

the rest—and feel just peachy because, in their trance of religious ignorance, they imagine that none of it is “real.”

So suffering continues and cannot be denied. Nevertheless, one can, I say, come to grips with feeling that life itself is unsatisfactory or that one must live in a state of perpetual anxiety. That is part of what I tried to address in *4T*, and why I say now, “Depending on no-thing, find your own mind.”

105 - *The sense of self*

Q: Early in *The Ten Thousand Things*, you spoke of “I, being a flow of consciousness.” I understood this to mean that I am aware somehow of what appears to be a spontaneous flow of life or the universe without knowing who I am. Do I have this right?

Then you say, “In accordance with that observation, one can just be, and let the stream of consciousness flow where it will. That is what I mean by awake.”

A: The “I” of enunciation—the “I” that calls itself “me”—is *part* of one’s actual being, but nowhere near all of it. In fact, most of one’s *actual* being operates behind the scenes, below conscious awareness. Think iceberg.

For example, you are not normally aware of your internal organs, unless there is a problem indicated by pain or discomfort. Nevertheless, those organs are in constant conversation with the brain, sending and receiving information second by second via nociceptors. So a great deal of the generalized feeling of being an entity, a “self,” derives from the sense of aliveness generated by that continual, unceasing communication, which is entirely nonverbal and ordinarily entirely unconscious. Even if there is a problem—a sharp pain in the gut, for example, or a heart arrhythmia that gets one’s attention—most of that nonverbal communication still remains unknown to the “I” of enunciation.

If one can get a feeling for this cognitive/informational limitation of the “myself” that ordinarily fancies itself the doer of perceiving, feeling, thinking, and acting (when, in actual fact, most of that occurs behind the scenes and out of sight), then this aliveness will flow more naturally and freely. From a wisdom perspective, the “I” of enunciation will stay out of the control room, and do what it does best: experiencing and participating on the everyday human level, without presuming itself to be the doer and decider of this aliveness. Otherwise, the controlling, choosing, deciding “myself” that one *believes* oneself to be,

and calls “I,” will dither and struggle, impeding that natural flow.

This is not a black and white, “either/or” matter, so perhaps it is better to say that one can go with the flow *to the extent* that one can understand consciously that no “myself” actually exists as a discrete unitary being. And therefore, although it may *feel* that “I” am deciding, choosing, and doing, that is largely an illusion, and can be seen as such, by some of us at least.

I don’t know if you are familiar with the five skandhas⁴⁹ idea in Buddhism, but that concept can be helpful in understanding my saying that the ordinary experience of a unitary “myself” is largely an illusion. But since it is an illusion that we are taught from birth, widely-shared, and difficult to contradict, awakening—in the way I mean that word—seems to happen only for some of us. The others remain firmly *attached* to the “I” of enunciation. It’s what they identify “as.”

Ordinary “spirituality” is not helpful in coming to this understanding, I say, and can even be counterproductive, if one imagines that choosing to undertake some practice will lead to “awakening.” No, I say—it won’t. Practices that are felt to be “chosen” for the purpose of transcending ordinary biological existence only deepen the illusion of “myself, the do-er.”

Does that help?

Q: Yes. Just hearing you say that diffuses much suffering. Still, when I look outward, the world seems to consist mostly of causes of suffering, even if those might appear to give pleasure; but, on the other hand, when I look inside, I feel peace and stillness. Slowly, the list of outward objects I crave seems to be dwindling. Is this what you call progressive awakening?

Other than the experience you had of suddenly awakening, is there any other way of snapping that list altogether? If yes, what can I expect? I find resistance from family, as they see me less and less passionate about things. I used to teach yoga and meditation, and felt quite enthusiastic about all that. I still attend satsangs, but I have stopped teaching as I have lost the desire for it.

A: A kind of dispassion often seems to go along with seeing things as they are. I don’t mean not caring about things: I still care, in a way more than ever, but with equanimity.

From my perspective, there *is* no inside and outside. That is a false dichotomy, a split where none actually obtains. I understand that experience can *appear* to be split like that, but this may become clearer if you ask yourself *who* is seeing all of this—both the apparent “inside” and the apparent “outside.” How is the seer different from what is seen? Is there a difference? And is there truly a little homunculus “inside” somewhere *doing* all this looking inward and outward (the “I” of enunciation, perhaps)—or does it just *feel* that way?

