

# SELF-INQUIRY: WHO AM I?

## The Fundamental Question of Life

*'What is the meaning of existence? What is life?  
Who am I? What is my true nature? Sooner or  
later any inquiring person asks these questions.'*

Can we answer the most essential of all questions – namely, “Who am I?” or more properly, “What am I?” What is my true nature? Why was I born. Why must I die? What is my relation to my fellow man? To be human means to ask these questions, and to be totally human means we must get an answer. Until these questions arise to consciousness, we cover our lives over with all kinds of activities, worldly involvements that leave us no chance to reflect on ourselves. But sooner or later these questions arise, and then there is no escaping them. They burn within us, and intellectual answers give us no peace. We pick up books dealing with the human condition, the meaning of life, and get all these beautiful set-out phrases, these flowering metaphors, but they do not answer the question. Only the gut experience of self-awakening satisfies the gut questioning. Personal experience is the final testimony to Truth. (1)

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We should endlessly put the question “Who am I?” to ourselves. By directing our thinking, not towards objects, but towards its own root, one finally discovers the fundamental principle of being. Man possesses, deep within himself, the essence of all wisdom. He may know it or not, but truth is within him and nowhere else. (2)

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I think that there appears in the life of every human being one moment when the question “What is life?” comes up. When you really look at this you see that you are constantly in the becoming process, never in the now. You are constantly past-future, past-future. You prepare the future by the past. When you take note of this, you are brought to ask, “Who am I? What is life?” As long as the student doesn't come to this point he is not a student. The moment the student asks the question and has no reference to the past, he finds himself spontaneously in a state of not-knowing. In this not-knowing he is in a new dimension. It isn't even a new dimension because in this, there is not any direction. One must live with the question. By living with the question I mean not looking for a conclusion, an answer, because the living with the question is itself the answer. (3)

Nobody can tell you who you are. It would be just another concept, so it would not change you. *Who you are* requires no belief. In fact, every belief is an obstacle. It does not even require your realization, since you already are who you are. But without realization, who you are does not shine forth into this world. It remains in the unmanifested which is, of course, your true home. You are then like an apparently poor person who does not know he has a bank account with \$100 million in it and so his wealth remains an unexpressed potential. (4)

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It is a form of maturity in life which brings you to certain questions. From all these questions we come to the fundamental original question: Who am I? This question, Who am I?, only comes when you have inquired in all possible directions. Only when you have explored all the directions do you come to the mature state of asking Who am I? In this question, Who am I?, a mature mind says, "I don't know." It is only in this "I don't know" that there is anything knowable, perceivable. For the "I don't know" refers to itself and there the question is the answer. That is an instantaneous apperception of ourselves. That is our timelessness. When we have explored all the directions, there is a natural giving-up. And then what you give up – what gives up – has a completely new significance. (5)

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In his life a man can ask himself many questions but they all revolve around one question: "Who am I?" All questions stem from this one. So the answer to "Who am I?" is the answer to all questions, the ultimate answer. (6)

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What is this "I"? Where does this "I" come from? When you die, where does it go? These are the most important questions you can ever ask. If you attain this "I" you attain everything. That is because this "I" is part of universal substance. Your substance, this desk's substance, this stick's substance, the sun, the moon, the stars – everything's substance is the same substance. So if you want to understand your true nature, first you must attain your original substance. This means attaining universal substance and the substance of everything. Everything in this world – the sun, moon, the stars, mountains, rivers, and trees – everything is constantly moving. But there is one thing that never moves. It never comes or goes. It is never born and it never dies. What is this non-moving thing? Can you tell me? If you find that, you will find your true self and attain universal substance. (7)

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## The Method of Self-Inquiry

*'The question "Who am I?" does not come from the mind. Simply asking "Who am I?" is accompanied by a tremendous primal energy; you are on fire.'*

Self-inquiry is the one infallible means, the only direct one, to realize the unconditioned, absolute Being that you really are. The attempt to destroy the ego or mind through spiritual practices other than Self-inquiry is like the thief turning policeman to catch the thief that is himself. Self-inquiry alone can reveal the truth that neither the ego nor the mind really exists and enables one to realize the pure, undifferentiated Being of the Self or Absolute. Having realized the Self, nothing remains to be known, because it is perfect bliss, it is the All. (8)

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Q: What is the practice?

A: Constant search for the "I," the source of the ego. Find out "Who am I?" The pure "I" is the reality, the Absolute-Existence-Consciousness-Bliss. When That is forgotten, all miseries crop up; when That is held fast, the miseries do not affect the person. (9)

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Q: How to realize the Self?

A: Whose Self? Find out.

Q: Who am I?

A: Find it yourself.

