

What to Do When There Is No Doer?

Written by Nirmala



(Note: This article is translated into Polish [here](#) .)

[Spiritual teachings](#) suggest that there is no doer, that there is no separate self that is the

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source of our actions. This teaching often causes a lot of confusion, as it is contrary to our experience. It seems that there is a doer and that *I am the doer: I get up in the morning,*

I

walk the dog, and

I

drive to work. How do these things happen if there is no doer? And if there is no doer, then what do I do? How do I live my life if there is no one here to live it? What do I do if there is no doer?

This confusion exists because spiritual teachings point to something that doesn't exist in the usual way. The nature of reality can't be described or explained with words, and it can't be experienced through the ordinary senses. In speaking about something that can't be spoken about, the easiest approach is often to use negation. If you can't speak directly about something, then you're left with saying what it is not.

So spiritual teachings contain a lot of negation: There is no self. There is no doer. The world is an illusion. Not this. Not that. Negation can be effective in pointing us away from illusions, such as the idea of *me*, and other false and mistaken ideas. If you take a moment to look for yourself, you discover that there is no individual self, only an idea of a self. The "I" is just an idea. So in this sense, it is accurate to say that there is no self and no doer.

However, the mind can't conceive of or even really experience nothing. If you are experiencing something, then that is by definition not nothing. So when the mind is pointed to nothing or to the absence of a self or a doer, it makes a picture or concept of nothing and thinks about that. If we are told there is no doer, the mind makes a picture of the absence of somebody, something like an empty chair or a broom sweeping by itself.

Again, this contradicts our actual experience: There is something in the chair when I sit down in it. The broom only sweeps when I pick it up and start sweeping. So there is obviously a distortion or inaccuracy in the approach of negation. While negation does evoke a certain experience of emptiness that can be spacious and restful, it doesn't capture the totality of reality. It leaves out our actual experience of the real world.

Another approach is the opposite: Instead of saying there is no self, there is no world, and there is no doer, we can say there is only Self, the world is all one thing, and it is this totality of existence that does everything. In other words, *everything* sweeps the floor and sits in the chair.

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If we look deeply into our experience, we can see that there is some truth to this perspective. If we trace back all of the causes of any action, we see that there are an infinite number of influences or causes for the simplest action.

For example, you may sweep the floor because your mother taught you to keep a spotless house and your dad taught you to be responsible, not to mention all the other messages you received from the culture and society about cleanliness and responsibility. Add to that all the people that influenced your mom and dad and everyone else who ever had an impact on you. And what about all the factors that led to the particular path of evolution that gave you those opposable thumbs that allow you to use a broom? If you include all the factors at play when you pick up a broom and sweep, you can see how it might make sense to say that everyone and everything is sweeping the floor. There is a doer, but it isn't you; it is everything. And by the way, all of these factors are at work if you don't sweep the floor. Not doing something is just another thing we do.

This approach of including more and more instead of negating everything is also a useful teaching tool. It evokes a sense of the oneness and richness of life. But again, it doesn't capture the actual experience of an action like sweeping. If only *everything* would sweep my floor, then *I* could go take a nap. Speaking about everything as the doer of everything that is done also doesn't capture the sense of no self that is experienced when we look within using spiritual practices such as self-inquiry.

So if it isn't complete to say that there is no doer, and if it isn't complete to say that everything is the doer, what's wrong with just saying that *I* sweep the floor, and be done with it? For purely practical purposes, saying "I" do something is enough. But as already noted, saying "I" leaves out the many rich and complex causes of our actions, and it leaves out the absence of a separate self that we discover when we look within. It also doesn't suggest that there's more to this reality than meets the eye.

So we are left with a dilemma: It's incomplete to say that there is no doer, it's incomplete to say that everything is the doer, and it's incomplete to say that I am the doer. It's like a multiple choice test where all of the answers are wrong! Yet, what is it like to not have an answer? What's it like to hold the question even when you've exhausted all of the possible answers?

The question of what is going on here, what is this experience of doing, can be a rich experience in and of itself. Such a question can put us more in touch with our experience than

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any answer can. The question invites a direct sensing of the various levels of our experience. As the broom moves across the floor, is it possible to simultaneously experience the emptiness within, the richness of the oneness of all things, and the personal actions of our particular body? Why do we have to choose one?

And what about the original question, “What do I do?” Could this also be a rich opportunity to explore all the dimensions of existence? Why does there have to be a right answer? Can the question, itself, evoke a deeper sensing of life and an endless willingness to question again and again? What do I do now? And what about now? The gift may be in the question itself, not in some final answer. Life is unfolding in ever new and different ways, so maybe only in each new moment can we discover what the *everything and nothing* that we are is going to do next.

There is an assumption that spiritual teachings are supposed to bring us spiritual answers, that we are supposed to finally get somewhere. But what if the point of this spiritual journey is the journey itself? What if the answers are true and relevant when they arise, but they become irrelevant in the next breath? So perhaps the question of what to do isn't meant to ever be done with or fully answered. Letting go of the idea of a right or final answer can make the question come alive in this very moment. What are you doing right now? What is most true to do now? And then, what about now? It's always time to ask again because it's always a new now.

Just for this moment, find out what happens if you just allow yourself to not know what the right thing to do is, who would do it, and even if there is anything to do, or if doing even really happens. When you question that deeply, is there more or less of a compulsion to act in unhealthy or ignorant ways? Or is there a natural curiosity and sense of wonder that arises and puts you very much in touch with all of the mysterious elements that make up this particular moment? Does this curiosity lead you to rash and silly decisions, or does it allow impulses and intuitions to arise from a deeper place within your being? If you know less and less about doing, what happens next?

The gift of the deepest spiritual questions arises in the day-to-day living of life. Asking, “What do I do?” can lead you on an exploration that has no boundaries, and the journey can only start here and now. What most often limits us is our conclusions. The simple antidote is to ask another question: “What do I do when there is no doer, when everything is the doer, and when it's also up to me to do something?”

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(From the free ebook: [*That Is That: Essays About True Nature*](#) available [here](#) .)