

WHO AM I?

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We offer here the complete version of the article.]

In her article *Occultism Versus The Occult Arts* Mme. Blavatsky (HPB) describes four kinds of Occult Sciences. Three of them—having to do with what we could call magic, or the knowledge of the occult forces in nature, in sounds, etc.—are disregarded by her as a source of spiritual awakening. After all, this kind of occult knowledge is not really spiritual but “of things pertaining to the realm of *material* nature”. Instead, HPB concentrates her attention on the fourth kind of Occult Science—*Ātma-Vidyā*. In her words:

Ātma-Vidyā, a term which is translated simply “knowledge of the Soul,” *true Wisdom* by the Orientalists, but which means far more . . . is the only kind of Occultism that any theosophist who admires *Light on the Path*, and who would be wise and unselfish, ought to strive after.”¹

Ātma-Vidyā is a Sanskrit word that literally means the “Knowledge of the Self”. This “knowledge” is not intellectual; it is a direct, spiritual knowledge that has a revolutionary effect on our consciousness. Since *Ātma-Vidyā* is considered so important, an inquiry into discovering one’s real nature is a central concern for anyone whose endeavor is to become a real Theosophist.

To proceed in this self-investigation the Theosophical teachings may be of great help, at least up to certain point. We said that *Ātma-Vidyā* is not an intellectual knowledge, therefore the teachings are useful if we don’t take them as mere concepts. They are pointers showing us the direction of our inquiry. In other words, the actual treading of the path should never be replaced by the mere study of the teachings. We must work on them and seek to verify them in our daily life, to the extent of which we are capable.

Theosophical teachings postulate that human beings are very complex and not merely a living physical body. Consciousness, mind and emotions

are not the by-product of chemical reactions in our brain but a reality in themselves, beyond our physical dimension. Thus a person, besides his or her physical body, has an emotional body (sometimes called ‘astral’ body), and a mental body. These constitute our *personality*, which lasts one incarnation. But this is not the whole of the human being. There is also an element commonly denominated the Soul, in Theosophy known as Causal body. This principle is beyond the cycle of death and rebirth and is the repository of our evolutionary experience. The Causal body, however, is not eternal, since it is dissolved and transformed into something else near the close of human evolution.

The one element in human beings that is eternal is *Ātman*—the Spirit, the real Self. This principle is not personal but universal. It is not that I have *my* Spirit and you have *yours*. There is only one Spirit, which is the common source of everything in the universe.

So, Who am I? Am I the personality, the individual Soul or the universal Spirit? Am I all of them? Even the philosophical answer to this question, as postulated by the Theosophical teachings, is quite complex. We are not going to engage here in offering a conceptual explanation but in proceeding with an inquiry that may eventually lead us to discover the answer by ourselves.

The Reason for Our Confusion

The very fact that we are asking the question of “Who am I” indicates that we do not know our real nature. Is it not strange? How is it possible that we don’t know who we are, if we *are* what we are? To understand this we have to examine three fundamental Theosophical teachings:

i) The universal Self, *Ātman*, in order to manifest itself in all cosmic planes needs vehicles of consciousness fitted to interact in each one of these realms. For example, it is obvious that in

order to have to function on the physical plane the Self needs a physical body. The same applies to the emotional, mental and other planes of the cosmos. The problem is that in using these vehicles of expression the Self becomes identified with them.

ii) These bodies, however, are not inert, lifeless vehicles. Everything in the universe is alive and has a consciousness of its own. The Self is using “living entities” as vehicles of expression. We could use an analogy and say that the Self is not driving a car (which mechanically follows the driver’s directions) but riding a horse—usually a wild one—with its own life and inclinations.

iii) These vehicles, although with a consciousness and life of their own are, ultimately speaking, but an expression of the Self in the different cosmic planes, since everything comes from the one single Reality.

No wonder the concept of who we are becomes fuzzy and mixed up!

As a result of this a certain sense of *being* is present in each one of these bodies or vehicles and we naturally feel “I’m this body, these emotions and these thoughts”. However true that may be in the field of Unity, on the manifested planes they are also different from the Self. In *At the Feet of the Master* it is said:

Do not mistake your bodies for yourself—neither the physical body nor the astral nor the mental. Each one of them will pretend to be the Self, in order to gain what it wants. But you must know them all, and know yourself as their master.²

Examining our body we see that it is a living entity with an instinctive or elemental consciousness of its own. It has its likes and dislikes and also its own needs. It is restless or lazy, suffers from hot or cold weather, is very sensitive or dull, and so on. In the Theosophical literature this consciousness of the body is called the *physical elemental*. It is not “we” who want to eat and drink, breath or sleep. It is the physical elemental. Thus, we live and interact with the environment through a vehicle that has its own tendencies but, being identified with it, we say “I can’t stand this heat”, “I like this food”, or “I want to sleep”.

