

CHAPTER 2

Who Are You, Really?

That Thou Art

— The Upanishads (Hindu)

The phrase *Tat tvam asi*, or “That thou art,” first proclaimed by the *Upanishads*, lies at the heart of Hindu mysticism. But what does it mean? “Thou” stands for *Atman*, which refers to your *true Self*, as opposed to the separate ‘self’ you imagine yourself to be; “That” stands for *Brahman*, the Ultimate Reality of everything that is. So, if you asked the Hindu mystics who or what you really are, their answer would be this: You are none other than the Ultimate Reality Itself!

But if you then asked what exactly this Ultimate Reality is, not one of them would be able to tell you. Why? Because, as the Upanishads themselves declare,

[Brahman] is immeasurable, inapprehensible, beyond conception, never-born, beyond reasoning, beyond thought.³³

If you asked a Buddhist what it is to know who you *really* are, you might get an answer like this from Tibetan master Dudjom Lingpa:

It is simply understanding correctly one’s own true nature as the fundamental nature of reality.³⁴

Notice, this is almost identical to the answer given by the Upanishads: Your true nature is the Fundamental Nature of everything. But then if you asked Dudjom Lingpa what that Fundamental Nature is, he couldn’t tell you, because, as he also says,

[That] nature is free of ultimately defining characteristics that can be expressed in words, beyond metaphorical approximation and devoid of any status as some entity that could actually be demonstrated.³⁵

Similarly, if you asked a Taoist sage who or what you really are, he would answer that you are one with the *Tao*, or Way, which refers to the Ultimate Reality underlying all phenomena. But as for what the Way Itself is, he couldn't tell you because, according to Lao Tzu, the fabled founder of Taoism,

The Way that can be spoken of
Is not the constant Way.³⁶

When Jesus was asked who *he* really was, he answered, "The Father and I are one"³⁷—which is to say, "I am one with the Ultimate Reality that is God." Now, although most Christians believe *only* Jesus is one with God, Christian mystics have claimed that God constitutes everybody's true being. This is why Meister Eckhart says,

Some simple people think that they will see God as if he were standing there and they here. It is not so. God and I, we are one.³⁸

But if you were to ask Meister Eckhart who or what God is, he couldn't tell you because, as he explains,

God is "above names" and ineffable.³⁹

Finally, if you asked a Sufi like Ibn al-ʿArabi who or what you really are, he would answer that you are

not other than the divine Identity Itself, as also no [determined] being, now or in the future, is other than His Identity; He is the Identity.⁴⁰

As for this Divine Identity, however, nothing can truly be said of It, for as Ibn al-ʿArabi also says,

No eye perceives It, no limit encompasses It, and no demonstration (*burhān*) gives knowledge of It.⁴¹

So, if you asked any of these mystics from any of these traditions about your true nature, they would all give you the same answer: They would all declare that your true nature is Ultimate Reality Itself. But as to what this Ultimate Reality actually *is*, not one of them could tell you, and neither can I. This, in fact, is what the word *mysticism* means. It comes from the Greek root, *mustes* or "closed mouthed." *Mustes* is also etymologically related to *mute*—i.e., someone who cannot speak—which is very appropriate when applied to mystics. It is not that they have some deep dark secret they are intentionally withholding from you. It's that they *cannot* tell you. They cannot tell you because the nature of Ultimate Reality is quite literally *unspeakable*.

Why Reality is Unspeakable

So why should this be the case? Why can't the nature of Ultimate Reality be defined in words? The answer has to do with the nature of words themselves. Whenever we use a word, we distinguish one thing from another by indicating a boundary. For instance, if I say, "This is a book," what I am really saying is, there is some boundary which separates a certain aspect of my experience—the 'book'—from all the other aspects of my experience.

