

You Are the Happiness You Seek

Uncovering the Awareness of Being

RUPERT SPIRA

'I've gained deeper understanding listening to Rupert Spira
than I have from any other exponent of modern spirituality.'

DEEPAK CHOPRA

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INTRODUCTION:

A Silent Prayer

*And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

T. S. ELIOT

It is mid-afternoon on the 20th of March 2020, and a silent, invisible intruder has brought humanity to a standstill. Almost overnight I have cancelled all live speaking engagements for the foreseeable future and have transferred my activities online. My first online retreat, with five hundred people from around the world, will shortly begin.

When holding a meeting or retreat, I do not plan what I am going to say. I often sit quietly in an attitude of unarticulated prayer that my understanding, such as it is, might formulate itself in response to the moment. And this is no ordinary moment.

I check my emails, and my attention is attracted to one whose subject is *World Happiness Day*. A friend has sent me a message letting me know that today, the Spring Equinox, has, since 2006, been designated by the UN an international day of happiness, in honour of the understanding that ‘the happiness, well-being and freedom of all life on earth is the ultimate purpose of every human being, nation, and society’.¹

How poignant and how ironic, when the world finds itself plunged into a crisis which will bring untold distress and hardship to so many people, that this day should be consecrated a day of happiness, well-being and freedom.

The familiar objects, activities and relationships that we take for granted are rapidly being removed from us: the freedom to earn a living, to socialise and to travel, a plentiful supply of food and goods in shops, education for our children and grandchildren, and security for our future.

But what about happiness? Can it be given and withdrawn? If so, by whom or what? What is its cause? Is it something that is taken in from the outside, or does it originate within us? Is there such a thing as lasting peace and happiness, or is this destined to alternate with suffering for the rest of our lives?

These questions have troubled the minds of innumerable people for thousands of years, and as I ponder them I recall the first time they formulated themselves in my mind. It was 1980 and I was twenty years old, living on the edge of Bodmin Moor in Cornwall in the South West of England, studying pottery with Michael Cardew, then eighty years old and one of the founders of the British Studio Pottery movement.

It was a somewhat monastic existence, and in many ways life at Wenford Bridge – Michael’s home and pottery – resembled an apprenticeship with an old Zen master. However, I had a friend, and, although we rarely saw each other due to the remoteness of my circumstance, her presence in my life was a source of consolation and happiness.

Every Friday evening after dinner, I would walk a mile or so up the hill to the phone box on the edge of the village of St. Breward, beneath which the pottery was situated, and call my companion. It was something of a ritual whose anticipation and memory, as much as the event itself, sustained me throughout the week.

On this occasion, the quality of her first ‘Hello’ conveyed everything I needed to know. The brief conversation that ensued simply confirmed it. Little did I know then that her parting words were to be one of life’s great gifts to me.

Later that night, lying awake in bed, as the initial wave of confusion and sorrow began to subside, I kept asking myself how a person can be the source of happiness one moment and the source of misery the next. For the first time in my life, I became acutely aware of the extent to which I had invested my happiness in my circumstances, in this case in a relationship.

I had already been interested in spiritual matters for some time, and since my mid-teens had been studying philosophy and practising meditation in the Vedantic and Sufi traditions at Colet House in London, under the guidance of Dr. Francis Roles. However, this event injected intensity and urgency into my interest; it became a passion.

It was obvious that I loved happiness above all else. It was also clear that nothing objective is certain or secure, and clearly does not unfold according to one's own wishes and expectations. And now the absurdity and futility of investing one's desire for lasting happiness in objective experience was inescapable. I fell asleep that night with a simple question in my mind, 'How may one find lasting peace and happiness?'

Almost exactly forty years later, circumstances are again demanding this question be addressed. However, on this occasion it is not just my personal circumstances that have precipitated the question in my mind, nor is it individual happiness that is at stake. It is the shared circumstances of each one of us that requires a response, and our collective happiness that is calling for attention.

The universe had responded to my silent prayer. Our online retreat began with this question, and the exploration of it evolved into this book. It is my hope that this book will take you from your self, who seeks happiness, to the happiness that is your self.

Rupert Spira

April 2021

CHAPTER ONE.

The Search for Happiness

Happiness, being found to be something final and self-sufficient, is the end at which all actions aim.

ARISTOTLE

WE SEEK HAPPINESS ABOVE ALL ELSE

Imagine a survey in which all seven billion of us were asked what we want in life above all else. Most of us would respond that we desire better health, increased income, an intimate relationship, improved living conditions, a family, better work or preferably no need to work at all, and so on. Some of us would ask for less tangible things: enlightenment or knowledge of God. Whatever our priorities, most of us would select from a relatively short list of possibilities.

However, if a second question then asked *why* we desire what we do, almost all of us would respond, in one way or another, that we seek the object, substance, activity,

circumstance or relationship because we believe it will bring us peace and happiness.

In other words, what we really long for is not a particular experience for its own sake, but for the peace and happiness that we believe we will derive from it. If we knew that the house we were about to buy, the person we were about to marry, the journey we were about to embark on or the job we were about to begin would make us miserable, we would no longer want it. We wish for these things only insofar as they are considered a source of happiness.

Even those who voluntarily undergo great hardship for the sake of a moral, political, religious or spiritual ideal do so ultimately for the sake of happiness, even if, in extreme cases, that happiness is postponed until after death.

The desire for happiness is, therefore, the driving force in most of our lives.

This longing for happiness takes us on a great adventure in the realm of objective experience. By 'objective experience' I do not refer to physical objects alone but to any experience that has some kind of form, including all thoughts, images, feelings, sensations, perceptions, activities and relationships.

