

The Illusion of the Separate Self

All of us use the word 'I' many times every day. To what or whom are we referring? As Mr Ouspensky explained in his Psychological Lectures, this thing that we call 'I' is not a single, constant entity – it changes from moment to moment:

Every wish, every desire, every 'like' and every 'dislike', every opinion and every tendency, every belief and every disbelief is an 'I'. And each one of them has his own will and his own resistance to the will of other 'I's. ...

First, I want to repeat what was said before about the absence in man of one permanent controlling 'I' different from other 'I's. All 'I's are equal; it is better to say that they are equally weak. Each of them can occasionally conquer other 'I's, each of them can become Caliph for an hour and then be replaced by another 'I'. None of them can do much good, but almost every one of them, in one hour or even less, can do so much harm that all the other 'I's will have to pay for it all their lives. [*The Psychology of Man's Possible Evolution*, Lecture 1]

Just a little self-observation will confirm this view. When we look carefully and impartially we see layer upon layer of different 'I's'. It starts at a superficial level with the job that we 'do': 'I', the IT expert, the musician, the engineer, the designer, the carer ... Just beneath that lie our opinions and beliefs: 'I' the environmentalist, the anti-globalisation-ist, the atheist, the Christian, the Buddhist, the Advaitin ... Near the bottom, the labels become more general – 'I' the thinker, the perceiver, the feeler, the chooser, the doer ... The common factor that runs through all these 'I's is the belief and feeling that 'I' am a separate entity – separate from the world and separate from everything and everyone else in it.

The system taught by Gurdjieff to Mr Ouspensky asserted that there is no real, permanent 'I' – that we have to develop 'Real I' within ourselves. However, as Mr Ouspensky recognised, the system is incomplete. He was convinced that if the source of the system could be found, this would include a method of remembering the Self that we really are and have always been. When Dr Roles met the Shankaracharya Shantanand Saraswati in 1961 it became clear to him that the Indian philosophy of Advaita taught by the Shankaracharya tradition was the source of the system taught by Gurdjieff. One of the central teachings of Advaita is 'tat tvam asi' translated as 'That thou art' and interpreted as meaning that Ultimate Reality, Brahman, is identical to the individual Self, Atman. It became clear that the idea of needing to 'develop Real I' had to be abandoned. Instead, Advaita teaches that the light of the Real Self is shining all the time, but just appears to be veiled. It is those apparent veils that create the illusion of a separate self.

The traditional path towards understanding our true nature, as taught in the Shankaracharya tradition, involves a long process of purification in which the pre-requisites to understanding our true nature are attained. (See last term's paper *20140603 Qualifications and Veils*.) Much, but by no means all of HH Shantanand Saraswati's teaching is along those lines, drawing ideas from all the major branches of Indian philosophy in answer to questions. However, He, in conjunction with Dr Roles and others did a lot to shorten this traditional process for those living ordinary lives in the Western world who wish to follow a Fourth Way path.

In recent times the process has been turned on its head in the Direct Path which is derived from the teachings of Atmananda Krishnamenon and Ramana Maharshi. In the Direct Path we start by discovering our true nature, and there then follows a much longer process of allowing our understanding to colonise mind and body – the equivalent of the purification prescribed in the traditional path. This is how Rupert Spira describes the first stage:

Normally we consider ourselves to be a separate entity, located in and as the body. In order to discover what we truly are, as opposed to what we seem to be, an investigation into both the belief and, more importantly, the feeling of being such an entity will, in most cases, be necessary.

It is inevitable, to begin with, that this investigation will seem to be an activity of the mind that is undertaken by the entity we presume ourselves to be.

However, as this investigation deepens it is discovered that there is no separate agent inside the body, thinking, feeling, acting or undergoing an activity called meditation or investigation. Rather it is discovered that, all along, even when we considered ourselves to be a separate entity, located inside the body, all we ever were and are is the Consciousness within which all things (including the belief and feeling of separation) appear and out of which they are made.

We realise that the apparent person is in fact not an entity but rather a process of thinking and feeling, made only of mind, that appears within (and is ultimately made out of) the knowing space of Consciousness. [\http://non-duality.rupertspira.com/read Question 69]

In this group we follow a similar approach, using just as much of Mr Ouspensky's and the Shankaracharya's teaching and methods as seems to be required as preparation for following the Direct Path. Learning to separate pure, direct experience from automatically superimposed concepts and ideas (as discussed in the previous paper) is an essential pre-requisite.

The investigation that takes place during the first step of the Direct Path involves the progressive discovery of everything that we are *not*. It is known in the Indian system as 'neti, neti' – 'not this, not this'. We discover that we are nothing – not-a-thing. We understand ourselves to be the 'witnessing presence of Awareness' to which and in which all the objects of the mind the body and the world appear. In other words, at this point there is still a subtle feeling of separation – a subject, the Observer or 'witnessing presence of Awareness', and a multiplicity of objects 'the observed'. Expressed in Mr Ouspensky's terms, the Observer is yet another (unreal) 'I', but is 'closer' to Real I than any of the other 'I's which are clearly seen to be false.

