

## ON SELF-INQUIRY

The method, process, and purpose

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*Our experience of life is based on what we pay attention to . . .  
what we pay attention to depends on our prior development and resulting belief systems.*

Self-inquiry will not make of you anything that you are not already; but it will, over time, destroy beliefs. Beliefs are the root of all suffering. Self-inquiry requires engaging inner struggle with ways we believe the world to be. In this way we overcome our ignorance and resistance and thereby come to self-knowledge. The purpose is to see into the nature of who you truly are.

***With reflection and self-inquiry, we gain conscious knowledge of our unconscious to live a more authentic and integrated life.***

Self-inquiry is the ability to inquire into our own thought processes and feelings and how we act on them (and then react to them). Through the process of self-inquiry, we become aware of the many things we do automatically. Continuous inquiry into ourselves leads to *creative intelligence* (1953, p. 74). With self-inquiry we can gain conscious control over what has been automatic and unquestioned (our unconscious).

The practice of self-inquiry leads to becoming conscious of formerly unconscious processes in ourselves. This is how perspective shift can begin to occur. It is an invaluable tool for gaining self-knowledge and insight into life patterns, feelings, unquestioned assumptions, or underlying motivations for thoughts or actions. It requires time for quiet reflection yet it can take place in a moment. In time you will learn that self-inquiry requires no special setting. However, in the beginning it is helpful to create a quiet context to support undisturbed inner reflection. Through the

method and practice of reflection and self-inquiry, inner wisdom can become a reality. Inquiring into the nature of one's *self* and coming to realize one's true nature leads to release and transformation.

### *The method*

The process of self-inquiry is so simple that it can be explained in a few words. To practice it you simply look directly into yourself in this present moment. Look into:

- what you sense, what you think, and what you feel
- the nature of the mind itself—thought, concepts, beliefs
- look into your emotions—the pain, desires, and what you wish could/should be
- the plain and undeniable *nowness* of *you* in this moment

Then look beyond the thoughts, sensations, and feelings into the “who” or the “I” that is looking. What remains?

The mind is used to organize our reality. It is continually occupied with the ten-thousand things, categorizing, and logisticizing. When the mind becomes quiet, there is a quality that is felt that is free of memories and associative thought. It is silence. During this silence, meaning in life often “emerges” that yields a larger perspective than one solely based on behavior, conditioning, or on the construction of social relationships. This is important, because if we carry the past into the

present through thought, then thought is limited as many spiritual traditions have pointed out. Transformation must involve a substantial revision of assumptions and habits of mind and their resulting points of view. Engaging this process builds trust in yourself and trust in the universe which provides a sense of peacefulness in your existence.

### *The human system*

Thoughts consist of two components:

1. Thoughts based on the past (that have become habits of mind)
2. Thoughts generated from the context in which one is currently involved.

Habits of mind often go unquestioned. When a thought goes unquestioned, the focus tends to be outward instead of inward on our own thinking processes. In this way, we tend to neglect the *self* that is apart from external concerns. It's really a problem of misidentification. It's a problem of looking in the wrong place. False identification is exposed when life as it has been known is revealed not to be life as it *is*. The pathology of our society is to idealize and strengthen the past while weakening effective self-inquiry (Mezirow, 1991).

Transformation must involve a substantial revision of assumptions and habits of mind with their resulting points of view, thereby reordering assumptions.

The application of reflection and self-inquiry is central to the transformation of old habits of thought. With self-inquiry we become aware of our assumptions, automatic responses, myths, assumed values and beliefs, explanations, and justifications that run our life as unquestioned norms. Many of these unquestioned norms are passed down from generation to generation and frame our knowledge base of what we think makes life *easy*. In fact,

unquestioned assumptions take away energy in the long term. Substantial change involves reassessment toward new meaning that is more reasonable (open, inclusive, and integrative). Self inquiry is:

- honest, quiet, critical reflection on our own thoughts, actions, feelings, and motivations
- a form of experiential knowledge-of-the-self that transcends beliefs and offers moments in which insight can emerge
- a process that leads to increased awareness and self-knowledge whereby a core-self is discovered

True self-knowledge *cannot* be given to you by anyone else. It must come from your own reflection and self-inquiry that examines taken-for-granted "truth" which stems from the past. True self-knowledge means a turning of the personality, a *making alive* in the fullest sense of these words. It allows our reality to be seen and understood. A being who has consciousness of herself finds her true self. It is not a matter of constructing herself (it is not a social construction). The true self emerges naturally when assumptions are questioned and eliminated. With self-inquiry we become transparent to ourselves then there comes freedom to make new choices.

### *Presence*

What separates humans from other life forms is the ability to know ourselves for who we truly are—beyond the occupations of the mind. *Perception* of what we are thinking, feeling, or sensing is not the true *self*—it is simply perception. What we perceive—the content of consciousness—is not who we are. The content of consciousness is simply an indicator of our current identification(s). Who perceives . . . is the question. If I am not what I perceive, then *who am I?*

Humans are not the contents of their consciousness. We perceive the manifestations of consciousness but are not those manifestations in that we can change. Krishnamurti (1999) discussed *a light in oneself* as *awareness* without content. He contended that awareness is not thought. He said, “Thought is limited and whatever it does will always be limited because in its very nature it is conditioned. When thought discovers for itself its limitation ... then that very observation brings thought to an end, to discover something new. Then there is space, and silence (pp. 108-109).” There is only perception—pure awareness.

Awareness alone remains. *I am that I am* – these are the words of the ancients. Once again, seer and seen are one. Be in the presence of this moment—as it is. The courage of acceptance without judgment is key (Gebser, 1984). With acceptance, separation dissolves and we know ourselves for who we truly are—as inseparable awareness.

### *Vigilance*

There is no end state. Vigilance is required especially because arrogance has a tendency to appear and reappear when we believe ourselves to

have “arrived” or to be something special (Gangaji, 2005). The work of this moment is to inquire into who we are—moment, to moment, to moment (Packer, 1990). Non tense attention is the way.

The implication is that self-mastery involves self-knowledge of who we are at each stage of development. Each stage builds upon the accomplishments of the one before it until each individual has self-knowledge of self as an integrated whole (Wilber, 2000). Each moment is a fresh moment to inquire openly, freely, easily, and without resistance. There is nothing to claim and no *I* to claim it. There is simply *being* in this moment of open awareness.

**Everyone looks through it, but no one can see it.  
It influences all perception, yet cannot be  
perceived.**

Self-inquiry is a way to avoid the unnecessary suffering that arises when we do not actualize our true nature and use all our capacities in life. It helps us to develop a sense of “self” that is free from the conditionings of the biographical past, with a good sense of discrimination and judgment, which springs from a relationship with purpose, meaning, and intrinsic values.

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