

THE IGNORED MIRROR



— REFLECTIONS AS LIFE'S COMPASS —

**WHAT TRULY DEFINES SUCCESS?
HARD WORK? TALENT?
OR SOMETHING DEEPER?**

PAPARAO CHINTALAPUDI



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Part 1.0

THE INNER JOURNEY: DEEPER ECHOES

Inner self: A vending machine of Emotions

The inner self is a complex, unpredictable entity. It acts, reacts, sulks, fumes, and, on rare occasions, stays silent. I think of it as the fulcrum of our persona and, intriguingly, a vending machine—one that dispenses emotions unasked. The challenge, however, is that this machine rarely operates under our control. We spend our lives striving to master it yet often fall short. Adding to the complexity, the outside world also seeks to press its buttons, triggering emotions in ways we do not always understand or consent to.

This inner self is the birthplace of our shared struggles, profound questions, and moments of doubt and triumph that shape our lives. Sometimes, we wonder: Is this inner self our ally or our emotional blackmailer?

Through the following reflections, we will traverse this intricate terrain together. We will examine how we perceive ourselves, confront self-imposed limitations, and unearth the fears we have left unexplored. This journey to self-

discovery also equips us with a compass—to navigate life's complexities while remaining aligned with our values.

Our intentionality holds the key. When deep and clear, our intentions can transform these insights into a compass or an anchor when life's currents grow too strong. Ultimately, the power to chart this journey lies within us.

REFLECTION 1.1

THE PERPETUAL DILEMMA

“To be or not to be?” Hamlet’s timeless question is not confined to Shakespeare’s theatre—it echoes in our lives, especially when we face choices that test our values, approaches, and attitudes. How do we navigate such conflicts?

Throughout my career, I have often wrestled with the tension between honesty and diplomacy. I know many others share this struggle. While diplomacy has its place, it can sometimes dilute the purity of honesty, leaving us feeling like we have compromised something essential.

In corporate meetings, I have faced moments where I had to either:

1. Align with or endorse a boss’s ideas—whether they made sense or not, or
2. Conform to Groupthink, which I find even more troubling.

Why do people fall into this pattern of ideological subservience? Is it fear of standing out, a lack of confidence in their ideas, or sheer indifference? Whatever the reason, the consequences are rarely positive. This tendency can damage not only individuals but entire organisations. For many, the motivation lies in external validation over internal truth.

I have often wondered whether Aristotle’s Golden Mean could offer guidance in such situations. His philosophy suggests a middle ground between extremes—in this case, the starkness of absolute truth and the softened edges of diplomacy. The idea is to communicate honesty in a way that

fits the practical realities of corporate life. But does taking this middle path mean ignoring our inner mirror?

Aspiring to live without such dilemmas is noble but requires an unwavering commitment to our values, which comes with its own costs.

So, we must ask ourselves: Are we ready to make those sacrifices, knowing they will bring challenges and uncertainties? If we choose that path, will we find the strength to face what it reveals about who we are?

REFLECTION 1.2

WHO IS SHAPING MY SELF-IMAGE?

Stoic Philosopher King Marcus Aurelius once said, **“It never ceases to amaze me: we all love ourselves more than other people but care more about their opinions than our own.”**

His words struck a chord with me, as I have often reflected on how much power we give to others’ views of us. How often do we let their opinions and judgements quietly shape how we see ourselves?

Every day, we encounter mirrors—not physical, but those formed by people’s expectations, biases, and judgements. These mirrors rarely show us the truth. Instead, they distort our self-perception, often in ways we do not even realise. It is a little like Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, where the portrait reflects something far removed from the actual person—except in our case, the distortion comes from the outside world rather than our own.

I learned this the hard way in my career. Let me share two anecdotes:

1. In one organisation, I was part of the “Golden Pot,” a select group of high potential employees on the fast track. The company’s belief in me became my mirror, reflecting promise and possibility. I trusted that image completely. But then, during promotion season, the role I was sure would be mine went to someone outside the “Golden Pot.” There was no explanation, no feedback—just silence. That silence shattered the mirror I relied on, leaving me to question everything: Was I not good enough? Did I misunderstand the confidence my boss had in me? Or had

I simply overestimated myself? Disillusioned, I left the company soon after.

