

The Light Behind Consciousness

Radical Self-Knowledge
and the End of Seeking

John Wheeler

NON-DUALITY PRESS

First published October 2008 by Non-Duality Press

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Typeset in Dante & ITC Stone Sans 12/13

Cover design by John Gustard

Non-Duality Press, Salisbury, SP2 8JP
United Kingdom



ISBN 978-0-9558290-6-2

www.non-dualitybooks.com

Preface

‘Will this suffering ever end? One way or another, my seeking and suffering must end! I am at the end of my rope—I simply cannot take it anymore!’

That was my state of mind in mid November, 2004. In twenty-five years I had read hundreds of books on subjects ranging from psychology, philosophy and mind-control, to Zen Buddhism, Christian Mysticism, Taoism and Advaita-Vedanta. Yet, still I found myself seeking, suffering and searching for the answer to end all questions, and to bring an end to this deeply painful and nagging sense that something is drastically wrong—something is wrong with me, and something is wrong with the world.

You cannot possibly say that you are what you think yourself to be! Your ideas about yourself change from day to day, and moment to moment. Your self-image is the most changeful thing you have. It is utterly vulnerable, at the mercy of a passer-by. To know what you are, you must first investigate and know what you are not. The clearer you understand that on the level of mind you can be described in negative terms only, the quicker you will come to the end of your search and realize your limitless being.

Nisargadatta Maharaj

These words struck me to the core. It came in the mail like several dozen others I devoured in 1998, but this odd-looking, black and gold book, whose title exclaimed ‘I AM THAT’ in bold, capital letters, marked the beginning of the end of seeking and suffering—the beginning of the end of the ‘me’ I took myself to be.

Over the next five years, I read and re-read the book slowly several times. Nisargadatta's potent words were sinking in, and I was starting to know in my own direct experience what he was pointing to—I am not the person I believed myself to be, I am consciousness, I am that which is aware. I could feel it, sense it—I knew it directly. What a change in perspective, what a new way of experiencing life! My world was literally being turned inside-out. I was no longer in the world, the world was in me! He was right! Amazing!

Waking up in the morning, showering, eating breakfast and driving to work—all happening to no one, and by no one! The universe is alive! The universe is functioning, and I am that functioning. I am that life. There is no separate person in the body. There is only universal life functioning beautifully and naturally on its own. And I am That!

And then—*slam!*—I came crashing right back to my own little world of me and mine. And the suffering continued. What happened! Where is my peace! God help me, please! There was always something to pull me back into the pain—a failed marriage, broken relationships, a lack of purpose, parents and family falling sick and dying. It was always something.

But I knew it was possible to be free of seeking and suffering. I had seen it, I knew it and experienced the truth of who I was—this simple presence of awareness that is the very essence of all life. But it seemed to be eluding me and I was suffering terribly. I needed help. I felt that I needed to meet someone who knew the truth that Nisargadatta was pointing to and could help me get clear once and for all—that was my hope.

The sense of presence expressing through the mind as the thought 'I am' is pure intelligence energy. It is the knowing that you are. The same intelligence-energy is functioning this universe. That innate intelligence is the essence of everything that appears and disappears. Realize that you are aware of presence right now. You know that you are. It spontaneously arises. The vibration, pulsation or throb of that intelligence

is happening spontaneously. There is nothing to start it; nothing to stop it. Realize there is no one to do it, and nothing to do, and it will settle down of its own accord.

‘Sailor’ Bob Adamson

In 2004 I learned of a man called ‘Sailor’ Bob Adamson from Australia who had been sharing the same message as Nisargadatta Maharaj for decades. Bob suggested I contact John Wheeler as John lives in the U.S. as I do.

So the belief in the existence of a separate self and our identity with that is the root of the problem. But eventually you come round to asking if the limited self that we have been taking ourselves to be is real or even present. If it is real, then we should be able to find it. So where is it? What is it actually? You come to see that all suffering is based on a cause which, upon investigation is found to be completely non-existent. Seeing this, all possible doubts and questions are undermined and cannot survive. Simultaneously, you come to see that you are inseparable from that natural state of presence-awareness which is inherently free, whole and complete. Nothing or no one can shake you from this understanding. It is the fact of your being, and you are that.

