

Understanding Self-enquiry

Part One An Overview of the Method

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Of the different methods for Self-realization, Self-enquiry may be said to be drawing an ever-increasing attention in modern times. The directness of its logic and the simplicity of its practice, so assiduously brought home to us by Bhagavan Ramana, induce us to attempt it in preference to other established methods. A great many fortunate ones succeed in making it their sole *sadhana*.

However, it appears that many among the lay adherents to Self-enquiry do not have an adequate comprehension of the method. They find it difficult to fathom the exact manner of enquiring into the origin of the I-thought.¹ Some infer the right method correctly,

¹ For typical cases, see *Be As You Are*, David Godman (Ed.), Penguin Books (1992), Chapter 6, 'Self-enquiry – misconceptions'; and also *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, §197, 290, 321, 322, 363, 430 (9/ed, 1994); *Maharshi's Gospel*, Book II, p.35, (2007).

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but do not feel sure of it, as their experience does not seem to tally with what they read from books. So, they keep looking for alternatives instead of pursuing steadfastly the direct course that their intuition tells them is correct.

It is therefore advisable to obtain a proper understanding of the method before we start Self-enquiry.² We will then realize that the practice puts us at once in sight of the 'distant' goal, much as a mountaineer obtains a glimpse of Mount Everest from afar through layers of mist and fog.³ There will be no more doubt as to our being on the right track, however long our practice may take for its fruition.⁴

An attempt is made here to present a detailed understanding of Self-enquiry in the light of the above. At first, an overview of the method is given, without going into the specifics of enquiring into the Self. These specifics pertaining to the inner *core* of practice are taken up in Part Two, based on the explanations given by Bhagavan, and with due note taken of the reported experiences and observations of some of Bhagavan's foremost disciples.

Sadhana by Self-enquiry

Sadhana for Self-realization is the process of progressive withdrawal of the mind from its forays in the wide world, to its source, the Self. This withdrawal of the mind, which really amounts to 'renunciation of the non-Self',⁵ may be said to take place in three stages.

² We shall see in Part Two that there is an empirical way which can make do with a limited understanding of the method. But the majority of *sadhakas* may nonetheless be inclined to seek the fuller understanding.

³ Bhagavan has compared Self-enquiry to the coaxing of an errant cow (the mind) back to its own farm (the Heart) by holding a handful of luscious grass (a 'preview' of the Self) before it. *Talks*, §563.

⁴ As Bhagavan says, the seeker feels sure of his way, in much the same manner as a dog that is in possession of its master's scent. The time to reach the goal will depend on how intently he pursues it.

⁵ The non-Self (insentience) will seem to have a *real* existence of its own as long as ignorance lasts, and so needs to be renounced to attain the Self. It resolves itself into the Self upon Realization. Vide *Talks*, §192, (p.159); §626, (p.590). Thus, what we truly renounce in the end is our wrong idea about the non-Self, and not non-Self itself.

At first, we (as the mind) give up the so-called 'external' world, which means the world of our sensory interactions (sight, touch, etc). In practice, it amounts to giving up interest in sense-objects, and is referred to as cultivation of 'external' (or *bahir-*) *vairagya*. If, with such a detached mind, we sit in an *asana* for practising Self-enquiry,⁶ the body makes no demands for attention from the mind, and so, in effect, we transcend the *gross* body. It signifies the first stage of renunciation, which relates to the *physical* plane.

Our consciousness is then limited to the *subtle* sphere, which is the world of our thoughts. We now have to renounce this 'internal' world. We give up every thought that comes to the mind, and adhere just to the 'I-thought' which lies at the root of them all. We may call this 'internal' (or *antara-*) *vairagya*. Our consciousness now becomes confined to our 'subtle body', or more specifically, to the *vijnanamaya-kosa* (intellect, with ego as its modification⁷). This represents the second stage of renunciation.⁸

The 'I-thought' is otherwise called the 'ego'. It is often looked upon as the 'gateway' to the Self, because it is only after crossing it that we gain a glimpse of the Self. As Bhagavan says, when the mind or the ego⁹ looks outward, it sees the 'world' (whether 'external' or 'internal', or both). When the mind turns inward, it is said to be identified with

⁶ The *asana* posture is advised since it can be held long, and the mind is not distracted by a need to shift posture. After gaining experience, the practice can be extended to other periods involving activity.

⁷ Cf. *Vivekachudamani* (v.184), Text and translation, Swami Madhavananda, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata (1989). The mind, when viewed as the agent, is called the 'ego'. The same mind, when viewed as the instrument, is called the 'intellect'. The ego and the intellect may thus be viewed as modifications of each other. In *Talks*, §277, Bhagavan identifies the 'I-thought' (ego) with *vijnanamaya-kosa*.

⁸ We do not aim to renounce this last remnant of the subtle body at this stage, as it will *land* us in the *causal* zone, which is characterised by deep sleep wherein there can be no further effort (vide *Talks*, §191). We need to keep hold of the intellect till such time as we transcend the causal body, for making the required effort. It is transcended along with the causal body at the point of Realization. Cf. *Maha Yoga*, K. Lakshmana Sarma, p.105 (9/ed, 1996).

⁹ Verse 18 of *Upadesa Saram* establishes the equivalence of the mind and the ego.

the Self. This ‘turning inward’ of the mind is the most crucial step in Self-enquiry practice. We shall consider it in detail in Part Two. The general idea is as follows.