Q: I do not know.

A: Think. Who is it that says, "I do not know?" What is not known? In that statement, who is the "I"?

Q: Somebody in me.

A: Who is that somebody? Find it. (10)

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Q: What is the means for constantly holding on to the thought "Who am I"?

A: When other thoughts arise, one should not pursue them, but should inquire: "To whom did they arise?" It does not matter how many thoughts arise. As each thought arises, one should inquire with diligence, "To whom has this thought arisen?" The answer that would emerge would be "To me." Therefore, 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 at its source. (11)

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Turn away from the experience to the experiencer and realize the full import of the only true statement you can make, "I am."

Q: How is this done?

A: There is no "how" here. Just keep in mind the feeling "I am," merge in it, till your mind and feeling become one. By repeated attempts you will stumble on the right balance of attention and affection and your mind will be firmly established in the thought-feeling "I am." Whatever you think, say, or do, this sense of immutable and affectionate being remains as the ever-present background of the mind. (12)

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Q: How does one come to know the knower?

A: I can only tell you what I know from my own experience. When I met my Guru, he told me: "You are not what you take yourself to be. Find out what you are. Watch the sense 'I am,' find your real self." I obeyed him because I trusted him. I did as he told me. All my spare time I would spend looking at myself in silence. And what a difference it made, and how soon! It took me only three years to realize my true nature. My guru died soon after I met him, but it made no difference. The fruit of it is here, with me.

Q: What is it?

A: I know myself as I am in reality. I am neither the body, nor the mind, nor the mental faculties. I am beyond all these. (13)

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If the enquiry "Who am I" were mere mental questioning, it would not be of much value. The very purpose of Self-enquiry is to focus the entire mind at its source. It is not, therefore, a case of one "I" searching for another "I." Much less is Self-enquiry an empty formula, for it involves an intense activity of the entire mind to keep it steadily posed in pure Self-awareness. Self-enquiry is the one infallible means, the only direct one, to realize the unconditioned, absolute Being that you really are. (14)

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Q: When asked about the means for self-realization, you invariably stress the importance of the mind dwelling on the sense "I am." Why should this particular thought result in self-realization? How does the contemplation of "I am" affect me?

A: The very fact of observation alters the observer and the observed. After all, what prevents the insight into one's true nature is the weakness and obtuseness of the mind and its tendency to skip the subtle and focus on the gross only. When you try to keep your mind on the notion "I am" only, you become fully aware of your mind and its vagaries. Awareness, being lucid harmony in action, dissolves dullness and quiets the restlessness of the mind and gently, but steadily, changes its very substance. This change need not be spectacular, it may be hardly noticeable; yet it is a deep and fundamental shift from darkness to light, from inadvertence to awareness. (15)

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The question "Who am I?" cannot arise in the mind. It has nothing to do with memory. All memory is absorbed by the living inquiry which takes place only in the present moment. Awakening is neither immediate nor gradual; it is instantaneous apprehension. The One – which we are – is beyond time. When the mind realizes this, it loses its fear and desire – desire which oscillates between having and becoming. (16)

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Q: When and how does the question "Who am I?" come from deep within.

A: It comes from the "I" itself. If there was not an "I," you would not be able to ask the question "Who am I?" So, when you pose the question "Who am I?" you can never find it, any more than the eye can see its own seeing. All that you can find is an object, a thought in space and time. But there is a moment when it gives itself up. It must be a total giving up, and then the asker is the answer. It is our dearest, it is love. (17)

## Realizing Our True Nature

*'Simply by questioning "Who am I" you will perceive your True-Nature with clarity and certainty. Always remember, you are neither your body nor your mind.'*

Were you to ask the average person what he is, he would say, "My mind" or "My body" or "My mind and body," but none of this is so. We are more than our mind or our body or both. Our True-nature is beyond all categories. Whatever you can conceive or imagine is but a fragment of yourself, hence the real you cannot be found through logical deduction or intellectual analysis or endless imagining. If I were to cut off my hand or my leg, the real I would not be decreased one whit. Strictly speaking, this body and mind are also you but only a fraction. The essence of your True-nature is no different from that of this stick in front of me or this table or this clock – in fact every single object in the universe. When you directly experience the truth of this, it will be so convincing that you will exclaim, "How true!" because not only your brain but all your being will participate in this knowledge. (18)

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There is no goal to be reached. There is nothing to be attained. You are the Self. You exist always. Seeing God or the Self is only being the Self or yourself. Seeing is being. You, being the Self, want to know how to attain the Self. All that is required of you is to give up the thought that you are this body and to give up all thoughts of external things or the not-Self. As often as the mind goes out towards outward objects, prevent it and fix it in the Self or "I." That is all the effort required on your part. (19)

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A theoretical understanding of mind is not enough to resolve the question "Who am I?" and through it the problem of birth and death. Such understanding is merely a portrait of reality, not reality itself. If you persistently question yourself, "Who am I?" with devotion and zeal – that is to say, moved by a genuine desire for self-knowledge – you are bound to realize the nature of mind. Now mind is more than your body and more than what is ordinarily called mind. The inner realization of mind is the realization that you and the universe are not two. This awareness must come to you with such overwhelming certainty that you involuntarily slap your thigh and exclaim: "Oh, of course!" (20)

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Q: What do you see?