Although any of these may seem to afford moments or periods of happiness, sooner or later they come to an end, the old dissatisfaction resurfaces and the search begins again.

Once the search in the conventional realm of objective experience has failed to deliver lasting happiness sufficiently often, many people turn to a religious or spiritual tradition. In this case, the goal, however we may conceive it, is the same: peace, joy, fulfilment, contentment or wholeness. Only

the means have changed. Even those of us who seek enlightenment on a spiritual path, or God on a religious path, do so only on account of the peace and happiness we believe we will derive from it.

If someone were to ask us whether we would prefer to be enlightened or happy, we would obviously choose happiness. If we believed that enlightenment would bring us misery, we would never seek it. It is only because it is believed that enlightenment will bring happiness that we are willing to devote our lives to seeking it. Likewise, if we believed that knowledge of God would make us miserable, no one would seek God.

The only reason we were seeking enlightenment or God in the first place was that all other possible sources of happiness had failed us thus far. It is often as a last resort that we turn to the search for enlightenment or God, in the hope that its fulfilment will finally relieve us of our suffering and provide happiness.

Therefore, the desire for happiness is the highest desire, and as such it is unique: it is the only thing we seek for its own sake.

I use the word 'happiness' as the goal of this search simply because it is the common word for the absence of suffering or the end of seeking. I refer to it this way because I believe, rightly or not, that this word most accurately conveys for the majority of people that for which they long above all else. It is also a word to which everyone can relate, and it refers to an experience with which everyone is familiar. In particular, it

is non-denominational and devoid of cultural overtones. It does not have to be believed in and is its own evidence.

However, any word inevitably has its limitations, depending upon our particular associations with it, especially in relation to that for which we all long above all else. If the word 'happiness' does not evoke in you that which you love and for which you long above all else, please substitute it with another: fulfilment, contentment, peace, love, truth, beauty, joy, salvation, liberation, enlightenment or God.

Whether we feel a strong yearning in our heart or just the slightest sense of dissatisfaction – the feeling that something is missing which, when found, will finally bring about the happiness for which we long – we are on a great search. However we conceive or name the goal of that search, its source is always the same, namely, the desire to bring our current dissatisfaction to an end.

If happiness is what we all love and long for above all else, then the investigation into its nature and cause must be the greatest endeavour on which one could embark.

HAPPINESS IS INHERENT WITHIN US

Happiness is always experienced inside us; it is never put in from the outside. It may seem to be connected to or triggered by external events, but unlike the food we eat, the water we drink or the air we breathe, we do not take it into ourselves from outside. It originates within us, it is experienced within us and, when it disappears, no residue of it is dispersed into the outside world. Happiness is entirely an interior experience.

If happiness is always experienced within, albeit triggered by objective experience, mustn't it lie in potential in us all the time? And if so, shouldn't it be possible to have direct access to it, and to remain constantly in touch with it, without the need for our external circumstances to be configured in a particular way?

If it *were* possible to be in touch with our inherent peace and happiness without being dependent on external circumstances, would that not be the greatest discovery one could make?

One might argue that *unhappiness* is also always experienced inside us and must, therefore, lie latent within us at all times. According to this view, our inherent happiness or unhappiness would simply be triggered by circumstances, depending on the extent to which they conform to our desire or expectation.

Although most people may not formulate it to themselves in this way, this is the common view of happiness and suffering. They are considered equal and opposite emotions, alternating in varying degrees in our lives, depending upon our circumstances.

In the absence of understanding the nature of happiness and how it may be found, our culture has conditioned us to believe and even expect that the constant cycle of happiness and unhappiness is normal and unavoidable. Why is this? We do not expect to cycle through periods of health and sickness on an almost daily basis, let alone numerous times within a single day. If we are sick, we consider it a signal from the body that something is wrong and needs attention.

Unhappiness is to the mind as sickness is to the body. It is a state of disharmony and imbalance. It is a signal that something is amiss and requires attention. However, in the absence of any understanding as to the real cause of unhappiness, our culture can only offer consolations and distractions.

We all feel that health is the natural state of the body. Why do we not feel that happiness is the natural state of the mind? In this book, I will suggest that it is, that happiness is the very nature of our being or self and, as such, lies in potential within us, accessible by all people and at all times, with the possible exception of those times when the safety and well-being of the body are compromised.

From this point of view, suffering is understood as the veiling or obscuring of our innate happiness. Thus, there is either happiness or the veiling of it, but never its absence.

All that is necessary to access our inherent happiness is to go directly into the depths of our being, behind the obscuring layers of thought and feeling. This is the great understanding that everyone should have from an early age. What could be more important in life than to know that we are already that for which we long?

This understanding is the essence of all the principal religious and spiritual traditions. However, in almost all cases it has been lost, or at least obscured, by layers of superfluous doctrines and practices that arose around the simple and direct insight upon which they were originally founded.

All the methods that are given in the various traditions have the ultimate purpose of facilitating access to the latent peace and joy that lies at the heart of all beings. The reason for so many different approaches and practices is not the complexity or inaccessibility of what is being sought. It is due partly to the differences between the cultures in which this understanding was originally formulated, and partly to the differing responses required to address people's particular difficulties and objections.

In each of these responses, this single understanding was refracted into numerous ideas and methods. However, when we distil these various approaches, they all indicate, in one way or another, that happiness is our nature, or that we are happiness itself.

THE END OF THE SEARCH

Everybody knows the experience of happiness. However, not everybody knows that happiness is the very nature of our self and can be found in the depths of our being. As a result of this overlooking of the essential nature of our self, a great search is initiated in the realm of objective experience.

