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*the journey beyond yourself*

**MICHAEL A. SINGER**

## the voice inside your head

“Shoot, I can’t remember her name. What is her name? Darn, here she comes. What is it... Sally... Sue? She just told me yesterday. What’s the matter with me? This is going to be embarrassing.”

In case you haven’t noticed, you have a mental dialogue going on inside your head that never stops. It just keeps going and going. Have you ever wondered why it talks in there? How does it decide what to say and when to say it? How much of what it says turns out to be true? How much of what it says is even important? And if right now you are hearing, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t have any voice inside my head!”—that’s the voice we’re talking about.

If you’re smart, you’ll take the time to step back, examine this voice, and get to know it better. The problem is, you’re too close to be objective. You have to step way back and watch it converse. While you’re driving, you hear internal conversations like,

“Wasn’t I supposed to call Fred? I should have. Oh my God, I can’t believe I forgot! He’s going to be so mad. He may never talk to me again. Maybe I should stop and call him right now. No. I don’t want to stop the car right now...”

Notice that the voice takes both sides of the conversation. It doesn’t care which side it takes, just as long as it gets to keep on talking. When you’re tired and trying to sleep, it’s the voice inside your head that says,

“What am I doing? I can’t go to sleep yet. I forgot to call Fred. I remembered in the car but I didn’t call. If I don’t call now...oh wait, it’s too late. I shouldn’t call him now. I don’t even know why I thought about it. I need to fall asleep. Oh shoot, now I can’t fall asleep. I’m not tired anymore. But I have a big day tomorrow, and I have to get up early.”

No wonder you can’t sleep! Why do you even tolerate that voice talking to you all the time? Even if what it’s saying is soothing and nice, it’s still disturbing everything you’re doing.

If you spend some time observing this mental voice, the first thing you will notice is that it never shuts up. When left to its own, it just talks. Imagine if you were to see someone walking around constantly talking to himself. You’d think he was strange. You’d wonder, “If he’s the one who’s talking and he’s the one who’s listening, he obviously knows what’s going to be said before he says it. So what’s the point?” The same is true for the voice inside your head. Why is it talking? It’s you who’s talking, and it’s you who’s listening. And when the voice argues with itself, who is it arguing with? Who could possibly win? It gets very confusing. Just listen:

“I think I should get married. No! You know you’re not ready. You’ll be sorry. But I love him. Oh come on, you felt that way about Tom. What if you had married him?”

If you watch carefully, you’ll see that it’s just trying to find a comfortable place to rest. It will change sides in a moment if that seems to help. And it doesn’t even quiet down when it finds out that it’s wrong. It simply adjusts its viewpoint and keeps on going. If you pay attention, these mental patterns will become obvious to you. It’s actually a shocking realization when you first notice that your mind is constantly talking. You might even try to yell at it in a feeble attempt to shut it up. But then you realize that’s the voice yelling at the voice:

“Shut up! I want to go to sleep. Why do you have to talk all the time?”

Obviously, you can't shut it up that way. The best way to free yourself from this incessant chatter is to step back and view it objectively. Just view the voice as a vocalizing mechanism that is capable of making it appear like someone is in there talking to you. Don't think about it; just notice it. No matter what the voice is saying, it's all the same. It doesn't matter if it's saying nice things or mean things, worldly things or spiritual things. It doesn't matter because it's still just a voice talking inside your head. In fact, the only way to get your distance from this voice is to stop differentiating what it's saying. Stop feeling that one thing it says is you and the other thing it says is not you. If you're hearing it talk, it's obviously not you. You are the one who hears the voice. You are the one who notices that it's talking.

