

Who Am I?

Ramana Maharshi

Preface

This essay, composed by Bhagavan in the mid-1920s, originated with answers that he wrote in the sand in 1901. For many years it was the standard introduction to Bhagavan's teachings. Its publication was subsidised and copies in many languages were always available in the ashram's bookstore, enabling new visitors to acquaint themselves with Bhagavan's practical advice.

Although it continues to be a standard primer for those who want to know what Bhagavan taught, parts of *Who Am I?* are quite technical. Since Sivaprakasam Pillai, the devotee who asked the questions in 1901, was well acquainted with philosophical terminology, Bhagavan freely used technical terms in many of his answers. I have explained many of these in notes that alternate with the text. The words of the original essay are printed in bold type.^[1] Everything else is my own commentary or explanation.^[2]

Since these explanations were originally answers to Sivaprakasam Pillai's questions, I have included some of the original questions in my own notes. Before each new section of *Who am I?* begins, I give, if possible, the question that prompted it. Towards the end of the essay Bhagavan took portions from different answers and amalgamated them into single paragraphs, making it hard to know for sure whether he is answering a particular question or merely giving a teaching statement.

The paragraph that begins the essay was not given out in response to a question. It was composed by Bhagavan when he was rewriting the work in the 1920s. Many philosophical works begin with a statement about the nature of happiness and the means by which it can be attained or discovered. Bhagavan has followed this tradition in this presentation.

Every living being longs to be perpetually happy, without any misery. Since in everyone the highest love is alone felt for oneself, and since happiness alone is the cause of love, in order to attain that happiness, which is one's real nature and which is experienced daily in the mindless state of deep

sleep, it is necessary to know oneself. To achieve that, enquiry in the form ‘Who am I?’ is the foremost means.

Editor’s Footnotes:

[1.](#)

This e-book does not follow the original formatting (as described here) found in David Godman’s website.

[2.](#)

The comments by David Godman can be found in the subsections named *Commentary*.

Questions and Answers

Question 1

Who am I?

‘Who am I?’ The physical body, composed of the seven *dhatus*, is not ‘I’. The five sense organs... and the five types of perception known through the senses... are not ‘I’. The five parts of the body which act... and their functions... are not ‘I’. The five vital airs such as *prana*, which perform the five vital functions such as respiration, are not ‘I’. Even the mind that thinks is not ‘I’. In the state of deep sleep *vishaya vasanas* remain. Devoid of sensory knowledge and activity, even this [state] is not ‘I’. After negating all of the above as ‘not I, not I’, the knowledge that alone remains is itself ‘I’. The nature of knowledge is *sat-chit-ananda* [being-consciousness-bliss].

Commentary

Vasanas is a key word in *Who am I?* It can be defined as, ‘the impressions of anything remaining unconsciously in the mind; the present consciousness of past perceptions; knowledge derived from memory; latent tendencies formed by former actions, thoughts and speech.’ It is usually rendered in English as ‘latent tendencies’. *Vishaya vasanas* are those latent mental tendencies that impel one to indulge in knowledge or perceptions derived from the five senses. In a broader context it may also include indulging in any mental activity such as daydreaming or fantasising, where the content of the thoughts is derived from past habits or desires.

The seven *dhatus* are chyle, blood, flesh, fat, marrow, bone and semen. The five sense organs are the ears, skin, eyes, tongue and nose, and the five types of perception or knowledge, called *vishayas*, are sound, touch, sight, taste and smell. The five parts of the body that act are the mouth, the legs, the hands, the anus, and the genitals and their functions are speaking, walking, giving, excreting and enjoying. All the items on these lists are included in

the original text. I have relegated them to this explanatory note to facilitate easy reading.

The five vital airs (*prana vayus*) are not listed in the original text. They are responsible for maintaining the health of the body. They convert inhaled air and ingested food into the energy required for the healthy and harmonious functioning of the body.

