

The Ultimate Guide to Ramana Maharshi's Self-Inquiry

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Preface

This is a guide to an extraordinary spiritual method, and one that I hope to keep updated with new questions and advice for seekers.

Introduction

So what's this all about? Self-inquiry is the tip of a spear — as I use it here, it is a “technique” (I put quotes around it because it's not exactly a technique) taught by the Indian holy man and sage Ramana Maharshi — as the kind of distillation of the wisdom of advaita (that means “non-dual”) Vedanta. Vedanta is the Hindu mystical tradition, and it basically states that life's deep pain and confusion is due to the wrong idea that we have about ourselves. We believe we are individuals living in a world. We are not. We are actually the awareness within which these thoughts appear.

If we look deeply into our own mind — and in particular the sense of “I” — we can find this truth for ourselves, and it is a truth that goes beyond words. This investigation will yield a freedom that is not supernatural but is not ordinary either. It will not give you magical and mystical powers, but will give you something better: it will reveal a liberation and a peace beyond words.

Now there are a few different reasons this might be appealing. The obvious one is suffering. Everyone wants to be happy. Well, the real happiness is not to be found out in the world. According to the Hindus, desire is a kind of hamster wheel. The more of it you have, the more of it you will have. You will either get what you want, in which case you'll keep wanting more, or else you won't get what you want. Either way you'll stay dissatisfied.

Find your true nature and you'll see that happiness is not out there but is your very essence.

The other big thing that people are looking for is truth of existence. What is life, what are we, what is all this here for, why does evil exist, etc. The problem is that any normal answer to these questions can be debated. How can we possibly know if it's true or not?

Self-inquiry also reveals an answer to this question that is beyond doubt. That is because it is not a normal answer. It is the revelation of something

beyond words, something which cannot be doubted, something which cannot fully be explained. It will set your doubts to rest, and give you satisfaction on these existential questions, not by answering them exactly, but by dissolving the frame of reference within which they made sense.

Finally, whether you call it truth or happiness or something else, the people attracted to the spiritual do usually have a sense that there is something more to life than what is on the surface, that this can't be all there is. That is certainly true, or rather, it turns out that all there is is quite different than what we think it to be.

Self-inquiry is part of a larger spiritual path

Self-inquiry does not work in isolation. The ancient Hindus had a host of requirements for would-be seekers being taught the deep spiritual knowledge. They wanted someone who already had the ability to distinguish between the transient and the permanent, who understood the world would not provide him with happiness, who had concentration and faith and wasn't too involved with pleasures and was patient and had an intense desire for spiritual liberation. Very few in fact had all these qualities prior to being instructed, and such a high bar is too high for our time and culture.

There is in fact a key requirement for self-inquiry, and that is a quiet mind. A quiet mind is a mind that is not overrun with distracting thoughts and which can therefore concentrate on the meditative practice of self-inquiry. The mind need not be perfectly quiet — that's not even possible — just quiet enough.

In my experience what is required to get there is two-fold: a good intellectual framework for the spiritual journey and being honest about what you want.

The intellectual framework can be attained by reading scriptures and books by the masters — I recommend scriptures in the Hindu Vedantic tradition, including the [Bhagavad Gita](#), [Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi](#), and the [Yoga Vasistha](#). I also recommend my own book, [How to Find What Isn't Lost](#), as a kind of modern integration, synthesis, and introduction to all these.

Then one asks a qualified teacher questions to iron out doubts (a qualified teacher is one with whom you feel peace and who can answer your questions). You have to be convinced that spiritual liberation is possible and desirable. And you have to have some basic understanding of what that journey is about.

Then, you have to be honest about what you want. You can tell yourself you want spiritual liberation, but if you don't, you won't pursue it. Often we don't pay attention to our actual feelings and instead tell ourselves a story about what we want, a flattering story, a story that perhaps our parents and society would like. Some of us tell ourselves that we're ambitious when we are not, and would be happy with, say, a simple job that doesn't pay much and isn't particularly prestigious. Some of us tell ourselves we want to lose weight or quit smoking or whatever when we don't.

Of course, it's not quite that simple. We can certainly have conflicting desires. We might want to lose weight but also want to keep drinking lots of beer. But then we should be honest about that conflict. And we should attempt to synthesize that conflict at some higher level, find some action and way of thinking about things that respects all the voices within us.