From what you have written, I’d advise not worrying about snapping anything together. Just live as you must until you die. Whatever wisdom and understanding you can bring to that process will be yours to enjoy.

Q: Thanks. So *nirvana* is also part of what you call “the hypnotic trance?”

A: You are most welcome. Yes, if *nirvana* is conceptualized or commodified as a *future destination* to be sought in hopes of transcending the biological and emotional suffering of human existence, I’d say that is a feature of the trance.

It may be hard to accept each moment as it is without hoping or searching for something “more evolved,” but seeing the lie in such hopes for the future, in my experience, allows freedom, sanity, and reality in the present. And you only have to take it one moment at a time. Without hope, imagined future glories—familiar hiding places—disappear. *This* moment is all one ever has to deal with, and all one ever can deal with. With that understanding, *samsara* is *nirvana*.

Q: Ha! Maybe your “freedom, sanity, and reality” got translated into “*nirvana*” by whomever.

49. See footnote on p.578.

A: As for *nirvana*, that's a tricky word. I think it literally means extinguished or blown out like a candle. That's not my experience at all.

Q: By the way, why is your book called *The Ten Thousand Things*?

A: "The ten thousand things" is an ancient term for the manifest universe. In the epigraph to the book, I quoted Eithei Dogen:

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is to be enlightened by the ten thousand things.

Q: I see. Thank you. So since I don't and can't know who I am, why bother? Is that it, Robert? In fact, stop wasting time and enjoy whatever appears to be here and now? I think I get the gist, but giving up doesn't come easy to the brain. Failure to know who I am feels like death.

A: Yes. Whatever one thinks or has been taught to believe—perhaps in one of those satsangs you attend?—each of us is *mortal*, and will age and die like any other animal. Nothing trumps biology—not, at least, so far as we know.

In fact, you will never be this young again, so enjoy it while it lasts. I would not see that approach as "giving up," but more as embracing the true existential situation of "myself." If I see things as they are, I may find that simply being at all—even if I don't know how or why—feels more like a gift than a burden. Would I really prefer that none of this be here: the stars, the oceans, the flowers, myself?

Q: So no euphoria, no bliss, no oneness with the universe. And even if I did get those experiences, like so many others those too would fade away, and I would be left with whatever *here* is. Perhaps the best teachers are those who never said anything.

A: Yes. I said nothing for years. But a friend I trust kept urging me to share my point of view. Finally, I gave in. Perhaps euphoria is a bit over

the top, but in my experience there *is* joy, there *is* love, and there *are* feelings of oneness. It's just that no feeling is permanent. Everything is in flux. To be honest, I *do* have feelings of unity, but I don't cling to them conceptually as an explanation of anything. Freedom is the key.

Q: I am already free. So it must be that I start to feel this freedom in my day-to-day living in the body?

A: Be as you are. If that includes feelings of oneness, lovely. If it doesn't, that's fine too. The point is to stop looking for something "else," something "better" than right now. One can spend an entire lifetime hoping to "transcend" ordinary human primate life. I consider that a crying shame, a waste.

Q: Anticipation of some bliss in the future seems to be so hardwired. Nearly all my life I have been trying to fix things so I would be happier tomorrow. I understand now that I missed out on many todays in the process. Thanks for that, Robert.

A: You are welcome. This life is so very brief. It's sad to see someone always on to the next thing, while the suchness of *this* moment goes unnoticed. And anyway, the expectation of being happier tomorrow may be misplaced.

Q: One thing keeps coming back. If some, like you, have this expansive experience, it must be physical/mental. That too is impermanent. So why does it seem so special? The Zen masters advise ignoring such experiences. That too, they say, is clinging and hence suffering. "Why invite more suffering?" they say. But a voice inside says, "Sour grapes!"

If I were really convinced that there is no "aha!" moment, I'd stop thinking of enlightenment. What would be the point?

A: I am not saying that there are no "aha!" moments. I would never say anything like that. I am saying that wishing for one will only get

in the way of noticing one if it arises, because an “aha!” moment may be entirely different from what one had been imagining. That seems to be the case for many of us. I have little “aha!” moments frequently, but most of them are undramatic, subtle, and quiet, so if I were always on some kind of mission to have my mind blown, I might miss most of them.