This paragraph of *Who am I?* has an interesting history. Sivaprakasam Pillai's original question was 'Who am I?', the first three words of the paragraph. Bhagavan's reply, which can be found at the end of the paragraph, was 'Knowledge itself is "I"'. The nature of knowledge is *sat-chit-ananda*.' Everything else in this paragraph was interpolated later by Sivaprakasam Pillai prior to the first publication of the question-and-answer version of the text in 1923. The word that is translated as 'knowledge' is the Tamil equivalent of '*jnana*'. So, the answer to that original question 'Who am I?' is, '*Jnana* is "I" and the nature of *jnana* is *sat-chit-ananda*'.

When Bhagavan saw the printed text he exclaimed, 'I did not give this extra portion. How did it find a place here?'

He was told that Sivaprakasam Pillai had added the additional information, including all the long lists of physical organs and their functions, in order to help him understand the answer more clearly. When Bhagavan wrote the *Who Am I?* answers in an essay form, he retained these interpolations but had the printer mark the original answer in bold type so that devotees could distinguish between the two.

This interpolation does not give a correct rendering of Bhagavan's teachings on self-enquiry. In the following exchange (taken from *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 197) Bhagavan explains how self-enquiry should be done, and why the 'not I, not I' approach is an unproductive one:

Question: I begin to ask myself 'Who am I?', eliminate the body as not 'I', the breath as not 'I', and I am not able to proceed further.

Bhagavan: Well, that is as far as the intellect can go. Your process is only intellectual. Indeed, all the scriptures mention the process only to guide the seeker to know the truth. The truth cannot be directly pointed at. Hence, this intellectual process.

You see, the one who eliminates the ‘not I’ cannot eliminate the ‘I’. To say ‘I am not this’ or ‘I am that’ there must be an ‘I’. This ‘I’ is only the ego or the ‘I’-thought. After the rising up of this ‘I’-thought, all other thoughts arise. The ‘I’-thought is therefore the root thought. If the root is pulled out all others are at the same time uprooted. Therefore, seek the root ‘I’, question yourself ‘Who am I?’ Find the source and then all these other ideas will vanish and the pure Self will remain.

Question 2

Will there be realisation of the Self even while the world is there, and taken to be real?

If the mind, which is the cause of all knowledge and all actions, subsides, the perception of the world will cease. [If one perceives a rope, imagining it to be a snake] perception of the rope, which is the substratum, will not occur unless the perception of the snake, which has been superimposed on it, goes. Similarly, the perception of one’s real nature, the substratum, will not be obtained unless the perception of the world, which is a superimposition, ceases.

Question 3

What is the nature of the mind?

That which is called ‘mind’, which projects all thoughts, is an awesome power existing within the Self, one’s real nature. If we discard all thoughts and look [to see what remains when there are no thoughts, it will be found that] there is no such entity as mind remaining separate [from those

thoughts]. Therefore, thought itself is the nature of the mind. There is no such thing as ‘the world’ independent of thoughts. There are no thoughts in deep sleep, and there is no world. In waking and dream there are thoughts, and there is also the world. Just as a spider emits the thread of a web from within itself and withdraws it again into itself, in the same way the mind projects the world from within itself and later reabsorbs it into itself. When the mind emanates from the Self, the world appears. Consequently, when the world appears, the Self is not seen, and when the Self appears or shines, the world will not appear.

If one goes on examining the nature of the mind, it will finally be discovered that [what was taken to be] the mind is really only one’s self. That which is called one’s self is really Atman, one’s real nature. The mind always depends for its existence on something tangible. It cannot subsist by itself. It is the mind that is called *sukshma sarira* [the subtle body] or jiva [the soul].

Question 4

What is the path of enquiry for understanding the nature of the mind?

That which arises in the physical body as ‘I’ is the mind. If one enquires, ‘In what place in the body does this “I” first arise?’ it will be known to be in the *hridayam*. That is the birthplace of the mind. Even if one incessantly thinks ‘I, I’, it will lead to that place. Of all thoughts that arise in the mind, the thought ‘I’ is the first one. It is only after the rise of this [thought] that other thoughts arise. It is only after the first personal pronoun arises that the second and third personal pronouns appear. Without the first person, the second and third persons cannot exist.