In the epic poem *The Mathnawi*, Sufi poet and mystic Jelaluddin Rumi tells of a man in Cairo who dreams of a treasure buried under a certain house in Baghdad. The man sets out on an arduous journey and, after numerous trials and adventures, reaches Baghdad and finds the house that appeared to him in his dream. He knocks on the door and an elderly man answers. The traveller relates his dream and the owner of the house replies, 'That's strange, last night I

dreamt of a house in Cairo under which a great treasure was buried'. The man from Cairo recognises the description of the house as his own and returns home. And sure enough, under his own home he finds a great treasure. All those years he had been sitting on it without realising it.

This is the archetypal trajectory of everyone's life: the great search for happiness in the realm of objective experience and the return to the treasure of one's own being. The out-breath and the in-breath. The adventure of becoming and the return to being. The unfolding of one's life on the horizontal dimension of time and the periodic plunge into the vertical dimension of being.

Nature provides numerous such moments: the end of seeking upon the fulfilment of a desire; a moment of astonishment; the unbearable grief at the loss of a loved one; the rapture of sexual intimacy; a moment of intense danger; a glance from a friend; the silence of the forest; the peace of deep sleep. Our lives are punctuated by such moments, hairline cracks in the world which, although not discernible on the surface of experience, are portals through which we pass out of time into eternity, only to be eclipsed again by the content of experience.

The memory of such times awakens in us a nostalgia, a longing for something that is not past and forgotten but present and veiled. It lies not in the annals of the past or the promise of the future but in the depths of being.

Impelled by this longing, we embark on a great search – outwardly in the realms of objects, substances, activities and relationships, and inwardly in states of mind – frequently sampling its perfume but never finding its source. It pervades

the content of experience but is never graspable as *an* experience, like a rainbow whose source can never be found. However, it cannot be found not because it is so far but because it is so close.

At the heart of all the world's great religious, spiritual and philosophical traditions lies the simple, direct means by which it may be recognised: becoming must subside in being.

Most of the time the drama of experience eclipses awareness of being. Now awareness of being outshines the drama of experience.

Awareness of being is known in each of us as the sense of 'being myself' or the knowledge 'I am' before it is coloured or qualified by experience. Therein lies the peace of our true nature. When our self is divested of all the limitations it acquires from experience, that for which we long above all else shines by itself.

In the Christian tradition, the same understanding is illustrated in the parable of the Prodigal Son. In this story, the youngest son of the king is dissatisfied with life at home and embarks on a great adventure in the world, seeking fulfilment. In spite of his numerous experiences, nothing fully satisfies him and he ends up in despair, reduced to looking after pigs and eating their food, until at last he 'comes to his senses' and remembers the abundance of his home.

This is symbolic of one who has exhausted the search for fulfilment in objective experience and recognises, or at least intuitively, that they are looking for happiness in the wrong place and must return 'home'. That is, they remember the peace and happiness that is the nature of their being and resolve to return there.

This remembrance is not the memory of something that we once possessed and have now lost, but the recognition of something that lies deep within us but that, until now, has been veiled and was thus inaccessible.

Some of us have to go to the brink of despair before recognising that we are seeking peace and happiness in the wrong place. For others, a relatively mild dose of failure, loss or sorrow is enough to prompt the intuition that objective experience can never be a source of lasting peace and happiness, and to initiate an investigation into the nature of our self.

Either way, there comes a point in many of our lives when we understand, or at least intuit, that the peace and happiness for which we long can never be found in an object, substance, activity, circumstance or relationship. This understanding does not imply that we lose interest in the world or that we no longer engage with objects, activities and relationships, but simply that we no longer do so for the purpose of finding peace, happiness and love in them.

No one would be reading this book if the search for happiness in objective experience had succeeded. In fact, one who is reading this book is almost certainly doing so precisely because this search has failed sufficiently often that they are at least beginning to suspect that they may be looking in the wrong place.

At some point a crisis is precipitated in our life in which we realise that we have tried everything – the conventional objects that are on offer in the world, and the less conventional states of mind that are available in the religious

and spiritual traditions – and seen that nothing has ever, or could ever, give us the lasting happiness we seek.

As a result of this we may have the courage and the clarity to face a simple, unavoidable fact: nothing can make us happy! Likewise, we understand for the same reason that nothing can make us *unhappy*, unless and until we give it the power to, in which case it will do so.

To seek peace and happiness in objective experience is destined to fail. It is a recipe for disappointment and, in time, despair.

THE ORIGINAL PANDEMIC

At the time of writing, many people are concerned that they may be infected with a virus that will cause sickness and possibly death to themselves or their loved ones. I do not mean to disparage such concern, or the attempts that individuals, communities and nations are taking to minimise the spread of the virus. I only want to point out the attention we give to this virus whilst ignoring another malady that has infected the vast majority of people without their realising it.

This malady is the belief that peace and happiness is dependent upon external circumstances. We have allowed a single belief to steal our innate happiness, to rob us of the one thing we love above all else. And yet, so ubiquitous is this condition that we do not even realise it as such; we consider it the natural state.

This syndrome has a simple symptom: suffering! Our suffering, whether it be an intense emotion of hatred, anger or jealousy that erupts temporarily in response to a

particular circumstance, or simply a mild but chronic feeling that something is missing, is the litmus test that indicates we have overlooked our essential nature or being and that, as a result, its innate peace and happiness has been obscured.

Just as physical pain is a signal from the intrinsic intelligence of the body letting us know that the body requires attention, so suffering is a message from the happiness that lies in the depths of our being: 'You are looking for me in the wrong place! I am not caused by anything outside of you. I am the nature of your being; there is no other place to find me. Turn towards me and I will take you into myself.'

