

## Article

# Does Ordinary Life Ever Have a Conscious Moment without the 'I'?

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### ABSTRACT

As long as we are awake and even while dreaming, a sense of “I am seeing, hearing, or doing, etc.” seems to be an inevitable content of any conscious experience. One may wonder whether it is ever possible in our ordinary lives to have an experience where the “I” is not present, or briefly, have a self-transcendent experience. I describe below a few of my experiences of short duration that are quite ordinary with nothing mysterious about them and argue that they are all self-transcendent. To explain how the self (ego) is present or not in an experience, I describe some properties characteristic of the self such as its sense of personal identity and ownership of action. Manifestation of these properties in an experience indicates the presence of the self and absence of these properties indicates its absence. In an act of observation, full attention paid to what is being observed seems to push every thought, including the self, out of the conscious mind and keep it fully occupied with the act of observation. A characteristic property of the self-transcendent state seems to be that one can only recognize such a state as being free from the self, but one cannot prove that it is so because the outward effect of the state may be the same as that of an alternative state where the self is present.

**Key Words:** Consciousness, self-transcendence, ego, agency, personal identity.

## Introduction

In our daily lives, almost always, the self seems to be involved in our perception of the world, thinking, experiences, and conscious actions. As long as we are awake and even while dreaming, a sense of “I am seeing, hearing, or doing, etc.” seems to be an inevitable content of any conscious experience. Hence an interesting question arises: is it ever possible in our ordinary lives to get into a conscious state where the “I” is not present, or briefly, have a self-transcendent experience? (Vedanta’s answer to this question is in the affirmative; “I” or self, which the philosophy calls ego is said to be not really conscious, in other words, consciousness is independent of ego.) In this article, I will analyze a few experiences of mine and argue why I think that they are self-transcendent. The experiences are all very ordinary in the sense that nothing prevents someone else to have the same or similar experiences.

We begin the discussion of my experiences with an analysis of what it means to transcend the self and therefore an analysis of related concepts such as properties characteristic of the self, self-awareness, awareness, and consciousness. We do so because during the analysis we will see that all of us (ordinary people, not necessarily saints, yogis, philosophers, or monks) can and do have

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moments of self-transcendence although we cannot remain in a conscious state with no sense of self for hours together and much less days together or the whole life. We may or may not remember such moments because they are short and also because we do not introspect ourselves every moment to see if “I” is there or not. So, some of the examples which we will come across in the following sections could be those of the personal experiences of many of us; none of them is mysterious, or out of the ordinary life, or something *in another dimension*.

In this article, the word self stands for what we mean by “I” in our daily usage in sentences such as “I know that”, “I do not know that”, “I did it”, “I did not do it”, “I want to be a teacher when I grow up”, or “this is my house”. We do not consider “self” and “soul” as synonymous and our analyses will not have anything to do with soul. The word “mind” stands for one that thinks where thinking is all the following: As long as the body is awake, the mind immediately records in memory a description of every interaction with the outside world and produces emotions such as joy and sorrow as responses; we call these records experiences. It can recall these experiences though not always. The mind has desires and goals, and plans to achieve them using its reasoning capability. It labels events as past, present, and future but the present is very short (even non-linguistic minds have reasoning and time-labeling capabilities to some extent). It carries on similar processes even in dreams although not rationally and without external (sensory) input. It can initiate the body to act. It performs all these functions with an awareness of doing so and with a sense of “I”. The mind is aware of the self also.

Clearly, narration of a self-transcending experience is an exercise in introspection. Since we are interested in finding a conscious state or an act where there is no awareness of “I”, we first need to understand if there is a difference between being conscious (consciousness) and awareness of something and, if there is, what the difference is.<sup>1</sup> Hence, we analyze awareness and self-awareness noting that both the self-transcendent state and one with awareness of the self are conscious states. Then we describe some behaviors, including some of my own, in which the self is involved and others in which the self seems to be absent at least momentarily. We will be able to recognize the presence or absence of the self at a particular moment by recognizing properties characteristic of the self. Manifestation of these properties in an experience indicates the presence of the self and absence of these properties indicates its absence. Some characteristics of the self we will recognize are: creation of a sense of personal identity distinguishing itself from others, ownership of action, presentation of a distorted view of reality, attachment to results of action, and a quick reaction upon receiving the results of actions whether initiated by the self or others.

From our analysis of some experiences, it appears that one can only recognize a state as being free from the self, but one cannot prove that it is so because the outward effect of the state may be the same as that of an alternative state where the self is present.

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<sup>1</sup> Sometimes, some authors may not distinguish between consciousness and awareness depending upon the focus of their discussion. For example, the words self-consciousness and self-awareness are synonymous. Since self-awareness (being aware of the self) is slightly different from the concept of self although necessarily associated with the self, it is useful to define awareness of an object, mental or physical, and to distinguish between consciousness and awareness. Living beings have a set of abilities called consciousness and one of them is the ability to produce awareness as an internally experienced outcome in a particular situation.

