

Modern man is a subject for whom his own self-awareness as a thinking, observing, measuring and estimating “self” is absolutely primary. It is, for him, the one indubitable “reality,” and all truth starts here. The more he is able to develop his consciousness as a subject over against objects, the more he can understand things in their relations to him and one another, the more he can manipulate these objects for his own interests, but also, at the same time, the more he tends to isolate himself in his own subjective prison, to become a detached observer cut off from everything else in a kind of impenetrable, alienated and transparent bubble, which contains all reality in the form of a purely subjective experience. Modern consciousness then tends to create this solipsistic bubble of awareness – an ego-self imprisoned in its own consciousness, isolated and out of touch with other such selves in so far as they are all “things” rather than persons. It is this kind of consciousness, exacerbated to an extreme, which has made inevitable the so called “death of God..”

The mystical consciousness of St. Theresa implies a certain basic attitude towards the self. The thinking and feeling and willing self is not the starting point of all verifiable reality and of all experience. The primal truth, the ground of all being and truth, is in God the Creator of all that is. The starting point of all Christian belief and experience (in this context) is the primal reality of God as Pure Actuality. The “existence of God” is not something seen as deducible from our conscious awareness of our own existence. On the contrary, the experience of the classic Christian mystics is rooted in a metaphysic of being, in which God is intuited as “He Who Is,” as the supreme reality, pure Being. The self-centered awareness of the ego is, of course, a pragmatic psychological reality, but once there has been an inner illumination of pure reality, an awareness of the Divine, the empirical self is seen by comparison to be “nothing,” that is to say contingent, evanescent, relatively unreal, real only in relation to its source and end in God, considered not as object but as free ontological source of one’s own existence and subjectivity. To understand this attitude, we have to remember that in this view of things Being is not an abstract objective idea but a fundamental concrete intuition directly apprehended in a personal experience that is incontrovertible and inexpressible.

-Thomas Merton on “self and reality”

Yet in this moment when one seems about to become a really total zombie, the whole thing blows up. For there is no fate unless there is someone or something to be fated. There is no trap without someone to be caught. There is, indeed, no compulsion unless there is also freedom of choice, for the sensation of behaving involuntarily is known only by contrast with that of behaving voluntarily. Thus when the line between myself and what happens to me is dissolved and there is no stronghold left for an ego even as a passive witness, I find myself not *in* a world but *as* a world, which is neither compulsive nor capricious. What happens is neither automatic nor arbitrary: it just happens, and all happenings are mutually interdependent in a way that seems unbelievably harmonious. Every this goes with every that. Without others there is no self, and without somewhere else there is no here, so that – in this sense – self is other and here is there.

When this new sensation of self arises, it is at once exhilarating and a little disconcerting. It is like the moment when you first got the knack of swimming or riding a bicycle. There is the feeling that you are not doing it yourself, but that it is somehow happening on its own, and you wonder whether you will lose it – as indeed you may if you try forcibly to hold on to it. In immediate contrast to the old feeling, there is indeed a certain passivity to the sensation, as if you were a leaf blown along by the wind, until you realize that you are both leaf and wind. The world outside your skin is just as much you as the world inside: they move together inseparably, and at first you feel a little out of control because the world outside is so much vaster than the world inside. Yet you soon discover that you are able to go ahead with ordinary activities – to work and make decisions as ever, though somehow this is less of a drag. Your body is no longer a corpse which the ego has to animate and lug around. There is a feeling of the ground holding you up, and of hills lifting you when you climb them. Air breathes itself in and out of your lungs, and instead of looking and listening, light and sound come to you on their own. Eyes see and ears hear as wind blows and water flows. All space becomes your mind. Time carries you along like a river, but never flows out of the present: the more it goes, the more it stays, and you no longer have to fight or kill it.

-Alan Watts, discussing the “true self”