2. In another role, I worked for a boss who liked categorising or bracketing his employees. He placed me in the “Excellent” bucket, where I stayed for years. My performance reviews did not seem to matter, the label stuck. Then, one day, the bucket was not mine anymore. My boss needed to make room for someone else, and I was moved out. Once again, I grappled with a broken mirror, wondering if I had allowed someone else’s perception to define my self-worth for too long.

Looking back, I have realised that the problem is not just the mirrors others hold up for us—how often we ignore our own. How much power do we give to these external reflections? How frequently do we let them overshadow what we know to be true about ourselves?

Corporate realities, like bell curve appraisals, may shape these mirrors, but they do not have to define us. The mirrors others create can be flawed. The only reflection that genuinely matters is the one we see when we look inward and ask ourselves about our worth and its alignment with our values and aspirations. Self-flourishing does not require too much external validation, I suppose!

How often do you pause to reflect on your self-worth independent of others’ opinions, and how can you build a mirror that aligns with your values and aspirations?

REFLECTION 1.3

OPTICS VS. VALUE: DECEPTIVE JOBS AND TITLES

*“What is visible is not always real, and what is real is
not always visible,”*

– Lao Tzu.

His wisdom resonates deeply with the world of careers, where job titles often fail to reflect their true essence. Beneath the surface of impressive optics, I have often found a hollow core, while roles with less glamour can profoundly shape outcomes and identities.

Let me share an anecdote. I know the HR Head of a large conglomerate who has a unique approach to negotiating titles with new hires. He generously offers almost any title they desire—except the CMD (Chairman and Managing Director). Thankfully, he knows where to draw the line!

At one point in my career, I, too, faced a dilemma between optics and personal value. After spending two decades in prominent line roles with P&L responsibility across different verticals, I was advised to take on a staff position in the business transformation that operated on a larger canvas involving strategic planning and cross-functional collaboration. Still, I had less visibility in terms of public recognition. Although my reporting lines remained unchanged, the optics of the new role were starkly different.

Many of my colleagues strongly discouraged the move, warning that staff roles lacked the recognition and prestige of line positions. They were showing me their mirrors. On one hand, I had the comfort of a well-established role with status.

Conversely, I was uncertain about a less traditional and unfamiliar path. Despite these concerns, I chose the new role, driven by one key question: Would the lack of external recognition diminish my sense of achievement?

That was a transformative question. In hindsight, I realised that the role's optics did not define its value. The new position challenged me to think differently, challenge entrenched systems, and contribute meaningfully. While the recognition was quieter, the work itself was deeply fulfilling.

This dilemma between optics and value is not limited to individuals. Organisations struggle when leadership decisions favour short-term visibility over long-term impact. Flashy initiatives may steal the spotlight, but the quieter, foundational work ensures sustainability.

As Lao Tzu reminds us, perhaps the question is not about what we see but whether we are willing to look beyond appearances to uncover the unseen.

REFLECTION 1.4

EMOTIONAL BAGGAGE: *BETAAL* ON OUR SHOULDERS

“If you carry joy in your heart, you can heal anytime. But if you carry burdens, every step becomes heavier.”

- Unknown source.

Indian readers may recall the timeless tales of Vikram and *Betaal*, written by Somdev Bhatt in the 11th century. *Betaal*, a ghost or vampire, clung to King Vikramaditya’s shoulders, whispering riddles and questions that tested his resolve and wisdom. Emotional baggage, like *Betaal*, clings to our memories, quietly influencing our choices and shaping how we see ourselves and the world.

Failures, more than successes, linger in our minds with uncanny persistence. My inability to gain admission to medical school stayed with me far too long, often casting shadows of doubt over my worth. Even as I reached professional milestones, that *Betaal* of failure reframed my achievements as acts of redemption rather than genuine progress. I often ask myself: Am I truly moving forward or simply trying to escape the weight of my past failures?