John Wheeler

Wow! Is this Nisargadatta come back to life? Amazing! The quote above is from one of my many dialogues and phone conversations with John over a period of six months. In November of 2004 I flew to California to attend John’s meetings and meet with him personally. Some of the dialogues between he and I are recorded in his book ‘Shining in Plain View’.

What a difference it made to have John personally point out to me what Nisargadatta and ‘Sailor’ Bob Adamson had pointed out to him and many others. John’s consistent and

clear pointing was exactly what I needed. I am extremely grateful. It is my hope that you find the same benefit.

Stephen Wingate
Boston, MA
March 2008

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Reality Beyond Consciousness

Reality is beyond all characteristics, even of being, consciousness, emptiness or any other designation. To 'awaken' to your identity as being, consciousness, oneness, presence, emptiness or what have you is still moving in the realm of phenomena as an imagined entity. Your essential nature is prior to the sense of consciousness and being. There is something in you that knows the sense of being conscious and present. That is your real nature. It is forever unknowable as an object. It is beyond being and non-being, consciousness and unconsciousness. There is a temptation to take reality to be the sense of being, presence, consciousness, aliveness or even something more objective, such as stillness or a peaceful state. But all those things are objective. You know them. What you are is evidently beyond them all.

At some point, there may arise a resonance with the pointer that there is something prior to consciousness, prior to being, prior to peace, prior to oneness, prior to emptiness. Why? Because all of those, however subtle, are conditioned states. They are experiences that can be grasped, understood or recognized. Even the sense of 'I am' is an appearance. It has appeared upon your true nature. It is the primary concept or

experience, which is the basis of all other experiences. Without the sense of 'I am', there can be no other experiences. You are beyond all experience, even the experience of 'I am'.

At the core of the mind is an empty space, a void through which the primordial, non-conceptual reality shines forth as consciousness. The whole world appears in the light of consciousness. Consciousness itself is a time-bound, phenomenal state, an appearance on that unconditioned source which is prior to consciousness. Reality is non-conceptual awareness that does not even know that it is. Simply put, you are the one who is aware of being and of being conscious. That 'you' is entirely beyond the body, senses, mind, consciousness and anything else that can be perceived or conceived. It cannot be grasped or even be understood, because it is what you are.

Prior to Consciousness

When you awake in the morning, consciousness dawns. In this state of being conscious, you perceive a body, mind and world. These are appearances only, not what you are in essence. To identify oneself with any of these appearances gives rise to the notion of being a separate person, self or individual entity. This is the cause of all seeking, suffering and doubts. Consciousness is a state that comes and goes. In sleep, unconsciousness or under anesthesia, the experience of being conscious subsides. So it is clearly a transitory state. However, before you awoke and became conscious of anything else, including the fact of being conscious, you existed. Consciousness happened to you who were there to experience it.

Your fundamental position is prior to consciousness. From this non-conceptual source, which is what you are, arises initially the sense of conscious presence. This is also the sense of being, the experience that 'I am', or the bare fact of knowing that you are. This is the first appearance upon your original state. Little can be said about your essential nature because it is clearly beyond all concepts and even prior to consciousness. Some pointers that have been used are: non-conceptual awareness, awareness unaware of itself, pure being (beyond being and non-being), the absolute, the unmanifest, noumenon, cognizing emptiness, no-thing-ness—to name a few.

This non-conceptual essence is pure non-duality or unicity in which the notions of both subject and object are merged. Just as the sun does not know light because it is light, so you do not know your original nature (as an object) because you are that. It is forever beyond the grasp of concepts and subject-object knowledge. Yet it is entirely evident and inescapable as that which allows you to say with utter certitude 'I am' and 'I know that I am'. Even when those words subside, you *are*. Even when the consciousness that knows those words

subsides, you *are*. Consciousness is the light of creation. But you are the primordial non-conceptual awareness, being or 'no-thing-ness' in which consciousness and all subsequent appearances come and go.

The Analogy of the Sun

To understand your true nature, consider the sun. Imagine you are the sun shining in space with no other objects present. You are present and shining, and yet you see nothing—neither light, other objects, nor yourself. Why? Because you are singular and there are no objects available to reflect your light and confirm your presence objectively. Should an object appear, you perceive your light reflected in that object and become conscious of something that appears as other or apart. In truth, you are only perceiving your own light, nothing else. The object is the means for you to perceive yourself indirectly. The reflected light takes the apparent form and location of the object. The reflected light may in turn light up other objects. The perception of light is time bound because it lasts only so long as the objects are present. Without any object, you (as the sun) revert back to your unmanifested, original condition (that is, the shining sun that sees nothing at all, including its own light).

