

AN INTRODUCTION TO NON-DUALITY

VOLUME II

The Recognition
of the
Nature of Reality

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The Recognition of the Nature of Reality is the second in a series of two introductory volumes on non-duality.

The first volume, *The Recognition of Our Essential Self*, presents the three recognitions: we are that *with* which all experience is known, we are that *in* which all experience appears and we are that *out of* which all experience is made.

Each of these three definitions can be taken as independent understandings of our essential nature, or they can be taken as a progression that takes us deeper and deeper into that essential nature.

This second volume reviews the first and second recognitions and explores the third more deeply.

The following dialogues are lightly edited transcripts of conversations Rupert Spira had with participants of live and online retreats and webinars.

INTRODUCTION: REALITY IS ONE

Non-duality is the understanding that reality is not divided into two essential ingredients but is rather a single, indivisible whole – made of pure consciousness – which lies behind, and is the sole reality from which, the multiplicity and diversity of all objects and people derive their apparently independent existence.

The non-dual understanding, in whatever tradition it is formulated, can be distilled into a single sentence: namely, that in spite of the appearance of multiplicity and diversity, *reality is one*. This one reality cannot ultimately be named or defined because it is that in terms of which or with reference to which everything else is defined. It cannot ultimately be named, but as a concession to our desire to speak of it, it has been called God, Allah, Brahman, consciousness, spirit, love, and so on. In their wisdom and humility, the ancient masters simply referred to it as not-two, preferring to say what it is not rather than trying to say what it is, and in this way, preventing it from ever coming within the confines of the finite mind.

However, whether we concede to give it a name or prefer to leave it unnamed, all that is necessary is to recognise this one reality, in spite of the appearance of a multiplicity and diversity of things, and to lead a life to the best of our ability in a way that is consistent with and an expression of this recognition.

In contrast, duality is the prevailing paradigm that underlies our world culture, namely, the belief that reality is divided into two essential elements: mind and matter, self and other, or in religious terms, God and the universe. One of the implications of this view is that each of us is a temporary, finite self which is separate from God, the world and all others. One of the consequences of this belief is the feeling of being limited and incomplete, which gives rise to seeking and resisting in a desperate attempt to feel whole and find completion. This view is so deeply inculcated into every aspect of our culture and informs almost all our thoughts and feelings, that it is subsequently expressed in nearly all our activities and relationships.

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If the dualistic view of reality is incorrect, why has it become so pervasive in our culture?

The fundamental assumption that underlies the current worldview considers matter the primary element of reality from which consciousness is assumed to be derived, giving rise to the belief and feeling that each of us is a temporary, finite self that lives in and shares the limits and destiny of the body.

The universe as we know it is how reality appears from the perspective of this temporary, finite self, the apparently sepa-

rate subject of experience. This subject–object relationship is the means through which the universe is perceived, but it is a partial or relative view – relative to the mind or self through which it is known – which does not tell us anything about the nature of reality itself. Therefore, it cannot be the foundation of a truly civilised society, if by ‘civilised’ we mean a society based upon the principles of truth, love and beauty, and the qualities of justice, equity, freedom, peace and kindness that are their inevitable consequences.

If the fundamental understanding that underlies society is derived from an erroneous or, at least, a partial view of reality, the error or limitation that is inherent within it will inform every aspect of that society and will, sooner or later, express itself in the activities and relationships of individuals within it. I would suggest that the current crises in our world culture – the pervasive unhappiness felt by so many people, the conflicts between communities and nations, and the degradation of the environment – are all the inevitable consequence of the prevailing materialist paradigm.

If the dualistic view of reality is an error or at least partial or limited, why is it so convincing?

The reason this view has become so convincing in our world culture is that it is founded on the evidence of our senses. For instance, when we close our eyes, the appearance of the world disappears, and when we open them, it reappears. We conclude from this that the mind that perceives the world is located just behind our eyes, giving rise to the belief that consciousness – the essence of the mind and the essential nature of ourself – is located in, limited to and generated by the brain. The fact that brain activity corroborates inner experience seems further evidence of this conclusion.

Once this initial belief is considered an unequivocal fact of experience and, as a result, becomes enshrined in our world-view, subsequent observations seem to substantiate it without our realising that they simply amplify the original presumption. For instance, it is observed that the same world is perceived by numerous minds and from this it is concluded that the world must exist independently from consciousness. Likewise, it is commonly believed that consciousness is always associated with objective experience: no objective experience, no consciousness.

For instance, in a faint, deep sleep or under anaesthesia there is no objective experience, and it is presumed therefore that consciousness is absent. From this it is concluded that consciousness is an intermittent phenomenon within the body and must therefore be generated by it and subject to its limitations. However, these assumptions are based on the evidence of sense perception, from which the nature of consciousness is deduced. In other words, the assumption that consciousness is located within and generated by, and therefore shares the limits and destiny of the body, is not arrived at through an investigation into the nature of consciousness itself but is rather deduced from the evidence of the senses.

Why does our culture hold on to this belief so tenaciously if it is the cause of so much suffering and conflict?

Albert Einstein observed that 'Common sense is a series of prejudices that most people acquire by the age of eighteen'. Could it be that the interpretation of reality based on the evidence of common sense is a series of prejudices that bears little relationship to reality?

Common sense tells us that consciousness appears in, is generated by and shares the limits and destiny of the body.

However, nobody has ever had, or could ever have, an experience outside consciousness because consciousness is the very medium within which all experience – including the experience of the body – appears. To believe that matter, the substance that supposedly exists outside consciousness, is primary, and that consciousness itself is derived from it, is akin to believing that waves create oceans, emails create screens or clouds create the sky.

The evidence of the senses used to tell us that the earth was flat. Although Pythagoras first suggested that the earth is round in the sixth century BCE, it took two and a half thousand years for this to be universally accepted. The heliocentric theory was first proposed in the third century BCE but took almost two thousand years to become mainstream. Likewise, most scientists still believe that matter is the fundamental substance of the universe and consciousness, or mind, evolves from it. In spite of this, no physicist or neurologist has ever observed or been able to describe how consciousness or mind evolves from neural activity in the brain. Indeed, ‘the hard problem of consciousness’ – how consciousness evolves from matter – is one of science’s most contentious issues. Could it be that the reason why scientists have still not discovered how consciousness evolves from matter is that it doesn’t?

Do you think that science will ever arrive at the conclusions of the ancient wisdom traditions?

Just as many religious people believe in a god beyond the universe, so most scientists believe in the existence of matter outside consciousness. As such, although the two disciplines of science and religion appear to represent extremes on a spectrum between belief and experience, they are more closely related than it might seem. They are both equally

founded upon a single assumption, namely, that consciousness exists in, shares the limits and destiny of, and is generated by the brain. Conventional religion and mainstream materialist science are both founded upon this assumption and amplify it within their respective fields.

If we want to build a model of reality, must we not start with experience and only resort to inference where experience itself cannot account for our observations? Everything that we know or experience is known or experienced in the mind and by the mind in the form of thinking, feeling, seeing, hearing, tasting, touching and smelling. How do we know that what we experience as an external universe is not a reflection of the limitations of our own minds? In fact, we can be sure that it is! Just as one who wears orange-tinted glasses will seem to see an orange world, so reality will always appear in accordance with, and as an expression of, the limitations of the mind through which it is known. We have reified the limitations of our own minds and, unaware that we are doing so, have projected those limitations onto reality itself.

I am not suggesting that all there is to the universe is the finite mind. That is solipsism, which is the belief that my finite mind is the only mind there is. Some so-called non-dual exponents suggest that solipsism is equivalent to non-duality, which is a complete misunderstanding and misrepresentation. Solipsism is the belief that this mind, *my* mind, is the only finite mind there is. You, I'm afraid, aren't having any internal experience. You aren't having thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions. Solipsism is a form of madness; it is not an expression of the non-dual understanding.

Reality is much bigger than the finite mind. I am suggesting that the universe is what reality looks like from the perspec-

tive of a finite mind or separate subject of experience. In other words, science as it is currently practised will never discover the nature of reality, for it is the very activity of science itself – thought and perception – that refracts reality into an apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves – the universe as we perceive it – thereby superimposing its own limitations onto everything that it knows or perceives, just as colourless light is refracted into numerous colours when it passes through a prism.

This does not mean that science can never know the nature of reality; it simply implies that to do so, scientists would have to be willing first to investigate the nature of their own minds. In other words, in order to know what reality itself is, it is first necessary to divest it of the limitations that mind superimposes on it. Therefore, there can be no higher science nor any greater endeavour than for the mind to investigate its own essential nature. This investigation into the nature of the mind – the nature of what we call ‘I’ or ‘myself’ – is the essence of the non-dual teaching. Unless and until we know the nature of that through which everything is known, we cannot know what anything is for certain. Scientists and theologians have been investigating and speculating on the nature of the universe for millennia and will continue to do so for millennia, unless and until they investigate the nature of their own mind.

As the mind makes this enquiry into its original nature, discarding everything that is not essential to it, all that remains is its essence of pure consciousness or knowing, the sole, non-dual reality that underlies the apparent multiplicity and diversity of all objects and selves. Having nothing in itself other than itself, this reality cannot be divided or limited and is, as such, infinite. Being infinite, it is whole, perfect and complete.

The artist Paul Cézanne once said, ‘The day is coming when a single carrot, freshly observed, will trigger a revolution’, reinforcing the understanding that is found in the Tantric traditions, in which an investigation into the nature of any experience, irrespective of its content, is considered sufficient to reveal the nature of reality. This is also confirmed in the minds and laboratories of some quantum physicists.

The artist and the scientist tend to explore the world; the mystic tends to investigate the self. If either investigation is taken far enough, both will sooner or later end up with the same conclusion: that there is a single, indivisible and infinite reality from which the apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves derive their seemingly separate existence but which is never actually compromised by them. There is only consciousness, or, in religious parlance, there is only God’s infinite, self-aware being.

This is the ultimate revolution, the turning around of the mind away from the evidence of thought and senses, which fragment and diversify reality, towards its own essence. It is the hallmark of all the world’s contemplative traditions and, at the same time, the ultimate science. It is the investigation of which all other disciplines of mind are but refractions, and the understanding that is derived from it is not only the source of the peace and happiness for which all people long above all else but must also be the foundation of any civilisation worthy of the name.

YOU ARE ALREADY YOUR SELF

In the first volume of this two-part book, we explored the three recognitions in the investigation of self and reality: you are that *with* which all experience is known, you are that *in* which all experience appears and you are that *out of* which all experience is made.

In this second volume, we will continue the exploration of these recognitions with a particular focus on the third recognition: knowing is all there is.

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Early on in this investigation, there is a turning away from the content of experience – thoughts, images, feelings, sensations and perceptions, activities, states of mind and relationships. We extricate ourselves from them. This is the Via Negativa of Western mysticism or the *neti neti* approach of the Vedantic tradition: I am not this, not this, not this. We see clearly, from our own experience, that no element of experience – no thought, image, feeling, sensation or percep-

tion – is essential to us. All of these appear, exist for a while and then vanish. None are essential to us.

To identify with our thoughts and feelings is to feel ‘I am my thoughts and feelings’. To identify with one’s body is to feel ‘I am this cluster of sensations’. If it were true that we were our thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions, then we would have to do something to disentangle or dis-identify ourselves from them, but it is not true. We have never been the same as or identical to a thought, feeling, sensation or perception. All of these appear, exist and vanish. They never were what we essentially are, and therefore no effort is required to disentangle or dis-identify ourselves. It is more a matter of understanding and seeing clearly the nature of ourselves – not how it might *become* through effort, practise or discipline, but how it is *now*, how we are now, although many of us may have overlooked or forgotten our essential self due to our fascination with the content of experience.

At this stage we take a step back from our experience into our self. Instead of being lost in the content of our experience, we come back to our self – not ourselves, a body and a mind; not ourselves, the person. The person, or the body and the mind, is what we are aware *of*; it is not what we *are*. What we are is the presence of awareness with which these are known.

This understanding, ‘I am awareness’, is the first great recognition. It is not an extraordinary recognition, nor is it difficult to realise – it does not require years of discipline, effort or practise. In fact, everybody – and by ‘everybody’ I mean not just those relatively few of us who are interested in these matters but all seven billion of us – has a sense of themselves as this presence of awareness.

However, in almost all cases, the awareness that we are is so entangled or mixed up with the content of experience that

most people do not know their self *clearly*. This lack of clear self-knowledge is considered to be the foundation of all suffering. That is why all the great religious and spiritual traditions begin with this investigation into the nature of our mind.

* * *

I can't find my self, so how can I know my self?

We cannot find 'I' for the same reason that the eyes cannot see themselves. The fact that the eyes cannot see themselves doesn't imply that they don't exist. It's just that the eyes are too close to themselves to be seen in the same way that all other objects are seen. Likewise, the self that looks for itself is too close to itself to be able to see or know itself in the same way that it sees or knows all other objects of experience, that is, in subject-object relationship. Just as our eyes can only see something that is at a distance from themselves, so we can only know something that is at a distance from or other than ourself.

If I were to ask you now to stand up and take a step towards yourself, what would you do?

I wouldn't do anything. I can't take a step towards myself.

Does that imply you do not exist?

No!