This presence is not just persistent; it can also be overwhelming. A minor setback today can feel disproportionately painful because it stirs echoes of old wounds. Past compliments and validation often fail to penetrate or heal these wounds.

Through deep self-confrontation, I have realised that if we confront these echoes—refusing to let them dictate our

present—the *Betaal* begins to lose its grip, becoming quieter and its weight diminished. This is not a single moment of realisation—it is an ongoing practice of self-confrontation, reflection, and frequent visits to my Ignored Mirror. Living in the present can gradually narrow the power the past holds over us. The past can shape us, but it does not have to define or destroy our future.

Of course, like in the Vikram-*Betaal* stories, the *Betaal* occasionally whispers wisdom, too. Just as *Betaal's* riddles ultimately made King Vikramaditya wiser, our past failures can whisper important truths if we listen carefully. These whispers of wisdom from our past struggles can be a compass with hard-earned insight.

The question is not whether we carry *Betaals* but whether we are willing to put them down before they take over our lives. Can we confront the echoes of our past, transforming their whispers into wisdom that guides our future?

REFLECTION 1.5

ARE WE A COLLAGE OF PERCEPTIONS?

“We do not see things as they are; we see them as we are.”

– Anaïs Nin.

American-French writer Anaïs Nin aptly observed that our perceptions, beliefs, and experiences act as a lens through which we interpret the world. Similarly, the world interprets us in countless ways, shaped by selective perceptions and inevitable distortions.

Have you ever felt trapped by how others perceive you? It is like being caught in a hall of mirrors, where each reflection shows a version of you filtered through someone else’s view. These fragmented perceptions—formed in fleeting interactions or moments—often start to build an image of us. We adopt these fragments without realising them, allowing them to shape our identity and sometimes become self-fulfilling prophecies.

I once tested this idea on myself during a class discussion at the University of Notre Dame. I asked my cohort to share their perceptions of me. Their answers ranged from “inquisitive” and “intentional” to “sarcastic” and “affectionate.” Each response revealed a facet of me, but none painted the complete picture. This exercise taught me a powerful lesson: while others’ views can offer insights, they are often incomplete and, at times, misleading. It was a stark reminder of how perceptions influence our sense of self.

No matter how elaborate, a collage of perceptions can never fully capture the complexity of who we are. Yet, we often

adjust our behaviour to fit these labels, even when they do not align with our true selves. Over time, this alignment creates an invisible construct—a perceptual prison built by the world around us and reinforced by our acceptance of it. We become its inmates, often without realising we hold the key to freedom.

If I extend this reflection to my pet Pomeranian, Rushi, and ask him who I am, his answer would be refreshingly simple: “a two-legged friendly creature that makes strange noises.” My identity, achievements, and carefully curated self-image mean nothing to him.

Rushi’s perception of me as a friendly, noise-making creature is not wrong—it is simply one fragment, one perspective among many. This serves as a reminder to question the universality of self-perceptions and others’ opinions. Our definitions of ourselves and the world are interpretations, not absolute truths. Recognising this helps us break down the walls of our perceptual prison and make room for a more authentic understanding of who we are. Apart from finding our authentic selves under these layers of perception, we must live with these ever-evolving identities, which are even intertwined with our various roles.

Are we willing to see beyond the fragments others project and the ones we have accepted? Or will we let these pieces define a never-complete whole?

REFLECTION 1.6

EXPECTATIONS VS. EFFORTS: WHO CHARTS OUR COURSE?

“Desire alone does not light a lamp; effort is the oil that fuels it.”

– Anonymous.

Does this not challenge Paulo Coelho’s popular notion: “When you want something, all the universe conspires to help you achieve it”? While Coelho’s words inspire us to dream, they can also mislead us into believing that desire alone guarantees success. The truth is far less poetic: the Universe owes us no favours. Success is not handed to us; it is earned through consistent and deliberate effort, putting us in the driver’s seat of our destiny.