This is true not only of words that signify concrete objects, like books, but also of more abstract words that signify different classes of phenomena. For instance, if I say "This cushion is blue," I am placing it within a *class* of objects that can be distinguished from other *classes* of objects that are red, or green, or yellow. And if I say that the statement "the earth is round" is *true*, I am distinguishing it from another class of statements about the earth—such as "the earth is flat"—which are *false*. The point is, words always refer to some form of distinction, and whenever we have a distinction, we have a boundary which, in turn, automatically produces a duality. This is true even if I only use one word. Even if I simply give something a name, I still end up with a duality consisting of whatever falls *inside* the boundary indicated by the name, and everything else that falls *outside* of it. And, of course, the more words I use, the more dualities I end up with. Consequently, the world described by words and language is unavoidably a world of dualities.

Now we normally take these dualities to be real because we normally take the distinctions and boundaries which our words indicate to be real. This is especially true of those *physical* boundaries which seem so clearly to separate things like tables from chairs, and trees from stars. Whenever we talk about such things we think our words simply describe objects that already exist out there in the universe.

But suppose this isn't true. Suppose our language doesn't just *describe* boundaries that already exist. Suppose it actually *creates* them. Suppose it is not just the boundary between 'self' and 'world' that is imaginary, as the mystics claim, but that *all boundaries whatsoever are imaginary*. Suppose it is our own minds that create these boundaries and then project them onto a Reality whose fundamental nature is *nondual*. Well, this is precisely what the mystics say. In the Buddhist *Lankavatara Sutra*, for example, we read this:

False-imagination teaches that such things as light and shade, long and short, black and white are different and are to be discriminated; but they are not independent of each other; they are only different aspects of the same thing, they are terms of relation not of reality. Conditions of existence are not of a mutually exclusive character; in essence things are not two but one. . . . All duality is falsely imagined.⁴²

So, too, Shankara writes,

No matter what a deluded man may think he is perceiving, he is really seeing Brahman and nothing else but Brahman. He sees mother-of-pearl and imagines that it is silver. He sees Brahman and imagines that it is the universe. But this universe, which is superimposed upon Brahman, is nothing but a name.⁴³

And Meister Eckhart declares,

If we will see things truly, they are strangers to goodness, truth and everything that tolerates any distinction, be it in a thought or in a name, in a notion or just a shadow of distinction. They are intimates of the One that is bare of any kind of multiplicity and distinction.⁴⁴

Rumi employs a series of poetic images to convey the same nondual message:

I sought round the world for “others” and reached certainty: There are no others.
The buyers are all a single buyer, the bazaar has but one aisle...
The whole world is indivisible, the whole world’s harp has but one single string.⁴⁵

So again, all these mystics agree: *All* boundaries are imaginary—not just the one which separates us from the world, but even boundaries that seem to separate concrete, physical objects from each other. All of them are products of our imagination, which we then superimpose upon a nondual Reality, so that it *appears* to be divided into a multiplicity of ‘things.’ And it is this appearance of multiplicity that prevents us from seeing that the true nature of everything—including ourselves—is nondual.

It is important to note, however, that mystics are not saying boundaries themselves are the problem. On the contrary, boundaries are extremely useful. If we could not distinguish between a tiger and a mouse, we would be in a lot of trouble. The real problem is that our minds get so habituated to seeing the world divided by these boundaries that we forget they are imaginary, and begin to treat them as though they actually existed ‘out there’ somewhere. To put it technically, we *reify* them—i.e., take the boundaries to be real. As a result, we start living in an *as if* reality, a metaphorical world which in the East they call *maya* or delusion.

So when mystics make statements such as “all dualities are falsely imagined” and “the universe is nothing but a name,” they are not implying that we should get rid of boundaries. They are simply calling attention to our deluded way of perceiving a Reality whose ultimate nature is nondual.