This analogy is parallel to your own original state or true nature. Your essence is pure non-duality, one without a second, which we might point to as non-conceptual awareness or pure being that is unaware of its awareness and without a sense of its own existence. When the mind, body and objects appear, they are perceived as objects in consciousness, which is the objective manifestation of your innate, aware presence. Consciousness is like the reflected sunlight. The state of being conscious arises along with the body-mind and appears limited to the time, place and presence of the body-mind. The body-mind 'gives birth' to consciousness. When the body-mind subsides, the consciousness of objects also subsides. Consciousness appears as a transient state on your original condition. It is intimately tied to the presence of the body-mind, which reflects the light of awareness, allowing consciousness to manifest in a tangible way. With the rising

of the body-mind in our experience, you have the instruments to say, 'I am', 'I am present', 'I know', 'I am conscious'.

So the presence of the body-mind is a necessary requirement for consciousness to manifest and for awareness to become aware that it is. Just as sunlight and reflected sunlight are really not two separate things, neither are non-dual awareness and manifested consciousness actually different. With the appearance of the body-mind, we become conscious, we know 'we are'. And with the rise of the sense of being conscious, all other objects are then known. Consciousness itself is really an object or experience, since it is a state that appears *to* you. With the subsidence of the experience of the body-mind, consciousness also departs. It 'returns' to its source of non-dual awareness or being. But nothing happens to you at all. In none of this have you ever left your original condition. You were, are and ever must be the timeless, unconditioned, non-dual being-awareness beyond body, mind and consciousness.

Back to the Sperm and the Egg

Take it back to the sperm and the egg. When they came together, life-energy infused the fetus and consciousness began to manifest in that body. Following birth, the sense of consciousness gradually matured. The world of experience appeared within consciousness, when you came to know 'I am'. Without consciousness, there is no world. Clearly, all things appearing in the field of consciousness, including the body-mind and everything perceivable and conceivable, depend on consciousness. They are impermanent and cannot be the abiding essence of what you are.

What is often missed is that consciousness itself, the basis of the appearance, is also time-bound. You are that which was present *before* consciousness appeared on you. Before consciousness appeared, you were, but you did not know yourself or have any sense of existence. That is the absolute, non-dual or perfect state. You often hear that you are consciousness, presence, the witness or the stillness beyond thought. This is only an initial pointer that is useful to free you from a grosser identification with the body, mind and personality. But to stop there and identify yourself as consciousness, presence or stillness is an error. Consciousness is not what you are ultimately. In fact, consciousness is the initial movement upon the unmanifest that gives rise to duality. Consciousness is duality itself. You are prior to consciousness, prior to being, prior to presence, prior to the knower, prior to stillness. Spirituality takes place in the domain of consciousness and is in duality. You are offered things to do, achieve and attain, because reality is being viewed through the lens of becoming and time. The overt or subtle message is that there is some state that you will get in the future. Abandon all such dubious concepts and be what you already are—the timeless, inconceivable absolute that is prior to the body, mind and personality—even prior to consciousness and being.

Non-Conceptual Awareness

Your true nature is non-conceptual awareness. This is the necessary ground of all experiences, even the presence and absence of being conscious (as in waking and dreaming) or unconscious (as in deep sleep). You are not the appearances or even the states of consciousness that come and go. You are to whom they appear. Seeing this, you can drop all the labels and just be what you are. The term 'presence-awareness' is another pointer to your natural state prior to consciousness. Consciousness is sometimes referred to as the 'I am' or witness. Presence-awareness equates with non-conceptual awareness itself, the absolute, which is what you are. This is the basis of all appearances, including the sense of 'I am'. After all, you do not have the sense or thought of 'I am' in sleep. So the sense of 'I am' comes and goes. But you are there in sleep and all states as the basic aware-presence itself. 'I am' and the ego are not the same. Ego is the notion of being a separate person, which is based on identifying oneself as the body, mind and/or personality. When you see that you are not that concept (the separate person), you see yourself as the impersonal consciousness or witness in which all experiences rise and set. But actually, your fundamental identity lies beyond (or prior to) this. You are the non-conceptual presence-awareness in which even the witness and the world of experiences come and go. That is the absolute or ultimate state. That is your natural condition even now, for you are aware not only of appearances, but the fact of being conscious or witnessing also. So you must be the awareness beyond all states, experiences and concepts.

