

Presence

The Art of Peace and Happiness

Volume I

Rupert Spira

PRESENCE: VOLUME ONE

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From THE SONNETS TO ORPHEUS

*Plump apple, smooth banana, melon, peach,
gooseberry... How all this affluence
speaks death and life into the mouth... I sense...
Observe it from a child's transparent features*

*while he tastes. This comes from far away.
What miracle is happening in your mouth?
Instead of words, discoveries flow out
from the ripe flesh, astonished to be free.*

*Dare to say what "apple" truly is.
This sweetness that feels thick, dark, dense at first;
then, exquisitely lifted in your taste,*

*grows clarified, awake and luminous,
double-meaninged, sunny, earthy, real—:
Oh knowledge, pleasure—inexhaustible.*

Rainer Maria Rilke
(Translated by Stephen Mitchell)

Preface

The cellist, Pablo Casals, explored and practised Bach's cello suites for thirty five years before recording them. In many ways the contemplations in this book follow a similar approach, exploring a single theme with gentle but somewhat relentless devotion.

In fact, even now, there is some reluctance to commit to the form of a finished book something whose nature does not lend itself readily to the written word. I would prefer the form of music, which dissolves as soon as it is uttered, leaving its true content as a formless perfume in the listener's heart.

This book is a meditation on the essential nature of experience, taking us on a journey into its heart. It is inevitable, therefore, that there is a certain amount of repetition.

For a mind that seeks new ideas, stimulation or entertainment, this repetition may seem frustrating at times, but for one who seeks the heart of experience it will not be experienced as such. Instead, we may see these contemplations as an ever deepening exploration of experience, giving way in time to an immersion in its essence.

In this exploration layers of subtlety and meaning are uncovered but we never rest for long on any particular formulation. Each new understanding dissolves the previous one, only to find itself being dissolved in time.

In fact, the potency of words which attempt to explore and express the nature of experience lies in their dissolving quality rather than their ability to formulate something that cannot accurately be put into words. It is in this spirit that I hope this book will be read.

Rupert Spira
September 2011

Introduction

If we were to conduct a poll of all six billion people living on earth which asked what they most wanted in life, almost all would answer, 'Happiness.'¹ Some may not answer as directly as this, saying instead that they want, for instance, an intimate partner, a family or more money, but all these are desired only for the happiness that they produce. In fact, most activities are undertaken with a view to obtaining happiness.

To begin with, in our search for happiness, we explore the possibilities that are available in the conventional realms of the body, mind and world. From an early age we discover that the acquisition of the object² of our desire seems to produce the happiness we long for and, as a result, the correlation between the acquisition of objects, activities or relationships, on the one hand, and the experience of happiness on the other, is established as a fundamental fact of our lives.

However, after some time, although we may still possess the desired object—whether it is a physical object, a relationship, an activity or a mental state—the experience of happiness that it seemed to produce, fades. This alone should be enough to indicate that happiness is not a result of the acquisition of objects, relationships or states. If happiness were related to objects then, as long as the object remained, happiness would remain.

Instead of receiving this simple message, we simply discard the object that once seemed to produce happiness and seek another one in its place, in the hope that it will redeliver the happiness that is now missing. In fact, this pattern of seeking one object after another in an attempt to secure happiness, peace or love, is the basic pattern of most people's lives.

Then, after the repeated failure of the normal objects of desire to produce happiness, we begin to seek other means. Either our search in the conventional realms of work and money, food and substances, or sex and relationships, will increase to an obsessive level, resulting in various degrees of addiction, or we will turn our attention away from the conventional field of possibilities and begin a spiritual search.

The spiritual search is usually undertaken as a result of the failure of the search to secure happiness, peace and love in the conventional realms of experience. Instead of happiness, which seems to be available only in fleeting glimpses, we now seek a permanent state of enlightenment. In fact, our search for enlightenment is simply a rebranding of the conventional search for happiness.

This search takes us to new realms of experience, tending to focus on the acquisition of states of mind rather than objects or relationships in the world. And just as the acquisition of an object or relationship puts a temporary end to the conventional search, giving us a brief taste of happiness, so these newly acquired states of mind bring the spiritual search to a temporary end, again giving us a glimpse of the same happiness, which we now call awakening or enlightenment. However, just as we previously mistook the acquisition of objects and relationships for the source of happiness, so we now confuse these new states of mind for enlightenment.

However, these brief glimpses, like the previous moments of happiness, are soon eclipsed by the old patterns of seeking happiness, peace and love in objects, relationships and states. As a result we are again faced with the failure of our search, only this time there are no more possible realms in which to search. Like the prodigal son, we have ventured into a 'far-off country' seeking happiness and we have now exhausted all its possibilities.

For some this failure is experienced as a time of despair or crisis. There are no further directions in which to turn and yet the search has not been brought to a satisfactory end. The usual means

of bringing the search to an end, or at least avoiding the discomfort of it, through substances, activities and relationships or subtler meditative states of mind, may have temporarily numbed it but in our hearts it is still burning. There is nowhere left to seek and yet we cannot stop seeking.

We do not all have to go to such extremes. In some cases intelligence rather than despair precipitates the understanding that what we truly long for cannot be found in any state of the body, mind or world. In fact it is always our own innate intelligence that is operating. In some it takes the shape of a crisis that strikes at the heart of our lives. In others it may be more measured.

However, in either case a new doorway may open up—the only one that has yet to be explored. Who is this self that is in almost constant search of happiness and what is the nature of this happiness? This is the moment when the prodigal son turns around. This book starts with this turning around. It is a profound exploration of the nature of our self and the happiness that we seek.

(1) In this book 'happiness' is synonymous with peace, love, beauty and understanding.

(2) In this book 'objects' refer to anything that is experienced in the mental, emotional or physical realms, including all thoughts, images, feelings, sensations and perceptions.

Part 1



Our True Nature

Who or What am I?

All we know of the mind, body and world is our experience of them and experience is utterly dependent on the presence of our self, whatever that may be. Nobody has ever or could ever experience a mind, body or world without their own self first being present.