The same applies to our astral or emotional body. Emotions are most of the time an automatic reaction in response to the environment. Our emotional body has also an elemental

consciousness of its own, called the *desire-elemental*. It likes certain things and rejects others. It seeks to feel different emotions because they are its very life and activity. It looks for excitement, variety, and new vibrations to experience—a constant need for new forms of stimulation, new possessions, relationships, situations, etc. Our emotions and desires are not “us”, rather, they happen in our emotional body, but we identify with them.

Our mind has also a consciousness of its own. The *mental elemental* tends to be restless to feel alive. Endless production of thoughts is its very nature and life, hence our difficulty in concentration, for example. It also creates certain patterns of thoughts, reactions and prejudices, and sees the world from that perspective.

In our identification with the bodies, we become their slaves. If we could only realize we are not these vehicles, we would be free to use them in the right way without getting entangled in their activities. But here again, who are we?

Looking for the Permanent within Us

How are we going to proceed to discover who we really are? One thing we know is that there is in us a constant sense of identity. We feel we are the same person during our whole life. When we say “I have changed during these years”, we mean that the essence of that “I” remains in the midst of constant changes. It is like the changes of color, shape, temperature, etc., that any object may undergo without ceasing to be the same substance. Let us investigate whether there is such a constant element in us, and where this element lies.

Our physical body changes over time. Our bodies now are very different from the bodies we had when we were born. However, we recognize ourselves as being the same person during the stages of childhood, youth and adulthood. It is obvious that our sense of identity is beyond the physical body. Otherwise it would change as the body changes.

Our emotional body is also constantly changing. There is a continuous play of different emotions and sensations inside us. We can even have opposite emotions within a very short time. The way we felt in our childhood is for the most part different from the way we feel now. True, there is a tendency to maintain certain emotional patterns because everything in nature wants to

preserve and repeat itself, but we experience a constant change of emotions within these more or less fixed patterns. Even the patterns may be changed if we work on it. In spite of all these changes there is still a sense of being the same person, which means that the sense of identity cannot be based on our emotional body.

The same can be said about our thoughts. They change continually (even though there may be some tendencies or habits of thought) and yet our sense of identity remains. Thus, thoughts cannot account for this constant feeling either.

However, when we examine this sense of identity, we discover that it is strongly based on our mental aspect. It is through the mind that we recognize ourselves and say “I am me and not anybody else”. What is the element in our mind that produces our sense of identity? Memory has, undoubtedly, a lot to do with it. Memory ties all past experiences to the present, playing an important role in keeping the sense that I am the same entity during the different stages of life, even though many changes have occurred. In fact, when a person loses his memory, he also loses his self-identity; he cannot remember who he is. But, even in extreme cases, there is something that still remains there: he may not know who he is, but he knows *that he is*. There is a *sense of being* that goes beyond the sense of identity. Descartes, in his search for something we could hold as true without any doubt, confused that feeling of *being* with thought, and concluded that the only indubitable knowledge was that he was a “thinking thing”. But if we go deeper in our self-investigation, if we observe our mind when in silent meditation, or when quietly contemplating something, we can discover that there is a non-conceptual knowledge or intuition, a feeling of “I am”, even when there are no thoughts or words to define it. It is an obscure, abstract, unformulated feeling that permeates the different levels of our personality and transcends them all. It is only when that pure and simple feeling of *I-am-ness* identifies with the vehicles of consciousness—with thoughts, emotions, name and form—that it is turned into the sense of identity and we say: “I am *so and so*”.

Beyond the personality

Where does that feeling of being come from? What is its origin? As HPB explains in *The Key to Theosophy*,³ the source of the pure sense of being transcends the personality. It comes from what in

Theosophical teachings is called the Causal body or Higher Ego, the individual Soul. HPB used the word “ego” in a philosophical sense several decades before the development of modern psychology with Freud and others. Modern psychology uses the word ego to refer to one aspect of the personality, which in Theosophy is called the “lower ego”. HPB used the term *Higher Ego* because this element in human beings is the *source* of our self-consciousness. The Higher Ego is our real Individuality, the relatively permanent principle beyond life and death, whose *ray* incarnates in different personalities. But this transcendental Ego is not affected by personal emotions or thoughts and is the source of all spiritual aspiration in the personality. We can say therefore that the pure feeling of *I am* is a kind of *sutratma*, that is, a link between our personality and the higher principles in us.