This can be accomplished in a number of ways, some of which I set out in [my book](#). Basically you go through a cycle of figuring out what you want, testing it in imagination or in action, and recording how you feel — often artistically, capturing how you feel as specifically and originally as you possibly can, in words, in drawing, or in whatever medium you prefer. You don't have to be a great or even good artist — the point is the process of trying to get at what you're feeling (not thinking, feeling).

The other terribly useful thing is therapy, but not just any therapy. Get psychoanalytic psychotherapy, or, better yet, psychoanalysis. These therapies take time, money, and effort, and they go deep — they are not quick fixes for particular symptoms, but help bring your unconscious tendencies to light and heal them through the powerful relationship you have with the therapist. To find a good therapist, go to [the website of the International Psychoanalytic Association](#), look up a training institute near you, and contact them for more information. Or [contact me](#) if you're having trouble with this process.

The point is that you need to have dealt enough with your emotions, be honest enough with yourself, and have dealt enough with past trauma, that

your mind is reasonably focused. Without that, you will not be able to proceed effectively with self-inquiry.

Now, to the technique

The basic technique is simple.

You know that “I am” right now, right? It’s obvious. Well, how do you know it? Where is that feeling coming from? Try to find out where in your experience it is coming from, this certainty that you are. Start in your body. Just like if someone asked you where you were feeling cold, and you searched your experience and said “Oh, my feet are feeling cold.” In the same way, ask about the feeling of the “I” that you somehow know with certainty.

And every time you think you know where it’s coming from, the rule is that you must ask yourself if you are aware of that thing which you think is the source of the I. If you are, you haven’t found the real source yet. So you keep going

If, for example, you say “It’s coming from my head” – well, ask yourself “Well, I am aware of the feeling and sight of my head, right?” Notice that. So where is the “I” that is aware of the head? It’s not coming from the head – it is aware of it. So where is the I feeling? It’s just like you notice that there is light in a room, and you’re looking for the source of the light. Is it coming from this chair? No. The chair is lit up by something else. Is it coming from that table? Same deal. So keep searching until you find the light bulb. You’ll know it when you find it.

You can do it sitting for a set time at first, even just a few minutes, but eventually you must graduate to attempting it at all waking moments. In other words, you must inquire even when you are doing other things — walking, talking, studying, working.

Dedicate a small amount of attention to the task at hand, and meanwhile attempt to inquire. With practice you will be able to balance the two, but put the greater focus on inquiry. If you are worried that you won’t work as well, or won’t work at all, inquire into who has that question/feeling/problem.

Ultimately self-inquiry does not exactly require you to give up work, but it may require you to realize that you're not really the one who decides what work to do.

Be assured that the work that needs to get done will get done, regardless of your pursuit of self-inquiry. But what the work that needs to get done is — that may not be what you think it is.

A little theory

A little interlude for theory. What's going on here? What is self-inquiry attempting to achieve? Briefly, the mind is a set of thoughts which you can think of like a set of filters. Each filter changes the color a bit more. So there's originally white light — that's the light of the true, original Self.

Then upon waking there is the thought "I am." That's the first filter the light passes through. That's what gives the possibility of having experiences — there has to be a separation between "I" and that which "I" experience. Without that thought "I am," that couldn't happen.

Next, the light passes through other filters of identity. "I am" then touches the mind, the senses, thoughts. No need to be too rigid or scientific about this. These are all connected. It's not like there's a particular sequence in which all these necessarily happen.

The important point is that the "I am" thought then begins to associate itself with these other identities. It begins to think of itself as a body, as a person, as having relationships, as being a co-worker or a citizen or a mother or a father or having such-and-such personality and such-and-such likes and dislikes.

But these are all what are called superimpositions (overlays) on the original white light, which, in truth, has never been changed.

Now all of this is just a metaphor — it's to be taken as a teaching but not too literally. The actual truth is beyond words.

The "I am" thought, which is, after all, just a thought, is painful and binding because of another invisible thought — it's the 'veiling' thought. That is, the fact that the "I am" thought is itself merely a filter for the original pure light, is hidden. There is an invisible thought that 'covers up' the fact of the space within which thoughts occur. It hides that space. It hides the reflectivity of thought and perception — the fact that these are all things that occur to us.

Because the veiling thought of forgetfulness (in eastern philosophy it is called “ignorance”) hides the background from us, we take these identifications seriously. Actually, it is not even we who take them seriously; taking them seriously is also a thought. It’s a thought of taking things seriously.

