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Many different types of meditation are practiced throughout the world. The Vedantic tradition of India has counterparts for most of these, from meditation on deities to that on the various aspects of consciousness. Of these different meditation techniques Self-inquiry (*Atma-vichara*), a self-introspection approach, is generally considered to be the most significant.

Self-inquiry is a process of meditation that involves tracing the root of thought to its origin in the heart. It shows us how to take our ego-consciousness back to the Divine I AM at the core of our being in which all sense of separate self disappears. Self-inquiry is the most important approach of the Yoga of Knowledge (*Jnana Yoga*), which is traditionally regarded as the highest of the *Yogas*.

Self-inquiry is the culminating practice through which Self-realization — the realization of our true nature beyond mind and body — can be achieved. It is emphasized in the entire Vedantic tradition since the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gita*. Many texts of *Advaita* or non-dualistic *Vedanta* describe it in detail, particularly the works of Shankaracharya, but also *Ashtavakra Samhita*, *Avadhuta Gita*, *Yoga Vasishta* and *Adhyatma Ramayana*.

In modern times Self-inquiry is known primarily through Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), the great sage of South India, who emphasized it as his main teaching. Ramana was a towering figure, a "spiritual Hercules" as Sri Aurobindo described him, a sage who achieved Self-realization after a mere twenty minute spontaneous meditation when he was but a lad of sixteen. Historically Self-inquiry has been a common practice among Swamis of the Vedantic orders. There remains a strong Self-inquiry tradition in India today, particularly among the Swamis of the south. Through the world-wide popularity of Ramana Ma-

harshi's teachings people of all backgrounds have begun to attempt this practice.

Method of Self-Inquiry

The process of Self-inquiry is so simple that it can be explained in a few words. One traces the root of one's thoughts back to the I-thought, from which all other thoughts arise and diverge. This is initiated by the question "Who am I?" or similar questions about one's true identity.

All our thoughts are based directly or indirectly on the thought of the self. Our thoughts consist of two components: a subjective factor — I, me or mine — and an objective factor — a state, condition or object with which we are involved — our own body and mind or external circumstances like our relationships, possessions or activities. We get caught in the object portion and fail to look within to see our true nature apart from these external conditioning influences.

The result is that the pure I or I-in-itself remains unknown to us. All that we call ourselves is but a conglomerate "I am this" or "this is mine," with the subject confused with an object. Our self becomes a self-image, a subject in the guise of an object, in which our intrinsic nature is lost, along with our dignity as a conscious being. We become a mere name and form, a commodity in the outer world to be used and exploited. Self-inquiry consists of detaching from the object portion to discover the pure Subject, so that we can become liberated from all external limitations.

The truth is that we don't know who we really are. What we call our Self is only some thought, emotion or sensation that we are temporarily identified with. We are trapped in ideas that we are happy or sad, good or bad, foolish or wise, but do not know the Self who experiences these changing qualities. Our lives are shrouded in ignorance about our true nature, starting with our bodily identity, the idea that we are no more than this changing physical vesture. As long as we don't question this process we must come to sorrow.

However, Self-inquiry does not mean merely to repeat the question "Who am I?" over and over again in our minds. This becomes an exercise in mental activity that breeds fatigue. It means searching for our true Self in all that we do, which is more a matter of observation than analysis, looking to the Self that is behind our various activities of breathing, eating, feeling, thinking and acting. Other questions can be helpful like "What am I?" or "Who is the experiencer?," or "Who is the seer?." Any type of self-introspection, in which we try to look dispassionately at who we are and the results of our actions, moves us in this direction.

Self-inquiry requires that we have a fundamental doubt about who we are that rejects all outer identifications. It is as if one had amnesia and didn't know who one was and had to give full attention to the matter before anything else could be done. Self-inquiry is not an intellectual or a psychological inquiry but an inquiry with one's entire energy and attention. It requires a full and one-pointed concentration, not interrupted by the intrusion of other thoughts.

True Self-inquiry is not just questioning the limitation of our outer identity, like our family, political or religious affiliations — whether one is a wife, a father, a Christian, Hindu or communist. It questions our internal identity as an embodied being and as a mind. It does not stop short with some general identity as a human, cosmic or spiritual being but rejects any formation of thought. It directs us back to the pure "I" that has no identity with any form of objectivity, physical or mental, that is in the world but not of it. The true Self is not only beyond human distinctions, it is beyond all conceivable divisions of time and space, name and form, birth and death. It is beyond all experience as the experiencer or observer of all.

