



Who am I? An enquiry into the Self by Sri Ramana Maharshi

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‘True, strong, fresh forever stands the Self. From it in Truth springs forth the phantom body and phantom world. When this delusion is destroyed, and not a speck remaining, the sun of Self shines bright and real with vast Heart expanse’ – Sri Ramana Maharshi

If asked any of his devotees, Sri Ramana Maharshi would have been described as a simple man, who never asked anything from anybody. Who never claimed to be a Guru, although he had won thousands of devotees all over the world. His smile was remembered by many, but till his death he remained a silent riddle, meditating in caves for years without speaking a word.

He was different from other Indian Gurus and teachers. Unlike Swami Vivekananda, he never went abroad to spread his wisdom to other places in the world, neither did he fight for political independence like Ghandi or had visions of a divine utopian society on earth like Sri Aurobindo. He is said to be guiding people more by his silent presence than by any word or deed, interested only in guiding people back to their true Nature in a time that many seemed to have forgotten their identity.

Man’s true Nature, according to Maharshi has nothing to do with his outward movements and the absorption of external stimuli by the senses. Man’s true Nature can only be found by turning inwards, where our divine nature reveals itself in Pure Consciousness or Pure Awareness, by Maharshi also called the ‘Self’. By turning our attention inward and ‘seeing ourselves’ we are asked to not be anything but our own Self. This, then, is true Reality, unlike that which is suggested to us in the world of appearances. It is there, always, and within our grasp. However, to be able to show its full splendor and radiance, the clouds veiling this Self from reaching our conscious experience must first be lifted. These clouds exist of our clinging to externalities in the form of our frailties, darkness and fear. Only by our awareness we open ourselves to this eternal light within.

In our daily lives, we often identify ourselves with our body and our thoughts. Out of it arises a sensation of ‘I’, also termed the ‘mind’. However, looking more closely, we find out it is no more than a bundle of thoughts. At the root of these thoughts lies the ‘I-thought’, which eventually merges



with the 'Eternal I' every night we fall asleep. The Eternal I is often linked to the name of God in many scriptures, as God mentioned his name to Moses as follows: *I AM That I AM*. According to Maharshi, the I-thought is no more than a link between our insentient body and the Eternal 'I' or Pure Consciousness. One method to get more closely to this Eternal 'I' is to ask ourselves: *For whom is this thought?*. If the answer comes, '*To me*', we ask ourselves next: *Who am I?* Asking ourselves this question, the individual 'I', or the limited 'I', falls down and a new Reality manifests itself spontaneously as 'I'. It is the Divine Essence in us. In this way, our attention is drawn back to the I-thought and eventually back to the state of Pure Being, Pure Awareness. This is the state of non-emergence of 'I', the place whence the 'I' originates. Only by focusing our attention to oneself via Self-enquiry, directing our outgoing mind back inward to its source and seeking the source of the feeling 'I', can we find our true identity. This then, according to Maharshi, is true spirituality.

The importance of Self-enquiry or *Atma-Vichara* is not new when it comes to Indian teachings. It was Sri Adi Sankara who long ago stated that Liberation cannot be attained by any amount of action but only by Self-enquiry, whereas in the Bhagavad Gita it is written to *fix the mind firmly in the Self*. Kaivalya Nevaneeeta, a classic text of the Advaita Vedanta, teaches us that *enquiry alone can lead to the knowledge revealed in the Vedas - knowledge of Self cannot be gained by study*. However, the method of Maharshi

goes further than just the mental level. Since Reality exists in the bottom of our Hearts and is beyond the range of thought, no amount of thought could lead us to realize or know Reality. Only *to abide in the Heart as it IS, is truly meditating upon it*, according to Maharshi. It is here, in the Heart, that the Self shines as the pure formless *I AM*.

How do we abide in the Heart as it IS? To understand this we have to understand the workings of the ego, or the I-thought. Maharshi explains that the ego exists and feeds itself because it is able to grasp a form. These forms could be, for example, thoughts, objects or knowledge. However, the ego itself has no form. This means that so long as it attends to second and third persons experiencing thoughts or knowledge, it feels it exists, but as soon as it experiences itself in first person or subject, it will lose its strength and disappear, falling back into its source in the Heart. This happens when we ask ourselves, any moment a new thought rises, the question: *Who am I?* When the ego, or mind, goes back to its source, the Self, no one remains to attend the thought and this thought will eventually subside. In verse 17 of Upadesa Saram Maharshi says: *If one enquires without inadvertence into the form of the mind (or ego), it will be found that there is no such thing as mind at all! This is the direct path for anyone and everyone!* The disappearance of the ego means that only one thing remains: Self or Reality. Only then are we finally able *to abide in the Heart as it IS*.

The core of Maharshi's teachings is thus

paying attention. Paying attention to the mere feeling of 'I'. The Self can only be known by means of Self-enquiry, which is not an activity of the mind, but the state of stillness of mind. It is only by Self-enquiry we can attain a state of egolessness in which 'I' does not rise, and which allows us to abide in our true state of oneness with the Reality. In a state of stillness, we also feel that time does no longer exist. By turning within, time and space are transcended and we cognize only the *NOW*. This eternity was always there, even at this present moment. We only have to be attentive of it. Therefore, abiding in the Self means also to abide in the ever-existing *NOW*.

This, then, is our path: first – through Self-enquiry and paying attention – to inwardly arrest the ever-flowing currents of thought, which brings us to a place of stillness. In this place of stillness, we experience the ever-existing *NOW* in all its vibrance. It is an experience beyond our senses and beyond the mind, an experience of 'being oneself' and being 'one with eternity'. To quote Maharshi: *Being the Self is itself knowing the Self, because Self is not*

two. This is Self-abidance. It is a feeling of absolute happiness, *Ananda*, but also *Sat* (Being) and *Chit* (Awareness). In the end, it is no more or less than the Self pulsating as the *NOW*.

At this moment, we realize that the mind and time were no more than ripples, which come and go. In the eternal stillness, mind and time are dissolved or 'consumed' in the eternal *NOW*. What only truly exists is the Self. In reality, no two 'I's' exist, one the ego and one the Self. In reality, all emotions, feelings and thoughts arise from the ocean of *I AM*. The answer to the question *Who am I?* does not really matter. If we think what we feel as 'I' is the Self, we perceive it as it IS. On the other hand, if we feel the 'I' as our ego, it will disappear upon us paying attention to it and the Self alone will be known. The outcome of asking ourselves this question is that the Eternal 'I' will remain shining. In the words of the Bhagavan: *'Your duty is to be; not to be this or that, simply BE. I AM THAT I AM sums up the whole Truth. The method to reach it is: BE STILL. Simple being is the Self'. Om Shanti Om.*

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