

## Chapter 3. IDENTITY

To develop intimacy with someone else, we must first become intimate with ourselves. We have to dive into that big, juicy, fundamental question:

“Who am I?”

Since we left the caves thousands of years ago, we have been puzzling over the mystery of our identity.

*Who am I? And how can I – whoever “I” am – be happier?*

Your core beliefs about your identity underlie everything about how you work, live, and love. So it’s a good idea to step back occasionally and take a look under the hood. Think of yourself as a computer for a moment; investigating your identity is a bit like examining and updating your operating system.

Yogis have been obsessed with figuring out human nature for a few millennia and they’ve come to a few helpful conclusions. Trying on their worldview can help us break free of habitual patterns, expand our understanding of who we are, and enter our relationships with less fear and more grace.

### Who am I?

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” I say to Lucas, settling into my chair at Starbucks. It’s early in my dating adventures, and I feel nervous.

Lucas grins back. He is a put-together guy, dressed casually, toffee coloured hair and nice brown eyes. And he’s cuter than his OK Cupid picture, heaven forfend. Much cuter, actually, now that I take a look at him. Friendly smile, kind eyes. There’s that weird little tickle in the back of my head, a buzzing attraction.

*Don’t be a weirdo, Rach. Do not start being a weirdo.*

“So...” he says, “Tell me something about yourself.”

“Well...” I say, “That’s an open question!”

“It’s a fresh start,” he says grandly, “the floor is open!”

“Okay, well, then.” I nod, take a breath, and smile in a way that might appear modestly captivating. “I’m a yoga teacher. Or rather, I’m the Director of Teachers’ College for YYoga. So I run all their teacher training programs, and I

created their 200 hour...that's the program that trains teachers to teach." I frown. Why am I trying to sound impressive?

I change tacks, "Before I came to Vancouver, I lived in New York City, where I was an actor. Theatre," I hastily specify, "not film. The stage." Uh-oh, do I sound like a snob? I think I sound a snob. "I mean, I love film," I say very clearly, "but I was classically trained for the theatre. The thea-TAH, ha ha. Mostly Shakespeare."

Oh, God, it was just getting worse.

I backtrack again. "Um, okay, so I wasn't so great at film, actually, I was always overacting. Too much of a ham, I guess. Hammy Rachel. Hammy hamster. Hammo-rific."

*Rach, you're now being a weirdo. It's officially time to stop talking. Stop. Talking.* "So there we are. Me in a nutshell. A ham sandwich. Um. Ta-da." I try to hide in my chair. "Uh, and who are you?"

When I'm asked to describe myself, my knee jerk reaction is to rattle off all the stuff that I think sounds good. I want them to like me, so out pours a giddy monologue of "impressive Rachel" talking points. Of course, I actually have no idea if they'll find my career details impressive. They may rather hear about someone's love of travel or passion for nature.

Naturally, in my monologues, I conveniently leave out all the other stuff that I don't like about myself so much.

That kind of intro would sound a bit different.

"Hi Lucas, damn, you're cute! Whooo-weee! Mama would approve of *you*. Well, about me, to be honest, I'm pretty anxious and absent-minded. I lose my car keys all the time. My car is dented because I keep running into stationary poles in parking garages. I'm very loving, but I have a really hard time with anger and can be a workaholic. I leave all the kitchen cabinet doors open when I cook, I tear my fingernails off as a cheap manicure, and I am profoundly hopeless with my hair. I had a really crappy divorce, and then stayed in a relationship with a guy who didn't want kids for a really long time! I practice yoga so that I don't lose my mind or become a total head case. How's your latte?"

Even if I could encapsulate all of my behaviour – good and bad - and somehow transmit it via Vulcan mind meld it to Lucas, would *that* have let him see the real me? Would that describe *who I am*?

Am I the sum total of my accomplishments, actions and behaviour? Or am I something more?

# Ignorance

According to yoga, we suffer from a deep confusion: we believe that we *are* the stuff in our heads.

- “I’m a yoga teacher.”
- “I love education.”
- “I was an actor.”
- “I love big cities.”