But there is even a problem with this way of putting it, because if I say, “Ultimate Reality is nondual,” this excludes the dualities created by imagining boundaries and distinctions. But if nonduality excludes duality, then nonduality ends up being dualistic, and is, therefore, in a sense false. A common analogy mystics use to try to clarify this paradoxical relationship between nonduality and duality is to compare it to the relationship between an ocean

and its waves. Even though we can distinguish different kinds of waves—big ones, small ones, choppy ones, curling ones, etc.—they are really all just forms of the water which constitutes the ocean. So, if you venture out in a boat and actually try to locate the boundaries which seem to separate the waves from each other, you won't find any, because they only exist in your mind. In reality, ocean, waves, and water are all One.

Eventually, however, this analogy, too, breaks down, because we normally experience water as a substance, which has specific properties and attributes that can be distinguished from other substances with different properties and different attributes. But the Ultimate Reality to which mystics bear witness is not a substance. It has no specific properties or attributes. Consequently, it's not a 'thing' among other 'things' which can be pointed out and described in words. In fact, even to say "Ultimate Reality cannot be described in words" is self-contradictory, because I am using the words "Ultimate Reality" to describe Ultimate Reality, while simultaneously denying that this can be done.

Now, mystics themselves are under no illusions about the paradoxical nature of their teachings. They know full well words can never communicate Ultimate Reality. Their real purpose is to inspire and guide our quest to discover this Reality for ourselves. Thus, the Buddha of the *Lankavatara Sutra* declares,

These teachings are only a finger pointing toward Noble Wisdom. . . . They are intended for the consideration and guidance of the discriminating minds of all people, but they are not the Truth itself, which can only be self-realized within one's own deepest consciousness.⁴⁶

Similarly, Rumi writes,

The only profit of speech is that it may cause you to seek and incite your desire. The goal is not realized through speech itself.⁴⁷

For mystics, this applies even to their tradition's most sacred scriptures. Here, for example, is what Dionysius the Areopagite, a fifth-century Christian mystic, says about the descriptions of God found in the Bible:

The reason for attributing shapes to that which is above shape, and forms to that which is beyond form, is . . . the feebleness of our intellectual power which is unable to rise at once to spiritual contemplation, and which needs to be encouraged by the natural and suitable support and upliftment which offers forms perceptible to us of formless and supernatural contemplations.⁴⁸

Describing the Indescribable

So what are some of the ways mystics have tried to describe "that which is above shape" and "beyond form?" The most universal way (and usually regarded as

the most esoteric) is known as the *via negativa* or the way of negation—of which we have already encountered some examples at the beginning of this chapter. Buddhists in particular have favored this form of expression, partly because they know how easily our minds fall prey to imagining a ‘thing’ whenever a positive term for the Ultimate Reality is employed. For instance, when most people hear the word *God*, it automatically conjures a picture in their minds of some Big-Daddy-in-the-Sky. To avoid this, Buddhists have traditionally eschewed theistic language. Instead, they prefer to use terms such as *shunyata*, commonly translated as “emptiness” or “voidness,” to indicate not only the true nature of our ‘selves,’ but of all ‘things.’ This teaching by Lama Yeshe, a twentieth-century Tibetan master, is typical:

We and all other phenomena without exception are empty of even the smallest atom of self-existence, and it is this emptiness (*shunyata*) that is the ultimate nature of everything that exists.⁴⁹

But while “emptiness” is specifically a Buddhist term, mystics of other traditions have also used the way of negation to convey their highest teachings about Reality. In Hinduism, for example, one of the most common formulas for speaking of Brahman is *neti neti*—“not this, not that.” This is because, as Shankara explains:

Brahman is without parts or attributes. It is subtle, absolute, taintless, one without a second. In Brahman there is no diversity whatsoever.⁵⁰

Likewise, Ibn al-ʿArabi writes this of the Absolute:

Its reality cannot be conceived. . . . It is God. The utmost knowledge we can have regarding Him is the negative qualities, such as, “There is nothing like Him, “Your Honoured Lord is free from the qualities which they attribute to him.”⁵¹

According to Ibn al-ʿArabi, then, the Reality which underlies all things is Itself “empty of all things.” Or to put it another way, despite the various Divine Names which are attributed to Him, God is actually a *no*-thing. This is also precisely the way Christian mystics have understood the Ultimate Reality, for as Dionysius says of what he calls the “nameless Cause of all being,”