Commentary

Hridayam is usually translated as ‘Heart’, but it has no connection with the physical heart. Bhagavan used it as a synonym for the Self, pointing out on several occasions that it could be split up into two parts, *hrit* and *ayam*, which together mean, ‘this is the centre’. Sometimes he would say that the ‘I’-thought arises from the *hridayam* and eventually subsides there again.

He would also sometimes indicate that the spiritual heart was inside the body on the right aside of the chest, but he would often qualify this by saying that this was only true from the standpoint of those who identified themselves with a body. For a *jnani*, one who has realised the Self, the *hridayam* or Heart is not located anywhere, or even everywhere, because it is beyond all spatial concepts. The following answer from **Day by Day with Bhagavan**, 23rd May 1946, summarises Bhagavan's views on this matter:

I ask you to see where the 'I' arises in your body, but it is not really quite true to say that the 'I' rises from and merges on the right side of the chest. The Heart is another name for the reality, and it is neither inside nor outside the body. There can be no in or out for it since it alone is... so long as one identifies with the body and thinks that he is in the body, he is advised to see where in the body the 'I'-thought rises and merges again.

A hint of this can also be found in this paragraph of *Who am I?* in the sentence in which Bhagavan asks devotees to enquire 'In what place in the body does this "I" first arise?'

Ordinarily, *idam*, which is translated here as 'place', means only that, but Bhagavan often gave it a broader meaning by using it to signify the state of the Self. Later in the essay, for example, he writes, 'The place [*idam*] where even the slightest trace of "I" does not exist is swarupa [one's real nature]'.

Sadhu Natanananda, on the flyleaf of his Tamil work *Sri Ramana Darshanam*, records a similar statement from Bhagavan: 'Those who resort to this place [*idam*] will obtain *Atma-jnana* [Self-knowledge] automatically.' Clearly, he cannot be speaking of the physical environment of his ashram because paying a visit there didn't necessarily result in enlightenment.

So, when Bhagavan writes 'In what place...' he is not necessarily indicating that one should look for the 'I' in a particular location. He is instead saying that that the 'I' rises from the dimensionless Self, and that one should seek its source there.

As he once told Kapali Sastri, ‘You should try to have rather than locate the experience’. (*Sad Darshana Bhashya*, pp. xvii-xix)

Question 5

How will the mind become quiescent?

The mind will only subside by means of the enquiry ‘Who am I?’ The thought ‘Who am I?’, destroying all other thoughts, will itself be finally destroyed like the stick used for stirring the funeral pyre.

Question 6

What is the means for constantly holding on to the thought ‘Who am I?’ And what is *jnana drishti*?

If other thoughts arise, one should, without attempting to complete them, enquire, ‘To whom did they occur?’ What does it matter if ever so many thoughts arise? At the very moment that each thought rises, if one vigilantly enquires ‘To whom did this appear?’ it will be known ‘To me’. If one then enquires ‘Who am I?’ the mind will turn back to its source and the thought that had arisen will also subside. By repeatedly practising in this way, the mind will increasingly acquire the power to abide at its source. When the mind, which is subtle, is externalised via the brain and the sense organs, names and forms, which are material, appear. When it abides in the Heart, names and forms disappear. Keeping the mind in the Heart, not allowing it to go out, is called ‘facing the Self’ or ‘facing inwards’. Allowing it to go out from the Heart is termed ‘facing outwards’ When the mind abides in the Heart in this way, the ‘I’, the root of all thoughts, [vanishes]. Having vanished, the ever-existing Self alone will shine. The state where not even the slightest trace of the thought ‘I’ remains is alone *swarupa* [one’s real nature]. This alone is called *mauna* [silence]. Being still in this way can alone be called *jnana drishti* [seeing through true knowledge]. Making the mind subside into the Self is ‘being still’. On the other hand, knowing the

thoughts of others, knowing the three times [past, present and future] and knowing events in distant places — these can never be *jnana drishti*.

Commentary

The word *swarupa* is another key word in the text. It means ‘one’s real nature’ or ‘one’s real form’. Each time the phrase ‘one’s real nature’ appears in this text, it is a translation of *swarupa*. Bhagavan’s repeated use of the word as a synonym for the Self indicates that the Self is not something that is reached or attained. Rather, it is what one really is, and what one always has been.