When we delve into the ‘I-thought’, we hurtle down into the causal plane, comprised of the numerous *vasanas* (predispositions or ‘tendencies’) that have accrued to us from innumerable past lives and the present one. These *vasanas*, though unseen, tend to obscure our view of the Self, which lies at the core of the ‘I-thought’ — as its very source. If we can somehow negotiate our way, bypassing these *vasanas*, just as a person might grope his way past obstacles in a dark room towards a ticking clock, we will be able to reach our goal, the Self. Basically, this is what Self-enquiry is all about. This ‘transcendence’ of the *vasanas*, in other words, the *causal* body, constitutes the third stage of renunciation, and leads to Realization.

Sadhana can thus be viewed essentially as a matter of transcendence of the three bodies in ‘successive’ stages of renunciation.¹⁰ Self-enquiry, as a method of *sadhana*, is primarily understood to comprise the second and third of these stages.

Realization and Liberation

The term ‘Realization’ (short for Self-realization) is used in literature in two ways. When used in the context of a gradual unfoldment of *sadhana*, the term is understood to mean ‘Self-abidance’.¹¹ In the wider context of, say, the goal of life or in a comparison of *sadhana* methods, the term is taken to be synonymous with ‘Liberation’. In the present article, the discussion mostly concerns the ongoing process of *sadhana*. Hence, ‘Realization’ shall generally be understood here in the sense of ‘Self-abidance’.¹²

¹⁰ The term ‘renunciation’ has been applied here to all the three stages only for purposes of a uniform presentation. In common usage, only the first of these stages is referred to as *vairagya* (renunciation) and the latter two stages as *abhyasa* (practice).

¹¹ An instance of such usage may be found in *Talks*, §562, pp.520-21, (9/ed, 1994).

¹² The only exceptions arise in paragraph one of the article, and in footnote 5, where it means ‘Liberation’.

‘Realization’, thus, is held to be different from Liberation. Liberation involves a total annihilation of all *vasanas*, and is irrevocable. Realization, on the other hand, can result even from a temporary transcendence of the *vasanas*, brought about by the strength of will of the seeker¹³ (enabled by Grace). Since the *vasanas* are not destroyed, they re-establish their hold on the seeker some time later.¹⁴ This they do by projecting thoughts, and so disrupting the ‘thought-free awareness’ that characterises Realization. As long as the causal body of *vasanas* lasts, it keeps projecting the subtle world of thoughts sooner or later. When it happens, the seeker is obliged to repeat Self-enquiry to regain the state of Realization.¹⁵

So, if the state of Realization is to last permanently, the *vasanas* must be extinguished totally. The seeker is powerless to bring this about *directly* by himself because the *vasanas* belong to the causal plane which is ‘subtler’ than his mind, the sole instrument at his disposal.¹⁶ He cannot therefore discern the *vasanas* (causal objects) with his mind — just as we cannot see our thoughts (subtle objects) with our physical eyes. So, the only way available to the seeker for overcoming the *vasanas* is an *indirect* one.

When we indulge in any thought (with or without bodily action), a residual impression, or *vasana*, of it is left behind in our causal body even after the thought has passed.¹⁷ If the same thought is repeated a

¹³ The ‘will’ may be viewed as an intense feeling towards the Self, somewhat of the kind felt by Bhagavan while meeting his death experience in Madurai. Vide *Mountain Path*, Oct-Dec 2009, p.63.

¹⁴ “The predispositions adhering to him from time immemorial draw him out and so ignorance overtakes him.” *Talks*, §95. See also §24, 141, 465, 562.

¹⁵ The will of the seeker gathers strength as a positive *vasana* as *sadhana* progresses. *Sadhana* can thus be viewed as a battle royal between the good and the bad *vasanas*.

¹⁶ In referring to the seeker as masculine, the term ‘he’ is not taken to be gender-specific, but to stand in common for ‘he’ and ‘she’.

¹⁷ It must be noted that it is not the actions themselves that create the *vasanas*, but the thoughts behind them. The *vasanas* are binding or non-binding depending on whether the thoughts are of attachment or free from it. *Nishkamyā-karma* does not produce any binding *vasanas* since the thought behind it is free from attachment.

number of times, the *vasana* gathers strength. It is somewhat like the furrows in a farmer's land getting deeper and deeper with his repeated tilling of the land. A *vasana* ('tendency') has the characteristic trait that it reinforces and projects time and again the original thought that caused it. If we entertain that thought, as we are normally prone to do, it, in turn, reinforces that *vasana*. There is thus a natural tendency for the *vasanas* to grow strong and become firmly entrenched.

If the farmer leaves his tilled land unattended and exposed to the elements for long enough, the furrows are levelled due to the forces of nature and disappear. Similarly, if by holding on to the state of Self-abidance (which is thought-free), the *vasanas* are denied any scope to project thoughts (and so reinforce themselves), they shrivel and die under the glare of the Self.¹⁸ This is the *indirect* and the *only* way to annihilate the *vasanas*.

Hence, the *sadhaka* should always try to remain in the state of Realization. This also helps in other ways. Since the seeker now spends less time in the 'thoughtful' state, there is less scope for the creation of new *vasanas*. Meanwhile, his will too gathers strength as a positive *vasana*. As a result, he can remain longer in the state of Realization, and this in turn further weakens the *vasanas*. There will thus be a snow-balling effect in favour of the extinction of all *vasanas*, which brings about Liberation.

From the above it is clear that both Realization and Liberation are states of abidance in the Self. Realization is 'thoughtless', but can co-exist with dormant *vasanas*. Liberation, on the other hand, is 'thoughtless' as well as '*vasana*-less'. Realization, when it is rendered permanent by the eradication of all the *vasanas*, is Liberation.¹⁹

¹⁸ "The ego does not die unless the Self's glance falls on it." *The Garland of Guru's Sayings*, v.920. See also *Talks*, §219. Sleep too is a thoughtless state, but it does not lead to obliteration of the *vasanas* since it is not endowed with the light of the Self.