Consciousness Is in Duality

At the level of discussion, a distinction can be made between consciousness and awareness. Consciousness is in duality and requires an object, even if that object is a total absence of any content. That absence is still an experience. Examples are deep sleep, yogic absorption (samadhi), being under sedation and so on. What is pointed to as awareness is beyond consciousness. Awareness is that in you which recognizes the fact of being conscious. It also recognizes the fact of being unconscious. That is your ultimate nature and is there whether you are conscious or unconscious. After all, it is you who are there to experience being conscious or unconscious, being awake or asleep. To summarize:

- Objects (mind, body, experiences, states and so on) appear in consciousness.
- Consciousness is always aware of something, even if that something is an experience of complete absence.
- Consciousness itself is a state that comes and goes (sometimes you are conscious, sometimes not).
- Awareness is that which cognizes the coming and going of consciousness.

To clarify this, ask yourself if you recognize the fact of being conscious. The fact of being conscious is an experience recognized by you. Therefore, you are prior to it. That prior-to-consciousness presence does not depend on objects or even consciousness to be. That which is prior to consciousness is what you truly are. The same goes for recognizing the sense of existence. The sense of existing is an experience recognized by you. Therefore, you are prior to that. That prior-to-being

state does not depend on objects or even the knowledge of existing to be. So in the final analysis, the experiences of being and consciousness are experiences in duality. They may be useful as pointers to your true state, but your real nature is beyond them.

The Absolute, Unconditioned Reality

The world of our everyday experience consists of the various things we sense and interact with, including external objects and our own bodies. We also experience an internal world of thoughts and feelings. To experience any of these things requires the presence of consciousness. How many thoughts, feelings or experiences could we have apart from consciousness? This is a simple point that is usually overlooked. In non-duality, primacy is given to consciousness as the basic fact of experience. In fact, at the level of appearances, consciousness is what you are, because it is the only continuously present factor in our experience. The world, mind and body appear as objects within consciousness. They have no independent existence apart from being perceived in consciousness. To overlook one's real position as the conscious knowing presence and identify oneself with the body is due to a basic misunderstanding, a conceptual error. The body is an object that appears in consciousness. You are the one to whom it appears. Essentially, the body, mind and world are fleeting and insubstantial appearances coming and going within consciousness. Relatively speaking, consciousness is more enduring, more substantial and more 'real' than the appearances. Because most of us are ignorantly identified as the body and mind, a first step in clarifying our identity is to see our identity as consciousness rather than any of the objects of consciousness.

Because objects only exist in consciousness and have no independent reality, we can view them as manifestations or appearances of consciousness, much as waves have no independent reality but are only appearances of the underlying water which is their substratum. In the wave analogy, all that is present is water. The wave is just a label for something that appears but has no independent existence as a thing apart from its source. In terms of consciousness, this means that

the objects (body, mind and world) do not exist as independent realities as such. It is consciousness alone that exists. This means that there has never been an actual independent body, mind or world at all. All of those things are only appearances of consciousness. All that is truly present in and through all experiencing is consciousness alone.

Consciousness itself is not a continuous or unchanging experience in and of itself. In waking and dreaming, consciousness is present, but in deep sleep we do not experience the fact of being conscious. It is not that we disappear, for some presence or essence continues as the backdrop of sleep, and that something subsequently experiences the re-emergence of consciousness and its objects. From this perspective, we can view consciousness itself as an experience that comes and goes. It is only after the appearance of consciousness that we experience the body, mind and world. These are experienced within consciousness.

Who or what experiences the arising and setting of consciousness? Consider the moment before consciousness emerges. No objects are present. There is no time, space or duality at all. It is entirely unconditioned, non-dual, without distinctions. There is no separation, no lack, no suffering. And yet that state is, because it is what consciousness arises from. Consciousness is a momentary flicker that arises out of the timeless, absolute source. The body, mind and world appear within that flicker of consciousness. Consciousness is like a light flashing on and off within the unconditioned absolute state. In a certain sense, we might say that the absolute is what cognizes the coming and going of consciousness. Just as the world is registered in consciousness, so is consciousness itself registered in the primal space of reality. That is why the absolute is sometimes referred to as the pure awareness that knows consciousness. It is the light behind consciousness. It is the source from which consciousness derives its substance and energy. This source is what the most radical and penetrating presentations of spirituality are pointing to as our fundamental and essential nature. It is not a state or experience, because states and experiences only occur after consciousness

appears. Our fundamental identity is prior to consciousness. That underlying and ever-present reality is the source which enables consciousness to be conscious and for being to be, so to speak.