All experience is known by our self and therefore our knowledge of the mind, body and world is related to and dependent upon our knowledge of our self.

The poet and painter William Blake said, "As a man is, so he sees." He meant that the way a person sees or understands him or herself deeply conditions the ways he or she sees and understands objects, others and the world.

Let us, therefore, start with our self, for everything depends upon it. What do we know about our self for certain?

In order to find this out we have to be willing to lay aside all we have learned about our self through others or our culture and be willing to rely only upon our own intimate, direct experience. After all, experience must be the test of reality.

The first thing we know for sure is that 'I am'. This simple knowing of our own being—so simple and obvious that it is usually overlooked—turns out to be the most precious knowledge that anyone can have.

We may not know *what* I am but we know *that* I am. Nobody can legitimately deny their own being, for even to deny oneself, one must first be present.

No one asserts 'I am' because they have been told it by their parents or learned it in a book. Our own being is always our direct, familiar and intimate experience. It is self-evident and beyond doubt.

In other words, being or presence is an inherent quality of our self. What else can we say for certain about our self?

Whatever our self actually is, 'I' is the name we give to it. In order to assert with certainty that 'I am'—and this assertion is one of the very few assertions that we can legitimately make—we must *know* or *be aware* that 'I am'. In other words, the reason we are sure about our own being is because it is *known* through *direct* experience. We do not rely on secondhand information nor on information that comes from the past to certify our own being. Right now our being or presence is obvious.

What is it that knows or is aware of our being? Is it 'I' that knows that 'I am', or am 'I' known by someone or something other than myself? It is obviously 'I' that knows that 'I am'. In other words, the 'I' that 'I am' is also the very same 'I' that *knows* or *is aware* that 'I am'.

In other words, awareness or knowing is an inherent quality of our self and it is our self, 'I,' that knows that it is both present and aware.

Our self doesn't need to *know* something special in order to know that it is present and aware. It knows itself just by being itself because it is by *nature* aware or knowing. Nor does it need to *do* something special, such as to think, to know that it is present. The knowing of our own being is the simple and most obvious fact of its experience. It is prior to all thinking, feeling or perceiving.

If someone were to ask us, "Are you present?" we may pause for a while and answer, "Yes." In that pause we refer to our intimate and direct experience of our self and from that experience comes the certainty of our answer. In that pause we do not refer to thinking, feeling or perceiving; we refer directly to our self. It refers to itself.

In other words, our self knows that it is present and aware *by* itself, *through* itself alone. It doesn't need any other agent such as a mind or a body, let alone an outside source, to confirm its own aware presence. It knows itself directly.

So it is clear from our own intimate and direct experience that 'I' am not just *present* but am also *aware*. It is for this reason that our self is sometimes referred to as awareness, which simply means the presence of that which is aware. The word 'awareness' indicates that the being we intimately know our self to be—that knows itself to be—is inherently present and aware.

In this book our self is also referred to as 'aware presence' or sometimes simply 'presence'. It is also sometimes referred to as 'consciousness' or 'being'. But most simply this aware presence is known as 'I.'

Whatever we may choose to call it, it is simply the intimacy of our own being—awareness' awareness of itself—which is the most obvious, familiar and direct knowledge that everyone has.

Before we know anything else we first know our own being. It knows itself. That is, the aware presence that we intimately and directly know ourselves to be, knows that it is aware and present. 'I' is the name we give to this simple knowing of our own being.

In fact, this knowing of our own being is so simple and obvious and, above all, so apparently insignificant that it is usually overlooked. This forgetting or overlooking of our most intimate being, although apparently such a small thing, in fact initiates almost all of our thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships and turns out to be the source of all unhappiness.

However, what is it that could forget or overlook this simple knowing of our own being, awareness' knowing of itself? Our being obviously cannot forget or overlook itself because the knowing of our own being is not something we *do*; it is what we *are*.

In fact, it is thought which seems to obscure this simple know-

ing of our own being and makes it seem that our self is something other than the presence of awareness. This obscuring thought is later substantiated with feelings and results in the veiling or loss of the knowing of our self as it truly is—its knowing of itself as it truly is—and the belief and feeling that we are something other than this aware presence.

The history of humanity on an individual and collective scale is the drama of this loss of our true identity and the subsequent search to regain it.

From 'I-the-Body-and-Mind' to 'I-Aware-Presence'

What other qualities does our self, this aware presence, possess other than simply being and awareness?

The fact that our self is present and aware is beyond doubt. However, to this simple knowing of our own being we normally add many attributes. In this book we proceed very slowly, referring only to our direct and intimate knowledge of our self, adding attributes, if any, that truly come from experience—that is, from our self's own experience of itself—rather than from any belief.

The first attribute we usually add to our self, to the simple knowing of our own being, is the belief that it resides *in*, is made *of* and is limited *to* the body and mind. We consider that our self resides inside the body and mind and that everyone and everything else resides outside.

This is the primary belief that is responsible for the fundamental presumption that underpins our entire culture, that experience is divided into two parts—a separate, inside subject, the self that knows, feels or perceives, and a separate, outside object, other or world that is known, felt or perceived.

This essential belief that 'I, aware presence' am synonymous with and limited to the body, and therefore share its characteristics, is responsible for the veiling or forgetting of our true identity of aware presence.

The simple knowing of our own being is not actually veiled or forgotten as a result of this belief any more than a screen is veiled

by the appearance of an image that appears on it, but it seems to be. This illusion, although it never actually happens, is tremendously powerful and profoundly conditions the way we think, feel, act and relate.

Let us look at this apparent fact that our self resides in and shares the characteristics of the body in more detail.

Notice first something in the apparently outside world, for instance the sound of passing traffic, or the sight of buildings or the landscape. The sound or the sight is known or experienced by our self, aware presence. We believe that I, this aware presence that apparently lives inside and is limited to the body, hears the sound of traffic or sees the buildings or the landscape.

However, I am obviously not a sound or a sight. I am whatever it is that is *aware* of the sound of traffic, or the sight of the buildings or landscape. These sounds and sights come and go, but I, aware presence, remain. For this reason we know that I am not a car, a building or the landscape.

