

The Myth of the Self

By Rafael Mendez

One of psychology's most enduring myths is the myth of the self, the belief that we possess a stable, permanent identity. Culture often encourages us to "find ourselves," "know who we are," and "stay true to ourselves" to a fixed sense of self, which we identify as "me". This belief shapes our education, relationships, careers, and morality. Yet this assumption is misleading and a major source of emotional suffering.

What does it mean to say the self is an illusion? The "self" is not a fixed inner entity but an ongoing process, a continuous flow of sensations, emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. Neurologically, it reflects shifting patterns of neural activity. We experience these mental events as if there were a central "me" behind them, a thinker behind thoughts, and a doer behind our actions. But there is no inner center. There is only activity: thinking, feeling, acting.

This illusion matters because when we believe in a fixed self, we overidentify with the stories we tell about who we are. We cling to roles, the strong one, the smart one, the good parent, the successful professional, because they offer a sense of stability in an impermanent world. Yet life inevitably disrupts these identities through loss, failure, aging, illness, and change. When our identity is threatened, we often experience anxiety, shame, or despair. Emotional distress arises from this dynamic. Narcissism, for example, is not simply vanity but an attempt to protect a fragile identity. Existential anxiety emerges from clinging to a self that life will eventually undermine. Believing in a permanent self creates conflict with the reality of constant change.

We often say we need to "discover" ourselves, but the self is not discovered; it is made up. We assemble it from memories, roles, achievements, and expectations into a story with a narrative. Once formed, we feel compelled to defend and preserve it. When life contradicts our self-image, suffering arises, not always from the event itself, but from the threat it poses to our identity.

Change is inevitable; identifying with a fixed self makes us feel vulnerable. We fear losing status, relationships, or emotional control because each loss seems to erase who we are. This leads to chronic anxiety and self-monitoring, worrying about how we are seen, judged, or valued.

All experiences, thoughts, emotions, and sensations are transient. Emotional suffering intensifies when we resist this impermanence, especially regarding our identity. We say, "This isn't who I am," or "I need to get back to my old self." Instead of allowing emotions to pass, we tighten around them, turning pain into prolonged distress. When difficulties arise, we often personalize them: instead of acknowledging "this happened," we say "something is wrong with me." Temporary emotions become interpreted as permanent flaws, giving rise to shame, guilt, and self-blame.

We will always have experiences and an illusion of self; we just need not over-identify with it. When we understand this, experiences lose their existential threat. Thoughts can arise without defining us. Emotions can be felt without becoming our identity. Change becomes less frightening. In this way, emotional suffering diminishes as pain is no longer compounded by the fear of losing who we think we are.