What is the relationship of consciousness to that prior source, the absolute? When we looked at the relationship of consciousness to its objects, we saw that there really were no separate objects, only consciousness. We can also see that consciousness cannot stand apart from its source as a separate independent reality. This means that consciousness is an expression or modification of the absolute, whatever we may choose to call that. Consciousness, which contains all that appears in dualistic experience, is itself a ripple arising and setting on the timeless, unconditioned, non-dual state, which is our true reality. If consciousness is only a modification of the absolute, non-dual reality, then consciousness as such does not truly exist, since it has no actual independent nature. Consciousness appears but it has never truly existed as an independent reality. All there is, is the unconditioned, absolute, non-dual source. That absolute reality is all there is, and it is all that we have ever been. There has never been anything else except this.

To speak poetically, consciousness is a fleeting ripple on the fathomless ocean of the unconditioned, absolute reality. Consciousness simply arises and sets as a vibration or pulsation of the uncreated and eternal non-dual awareness. In that apparent ripple of consciousness appear universes, worlds, living beings and everything within the domain of time and space. Yet no thing has ever really come to be, because objects have never existed apart from consciousness and consciousness has never existed apart from the absolute. That absolute is beyond time, space, body, mind, world, being and consciousness. This is what your true nature is at this very moment—the absolute, unconditioned reality prior to consciousness.

Clarify What You Are

The focus in non-duality is to clarify what you are. It is not an inquiry into the world appearance (cosmology), the creator (theology) or the apparent person and its motives, actions and experiences (psychology). The cosmos, God and the person are subsequent appearances upon your fundamental nature. They are ephemeral appearances with no substance or independent nature whatsoever. For anything to be, consciousness must be present. So non-duality is really the inquiry into the nature of consciousness and your relationship to consciousness. The root cause of suffering and problems in life is identifying oneself with an appearance in consciousness, such as the body, mind, person or assumed separate self. You are not a thing which is perceived, but the conscious presence or witness of what is perceived. Continuing the inquiry, you find that you are not even the conscious presence, which is a time-bound state, but that to which the conscious presence occurs. Therefore, what you actually are is the source or ground from which consciousness and all subsequent appearances emerge. That is the absolute or ultimate state, which is your timeless, original condition. First, see yourself as the witness or conscious presence. From that vantage point, you will realize that what you truly are is that which is prior to consciousness. No word will cover that, but it might be pointed to as 'non-conceptual awareness' or 'cognizing emptiness'. You are that.

My Experience

Through conversations with ‘Sailor’ Bob Adamson and the pointers he shared, I came to see that I was not the person I took myself to be. In fact, the person I assumed that I was did not even exist, except as an assumption. The entity at the center of my world, the very self around which my mind and all of its problems, questions, doubts and issues revolved, was not and never had been present. All of those conceptual difficulties simply evaporated due to having no central point of reference any longer.

One of the first recognitions was a very clear knowing that the spiritual search that had lasted several decades was over. This was not because any particular goal had been attained, but because the seeker had disappeared. With the dissolution of the ‘I am’ as a valid concept, any other concept which I habitually attached to that concept, such as ‘I am this’ or ‘I am that’ was rendered null and void. ‘I’ no longer existed as the person I assumed I was. This did not mean that I disappeared. Relatively speaking, nothing changed at all. Perceiving, thinking, feeling, experiencing—all of these things went on as before. The difference was that things were no longer referred to a self-center, because there was no self-center. This made all the difference, for as ‘Sailor’ Bob Adamson once told me, suffering is nothing more than self-centered thinking. Suffering is a result of the belief in the reality of the separate self. And without the cause, can you have the effects?