Now what about the body? Are we not also aware of the body in a similar way to being aware of sounds and sights?

For instance if we have a headache, we are aware of it as a sensation that appears and disappears, just as we are aware of the sound of traffic that appears and disappears. For this reason we know that a headache is not essential to our self. Our experience of our self—awareness' experience of itself—is that it is ever present. Therefore, whatever we essentially are must also be ever present.

It is because a headache appears and disappears, as opposed to our self that remains after it has gone, that we know that a headache is not essential to our self. It is not what we *are*. Even if we have never formulated it in this way, it is because a headache appears and disappears that we understand that a headache is not essential to our being.

If we now turn our attention to the tingling sensation of the face, hands or feet, we discover that we are aware of that sensation just as

we are aware of the traffic, the buildings, the landscape or a headache. And just as sounds and sights appear and disappear, so do the sensations of the body, leaving our self, aware presence, remaining.

In other words, the body—in this case, the face, hands or feet—are objects of our attention just like the sounds and sights of the world and we, aware presence, are their subject or knower.

In this way we come to a simple but revolutionary discovery: it is not 'I, the body' that am the *subject* or *knower* of experience but rather 'I, aware presence', that am the subject or knower of experience, and the objects of the body, like the objects of the world, are *known* or *experienced*. In other words, we are aware of the sensations of the body in the same way that we are aware of the perceptions of the world.

We may object that a headache is not always present and is therefore not inherent in our self, whereas the body *is* always present and is therefore legitimately considered to be our self. However, if we go to any sensation or perception of the body, we find that it is not always present.

If we look closely at the actual *experience* of the body rather than the *idea* we may have of it, we find that our only experience of it is the current sensation or perception. All sensations and perceptions appear and disappear but our self, aware presence, remains throughout. This ever-present 'I' cannot therefore be made out of an intermittent object such as a sensation or perception.



Now what about the mind that, for most of us, is considered to be identical with our self? The mind consists of thoughts and images. In fact, no one has ever experienced a mind as such, that is, a permanently existing container of all thoughts, images, memories, fears, hopes, desires etc. The existence of a container of all of those is itself

an idea. In other words, we do not know a mind, as such. All we know of the apparent mind is the current thought or image.

Take any thought, such as the thought, “What shall we have for dinner tonight?” That thought appears as a subtle object similar to a perception of the world or a sensation in the body. In other words, it is not ‘I, the mind,’ that is the subject or knower of my experience, but rather ‘I, aware presence,’ that is the subject or knower of the objects of the world, body *and* mind.

Ask yourself if, in your actual experience, the body is the subject or knower of experience. Can a face, hand or foot know or experience something? Can a face, hand or foot hear, taste, smell or, for instance, see these words? Or are the face, hands and feet *known* or *experienced* along with everything else?”

And what about a thought or an image? Can a thought or an image know or experience something? Can a thought see or an image hear? Can a thought see or understand these words or are thoughts seen and understood by our self?

If we stay close to experience, using only our actual experience as a test of truth or reality, we will see that the body and mind do not *know* or *experience*—they are *known* or *experienced*.

See clearly that it is not ‘I, the body and mind,’ that is aware of the world but rather that ‘I, this aware presence,’ is aware of the body, mind and world.

The discovery that our self is not essentially a body or a mind but is in fact the aware being or presence that knows or witnesses them, has radical and profound implications.



witnesses the mind, body and world. The second is to *be* that, knowingly, instead of imagining that we are something else such as a body or a mind.

We do not *become* this witnessing presence as a result of this exploration. Rather we notice that we are *always only* that and now we abide as that *knowingly*.

Previously we took our self to be a body and a mind and all experience was conditioned by and appeared in accordance with this belief. Now we reclaim what was always ours. We stand knowingly as the witnessing presence that we always are but which is nevertheless sometimes veiled, forgotten or overlooked.

When we witness our body and mind in this way, we stand, without perhaps realizing at first, as the aware presence to which they appear.

In the following chapters we will take our stand as this witnessing presence of awareness and explore our experience of our self, as that. That is, we will explore awareness’ own knowledge of itself from its own intimate and direct experience.

Although the results of this exploration will be formulated by the mind, it is important that the experiment itself is not based on thought, that it is not based on the *ideas* we may have about our self, but rather on our actual experience of our self, on the simple knowing of our own being as it actually is in its own experience of itself.

The first step in this consideration is the discovery that we are this aware presence and to see that it is this presence that knows or

Our Self is Without Location or Limit

For a mind that has become accustomed for so many years to knowing only objects—that is, to focusing its attention and interests on the body, mind and world alone—it is inevitable that the desire to know oneself as some kind of a subtle object will persist. We will search for this aware presence and try to make it an object of our knowledge or experience.

However, if we return again and again to the experiential understanding that our self is the knower or witness of all objects, it becomes clear that it cannot itself be an object.

It is our simple experience that our self is present and aware but has no objective qualities. As this experiential understanding deepens, so the attempt to search for our self as an object decreases correspondingly.

The inability to know our self as an object does not mean that our self cannot be known. It simply means that it cannot be known in the way that an object is usually known, that is, through the subject-object relationship.

Our true self is known in a more intimate and direct way, simply through being. In fact, we discover that the only way to *know* our self is to *be* our self and not to mistake our self for any kind of an object.

If someone were to ask us to turn our attention towards a sensation in the body, a thought or image in the mind or an object in the world, we would have no difficulty, just as we have no difficulty in turning our attention towards these words.

But what about if someone were to ask us to turn towards our *self*, towards the aware presence that *knows* the objects of the body, mind and world? Try to do that. For instance, try to turn your attention towards whatever it is that is seeing these words. Some of us may be inclined to turn our attention towards a sensation around the eyes or head, but notice that the eyes and the head are themselves sensations of which we are aware.

Try again to turn your attention towards whatever it is that is *aware* of these sensations and which is not itself a sensation. In which direction do we turn? Notice that any direction in which we turn is always towards some kind of an object, more or less subtle.

