

Who Am I?

What Does It Mean To Be Human?

Nasrudin, the wise fool of Sufi tales, went to the bank one day to cash a check, and the teller asked him to identify himself. He whipped a mirror out of his pocket, looked at himself, and said, “Yep, that’s me all right.”

We might whip out a driver’s license instead of a mirror, but our sense of who we are may go no deeper than Nasrudin’s. We seldom ask ourselves, Who am I? What does it mean to be human?

Know Thyself

Throughout our history we Westerners have attempted to know ourselves, as the Delphic oracle advised. In the Middle Ages, we developed a theory of “humors” which were supposed to determine our physical and psychological types. More recently some of us have explored the subconscious that Freud uncovered, full of our worst qualities, or the wider unconscious with heroic and wise potentials that Jung discovered, or even the transpersonal consciousness beyond our separate personal concerns that has been more recently probed in the West.

The Ancient or Timeless Wisdom called Theosophy has long presented a more precise and detailed understanding of the full range of human nature than modern psychology has yet imagined. Yoga philosophy, Tibetan Buddhism, and the teachings of ancient Egypt are just a few traditional sources for the expanded view of human nature found in modern Theosophy.

You may easily recognize aspects of yourself in the Theosophical description of human nature, and you may find other aspects that you only dimly sense in yourself. For example, many people have intimations that they are more than the everyday self—intimations of immortality, the poet William Wordsworth called it. Within each of us is a core, an eternal spark, the “atman” or Self, the Christ within, or Buddha Nature which is one with the divine Ground of being that we call God. We express this inner core in the world through powers that our life experiences gradually activate.

The powers, or capacities and abilities by which we express our inmost Self, are called *principles* in Theosophical literature. We can think of them in two groups, one oriented largely to the outer world and more ephemeral, called the *personality*; and the other deeper, more inward, and more enduring, called the *individuality*. Expressions such as “I wasn’t myself” or “I was beside myself” show an intuitive

sense that we have both an outer or “lower” and an inner or “higher” self. The Ancient Wisdom makes this insight explicit.

The Personality

In the first set of principles, or personality, you can easily recognize yourself, for it is what we usually identify as “myself,” consisting of the most familiar aspects of our nature. Though it is sometimes called the “lower” self, it is not inferior to any other part, just as low C is not inferior to high C on the piano. They are both necessary parts of a whole.

The personality consists of the physical body (both the dense part we are all familiar with and a subtler part called the “vital double” associated with the energy that flows through it), the emotions, and part of the mind.

Body, double, and vitality. When you feel tired or “low energy,” your flow of vital energy is low. When you feel energized and alive, the flow is strong. The body has around and all through it an energy field called the vital or “etheric” double or body. This field is energized by the life force that the Hindus call “prana,” the Chinese “chi,” and Western psychologists “libido.” This force is a universal energy in all living things, whose proper flow is essential for life and health.

Emotions. Emotions, feelings, desires, and passions can be very powerful forces, and they tend to have great swings. Sometimes we are enthusiastic and excited about life. At other times we are depressed and lethargic. We may be angry, sad, affectionate, joyous, all within a short time span. Our bodies are surrounded and interpenetrated by a field of emotional energies in addition to the vital double. Emotions course through this field, sometimes threatening to overpower us.

Personal mind. The aspect of the mind that is included in the personality is closely connected with the physical brain, and so is also called the brain mind, or the concrete mind because it sees specifics, being down-to-earth and practical, or the “lower” mind because it is closer to the world around us. Through its powers we make schedules, find directions, solve practical problems, and organize our everyday lives.

The personal mind is also the “monkey mind” that continually jumps about from one thing to another, as you probably noticed if you have tried to meditate. It is the seat of stereotypes, automatic defenses, rigid ways of reacting without regard to the uniqueness of a situation, and conditioning of all types. For example, if a person of another race or culture is abrupt with us, we may feel hostile toward the whole group with whom we identify that person. We act from such habits and conditioning more than we realize.

The Individuality

Can you conceive of yourself without your body, emotions, and “monkey mind?” Would anything be left? We use the energies and powers of the personality constantly and usually think that is what we are. However, sometimes we touch another, deeper level of our being, for example, when we are inspired and lifted out of ourselves.

When we are completely lost in appreciation of nature, or in a work of art or music, or in religious devotion, we can be lifted to a higher sense of who we are. This “standing out” of our everyday self (which is what the word *ecstasy* means etymologically) can also happen as a result of selfless love, compassion, and sympathy. The spiritual will or intention, which gives us a sense of direction, is also an aspect of the individuality. One way to become open to this aspect of ourselves is through meditative and contemplative experiences in which the mind becomes still and turned inward, rather than pulling us outward.