With the self-center out of the picture, what was left? What was I? Clearly I was still there, but not as anything I had previously taken myself to be. I existed, but not as some ‘thing’. A better statement would be that I was no thing, meaning nothing in particular. I was aware, yet not confined to any particular state of consciousness. In this non-conceptual recognition, my being was vast, empty, clear, present, aware, utterly untouched by appearances, yet intimately connected

to them all, naturally and effortlessly present, inescapable, beyond doubt, fearless and free. The personal suffering that had gripped my mind for years, even during the years of being a spiritual 'person', simply could not reformulate any longer. And, most incredibly, this turned out to be the natural state that had been present from the start, only unrecognized until Bob Adamson pointed this out and encouraged me to see the obvious.

Do Not Follow the Questions

The most direct way of handling questions is not to follow the questions but notice that the very questions arise presently to you. Your being is clearly evident as that knowing presence that is aware of each and every question. Is your being here or not? Is there any separation from that, even now? Seeing this undermines the doubts immediately and leaves you clearly present and aware. That present awareness is your true nature. You can doubt many things, but you cannot doubt that you are.

Just get acquainted with what you are. Any strategy or approach is another movement of thought which, ultimately, leads away from the fact that what you are seeking you already are. The simple fact of our already-present identity as that wavers due to interest in thoughts. Then we look for special techniques to eradicate interest in the mind or simply to still it. But that is not conclusive. Simply understand very clearly what is happening. Have a good look and see the mechanism of suffering. Understanding is the key, rather than some technique or strategy.

It is the interest in self-centered thoughts that sustains suffering. It can be helpful to look at why the interest is there. Why are we interested in such thoughts, especially when such interest moves us away from the immediate clarity of what is true? I cannot offer a technique, because to do so would be speaking to you as a person, which is ultimately an imaginary concept. I would rather say just have a look and see where you are right now (and at every moment). If suffering or doubt arises, I suggest thoroughly understanding the mechanism of that. Understanding unwinds the conceptual bondage, because it is all based on a misconception or misunderstanding. Trying to exert an act of will to 'become free' would not work. Who is exercising it? Such an act of will, even if it could be accomplished, would be a mental event. Understanding is

more penetrating because awareness naturally stands beyond the mind's grasp.

If you observe a grasping onto passing thoughts, then there is that remainder of belief that such thoughts are true. Ferret out the beliefs driving the interest in thoughts. See if they are true. Typically, there is some statement being asserted in thought about who we are that we are still assuming as true. As long as that is not seen, the belief continues to arise. My main advice is to confirm and doubly confirm your true nature as the being-awareness beyond perceptions, feelings and thoughts, because it is only with that firm understanding that the false beliefs stand out very clearly. From there you can see the underlying mechanism of suffering and, in that understanding, be free of it.

Fear and Anxiety

Feelings of fear and anxiety are driven by assumptions and beliefs about our identity that are taken as true. Take a look at the beliefs and concepts. In my view there is no real adequate response to fears and anxieties per se (assuming they are conceptual in origin), because they are just effects of underlying causes. Following them, being with them, allowing them, transcending them and so forth are all unworkable as conclusive responses because those approaches fail to get to the root cause(s). I also do not feel that remaining present to the feelings as feelings is particularly effective in providing a resolution. It is a start. At least one is not then fighting the feelings, which is a clear dualism. But you can dig a bit deeper and probe into what I call the 'mechanism' of suffering. Notice that all suffering is driven by thoughts, more precisely, thoughts that are taken as true (that are believed). Suffering drops when those thoughts are exposed and questioned. However, you can continue the inquiry even deeper by investigating what is the root cause and source of all suffering thoughts. Here is my short course.

Suffering is only a product of thought. Not all thoughts cause suffering. In fact, most do not. Suffering thoughts are related to our sense of identity. In other words, suffering is self-centered thoughts. Self-centered thought revolves around the idea of a separate self, which we take to be what we are. This self is an image, a creation in thought. It is not who we truly are. From this 'mechanism' arises confusion and contradiction (that is, suffering). For a conclusive resolution of suffering, the root belief in the central 'I' notion needs to be questioned. Otherwise, the root of all suffering and doubt thrives. The separate 'I' is assumed to be real and present, but is it? Where is it? What is it? And what is the relationship between this assumed 'I' and what we truly are? When the 'I' is examined, it is found to be non-existent, except as a notion. In this seeing, the suffering, doubt and problems are resolved.

