

Finding Your Original Face

A Spiritual Approach to Body Dysmorphia



'What did your face look like before you were born?'

Zen Koan¹

In Zen Buddhism a *koan* is a paradoxical puzzle; one without any solution which can be put into words. Its intent is to break us free from limiting perceptions, opening us up to seeing reality in a whole new way.

The koan beginning this essay poses a nonsensical question (of course you didn't have a face before you were born!) in order to have us reflect on the deepest of questions: who we truly are. This question of *core identity* is central to all the world's spiritual traditions and formed the basis of my investigation into body image distress.

My interest in dysmorphia emerged in 2014 after watching the BBC documentary *Too Ugly for Love*.² This program followed three people whose lives were severely handicapped by self perceived ugliness. Something about it captivated me. On one level, I could detach and view it as a fascinating insight into the corruptibility of human perception. On another, I could feel compassion for the seemingly needless suffering. On another still, perhaps I also

recognised elements of that suffering within myself, however difficult it was to admit it.

I had at that time been involved in spiritual philosophy and the practice of meditation for over a decade.³ Watching the documentary, I was struck by certain parallels. Throughout the ages those with mystical inclinations have often had a rather awkward relationship with their physicality. Clinging to the purity of the soul, they reject the body as a kind of prison we are confined to.⁴ Paradoxically, spirituality also has an emphasis on embodiment practices, seeking union of body and soul. Could it also hold the solution, a path out of the pain of dysmorphia?

Over the next couple of years I worked on developing meditative exercises to address body image distress. I was fortunate to be involved in a spiritual study group, which provided a space to trial these exercises. This also enabled me to have a lot of fascinating conversations about appearance concerns, things most people would never normally voice. It was astounding to me that I had so many friends whose lives had been restricted to some degree by how they perceived they looked. Equally astounding was that I could have known them for years and wouldn't have had a clue that this was the case.

In 2015 I made the acquaintance of Dr. Nicole Schnackenberg, who was then in the process of publishing her book, *False Bodies, True Selves*, which also explored a spiritual approach to dysmorphia.⁵ It was wonderful to meet someone who also thought there was value in such an approach. The following year we began an online support group together, with the aim of providing a space where participants could look at body image issues through a spiritual lens.⁶

This leads me to the subject of this essay. In 2018 I emailed the members of our group to ask if any of them would participate in a study. The plan was for me to deliver approximately six meditation based sessions, with participants filling out a before and after questionnaire, so it would be possible to qualitatively assess if the process had been helpful.⁷

In a moment I'll describe the nature of the study, as well as the effects participants observed their engagement had on them. Before I do so, I would like to emphasise that I do not think any grand conclusions can be drawn from this endeavour. That was not my intention. When dealing with something as complex as the human psyche, countless variables prevent firm conclusions from being reached. With that being said, there are of course valuable insights to be gained from listening to people's lived experience, and courses of action that can be cautiously derived from them.

To begin, I think it's worth touching on the reasons people gave for wanting to participate in the study. Here are some examples:

'From the age of fourteen I have been generally dissatisfied with my body and my overall self. I have had times where I feel better but deep down I am not.'

'I have had a severe dislike of my body and appearance from as early as I can remember. I was only diagnosed with Body Dysmorphic Disorder (BDD) at the age of twenty-eight. Before then I just thought everyone felt the same hatred about themselves.'

'I have always had issues related to my appearance. They limit me from living my life fully and sometimes they can preoccupy my every thought.'

'I really need to learn what it is to love myself, and how to do that. That is not something that comes naturally for me and never really has. My experience has been traumatic in so many different ways. My self-confidence is non-existent. I am extremely critical of myself. I suffer with extreme anxiety because I am so worried about what people think about the way I look. I have caused severe scarring on so many places on my body. This causes me a lot of shame as well. I often isolate myself because I do not want anyone to see me this way.'

'Since as far back as I can remember I have had a sense of feeling "weird" and "disgusting" in my appearance. When I first articulated this at around five years old I'd identified I had a weird belly button which I felt was so disgusting I couldn't ever let anyone see it. I wasn't like other humans because no one else had what I had, and so I had to hide this forever and I would never have a normal relationship when I was an adult. I spent all my school years hiding this away whenever we had to change for PE at school, and lived in fear of anyone seeing it. At around eight I became obsessed with my pointy ears and felt they also meant I was not a normal human and would just have to accept that for the rest of my life. In secondary school this began to affect my confidence to socialise, as I felt I didn't have anything to say and if anyone knew how ugly I really was underneath my hair and clothes no one would like me. I felt my worth was fully based on how I looked.'