You just thanked me for reminding you that in your search for happiness tomorrow you “missed out on many todays in the process.” That’s a kind of “aha!” moment, isn’t it? It would be for me.

I don’t use the word “enlightenment” myself because, in my view, it is fraught and carries too much baggage. But I do use the word “awake.” I observe that lots of us really *are* awake, or could be at least, but miss it because we were expecting to feel, “Eureka! Now everything is solved!” And that isn’t necessarily the feeling—although it might be, I suppose. I am saying that if it can be noticed that you — the “I” of enunciation, the feeling of “myself” you call “me”—are neither making thoughts, feelings, and perceptions nor controlling them once they arise, you *are* what I call awake. It just has to be noticed and called that.

Q: You have deconstructed every other religion, what do you think of Kabbalah?

A: Kabbalah is the mystical side of Judaism, focused squarely upon what I criticize as magical thinking: the entirely false belief that humans can influence and alter the course of natural events by uttering the “secret names of God;” intoning magical incantations; wearing amulets; working with sorcery, seals, and symbols; resorting to thaumaturgies; and the rest of that superstitious twaddle.

As you know, I reject the “God” thing entirely. Humans have cooked up gods since time *immemorial*. For me, it’s just not an issue.

Once people prayed to Zeus and “knew” what he wanted from them: lots of sacrifices. Nowadays people pray to Jesus, Jehovah, or Allah, and “know” what “He” wants. I see no difference. None. Mythology is mythology. The gods used to be painted on the walls of

caves, and children and animals sacrificed to them. That was pre-science, so it may have been all they had. But nowadays, to believe in all that godlore requires a different *kind* of sacrifice: the sacrifice of good sense and reason.

Q: Well then, a final question, please. If I can see “myself” as a construct, can “I” be *part* of the construct? If I knew that, then I would know who I am. Do I have any attributes?

A: Of course you do. A questioning, questing mind seems to be among them.

Q: I love it. The *construct* is my attribute. Who is under hypnosis? Isn’t it the body/mind? The construct can never know, but I can see the construct. Or is that the construct looking at itself?

A: The part of the mind of which you are aware is hypnotized by the notion of *becoming* something one is not now.

Q: If there is nothing else, then perhaps there is no value in seeking, but it does seem that I found considerable insight into my stupidity along the path, though.

A: What you are calling “the path” is seen only in retrospect as a history of certain memories. “Path” is a poor name for *be-ing*. It’s a name that can only confuse. A *path* is a track that is already laid out—perhaps marked by stones or the footsteps of others. If one is really living, and not just following and imitating, that is not what this aliveness is like. Some people seek and follow until they find what they wanted—Jesus, nonduality, whatever. Others live in the spontaneous present.

Q: Isn’t spiritual seeking similar to Freud’s self-analysis? Forgive me if I am paraphrasing him incorrectly. Isn’t much of the Buddha’s teachings the earliest form of psychology?

A: Judging from the words attributed to Gotama, he was a great psychologist. If his work could be understood that way, much confusion would subside.

Q: I understood your book, Robert, but it is really tough to accept that I cannot know the answers to ultimate questions.

A: Yes. I get that. The spiritual teachers are trying to claim that you *can* know, and that they will show you how to know. Perhaps they have been hypnotized themselves, or maybe they want to add you to their roster of followers. It takes a strong mind to resist hypnosis, and to live only for what one really *can* know—which is nothing about Brahman and all that, but only one's own mind in this moment.

Q: What do you think of this saying, Robert: "The reason you can't know Brahman is because you're it?"

A: Nah. Clever nonsense that means nothing much. As far as I *know*, what I *really* am is a primate human animal whose ancestors evolved from the same original one-celled ancestor from which all life on Earth evolved, beginning billions of years ago. The evolved brain is capable of complex conceptual thought, including concepts about non-existent items—items that exist only in imaginary ontology—and to me, Brahman seems to be one of those concepts.

I am not saying the Brahman of the Hindu scriptures does not exist, but I see scant evidence for it. There may be a teapot, too small to be detected by telescopes, orbiting the sun somewhere between the Earth and Mars, as Bertrand Russell said. No one can *prove* there isn't. Those who are "certain" of religious metaphysics, from my perspective, seem terribly overeager to take ideas on faith and deem them "Truth."