You cannot take a step towards yourself not because you do not exist but because you already stand as yourself. Likewise, you cannot find your self, not because you do not know your self but because anything you find would have an objective quality to it and would therefore be something that is not essential to you. It would be an object of your experience.

What do I have to do in order to know my essential self?

You do not have to do anything or go anywhere. You are already your self. Just see what you are when everything that is not essential to you has been discarded.

Do I have to reject everything that is not essential to me?

It is not necessary to reject anything. It is only necessary to see that your essential nature is not anything that you are aware of but is rather that which is aware.

But I can't know it.

Nor can you deny it, for your very denial of it asserts your presence! You say, 'I cannot know it'. Who is the 'I' that may or may not be able to know itself? That one is you. It is always shining brightly in the midst of your experience, irrespective of its content.

I don't know what that is.

You know your self more intimately than you know any other thing, but you have overlooked it in favour of objective experience.

There were once two young fish swimming in the sea. In time, an old fish appeared, swimming in the opposite direction, and as he passed them, he called out, 'Morning, boys! How's the water today?' The two young fish swam on, and after a while one of them turned to the other and said, 'What's water?'

You seem not to know your self, not because you are mysterious or unknowable but, on the contrary, because you are so intimate and familiar with the self that you are that you have overlooked it. In so doing, you have mistaken yourself for a cluster of thoughts, images, feelings, sensations, memories,

and so on. Cease being exclusively fascinated with the objective content of your experience and your essential self of pure knowing or aware being will emerge from obscurity in the background of experience.

How can I do that?

It is not necessary to do anything. It would only be necessary to do something if you were not your self now and had to become your self in the future. We are not speaking of a self that you might become; we are investigating the self that you are *now*, the one you have always been, the one you always refer to as 'I'.

All I have is my experience.

Who is the 'I' that has or knows experience?

(Long pause) I am.

Stay with the knowledge 'I am' or the feeling of being. The knowledge 'I am' is your knowledge of your self; it is the knowing of your own essential being. It is your self's knowledge of itself.

(Long silence)

What is the nature of the 'I am' before any experience has been added to it?

(Long silence)

I like your response! That silence is the finest and most trustworthy expression of who you are – not an extraordinary you, a spiritual you, a special you or an enlightened you, not a you that you have suddenly become as a result of this investigation, but the ordinary, intimate, familiar you that you always and already are but which you have overlooked due to your exclusive fascination with the drama of experience.

But it's so hard to find!

It is not only hard to find – it is impossible to find, because it is what you already are! It is only possible to find something that is lost or absent. In your own experience of yourself, are you ever lost or absent?

No.

Our self seems hard to know or recognise only due to our absorption in the drama of experience, just as one who is lost in the drama of a movie may claim that she cannot see the screen. She is already seeing the screen, but she does not realise it because it is disguised as a movie. Likewise, we are always knowing our self – our self is always knowing itself – but in most cases our self is mixed with and, as a result, disguised by, the content of experience and seems therefore to be missing. In other words, our self does not seem to be absent or missing because it is so far away or unknowable. On the contrary, it seems to be missing because it is so close, intimate and familiar.

What is the nature of our self prior to experience? Before we know 'I am a woman, I am a mother, I am French, I am thirty-seven years old, I am lonely, I am healthy', we know that we *are*. We know simply 'I am'.

But the knowledge 'I am' seems so ephemeral and insubstantial.

On the contrary, it is the only experience that is beyond legitimate doubt. Everything we know, have ever known or could ever know might be an illusion, but whatever it is that knows that illusion must itself be real, because if it were not real it would not be able to know or experience an illusion or anything else for that matter.

Moreover, all we know of the world are fleeting perceptions, but whilst these continuously appear and disappear, we, the one who knows them, remain steadily and silently present throughout. We believe that the world is substantial and permanent and that we are insubstantial and fleeting, but our experience is the opposite. We are the only element of our experience that never changes or disappears. Our self – the essence of the mind, the fact of being aware or pure awareness itself – is the only reliable factor in all experience.

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If I am not my mind, who practises self-enquiry?

The mind asks the question, ‘Who am I?’, ‘Am I aware?’ or ‘What is the essence of myself?’, but don’t let the mind answer. The mind can only know objective experience, so if we let the mind answer that question it will superimpose its own limitations on it.

Let’s use the analogy of John Smith and King Lear. John Smith, who lives a peaceful and uneventful life, leaves home one evening and goes to the theatre to play the part of King Lear. He dresses up in King Lear’s clothes and adopts King Lear’s thoughts and feelings. The play begins, and King Lear starts quarrelling with his daughters and becomes involved in the affairs of his kingdom. At some point he becomes so immersed in them that he forgets he is John Smith and seems, as a result, to become King Lear. He believes and feels, ‘I am King Lear’. The moment that thought and feeling take hold of him, his suffering begins.

The play comes to an end, but John Smith has become so entangled in the drama of King Lear’s life that he forgets to revert to himself. When a friend comes backstage to John

Smith's dressing room to congratulate him on his performance, he finds him miserable. The friend asks him, 'Why are you miserable? That was wonderful!' King Lear explains, 'I'm broken-hearted because of the death of Cordelia'. His friend says to him, 'Don't be silly! You are not miserable because of Cordelia; you are miserable because you have forgotten who you are. Who are you *really*?' King Lear replies, 'I'm the father of three daughters and the king of England!' His friend says, 'No, that's not who you really are. You have not always been a father and king, so being a father and a king are not essential to you. Go further back, deeper into yourself. Who are you really? What element of yourself is essential to you?'

King Lear starts describing his thoughts and feelings, and his friend again replies, 'No, these thoughts and feelings are not essential to you. They are not always present in your experience, but *you* are always present. Who are you, prior to your thoughts and feelings?' King Lear goes more and more deeply into himself, discarding everything that is not essential to him – his activities, relationships, thoughts, feelings, history, conditioning, and so on – until suddenly there is the recognition 'I am John Smith!' At that moment his suffering ceases.

Each of us is a King Lear or Lady Macbeth, that is, each of us is pure awareness clothed in thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions, and seems, as a result, to have become a temporary, finite person or self. However, after each of us has discarded everything that is not essential to us, what remains? Only pure awareness! After awareness has extricated itself from everything that is not essential to it, only pure awareness remains. And being prior to and inherently free of thoughts and feelings, pure awareness knows no sense of lack and therefore no suffering. Its nature is happiness.

Are we destined to suffer as long as we are embodied people?

No! Imagine John Smith returning to the theatre the following evening to play the role of King Lear again. His experience is exactly the same as the previous evening – the same thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships – but this time he doesn't forget that he is John Smith. During both performances he is John Smith, the first evening unknowingly, the second knowingly. On the first evening he forgets or overlooks himself; he falls asleep to his true nature. On the second he remains awake to who he really is and therefore remains in touch with his true nature and its innate peace.

Likewise, it is possible to lose oneself in experience, to forget or overlook who we essentially are and suffer accordingly, but it is also possible to be fully engaged with all aspects of experience whilst remaining in touch with our true nature and its innate peace and happiness. This overlooking of our essential self or being is referred to as 'ignorance' in the Vedantic tradition – the ignoring of our true nature – as the forgetting of God's presence in the Sufi tradition and as 'original sin' in Christianity, the latter implying that the forgetting or overlooking of our divine nature is the primary error of which all subsequent so-called sins are simply an elaboration or an expression. As such, the forgetting or overlooking of our true nature – in religious language, the overlooking of the presence of God that shines in each of our minds as the knowledge 'I am' and is felt in the heart as the feeling of being – is the original error from which the sense of separation and the inevitable suffering that attends it follows.

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I have heard you say that the nature of our being cannot be known as an object of experience, so how do I know that I know?

It's a beautiful question. When you say 'I know my thoughts', your thoughts are one thing and that which knows them is something else. The knowing of your thoughts takes place in subject-object relationship, there is that which knows and that which is known. All experience takes place in subject-object relations apart from one, which is the awareness of being or 'I know that I know'.

When we say, 'I know that I know', the knowing that knows and the knowing that is known are the same. When we say, 'I know that I am', the I that I am and the I that knows that I am is the same. There isn't a subject and object of the experience. The awareness of being is an utterly unique experience. It is the only experience there is that doesn't take place in subject-object relationship. There is no distance between the knowing that knows and the knowing that is known. They are the same.

You have to answer the question, 'How do I know that I know?', in your own experience by going to the experience of knowing, of being aware of being aware, or 'I know that I know'. This is a question like, 'Am I aware?' It takes you directly – by which I mean it is not mediated through the mind – to your true nature. All that is necessary is to remain there.

Here's another way of responding to your question. If you were to ask the question, 'How do I know the sky is blue?', that question would take your mind towards the sky, 'How do I know that my thoughts are agitated?' takes you toward your thoughts and 'How do I know that I am hungry?' takes you toward your sensations. However, 'How do I know that I know?' doesn't take you towards anything. It takes you in a directionless direction, away from the content of experience to the fact of knowing. Make that question your meditation.

‘I AM’ IS AWARENESS’S KNOWLEDGE OF ITSELF

W *hat is it in me that knows that I am?*

It is obviously you who know that you are. When we say, ‘I know that I am’, is the ‘I’ that I am the same ‘I’ that knows that I am, or is it a different ‘I’? Is it you who know yourself or is your self known by something other than itself?

It is the same ‘I’ that knows that I am.

Yes, the ‘I’ that I am is obviously the same ‘I’ that knows that I am. It is only possible to assert with absolute certainty that ‘I am’ because I know that I am. *I* know that *I* am. The ‘I’ that I am is the ‘I’ that knows that I am. Right there, in our ordinary, intimate, familiar experience of ‘I am’, we are knowing our self. In other words, the knowledge of our own being – its knowledge of itself – is the only knowledge in which the subject and object of experience are the same. In fact, a subject of experience can only exist in relation to an object, so it would be more accurate to say that our knowl-

edge of our self simply does not take place in subject–object relationship. It is non-dual knowledge.

The statement ‘I know that I am’ is a statement of the self’s knowledge of itself. It is awareness’s awareness of awareness; consciousness’s consciousness of consciousness. (‘Consciousness’ and ‘awareness’ are used synonymously throughout this book.) It is an utterly unique knowledge. It is the only knowledge that has no objective quality and that never changes or disappears. Moreover, it is the only knowledge that is not known by something other than itself and therefore is not relative to the mind that knows it. It is, as such, absolute knowledge.

If it's ever-present and unchanging, why are more people not aware of it?

Because we are educated from an early age to pay exclusive attention to the objective content of experience. As a result, our knowledge of our self is eclipsed or obscured by our knowledge of other things.

However, our essential self is not present in some people to a greater degree than in others, nor does it require special qualifications or circumstances to be recognised. It is equally present in a deep depression, a moment of ecstasy or the taste of tea. When we say, ‘I am depressed’ or ‘I am in love’, the ‘I am’ is equally present in both, but we emphasise the depression or the feeling of being in love instead of the ‘I am’ and thereby overlook our being, which shines equally brightly in both experiences as it does in all experiences.

As a result of the overlooking or ignoring of our being in favour of objective experience, our essential nature seems to be lost, and, as a result, is cut off from its inherent qualities of peace and fulfilment. This apparent loss of peace and

happiness initiates the great search for happiness in objective experience, whilst all along, the happiness we seek lies quietly in the depths of our being, equally available at all times, under all circumstances and to all people.

But so few people seem to have access to this knowledge.

The knowledge of our essential self or being is not an extraordinary experience that a few rare people have privileged access to. The knowledge 'I am', or the feeling of being that shines at the heart of everyone's experience, is the same for all people, at all times and under all circumstances, just as the screen upon which all movies appear is the same irrespective of the content of the movie. All that is necessary is for our self to recognise its essential nature before it has been coloured or qualified by experience.

What is it that initiates this return to one's own being?

Interest or suffering. Some people are graced with the desire to know the nature of reality for no particular reason, whilst others, indeed for most people, the failure of objective experience to alleviate their suffering and to satisfy their longing for lasting peace and happiness either initiates an enquiry into the source of peace and happiness in themselves or, in extreme cases, brings the mind to a state of frustration or even despair, in which its seeking activity comes to an end. In that pause, the essence of the mind briefly shines.

But even if that does happen, the experience doesn't last.

Occasionally, the clarity and intensity with which the essence of the mind shines at such a time is sufficiently powerful that it is never again outshone by experience. In most cases, however, the habits of thinking and feeling will return and eclipse their background of pure knowing, being aware or awareness itself. In this case, the mind will have to make a

conscious effort to trace its way back to its own essence and, as a result, to taste the peace and happiness that reside there.

Self-enquiry is the process by which the mind traces its way back to its innate peace and happiness. It is the simple exploration of what we refer to when we say 'I'. At some point we arrive at the pure knowledge 'I am' before it is coloured or qualified by experience. At that point there is no further need for investigation. We just abide in the experience 'I am' or the feeling of being. Our own being sinks more and more deeply into itself.

This self-abidance is the deeper aspect of self-enquiry. In other words, self-enquiry may be initiated by an investigation at the level of the mind, but as soon as our being emerges from obscurity, just as a screen might seem to emerge from the background when we soften the focus of our attention from the drama in the movie, no more investigation is required. We just rest there. We stay with our self, our self stays with itself, instead of losing itself in the adventure of experience.