The individuality has also been called the “higher” or immortal Self, the soul, and the reincarnating Ego. It consists of another group of principles, including an aspect of mind that is abstract because it deals with generalities and universals.

Impersonal mind. The personal or “lower” brain mind is conditioned by our experiences and is constantly changing because of the influence of its experiences in the world. The impersonal, “higher,” or abstract mind deals not with sensory data, but with the universal principles that underlie the way we respond to sensory data. Mathematics and symbols that stand for a whole class of things call on higher, impersonal thought. The impersonal and personal minds are not separate entities, however. Rather, the personal mind is how the impersonal mind works through the brain during an incarnation. Both are aspects of one mind, *manas* in Sanskrit.

Intuition. You may have found yourself puzzling over a problem or idea. Then you drop it and, without warning, insight dawns. This is an example of the intuition working through the mind. Sudden insight or illumination is a characteristic of the intuition or *buddhi*, as it is called in Sanskrit. *Buddhi* also gives rise to a sense of unity, whether with another person, with nature, with the planet, the cosmos, or with the Divine.

Spiritual intention. The principles of intuition and abstract mind are directed by the spiritual intention or will, an aspect of atman, the Self or divine spark, that focuses our energies on long-range spiritual goals and gives us a sense of direction from deep within. We may sense this function of the self when we hold a strong intention for a long time, as when a graduate student postpones personal gratifications or we persist in spiritual practices over the years.

The principles are not separate parts of us. Rather, they are aspects of the one Self within us. They are ways the whole expresses itself in the world. They are like the colors of the rainbow that emerge from the white light of spirit or atman, the inner spark that is one with the Divine.

Our Long Journey

“Atman is Brahman” is an Eastern expression that, like the Christian “I and my Father are one,” expresses the important concept that we are one with the Divine. Atman, the Divine within, is the very core of our being from which all the principles emerge, and it is also the divine Ground that sustains and upholds the universe. We travel from our home in atman into the world to gain experience and return enriched by the journey.

Myths and fairy tales about journeys often depict our sojourn into the personality and body and our return to our home in atman. The story of Tom Thumb is one of them.

Tom’s father was a tailor and his mother spun thread. The thread represents the unformed substance from which the cosmos is woven, and the fabrics fashioned by the tailor are the forms made from this thread. Thus Tom’s parents symbolize atman or the divine essence from which everything emerges in its complementary male/female aspects.

Tom is “no bigger than your thumb.” Atman is described in the Upanishads as “greater than the great,” that is, universal, but also as “smaller than the small,” a point of the Divine buried in the heart of every living being. Tom was born prematurely, just as we are unformed and inexperienced as we embark on our spiritual journey. Tom is eager to leave home and parents and see the world, as we are eager to embark on a life of experience.

During his adventures, Tom is swallowed by a cow, an earthy symbol that represents taking on a physical body. He also falls in with thieves and is swallowed by a fox or a wolf, traditional symbols for greed and gluttony that symbolize over-attachment to the physical world. However, Tom also guides a horse by whispering into its ear, which suggests that in time he takes command of the physical body. Eventually Tom returns to his home and parents, a wiser boy than when he left.

The pilgrim soul in us that journeys through the material worlds is atman, a point in the Divine, clothed in a fine sheath of buddhi. These two combined are called the *monad*. As they embark on their journey, they become embedded in the field of manas, the impersonal mind. Throughout the long pilgrimage these three remain in union as the individuality, and they become reflected in the world. Like Narcissus

in the Greek myth, the individuality becomes infatuated with its reflection, the personality, forgetting who it truly is.

We as the individuality, or atma-buddhi-manas, project many personalities over long periods of time. Reflected in these personalities, we are faced with challenges and opportunities that develop our principles and capacities more and more fully. The capacities we unfold persist in our individuality as we evolve and express them in the world. Nothing we gain is ever lost, though it may be inactive for a time.

Finally, we begin to sense the purpose of our long journey through many lives. People who are interested in finding the meaning of life through a study such as Theosophy are beginning to turn homeward. The desire to work with our spiritual purpose arises, and we feel moved to develop ourselves deliberately and to live in greater harmony with the highest within us. Like Tom Thumb, we head toward our home in atman.

Suggestions for Further Reading

The Personal Aura, by Dora van Gelder Kunz.

The Pilgrim and The Pilgrimage, by Emily B. Sellon.

Seven Principles of Man, by Annie Besant.