Consider the analogy of material balancing chemistry equations: the inputs always determine the output. For instance, if we want a flourishing career or meaningful relationships, our investment must match our desired outcomes. The effort is the key determinant in this equation, while luck and prayers serve as occasional sparks—unreliable and unpredictable catalysts. Stretching expectations without aligning them with deliberate action often leads to frustration and disappointment.

I recall a story about a friend who once visited an astrologer. The astrologer confidently predicted that my friend would become a famous auditor, citing his current apprenticeship as proof of this certainty. Convinced that success was preordained, my friend relaxed his efforts, believing the outcome was inevitable. Predictably, he never

achieved the fame he had been promised. His reliance on expectations, without action, became his downfall.

Expectations can inspire us to dream big, aim high, and push further. But unchecked, they risk becoming burdens, creating unrealistic demands, and draining our peace of mind. Striking a balance between aspirations and reality is essential to shaping a meaningful and fulfilling life.

Managing expectations is not about lowering them but aligning them with deliberate effort and personal values. When we do this, expectations transform from heavy burdens into empowering tools for growth, guiding us toward authentic success.

Desires may set the goal, but only effort fuels the journey. Are your dreams lighting the path forward, or are they waiting for the oil of effort to bring them to life?

REFLECTION 1.7

THE FREEDOM DILEMMA: THE CHALLENGE OF LETTING GO

“In the process of letting go, you will lose many things from the past, but you will find yourself.”

– Deepak Chopra.

Freedom and letting go might seem like synonyms, but in reality, they drive each other in unexpected ways. We all crave freedom—liberation from societal norms, rigid roles, or limiting beliefs. Yet, achieving it does not always bring the relief we expect. Often, freedom expands choices but also increases responsibilities. It opens vast possibilities but offers no clear direction. This is the paradox of freedom: it liberates us and challenges us to use it wisely.

Nature offers profound lessons in letting go. Over millennia, rivers have carved new courses, mountains have eroded into valleys, and forests have regenerated. Even our bodies follow this principle of renewal—scientists remind us that parts of us are born and die daily. A six-pound newborn grows into a 200-pound adult through continuous cycles of growth and decay. Letting go is fundamental to survival and essential for balance, transformation, and evolution.

Yet, as humans, we resist. While we may accept the physical changes in our bodies, we cling stubbornly to our egos, beliefs, possessions, and roles—things that often no longer serve us. Why do we hold on so tightly to what we cannot keep? Do we mistake letting go for failure rather than seeing it as an opportunity for renewal?

Breaking free from rigid roles in my career brought immense relief—an invigorating sense of liberation. But it also left me grappling with the challenge of what to do with my newfound freedom. Without a clear purpose or structure, liberation can feel hollow. I have observed the same in organisations: attempts to flatten hierarchies often promote innovation but leave teams directionless without leadership. Freedom without self-control or purpose can spiral into chaos.

Self-control and freedom may appear as opposites, but they complement each other. Without self-control, freedom risks becoming disorder, and self-control becomes oppressive. The balance lies in understanding what to hold on to and what to let go of—a delicate act of discernment that mirrors nature's wisdom.

Letting go is not a loss but an act of trust in ourselves and the renewal process. Despite knowing that life will eventually require us to let go, we cling to our egos, possessions, and roles. Why do we resist what is natural?

Isn't freedom about choosing what truly matters, not the absence of constraints? Similarly, is not letting go an act of courage to create space for transformation, not surrendering as we fear?

What are you holding on to that no longer serves you, and how might letting open the door to a freer, fuller life?

REFLECTION 1.8

REBIRTH: A CHOICE, NOT A PROMISE!

“Each morning, we are born again. What we do today is what matters most.”

– Buddha.

On a lighter note, rebirth in some religious contexts feels like the elusive rewards promised in a corporate bonus system—offered for the future, contingent on performance today, but often beyond reach. Like variable pay, the promise of rebirth often feels distant and unattainable, yet it has been sold to millions over centuries to encourage moral and righteous living.