As the Sufi mystic Bayazid Bastami said, 'For thirty years I sought God. But when I looked carefully I found that in reality God was the seeker and I the sought.'² Whenever we are seeking happiness, it is in fact our innate happiness that is seeking us. The happiness we seek is the happiness we are.

The great understanding that lies at the heart of all the main religious and spiritual traditions consists of two essential insights: happiness is the very nature of our self, and we share our being with everyone and everything.

The second insight will be touched upon towards the end of this book. As regards the first, in order to liberate this happiness from its hiding place in the depths of our being and bring it out into our lived and felt experience, it is necessary to go to one's essential being or self and recognise its nature.

This is why self-knowledge stands as the foundation of all the major religious and spiritual traditions. It is the great

understanding that gives us access to the peace and happiness that is our very nature.

CHAPTER TWO.

Know Thyself

Every living being longs always to be happy, untainted by sorrow; and everyone has the greatest love for their self, which is solely due to the fact that happiness is their real nature. Hence, in order to realise that inherent and untainted happiness, which indeed one daily experiences when the mind is subdued in deep sleep, it is essential that one should know oneself.

RAMANA MAHARSHI

In the Christian tradition it is said, 'The kingdom of heaven is within you'. What is the kingdom of heaven if not a realm of eternal happiness? The essential message of Christianity is that this realm of eternal happiness lies within us; it is the nature of our being.

In the Vedantic tradition of India we find the same understanding condensed into three Sanskrit words, *sat chit*

ananda. *Sat* refers to being, *chit* to knowing, consciousness or awareness, and *ananda* to peace or happiness. Thus, *sat chit ananda* means simply that to know the nature of one's being is happiness itself.

In Buddhism it is said that the very nature of one's mind is inherently free from any imperfection. Cautious not to objectify happiness as a state of mind, the Buddhist teaching refers to it simply as the end of suffering. Thus, all that is required to access that happiness is to know the nature of one's mind.

Indeed, if we were to distil the essential understanding contained in all the great religious, spiritual and philosophical traditions into a single phrase, it would read something like this: 'Happiness is your nature' or 'You are happiness itself'.

It follows that in order to access the peace and happiness for which all people long above all else, all that is necessary is to understand the nature of one's self. For this reason, the words *Know Thyself* were carved onto the entrance to the temple of Apollo in Delphi, thus standing at the very origin of Western civilisation.

We all seek happiness, but most of us seek it in *objective experience*. In the approach that is being suggested in this book, we seek peace and happiness *at its source*, namely, in our self or our being. For this reason it is sometimes referred to as the direct path to peace and happiness.

A SOFTENING OF ATTENTION

What does it mean to know oneself? In the early 1980s, I went with my brother Andrew to a series of Alfred Brendel's recitals of Beethoven's piano sonatas in London. During these recitals my attention was in general fully absorbed in the music, but from time to time I noticed a softening of its focus.

On one occasion, my attention relaxed sufficiently that I became aware not only of the music but of the fact that I was listening to the music. In other words, *I became aware that I was aware.*

There was nothing extraordinary about this. On the contrary, the fact of simply being aware, or awareness itself, was clearly the most familiar and intimate aspect of my experience. However, I had previously overlooked it, so exclusively focused was I on my experience – on this occasion, the content of the music.

In time, my attention was again drawn to the music, but I noticed that at certain points during the recital it spontaneously disengaged from it and returned effortlessly to the fact of being aware. It even felt at times as if my attention were being pulled backwards, away from its content, towards the fact of simply being aware, or awareness itself.

After some time, I noticed that I had the ability to travel backwards and forwards with my attention, between the music in the foreground and the presence of awareness in the background.

I began to explore this new faculty, and at some point it became clear that in between the background of being aware and the foreground of the music there was an intermediary

layer of experience, a middle ground, so to speak, of thoughts, feelings and sensations of the body.

There were now three elements of my experience: one, the external world (consisting of the concert hall, the audience and the music); two, my mind and body (comprising the internal world of thoughts, feelings and sensations); and three, in the background, the fact of being aware or awareness itself.

It was as if I had taken a step back from my mind and body, with which I normally identified myself. They were now part of the foreground of my experience and I was standing as the presence of awareness behind them, watching them just as I was watching the performance.

As my attention travelled back and forth between these three realms, it occurred to me that the person I normally considered myself to be – my mind and body – was itself part of the objective content of experience that I was aware of, along with the auditorium, the audience and the music.

In particular, I noticed that my thoughts and feelings were a layer of experience that not only was added to my experience of the world, like subtitles superimposed upon a movie, but also through which I interpreted the world.

Some time later I would also notice that my experience of the world was itself filtered through my sense perceptions, which impose their own limitations on whatever is perceived. This would, in turn, give rise to the question as to what the world is in itself, beyond these limitations. But for now, this challenge to my customary sense of myself was enough.

A SHIFT IN IDENTITY

At some point a question spontaneously arose in my mind: Who am I really? Am I the thoughts, feelings and sensations that I am aware of, or am I the one that is aware of them?

I was familiar with the Indian sage Ramana Maharshi's use of such questions, a method known as 'self-enquiry', but had found it rather heady and abstract. No doubt the question that emerged at this stage was prompted by my previous interest in these matters, but nevertheless it arose in me this time as if for the first time and was profoundly connected to my experience.

This questioning was not just a mental exercise. Nor was it a method I was practising in order to bring about a certain result. It seemed to be taking place spontaneously, although I was cooperating with it.

It became obvious that whatever it is that knows our thoughts and images is not *itself* a thought or image. What is that?

