

The Default Setting: Re-Concocting the Same Old “Self”

“When the ego struts its stuff, we don’t think that we’re enough.” M. T. Head, Hiphop Heart Sutra

When I was in my late twenties, I was asked to give a presentation on a subject I thought I knew a lot about. The topic was conceptual rather than experiential, and halfway through the presentation, a voice shot through my head: “What you’re saying is all theoretical and won’t benefit anyone’s life.” Whether this was the voice of existential humility or of integrity, just as I was about to tell the participants to pack it in, up came a counteroffer from the voice of self-preservation: “Why not just finish up with a flourish, and then never, never do this again?” The self-image that had agreed to do this presentation was a *default setting*, a seemingly preset, hard-wired program, something that people and computers revert to when the microchips are down. My default setting in this case was to appear knowledgeable, charming, and charismatic, with enough pizzazz that folks would buy my act. I didn’t see what I was doing, since a default setting is closer than our own skin, and its familiarity allows it to run with impunity, continually reinforcing old familiar icons. We rarely see it as a fabrication, or rather as a prefabrication, since it’s nothing new if we’re over two.

You know your default setting is running when you say things like “That’s just the way I am,” or “I’m not that kind of person.” Defaults differ; one person heads for depression, another for Las Vegas. We approach life reactively—from our conditioned ego patterns and mind states — rather than responsively, motivated by the ability to respond appropriately to the requirements of a specific situation. Flexibility hardens into rigidity, as our default setting scans like radar for evidence to reinforce its misperceptions. This is the extreme version of our trained parrot, and its tenacity

lends credence to an old proverb: A pickpocket looks at a crowd and sees only pockets.

Greek-Armenian mystic and teacher Georges I. Gurdjieff used the term *chief feature* to describe the default setting, in reference to a characteristic that could either serve life beneficially or reinforce the momentum of our unconsciousness. A default setting comes under the heading of *conditioning*, a term used in spiritual and therapeutic traditions, or *programming*, a term applied to both people and computers (and parrots). It's easy to spot someone else's programming, while our own can be hidden in plain sight, at least from us, particularly if our default happens to be culturally acceptable. For example, one of my default settings has been to buzz around, packing in seemingly noble projects, at times as a cover-up for a fear of being unmasked as ignoble.

Variations on the default setting abound, including: anguish addict, confusion junkie, naysayer, top dog, fault-finder, know-it-all, stoic, cynic, and catastrophizer. Do you know yours? Our stock phrases provide hints: "Nobody tells me what to do"; "I'm more sensitive than most"; "You can't trust anybody." Coping strategies also provide clues; when you're stressed or pressured are you more likely to be pleasing? To withdraw? To be aggressive? To procrastinate? To seek distraction through substances or obsessive activity?

Default settings resemble viruses, or rather retroviruses, in the way they seem to skew into our cells and co-opt our life force for their survival. With computers, the solution is simple: install an antivirus program. On the wakeup path, our objective isn't to delete something, but to become aware of programming that is already running. Otherwise, how can we see our ego as one of the myriad forms of full-emptiness?

Investigating our default setting employs tools from all five dimensions of heartmind. Let's say you're with a new acquaintance you would like to have think highly of you, and you suspect that your automatic-pilot attitudes and self-images are trying to take over. It's possible to take a moment

to feel the sensations and movements through which your default setting is strutting its stuff; that's the physical dimension. You can also listen to the thoughts that are proposing an image you would like to convey; that's the mental dimension. And you can check to see if habitual mind states are running, by consulting the emotional dimension. To recognize that there's space abounding, with room for all of this to be considered and experienced, take a moment to focus on your surroundings, letting the environment permeate your default setting's components.

Momentary check-ins like this might be the zen equivalent of defragging a hard disk. Available space that we had lost sight of opens up, and our trained parrot's fragmented files, which are the very things blocking awareness of spaciousness, can't run with the same abandon. Five-dimension awareness like this is an intense reminder of how unsatisfying a default setting really is. As we start to see life for what it is, a salutary by-product of the process is that our aspiration to see life more clearly is refreshed.

Check-ins also reaffirm something that many spiritual traditions stress: the need for ongoing embodied awareness and observation, and for remembering to keep on raising the question of what's most important.

Elizabeth Hamilton, excerpted from UNTRAIN YOUR PARROT
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