

# A Perennial Question—‘Who am I?’

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Isn't the question questionable? I may not know who you are or what an aardvark is, but can I not know *myself*? And if I don't, then can I ever? Before trying to answer these questions, let us ask the following questions:

- (a) How many persons are involved in the question ‘Who am I?’ If we think of answering, ‘One, namely, I’, then let us pause and ponder. ‘Who am I?’ is a question, and a question involves the one who asks—the questioner—and the one of whom it is asked—the answerer: a tango. Here: *Who asks and who answers?*
- (b) How many persons are involved in understanding the answer? Are we going to answer, ‘One, namely, I’, without pausing to realize that here too we have the tango: the one who understands and that which is understood? So again: *Who do I tango with?*
- (c) Generalizing the issue, let's ask: That which I can perceive, which I can (or need to) understand, which I can forget, which I can transact with, whose change I can register—*can that be truly 'I'?* *Can I tango solo?* We all agree that we have a certain feeling of ‘I’—let's say, the ‘I’-sense. But here, aren't we suspecting some other ‘I’ beyond that—to tango with? Let's move on.

## I, the schizophrenic

- (a) On a cold, blustery evening, I see hot

*pakor*s being fried in a wayside stall. I say ‘yes’ to myself and instinctively fast-pace towards the mouth-watering fritters. The next moment I stop short saying ‘no’ to myself because the oil used may not exactly be a physician's delight. ‘Okay, but once will do no harm’, I tell myself and again make for the *pakor*s. But eventually I overrule my greed.

- (b) Exams being around the corner, again and again I push a sleepy and recalcitrant myself to study all night.
- (c) My close friend has hurled undeserving abuses at me and I am mortified. Later, I tell myself that people do sometimes err, even I do. So I advise myself to forget the matter. I struggle with myself and a few days later I do forget the matter and the grudge and feel easy.

Isn't it surprising that I was arguing with myself, pushing myself, advising myself and struggling with myself? Can I really do that—in a mystifying ‘*I vis-à-vis 'I'?* *How many things am I? Am 'I' schizophrenic—a split personality?*

## I, the possessed

Again, suppose

- (a) My house is on a river on which quaint country-boats ply.
- (b) I have developed rashes on my body. Maybe it has been caused by my nylon shirt rubbing on my skin.
- (c) I was feverish yesterday and so my intelligence was sluggish in class. That's

why I couldn't complete my classwork.

- (d) But today I am sharp and have done very well in class and so my mind is cheerful and expansive.

Okay, the house and shirt can be 'mine', sure, but can my *mind* and *intelligence* too be 'mine', the 'possessed', and not 'I' myself? Are my mind and intelligence like my house and shirt? What exactly is 'mine'—and whose exactly is 'mine'? Can 'I' be 'mine' also? 'I' am who?

### I, the chameleon

- (a) Once I was the owner of the house in which I now live as a tenant.  
 (b) When I retired yesterday, I was somebody—the CEO of Maladjust Inc. Today I am nobody.  
 (c) Yesterday I was solo. Today I will marry and become a husband.

If I am one single entity—as surely I am and have to be—then how come I am so many things as well: owner, tenant, CEO, husband? Aren't these then only 'role-playing appellations'—titles or *upādhis* as the Upanishads describe them? Does anything change in the *true me* for every role that I play? Am I not simply wearing different hats? If 'I' remain the same, then *who / what changes and who / what changes not?* The change, if any, that I feel is just that: a feeling only—is it not?

### I, the young; I, the old; I, the changing; yet I, the same

I, now old, sitting alone, am reminiscing about my childhood days, student days. I am thinking—how the world has changed and how I have changed! I pause to wonder: how is it that I can *myself* know that I have changed? Change can be registered by that which hasn't changed—a constant. If I am that constant then who has changed? And if I have changed, then who is the *constant* that

has registered the change? And if I have changed and am changing all the time, then how come I go on using the same appellation 'I'? Science says that all the molecules of a person's body get replaced by new ones every decade or so. How is it then that that person doesn't get to know it, feel it? What is then my real, *unchangeable* identity?

### I, the unexplored

Isn't it queer that I who know and understand so many things should have difficulty in knowing and understanding 'I myself'—even when, as they say, I am so full of 'I, me and myself'? Indian *darshanas*, worldviews, have been exhorting us to *discover ourselves* above all, but we have been turning a deaf ear to that. We explore the world but leave ourselves unexplored. Is it a sensible thing to do? It seems that we are sure—cocksure—that the question of 'discovering ourselves' does not arise, and is indeed ludicrous, for, obviously, we know ourselves only too well. And also, if we don't know ourselves now, we never will. If this is indeed our mentality, then doesn't the above question-and-answer session jolt us out of such injudicious smugness and bid us to pay heed to ourselves? '*Diyā tale āndherā*' they say—'it's dark under the lamp'. How true it is in the present case! There is this most important passage in the *Katha Upanishad*:

*Parānci khāni vyatrinat svayambhustasmātparān pashyati nāntarāman.* (2.1)

It means 'The self-existent Lord created the sense organs with the inherent defect that they are by nature outgoing. Thus we look to the world outside and see not the Self within us.'

Things like conscience, judgement, do's and dont's—they involve *silent*

*conversation*, don’t they? ‘The still small voice’, they say. *Whose voice is it?* We—our senses, mind, intellect—are experts in illuminating secrets of the world without, but are found so woefully wanting in illuminating the world within! Must we spend a whole life never caring to investigate the ‘within’—the ‘true I’?