Whatever it is that is aware of our feelings and sensations is not *itself* a feeling or sensation. What is that?

Whatever it is that perceives the world is not *itself* a sight, sound, taste, texture or smell. What is that?

It is simply that which knows or is aware. It is our self. It is awareness or consciousness itself.³

Until this recognition I had considered myself to be a person, a body-mind, an amalgam of thoughts, feelings and sensations. It seemed to be myself *as this person* who was aware

of the world. As such, I considered awareness an *attribute* of the body-mind, a faculty that I as a person *possessed*.

I now realised that the person I previously imagined myself to be was something that I was *aware of*, along with my experience of the world.

I recognised that I was essentially *that which knows* or *is aware of* the entire content of experience, including the thoughts, images, memories, feelings and sensations that constitute the mind and body.

I realised that it is not myself as a *person* who is aware of the world, but rather myself as *awareness* that is aware of the person and the world.

The transition from the belief that we are a person with the faculty of awareness to the understanding that we are awareness itself may seem like a small step, but it has enormous implications for any individual and for the evolution of humanity as a whole. Indeed, I would suggest that it is the next evolutionary step, and that upon which the survival of humanity, as we know it, depends.

The understanding 'I am awareness' is the first great understanding.

This is not an extraordinary recognition or something that is difficult to access. In fact, it is enshrined in common parlance. We say, '*I know* my thoughts and images', '*I am aware* of feelings and sensations' and '*I perceive* the world'.

In each of these statements, we recognise ourself as the *knowing*, *aware* or *perceiving* element, and thoughts, images, feelings, sensations and perceptions as *objects* that we know, are aware of or perceive.

In other words, we are not essentially our thoughts, images, memories or stories about our life; *we are that which knows them*. We are not essentially our feelings or sensations; *we are that which is aware of them*. We are not the sights, sounds, tastes, textures and smells that constitute our experience of the world; *we are that which perceives them*.

We are nothing that is experienced; *we are that which experiences*.

We are not essentially anything that we are aware of; we are simply the fact of knowing, being aware or awareness itself.

LETTING GO

I understand that I'm not my body or mind, but who would I be if I were to let go of everyone and everything with which I associate and identify myself?

You would be the same inherently peaceful and unconditionally fulfilled self that you are now, although you do not currently recognise your self as such because of your entanglement in, or identification with, the content of experience. The only difference is that what you now consider a distant possibility would become your lived and felt experience.

Every night you willingly and effortlessly let go of everyone and everything with whom you associate or identify and fall deeply asleep. In the experience of deep sleep you are all alone. Everything that is not essential to you has been

removed and, as a result, you experience the peace of your true nature.

If letting go of everyone and everything were a traumatic or frightening experience, we would dread falling asleep at night. But we look forward to it! Why? Because it gives us access to the peace of our true nature, which is veiled by the activities of thinking, feeling, acting and relating during the day.

In fact, when we fall asleep we do not enter a new state. We are always essentially the presence of awareness. However, during the waking and dreaming states, we forget or overlook this or, more accurately, it is obscured by thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions. In these two states awareness is so thoroughly mixed with the content of experience that it is not recognised as such. It is veiled by experience.

Likewise, when we emerge from deep sleep into the dreaming and waking states, the presence of the awareness that we essentially are does not change or disappear. It is simply veiled by experience. Our essential self of pure awareness does not need to be liberated. It is already and inherently free of the content of experience.

So it is not necessary to let go of anyone or anything. All that is required is to recognise our essential nature of pure awareness that lies behind all experience and shines in the midst of all experience.

Nor will you lose your ability to think, feel, act, perceive and relate. On the contrary, these activities will be greatly enhanced by this new understanding of your self, for the one

on whose behalf they arise, and in whose service they are undertaken, will be clearly known.

CHAPTER THREE.

Are You My Self?

*Home is neither here nor there. Home is within you,
or home is nowhere at all.*

HERMAN HESSE

If the presence of awareness is the primary fact of experience, why are most of us not in touch with it?

It is simply because we become lost in or identified with the content of our experience. If someone were to ask us to look around the room in which we are currently sitting and describe what we are experiencing, most of us would refer to chairs, books, papers, photographs, paintings, a table, and so on.

Very few would mention the space of the room. Why not? We overlook the space because it has no objective features that can be seen, heard, tasted, touched or smelt. At the same time, we cannot say that we are not experiencing it.

Likewise, if someone were to ask us to describe our current experience in general, almost all of us would list our thoughts, images, memories, feelings, sensations of the body, perceptions of the world, activities, relationships, and so on. Very few of us would mention the presence of awareness. Why not?

The fact of being aware is the most obvious, intimate and familiar element of experience, and yet it has no objective features. Like space, it cannot be seen, heard, tasted, touched or smelt. It is, so to speak, transparent; it is silent and empty. And yet without it there can be no experience.

THE OVERLOOKING OF OUR TRUE NATURE

It is inconceivable that a landscape painter would spend her life painting in nature, noticing the trees, fields, animals, flowers and clouds, without ever noticing sunlight. The light cannot be seen directly, and yet it is that which renders the world visible. Indeed, it is all she truly sees!

Likewise, awareness renders all experience knowable. It is for this reason that awareness is said to be luminous. It is the illuminating or knowing factor in all experience. It is, as such, the primary and most important element of experience, and yet it is almost always overlooked or ignored in favour of the objective content of experience.

Consider the amount of knowledge and experience that each of us acquired during our education. Did any of our parents or teachers ever ask us what it is that knows or is

aware of that knowledge and experience? I have yet to meet anyone who answers 'yes' to that question.