Mauna is another of the synonyms Bhagavan used to describe the Self:

Question: What is *mauna* [silence]?

Answer: That state which transcends speech and thought is *mauna*.... That which is, is *mauna*. Sages say that the state in which the thought ‘I’ does not rise even in the least, alone is *swarupa*, which means *mauna*. That silent Self is alone God... (Be As You Are, p. 13)

In *jnana*, the state of Self-knowledge or Self-realisation, there is no one who sees, nor are there objects that are seen. There is only seeing. The seeing that takes place in this state, called *jnana drishti*, is both true seeing and true knowing. It is therefore called ‘seeing through true knowledge’.

In *Day by Day with Bhagavan* (17.10.46) Bhagavan points out that this seeing is really being and should not be confused with or limited to the sensory activity that goes under the same name: ‘You are the Self. You exist always. Nothing more can be predicated of the Self than it exists. Seeing God or the Self is only being God or your Self. Seeing is being.’ The same concept was elegantly formulated by Meister Eckart, the medieval German mystic, when he remarked, during one of his sermons, ‘The eye by which I see God is the same eye by which God sees me. My eye and God’s eye are one and the same, one in seeing, one in knowing...’

Question 7

What is the nature of the Self?

The Self, one's real nature, alone exists and is real. The world, the soul and God are superimpositions on it like [the illusory appearance of] silver in mother-of-pearl. These three appear and disappear simultaneously. Self itself is the world; Self itself is the 'I'; Self itself is God; all is Siva, the Self.

Commentary

At the beginning of this paragraph Bhagavan says, in effect, that the world, the soul and God are illusory appearances. Later he says that all three are the Self, and therefore real. This should be seen as a paradox rather than a contradiction. The following answer from *Guru Ramana*, 1974 ed., p. 65, clarifies Bhagavan's views:

Sankara was criticised for his views on *maya* [illusion] without understanding him. He said that (1) *Brahman* [the Self] is *real*, (2) the universe is unreal, and (3) *Brahman* is the universe. He did not stop at the second because the third explains the other two. It signifies that the universe is real if perceived as the Self and unreal if perceived as apart from the Self. Hence *maya* and reality are one and the same.

The seeing of names and forms is a misperception because, in the Self, the one reality, none exist. Therefore, if a world of names and forms is seen, it must necessarily be an illusory one. Bhagavan explains this in verse 49 of *Guru Vachaka Kovai*:

Just as fire is obscured by smoke, the shining light of consciousness is obscured by the assemblage of names and forms. When, by compassionate divine grace, the mind becomes clear, the nature of the world will be known to be not illusory forms, but only the reality.

Question 8

Are there any other means for making the mind quiescent?

To make the mind subside, there is no adequate means except enquiry. If controlled by other means, the mind will remain in an apparent state of subsidence, but will rise again. For example, through *pranayama* [breath control] the mind will subside. However, the mind will remain controlled only as long as the *prana* [see the following note] is controlled. When the *prana* comes out, the mind will also come out and wander under the influence of *vasanas*. The source of the mind and the *prana* is one and the same. Thought itself is the nature of the mind, and the thought 'I' which indeed is the mind's primal thought, is itself the *ahankara* [the ego]. From where the ego originates, from there alone the breath also rises. Therefore, when the mind subsides, the *prana* will also subside, and when *prana* subsides, the mind will also subside. However, although the mind subsides in deep sleep, the *prana* does not subside. It is arranged in this way as a divine plan for the protection of the body and so that others do not take the body to be dead. When the mind subsides in the waking state and in *samadhi*, the *prana* also subsides. The *prana* is the gross form of the mind. Until the time of death, the mind retains the *prana* in the body. When the body dies, the mind forcibly carries away the *prana*. Therefore, *pranayama* is only an aid for controlling the mind; it will not bring about its destruction.