Some participants were specifically interested due to the meditation aspect, or had a sense that their issues had a deeper, perhaps spiritual, root:

'I would like to take part because I'm interested in how mindfulness can help us cope with suffering and I'm curious to further learn about

mindfulness. I hope to gain more awareness of mindfulness, more experience in mindfulness practice and hopefully a deeper understanding of my own suffering and perhaps how to alleviate it.'

'I'm turning thirty-two in less than two weeks and I have been thinking a lot about who I truly am—my "authentic self." I strongly suspect that the challenges I face with body image have much to do with my inability to perceive who I am and what I want to do with my life.'

The underlying ideology of the study drew on various aspects of spirituality and focused on different areas depending on the needs of the individual participant. During the first session I would attempt to get a sense of which direction the participant was drawn to.

The most foundational aspect of the sessions was a pure meditation exercise, which formed a basis for everything else. This exercise went beyond a simple mindfulness style meditation, where attention may be placed upon the breath. With the breath as a starting point, I would have participants turn their attention around to look into their own centre, becoming aware of awareness itself—or put another way—*to look at the thing which is looking*.

Viewed esoterically, this process represents a dissolution of the self into the ocean of consciousness from where it arises. On a more mundane level, it is an immersion into a deeply calm state of mind, akin to embracing the relaxation of deep sleep whilst remaining wide awake.

Even here however, there is some level of variation in what participants would do. For some, the most basic aspect of simply watching the breath was sufficient, they preferred a tangible anchor and would get lost when turning attention inwards. Other participants greatly benefited from the deeper aspect:

'The level of self enquiry and discovery of a deep consciousness will stay with me and I found this approach new to me and hugely rewarding and interesting. It has reinvigorated my exploration of meditation and awakened an awareness and curiousness of human consciousness I've never experienced. It has been refreshing to work with my mind in a way that is not as much about problem-solving but more about exploration.'

'I've learnt to go deeper into meditation, which has given me access to a greater sense of connectedness to the world (which I struggled with before).'

'I am becoming more and more interested in meditation because I have found that there is an absolute bliss that I experience when meditating. It

really is like time does not exist. The timeless feeling is brief but absolutely amazing and strangely enough it feels like an eternity. I wonder if that is what is meant by time bending in on itself, or something to that effect.’

Beyond its innate benefits, the meditation established a foundation for an introspection exercise exploring the roots of distress. It does so by shifting a person’s sense of identity to a deeper place within, away from thoughts and towards the blank canvas of awareness in which they arise. Cultivating this insight that ‘I am not my thoughts’ is essential if we are to gain any real insight into their truth or falsehood—we must first disentangle our *self* from them.

The *self inquiry* process consists of entering a meditative awareness, placing attention on whatever feelings may naturally arise, then very patiently allowing deeper insight to emerge. During this process a participant will invariably be drawn back into swirling thoughts, so it is important to regularly reconnect with that calm sense of awareness.

As the facilitator I am also engaging in meditation; reflecting on anything the participant says and offering questions intended to draw out greater insight.

I should emphasise that this is completely different to *thinking* about what the root of a problem might be, instead it is a direct *experience* of that root:

‘The self enquiries were really useful to me and made me think about things in a different way to before.’

‘I realised during the sessions that my issues and trauma coping mechanisms are deeply layered. What has stayed with me the most is the understanding that there is more behind each layer—and that what is behind isn’t necessarily what is indicated by the emotions (fear, anxiety, anger, sadness) on the surface.’

‘With therapy alone, I always feel like I’m just skating on the surface in dialogue. Therapy I have had that incorporated meditation allowed me to at least feel how I experience certain uncomfortable emotions. These sessions allowed me to reach even beyond that to see that there are stories, memories and more of myself beyond the scarier overwhelming feelings.’

‘One of the most important things I learnt from the sessions was to really listen to what my emotions are trying to tell me. From my experience, the more I resist my emotions or avoid them, the stronger they become. I now realise that it is because they are trying to tell me something. Learning this technique has been life changing.’

‘Regarding the effectiveness for improving my perspective and aiding me with my issues, I was very surprised at what emotions and thoughts that were conjured up in the sessions and this has helped me identify reasons for my issues that hadn’t previously crossed my mind and allowed me to come to terms with this through using it as a tool to turn around my negative thoughts.’

