

experience, which can help form a framework and basis for a practical approach to self-inquiry.

Roles of Philosophy and Experience

As we begin to think about the true nature of things, it is helpful to have a foundation in the form of an idea or structure. Quantum physics was mentioned for this reason, offering the modern scientific model of emptiness underlying our physical universe. The ancient philosophical traditions of the East concur with this view, with an additional component added – the presence of *consciousness* in absolute emptiness and emerging from it. While it may not be possible to verify that the emptiness underlying everything is conscious, we can certainly verify that what manifests from emptiness is conscious, because we are conscious.

Ancient eastern philosophy, and some western philosophies also, hold emptiness to be the great *Self* of all, and that all individual selves are but rays emanating from the *One Great Self*, much the way waves dance upon the surface of the ocean, only to dissolve and reappear on the surface of the ocean again and again. The waves are ever-changing expressions of the great ocean they dance upon.

Whether the great ocean of emptiness beyond the manifested universe is conscious can be debated. But there can be little debate about whether human beings are conscious. It is this singular fact that underlies the entire field of self-inquiry.

There is a vast theoretical body of knowledge, which can be found in the amply documented philosophies of both the East and the West, plus the experiential component of consciousness which can be found in every human being. Put these two together, and you have the beginnings of self-inquiry.

It is really quite simple. If we can come to know that we are, in fact, the ocean before, during and after we are the wave, then the inquiry is done. Enlightenment is ours. Philosophically, that is called the *end of knowledge*. In the East, it is called *Vedanta – the end of the Veda*.

But, experientially, it is not so simple. Something more is needed, which is often overlooked by those who hold an uncompromising view of human enlightenment. If our experience does not fulfill the philosophy, or even what another may claim as their experience, then the inquiry is not complete. While purists may hold that only emptiness exists, it is up to each of us to verify the truth for ourselves. It is for this that the methods of self-inquiry are given.

But it turns out that self-inquiry is very much a moving target, depending on the person who is doing it. Just as certain ideas will resonate with some people and not others, the methods of self-inquiry may resonate with some practitioners and not with others. The reason for this variation is due to the inner condition of each individual nervous system. The degree of inner purification and opening deep inside has a direct bearing on the degree of consciousness that is available in the person for gaining knowledge of the nature of existence, at least insofar as knowledge can be gained through direct experience within the individual.

The key factor in this is the presence of what we call inner silence, also called pure bliss consciousness, the *Self*, or the *witness*. It is called the witness because stillness in our awareness is our ground state and, once established, is capable of experiencing all thoughts, perceptions and emotions as objects outside its own unmoving awareness.

The presence of the witness changes the complexion and effectiveness of all self-inquiry methods dramatically, and our perception of every day living also. What had been a moving target becomes steady, and the very knowledge we have been seeking is what we become. We were *That* all along, and the witness is *That*. There is the old saying that, what we are seeking is what is doing the seeking. Our inner awareness in the form of the witness is both the goal and the means for attaining it.

The witness can be cultivated in human beings by engaging in self-inquiry. This is its purpose. However, it is very difficult to do it using self-inquiry as the sole means. Ask anyone who has tried without using any other supporting practices.

A much more effective way to cultivate the witness is with daily *deep meditation*. Once this kind of cultivation is occurring on an ongoing basis, then self-inquiry will have the ability to gain some real traction in our lives, and add far-reaching additional benefits that could not be realized with either deep meditation or self-inquiry alone. When we say “traction,” we mean the formation of an intimate *relationship* between our native consciousness and the objects of this world, including our thoughts, feelings and perceptions of the external environment. Our abiding inner witness, combined with self-inquiry, can lead us steadily toward a condition of *Oeness*, beyond the ups and downs of life, even as we are fully engaged and going about our business each day. In this condition, there is not grasping or hanging on.

So, if we are looking for real self-inquiry, we should look beyond the dictums of rigid philosophical systems to the inner workings of our own nervous system. If we do that, we will go beyond ideas to the

experience itself. Then the wave will know itself to be the ocean, even as it continues as a wave.

Philosophy is therefore a stepping stone to the greatest knowledge, which is direct knowledge of our *Self*.

The Importance of Practice

There are those who say that practice is not necessary to reach enlightenment. Indeed, the unconditioned state of pure bliss consciousness is beyond all practice. So they are right in saying that the end state is beyond all practice, and even beyond all experience. When the fluctuations of the mind have been transcended, only the absolute remains. To be in this condition, nothing must be done, and nothing is, at least from the point of view of someone who is in this state on an ongoing basis. But what about everyone else?

The advice not to practice is an extremist view that leads many into confusion, particularly those who have responsibilities in the world. Such advice may be interpreted to mean going on with life as it has always been (having learned what?), or rejecting life completely in favor of *doing nothing*. Either way, there will be a problem.

So, while philosophically the argument not to practice, or do nothing, has appeal, on the practical level it has little relationship to what most people are involved with in daily life – living and doing. And neither is the advice to not practice particularly helpful for people who are contemplative in their nature, as it will often be interpreted to mean sitting around all day doing nothing.

The question is not so much about whether practice is necessary or not. Practice is not the enemy. Effective