Prologue 1 · I

“I” is the word we use more than any other in daily life. We repeat it constantly, almost without noticing, yet rarely do we pause to ask what it actually means. The question “Who am I?” has been carried through centuries of philosophy. Many answers have been offered, but few translate into something we can apply in the ordinary rhythm of everyday living.

What I Am Not

The most common assumption is simple: **“I am this body.”**
We cling to this belief with surprising intensity. When danger appears, the body reacts before thought even begins. We dress it in comfort or beauty. We decorate it, maintain it, protect it. We invest time, money, and emotion into its care. When the body shows a flaw, we rush to repair it. Everything in our behavior suggests that we believe the body is “me.”

But is this body truly “I”?

A duck on the roadside is clearly not “me.” Yet if I eat the duck, digest it, and absorb its nutrients, does that absorbed part suddenly become “me”? Every cell in this body is built from materials taken from the world. Each day we eat food, break it down, and distribute it throughout the body. Carbohydrates become energy. Proteins become structure and repair. Fats are stored. None of this was originally “mine.” Even the sperm and egg that formed my first cell came from my parents, who themselves built their bodies from the world’s offerings.

So the body is a temporary gathering of borrowed materials. Its assembly and disassembly cannot, by themselves, determine whether “I” exist. **“I” cannot simply be the body.**

If my hand is part of my body, what happens when it is cut off? Is that hand still “me”? Once separated, it no longer receives commands from the body, no longer receives nutrients, and eventually decays into something else. Yet before separation, it was connected, functional, and made of the same substances. So can “connection” or “separation” alone define what counts as “I”?

Push the question one step further. The metal teapot on the table is obviously not “me.” But if that metal is reshaped into a prosthetic hand and attached to my arm, does it then become part of “me”? And what about the original hand that was cut off—was it “me” before, and now no longer? Does “I” depend purely on whether something is physically attached to this body?

These questions reveal a deeper point: **the boundary of the body cannot reliably define the boundary of the self.** The body changes, exchanges material with the world, and can be divided or extended. None of these shifts provide a stable definition of "I."

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If the body cannot fully define who I am, the next answer often appears: "I am the brain, because the brain controls the body." At first glance, this seems more precise. The brain issues commands, processes information, and appears to coordinate everything we do.

But research shows that the body replaces nearly all of its cells every five to seven years — and the brain is no exception. If the brain is constantly renewing itself, is the "new" brain still the same one as before? If the brain truly stores memory and acts as the central command center, then certain medical cases become difficult to explain. Some infants are born with up to ninety-five percent of their brain tissue missing, yet they can still develop memory and function. This suggests that a large portion of the brain may be redundant or repetitive.

More importantly, even with modern technology, we still cannot locate where memory is stored. We only know that the brain can somehow access information and direct the body. When you see a scene, your eyes send signals to the brain. The brain processes them — but where is that processed information kept? At present, we simply do not know.

Thought as the Self?

Another popular answer is: "I am my thoughts."

This feels intuitive, even modern. But if thoughts are "I," then we must examine what thoughts are made of.

Thoughts run on top of language. And language does not originate from you. The words you use, the grammar you follow, even the tone of your inner voice — all of these were learned from outside. You absorbed them from parents, teachers, books, screens, and the people around you. Your personality and your habitual ways of thinking are condensed from your past experiences. Like the body, they are borrowed.

Try observing this directly. When you speak to yourself in your mind — in Chinese or English — whose voice is that? It feels like you are talking to yourself, but if you listen carefully, you may notice something else. It is not a solid "me" speaking. It is language moving through the mind.

Is Consciousness the Self?

Many people say, "My consciousness is who I am."

But observe carefully.

When you suddenly drift off into a daydream, your body continues acting — your hand keeps writing, your feet keep walking. In that moment, consciousness is not participating, yet the action continues.

Consider anesthesia. On the operating table, consciousness disappears completely, but the body continues breathing, the heart continues beating. Consciousness is absent, but life does not stop.

Or think about driving. Sometimes you arrive at your destination with almost no memory of the journey. Consciousness seems to have "stepped out," yet the action was completed.

These experiences suggest that consciousness behaves more like an interpreter — something that explains what happened after the fact — rather than the true operator. It is not a stable "I." It is a projection of thought and sensation, not the source of them.

Is the Soul the Self?

Some say, "The soul is who I am."

But the soul has never been empirically verified. It remains a concept — a word created to comfort us or to explain what we cannot yet understand. We cannot detect it in experiments, nor can we perceive it directly through the senses.

Think back to deep sleep. When consciousness disappears and thought pauses, you do not experience a soul acting independently. Or consider moments of intense emotion — pain, joy, anger. What you feel are bodily reactions and mental waves, not a separate soul moving within them.