¹⁹ "Experience [of the Real] is said to be temporary or permanent." *Talks*, §95. See also § 57, 562.

Self-enquiry as a Three-step *Sadhana*

We generally tend to think that Self-enquiry consists of two steps, namely, giving up the existing thoughts in favour of the 'I-thought', and investigation of the source of the 'I-thought' to attain the state of Realization. This however, is not the complete picture. *Sadhana* cannot end with mere Realization, since it will lapse after some time and ignorance will return, due to the influence of the *vasanas*. Hence the aim must be to abide in the state of Realization as long and as often as possible till all the *vasanas* are extinguished and Liberation is attained. Self-enquiry, therefore, must be considered to consist of not two, but *three* steps; the third step being a continued abidance in the Self.

Two-step and One-step Models of Self-enquiry

When a seeker, relatively new to the practice of Self-enquiry, sits for practice, he will be besieged by thoughts to an unprecedented degree, as his mind tends to revolt sensing his efforts to discipline it. The seeker will then find it appropriate to use the query, "To whom are these thoughts?" to which the answer, "To me" brings to the fore the 'I-thought'. As he advances in his *sadhana*, the distracting thoughts decrease, and he finds that he can summon the 'I-thought' in an instant by merely willing it, without need for the query. It means he has no more use for the first step of Self-enquiry. To him, Self-enquiry now consists of only the latter two steps, namely, investigation of the 'I-thought' to attain the Self, and continued abidance in the Self. We may refer to this as the 'two-step model' of Self-enquiry.

When the seeker, who is up to this level, wants to investigate the source of the 'I-thought', he first asks himself, "Whence am I?"²⁰ In order to get the answer he plunges into the causal zone, where he is, so to say, to 'grope' for his Self. Initially, he may not succeed in 'sighting' it clearly, but with sustained practice finally achieves it. With

²⁰ An alternative is to use the question, "Who am I?" However, Bhagavan in his latter days seems to have favoured the use of "Whence am I?" which he says is the *true import* of "Who am I?" Vide *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entry of 1.12.1945, p.47. (1989). Vide also *Talks*, § 67, §202; and *Upadesa Saram* (v.19).

further practice at this level, he reaches a stage when he can summon his abidance in the Self with just a little effort,²¹ just as he became able to summon the ‘I-thought’ earlier. He then has no more need for the said query. Self-enquiry, for him, is reduced to the single step of abidance in the Self. We shall refer to this as the ‘one-step model’ of Self-enquiry.²²

We thus see that the interpretation of Self-enquiry differs with the degree of maturity of the *sadhaka*. When the *sadhaka* is fresh to the task, it will appear to him as a three-step *sadhana*, and as he gathers experience, the number of steps is reduced to two and then to one. When we read Bhagavan’s teachings, we come across certain statements which are specific to *sadhakas* with one or more of these backgrounds. If we do not distinguish them properly, such statements will be incomprehensible, and throw us into confusion. The following cases illustrate the point.

Effort in Self-enquiry

Bhagavan has said that in Self-enquiry, though effort is at first required, a stage will come, short of attainment of the goal, when it will be impossible to put in any effort.²³ At first this statement will look puzzling, since we cannot ordinarily fathom how a *sadhana* can go on without any effort. The meaning will be clear only when we admit step-3 as a part of Self-enquiry, such as in the three-step model of Self-enquiry. We see then that effort is required to practise the first two steps. But when we come to the last step — that of continued abidance in the Self — there is no scope to make any effort since the ‘agent’ (ego) that is to make the effort, is merged in the Self. Yet, *sadhana* continues by way of annulment of the *vasanas*.²⁴ Thus Bhagavan’s statement applies to the three-step or two-step model.

²¹ *The Garland of Guru’s Sayings*, v.399.

²² The main obstacle to his *sadhana* at this stage could be the *vasana* that temporarily blocks his ‘will to do *sadhana*’, when he is out of the state of Realization.

²³ “All that you need do is to find out its [ego’s] origin and abide there. Your efforts can extend only thus far. Then the Beyond will take care of itself. ... No effort can reach it.” *Talks*, §197. See also §78.

²⁴ *Talks*, §197, p.163, (1994).

Means and Ends

Bhagavan has often characterised Self-enquiry as a *sadhana* in which the means are the same as the end.²⁵ The statement can be baffling, since the question arises, “If they are identical, how does one *lead* to the other?” Further, if they are the same, the end must be realized the moment the means are set in motion, negating any need for *sadhana*. These anomalies disappear when we realize that here Bhagavan is identifying Self-enquiry with the one-step model. According to this view, *sadhana* consists merely in holding onto ‘the abidance in the Self’,²⁶ and this too, serves as the *means* to eradicate the *vasanas*. When *sadhana* concludes with the eradication of all the *vasanas*, the end-state of Liberation is obtained. This is a state of abidance in the Self. The *means* adopted for *sadhana* are thus the same as its *end*.

Duality and Non-duality in *Sadhana*; Meditation and Self-enquiry

The two-step model of Self-enquiry has been adopted by Bhagavan for the categorisation of meditation and Self-enquiry. Meditation, as he says, consists of ‘concentration on a single thought’, the thought being that of an ‘object’. An ‘object’ is regarded as an entity *external* to the ego, which is the ‘subject’ or ‘doer of *sadhana*’. Bhagavan therefore terms meditation as an ‘objective’ *sadhana*. In the two-step model of Self-enquiry, the attention of the seeker initially starts with a consideration of the ‘I-thought’, which is the ego or the ‘subject’. It ends with the Self, which is *internal* to the ego, and with which the ego *identifies* itself. Self-enquiry is thus concerned all through with the ‘subject’ *alone*. It is therefore termed a ‘subjective’ *sadhana*, unlike meditation which is ‘objective’. Bhagavan is emphatic that *this is how* meditation and Self-enquiry differ from each other.²⁷

²⁵ *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entry of 1.12.1945, p.48,(1989).

