

Article

Who Am I?

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Abstract

In the ultimate state of reunion with the Absolute, there is no individual being, only the One undivided Being of the Absolute. Ultimately, I am not. Ultimately, only the Absolute is.

Key Words: Who am I, Absolute, One, undifferentiated consciousness, undivided being.

*Burning, burning, burning, burning.
O Lord, Thou pluckest me out.
The Fire Sermon*

Enlightened beings, like the being of Nisargadatta Maharaj, Jed McKenna and Osho, make an important distinction between the Self and the Source. The Self is only present if a world appears for the Self to perceive. By the Self, the I Am, Atman or any other way of expressing it, the Self only refers to the witness, the pure point of consciousness present at the center of the world perceived by the witness. This is how Nisargadatta describes it:

Only the onlooker is real, call him Self or Atman.

*The witness is merely a point in awareness.
It has no name and form.*

*It is a dimensionless point of consciousness, a conscious nothing.
All you can say about yourself is 'I am'.*

You are and I am only as points in consciousness.

*Delve deeply into the sense 'I am' and you will discover that the perceiving center is universal. All that happens in the universe happens to you, the silent witness.
There can be no universe without the witness, no witness without the universe.*

In other words, if there is no Self, then there is no world. The Self must be present for the world to appear. If that world disappears, then there is no Self. The key concept is that every witness has its own world, but the observer's world is no more real than a dream world.

This is how Osho describes it:

*We are not really in the world.
The world consists not of things outside us but of our dreams.
Everyone lives in his own dream world.*

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If suddenly all dreaming disappeared from the consciousness, your world would disappear because your world was your dreaming.

*We call Buddha the awakened one.
This awakening is really the cessation of inner dreaming.
When there is no dreaming you become pure space.
This non-dreaming consciousness is what is known as enlightenment.*

Nisargadatta describes the appearance and disappearance of the world:

*In pure being consciousness arises.
In consciousness the world appears and disappears.
Consciousness is on contact, a reflection against a surface, a state of duality.
The center is a point of void and the witness a point of pure awareness; they know themselves to be as nothing.
But the void is full to the brim.
It is the eternal potential as consciousness is the eternal actual.*

The Self, Atman, the witness, the I Am, or whatever else one wants to call it, is only present when the world appears. When the world disappears, there is only the void, which Nisargadatta calls pure being, Shankara calls Brahman, and McKenna calls empty space or No-self.

*Empty space is my reality. The void. No-self.
I abide in non-dual, non-relative awareness.
That's where I am now.*

Truth realization is really only possible if one looks within and withdraw one's attention away from the world. There are many experiences one can have in the world, but whatever those experiences are, they're not truth realization. The only clear way to define truth realization is in terms of the disappearance of the world.

Like Osho and Nisargadatta, McKenna describes truth realization in terms of the disappearance of the world. The witness is only present when the world appears. The disappearance of the world is always describes as an experience of falling into the void. When the world disappears, only the void remains:

And then, one day, there is it. Nothing.

Without warning, you're launched into empty space, and before too long, empty space becomes your reality.

*Now she's in free fall.
At the precise moment of impact, the planet will disappear, and nothing will take its place. Her free fall won't end, but it will no longer feel like falling because there will no longer be anything to reference it against.*

*This is where dual awareness ends. From then on she will live in boundless awareness,
never again able to differentiate between self and non-self.
Abiding non-dual awareness.*

*Like a child flicking a switch that turns the world off like a light. What can you say
when the thing that ends isn't within a context, but context itself?*

Osho describes the same experience:

*You fall into an abyss, and the abyss is bottomless: you go on falling.
That is why Buddha has called this nothingness emptiness.
There is no end to it. Once you know it, you also have become endless.
At this point Being is revealed: then you know who you are, what is your real being,
what is your authentic existence.
That being is void.*

McKenna gives a description of the pre-enlightenment self-identified delusional state of being, the self-destructive process that leads to enlightenment, and the post-enlightenment ascended state of being:

*The enlightened view life as a dream.
Of what real importance is anything in a dream?
You wake up and the dream is gone as if it never was.
All the characters and events that seemed so real have simply vanished.
The enlightened may walk and talk in the dream world, but they don't mistake the dream
for reality.*

*Before enlightenment I believed my ego was me, then enlightenment comes along and
no more ego, only the underlying reality.
Now it's after enlightenment and this ego might be slightly uncomfortable or ill-fitting
at times, but it's all I've got.*

*The idea that your ego is destroyed in the process of becoming enlightened is roughly
correct, but it's not complete. Before enlightenment, you're a human being in the world,
just like everyone you see. During enlightenment you realize the human being you
thought you were is just a character in a play, and that the world you thought you were
in is just a stage, so you go through a process of radical deconstruction of your
character to see what's left when it's gone.
The result isn't enlightened-self or true-self, it's no-self.*

*When it's all over it's time to be a human being in the world again, and that means
slipping back into costume and getting back on stage.
Now you're actually in the audience, watching the drama.
I could never mistake the play for reality again, or my character for my true state.*

The only way to understand what McKenna is saying here, short of one's own truth realization, is to understand the theory of enlightenment. It is not necessary to have such a theory to become enlightened, and having such a theory may not necessarily help one undergo the process that leads to enlightenment, but truth realized beings, like that of McKenna, Nisargadatta and Osho, are only able to discuss their experience intelligently because they have a sound working theory of enlightenment. There is really nothing to say about the truth-realized state, but there is a lot to say about the process that leads to truth realization.

In all of these discussions, the world is described as a dream world, like a play enacted on a stage; the ego is described as one's character in the drama; and the witness is described as the consciousness, the I Am, the being, that is out in the audience watching the drama. An illusion the being is a part of the world it perceives is created if the being identifies itself with its character in the play. That is the nature of the delusional self-identified state. To bring this illusion to an end, the being's character and world must disappear. That is the self-destructive process. When the being's world disappears, only the being's underlying reality remains. That underlying reality is the void. The being is only present when its world appears, and only the void remains when its world disappears.

Truth realized beings describe the world like a play enacted on a stage, or like a game or a form of play. This game is played by consciousness itself. The only problem with this game is if the consciousness forgets what it is and identifies itself with its character in the play. That self-identification is called bondage. The only possible freedom is in non-identification. Nisargadatta describes this as:

When you refuse to play the game, you are out of it.

After truth realization, the being perceives its world again, but it ascends to a higher level of consciousness, like a higher dimension, and no longer identifies itself with its character in its world. Plato tells us all the images of things in that world appear like shadows projected on a screen, like the animated images of a movie. In the ascended state, one clearly sees that the projected images are all illuminated by the light of consciousness itself. That illumination is like a reflection from a surface, just like the reflected images of a movie. It is as though the being comes out of its world, but it never really was in its world. Only an illusion ends.

Nisargadatta describes the end of that illusion:

*It is the witnessing consciousness that makes realization attainable.
It is the witness that works on the person-on the totality of its illusions.*

Realize that you are dreaming a dream you call the world.

*Once you realize that there is nothing in this world which you can call your own you
look at it from the outside as you look at a play on the stage or a picture on the screen.
To know the picture as the play of light on the screen gives freedom from the idea that
the picture is real.
In reality I only look.*

*Whatever is done is done on the stage.
Joy and sorrow, life and death, they are real to the man in bondage; to me they are all
in the show, as unreal as the show itself.*

*I see only consciousness, and know everything to be but consciousness, as you know the
pictures on the cinema screen to be but light.
It is enough to shift attention from the screen onto oneself to break the spell.
It is enough to shift attention to the Self and keep it there.*

*Look at the dream as a dream.
When you see your dream as dream you wake up.
When you have seen the dream as a dream you have done all that needs be done.*

Nisargadatta refers to the post-enlightenment ascended state of being as the watchtower of the real:

*The witness that stands aloof-is the watchtower of the real-the point at which
awareness, inherent in the unmanifested, contacts the manifested.*

McKenna also describes the post-enlightenment ascended state of being:

*Ego doesn't need to be killed because it was never really alive. You don't have to
destroy your false self because it's not real, which is really the whole point.
It's just a character we play.
What needs to be killed is that part of us that identifies with the character.
Once that's done-really done-then you can wear the costume and play the character as
it suits you to do so, now in the character but not of the character.*

McKenna points out that only discontent fuels the self-destructive process that ultimately leads to truth realization. This is not hatred of the world per se, but hatred of one's own false self that appears as a part of that world. If one clearly sees the falseness of one's own ego, this leads to the desire to be free of ego, and only that desire for freedom leads to the deconstruction of ego, which in a paradoxical way brings the expression of desire to an end. McKenna describes the origin of this discontent that fuels the self-destructive process in this way:

To know the lie is to hate it; to see it is to slay it.

Like the Buddha, McKenna describes this self-destructive process of ego deconstruction as a process of burning:

*Spiritual enlightenment is the state in which the self is free of all delusion, including self
itself.*

The process of becoming enlightened is a deliberate act of self-annihilation.

It is the false self that does the killing and the false self that dies; a suicide in all but the physical sense. Because there is no true self to fill the vacancy created by the passing of the false self, no self remains.

It is not possible to knowledgeably choose or want spiritual enlightenment.

To desire it is to misunderstand it. Ego cannot desire egolessness. One does not undergo the process of awakening out of love for the true but out of hatred for the false; a hatred so intense that it burns everything and spares nothing.

Nisargadatta also describes the same process of burning:

As long as you take yourself to be a person, a body and a mind, separate from the stream of life, having a will of its own, pursuing its own aims-you are living merely on the surface, and whatever you do will be short lived and of little value, mere straw to feed the flames of vanity.

The essence of bondage-is the mixing of the real with the unreal-because you have not understood that you are dreaming.

*Once you have seen that you are dreaming, you shall wake up.
But you do not see because you want the dream to continue.
A day will come when you long for the ending of the dream.*

Nisargadatta speaks of vanity in the biblical sense:

*I have seen all the works that are done under the sun
And behold, all is vanity and a chasing after wind*

Nisargadatta also describes the physical world as a dream world:

*In my world nobody is born and nobody dies.
Some go on a journey and come back, some never leave. What difference does it make
since they travel in dreamlands, each wrapped up in his own dream.
Only the waking up is important.*

Nisargadatta describes that being a part of the world is like being in a hypnotic trance. It is as though one is only watching a movie, but one has suspended disbelief and identified oneself with the central character of the movie, as the animation appears from one's central perspective. The only way to break this hypnotic spell is to withdraw one's attention away from the illusion.

There are a limited number of options one has to break this hypnotic spell. One can withdraw attention away from one's world and focus attention on one's own sense of being present, or one can focus on one's false self. As McKenna tells us, to know the lie is to hate the lie. The energy of that self-hatred is utilized to energize the self-destructive process of ego deconstruction.

A necessary part of that self-destructive process is surrender, as one lowers one's defensive shields and stops defending oneself, which allows for the deconstruction of the illusion.

As McKenna puts it, surrender is a natural consequence of clearly seeing the illusion:

Surrender follows naturally from seeing what is.

Nisargadatta puts emphasis on looking within and focusing one's attention on one's own sense of being present. McKenna puts emphasis on looking within and focusing one's attention on one's own false self, which leads to a self-destructive process of deconstructing one's false self. Like Osho, both emphasize the role of surrender in that self-destructive process. The Nisargadatta approach eventually leads to the McKenna approach, and the McKenna approach to the Nisargadatta approach, as both approaches eventually cover the same ground and lead to the same final destination. These two approaches just begin in different places.

As McKenna tells us, when the observer's world disappears, only the observer's underlying reality remains. Since the Self that identifies itself with the false self is only present when the world appears, the world and self are inextricably linked. They appear together and they must disappear together. When they disappear, only the void remains. McKenna calls what remains empty space or No-self.