The soul appears to exist because we place unexplained phenomena into that category. But this is a linguistic projection, not evidence. It is an empty container holding human imagination, without any verifiable substance.

Therefore, the soul cannot serve as the foundation of "I."

It is a concept, an unproven hypothesis. And "I" cannot rely on an unproven hypothesis to exist — unless we can demonstrate the soul's existence, define its characteristics, and compare them against experience.

The Existence of "I"

What, then, is the "I" that the world believes in?
At its core, it is a **concept** — something that can be projected onto almost anything. "I" functions much like money: it has no inherent substance, yet gains power because

people collectively agree to treat it as real. Many of the things we rely on work this way. A house is called a “home,” but the building itself is not a home. Borders matter to humans, yet mean nothing to animals. We depend on these concepts every day, but rarely pause to examine how fictional they truly are.

“I” is one of these fictions.
It is a construct created by thought, capable of attaching itself to any object or experience. We project it onto the body, onto thoughts, onto consciousness, even onto the idea of a soul. We project it onto video-game characters, feeling joy or sorrow as if their fate were our own. We project it onto movie protagonists, tightening our chest when they suffer and relaxing when they triumph.

This projection is simply the mind focusing its energy.
When a paper airplane flies, your attention lands on it, and suddenly it feels like part of “me.” When a beloved teacup breaks, sadness arises because “I” had attached itself to the cup. When your favorite team wins, you celebrate; when they lose, you feel defeated — because “I” was projected onto them as well.

The concept of “I” is fluid, portable, and endlessly expandable.
It can attach to anything the mind chooses to claim.

The Expansion of “I”

Imagine parking your car on the street. A child walks by and scratches it with a key. Would you feel angry? Most people would. Repairing the damage costs time and money. But even if the child’s parents promise to cover all expenses, you would still try to stop the child. The reason is not just inconvenience — it is because the car has already been absorbed into your concept of “I.”

When someone else’s car is scratched, you feel nothing.
When your car is scratched, you cannot accept it.
The difference lies in a single word: **“my.”**

Add “my” to anything — my body, my car, my belongings, my child, my parents — and it becomes part of the expanding territory of “I.” You protect “my” body, defend “my” possessions, invest in “my” child’s future, honor “my” parents. The moment something is labeled as “mine,” it becomes something the self must guard.

The Black Hole of Identity

The unsettling truth is that the concept of “I” expands endlessly.
Once it begins, it rarely stops.

From nothing, life gradually accumulates:

- “my family”
- “my friends”
- “my home”
- “my school”
- “my company”
- “my employees”
- “my property”
- “my pride”

“I” grows larger and larger.
The number of things to defend multiplies.
And with it comes exhaustion, anxiety, anger, fear, and insecurity.

Why do so many fictional villains dream of ruling the world?
Because the world is the largest imaginable territory that can be claimed as “mine.”

How “I” Creates Suffering

When you develop a chronic illness, you feel sadness and anxiety.
But when the same illness happens to a stranger, you do not feel the same distress.
The difference is simple: the illness has been absorbed into the concept of “I.” It becomes something you cannot remove, something you desperately want to escape but cannot.

Yet suffering does not come from the illness itself — it comes from how the illness is perceived.

Imagine a rare disease that affects only one in ten thousand people. Without treatment, you would die within two years. Even with treatment, you would spend enormous time and money just to slow its progression. Naturally, you would feel devastated.

Now imagine a different world:
In this society, the same disease is considered a divine blessing. Patients receive the highest honor, and their families are rewarded with wealth and support. In that world, the same illness would cause far less anxiety — some people might even wish to have it.

The disease has not changed.
Only the **meaning** attached to it has changed.
Therefore, the root of anxiety lies not in the illness, but in the way we interpret it.

The Illusion of Selfless Love

Motherly love is often praised as the purest form of love — unconditional, selfless, noble. But if you are sensitive only to your own child's feelings while ignoring the feelings of others, is that truly selfless?

In reality, we simply expand the concept of "I" to include the child we gave birth to. This love easily becomes indulgence.

The test is simple:
How much of "me" is mixed into the love?

We want to give our children the best, but sometimes this harms other children. We may treat our children as extensions of ourselves, pushing them to fulfill the dreams we never achieved. Yet both you and your child are products of the world's conditions — your so-called "effort" is shaped by past experiences and environments.

Only when love is grounded in gratitude — not possession — can it become truly selfless.
When "I" contaminates love, it becomes indulgence: a sweet poison.

The standard is straightforward:
Does your parenting harm others?
And when your child behaves in harmful ways, do you correct them?

The Fragile Foundation of "I"

The existence of "I" depends on the assumption that the physical world is objectively real. If everything right now were merely a dream, then this "I" would lose its foundation. It would be no more real than a character in a novel — constructed only within the narrative.