²⁶ *The Garland of Guru’s Sayings*, v.1193-94.

²⁷ “Meditation requires an object to meditate upon, whereas there is only the subject without the object in *vichara*.” *Talks*, §390. See also §338, §52.

So, if ever a doubt should arise as to whether a particular *sadhana* is meditation or Self-enquiry, the issue should be settled on the basis of this criterion.

If, instead of the two-step model, we adopt the single-step model for Self-enquiry, *sadhana* consists of mere abidance in the state of Realization, which is a non-dual state. From this viewpoint, Self-enquiry can be termed a ‘non-dual *sadhana*’. Other *sadhanas* such as meditation necessarily involve the ego, which is composed of many parts,²⁸ and so they come to be classed as ‘dualistic’ *sadhanas*. The duality referred to here is the *absolute* duality — that between the Self and the non-Self, whereas the categorisation given by Bhagavan is based on the subject-object duality at the level of the ego, not the Self.

Meditations mistaken for Self-enquiry

Certain meditations are sometimes mistaken for Self-enquiry due to the similarity of terms used in their nomenclature. Notable examples are ‘meditation on the heart-centre’, and the so-called ‘meditation on the Self’. Meditation on the heart-centre finds mention in the *Upanishads* under the name of *dahara-vidya*,²⁹ and is regarded as an important kind of *saguna* meditation. Here, the object of meditation is a small cavity imagined to be there in a subtle ‘heart’ situated near the breast-bone. This is sometimes confused with the Heart spoken of by Bhagavan as our spiritual centre, and on this basis ‘meditation on the heart-centre (understood as Heart)’ is taken to mean Self-enquiry. This is clearly incorrect, since the Heart cannot be an ‘object’ to the ego, but is its very source. There can therefore be nothing like a ‘meditation’ on the Heart to speak of.

The term ‘meditation on the Self’ has been used by Bhagavan on at least two occasions,³⁰ and on both occasions it is clear that he meant it as a meditation, and not Self-enquiry. However, since the

²⁸ “This ‘I’-thought is not pure. It is contaminated with the association of the body and senses.” *Talks*, §266. A detailed analysis of the I-thought is taken up in Part Two.

²⁹ *Brihadaranyaka Up.*, IV.4.22. The term *dahara* denotes ‘cavity in the heart’.

³⁰ *Talks*, §52 of 9.6.1935; and *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entry of 21.1.1946.

true Self cannot be an object of thought, the term must be understood to stand for ‘meditation on an aspect of the Self’. Such a meditation is said to be of two kinds, namely, *nirguna* and *saguna* meditations,³¹ and finds wide mention in the *Upanishads*. ▲

(To be concluded)

³¹ *Nirguna* meditation is concentration on an object that has no quantifiable attributes — e.g., *Om* (cf. www.swami-krishnananda.org/panch/panch_09a.html). *Saguna* meditation uses a number of objects with quantifiable attributes, such as the heart-centre. In informal expression, the term ‘meditation on the Self’ is sometimes used to mean commonly either meditation or Self-enquiry, and on rare occasions, to mean Self-enquiry. Such usage is not advised in serious disputations.

Understanding Self-enquiry

Part Two Enquiring into the Self

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Self-enquiry is ordinarily said to proceed in three steps. Firstly, the stream of thoughts in the mind is brought to a halt in order to bring the 'I-thought' into focus. The source of this 'I-thought' is then investigated to attain abidance in the Self. Next, the state of abidance in the Self is allowed to last as long as possible. The cycle is repeated till all the *vasanas* are eliminated, culminating in Liberation.

Of the three steps enumerated, the first one is plain enough to understand and follow. At any rate, it is soon found to be redundant. The third step requires no special skills since it is only a matter of holding on to what has been gained in the second step. So, if any difficulty is experienced with Self-enquiry, it is only with the second step of investigating the source of the 'I-thought'. Many seekers find it difficult to understand the true nature of this step. It shall be our

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endeavour here to delve into and obtain as clear a picture as possible of this crucial step.¹

Thought and Feeling

Our mind operates broadly on two planes of consciousness, namely, thought and feeling. To take an example, we all know what it feels to be angry. At such times, what we sense with our mind is the 'feeling of anger'. When a Guru speaks to his disciples on the need to shun anger, by recounting its many evils, what occurs in the minds of those people is the 'thought' of anger. Thus, thought and feeling are entirely different things.²

'Feeling' may be said to be more *intimate* to us than 'thought'. We can see this clearly from the fact that, generally speaking, we can change a thought quickly at will, but not so a feeling. While thought may be said to be 'superficial', being essentially confined to the the mind, feeling would somehow appear to run deeper in our being. Feeling is therefore said to belong to the category of *experience*, while thought is to that of *knowledge*.

I-thought and I-feeling

The I-thought and I-feeling occupy a central place in Self-enquiry, because the very purpose of Self-enquiry is to unveil the Self, which is our true 'I'. As with any other thought-feeling pair, the I-feeling is more intimate to us than the I-thought. It means, of the two, the I-feeling is closer to our Self, and plays by far the greater role in the practice of Self-enquiry.³

¹ When we try to explain matters closely related to the Self, we cannot avoid some degree of ambiguity. This is because the Self is non-dual, whereas all our analysis rests on dualistic concepts. Whenever advancement in understanding is obtained, it is only by pushing the anomalies and uncertainties to a yet higher level where they do not immediately bother us.