## What self is in Western and Eastern Philosophies

An attempt to recall an experience where there is no awareness of self implicitly assumes that such a conscious state is possible; in other words, it assumes that self is not the source of consciousness. This assumption seems more akin to eastern philosophies (particularly Hindu and Buddhist<sup>2</sup> philosophies) than Western philosophies in the following way. In Hindu and Buddhist philosophies and some Western philosophies, the self is said to be an illusion<sup>3</sup>. According to Hindu philosophy, the mind is not conscious! It only *appears* to be conscious, but there is a certain Consciousness (with big C and sometimes called the Supreme consciousness) different from the mind and matter that is the source of the sense of consciousness in our minds. Buddhism classifies various aspects of matter and mind and their interaction into *skandas* (aggregates) and postulates transcendent consciousness beyond the aggregates. A Buddha, that is, an enlightened one, is a non-aggregate being who is able to detach oneself from the aggregates. There are primarily two categories of consciousness: one is called mental consciousness which depends upon aggregates and the other is non-manifest consciousness unconditioned and unsupported by the aggregates. The former consists of mental perceptions formed as a result of contact with material world or perceptions of itself (self-awareness). Buddha consciousness, that is, non-aggregate consciousness or transcendent consciousness arises after withdrawal of all attachment to the aggregates. Thus Buddhism asserts that a state of pure consciousness not dependent upon the mind or matter exists. Western philosophies, particularly those that emphasize reason and scientific thought, usually do not seem to indicate the existence of consciousness beyond the mind although some of them may characterize the mind as immaterial<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> The words "self", "I", and the phrase "I am" are used with different meanings in different religious works of both Hinduism and Buddhism even in ancient times. There is a lot more confusion in their modern translations. There are several branches of Buddhism and several interpretations varying from "no-self", "empirical self", to "true self". However, they all agree that ego is an aspect of the mind and that there is a non-bodily entity in a person (which we call soul here), that, upon death, becomes one of the causes for the arising of a new birth. Buddhist perspective is that consciousness does not emerge from the brain or from matter (Luisi 2008). In a dialogue reported here, Dalai Lama admits that in Buddhism there is an implicit recognition of the difficulty of defining what consciousness is, but that it is possible to recognize consciousness experientially and identify it. On the contrary, Hinduism explicitly asserts that there is a certain Consciousness independent of matter and mind; it is indescribable but can be experienced directly with no involvement of mind and matter.

<sup>3</sup> Descartes (1641/1901) argued that phenomena manifest in one's experience are illusions because they depend upon sensory inputs to the self, but a subjective self is real because it is needed to experience the illusion. In contrast, Hume (1781/1967) considers the self as a bundle of perceptions and an illusion.

<sup>4</sup> Descartes believed that body and mind are mutually exclusive substances; the body is a mechanically functioning system and simply the interaction of biological matter with nothing conscious about it whereas the mind is immaterial and the source of consciousness (Cottingham 1996). His famous expression, "I think, therefore I am" asserts that the self is the thinker, the consciousness, and the ultimate existence. Cartesian dualism is a subject of extensive debate by modern philosophers and scientists in various branches and led to the development of the so-called dualistic interactionism, monism, and dual-aspect theories of consciousness. However, neither the modern critics of Descartes nor his supporters separate self and consciousness. Prior to Descartes and ever since the Greek philosophers Aristotle, Plato, and others, Western philosophers considered the soul and self as the same; they were interested in the mind-body/world relationships and in self-development with regard to various metaphysical, spiritual, moral, and ethical aspects (Cottingham 1996). But they do not seem to make a distinction between consciousness and self explicitly.

According to the *Gita* (Bhagavad Gita, n.d.), all creation is made up of two kinds of *prakriti* (nature): the material and the spiritual. Both living beings and the material world are parts of *prakriti*. The *prakriti* of the former is called *jiva-prakriti* and is conscious whereas the *prakriti* of the latter called *jada-prakriti* is unconscious and includes inert matter. However, one should not confuse the limited consciousness of living beings with the all-pervading Consciousness of which the whole creation is a manifestation. *Jada-prakriti*, that is, material nature, is comprised of earth, water, fire, air, space, mind, intelligence, and ego (Bhagavad Gita 7:4). Every living being is a *jiva* (equivalent to soul in English), a non-material being who has chosen to associate and identify with a material body and to interact with the material world for sense enjoyment. *Jiva* survives bodily death. *Jivas* are infinitesimal sparks of Consciousness; the consciousness that a living being experiences is in relation to the being's physical body and depends upon the interaction with the *Jada-prakriti*. Hindu philosophy treats the self or ego as different from the soul<sup>5</sup>. The ego and the mind are things the soul carries as it were; they are qualities of the soul and are not conscious. Hindu philosophy believes that the soul can detach itself from the mind and ego, and get into the state of pure Consciousness by adequate effort in one's life. Buddhism believes that some non-bodily components of aggregates survive bodily death similarly to the soul in Hinduism. Buddhism preaches that by detachment from ego and its cravings and being aware of the processes of mind and ego, the aggregates vanish and what remains is a higher level of consciousness free of all mental processes and worldly miseries. Nirvana is said to be one such state of a higher level of consciousness that is sometimes described as a state of nothingness or emptiness (cf. *Nirvana*, Wikipedia, 2011).

All philosophers, both eastern and western, agree that the mind is dependent upon its memory for all its functions and that the sense of self and time (past, present, and future) are creations of the mind. Most theistic religions<sup>6</sup> postulate that God is spirit but not matter, and that He is always conscious; they all preach their followers to surrender their selves to God (whom we have not seen!). It is a way of eliminating the role of self in performing various actions. However, Western religions do not explicitly point out that the self is not conscious by itself. Western philosophies do not explicitly state that the self is not the source of consciousness because they do not mention the possibility of an experience where there is no awareness of self. One Western philosopher who comes closest to the idea that reality not known to the mind may exist is Kant (1781/2003). He viewed the mind as being limited by its own abilities because it constructs our experience along certain lines (space, time, causality, self, etc.). Thus, thinking and experiencing give no access to things as they really are. No matter how sharp our thinking is, we cannot escape the inherent constraints of our minds. He also stated that God and souls are a matter of faith and unknowable by ordinary means.

