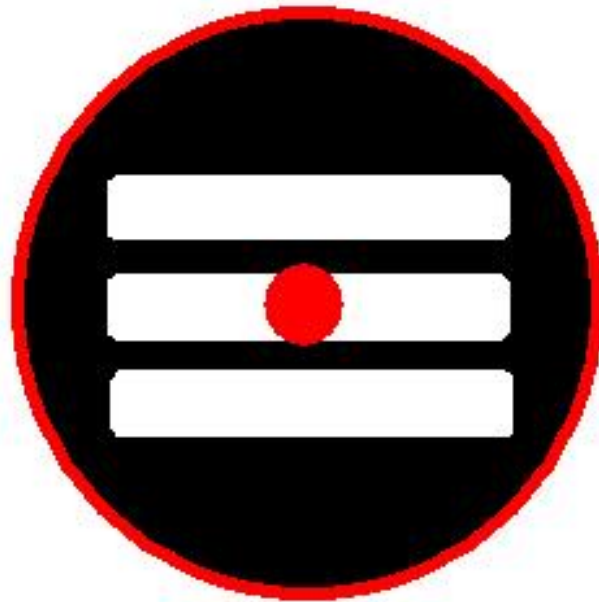


THE NATURE OF THE EXPERIENCING 'SELF'

Western and Eastern Perspectives



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In Western philosophy and psychology, as in practices of psychotherapy and counselling, the nature of an individual's mental, emotional, sensory and somatic experiencing may be 'looked at', 'looked into', communicated and discussed. However the basic question of *who or what* constitutes the nature of the 'self' that is 'experiencing' - or 'looking' at or into 'their' experiencing (the 'subject', 'knower', 'observer' or 'introspector') is largely ignored. Instead a basic unthought assumption pervades both everyday language and that of therapeutic or counselling discourse and dialogue. This is the assumption that personal pronouns such as 'I' and 'you' (as used in such phrases as 'I felt...', 'I experienced...' or 'How do you feel about...?' / 'How did you experience...?') denote some pre-existing self or identity or *who* separate from *what* it experiences. The implication is that the 'I' or 'you' that does, thinks, feels or experiences one thing is the *same* 'I' that does, thinks, feels or experiences another. Even a question as common and simple as 'How are you?' therefore, far from being 'neutral', carries with it and *demand*s from the one questioned a type of answer that, by using the word 'I', conforms with and reinforces the assumption of a self separate and apart from its experience. The more basic assumption here is that experiencing in all its modes – mental and emotional, sensory and somatic – is *the private property* of a subject, self, ego person or *who*, understood as unchanging 'I-identity', 'You-identity', 'She-identity', 'He-identity' or 'We-identity'.

What fails to come to awareness here is any clear distinction between this ‘who’, understood as a singular *experiencing* self or ‘I’ and something quite different – the *experienced* self in all its diversity. Terms such as ‘self-awareness’ or ‘self-experience’ (Bollas) thus remain unthought and ambiguous without this distinction, leaving it unclear as to whether they refer to a particular experience *of* self or identity – what can be termed an *experienced self* – or to experience as such – understood as ‘belonging to’ or ‘owned’ by the ‘self’.

The question of the exact nature and relation between any *experienced self* and the *experiencing self* thereby remains unthought. And yet this question is a central one because it bears on another as-yet unthought question of great significance in both life and therapy. This is the question of what it means to ‘change’. Does change merely mean a change in the way a person *experiences* life – or does it mean that *they* change – that their very experience of *self* is altered, and not just experiences or feelings belonging to or ‘had’ by that self. At a most fundamental level, can our self-experience in this sense – our very experience of *who* we are – be separated from *what* we experience, in particular the experience of the world, other people and all that the ‘I’ normally takes as ‘other than self’?

If the very separation of our *self-experience* from our *experience of others and otherness* were nothing fixed, then identity or selfhood itself would be experienced as something *constantly in flux*. The very idea – constantly reinforced by the very *word* ‘I’ – of a fixed self or ‘I-identity’ that simply ‘possesses’ or ‘owns’ particular feelings and experiences – would be revealed as nothing more than an *illusion*.

It is, in essence, this very illusion that constitutes both the *defining nature* and *primary defence* of what has been termed ‘ego’ or ‘ego-identity’. For this is a sense of identity built on sustaining a firm and fixed *boundary* between *what* we experience, including our experience of others and otherness, and *who* we experience ourselves to be – the experienced *self*.