² It does not mean that they are *necessarily* mutually exclusive. For instance, the thought of anger and the feeling of anger occur together when a person shouts angrily, "I don't get angry for nothing."

³ "Thoughts must cease ... Feeling is the prime factor, and not reason." *Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi*, §24 of 4.2.1935 (p.21), 9/ed., 1994. "... the actual intuition is akin to feeling ..." *Talks*, §28 (p.31).

When we refer to ourselves in everyday life as 'I', what operates in our mind as 'I' is the 'I-thought'. It is not our true-I, but a pseudo-I, otherwise known as the 'ego',⁴ which alone projects all other thoughts. It operates primarily as the idea 'I-am-the-body', or 'I-am-the-mind'. For instance, when we say, "I had been to Chennai yesterday", the 'I' there is mostly identified with our body. When we say, "I like poetry better than prose", that 'I' is identified more with our mind. It is hence that Bhagavan said, "This 'I'-thought is ... contaminated with the association of the body and senses."⁵ Being thus composed of parts, the I-thought is classed as 'dualistic'.⁶

The I-thought may take other derivative forms too, such as 'I-am-the-doer', 'I-am-the-enjoyer', 'I-am-the-parent', 'I-am-the-shopper', etc depending on the situation.⁷ Each form is composed of two parts: the subjective part 'I',⁸ which represents the sentient principle, and a predicative, insentient part such as 'body', 'doer', 'parent' etc. The idea such as 'I-am-the-body' superimposes a false sense of sentience of the 'I' on the predicative part. In most situations in life, we identify ourselves with this falsely sentient predicative part. We are therefore, most of the time, a doer, a parent, a shopper or some other cognizable object, but not our *original*, subjective 'I'. This, in brief, is the nature of the I-thought.

But, then, there can be certain situations in which we take part with a noticeable level of awareness of our subjective 'I'. A typical instance is when we brood over a misfortune that has visited us most

⁴ "The ego is the I-thought. The true 'I' is the Self." *Talks*, §146 (p.128). See also §285 (p.243).

⁵ *Talks*, §266 (p.222). See also §285 (p.243).

⁶ "Duality is the characteristic of the ego." *Talks*, §618 (p.582). The 'duality' is reckoned at the absolute level.

⁷ "... the forms the ego may assume are legion." *Maharshi's Gospel*, Book II, p.63 (2007). Often times we have a multiple set of identities which lie in a jumble, without our precise knowledge of what they are.

⁸ The term 'subject' is used here in the grammatical sense as the complement to 'predicate'. It should not be confused with the ego, for which 'subject' too has been used, in the sense of a doer of *sadhana*, in Bhagavan's system of categorisation of meditation and Self-enquiry. (Vide Part One).

unexpectedly. Another is when we offer our grateful thanks to a stranger, who had gone out of his way to help us in a crisis situation. The *feeling* of 'I' that we become aware of and *experience* in ourselves at such times is what we call the 'I-feeling'. In the examples cited, this I-feeling plays a subordinate role to the I-thought which actually runs the proceedings. We may call it the 'implicit' I-feeling. We can see that even such a second-grade I-feeling occurs a little deeper in us than the I-thought we have when we make a matter-of-fact statement like "I like poetry better than prose."

Once we have some inkling of what I-feeling is, we may be able to summon it at will with a little practice. The practice consists in merely turning our attention inwards, and looking for a *feel* of our subjective 'I'. In other words, we straightaway *intuit* the I-feeling. It is an 'explicit' type of I-feeling, in which thought, if any, takes a mere secondary role. It is the only kind of I-feeling that is relevant in Self-enquiry. Hence from now on when we say 'I-feeling', we shall mean only the explicit kind.

Initially, we may find the I-feeling a little too elusive, but after some practice, will be able to hold it for a few moments at a time. Even at this early stage, we can see how remarkably different it is from the I-thought. We distinctly experience some kind of 'abidance' within us: we feel we are at one with where we belong, untouched by any objective feature of our existence. We get a feeling of being in something of a safe-house, beyond limits for intrusive thought. The world would seem to lie somewhere 'out there', and not in our immediate ken. It will appear there is nothing that can threaten our existence in that 'pure' state, and so we feel we ought to be eternal in that state. All these we experience within the brief span over which the 'I-feeling' lingers. The criss-crossing of any thoughts expressive of this state does not seem to hamper the feeling of our 'abidance'. Such a state of abidance co-existing as a capsule alongside 'non-intrusive' thoughts, is what we shall call the 'impure' I-feeling. It is the key element in the take-off to Self-enquiry.

Although we have deduced the I-feeling as only a kind of I-thought, in which we identify ourselves mostly with the subjective 'I', we see

that it is profoundly different from the usual, predicative type of I-thought, in which we identify ourselves with all kinds of insentient things. We shall therefore treat them as two separate and distinct entities. The I-thought may then be broadly characterised as being predicative, conceptual, of the nature of knowledge, and dualistic. The I-feeling, on the other hand, is largely subjective, intuitional, of the nature of experience,⁹ and unitary (or integral).

The Essence of Self-enquiry Practice

The second step in Self-enquiry, which is our main area of concern here, might be stated somewhat thus: "When we investigate the source of the I-thought (or ego),¹⁰ there results our spontaneous abidance in the Self."¹¹ We are usually deceived by the simplicity of the statement. If we take it literally, we find it odd that we do not get the *real* non-dual experience, said to be characteristic of the Self, upon an attempted investigation of the I-thought. All that we get to is the I-feeling, with a few thoughts fluttering about. But, then, we arrived at the I-thought only after eliminating other thoughts, and now its investigation brings us back to some thoughts again. We wonder if we are to proceed once more with the question, "To whom are these thoughts?", and if so how it would end.