Jiddu Krishnamurti, a twentieth century philosopher, discussed concepts of self, memory, and awareness-without-the-self extensively. Although he claimed that he did not believe in any religion, his philosophy has similarities to Buddhist philosophy. Krishnamurti (1949) associated

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<sup>5</sup> The word "Atman" in Sanskrit is translated as self and very often misinterpreted to be the same as ego, particularly in the West. Ego, which is synonymous with "the self" in this article, is equivalent to "Ahamkara" in Sanskrit. Atman should be translated as soul and is different from ego or if Atman is translated as self then self should be interpreted as being different from ego. Atman is usually masked by ego but can get rid of it. According to Hinduism Atman is part of reality whereas ego or self is an illusion.

<sup>6</sup> Buddhism never mentions God.

the self with memory: “It is the memory of yesterday – of possessions, of jealousies, of anger, of contradiction, of ambition, of what one ought or ought not to be – it is all these things that make up the I; and the I is not different from memory ... memory is the self”. Here is another excerpt from Krishnamurti’s (1953) work: “Mind is memory, at whatever level, by whatever name you call it; mind is the product of the past, it is founded on the past, which is memory, a conditioned state. Now with that memory we meet life, we meet a new challenge. The challenge is always new and our response is always old, because it is the outcome of the past. So experiencing without memory is one state and experiencing with memory is another.”

## Personal identity and the self

**Can one distinguish oneself from others without being aware of doing so?** Indeed, our computers do so. We need and use communications in the world that we live in. Communication, whether verbal or otherwise, involves at least two distinct entities, living or non-living, and therefore the act of communication depends upon the participating entities’ ability to distinguish themselves from one another. The essence of “I” is to consciously distinguish oneself from everything else in the universe. Here, the word “consciously” is important because, otherwise, a computer also distinguishes itself from everything else in the universe. That is why we are able to develop and use computer communications. If the programmer gives the name “I” to a robot, it will thereafter say “I know this”, “I did this”, and so on. But it does not have what we call self-awareness or any awareness in fact. So how does a computer or a robot distinguish itself from the rest of the world without being aware of anything? It is like this: The computer has a *memory*. The computer pretends to be aware of an object when a description of the object in some computer language is entered into its memory. Nowadays, many of us use personal computers and we are very much used to expressions like “the computer knows this”, “it understands that”, “it thinks”, etc. In fact, we can precisely define what it means for a computer “to know” or “to be aware” of an object. Such phrases simply mean that the computer has a description of that object in its database. Once an object’s description is entered into this memory, thereafter the computer can perform any number of operations using that description. It can compare the object with other objects also “known” to it in the same way. It can add, subtract, compute functions of it, draw a picture of it, and so on. The computer can do almost anything that a person can do with that object and behave as though it knows and remembers the object without actually being aware of anything! Whether conscious or not, if one may say so, a memory can perceive an object in the following sense; a memory’s perception of an object is the object’s description that is stored in it. So, given any object material or mental, the computer either already “knows” it or does not “know” it according to the above definition. The computer’s knowledge divides the world into two parts – one which is *known* to it and the other not *known* to it. The computer establishes its identity (as the producer of a unique division of the universe) by the very existence of its memory as a common point of reference to all objects whose descriptions it contains.

Now, the above definition of awareness applies to a human brain as well. Neuroscience tells us that a human being (or some other living being) is aware of an object, which may be material or mental, only when a physical representation (neural correlate or activity) of that object exists in his/her brain’s memory (non-local or local or whatever the nature of the memory’s structure).

Hence awareness requires creation of a record in a certain memory and therefore it is an outcome of a certain process. However, unlike the computer, we have this experience of being aware of objects, at least when awake. Therefore in the case of the brain, an experience associated with the neural record must also be created whenever the latter is created. Thus awareness of an object or event (physical or mental) is the outcome of a process, a process that creates in a certain memory an experience that describes the object. So there must be a capability that enables the brain to produce awareness of whatever object is introduced to it<sup>7</sup>. Living beings have a set of capabilities that together may be called consciousness; one of them is the just described ability to produce awareness of objects (physical or mental). Another is to produce self-awareness. Since the self is an aspect of the memory as a whole, the process of production of self-awareness is much more complicated than the above described process of production of awareness of a content of the memory. Other abilities of consciousness include the ability to pay attention to an object and the ability to make choices consciously (unlike a computer), the so-called free will.

Why did we go through the computer episode? It suggests that a memory is not necessarily conscious and that the sense of self may simply be one of the memory aspects of the mind because indeed, the mind is a memory. The episode also suggests the possibility that consciousness and the sense of individuality may be completely independent of one another. It raises the question, "If one with no consciousness can manifest individuality, what about the opposites of both; in other words, can one have consciousness but manifest no individuality?"

## Delusion and self

The computer episode may also help to understand how self is related to delusion. A computer can recognize patterns in the data presented to it. To do so, the computer needs some heuristics coded and entered into it beforehand. If heuristics are changed, the computer may find a different pattern when the same data are presented to it again. Or, if different heuristics are entered into two computers, then they recognize different patterns even if the same data are presented to them both. Hence the pattern that the computer perceives in the presented data depends upon some contents of its memory. In the case of the computer, the stored description of the pattern is purely material. It has no meaning for the computer. But not so in the case of the human brain, which creates a meaning and interpretation along with a neural representation of any observed object. The brain's description of an object or an event has both physical and mental parts to it. The interpretation part is almost always based on values, experiences and desires all existing in the memory. It is similar to the computer's interpretation of data to recognize patterns using the heuristics in its memory. Thus, how one perceives an event depends upon his/her past, that is, his/her personal memory and his/her self. That is why we say human perception is subjective<sup>8</sup>. Hence subjective perceptions of two people observing the same event

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<sup>7</sup>As already said, according to ancient Indian Philosophy, mental records are not conscious by themselves just like their associated neural records. Similarly, the process of creating mental records, that is, *experiences*, is just as mechanical (not conscious) as the process of creating neural records. Their thesis is that the mind may behave as if it is conscious (like the computer!) but is not really conscious. It appears to be conscious because of its source, Consciousness (with big C), which is beyond the physical body, the universe perceived by the senses, and the mind. Consciousness is the source of all creation and the source of everything that we ever know. Matter appears not to be conscious also because of the same source!