In this self-abidance or self-resting, the qualities of peace and fulfilment for which we long above all else and that are innate in our essential being make themselves known, occasionally suddenly, usually gradually. They emerge from within us.

I seem to lose this peace so easily.

When you say, 'I lose this peace so easily', you speak on behalf of the mind, not the self. You, awareness, never lose yourself. It is only because you have mistaken yourself for a cluster of thoughts, images, feelings, sensations and perceptions – that is, it is only because you, awareness, have lost yourself in your own activity – that you feel your peace is at

the mercy of circumstances and that you must therefore continually negotiate experience. The inherent peace of your true nature does not depend on what is or is not taking place in the mind, any more than the condition of a screen depends on the content of a movie.

To begin with, experience seems to eclipse our true nature of knowing, being aware or awareness itself and its innate peace, and there is therefore an inevitable feeling of going back and forth between the foreground of experience and the background of our true nature. But in time experience begins to lose its capacity to veil its reality – the inherently peaceful presence of awareness – and the feeling of going back and forth begins to subside. The peace of our true nature begins to shine in the midst of experience, not just in the background. Previously experience outshone awareness; now awareness and its innate peace outshines experience.

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How do I know infinite consciousness? I have not been successful with this. I still feel like it's a concept. I'm trying to experience consciousness, but there is no consciousness without content. I can hear a sound come and go, but before this sound my consciousness is filled with other experiences. I feel like it's impossible to experience the screen without the movie.

It's not necessary to experience the screen without the movie because you are experiencing the same screen whether the movie is playing or not. Don't worry about whether there is content, or objective experience. Just be interested in the fact of being aware.

For instance, you've got an idea that you don't experience unlimited consciousness now, and that you may have that

experience in the future, but you are *now* having the experience of consciousness. However, it is so mixed up with the content of experience that you think it is finite. Let's do an experiment to illustrate this. Is it your experience right now that you are aware?

Yes.

Just close your eyes and tell us about the experience of being aware, not the content of awareness.

(Long pause) Not to speak about any content is to say nothing.

Strictly speaking, you are absolutely right, but make a concession and do your best to use language. Find words that best describe the experience of being aware or the fact of awareness.

It's like being only here, only in this moment. It feels quite timeless.

Yes, it's ever-present. What else?

There is no distance. It's absolutely close.

Yes, utterly intimate. It's closer than close.

It is just being. It feels like an energy that is aware.

I understand why you are struggling to say anything about it, why you are finding it difficult to say anything about the fact of being aware, but I want to push you a little bit. If I were to ask you to describe the sensation of your hand on your mouth, you would find that relatively easy to describe. If I asked you to describe the thought you are currently having, you would find it easy. Why is it so hard to describe the simple fact of being aware?

(Long pause) I've got no words for it.

Perfect. You are absolutely right. Your silence is the best answer you could have given. Why do we fall silent when we try to say something true about the presence of awareness? Because all words have evolved to describe the objective content of experience, and awareness, having no objective content, cannot be described in words. Having no objective features, it has no limits. There is nothing objective there to describe or limit it. Right there, you are experiencing infinite consciousness. You are expecting the experience of infinite consciousness to be a marvellous mystical experience. It's not. It's just the ordinary intimate familiar experience of being aware when we go directly to it before it is mixed with the content of experience. *You are already having the experience you are seeking.*

(Soft laughter)

That is why this is called the way of recognition. You haven't experienced something new. You have just recognised what you were always experiencing, but you didn't know it for what it really is.

* * *

The essence of anything is the aspect of that thing which cannot be removed or separated from it. Anything that can be removed or separated from a thing is not essential to that thing; it is superfluous.

Take this first step in your experience. Know yourself as that which knows or is aware of your experience. When a thought or a series of thoughts appear to you, you are not any of those thoughts. You are the one that knows them. The thought is not essential to you. It appears, exists for a moment and then vanishes. You are present before, during

and after its appearance. The thought doesn't affect that which knows it in any way. That which knows the thought is always in the same condition of simply knowing or being aware.

Take the image of somebody watching a performance from a distance, completely uninvolved in the drama. What does or does not take place in the drama is of no consequence to the viewer. The viewer remains in the same condition throughout.

We are the witness of the witnessed, the impartial, uninvolved, independent, inherently free, unchanging, unmoving, unconcerned knower of all experience. Whatever it is that knows or is aware of your current experience is in exactly the same condition now as whatever it is that knew your experience at breakfast this morning, or your experience yesterday, or last year, or ten years ago, thirty years ago, fifty years ago.

Whatever it is that knew or was aware of our experience when we were five-year-old children is in exactly the same condition – indeed, is exactly the same presence – that is now aware of this experience. Nothing that has happened in the intervening years has changed, harmed, stained or modified our self, the knower of experience. It knows nothing of health or sickness, good or bad, right or wrong. All these distinctions apply to the objects of experience, not to the subject of experience, that is, not to our self.

Ask yourself the questions, 'What is essential to me? What cannot be taken away from me? What remains with me throughout all changing experience?' Only *that* qualifies as our self. For instance, is the current thought that you are now having, whatever the content, essential to you? Has it always been with you? Obviously not. It has already vanished and been replaced by another thought. But *we* don't vanish. We

remain behind, so to speak, knowing the next thought, and the next thought, and the next thought. No thought is essential to us. All our thoughts are continually being removed from us, like a garment that we take off before going to bed.

What about your feelings? Is any feeling essential to you? Take your current feeling, whatever the content – it may be boredom, irritation, loneliness – if indeed there are any feelings present. Has this feeling always been with you? Obviously not. Our feelings are continually appearing and disappearing. They may appear and disappear a little more slowly than our thoughts, but nevertheless, no feeling is essential to us, not even our most intimate and precious feelings. Our feelings are simply like another garment that we take off at night; they are not essential to us.

What about the sensations of your body, the tingling sensation of your face, hands or feet? No sensation stays the same, even for a moment. They are continually pulsating or vibrating. No sensation is essential to us. Ask yourself the question, 'Are any of my perceptions – sights, sounds, tastes, textures or smells – essential to me?' Are these not also continually appearing and vanishing? Is the sight of your room or the sounds you hear essential to you? Obviously not. Our perceptions are added to us and then removed from us, like a piece of clothing that we put on in the morning and take off in the evening.

Are any of our activities or relationships essential to us? Is not a relationship also something that starts and ends, something that is added to us and, in time, removed from us? Ask yourself the question, 'What remains of myself when anything that can be removed from me is removed from me?' Only that qualifies as our self.

It's like when we get undressed at night. When everything that can be taken off is taken off, all that remains is our naked body. Likewise, when everything that can be removed from us is removed from us, all that remains is our naked self or naked being. It is this naked being that shines in our experience as the knowledge 'I am' before it is coloured or qualified by experience.

AWARENESS IS ALWAYS AWAKE

Understand and feel that we, awareness, are like an immense, open, empty, borderless space within which the entirety of our experience takes place and with which it is known.

Imagine now that we were to remove the entire content from the space of awareness, like emptying a room of all objects and furniture. Visualise and imagine you, awareness, prior to the arising of any experience. This should not be difficult because experience is continually arising and vanishing. Imagine that your thoughts vanish, but for a period of time they are not replaced by another thought. Your feelings and sensations vanish, your perceptions, activities and relationships vanish. Just you, awareness, all alone with yourself, knowing only your own being, perfectly at peace, utterly fulfilled in yourself, lacking, wanting and needing nothing, just resting in the peace of your own being.

Notice that we have not become a new, special, spiritual or enlightened self as a result of this investigation or contemplation. We are simply going deeply into the experience of

ourself as we always and already are. We have not touched any element of our experience. We have not manipulated any element of our experience.

Feel the innate peace and fulfilment of yourself, awareness. Feel that, prior to the arising of any experience, we, awareness, are utterly at peace and there is not the slightest sense of lack in us. The common words for this absence of a sense of lack are happiness, fulfilment, contentment. Understand and feel that this peace or happiness is your very nature. Peace and happiness are not something to be acquired from outside. They have absolutely nothing to do with the content of experience. Peace and happiness are not the result of, and can never be derived from, the content of experience. They are our nature.

This is the second great recognition that everyone should know about early on in their childhood. The first great recognition: I am awareness. The second great recognition: peace and happiness are my nature. They can never be given to me from the outside. Peace and happiness are not intermittent experiences that I have from time to time; they are the very nature of myself.

* * *

Is the experience of deep sleep, as opposed to the waking and dreaming states, the shining of our true nature? I was hoping you might be able to point me in the direction of experiencing that rather than inferring it. I can infer deep sleep from my experience, but I can't experience it.

Close your eyes and take any thought. Let's call it thought number one. Now take a second thought, and let's call it

thought number two. Okay, open your eyes. What took place in between those two thoughts?

There were no thoughts.

Yes, but was there a discontinuity of experience between the two thoughts?

No, my experience was continuous.

What continued to be present between the two thoughts? In other words, what is it in your experience that accounts for its continuity?

I don't know.

If you didn't know you would have answered 'I don't know' to the question, 'Was there a discontinuity of experience between the two thoughts?', but you answered 'No'. Therefore, you must have known whatever it is that continues in experience, otherwise you would not know the experience of continuity and would have answered 'Yes'.

Okay, I definitely experience a continuity of experience, but all I can find in my experience are fleeting thoughts and perceptions.

But isn't the 'I' that finds or knows the appearance, existence and disappearance of fleeting thoughts and perceptions their continuous or ever-present background?

Yes.

What is that?

(Long pause) I can't find it.

Nor can I! All that can be found in experience are thoughts, images, feelings, sensations and perceptions, but the one that knows or finds them, or doesn't find them, is your self – the simple, non-objective fact of just knowing, being aware or

absence of awareness or the presence of anything other than awareness.

But deep sleep seems to me to be the absence of awareness.

Deep sleep is the awareness of absence, not the absence of awareness.

How do you know?

It is my experience.

But I experience the absence of awareness in deep sleep.

You *believe* that you experience the absence of awareness in deep sleep, but have you really investigated it? Who has the experience of the absence of awareness?

(Long pause) I don't know.

You said, “‘I’ experience the absence of awareness in deep sleep’. Isn’t that ‘I’ both present and aware in order to claim the absence of awareness as its experience?

Yes.

And what would that aware presence be?

(Long pause) Awareness.

Exactly! Do you see how the mind mistakes the absence of objective experience for the absence of awareness? Nothing objective is experienced between two thoughts or perceptions, but this does not imply the absence or discontinuity of awareness. In fact, mind is simply the name we give to awareness when awareness colours itself in the form of experience. As such, mind is the *activity* of awareness; it is not an entity in its own right. We could say that mind is awareness in motion; awareness is mind at rest.

When there are no thoughts or perceptions, there is no mind – that is, no activity of awareness – but awareness itself simply remains in its inactive or uncoloured condition. When the mind rises again – that is, when awareness assumes the activity of thinking and perceiving – there is no trace in it of the experience of deep sleep because there is nothing objective in deep sleep to remember. Therefore, the mind, which can only know objective experience – or more accurately, which is the form of awareness in which objective experience is known – denies the existence of awareness in deep sleep.

But if we ask awareness, ‘What is your experience of yourself?’ – after all, only awareness is aware and therefore only awareness has any knowledge of itself – awareness, if it could speak, would answer, ‘In my own experience of myself, I am ever-present’.

But how can I know that for myself?

It's easy, for you *are* the awareness in whose experience awareness is ever-present. Just ask yourself the question, 'Have I ever had, or could I ever have, the experience of the absence of myself, that is, the absence of awareness?'

No.

Has anybody ever had, or could anybody ever have, the experience of the absence of awareness?

No.

How do we know that there *is* something in reality that corresponds to the absence of awareness?

We don't!

Exactly! The belief that awareness or consciousness is a fleeting, fragile, temporary epiphenomenon of the brain is simply the religion of scientific materialism to which the vast majority of humanity subscribes unknowingly. Be an honest scientist. Stay close to the evidence of experience. In your own experience of yourself, you are ever-present. That is awareness's knowledge of its own eternity.

Is this why there seems to be a lingering memory of deep sleep?

Yes, at least that is the mind's interpretation of the experience. Imagine how the character in a movie would construe the gap between two frames in a movie.

The character in the movie is not present in the gap between frames because there is no movie playing there, so the character in the movie knows nothing of the gap?

Yes and no. The gap in the movie is not an event that takes place in the movie, so in that sense the character in the movie knows nothing of the gap. However, the colourless screen that is present in the gap doesn't disappear when the next frame appears. It remains present, in the background, as it were, so what was present in the gap – the colourless screen – lingers, so to speak, when the next frame appears. In that sense, what was present in the gap is felt by the character in the movie, by virtue of the fact that it is the very stuff out of which the character is made. In other words, it is the essence of the character.

In the same way, pure awareness is present in the gap between two thoughts or perceptions, and when the next thought or perception appears, pure awareness lingers in the background of the mind. This lingering of awareness is construed by the mind as a memory of deep sleep. In fact, it is the memory of our eternity; not the memory of something

that happened in time but the deep knowledge of our essential, ever-present being, albeit usually veiled to a greater or lesser extent by the drama of experience.

The peace that suffuses the first few early morning moments doesn't come from a past state of deep sleep; it comes from the depths of one's being, which is as yet only thinly veiled by thoughts and perceptions and is therefore still able to shed its fragrance on the waking state, like a white page thinly veiled by a wash of watercolour.

