

The single-most desire that all human beings share is to be ever happy and free of suffering. Consequently, our life journey is one of attempting to fulfill this basic requisite. The question then arises — *Is happiness found in the world outside of ourselves or is it innate and ever present within us?*

Self-inquiry is a means of answering this question. It is a simple yet often challenging way of redirecting the outward-turned mind onto its source — the self, which is referred to in various traditions as God, Brahman, Jehovah, Allah, Buddha nature, Christ consciousness and the Light. The way is simple in that the instruction is easy to understand and follow, but challenging in that our tendencies, or habits of the mind, often sabotage our effort. Self-inquiry involves investigating *Who am I?* to quiet the mind while, at the same time, divest the false sense we have of ourselves of its authority. This question is not intended to be a repeated mantra but rather an impetus to begin the inquiry. Redirecting the mind onto itself can be likened to swimming upstream against the current when we are accustomed to simply floating downstream. If the mind is restless or drowsy, the attempt to swim against the current of thoughts is futile. However, when the mind is alert and still, the current is not detectable and swimming upstream is effortless.

As we begin self-inquiry, we become aware of the rapid rate at which our thoughts proliferate, moving from past activities and concerns to the future and back again, barely hesitating while passing over the present moment. We can also single out the central thought from which all other thoughts arise. This thought, which we call “I”, is our ego. It comprises the mind, which can be seen as simply a jumble of thoughts, and the body, which the ego arbitrarily identifies itself to be. The ego takes full credit for the cognitive skills of the brain, which are separate and distinct from the mind, while its constant mind chatter provides the means for it to maintain a position of control. As a result, the false sense of being a distinct and separate individual is born.

The ego evaluates everything it encounters and, based on previous encounters, rates each as pleasing, indifferent or displeasing. Observing the ego, we see that its appearances are intermittent, mutable and impermanent, similar to a cloud in the sky. Consequently, it cannot be real though we mistake it as such and give it full rein to govern our lives. We also notice its perceptions are based on duality. In other words, each of its perceptions requires an opposite, a polar complement; for there to be things that please the ego, there must be things of equal measure that displease it.

When observing the thinker, or ego, our habitual tendencies often come to the fore, such as an unexpected awareness of being impatient,

judgmental, irritable or selfish. This might discourage us from continuing our inquiry or cause us to become self-critical and then analyze or attempt to alter our tendencies. But using the mind to correct the mind would be like asking the thief disguised as a policeman to catch the thief. So, instead of altering or running away from our tendencies, we continue our pursuit and still the mind by seeking the thinker, or finding from where its thoughts arise, or simply letting the thoughts go.

As the mind winds down, we notice that problems are easier to resolve, creative ideas come more readily and making plans is less complicated. Engaging in any of these endeavors, however, invites the ego's return and terminates our inquiry. By resisting this temptation, we soon discover for ourselves that resolution, creativity and planning take place spontaneously in the complete absence of the ego.

Still another potential deviation from our inquiry occurs when we find ourselves entangled in the endless stories of the ego or its conversations with itself that can last anywhere from a few moments to extended periods of time. While some of the repetitive themes of these stories may seem to be pacifying, they all stimulate the mind creating restlessness or drowsiness. Some stories deceive us with their sense of urgency and importance or with their noble aspirations. We might feel as though we get pulled into them by a compelling force without our even being aware of it. Yet this force is just a conditioned reaction of

the mind that distracts us from the sublime yet continuous force that draws us to the self, like the force of gravity that pulls objects to the earth. Confronting the ego straight on takes a great effort that requires undying patience, humility and fortitude. Perhaps it is as great as the effort we made when we were first learning to walk. Then, despite countless failures, we persisted until we achieved our goal. Such determination is needed again to achieve the greater quest of self-realization.

Each time we focus on the thinker, it disappears only to quickly reappear in a different guise. The thinker's erratic appearances can be likened to a gopher peeping its head out of a hole. When a cat lunges toward it, instantly it disappears only to reappear from another of its many holes. If we become disheartened by our initial inability to maintain concentration, we need to inquire, *Who is discouraged?* If the discouraged one is not found to be everlasting, can it be real? Challenging the existence of the ego in this way provides invaluable insights into our essential nature. If we wonder who is making this inquiry, it is the ego looking for itself. When it cannot be found, its elusive existence ceases and the self alone remains. Similar to the stick used as a poker to stir a fire, the ego eventually burns itself up.

The objective of most spiritual traditions and psychological practices is to understand the ego, or disarm it of its dominance, or, at the very least, divest it of its considered "undesirable" aspects. On the other hand,

self-inquiry aims to destroy the ego altogether. This is not done with disdain, considering that its illusive existence manifests from the self and, consequently, is not apart from it. The ego has inadvertently been mistaken to be the self. The analogy often used to explain this paradox is that of a coiled rope appearing to be a snake. The rope and the snake are not separate entities. However, without careful investigation, the rope is believed to be the snake in the same way that the ego is believed to be the self. What needs to be destroyed is our false identification with the ego. However, we're not inclined to challenge its position of authority, much less destroy it, for fear of losing it. We assume the ego provides a function that we cannot live without, even though we can clearly observe that its mental chatter only hinders awareness. For the ego to exist, it must grasp onto things external to itself — objects, thoughts, sensations. Turning the attention onto the ego by seeking its origin disables its ability to grasp. Hence, it disappears leaving only the self.

