

Am I a Material Body or Brain?

In the Direct Path there are just two barriers to the first step of discovering our true nature – belief, and resistance to questioning the validity of our beliefs. We all have a huge portfolio of beliefs based on what we have been taught in school and by our parents, what we have read, and for some of us, spiritual beliefs that we have acquired from gurus or from spiritual books. How do we decide what to investigate? One approach would be to base our investigation on the five sheaths or veils that cover the self, as described by the founder of the Shankaracharya tradition, Adi Shankara. These sheaths form the basis of the neti-neti method ('not this', 'not this') in the path of discrimination. The aim is to remove each sheath in turn, like layers of an onion, to bring us to the realisation: 'I am nothing, not-a-thing'.

Last year we looked at the traditional Indian descriptions of the five sheaths in the paper *20140603 Qualifications and Veils*. This term we will take a 21st century Western perspective and examine our cultural, scientific and religious belief systems related to each sheath. We start with the 'food sheath', Annamaya, characterised by the belief 'I am my physical body'. We will all have recognised by now, that the self which we feel ourselves to be must be more than just a bunch of cells organised into the flesh, blood and bones of a human body. At the most basic level, we can perhaps agree that 'I am that – whatever it is – which right now is reading these words'. This can be generalised to: 'I am that which is aware of my experience'. But what *is* that awareness? Where does it come from? Does it live in the brain?

Our Western culture is based on materialism: all there is to the universe is matter. (Scientists would say 'matter and energy', and point out the interchangeability of the two). In other words, the body is in the world, the brain is in the body, the mind is in the brain (or *is* the brain) and consciousness is in the mind (or *is* the mind). But how then can consciousness or awareness arise from dead, inert matter which is no more than an organised collection of atoms and elementary particles? This is known as the 'hard problem of consciousness'. Three possible solutions are offered by the materialists:

1. Consciousness is an emergent property of the complex organisation of matter. One of the implications of this philosophy is the possibility of building a machine, a robot, which is conscious.
2. Consciousness is an irreducible property of matter or the intrinsic nature of matter. Everything in the universe *has* consciousness or *is* conscious. Stones, rivers, televisions, cars are in some sense conscious. This philosophy is known as panpsychism.
3. Consciousness doesn't exist – it is an illusion.

First, let's look at the scientist and philosopher Bernardo Kastrup's explanation and critique of the materialist solution of emergence:

Some neuroscientists and philosophers speculate that consciousness is an 'emergent' property of the brain. 'Emergence' happens when a higher-level property arises from complex interactions of lower-level entities. For instance, the fractal patterns of snowflakes are emergent properties of complex interactions of water molecules. But to merely state that consciousness is an emergent property of the brain is rather a cop-out than an explanation. In all known cases of emergence, we can deduce the emergent property from the characteristics of the lower-level entities that give rise to it. For instance, we can deduce the fractal shape of snowflakes from the characteristics of water molecules. We can even accurately simulate the formation of snowflakes in a computer. However, we cannot – not even in principle – deduce what it feels to see red, to be disappointed or to love someone, from the mass, charge or momentum of

material particles making up the brain. *As such, to consider consciousness an emergent property of brains is either an appeal to magic or the mere labelling of an unknown. In both cases, precisely nothing is actually explained.* [Brief Peeks Beyond, page 59]

It is perhaps the implausibility of emergence that has recently led a number of materialist philosophers to suggest panpsychism as a solution to the hard problem of consciousness. This theory might seem a little less implausible, but as Bernardo Kastrup points out, there is absolutely no evidence to support it:

The problem with panpsychism is, of course, that there is precisely zero evidence that any inanimate object is conscious. To resolve an abstract, theoretical problem of the materialist metaphysics one is forced to project onto the whole of nature a property – namely, consciousness – which observation only allows to be inferred for a tiny subset of it – namely, living beings. This is, in a way, an attempt to make nature conform to theory, as opposed to making theory conform to nature. [Materialism is Baloney, page 19]

At first sight panpsychism might appear to be a non-materialist philosophy, but if we look more deeply we see that

... it [panpsychism] provides an easy escape route for the materialist. It magically 'solves' the hard problem of consciousness simply by declaring consciousness to be either an irreducible property, or the intrinsic nature, *of matter*. This way, it maintains our present delusion that matter – either in substance or in structure – is the primary aspect of reality.

[<http://www.bernardokastrup.com/2015/05/the-threat-of-panpsychism-warning.html>]

The belief in panpsychism is common in spiritual circles, but it is a misunderstanding of the non-dual teaching. They believe that everything is conscious or consciousness is *in* everything – humans, cats, ants, trees, stones, rivers, and even the air that we breathe. In contrast, the non-dual teaching says that consciousness is the primary reality. Consciousness is not *in* any of these things – all of them are *in consciousness*. And at the Absolute level, *there are no 'things' with a separate, independent reality*.