But it seems to fade quickly.

It seems to, but it doesn't! All there is to experience is the knowing of it, however mild or intense our experience may be. Know only the knowing of experience and you will understand and feel that awareness is never dimmed. The more you feel awareness shining quietly in the background of experience –indeed, as the very reality of your experience irrespective of its content – the more you will feel its peace and warmth pervading your experience.

So, we, awareness, don't really wake up in the morning?

Exactly! We, awareness, are always fully awake. Like the sun, awareness always shines with the same brightness. There are no states or degrees of awareness. Awareness is always in the same placeless place at the same timeless time, the dimensionless here and the ever-present now. Awareness simply colours itself with its own activity and, as such, appears as the waking and dreaming states, without ever ceasing to be itself.

So there is no time for awareness?

Time comes into apparent existence when the activity of thinking begins.

And space?

Space comes into apparent existence when the activity of perception begins. This is, in fact, consistent with our experience. After all, imagine you dream that you take a trip across America that lasts for three months. How much time and space does the dream occupy in your waking-state mind?

No time or space.

Exactly! Consider the possibility that the time and space that seem to be real from the perspective of the waking-state mind do not take up any time or space in awareness, the one universal mind. Time and space come into apparent existence with the activities of thinking and perceiving. Consider the possibility that there is a single, infinite, indivisible and ever-present reality which refracts itself through the activities of each of our minds into an apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves that we call the world.

That's mind-blowing!

That's what the Buddhist term nirvana means: 'blown out'. When the mind is blown out, that is, when the activity of thought and perception ceases, pure awareness, the ultimate, ever-present and unlimited reality of all seeming things, shines by itself. When the activity of thought and perception begins again and, as a result, a multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves appear, that is still only the shining of that reality.

PEACE LIES AT THE HEART OF ALL

I *s there a purpose to suffering?*

The essential message contained in suffering is always the same, irrespective of its content, namely that we have mistaken ourself for a fragment: a finite, independently existing entity, a personal awareness or separate self. The content of suffering always changes; the self around whom suffering revolves is always the same. Suffering is an expression of our innate intelligence, saying, 'Pause, you have forgotten who you truly are. You have mistaken yourself for a separate entity.'

In the Vedantic approach, we investigate that apparently separate entity or self on whose behalf the feeling of suffering arises. Who is the 'I' in the 'I am suffering' feeling? In other words, we turn away from the suffering and investigate ourself, the one who suffers. However, that self, the one who resists and seeks, is never found. All that is found is the true and only self of pure knowing, being aware or awareness itself.

In this investigation, awareness returns, as it were, from the adventure of separation and becomes aware of itself, and in its experience of itself it finds no suffering. This absence of the experience of suffering or lack is known, from the perspective of the apparently separate self, as peace or happiness.

What is the difference between the Vedantic and the Tantric approaches?

The Vedantic approach to feelings makes a clear distinction between the subject and the object of experience. The value of this approach is that it establishes the presence, the primacy and, above all, the inherently peaceful, unconditionally fulfilled and utterly independent nature of awareness.

The Tantric approach completely collapses this apparent distinction between the apparent subject and objects of experience, until all that remains is the single, indivisible, unnameable intimacy of experience, in which it is no longer possible to separate out a multiplicity and diversity of objects, nor a separate subject. There is just the raw intimacy of experience, which is not inherently pleasant, and therefore there is no longing for it or holding on to it; nor is it particularly unpleasant, and therefore there is no rejection of it and, as a result, no suffering.

Is there a smooth transition from one approach to the other?

We could suggest an intermediary step between these two extremes. In this intermediary approach we start with knowing and feeling ourself as awareness – not the detached, distant witness of experience as in the pure Vedantic approach, but rather the open, empty space of awareness, not simply *to* which our experience appears but *within* which it arises.

In other words, in this approach we neither invert the attention on its source, seeking the nature of the self on whose behalf the feeling arises – as we do in the Vedantic or inward-facing path – nor do we go deeply into the experience itself, dissolving any distance or separation between ourself and the experience – as we do in the Tantric approach. In this intermediary approach, we still make a distinction between awareness and its objects – in this case, our feelings – but awareness is now known and, more importantly, felt as the medium or space *within* which they arise.

Although I no longer believe that I am a separate self, I still feel a cold, dark, impenetrable sensation in my belly that betrays again and again an old sense of separation.

Once the self on whose behalf the feelings arise has been investigated and has been found not to exist in the way that was previously believed and felt, all that remains of the feeling of suffering is a sensation or network of sensations in the body. It is this sensation in the body that feels cold, dark and impenetrable. Visualise and feel that the space of awareness in which this cold, dark, impenetrable sensation arises is warm and loving. Offer or surrender the sensation to this loving space. Visualise the experience of lowering your body into a deep, hot bath on a cold winter's night and infuse this surrender of your feelings to the space of awareness with the same quality. Just allow the darkness and density of the vibration to soak in the loving emptiness of awareness.

You are neither turning away from the sensation nor directing your attention towards it. Simply be knowingly the open, empty, inherently peaceful and unconditionally loving space of awareness in which the sensation arises and with which it is known. From the perspective of a separate self this offering or surrendering of everything to the safekeeping of

awareness will seem like an activity that you do; from the perspective of awareness itself, this allowing, welcoming or surrendering of the feeling is its very nature.

How can I find out if this is working?

When the question, ‘Is this working?’ no longer arises, then it’s working! The question, ‘Is this working?’ betrays your desire to get rid of the sensation. More accurately, it betrays the presence of a separate ‘you’ that desires to get rid of the sensation. On whose behalf does this desire arise? The open, empty, inherently peaceful and unconditionally loving space of awareness has no agenda for or against any experience, just as the space of the room in which you are currently sitting, relatively speaking, has no agenda with what does or does not take place within it.

It is only an illusory separate self that wants to get rid of a feeling and therefore wonders if its methods are working. Surrendering a feeling in order to get rid of it is bargaining, not surrendering. Instead of asking how to know if this is working, contemplate your experience so fully and intimately until there is no longer any resistance to it. When you can answer ‘Yes’ to the question ‘Can I live with this feeling forever?’ you know that your surrender is complete.

I have lived with depression all my life and nothing I have tried works.

Anything you try to do to get rid of the depression will more or less subtly reinforce it. To begin with, you may separate yourself from the depression as the witnessing presence of awareness to whom it appears and with which it is known, and this will bring with it a measure of peace. In time, you may feel yourself as the open, empty, inherently peaceful and unconditionally loving presence of awareness within which

all your experience arises. This will, to a degree, collapse the apparent distinction between your self – awareness – and the depression, and, as a result, you will experience a deepening of peace. However, at some point it is necessary to completely collapse the apparent distinction between awareness and its objects – your depression, in this case – and only then is the peace that lies at the heart of all feelings fully revealed.

In other words, turn fully towards your experience and you will find at its heart the peace you previously sought by avoiding it. Open yourself so fully to the experience of depression that there is not the slightest trace of resistance to it in you. It is only possible to resist, or indeed desire, something that is at a distance from ourself. In other words, it is only when we separate ourself out from the intimacy and immediacy of experience as a separate knower that resistance or seeking can arise.

For example, in order to perceive an object and label it a ‘chair’ or a ‘flower’, it is first necessary to separate oneself from the object and view it at a distance. If you bring the chair or flower so close that there is no distance between the object and your eyes, you will no longer be able to see, let alone name it. Likewise, in order to label an emotion ‘anger’, ‘envy’, ‘sorrow’, ‘fear’, and so on, let alone consider it unpleasant or negative, it is first necessary to detach oneself from it as a separate knower of experience and view it from an apparent distance.

The Vedantic approach aims to *increase* that distance and thereby reduce the power of the object over you. The Tantric approach aims to *decrease* that distance until the ‘I’ that knows and the object that is known – the feeling, in this case – have merged into a single, indivisible whole, which may

have a certain intensity to it but which can no longer be named, let alone deemed pleasant or unpleasant.

In other words, the experience is known – that is, the experience is experienced – but nothing is known *about* the experience. It cannot even be labelled ‘depression’, ‘sorrow’, ‘fear’, ‘shame’, and so on, let alone deemed unpleasant. This is the Way of Unknowing.

Does this transform the suffering?

The suffering is not transformed; the raw experience is revealed as it essentially is before resistance to it has turned it into suffering. In other words, even to know the emotion as depression, sorrow or fear, a self first has to be separated out from it. It is only from the illusory perspective of that apparently separate self that the emotion can be labelled ‘depression’, ‘fear’, ‘guilt’ or ‘shame’ and, as a result, judged unpleasant. Indeed, the experience cannot even be legitimately labelled an emotion, or even an experience, but if we are to speak of these matters, we must agree to label it in some way.

If the emotion is allowed or welcomed so fully that there is not the slightest impulse to resist, avoid, manage or get rid of it, it will no longer be experienced as suffering. It will lose its name and form and its essence or reality will be revealed – not because you have done something to it but, on the contrary, because you have *not* done anything to it. In fact, it is not even because you have not done anything to it, but rather because there is no ‘you’ present in the experience that could either do or not do something to it.

So it's enough to practise allowing or welcoming the feeling?

Don't turn allowing or welcoming into a practice that you as a separate self *do*! The self that stands apart from the

emotion, practising, allowing or welcoming, is the same self that stands apart from the experience, labelling it suffering and judging it unpleasant in the first place. In other words, the separate self perpetuates its illusory identity and its inevitable train of suffering by practising welcoming or allowing.

In this approach, allowing or welcoming is what we *are*, not what we *do*. Don't turn a description into a prescription! It is the nature of awareness simply to allow everything within itself without discrimination, preference or resistance, so this does not need to be practised. Just see that it is already the case. From awareness's point of view – by which I mean from the perspective of one in whom the understanding that open, empty, inherently peaceful awareness is their essential, irreducible self – the emotion is simply a movement or modulation of itself and is neither particularly pleasant nor particularly unpleasant. Therefore, there is no impulse in awareness to either resist or grasp the experience.

Does this mean that all emotions are equal?

All experience is a single, homogeneous, indivisible field which only appears as a multiplicity and diversity of separate objects from the perspective of an apparently separate subject of experience. It is only from the distance of that apparently separate knower of experience that a discrete object – an emotion, in this case – comes into apparent existence, which can then be held on to or rejected. If the known object – the feeling – is brought so close that there is no longer any distance between it and the knowing subject, the distinction between the knower and the known collapses until there is just a single, indivisible, homogeneous and unnameable experience, which may have a certain intensity to it but cannot be given a name such as 'depression', 'fear', 'sorrow',

and so on, let alone deemed pleasant or unpleasant. Divested of its superimposed unpleasantness, the reality of the experience is revealed. This absence of unpleasantness is known, from the perspective of a separate self, as peace or happiness.

When I experience deep suffering or anger, it's very physical. I might wake up feeling like I have a stone on my chest or, if I'm angry at my children, I can't stop behaving in a way I know is not right. In those moments I'm overwhelmed by feelings and don't know what to do. It seems like nothing can help me, even thinking, 'Okay, I am the awareness of it'.

Take the Tantric approach: invite the feeling of anger – or whatever other feeling may be present – so close that it is not possible to separate yourself from it and therefore to know what it is. All that remains is pure experiencing or knowing – a single, intimate, indivisible and impersonal whole, in which there is no person present to whom the experience belongs nor any discrete object that could be designated with a noun, let alone qualified by an adjective.

In fact, the separate subject and object of experience never existed to begin with, either to be merged together or not, so this is only said as a concession to the separate self you imagine yourself to be and who now wishes to get rid of her suffering. In the absence of an independently existing self from whose perspective experience is deemed either pleasant or unpleasant, desirable or undesirable, all that remains is pure experiencing, divested of all afflictive qualities.

An emotion such as anger can only stand as such if you keep it at a distance from yourself. Take the example of a fight between two boxers: when the boxers stand a metre apart, they are within range of one another and therefore are dangerous. However, when they are in their respective corners, eight metres or so apart, they are safe. The boxers

witness each other from a distance at which they are no longer a danger to one another. That's the Vedantic approach.

However, during the fight, the boxers are not allowed to retire to their corners for refuge, so instead, when they no longer wish to be subjected to the tyranny of their opponent, they bring their opponent close; they collapse onto one another in a 'clinch', thereby neutralising their opponent's power. That's the Tantric approach.

In everyday life, like a boxer who stands a metre away from his opponent, our suffering stands close enough to us to be dangerous but far enough from us to be labelled 'anger', 'envy', 'sorrow' or 'fear' and thus deemed pleasant or unpleasant. Either retire into the heart of awareness, from whose safe distance the emotion has no power over you or bring the emotion so close that it loses its name and, as a result, its negative charge.

Both approaches are valid and, I would suggest, equally necessary in different circumstances. The danger of an exclusively Vedantic approach is that we may tend to stand apart from our feelings and never fully face the dysfunction in our lives of which they are the cause. The danger of an exclusively Tantric approach is that we may justify our relentless search for intense emotion and experience, thereby washing a spiritual veneer over the underlying sense of lack from which it emerges.