It is within our intellects, souls and bodies, in heaven, on earth, and whilst remaining the same in Itself, It is at once in, around and above the world, super-celestial, super-essential, a sun, a star, fire, water, spirit, dew, cloud, stone, rock, all that is; yet It is *nothing*.⁵²

But although the *via negativa* avoids some of the pitfalls inherent in trying to characterize Ultimate Reality in words, it still contains a number of serious drawbacks of its own. For one thing, it doesn’t give us much of a clue as to how this Reality relates to us personally. And yet if this Reality is, indeed, the

Truth of who we really are, then it cannot be all that remote from our everyday experience. On the contrary, it must be a *no-thing* that is somehow always present as an essential component of whatever we are doing, thinking, feeling, or perceiving.

The second drawback is that, by themselves, negative expressions fail to communicate any sense of the incomparable value which discovering this Reality might hold for us. If all we are going to find out at the end of a mystical path is that everything is “selfless,” “empty,” and “nothing,” why bother to travel it? In order to counter-balance such nihilistic impressions mystics have also found it necessary to employ the *via positiva*, or the way of affirmation—especially in their more practice-orientated teachings. So let us explore some of the positive expressions mystics have used when trying to speak about Ultimate Reality.

Consciousness and Reality

Among Hindus, one of the most common ways of describing Ultimate Reality goes back to the Upanishads, which declare it to be the “Pure Consciousness of conscious beings.” Here’s how Shankara describes it:

It [Brahman] is pure, absolute consciousness, the eternal reality. Such is Brahman, and “That art Thou”.⁵³

Now notice that Shankara is not saying Brahman is some sort of Supreme Being who *has* consciousness. Rather Brahman *is* Consciousness Itself. There is no Brahman apart from Consciousness and no Consciousness apart from Brahman. The two terms are synonymous. Moreover, this Consciousness is none other than the very consciousness that is illuminating your own mind, right now—which is why Shankara, along with the Upanishads, insists that Brahman is identical to Atman, your true Self.

Of course, *Consciousness* is not the actual word used in the Upanishads or by Shankara. It is an English translation of the Sanskrit, *chit*. And mystics of other traditions have used equivalent terms that we can also translate by our word *Consciousness*.

In Arabic there is apparently no single word that can be translated as *consciousness*. However, the Qur’an says repeatedly that Allah is “the Seeing and the Hearing.” No doubt, ordinary Muslims take this to mean that Allah is the Supreme Being who sees and hears everything that goes on in the universe. But these words can also be taken to mean that Allah *is* Seeing itself and *is* Hearing itself—which is precisely how Sufis like Ibn al-‘Arabi *do* take it. Moreover, this interpretation is reinforced by a *hadith* (saying of Muhammad) in which Allah specifically declares that He is the hearing and seeing of his servants. This is what Ibn al-‘Arabi is referring to when he insists,

He [Allah] is identical with the attributes and members of the servant, for He said, “I am his hearing.” Thereby He attributed hearing

to the entity of the existent thing which hears, while He ascribed it to Himself. But there is no Existent Being save He. So it is He who hears, and He is the hearing. So also is the case with the other faculties and perceptions. They are nothing but He.⁵⁴

Now, when Ibn al-ʿArabi talks about “hearing,” and “the other faculties and perceptions,” isn’t he really talking about what we would call *consciousness*—that power of awareness which allows us to perceive and know whatever it is we perceive and know? And when he says that this awareness is none other than Allah Himself isn’t this the same as saying that Allah is Consciousness Itself? In fact, this is precisely how one of today’s foremost Sufi scholars, William Chittick, characterizes his teaching. “God” for Ibn al-ʿArabi, Chittick writes, “is sheer Being, utter Plenitude, pure Consciousness.”⁵⁵ And since, as Ibn al-ʿArabi himself says, there are no beings other than God, this means that we ourselves must also be “sheer Being, utter Plenitude, pure Consciousness.”

