the conscious knowledge "this is me," I think it is

¹ THE EXPERIENCE OF NO-SELF; 1982 Iroquois House, Sunspot, New Mexico. 0-931980-07-0. This is the true first edition, prior to both the 1984 Shambhala release (which featured an introduction by Thomas Keating), and the SUNY edition in 1993 (apparently without the Keating intro, but with revisions to the original text by the author).

² All *italics* appear in the original. A bracketed ellipsis [...] indicates passages omitted in the interest of concision.

obvious that the self only becomes a force when self-consciousness—which *is* the reflexive mechanism—develops to the point of claiming this physical energy for its own. Thus, no matter how much physical energy a man has, without this self-conscious mechanism there could be no feeling of *personal* energy. Without a sense of possession, physical energy has no more meaning, no more feeling behind it, than the noticeable effects of air and water to which no one can make a personal claim.

When the reflexive mechanism closes down, however, the feeling of physical energy again becomes separated from self-consciousness, and though this energy remains, it cannot be experienced in the same possessive way as it was before. Cut off from self-consciousness, the knowledge and feeling of getting around under one's own steam is gone. At first this gives way to something akin to a sense of weightlessness, an unusual type of knowledge (not really a physical sensation) that will remain with us as long as any relative difference between the old way of *feeling* life and the new way of *knowing* life can be noticed or recalled. As we acclimate to this new life, the old ways of feeling energy are quickly forgotten, or so I learned from experience.

In the history of the self then, physical energy comes first. Self-consciousness comes next, and develops to the point of becoming aware of physical energy within the body, which it then claims as its own. In this way, the reflexive mechanism of the mind, which is not the self, nevertheless gives rise to the self or makes it possible. But with this recognition of personal energy, a division is created between what was initially physical energy, and what we will now call “self-energy,” will, or mental, psychic energy, which some people believe is beyond the physical realm—and in some ways it is. Where at first there was only energy of the body, now there is energy of the mind, which resulted when the sense of personal energy infiltrated the cognitive system seemingly to energize its thoughts and acts. It goes without saying that, of itself, thought has no power or meaning unless there is some force or drive to back it up. Rid thought of this power, and thinking appears to be no more than a neurological mechanism of the brain. Ultimately then, self is not the thinker of thoughts; rather, at its most subtle, rock-bottom level, self is nothing more, yet nothing less, than the *consciousness of “personal” energy*.

Given this history, it should be obvious that if someone wanted to go beyond the self, it would be useless to try to alter either the cognitive or affective systems. As long as the brain persists with its automatic reflexive mechanism, it would only bring about another self no matter how we try to suppress or tamper with these systems. So whatever the reflexive mechanism is, it is strategic both to a life with a self and a life without a self. This is why I have said that only an outside agent can bring about the demise of the self; an agent, however, that has a physiological counterpart. I am convinced that we may some day discover the secret of this reflexive mechanism [...]

Nevertheless, when the time is ripe—a time no man knows of—this mechanism gives out, gives way to a life that is beyond any need of a self. This does not mean that we fall back into an infantile or bestial form of life. Though we continue to share in every strata of existence, the disintegration of the self is a forward, not a backward, movement. Once the mind has been appropriately conditioned to its human potential, it does not forfeit this in order to see “that” which lies beyond it.

The impermanence of the self is comparable, perhaps, to the pineal body or organ in the center of the brain, which is said to be functional in the developmental years but later ceases to function. In similar fashion, the self, which was necessary for a specific way of knowing in the first part of life, ceases to function when it has outgrown its usefulness. Thus, the intervention of an outside agent has something to do with man's reaching an unknown level of psychological development,

integration, or evolution, before this agent can act, or before man can dare to live without a self. Indeed, the very need for integration is to come to a point of graceful disintegration; the need for personal wholeness is to pass into a greater wholeness; and the purpose of having a self is to eventually go beyond it.³

It is imperative to examine closely and realize that the root of the affective system is a sense of selfhood; a feeling of personal energy which is identical to its will, its drives, its motivations, values, and goals. This branches out to give rise to memories, desires, expectations. This fans out still further to color every perception and thought, until it reaches into every experience including the aesthetic sense of beauty, a sense of natural order, a sense of contentment, peace, boredom, tiredness, loneliness, *ad infinitum*. In a word, this system includes every sense of psychological interiority, and feeling of contemplative spirituality, that we know of.⁴

If it has not been underscored before, it must be emphasized here, that the faculty of the will is itself, the core of the affective system, the seed of the self, and the feeling of personal energy that gives rise to the system in the first place. Thought alone is powerless to act because it must be moved by this feeling if it is to have any part in our behaviors. This then, was the major discovery regarding the self: that its very nucleus *is* the will or volitional faculty.

Though I had been taught that the will was a cognitive and not an affective faculty, I was never able to place it in either category—at least experientially—since it was somehow superior and more mysterious than either of these faculties. What I see now, however, is that the will is not truly associated with the cognitive, for the ordinary faculties of the mind continue undisturbed in its absence. I also see how the will is difficult to pinpoint if it is the instigator and controller of the affective system, as well as the mysterious medium between mind and feelings. When the affective system first disappears, it is not the emotions that abruptly fall away; rather, it is the very source of their power that is made immovable. As a result, the affective branches slowly fade and disappear before we even know they are gone.⁵

It is only when we realize our oneness with the true Other that we come upon a unity and wholeness that can withstand the test of all encounters with other selves. In this way, no matter what happens in our relations with the outside world, we are not fragmented, we do not fall apart, become lost, dependent, or see problems where there are none. It is only after we come upon the Other—the stillpoint at the center of our being—that we find the key to a powerful sense of security and independence that *then* allows us to go out to others, to be generous, to give them their freedom, to be open-minded and understanding. If for some reason we do not find this inner resource, we have no choice but to grasp at what is without, and it is this premature movement outward instead of inward that gives rise to all problems in relationships. The real problem in life is not between people, but between the individual and his true Other.⁶

³ *Ibid.* pp. 170—174.

⁴ *Ibid.* pg. 180.

⁵ *Ibid.* pp. 184—185.

⁶ *Ibid.* pg. 188.