Not only do we buy into the idea that we are defined by our thoughts, we also believe that we are defined by our *feelings*, which can lead to a gigantic roller coaster ride of emotions.

- “I’m sad.”
- “I suck.
- “I’m amazing!”
- “I’m the most horrible person ever.”

As we walk around in the world, we are constantly identifying ourselves with all the noise crackling between our ears. I call this noise our “hamsters.” Our thoughts and feelings are like crazy hamsters, racing around after every distraction and running on their hamster wheels. Unfortunately, they’re dragging our sense of self along with them.

## Avidya

"Ignorance." Or literally, “non-seeing.” Avidya is the fundamental mistake we make in assuming that we are defined by the changing thoughts in our heads. According to yogic wisdom, we are not just our minds; we are actually the Presence who is *observing* our experience. Tapping into our true identity allows us to find more steadiness and self-reliance in a constantly changing world.

While our thoughts and feelings are an integral part of our human experience, identifying with them exclusively is a one-way ticket to suffering. We will be constantly adrift because our thoughts and feelings are always changing. Our happy sense of self will be shattered with one bad experience or an ill-spoken word. Getting fired from our job destroys our sense of pride in our competency. A fight with a loved one unmoors our sense of safety.

When I moved from New York City to British Columbia, my life was upended. Before the move, I had been an actor, a teacher, and a New Yorker. I felt incredibly proud of my association with the city, as if I owned a piece of its glamour simply by living there.

When I arrived in Vancouver, all of the landmarks that I had been using to define myself were gone: I wasn't working, I had no history, no one knew me, and I was living in a city and a country that were unfamiliar. My husband, who could have been an anchor, disappeared suddenly into his alcohol addiction. My new marriage foundered. I completely fell apart.

During this time, I became painfully aware of how much my inner sense of self was anchored to the stuff outside of me. When those external landmarks disappeared, I felt lost. As it turns out, I had very little inner sense of self to rely on.

Ultimately, the external world can never give us stability.  
And here's the root of our confusion: it's not supposed to.

## Reality

The nature of the universe is to change. Stars are born, they live, and they die. Tides move. Mountains crumble. Change is intrinsic to the fabric of the life.

### Prakriti

Mother Nature. The universe that is sensible, that is, can be experienced through our five senses (sight, taste, touch, sound, smell). Mother Nature is composed of the elements: earth, air, fire, water, and space. It is the nature of all these elements to change. Everything in the world - the seasons, the tides, the phases of the moon, the beating of our heart - is subject to a beginning, middle, and end. Despite our attempts to fix it or control it, everything in the realm of Prakriti is temporary.

There's only one problem: **our minds hate change.**

The mind wants the external world to be knowable, static, and permanent. Because uncertainty feels so scary, we spend a lot of time trying to control our environment and make the outer world behave in a way that we like. We are control freaks, scrambling for a foothold. It's like trying to make a fort on a rockslide: ultimately, it just won't work.

### Gunas

The qualities of nature. The three gunas describe the qualities of movement inherent in the material world. *Rajas* is quick and light, *tamas* is heavy and full of inertia, and *sattva* is luminous and balanced. All of Mother Nature is constantly moving and changing according to the influence of these qualities. In other words, everything is either speeding up, slowing down, or balanced...until it changes.

Usually our world doesn't change all at once. If we lose our job, we still have our marriage. Or if we change cities, we still have our work.

But have you ever been through a period when several pillars of your life became unmoored at the same time? You may have felt "lost" and not known "who you were." You may have felt groundless, anxious, and untethered.

During my move, I uprooted many pillars of my life at the same time. New country, new coast, new marriage, new home, no job, no friends, and no stuff.

No wonder I felt so unstable!

Despite our anxiety, these transitions can also be a gift because they reveal how much we rely on the external world for a sense of ourselves. While it can be painful at the time, these transition times help us realize that the external world does not define who we are. When everything falls apart, we have the opportunity to experience the Reality of the Universe, which is that nothing is truly permanent. And – if we can soften to the experience – these moments offer a portal through which we can connect to something within us that is deeper.