<sup>8</sup> Searle (2000) describes subjectivity as follows: "Subjective conscious states ... are experienced by some 'I'

can be different and usually they are.

If two people describe the same event in two different ways, which one is the correct description? What is the truth? This confusion arises particularly while judging one's own action or another's. For example, I may make a donation to a charity to claim tax deduction but think that I did so unselfishly and out of pure compassion because I often heard that it is somehow great to be selfless. Or, I might have made the donation selflessly but somebody else who did not may be jealous of me and say that I did it for the sake of tax deduction. They may also rationalize their stinginess by thinking that the particular charity is not properly organized. The self rationalizes because it wants to feel good and the desire to feel good is always there in the mind. Thus, involvement of self in forming a perception leads to delusion.

### **Can One Be Conscious Without the Sense of "I"? (Is it possible to transcend the self?)**

Saints and philosophers have been answering "yes" to this question since a long time. But how does one get to that state, by trial and error? Well, they have also been suggesting various techniques to achieve self-transcendence. Here are some examples:

Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950) known to some in the west, used to call the sense of self as the I-thought. He used two words "Self" and "self" in his teachings (Ramana Maharshi 1982). The former (with big S) is what remains when the sense of self ceases to exist; in other words, Self is the state of self-transcendence. He explained (Godman 2002):

You see, the one who eliminates the "not I" cannot eliminate the "I". To say "I am not this" or "I am that" there must be an "I". This "I" is only the ego or the I-thought. After the rising up of this I-thought, all other thoughts arise. The I-thought is therefore the root thought. If the root is pulled out all others are at the same time uprooted. Therefore, seek the root "I", question yourself "Who am I?" Find the source and then all these other ideas will vanish and the pure Self will remain.

He talked about a technique called who-am-I or self-inquiry to remove the I-thought. The technique is to introspectively question oneself from where this thought is coming; he said that the thought of self disappears if one looks deeply inside for it (Ramana Maharshi 2007):

For all thoughts the source is the I-thought. The mind will merge only by Self-enquiry "Who am I?" The thought "Who am I?" will destroy all other thoughts and finally kill itself also. If other thoughts arise, without trying to complete them, one must enquire to whom this thought arose. What does it matter how many thoughts arise? As each thought arises one must be watchful and ask to whom this thought is occurring. The answer will be "to me". If you enquire "Who am I?" the mind will return to its source (or where it issued from). The thought which arose will also submerge. As you practice like this more and more, the power of the mind to remain as its source is increased.

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that has the experience, and it is in that sense that they have first-person ontology."

Self (with big S) is the same as Consciousness or pure consciousness free of the mind<sup>9</sup>.

Krishnamurti's talks and writings are all about being conscious, aware or observant without any involvement of self. "Only when the activity of the self, of memory, ceases is there a wholly different Consciousness, about which any speculation is a hindrance" (Krishnamurti 1946). Furthermore: "The memory of technical things is essential; but the psychological memory that maintains the self, the 'me' and the 'mine', that gives identification and self-continuance, is wholly detrimental to life and to reality. When one sees the truth of that, the false drops away; therefore there is no psychological retention of yesterday's experience" (Krishnamurti 1953).

As already said, most religions preach surrendering to God. It is a way of transcending the self.

**Can one be conscious without the sense of "I" for a few moments?** Obviously, it is not easy to practice Ramana Maharshi's technique of self-inquiry or to stop the mind from thinking as Krishnamurti suggests and be conscious all the time without the sense of "I". Nor it is easy to surrender oneself to God because we do not see Him nor hear Him and therefore do not know what if any, He is telling us to do in a situation. Usually, those who attend places of worship (of any religion) and read their scriptures regularly think of themselves as sincere practitioners of their religion and therefore think that they have surrendered themselves to God. But such actions do not necessarily imply that the self is surrendered; they do involve the self if the purpose of performing them is to derive the satisfaction of being a religious person. So, let us ask a slightly modified version of the question of the previous section as follows: Can one be conscious without the "I" at least for a moment? Since we saw in an earlier section that a property of the self is to distinguish itself from others, let us modify the second question further as: *Can one exist in a conscious state even for a moment, without feeling separate from everything else in the universe?* Let us simplify it further: *Can one identify with (as opposed to distinguish from) one other or a few other beings, for a moment or longer, although not with the whole world?*

## Identification versus Separation

This last question seems to be not as difficult to try to find an answer as the previous ones are. We all heard of the fairly common expression "to put oneself in somebody else's shoes". For example, sometimes, when a friend is in financial troubles, we may sympathize and try to help. Other times, we do not feel the same sympathy and may just pass a judgment like "he should not have spent beyond his means" or some other remark. Compassion and sympathy indicate that we have identified with the other person and felt his/her anguish and wish that the problem would go away just like he/she does: we have put our feet in the other person's shoes. When we are not compassionate or sympathetic, we have separated ourselves from the other person; their problem is not ours. Usually we identify ourselves with our immediate families; we are happy when they are all happy, we are sad when any of them is not doing well. We say that a mother's love for her

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<sup>9</sup> Unlike the self that distinguishes itself from the rest of the creation, Self identifies itself with everything in the creation. In the experience of Self, there is nothing different from the Self. Some (Vivekananda and Krishnamurti among others) have reported an experience in which everything they see, hear, touch, eat, drink, and so on, as being the same as themselves.



children is selfless because she does things for them not minding her own comfort. When we love another person or an animal, a pet for example, we identify ourselves with that person or animal. So, we do have some selfless, not necessarily rare, moments in our lives.