The fact is that the statement of the second step is an oversimplification. Taken literally, it holds good only in the case of a very advanced *sadhaka* (to whom the one-step model of Self-enquiry applies). To the rest of us, the abidance in the Self can come only over a period of time,¹² and not spontaneously. Alternatively, if we want to

⁹ "How do you say 'I am'? ..." (D: By experience.) "Yes. Experience is the word. Knowledge implies subject and object. But experience is non-terminous, eternal." *Talks*, §128 (p.114).

¹⁰ The investigation takes the form of the question, "Whence am I?" The question is put by the ego to itself. Hence it is equivalent to asking, "Whence is this I-thought?" Cf. *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entry of 1.12.1945, p.47, (1989).

¹¹ The inclusion of 'spontaneous' is felt justified in view of the exclamatory '*ayi*' in *Upadesa Saram*, v.19, and Sadhu Om's interpretation of *Ulladu Narpadu*, v.30, in *The Path of Sri Ramana*, v.i., Ch.8, p.142.

¹² *The Garland of Guru's Sayings*, v.399. See Part One of the article for the meaning of the one-step model.

rely on the term 'spontaneously', then we have to take the statement in a different sense. Then the statement applies to practically all of us. We shall return to this point later.

Strictly speaking, for the *practice* of Self-enquiry, we do not need any more understanding than what has been given above of the I-feeling, and a general insight into the method as given in Part One. We can then, if we have normal levels of intuition, practise Self-enquiry to its logical end. The practice consists in merely holding on to the 'abidance' found in the I-feeling all the way, till, at long last, Realization is obtained.¹³ The state of Realization will be unmistakable,¹⁴ and so we will know when we come to it. It lasts for some time, and then the former duality sets in. We have then to go through the cycle once again. Eventually, when all the *vasanas* are destroyed, we attain Liberation.

In case a *sadhaka* finds it beyond his capacity to intuit the I-feeling, he need not be disheartened. He can take to a vocal or mental *japa* of 'I', incessantly.¹⁵ His mind will then automatically catch the I-feeling within. It must be understood that the practice must be continued each time till the onset of I-feeling, which must then be held on to. Without it, merely indulging in the I-thought fleetingly, howsoever often, does not serve any purpose.

A useful suggestion at this juncture is that the seeker should not over-exert himself for obtaining or retaining the I-feeling. This is because when the mind gets active, intuition takes a back seat. Only intuition can bring in abidance. Folding up the analytical mind, and adopting a laid-back attitude, is what is needed to bring intuition into play. It is like withdrawing into the 'now' of the moment.

¹³ "Thus it is sufficient if we cling to the feeling 'I' uninterruptedly till the very end." *The Path of Sri Ramana*, Part One, Sri Sadhu Om, Sri Ramana Kshetra, Tiruvannamalai, Ch.7, p.138, (6/ed., 2005). The term 'Realization' is used in the sense of 'Self-abidance', as explained in Part One of the present article.

¹⁴ *Talks*, §205 (p.174).

¹⁵ "Think 'I' 'I' 'I' and hold to that one thought to the exclusion of all others." *Talks*, §266 (p.222). See also *Who am I?* §9; *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entries of 8.5.1946, 28.6.1946, 24.11.1946.

The practical-minded seeker can, therefore, straightaway plunge into practice on the basis of these indications. He has everything to gain and nothing to lose thereby. If, however, the seeker is one of an inquisitive type, who would not take a step forward before he understands the in and out of a thing, then he needs put himself to a little more study. In this cyber age, we may suppose, most seekers would belong to this category. We shall, for their sake, attempt a detailed analysis below.

Identity of the I-feeling vis-à-vis the Self; Evolution and Involution

When the unmanifest Self begins to manifest, its light issues out as 'I' or *aham*.¹⁶ We may refer to it as the 'undifferentiated-I'. Bhagavan often refers to it as the 'light of I—I' (or 'reflected light from the Self').¹⁷ Sometimes he calls it 'light of I' in the sense of 'the I that is light'.¹⁸ The *Maya* mode begins here.

The 'undifferentiated-I', upon further evolution, divides itself into what we may designate as the 'particularised-I' (also known as *aham*), and the object, *idam*.¹⁹ The two may be looked upon as the sentient and the insentient principles respectively. The particularised-I, by its very nature, seeks an object for its identity. So it grabs a part of the *idam*, such as the body, and superimposes itself on the latter forming the 'ego'. The rest of the *idam* takes on the role of the 'world'. The particularised-I, that now forms the sentient constituent of the ego, is what we have called the 'subject-I' (i.e., subjective 'I'). The portion of *idam* constituting the insentient part of the ego, is called the 'predicate'.²⁰

¹⁶ *Talks*, §518 (p.500); §314 (p.275); §510 (p.493).

¹⁷ *Talks*, §307 (p.267).

¹⁸ *Talks*, §518 (p.500).

¹⁹ *Talks*, §314 (p.275). The terms 'undifferentiated' and 'particularised' have been adapted from Bhagavan's explanation in §510 (p.493).

²⁰ This entire cycle of evolution is said to occur every day in the trice of a moment when we awake from sleep (*Talks*, §314, p.275; §323, p.288). We are, however, not to consider it as taking place in time, but in the planes of consciousness. So, it is not as if at a certain point of time when the world appears, the Self or its other modes cease to exist. Time itself is non-existent in certain planes of consciousness.

