

11. Who Knows? Self Inquiry

August 16th, 2018

Let's begin tonight with an experiment. Close your eyes and feel your body. Arms, hands, legs. You can move a little to help you feel what it feels like to be in your body. Notice, say, your hands; now notice that you can notice that you are noticing your hands. In other words, you can be aware that you are feeling your hands, right? Who is feeling your hands? *You* are! There is something to you that is preeminent to your hands, and to the feeling of your hands.

I met a woman a couple weeks ago who had just had a leg amputated. She was zooming around Arizona on a holiday on one leg. She was aware of the fact that she used to have two legs and now she only had one; do you think when they removed her leg that they removed part of who she was? I mean, the essence of her? *She* knews that she is missing a leg. *She* is still a complete person, who is aware that her body has had a part removed. But the essence of who she is is still there.

We can conclude that our body is not who we are. Maybe our essence is in our mind, in the complex combination of emotions and thoughts that come and go. So close your eyes again, and notice your thoughts and emotions. Can you observe images or words passing through your mind? Can you notice any emotions right now? Curiosity or confusion, maybe, or something else? Who is watching your thoughts right now? Who is aware of those emotions? *You* are! There is something of you that exists separately from your thoughts and emotions that is able to observe those thoughts and emotions.

Now imagine you have a really deeply concentrated meditation session, and your mind totally calms down. You have no thoughts or emotions, just that wonderfully peaceful sensation of a perfectly quiet mind. No thoughts. No emotions. Have *you* ceased to be? But there is something of you that is aware that you have no thoughts or emotions.

Our thoughts and emotions are not who we are.

Well, then, who *are* we? That question is the root of the practice I want to talk about tonight. It is a practice that is most common in Hindu and yogic traditions, though it is also found in zen, and more recently in secular self-realization practices. It is commonly called "Self Inquiry." The point is to continually ask yourself who you are (or who you are not) until you eventually have a direct experience and the resulting deep understanding that you are nothing more than pure awareness.

This is a very powerful technique. Some people understand it easily and are able to do it easily. I am not one of those people. I want to say up front that this is not a technique I personally find easy to do. But because it is so beneficial for many, I don't want to leave it out of our Contemplative Odyssey. I have read up about it and have been practicing it in preparation for tonight, so I think I can give you a good explanation and decent instructions. However, I cannot teach from deep experience here, and if you want to go deeper into Self Inquiry, I suggest you do some reading and maybe find some YouTube videos that can teach you more than I. (And if anyone is aware of a Self Inquiry teacher in Flagstaff, please let me know so that I can add them to my list of resources). This practice has been popularized in modern times by a guy called Ramana Maharishi. Searching his name online would be a good place to start if you want to learn more.

Before getting to the instruction, let me give you a visual that may help with a conceptual understanding. (And if it adds to the confusion, then please just ignore it).

[Using white board]. Say this is the sphere of reality. Or rather, your sensory experience of reality, because we can only know anything through our senses (and I'm including thoughts and emotions as senses). So imagine that this is 3-D. The sphere of experiential reality. Here you are in the middle of it, sensing things around and within you. (I'll use "seeing" as the example, but this is true of all sensory experience). When you notice something, your attention is drawn to that object. [Arrow from head to object]. Things arise all around and within you, and whenever you notice them, your attention shoots out to them, right? In fact, that's one of our basic techniques in Unified Mindfulness, pointing the spotlight of our attention onto the things we are observing.

But we have just agreed that whoever we are, we are not just the feeling or the sight or the thought. *I* am something sort of behind the sense, something that can observe myself seeing it. [Behind the head]. So what if, instead of looking at an object, whenever you notice that you are *seeing*, you turn around and look back at whoever it is that is watching? Not physically, of course, but turn your attention in the other direction, toward the observer. Keep looking further and further back. [Arrow from back of head to edge of sphere]. Eventually, you reach the edge of your sensory reality, and pop through into whatever is here, outside of the senses that have previously always limited your experience. What's out here? Something beyond reality. Just awareness. The True Self. The Big Self. Emptiness. The Void. The universal, omnipresent, unchanging whatever-it-is that we exist within, but are rarely aware of.

These Self Inquiry practices look back, toward the Big Self of Pure Awareness.

There are two approaches to Self Inquiry, two sides of the same coin. One is called *neti-neti*. This is Sanskrit, and means “not this, not this.” With this practice, we look at what we *aren't* until there is nothing left. The other approach asks “Who is watching?” This side of the coin looks back toward what we are, until we finally reach it.

With *neti-neti*, you allow your attention to be drawn to things, as if you were doing a meditation focusing on all mental and physical sensations. Whenever you become aware of something, rather than throwing all your attention on the arising, you notice that you are able to notice that you are noticing, and can therefore conclude that *you are not this*. It's not an intellectual exercise, though you may need to prompt yourself at first by asking “is this me?” and answering “not this.” Every time you become aware of something, experience the fact this this is not who you are. You might find yourself getting more and more subtle. At first, you are not the itch, but after a while, you also notice that you are not the thing that is feeling the itch. And then you are not the thing that is noticing that you are feeling the itch, because there is still something able to notice that.

“Who's watching” is essentially the same thing, except you are looking for the observer rather than negating whatever is not the observer. When you feel an itch, you notice that you feel an itch, and you ask yourself who it is that is noticing that you are feeling it. Again, the practice is not to verbally ask yourself and try to answer the question, but rather to experience the noticing directly, which will lead you to recognize an observer experiencing that. “Well, then who is watching me watching me watching this itch?” Eventually, your direct experience reaches the edge of that sphere of reality and you pop out, or I should say, reality pops, and there is only pure awareness.

Shall we give it a try?

[Do GM]