MOVING BEYOND THE WITNESS

In the third stage of understanding, any residual distinction between awareness and its objects is completely collapsed. Take, for instance, a thought – it doesn't matter its content – and ask yourself the question, 'Is there anything to the current thought other than the experience of thinking?' Now ask yourself the question, 'Is there anything to the experience of thinking other than the knowing of it?' If you were to touch the experience of thinking, would you find anything other than knowing or consciousness there?

When I ask, 'Would you find anything other than knowing there?', you are this knowing. You are consciousness or awareness. Another way to ask the question would be, 'When you – *knowing*, that which knows – touch the stuff out of which thinking is made, do you find anything other than yourself there?' Does knowing find anything other than knowing in the experience of thinking? See in this way that in the experience of thinking there is no thought and no knower of the thought; there is just the experience of

thinking – a seamless, homogeneous experience which is not actually divided into a thinker and a thought. It is one indivisible experience, made only of knowing.

At this stage of understanding, thought is no longer considered a distraction from our true nature. A thought would only be a distraction from our true nature if it were something other than our true nature. Then we would have to turn away from it. But at this stage of understanding, all there is to a thought, or the experience of thinking, is our true nature of pure knowing. The thought does not conceal our self; it reveals our self. It does not veil its reality; it shines with its reality.

* * *

What is the nature of the space of awareness within which all experience arises?

Prior to the arising of experience, the space of awareness is an object-less field of infinite potential, made only of pure knowing. When I say ‘pure knowing’ I mean knowing that is not mixed with anything other than itself: a single, infinite, indivisible field, within which all possible experience lies in potential and out of which all experience, as it arises, is made.

In other words, all experience is a vibration of this knowing, a movement of this knowing. Experience is, as such, the activity of consciousness, just as a movie could be said to be the activity of a screen. But at no point in the movie does anything other than the screen come into existence. Likewise, in just the same way, at no point in experience does anything other than this infinite, indivisible knowing come into existence.

Remember, I'm not speaking abstract philosophy. I'm not suggesting anything that cannot be verified in your own current, direct experience. Just ask yourself the question, 'Do I ever come in contact with anything other than the knowing of my own experience?' Is anyone currently experiencing anything other than the knowing of experience? Has anyone ever encountered anything other than the knowing of experience? Could anyone ever experience anything other than the knowing of experience?

I'm not just speaking of those relatively few of us who are interested in these matters. Consider all seven billion of us, and if we include all the animals, all seven trillion of us. Does anyone, has anyone, or could anyone ever encounter anything other than the knowing of experience? And consider whatever other beings there may be in whatever other universes there are. Could they ever know anything other than the knowing of their experience, whatever their experience might be? Consider God's experience, if you believe that there is something that is indicated by the word 'God'. Could God ever know anything other than the knowing of its experience?

In other words, how do we know that there is anything other than knowing, or awareness, or consciousness? We don't. To believe that there is something other than this infinite, indivisible knowing is the religion of materialism upon which our world culture is founded. Have the courage and the clarity to be like an honest scientist or a true mystic. Stay only with the evidence of experience.

* * *

My question has to do with awareness and the body. It feels like one of the barriers for me is a misunderstanding of the relation-

ship with the body. I've heard you say we disconnect from or separate from the experience of sense perceptions, then we come back and we reintegrate that.

First of all, you feel yourself not just as the presence of awareness with which all experience is known but feel yourself as the space of awareness in which all experience appears. That's the first step – I'm this open, empty space of awareness.

Next, we go to the direct experience of our body which, if your eyes are closed, is just the current sensation. Leave the idea of the body behind, leave the image of the body behind, leave the memory of the body behind and just imagine you are a new-born infant. This is the first experience of the body you've ever had. It's just a raw tingling, amorphous sensation.

Now, feel that this sensation appears in the space of awareness. Normally, we think awareness appears in the body, but if we go close to our experience, we see that actually the experience of the body is a sensation and that sensation appears in awareness.

And it's as if awareness just permeates, it moves.

Exactly, the sensation is like a cloud. It's not really something solid and dense. It's more like a cloud – porous and amorphous. It doesn't have a clearly defined border or an age or gender. No shape or a size or a history. Just raw sensation. Feel the sensation in that way, suspended weightlessly in awareness, permeated by awareness.

Then, if you like, breathe the transparency, the emptiness of awareness, into the sensation. In this way, you permeate the sensation with the emptiness of awareness. If the sensation feels solid and dense, you permeate it. You imagine the sky permeating a cloud, filling it up with its emptiness. You feel

you can breathe the emptiness of awareness into the sensation. In a way, you're turning the sensation into awareness. In the Tantric tradition it's called 'devouring our sensation'.

Well, I didn't choose this path. This path chose me and it was the Tantric path.

Yes, exactly. Everything, ultimately, is already awareness, but if we don't feel that, then these are practices which turn our intellectual understanding into our lived and felt experience so that we actually feel that the body is transparent, luminous, empty, made only of awareness. This is the Tantric approach.

In the Vedantic approach, we turn away from the content of experience – I'm not my thoughts; I'm not my feelings; I'm not my sensations; I am that which is aware of them. Then we turn towards the content of experience, and pervade not just the mind and the body, but our experience of the world. Permeating our experience of the world with a luminosity, the emptiness and lovingness, the presence of awareness.

IS THE WORLD A DREAM?

I have a question about the screen of consciousness and the images to which you refer. When I hug a tree or person, pat a dog or smell a flower, it feels real. I touch and feel them, and feel the oneness of shared consciousness, but I have difficulty seeing that as an image on the screen. On an experiential level, it seems to be quite real, so I'm not sure how I should be going about that.

I'm not suggesting that the world is not real. An illusion is not something that is not real; an illusion is something that *is* real, but is not what it *appears* to be. I'm not suggesting that the world is not real, but I am suggesting it's an illusion – that is, it is not what it appears to be.

What does it appear to be? A multiplicity and diversity of objects made out of stuff existing outside consciousness. What I'm suggesting is that consciousness is its ultimate reality. It's real as consciousness, but it's unreal as material objects.

Material objects are an appearance on the screen of perception. What we see as the world is the way the activity of consciousness appears to our localised points of view, just as the streets of Paris, that you dream of at night, are how the activity of your own mind appears from the perspective of the person in the dream that you seem to be. From the perspective of that person, the streets of Paris seem to be made out of something separate from their self, other than their self, made out of stuff called matter. But when you wake up, you realise your own mind divided itself into a subject and object. From the perspective of the separate subject of experience, its own activity appeared as a world made out of matter, but when you wake up you realise it was all the activity of my own mind.

What I am suggesting is that we are all localisations in consciousness, characters in God's dream, from whose point of view the activity of infinite consciousness appears to us as the physical universe. It's real, just as the streets of Paris that you dream of are real. But what is their reality? Your own mind. The world is real, but what is its reality? Infinite consciousness.

Yes, I think I probably misunderstood the real and unreal.

It's very common. I did for years. I heard, in my classical Advaita Vedanta training, that the world is an illusion, and I misunderstood this. I railed against this understanding for years. I thought, 'No, the world is real. I cannot subscribe to the belief that the world is unreal. It is so obviously real.'

I misunderstood. I thought that something that is an illusion is something that is not real. I didn't realise that all it means is that the world is not what it appears to be. It is real, but it's not what it appears to be. Real as consciousness; unreal as matter.

That helps me. My final thought was who is projecting this dream on the screen?

This is not an old-fashioned screen with a projector at a distance from it. It's a laptop. The screen is both generating the movie, viewing the movie and ,simultaneously, it is the reality of the movie. Consciousness, which is the reality of the universe, is generating its appearance within itself; it is viewing that appearance from a localised perspective; and it is the reality of that appearance. Just as when you fall asleep at night, your own mind generates the dream, views the dream from the localised perspective of the character in the dream that you seem to become, and it is the substance of the dream.

* * *

If the illusion of duality is the result of a mistaken view of reality, why does it persist when it is recognised that consciousness is the ultimate reality of the universe?

The illusion of duality – the subject–object relationship – is the means by which awareness manifests its infinite potential in form and is, as such, the agent of manifestation. Take the analogy of a dream, which, of all analogies, is perhaps the one with the greatest explanatory power, for this reason: the finite mind, being a localisation or contraction of infinite awareness, is a microcosm of it, containing within itself all the qualities and capacities of awareness in a nested spectrum of possibilities. Thus, it is reasonable to expect the mind to behave in similar ways to awareness, albeit on a miniature scale.

In order for a dream to arise, the dreamer's mind performs three acts simultaneously: one, it imagines a dreamed world

within itself; two, it overlooks itself and, as a result, forgets that it is dreaming; and three, it enters its own imagination – the dreamed world – as an apparently separate subject of experience from whose point of view it is able to know or perceive itself as the dreamed world. In other words, the dreamer's mind does not know or perceive the dreamed world directly. It has to do so via the agency of a separate subject of experience – the dreamed character – within the dream itself. However, the dreamed character is not separate from or other than the dreamer's mind. It is a localisation, contraction or limitation of the dreamer's mind.

An infinite number of dreams lie in potential within the dreamer's mind, but in order to manifest one of them, the single, homogeneous field of the dreamer's mind must seem to divide itself into two parts: one, a dreamed world, and two, the dreamed character from whose perspective the dreamed world is known or perceived. From the perspective of the dreamer's mind, this division of itself into two parts never actually happens, but the dreamer's mind has overlooked or fallen asleep to itself and therefore does not know that it is dreaming. As a result, the division of experience into a subject – the dreamed character – and a corresponding multiplicity and diversity of objects and others – the dreamed world – seems, from the perspective of the subject in the dream, to be very real.

It is only when the dreamer wakes up that she realises that the entire dreamed world, which seemed to be something separate from and other than the character in the dream that she took herself to be, was in fact nothing other than a refraction of the single, indivisible and homogeneous reality of her own mind. As such, the dreamed world is not something apart from the dreamer's mind, nor even an object appearing in or to the dreamer's mind. It is simply the *activity* of the

dreamer's mind. In other words, in the dream there are no real objects or selves, each with its own discrete and independent existence. There is just a single, infinite, indivisible reality, simultaneously assuming the form of the subject and object of experience in order to manifest the potential that lies within itself.

Consider the possibility that, in the same way, awareness simultaneously 'dreams' the world within itself, forgets that it is doing so and enters into its own creation in the form or activity of each of our minds, through whose agency it knows or perceives itself as the world. The only difference between the dream of a single mind and awareness's dream is that a single mind localises itself as a *single* subject of experience within its own dream, whereas awareness localises itself as *numerous* subjects of experience – each of our finite minds – from whose point of view it perceives numerous versions or perspectives of itself in the form of everyone's experiences of the world.

Just as there are no real independently existing objects or people in a dream, likewise, in reality, there are no real, independently existing objects or selves. Objects, selves and others are what infinite, indivisible awareness looks like from the perspective of an apparently separate subject of experience, just as the inside of our own mind appears as a dreamed world of objects and others from the perspective of one of the characters in the dream. In other words, consider the possibility that awareness localises itself in the form of, or as the activity of, each of our minds, and through the lens or agency of this localisation its own formless reality appears in form, that is, as the universe. As such, each mind is not an entity in its own right but rather the movement or activity of consciousness, through whose agency consciousness realises a

segment of its infinite, formless potential as the universe. In other words, consciousness *is* the universe!

It is precisely for this reason that the illusion of an outside world made out of something other than consciousness – namely matter – is so powerful. The only way consciousness can manifest its infinite potential in form is to overlook or forget itself, assume the form of the world and simultaneously enter into that world as a separate subject of experience from whose perspective that world is known and as a reflection of whose limitations it appears.

Because the world can only be known or perceived from the perspective of an apparently separate person or subject of experience – for it is not possible to have an object without a subject, any more than it is possible to have only one side of a coin – it will always appear in a way that reflects and therefore reinforces the apparently limited and separate status of the subject. The subject–object relationship is, as such, the means through which manifestation or creation takes place. The illusion of duality is, therefore, not a mistake to be corrected or annihilated. Nor is the illusion itself problematic; it is the *belief* that the illusion is real in and of itself that is problematic because it legitimises and substantiates the separate subject or self around whom all suffering arises. As such, duality – and the suffering that inevitably attends it – is the inevitable consequence of manifestation or, in religious terms, the price God pays for creation.

TIME AND SPACE

I want to look at the topic of time. There is this moment, which is always the eternal now, but images and perceptions seem to change and there is always a sense of duration.

What is it that lasts in your experience? You are absolutely right, there is a continuity to experience. Experiences are not a series of disconnected fragments. It is smooth, continuous, but no thought, feeling, sensation, or perception is continuous. So from what does experience derive its continuity?

Surely by our presence.

Exactly. Consciousness is the only lasting or stable element in experience.

So duration, I don't know how to express it.

Duration or time is what consciousness looks like when it is filtered through the limitations of our mind. Remember all experience is a colouring of consciousness or the activity of

consciousness, just like a movie could be said to be the colouring or the activity of the screen.

The television screen has two dimensions; it is flat, but when it colours itself in the form of the movie, it appears as a three-dimensional landscape.

Consciousness is eternal or ever-present now, but when it colours itself in the form of each of our minds, its eternity appears as time. Just as the two-dimensional screen appears as a three-dimensional landscape, so time is what eternity looks like when filtered through the activity of thought.

