

Questioning our Beliefs

If we want to discover for ourselves what we really are, we must first give up all the beliefs we hold about our true identity and start our investigation from openness and unknowing. If we ask the question 'what do I really know, with absolute certainty, from my own experience?', we find that almost everything we think we know comes from second-hand knowledge – it's just belief. Some beliefs come from the culture in which we live, some from our education, and some from spiritual teachings. The first step is to recognise them as beliefs rather than facts. For example, we might believe that we are a limited entity that lives inside a body, which looks out at a world of solid objects made of matter, separate from itself. Or we might believe that what we are, our true self, is a tiny fragment (Jiv-Atman) of the large self of the universe (Param-Atman). Or we might believe that this self that we are needs to improve, develop or evolve into something better, more spiritual, operating at a higher or more refined level, before it can become complete or fulfil its ultimate purpose or reach enlightenment. As Rupert has said (in *The Transparency of Things*): 'Many of our ideas and beliefs about ourself and the world are so deeply ingrained that we are unaware that they are beliefs and we take them, without questioning, for the absolute truth.'

So, the second step is to test all such beliefs against our experience. Can we find any evidence for any of them? Just because they seem to correspond with views held by distinguished scientists, or words spoken by a realised teacher, does not make them true. All science is based on underlying axioms or assumptions: questioning those basic assumptions is outside the province of science. And as we saw from the previous paper, no words from realised teachers can be regarded as absolutely true – many of their answers are given as 'compassionate concessions' to those who believe themselves to be a separate entity, or in classical Advaita language, 'a thorn to remove a thorn' – a lesser untruth to remove a greater untruth.

In the Direct Path, a detailed and careful investigation is undertaken, questioning everything we hold to be true about ourselves, regardless of its source. Adopting a new set of non-dual beliefs or trying to create a synthesis of contemporary non-duality with our dearly-held beliefs from a previous spiritual path is unhelpful because as Rupert says: 'Consciousness liberates itself with clarity and honesty, not with the superimposition of beliefs and dogma.' The most a teacher can do is to help us with our own investigation by suggesting a new direction or a different approach when we get stuck. But that would be just a suggestion that relates to our specific needs in that moment, and is intended as a starting-point for deeper enquiry. The rest is up to us.

This enquiry should not be regarded as a discipline or a practice – it should be interesting, enjoyable and ultimately compelling because it comes from our natural love of truth and our desire to understand:

We have to make a distinction between two forms of practice. There is a form of practice which is boring, which is repetitive, which makes the mind and the body dull. I wouldn't recommend any kind of practice like that. But there is something – we cannot call it practice – which is some form of investigation that originates from an eagerness to understand, an eagerness also to conduct experiments. And that is very effective in liberating us from our belief systems and feeling systems that are left-overs of ignorance, the belief that we are a separate and individual consciousness. ... That kind of practice is not boring; it already carries with it joy and happiness – the joy of discovery. [Francis Lucille: *The Nature of the Self*, SAND conference 2012]

In an interview in 2009, Rupert explained in detail the steps he took in his own self-enquiry which led him to enlightenment. Many of his meditations make use of that same pathway. He had guidance

from his teacher, Francis Lucille, but the investigation was his own and was carried on over several years:

I would ask myself 'what evidence do I have for the deep belief and more importantly the feeling that what I am is located in a body. What I am, whatever that is – for instance it is hearing these words, it is seeing my sitting room and the landscape out of the window at the moment – whatever it is that I refer to as 'I' is undoubtedly present and it is undoubtedly knowing, or experiencing. For instance, it knows my thoughts, it knows now, as we're talking, all the thoughts that are appearing and these thoughts are known or experienced by something. There are bodily sensations taking place at the moment – an amorphous cluster of bodily sensations – these again are known or experienced. And likewise, there are changing perceptions taking place – the visual perception of this room and the landscape outside. So thoughts, sensations and perceptions – they are all appearing to me, they are all known by me. What about this 'me' that knows them? It is my experience that I am present, here, knowing. But when I look towards this presence, and when I try to find it, when I try to see 'what are you?', what are you made out of?', where are you?', when I look towards it a very strange thing happens: I don't even know which direction to look in. Any direction would be in the realm of objects. Any direction would be either in the direction of an idea, or an image, or a perception – a physical direction. But when I look towards it I don't know where to look. Every direction seems to be the wrong direction. It always seems to be behind me – that's another way of saying it. Wherever I look it's behind me, and then when I turn round, it's behind me again.