The second step is to investigate the nature of the Awareness that we have seen ourselves to be. This investigation can take place only from that placeless place 'behind the mind' where our experience is uncoloured by the pre-processing of the mind. Here is the Shankaracharya's description of the approach that is needed:

One should be able to see the things which are happening in the world—but only as a silent Observer. See all the pleasures on the [cinema] screen, but don't be involved and moved off course.

All the exciting things which are shown on the screen do not colour the screen itself—the screen is pure white. It has no colour of its own—it just reflects the colours which are thrown on it.

So should we become like a screen where every part of the activity takes place—is allowed to take place, but we should become pure white and not be stained or dyed with any of the colours of the world. [HH Record 1972, 3 October]

Investigation of our experience seen from the point of view of the 'silent Observer' shows us that what we are, pure Awareness, is unlocated in space and unlimited in time. It has no dimensions. The

separate self that we previously imagined ourselves to be – ‘I’ the thinker, the perceiver, the feeler, the chooser, the doer has no independent reality separate from the witnessing of it:

At the moment we know ourselves as the witness we know, by definition, that there is no individual doer or experiencer. There are just thoughts, sensations and perceptions arising in and made out of our own self. The previously imagined doer or experiencer is understood to be simply a witnessed thought or sensation. [<http://non-duality.rupertspira.com/read> Question 98]

The final step in the discovery of our true nature is to see that all the witnessed thoughts, sensations and perceptions are made out of our Self, pure Awareness. All feeling of separation, all sense of duality disappears. Rupert continues:

When we know thoughts, sensations and perceptions to be arising IN our self, we are the witness. When we know them to arise AS our self we are their substance.

As witness we are transcendent. As substance, immanent.

As witness we take our stand as wisdom. As substance, love.

These are the two modes of experience: as witness we are the Knowing element in all experience. As substance we are the Being element in all experience. That is, we simultaneously *know* the world and *are* the world. [<http://non-duality.rupertspira.com/read> Question 98]

Some obvious questions arise: ‘Can we really short-circuit the traditional paths, developed over many centuries? Surely there must be risks or pitfalls in the short-cuts provided by the Fourth Way?’ As Rupert explains, if the initial investigation is not thorough and understanding is incomplete, it is easy to fall prey to the machinations of mind designed to protect the apparently separate self from being clearly seen:

It is only when the whole mechanism of the apparently separate self has been seen clearly in all its subtlety that we are free of it, that is, that ‘I’, awareness, stands knowingly in and as itself, unapparently-veiled by the belief and feeling of separation.

It is not enough to wash a veneer of ‘Oh well, everything is equally an expression of awareness and therefore nothing matters’ over our beliefs and feelings. This kind of superficial thinking is one of the safer refuges for the apparently separate self.

The sense of separation is a past master at appropriating anything for its own purposes of self-validation and justification, and superficial spirituality is one of its less easily detected forms.

Hence the new religion of non-duality. [*Presence* Vol II, p193]

A similar pitfall arises in which the apparently separate self seems to appropriate for itself the characteristics of unqualified, unlimited love and peace that belong to the real Self, Awareness alone. ‘Love’ becomes limited to those who support and encourage that illusory self, and ‘peace’ to those who profess the same beliefs. The result is conflicts and divisiveness. As Mr Ouspensky explained, real love is a positive emotion that does not discriminate, is universal in its scope, and cannot turn negative. We cannot manufacture it or invoke it: it arises automatically when we lose the feeling of being separate and abide knowingly as the real Self.

It is our natural, paramount love of truth combined with sincere, impartial self-observation and rigorous investigation of our experience that provides initial protection from these pitfalls. Later, when we discover our true nature and fall in love with abiding knowingly as the real Self, the

emergence of an old habit related to the illusory separate self is seen for what is, and it loses its power of deception.

Practice

We have spoken many times about the importance of practice, but perhaps what has been missing has been the understanding that practice is only of real value if it is initiated by love. As Mr Ouspensky explained, the door to the Fourth Room is found in Emotional Centre. Rupert takes this further and suggests abandoning the word 'practice' altogether:

Immediately forget the word 'practice'. If we live somewhere out in the country, we don't feel every day: 'I'm going to *practise* going for a walk'. We go for a walk because we love to do so. And even if we may take the same lane up behind the house every day, we never feel we are going on the same walk. Every time we set out on the lane behind the house, it is a new walk.

[from yoga meditation: *Emptiness moving in Emptiness*, 12/11/2013]

A little self-discipline is needed by most of us at the start. But after a time, perhaps it is worth trying to see it this way when we sit down to meditate, and also when we abide as the Observer or 'witnessing presence of Awareness' during our activities throughout the rest of the day? It is the resulting enjoyment, freshness and lightness of being that arouses the love that we need to feed the virtuous circle.

Contemplation

We normally think that to be a separate self is natural and effortless, and that to be the open, empty presence of Awareness requires effort. In fact, it is the other way round: to be the open, empty presence of Awareness is natural and effortless, but to be a separate self requires a continuous and subtle effort of thinking and feeling.

[Rupert Spira]