Anyhow, it is this “I am” thought which has gone through all these filters and which sustains itself that is taken seriously because we cannot see its background because of the veiling thought. We are tracing back the “I am” thought back through all the various filters to its origin in that first filter.

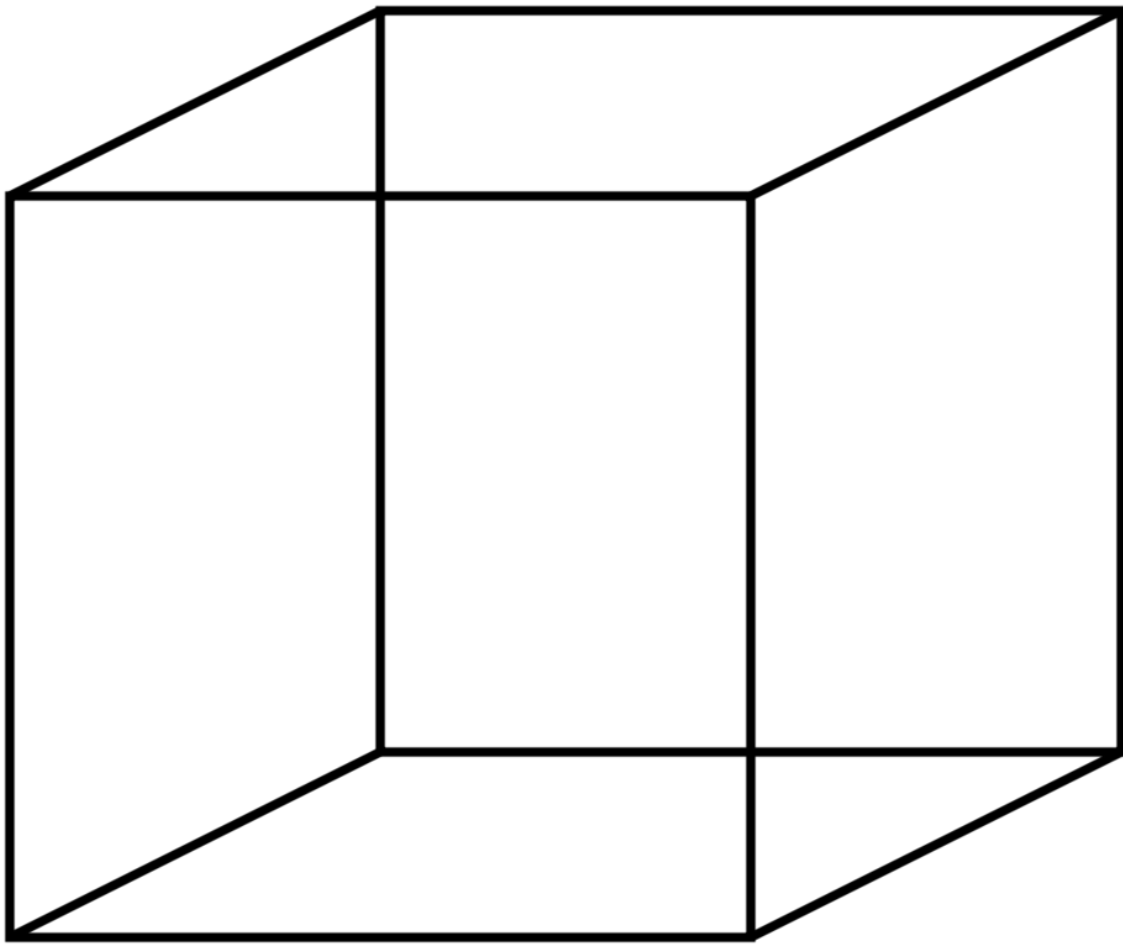
And if we examine it like that, we will ultimately find that it is just a thought. That’s the purpose of self-inquiry. When we see that the “I am” is just a thought, we will see that it’s a filter. If we see that it’s just a filter, then we cannot help but see what it is a filter for. We will then see through the veiling thought and have a glimpse of the fact that the normal “I” is a lie; that what we are is in fact not subject to its limits. We will have a glimpse of the background of the “I,” which is our true Self. In that there is silence, bliss, and peace, and questions do not bother us anymore.