Most probably, every reader of this article must have given donation to one or more charities sometime or other, and I did too. I cooked food and served it in homeless shelters and gave money to charities collecting money for food for the poor and orphans purely out of sympathy towards the unfortunate ones but not with the purpose of claiming a tax deduction on my income tax returns. The source of those actions is selflessness. But its scope is very limited in terms of both time and effort. Did it have an effect on my worldview? Yes, in the following way: The effect occurred soon after identifying my self with the unfortunate; it is to feel compassionate towards them. My view of the homeless changed at least to the extent that, until then, I was not thinking about their problems and anxieties, but the act of identification made me do a little something about it. How long I continue to contribute to charitable work depends upon how long the effect lasts. Interestingly, the same action of charity may be done with or without involvement of self. If I make a donation to make a name for myself or for tax deduction purposes, such a donation is initiated by my self because it seeks some benefit for itself from the results of the action; the motive for the action is not selfless but instead selfish. An action of charity is selfless only if I do it completely for the sake of the unfortunate. Hence the actual physical action can be the same whether it is initiated selflessly or by the self. Only an unbiased introspection, that is, one without the involvement of self can reveal the true nature (selfish or selfless) of an action.

All living beings have an instinct for survival that makes us compete for resources. We kill other life to satisfy our hunger; we cannot help it. That is the way life is: "Number one comes first!" However, incidents like the following one reported on the web do occur sometimes. It may be true or not, but it is possible that the incident happened: Amar Ali was swimming near the Konodas Bridge in Gilgit when the tides swept him away into the roaring Hanisara (local name of River Gilgit). Israr, a fifteen-year old teenager, jumped into the river upon seeing Amar drowning. To the surprise and delight of hundreds of onlookers, Israr fought against the wild currents and was able to save the life of Amar. In this story, clearly the teenager overcame his sense of self and identified himself with the drowning person. He was not thinking as much about his own life as he was about the drowning person's life. He felt the same urgency to get out of the drowning situation as the drowning person. That is why he jumped into the river. This is an example of risking one's own life out of compassion. On the other hand, suicide bombers do more than risk their lives; they give up their lives not out of compassion but out of revenge towards a community or for a political purpose. This act is not initiated completely without self-interest because the purpose of the act is either to derive the satisfaction of harming the other community and/or to obtain financial benefit for the family. These purposes are given a higher priority in their brains/minds over their own survival. That is why a lot of preplanning happened prior to the act. The bombers do not identify themselves with their victims; they want their victims dead, which is not what the victims want.

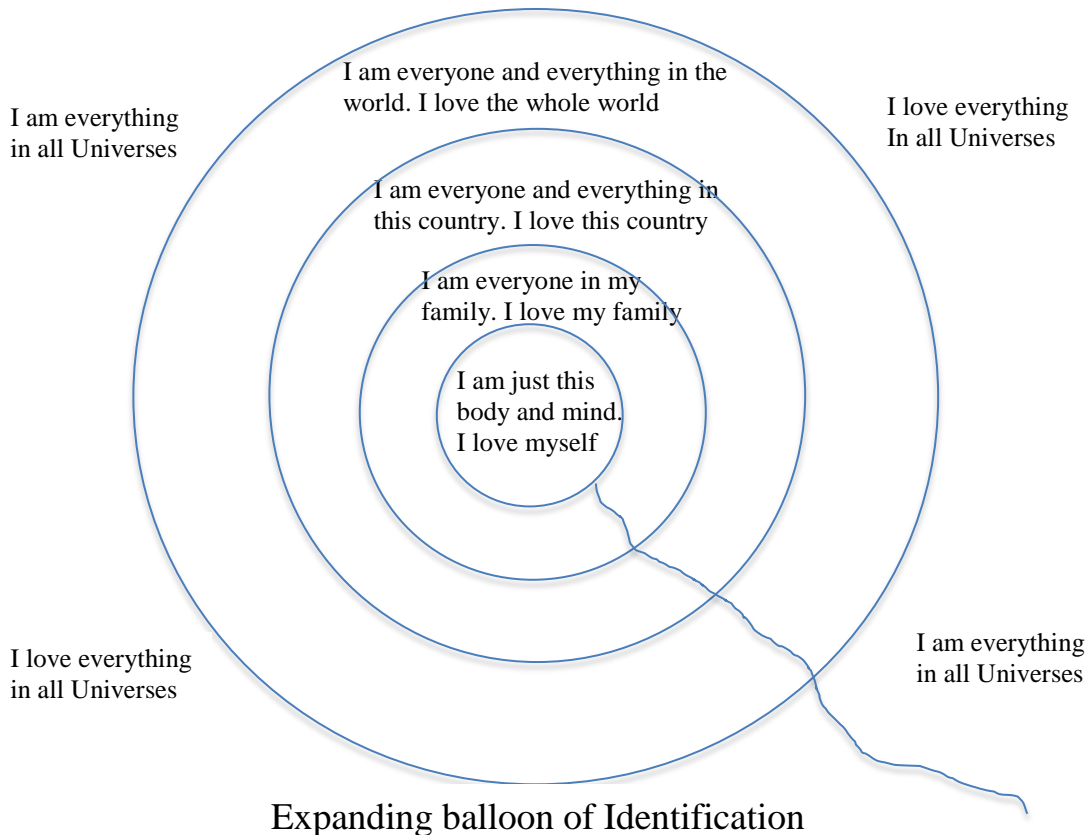
It is as though our self is at the center of an expandable balloon filled with what we may call a sense of identification or sense of self. I-thought is at the center of the balloon and identifies itself with our body and its associated experiences. For most people, the balloon expands to