If we read the Christian mystics, we won’t find the word *consciousness* in their vocabulary either. The reason is that, although *consciousness* is a Western word, it is also a relatively modern one, which only gained widespread currency after the seventeenth century. The historical timing here is significant, because this was precisely the period during which traditional religious terms such as *spirit* and *soul* were being nudged out of fashion by the new materialist paradigm just beginning to captivate the minds of educated Europeans. *Consciousness*, then, is really a kind of secular substitute for these older words which had been used to explain and express the same basic mystery—namely, what it is to be alive and *aware*. When we read in the Book of Genesis, for instance, that God gave Adam life by breathing His *Spirit* into him, we can understand this in modern terminology to mean that our own consciousness originates in the Divine Consciousness. Likewise, St. Augustine writes that, distinct from all objects, there is

the light by which the soul is illumined, in order that it may see and truly understand everything, either in itself or in the light. For the light is God himself ... in whose illumination it [the soul] is enabled to see all the objects that it sees and understands in itself.⁵⁶

Isn’t he referring to what we would call the “light of consciousness,” which Augustine here equates with God Himself? So again, while we almost never find Christian mystics before the modern period using the word *consciousness*, the sense of what they were trying to communicate is the same.

Even Buddhists have often found it necessary to employ positive expressions for Ultimate Reality—if only to make it clear that when they talk about “emptiness” they don’t mean some kind of total vacuity. Here, for example, is how Dudjom Lingpa explains it:

Emptiness does not constitute an inert void, but is subtly lucid, free of sullyng factors, like a polished mirror in which anything at all can arise—this is mirror-like pristine awareness.⁵⁷

Notice that the positive expression he chooses to characterize Ultimate Reality is “pristine awareness.” This translates a Tibetan term *rigpa*, which is also sometimes rendered as “primordial awareness.” In a similar fashion, Zen teachers often speak of “Big Mind,” “Buddha Mind,” or “One Mind.” Thus, the ninth-century Zen master, Huang Po, writes,

All the Buddhas and all sentient beings are nothing but the One Mind, besides which nothing exists.⁵⁸

Once again, all these phrases are really synonymous with “Pure Consciousness,” or “Consciousness Itself.”⁵⁹

Perhaps for Westerners the biggest problem with using *Consciousness* to describe Ultimate Reality is that the term comes with a lot of built-in materialist assumptions which dominate our culture. As a result, we tend to have all sorts of preconceptions about what consciousness is, and our relationship to it. For instance, most of us were taught that consciousness is something which is produced by and located in our physical brains. As such, it is something we “possess” and, therefore, can “lose.” It is also something that all human beings (as well as other higher organisms) possess. Consequently, there are a great many consciousnesses in the world.

Moreover, according to the materialist worldview, all the contents of consciousness—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations—are caused by contact with objects outside of consciousness. Even the so-called subjective contents of consciousness—thoughts, memories, plans, feelings—are actually caused by processes in our brains which themselves exist outside of consciousness. Thus, consciousness and its contents have no real existence of their own. They’re all mere *epiphenomena* or by-products of matter.

However, if we examine consciousness carefully, we find there are a number of problems with this materialist view. For one thing, no one has ever been able to explain exactly how the brain, which is composed of matter, can generate something like consciousness, which seems to be completely immaterial. If consciousness were material, it would, by definition, have at least some physical properties. But what properties can we attribute to consciousness? What color is it? Does it have any form, size, or shape? Does it have a taste, smell, or texture? Can we determine how much it weighs?

We can also ask whether consciousness really is located in our brains. If we look at our actual experience, the reverse is apparently true. Brains are located in consciousness, because that is where we always find them. But if we operate on a person’s brain and peer inside, we will never find any ‘thing’ called consciousness. So it seems that, empirically speaking, while brains always appear *in* consciousness, consciousness never appears *in* brains. In fact, we can question whether consciousness can be located anywhere at all. For instance, if consciousness is, indeed, located in our brains, then how far beyond them does it extend? Fifty feet? Fifty miles? Fifty light years? This is a particularly interesting question to ask yourself on some clear night when you are outside, gazing up at the stars. Are they not *in* consciousness? And what about space itself? Is

consciousness located in space, or is space located in consciousness? If space is located in consciousness, then consciousness itself has no location.

