

The Transparency of Things

Contemplating the
Nature of Experience

Rupert Spira

NON-DUALITY PRESS

First published November 2008 by Non-Duality Press

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Typeset in Aldus 11/13

Cover design by Rupert Spira and John Gustard

Non-Duality Press, Salisbury, SP2 8JP
United Kingdom



ISBN 978-0-9558290-5-5

www.non-dualitybooks.com

This book is written with gratitude and love for Ellen, my companion, and Francis Lucille, my friend and teacher.

Contents

Foreword · xi

The Garden Of Unknowing.....	1
Clear Seeing	4
What Truly Is	9
Everything Falls Into Place.....	17
Abide As You Are.....	25
The Drop Of Milk	28
Consciousness Shines In Every Experience	34
Ego	44
Consciousness Is Its Own Content	50
Knowingness Is The Substance Of All Things	58
Our True Body	61
'I' Am Everything.....	67
What We <i>Are</i> , It <i>Is</i>	72
Peace And Happiness Are Inherent In Consciousness	82
Consciousness Is Self-Luminous	94
The Choice Of Freedom	98
The Ease Of Being.....	102
Knowingness	114
There Are Not Two Things.....	118
Knowing Is Being Is Loving	128

Changeless Presence.....	131
Time Never Happens	137
Unveiling Reality	143
We Are What We Seek	145
Nature’s Eternity.....	152
Consciousness And Being Are One.....	166
The Fabric Of Self	169
The True Dreamer.....	173
The Here And Now Of Presence	185
Consciousness Is Self-Luminous	188
Consciousness Only Knows Itself	192
Consciousness Is Freedom Itself	194
It Has Always Been So.....	202
Sameness And Oneness	205
A Knowing Space	210
Consciousness Peace ‘I’	215
Just This.....	218
The Doer	221
Origin, Substance And Destiny	225
Love In Search Of Itself.....	227
Openness Sensitivity Vulnerability And Availability	234
Time And Memory	243
The Moon’s Light	249
The Natural Condition.....	257

*“That which is, never ceases to be. That which is not,
never comes into being.”*

PARMENIDES

Foreword

This book is a collection of contemplations and conversations about the nature of experience. Its only purpose, if it can be said to have any purpose at all, is to look clearly and simply at experience itself.

The conventional formulations of our experience are, in most cases, considered to be so absolutely true as to need no further investigation. Here, the opposite is the case. Absolutely nothing is taken for granted, save the conventions of language that enable us to communicate.

From an early age we are encouraged to formulate our experience in ways that seem to express and validate it, and these expressions subsequently condition the way the world appears.

'David loves Jane,' 'Tim saw the bus.' Our earliest formulations divide experience into 'I' and 'other,' 'me' and 'the world,' a subject experiencing an object. From that time on, our experience seems to validate these formulations.

However, at a certain stage it begins to dawn on us that these formulations do not *express* our experience, but rather they *condition* it.

This book does not address the particular qualities of experience itself. It explores only its fundamental nature. What is this 'I'? What is this 'other,' this 'world'? And what is this 'experiencing' that seems to join the two together?

The essential discovery of all the great spiritual traditions is the identity of Consciousness and Reality, the discovery that the fundamental nature of each one of us is identical with the fundamental nature of the universe.

This has been expressed in many different ways. 'Atman equals Brahman.' 'I and my Father are one.' 'Nirvana equals Samsara.' 'Emptiness is Form.' 'I am That.' 'Consciousness is All.' 'There are not two things.' 'Sat Chit Ananda.'

Every spiritual tradition has its own means of coming to this understanding, which is not just an intellectual understanding, but rather a Knowingness that is beyond the mind. And within each tradition itself there are as many variations on each approach as there are students.

This book explores what it is that is truly experienced. "What is the nature of our experience in this moment?" is the question that is returned to again and again.

However, this is not a philosophical treatise. It is a collection of contemplations and conversations in which a few core ideas are explored over and over again, each time from a slightly different angle, and for this reason there is an inevitable element of repetition.

In some ways this book is written like a piece of music in which a single theme is explored, questioned, modulated and restated. However, each time the central theme is returned to, it will, hopefully, have gathered depth and resonance due to the preceding contemplation.

The meaning of the words is not in the words themselves. Their meaning is in the contemplation from which they arise and to which they point. The text, therefore, is laid out with lots of space in order to encourage a contemplative approach.

Having said that, the conclusions drawn are only meant to uproot the old, conventional and dualistic formulations that have become so deeply embedded in the way we seem to experience ourselves and the world.

Once these old formulations have been uprooted, they do not need to be abandoned. They can still be used as provisional ideas that have a function to play in certain aspects of life.

