

A MEDITATION ON I AM

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PUBLICATIONS BY RUPERT SPIRA

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INTRODUCTION

THE UNITY OF BEING

Throughout our lives we make statements such as, 'I am five years old', 'I am twenty-four years old', 'I am lonely', 'I am in love', 'I am excited', 'I am depressed', 'I am having lunch', 'I am reading a book', 'I am married', 'I am single', and so on.

In each of these statements we refer to our basic self or being — 'I am' — which is subsequently coloured by various thoughts, feelings, states of mind, activities or relationships. In each of these descriptions a temporary quality or characteristic is added to our being and, as a result, 'I am' becomes, or seems to become, 'I am this or that'.

The contents of experience are continuously changing. No thought, feeling, state of mind, activity or relationship is essential to us. They seem to temporarily qualify our self, but our basic sense of being remains the same throughout. It is the changeless background of our ever-changing experience.

We are now the same self that we were yesterday, that we were last year and that we were as a young child. The self who experiences loneliness or depression is the same self who knows excitement or the experience of being in love, just as the one who was in a relationship is the same one who is now single.

What accounts for this conviction that we are always the same person? After all, none of our thoughts, images, feelings, sensations, perceptions, activities or relationships remain the same. And yet there is undoubtedly a current that runs consistently throughout all changing experience.

* * *

Our being or self is the constant factor in all changing experience, just as a screen is the stable background upon which all movies are played. In a movie, no two images appear concurrently; if they did, they would be the same image. Therefore, no single image is directly related to any other in the film.

It is the screen that lends continuity to this otherwise discontinuous set of images, allowing the movie to appear as an undivided whole rather than a series of fragmented parts. Likewise, our being lends its ever-presence to the ever-changing flow of objective experience, conferring unity and continuity upon it.

Our being is not itself an experience but enables all experience to occur, just as the screen permits a film to be played. There could be no experience without our self, just as there can be no movie without a screen.

Our self is the common thread that weaves the tapestry of life into a coherent whole, the ever-present fibre that unites what would otherwise be a fragmented patchwork of thoughts, images, feelings, sensations and perceptions. It is the luminous thread that confers integrity and coherence upon our ever-changing experience, thereby accounting for the undeniable unity and continuity of experience.

The screen is the colourless background of all the coloured images in a film. As such, it shares none of the limitations that characterise the objects, people or events in the movie. At the same time, the screen is not separate from the film; it pervades each and every scene. Each image, after all, is simply a temporary modulation of the screen.

Similarly, our self shares none of the limits that characterise the content of experience, that is, our thoughts, images, feelings, sensations, perceptions, activities and relationships. Our being is the objectless, aware presence that lies behind and, at the same time, intimately pervades all experience. As such, our being both transcends the limitations of experience and is immanent within them.

* * *

Divested of the qualities that it borrows from experience, our essential nature is unlimited or infinite. As such, our being is not 'our' being; it is simply *being*. Just as the screen is not a property of any particular image or movie, so being is not a property of any particular object or person. It is simply the intimate, impersonal, infinite being from which everyone and everything derives its apparently independent existence.

In relation to ourself, our shared being is referred to as 'I'. In relation to the universe, it is sometimes referred to as 'God'. Although both these words have associations and, therefore, limitations, each conveys something of the nature of the reality to which it refers. The word 'I'

denotes the intimacy of our shared being, while the word 'God' evokes its impersonal, infinite nature. We might simply refer to it as 'presence', because presence is the common factor in all that is.

Given that we are inextricably linked to the universe, our essential nature and that of the cosmos must be one and the same, just as the nature of a wave and the nature of the ocean are one. This understanding was expressed by Jesus when he said, 'I and my Father are one'. That is, my essential being and the being of the universe are one.

The same understanding is expressed in Buddhism, 'Nirvana and samsara are one', indicating that the essential nature of our mind and the reality of the world are the same. This universal truth is echoed in the Hindu religion, 'Atman and Brahman are identical'. That is, the apparently individual being of every person is God's universal being.

In the Sufi tradition, 'Whosoever knows their self knows their Lord', that is, whosoever knows what is designated by the name 'I' or 'I am' stands identified with the ultimate reality of the universe. In other words, the ultimate reality shines in each of our minds as the knowledge 'I' or 'I am', before it is coloured or qualified by experience. As such, 'I am' is the divine name.

* * *

There can be no endeavour of greater importance than the journey to know oneself: to recognise one's essential nature, that which gives birth to existence. Indeed, if we do not know the nature of being, how could we know the nature of anything that exists?

