



## *Why am I me?* by Piya Tan

is not found in any of these faculties, nor our feelings, nor perceptions, nor volitions, nor consciousness.

Our self is the sum total of these aggregates of form, feeling, perception, volition and consciousness. Yet it is neither found in any of them or outside of them. For, they are all ever in a stage of flux, creating meaning for ourselves.

All living beings have these faculties or aggregates, or at least some of them. In that case, why am I not someone or even something else, perhaps a cat, or a butterfly,<sup>5</sup> or a beetle,<sup>6</sup> or even a hat.<sup>7</sup> One possible answer is that we are deeply conscious of ourselves to the extent we discern an “I” against another “you.”

In the US dystopian science fiction movie, “I Robot” (2004), there is a scene where Will Smith enters a vast hall full of identical robots, all fresh off the production line. When all these robots are turned on for the first time, we can imagine them all looking at each other, saying to themselves, “Why am I in this body and not one of those others?” If we are any of these robots, we would have to conclude that we are not just in this body, but in all of them at the same time!

The Buddha actually mentions such an existence in his teaching of the “9 abodes of beings,” where the beings of the four lower realms – the asuras, the pretas, the animals and the hell-beings – are said to have different bodies, but having the same perception. The brahmas, too, have different bodies, but same perception (but which is blissful). Humans and some of the lower gods are both different in body and in perception. The “radiant gods,” however, are said to be the same in body, but different in perception. The higher gods of the form world are said to be the same in body and the same in perception.<sup>8</sup>

Now we come to another interesting question about the identical robots. We could say that each of us, as these robots, can only have the experience of one robot at any time. Suppose all of us were rebooted so that our memories were erased, would we wake up the same robot again or as a different robot?

As humans, we know that we are each “ourself” because of our memory (*sati*). From the time we are born, we accumulate experience and knowledge, which remain with us for life and reinforce our individuality. Ironically, when we think, we more likely see ourselves as being different. However, when we feel (such as when we are joyful for any reason), we tend to see ourselves as more connected with one another.

We have to rise above merely thinking, to be able to understand the core question we are asking here. Why does one robot have experiences of “me” as opposed to another? Perhaps it is something random that each robot feels differently following each reboot.

Perhaps, we could say that because the robots cannot all be switched on at exactly the same instant, there will only be one turned on at any specific moment. This means that the

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<sup>5</sup> See the skeptical Chinese philosopher, Zhuangzi (4<sup>th</sup> century BCE): see end of this excerpt, [http://users.wfu.edu/moran/zhexuejialu/Zhuang\\_Zi\\_2.html](http://users.wfu.edu/moran/zhexuejialu/Zhuang_Zi_2.html).

<sup>6</sup> See Franz Kafka, *The Metamorphosis* (1915). Original German, *Die Verwandlung*; for modern translations, see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/5200/5200-h/5200-h.htm> & <http://records.viu.ca/~johnstoi/stories/kafka-E.htm>.

<sup>7</sup> See Oliver Sacks, *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat*, 1985: <http://robinlea.com/pub/wife-hat.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> On the 9 abodes of beings, see **Group karma**, SD 39.1 (1.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/39.1-Group-karma-piya.pdf>

moment we die, the very next instant somewhere in the universe, a new being is born, and we will be that being. Or we could arise as an “intermediate being” without any identity.<sup>9</sup>

Whether the robots, are “switched on” at the same time, or at different times, it would make better sense to say that they are all conscious at the same time. This would fit the idea that as humans, we are all conscious of ourselves. In such a situation, there is really no “I” or “me,” but rather an “us,” which we are unable to experience because of our separate bodies. It's like a row of glasses of water. Do they all contain the same water, or different water? If we understand the nature of water, we would accept that it is the same water.<sup>10</sup>

This has a vital implication for us. It means that we should treat everyone else in the same way as we would like to be treated ourselves. We are all then connected in an interbeing – they are me and I am them – we are one and the same. This is a natural basis for lovingkindness and compassion, for accepting others unconditionally, and for being kind to others even when we think they do not deserve it. For, we are them.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This latter notion is supported by the suttas, and more widely accepted by Buddhists today: see **Is rebirth immediate?** SD 2.17 (1.3 + 3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/2.16-Is-there-a-soul.-piya.pdf>

<sup>10</sup> Further see **The person in Buddhism**, SD 29.6b: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/29.6b-The-person-in-Buddhism-piya.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> For a study on personal identity and its problems, see **Self and selves**, SD 26.9: <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/26.9-Self-Selves-piya.pdf>.