We have been conditioned to believe that consciousness is found in the physical body. Yet the fact remains that distinctions cannot be made between our consciousness and that of others; consciousness is singular and exactly the same in all beings. The consciousness of the ego is only a superficial reflection of the pure, ever-shining consciousness of the self. The analogy often used to clarify this phenomenon is the luminosity of the moon being solely the reflected light of the sun. Besides uti-

lizing the consciousness of the self, the ego takes full advantage of the self's knowledge, which is revealed through the silent language of the intuition, by manipulating this knowledge to conform to the ego's ever-changing perceptions and beliefs.

Our attachment to the ego is said to be the addiction that surpasses all others. The ego identifies itself as the physical body, which is constantly changing and has no lasting existence in and of itself. On the other hand, we are certain of our existence, since it always is and has never changed. It is continuous throughout the sleep, dream and waking states, whereas the body that appears in the waking state disappears altogether in the other states. We are continuous existence. The body is discontinuous and is part of the ever-changing phenomenal world. Ironically, we fear breaking our addiction to the ego even though we do it everyday when we go to sleep. In fact, we long for the deep sleep in which the ego does not exist, though we are fully present, and value that time as the most precious of our greatest pleasures.

Wherever we happen to be throughout the course of our daily lives, we inquire to find the origin of our habitual tendencies and consequent mental states. *Who is irritated right now? Who is judging or feeling pain? Who is thinking?* During this continuous meditation in which we take the position of a silent witness, we develop an ability to simply

observe thoughts as they arise in the mind without thinking about them. From this vantage point, we see that there is really no one to whom the mental states belong and the culprit responsible for their appearances is none other than the imagined sense we have of ourselves.

As our habitual tendencies diminish along with the mind chatter, our point of view broadens and our attention moves closer to the present moment where the ego has nowhere to hide. The hard edges of our perceptions soften, which enables us to trust in what lies beyond them. Upon realizing the ego has been the sole obstruction to our inherent happiness, we strive to rid ourselves of it. And from what we have experienced as a result of our direct observation, the only way to do this is to know with absolute certainty that the ego is not real. That is, it cannot be found. This awakening can be likened to letting go of a burning coal that we have been holding onto for eons.

Whenever the mind steadies and becomes quiet, we fix our attention on the emptiness, the stillness. With our old familiar habits of the mind and self-identifications behind us, we face the unknown and might wonder, *Am I this static void?* At this point, any perception or expectation we might have of the self must be abandoned along with the intellect. Just as a candle used to see things in the dark becomes useless in the presence of the sun, the intellect no longer serves a purpose. With full alertness and trust in the great unknown, we focus our attention on

the one who becomes aware of awareness itself and realize it to be our true self.

The self is pure consciousness — the one and the same that is common to all beings. It is impersonal and often referred to as “the deathless” because it was never born nor will it ever die. Being formless, indiscernible to the physical senses, and equally present in the awake, dream and sleep states, the self has no limitations and is always accessible. It is our true teacher and the wellspring of grace. Hindu texts explain the self as a fusion of *being* or existence; *consciousness* or awareness; and *bliss* or happiness, peace and love. Beyond this, the self cannot be adequately explained in dualistic terms because, being the absolute, it transcends them. The self is not something found anew nor can it be attained, since we have never been apart from it for a single moment. If it were otherwise, the self would not be everlasting, permanent and true. And if it were something for us to gain, we would stand an equal chance of losing it. In truth, we have always been self-realized. Our pursuit is one of removing the ignorance that keeps us from knowing and, in turn, being the self.

Self-realization occurs when the mind has completely and permanently merged into the self. The illusion of “I” has been cast off, yet, paradoxically, “I” remains. “I” is perpetually being right here, right now, unlike a meditation period in which thoughts resume from where

they left off once the meditation has ended. When a person is self-realized, the mental faculties continue to function as normal, yet without the interference of mind chatter, while interactions with others and daily routines are carried out as usual. In the presence of those who are self-realized, we might experience within ourselves a marked sense of clarity, happiness and peace. But aside from this, distinguishing characteristics common to all of them cannot be found.

While books and teachings on self-realization may kindle our interest, offer guidance and resolve some of our doubts, they only lead to more questions, since the nature of the mind is thought regeneration. Self-realization cannot be achieved by the intellect but rather through direct experience alone.

Our desire to be ever happy is proof of the unwavering happiness found in the self. We would not desire this if it were not already known to us. After all, we knew only happiness when we were born. Happiness is our very nature, not something that can be attained or defined by its opposite. Our desire to be ever happy is realized when we rid ourselves of the ignorance that keeps us from it. Thus, we let go of our thoughts and inquire, *Who am I?*



When we realized that  
we each perceived the world in different ways,  
we let go of our perceptions and found each  
other within our self.