You do hear it when it talks, don't you? Make it say "hello" right now. Say it over and over a few times. Now shout it inside! Can you hear yourself saying "hello" inside? Of course you can. There is a voice talking, and there is you who notices the voice talking. The problem is that it's easy to notice the voice saying "hello," but it's difficult to see that no matter what the voice says, it is still just a voice talking and you listening. There is absolutely nothing that voice can say that is more you than anything else it says. Suppose you were looking at three objects—a flowerpot, a photograph, and a book—and were then asked, "Which of these objects is you?" You'd say, "None of them! I'm the one who's looking at what you're putting in front of me. It doesn't matter what you put in front of me, it's always going to be me looking at it." You see, it's an act of a subject perceiving various objects. This is also true of hearing the voice inside. It doesn't make any difference what it's saying, you are the one who is aware of it. As long as you think that one thing it's saying is you, but the other thing it's saying is not you, you've lost your objectivity. You may want to think of yourself as the part that says the nice things, but that's still the voice talking. You may like what it says, but it's not you.

There is nothing more important to true growth than realizing that you are not the voice of the mind—you are the one who hears it. If you don't understand this, you will try to figure out which of the many things the voice says is really you. People go through so many changes in the name of "trying to find myself." They want to discover which of these voices, which of these aspects of their personality, is who they really are. The answer is simple: none of them.

If you watch it objectively, you will come to see that much of what the voice says is meaningless. Most of the talking is just a waste of time and energy. The truth is that most of life will unfold in accordance with forces far outside your control, regardless of what your mind says about it. It's like sitting down at night and deciding whether you want the sun to come up in the morning. The bottom line is, the sun will come up and the sun will go down. Billions of things are going on in this world. You can think about it all you want, but life is still going to keep on happening.

In fact, your thoughts have far less impact on this world than you would like to think. If you're willing to be objective and watch all your thoughts, you will see that the vast majority of them have no relevance. They have no effect on anything or anybody, except you. They are simply making you feel better or worse about what is going on now, what has gone on in the past, or what might go on in the future. If you spend your time hoping that it doesn't rain tomorrow, you are wasting your time. Your thoughts don't change the rain. You will someday come to see that there is no use for that incessant internal chatter, and there is no reason to constantly attempt to figure everything out. Eventually you will see that the real cause of problems is not life itself. It's the commotion the mind makes about life that really causes problems.

Now this raises a serious question: If so much of what the voice says is meaningless and unnecessary, then why does it even exist? The secret to answering this question lies in understanding why it says what it says when it says it. For example, in some cases the mental voice talks for the same reason that a teakettle whistles. That is, there's a buildup of energy inside that needs to be released. If you watch objectively, you will see that when there's a buildup of nervous, fearful, or desire-based energies inside, the voice becomes extremely active. This is easy to see when you are angry with someone and you feel like telling them off. Just watch how many times the inner voice tells them off before you even see them. When energy builds up inside, you want to do something about it. That voice talks because you're not okay inside, and talking releases energy.

You will notice, however, that even when you're not particularly bothered by something, it still talks. When you're walking down the street it says things like,

"Look at that dog! It's a Labrador! Hey, there's another dog in that car. He looks a lot like my first dog, Shadow. Whoa, there's an old Oldsmobile. It's got Alaska plates. You don't see many of those down here!"

It is actually narrating the world for you. But why do you need this? You already see what's happening outside; how does it help to repeat it to yourself through the mental voice? You should examine this very closely. With a simple glance, you instantly take in the tremendous detail of whatever you're looking at. If you see a tree, you effortlessly see the branches, the leaves, and the flowering buds. Why then do you have to verbalize what you have already seen?

"Look at that dogwood. The green leaves are so beautiful against the white flowers. Look how many flowers there are. Wow, it's so full!"

What you'll see, if you study this carefully, is that the narration makes you feel more comfortable with the world around you. Like backseat driving, it makes you feel as though things are more in your control. You actually feel like you have some relationship with them. A tree is no longer just a tree in the world that has nothing to do with you; it is a tree that you saw, labeled, and judged. By verbalizing it mentally, you brought that initial direct experience of the world into the realm of your thoughts. There it becomes integrated with your other thoughts, such as those making up your value system and historical experiences.