And then usually we’ll fall back, due to habits of mind, into our own old pattern of seeing things. But with repeated effort, it will become easier and easier to stay in the real truth. The real truth is so sweet and free that we gradually stop pursuing the old mental habits, which are based around desires for various things. These desires are based on our limited identification — the thought “I am a person.” Those desires are seen to be painful, even the pleasant ones, because they draw us away from the bliss of our true Self, which is available to us at all times if we can stop distracting ourselves from it.

Those thoughts which connect us to our old identity will fade away. Eventually it will become effortless, and we will stop falling back. The piercing of the veil of ignorance will be accomplished.

All these are just words. You will have to see for yourself what it is actually like.

Another way of looking at it is that it is like those illusion cubes that change shape depending on how you look at them. If you look at the lower middle corner, you can make it change perspective. The “I” is like this corner; it is the point where, if focus is pointed, the perspective can be shifted.



You are already what you seek

The idea of self-inquiry is that you are already what it is that you seek. The belief that you are a person, and all the desire-based thoughts, feelings, and actions based on that deeply-ingrained belief — those are the problem. They hide the fact of your true nature. They distract you from an underlying, constant peace.

So the question is how to get rid of those distractions. The answer is that you stop paying attention to them. And that happens over time. When you put in effort to inquire, you will eventually start to touch the real Self. It will be sweet enough that it will eventually become quite easy to stay there rather than allowing the mind to go chase so-called happiness elsewhere.

The basic stages of self-inquiry are a looking into the “I” feeling through the body and then into the mind; then a feeling that one cannot go any further... a kind of impasse. You might see that you are the witness of your thoughts, but not be able to go any further. But the idea that you are a witness is also not true. Are you not aware of being the witness? Yes. Then that fact cannot be you. The witness is just an idea. You cannot be an idea. You are that which is aware of all ideas.

Then you keep trying, keeping the focus on the I, keep going and going, looking with an intensely curious and inquisitive mind: “Who is this I?” It’s not a verbal question that you repeat mechanically like some parrot — it’s an intense inner searching attention, not resting with content with any specific answer. Someone is aware even of the impasse. You look for that someone.

Eventually the penny will drop, the light bulb will be revealed, and you’ll experience what I call the spacious mind — it’s a kind of inversion where what you thought was the “I” actually turns out to be on the inside of the true Self. Everything reveals itself to be perfect and effortless.

If there is peace and clarity then, there will at this point be no question of what to do next. There will simply be peace and clarity.

This is in fact, simply put, the Truth of your being. This is your real Self.

But what will usually happen then is that you will seem to be dragged back before you even know it by your thoughts, your old identity, the old distractions.

You'll have to repeat the inquiry process over and over to "get back" to the spacious mind, and every time it will get slightly easier. What are you doing? Each time you touch the spacious mind you are re-recognizing the illusion.

At a certain point you will have burned enough of the old habits away that you won't come back, that your perspective will have been permanently altered.

Another way of looking at that fact is to ask yourself: who is it that keeps going into the spacious self and coming back? Is that you?

A curious, open looking is what self-inquiry ultimately requires. See what is actually there. It requires, however, some time and practice.

Now, for some frequently asked questions

- What now? What to do now?

Sometimes you arrive at a point — perhaps it's an impasse, perhaps you think it's the spacious mind — and ask “What now?” This can take many forms. You could be asking how you should be integrating the spiritual into life, or expressing dissatisfaction because you expected more peace, more happiness.

Any of these kinds of questions are signs that inquiry is not over. To whom are all these thoughts occurring?

If you feel dissatisfaction or else a burdensome sense of having to make difficult decisions and not knowing where to turn, inquire to whom all these feelings and thoughts occur.

- It just seems like nothing.

This too is a thought, usually after some inquiry has happened and it seems like it's eliminated everything as the I. What remains? Sometimes it seems like nothing.

This is a dissatisfying thought that must be inquired into. Who says “it” just seems like nothing?

- It isn't satisfying. Where's the happiness/peace?

Yet again this is another dissatisfying thought that must be inquired into. Only when these thoughts are purged will the satisfying nature of the Self shine. But it cannot be grasped after; only by letting go (or inquiring into the I, which comes to the same thing) can it be. And it will not be you, meaning your mind, which grasps it. When the mind through self-inquiry involuntarily releases its grasp — it is then grasped.