So I could never find this presence. Whenever I tried to find any objective quality that it might have, for instance it might be of a particular shape or a particular size or a particular age or a particular colour, all these qualities are known by it, but it itself doesn't have a colour or a shape. So I would explore in my experience, I would try to find this presence that I know myself to be, and I found nothing. So it became absolutely clear – just based on my very simple experience – that what I am, although undoubtedly present and knowing or aware, couldn't be located anywhere in the realm of the mind or the body. And this paved the way for a much deeper exploration. Because I was then faced with the situation that OK, I know, I see clearly that I am not located or limited. That is that I, consciousness, presence, is undoubtedly present and unlimited. And yet I still feel that I'm located. I still feel that I'm the body or that I am in the body. So I had what was really an intolerable situation, that was a deep contradiction. I had come to the intellectual conviction that I had no evidence for the belief that what I am is limited or located, and at the same time I felt limited and located.

I then started a much deeper exploration of the feelings. What is it that makes me feel that I am limited and located? So I would go into the experience of the body, and explore the body, and ask myself – to begin with, with my eyes closed, but later with my eyes open – 'what is my actual experience of the body?'. And my experience with my eyes closed is of this amorphous, tingling mass of sensations. In actual experience, it doesn't look anything like the body that I conceive of or see in the mirror. It's just an amorphous cluster of tingling vibration or sensation. And I would ask myself: what is it that makes me think and feel that I am this tingling cluster of vibrations? Do I find consciousness inside this tingling cluster of vibrations? Or is it my experience that this tingling cluster of vibrations that I call the body, appears inside consciousness, inside myself. And it became very obvious that I had never experienced consciousness in the body. It's always been my experience that the body, this cluster of sensations appears in consciousness.

Of course, I'm speaking it now, explaining it rationally, intellectually. But it was a very experiential exploration and it took time because there were all sorts of locations in the body that seemed to claim to be the residence of this 'I'. It took place over a period of years really, exploring all the sensations that I thought were utterly, intimately, myself. I came to the very, very clear experiential understanding – not just the intellectual understanding – the experiential understanding that the tiny little cluster, for instance, the little tingling sensation behind the eyes that seemed to be so absolutely me is actually no more 'me' than the little tingling perception of vibrating blue that I can see that we call 'the sky'. Both of them – the tingling sensation behind the eyes, and the vibration of blue called the sky – both of them appear in the same placeless place of consciousness. They both appear in me. And if I look at both these experiences and ask myself 'what are they made out of? What is their substance?', I find that they are both made out of the same thing – out of knowing or experiencing. This feeling exploration – it wasn't an intellectual exploration – it broke down gradually the apparent me-ness of the body and the apparent not-me-ness of the world. It became clearer and clearer and clearer that everything that appears – the tingling vibration at the soles of my feet, and the humming of the traffic outside, or the visual perception of the houses outside – they were all made out of the same stuff, experiencing or knowing. And that knowing itself was what I am – presence.

[Rupert Spira: 14th September 2009, Transcript from Interview with Areti Alexova, Part 1]

It's not a one-off enquiry which results in an answer. Each time, in each line of enquiry, our questioning brings the mind to a stop and we abide there as pure awareness. We need to go on and on and on retracing our steps back there and abiding there, until eventually it becomes the mind's 'default setting'. As Jean Klein explains:

Life is the best teacher. Every circumstance, in a certain way, is a teacher. I think every situation, every moment brings you to a question. You have to deal with situations, with objects, and every situation, every moment can bring you back to the 'Who am I?' What is this 'I' that you can never represent? What is the fundamental global feeling of 'I'? You can never concretize it, but still there is a kind of original feeling. So, every moment of every situation can bring you back to this inquiry. And what happens then, is that you live in an unknown.

[Jean Klein: *Living Truth*, 1988 July 17, morning]

We sometimes hear non-duality teachers say: 'Give up the search, you are what you are looking for, seeking is an activity of an apparent separate self'. While it is true that the activity of seeking eventually dies away after enlightenment, it is not true that stopping seeking will bring about enlightenment. Here is Rupert's advice:

I would encourage people, if they are looking, to keep looking. To bring all their love and all their intelligence to their search. As we do this, our search becomes more and more refined. We don't *find* what we are looking for: we *dissolve* in what we are looking for.

[Rupert Spira: 14th September 2009, Transcript from Interview with Areti Alexova, Part 2]

Contemplation

When the 'I' of the apparently separate self is divested of all beliefs and feelings of lack and limitation, it stands revealed as the true and only 'I' of ever-present, unlimited Awareness.