Religious texts frequently use the concept of rebirth to inspire people to walk the righteous path. While the metaphor is powerful, its literal interpretation can leave us questioning its plausibility. Spiritual philosophers, however, have often viewed rebirth not as a distant promise but as a call to reset and renew in this life whenever we stray from our path.

Buddha’s story is itself a testament to rebirth. Born into royalty, Prince Siddhartha renounced his princely comforts to seek enlightenment, ultimately becoming Gautama Buddha. His transformation was not tied to another life but was a deliberate, profound shift within this one. Siddhartha’s story reminds us that rebirth is not bound by time—it is a conscious realignment with purpose, available at any moment.

Once a shy lawyer, Mahatma Gandhi redefined himself as a global icon of nonviolent resistance. Nelson Mandela emerged from 27 years of imprisonment with a renewed

purpose: to unite a divided nation. These examples remind us that rebirth does not demand a new life; it calls for courage, awareness, and the willingness to let go of what no longer serves us.

Rebirth does not carry the weight of past lives or karmic debts. Instead, it is a clean slate—a chance to free ourselves from yesterday’s mistakes, regrets, or expectations. Life always provides opportunities to reset. Rebirth does not come from passively waiting for change but actively cultivating self-awareness and a deep craving for fulfilment.

Letting go is central to this process. Releasing past burdens—whether emotional, societal, or self-imposed—creates space for transformation. Siddhartha let go of his royal identity, Gandhi released his insecurities, and Mandela chose forgiveness over anger. In each case, rebirth was a conscious act of renewal.

Rebirth does not require dramatic life changes. Sometimes, it is as simple as starting your day with fresh resolve or forgiving yourself for a mistake. Can we not pause momentarily and reflect, “What is one small step I can take today to move closer to the person I want to become?”

Imagine a friend asking, “If you could start fresh right now, what’s one thing you would leave behind?” How would you respond? Would it be fear, regret, or a long-held expectation? And then, ask ourselves, “What is stopping us from letting go and stepping into a new beginning today?”

Rebirth is an invitation—a chance to realign with what truly matters, here and now. So, what will it take for you to embrace your moment of renewal?

REFLECTION 1.9

SURVIVING THE IMPERFECT CAREERS

“Life is not about waiting for the storm to pass, but learning to dance in the rain.”

– Anonymous.

Much like water, careers flow along the paths of least resistance, settling into the best available alternatives at any moment. The decisions we make at each stage of life are often the best we can manage under the circumstances. And yet, we sometimes indulge in wishful thoughts of “what could have been.” But let’s be honest—those fantasies are just that: fantasies. For most of us, this principle holds, even as a fortunate few stumble into perfect opportunities by sheer coincidence.

Pursuing a “perfect career”—a flawless job or ideal promotion—is a common yet draining illusion. How many years are spent chasing this mirage, waiting for something better while overlooking the opportunities already at hand? Rarely do solutions to career dilemmas arrive in neatly wrapped packages. Instead, they come in fragments, leaving us responsible for piecing them together into something meaningful.

Waiting for perfection often conceals deeper issues: fear of failure, inertia, or procrastination. It is a never-ending cycle of worry—about not progressing fast enough or missing the next big opportunity. But this cycle is unnecessary. Progress does not need to be perfect; it needs to move forward. Concentrating on the opportunities before us can redirect

our energy from chasing illusions to constructing something tangible and fulfilling.

As we navigate the realities of imperfect careers, a question often arises: “Can I find fulfilment in what I’m doing right now, or am I always waiting for something better?” It is worth asking yourself: What if your path isn’t a mistake but an opportunity to create meaning? Is not it possible that the fragments of your work—no matter how scattered—can be pieced together into something genuinely gratifying?

Often, colleagues would ask me, “Do you think I can find the perfect job?” My standard reply was, “Probably not. But you can find your Flow—that state where you’re so immersed in what you’re doing that time fades away, and the work itself feels fulfilling. Is not that the closest thing to perfection we can achieve?”

So, here is a thought: What small step can you take today to stop chasing illusions and step into the Flow, where fulfilment becomes the natural outcome?

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