Take a moment to examine the difference between your experience of the outside world and your interactions with the mental world. When you're just thinking, you're free to create whatever thoughts you want in your mind, and these thoughts are expressed through the voice. You are very accustomed to settling into the playground of the mind and creating and manipulating thoughts. This inner world is an alternate environment that is under your control. The outside world, however, marches to its own laws. When the voice narrates the outside world to you, those thoughts are now side by side, in parity, with all your other thoughts. All these thoughts intermix and actually influence your experience of the world around you. What you end up experiencing is really a personal presentation of the world according to you, rather than the stark, unfiltered experience of what is really out there. This mental manipulation of the outer experience allows you to buffer reality as it comes in. For example, there are myriad things that you see at any given moment, yet you only narrate a few of them. The ones you discuss in your mind are the ones that matter to you. With this subtle form of preprocessing, you manage to control the experience of reality so that it all fits together inside your mind. Your consciousness is actually experiencing your mental model of reality, not reality itself.

You have to watch this very carefully because you do it all the time. You're walking outside in the winter, you start to shiver, and the voice says, "It's cold!" Now how did that help you? You already knew it was cold. You're the one who's experiencing the cold. Why is it telling you this? You re-create the world within your mind because you can control your mind whereas you can't control the world. That is why you mentally talk about it. If you can't get the world the way you like it, you internally verbalize it, judge it, complain about it, and then decide what to do about it. This makes you feel more empowered. When your body experiences cold, there may be nothing you can do to affect the temperature. But when your mind verbalizes, "It's cold!" you can say, "We're almost home, just a few more minutes." Now you feel better. In the thought world there's always something you can do to control the experience.

Basically, you re-create the outside world inside yourself, and then you live in your mind. What if you decided not to do this? If you decide not to narrate and, instead, just consciously observe the world, you will feel more open and exposed. This is because you really don't know what will happen next, and your mind is accustomed to helping you. It does this by processing your current experiences in a way that makes them fit with your views of the past and visions of the future. All of this helps to create a semblance of control. If your mind doesn't do this, you simply become too uncomfortable. Reality is just too real for most of us, so we temper it with the mind.

You will come to see that the mind talks all the time because you gave it a job to do. You use it as a protection mechanism, a form of defense. Ultimately, it makes you feel more secure. As long as that's what you want, you will be forced to constantly use your mind to buffer yourself from life, instead of living it. This world is unfolding and really has very little to do with you or your thoughts. It was here long before you came, and it will be here long after you leave. In the name of attempting to hold the world together, you're really just trying to hold yourself together.

True personal growth is about transcending the part of you that is not okay and needs protection. This is done by constantly remembering that you are the one inside that notices the voice talking. That is the way out. The one inside who is aware that you are always talking to yourself about yourself is always silent. It is a doorway to the depths of your being. To be aware that you are watching the voice talk is to stand on the threshold of a fantastic inner journey. If used properly, the same mental voice that has been a source of worry, distraction, and general neurosis can become the launching ground for true spiritual awakening. Come to know the one who watches the voice, and you will come to know one of the great mysteries of creation.

## your inner roommate

Your inner growth is completely dependent upon the realization that the only way to find peace and contentment is to stop thinking about yourself. You're ready to grow when you finally realize that the "I" who is always talking inside will never be content. It always has a problem with something. Honestly, when was the last time you really had nothing bothering you? Before you had your current problem, there was a different problem. And if you're wise, you will realize that after this one's gone, there will be another one.

The bottom line is, you'll never be free of problems until you are free from the part within that has so many problems. When a problem is disturbing you, don't ask, "What should I do about it?" Ask, "What part of me is being disturbed by this?" If you ask, "What should I do about it?" you've already fallen into believing that there really is a problem outside that must be dealt with. If you want to achieve peace in the face of your problems, you must understand why you perceive a particular situation as a problem. If you're feeling jealousy, instead of trying to see how you can protect yourself, just ask, "What part of me is jealous?" That will cause you to look inside and see that there's a part of you that's having a problem with jealousy.

