



Considering the change or flow –
who are we after all?

Letter 22

Who are we – considering change?

Dear friend,

A thorough investigation of change takes us ever deeper into the discovery of reality; that's why the Buddha insisted so much on it. Discovering change, the process nature of life, is synonymous with discovering reality. Understanding change means understanding life.

In the last exercises we focussed on investigating change, moving from outer change in the world to change in all areas of our sensory perception. We looked into the five outer senses – feeling the body, hearing, seeing, tasting, and smelling – and also to some extent looked into the sixth sense of mental perception with its multitude of mental movements such as thinking, knowing, remembering and simply being aware when not thinking. Wherever we look, in all areas of life experience, there is change, constant movement, flowing awareness.

Naturally the question arises: When everything is constantly changing, who am I after all? Is there such a thing as a consistent self?

Let's not jump to conclusions but continue our investigation. This person called 'me' seems to be the coming together of constantly changing experiences in all six sensory fields. The five outer senses feed into the sixth sense, the mental faculty. There meaning is given to the sensory experiences by an elaborate process of comparing the various sense impressions with previous experiences. This is accompanied of course by keeping further memory traces which add to our growing life experience.

I will try to illustrate this with the example of hearing a voice. See how the mental faculty constantly forms inner images of the incoming sense data and makes sense of them. What we call hearing is actually an elaborate process of decoding sensory data. The flow of incoming sound waves, let us say of a human voice, leads to successive depolarisations of the sensory cell membranes inside our ears. Thus the sound stimulus produced by the voice is transformed into electric charges which are communicated through neurons to specialized

brain cells where this information is compared to previous experiences. Background noises, for example a train passing by, are eliminated as irrelevant, and the currently more important information is retained. This information is formed into a mental after-image or after-sound of that moment of hearing. This after-sound is not the original sound wave anymore but a later memory trace of that original sound impression which itself has already ceased. As a distinct memory imprint, the after-sound can now be compared to other memory imprints of hearing sounds, which originated throughout our life. Thus, it can be identified as a certain kind of sound – a human voice. By the same basic process of comparison with earlier hearing experiences further meaning can be given to the fluctuations of that human voice. At the very end of this distinguishing process we have the clear impression not only of hearing a human voice, but the voice of a specific person producing sounds which are identified as words with a definite meaning. This meaning is given to those sound combinations due to a long learning process in communication through language. The hearing consciousness has thus fed its primary sensory information into the mental consciousness and it is there where the information begins to make sense and we understand what the person is saying.

In the same way as we just explored for the process of hearing, we are constantly decoding visual, tactile, olfactory, gustatory, and conceptual information. In all areas the mind distinguishes specific sense impressions from similar ones and compares them to memory images of previous experiences. It also combines the information from the different senses to form a coherent picture of our overall present life situation. Fortunately these billions of processes take place without any need to stimulate them individually – it all happens quite automatically following habitual patterns of functioning.

But this description of the processes of perception does not pretend to cover all of what we are – a human being is not simply a decoding machine of sensory data! We can also describe a human being as a spontaneous, uninterrupted flow of qualities in action. Various perspectives are possible. We will have to look into that question “Who am I?” in more depth, for example why the processes of decoding and interpretation of sense data give different results in each individual.

But the important point right now is quite simple: to become aware of the constant flow of micro-operations in our six senses and to understand that the overall picture of a fairly coherent, ‘stable’ life is produced on the basis of that constant flow. Actually, nothing is really stable within the six sense consciousnesses. Constant processes of decoding and interpretation give meaning to the flow of life experiences. How we decode and interpret these life experiences seems to be a crucial factor in understanding the differences between people.

One important difference between people is how much we believe in the impression of seeming stability. An excessive belief in that stability will lead to frustration when faced with

inevitable change. We need to correct this unwarranted belief in stability by an increased awareness of change. This is what we are doing right now.

Exercise: *In order to become increasingly aware of the flow of micro-operations that make up our life, let's investigate the process of seeing. Put a page with some written text in front of you (or simply use this text you're reading now on your computer). Let your open eyes rest on the surface. Try to see the whole of it without reading the text. Repeatedly relax and sharpen the focus to become aware of the minute processes of differentiating the white of the background from the colour of the text, and how clusters of the same colour are interpreted as a script with individual lines running across the page in which individual forms are interpreted as letters.*

During the exercise refrain from reading the text – try to stop the decoding machine for a moment. Just look and observe the wish to give meaning. Observe the repeated, almost automatic, if not obsessive impulse to read. Allow yourself to rest on a single word with its individual letters – try to see the letters as simple forms or lines which do not have an inherent meaning. Then see how mentally the forms are seen as letters which are grouped into syllables and words to which certain meanings are attributed. Go back and forth from the mere visual impression into the conceptual understanding of what is written there until you have a clear understanding of the many micro-operations involved in the act of reading.

Then look at the room where you are sitting and do the same thing. Go from the mere visual perception into the conceptual 'reading' of your environmental situation, where a chair is identified as a chair to sit on, a table is a table, and looking through the window you know that what you see is much further away than the painting on the wall. All of this is part of the constant decoding and interpretation process that forms our life. And much of that is very personal, especially when we see how our personal likes and dislikes of certain forms, colours, sounds, odours, tactile sensations etc. enter into the play of interpretations.

We repeat this again and again with all sensory experiences until we enter a deep "seeing" of the process nature of life, which brings us into direct contact with the unified experience of flowing awareness.

With heartfelt wishes for all of us to become the flow of unified awareness,

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