In that sense, "I" is nothing more than a concept.
A projection. A shape drawn by thought onto the canvas of experience.

The Sorrow and Anxiety of "I"

When a loved one dies, we naturally feel sadness. But is this sadness truly an expression of love? Not exactly. The grief we experience is not about where the loved one has gone, whether they suffered, or whether there is an afterlife. What we mourn is the fact that **"I" can no longer see them**. The loss we feel is the loss of a part of "my world," because that person had been absorbed into the concept of "I." A piece of the self has been torn away, and we are powerless to restore it.

Now imagine a different scenario. Suppose this same relative had abused you since childhood, drained your finances, disrupted your life, and prevented you from forming friendships or relationships. Would you still feel the same sorrow at their passing? The answer reveals something important: **our grief is not a pure expression of love, but a reaction to how deeply someone has been woven into the fabric of "I."**

Seeing Through the Illusion of "I"

If you look deeply enough — or if you are a devout Christian, or a wise Buddhist — you may come to understand that the "I" recognized by the world does not truly exist.

A devoted Christian sees everything, including the body and the mind, as gifts from God. Nothing is owned; everything is received.
A wise Buddhist would say, "There is no inherent self; all forms arise from conditions."
Both perspectives point to the same insight: the "I" we cling to is not a solid entity. It is part of the world's unfolding, not something separate from it.

"I" is a concept buried in the subconscious.
Time cannot erase the habits built around it, but understanding can gradually dissolve its authority.

You can begin by seeing what "I" is **not**:

- I am not my body — the body is merely the vehicle for this lifetime's experience.
- I am not my lifestyle — circumstances shift, roles change.
- I am not my illness — the body's condition does not define the essence of being.
- I am not my thoughts — thoughts arise from language, memory, and conditioning, not from a permanent self.

As these layers fall away, the illusion of "I" becomes clearer.
What remains is not a diminished self, but a freer one — no longer bound by the endless expansion, fear, and sorrow that the concept of "I" creates.

The Emotional Weight of "I"

All emotions arise as reactions to the concept of "I."
Krishnamurti, in *The First and Last Freedom*, points out that fear does not come from the unknown, but from the possibility of losing what we already have. The *Heart Sutra* expresses the same truth: "When the mind has no attachments, there is no fear." These attachments are not limited to possessions or loved ones. They include the entire

structure of “I” and everything that extends from it. What we call fear is simply the unwillingness to lose what “I” has claimed.

I fear death because I am still attached to life, to possessions, to the people I love.
But when a person has nothing left, life and death lose their weight.
Yet the goal is not to wait until we have nothing before we can see clearly. The deeper insight is this: life lasts only a few decades, and nothing truly belongs to “I.” We are merely temporary borrowers. Even if you purchase a priceless painting, it will belong to someone else the moment you die.

If nothing has ever truly been ours, then nothing can truly be lost.
And if “I” has never had real existence, then it cannot truly disappear.

Anxiety and the Expanding Self

Financial pressure or work-related stress can certainly trigger anxiety, but the deeper root lies in the attachment to “I” — the refusal to let anything threaten our desired lifestyle or imagined future. Money can ease anxiety temporarily, but it cannot cure it. Desire expands endlessly, and every new desire creates a new vulnerability.

We must still act responsibly and solve practical problems, but our mindset must remain steady.
To face an unstable reality with a stable heart is the essence of clarity.

Recognizing that “I” is only a concept does not make anxiety vanish overnight.
But it allows us to see its illusion more clearly, and gradually, we stop being dragged around by it.

Meeting Anxiety Without Becoming It

This does not mean we should surrender when difficulties arise.
Action must remain active; the mind must remain calm.
If we cling to anxiety about money, life becomes filled with anxiety. You may have seen people lash out in anger because of their fear, or you may have felt yourself being pulled around by anxiety’s momentum.

Anxiety is simply a reaction to reality — an experience passing through the mind.
Our task is not to deny it, but to acknowledge it and allow it to be felt.

However, when we fold this experience into the concept of “I,” the burden grows heavier. If anxiety becomes “my anxiety,” it becomes part of the self that must be defended, fixed, or eliminated. The moment it becomes personal, it becomes imprisoning.

Seeing that the socially accepted “I” is only a concept does not eliminate anxiety instantly.
But it weakens its grip.
It loosens the chains.
And over time, it allows us to live without being completely controlled by the fears that once defined us.

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The Weight We Carry

Every person has strengths and weaknesses. Every life arrives with its own trajectory — some extraordinary, some quietly ordinary. Anxiety does not make life richer; it only makes it dimmer. In my own childhood, I suffered immense pressure because of poor academic performance. Only later did I understand that every experience, pleasant or painful, is part of life’s curriculum. It teaches us acceptance. Perhaps the meaning of my “grey childhood” was simply to remind others: do not pass your anxiety onto your children, and do not punish yourself for not meeting someone else’s standards.