Once you clearly see the disturbed part, then ask, "Who is it that sees this? Who notices this inner disturbance?" Asking this is the solution to your every problem. The very fact that you can see the disturbance means that you are not it. The process of seeing something requires a subject-object relationship. The subject is called "The Witness" because it is the one who sees what's happening. The object is what you are seeing, in this case the inner disturbance. This act of maintaining objective awareness of the inner problem is always better than losing yourself in the outer situation. This is the essential difference between a spiritually minded person and a worldly person. Worldly doesn't mean that you have money or stature. Worldly means that you think the solution to your inner problems is in the world outside. You think that if you change things outside, you'll be okay. But nobody has ever truly become okay by changing things outside. There's always the next problem. The only real solution is to take the seat of witness consciousness and completely change your frame of reference.

To attain true inner freedom, you must be able to objectively watch your problems instead of being lost in them. No solution can possibly exist while you're lost in the energy of a problem. Everyone knows you can't deal well with a situation if you're getting anxious, scared, or angry about it. The first problem you have to deal with is your own reaction. You will not be able to solve anything outside until you own how the situation affects you inside. Problems are generally not what they appear to be. When you get clear enough, you will realize that the real problem is that there is something inside of you that can have a problem with almost anything. The first step is to deal with that part of you. This involves a change from "outer solution consciousness" to "inner solution consciousness." You have to break the habit of thinking that the solution to your problems is to rearrange things outside. The only permanent solution to your problems is to go inside and let go of the part of you that seems to have so many problems with reality. Once you do that, you'll be clear enough to deal with what's left.

There really is a way to let go of the part of you that sees everything as a problem. It may seem impossible, but it's not. There is a part of your being that can actually abstract from your own melodrama. You can watch yourself be jealous or angry. You don't have to think about it or analyze it; you can just be aware of it. Who is it that sees all this? Who notices the changes going on inside? When you tell a friend, "Every time I talk to Tom, it gets me so upset," how do you know it gets you upset? You know that it gets you upset because you're in there and you see what's going on in there. There's a separation between you and the anger or the jealousy. You are the one who's in there noticing these things. Once you take that seat of consciousness, you can get rid of these personal disturbances. You start by watching. Just be aware that you are aware of what is going on in there. It's easy. What you'll notice is that you're watching a human being's personality with all its

strengths and weaknesses. It's as though there's somebody in there with you. You might actually say you have a "roommate."

If you would like to meet your roommate, just try to sit inside yourself for a while in complete solitude and silence. You have the right; it's your inner domain. But instead of finding silence, you're going to listen to incessant chatter:

"Why am I doing this? I have more important things to do. This is a waste of time. There's nobody in here but me. What's this all about?"

Right on cue, there's your roommate. You may have a clear intention to be quiet inside, but your roommate won't cooperate. And it's not just when you try to be quiet. It has something to say about everything you look at: "I like it. I don't like it. This is good. That's bad." It just talks and talks. You don't generally notice because you don't step back from it. You're so close that you don't realize that you're actually hypnotized into listening to it.

Basically, you're not alone in there. There are two distinct aspects of your inner being. The first is you, the awareness, the witness, the center of your willful intentions; and the other is that which you watch. The problem is, the part that you watch never shuts up. If you could get rid of that part, even for a moment, the peace and serenity would be the nicest vacation you've ever had.

Imagine what it would be like if you didn't have to bring this thing with you everywhere you go. Real spiritual growth is about getting out of this predicament. But first you have to realize that you've been locked in there with a maniac. In any situation or circumstance, your roommate could suddenly decide, "I don't want to be here. I don't want to do this. I don't want to talk to this person." You would immediately feel tense and uncomfortable. Your roommate can ruin anything you're doing without a moment's notice. It could ruin your wedding day, or even your wedding night! That part of you can ruin anything and everything, and it generally does.