In Self-enquiry, we aim to precisely reverse this process of evolution, by taking the consciousness up the scale — from the ego to the Self.²¹ We call it ‘involution’. Two important stages in this ascent are the subject-I (in the I-feeling) and the undifferentiated-I.

When we wish to investigate the source of the I-thought, we instinctively try to look for our Self, but it being too ‘remote’, we reach only the subject-I. It involves shifting of our attention that is presently locked in the predicate part of the ego, to the subject-I. While doing so, we do not find it necessary to identify what that predicate part is, since it may consist of many identities, all lying in a jumble. It suffices if we merely fix our attention in the direction of the subject-I. The shifting then occurs by itself, as desired.

Our abidance in the subject-I is at first accompanied by some thoughts. This is what we have called ‘the impure I-feeling’. From now on, our practice consists in merely holding on to the abidance found in it.²² The abidance becomes more and more intense and steady, as the practice goes on.²³ As for the thoughts, we do not have to specifically try to control them. If we remain keen with the abidance, the thoughts (and with them the breath) will subside in due course. The control of thoughts was *once* necessary to arrive at the I-thought for investigating its source, but that purpose is now served with the onset of the I-feeling, and we have no more concern with either the presence or absence of thoughts.²⁴

In due course, we attain a perfect, unwavering abidance in the subject-I. Since this is tantamount to holding it in isolation from its predicate, the subject-I transpires to be the ‘particularised-I’ itself.

²¹ “This is the only way, to go back by the same way by which you came.” *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entry of 27.12.1946, p.301, (1989).

²² “You are hazily aware of the Self. Pursue it.” *Talks*, §240 (p.193).

²³ This is due to the steady eradication of the *vasanas*, as explained later, and the strengthening of the positive *vasana* of *sadhana*.

²⁴ This is what makes the practice of Self-enquiry possible concurrently with other activity as a second rung of *sadhana*. Our mind can be active in other ways, even as we keep to our abidance. Such a parallel activity is not possible with meditation. *Talks*, §17 (p.11), §310 (p.268).

Our continued abidance, now in this particularised-I, amounts to its isolation from *idam*; and so, it being unstable in this condition, resolves itself into its cause, the undifferentiated-I. We thus arrive at abidance in the undifferentiated-I. Bhagavan considers this as an indispensable stage before Realization. He terms it therefore as the ‘forestate of Realisation’,²⁵ and refers to it often as the ‘transitional-I’.²⁶ At times, he refers to it as ‘pure-I’ too.²⁷

When the undifferentiated-I is held steady, it itself is realised to be the Self.²⁸ It is somewhat like this. The Self is like a person resting in the interior of his house. The undifferentiated-I is like the person standing at the front door intending to go out.²⁹ The *sadhaka* is like a passer-by who can strike conversation with the person standing at the front door, but not with the one in the interior. If, now, the passer-by engages the person at the door in conversation long enough, the latter’s intention to go out is frustrated, and he becomes as good as the person resting in the house. In the same way, the urge of the undifferentiated-I to evolve as *aham* and *idam* is defeated by our constant attention to (or abidance in) it, and in absence of that urge, it is no different from the Self.³⁰

It is clear from the above, that the I-feeling has nothing to do with the true Self. But in parts of spiritual literature, the I-feeling is

²⁵ *Talks*, §62 (p.68) read with §518 (p.500).

²⁶ “If the transitional ‘I’ be realised the substratum is found and that leads to the goal.” *Talks*, §314, (p.275). The ‘substratum’ means the Self, ‘finding it’ is Realization, and the ‘goal’ is Liberation (See Part One of this article for the difference between Realization and Liberation). Bhagavan points out “This is the only passage to the Realisation of the Self” *Talks*, §323 (p.288).

²⁷ “... the pure ‘I’ of the transitional stage must be held” *Talks*, §314 (p.276).

²⁸ “If ... one senses it (*sphurana* or undifferentiated-I) continuously and automatically it is Realization.” *Talks*, §62 (p.68).

²⁹ It is analogous to *Isvara* in classical *Vedanta*. *Isvara* may be looked upon as *Brahman* with intent to create. If the intent is frustrated, then he is *Brahman*.

³⁰ In the cosmic scale of evolution, *Brahman*, *Isvara*, *Hiranyagarbha* and *Virat* (Cosmic Consciousness) come in that order. During involution effected by *sadhana*, we may therefore expect to visit these states in the reverse order. The subject-I, particularised-I and undifferentiated-I may thus be identified with Cosmic Consciousness, *Hiranyagarbha* and *Isvara* respectively. Cf. *Talks*, §323 (p.288).

identified with abidance in the Self. We have to understand that such passages are only simplified presentations. Else, we will be confronted with the anomaly that the Self, known to be beyond the mind,³¹ is being cognized by the mind. The fact that we need to expend effort to *maintain* the I-feeling, also shows that it cannot be a state of abidance in the Self, which is known to be effortless. Besides, Bhagavan has ruled out any connection between ‘feeling’ and the Self.³² Hence, the I-feeling must be understood as merely abidance in subject-I, and not the Self.

In general, whenever we see references to the Self in literature in a dualistic context, we might do well to take them as referring to a manifestation of the Self, (known in common as ‘I’, *aham*, *naan* or ‘pure-I’) such as the subject-I or undifferentiated-I, and not the true Self (otherwise called ‘I—I’, *atma*, *taan*, or ‘true-I’). The statement of step two of Self-enquiry we saw earlier, may therefore be understood (inclusive of its reference to ‘spontaneity’) to refer to a manifested form of the Self as far as a beginner is concerned.

