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**The Closely Examined Life:
Self-inquiry as the Direct Route to Truth**

by Carol L. Skolnick

I

*For everyone who asks, receives; and he who seeks, finds; and
to him who knocks, the door will be opened.*

—Jesus of Nazareth, Matthew 7:7

If the great teachers and traditions of the world have agreed on anything, it is this: we are not who we think we are, and there is more to "what is" than meets the eye. The most ancient spiritual texts state, "the world is as you see it." We know this much to be true because while truth, like a blank movie screen, is unchanging, the perceived world is as changeable and one-dimensional as the film projected upon that screen.

Modern science also recognizes that we can only perceive a "relative reality." The Copenhagen interpretation of quantum mechanics comes to the exact same conclusion as that of the Indian rishis: the world does not exist but for our mental or cognitive construction of it, and furthermore each individual perception is limited by the filter through which it is constructed. The old story of the blind men and the elephant comes to mind, each man with his own mental image of the huge beast—rope, wall, tree trunk, or snake—based on a limited experience of the whole.

If we are not who we think we are, then who are we? If things are not as they seem, what is the truth? How can we distinguish the real from the illusory through the filter of the body/mind? One way is to ask ourselves what is true...for us. Shankara, the father of *advaita vedanta*, the Indian school of nondualism, called this process *atma vichara*; self-inquiry.

Before Shankara, Gautama Siddhartha asserted that "Buddhahood" is already attained; nothing must be done but to open the eyes. Such teachings may frustrate seekers unable to tap their true nature through the usual spiritual practices. Watching and witnessing thoughts without attachment can lead to bliss, but how to hold that state when thoughts are so abundant and sense-impressions so compelling? Familiarity with sacred writings may satisfy the mind that there is only One, but the mind is fickle and tends to turn outward. We may "know"—based on what we have read or been taught or glimpsed for ourselves—that "we are That," but there have always been those of us who will never be satisfied with anything less than a personal, direct, and lasting experience of that Oneness.

At least from the time of the Vedas, the earliest known scriptures—and perhaps from the beginning of thought itself—human beings have questioned their reality in an effort to experience clarity amidst confusion and illusion. The Buddha exhorted his students to question everything, including his own teachings. Twenty-five centuries ago, the Greek philosopher Socrates opined, "The unexamined life is not worth living." Inquiry is part and parcel of all Eastern nondual traditions including Zen, advaita, Taoism, and Dzogchen. It has been popularized in recent years by advaitins in the Ramana Maharshi/Poonjaji lineage, by spiritual giants like Eckhart Tolle and Lama Surya Das, by psycho-spiritual innovators including Byron Katie, founder of The Work, and Lester Levenson, who developed the Sedona Method...even by psychotherapists, most especially Albert Ellis, whose Rational Emotive Therapy, a highly systematized clinical treatment, is at its essence a form of *atma vichara*.

Through tracing the root of thought back to its origins, practitioners of self-inquiry hope to experience what the neo-Christian textbook *A Course In Miracles* proposes: "Nothing real can be threatened. Nothing unreal exists." Through inquiry, it is said that we can break through our illusions and begin to touch the ineffable truth.

II

To attain knowledge, add things every day.

To attain wisdom, remove things every day.

—Lao-tzu

Advaita vedanta, the Indian school of nonduality, teaches that there is nothing, "no thing," because no manifestation is permanent. The whole of creation is as ephemeral as a thought; even "I" is a false construct, existing only in the moment that mind attaches to an "I-thought."

Shankara (b. ~686 ACE), the founder of advaita, tells us:

Brahman satyam jagan mitya

Jivo brahmaiva na paraha

(God is truth; the world is illusion.

The individual soul and the Supreme Self are not different.)

Shankara was also perhaps the first to recognize that the mind creates the coverings of illusion and is, at the same time, the instrument that removes those coverings. He also noted, before the quantum physicists, a difference between the collective world-illusion, and that of the individual's unique perception. For example, if we have the thought "the world is a terrible place," or "the world is a beautiful place," that is a personal, private illusion; whereas we would all say that we live in "the world." One experience is universal, while the other is one person's projection. The world-appearance, therefore, is both "what is," and "what is not."