Commentary

According to the *Upanishads*, *prana* is the principle of life and consciousness. It is the life breath of all the beings in the universe. They are born through it, live by it, and when they die, their individual *prana* dissolves into the cosmic *prana*. *Prana* is usually translated as 'breath' or 'vital breath', but this is only one of many of its manifestations in the human body. It is absorbed by both breathing and eating and by the *prana vayus* (mentioned earlier) into energy that sustains the body. Since it is assimilated through breathing, it is widely held that one can control the *prana* in the body by controlling the breathing.

According to yoga philosophy, and other schools of thought agree, mind and *prana* are intimately connected. The collective name for all the mental

faculties is *chitta*, which is divided into:

1. *manas* (the mind), which has the faculties of attention and choosing.
2. *buddhi* (the intellect), which reasons and determines distinctions.
3. *ahankara*, the individual feeling of 'I', sometimes merely translated as ego.

Chitta, according to yoga philosophy, is propelled by *prana* and *vasanas* and moves in the direction of whichever force is more powerful. Thus, the yogis maintain that by controlling the breath, which indirectly controls the flow of *pranas*, the *chitta* can be controlled. Bhagavan gives his own views on this later in the essay.

The reference to *samadhi* needs some explanation. According to Bhagavan (*Guru Vachaka Kovai*, verse 898,) '*Samadhi* is the state in which the unbroken experience of existence is attained by the still mind.'

Elsewhere he has said, more simply, 'Holding onto reality is *samadhi*.' (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no. 391)

Though Bhagavan would sometimes say that a person in *samadhi* is experiencing the Self, these *samadhis* do not constitute permanent *realisation*. They are temporary states in which the mind is either completely still or in abeyance.

The next section is a continuation of the answer to the previous question: 'Are there any other means for making the mind quiescent?'

Like breath control, meditation on a form of God, repetition of sacred words and regulation of diet are mere aids for controlling the mind. Through meditation on a form of God and through the repetition of sacred words the mind becomes focused on one point. An elephant's trunk is always moving around, but when a chain is given to it to hold in its trunk, that elephant will go on its way, holding onto the chain instead of trying to catch other things with it. Similarly, when the mind, which is always wandering, is trained to hold onto any name or form of God, it will only cling to that. Because the mind branches out into innumerable thoughts, each thought becomes very

weak. As thoughts subside more and more, one-pointedness [of mind] is gained. A mind that has gained strength in this way will easily succeed in self-enquiry. Of all regulations taking sattvic food in moderate quantities is the best. Through [this], the sattvic quality of the mind gets enhanced and becomes an aid to self-enquiry.

Commentary

A sattvic diet is one which is vegetarian and which also excludes stimulating substances – such as chillies, tobacco, alcohol – and food that is excessively sour, salty or pungent.

Some Indian systems of thought maintain that the mind is composed of three fluctuating components called *gunas*:

1. *sattva*, purity or harmony.
2. *rajas*, activity.
3. *tamas*, inertia or sluggishness.

Since the type of food eaten affects the quality of the mind, non-sattvic foods promote rajas and *tamas*. The sattvic mind is the most desirable. One of the aims of spiritual practice is to increase the sattvic component at the expense of rajas and *tamas*.

Question 9

Is it possible for the *vishaya vasanas*, which come from beginningless time, to be resolved, and for one to remain as the pure Self?

Although *vishaya vasanas*, which have been recurring down the ages, rise in countless numbers like the waves of an ocean, they will all perish as meditation on one's real nature becomes more and more intense. Without giving room even to the doubting thought, 'Is it possible to destroy all these *vasanas* and remain as Self alone?' one should persistently and tightly hold onto meditation on one's real nature. However great a sinner one may be, one should, instead of lamenting, 'Oh, I am a sinner! How can I attain

liberation?’ completely give up even the thought of being a sinner. One steadfast in meditation on one’s real nature will surely be saved.

Question 10

How long should enquiry be practised? What is non-attachment?