include their family. For some the balloon expands to include friends and for others it may enclose the community they were born into or the country they were born in or living in, and so on. In the mother-child example mentioned above, the mother's balloon has the child inside. Whenever we love somebody without expecting anything in return for ourselves, our sense of self extends to include the other being. In a moment of love with no expectation for any returns, we are one with whom we love; the sense of distinction, duality, separation, and all that the self or I-thought stands for disappear; hence it is a self-transcending experience. However, it is self-transcending in a limited way if the *love* is only for the person/s being loved but not for others. For example, if a mother loves her own children but is jealous of other children, her transcendence of self is limited. In the story of the last paragraph, when the teenager jumped into the river, nothing else in the world other than the drowning person occupied his mind, so he is not aware of his self at that moment. Afterwards, when the whole rescuing operation is over, Israr must have felt happy and even proud of himself when onlookers praised him; feeling proud in such an occasion is not bad but it simply indicates the return of the "I".

On the other hand, people like Jesus Christ and Mahatma Gandhi are said not to have had self-interest ever in their whole lives; whatever they did was for the well being of others and without discrimination of any kind. This means that their balloon of identification covers everybody and everything and all the time. They lived in the self-transcendent mode throughout their lives. In the Gita the Lord Krishna said: "That Yogi is the best of all Yogis who looks upon everyone as equal to himself [or herself] and considers happiness and unhappiness of others as his own" (Bhagavad Gita 6:32, Dhyana-yoga). The Bible says the same thing "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39). Here, the first scripture is describing how a person in the state of self-transcendence would behave towards others and the second one is commanding us to transcend self in our treatment of others.

## Attention and self

We forget our "I" when we are listening to somebody or something seriously. We have heard the phrase, *the art of listening*, and know how useful and powerful listening is. Listening involves paying attention to what is being heard. One can learn something only when one pays attention to what is being said, or heard, or read. The longer we can keep our attention focused, the better we learn. At the moment of complete attention, only the object of attention occupies the mind, there is no I-thought at that moment. Attention span varies from person to person. Vivekananda's memory was very sharp (Prosad 1997); at the age of only six, he could recite a whole book of Sanskrit verses. If he heard anything once he remembered it throughout his life. Once he read a book he could recall word by word of that book any time and any place. This was because whatever he did he paid his full attention to it. Usually for most people, the attention span is fairly short because mind wanders. For example, when we are studying for an examination and trying to concentrate, other thoughts keep on creeping in. Still, whenever we have learned a fact or a mathematical theorem for example, we must have paid attention to it while reading it or listening to somebody who said it; the self steps aside during moments of such attention.



Of course, the memory is present during the act of observation even while paying attention, because what is learnt is recorded immediately in the brain. However, such recording of facts does not depend upon any contents already existing in the memory; the recording is similar to a person's writing the observed facts on a clean paper directly; the paper has no influence on what is being written on it. Recording of what is attentively observed is unlike a computer's recognition of patterns, described in the earlier section on delusion, where the pattern perceived by the computer depended upon the heuristics which were already contents of the memory; here, the already existing contents influence what is being written at present. Thus one may say that a perception is what is recorded in the memory when the self participates in the act of recording whereas factual knowledge is what is directly recorded by consciousness without the participation of self<sup>10</sup>. Krishnamurti (1953) seems to agree with this notion of two kinds of

<sup>10</sup> The computer's memory has two components: one is a database, which is a set of static records and is the passive component; the other is software, which is a set of instructions and the active component. When turned on, the software becomes dynamic and creates new records in the database using input data. Heuristics are software entities that the computer operator can turn on or off; s/he can enter the pattern directly into the database instead of seeking assistance from the software if s/he so chooses. (Of course, a computer user does not want to do so under ordinary circumstances.) On the other hand, a paper, although it is a memory device, has no software, the active component; the paper is similar to the computer's database. The brain/mind is more like a computer than a paper in that the brain/mind's memory has both passive and active components; the self is an active aspect of the memory because it is associated with the entire memory. But it seems that it is possible for consciousness to create records in the brain's memory without involving the self just like a computer user can enter and save data in the database without invoking the software.

memory: factual and perceptual; he calls the latter psychological memory.

Here is an experience of mine in which I overcame stage fear by paying attention to what I presented rather than to my anticipated perception of me by the audience. My heart used to start pounding just before I proceeded to the platform. My supervisor, who observed me and understood my problem, suggested to me to try to speak slower. I followed his advice. To try to speak slower than I did before, I had to pay attention to each word I was saying and it worked! Anxiety and fear were out of my mind! I tried to speak slowly during only one or two presentations but stage fear is gone forever. While I listened to my own words, those words alone occupied my mind and the thought of how the audience will receive my presentation was not in the domain of my awareness. After a few attempts, my mind must have gotten used to directing my brain to speak slowly and pay full attention to what I was saying. Of course, while making a presentation, it is good to be sensitive to whether the audience is receiving clearly what one intends to convey. In that case, attention is paid to the audience's response in the spirit of service but not in the spirit of what is in it for the presenter, success or failure. Hence one may look for the audience's response either selfishly or selflessly. One only knows how it is done but cannot prove it to somebody else that it is done selflessly.

