

## Dissolution of the Witness

The first step in the Direct Path involves separating out what is 'me' from what is 'not me'. In Sanskrit this is referred to as the neti-neti process. When we have investigated and removed everything that is 'not me' from our concept of 'I', we arrive at the understanding 'I am that which is aware of my experience'. In other words, 'I am the witnessing presence of awareness'. But that is not the end of the spiritual path. As Rupert describes in this extract from a dialogue with a member of the Study Society, it is just a stepping stone:

Q: Is the watchfulness that I experience, the reflection of the Atman in the mind?

RS: The word 'Atman' means 'self', yourself, what you refer to as 'I'. Now in most cases, this 'I' is mixed with thoughts and feelings, and therefore seems to be a 'jiva-Atman', a separate self, because of the mixture of the pure Self, Atman, with thoughts and feelings. And this mixture of the Self with thoughts and feelings makes the temporary, finite self, that each of us knows as the 'separate self', or ego, or finite mind – the jiva-Atman. But if we make a deep investigation of that self – now who would make a deep investigation of oneself?, only oneself can make that investigation. But if the self makes an investigation of itself, and it explores only that which it essentially is, if it rejects as 'not me' anything that is not essential to it, such as thoughts and feelings and activities and relationships, what is left when everything has been removed from the jiva-Atman, the separate self, is the pure Atman. And without all the limiting features of thoughts and feelings, that Atman has no limits. It is unlimited or infinite. It is the Param-Atman, the ultimate self, in fact the only self there is. When the Param-Atman, the ultimate self, infinite consciousness, reduces itself, contracts itself into each of our minds, it still remains shining in each of our minds as 'myself', but its light is dimmed as a result of its mixture with thoughts and feelings.

Now, no matter how dense our thoughts and feelings, everybody still has the experience of being 'myself'. So, although in most people, 'myself' is thoroughly mixed with thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships, nevertheless, the knowledge 'myself' or the knowledge 'I am' still shines in everybody's experience. Even Hitler had the experience 'I am'. The nature of that 'I am' in Hitler's experience was profoundly dimmed by the quality of his thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, the knowledge 'I am' shone in his experience. That was infinite consciousness shining in a rather murky mind. It's like sunlight shining through thick cloud or thick fog – some of its light still manages to filter through that denseness.

Now however dense our minds, everybody has the experience 'I am myself'. And if everybody were really to explore 'what do I really mean by "myself"? what is *truly* myself?' – this is King Lear asking himself 'who am I really?' – they embark on this journey, this inward-facing journey where they discard everything that is not essential to them and eventually there is this revelation, or this 'laying bare' of their essential, irreducible self, the 'am-ness' of themselves, which is the pure Atman, or Param-Atman. And that unlimited consciousness shines in each of our minds, either as the knowledge, 'I am' or as the knowing with which we know our experience, The knowing that illuminates all of our experience, is that infinite knowing. And when that knowing shines in the finite mind, it's called the 'witness' of experience. So the witness of experience is still something apparently finite, because for there to be a 'witness', there must be a 'witnessed'. So the witness is the separate subject of experience. So the witnessing presence of awareness is, in a way, the portal through which mind passes on its way back to its essence. But the witness is only a stepping stone, because if there is a witness, there is a witnessed. So the witness is the separate

subject of experience – it's not yet pure consciousness. Or rather, it *is* pure consciousness, but it's pure consciousness shining in the finite mind.

Q: I'm trying to relate that to the experience I had.

RS: Well try to relate it to your experience *now*. There is something knowing your experience, something that is witnessing your experience. Your experience is finite. All you are experiencing is your finite mind at the moment, that is thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions. So all you are experiencing now is your mind. But there is an element of your mind that is *knowing* your current experience. So this 'knowing' is shining in your mind as the witness of your current experience. Now that witness *seems* to be limited to your mind. But in fact if you investigate that witness, you'll find it is infinite. So the witness in each of our minds would be like the space in this room. The space in this room seems to be limited by this room, but when investigated, it is the infinite space, relatively speaking, of the universe. So the witness in each of our minds is like the space in this room. It seems to be a separate witness, the witness still seems to be located here, behind my eyes, just like the space of this room seems to be located in this space in Buckland Hall. But this space is not located in this room, this room is in fact located in this space. So the witness seems to be located in each of our minds. The witness still seems to be something that is temporary and finite. But if we investigate that witness, we find it is not *in* the mind, the mind is in it. Just as if we investigate this space, we find that this space is not in this room, this room is in fact in the single space of the universe. So we could say the witness is the *trace* of the infinite in the finite mind.

[Buckland Hall, 4<sup>th</sup> December 2017: From '*The Realisation of Infinite Potential*']

It is obvious that this understanding 'I am the witnessing presence of awareness' is still a position of duality, because if there is a witness there must be a witnessed. But we shouldn't be in a hurry to move on from this position. It's important to look into the nature of this 'witnessing presence':

Q: I recognise that I have been meditating as the witness of experience, but I realise this is dualistic. How can I make the transition to non-duality?