As long as there are *vishaya vasanas* in the mind, the enquiry ‘Who am I?’ is necessary. As and when thoughts arise, one should, then and there, annihilate them all through self-enquiry in the very place of their origin. Not giving attention to anything other than oneself is non-attachment or desirelessness; not leaving the Self is *jnana* [true knowledge]. In truth, these two [non-attachment and desirelessness] are one and the same. Just as a pearl diver, tying a stone to his waist, dives into the sea and takes the pearl lying on the bottom, so everyone, diving deeply within himself in a detached way can obtain the pearl of the Self. If one resorts uninterruptedly to remembrance of one’s real nature until one attains the Self, that alone will be sufficient. As long as there are enemies within the fort, they will continue to come out. If one continues to cut all of them down as and when they emerge, the fort will fall into our hands.

Question 11

Is it not possible for God or the Guru to effect the release of the soul?

God and Guru are, in truth, not different. Just as the prey that has fallen into the jaws of the tiger cannot escape, so those who have come under the glance of the Guru’s grace will never be forsaken. Nevertheless, one should follow without fail the path shown by the Guru.

Remaining firmly in Self-abidance, without giving the least scope for the rising of any thought other than the thought of the Self, is surrendering oneself to God. However much of a burden we throw on God, He bears it all. Since the one supreme ruling power is performing all activities, why should we, instead of yielding ourselves to it, think, ‘I should not act in this

way; I should act in that way'? When we know that the train is carrying all the freight, why should we, who travel in it, suffer by keeping our own small luggage on our heads instead of putting it down and remaining happily at ease?

Commentary

In the last three sections Bhagavan has used three terms, *swarupa dhyanam* (meditation on one's real nature), *swarupa smaranai* (remembrance of one's real nature), and *atma chintanai* (the thought of the Self) to indicate the process by which one becomes aware of the Self. They should not be understood to mean that one should try to focus one's attention on the Self, for the real Self can never be an object of thought. The benedictory verse of *Ulladu Narpadu* explains what Bhagavan meant by such terms. It asks the question, 'How to meditate on that reality which is called the Heart?' since that reality alone exists, and it answers by saying, 'To abide in the Heart as it really is, is truly meditating.' That is to say, one can be the Heart by 'abiding as it is', but one cannot experience it as an object of attention.

This interpretation is confirmed by the sentence in the last extract from *Who Am I?* in which Bhagavan equates *atma chintanai* (the thought of the Self) with *atma nishta* (Self-abidance).

In a similar vein Bhagavan remarks later in the essay that 'always keeping the mind fixed in the Self alone can be called self-enquiry'.

Question 12

What is happiness?

What is called happiness is merely the nature of the Self. Happiness and the Self are not different. The happiness of the Self alone exists; that alone is real. There is no happiness at all in even a single one of the [many] things in the world. We believe that we derive happiness from them on account of *aviveka* [a lack of discrimination, an inability to ascertain what is correct]. When the mind is externalised, it experiences misery. The truth is,

whenever our thoughts [that is, our desires] get fulfilled, the mind turns back to its source and experiences Self-happiness alone. In this way the mind wanders without rest, emerging and abandoning the Self and [later] returning within. The shade under a tree is very pleasant. Away from it the sun's heat is scorching. A person who is wandering around outside reaches the shade and is cooled. After a while he goes out again, but unable to bear the scorching heat, returns to the tree. In this way he is engaged in going from the shade into the hot sunshine and in coming back from the hot sunshine into the shade. A person who acts like this is an *aviveki* [someone who lacks discrimination], for a discriminating person would never leave the shade. By analogy, the mind of a *jnani* never leaves Brahman, whereas the mind of someone who has not realised the Self is such that it suffers by wandering in the world before turning back to Brahman for a while to enjoy happiness. What is called 'the world' is only thoughts. When the world disappears, that is, when there are no thoughts, the mind experiences bliss; when the world appears, it experiences suffering.

Question 13

Is not everything the work of God?

In the mere presence of the sun, which rises without desire, intention or effort, the magnifying glass emits hot light, the lotus blossoms and people begin, perform and cease their work. In front of a magnet a needle moves. Likewise, through the mere influence of the presence of God, who has no *sankalpa* [intention to accomplish anything], souls, who are governed by the three or five divine functions, perform and cease their activities in accordance with their respective karmas. Even so, He [God] is not someone who has *sankalpa*, nor will a single act ever touch him. This [untouchability] can be compared to the actions of the world not touching the sun, or to the good and bad qualities of the elements [earth, water, fire and air] not affecting the immanent space.