If we take our attention away from that object and try to turn it towards whatever it is that *knows* or *experiences* that object we are always frustrated. Every direction turns out to be the wrong direction. It is like standing up and trying to take a step towards one's body; every step is the wrong direction. And yet, at the same time, no step takes us further away.

At some point there may be a spontaneous collapse of the attempt to find oneself as an object in the body or mind. In this collapse, the seeking mind comes briefly to an end and in that moment—it is, in fact, a timeless moment—our self glimpses or tastes itself as it is, pure aware presence, unconditioned by any of the beliefs or feelings that thought superimposes upon it.

Although this experience is a transparent or non-objective experience that does not come in the form of a thought, image, sensation or perception, nevertheless when the mind and the body reappear, they will often seem to be pervaded by a new kind of knowing which is at once intimate and familiar, and at the same time comes from an unknown direction.

The mind and the body are in fact transformed, albeit temporarily, by this transparent experience and may even be bewildered or even occasionally afraid by it. However, because the mind is not present during this transparent and timeless experience, the experience

itself cannot be remembered. There is nothing objective there to remember.

As a result, the mind will, in most cases, dismiss this transparent experience as insignificant or even non-existent and get back to its usual business of focusing on objects in some form or other.

However, this dissolution into our true nature leaves a residue within us that can never be completely forgotten and often remains for decades as a sort of nostalgia or longing for something that once existed in our past, often in childhood, and for which, in quiet moments or at a time when the normal flow of our life is interrupted, we deeply long.

In fact, it did not exist in our *past*. It is present in our *self*. It is our self and is present and available now as it was then, in that first brief acquaintance.

If we ponder this new but strangely familiar experience and keep returning to it, we come to the extraordinary and profound realization that we cannot find our self—it cannot find itself—as an object located in space. We discover that we are *aware* of all objects and places but that our self is not itself an object nor does it have any actual experience of itself being located in any particular place.

In other words, if we stay close to the simple, direct knowing of our being—its knowing of itself—we find that we have no knowledge of our self being located somewhere.

It is in fact only a thought that first identifies our self, aware presence, with the body, that subsequently imagines that we are located within it. This thought is superimposed upon our true nature of aware presence, but never actually locates it.

In identifying our self as a body, thought presumes that we, aware presence, share the qualities and therefore the limits that the body possesses.



And can we find any limit to our self, aware presence? The mind may imagine limits but do we actually experience any? It is our self, aware presence, that knows or experiences whatever is known or experienced. So the question may be re-phrased by asking if our self, aware presence, has any experience of *itself* being limited.

To begin with, the imagined limits that the mind superimposes upon our self may seem so obviously true as to eclipse our actual experience. However, if we put these beliefs on one side and really explore whether or not there is any real experience of a limit to our self, this aware presence, we realize that there is none.

Every limit that the mind suggests turns out to be some kind of an object. The mind claims that our self is a body and, having made this initial presumption, subsequently claims that it has a shape, an age, a history, a future, a weight, a colour, a nationality, a gender and a size.

However, all these characteristics are qualities of the body not of our self. They are known *by* our self but do not belong *to* our self. They do not limit our self any more than an image limits the screen on which it appears.

If we return again and again to our self in this way, looking always for any quality that actually limits it, it becomes clear that our self has never experienced any limit within itself. In fact, aware presence always experiences itself as being without limits, but this experience is usually eclipsed by the beliefs that the mind superimposes upon it.

We have become so accustomed to thinking and, more importantly, to feeling that our own being shares the limits of the body that we now take it for granted. Subsequently most, if not all, our thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships express this fundamental presumption.

This realization, like all understanding when it actually takes place, is always sudden. In fact, it is timeless because the mind is not party to our self's own experience of itself and, without the mind, there is no time. However, it may not always be immediate. It may take a period of contemplative and sensitive exploration of our experience to come to this understanding.

This discovery of the unlimited nature of our self may have dramatic and immediate effects in our life—the mind may even be quite confused that its own belief systems no longer seem convincing but have not yet been replaced with a new interpretation of experience. However, this experiential understanding may just as well go almost unnoticed for a while, in which case the mind will gradually become accustomed to our newly discovered experience of our self.

Either way, if this experiential understanding is explored and its implications allowed to permeate our lives, it will turn out to be the greatest discovery one can ever make and the key to resolving the dilemma that exists at the core of almost everybody's life: the almost constant search for peace, happiness and love.

The Forgetting of our Essential Being

Having overlooked the simple knowing of our own being as it is and imagined it instead to be located in and as a body and mind, we have come to believe that our self, aware presence, shares the qualities of thoughts, feelings, images and sensations.

We have forgotten that we are the one that is *aware* of thoughts, feelings, images and sensations and believe instead and, more importantly, feel that we actually *are* those thoughts, feelings, images or sensations.

If a feeling of sadness appears, we feel that *I* am sad. If we look at our face in the mirror and see that it has aged, we think that *I* am aging. If a thought tells us that we are forty years old, we think that *I* am forty years old. If an agitated thought appears, we feel that *I* am agitated. If a sensation of hunger appears we feel that *I* am hungry. If we got poor grades at school we feel that *I* failed. If the grades were good, that *I* succeeded. If there are no friends around we feel that *I* am lonely. If the body is sick or dying, we feel that *I* am sick and dying. If there is resistance to the current situation and a desire to change it for a better one we feel that *I* am unhappy. We could go on almost indefinitely.

Suffice it to say that our understanding of our self is deeply conditioned by our beliefs and feelings. We have invested our being with the limited qualities of the body and mind. Just as the screen seems to be overtaken by the qualities of the film that appears on it, so our essential being seems to be overtaken by the qualities of the body and mind.

For instance the screen seems to become blue when the sky appears in the film, but blueness never becomes an essential quality of the screen. It just seems to colour it temporarily. Our being has become coloured by the qualities of the mind and body in the same way, to such an extent that it seems to have actually *become* those qualities.

The screen is, in fact, colourless and it is precisely this colourlessness that enables it to assume all colours without itself ever actually becoming a colour. Likewise, our essential being is objectless, transparent, open, empty, aware presence—it has no objective qualities that pertain to the body or mind—and it is precisely because of this that we are capable of the entire range of thoughts, feelings and perceptions without ever actually becoming a thought, feeling or perception.