The word 'existence' is derived from two Latin words, *ex-*, meaning 'out of' or 'from', and *sistere*, meaning 'to stand'. This implies that anything that exists *stands out from* the background of being, just as the objects and people in a movie stand out from the background of a screen. Of course, no object or person in a film actually stands apart from the screen; they only seem to. Likewise, no object or person stands apart from the background of pure being; they only seem to.

This understanding is echoed in the Bha-gavad Gita, 'That which is never ceases to be; that which is not never comes into existence'. And in the Muslim tradition it is said, '*La ilaha illallah*', meaning, 'There is no God but God', that is, no person is a self unto their self and no thing is a thing unto itself.

Nothing has its own existence, but rather everything borrows its apparent existence from God's being, the only being there is. There is only one reality, and that reality stands alone, indivisible, indestructible, whole, perfect and complete.

Just as all movies are a colouring of a single, indivisible screen, so all people and things are a modulation of pure being. Being is 'pure' because there is nothing in being other than being itself with which it could be mixed or limited. As such, it is infinite, indivisible and, at the same time, utterly intimate. It shines in our self as the knowledge 'I' or 'I am'.

This does not imply any disparagement of people or things. On the contrary, we are elevating people and things to their proper status. We are relieving the world of its status as an object to be exploited, and we are liberating people from the projection of 'other' to be oppressed, thus alleviating both from the inevitable consequences that attend such beliefs.

In other words, we are removing the filter of beliefs through which the universe has been fragmented into an apparent multiplicity of objects and others. We are discerning the unity of being in the diversity of existence, the 'white radiance of eternity' in the 'dome of many-coloured glass', as the poet Shelley put it. In the filmmaker Pasolini's words, we are 'restoring to reality its original sacred significance'.

* * *

When the unity of being shines in our relationship with another person, we experience it as love. Our being recognises itself in the apparent other. As the Sufi mystic Balyani said, 'Otherness for Him is Him without otherness'. It is for this reason that Rumi said, 'True lovers never really meet; they are in each other all along'.

And when our experience of an object — such as a painting, sculpture, bowl, dance, piece of music or landscape — momentarily dissolves the subject—object relationship through which we normally perceive, we experience the revelation of beauty. As with the experience of love, in which the separation between ourself and the apparent other dissolves, so in the experience of beauty, the distinction between ourself and the object or world subsides.

As such, love and beauty are revelations of reality, the shining of being in the midst of the apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves.

They are the revelation of God's presence, which shines as the am-ness in all selves and the is-ness in all things.

Ultimately, our being cannot legitimately be given a name, for all names have evolved to describe the content of experience. Even to call being 'infinite' is to say too much, as this suggests that there could be something real in existence that is finite, with which it could be contrasted. That would give credence to the idea that there is something other than God's being, and that is blasphemy.

Even the name 'being' goes too far, as it implies its opposite, non-being. If we wish to speak of being, we should really remain silent. As the painter Chatin Sarachi once said to my mother, 'If God exists, how do you dare even mention his name?'

And yet, paradoxically, how could anything be more worthy of our interest, love and attention than that from which all objects and selves derive their apparently independent existence? It is that which can never be captured in words, and yet all words speak only of it. It is that which can never be portrayed by art, and yet all art issues forth in its service. It is that which demands our silence, and yet all speech — and all poetry — pours out in its name.

As a Zen master once said, 'If I speak, I tell a lie; if I remain silent, I am a coward'. It is in this spirit that, over a number of years, the words of this poem took shape in my mind.

Rupert Spira
OXFORD, MAY 2020

I AM

I am

I have no words to express Myself
but all words express only Me

I have no meaning
but impart meaning to all that is perceived

I am without beginning and end
but all things begin and end in Me

I have no name
but am called by all names

I have no form
but all form indicates Me

I have no origin
but am the origin of all things

I am without division
but all divisions exist in Me

I am the knowing with which all things
are known

I am the presence in which all things appear

I am the substance out of which all things
are made

I am and know Myself alone

I shine in the mind as the knowledge 'I am'
I pervade the body as the feeling of being
I am felt in the heart as peace and happiness
It is My being that shines as existence in
all things

I am the longing in sadness
and the longed for in all longing

I am the expecting
and the expected in all expectation

I am the restlessness of the restless

I am the peace of the peaceful

I am happiness itself

I speak but am silent

I move whilst at rest

I know but cannot be known

I experience but cannot be experienced

I am but do not exist