Subconscious Processes in Self-enquiry

When we investigate the source of the I-thought, we instinctively shift our attention from the predicate part of the ego to the subject-I.³³ These two parts of the ego are joined together by a ‘knot’, called the *chit-jada-granthi*.³⁴ It consists of age-old *vasanas*, and belongs to the *causal* sphere. So, shifting of our attention from the predicate to the subject involves crossing of this causal zone by our intellect, the agent

³¹ Cf. *Kena Up.* I.6, *Taittiriya Up.* II.9.

³² “*Pratyaksha* [the Self] is very being and it is not feeling, etc.” *Talks*, §500 (p.481). “*Pratyaksha* is another name for the Self.” *Day by Day with Bhagavan*, Entry of 22.3.1946 afternoon, p.157.

³³ Alternatively, this may be viewed as *separation* of the subject-I, which is presently superimposed on the predicate, from the latter by undoing the superimposition. The *Katha Upanishad* (II.3.17) famously compares it to the separation of the pith from the reed of Munja grass. Bhagavan terms it “sifting of the pure ‘I’ from the contaminated ‘I’.” *The Talks*, §266 (p.222). Muruganar puts it as, “in the heart, renounce the relative”. *The Garland of Guru’s Sayings*, v.415. Bhagavan considers this step as so central to Self-enquiry, as to say, “*Atmavichara* ... consists in sifting the Reality from unreality.” *Talks*, §298 (p.261).

³⁴ *The Path of Sri Ramana*, Ch.8, p.161.

of action. Since the intellect cannot discern causal objects, this passage of the intellect through causal zone has been compared to the groping of one’s way in a dark room past obstacles towards a ticking clock (see Part One). It is thus that the knot is transited (‘transcended’) subconsciously.

When we attain abidance in the subject-I, the light of the subject-I falls on the *vasanas*, causing their annihilation to an extent.³⁵ Since it is only a reflected light, its intensity is less as compared to the light of the true Self. Hence only the grosser of the *vasanas* are eliminated at this stage. In the subsequent stage of abidance in undifferentiated-I, the less gross *vasanas* start to be eliminated. When, finally the Self is realised, its direct light shines on the *vasanas*, and hence even the subtlest of *vasanas* start to be eliminated. Continued practice at these different stages eliminates all *vasanas* and leads to Liberation.

Concept of *Sphurana*

Sphurana stands for abidance in a manifestation of the Self (in the *Maya* mode), such as the subject-I or the undifferentiated-I. *Sphurana* is short for *aham-sphurana*, which means ‘shining forth of I’. It is a figurative way of referring to the seeker’s glimpsing of the ‘I’ (*aham*) during the said states of abidance. Thus, when we enter the I-feeling, we are said to have *sphurana* of the subject-I. A characteristic of *sphurana* is that it is cognized by the mind. So, *sphurana* has a semblance of non-duality in the form of abidance, and duality in the form of knowledge of the mind.

The concept of *sphurana* allows us to discuss abidance in subject-I and undifferentiated-I in common. It is advantageous, since, for all practical purposes, we as *sadhakas* do not have to distinguish between them any time. All that we do is merely keep holding our abidance, and it changes from subject-I to undifferentiated-I on its own. The subsequent abidance in the Self too follows on its own, except that a brief discontinuity will be encountered before this ultimate step.³⁶

³⁵ “Apprehending it (the Self) even vaguely helps the extinction of the ego.” *Talks*, §80 (p.82).

³⁶ *The Path of Sri Ramana*, Ch.8, p.151; *Concentration and Meditation*, Swami Sivananda, The Divine Life Society, p.342 (3/ed., 1964).

The fact that the intellect is able to cognize the higher manifestations of 'I' in *sphurana* may be understood from two viewpoints. Firstly, as Bhagavan said quoting from *Kaivalya Navaneeta*, "*Maya* cannot obscure *Sat* (being) but it does obscure *Chit* and *Ananda*."³⁷ Hence the 'being' aspect of the Self is transparent to the intellect, and is realised as *sphurana*. Secondly, the intellect becomes subtler and subtler, as *sadhana* progresses.³⁸

Bhagavan wants us not to think of *sphurana* as something too far out of the ordinary. He assures us, "*Sphurana* is felt on several occasions, such as fear, excitement, etc."³⁹ In its pure form, it is said to occur immediately upon our waking from sleep for a brief moment. Bhagavan suggests holding on to it as a viable way to Realization.⁴⁰ *Sphurana* is also said to be experienced in the brief interval between two consecutive thoughts.⁴¹

Sphurana stays with us from the time we attain the impure I-feeling till we are on the verge of realizing the Self. It ensures that we never lose track of our goal, just as a dog that is in possession of its master's scent, or a mountaineer with a hazy view of the distant peak, do not.

Incentive to Practice

A sound understanding of Self-enquiry is itself the best incentive to its practice. The knowledge that the *vasanas* start getting depleted from as early a stage as abidance in subject-I (I-feeling), enthuses us to proceed with hope even if we do not presently measure up to sky-high levels of aspiration. We feel optimistic that both our aspiration and practice will pick up as time passes. It behoves us to keep persevering and translate this hope into reality. ▲

³⁷ *Talks*, §100 (p.97). See also *Self-enquiry*, §39.

³⁸ *Self Enquiry*, §11, p.9 (1999); *The Path of Sri Ramana*, Ch.8, p.158.

³⁹ *Talks*, §62 (p.68).

⁴⁰ *Talks*, §196, (p.162); §314 (p.275); §311 (p.271); §323 (p.288); §609 (p.564); §623 (p.586).

⁴¹ *Talks*, §609 (p.564); §286 (p.245); §314 (p.276).