["Only to the extent that we expose ourselves again and again to annihilation can that which is indestructible in us be found." - Pema Chodron](#)

Because there is something that *is* stable, and permanent, and unchanging. And that's the Real You.

## The Big Self

Remember the movie "The Matrix?"

In the story, Neo's true self was trapped inside a pink tank of goo. However, even though he was stuck in a tank, he was hooked up to a virtual reality machine that made him think he was living a normal life in a computer-generated world called "The Matrix."

Although we may not be roped into a gestation tank full of pink goo like Neo, the way our minds work is not so different.

Like Neo, we are continually participating in the ultimate virtual reality game. However, we experience this virtual reality through an avatar called, "you."

From the moment that you are born, everything that you sense, fear, and desire is perceived through a human suit that has five senses. Through your days and nights, you ride the roller coaster adventure of this VR world. Your character goes to work, goes on dates, and meets with friends. Through your avatar, you experience the delights – and challenges – of the world. You can think of your avatar as your "Little Self."

But you are not the character in the movie. *You* are the *Presence* that *is watching* the movie. This Presence is your “Big Self.” In our *Matrix* metaphor, your “Big Self” is Neo in the tank, watching the Little Neo have adventures in the Matrix.

When I moved to Vancouver, my Little Self was on a remarkable adventure. Everything in the world was changing for my avatar. I felt all the pain, loss, and loneliness of the main character’s drama. And yet the Presence watching my experience was unchanged. My Big Self was there – unharmed – through all the drama of my life. However, I was so wrapped up in the experience that I often forgot that I was the Presence watching the story rather than the avatar.

When we begin to experience our Presence, we can step back and recognize that the movie isn’t Reality. No matter what turmoil and change is happening in our lives, our Big Self is ultimately okay.

Think about it for a moment. Are you the same *you* that you were five years ago?

Well, in some ways, no. Certainly you have learned new skills, had new adventures, and perhaps changed the external trappings of your life. But is the same *you* looking out of your eyes? How about ten years ago, or twenty? Is the same *you* looking out of your eyes now as was looking out of your eyes when you were a child?

Yes.

Beneath all the change happening in the external world, there is something fundamentally unchanging in *you*. However, we’re usually so busy believing all our thoughts and our feelings that we miss the opportunity to sit in this deeper, unchanging Presence.

### Purusha

According to Yoga philosophy, Purusha is your true, unchanging Big Self. You can choose whatever word you like for it: consciousness, soul, Presence, higher self, absolute, or God. Unlike Prakriti (mother nature), Purusha does not change or shift, but is eternal and steady. Although we get confused and think that we are the stuff in our heads (which is in the realm of Prakriti), we are actually Purusha. We are Presence.

Can you recall a moment where the movie in your head has gone silent? Suddenly, the relentless mind hamsters stopped running around and there you were: present, aware, being. You may have even had a momentary recognition of how deeply you were connected with everything around you.

Many of us have experienced this wondrous awareness in Savasana (corpse pose) or after meditation. In fact, this calm steadiness is often why we come back to our mats again and again. A Big Self moment can also arise spontaneously: walking through a forest, sitting with a loved one, or enjoying a sunset.

When we arrive in our Big Self, we experience that the moment is *now*, there is nowhere else to get to, and nothing better is around the corner.

*This is yoga.*

While we often associate yoga with practicing poses, the goal of yoga is stilling the mind so that we can experience our Presence. Physical movement has only been a part of the yoga tradition for a few hundred years. These poses are simply tools that help to support an awareness of our Presence.

Usually a Big Self will only last a moment or two before our thoughts rush back in and hurry us onto our day, agendas, fears, and obligations. The hamsters start running again! Yoga is a tool to help us to experience our connection to our essential self with more consistency.

Yoga citta vritti nirodhaha

"Yoga is the restraint of the fluctuation of the mindstuff." - Yoga Sutras.

The Yoga Sutras are a compilation of yoga philosophy written by a sage named Patanjali about two thousand years ago. When we quiet the voices in our heads, we stop misidentifying our true self with all our mind chatter. When we stop identifying with the mind, we realize that we are already whole, already complete. The answer to our perpetual cravings for safety isn't outside, it's inside. When the mind stops racing, we discover that WE are the answer that we have been waiting for.