Professors, particularly mathematicians and physicists, are known to be absent-minded. A well-known story about Newton goes like this: Newton once invited a friend for dinner. The friend arrived as scheduled to dine with him. Finding him deeply absorbed in working out a mathematical problem, the friend sat down to wait. Sometime afterwards, someone brought dinner from the kitchen but only for one, and put it on the table because Newton had forgotten about inviting the friend. When Newton continued to work at his desk, the friend, in order not to disturb him, ate Newton's meal. A little later, Newton, having finished his work, finally looked up and was surprised by both the presence of his friend and the empty dinner plate. Looking at the empty plate he said, "If it weren't for the proof before my eyes, I could have thought that I had not yet eaten." The point of the story is that all of Newton's attention was focused on the mathematical problem and everything happening around him escaped his notice. In the state of absorption, Newton was thinking only about the problem and its solution; there is no thought of even "I" in that state. Full attention to an object whether external or mental, pushes out all other thoughts from the domain of the mind's awareness. Solving a mathematical problem consists of a sequence of thoughts to which the mind pays attention one after another while solving the problem. During that time, if one can concentrate, no other thought draws mind's attention to it, nor does any sensory input from the external world draw mind's attention. Attention to an object (physical or mental) is required to recognize or be aware of that object.

One does not have to be a Newton to be so absorbed in what one does. When I was working on my thesis for my mathematics degree, I used to be absentminded the same way. When I was thinking about solution to a mathematical problem, I would not know if a visitor came even if they passed by me. I would not say hello to a friend even though I was staring at her; my eyes were looking at her but not I. Knowing me well, friends did not feel offended. They used to wake me up, so to speak, from my state of absorption and then I would respond.

There seems to be an interesting effect on one's mind itself of such attentive thinking, particularly when the solution to the problem occurs to the mind later but not while thinking

about it. The object of thinking need not be a mathematical problem; it could be an idea in an essay or in a piece of poetry yet to be written or completed. We hear of people having a eureka-like experience sometime later, a few hours or few days later after having stopped thinking about it. The solution to the problem or what to write in the poem or essay strikes the mind suddenly like lightning from the blue, when one is not thinking about it. I had that experience many times. Since there is no related effort when the idea creeps into the mind (I might be thinking about something unrelated), awareness of self seems to be interrupted momentarily. The experience certainly has an element of surprise in it if not mystery. I do not know if psychologists and neuroscientists have an explanation of why the idea reveals itself so suddenly.

## Sense of agency and self

Often, religious people of any faith have something to say about how creative ideas occur to our minds. I have a Christian friend who is a firm believer. If I tell her that I am working on writing an article she would say, "Surrender yourself to the Lord. He will show you what to write! A Hindu poet of the fifteenth century and well known for his translation of the Bhagavatam, a book of stories of Lord Vishnu, writes in the preface that "He is the author and I write what He wants me to" (Bammera Potana 2004). Both statements imply that a writer needs to or does set aside the sense of self while doing creative work. They imply that creative inspiration occurs when the self retires from the scene of action<sup>11</sup>. As said before, surrendering oneself to God is a way of letting go of the self. In fact, one of the main teachings of the *Gita* is that the right way to do any work is to do it without the sense of agency, that is, without feeling something like "This task cannot be, or would not have been accomplished without my undertaking it". Again, surrendering oneself to God is not at all easy because one does not know what God wants one to do. One may do what one's self wants, or what one thinks is the best thing to do under the given circumstances but strongly believe that he/she has acted according to God's will<sup>12</sup>. Such belief is usually a delusion created by the self.

In the case of my overcoming-stage-fear experience, let us look into what was causing the anxiety when it did. One of the causes is the need to do well and thereby avoid failure. What is success? Approval of what I say by the audience and failure is disapproval by them. The anxiety arises because of forgetting that one cannot control others' reactions or judgments and

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<sup>11</sup> In the context of discussing the relation between time and experience, Nixon (2010) expresses a similar idea: "It may be possible to somewhat escape the self-constructed prison of time-past through creative inspiration or spontaneous action in a crisis situation." We have already seen in an earlier section, in the story of the teenager's rescue of the person drowning in the river, how he overcame self in a crisis situation.

<sup>12</sup> Scriptures (of any religion in general), are interpreted differently by different people making it difficult to understand the religion and much more difficult to practice it. Hypocritical but passionate practice of different religions by different communities without proper understanding of their religion has been the cause of several wars throughout history. It is the abusive practice of religions that has created the generation of today's suicide bombers. In any case, hurting someone is not a selfless action unless it is done for the sake of well-being of that someone or others, as in the well-known examples of a doctor performing surgery on a patient or a judge sentencing of a serial killer to death. Any action based in hatred, jealousy, vengeance, etc. implies the perpetrator's separating himself/herself from the victim but not identification with the victim because the victim does not want to be hurt.

therefore trying to find a way to please the audience but not knowing how to do it. In other words, anxiety arises because of thinking that I am responsible not only for how I perform, but also for their reaction. When I pay full attention to what I say, but not to *me*, this sense of agency disappeared. Actually, if I paid full attention to the topic of my presentation when I prepared it, the sense of self was not present even during the preparation as we saw earlier.

Here are two of my experiences in one of which I feel that I am the doer, and in the other, I simply implement somebody else's instructions. I taught mathematics in a university in India. As part of my job, I graded students' answer sheets after exams. Answers in the final exam were evaluated by teachers within the university as well as by external examiners and averages of internal and external grades were used to decide pass or fail and rank. Internal evaluators were, in general, generous because they wanted to compensate for any low grades from external evaluations that are usually rigorous. They wanted more students to score high grades and the department to have a good reputation. Students were also pleased to have secured good grades, so everybody was happy. Somehow, students' grades from my evaluation were usually much lower than those from other teachers and close to those from external evaluators. As a result, the faculty members were not thrilled to see my grades. On my part, I was also happy if students got good grades. I did not intend to be mean to them. I could not even show partiality because students were not supposed to write their names on answer sheets. In mathematics, an answer is either correct or incorrect; usually there is no in-between. If I gave a full grade for an incorrect answer, I would be unfair to ones who wrote the correct answer; moreover, it misleads the one who wrote the wrong answer. I did not know how to change my evaluation scale to produce better results, but I was unhappy that I could not improve their grades. A few years later, I was a teaching assistant in a computer science department and used to help my professor with the grading work. He would give me a paper with instructions showing what grades to assign to different answers. I followed them and had complete peace of mind! Whatever grades students secured did not bother me as they did before. I was not responsible for what they got.

