

## Exploring the Nature of Myself

Our 2017 Summer Programme contained ideas for a number of lines of enquiry, or prakriyas, to lead us to an understanding of our true nature. As requested at the end of last term, we will start the New Year by considering the first of these, 'What Am I?'. The corresponding text from the Summer Programme is attached as an Annex to this paper.

Before going into the enquiry in more detail, it might be helpful to look at how Rupert describes the steps of understanding. (It's worth noting that although these are in a particular order, there is usually some overlap between steps):

The spiritual path could be divided into three steps. The first step involves the investigation into the essential nature of the ego or separate self through the *neti neti* process, in which the witnessing subject of experience is extricated from all objective content and stands alone as pure consciousness, the primary and fundamental element of all experience.

In the second step, consciousness releases its attention from the objective content of experience, from which it separated itself in the first step, and begins to flow backwards or inwards into itself, eventually coming to rest in itself. It is in this self-resting or self-abiding that consciousness is gradually, in most cases, divested of its self-assumed limitations and recognises its own ever-present and unlimited being. This self-resting or self-abiding is the essence of meditation and prayer.

Once consciousness has recognised its own ever-present and unlimited nature – the recognition that is traditionally referred to as enlightenment or awakening – the purpose of distinguishing consciousness from objects has been accomplished and it is now necessary to dissolve this distinction. Thus, the third step on the spiritual path involves an exploration of objective experience in the light of our new understanding in order to collapse the apparent distinction between consciousness and its objects.

In this exploration, we discover that consciousness is not simply the witnessing presence *to* which all experience appears but the space or field *in* which all experience appears. ...

Even if we perceive something that seems to be at a vast distance from ourselves, such as the moon, all that could ever be known of it is a thought, image or perception, and all thoughts, images and perceptions appear in consciousness. ...

In the final stage of this exploration the distinction between consciousness and its objects collapses completely. Experience is not just known *by* consciousness; it does not just appear *in* consciousness; *consciousness is all there is to experience*. There is only consciousness. As the Vedantins say, 'There is only the Self', and as the Sufis say, 'Everything is God's face'.

[*The Nature of Consciousness*, ch 9]

The first step requires us to see that we have a whole tapestry of interrelated ideas and beliefs about ourselves that has no basis in actual experience. The first of these is that our essential being lives in, is derived from and is limited to the body and mind. We imagine that our self lives inside the body-mind and everything else exists outside. Here are Rupert's suggestions for examining the truth of that belief:

Notice first something in the apparently outside world, for instance the sound of passing traffic, or the sight of buildings or the landscape. The sound or the sight is known or experienced by our

self, aware presence. We believe that I, this aware presence that apparently lives inside and is limited to the body, hears the sound of traffic or sees the buildings or the landscape.

However, I am obviously not a sound or a sight. I am whatever it is that is *aware* of the sound of traffic, or the sight of the buildings or landscape. These sounds and sights come and go, but I, aware presence, remain. For this reason, we know that I am not a car, a building or the landscape.

Now what about the body? Are we not also aware of the body in a similar way to being aware of sounds and sights? ...

If we now turn our attention to the tingling sensation of the face, hands or feet, we discover that we are aware of that sensation just as we are aware of the traffic, the buildings, the landscape or a headache. And just as sounds and sights appear and disappear, so do the sensations of the body, leaving our self, aware presence, remaining. In other words, the body—in this case, the face, hands or feet— are objects of our attention just like the sounds and sights of the world and we, aware presence, are their subject or knower.

In this way we come to a simple but revolutionary discovery: it is not 'I, the body' that am the *subject* or *knower* of experience but rather 'I, aware presence', that am the subject or knower of experience, and the objects of the body, like the objects of the world, are *known* or *experienced*. In other words, we are aware of the sensations of the body in the same way that we are aware of the perceptions of the world. ...

Now what about the mind that, for most of us, is considered to be identical with our self? The mind consists of thoughts and images. In fact, no one has ever experienced a mind as such, that is, a permanently existing container of all thoughts, images, memories, fears, hopes, desires etc. The existence of a container of all of those is itself an idea. In other words, we do not know a mind, as such. All we know of the apparent mind is the current thought or image.