Yet what of the *experiencing self*? If this is *not* the fixed egoic ‘I’ of both common speech and counselling dialogue - then who or what is it? Such questions brings us to a ‘basic question’ that has long been a part of Eastern philosophical thought, yet still remains wholly unthought in the theory of Western ‘psychology’ and thus also in the Western-rooted practices of ‘psycho-therapy’ and counselling. For these are practices which tend simply to take for granted the existence or ‘possession’ of an experiencing ‘self or ‘I’ on the part of both counsellor or therapist and client, whilst at the same time ignoring or marginalising the question of who or what constitutes the nature of this *experiencing self*, and its relation to any *experienced self*.

2. The Debate Surrounding a Basic Question

For over two thousand years a single, simple yet basic question has been constantly debated among and between Hindu and Buddhist thinkers surrounding the nature of *experiencing* as such. Countless *sutras* and *tantras* and the most convoluted arguments have been devoted to it. Reality consists of things experienced in awareness, including our experienced feeling or sense of self. The basic question I refer to is:

WHO OR WHAT IS THE EXPERIENCER?

Summarised crudely, the Buddhist answer to this questions is that there simply is no experiencer – there is no experiencing ‘Self’. There is just experiencing – and beyond that, an ultimate reality beyond experiencing - pure Emptiness or Nothingness.

The Hindu answer - again summarised most briefly and coarsely - is that the Self is the experiencer, and that since all experiencing belongs to the Self, the Self alone - understood as identical with Brahman or Shiva - is ultimate reality. Yet how can we know of any such Self except through an *experience* of it? And who then is the experiencer of this Self? Another higher Self? If so however, then the initial question reoccurs – how can we know of any such Self except through an experience of it, thus reducing the Self as experiencer to an experienced self?

An answer to a question that raises the same very question – in this case the question ‘Who is the experiencer’ is known as ‘regressive’ – leading to an infinite regress to the initial question, which thus finds no final answer. Only through the Advaitic philosophies of Adi Shankaracharya and Sri Abhinavagupta did the first rays of light begin to shine on this age old question. Refined through the prism of what I call ‘The Awareness Principle’ they offer a new answer to this oldest of questions.

To experience something is to be aware of it. The new answer to the question ‘Who (or what) is the experiencer? is that *awareness* is the *experiencer* - not awareness of anything in particular, of any particular thing that is experienced, but awareness *as such* or ‘pure awareness’.

The distinction – between awareness as such and anything we experience or are aware of – is a fundamental one. It is as basic and clear as the distinction between a mirror and any images reflected in it, or between empty space and any objects in it. A mirror is an analogy of that pure awareness which remains forever distinct from anything we see – experience – in it. Similarly space is an analogy of pure awareness - being both inseparable and yet also forever distinct from anything experienced within it. Indeed space is more than a mere ‘analogy’ of pure awareness – it is itself nothing but a spatial field of awareness, that which first allows things to be experienced as present or absent, existing or not-existing.

“Without awareness of reality, how can reality exist?”

Sri Ramana Maharshi

The question is a rhetorical one, for it leads necessarily to the conclusion that awareness is - in principle or *a priori* - a more fundamental reality than any reality we are aware of – being the pre-condition for and therefore prior to existence as such. Hence the saying of Abhinavagupta:

“The being of all things that are recognised in awareness [including their ‘self-being’] in turn depends on awareness.”

Yet it was Shankaracharya who was the first to urge against understanding the experiencer as the Self in a narrow sense – as the egoic self or ‘I’. Thus he warned against the tendency to linguistically personalise experience – to think and speak of what ‘I’ or ‘you’ experience, or of ‘my’ or ‘your’

experience. For he understood that the egoic ‘I’ constantly seeks to possess experience as its own - as its private or personal property – and does so primarily through use of the very word ‘I’ in the act of speech.

Where do the insights of Advaita and Shankacharaya however, leave the notion of the Self or *Atman* as opposed to the ‘ego’ or *Ahamkara* – the latter being a ‘self’ defined and reinforced by its very use of the terms ‘I’ and ‘my’? The resounding resolution to this question is announced in the first of the *Shiva Sutras* of Vasugupta, the foundational scripture or ‘tantra’ of Kashmir Shaivism. In a single compound noun (*Chaitanyatman*) it is effectively declared that the essential nature of the Self is itself nothing but awareness as such. The Self, therefore is not some pre-existent being or experiencer that happens to have ‘have’ or possess awareness. On the contrary, the Self is awareness *as such* or ‘pure awareness’ (*Chit*).

In the light of the *Shiva Sutras* therefore, there is no longer any *contradiction* between the old Hindu maxim that the Self is the experiencer – and the highest reality – and the recognition that Awareness is the experiencer. For as stated in *Shiva Sutras* 1.1, the essential nature of the Self – as opposed to the ego - IS Awareness. Awareness then is the *experiencing self* - a self quite distinct from both the ego *and* from any *experienced self*. The Buddhists are right in understanding that every such *experienced self* is ‘no self’ – being forever constituted and altered by the flux of experiencing. Yet behind all experiencing and all experienced selves lies that awareness which is very essence of the experiencing self.