Commentary

Sankalpa means ‘resolve’, ‘will’, or ‘intention’. God has no personal *sankalpa*. That is to say, He does not decide or even think about what he should do. Though mature devotees ‘bloom’ on account of his presence, it is not because He has decided to bestow His grace on these fortunate few. His presence is available to all, but only the mature convert it into realisation.

The three divine functions are creation, sustenance and destruction. The five divine functions are these three plus veiling and grace. According to many Hindu scriptures, God creates, preserves and eventually destroys the world. While it exists, He hides His true nature from the people in it through the veiling power of *maya*, illusion, while simultaneously emanating grace so that mature devotees can lift the veils of illusion and become aware of Him as He really is.

Question 14

For those who long for release, is it useful to read books?

It is said in all the scriptures that to attain liberation one should make the mind subside. After realising that mind control is the ultimate injunction of the scriptures, it is pointless to read scriptures endlessly. In order to know the mind, it is necessary to know who one is. How [can one know who one is] by researching instead in the scriptures? One should know oneself through one’s own eye of knowledge. For [a man called] Rama to know himself to be Rama, is a mirror necessary? One’s self exists within the five sheaths, whereas the scriptures are outside them. This self is the one to be enquired into. Therefore, researching in the scriptures, ignoring even the five sheaths, is futile. Enquiring ‘Who am I that am in bondage?’ and knowing one’s real nature is alone liberation.

Commentary

In self-enquiry one is enquiring into the nature and origin of the individual self, not the all-pervasive Atman. When Self appears in capitals, it denotes Atman, the real Self. When self it appears in lower case, it refers to the individual.

The five sheaths or *kosas* envelop and contain the individual self. They are:

1. *annamayakosa*, the food sheath, which corresponds to the physical body.
2. *pranamayakosa*, the sheath made of prana.
3. *manomayakosa*, the sheath of the mind.
4. *vijnanamayakosa*, the sheath of the intellect.
5. *anandamayakosa*, the sheath of bliss.

Sheaths two, three and four comprise the subtle body (*sukshma sarira*) while the fifth sheath, called the causal body, corresponds to the state of the individual self during sleep.

The individual 'I' functions through the five sheaths. Practitioners of the *neti-neti* ('not this, not this') type of *sadhana* reject their association with the five sheaths in the way described in the second paragraph of *Who Am I?* The idea behind this practice is that if one rejects all thoughts, feelings and sensations as 'not I', the real 'I' will eventually shine in a form that is unlimited by or to the sheaths.

Continuation of the answer

Keeping the mind fixed in the Self at all times is called self-enquiry, whereas thinking oneself to be Brahman, which is sat-chit-ananda [being-consciousness-bliss], is meditation. Eventually, all that one has learnt will have to be forgotten.

Commentary

One can distinguish different levels of experience in the practice of self-enquiry. In the beginning one attempts to eliminate all transient thoughts by concentrating on or looking for the primal 'I'-thought. This corresponds to the stage Bhagavan described earlier in the essay when one cuts down all the enemies, the thoughts, as they emerge from the fortress of the mind. If one achieves success in this for any length of time, the 'I'-thought, deprived of new thoughts to attach itself to, begins to subside, and one then moves to a deeper level of experience. The 'I'-thought descends into the Heart and

remains there temporarily until the residual *vasanas* cause it to rise again. It is this second stage that Bhagavan refers to when he says that 'keeping the mind fixed in the Self alone can be called self-enquiry'. Most practitioners of self-enquiry will readily admit that this rarely happens to them, but nevertheless, according to Bhagavan's teachings, fixing the mind in the Self should be regarded as an intermediate goal on the path to full realisation.

It is interesting to note that Bhagavan restricts the term 'self-enquiry' to this phase of the practice. This unusual definition was more or less repeated in an answer he gave to Kapali Sastri:

Question: If I go on rejecting thoughts, can I call it *vichara* [self-enquiry]?