We have to bear in mind, however, that the Higher Ego is not the highest principle in human beings, the Spirit or Ātman which, being but a ray of the Absolute, is beyond any sense of “I”. The Higher Ego is in a process of evolution to merge with the spiritual nature, thus becoming a Spiritual Ego, self-conscious and yet one with all. How can we, then, conceive Ātman, the seventh or highest principle in humans? In the *Mahatma Letters* we read:

Spirit or LIFE is indivisible. And when we speak of the seventh principle it is neither quality nor quantity nor yet form that are meant, but rather the space occupied in that *ocean* of spirit.⁴

This quote states that Ātman (the Spirit *in man*) is not “something” but *the space* an individual occupies in the ocean of the indivisible, *universal*, Spirit. This concept can also be found in *The Secret Doctrine* where HPB explains that the only mental formulation we can have about the highest reality in the universe, the Absolute, is that of being the Space.⁵ Let us explore the implications of these statements.

We may consider Ātman’s expression as the subjective space within which our personal consciousness operates. That is, I perceive what I call *my* thoughts, desires, feelings, sensations, etc., operating within myself, within a space that belongs to me. But I cannot perceive directly what happens to you, because your emotions and

thoughts are outside my “personal space”. I am myself, and you are a different person.

Now, space has no real boundaries. We create limits when we identify ourselves with the personality, but those limits expand as we become less self-centered and integrate others in our consciousness. The mystic realizes that everything is within him and he is in everything. In that process of ever increasing expansion, the day will come when the One Universal Self is realized, and it is then that we will know our real nature. Before we can realize this Unity, however, the first stage is to cease our identification with the personality and to unite our consciousness with the Higher Ego, the source of our sense of being.

The practice

Mahatma KH said:

The truths and mysteries of occultism constitute, indeed, a body of the highest spiritual importance, at once profound and practical for the world at large.⁶

We will explore now the practical import of these teachings. How are we going to proceed to break this identification with the personality? There are different approaches to this but, as we will presently see, they are ultimately based on those two elements that have their origin beyond the personality and yet are within our reach: the pure sense of *I-am-ness*, and the sense of *space*. In fact, both feelings seem to go always together, although some practices emphasize more one aspect or the other.

Let us start with a general statement about how we should go through our daily life in order to come closer to our real nature, and then we will proceed to examine some specific practices that may help us train in this.

While engaged in our daily activities we should stay with this pure, non-conceptual sense of *I-am-ness* as frequently as possible. We are not referring to the sense of “I am the one who acts, feels and thinks” because in that case we feel “I am the producer of thoughts, emotions and actions”. To be sure, there is mental, emotional and physical action, but the one who acts is the personality, the aggregation of elemental consciousnesses. It is only when we cease identifying with the doer that the pure sense of *I-am-ness* shines. We must develop an attitude of being the witness of the action at any level, in other words, to develop a

silent, passive awareness of everything that happens, inwardly and outwardly. It is not that we don’t have to act; we cannot act. We, as pure consciousness, can only be aware. When facing any situation, *let* the personality ponder, look for the best response, and choose, act or restrain according to the highest good it can perceive. But do not be confused by assuming that all that is being done by you. You are only the awareness that embraces both the doer and the doing—you are beyond.

This attitude can be developed with the help of some meditative practices and the effort to apply them to daily life.

i) Abiding in the simple and pure sense of I-am-ness

Nisargadatta Maharaj used to say: “All you have to do is to hold on to *I am*”. In this approach to meditation we do not have to *do* anything but to sit and *be*. We just sit completely relaxed—physically, emotionally and mentally, and rest—aware in that sense of being, of existing. The difficulty we may find in this approach is that we may be distracted by the movement of thoughts and feelings and soon be completely engaged either in the distraction or in a struggle trying to control the thoughts. When this happens just notice the distraction and come back to that pure sense of *I-am-ness*. Don’t fight your thoughts. Just be aware you lost sight of your sense of being and come back to it, once and again, gently, naturally, without struggle. It is an exercise of letting go of distractions, and the “effort” is made to remain aware in the original nature of the undistracted mind. Through practice, we will find the “correct positioning” of our mind where there is neither struggle nor distraction.

Now, for those “addicted to thinking”, as Ramana Maharshi would say, there is an alternative approach that is more active, but eventually leads to the same state. He recommended the use of the question “Who Am I?” as the seed of inquiry:

When thoughts arise, one should not pursue them, but should inquire: “To whom do they arise?” . . . The answer that would emerge would be “To me”. Thereupon if one inquires “Who am I?”, the mind will go back to its source; and the thought that arose will become quiescent. With repeated practice in this

manner, the mind will develop the skill to stay in its source.⁷

Here we are using thought to transcend thought since, according to Ramana Maharshi the question of “Who Am I?” will itself get destroyed in the end along with all other thoughts.

ii) *The sense of being the space.*

We now come to the second element. The approach in point i) was basically aiming at retrieving attention from the psychological movement in order to become aware of that subtle feeling which is the pure sense of *being*. But here, our attention will be directed to what is actually happening in our ordinary consciousness without trying to focus on anything in particular. The goal of this technique is not to silence the mind, to manipulate, or to control thoughts and emotions. After all, the one that controls is just another thought, and our real nature is beyond thought. We sit and let the emotions and thoughts rise and fall by themselves while we are merely aware of them. In other words, we are like the immutable space which contains the psychological movement but is not affected by it. Some meditative practices that work in this way are the Tibetan Buddhist Mahamudrā and Dzogchen, and the approach of J. Krishnamurti.

