

“I” AND NO “I” – UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY AND UNITY

“I”, “I am”, “I am That”. So the progression of the understanding of self proceeds until “I am That I am” is understood, known and experienced. The difficulty with “I” and understanding its place and relevance to the experience of absolute unity is that theoretically “I” cannot exist – and yet we all experience it. So we are left with a position of “I and no I” and that is what we will examine in this article.

“Who am I?” is one of the simplest meditative questions posed. Whoever first thought of asking it was a genius. Just those three simple words have the capacity to pierce through every level of mental fabrication we have ever created. All understanding based on false premise is swept away. Those three words are the key to enlightenment, to self-realisation, to being totally whole, to total liberation. Ignorance is replaced by light and all emotional clutter is dissolved. Three simple words – or rather the answer to them – can free us from all suffering and from all error. But we have to experience the answer and live it; an intellectual understanding is not enough. Nevertheless, some intellectual thought is necessary to break down some of the

belief patterns that prevent us from experiencing who we really are.

Those belief patterns exist at different levels in our psyche. For example, some people – perhaps most – place great store by their name. To some it is the sweetest sound; others dislike their name and change it to something else. Some people are offended if their name is mispronounced or if someone makes fun of it. But who were we before we were given that name (or before we gave it to ourselves)? The “I” – our sense of individuality and self-identity – was already present. When we give that some thought, it makes it quite bizarre that so many people want to be remembered after they have left the face of the Earth *by their name!* Yet a few moments reflection makes it perfectly obvious that we are not our name.

Another belief pattern is identifying ourselves with our body. This is absolutely insane but most of us do it and of course we apply it equally to other people. “How well you look. How I’ve aged.” We should be grateful, perhaps, to those who submit themselves to all manner of unnecessary cosmetic surgery for at least underlining for us the ludicrousness of this belief. Yet the body is nothing more than a flowing river of cells. It is in a state of continual change. Take a good look at your hands. Whatever their appearance, everything about them is almost brand new. There is nothing about our bodies that is more than a few months old. We are not the body; that is for sure.

If we are neither our name nor our body, what is the nature of our existence? If it is the sum total of our emotions, our thoughts and our beliefs, then all those things would have to be permanent but we know from experience that they are not. Thoughts are as ephemeral as the wind and our emotions are as stable as snowflakes in spring sunshine. Even our beliefs alter over time as our viewpoints change from experience or as we become better (or worse) informed.

At this point one might say, “Hold on a minute. If a human being isn’t a body with a name, thoughts, feelings and beliefs, then what is he or she?” Of course, a human being has these attributes but none of them has what we could describe as a self. None of them forms the backdrop, the “I”; they are almost window-dressing to something far deeper. It is that something far deeper that is important because it is identifying ourselves with the window-dressing that causes us to go round in circles. Instead of uncovering the buried treasure, we play around with the stones on the surface, re-arranging them into different patterns until we discover that that is all rather pointless. That’s when we start thinking about those magic simple words: “Who am I?”

So if we are not the name, body, thoughts, feelings and beliefs (all of which go to make up our personality or character that is presented to the world), what is left? There is what could be described as the observing consciousness – the “I” that commands or controls the outer aspects, the personality. A person who has had a

clear meditative experience will understand this more easily but even if we have not been so fortunate to have had that, we can at least think about the possibility of a state where everything is stilled – no thoughts, no mental or emotional activity at all – where there is simply awareness with full wakefulness. The after a while something in us stirs and that pure experience is gone. But in that state, for a short time, the everyday “I” disappeared. It wasn’t replaced; it simply disappeared – not to leave us dead or unconscious but actually more awake than we have ever been. In this state there is an “I” – an observer – but no little “I”, no “me”, no arising of “this is mine” or “that is not mine”. In fact, no judgment of any sort arises. In that state of awareness, there is total fullness. Nothing is missing, nothing is needed, and nothing is desired. *This* is our true nature.