You buy a brand-new car and it's beautiful. But every time you drive it, your inner roommate finds something wrong with it. The mental voice keeps pointing out every little squeak, every little vibration, until eventually you don't even like the car anymore. Once you see what this can do to your life, you are ready for spiritual growth. You're ready for real transformation when you finally say, "Look at this thing. It's ruining my life. I'm trying to live a peaceful, meaningful existence, but I feel like I'm sitting on top of a volcano. At any moment this thing can decide to freak, close down, and fight with what's happening. One day it likes someone, and the next day it decides to pick on everything they do. My life is a mess just because this thing that lives in here with me has to make a melodrama out of everything." Once you've seen this, and learn to no longer identify with your roommate, you're ready to free yourself.

If you haven't reached this awareness yet, just start to watch. Spend a day watching every single thing your roommate does. Start in the morning and see if you can notice what it's saying in every situation. Every time you meet somebody, every time the phone rings, just try to watch. A good time to watch it talk is while you're taking a shower. Just watch what that voice has to say. You will see that it never lets you just take a peaceful shower. Your shower is for washing the body, not for watching the mind talk nonstop. See if you can stay conscious enough throughout the entire experience to be aware of what's going on. You'll be shocked by what you see. It just jumps from one subject to the next. The incessant chatter seems so neurotic that you won't believe that it's always that way. But it is.

You have to watch this if you want to be free of it. You don't have to do anything about it, but you have to get wise to the predicament you're in. You have to realize that somehow you've ended up with a mess for an inner roommate. If you want it to be peaceful in there, you're going to have to fix this situation.

The way to catch on to what your inner roommate is really like is to personify it externally. Make believe that your roommate, the psyche, has a body of its own. You do this by taking the entire personality that you hear talking to you inside and imagine it as a person talking to you on the outside. Just imagine that another person is now saying everything that your inner voice would say. Now spend a day with that person.

You've just sat down to watch your favorite TV show. The problem is, you have this person with you. Now you'll get to hear the same incessant monologue that used to be inside, except that it's sitting next to you on the couch talking to itself:

“Did you turn off the light downstairs? You better go check. Not now, I’ll do it later. I want to finish watching the show. No, do it now. That’s why the electric bill is so high.”

You sit in silent awe, watching all of this. Then, a few seconds later, your couch-mate is engaged in another dispute:

“Hey, I want to get something to eat! I’m craving some pizza. No, you can’t have pizza now; it’s too far to drive. But I’m hungry. When will I get to eat?”

To your amazement, these neurotic bursts of conflicting dialogue just keep going on and on. And as if that’s not enough, instead of simply watching TV, this person starts verbally reacting to whatever comes on the screen. At one point, after a redhead appears on the show, your couch-mate starts mumbling about an ex-spouse and a painful divorce. Then the yelling starts—just as though the ex-spouse were in the room with you! Then it stops, just as suddenly as it started. At this point, you find yourself hugging the far corner of the couch in a desperate attempt to get as far away from this disturbed person as you possibly can.

Will you dare to do this experiment? Don’t try to make the person stop talking. Just try to get to know what you live with inside by externalizing the voice. Give it a body and put it out there in the world just like everybody else. Let it be a person who says on the outside exactly what the voice of your mind says inside. Now make that person your best friend. After all, how many friends do you spend all of your time with and pay absolute attention to every word they say?

How would you feel if someone outside really started talking to you the way your inner voice does? How would you relate to a person who opened their mouth to say everything your mental voice says? After a very short period of time, you would tell them to leave and never come back. But when your inner friend continuously speaks up, you don’t ever tell it to leave. No matter how much trouble it causes, you listen. There’s almost nothing that voice can say that you don’t pay full attention to. It pulls you right out of whatever you’re doing, no matter how enjoyable, and suddenly you’re paying attention to whatever it has to say. Imagine that you’re in a serious relationship and are about to get married. You’re driving to the wedding and it says,

“Maybe this is not the right person. I’m really getting nervous about this. What should I do?”