One of the hardest things for Westerners to question is the assumption that consciousness is something we possess and can lose. It seems so obvious, for instance, that when you fall into a deep sleep, you are *unconscious* of what is occurring around you. Moreover, this seems to be confirmed by other people who, when you wake up, tell you things like, “You don’t know what has happened because you were unconscious.” If, however, you pay close attention to the whole process of falling asleep and waking up, chances are you will find that what you actually experience is a break in the continuity of the *contents* of consciousness. When the contents of consciousness disappear, you take this to mean that consciousness itself has disappeared. But is this really the case? Have you ever actually *experienced* unconsciousness? Wouldn’t this be a contradiction in terms? Is not consciousness the one component or dimension of all your experience that is *never* absent? Perhaps this notion of “losing consciousness” is simply an imaginary construct which allows you to maintain a sense that the world has a continuous, objective existence?

We can also examine the notion that there are multiple consciousnesses in the universe. If this is true, then where is the boundary between them? Where does your consciousness end and mine begin? Have you ever experienced more than one consciousness? Has anyone ever experienced more than one consciousness? If not, then why assume that more than one exists?

This brings us to the last and most profound question about consciousness—namely, is there really an objective world “out there” somewhere beyond it? If there is a world outside of your consciousness, how do you know it exists? Have you ever experienced anything *apart* from consciousness—trees, mountains, chairs, people, rivers, stars? In fact, we can ask the same question about the ‘self’ who is supposed to possess this consciousness. Don’t all the things you regard as comprising yourself—thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, memories—arise and pass *in* Consciousness? Perhaps, it is not you that has consciousness, but consciousness that has you!

In future chapters we will introduce a variety of contemplative experiments designed to help us explore these questions in much greater depth and detail. The point of raising them here is simply to put us on guard against taking for granted any materialist assumptions that we may be harboring about the nature of consciousness, because such preconceptions will distort our understanding of what the mystics mean when they use this term. For them, Consciousness is not an epiphenomenon of matter. On the contrary, what we call material ‘things’ are epiphenomena of Consciousness. This is why they claim it is Consciousness, and not matter, which constitutes the ultimate nature of Reality.

From a mystical perspective, the great advantage of employing the term *Consciousness* for Ultimate Reality is that, not only is it “empty” of any thingness (and therefore consistent with the mystics’ use of the *via negativa*), but it also points in a positive way to an all-pervasive dimension of experience with which we are already intimately familiar. So, by equating Consciousness

with the Ultimate Reality, mystics are actually giving us an instruction on how to start exploring this Reality in our own everyday lives. But it still does not answer this question: How will realizing that your true nature is Consciousness Itself bring you any closer to attaining the kind of abiding happiness we all long for?

Actually, what mystics claim is not that realizing your true nature will *bring* you happiness, but that you will discover you are *already* happy. Why? Because Consciousness Itself *is* Happiness Itself! This aspect of Ultimate Reality is perhaps the hardest to communicate in words, simply because the kind of Absolute Happiness we are talking about transcends anything we can experience as long as we remain trapped in delusion. Nevertheless, there are times in our lives when reflected rays of this Happiness do pierce through the veils of our ignorance, as for instance when we are transported out of our everyday selves by great love or bliss. That's why, in order to convey some hint of the kind of Happiness that constitutes our true nature, mystics have often compared it to these kinds of ecstatic states.