When the stories in our head pause, we have a moment of clarity where we realize that we are not the incessant thoughts that are running through our mind. We are more than our "story." We are the Big Self or witness that lies behind our thoughts. We are the Presence watching the great virtual reality show with love, patience, and kindness.

As we cultivate our capacity to restrain our relentless thoughts and connect with our Presence, we become less dependent on the external world. We don't feel as compelled to defend our identity ("I am a teacher," "I am a happy person," "I am a Democrat," "I am single") because we recognize that these labels are temporary and can't possibly summarize the totality of who we really are.

When we experience Presence, we experience our intrinsic “okayness.” We recognize that the fluctuations of the world, our minds, and our feelings will continue to rock and roll, and we are still safe, happy and free.

### Tat Tvam Asi

From the Upanishads (stories and practices from about 3000 years ago), there is a saying, “Tat Tvam Asi” or, “That thou Art.” In other words, you are the very essence that you are seeking.

“So...” he said, “Tell me something about yourself.”

“Well, Lucas, I’m an eternal being of light, love and presence that is currently experiencing the material world in a changing human form. Mmmmm, wow Starbucks makes a great Americano! And you?”

Yeah, no... I’m not going to say this.

Well, at least not on a first date.

While it’s all well and good to realize that our Big Self is a transcendental Presence that defies material existence, we also live and work (and date) in the real world. We need our senses, egos, bodies and minds to move through through life.

As real-world yogis, our work is to stay connected to the Big Self while we use our Little Self to get around. This is called *mindfulness*, or as I call it, *practicing the pause*.

### Mindfulness

Mindfulness is the practice of staying connected to our Big Self as we negotiate the marvellous complexity of the world.

Connecting to the Big Self doesn’t mean that we don’t get to enjoy all the juiciness of our senses. Quite the contrary! When we are able to stay connected to our Big Self in the present moment, then we can experience our mind and our emotions without being ruled or overwhelmed by them. We can enjoy the richness and adventure of our human experience without losing our centre. In fact, we will be able to enjoy a richer, lusher, and more vibrant experience because we won’t be as scared that we can really be hurt.

## Dating

Dating is the perfect playing ground for practicing mindfulness because of the uncertainty. The terrible, exciting uncertainty.



In our day-to-day lives, we usually can pretend that we can control the world. We have habitual routines that give us a sense of steadiness and we can forget to stay connected to the Big Self.

When we go out on a date, we disrupt our routines and wake up. We can't possibly know how anything is going to go because we're meeting a perfect stranger! During a date, the fundamental uncertainty and shiftiness of the world is exposed. And in the midst of all that chaos, we can practice returning to the fundamental and unshakeable ground of our Big Self.

Through staying connected to the Big Self, we can play the game of dating – and life – with less fear and more possibility.

## Practices

### **Journal Practice: Who am I?**

- Write a list of the adjectives that you often use to describe yourself.
- How would your friends describe you?
- Are these words always accurate?
- If you are not these words, are you still *you*?

### **Reflection: Who am I?**

Looking back at your life, can you think of a time when “you” have not been you?

- Who was looking out of your eyes five years ago?
- Who was looking out of your eyes ten years ago?
- Who was looking out of your eyes when you were a child?

### **Dating Practice: Bring your soul along**

- As you introduce yourself to your date, notice what you say. Notice what your date says. Reflect upon how you both are defining yourself – and why.
- During your date, periodically take a few moments to breathe and clear your mind. Can you sit in the open space of possibility?

### **Meditation Practice: Finding Presence**

Our solution is not outside, but within.

Set a timer for five minutes, or sit as long as you wish.

- Find your meditation seat (see chapter two for more detailed instructions if needed).

- Focus on your breath.
- As the thoughts arise, acknowledge them. Then allow them to fall away. Notice the space between your thoughts.
- Who is watching your thoughts?
- Sit in the space of Presence.

**Yoga practice: Inward looking**

- Forward fold

Close your eyes. Either hold onto opposite arms or bring your fingertips to your shins or the floor. Close your eyes, sense your body, and take five deep breaths.