The thought current naturally moves back to the Self to the extent that we do not preoccupy our minds with outside stimulation. The problem is that the senses present so many distractions that it is difficult to look within. Self-inquiry means to

constantly question and try to reverse this process of extroversion, holding our awareness in the heart.

Self-inquiry leads us ultimately to the experience of the Absolute in which the phenomenal world becomes little more than a mirage of the mind and senses. It goes far beyond the discovery of some greater self, human or creative potential. It is called the direct way to the Absolute.

Self-Inquiry and Other Meditational Practices

Self-inquiry, it should be noted, is a kind of mental activity, though of a special nature. It is **not** an attempt to suppress thought **or** to hold the mind in a blank or empty state, which can be another trap that prevents real transformation. Self-inquiry does not teach that all thought is bad but, in fact, that one form of thinking is necessary for liberation. It teaches us to use the mind in the right way, which is to turn it into a tool of inquiry. Self-inquiry requires much thoughtfulness, particularly in its preliminary phases, and the development of a strong mental discipline. Unless we have resolved our problems through deep examination it is useless, not to mention impossible, to stop the mind from thinking.

One may ask how Self-inquiry, a mental activity, can empty or silence the mind? Does not mental activity increase mental activity? It is not possible for the mind to be empty if its contents have not been released. Mental activity springs from a source, the "I-thought." We must go to the root of something to change it. This is to return to the I-thought in order to go beyond all other thoughts. Holding to the I-thought destroys all other thoughts.

Hence Self-inquiry is not a kind of passive mindfulness in which we focus on being aware of something, like our breath, hands or an activity that we may be doing. Self-inquiry does not say "Be aware of your breath" but, rather, "Who is breathing?" or "Who is really alive?" It does not say "Be mindful of your body," but rather asks "Are you the body?"

Similarly, Self-inquiry is not a form of concentration, in which

we try to concentrate on one object, like a *mantra*, to the exclusion of all others. It is concentration on the Self where our attention automatically returns whatever else we may try to do. We cannot completely concentrate on anything else unless we first know ourselves. Otherwise the I-thought must arise and break the continuity of our concentration. Rather than fighting the I-thought and trying to return to an object of concentration, Self-inquiry concentrates on the I-thought to put an end to other thoughts.

Self-inquiry is also not an attempt to be good or to make ourselves better. It is questioning the reality of the entity who we think is either good or bad, can either improve or degenerate. It questions our efforts to be this or that and says that without knowing ourselves, without eliminating the root of the ego, it is of no lasting benefit to try to become anything, however great or noble.

Above all Self-inquiry is not an ordinary mental activity, a form of philosophical speculation or psychological analysis. It is not seeking any mental answer and has no conceptual result. While Self-inquiry leads to the absolute truth, which can be called the pure I or Self, the name is only a pointer. One can call it God, knowledge, enlightenment, Buddha or whatever one likes but it is not a state defined according to an idea, or in which mental recognition can occur. Self-inquiry is questioning of the validity of all entities and conclusions created by the mind. This does not mean that practices like mindfulness, ethical disciplines, *mantra*, *pranayama* or the study of scriptures do not have their place, but that these are supportive to Self-inquiry or an alternative line of approach. To follow ethical disciplines, to place the body in a comfortable position, to deepen the breath, to withdraw the mind from sensory stimulation, to develop concentration and other yogic practices, should be done, but we should not stop there but proceed to Self-inquiry. Only rare individuals can proceed directly to Self-inquiry and even they can benefit by such preliminary practices.

The Practice of Self-Inquiry

Self-inquiry can be done at all times, places and circumstances. It does not require knowledge of special yoga techniques. It does not require that we otherwise try to overtly change ourselves or what we are doing. It only requires that we place our attention on the source from which thought naturally springs. This, however, is one of the most difficult of all things because it requires control of the wavering and fickle mind. Yet there are several things that can help promote it.

Self-inquiry is done most easily when we are sitting alone, particularly in nature. The outer nature is the door to the inner nature. It provides the space and peace that allows the mind to return to its source. In nature, apart from our personal involvements, we can more easily inquire into who we really are, into not only the meaning of human life but that of cosmic existence.

We can practice Self-inquiry when we are around other people, but this requires more effort because social contact pulls the mind outward. It is important therefore to reduce our outer activities and social contacts to aid in Self-inquiry. Generally in India Self-inquiry is not done in a group setting, in a standardized manner or according to a specific course of practice. It is mainly done on an individual basis, though communion between practitioners is encouraged as is specific instruction from the teacher.