There seem to be two subtly different ways of positioning our mind here. We can either feel we are the space *beyond* any psychological movement, i.e., our presence *transcends* it; or we can feel there is nothing but this psychological movement and therefore our presence or awareness is *within* it, i.e., it is *immanent*. These two options may be related to Mme. Blavatsky’s statement in her *Diagram of Meditation*:

First conceive of UNITY by expansion in space and infinite in time. (Either with or without self-identification).⁸

We have to remember that the concept of *Space* in Theosophy is not one of empty space, but one that contains everything. So let us explore these two approaches in more detail:

a) Transcendence: In this approach we shift our identification with the psycho-physical activities to a state of witnessing *all* that happens, without choosing any feeling or thought in particular. We observe how every action is performed within the field of consciousness, and

establish ourselves as being the space that embraces them rather than as the content of our consciousness. There is not the feeling of “I think, I feel, I want, I wish” but a sense of “There are thoughts, feelings, desires, etc., moving in the field of consciousness”. We watch the movement of our psyche as we watch a river flowing or the clouds moving in the sky—detached. The movement is independent of us. We just witness it. We also find this concept in the *Tao Te Ching* of Lao Tsu:

Empty yourself of everything. Let the mind become still. The ten thousand things rise and fall while the Self watches their movement.⁹

In this exercise there still seems to be certain element of duality since the witness is different from the psychological movement. I believe, though, that when any of these techniques are earnestly performed, they purify themselves to eventually lead to a state of non-duality where the witness dissolves himself in the pure witnessing.

b) Immanence: Here one begins almost in a state of non-duality. “The first step is the last step”, as Krishnamurti said. There is no difference between the meditator, or inquirer, or witness, and the contents of his consciousness. The observer is the observed. In this approach there is not even the attempt of “positioning” our consciousness in any particular way, because the very attempt is done by a psychological entity which is separating itself from the rest of the psychological movement. There is only pure non-dual, non-self-conscious awareness. When that state happens there is spontaneous integration within the consciousness. We are one with thoughts, emotions, and the whole field and space of consciousness. It is said in the *Mahatma Letters* that this is a spiritual state where real knowledge may come:

The Real Knowledge here spoken of is not a mental but a spiritual state, implying full union between the Knower and the Known.¹⁰

The difficulty in this approach is that we cannot access that non-dual state through any effort of our will, which works within the dual consciousness. The very attempt to do something (even the “attempt” to be aware) introduces duality. So, how is that state to come into being? The way seems to be a negative one. It is not that we have to do something but we have to stop doing. That non-doing, however, cannot be merely inaction. Most people do not try to meditate and

yet, this spontaneous state of integration does not happen. The stopping of the effort must come by transcending effort, that is, through the *realization* that any attempt on our part is introducing duality and is therefore useless for our present purpose.

Practically speaking, we could start by making an intelligent effort to deal with whatever psychological movement is present, introducing duality. We should examine it, question it, be aware of it, and at the same time, be aware of the one that is making the effort. Eventually we

realize, we actually see as an experience (not as a concept read somewhere), that the very effort gives birth to the psychological entity, the “I”, that introduces duality. We then see that there is only psychological activity. The observer is not different from the observed. When we realize this there is a spontaneous “dropping” of any effort and the consequent cessation of duality. This “uncaused” insight, in which duality vanishes, has a transformative quality.

References

¹ HPB, *Collected Writings (CW)* vol. IX, “Occultism Versus The Occult Arts”, p 252.

² J. Krishnamurti, *At the Feet of the Master*, Chapter 1, “Discrimination”.

³ HPB, *The Key to Theosophy*, Chapter II, “The Difference Between Theosophy and Spiritualism.”

⁴ Mahatma M, *The Mahatma Letters to A. P. Sinnett (ML)*, Chr. Ed. No. 44 (ML-13)

⁵ HPB, *The Secret Doctrine* vol. I, “Proem”, p. 8

⁶ Mahatma KH, *ML*, Chr. Ed. No. 12 (ML-6)

⁷ Sri Ramana Maharshi, *Who Am I? (Nan Yar?)*.

⁸ *The Theosophist*, May 2003, pp. 308-9

⁹ Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*, Chapter 16, tr. Feng and English

¹⁰ Mahatma KH, *ML* Chr. Ed. No. 69 (ML-69)