Thoughts and Awareness

There are different ways of using terms, and they can be used in contradictory ways. You need to look past the words to what is being pointed to. As I see it, there are thoughts, emotions, sensations and perceptions which appear or are known. Even this labeling is somewhat arbitrary. These experiences are objective, observable phenomena that appear before us as 'things' or observable events. Then there is the knowing presence, the one who knows those things. All you can say about this knowing presence is that it is and it is aware. There are no phenomenal characteristics that can be assigned to it, because it is not an object.

I use the term 'mind' very loosely to refer to the object side of things. It is only a makeshift label, as there really is no such thing as a mind, independent of the thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions that appear. Mind (used as a collective term referring to the objects) comes and goes. It arises and disappears. Awareness, which is the knowing presence itself, is quite different. That is why I feel it is an error to equate mind and awareness at this level of discussion. Take a thought. It appears and disappears in awareness. When it leaves, awareness does not disappear. Clearly they are not the same thing. Now a thought appears from and subsides into awareness, so in essence it is that awareness. But in the appearance as thought, you cannot say that the appearance as such is awareness. It is very important at this level to have a clear recognition of the difference between thought as such and awareness as such, because the whole problem ultimately boils down to overlooking the presence of awareness and mistaking the mind to be that which is conscious.

Getting back to the issue of thought and awareness, it might be summarized by the following statement: 'Thought is nothing but awareness, but awareness is not a thought'. This may appear cryptic, but it becomes clear if you look at

some analogies. A wave is nothing but water. But water, as such, is not a wave. The water can exist independently of the wave. But the wave cannot stand independent of water. A gold ornament is nothing but gold. But gold, as such, is not an ornament. The gold can exist independently of the ornament. But the ornament cannot stand independent of gold. So, a thought is nothing but awareness (that is, its substance is awareness), but awareness can exist independently from a particular thought. When a thought is present, you know it. When the thought is not present, you know that the thought is not present. Evidently, you as the conscious presence exist independently from that given thought.

When I talk about awareness, I am not referring to the mind (or functioning of thought) at all or even states of consciousness. I am referring to that knowing presence in you that is aware of thoughts, experiences and states of consciousness. The principle of awareness is quite independent of the mind, just as water is quite independent of its temporary manifestation as a wave.

Activity and Understanding

The main thing with all this is to clarify your identity. You are something after all! As I see it, all the paths and traditions are simply trying to clarify what we are. Some approaches of pointing to this tend to do it positively: 'You are this'. Some approaches do it negatively: 'You are not this'. In my view, they are all saying the same thing in different ways.

All the doing, studying and practicing tend to be distracting in the end. Why? All that really needs to happen is a correction of our view or understanding. Suffering arises from a misunderstanding, primarily a misunderstanding of who or what we are. No amount of activity addresses this necessarily. Also self-knowledge is really a clear understanding or insight. Basically, what you are, as you eventually come to see, is non-objective, non-conceptual being-awareness. It is totally, clearly present now. Being is. Awareness is cognizing right now. The interesting thing is that you actually know this and always have. There is an undeniable sense of being present and aware. It is totally, intuitively clear.

Something happens I would say (hopefully without getting too mystical) when you hear about this directly. Why? Because the one pointing to it knows it already. Words are just trying to point, but there is something being pointed to. That is in you, but you just do not 'see' it yet. This being, awareness or true nature is non-objective and pre or non-conceptual. In other words, before the next thought appears, being is and awareness is functioning. The conceptual mind is an instrument in non-conceptual awareness. There is a very basic point here, not to be missed or glossed over. The thinking mind is a tool or appearance that arises subsequent to your true nature. You are and what you are is aware or cognizant. The conceptual mind appears to this knowing presence. It is extremely critical to see this point. Make sure it is clear.

All questions are mental phenomena or thoughts. Being is not a thought. The mind is oriented to objectivity—things, thoughts and activities. That is why the thinking mind is not the proper tool for recognizing one's being. It cannot be done. It is like looking for wine in an empty wine bottle. It simply is not there! That is why only reading about this will never 'work'. Nor will practicing, in the sense of pursuing objective states.

Self-knowledge 'arises' from the non-conceptual recognition of your identity as aware-being. Every being is this presently. Only they may not have recognized what this is and are imagining themselves to be something they are not. This is the fundamental ignorance, the initial link in the chain of suffering. All hell breaks loose from there!

How to understand all this? There is no practice per se. Mere activity is not opposed to ignorance, only right knowledge can cancel ignorance. That is why the emphasis is on knowledge or understanding. The best way and most successful approach to understand this for most of us is to have discussions on this with someone who can speak from their own first-hand experience.