Like the ancient *rishis* before him, whose experiences are chronicled in the wisdom of the Upanishads, Shankara used negation—recognizing that "this" is also "not this"—to facilitate disidentification with the "I"-self. The more we know we are "not this," this ephemeral being—that the true nature of an object is "not that," that which can be perceived, created, and destroyed through the senses—the closer we can come to knowing what is: "I am not this body." "This is not my fear." "You are not who I think you are." In a world where nothing is what it appears to be, what we are left with is the Supreme Self, that which is prior to "I."

According to Ramana Maharshi, the father of modern *advaita* (literal meaning: "not two"), either surrender or inquiry is the final spiritual practice...and, as Ramesh Balsekar, a contemporary *advaitin*, has pointed out, the only true surrender occurs when there is no one to surrender to. Self-inquiry becomes necessary when there is a sense of duality, of "ego" and "other." Part of the paradox of self-inquiry is that we think we are the observer. But who is it that is aware of an observer? Who is seeing through these eyes?

Ramana's inquiry is based on the question of "Who?" Typical Ramana-style inquiry questions include, "Who am I?" "Who is aware of this?" "Who is it that thinks this thought?" "What is it that is unchanging that is watching the changes?" "What reacts and what remains untouched?"

Through continued inquiry we come to see that awareness is aware of itself. As this becomes clear, we disidentify with the mind's projection of self; the sense of a separate "observer" lessens and, it is said, eventually disappears, even while functioning through a mind and a body.

III

Your whole world is only the concept you're in—

in the moment.

—Byron Katie

If awareness is the only reality, it would stand to reason that confusion is the only illusion...or, as the contemporary American teacher Byron Katie puts it, "Confusion is the only suffering." Inner chaos occurs when we believe an untrue thought to be true without having examined it. However, thought does not have to

be seen as an enemy, but rather as part of the totality of truth. "I love the mind," says Byron Katie. "That's all there is. There's nothing else to love."

This was not always the case for Katie. Her self-inquiry process, called The Work, was born on the floor of a halfway house in 1986 when Katie, a very ordinary 43-year-old California wife, mother, and entrepreneur—with no metaphysical or spiritual background or interests—woke up on the floor and found herself and her old stories of suffering "undone." As she watched the same beliefs that had caused years of suffering and dysfunction return to her awareness, an unraveling mechanism arose which Katie was later able to articulate as a written self-inquiry practice anyone could learn, consisting of four simple questions, more deeply probing sub-questions, and a "turnaround."

"Thoughts are innocent," says Byron Katie. "They appear. We're not doing them." She noticed that attachment to thought creates suffering; detachment brings peace. However, Katie notes, we've been trying to drop thoughts all our lives and we've never succeeded. Her solution is to apply gentle inquiry to any thought, to meet it with understanding; then the thoughts "drop" us. She suggests beginning with the four somewhat Socratic questions:

1. *Is it true?* then,
2. *Can you absolutely know that it's true?* Not just the "I" thought but any stressful thought about any person, object, idea, or entity can be "undone" through inquiry: family, the government, God, men, women, children, dogs, cats, cancer, earthquakes, war...everything eventually points back to the self.
3. *How do you react when you believe that thought?* While spiritual practice quiets the mind, investigation stops it in its tracks, turning it inward. By continuing to write out and question thoughts in this fashion, we prepare the "I-identified" mind for its ultimate demise.
4. *Who or what would you be without this thought?* Katie's fourth question is the "Who" of Ramana, the "now" moment described by Eckhart Tolle. Without a story, we are the nothingness embraced by the advaitins, free of pain and limitation, of frustration and the feeling of bereftness. We see the Truth as the thing appearing, reality, what is...and because there is no attachment to the story of "shoulds," we come to love that reality however it shows up.

The "turnaround" portion of Katie's Work serves the same purpose as Shankara's technique of negation. Resistances are used as a tool for experiencing acceptance: turned around, "I never want to" becomes "I look forward to." From the investigation of negations and resistances springs forth an expanded view of what's true.

As we have seen, the masters of inquiry throughout the ages have shown us that chaos is nothing but attachment to a thought that is not true; clarity is always just a few pointed questions away. Through the experiential education of self-inquiry, as we make friends with the mind rather than attempt to banish or bypass it, we can touch upon that which seekers have always desired to know:

*Knowledge of truth arises from such inquiry;
from such knowledge there follows tranquility in oneself;
and then there arises the supreme peace that passeth understanding
and the ending of all sorrow.*

—*Yoga Vasishtha, II:14*

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