Is it not extraordinary that, as a culture, we have almost universally overlooked the primary and most important element of experience? And could there be anything more interesting than to know the nature of that through which everything else is known? Indeed, would it be possible to know what anything truly is without first knowing the nature of that with which it is known?

The fact of knowing, being aware or awareness itself is closer to us than our breathing, our innermost thoughts or our most cherished feelings. In fact, it is not *close* to us; it is what we essentially are. It is overlooked precisely because it is so intimate and familiar, not because it is remote, unknown or inaccessible.

It is sometimes said that awareness transcends experience, implying that it lies *beyond* experience and is, as such, out of reach, unknowable and mysterious. Nothing could be further from the truth. Awareness lies *behind* the layer of thinking, feeling and sensing with which we normally identify ourselves and is *prior* to it, just as a screen could be said to lie behind and be prior to the movie that appears on it.

Awareness is not overlooked because it is unknown but because it is so *well known*. Familiarity, in this case, may not breed contempt, but it certainly accounts for neglect. We tend to overlook the space of a room or the light in a landscape because our attention is exclusively focused on objects. However, as soon as our attention relaxes, we become aware of the space or the light.

Similarly, we overlook the presence of awareness due to the exclusive focus of our attention on the content of experience, that is, our thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, activities and relationships. However, awareness is like the space or the light: as soon as our attention relaxes, we become aware of it.

It is for this reason that in the Tantric tradition of Kashmir Shaivism it is said that awareness is ‘the greatest secret, more hidden than the most concealed and yet more evident than the most evident of things’.⁴

When I suggest that we overlook the presence of awareness in the same way that we overlook the space in a room or sunlight in the landscape, I imply that we are one thing and awareness another. This is not intended. *We are awareness!*

It is we, awareness, who, directing the light of our attention towards the objective content of experience, overlook our self, the subject of experience. When the focus of our attention softens and we become aware that we are aware, it is we, awareness, who relax our attention from its objective content and, as a result, become aware of our self.

We come back to our self; we remember our self. However, this is not a remembrance of something that was once known and subsequently forgotten. It is the recognition of what we always and already are but usually overlook or ignore.

We might call this overlooking or forgetting of the presence of awareness the original ADD – Awareness Deficit Disorder – from which the vast majority of humans suffer unknowingly. It is the cause of all psychological suffering of

the individual, and the conflicts between individuals, communities and nations.

In the Vedantic tradition it is referred to as ignorance, in the sense of ignoring our true nature, and in Christianity as Original Sin, that is, the initial error from which all subsequent errors are compounded.

The fact of knowing, being aware or awareness itself is not something that some people have in greater measure than others, nor is it more readily accessible to some people than to others. None has privileged access to it. It is available to all people, at all times and under all circumstances, simply by virtue of the fact that everybody is aware, irrespective of what they may be aware of in any moment of experience.

It can be easily recognised as soon as we soften the focus of our attention from its objective content and come back to our self. It is the silent presence behind and within all experience.

RETURNING TO THE PRESENCE OF AWARENESS

After the experience at the concert in London, I noticed often over the next few weeks that there were gaps in the flow of experience during which my attention would be gently drawn back to the fact of being aware. It was as though attention were a two-way street that could be travelled in one direction, towards the content of experience, and in the opposite direction, towards myself, the presence of awareness.

I also noticed that the intermediary layer of thoughts and feelings was frequently provoked in response to my experience of the world. If I liked whatever I was experiencing, I would seek to hold on to it; if I disliked it, I would attempt to get rid of it.

In other words, I noticed that experience was often accompanied by a sense of dissatisfaction. Sometimes this dissatisfaction was barely discernible, such as a feeling of boredom or a sense of lack that was not intense enough to command my attention but kept me, without my realising it, in a more or less continuous state of seeking and resisting.

On other occasions the dissatisfaction was fully felt in the form of suffering. Whenever I noticed this, I would make a conscious effort to return to the presence of awareness in the background of experience, for I had already noticed that, being devoid of all objective qualities, it was the place of peace or refuge in myself.

Sometimes this was easy and required almost no effort, and at other times there was some reluctance. It was in response to this reluctance that I began to develop a regular habit or practice of returning my attention to its source in the presence of awareness.

This new habit was very simple. As a child I was brought up with P. D. Eastman's book *Are You My Mother?*, in which a recently hatched baby bird is separated from its mother and sets off in search of her. After some time, the bird encounters a kitten and asks it, 'Are you my mother?' 'No', replies the kitten. Next it comes across a hen. 'Are you my mother?' it asks. 'No', replies the hen.

The baby bird continues on its journey asking everything that it encounters – a dog, a cow, a car, a boat and an aeroplane – the same question. Finally, the bird is returned to its nest and reunited with its mother.

The practice of stepping back from the content of experience and resting in and as the presence of awareness proceeds in a similar way. We simply ask every experience that we encounter, ‘Are you myself?’

When we see a mountain, a building, a person or a movie, we do not mistake it for ourself. They are what we *know* or *experience*, not what we *are*.

Likewise, when we encounter a thought, image, feeling or sensation, we simply enquire, ‘Are you what I essentially am?’ These are objects of experience that are known, witnessed or experienced by us, that is, by awareness. We are no more our thoughts, images, feelings and sensations than we are a mountain, a tree or a movie.

This simple question invites a softening of the focus of our attention from its objective content and facilitates the recognition of our self as the witnessing or knowing presence of awareness.

Most people are so accustomed to paying exclusive attention to the content of their experience that this process of stepping back and resting as the presence of awareness may seem, to begin with, to involve some effort or practice.

