

The Starting Point

The 'Fourth Way' begins with the idea that life is not what it seems. Modern civilization generally takes it for granted that normal human beings are conscious and can exercise free-will. For centuries mankind has seen itself as being at the pinnacle of evolution, effectively ruling the world and master of its own fate. In a highly evolved society, providing an unprecedentedly secure and comfortable life-style, only severe misfortune can shake the life-long conviction that 'I can do what I choose if I want to.'

The System sets out to demonstrate that this conviction is fundamentally deluded. It claims that the normal waking state is only one of many levels of consciousness and there are other levels available to human beings in comparison to which the normal state is like a waking sleep. The Creation, the System says, has brought mankind to a stage where its own requirements are fulfilled. The species has evolved sufficiently to provide for the particular purposes of a higher being—for Nature, the biosphere—but these purposes remain imperfectly perceived or perhaps even quite unknown to the mortal beings they control.

The vast majority of the seven billion people on the planet are said to exist in this state of waking sleep, acting and reacting in response to influences only dimly recognised—as puppets animated by invisible strings. It is said that any further development of consciousness, any mass escape from this mechanical existence, is not in the interests of Nature and can be attempted only by individuals. Nevertheless, the System also affirms that the *possibility* of a greater consciousness is latent in every one of us and that many higher energies are constantly available in the human organism—but that the way to open the channels and so allow these energies to flow naturally has somehow been forgotten.

The System insists that before anything can change we must first realise our position. Unless we can allow ourselves to see the real extent of our mechanicalness, unless we *experience* this, there will be no reason to wish to be any different.

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We are largely mechanical beings. Our assumed possession of free-will is actually very limited, almost entirely an illusion.* This statement would be shocking if we could take it seriously, but it threatens our precious sense of selfhood so much that we immediately cushion and deflect the real meaning of the message before it can become emotional. Nevertheless, until the idea does become emotional, unless we *feel* it, it will have little effect—or at best act very slowly.

The System points out that we have not one but many different, disconnected 'I's. We credit ourselves with a unique and consistent character, but in fact a range of different and conflicting 'I's appears haphazardly in response to our constant identification with whatever desire arises in the moment. One 'I' is attracted by the display in the shop window, another decides to make the purchase and yet a third is horrified by the credit-card statement. This process operates at all levels of our life. Each successive 'I' feels different, yet they all imagine themselves to be '*the* I' whilst temporarily directing our conscious energy. Each and every one claims the indubitable reality of the moment. We, or our friends, may call them

*Modern neuroscience increasingly supports this view. Many 'conscious' decisions' in the fore-brain are *preceded* by the unconscious neurological and motor activity required to implement those decisions.

'moods' and together they make up the cast of the composite character called 'me'. This is the 'me' who lives at the level where things seem indisputably separate. Me, and mine. The System says that this transient sense of 'I' is all that we possess and anything like a 'permanent I' or a 'real Self' does not exist—in fact cannot exist in us as we are.

Today, both science and psychology increasingly demonstrate that the sense of individuality we take so for granted is mechanically constructed, pre-conditioned, first by heredity, through our genes, then by our childhood experiences and from day-to-day, from moment-to-moment, by the unconscious biological and neurological systems which keep us alive. Perhaps we do have 'something of our own', but we don't remember what it is.

Only after having become more keenly aware of the reality of this situation can methods for changing the construction of our being become a practical proposition. To begin to remember our 'real Self' we have somehow to learn to observe ourselves as we are.

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Nearly a hundred years ago, when the System was first taught in the West, this stark picture of mankind's condition was all it offered, but during his last few years PDO started to realise that it was telling only half the story. He became convinced, *not* that the System was wrong but that it was incomplete. Firstly, it lacked a simple and effective method of turning its extraordinary knowledge into a practical proposition. FCR followed his teacher's instruction and looked for the source, and having found it he discovered not only the method but a great deal more. Although the Shankaracharya's teaching agrees entirely with the System about the normal mechanical condition of mankind, it gives a very different, and a much more hopeful account of the possibilities latent within us.

Advaita Vedanta also teaches that ordinary life is an illusion, but it describes the Creation from a universal, rather than an individual point of view. The foundation of its teaching is that the true nature of everything in the Creation is the pure consciousness from which all the multitude of different forms seem to arise. It promises that we will quite naturally come to know ourselves as one with this eternal unity if we will only allow the limitations imposed by our illusory sense of a separate individuality to be dissolved.

Advaita teaches that in fact it is this universal conscious energy which underpins all our feelings of individuality. In truth, the only 'real I' is pure consciousness itself, permanent and unchanging, but we keep on associating this energy, which provides the light of our personal consciousness, with whatever it happens to be illuminating at the time. By a process of 'identification' we attach attributes to the light, giving it form and colour and limiting it to being perceived as an object or a being. The description of light falling on physical objects is analogous, but not entirely similar, to the diffusion of pure consciousness through the mechanism of human perception.

The Work is the process by which we can allow our limited and changing sense of 'I' to expand to the point where it becomes universal. By learning how to become free of identification we can begin to become aware of our essential oneness with the Unity in which pure consciousness and love are perceived as one.

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