In fact, all thoughts, feelings and perceptions shine primarily with the light of our essential nature, by which they are illumined or known, irrespective of their particular characteristic, just as all images shine with the light of the screen.

When the film starts we forget the screen and pay attention only to the film. In fact, the screen *seems* to become an image. This is what happens to our essential being. It seems to have become taken over by thoughts, feelings and images so as to be indistinguishable from them.

Thus this inadvertent mixture of our self with a collection of thoughts, feelings, images and sensations has taken root in us to such an extent, and is so encouraged by our culture and education, that it is now normal to think and, more importantly, to feel our self as a sort of collage of such thoughts, feelings, images and sensations.

We have forgotten our essential identity of pure aware being and allowed it to become mixed up with the characteristics and qualities that define the body and mind. Most people live almost constantly in this state of amnesia and their lives are a reflection of this simple forgetting.



Who is the one that has forgotten this? Our self is always only itself, prior to and independent of any thought that may or may not be present.

Awareness is not a quality that our self turns on and off. Awareness is its nature. It is always present and aware and, therefore, by definition, always aware of itself.

This self-awareness, or awareness' knowing of itself, may be eclipsed by the appearance of a thought or feeling but it is never extinguished by it, just as the screen is never truly veiled by the appearance of an image although it may seem to be.

The self that we seem to have become as a result of the forgetting or veiling of our essential being is an imaginary one. It is in fact a *thought*, not an entity or a self, that has caused this exclusive association of our self with an object of the body and mind.

This thought equates or identifies the characteristics of the body and mind with our essential being, and collates them into what seems to become a separate, independent entity or self that resides in the body. This thought takes the awareness that is present in and as our essential being and the limited qualities of the body and mind, mixes them together and produces, as a result, an imaginary, limited, separate self that lives inside the body and mind.

These two, awareness—our self—and the limited qualities of the body and mind, seem to become one entity, one self. However, this apparently separate, inside self is made only out of the thought that thinks it.

It is like mixing oil and vinegar and producing one single substance, salad dressing. However, when the salad dressing is allowed to settle, the oil and vinegar separate out. We realize that they only seemed to be one homogenous substance.

The investigative and contemplative exploration of our experience that we are engaged in here is the settling out of these two qualities—the qualities that are innate in our essential being and those that properly belong to the appearances of the body and mind.

Having imagined this ‘I-the-separate-inside-self’, thinking then further invests it with numerous other attributes, thereby transforming what is, in fact, just a fragile, ephemeral thought into what seems to be a dense, complex entity.

This forgetting of the true nature of our essential self is never an experience of our actual self. It is always only a thought. In other words, our self—the true and only self there is—never forgets itself, from its own point of view, which is the only real point of view there is.

The forgetting of our essential nature is always for thought, never for our self. It is for this reason that all the subsequent thoughts and feelings that depend upon this primary ‘I-the-separate-inside-self’ thought, are only for the separate inside self that thinking imagines us to be, and never for our real self.

Later it will be seen that all psychological suffering is born of this ‘I-the-separate-inside-self’ thought and therefore all suffering is for the imaginary self, never for the true and only self that we always are.

In reality, our true self is never sad, of a certain age, agitated, hungry, lonely, sick or dying, etc. Even in the presence of such beliefs and feelings, our self is utterly free of them. Our self is present as the knower or experiencer of such qualities but is not made out of them.

At the same time, whenever such thoughts or feelings appear, they are intimately one with our self, just as the image on a screen is intimately one with the screen. In this way, our self is both the knower of all such thoughts and feelings—hence our inherent independence and freedom—and, at the same time, intimately one with

them. This intimacy of experience is love. It is for this reason that all true intimacy or love is always combined with freedom.

In fact, our essential being is never truly obscured by these thoughts and feelings just as the TV is never truly covered up by the image and, therefore, it is more a matter of recognizing the true nature of our being rather than finding it.

This exclusive mixture of our essential being with the appearances of the body or mind is the single event that dictates most of the thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships of this apparent entity. However, it is not an event that happened long ago and is now cast in stone. It is re-enacted moment by moment and can be dropped at any moment just by simply recognizing who we really are.

Presence

The Intimacy of All Experience

Volume II

Rupert Spira

PRESENCE: VOLUME TWO

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*Pure intimacy
Parted by thought
Becomes a self and world*

Introduction: The Seamless Intimacy of Experience

In 1998 I was staying with my friend and teacher, Francis Lucille, and we were talking about the nature of experience. At one point a dog started to bark in the distance and I observed that it seemed a fact of experience that the dog was outside, separate and at a distance from myself.

Francis said to me, "Shut your eyes and place your hands on the carpet." I placed my hands on the carpet and he asked, "Now where does that sensation take place?" That was all he said.

At that moment it suddenly became clear that the sensation of the carpet was inside me, that is, inside this perceiving consciousness, appearing in exactly the same place as my thoughts and bodily sensations.

On opening my eyes the carpet appeared to be outside again. However, I reasoned that the carpet was only one thing. As a sensation it seemed to be inside but as a visual perception it seemed to be outside. Well, which was it? It couldn't be both.

In this way I explored and experimented with my experience, always with the same question in mind, "What is the real nature of this experience?" I didn't want a rational response, couched in the non-dual terms that had become so familiar over two decades of seeking. I wanted direct experience.

I would sit for hours refusing the conventional labels that thinking superimposes on experience, allowing experience to reveal itself as it is. As time went on it became more and more obvious that all experience takes place inside consciousness, that is, inside myself, whatever that is.

In due course I came to see in an experiential way that if there is nothing outside experience there can be nothing inside, for inside and outside are two sides of the same coin. One cannot stand without the other. Experiencing simply remains, neither inside nor outside, and the totality of this experiencing is permeated with, inseparable from and ultimately made out of consciousness, our self. In fact, it is misleading to have three words, experiencing, consciousness and our self, for that which is always one.

Nothing extraordinary happened except the falling away of the concepts with which we normally describe our experience and with which we artificially fragment experience into a perceiving subject on the inside and a perceived object, other or world on the outside.

