

Identifying with Disease

Diana Reed© July 15, 2011

I often wonder if we make negative connections to ourselves in the quest for an identity. Just as we may seek validation from another human being to determine our self worth, do we also label ourselves through our conditions, disease or age? By giving ourselves a label, whether or not it is negative, are we setting ourselves up for a lifetime of single-minded identification?

Before I begin a yoga class, I ask new students to inform me of any recent surgeries or injuries so that I may help them avoid risky movement. In one such class, a student advised me that she had undergone shoulder surgery and was still hurting. She went on to say that she was careful to limit her movement as moving the shoulder caused discomfort. I asked her how long it had been since the surgery; her answer was seven years. Throughout the rest of the class, she consistently held her shoulder and did very little to move it. When I advised her that moving the shoulder would begin to increase its range of motion, take away the stiffness and ease the pain, she was reluctant to believe me.

I encounter people of all ages and all walks of life in class. Some of them are content to carry a label of their disease or condition, wearing it almost as a badge. It is who they have become. "I am diabetic" "I suffer with sciatica" "That aggravates my arthritis" Statements that nearly define who the person is. That person identifies with their illness, allowing it to limit what they can do, or worse, who they are.

Still, there are others who are in remission from cancer or live with osteoporosis. Yet their disease does not claim them. They refuse to be labeled, or limited for that matter. Recently a student returned to class after suffering a stroke just ten days earlier. Ten days - or seven years? The fact of the illness does not decide who they are as a person. It is neither the beginning nor the end of their *self*.

Yoga teaches us Svadhyaya or self-study. This is the act of becoming self aware, to the point of recognizing and accepting our limitations but not being ruled by them. We learn to be non-reactive, cultivating contentment and gratitude for current conditions, no matter what they may be. Of course, living with any condition or disease has its tolls, trials and tribulations. It isn't always easy. But, it is not who you are. Think about that. And its not only disease, its aging

as well. Yes, of course there are limitations and new aches and pains from aging, but is it your identity? Is it really what makes you who you are, or is it just a fraction, a moment in the fabric of time? Is this your singularity, or are you complex, alive and vibrant despite?

This is not about living with a condition or disease; it is not about the effects that illness has on you. This is not about trivializing or negating the condition. This is about acceptance and turning off the mind chatter that convinces us it is all we are. So what can we do to change this way of thinking? What steps can we take to divorce from identifying with a condition and remarry vitality and zest for life? Try these steps to bring a shift in perspective.

- 1) Find a quiet place where you'll be undisturbed and sit or lie quietly and comfortably. Become aware of the soft flow of your breath, allowing it to be free and unobstructed. Relax physically by scanning the body for any trapped or unnoticed tension. Breathe into those areas that feel stuck.
- 2) Ask yourself the question: What do I want? Then pay attention to the thoughts that cross your mind. Try not to indulge the thought or let it take you into other thoughts that may cause anxiety. Simply observe the thought. As you observe the thought, pay attention to how your body is reacting, noticing additional tension or increased relaxation.
- 3) Ask yourself the question: How do I feel? Attend to the response from this question and remind yourself that the moment you are in is your one true reality. If the answer is "I feel fine", enjoy that and know that it is completely true and real. If the answer comes as "I feel pain" or "My back hurts", explore that further. Where is the pain? What is its quality? Spend a few minutes breathing into that area, even envisioning a golden healing light enveloping the area, easing pain or discomfort. Allow the power of positive thought to begin changing physical sensation.
- 4) Ask yourself the question: Who am I? Let your thoughts come, again playing the observer, not allowing yourself to be carried away. Continue breathing deeply as unfavorable thoughts start to ebb. Ask the question again and *feel* the answer. Rather than trying to settle on a word or description, quietly feel who you are. Become aware of your existence, the fact of your self, without analysis. You simply are. Fall intimately into your own being.

It may take practice to begin a mind shift, but it is not impossible. Our quantum fields are in constant communication with our inner and outer selves. Turning the tide of our own thought takes time and patience. Repeat the steps above when you find yourself identifying with a particular idea, expectation or reaction. Remember, you are not your parts; you are not even the sum of your parts. Your being goes deeper than the physical self. You are not your pain; you are not your disease. You are a conscious being connected to every other conscious being through vast universal energy. Just as you can send someone else a prayer or well wishes, so you can begin a process to heal your physical self and link to your true identity. You *can* rise above a part, mesh with the sum, and transcend it all.

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