While we are at it, space is what infinite or dimensionless consciousness looks like when filtered through perception. In other words, thought and perception are the two activities of the finite mind. Consciousness itself assumes the form of the finite mind, and the finite mind is its activity. Through the activity of thought, consciousness appears as time; through the activity of perception, consciousness appears as space.

Is a functioning of pure consciousness mind?

Yes, mind is the activity. By mind, I mean thought, feeling, sensation and perception – the totality of our experience. That is what I call the finite mind. But there is no such thing as a ‘finite mind’.

It's not an entity.

It's not an entity, it's the activity of consciousness. Just as there is no real character in a movie – the character in the movie is the activity or colouring of the screen – so all there is in our experience is the activity of consciousness. The activity of knowing.

It's very easy to check that in your experience. Are you currently experiencing anything other than the knowing of

your experience? Have you ever experienced or could you ever experience anything other than the knowing of experience? No, all that is ever known is knowing. All experience is the activity of knowing, a movement of consciousness.

I am not talking about some extraordinary, abstract, metaphysical philosophy. What is an extraordinary, abstract, metaphysical philosophy is the belief of something called a world made out of matter outside of consciousness? That is abstract or intellectual.

So with the thought 'I am', time and space seems to come out from consciousness?

Yes. When the activity of the mind ceases, such as in deep sleep, surprise, surprise, there is no experience of time and space. When the activity of the mind begins again, surprise, surprise, we experience time and space. Could it be that the experience of time and space is connected to the movement of our minds?

* * *

When I look at my experience, I see time, space, events and objects; I don't see awareness.

That is like the dreamed character remonstrating with one of her friends in the dream, who suggests to her that all she is seeing is the dreamer's mind! Not only is the dreamer's mind all the dreamed character is really seeing, but the dreamed character herself is simply a temporary and, ultimately, illusory limitation of the dreamer's mind. All there is to the dream is the activity of the dreamer's mind; at no point in the dream do any discrete, independently existing objects or selves ever come into existence. Likewise, not only are you only seeing awareness, but you *are* the awareness that is

seeing! In fact, the reason why we always feel that there is always only one experience taking place, in spite of the fact that it appears as a multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves, is that experience is always a single, intimate, indivisible whole made of pure knowing or awareness itself.

However, you are not seeing awareness in its formless, dimensionless condition, because the activity of mind through which awareness sees or knows the world imposes its own limitations on everything that is experienced, refracting it into an apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves. Therefore, it is not possible for the finite mind to see or know awareness directly, even though everything it sees or knows is made of awareness alone, just as it is not possible for the dreamed character to see or know the dreamer's mind, although everything she sees or knows is only that. In other words, the mind has a sort of blind spot: it cannot perceive reality, although everything that it perceives is only that reality.

But time and space seem so real to me.

Time and space *are* real, but their reality is awareness! Time and space are how awareness *appears* when viewed from the perspective of a finite mind. In other words, although awareness is the real 'container' of all experience, when viewed by a finite mind it will appear in a way that is consistent with the limitations of that mind. That is why as humans we feel that time and space is the medium within which all experience takes place. Experience does take place in time and space, but time and space itself is just how dimensionless awareness looks when viewed through the prism of the mind.

What is it that governs the way in which the world appears?

The structure and conditioning of the mind through which it is perceived. In other words, the subject and object of experience are co-created in a single act, each pole arising simultaneously as a mutual reflection of the other. As such, the localising of awareness in the form of each of our minds brings into focus the previously unfocused, and therefore formless, reality of infinite awareness. As the mind is constructed, so accordingly the world appears. I say 'previously unfocused' as if awareness exists prior to this focusing or localising of itself in the form of each of our minds, but there is no time present 'before' this localisation of awareness in the form of the finite mind, because time only comes into apparent existence with the arising of a finite mind.

The structure of the human mind is common to all minds: we all experience in four dimensions of time and space, irrespective of the way we think, feel, perceive, act and relate. However, our minds are conditioned by local, cultural, temporal attitudes that vary at different times and places, and within any one mind this conditioning can be changed. The appearance of duality is structural; the belief that it is true is conditioned.

It is not *what* we see that matters but the *way* we see. We can be sure that the likes of the Buddha, Ramana Maharshi, Meister Eckhart and Rumi saw much the same world that we do, only the way they saw differed. We do not think of the world because it exists; it seems to exist because we think of it. It is the activity of thought and perception that refracts the infinite and indivisible reality of pure awareness into an apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves. All that is necessary is to understand and feel this infinite and indivisible reality that shines in and as all experience and to lead a life, to the best of our ability, in a way that is consistent with this feeling-understanding.

WHAT ABOUT MATTER?

How does the inside of consciousness's mind appear as a multiplicity and diversity of objects made out of matter?

Because the multiplicity and diversity of objects are seen from the perspective of a separate subject of experience, and everything that is seen or known from that perspective appears in accordance with its limitations.

Just as the dreamed character feels that the knowing with which she knows her experience lives in and shares the limits and destiny of her body, so most people believe and feel that the knowing with which they know their experience resides in the body and shares its limits and destiny.

In other words, most people feel that they are a self, made of mind located inside the body. The consciousness that we essentially are is not a by-product of, nor is it contained within, the body, but it does view experience from the perspective of the body. As such, the outside world is the inevitable corollary of the inside self.

In other words, manifestation must always appear in duality. As such, duality is the mechanism through which consciousness manifests. Just as the dreamer's mind localises itself as the dreamed character localised in the dreamed world from whose perspective the unlocalised aspect of its own mind appears as the world, so consciousness localises itself as the separate subject of experience, as a result of which the unlocalised aspect of itself appears as the world.

Thus, the world is how unlocalised consciousness appears from the perspective of localised consciousness. Mind and matter are two sides of the same reality: the one infinite, indivisible, self-aware mind. For the potential latent in reality to be manifest, reality must divide itself in two – a subject that knows and an object that is known. There is nothing wrong with this mechanism. Without it there would be no creation. Therefore, creation must always involve the veiling of reality. For reality to manifest its infinite potential it must appear to be something *other than itself*. The infinite must appear to be finite. Consciousness must veil itself with its own creativity. This is why the Sanskrit word *maya* is translated as both 'illusion' and 'creativity'.

Consciousness veils itself with its own activity and appears, from the perspective of the apparently separate subject of experience, to become a multiplicity and diversity and objects. In order to manifest its infinite potential consciousness must forget, ignore or overlook itself. It must fall asleep to its own infinite reality and seem to become a separate, independently existing self in its own dreamed world. That is the price consciousness pays for manifestation.

When consciousness falls asleep the mind awakens; when the mind sleeps, consciousness awakens. Having said that,

consciousness never actually divides itself or becomes anything other than itself. There is always only a single, infinite, indivisible whole, made of pure consciousness, with no objects, entities or selves ever to be found.

Does the illusion ever end?

The illusion ends every time the activity of mind comes to an end and for a timeless 'moment' consciousness stands naked. This happens at the end of every perception, the end of every state and the end of every life. In fact, states of mind are simply collections of perceptions, and lives are collections of states. However, we never experience more than one perception at a time, so states and lives are concepts.

Even a perception is a concept. There is perceiving, and all there is to perceiving is knowing or consciousness. Consciousness itself never actually becomes a perception or passes through a state or a life. It just perpetually colours and uncolours itself with its own activity, never actually going anywhere or becoming anything other than itself. It is always in the same placeless place, at the same timeless time.

But your question implies that the illusion is a problem. The illusion is not the problem, it is the belief that the illusion is real in its own right that is the problem. The illusion is real, but its reality is not what it appears to be. The world is real, but its reality is consciousness, not matter.

Is suffering also inevitable?

Suffering is inevitable for as long as we do not see through the illusion of separation. Consciousness collapses into a finite mind for the sake of manifestation. It seems to become a temporary, finite self and, in doing so, loses touch with its innate peace and fullness. Being finite it feels incomplete;

being temporary it fears death. Thus the search for happiness and the fear of death are an inevitable consequence of the collapse of consciousness into the finite mind. These manifest in the life of the apparently separate self as seeking and resisting, the two essential motivations of all apparently separate selves.

Once an apparently separate self has failed sufficiently often to find the peace and happiness for which it longs in objective experience, a new possibility opens up. Sometimes this possibility appears unsolicited, sometimes as a result of a deep investigation into the cause of happiness or the nature of oneself, sometimes at the suggestion of a friend and sometimes during an experience of great loss or despair when the normal strategies of the mind may be temporarily exhausted and a spontaneous surrendering of all the mind's activity takes place, leaving its reality – our inherently peaceful, self-aware being – quietly shining.

But this is usually just a brief glimpse.

It may be a brief glimpse or it may become the new default. In most cases, the old habits of thinking and feeling return and veil the mind's innate peace. But once a mind has been touched by the revelation of its essential reality, it is never the same again. Even those who, usually for want of the proper interpretation, fail to realise what has happened to them and thus turn again towards objective experience seeking fulfilment are often haunted by the memory of this unusual but strangely familiar intervention in their lives, and often live in a state of nostalgia for an experience to which they now feel they have no access. Little do they realise that what they long for is not an experience which happened in the past but one that is present now, only thinly veiled by the drama of experience.

However, there are also accounts of people for whom this first glimpse was so powerful that they became immediately and fully established in the peace of their true nature, never to leave it again. The renowned Indian sage of the twentieth century, Ramana Maharshi, is perhaps the best-known and most complete example of this spontaneous and complete recognition of his true nature, and the peace and fulfilment that accompanies it.

The story relates that, as a sixteen-year-old schoolboy, he was at home alone one evening when he became spontaneously overcome by the fear of death. He literally thought he was dying, so he lay down on his bed and asked himself what was going to happen. He reasoned with himself that everything he knew would be taken away from him: his parents, family, friends, home, village, thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, perceptions, everything. When, in his imagination, he had taken everything he knew away from himself, he simply asked himself what would remain: 'What remains of "I" when everything that can be taken away from me is taken away?' He was spontaneously tracing his way back to his essential, irreducible self, before any experience has been added to it.

In other words, Ramana Maharshi was practising what he would later formalise as the practice of self-enquiry or, as he sometimes referred to it, sinking the mind into the heart of awareness. In his case, so intense was the fear of death and, as an inevitable counterpart to this fear, so powerful and single-minded the enquiry into his true nature, that he recognised the essential, irreducible nature of himself with absolute clarity, and that knowledge never left him.

In fact, so complete was his immersion in the peace of his true nature that it took him several years to be able to func-

tion normally in the world again. When he did start functioning relatively normally, the peace of his true nature continued to shine so brightly in him that people came from all over the world just to sit in his company and avail themselves of that peace which, for the most part, communicated itself to them without the need for verbal discourse.

* * *

There has been a lot of discussion about the finite mind and matter. I'd like to see where my understanding is. So the finite mind is a localisation of infinite awareness, right?

Yes.

And stuff, not matter, but stuff in the world is the activity of consciousness or aware being, right?

Yes.

So the body is also stuff and the activity of consciousness or being?

Yes.

And so there seems to be a one-to-one relationship between a particular finite mind and a particular activity of consciousness.

Yes.

What is the relationship between a particular finite mind and a particular body? How do they talk to each other? How are they connected?

Let me read you something from *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* by William Blake, who was one of the great Tantric masters of the Western tradition:

‘Man has no Body distinct from his Soul. For that called Body is a portion of the Soul discerned by the five senses, the chief inlets of Soul in this age.’

Let me translate that into modern English. ‘Man has no Body distinct from his Soul’ – a person does not have a body that is distinct from their mind. ‘For that called Body is a portion of the Soul discerned by the five senses’ – a person does not have a body that is distinct from their mind; what we call the body is just the portion of the mind that is discernible to the five senses. That's the consciousness-only model.

Let's put that in the context of our discussion. The reality of the universe is infinite consciousness. The universe as we know it is what the activity of infinite consciousness looks like from our localised perspectives. Infinite consciousness localises itself as the finite mind, and it views the unlocalised portion of itself as the universe. Now what does the localised portion of itself look like? The body.

That's why when you close your eyes, you don't experience yourself as a body, you experience yourself as a bundle of thinking, sensing, feeling and perceiving, but *we* don't experience you as a bundle of thinking, sensing, feeling and perceiving; we experience you as a body. You are what the localised activity of consciousness looks like from the point of view of another localisation. A person does not have a body distinct from their mind; what we call the body is just that portion of the mind that is discernible to the five senses.

There is no relationship between the body and the mind because there can only be a relationship between two things. Internally we experience mind, and from the outside that experience of mind appears to another mind as a body. The body is the extrinsic appearance of the finite mind. There's

not a relationship between the two things because they are the *same* thing. There is no distinction between body and mind. There is no distinction between matter and mind. They are two phases of the same thing: one is the extrinsic appearance; one is the intrinsic appearance.

EVOLUTION AND THE NON-DUAL PERSPECTIVE

I *'m trying to understand how evolution fits into all of this.*

Consciousness never evolves. The consciousness that is aware of your current experience is in exactly the same condition as the consciousness that was aware of your experience when you were a five-year-old boy. It's identical. If you were to take a selfie of your self – that which knows your experience now – and you were to have taken a selfie of consciousness when you were five years old – that which knew your experience then – and you compared these two images, they'd be identical.