Over a period of time there were many revelations about the nature of experience, each one seeming to penetrate more deeply to its core. and, as a result, the old belief systems with which experience had been shrouded for so long were slowly dismantled.

During this time the fabric of the separate inside self became clear and with it the so-called separate outside world. The separate self was revealed as a dense and intricate network of resisting, fearing, avoiding, seeking and conceptualising. In other words, it became clear that the separate self is not in fact an *entity* but rather an *activity* that appears in consciousness.

And as a natural corollary to this understanding, it became clear that all we know of an outside world is sensing and perceiving which, although seeming to take place outside, in fact takes place within consciousness, in exactly the same place as the resisting and seeking that characterise the separate self. In both cases, whether I looked inside or outside, it became clear that there is only the seamless intimacy of pure experiencing itself.

In other words, it was clearly seen that consciousness pervades all experience equally. No part of experience is any closer to or further from consciousness than any other part. In fact, there are no parts to experience. It is one seamless, intimate whole permeated by

and ultimately made out of consciousness.

All that changed was that a centre or location where thinking, sensing, perceiving, feeling, loving, acting etc. takes place was no longer imagined. The continual reference to a personal self fell away and with it the imaginary distance, objectivity and otherness of the world dissolved. Only experiencing remains... direct, intimate, vibrant and friendly.

The title of my first book, *The Transparency of Things* came to me as a way of trying to indicate that all our so-called objective experience—the body, world, things and others—is made out of the same transparent, open, empty, luminous substance as the consciousness in which they appear.

The current title, *Presence*, goes a step further. There are no 'things' there in the first place to be transparent or otherwise. There is simply aware presence, ever-present, knowing, being and loving itself, sometimes resting, as it were, in the knowing of its own being and sometimes simultaneously knowing, being and loving itself in and as every minute gesture of the apparent mind, body and world.



As far as trying to share or communicate this experiential understanding, it is legitimate and in most cases necessary to have the freedom, sensitivity and flexibility to begin at any point along the apparent paths of understanding or love, depending on the perspective of the question, and to explore the nature of experience from there, taking the presumption that is concealed in the question as a starting point.

Most of what is said in this book has been prompted by a question, because without a question there is little impulse to formulate what cannot truly be formulated. As such, what is said here will, in most cases, start from the underlying presumption in the question

and go from there to as direct a formulation of the nature of experience as is possible in the given circumstance.

However, it may not go there in one leap. It may involve an apparent process in time in which we move slowly, intimately and carefully from our presumptions, whether they be in the form of beliefs or feelings, to our direct experience. How long we take and how directly we go depends on the nature of the resistance of the dualising mind that is being engaged in this conversation. We may go straight from there to the reality of our experience in the shortest and most direct way, or we may proceed slowly and even not quite complete the full exploration, leaving that to be completed by the one who is asking the question.

In this way, the reality of our experience is refracted into as many formulations as there are questions, none of them being absolutely true but each one tailored with love and understanding to the presumptions that are concealed and expressed in the question.

So our conversations are like a dance, intimately, subtly and lovingly following the dualising mind in all its abstract, convoluted and erroneous beliefs, dancing with it for as long as it wishes to dance; never trying to replace one concept with another that is deemed to be absolutely true, but all the time using concepts to dissolve the hardened shell of abstract thinking in which our experience seems to have been imprisoned, thereby leaving the raw reality of experience naked, as it were, shining in and by itself.

In this way, we avoid the pitfall of responding to all questions with the same absolute truth (as if the absolute truth could be accurately expressed by any formulation) which, although seemingly unassailable, may simply be one more refuge for the sense of a separate self—the refuge of non-dual perfectionism. Above all, this freedom from the new convention of non-dual perfectionism leaves it abundantly clear that the reality of experience cannot be adequately formulated by the mind and the little imperfections in every phrase are repeated reminders of this.

In fact, words are the least part of what is being communicated here. However, being confined to this written form they may temporarily assume more importance than they deserve. Rather, it is the experiential understanding from which the words come that is their true import, and this leaves open the possibility of a wide variety of expressions and formulations, including even those that may seem to condone the apparently independent existence of objects, entities, things and the world, if needs be.

Any teaching that mechanically asserts and reasserts the same absolute truth as a blanket answer to all questions is, at best, dogmatic and, at worst, dubious. The true non-dual understanding is like an explosion—it cannot be contained in any form. It is always uprooting any attempt of the mind to catch it, tie it down, package or control it. This explosion may or may not be fierce. It may just as well be a gentle almost imperceptible dissolving.

My hope is that these words will be like drinking a delicious old wine. We take small sips with long pauses in between and the wine percolates into the mind and body, pervading and dissolving them as it goes. Such are the words of the teaching. It is the after-taste that truly matters. Long after the words have gone, the silence from which they originate and with which they are saturated resonate in the mind and body, drawing them into itself.

The Primacy of Presence

Experience is all that is known or could be known. So let us start here. Where else could we start? What is the reality of this current experience?

There are these words and all the other apparent objects of the mind, body and world, that is, thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions. And there is 'something' present which is seeing these words and experiencing whatever else is being experienced in this moment. This 'something' is experiencing the tingling sensation we call our feet; it is hearing the sound of rain; it is knowing our thoughts.

Whatever it is that is experiencing the current amalgam of thoughts, sensations and perceptions is undoubtedly present and is therefore sometimes referred to as 'being', and undoubtedly knowing, experiencing or aware and is therefore sometimes referred to as 'consciousness' or 'awareness'. Above all, it is what we know and experience our self to be and therefore it is known as 'I'.

Every experience is, as it were, lit up and simultaneously known by our self, this aware presence. Without it no experience is possible. Our self is the knowing or experiencing aspect in every experience. It is also the being or existence aspect of all experience—the 'amness' of the self and the 'isness' of all seeming things.

Experiences are changing all the time but *experiencing* is present throughout these changes. Would it be possible to experience the absence of this experiencing? No! In order to claim legitimately that experiencing was absent, its absence would have to be experienced and, by definition, experiencing would therefore be present.

