

Malcolm Martin

*You Can't Be Yourself By Yourself*

Week Two: "A Whirlpool in a River: Embracing Complexity"

June 11, 2022



Last time, we were talking about what structural selfishness might mean and the relation of structural selfishness to my own personal suffering. Central to this is the question of what is a self? What is this thing I call me? The founder of Ordinary Mind Zen School is Charlotte Joko Beck. One of her favorite metaphors for what it is to be a self was that of a whirlpool in a river. Not some massive thing out at sea, but just like when you're watching the flow of the river and the banks send waves ripples backwards and forwards and little whirlpools form. Branches get caught in it, leaves, a bit of dirt. They swirl round and round. The whirlpool lasts for a second, a minute, an hour. Maybe it's there most of the time, but it's changing every second and it's gone, just back into the river, the flow of the river.

Joko was arguing that that's a pretty good image for the self. We aren't permanent. We aren't stable. There's not some little nugget of me. I'm like the whirlpool. From our point of view, what's really important is that the whirlpool is made of river. It's not separate in any sense from the river. Just for a few moments, we can identify it as this whirlpool. It doesn't even have any definite edges, any definite boundaries. It's just here, and we can see it pulsing, fluid, and changing, and it's gone.

That's actually a nice image for a Zen Buddhist idea of the self. And yet, most of the time, in most respects, we like to think of ourselves as something much more like a billiard ball. It's hard. It's permanent. It doesn't change. It bumps into things. It pushes them out of its way. And it's part of a game. Am I winning? Am I losing? Every moment, all the time, that's a question. That's how we tend to live. And it's even enshrined in things like the basis of our laws. Everything is about the individual, increasingly so. This is part of what it is to be a modern human being.

What's the consequence of trying to live like a billiard ball, imagining that we're a billiard ball? One can argue that it's really hard. It sets up tension within ourselves. It sets us in competition, one with another. We forget and entirely deny our whirlpool nature. I have a great dharma friend

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who posted to our group a wonderful beachscape picture. It's a Welsh beach, and in it, sea and sky and spray and sand mix, meld, blur together. That's the sea. That's the land. But where's the edge? Where's the boundary? There's nothing. You can't tell. And within that, little people are wandering about, hard to pin down.

That reminded me of the Chinese character that comes into Japanese as *yugen*. You can translate *yugen* in a lot of ways. We'll go with mystery. The character is actually the character for mountain, and between the prongs of the mountains are little characters that mean mist. So it's mist in the mountains, when everything becomes a blur, hard to define, hard to pin down. That's pretty much the texture of life, the experience of all life.

Do you remember painting by numbers? I think they still exist. I used to love them as a child. You got a canvas, and you had a picture on it with all the outlines drawn in very carefully. In each little patch, there was a number that told you which color to put in. The outlines are all drawn in for you. The colors have been selected for you. All you have to do is put the right color in the right place, and magically, the picture appears. In a way, that's exactly what we're doing most of the time, most of our lives. We're taking these lines, which we draw in what's ultimately a conventional place. This is where we tend to put the lines. There's no reason why we should put it two millimeters this way or two millimeters that way. We can make a kind of outline. Art is something that is mysterious, infinitely subtle, infinitely gradated. I put an abstracted structure over that because I need to make sense of it. I'm trying to make a picture out of it. I can't just blur everything. That's what we do. That's absolutely what we do the whole time. In order to live our lives, we need to draw the outlines, and we always put them in a conventional place. What I'd like to suggest is that actually, when it comes to how we are with each other, how we are in behaving towards ourselves, we're just following the lines that are there. These lines lead us into structural selfishness and selfing—"This being is me"—in each moment, seeing myself as separate, as identifiable, as distinct from you and you and you and everybody else.

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I've said that we place the lines conventionally, and this is a really important idea. In Buddhism and in Zen, we talk of emptiness. Obviously, the easy mistake to make with that is that things are unreal or they don't exist. It's more accurate to say that what we mean by that is that everything is relational. Everything is conventional. There's no grounded distinction between things. Things blur. Things are mysterious. Everything is gray. Everything is yugen. But if I live in a culture which tells me there is black and there is white, there are men and there are women, no possibility, everything has to be this or that and treated accordingly. We talk about emptiness, and it doesn't mean that things are unreal or that they don't exist. It means that there are no definable separate, substantial, essential differences between anything and anything else, whether that's me and you or a table and a chair. It's all interbeing. It's all interdependent. It's all relational. It's all connected.

Now, that can sound very mystical, very woo woo, as my own teacher Barry Magid says. It's not. It's absolutely particular, concrete. Our society invites us to think of the self in terms of a billiard ball, in terms of being separate, identifiable the whole time. How do we actually create identities? The only way I can define what I am is by what I'm not. So to be a man is to not be a woman, to be English is to not be Chinese, and we can go on endlessly, whether these are binaries or multiple choices. It's the distinctions, what makes things identifiable, that are important. It's where we're drawing the lines on the painting by numbers.

There are many ways that this shows up. Don't think for a moment this is just about ideas, just about concepts or misimagining who I am. It's absolutely crucial. The one factor which is going to make the most significant difference to my life chances as a human being is the citizenship I hold, which basically has to do with where I was born. That's absolutely random chance. I was born here in the UK. I wasn't born in Yemen. I wasn't born in Somalia. I wasn't born in China. That fact is the single most important determinant of the life chances and possibilities that I do

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and don't have throughout my life, and that goes in every single possible level. To be a man or to be a woman, to be Black or to be white, to be able-bodied or to have a disability, to be mentally normal, to be seen in terms of my sexuality as normal or abnormal—all of these things can have a really important impact on me.

Where am I drawing the lines? Well, I'm not making this up for myself. These are all the lines that my society draws and offers me, and I follow the lines. Sometimes I get to contradictions within the lines. They cross each other out. How on earth does that work? What society wants me to be, what the billiard ball idea of a self wants me to be, is to see myself as permanent, as separate, as a psychologically integrated, normal individual whose every deviation from that is some kind of pathology that needs to be corrected, a symptom which needs to be treated. And that's how we treat ourselves: endless self-improvement. Why aren't I this? Why aren't I that? Why aren't I better? And so on.

The poet Walt Whitman said, "I contain multitudes." Actually, that is me. I contain so much diversity, grayness, and yet I'm asked to make myself into this one thing. So we could say that the problem is simply one of perception. I misperceive myself. I misrecognize myself thinking and imagining that I'm a billiard ball, desperately trying to be the best billiard ball I possibly can and win all the time, when I'm a whirlpool, flickering in and out of existence, one moment, one thing, one moment and other thing. That's why it feels so strange.

Next time, I want to get a little bit more detailed and bring it back to my experience and your experience through the Ordinary Mind approach to practice based in our sitting and meditation, and taking that out into our experience of each moment of life as it is, as our practice principles say.