The Path of Becoming Versus Being

The notion that spirituality involves an awakening followed by a period of integration resulting in final liberation is entirely fallacious. Many non-discriminating seekers are misled by such patently dualistic and erroneous concepts. These notions are attractive primarily because they tally with the seeker's own unexamined beliefs, namely that he or she is a separate person and that freedom lies in the future at the end of a process. This is the path of becoming, rather than being, of duality, rather than non-duality.

Many who hold to this conceptual framework are convinced that they have 'awakened' and have understood the basic points of non-duality, but a little self-examination shows that the seeking, doubts, suffering and bondage to the conceptual mind are often still in full force. The continuing interest in so-called 'enlightened' teachers, spiritual fads, books, seminars, satsangs, retreats, self-improvement techniques and so on is a clear sign that the core matter is not settled and the basic message of non-duality is not clear.

Many working within this framework believe that lasting freedom will dawn after some period of time, such as five or ten years. They fail to see that freedom is not the result of time, which is only an imaginary concept. Freedom is the ever-present natural condition, which is only seemingly obscured by limiting beliefs and concepts that are being believed presently. The dualistic model elevates and glorifies the special, 'enlightened' teacher, who is assumed to have achieved the goal, and attracts those who view themselves as seekers who are on the inside track to their own eventual 'liberation' also.

Again, this model is popular not because it is true, but because it matches the seeker's own dualistic beliefs. The issue is often clouded by residual interest in fame, wealth, popularity, special status and so on. But eventually, through experience, discrimination and honest self-evaluation, the light dawns and

one begins to question the conceptual frameworks that one has assumed as true. Then the clear pointers of genuine non-duality may find an opening through which to strike.

The Utter Simplicity of This

Questions and doubts are thoughts arising and setting before you. They come and go, but you remain as what you are. You clearly exist and you are clearly aware. Everything else is an object that comes and goes. Everything you can sense, perceive or know is a thing, an object, an appearance. This includes the apparent body, mind, personality and all else.

All you can say about yourself is 'I am' and 'I know' and 'I am nothing perceivable or conceivable'. Awareness or being are not things 'out there' that you see apart from yourself. You *are* that which is present and aware. You are that pure knowing presence itself. This is so simple and intuitively obvious that we overlook the point that this is completely self-evident. Instead of simply pausing at this point, we are apt to jump back into the questions and doubts of the mind granting them a sense of reality. Suddenly, we are talking about 'I' and 'awareness' and trying to piece it all together at a conceptual level, and of course we come up empty handed. That is why the answer can never be found in the mind. The mind, as such, has no capacity to know your real nature. The mind is simply a label for a collection of inert thoughts rising and setting before your knowing presence. That is why all the questions and doubts fail to lead us to the direct knowing of who we are.

Before the next thought appears, you are. This presence, the sheer fact of being and knowing, does not need any confirmation by thought. It is clear and certain knowledge that does not need any mind activity to confirm. Everyone knows he or she is. That knowing does not engage the conceptual mind at all. It is evident. It is more than evident. It is beyond doubt, even now. You cannot say 'I am not' or 'I am not aware'. Try it and see if you can convince yourself otherwise! That is what is very interesting about this. The clear and certain self-knowledge is already established. Our trouble is that we give undue emphasis to the mind. 'What about this? What about

that?’ But can those thoughts even be there without your own existence?

The mind creates the notion of a limited ‘I’, a person, a being standing apart from pure awareness, then we identify as that seeming entity. But that itself is just a concept that comes and goes, leaving us totally untouched and unchanged. Taking that separation as real, we look for techniques to gain reality, we wonder how we will achieve knowledge of who we are and so on. But these are all founded on the notion that we are a separate ‘I’ apart from reality. We take this thought to be who we are, imagine a duality and seek understanding, as if we do not have it. But it is all conceptual, because we have never left reality. Reality is simple being, which is present and aware. You are that even now. The notion of separation, the ‘I’ thought, which is the basis of all concepts, is simply a notion that comes and goes as an image in the pure untouched awareness that you are.

Pause thought and know that you are already that which you have been seeking. All the doubts and questions are based on the presumption that you are separate from being-awareness. But that separation never happened. You are that knowing presence, even now. Words are apt to over-complicate the utter simplicity of this.