Only, in other words, a quiet mind will enjoy the peace of the Self, but it will not be the kind of peace about which it can say “I am peaceful.” As soon as it thinks that, the peace is gone. Simply bow your head and in the reverential Presence of Awe, allow what is to be.

- How can I work while doing self-inquiry?

If this really bothers you, you can perform karma yoga, which will help quiet your mind so that you can do self-inquiry. Do your work as normal, but simply dedicate their results to God or to the Universe. Let go of the results. Perform the actions with the thought, “I am actually not doing these actions.”

- Meanwhile, do self-inquiry during a set time of day.

Later, however, you must graduate to trying to do self-inquiry at all times, and what work happens will happen. When the mind is silent, it does not worry about these questions. The one who worries about work must be inquired into. This is the only real solution to this problem.

- Who is to make decisions while I am self-inquiring?

Initially you can try to make decisions and then inquire into who is making them, but ultimately, you will have to inquire into who it is that believes that they have to make decisions and that they are the ones capable of making them. Are you really the decision-maker? Only sustained self-inquiry will give you the answer to that question.

- Is self-inquiry the same as abiding in awareness?

There seems to be a technique that some people talk about where they try to ‘stay’ as awareness. The reality is that you cannot stay as awareness; that is just a thought. You are awareness. Still, any concentration practice can be useful, so do that if you believe it helps. The important thing eventually is to ask yourself who it is that thinks that they are abiding in awareness? Who is it that is making the decision to act like that? “I am,” right? And who is that I?

- What about surrender?

Self-inquiry and surrender are complementary processes. Surrender is letting go of all your desire for things to be other than the way they are. Ultimately it is letting go of all effort and of all thinking.

You cannot fully surrender just by trying. You won't be able to. But surrender even partially is very helpful. And it really simply is the flip side of self-inquiry, because eventually you will be forced to ask: who is surrendering? And what about surrendering surrender? What would that be like?

In parallel, self-inquiry automatically involves surrender. Because as you realize that you are not the doer of actions or the experiencer of the world — that you are not the person that you thought you were — then the thinker, the body, and all the desires connected with those identities will be automatically surrendered, since they make no sense anymore.

- Why look for the 'I' instead of the observer?

Looking for the observer is helpful up to a point. One could ask, for instance, “Who is aware that you are aware?” This is quite similar to self-inquiry.

My problem with this is that the awareness that we know in our waking state is a conditioned awareness. True awareness operates even in deep sleep. It is simply that it is aware of a state of nothingness at that time, a state of pure forgetfulness. By looking only for the observer, we tend to associate ourselves with the waking observer.

Also, the point of self-inquiry is to destroy the structures of our ignorance and our identification with the wrong entities. All of that is located around the “I.” By inquiring into the I we then are able to penetrate our wrong understanding of it and destroy and burn that structure.

Inquiring into the observer does not have the same effect. Inquiring into the observer can be useful, but ultimately the I goes beyond what we think of as

the observer.

Still, do what works for you. If this technique works better for you and is more intuitive, I give you permission to use it. And if it goes stale, you can then take up self-inquiry.

- What about seeing lights, strange sensations, bizarre hallucinations, etc. that occur during self-inquiry?

This is one of the reasons I like to recommend psychoanalytic therapy to seekers. Always good to have someone on your side who is objective and can help you through some of this stuff. A spiritual teacher or coach can perform this function too.

Though particularly if you have a history or family history of mental illness, it is important to have a therapist to keep you grounded.

Otherwise, however, inquire into what each such experience is. The fruit of self-inquiry is not an experience. Experiences happen between subjects (the “I”) and objects (what the “I” experiences). The truth about who you are is not an experience like this. It is not a magical, mystical, mind-bending awesome experience, though that may or may not happen at points during the search. It is not thunder and lightning. And yet it is not ordinary. It cannot be put into words. It will not tell you anything specific. It will not speak at all. It will not tell you about the nature of God or the universe or anything like that. It will simply be — the holy silence of your being. You will know it; or rather, it will know itself by itself.

- How will I know when I’m done?

When this question no longer makes any sense.

- I have a question that isn’t on here. What do I do?

[Contact me.](#)

Notes

Author

This text was written by [Akilesh Ayyar](#).

Source

<https://www.siftingtothetruth.com>

r/Streamentry subreddit discussion thread

[\[advaita\] The ultimate guide to Ramana Maharshi's self-inquiry path to awakening](#)

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