If someone outside of you said that, you’d ignore them. But you feel you owe the voice an answer. You have to convince your nervous mind that this is the right person, or it won’t let you walk down the aisle. That’s how much respect you have for this neurotic thing inside of you. You know that if you don’t listen to it, it will bother you every day of your life:

“I told you not to get married. I said I wasn’t sure!”

The bottom line is undeniable: If somehow that voice managed to manifest in a body outside of you, and you had to take it with you everywhere you went, you wouldn’t last a day. If somebody were to ask you what your new friend is like, you’d say, “This is one seriously disturbed person. Just look up *neurosis* in the dictionary and you’ll get the picture.”

That being the case, once you’ve spent a day with your friend, what is the probability you’d go to them for advice? After seeing how often this person changed their mind, how conflicted they were on so many subjects, and how emotionally overreactive they tended to be,

would you ever ask them for relationship or financial advice? As amazing as it seems, you do just that every moment of your life. Having taken its rightful place back inside of you, it is still the same “person” who tells you what to do about every aspect of your life. Have you ever bothered to check its credentials? How many times has that voice been totally wrong?

“She doesn’t care for you anymore. That’s why she hasn’t called. She’s going to break up with you tonight.

I can feel it coming; I just know it. You shouldn’t even answer the phone if she calls.”

After thirty minutes of this, the phone rings and it’s your girlfriend. She’s late because it’s your one-year anniversary and she was preparing for a surprise dinner. It was definitely a surprise to you, since you completely forgot the anniversary. She says she’s on her way over to pick you up. Well, you’re very excited and your inner voice is chatting about how great she is. But haven’t you forgotten something? Haven’t you forgotten about the bad advice the inner voice gave you that caused you to suffer for the last half hour?

What if you had hired a relationship advisor who had given you that terrible advice? They had completely misread the entire situation. Had you listened to the advisor, you never would have picked up the phone. Wouldn’t you fire them on the spot? How could you ever trust their advice again after seeing how wrong they were? Well, are you going to fire your inner roommate? After all, its advice and analysis of the situation were totally wrong. No, you never hold it responsible for the trouble it causes. In fact, the next time it gives advice, you’re all ears. Is that rational? How many times has that voice been wrong about what was going on or what will be going on? Maybe it’s worth noticing whom you’re going to for advice.

When you’ve sincerely tried these practices of self-observation and awareness, you’ll see that you’re in trouble. You’ll realize that you’ve only had one problem your entire life, and you’re looking at it. It’s pretty much the cause of every problem you’ve ever had. Now the question becomes, how do you get rid of this inner troublemaker? The first thing you’ll realize is that there’s no hope of getting rid of it until you really want to. Until you’ve watched your roommate long enough to truly understand the predicament you’re in, you really have no basis for practices that help you deal with the mind. Once you’ve made the decision to free yourself from the mental melodrama, you are ready for teachings and techniques. You will now have a real use for them.

You will be relieved to know that you are not the first person to have this problem. There are those who have gone before you who found themselves in the same situation. Many of them looked for guidance from those who had mastered this field of knowledge. They were given teachings and techniques, such as yoga, which were created to help in this process. Yoga is not really about getting your body healthy, although it does that too. Yoga is about the knowledge that will help you out of your predicament, the knowledge that can free you. Once you’ve made this freedom the meaning of your life, there are spiritual practices that can help you. These practices are what you do with your time in order to free yourself from yourself. You will eventually catch on that you have to distance yourself from your psyche. You do this by setting the direction of your life when you’re clear and not letting the wavering mind deter you. Your will is stronger than the habit of listening to that voice. There is nothing you can’t do. Your will is supreme over all of this.

If you want to free yourself, you must first become conscious enough to understand your predicament. Then you must commit yourself to the inner work of freedom. You do this as though your life depended on it, because it does. As it is right now, your life is not your own; it belongs to your inner roommate, the psyche. You have to take it back. Stand firm in the seat of the witness and release the hold that the habitual mind has on you. This is your life—reclaim it.