I have no use for "faith." I see what I see—not what some "teacher" or scripture *tells* me to see. So I am free, not because I believe one thing or another, but because I don't need to believe *anything* in order to live and breathe, laugh and love.

Q: What do you think of "I am not the body" or *neti neti*⁵⁰?

A: I do not agree at all with "I am not the body." What is the meaning of such an assertion? Without a body, including a brain, there *is* no I, is there?

Neti neti. Yes. That seems a good approach. Why not give it a shot?

Q: Do you feel that consciousness is an emergent property of the body? Or do you just not care?

A: You do know the right questions to ask. Ha, ha.

The jnanis and the Vedic scriptures claim that consciousness exists prior to brains, and that brains are only objects *in* consciousness. But that seems a far reach, and they offer no evidence, but only tradition, testimony, and shaky logic. Tradition is not evidence, nor is logic. Zeno "proved" that an arrow could never reach its target.

As for testimony, anyone can claim anything while feeling totally certain of what he or she is saying, but that does not make it so. If some contemporary spiritual teacher has *evidence*—not scripture, not belief, not faith, not talk, but observable *facts*—put them on the table. I would be interested to see them.

There is a great deal of evidence to suggest that consciousness is an emergent property of brains—for example, if part of the brain is damaged, consciousness is impaired. The 1985 book *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, by the neurologist Oliver Sacks, speaks in detail of such cases and is a lovely read.

I will never accept any unsubstantiated ideas about consciousness or anything else, regardless of how many humans before me believed them. Ancient does *not* equal true—only old.

Q2: How do you know the difference between awakening and just being in a dark place? I read your report of Sonam Kazi's⁵¹ 50. *Neti neti*: in Hinduism, and in particular Jnana Yoga and Advaita Vedanta, a Sanskrit expression, meaning "not this, not that," or "neither this, nor that."

51. Sonam Topgyal Kazi, or Sonam T. Kazi or Sonam Topgay Kazi (1925-

remarks about your past lives and how you rejected all that. Like you, I totally don't care about past lives. I don't care about religion. I have zero interest in pursuing any "spiritual truth." I have no way of discerning truth. But I don't think my lack of interest in those things is a sign of being awakened. I think it is because I have no faith in anything anymore.

My life-long belief system is just plain gone, like shattered glass. But what is left in its wake is fear. Maybe the fear is based on the loss of my sense of security. Regardless of its validity, I once had a sense of security, but that is gone. I don't even know why I am sharing this with you, Robert.

On the other hand, something smacked me right in the forehead last night. I've always liked the movie screen analogy, even though I didn't really get it. It made logical sense, but not *felt* sense, I guess you could say. But last night it just hit me. I got it deeply. It was suddenly clear and obvious. The screen—which is my awareness—just is. It has no choice about what movie plays, what feelings arise, what scenes are seen. The screen *lives* the show. The events happen on the screen of awareness, and become part of "me," is how I see it now.

The losses of loved ones I have faced—there was no choice but for that to play out. The screen took it all in, and that *is* "me" now. I can't rewind, I can't edit, and I can't fast forward. At least, that is how things appear at present. Tomorrow may be different, and probably will be.

A: Good. You have seen that no one gets to *choose* the movie, because the movie is this aliveness itself. To see—not just on a logical level, but empirically—that this wild aliveness is the deepest referent of the word "myself," leaves no choice but to *deal* with that movie minute by minute. The movie *is* me. The sense of *be-ing* flows unstoppably—a river of perceptions, thoughts, and feelings springing up spontaneously; already water over the dam before anyone can judge them, control them, or fix them. Like it or not, the would-be doer or controller lags behind, if only by a split second. Something seen cannot then

be made "unseen," nor a thought erased.

To call this aliveness a movie is not to trivialize it, or to suggest that it is not "real," as some foolish people imagine. It is a "movie" in the sense that it keeps playing, and you are already in the theater watching it, with a "no refunds" policy at the box office. You can try to turn your face away, but the movie just keeps playing. Each moment of that movie—which will end presumably at death—comprises a never-to-be-repeated suchness on its own.

Awake, one notices the suchness of each moment. Each moment is precious precisely because it is ephemeral and transitory. One meets that suchness with open arms, chewing up perceptions, thoughts, and feelings, and swallowing them bite by bite. Any particular moment may taste sweet or bitter, but we all must keep eating.

2009), a Tibetan writer and translator and specialist in Dzogchen.