RS: This witnessing meditation that you have been doing is exactly the right place to start, and you've been doing it for a long time. Because normally we feel 'I the body-mind am aware of the world'. So this first stage of the contemplation is to recognise that no, it's not the body-mind that is aware of the world, it is 'I', the witnessing presence of awareness that is aware of the body-mind-world. And this establishes 'I am the witnessing presence of consciousness'. Now that recognition by itself, doesn't bring about liberation. It gives us access to the peace of our true nature, but it doesn't bring about full liberation, because the witnessing presence of consciousness has not yet been liberated from limitations. We can still know: 'Yes, I am the witnessing presence of awareness', but that awareness can still be temporary and finite. And so this is why it's valuable to pause and spend some time in this intermediary step, to really establish in our experience that the witnessing presence of awareness is not located anywhere. It is not in time or in space. In other words, it is eternal and infinite. And that takes, in most cases, some time.

In the first step, the true and only self of pure awareness has been liberated from the first layer of limitations – thoughts, feelings and sensations. But it's as if there are layers of limitation around awareness, and it's necessary to go all the way back to pure awareness that has no finite qualities, that doesn't share the limits or the destiny of the body. That recognition, the recognition 'I, the witnessing presence of awareness am ever-present, and therefore without

birth or death and infinite, and therefore have no sense of lack'. So this discovery – I am eternal and infinite puts to rest the two essential elements of the separate self – the fear of death and the sense of lack.

But as you rightly say, even when we discover the ever-present, infinite nature of awareness, there is still this duality. We could call it 'enlightened duality', because there is 'I', infinite awareness, and all this other realm of experience, the body-mind-world. So we then have to collapse the apparent distinction between these two realms and that's exactly what the yoga meditations are designed to do.

[March 2<sup>nd</sup> 2015 [\*The Dissolution of the Subject and the Object of Experience\*](#)

The yoga meditations are experiential explorations of mind, body and world based on the tantric Kashmiri Shaivite tradition. They involve feeling and sensing rather than thinking, and for this reason they need to be experienced directly rather than through reading. However, here is a summary of the path along which these yoga meditations take us, in order to effect the dissolution of the witness:

If we explore this Knowing Presence that we know ourselves to be, we discover from direct experience that there is nothing in our experience to suggest that it is limited, located, personal, time or space-bound, caused by or dependent upon anything other than itself.

Now we look again at the relationship between Knowing Presence and the objects of the body/mind/world: How close is the world to our knowing of it? How close is the world to 'experiencing?'

We find that there is no distance between them. They are, so to speak, 'touching' one another.

Now we can go deeper. What is our experience of the border between them, the interface where they meet or touch? If there was such an interface, it would be a place where Consciousness ended and the object began. We find no such place.

Therefore, we can now reformulate our experience based upon our actual experience, not just theoretical thinking. We can say that objects do not just appear *to* this Knowing Presence but *within* it.

At this stage Knowing Presence is conceived (based on experience) more like a vast space in which all the objects of the body/mind/world are known and experienced to appear and disappear.

However, it is still a position of dualism, a position in which this vast knowing space is the subject and the world is the object that appears within it.

So we again go deeply into the experience of the apparent objects of the body/mind/world and see if we can find in them a substance that is other than the Presence that knows them or the space in which they appear.

This is a very experiential exploration that involves an intimate exploration of sensations and perceptions and which is difficult to detail with the written word. It is an exploration in which we come to *feel* not just understand that the body/mind/world is made out of the substance that knows them.

However, in this formulation there is still a reference to a body/mind/world, albeit one known by and simultaneously made out of Knowing Presence. It is a position in which the body/mind/world doesn't just appear within Presence but as Presence.

But what is this body/mind/world that is appearing as Presence? We explore experience more deeply again and find that it is this very Presence itself that takes the shape of the body/mind/world.

Knowing Presence takes the shape of thinking and appears as the mind. It takes the shape of sensing and appears as the body. It takes the shape of perceiving and appears as the world, but never for a moment does it actually become anything other than itself.

At this stage we not only know but *feel* that Presence or Consciousness is all there is. It could be formulated as, 'I, Consciousness, am everything.' At the same time we recognise that this has in fact always been the case although it seemed not to be known previously.

So we have moved from a position in which we thought and felt that 'I' am something (a body/mind) to a position in which we recognised our true nature of Knowing and Being (Presence) and which we expressed as 'I, Consciousness, am nothing.' And we finally come to the feeling/understanding that I, Consciousness, am not just the witness, the knower or experiencer of all things, but am also simultaneously their substance. In other words, 'I, Consciousness am everything.'

Even this is to say too much, for what is this 'everything' that is referred to? Language collapses here. Instead of saying 'Consciousness is all,' we should say just 'Consciousness is.' But then what is this Consciousness that is being framed....again it is to say too much.

To summarize we move from 'I am something' to 'I am nothing,' from 'I am nothing' to 'I am everything' and from 'I am everything to 'I,I,I. ...'

We fall silent here.

Having said that, I would add one thing. As we abide knowingly as this Knowing Presence we discover that it is not a void, an emptiness. Rather it is the fullness of Love. In other words, Love is the substance of all things. ...

The abidance in/as this Love is simply to abide as the Self that we are and that we know ourselves to be. Love is known to be the substance of every appearance and to be solely present throughout all the apparent stages of its revelation. It is the origin, the substance and the goal of our enquiry. [August 31<sup>st</sup> 2009 [Are there two things: Consciousness and its object?](#)]

## Contemplation

*As the witnessing background of all experience, our essential nature of pure Awareness is inherently free from all things; as the substance of all experience, it is intimately one with all things.*  
(Rupert Spira)