3. The Search for the Ultimate Mantra

What does all this mean for us in practice and in our lives?

Throughout the millennia in which the basic question was explored and debated, there was also a continuous search to refine an ultimate *sutra* that would serve also as an ultimate *mantra* – a precisely **WORDED** awareness or *Vikalpa* guaranteed to serve as both liberator and protector of an ultimate, **WORDLESS** awareness.

The search by sages, gurus and acharyas for this ultimately precise ‘mantric’ wording or ‘formulation’ can be compared to the search by physicists for an ultimate mathematical ‘solution’ or ‘formula’ by which all phenomenon can be explained. It is an on-going search that demands as much *linguistic* precision and rigour as physics requires *mathematical* precision and rigour.

In my writings on [**The Awareness Principle**](#) I have evolved a variety of very precise linguistic formulations designed not only to offer intellectual answers to philosophical questions but to serve as life-transforming mantra. To begin I wrote of ‘the fundamental distinction’ – between all we experience or are aware *of* on the one hand - and awareness as such on the other. The message was that there was a way to pass from a state of simply ‘being aware’ (experiencing) to identifying with – being - awareness as such. The mantra thus read: *from Being Aware to Being Awareness*.

Later evolved a new mantra ‘*There is an awareness of...*’. The intent of this mantra was to serve as way of reminding ourselves, in any situation and in

the course of any experience’ – that anything we are experiencing - inwardly or outwardly - is *distinct* from the pure awareness of experiencing it. The mantra also serves to remove the possessively egoic personal pronouns ‘I’ and ‘my’ from the language in which we think and express experience – thus also *transforming* the very way we experience both self and world. For there is a world of difference between an experience that is accompanied by the habitual thought that ‘I’ experience this (for example ‘I feel X’ and an experience which is accompanied by the mantra ‘***There is an awareness*** of experiencing this’.

Occasions for the use of this mantra are infinite. If there is any type of experience occurring whatsoever - whether of seeing, hearing, feeling or thinking something - instead of saying to ourselves ‘I see/hear/feel/think this or that’ we renounce the word ‘I’ and both think and say to ourselves:

“No, it is not that ‘I’ see, hear, feel or think this or that.” Instead ***There is simply an awareness of*** this that is seen, heard, felt or thought - just as there is simply ***an awareness*** of experiencing our own self in a particular way. This self that is experienced in a particular way is precisely that – an experienced self and *not* ‘the experiencer’ - the experiencing self.

As a result of recalling the mantra - the mental recognition - that ‘***There is an awareness of experiencing this***’ or ‘***There is an awareness of experiencing this self***’ it becomes possible to identify with that very awareness – to ***BE IT***. Being Awareness - that awareness which is the experiencing self – is what saves us from identifying with any experience and with any experience of self that accompanies it.

The mantra '*There is an awareness of...*' thus allows us both to hold on to 'the fundamental distinction', to avoid identifying with any experienced self, and, at the same time, prevents the egoic self from using from using the habitual word 'I' to seize and possess as its 'own' the entire realm of experiencing.

4. A New Mantra

Here however, I wish to share another, yet simpler mantra by which the ego - with its constant use of the word 'I', its implicit claim to be 'the experiencer' – and with this its constant tendency to thereby *narcissistically personalise* all experiencing - can be successfully circumvented and transcended.

The new mantric formulation is:

IT experiences this.

By 'IT' is meant that Supreme, Universal and Divine Awareness – awareness as such or pure awareness – which is at the same time the true essence of the experiencing Self. The use of this new mantra is similar to the mantra '*There is an awareness of...*'. For it also allows us – after or in the course of any experience of any nature - to renounce the personal pronoun 'I' and instead remind ourselves of and re-cognise the truth that it is not the personal 'I' that is 'the experiencer' but rather 'IT' – that ultimate and trans-personal reality which is the Supreme, Universal and Divine Awareness.

Formulated in a progressively more elaborated way the mantra reads:

1. *IT experiences this.*
2. *Not 'I' but IT experiences this.* (for example pleasure or pain)
3. *Not 'I' but IT experiences this current sense of self* (the experienced self as opposed to the experiencing self)
3. *It is not 'I' experiencing this but IT experiencing this - through and as me.* (for example, 'It is not that 'I' or 'me' experiencing pleasure or pain, but rather IT experiencing pleasure or pain through and as me).
4. In general: *It not 'I' or 'you', 'him' or 'her' that experiences this but IT – experiencing itself through and as 'I' or 'you', 'him' or 'her'.*

The first formulation of the mantra however, remains the most potent seed or *bija* of all further and more elaborate formulations.