### **I, the laughter, weeper, learner**

- (a) Feeling empty, I think of entertaining myself. I google an ice-cream recipe and then mix milk, sugar, egg and cream together in a bowl and freeze it. Later, out the bowl comes joy—delicious ice-cream! I LOL!
- (b) Again I google. This time to learn. I discover—
- that there was in India, from the 14th century, a school that is now called the Kerala School of Astronomy and Mathematics,
  - that one Madhava and one Nilkantha were its two leading lights,
  - that, among other things, they did pioneering work in trigonometry and in what is now called ‘infinite series’, which included infinite series representations of sine, cosine, tangent and arctangent (of angles), and also of  $\pi$  (‘pi’), which is the ratio of the circumference to the diameter of any circle, and
  - that Nilkantha developed a partially heliocentric model of the solar system somewhat akin to the model developed by the famous Tycho Brahe in the late 16th century.
- (c) Rising early and catching my favourite team’s football match on the TV, I end up weeping at my team’s defeat.

These things that I did are commonplace, but there lurks in them an uncommon issue. Let’s ask: Does it mean that milk + sugar + eggs + cream + freezing

= joy? Was joy lurking in the cream or the egg? Did the freezing make it ooze? Let’s ask: Where was the knowledge about the Kerala School and how did it reach me? Did it radiate from the computer screen and lodge in me? Along with light, did grief emanate from the pixels of the tv screen?

### **I, the imposter**

We should by now be more or less certain that what we think of as ‘I’ is not really that ‘I’: ***I am mistaken about my own identity!*** This is precisely what the Upanishadic passage already quoted cautions us about. While it is usually a long-drawn-out affair to convincingly fathom who the real ‘I’ is / am, happily, some important preliminary—even if tentative—findings are possible here and now.

What is very evident is that there are several ‘I’s. We are cavalierly confusing various things with the ‘true I’, the most telling example being the mix-up between *my mind* and I. Clearly, some unravelling is needed. The ‘true I’ needs to be extricated from the clutches of imposters.

### **I, the unperceivable perceiver, unthinkable thinker, unknowable knower**

Let us do this experiment—a *must*. Let us sit comfortably and steady, and alert, in a silent and uncluttered room where there is no other person. Then let us still our mind—banishing bodily feelings (like aches and itches) and memories, and gradually attenuating thoughts too, as best we can... So, now we are not aware of anything, body, room, furniture, people ... thoughts, memories ... nothing. ... Yet, we are fully aware of something! Yes, that’s it: *the awareness of ‘I am’*.

There is this momentous question in the *Brihadāranyaka Upanishad*: How will the knower be known? The verse says, you

cannot see the seer of seeing; you cannot hear the hearer of hearing; you cannot think of the thinker of thinking; you cannot know the knower of knowing. This is your self that is within all; everything else but this is perishable.

If someone has to eventually perceive, then who will perceive the perceiver, and how? Can the eye see itself? If everything—including ‘I’—needs to be known by a knower, then how indeed will the knower be known? By whom? The light of a flame illumines objects for us to see. What light do we need to illumine the flame? The flame is *svayamprakāsh*—self-illuminated. And so, says the Upanishads, is the ‘true I’—You!

Though momentous, these questions should be obvious and even easy in the sense that a schoolboy would understand their import. The questions are not remarkable; *what is remarkable is that we don’t ask these questions ever—or even summarily dismiss them!*

The *Kena Upanishad* has a number of wonderful verses (1.5-1.9). The sum and substance of these verses is:

Not that which the eye can see, but that whereby the eye can see: know that to be Brahman the eternal, and not what people here adore. Not that which the ear can hear, but that whereby the ear can hear: know that to be Brahman the eternal, and not what people here adore. Not that which speech can illuminate, but that by which speech can be illuminated: know that to be Brahman the eternal, and not what people here adore. Not that which the mind can think, but that whereby the mind can think: know that to be Brahman the eternal, and not what people here adore.

The tragedy is that we are always putting the cart before the horse by going straight to the *object* of perception, of thought, without pausing to address the issue of how such perception or thinking happens and by whom?

The very first verse of the *Kena Upanishad* runs thus:

*Keneshitam patati preshitam manah  
Kena prānah prathamah praiti yuktaḥ /  
Keneshitām vācam imām vadanti  
Cakshuh shrotram ka u devo yunakti? //*

—‘Willed by whom does the directed mind go towards its object? Being directed by whom does the vital force, that precedes all, proceed (towards its duty)? By whom is this speech willed that people utter? Who is the effulgent being who directs the eyes and the ears?’

Aren’t these questions so deep, so full of poetry—and so sensible too? Clearly, the *vāk* or speech stops with the perceiver, the thinker, the knower. Undoubtedly therefore, the perceiver, the thinker, the knower is someone super-special! We can disregard him only to our own peril!

### I, the lost-and-found

The passage from the *Katha Upanishad* (2.1) already quoted does not end there. It moves on to say that ‘a sage withdrew his senses from the world of change and, seeking immortality, looked within and beheld the deathless Self’. A momentous statement again! Let your senses not distract you, it advises. That’s the first step to finding—*realizing*—your true Self—the DEATHLESS SELF!

What does that mean? For one, it means that—however surprising—the senses hinder and don’t help! For another, it means that you can never objectify your true Self! This is obvious from what we have seen already, that the perceiver cannot be perceived, nor the knower known. For yet another, the true Self is deathless, indestructible, eternal! All that can be objectified or apprehended by sense-mind-intellect is perishable, and the perishable is not, never, cannot be, the ‘true I’!

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