That state of awareness can be refined further. Sometimes it may be said that the “I” observing is the soul – or *atman*, to use a Sanskrit term widely used in some systems of philosophy. This still predicates an individual self – a sort of permanent entity that remains. Some schools of thought assert that there has to be a permanent self, a permanent individuality. The trouble with that argument is that if something is permanent, not only will it never cease to exist, there can never be a time when it didn’t exist. As there is nothing in the whole cosmos that is permanent, the logic of the permanent soul or self type of reasoning is that the countless myriads of souls or selves throughout the entire

cosmos would have to have been in existence before any material form whatsoever. That does of course blow the creation theory out of the water (which many such schools of thought support) but it also neatly demolishes the big bang theory, the chaos theory and, in fact, any theory at all about the formation of the universe or any part of it. More importantly, the permanent self theory eventually destroys itself because the individual selves, souls or atmans would have to be composed of something. That something is all that is left – the ultimate, Totality, the Absolute, Tao, God – whatever term is used doesn't matter; a *permanent* self could not be from God or of God because by definition there has never been a time when the permanent self didn't exist. So then there would be God and Not-God, Totality would not be Totality, which is a contradiction in terms. However a *temporary* self or sense of individuality is possible.

In a state of further refinement of consciousness, "I" disappears altogether. There is simply an all-expansive, all-embracing, totally boundless awareness. It is the state where, to use a common analogy of waves and water, the wave loses all sense of being a wave and simply has "water consciousness". A wave is nothing but water. Our consciousness is nothing but pure or primordial consciousness but, due to trickery of the mind, we think we are individual, like a wave that, if it could think, thought it was a wave.

It actually brings new meaning to the biblical expression "ashes to ashes and

dust to dust". That is usually thought of in terms of our precarious physical existence. But if we think of it in terms of consciousness it takes on a newer, far more profound meaning. Individual consciousness is from original consciousness and, in case that generates feelings of terror of annihilation, it also means that there is nothing to lose, ever.

If we are all part of totality and cannot be removed from it nor exist separately from it, why do we experience the separate "I"? Why do we not experience unity at all times? If it is a case of simply forgetting, then surely a quick reminder should do the trick? The difficulty is that the sense of "I", the sense of being separate from everything else, is very deep; so deep, in fact, that it shapes everything about us. It is a deeply entrenched belief and we are loath to give it up. Even those with religious beliefs may find what is posited here as heresy – as heretic, perhaps, as the assertion made centuries ago that the world isn't flat after all. In the deeper Buddhist teachings on the nature of reality (especially Dzogchen and Mahamudra), there is described the process of *unenlightenment* – a fall into ignorance, if you will. Twelve stages are detailed but the essence of them is that within the primordial state of pure awareness a slight movement occurs – an awareness of awareness. The barest ripple in a boundless ocean results in the subtlest beginnings of a sense of "I". From our limited point of view this is still a state of extraordinary purity but from it the process of observation arises. In order to observe, three things are required: (1) a

subject – the observer, (2) that which is observed – the object, and (3) the act or process of observation itself. This is the start of the stages of unenlightenment that eventually lead to the formation of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and so on. This reverse of enlightenment is a little like the formation of a pearl – just a tiny impurity causes the mother of pearl to gather round it and build up. The strongest mental formation in this and which we suffer from is what is generally termed the ego, that sense of “I, me and mine” that protects itself at all costs from anything that threatens it. The ego can be useful but it is also a barrier that eventually has to be overcome if we are to have a mind that is at ease. At some stage a little melting of the ego takes place as some of the higher motives in life start to creep in and the move from selfishness to selflessness is crucial in that. This is also when some sort of yearning develops – a yearning to go back to one’s true source. It is usually very vague to begin with – often a hazy feeling that there is more to life than meets the eye – but it is the start of the long process of enlightenment which seeks unity in everything.

Does the enlightened state mean that there is nothing but primordial awareness, an experience of blank boundlessness? No, it means that our awareness becomes so expanded and purified that we experience unity. It isn’t just an *understanding* that everything is in reality one totality; it is a firmly established living reality. It is said that it is like a mirror which reflects everything but doesn’t need to react to it. That may be hard to

imagine but we can understand that it is possible to appreciate a beautiful painting even though we know it is just paint and canvas; we can also understand that the illusions of the film-maker are not real but knowing that doesn’t make them disappear. However, it is also important to understand that the enlightened state is not colourless, anodyne or remote but gives rise to the most inconceivable wisdom and compassion – which are subjects, perhaps, for another time. Suffice it to say for now that the enlightened person has the greatest skill in speech and action resulting from the true view of diversity within unity and to that extent enjoys “I” with “no I”.

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