McKenna describes the process that leads to truth realization as an undoing of all the processes that created the observer's world and character in the first place. Science describes creation and destruction processes, and has something to say about the undoing process. The undoing process is described as a process of burning, but the final destination of the journey is not a process.

As McKenna tells us, nothing doesn't burn:

*Dreams are highly flammable things.
Not all fires are started by conscious intent.
Sometimes they just flare up-and then you learn two things fast; fire doesn't negotiate
and nothing doesn't burn.*

*The cogito is like a Molotov cocktail with which we can firebomb our own mind, safe in
the knowledge that truth doesn't burn.*

Nisargadatta also describes this self-destructive process:

*The way to truth lies through the destruction of the false.
To destroy the false you must question your most inveterate beliefs.
Of these the idea that you are the body is the worst.
It is the clinging to the false that makes the truth so difficult to see.
Everything must be scrutinized and the unnecessary ruthlessly destroyed.
There cannot be too much destruction.
For in reality nothing is of value.*

You progress by rejection.

*To question is the essence of revolt.
Without revolt there can be no freedom.*

*Investigate your world, apply your mind to it, examine it critically, scrutinize every idea
about it.*

*There is nothing wrong with the senses, it is your imagination that misleads you.
There is a deep contradiction in your attitude which you do not see.*

See your world as it is, not as you imagine it to be.

*See the person you imagine yourself to be as a part of the world you perceive within
your mind and look at the mind from the outside, for you are not the mind.*

Nisargadatta describes the role of surrender in this self-destructive process:

*Self-surrender is the surrender of all self-concern.
It cannot be done-it happens when you realize your true nature.*

*When there is total surrender, complete relinquishment of all concern with one's past,
present and future, with one's physical and spiritual security, when the shell of self-
defense is broken, a new life dawns, full of love and beauty.
Complete self-surrender by itself is liberation.*

Nisargadatta also describes the role of detachment and letting go:

*Freedom means letting go.
Spiritual maturity lies in the readiness to let go of everything.*

*Discrimination will lead to detachment. You gain nothing. You leave behind what is not
your own and find what you have never lost-your own being.*

Osho describes the process of inquiry: Who am I?

*If you go on inquiring 'Who am I?'
You are bound to come to the conclusion that you are not.
This is an inquiry to dissolve. There is no answer. Only the question will dissolve.
There will be no one to ask 'Who am I?' And then you know.*

*When the 'I' is not, the real 'I' opens.
When the ego is not, you are for the first time encountering your being.*

McKenna clearly addresses the question: Who am I? Only the witness, also called the Self, I Am, or Atman, has a sense of being present for its world. As Nisargadatta, McKenna and Osho make clear, the witness is only a point of consciousness present at the center of the world perceived by the witness. Even Shankara makes a distinction between the Source, which he calls Brahman, and the Self, which he calls Atman. Though Shankara states "thou art that", he also states there is "ultimately no difference between Brahman and Atman". His use of "ultimately" is key, as he is referring to the ultimate state of truth realization:

That which permeates all, which nothing transcends and which, like the universal space around us, fills everything completely from within and without, that Supreme non-dual Brahman—that thou art.

Brahman is the only truth, the world is illusion, and there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and Atman.

McKenna clearly states that truth realization is a dissolution into void:

*The truth of the situation is that eventually, there's nothing.
Infinity. Eternity. The void.*

Truth is one, is non-dual, is infinite, is one-without-other.

Truth is dissolution, no-self, unity.

*There's nothing to say about it, nothing to feel about it, nothing to know about it.
You are true or you're a lie, as in ego-bound, as in dual, as in asleep.*

Osho also describes truth realization as a dissolution into void:

*The inner emptiness itself is the mystery.
When the inner space is there, you are not.
When you dissolve, the inner emptiness is there.
When you are not, the mystery will be revealed.
You will not be a witness to the mystery, you will be the mystery.*

This ultimate state of being is what Shankara refers to when he says "there is ultimately no difference between Brahman and Atman". To say "I am Brahman" or to say "Be still and know that I am God" is to say the same thing.