Consciousness doesn't evolve, but the mind does. I would suggest that the only evolution of the mind that is really worthy of the name would be a mind that evolved more and more to express the principles of truth that we discussed earlier, namely that peace and happiness are the nature of our being and we share our being with everyone and everything. A mind that evolves in that direction is real evolution.

Take it back five billion years, the Big Bang and then earth and all life – did that, is that really happening?

You mean, was there a universe five billion years ago?

Yes. How does that relate to just consciousness?

At least consider the possibility that what we call the universe is the activity of consciousness, the activity of being, and there is no actual physical universe as appears to our senses. What we call the physical universe is how the activity of consciousness appears from our localised perspectives. Before there were any localised perspectives, that is before life on earth, the reality of the universe – infinite consciousness – still existed. However, it didn't appear as a universe because there was no finite mind for it to appear to, but the reality of the universe prior to its appearance, was still present.

Stuff was still happening.

Stuff was still happening; consciousness was still vibrating within itself. However, we've got a foot in both camps here, because prior to the activity, prior to the localisation of a finite mind, not only was there no appearance of the world because there was no perception, there was also no thinking, so there was no time.

To say the Big Bang and the universe existed five billion years ago before there were any finite minds to perceive it means we've got a foot in both camps. We're presuming that the universe didn't appear as a universe because there was no mind to perceive it, but we're retaining the thinking aspect of the mind and presuming that time still existed. No, there was no perception, therefore the world didn't appear; there was no thinking, therefore there was no time.

But there are physical correlates of time, like geology, or the vibration of atoms or the length of distance of light.

Time is an interpretation of our experience. Have you ever experienced time? Have you ever experienced the past?

No.

Has anyone ever experienced the past?

No, but...

Has anyone ever experienced the future, or could anyone experience the past or the future?

No. I've not experienced it. It's just thoughts in the present of the past, but there's evidence.

The evidence is not evidence. What we consider to be evidence is an interpretation of the apparent evidence. You could argue that there is evidence for a world outside consciousness. That's what most people think – they say, 'Look, there is a world out there', but that's not evidence. It's an interpretation of the evidence in line with the prevailing materialistic paradigm. If we presume that the prevailing materialistic paradigm is absolutely true, then the appearance of the physical world will seem to be evidence for a world outside consciousness. The evidence is just a consequence of the assumption. If we don't make an assumption that there is a world outside consciousness, we can interpret the evidence in a different way.

For instance, we could interpret the evidence of an outside world in a way that is consistent with the consciousness-only model. We could say that what appears as the world is the way the activity of consciousness appears from our localised perspectives. What legitimacy is there to that interpretation? One, it is consistent with the fact that we never experience

anything outside consciousness, so it's consistent with experience. And two, it's a process that we experience every night when we have a dream. At night, the dreamed world appears to the character that we seem to be in the dream to be outside of itself, separate from itself and independent of its own mind. When we wake up in the morning, we realise the whole dreamed world was the activity of our mind. It only appeared as an outside world from the localised perspective of the person we seemed to be in our dream.

We have a beautiful model of reality every night; we experience it. All we need to do is extrapolate that model one level up. Could it be that this world is the activity of a universal consciousness and that we are the localised perspectives of that consciousness, in that consciousness, from whose perspective it sees its own activity as the visible world. That's not only consistent with the model that we have every night in a dream, it's consistent with our experience, namely that there's nothing outside consciousness. It's consistent with our intuition that what we essentially are on the inside is one with the universe.

The prevailing materialist paradigm makes an assumption that there is something outside consciousness. Nobody has ever experienced that thing or could ever experience it because all experience is in consciousness. But the prevailing materialist assumption is predicated and founded on a single assumption: there is something outside consciousness, let's call it 'matter', which precedes consciousness and gives rise to consciousness. This completely contradicts our experience. What it says is that the only thing which is never experienced and is outside consciousness – matter – gives rise to the only thing that is ever experienced – consciousness.

I don't have a problem with that. I'm trying to understand dinosaur bones.

Dinosaur bones are what a particular activity, a little fragment of an activity of consciousness, looks like from our point of view. Perception fragments the unity of consciousness, the unity of being, and makes it appear as ten thousand things. We could say perception fragments the dimensionless presence of consciousness and makes it appear as space, and thinking fragments the dimensionless presence of consciousness and makes it appear as time. In other words, space and time are not fundamental to reality. Space is how reality appears when it is filtered through perception, time is how reality appears when it is filtered through thinking. Space and time have more to do with the perceiving apparatus than with reality itself.

So there were dinosaurs?

There is no time present in which anything previously existed.

So there are dinosaurs?

No, there are no dinosaurs, there are no people. There are no dogs and cats. There are no chairs or tables. There are no lights or windows. There are no trees. There's no sky. There's no earth. No.

That's just perception.

There's just God's infinite, indivisible, intimate, impersonal being, vibrating within itself, appearing as all of those things from each of our localised perspectives, but none of those things ever actually come into existence. They never stand out from being with their own independent reality. There is just God's being vibrating within itself, appearing as all those

things without ever ceasing to actually be itself or without ever becoming anything other than itself.

* * *

I think I know the answer to this, but I would like to ask about evolution anyway. If my sense of separate self dissolves, I recognise my own being and, as a result, I become more loving. Is that evolution?

It's an evolution at the level of the mind, yes. But let me tweak your formulation: 'If my separate self dissolves and I recognise my true nature, will I become more loving?' It's the other way around. We don't have to dissolve the separate self in order to recognise our true nature. Here, we just recognise our true nature, and as an inevitable consequence of that recognition, the sense of separation begins to dissolve.

Don't work on the separate self, just go directly for your true nature, and to the extent that we have recognised and are established in that recognition, then the mind, the way we think and feel, and in time, our activities and relationships will evolve in a way that is consistent with this recognition. Our true nature doesn't evolve, but our mind, behaviour, relationships evolve in a way that is consistent with the recognition of our true nature.

Everything ultimately comes back to what's already there, which is unchanging. So if I am that, and this evolution of the mind happens, does it have any effect on that which doesn't change?

No, that which doesn't change has an effect on that which changes, but that which changes has no effect on that which is changeless.

So evolution is only for that which is separate.

Evolution is only for the mind, yes.

There's no evolution.

No evolution of consciousness.

What was, what is, has always been.

Reality is changeless. Anything that changes cannot be ultimately real in its own right because if it were to change and disappear, its reality would disappear. How could something that is real disappear? Into what would it disappear? It couldn't disappear into something that is unreal because something that is unreal cannot exist. How can something that is real disappear? Where would it go? What would it go into? It would have to go into something that is real, and therefore that would be reality. Reality cannot disappear. If we concede the existence of time, reality, as it is now, is the same as it was a billion years ago.

In terms of evolution, in the wrong direction.

As I suggested, there are two possible directions for humanity. It's another way of having the same conversation. We can either evolve in a way that is consistent with the understanding that one, peace and happiness are the nature of our being and two, we share our being with everyone and everything. Humanity can either evolve in the direction of that understanding or it can evolve in the direction which violates that understanding. Those are really the only two options for humanity, for evolution.

It's pure simplicity, amidst all the complexity...

It is pure simplicity. The one appearing as the many. All the complexity is at the level of the many. There cannot be complexity for the one. There is utter simplicity. This is not just theoretical. In the knowing of our own being, is there

any complexity in the feeling of being? There's complexity in our thoughts, feelings, activities, relationships, but the experience of simply being, is there any complexity there?

No. It's beautiful, It's like a new-born baby.

Perfect, it's like a new-born baby, pristine, fresh, uncontaminated, immaculate, whole, perfect, without lack, pure goodness, beauty, love. It is so simple.

If we were to take three thousand years of religious and spiritual instruction and expression, and we were to run it through an algorithm and distil it into one sentence, it would read something like, 'Peace and happiness are the nature of our being and we share our being with everyone and everything'. That's it. If you understand and feel that, and you lead a life to the best of your ability in a way that is consistent with that felt understanding, that's it.

All the Sutras, Upanishads, Gospels – that's all they're saying in innumerable different ways. Why? Because we, as individuals, have numerous difficulties, objections and questions, so in order to attend to those difficulties, objections and questions, the understanding has had to diversify to accommodate our differences. It's not because the truth is complex. It's because our minds are complex that the spiritual teachings have become complex. The truth they are all trying to express is so simple. How could the one not be simple? How could there be any complexity in the one, in reality?

So all projection is absorbed back into the one?

Yes, everything emerges from the one and sooner or later is destined to return there. Everything, as soon as it has emerged from the one, is on a pathway back to the one. Everyone and everything has to go back to that from which it emerges. There is nowhere else for it to go. Everything and

everyone is tending towards that. Every person's desire for happiness, everyone's desire for intimate relationship, every scientist's desire for understanding, every artist's desire for beauty, is only the desire to return to the one. Or the one's desire to bring its creation back into itself.

And that which emerges, it appears to emerge from me?

From you, if by you, you mean the one, not from you the individual.

A thought appears to come from this in here, but does a thought come from the body-mind or does a thought come from...?

A thought doesn't come from the mind, the mind *is* thought and perception. That's all there is to the mind. The mind isn't an entity that generates the thoughts and perceptions. The mind is just a word that describes thoughts and perceptions. There's no container of those thoughts and perceptions, there's just the thoughts and perceptions.

They're not in my head.

No.

Where's my mind?

You say, 'Where is my mind?', implying that there is some location in which your mind exists. No, all the locations exist in your mind, your mind doesn't exist in a location. When consciousness puts on the virtual reality headset – the glasses of thinking and perceiving – it suddenly finds itself located in the world because it is thought and perception that brings about that sense of being located. Thought and perception isn't located somewhere; somewhere is generated as a result of thought and perception.

THE WAY OF SURRENDER

Sometimes my emotional suffering is so intense that I'm too afraid of it to bring it close.

Be like a new-born infant. You are a field of pure knowing, pure sensitivity. You are experiencing but you do not know what you are experiencing, nor do you know that you are a self who experiences. There is just a raw, unnameable sensation completely filling the field of experience. You have no idea that the experience is a contraction in your stomach or a feeling of shame, sorrow, fear, anxiety, and so on. In fact, you know nothing of a body or even a sensation, let alone a self. There is just a vibration appearing in, known by and made of the openness of yourself.

Bring your experience so close that you can no longer give it a name, and then ask yourself the question, 'Where is my suffering now?' Bring the experience close – closer than closer – until you can no longer find yourself apart from it, nor can you find any object or feeling that you can name or to which you can ascribe either positive or negative qualities. Ask yourself the question, 'Without reference to thought or memory,

what do I know about my current experience?’ This will take you deeply into the experience itself – not *ideas* about the experience – and you will find everything you have ever truly longed for there.

All our suffering exists in the apparent distance between the subject and object of experience. In the absence of that distance, suffering cannot stand. And what is the common name for the absence of suffering?

Happiness!

Yes. From the perspective of the apparently separate self, this absence of suffering is known as happiness. As such, the separate self feels that happiness is the opposite of suffering and alternates with it. That is just the erroneous view of the separate self. Happiness is not the opposite of suffering; it is the very reality of suffering, indeed, the reality of all experience. Suffering is not the opposite of happiness; it is the veiling of happiness. It is for this reason that misery is known as unhappiness, but happiness is not known as ‘unmisery’.

Is it enough just to face my feelings?

Yes, but not as a separate self who stands apart from the feeling. The suggestion to fully face the feeling is made as a concession to the apparently separate self who is accustomed to turning away from such feelings. It would be more accurate to suggest fully feeling the emotion without separating yourself out from it, either as a separate knower of the emotion or even as the space of awareness within which the emotion appears.

It is only from the perspective of a separate knower of experience that any experience can be given a name and subsequently deemed pleasant and desirable, or unpleasant and undesirable. In the absence of the sense of being a separate

knower, experience is always a single, indivisible whole in which there are no separate objects or selves and, in particular, no individual self present to either reject or grasp the experience. In other words, it is by opening oneself so completely to the experience that we can no longer separate oneself from it as a separate knower and, therefore, a separate sufferer, that we find the peace which we previously sought by avoiding the experience.

So it's a complete surrendering of my feelings?

It is not a surrendering of your feelings. That would leave you, the feeler or the surrenderer, intact. It is a surrendering of *yourself*. This approach could be called the Way of Surrender, as opposed to the Vedantic approach, which could be called the Way of Investigation. In the Way of Surrender, it is not the person that surrenders his or her experience. That would simply be another way for the separate self or person to subtly perpetuate its illusory existence, albeit by seemingly spiritual means. It is not the person that surrenders; it is the person that is surrendered.

Then who does the surrendering?

The true and only self of pure awareness is already perfectly surrendered to all experience, that is, there is not the least impulse in pure awareness to resist experience. Even this is not quite true, because it suggests that experience is one thing and awareness another. There is nothing in experience other than the knowing of it – the awareness of it – and therefore nothing in experience that could either be resisted by awareness or not. For awareness, everything is just itself, and there is nothing in itself other than itself which could either resist or be resisted. So even the idea of surrender is already a compassionate concession to the separate self. However, given that all spiritual teachings make a concession

to the apparently separate self to a greater or lesser degree, let us consent to make this concession.

Surrender could be said to be the natural condition of awareness. Surrender – the utter intimacy with all experience without resistance – is what awareness is, not what a person does. On the other hand, the person – the conceptual self that seems to be a separate subject of experience and from whose perspective experience is deemed unpleasant and therefore undesirable – is not an entity that resists; it is the very activity of resisting. Surrender is what we are, not what we do; resistance is what we do, not what we are.