To practice Self-inquiry while we are engaged in action we can call to mind the inquiry "Who is the doer?" In this way we will not let our actions dominate our awareness. This in fact gives us better skill in action because it removes any ego distortions from what we are attempting to do.

Perhaps the easiest way to approach to Self-inquiry is to learn to discriminate between the seer and the seen. First, one discriminates the seer from objects in the external world, like looking at the leaves of a tree blowing in the wind. One holds to the eye as the seer and what the eye sees as the seen, noting that fluctuations in external objects do not cause the eye to

change. One's power of seeing remains constant through the various objects seen.

Second, one discriminates the seer from the sense organs. In this instance the mind is the seer and the senses are the seen. There are several senses and each one varies in acuity but the seer of the senses is constant and not altered by their fluctuations. For example, the seer of the eye is not tarnished by any impairments in the eye, like loss of visual acuity.

Third, one discriminates between the seer and mental states. The self is the seer and the mind is the seen. Thoughts and feelings continually change but their seer, if we look deeply, remains the same. Our seeing as a child and as an adult is the same seeing, not only of external objects but of our internal thoughts and feelings.

Fourth, one discriminates between the seer and the ego, between the pure-I or higher Self and the lower self, the I identified with body, emotion or thought. We learn to observe ourselves and our personal limitations, as external forms like our house or our car. We see the ego as various mental conditions but not the true Self that is beyond the mind. The pure Self devoid of external associations can then shine forth. One then strives to abide in that state of pure awareness.

And in this process one is to negate external objects as not the Self or not I. Then one can negate internal thoughts and feelings, including the ego itself. Whatever one can perceive as an object externally or internally is not the Self who is the witness of all.

Judging One's Practice

Even a beginner can benefit from the practice of Self-inquiry. It is not difficult to begin the process of Self-inquiry and experience a shift in our sense of self. Our thoughts begin to subside as we realize that what we have called our self is largely only an identification of the I with some thought or feeling that is external and transient. We see that the more our thoughts deviate from Self-awareness, the more confusion and

suffering is created. Yet though this process is not difficult to initiate, it is difficult to sustain.

Most of us will discover that we can practice Self-inquiry for a time, perhaps extending through several months or years but that it is hard to maintain it as a primary or ongoing practice. It is not a practice like *pranayama* or *mantra* that can be done in a routine manner. There is no particular structure or ceremony to it. It is not a step by step process with different levels and angles that can be easily mapped out. It remains at the center but to get to the center and stay there is not that easy. While we make some headway with it, we often reach a barrier that is hard to cross. While it is easy to get rid of superficial identifications like those of a political or social nature, it is much more difficult to break our identification with our own body, emotions, and memories.

Self-inquiry is also a difficult practice to judge. Because it has no real stages one can wonder whether one is making any progress at all, or one can imagine great progress when there is none. The easiest way to determine one's progress is detachment, peace and equanimity of mind. If one is going deeply into the practice one will experience a state of Samadhi in which one goes beyond body- and ego-consciousness, the ordinary mind gets dissolved and time and space disappear.

Yet false *Samadhis* can occur, which is why the guidance of a genuine teacher remains important. This, however, is not easy to find. True teachers of Self-inquiry are often reclusive and seldom take on many students, usually only those who are ready for intense practice. Those who make a big outer display of being teachers of this direct path and who gather large numbers of people around themselves are often those who failed to finish their practice, which is generally long and arduous.

People fail at Self-inquiry for two reasons: either we haven't prepared the ground for it properly or we haven't been consistent in our practice. In fact very few people who begin the practice of Self-inquiry continue with it as their primary practice and most eventually abandon it altogether. While an instant enlight-

enment path, becoming immediately the Self of all, is an appealing concept that can arouse a temporary enthusiasm, it usually requires lifetimes, not merely years of deep practice. Therefore it is best to approach Self-inquiry as a long term process, not seeking immediate results. One should first aim at a regular practice, for example, half an hour morning and evening, after other yogic or meditational practices to prepare the mind, and continue this for some time before judging the efficacy of what one is doing.

In the ultimate truth the Self is the reality and our inquiry into it and all else that we do is merely a fiction of thought. Yet this fiction of thought is not personal but includes the entire universe. It is the great *Maya* of the Lord (Bhagavan) that requires not only our own selfless effort but Divine grace in order to cross over it.



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