Pain, Resistance, and the Mind

Have you ever suffered from a chronic or difficult illness?
The physical sensation of pain is just that — a sensation. What truly torments us is our resistance to it. We fear pain not because of the pain itself, but because we refuse to accept it.

Consider something simple.
Most people would never scratch their skin open for no reason — it hurts.
But when a mosquito bite itches, scratching it until it breaks the skin can feel strangely satisfying. The pain has not changed. What changed was your relationship to the itch. When pain overwhelms the irritation, the tension is released, and the mind interprets that release as pleasure.

This reveals something important: **suffering does not come from the illness itself, but from the insistence that it must be cured.** When there is still a sliver of hope, anxiety often intensifies — the gap between desire and reality becomes a burden. But when all hope is gone, many people find it easier to let go and simply live the time they have left.

The deepest pain is not the illness.
It is the attachment of “I” — the refusal to be touched, threatened, or changed.
Yet “I” is only a concept. Trying to make it eternal is a battle that cannot be won.

The Illusion of Control

You might think it is better to choose a small chance of recovery over a terminal diagnosis. But this contains a misunderstanding: **health is not a right we truly possess.** Even if technology could grant immortality, accidents could still end life in an instant. Believing we have absolute control over outcomes is itself an expansion of "I."

The human body does contain remarkable potential. Spontaneous recoveries and unexpected healing do occur. But when we direct our inner energy toward resisting illness, negative emotions often worsen the condition. When we release our attachment, that same energy can shift toward healing.

Those who recover are often those who have learned, in the deepest sense, to let go.

Letting Go, Without Falling Into Despair

It is important to distinguish **letting go** from **despair**.
Despair is a forced surrender; letting go is a conscious acceptance.
Despair is lying in the river, carried helplessly by the current; letting go is standing on the bank, watching the water flow. Attachment is resistance. Despair is collapse. Letting go is freedom.

Medicine and surgery are also part of the world. Rejecting them is simply another form of extremity. True letting go means accepting both the illness and the treatment, seeing everything as part of the experience. It is not a behavior, but a shift in the soul — an evolution of perspective.

The Weight of Pain

At different stages of life, we all encounter suffering that feels insurmountable. Physical pain can be agonizing, but emotional pain often cuts deeper. To outsiders, your struggle may seem trivial, but pain is always personal. Only the one who carries it knows its weight. When life becomes unbearably heavy, some may even contemplate ending it.

Yet pain is not something we are required to carry.
At its core, pain is the gap between **what we wish for** and **what reality offers**.
And desire is part of the expanding, self-protective structure of "I." Reality is full of uncertainty, so pain is simply a by-product of "I" colliding with the unknown. It has no independent existence.

Life lasts only a few decades, and all of us will reach the final chapter.
If we choose to spend that chapter burdened by suffering — or to end life prematurely — then the story concludes in pain. True wisdom is stepping outside the experience, seeing the whole landscape rather than being trapped inside a single moment. Zen

expresses this beautifully: do not stand in the river fighting the current; stand on the bank and watch the water pass.

How Pain Becomes Personal

Pain becomes suffering only when you allow it to enter the territory of "I," merging the self with the experience. The severity of any hardship depends on your interpretation. A wealthy young woman may be devastated by a small cut on her hand, while a girl from the countryside might ignore the same wound and continue working. The injury is identical; the mind that interprets it is not.

A more skillful approach is to recognize that the "I" you defend does not truly exist. When the self dissolves, the weight of pain dissolves with it.

Sitting With Experience

So when you are ill, in pain, or overwhelmed by worry, sit down and gently remind yourself:
"I" does not truly exist. It is only a concept.

The body is a medium for experience.
Thoughts are condensed memories.
Emotions are responses to the world.
Illness is a condition for the soul's growth.
Pain is a force that helps us cross difficult thresholds.

Each of these can become an invitation — a chance to rise above the immediate moment and see the broader meaning of your life.

Without "I," the body is not "me," thoughts are not "me," emotions are not "me," illness is not "me," and pain is not "me." When you can notice and name a negative emotion, it has already separated from the self. You are no longer fully controlled by it, and anxiety begins to soften.

The Practice of Lightening the Load

Of course, the concept of "I" is deeply ingrained. It has momentum, so emotions will return again and again. But each time you sit quietly and repeat this process, the weight of suffering becomes lighter. As the Buddhist teaching goes, "Letting go is enlightenment." Releasing attachment is returning to the source.

If letting go feels impossible for now, you can choose another path: **offering up**.
Like a Christian placing the body, the illness, the thoughts, and the emotions into God's

hands, connecting with divine love. Whether you release or offer, agitation naturally dissolves, and love naturally appears.