A: I see what you too could see, here and now, but for the wrong focus of your attention. You give no attention to your self. Your mind is all with things, people and ideas, never with your self. Bring your self into focus, become aware of your own existence. See how you function, watch the motives and the results of your actions. Study the prison you have built around yourself, by inadvertence. By knowing what you are not, you come to know your self. All you need is to get rid of the tendency to define yourself. All definitions apply to your body only and to its expressions. Once this obsession with the body goes, you will revert to your natural state, spontaneously and effortlessly. The only difference between us is that I am aware of my natural state, while you are bemused. Just like gold made into ornaments has no advantage over gold dust, except when the mind makes it so, so are we one in being – we differ only in appearance. We discover it by being earnest, by searching, enquiring, questioning daily and hourly, by giving one's life to this discovery. (21)

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It is true that the majority of people think of themselves as a body and a mind, but that doesn't make them any less mistaken. The fact is that in their essential nature all sentient beings transcend their body and their mind, which are not two but one. The failure of human beings to perceive this fundamental truth is the cause of their sufferings. Because we delude ourselves into accepting the reality of an ego-I, estrangement and strife inevitably follow. The Buddha in his enlightenment perceived that ego is not indigenous to human nature. With full enlightenment we realize we possess the universe, so why grasp for what is inherently ours? We have only to persist in questioning, "Who am I?" if you wish to experience the truth of what I have been saying. (22)

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The sense of being, of "I am," is the first to emerge. Ask yourself whence it comes, or just watch it quietly. When the mind stays in the "I am," without moving, you enter a state which cannot be verbalized but can be experienced. All you need to do is try and try again. After all the sense "I am" is always with you, only you have attached all kinds of things to it – body, feeling, thoughts, ideas, possessions, etc. All these self-identifications are misleading. Because of them you take yourself to be what you are not. (23)

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He who longs to know his true nature must first understand the mistaken identification with objects: "I am this," "I am that." All identifications, all states are transitory and consequently unreal. Identifying the "I" with this or that is the root of ignorance. Ask yourself what is permanent throughout all the stages of life. The question "Who am I?" will be found to have no answer. You cannot experience what is permanent in a subject/object relationship, as something perceivable. You can only formulate and explain that which you are not. What you fundamentally and continually are cannot be put into words or reasoned out. Being is non-dual, absolute and constant, ever-present whatever the circumstances. (24)

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To know what you are you must first investigate and know what you are not. And to know what you are you must watch yourself carefully, rejecting all that does not necessarily go with the basic fact: "I am." The idea: I am born at a given place, at a given time, from my parents, and now I am so-and-so, living at, married to, father of, employed by, and so on, are not inherent in the sense "I am." Our usual attitude is of "I am this." Separate consistently and perseveringly the "I am" from "this" or "that," and try to feel what it means to *be*, without being "this" or "that." All our habits go against it and the task of fighting them is long and hard sometimes, but clear understanding helps a lot. The clearer you understand that on the level of the mind you can be described in negative terms only, the quicker you will come to the end of your search and realize your limitless, timeless being. (25)

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If you meditate on this question, "Who am I?", if you begin to perceive that neither the body nor the brain nor the desires are really you, then the very *attitude of enquiry* will eventually draw the answer to you out of the depths of your own being, it will come to you of its own accord as a deep realization. Know the real self, and then the truth will shine forth within your heart like sunshine. The mind will become untroubled and real happiness will flood it, for happiness and the true self are identical. You will have no more doubts once you attain this self-awareness. (26)

### Consciousness and "I am"

*'The "I am" is the substratum, the underlying background to every experience, sensation, perception, thought and feeling'*

You know so many things about yourself, but the knower you do not know. Look within diligently, remember to remember that the perceived cannot be the perceiver. Whatever you see, hear or think of, remember – you are not what happens,



you are he to whom it happens. Delve deeply into the sense "I am" and you will surely discover that the perceiving center is universal, as universal as the light that illumines the world. All that happens in the universe happens to you, the silent witness. On the other hand, whatever is done, is done by you, the universal and inexhaustible energy. (27)