In this case, we may ask ourself a question such as, ‘Who am I really?’, ‘What is it that knows or is aware of my experience?’, ‘What is the continuous element in all changing

experience?’ or ‘What is it that cannot be removed or separated from me?’

Each of these is a variation of the same question, what I call the ‘sacred question’, whose purpose is to gently invite our attention away from its objective content and back to our self, the presence of awareness. That is the essence of self-enquiry.

As an alternative to this line of questioning, we may also reason that nothing that appears and disappears in our experience could be essential to us. Only the fact of being aware remains consistently present, and therefore only the fact of being aware qualifies as our essential self.

For a while, the pull of objective experience may be so strong that it only seems possible to remain knowingly the presence of awareness for brief periods, and questions or lines of reasoning such as these may need to be repeated. However, every time we return to awareness, we are eroding the old habit of losing oneself in the content of experience and, although we may not realise it to begin with, establishing oneself in our true nature.

In time, it becomes so natural to understand and feel oneself as the presence of awareness that it no longer needs to be maintained by effort or practice, nor does it need to be initiated by a question or a line of reasoning.

Just as previously we did not need to remind ourselves continually that we were a man or a woman, because it was simply our default identity, so now it is no longer necessary to remind oneself, or make the effort, to be knowingly the presence of awareness. It simply becomes our new identity.

There may still be moments of forgetting, but these occur less frequently and endure for less time.

Somebody once asked the Indian sage Atmananda Krishna Menon how one knows when one is established in one's true nature and he replied, 'When thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions can no longer take you away from your self.'

As the content of our experience gradually loses its capacity to take us away from our self, it is no longer necessary to turn away from it. We remain knowingly the presence of awareness both in formal periods of meditation, when we withdraw our attention from the content of experience, and during everyday life, in the midst of experience.

The dilemma of attention is resolved. The conflict between awareness and experience diminishes. Experience becomes increasingly transparent to the presence of awareness and we find ourself at home everywhere.

CHAPTER FOUR.

The Art of Self-Enquiry

Of all the koans, 'I' is the most profound.

IKKYU

Can you give an example of self-enquiry in action?

I remember a young man who attended one of my retreats several years ago. His face bore the marks of a lifetime of suffering. During the retreat I could feel his resistance wanting to formulate itself as a question, and a few days before the end he challenged my suggestion that his nature was inherently peaceful: 'If my essential nature is freedom, peace and happiness, why do I suffer so much of the time?'

I suggested that it was simply because he had lost himself in, or identified himself with, the content of his experience. 'But my experience is so intense and overwhelming much of the time', he replied, 'that I don't know how to *disidentify* myself from it'.

‘It would only be necessary to disidentify yourself from the content of experience’, I suggested, ‘if you were identical to it in the first place.’

‘Does the space in a room have to work hard not to identify itself with the four walls of the room, or to let go of all the objects or people as they leave the room? It would only have to do so if it were attached to them in the first place. The space of the room is already and inherently free and at rest.’

‘You are like that’, I suggested. ‘You only need recognise yourself as such.’

‘So what’s keeping me from doing that?’ he asked.

‘Just an old, conditioned habit’, I replied. ‘Our culture has educated us to believe certain things about ourselves from an early age and we do so without question. This may work, more or less, for a while, but sooner or later the suffering that inevitably attends these assumptions compels us to question them. The primary assumption is that our essential self or being is conditioned by, and limited to, the content of experience.’

After giving the young man a moment to take this in, I asked him to tell us about his self.

‘When I first arrived at this retreat...’ he began.

I stopped him. ‘You are describing a memory. We want to know about your *self*.’

‘I feel like I’m destined to suffer all my life’, he said, with an air of resignation.

‘Now you are telling us about a feeling, not about your self. Your feelings appear to you, they arise within you, they

may linger for some time and they may be familiar and repetitive, but sooner or later they vanish. When you say “I feel”, tell us about the one you refer to as “I”, not about *what* you feel.’

‘I think it’s –’

‘Don’t tell us about your thoughts!’ I interrupted, to keep him from taking another step in the wrong direction. ‘Tell us about the “I” to whom your thoughts appear.’

‘I...’ There was a long silence.

‘Perfect!’ I said quietly. Although reluctant to disturb the silence, I did so because I sensed thought beginning to take over again. ‘You have the undeniable sense of simply being. “I” is the name you give to that being. Tell us more.’

‘I am...’ Another long silence followed. By this stage the man’s eyes were closed and I could see that the tension on his face had already diminished.

I could tell how sincerely and intently he was participating in our conversation. He was giving his attention exclusively to his self, to the fact of simply being, before it was qualified in any way by his experience. There was no struggle with the content of experience; he had simply become more interested in the nature of his self.

It was clear that it was no longer necessary to guide him through a series of questions, nor even to interpret his experience. One could have heard a pin drop in the room of two hundred people. I could feel that we were all sharing the same experience, participating in the experience of simply being.

He opened his eyes and, with a broad smile, asked, 'Is it that simple?' But his rhetorical question required no response. His experience was its own evidence.

TRACING OUR WAY BACK TO OUR SELF

Later in the day the man asked, 'But what if all the old suffering comes back?'

'It probably will', I admitted, 'through force of habit. A glimpse of our true nature doesn't erase years of conditioning. In almost all cases, the old conditioning will return.'

'But whenever it does, all that is necessary is to trace your way back to your essential being as you just have, and rest there, as that. Every time you do so you are weakening the old habit of becoming lost in or identified with the content of your experience, and instead are becoming established in your true nature of peace.'

We didn't speak again for a day or so, but I noticed that whereas previously he had kept himself apart from the group, he was now talking enthusiastically with other attendees and participating in shared activities, such as meals and afternoon walks in the countryside. On the last day he was eager to ask another question.