So the person cannot practise surrender?

From the perspective of the person, the revelation of the inherently surrendered nature of awareness, and the peace that accompanies this recognition, is preceded by the cessation or relaxation of the activity of resistance. This cessation or relaxation of the activity of resistance is, from the perspective of the person, felt as the practice of surrender. If we believe and feel that we are a person or separate self – and if we are suffering, whether we realise it or not, we are assuming that we are a person or separate self – we should practise this surrendering. However, the person does nothing. In fact, there is no separate person there in the first place either to do something or not to do something. This is why the teaching ‘You are not the doer’ is inadequate. It leaves the ‘you’ intact, albeit divested of the ability to do.

There is just the inherently peaceful, utterly surrendered presence of awareness, contracting into the finite mind for the sake of manifestation, and thus veiling itself with its own activity. The unveiling of itself is known, from the perspective of the finite mind, separate self or ego, as the path of surrender.

All my life I have done everything I possibly could to avoid my suffering in whatever form it appeared, and you are suggesting the opposite.

Well, you wouldn't be at this meeting if your lifelong habit of avoiding your suffering through the acquisition of objects, substances, activities, states of mind and relationships had succeeded in reducing it. In fact, you are here precisely because it hasn't worked. You have come here as a last resort.

Does it need to be a last resort?

In theory, no, but in practice, for many people it is. In other words, one failed relationship, or one lost object upon which we previously relied for happiness, should be sufficient to indicate that the peace and happiness for which we long cannot be delivered by, and is not dependent upon, the objective content of experience. But in practice most of us need to experience numerous such failures or losses before this understanding begins to dawn on us and, as a result, we are open to a new possibility.

* * *

I have a fear of surrendering fully to the process of letting the separate self dissolve, a fear of losing my mind. Who is doing this? There's nobody to surrender! I don't have to do anything, do I?

In this process there is a complete reorchestration of the body and the mind, so it's natural and to be expected that as this surrender takes place at a feeling level, you might wake up in the middle of the night with a torrent of questions. The reorchestrating of the mind, of our beliefs, takes place in parallel with the reorchestration of the body and our feelings. It takes place in layers, so as the realigning of

the body takes place, new and subtler layers of belief will be exposed.

So now a whole range of questions will come up in your mind. They will be answered in time, but then the next, slightly subtler layer of questions, which at the moment are not in view yet, will be exposed and come to the surface. As in the analogy of the well, the feelings at the very bottom of the well take time to come to the surface. You're not going to lose your mind, but the structure of your mind is going to be reorchestrated. Almost every belief you have ever had is going to be challenged. From a conventional point of view that can be frightening because many people invest their identity in the structure of their mind and beliefs.

I feel myself reaching for the rail of relationship, people who can help me.

Let's recall what the Buddha said: there are three vehicles of the teaching, the teacher, the teaching and the community of friends that gather round the teaching, and that is a very important vehicle. We feel this community of shared being, how supportive it is. That in itself is a communication of the teaching. It is not just something that happens in this room for two hours, twice a day. It continues when we're having breakfast together, going for walks, meeting for coffee. In Sanskrit it's called satsang, from sat meaning 'being' and sangha meaning 'community'. It's the community of being, this sharing of being that takes place, that is an instrument of the teaching. When you are just with friends, the teaching is working.

There is a woman who comes to my meetings, and we have this ritual, the same every time for years. She comes up to me in floods of tears and says, 'Rupert, I don't understand a word you say, but I absolutely love being here'. I've watched over

the years this shadow lift from her face. I honestly think she doesn't understand anything about the non-dual teaching at a conceptual level, but the teaching is being administered to her, not just by me, but by the community of friends, this shared love of truth.

* * *

Can you talk about the Direct Path? The idea that I, as a separate self, am an illusion is extremely devastating. It shakes everything that I know.

To suggest that the separate self or ego is an illusion is not the same as saying that it doesn't exist. That's very important. Something that doesn't exist, simply doesn't exist in any form. Remember, an illusion is something that does exist, but is not what it appears to be. I suggest that the separate self is not non-existent – in other words, there is a reality to the separate self – but it is not what it appears to be. It's not really temporary and finite.

The separate self is an apparent limitation of the true and only self, which is infinite consciousness. If I were to say that the separate self is non-existent, that would be devastating. You are right, but I am not saying that. I'm saying that the apparent separate self is really the infinite self. That is the opposite of devastating. It is great news.

I don't disagree. Thanks for the clarification. It's just that from a conventional way of thinking, it is radical.

That's true. It is a radical approach given that almost all people believe and feel that they are temporary finite separate selves.

I don't know anyone in my life that I can talk to about these things. I'm involved in a world where everyone thinks the old way.

That's true, but strangely almost everything they do – though they almost certainly don't realise it – is for the sole purpose of divesting themselves of an apparent limitation and experiencing themselves as they truly are. That's what most people are doing.

Is there anything from your experience on your journey you can share for advice?

Everything I share comes from my own experience. It's difficult to single out any one thing. I'm sharing with you the fruits of forty-five years of exploration of these matters. I'm happy to answer you, but you have to ask me something more specific.

Okay, how important is having a teacher?

I think it's helpful to have a friend who you can discuss these matters with when you are unsure about something – exactly as we are doing now. You were not sure about something, and I intuited that you equated the illusory separate self with the non-existent separate self, and, as a result, you felt that it was a rather devastating teaching. Hopefully that clarification was helpful. If it was, it could save you years of misunderstanding.

A lot of people struggle with the idea of the separate self being non-existent because they've been told 'there is nobody here, there's nothing to do, there isn't a self'. They intuit that there is something true in what they are hearing, but it conflicts with their experience. I've met people who have grappled with this for years and have become nihilistic and depressed as a result.

So that's an example. A conversation can save you years of misunderstanding, but don't build a big story around a teacher. Consider the teacher a friend. Someone who has and is exploring these matters – just someone to talk to now and again or spend time with on one of their retreats in order to consider the pathways they are sharing. It's helpful.

* * *

Ask yourself the questions: What is my experience made of? What is the stuff out of which my thoughts, images, feelings, sensations and perceptions are made? If I were to touch that stuff, what would I find? When a thought appears, does it originate in a space outside awareness? Is it placed into awareness, and then when a thought disappears, is it removed from awareness? Does it disappear into a space outside awareness? Do the sounds I hear arise within awareness, or do they originate outside awareness and are they then placed into awareness? If all experience arises within, exists in and dissolves back into awareness when it vanishes, what could experience be made of? What is there in awareness other than awareness out of which any experience could be made?

If we stay strictly with the evidence of experience, we have to conclude that everything we know or experience is known by consciousness, appears in consciousness and is a play of consciousness. Just as the dream that we have at night appears in, is known by and is a play of our mind, likewise, anything and everything that we experience appears in, is known by and is a play of consciousness. All there is to a thought is thinking, and all there is to thinking is the knowing of it. All there is to a sensation is sensing, and all there is to sensing is the knowing of it.

In the first step, we recognised that all experience appears *to* consciousness, and in the second step that all experience appears *in* consciousness. In the third step we recognised that all experience is a play *of* consciousness. All that is necessary is to understand this and to lead a life that is consistent with that understanding.

THE EVER-PRESENCE OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Imagine consciousness as a realm of infinite potential. Being infinite, it has no form, and having no form it is unmanifest. In order to manifest a part of its infinite potential in form, infinite consciousness needs a mechanism whereby it can limit itself. Mind is the activity through which and as which consciousness limits itself, thereby manifesting part of its infinite potential. As such, mind is manifest consciousness; consciousness is unmanifest mind.

Unlike a dream that appears in each of our minds at night, in which our mind localises itself as a single subject of experience within the dreamed world, from whose perspective the dreamed world is known, consciousness can localise itself simultaneously as numerous separate subjects of experience within its own dream. Each of us is a localisation of consciousness, numerous separate subjects of experience in consciousness's imagination, through whose agency consciousness sees the unified field of its own mind simultaneously from numerous different vantage points as an apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects.

This is why we all see the same world. It *is* the same world! But it is not a world made of matter. It is a world made of the one infinite, indivisible mind – consciousness itself – albeit refracted into a multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves through the prism of the mind.

* * *

I would like to ask about continuity. In my experience I see evidence all around me that an unfathomably large universe has existed for billions of years, and I find myself a fleeting, infinitesimally small fragment that exists for barely the blink of an eye and is of no consequence to the universe. Within myself I find a flickering, vulnerable, insubstantial consciousness that can be extinguished by a random, insignificant event.

That is not your experience. It is an interpretation of your experience.

Well, it is an interpretation I share with the vast majority of humanity.

Truth is not a democracy.

Why should I believe what you say?

I strongly recommend you *don't* believe what I say, but by the same token I suggest you also question what your culture has told you. After all, look around at the extent of the unhappiness felt by individuals, the conflicts that exist between communities and nations, the cruelty humans inflict on animals and the degradation of the planet. Are these the outcome of a society grounded in love and intelligence?

Obviously not.

Then why set so much store by the fundamental principles upon which our world culture is based? We have been wrong before. We used to believe that the earth was flat and that the sun travelled round the earth. Could we be wrong again? I recommend that you investigate your experience and only draw conclusions, if you must draw conclusions, that are consistent with experience. In other words, be an honest scientist: subject your theories to the scrutiny of experience.

I experience a world outside of myself and beyond my control.

The vast majority of your bodily functions are beyond your control, but you do not consider that sufficient evidence to believe that they are separate from you.

No, but they take place inside me whilst the world is outside me.

All you know of the world are fleeting perceptions that appear in your mind. Are you sure that your mind does not superimpose its own limitations on everything that it knows and perceives? Everything appears in accordance with the limitations of the medium through which it is perceived. How do you know that what you perceive as the world is not a reification of the limits of your own mind?

I don't.

Consider the possibility that it's your mind that fragments the indivisible unity of existence, thereby rendering it an apparent multiplicity and diversity of objects and selves.

But the world is continuous whilst I last but a moment of geological time.

There is undoubtedly a continuity to your experience, but are you sure that it comes from the world? What is the continuous element in all experience? Thinking, sensing, perceiving? No, these are temporary and intermittent. The only

element of experience that remains consistently present throughout all experience is the knowing of it, the consciousness of it. In other words, if you look honestly and carefully at your experience you will see that it borrows its apparent continuity from the ever-presence of consciousness. The experience of continuity is consciousness's knowledge of its own ever-presence.

Are you suggesting that the world only exists when I am perceiving it?

I'm afraid that what I am suggesting is worse than that! Not only am I suggesting that the world doesn't exist when we are *not* perceiving it; I am suggesting that the world doesn't exist in the way it is normally conceived, even when we *are* apparently perceiving it.

But you cannot just dismiss the world as an illusion!

Implying that the world is some kind of illusion is not to dismiss it. It is the prevailing paradigm of scientific materialism that has dismissed the reality of the world and, as a result, paved the way for its degradation and exploitation.

In what sense can the world be considered an illusion?

An illusion is not something that does not exist; it is something that exists but is not what it appears to be. As such, all illusions have a reality to them. Moreover, the reality of an illusion always has a greater degree of reality to it than the illusory form in which it appears. Thus, the screen has a greater degree of reality to it than a landscape in a movie. The dreamer's mind has a greater degree of reality to it than the Caribbean beach in its dream.

In fact, all there is to an illusion is its reality. As such, one need not turn away from the movie to see the screen, nor

from the Caribbean beach to know the dreamer's mind. The movie is shining with the screen, just as the Caribbean beach is shining with the reality of the dreamer's mind. Likewise, it is not necessary to reject or turn away from the world in order to know its reality. On the contrary, it is by going deeply into the world that we access its reality. That is the way of the artist or the scientist.

Therefore, to suggest that the world, as it is normally conceived, is an illusion, is not to deny or downgrade it but rather to resurrect and restore it. Like Paolo Pasolini, who said of his filmmaking, 'I want to restore to reality its original sacred significance', I wish to liberate the world from the tyranny of beliefs in which it has been imprisoned – and which has given rise to its exploitation and degradation – and to upgrade it to its rightful status.

And what is its rightful status?

Words can only speak of the appearance of things, not the reality of things. If it were possible to speak of the rightful status of the world there would be no need for art or poetry. William Blake was once trying to explain this non-dual perspective to one of his materialist friends. His friend asked him, 'Do you mean to say that when you see the sun rise you do not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?' To which Blake replied, 'Oh no, no, I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy is the Lord God Almighty".'

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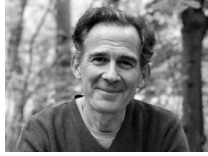
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From an early age Rupert Spira was deeply interested in the nature of reality, beginning to meditate at the age of seventeen and studying the teachings of the classical Advaita Vedanta tradition over the next twenty years. In 1997 he met his teacher, Francis Lucille, who introduced him to the Direct Path teachings of Atmananda Krishna Menon and to Jean Klein and the Tantric tradition of Kashmir Shaivism. More importantly, Francis directly indicated to him the essential nature of his being or self and its inherent peace and joy. Rupert lives in the UK and holds regular meetings and retreats online, and in Europe and the US.

For books, downloadable content and information about attending events, please visit:
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