Answer: It may be a stepping stone. But real *vichara* begins when you cling to yourself and are already off the mental movements, the thought waves. (*Sad Darshana Bhashya*, 1975 ed., p. ix)

The following optimistic answers by Bhagavan, on keeping the mind in the Heart, may provide encouragement to those practitioners who often feel that such experiences may never come their way:

Question: How long can the mind stay or be kept in the Heart?

Answer: The period extends by practice.

Question: What will happen at the end of that period?

Answer: The mind returns to the present normal state. Unity in the Heart is replaced by a variety of perceived phenomena. This is called the outgoing mind. The Heart-going mind is called the resting mind.

When one daily practises more and more in this manner, the mind will become extremely pure due to the removal of its defects and the practice will become so easy that the purified mind will plunge into the Heart as soon as the enquiry is commenced. (*Be As You Are*, p. 66)

Bhagavan noted that ‘thinking oneself to be Brahman... is meditation’, not enquiry. Traditional advaitic *sadhana* follows the path of negation and affirmation. In the negative approach, one continuously rejects all thoughts, feelings and sensations as ‘not I’. On the affirmative route one attempts to cultivate the attitude ‘I am Brahman’ or ‘I am the Self’. Bhagavan called this latter approach, and all other techniques in which one concentrates on an idea or a form, ‘meditation’, and regarded all such methods as being indirect and inferior to self-enquiry.

Question: Is not affirmation of God more effective than the quest ‘Who am I?’ Affirmation is positive, whereas the other is negation. Moreover, it indicates separateness.

Answer: So long as you seek to know how to realise, this advice is given to find your Self. Your seeking the method denotes your separateness.

Question: Is it not better to say ‘I am the Supreme Being’ than ask ‘Who am I?’

Answer: Who affirms? There must be one to do it. Find that one.

Question: Is not meditation better than investigation?

Answer: Meditation implies mental imagery, whereas investigation is for the reality. The former is objective, whereas the latter is subjective.

Question: There must be a scientific approach to this subject.

Answer: To eschew unreality and seek the reality is scientific. (*Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, talk no 338)

Question 15

Is it necessary for one who longs for release to enquire into the nature of the *tattvas*?

Just as it is futile to examine the garbage that has to be collectively thrown away, so it is fruitless for one who is to know himself to count the numbers and scrutinise the properties of the *tattvas* that are veiling the Self, instead of collectively throwing them all away.

Commentary

Indian philosophers have split the phenomenal world up into many different entities or categories which are called *tattvas*. Different schools of thought have different lists of *tattvas*, some being inordinately long and complicated. Bhagavan encouraged his devotees to disregard all such classifications on the grounds that, since the appearance of the world is itself an illusion, examining its component parts one by one is an exercise in futility.

Question 16

Is there no difference between waking and dream?

One should consider the universe to be like a dream. Except that waking is long and dreams are short, there is no difference [between the two states]. To the extent to which all the events which happen while one is awake appear to be real, to that same extent even the events that happen in dreams appear at that time to be real. In dreams, the mind assumes another body. In both the dream and the waking [states] thoughts and names-and-forms come into existence simultaneously.

Question 17

Is it possible for the *vishaya vasanas*, which come from beginningless time, to be resolved, and for one to remain as the pure Self?

There are not two minds, one good and another evil. The mind is only one. It is only the *vasanas* that are either auspicious or inauspicious. When the mind is under the influence of auspicious tendencies, it is called a good mind, and when it is under the influence of inauspicious tendencies, a bad mind. However evil people may appear, one should not hate them. Likes and

dislikes are both to be disliked. One should not allow the mind to dwell much on worldly matters. As far as possible, one should not interfere in the affairs of others. All that one gives to others, one gives only to oneself. If this truth is known, who indeed will not give to others? If the individual self rises, all will rise.

If the individual self subsides, all will subside. To the extent that we behave with humility, to that extent will good result. If one can continuously control the mind, one can live anywhere.

Commentary

The final two paragraphs of the essay are taken from an answer to a question that has already been given.

Notes

Translation and commentary

Ramana Maharshi's *Who Am I?* essay was translated and commented by [David Godman](#).

Source

<https://www.davidgodman.org/who-am-i>

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