A mantra is a 'guarding thought'. To transcend the ego and to attain and protect a state of pure awareness one need only to renounce the word 'I' and to think: **'IT experiences this'** or **'IT is experiencing this'**. Doing so we can come to instantly recognise the true nature of 'the experiencer' - neither as a mere realm of Emptiness nor as an 'I' which has or possesses awareness but as IT - that Universal, Supreme and Divine Awareness which is the very essence or 'heart' of the Self.

“Because this awareness-reality, itself free from thought, exists as the source of all thoughts, it is called Heart. How to know it? To be it, as it is, thought-free, in the Heart.” *Sri Ramana Maharshi*

The formulation '*It experiences this*' like the formulation '*There is an awareness of experiencing this*' are specific and precise mantric 'wordings' which - mentally recalled and re-cognised – *can instantly evoke a wordless, bodily transformation of all that we experience*. That is their power and purpose *as* mantra – as guarding thoughts. These are important because the realm of experiencing is itself not only reflected in thought but also *shaped* by thought.

Experience - including our ever-changing experience of self - the *experienced self* – has quite a different quality according to whether the thought that pervades and shapes it is '*I am experiencing this*' or '*IT is experiencing this*', '*I am experiencing myself in this way*' or '*IT is experiencing me in this way*'.

5. Final Note

Being Awareness – being 'IT' – is the highest Bliss. Hence the Eternal Truth *Sanatana Dharma* of that most central of Hindu-Sanskrit philosophical terms: *Sat-Chit-Ananda* ('Being-Awareness-Bliss'). In the tradition of *Shaiva Advaita* the Supreme Awareness and with it, the state of Being-Awareness-Bliss is, though trans-personal in essence, both personified and embodied by the image or 'murti' of Lord Shiva in meditation. This image is also used as focus of meditational worship (*puja*). *Puja as murti darshan* is a religious meditational path to the most profoundly blissful experiences of the Divine Awareness. All the more important then, that such *experiences* too be also 'bracketed' with the mantra '*IT experiences this*'. For otherwise we are left in a situation in which people indulge in describing wonderful

‘personal’ experiences of meditation as if these experiences were ‘theirs’, speaking for example of the amazing experiences ‘they’ had with this or that meditation, workshop or guru. In this way they personalise experience of the trans-personal and divine - rather than transcending the realm of personal experiencing through it – through awareness.

The traditional mantra of *tantric* meditational worship reads – ‘to worship a god is to become that god’. Put in more precise terms it should read: to ‘become’ a god is to experience the god itself becoming us - experiencing and bodying itself (‘ITS-Self’) as and through us. If, on the other hand, there is the merest trace of the thought that ‘I’ am now experiencing or becoming the god being worshipped - and that in however blissful or wonderful a way, then the threshold to true identification or unity (*yog*) with the Supreme Awareness - with Shiva – has still not been crossed. For this threshold to be truly crossed the experience must be one of IT (the Supreme Awareness that is Shiva) embodying, experiencing and enjoying itself as us – and *not the other way round*. Shiv-awareness or *Shivattva* is therefore *not* a result of the individual self or *Jiva* experiencing Shiva or experiencing itself ‘as’ Shiva, but the other way round - Shiva experiencing Himself as the individual self or *Jiva*. This is why the sacred mantra SHIVOHAM needs to be understood the right way round – not as saying ‘I am Shiva’, thus placing the ‘I’ first, but rather as saying that ‘Shiva is what I am’ (*Shiv-Aham*). Here Shiva ‘Himself’ is understood as personifying IT - that ultimate trans-personal or ‘non-higher’ awareness-reality that is called *Anuttara* or *Paramashiva*.

6. Postscript

I have not even bothered here to address the new, current and supposedly ‘scientific’ answer to the question of ‘who or what is the experiencer?’ – namely that ‘the experiencer’ is nothing but the brain. For it is - in principle - sheer philosophical and linguistic muddle-headedness to think that anything experienced (any ‘object’ of experience) can possibly be the experiencer (the experiencing ‘subject’ or awareness).

7. Karika (mantric verse)

Aware of action but not doing

Aware of seeing but not looking

Aware of thoughts but not thinking

Aware of the mind but not focussing it

Aware of speaking but abiding in silence

Aware of moving but abiding in stillness

Aware of words forming but not speaking

Aware of a self but not identifying with it

Abiding in the bliss of pure, defocussed awareness

Acknowledging that awareness as sole experiencer

Allowing that awareness alone to act, see, move, breathe and speak us

Being that Awareness, and in doing so experiencing ITS Bliss.

That is the meaning of the Sanskrit *Sat-Chit-Ananda*

... ‘Being-Awareness-Bliss’