Nisargadatta describes the ultimate Source of all things:

*Reality is essentially alone.
To know that nothing is, is true knowledge.*

Nothing perceivable is real.

The totality of all mental projections is the Great Illusion.

*When I look beyond the mind I see the witness.
Beyond the witness is infinite emptiness and silence.*

Nisargadatta describes truth realization as a process of becoming nothing:

For the path of return naughting oneself is necessary.

*My stand I take where nothing is.
To the mind it is all darkness and silence.
It is deep and dark, mystery beyond mystery.
It is, while all else merely happens.
It is like a bottomless well, whatever falls into it disappears.*

Obviously, existence cannot stop existing, but the individual sense of existing, the individual sense of I Am, can come to an end. As Osho clearly states, that individual sense of I Am comes to an end in a state of dissolution into the void. The individual consciousness and being of the witness dissolves into its source of undifferentiated consciousness and undivided being. As McKenna puts it:

In the void of undifferentiated consciousness-awake is awake.

Nisargadatta clearly states that it is the witness, the I Am, that identifies itself with the personality, the character, the ego, the false self, that appears in its world:

You are the source of reality-a dimensionless center of perception that imparts reality to whatever it perceives-a pure witness that watches what is going on and remains unaffected. It is only imagination and self-identification with the imagined that encloses and converts the inner watcher into a person.

The person is merely the result of a misunderstanding.

In reality there is no such thing.

Feelings, thoughts and actions race before the watcher in endless succession.

In reality there is no person, only the watcher identifying itself.

Nisargadatta also states that non-identification is liberation:

Self-identifications are patently false and the cause of bondage.

Non-identification is liberation.

You need not know what you are.

Enough to know what you are not.

The discovery of truth is in the discernment of the false.

You can know what is not.

What is-you can only be.

By "what is not", Nisargadatta refers to the illusory images of a world perceived by the witness. Only the witness has a sense of being present for its world, and only that being, "what is", has a source of timeless, absolute being. The Bhagavad-Gita also makes this distinction between the real and the unreal:

*The unreal has no being.
The real never ceases to be.*

Nisargadatta Maharaj says the same thing:

*The Supreme state neither comes nor goes. It is.
It is a timeless state, ever present.*

Implicit in this discussion of self-identification is that the world must appear, and the witness must be present for that world, for the witness to identify itself with its false self that appears in that world. When that world disappears, only the void remains. Nisargadatta calls the undivided being of the void pure being:

*I know myself as I am in reality.
I am neither the body nor the mind. I am beyond all these.*

*You are accustomed to deal with things, physical and mental.
I am not a thing, nor are you.*

We are neither matter nor energy, neither body nor mind.

I am not my body. I am the witness only.

I am timeless being.

*In pure being consciousness arises.
In consciousness the world appears and disappears.
Consciousness is on contact, a reflection against a surface, a state of duality.
The center is a point of void and the witness a point of pure awareness; they know themselves to be as nothing.*

*Nothing lasts.
The void remains.
You remain as pure being.*

In other words, I am not-a-thing that I perceive in my world. I am the witness only as long as I perceive things in my world, but ultimately I am not even the witness. Ultimately, I am not. Ultimately, only the void is.

Nisargadatta describes how the observer's world is created in a state of motion (as the observer follows an accelerated worldline), while the ultimate detached state (of free fall) allows for reunion with the Absolute and ultimate peace:

*The I am in motion creates the world.
The I am at peace becomes the Absolute.*

In the ultimate state of reunion with the Absolute, there is no individual being, no individual sense of 'I am', only the One, undivided Being of the Absolute. Osho expresses this ultimate state of being as 'Ultimately, I am not; ultimately, only the Absolute is'. Nisargadatta and Shankara express this ultimate state of being as 'Ultimately, I am the Absolute'. There is no real contradiction. These words only attempt to express the inexpressible, and should not be considered as absolute truth, but only like signposts that help guide us in the path of return.

In the ultimate words of Nisargadatta:

*The dreamer is one.
I am beyond all dreams.
I am the light in which all dreams appear and disappear.*

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