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You want to know yourself. For this keep steadily in the focus of consciousness the only clue you have: your certainty of being. Be with it, play with it, ponder over it, delve deeply into it, till the shell of ignorance breaks open and you emerge into the realm of reality. (28)

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The consciousness of being the "I am" is the basis of consciousness. When we think "I am" and only that, without any qualification, we are pure consciousness without an object, the timeless background, the reality which underlies the three states of waking, dreaming and deep sleep. But the moment we say: "I am tired, I am clever, I am a Knight of the Bath" . . . we risk falling into false identifications. When we say "Who am I?" and establish my consciousness in a state of empty availability, I make it possible for this consciousness to return to the pure subject. I prevent my consciousness from being attached to any qualification whatsoever, thus putting it in a state of helplessness which enables it to turn back on itself and return to its original purity. (29)

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So who is the experiencer? You are. And who are you? Consciousness. And what is consciousness? This question cannot be answered. The moment you answer it, you have falsified it, made it into another object. Consciousness, the traditional word for which is *spirit*, cannot be known in the normal sense of the word, and seeking it is futile. All knowing is within the realm of duality – subject and object, the knower and the known. The subject, the I, the knower without which nothing could be known, perceived, thought, or felt, must remain forever unknowable. This is because the I has no form. Only form can be known, and yet without the formless dimension, the world of form could not be. It is the luminous space in which the world arises and subsides. That space is the life that I Am. It is timeless. I am timeless, eternal. What happens in that space is relative and temporary; pleasure and pain, gain and loss, birth and death. (30)

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Q: Our real being is all the time with us. How is it that we do not notice it?

A: Yes, you are always the Supreme. But your attention is fixed on things, physical or mental. When your attention is off a thing and not yet fixed on another, in that interval you are pure being. When through the practice of discrimination and detachment, you lose sight of sensory and mental states, pure being emerges as the natural state.

Q: How does one bring to an end this sense of separateness?

A: By focusing the mind on "I am," on the sense of being, "I am so-and-so" dissolves and "I am a witness only" remains and that too submerges in "I am all." Then the all becomes the One. Abandon the idea of a separate "I" and the question of "whose experience?" will not arise.

Q: You speak from your own experience. How can I make it mine?

A: You speak of my experience as different from your experience, because you believe we are separate. But we are not. On a deeper level my experience is your experience. Dive deep within yourself and you will find it easily and simply. Go in the direction of "I am." (31)

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The whole universe is experienced in the consciousness "I Am." If that is not there, what else can ever exist? This consciousness is beating a drum; everyone is carried away by the noise of the drum. Who looks for the drummer? Who is sounding and beating the drum? (32)

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Become conscious of being conscious. Say or think "I Am" and add nothing to it. Be aware of the stillness that follows the I Am. Sense your presence, the naked, unveiled, unclothed beingness. It is untouched by young or old, rich or poor, good or bad, or any other attributes. It is the spacious womb of all creation, all form. (33)

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Hold on to this knowingness "I am," and the fount of knowledge will well up within you, revealing the mystery of the Universe, of your body and psyche, of the play of the five elements, and of everything else. In the process of this revelation, your individualistic personality confined to the body will expand into the manifested universe, and it will be realized that you permeate and embrace the entire cosmos. (34)

## Meditations

Give up all questions except one: "Who Am I?" After all, the only fact you are sure of is that you are. The "I am" is certain. The "I am this" is not. Struggle to find out what you are in reality.

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In reality there is only one question. And the asker of this question is the answer. There are not two, there is only one. The only question is "Who am I?"

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"I exist" is the only permanent, self-evident experience of everyone. Nothing else is so evident as "I am."

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There is nothing so simple as being the Self. It requires no effort, no aid. One has to leave off the wrong identity and be in the eternal, natural, inherent state.

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Do nothing, absolutely nothing! Just *be*, be the knowledge "I am" only and abide there.

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Don't say "I am this," "I am that." Just hold on to yourself, you are. Just be, just be "you are."

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Is there anyone who is not aware of himself? Each one knows, yet does not know the Self. A strange paradox.

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No attempt is needed to attain Realization. For it is nothing external, nothing new. It is always and everywhere – here and now.

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Go back to that state of pure being, where the "I am" is still in its purity before it got contaminated with "I am this" or "I am that." Your burden is of false self-identifications – abandon them all.

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Everybody is glad to be. But few know the fullness of it. You come to know by dwelling in your mind on "I am," "I know," "I love" – with the will of reaching the deepest meaning of these words.

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There is nothing to fear. Just deepen and deepen the questioning until all your preconceived notions of who and what you are vanish, and at once you will realize that the entire universe is no different from yourself.

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