Would it be possible to experience the beginning or end of experiencing? If we claim that experiencing begins or ends, something must be present there experiencing its beginning or ending. If we stay close to experiencing, which is always now, we see that it is only abstract thought that claims that it begins and ends. It is, in fact, ever-present.

Does experiencing change when the particular characteristics of experiences change? No! It is present consistently throughout all changes. Therefore, experiencing itself cannot be made out of something that changes, such as a thought, sensation or perception.

Everything that is known or experienced is known *by* or *through* our self, aware presence. In time, this presence is understood to be the *only* substance present in experiencing.

Our self, presence, is the most intimate fact of experience. It pervades all experience. It is what we refer to as 'I'. It is what we intimately know ourselves to be or, more simply, it is the knowing of being. Our being is not known by something or someone other than itself. It is known by itself. The 'I' that I *am* is also that 'I' that *knows* that I am. However, 'I' does not know itself as *something*, as an object. It *is* the knowing of itself. It knows itself simply by being itself.

Presence, consciousness, awareness, our own being, is the primal and essential ingredient of experience. It is that which makes all experience possible and knowable. In time we discover that this presence is the *only* ingredient of experience. As such it is not an ingredient, something that experience is made *of*, but rather it simply *is* experience, all alone.

Is our self, our own being, ever not present? Prior to the arising of thought, there is no experience of time, in which our self is either present or not. Even *during* the appearance of thought there is no experience of time but only the *appearance* of time. However, even now our self is not present *in* the present moment. It *is* the present; not 'now' a moment in time but eternally, timelessly ever-present now.

Would it be possible to experience the absence of our self? What would know or experience such an absence? That one would have to be both present and aware. In other words it would be our self, aware presence. Would it be possible to have an experience without our self? Is any part of experience not utterly permeated with that which knows it? Do we know of anything that exists apart, separate or independent from our self? No!

All apparently objective qualities of sight, sound, touch, taste and smell are known or experienced *by* our self and, therefore, although undeniably present, our self itself cannot have any objective qualities. All objective qualities are known *by* our self, but our self is not made out of an object.

All experience is pervaded by experiencing or knowing. This knowingness is present throughout all thoughts, feelings, sensations and perceptions irrespective of their particular characteristics. Presence, our self, is this transparent unchanging knowingness in all experience.

If we remove all that is perceivable from the perceived all that remains is our self. That one, which is the intimacy of our being, is eternally present throughout all experience, lending its own reality to all things. In fact, the apparent reality of all things, all experience, belongs to our self alone. All that we love in objects, others and the world is their reality, and *their* reality is *our* reality. We love our self alone. It is not a personal self, a me, that loves this being. It loves its own impersonal being. All experience is only that.

Our self has no objective qualities so how do we know that it is limited, located or personal? It cannot be known, seen or felt objectively, so how do we know that it resides in the body or mind? We do not.

The mind, body and world are constantly changing in our experience and are often not present. However, our self is ever-present throughout all experience. It is the experiencing element that runs

throughout all experience. It can never be known as an object because it is the knower of all apparent objects.

However, it never ceases to know itself. Nothing new needs to be added to experience to become aware that our self is always being and knowing itself alone, not 'always' in time but eternally now. Knowing or experiencing is its nature. Knowing or experiencing is not what it *does*. It is what it *is*. Therefore, it is by definition always knowing itself.

As knowing is its nature, simply being itself *is* the knowing of itself. And as it is ever-present, it is always knowing itself. In fact, it knows nothing other than itself.

The appearances of the mind, body and world are known by it but our self does not need any of them in order to know or be itself. It knows itself without the need of any light other than its own. In fact, there is no light other than itself.

Our self needs the mind, body and world like the screen needs the film. In other words, it doesn't! However, unlike the screen that is simply present, relatively speaking, our self is a *knowing* or *aware* presence. Just by being itself it knows itself. It knows itself in all experience. It never ceases to experience itself.

Whatever is known or experienced in every experience *is* its knowing or experiencing of itself and this absolute intimacy of itself with all apparent objects and others is known as love. In other words, experience is not just made of awareness and presence but also of love. These three are one.

All we have ever longed for resides in simply abiding as this aware presence knowingly.

Knowledge and Love are One

In this investigation into the nature of experience we simply take our stand knowingly our true self of aware presence, irrespective of the particular characteristics of experience. We remain knowingly what we always already are. We always are only this presence but sometimes fail to notice that this is so.

What is it that fails to notice this? Our self cannot fail to know itself just as the sun cannot fail to illumine itself. It is only a thought that imagines that our self is *not* known and that something else—like a body, mind or world—*is* known. With this thought alone, our self seems to contract inside the body and mind and objects, others and the world seem to be projected outside. As a result, intimacy is veiled, love is lost and seeking begins.

However, all this is only for thought. Our self only knows the intimacy of its own being and all experience is that. The apparent veiling of our self and the corresponding disappearance of peace, happiness and love is always for thought, that is, always for the imaginary inside self, but never for the real and only self there is.

First we notice our self, then we stand knowingly as that self, then we see that there is only our self. And what is it that sees this? Our self. In other words, our own being abides in its eternal nature of peace, happiness and love and no longer loses itself to the apparent objects of the body, mind and world.

The more our self is noticed, the more its qualities are revealed in our experience. The mind, body and world, which once seemed to veil it, are now seen to shine with its light. We give to our self

the attention we used to give to the world and the objects that once seemed to limit or obscure it are now seen only to reveal or express it.

Just as in a physical object, at a relative level, all we see is reflected light, so in reality all that is experienced is made of our self, aware presence. The only difference is that the sun's light is seen by something other than itself whilst it is our self that experiences itself in all experience. It is not known by any other light.

Nothing objective can touch, change, affect, move, alter, destroy or manipulate our self, aware presence, in any way, just as the image in the mirror cannot affect the mirror. Our self is intimately one with all experience just as the mirror is one with the image when it appears and yet we are entirely independent of all appearances just as the mirror is independent of the image.

In fact, we are not 'intimately one with' experience for there are not two things there in the first place—our self and experience—to be intimate with each other. There is just pure seamless intimacy—no inside self and no outside object, world or other.