Love and Bliss

In Hinduism, for example, one of the most common formulas for describing Brahman is *Sat-Chit-Ananda* which means Being-Consciousness-Bliss. Here is how the twentieth-century mystic Anandamayi Ma explains it:

When trying to express Him by language, He becomes imperfect. All the same, in order to use words, he is spoken of as *Sat-Cit-Ānanda* (Being-Consciousness-Bliss). Because He Is there is Being; and because He is Knowledge itself, there is Consciousness; and to become conscious of that Being is indeed Bliss. To know the essence of Truth is bliss. This is why He is called *Saccidānanda*, but in reality He is beyond bliss and non-bliss.⁶⁰

Buddhists often use the term *Dharmakaya* or Truth-Body to indicate the most fundamental aspect of Ultimate Reality. In Tibetan Buddhism the Truth-Body is described as the inseparable union of Emptiness and Bliss out of which all phenomena manifest. Here is how the twelfth-century nun Machig Ongjo expresses her own Realization of this:

The distinguishing factor of all phenomena is emptiness. Spontaneous liberation is the Great Bliss itself. It is the Dharmakaya, beginningless, beyond name and words. I know this only because of the guru's kindness. The natural state, spontaneity, arises by itself. This is the bliss of knowing myself as not separate.⁶¹

In many traditions, Love and Bliss are considered to be the motivating force behind the Formless Consciousness's manifestation in and as the world of forms. Thus, in the Upanishads we read,

Brahman is bliss: for FROM BLISS ALL BEINGS HAVE COME, BY BLISS THEY ALL LIVE, AND UNTO BLISS THEY ALL RETURN.⁶²

Ibn al-ʿArabi puts it this way:

The movement that is the coming into existence of the Cosmos is a movement of love. This is shown by the Apostle of God in the saying [which God communicated to him], "I was an unknown treasure, and longed to be known," so that, but for this longing, the Cosmos would not have become manifest in itself.⁶³

And Dionysius the Areopagite insists,

We must dare to say, for the sake of Truth, that the very Cause of the universe Himself, because of his beautiful and good love of everything, through the exceeding greatness of His loving goodness, becomes as it were transported out of Himself in His Providence for all beings.⁶⁴

Now again, the great danger in using words like bliss and love is that they prompt us to conceive of the Ultimate Reality as some kind of anthropomorphic Super Self who experiences emotions the same way we do. This is because normally we assume there must be some self that has emotions. But is this really true—particularly when it comes to emotions of love and bliss? For example, our most intense experiences of bliss often occur when we completely "lose ourselves" in some all-consuming activity like singing, dancing, or sex. Likewise, our capacity for love is directly proportional to our capacity to disregard our own self-interests for the sake of others. Thus, for mystics, Perfect Love and Bliss indicate not the presence of some 'self'—whether human or divine—but rather its absence. Brahman does not experience bliss, Brahman is Bliss. God does not *feel* love, God *is* Love. It is precisely because, in their purest manifestation, love and bliss are expressions of self-less-ness that these terms can serve as powerful pointers to that aspect of both the Ultimate Reality and our own true nature which, once discovered, marks the end of our search for Happiness.

So perhaps we can sum all this up by saying that the full answer that mystics give to the question, who are you really? runs something like this: In reality, you are not some limited, finite entity, ego, or self that undergoes birth, suffering and death. This whole dualistic experience of 'I' and 'other', 'subject' and 'object', 'self' and 'world' is imaginary, *maya*, a delusion, founded on sheer ignorance. In Reality, you are Consciousness Itself (known in various traditions as "Allah," "Brahman," "Buddha-Mind," "God," "Tao"), which is empty of all 'thingness' and, therefore, no-thing—but a no-thing in which all things, selves, and worlds endlessly appear and disappear in a Great Cosmic Drama. Moreover, precisely because this Consciousness-that-you-are is completely Self-less, not only is it free of all suffering, its nature is Perfect Happiness, eternal Bliss, and overflowing Love.

This, then, is the “Truth that makes you free.” But there is a catch. The only way to know this Truth for yourself is through a special mode of cognition called *Gnosis* or, more popularly, *Enlightenment*. It is this to which we must now turn our attention.