‘I also found it helpful to stay with the feelings in the body rather than engage with the mind. Engaging with the mind was a defence mechanism for me already and rationalising kept me in my head. Closing my eyes and “being with my defences fully and in the body without judgement” helped to clarify them for myself and later put them into words. I believe that insight sessions should be focused mainly on the body sensations as they usually revealed the deeper defences that I had to “numb out and intellectualise” and helped uncover what they were actually defending deep down.’

‘I discovered deeper issues that the shame was covering up including hating being hypersensitive and linking it to being weak, feeling childish, inadequate, and “dorky” and disowning it over many years. I feel some more acceptance towards this than before and less judgemental about myself.’

‘During the self enquiries I experienced certain moments that were really helpful, especially stuff coming up around my mum; jealousy and certain things that have happened to me which seemed to be blocked. Discovering this block was important to me, as before I wasn't aware I had any blocks or if I did what they were.’

‘Dialoguing with the BDD was also extremely helpful to understand the role it plays and why it is there, how it “feels” and I hope move that on going forward—in particular identifying the theme of safety which came up a lot through the sessions and I think is a key factor underlying the BDD and to recovering from it.

It is worth emphasising a particular aspect of the inquiry process, as well as the sessions in general, the aspect of *acceptance*. There is a seeming tension between self-transformation and self-acceptance. People, of course, sign up to therapeutic programs with transformation in mind. They wish to be somewhere they currently are not. This constant effort to change can itself add to a person's woes, in addition to being counter productive. The contradiction resolves in realising that acceptance is foundational to transformation. Only through acceptance can we come to clearly see what is going on within us.

With the meditation exercise as a foundation, I would encourage participants to set down the desire for change, and instead simply greet what was arising within them. To not necessarily see seemingly negative aspects as bad, but rather to take an interest in them:

‘It’s such a relief to be able to be free of the tyranny of words and constantly having to define reality, and just be.’

‘I can say that I do feel like the sessions have had a very positive impact on my daily life. I have learned to be accepting of myself. This is not something I have really ever been able to do. By accepting myself for who I am, I am actually liking the person I am, which is very different from really not liking myself at all.’

‘I have never learnt to accept things for what they are. This concept has never ever been introduced to me before. Usually it is always about discussing and trying to understand what the problem is. Never has any therapy I have had, ever been about acceptance in any way.’

‘I know that I have a right to my feelings and that I explain my body dysmorphic disorder better. I am no longer ashamed.’

Some participants were not interested in the spiritual philosophy underpinning the approach, if that was the case it proved possible to not overemphasise that aspect. For others, it made a big difference:

‘I felt that my request to keep spiritually/religious themes to a minimum was dealt with and I didn’t feel like anything ever affected my trust in the process.’

‘The sessions have opened my eyes to a more positive belief system in the form of a non-dual way of thinking, the idea that things don’t need to be either/or, they can be both at the same time. This idea has given me a way to apply spiritual practices to my everyday life, and reduced feeling the need to be perfect. I am positive about my future. I feel that I have seen a glimmer of hope and peace which previously I had to look very hard for, and now I’m finding it less and less difficult.’

I believe it is worth specifically mentioning death and bereavement. This may feel out of place, but several participants indicated a fear of death (their own or that of others) lurked behind their body image distress. It also brings in another aspect of a spiritual approach, that of Near Death Experience (NDE) research. Whatever a person’s opinion on the topic, engaging with NDE literature has been shown to grant some of the same benefits of people who undergo NDEs:⁸

‘It was helpful to be able to explore verbally painful areas of my experience and find a release, such as the grief over my father’s death and the dread of anticipating my mother’s death.’

‘The sessions have awakened a curiousness in spirituality for me and I am actively exploring this side of myself. I have had discussions with my family about this and they would notice a marked change in my opinions on the subject. This included changing opinions around the continuation of life after death, in part due discussing information on the near death experience phenomenon.’

‘I rarely talk about my fear of death and when I’m feeling really negative and that life is pointless I often keep this to myself so I don’t bother other people, or because when I have shared things like this people have tried to solve my problem for me or try to talk me out of having the problem which hasn’t been helpful. In these sessions it was a nice relief for this to not be the case and actually be useful for me and not feel ashamed for sharing it.’

I wanted to ensure participants went away able to sustain an involvement with spirituality. This was more important to me than pushing to attain a big healing effect during the sessions:

‘I see my future as me doing some self-inquiry at home, and possibly sharing the experience with my partner. I didn’t see myself ever doing this as I always thought “meditation” would take a long time and I wouldn’t be able to focus. I am interested in finding some audio meditation as I feel I connect with those more because of having prompts, rather than quiet time.’