To begin with, as we take our stand knowingly as aware presence, the mind, body and world recede into the background. When the presence and primacy of our self has been established, objects come close again, closer than close. They dissolve into our self and reveal themselves as none other than the shape that our self is taking from moment to moment.

In fact, to know an apparent object of the mind, body or world, that apparent object has to dissolve into our self, awareness. That is the way an object is known, by dissolving in awareness. To know anything its apparent 'thingness' must dissolve in awareness and become pure knowing.

However, it is not that an object that was once real in its own right dissolves into awareness but rather that the object is understood to be only the *knowing* of the object—it was never anything other than that in our experience in the first place—and the only

substance present in knowing is awareness, our self. So it is the *apparent* 'objectness' of an object—its 'outside-ness', its 'not-me-ness', its 'something-ness'—that dissolves.

This dissolution is known as the experience of love. It is the dissolution of all the apparent boundaries that seem to keep an object, other, person or world, at a distance or separate. Love and knowledge are, in fact, one and the same.

The Innocence of Experience

Whatever it is that is seeing these words is the substance of these words. Whatever it is that is seeing the carpet is the substance of the carpet. Whatever it is that is feeling the chair is the substance of the chair. Conventional wisdom suggests that whatever it is that *knows* any experience is distinct from the existence of whatever it is that is *known*. It postulates a separate 'I' that *knows* and a separate object, other or world that is *known*.

In reality, there is no separate, inside 'I' and no separate, outside object, other or world. There is no experience of a world, person, object or other as such, that is, as an entity in its own right independent and separate from our self, awareness. This separation of the *knowing* subject from the *existence* of object, is a concept made only of the thought that thinks it.

In reality our self, awareness, and the existence or being of an apparent object or other are not two. They are seamlessly one. The knowing of a tree and the existence of the tree are made out of the same stuff. This understanding is a common experience. In fact, it is not *an* experience. It is all that is ever experienced. It *is* experience itself. Experience is not a collection of objects known by an inside self. 'Experience' is just another name for our self, awareness. All seeming things are only our own infinite being.

In the experience of an apparent object, other or world, the dualising mind (which is the thought that seems to separate the knowing subject from the known object) is not, by definition, present. The mind appears as a thought after the event to which it refers. Take any

experience. By the time thought has risen to name it, the experienced that is being named has vanished. Therefore, thought can never touch experience itself, although it is made out of it. Experience itself is always pristine, free, untouchable, unknowable by thought, pure intimacy, vibrant, alive.

The world that thought imagines is not the real world of experience but an abstraction that masquerades as the real thing. The real nature of experience can never be found by the mind and yet it is all that is ever known. This and every experience is shining with that reality alone.

Thought misinterprets this seamless intimacy of experience and creates a *knower*, *owner* or '*haver*' of the experience—the separate, inside self—and a *known*, *owned* or '*had*' object of experience—the object, other or outside world. This utter intimacy of the knower and the known is a well-known and familiar experience. It is what is referred to as peace, happiness, love and beauty. In fact, it is all that is ever happening but it seems to be veiled by dualising thought.

Peace, happiness and love are simply the names we give to the dissolution of the apparent distinction between the knower and the known, between the subject and the object. We all know this from our relationships. Love is the dissolution of everything we conceive and perceive our self and the other to be. It is an experience of the absolute oneness of our shared identity. In fact, our identity is not shared. There are not two entities there in the first place to share it. It is, I am, all alone.

When we say, "I fell in love," we literally mean that we fell out of the conceptual straitjacket in which we had previously resided, into love. In fact, we never fall *out of* anything because we were never truly located as a separate inside self or entity *in* something, such as a body, in the first place. The separate entity is simply the prisoner of thought.

When we fall in love, or indeed when we love, we simply recognise our self to be and to have always been this transparent presence

in which there is no room for an object, other or person. Of course, when the dualising mind re-emerges from this non subject-object experience of love, in which it was not present, it recreates the apparently loving subject and the apparently loved object and says, "*I love you.*" However, the apparent 'I' and the apparent 'you' are fabrications of the mind, made only of the thought that thinks them.

With this appearance of two apparent things (a knowing subject and a known object) our natural identity of ever-present, transparent, infinite presence is veiled and with it the innocence and intimacy of all experience, which is known as peace, happiness or love, is lost. We seem instead to become a separate, limited, inside self, searching in a world that is now believed and felt to be outside, separate and 'other,' that is, searching in the realm of situations, objects and relationships for the peace, happiness and love that have been lost.

At some point our search collapses and we turn round, as it were, and look towards this one who is in search. However, it is never found. All that is found is the only self there ever is, aware presence, the simple knowing of our own being, unqualified by any of the limitations that thinking seemingly superimposes upon it.

And what is it that recognises this aware presence? Only that which is aware and present could do so. In that simple recognition, aware presence or awareness knows itself and, by the same token, is realised to be always, only knowing itself.

When we return to our self in this way, the apparent entities of the person and the world dissolve, leaving only the innocence and intimacy of experience, which is known as peace, happiness or love.

If we now take our stand as this love and look again at the apparent objects of the mind, body and world, we find that there is no substance present there other than the love that we intimately know ourselves to be, that is, that knows itself to be. We drop out of the world as a separate entity and re-enter it as love, this utter innocence and intimacy of experience.

The experience of beauty is the same. It is the collapse of the apparent separation between the object or world and our self, or rather the recognition that there has, in fact, never been any such separation. When we walk out into a landscape and are melted by its beauty, this is what is happening. Thinking comes to an end and our own being tastes itself as it is. That is the experience of beauty. It is never an object that is beautiful. It is rather that all objects shine with the light of our own being.

Likewise, 'understanding' is the name that is given to this realisation when it is revealed through the dissolution of a line of reasoning and 'love' is the name we give to it when it is revealed through the dissolution of feeling or emotion. In other words, all these words refer to the death of the separate, inside self and with it the dissolution of its corollary, the outside object, other or world.

Peace, happiness, love, beauty, understanding all refer to the same transparent, ever-present, infinite reality of experience.