## **Attachment to results of action and self**

When I was a student in computer science, my advisor had his first baby. At that time, I had a three year old child. In my house, we had an electric swing that I had bought for the child when he was born, but was not being used because he outgrew it. I thought it could be useful to my advisor and his wife to put their baby to sleep, so I asked my husband to take it out and check whether it is still working. Two or three days later, I asked him whether he checked the swing; he said he did and that the swing was working, so I offered the swing to my advisor and he accepted the offer. He invited me and my husband to come over to his place and bring the swing. One evening we went to his place and, after some conversation, my husband opened the box, took the swing out and set it up. There it was: the swing looked fine but when the button was pressed it would not swing! I was totally embarrassed. Of course, our hosts did not complain at all, and after spending some more time there, we came home. But my mind was not at peace. I went on thinking, "I should have checked the swing myself," or "Should I buy a new one and give it to them?" or "Why did I offer it in the first place?" and so on. I was thinking about the incident so constantly that I could not concentrate on the subject matter when I was in

the class. A few days later, following the suggestion of a friend, I went to talk to the university psychologist about this state of mine. She praised me for being so concerned about keeping a promise, said that I need not worry because the swing could still work by pushing by hand, and other such words to calm me. One of them was that my advisor and wife were probably pleased anyway and might not think any less of me. When I heard that, the real reason for my unhappiness suddenly dawned on me. I was not worried for the young parents, but I was worried for myself; I was worried that I might have lost my advisor's good impressions of me. I was worried that he might have thought of me as a disorganized person. Why I did not give them a new swing was also for the same reason: I was worried that if I did so, then he might think that I was overdoing things to win his favors because I already gave a gift to the baby. The realization put an end to my unhappiness. At the moment of realization, the introspection was not by my self; it was as though somebody else with no bias whatsoever looked at the contents of my mind and showed me what the real reason for unhappiness was. The realization also detached me from all consequences of what took place. Even if I believed what the psychologist said (that my advisor did not mind what happened), I would have probably overcome my unhappiness but not overcome my ego, and I would not have found the cause of unhappiness.

A similar incident happened another time. Knowing that I was about to visit India, an old man who was a friend of my father asked me to bring him a radio. So I bought one that works on both 110 and 220 volts DC. The storekeeper tested it in front of me here in the U.S. and then gave it to me. I took it to India and gave the unopened box to my father's friend when he came to visit us. He opened it and put the radio's power plug into the power outlet before I could ask him to check what the DC setting was. The radio blew up at once, probably because the shopkeeper left the switch setting on 110 volts. We were all disappointed. Next day, I bought a new radio and gave it to him and we were all happy. This time there was no dilemma whether to buy another one or not because I was not worried about what he would think of me if I did or did not. I was free to buy or not to buy. I was not controlled by the anticipated results of the action. I bought a new radio anyway because I identified myself with him. I was one with him all along: when I first bought the radio, he wanted it, so I wanted it; when it exploded, he was disappointed and I was disappointed; when I bought it the second time, both of us were happy again.

It is interesting how the self creates big delusion in this context. The first experience described above shows that my anticipation of the results of buying a new swing controls the self's present action. The other experience shows that lack of any expectation as a result of the action allows freedom to act, how to act or not to act. However, the self always thinks that it is the initiator, doer, and controller of all actions, whereas it is actually being controlled by the past or anticipated responses of its own actions from other.

## Conclusion

The principles that I have used in my analysis of an experience are as follows: The self is an aspect of the mind which, as defined in the beginning of the article, is a memory. When a perception of the self's encounter with the world is created, the perception is dependent upon the contents of the memory and therefore may be a distorted view of reality. On the other hand,

withdrawal of self from the act of observation brings awareness of reality. The same is true when one tries to evaluate or judge one's own thoughts although, in this case, the objects of observation are internal to the mind/brain. After forming a perception, the self reacts. When somebody praises me I feel good; when somebody insults me I feel offended. All emotions such as joy, sorrow, pleasure, and pain are reactions to what the self receives from the outside world; they depend upon whether what is received is what the self wanted or not. Emotions such as anxiety and fear are responses to anticipation of future events, but the anticipation (an image of the future event) is already in the memory. Therefore, reactions depend upon the memory contents just like perceptions do. When the self initiates an action, it does so based on expectations, perceptions, and reactions. On the other hand, if I do not mind what another person says about me, then my ego is not acting up. If so, what others say or think will not affect my actions. Hence the self is not involved in those actions that are not based on perceptions, prejudices or anticipated results of those actions.

My observation is that almost always self is involved in our thinking, actions, and perceptions of the world. As Nixon (2010) says: "Only rarely can we escape the context of self through which our life experience is filtered..." However, in the lives of ordinary people who have basic human values but who may or may not practice meditation, yoga, or other techniques of mind control, the self still steps aside momentarily now and then. The frequency of occurrence of such moments may vary from person to person. Introspection and analysis of one's own experiences certainly helps understand the nature of the mind and may help to increase the frequency and duration of the self-transcendent state. As we saw above, a few moments of absence of self in my experience have nothing mysterious about them. Such moments may bring memories of similar moments to the mind of the reader.

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