‘I think I will find it hard to gain new insight, without the guidance and alternative views of another person. However as a whole I am much more positive about the future and it’s allowed me to look forward to all the good things in my life. This was difficult to do previously because my mind was too fogged with worries and anxiety. I hope to be able to keep up the positive outlook with the meditation recording and exploring other articles and videos.’

‘I’m going to return to spiritual healing sessions to nurture and develop a spiritual appreciation of life.’

‘I am actively seeking out new experiences and considering how to further my mindfulness and meditation practice. I am now meditating daily again

and for longer periods and I'm hoping to keep going on the journey of self-enquiry.'

'I now feel more hopeful. I was quite anxious previously as my psychologist I really liked and was the first one I had found helpful and we were making progress—suddenly left in November last year for personal reasons—and I felt rather lost and like I was walking on a cliff edge without her support and input and guidance as to what to do to continue to tackle my BDD. Since the treatment I feel I have more tools to continue inner dialoguing and also meditation—I feel more “in control” and confident in the practical progress I have made. I am also proud of the practical progress I have made.'

Some participants commented that they felt the process complimented Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT) sessions they had received, whilst others were critical of CBT, contending it was too 'surface level'. My own sense is that self-inquiry practice could be thought of as a kind of 'inner CBT', and I cannot see how the two approaches could be anything other than complimentary:

'Thought interventions like CBT just kept me stuck in my own head and intellectualising a never ending stream of thoughts. They felt very surface level and like playing a whack-a-mole game. My major defence was already intellectualisation so CBT just fed into it more and I could spend hours wrestling with never ending negative thoughts while not gaining much progress.'

'When I said each time to the BDD professional at the time that I felt the causes of my BDD on a deeper internal level needed to be addressed I was told that that was not necessary and CBT and antidepressants were enough and the only effective treatment. When that treatment failed a number of times—as in my BDD always worsened daily—in terms of the images and thoughts and anxiety—and I later had a full nervous breakdown from the BDD. I then became convinced I was untreatable and attempted suicide twice.'

'I felt that the sessions were a very much needed help to uncover the deeper core issues that needed to be addressed. I had been doing mainly CBT and Exposure Response Prevention only beforehand which I felt was more "surface level" interventions. I knew I had shame and avoidance and safety mechanisms but I did not really know why. So the mental and behavioural interventions were just bringing them to the surface occasionally but not acknowledging them directly. It felt like a bit of a merry go round for years with just the standard behavioural treatments.'

‘I now feel I have more confidence, and it has supported my CBT in that it gives me the confidence to carry out the challenges set by my therapist.’

To sum up; I stress again that I wouldn’t want to suggest any grand conclusions can be drawn from this rather informal study. At the same time, I sincerely hope it provides insight to those suffering with body image distress, their loved ones and therapists working in this area. I would also suggest that the principles are transferable to other areas of human psychological suffering.

Whilst some aspects of this approach are quite technical, requiring a reasonable degree of study, the core concepts are so simple as to be self-evidently true: we may enact transformation through compassionately paying attention to what is arising, greeting it with reflective interest, and patiently allowing deeper meaning to emerge. This is the case whether a person is attempting to gain insight into their own psyche, or in the role of therapist, guiding others into theirs.

Notes

1. The full koan is usually rendered as: *'What did your face look like before your parents were born?'*

2. Unfortunately all I can find online of the documentary now is this [thirteen minute clip](#).

3. To understand more about me see [my website](#).

4. For example; the Platonic philosopher Plotinus, one of the most mystical philosophers of the Ancient World, whose student Porphyry described him as 'seeming ashamed of being in the body.' When asked why he refused to sit for a sculpture, Plotinus responded:

'Is it not enough to carry about this image in which nature has enclosed us? Do you really think I must also consent to leave, as a desired spectacle to posterity, an image of the image?'

Porphyry: [*On the Life of Plotinus and the Arrangement of his Work*](#)

5. All Dr. Schnackenberg's books are available on [her website](#). See also my [interview with her](#) about *False Bodies*.

6. For details on this and other online support groups see the Body Dysmorphic Disorder Foundations [website](#).

7. Some of the participants' comments have been edited for this article. The full study can be read [here](#).

8. See the research of [Dr. Piero Calvi-Parisetti](#), who combined Near Death Experience with CBT. Dr. Calvi-Parisetti gave an interview about his work on the [Skeptiko podcast](#).

See also the paper: [*Does Learning About Near-Death Experiences Promote Psycho-Spiritual Benefits in Those Who Have Not Had a Near-Death Experience?*](#)

Artwork courtesy of Emma Keyes