

Who are we?

1b Identity



TEACHER'S NOTES

ACTIVITIES

Young British Buddhists explore identity.

Discuss before working online

- What do we mean when we talk about a person's "identity" or "personality"?
- What does it mean, to "know who you are"?

In the video, notice what people say about

- self and identity
- the way people feel about themselves

Online video clip: 4.5 mins

The teaching of no (fixed) self

Buddhism has a particular contribution to make to discussions of community cohesion and identity. Identity is something we all need. According to Buddhism, it's also something to let go of, again and again, in every moment.

The Buddhists in the video explain the teaching of no fixed self (*anatman/anatta*). In the Buddhist view, everything is composite and depends on other things. Thus, everything changes constantly, including us (*anitya/anicca*).

The most famous scriptural exposition of *anatman/anatta* describes the monk Nagasena's discussion of a chariot with the ancient king Milinda. Where does the essence of the chariot lie? The king cannot answer. "Chariot" is a concept applied to a temporary arrangement of wheels, chassis, reins, etc. So it is with our moods and thoughts, and our bodies which alter as our nails grow and stomachs fill and empty. Thus, there is no soul, no unchanging pure essence which outlives the body.

Buddhism simply observes that this is the Way Things Are - and when we behave as though things did have a fixed identity we suffer because we are not behaving in accordance with Reality.

Nurturing what is positive in tradition can provide security and help build community – up to a point. However, clutching at a sense of **me**, **my** culture, **my** tradition (even **my Buddhism**) leads to disharmony, defensiveness, warfare; polarisation with people who are "not like us".

Activities

1 Groups Brainstorm all the types or groups you belong to, and the labels people give themselves and other groups; eg. Sri Lankan, Muslim, white, boys, redheads, etc. Does each person just have one label? Get people to stand in one kind of grouping, and then another. How much do people move? Does anyone not move at all? What does this tell you about people, identities and labels?

2 Discussion A sportswear company uses an image of a meditating Buddhist monk to advertise their new trainers in the UK. (This activity is based on a true story.) Some UK Buddhists are offended by this and protest against the advert. Many of these Buddhists' families come from traditionally Buddhist countries in Asia. Other Buddhists say it doesn't matter very much. Many of these Buddhists are white or black people who have become Buddhists. Consider questions of **identity**, **ethnicity**, **tradition**, **understanding** and respect.

- What part do you think Buddhists' different ethnic backgrounds might play in the ways they respond to the advert?
- Why might two Buddhists of the same background take differing views?

3 Webquest

If there is no such thing as a fixed self, it makes no sense to label or fix people. **Pink Stinks** and **Cool to be me** look at assumptions about girls' and young women's behaviour, clothing and interests. If you're a boy/young man, see if these sites remind you of similar assumptions about boys. As you look through them, make notes or drawings about anything you find interesting. In writing, artwork or a presentation explain

- some aspects of who you are/what sort of person you are
- who/what you would like to become or do
- any beliefs or assumptions you think get in the way – your own or other people's.

Web sites appear online.

Activities are abbreviated from online materials.

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INFORMATION



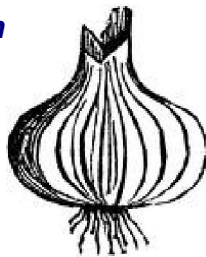
Young British Buddhists explore identity.

Identity and the onion

In the video Venerable Amaranatho says:

If we look at our identity, we can see it in terms of an onion. We're just peeling off the layers, layer upon layer, and slowly as well, and we're investigating each layer as it comes off. And although we reconstruct it at the end because we need to function the world, the essence is that there is no onion.

This sounds a bit mysterious. What is he talking about?!



We see an onion as a thing and think "onion". However, Buddhism says that if we take away the layers there is nothing left which we can truly call an onion.

When he talks of peeling off the layers slowly, Amaranatho is referring to the way a Buddhist may choose to reflect on the various aspects of their personality or identity. Doing this, they will see that there is nothing fixed about them: each of us is a collection of tendencies and habits developed in response to all the things which have influenced us in life.

Buddhism says everything is like that. There is no bit of Amaranatho which remains the **real** Amaranatho if we take away all the other bits.

So Buddhism says we have no fixed identity or personality that we need to protect. Everything is always changin. For example, while you are reading this, you are having mental responses to what you are reading and your hair and nails are growing.

Buddhism teaches that eventually, with practice, we can come to see that there are really no "things" at all; just processes.

However, only a Buddha could really live like this. People who are not Enlightened yet still need a sense of self, and some healthy self-respect. That means most of us.

Everyone can change for the better

If there is nothing about us which is fixed, it follows that we can all change for the better.

Buddhism teaches that as we make an effort to act more kindly and wisely we will become happier, kinder, wiser people. (If we put energy into our unhelpful habits, we will still change, but become more and more unhappy and unpleasant to know!)