'I understood when you suggested all I had to do was trace my way back to my true nature and rest there. So I kept doing that, but after a while I noticed that I couldn't find that self who was tracing its way back to my true nature. There's just me, that peaceful presence. Does that make sense?'

‘It does make sense’, I replied, and explained to him that the suggestion to trace one’s way back to one’s true nature and rest there, as that, is a compassionate concession that is given to one who believes and feels that they are a suffering self.

‘If I had suggested to you a couple of days ago’, I said, ‘that the self on whose behalf your suffering arises is an illusion and, therefore, by implication, that your suffering itself is an illusion, I suspect that you would have been frustrated. Another layer of resistance would have been added to your current experience of suffering, simply compounding it.

‘So I gave the apparently suffering self something to do: trace your way back to your self, and remain resting in your being at all times. Having tried this only a few times, you brought yourself to the understanding that you are always and already the inherently peaceful and unconditionally fulfilled presence of awareness. It is not something you become through effort or practice. You simply recognise it is what you always and already are. That is, it recognises itself, in you, as you.’

‘Is there something else I should do now?’ he asked.

‘If this is clear’, I suggested, ‘nothing remains to be done. Who would do it, and to what end? The question of doing something or not doing something simply no longer arises. However, if it is not clear, that is, if suffering arises again, see that it arises on behalf of the temporary, finite self that, at least in that moment, you believe yourself to be.

‘Once again you can simply trace your way back to your inherently peaceful and unconditionally fulfilled nature of

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I'm haunted by the feeling of being a failure and not having fulfilled my potential in life. I've tried so many approaches to help with this but it just persists. Can the practice of self-enquiry help me?

In this approach we don't pay much attention to the feeling of failure or lack of fulfilment. Instead we go directly to the core of the issue, the 'I' on whose behalf such feelings arise.

All our emotional or psychological suffering arises on behalf of that one, so by resolving this issue once and for all, we do not simply take care of the feeling of being a failure or unfulfilled; we take care of the *source* of all afflictive emotions.

When we explore the 'I' around whom our suffering revolves, we don't find a self who is frustrated, unfulfilled, anxious, lonely, ashamed, and so on. We find our essential being, which is completely free of any such feelings. That is to say, it finds or recognises itself. It is open, empty, at peace and without any sense of lack. This is our natural state.

In fact, it is not even necessary to conceptualise it as peace and happiness. We do so only in order to contrast it with our previous state of disturbance and lack. Once we have been accustomed to this natural condition for some time, it simply becomes our new norm.

All that is necessary is to remain in touch with our self, the inherently peaceful and unconditionally fulfilled

presence of awareness, until this becomes our new, felt sense of self. In fact, it is not really a *new* sense of self. It is simply the familiar sense of self that always accompanies us, that is us, but is now relieved of its previous agitation and sense of lack.

The feeling of dissatisfaction which has accompanied us for most of our life simply leaves us, not because we have done anything to it but because we have undermined the assumption upon which it arose. We feel fulfilled, but for no particular reason.

All our physical and mental faculties remain intact. They are simply relieved of the tyranny of the separate self and, as a result, are now free to be used in service of the qualities that are inherent in us, namely peace, joy, love and freedom.

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It is simply the process whereby our essential nature or being is revealed, after it is divested of all the qualities or characteristics that it acquires from experience. Instead of allowing our attention to become mixed with the content of experience, we trace it back in the opposite direction. In the absence of anything to hold on to, attention can no longer stand and is dissolved in its source of pure awareness.

This recognition of the essential nature of our self is traditionally referred to as enlightenment, awakening, salvation or satori. However, enlightenment is not an extraordinary, mystical or exotic experience. In fact, it is not an objective experience at all. Somebody once asked the Zen teacher Shunryu Suzuki why he never spoke of his enlightenment experience, and his wife, who was sitting at the back of the hall, stood up and said, 'Because he never had one!' Our essential being or true nature of pure awareness simply ceases to be veiled or 'endarkened' by experience and, as a result, stands revealed.

DIRECT AND INDIRECT PATHS

This return to our being, which is referred to in many different ways in the religious and spiritual traditions, constitutes the essence of meditation. It is sometimes referred to as the Direct Path, as it is the means by which we go directly to the happiness that is the nature of our being, rather than via an object such as a mantra, the breath or a teacher.

Ramana Maharshi referred to it as 'sinking the mind into the heart'. Jesus referred to it as 'entering into thy closet,

closing thy door and praying to thy Father, who is in secret', that is, returning one's attention to one's being and resting there quietly, all alone.

This return to our being and its inherent peace is often initiated by an investigation, and hence its name, self-enquiry. However, once the enquiry has brought about the letting go of everything with which we normally identify our self, no further investigation is required. Self-enquiry gives way to self-abiding, self-remembering or simply resting in being, as being.

It is in this self-resting that the unlimited and inherently peaceful nature of our being reveals itself, either gradually or suddenly. The memory of our eternity emerges, not from the past but from the depths of our being, where it is lying quietly all the time.

Thus, the essence of meditation is simply to be aware of being. And as we are always aware of simply being, meditation ultimately is not something we do. It is what we are.

In the context of this understanding, what is the purpose of meditations that involve focusing our attention on something like a mantra, an image, a flame, the breath or the pause between breaths?

Many of us are so accustomed to giving our attention exclusively to the content of experience that bringing our attention back to rest in the heart of awareness may, initially, be too much of a confrontation. The gravitational pull of thoughts and feelings, the experience of the body and world, and the demand of activities and relationships is simply too strong.

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