If we stay close to experience, using only our actual experience as a test of truth or reality, we will see that the body and mind do not *know* or *experience*—they are *known* or *experienced*.

See clearly that it is not 'I, the body and mind', that is aware of the world but rather that 'I, this aware presence', is aware of the body, mind and world. ... [Presence Vol 1, ch 2]

The second step starts from this understanding. We spend time abiding as that aware presence that we now know ourselves to be, and thereby begin to understand its essential nature. Although this aware presence is never absent, normally it is so mixed up with thoughts and feelings that we can't imagine what it is like without them. We can't see our essential nature with our mind. So spending time just resting as the presence of awareness, beyond the reasoning mind is important.

But there is still some enquiry needed. We need to explore the limitations we project onto this aware presence. The first point to notice is that awareness never changes; it remains unaffected by the nature or content of experience:

The knowing with which all experience is known is always the *same* knowing. Its condition or essential nature never changes. It is never modified by what it knows. Being the common, unchanging element in all experience, knowing, being aware or awareness itself does not share the qualities or, therefore, the limitations of any *particular* experience. It is not mixed with the limitations that characterise objective experience. It is, as such, unqualified, unconditioned and unlimited. ...

The knowing with which enthusiasm or exuberance is known is the same knowing that knows our darkest feelings and moods. The objective element of experience always changes; the subjective element never changes. The known always changes; knowing never changes. [Rupert Spira: *The Nature of Consciousness*, ch 1]

Do we each have our own awareness, or is there just one awareness? Are there any limits or boundaries to awareness? One way to explore this is to ask whether there is any difference between the pure awareness that each person experiences:

When anyone, regardless of the state of their mind or the condition of their body, hears the question 'Are you aware?', they pause. In that pause everyone refers directly to the identical experience of being aware. Awareness's awareness is redirected away from the object on which it was previously focused and reoriented towards itself, that is, towards the experience of simply being aware. And in doing so, everyone refers to exactly the same experience.

It is important here to make the distinction between 'similar' and 'same'. In referring to the experience of simply being aware, it is tempting at first to believe that we all refer to a *similar* experience. Such a view would suggest that there are multiple, similar awarenesses, one for each person or animal. However, if there were more than one awareness, each awareness would have to have some objective quality that distinguished it from all the others. But no such objective quality is found in our actual experience.

Thought *believes* that awareness has limiting qualities, but those qualities are never actually found in experience. That is, in awareness's own experience of itself, there are never any limitations or boundaries, just as, if space were able to look at itself, it would find no limit or boundary within itself. [Rupert Spira: *The Nature of Consciousness*, ch 5]

We will leave the third step for another time.

## Contemplation

*Thinking imagines that our essential nature of pure Awareness shares the limits and the destiny of the body. With this belief, a limited, temporary self comes into apparent existence, on whose behalf most thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships are undertaken.* [Rupert Spira]

## Annex: Extract from 2017 Summer Programme

This programme contained ideas for self-enquiry based on different pathways to the understanding of our true nature. The following extract covers the best-known pathway: Who (or what) Am I?

### *What Am I?*

See first that the essential nature of what you call 'I' does not change. If this is not apparent to you, look closely at whatever it is that you feel is an essential part of you which you recognise as being changeable. For example, your body is changeable. The cells it is made from are constantly being replaced. Is this really an essential part of you? What would happen if you had a leg or an arm cut off? Would you have lost part of your essential nature? And what about the mind? What is there to the mind other than thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions? These change all the time. If any one of these channels of perception is removed, does 'I' get any smaller?

Now ask yourself: 'what cannot be separated from me? What is this feeling of 'I' that has remained the same all my life?' Perhaps you then come to the conclusion that 'I' must be simply that which experiences everything that arises in experience. In other words, 'I' is the witness of all my experience – from when I was a tiny child up to now.

Then you might start to explore the witness of experience and the relationship with that which is witnessed. Is there really any evidence of two things – a witness, and a flow of experience that is witnessed? Going on from there: Is there anything present in experiencing other than the knowing of it? Is it a reasonable description to say that I am pure Consciousness or pure Knowing, and that all that is witnessed is 'made out of' or 'a vibration of' the Consciousness that I am?