The third solution, that consciousness doesn't exist, has been proposed by materialist philosopher Daniel Dennett. It is perhaps the least plausible of all and goes against our deep intuition. In what medium did his idea occur? Surely in consciousness? This is what Bernardo Kastrup says:

Dennett suggests that, if enough aspects of experience are found to lack any correspondence with consensus fact, consciousness will be shown to be nonexistent. This is wholly illogical: even if we find one day that everything we experience fails to correspond to consensus fact, that will simply show that consciousness is populated with illusions. It will leave consciousness itself intact. We are still conscious of illusions, in exactly the same way that we are conscious of our dreams. [Brief Peeks Beyond, page 67]

All three solutions start from the fixed belief that matter is the primary substance out of which the universe is made and try to reconcile this belief with the phenomenon of consciousness. When we recognise the primacy of matter to be just an assumption and not a fact we open ourselves to new possibilities.

All we know of ourselves and the world comes from our direct experience – thoughts, sensations and sense perceptions. The whole of science is based on sense perceptions. Scientists use instruments to extend the range of sensory input, but ultimately all scientific data comes through

the senses. Scientific ‘facts’ are nothing more than models of the world developed from observations of sense data, and all scientific models are based on implied assumptions that have not been and usually cannot be tested. That is certainly not to say that science is ‘wrong’ or ‘useless’. We need to create models of the world in order to make sense of it and we need to make sense of it in order to survive. In fact model-building is an intrinsic function of the human and animal mind. But it’s important to recognise that the models we build do not necessarily reflect reality. Those who are interested in the way our minds automatically manipulate sense data might enjoy the illusions on this website: <http://www.michaelbach.de/ot/>

The first stage of self-enquiry, known as ‘higher reasoning’, is based on considering only our direct, unmanipulated experience. We imagine that we are new-born infants and try to look at our experience from that viewpoint. Bernardo Kastrup’s books such as *Matter is Baloney* and *Brief Peeks Beyond* illustrate the power of this approach. He is not a follower of any spiritual teaching, but he uses his scientific background and training in logic to develop a hypothesis that is remarkably similar to the mystical teachings of most of the world’s religions and cultures. He suggests that the materialists have got everything upside down and that a more plausible solution to the hard problem of consciousness is that consciousness rather than matter is the primary reality of the universe. His hypothesis is consistent with the Direct Path teaching that mind is a modulation of consciousness and that the body, brain and world are simply models that mind superimposes on experience.

The aim of the neti-neti approach is to discover that our beliefs about what we are and what the world is are just that – beliefs and not facts. We use the hints given to us by realised people to steer our investigation in a fruitful direction, but in doing so we must be careful not to replace our old beliefs with new ones. Francis Lucille explains why this is important:

Q: I am full of doubt about the effectiveness of rational analysis as a path to the beyond. When I try it, what happens is that I become aware of the falsity of a customary belief about who I am but then I find that I am caught in a more subtle belief. Every time I go beyond one belief I only find myself in a more subtle belief, and the process seems to continue ad infinitum. How can any thought take you out of the realm of thought?

It is impossible if you go about it in this way. It is impossible if, after discovering the falsity of the belief that you are *a*, you jump into the belief that you are *b*. You will just progress from belief *a* to *b* and then to *c*. As you say, there is no end to it. But the end does come when you stop believing that you are *anything*, any object. No object will do. The sickness of the mind is that we think that we can construct, within the mind, an idea of what we are. It is an impossibility!

The mind is convinced that there is no way to know what we are, other than through the mind, because the mind has no access to any other form of knowing. The mind will stop looking the moment that it has a clear understanding that its search is doomed to failure.

[*Truth, Love Beauty*: Ch 9, You Have a Choice]

So self-enquiry starts with the mind but does not end with the mind. We use the mind to thoroughly and rigorously examine our beliefs through higher reason, but in doing so we bring the mind to a stop. As Jean Klein describes, we arrive at a placeless place of openness and not-knowing:

When you ask yourself, “Who am I?” you cannot have an answer, because any answer can only refer to the already known. So you live in “I don’t know,” free from knowledge. You live for the time being in not-knowing. This not-knowing has its own taste, its own flavour; the mind is not

furnished; you feel yourself completely in space. You are really free when you live in questioning, in the “I don’t know.”

Then you will discover that the questioning is the answer. You will discover that the questioning, the asking, cannot be localized—it is not an object, you cannot think it, objectify it. In that moment the questioning refers to itself. You will find yourself in this stillness, this not-knowing, where there is a total absence of yourself. In this total absence of yourself there is presence. It is a presence beyond space and time. It is presence in presence and absence. It is not in subject-object relationship. [*The Book of Listening*: Dialogue in New York, April 27 1990]

Nothing that is said or written by anyone – including realised people – can be absolutely true. The words we read or hear from spiritual teachers are merely pointers to a truth that cannot be expressed in words or even thought about. And if we look for our own answers through thinking we are doomed to fail. As the Sufi teacher, Elias Amidon, explains:

Ultimately, however, we will be forced to abandon words altogether and simply open ourselves to this intimate space that is forever present before thoughts appear or words take shape, and after they vanish. In either case, our explorations are by necessity immediate, experiential, and direct. We cannot just think about these matters and presume to know what they mean. Direct experience without the intermediation of thought is the heart of our practice.

[*The Open Path*, page 136]

Contemplation

All that is known is experience, but there is no independent self that experiences and no independent object, other or world that is experienced. There is just the experiencing of experience. [Rupert Spira]