The new formulations are perhaps closer or more accurate expressions of our experience than the old ones, but their purpose is not to replace the old certainties with new ones.

They simply lead to an open Unknowingness, which can be formulated from moment to moment in response to a given situation, including a question about the nature of experience.

There are many ways to come to this open Unknowingness, and the dismantling of our false certainties through investigation is just one of them that is offered here.



If our attention were now to be drawn to the white paper on which these words are written, we would experience the uncanny sensation of suddenly becoming aware of something that we simultaneously realise is so obvious as to require no mention. And yet at the moment when the paper is indicated, we seem to experience something new.

We have the strangely familiar experience of becoming aware of something which we were in fact already aware of. We become aware of being aware of the paper.

The paper is not a new experience that is created by this indication. However, our awareness of the paper *seems* to be a new experience.

Now what about the awareness itself, which is aware of the paper? Is it not always present behind and within every experience, just as the paper is present behind and within the words on this page?

And when our attention is drawn to it, do we not have the same strange feeling of having been made aware of something that we were in fact always aware of, but had not noticed?

Is this awareness not the most intimate and obvious fact of our experience, essential to and yet independent of the particular qualities of each experience itself, in the same way that the paper is the most obvious fact of this page, essential to and yet independent of each word?

Is this awareness itself not the support and the substance of every experience in the same way that the paper is the support and the substance of every word?

Does anything new need to be added to this page in order to see the paper? Does anything new need to be added to this current experience in order to become aware of the awareness that is its support and substance?

When we return to the words, having noticed the paper, do we lose sight of the paper? Do we not now see the two, the apparent two, simultaneously as one? And did we not always already experience them as one, without realising it?

Likewise, having noticed the awareness behind and within each experience, do we lose sight of that awareness when we return the focus of our attention to the objective aspect of experience? Do we not now see the two, the apparent two, Awareness and its object, simultaneously as one? And has it not always been so?

Do the words themselves affect the paper? Does it matter to the paper what is said in the words? Does the content of each experience affect the awareness in which it appears?

Every word on this page is in fact only made of paper. It only expresses the nature of the paper, although it may describe the moon.

Every experience only expresses Awareness or Consciousness, although experience itself is infinitely varied.

Awareness or Consciousness is the open Unknowingness on which every experience is written.

It is so obvious that it is not noticed.

It is so close that it cannot be known as an object and yet is always known.

It is so intimate that every experience, however tiny or vast, is utterly saturated and permeated with its presence.

It is so loving that all things possible of being imagined are contained unconditionally within it.

It is so open that it receives all things into itself.

It is so spacious and unlimited that everything is contained within it.

It is so present that every single experience is vibrating with its substance.

It is only this open Unknowingness, the source, the substance and the destiny of all experience, that is indicated here, over and over and over again.

Rupert Spira
October 2008

The Garden Of Unknowing

The abstract concepts of the mind cannot apprehend Reality although they are an expression of it.

Duality, the subject/object polarization, is inherent in the concepts of the mind. For instance, when we speak of the 'body' we refer to an object, which in turn implies a subject. If we explore this object we discover that it is non-existent as such and is in fact only a 'sensation'.

However, a 'sensation' is still an object and further exploration reveals that it is in fact made of 'sensing,' of 'mind stuff,' rather than anything physical.

However, 'sensing' in turn is discovered to be made of 'knowing.' And if we explore 'knowing' we find that it is made of Consciousness.

If we explore Consciousness we find that it has no objective qualities. And yet it is what we most intimately know ourselves to be. It is what we refer to as 'I.'

And if we explore 'I' we find it is made of...

The abstract concepts of the mind collapse here. They cannot go any further. There is no adequate name for that into which the mind dissolves. We are taken to the utmost simplicity of direct experience.

This de-objectification is the process of apparent *involution* through which That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named withdraws its projection of the mind, body and world, and rediscovers that it is the sole substance of the seamless totality of experience.

That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named, the Absolute Emptiness into which the mind collapses, then projects itself, *within itself*, back along the

same path of apparent objectification, to recreate the appearance of the mind, body and world.

That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named, and yet which is sometimes referred to as 'I,' Consciousness, Being, Knowingness, takes the shape of thinking, sensing or perceiving in order to appear as a mind, a body or a world.

This is the process of apparent *evolution* through which That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named gives birth to a mind, a body and a world, without ever becoming anything other than itself.

This process of evolution and involution is the dance of Oneness, That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named taking shape and dissolving, vibrating in every nuance of experience and dissolving itself into itself, transparent, open, empty and luminous.

Mind attempts to describe the modulations of this emptiness manifesting itself as the fullness of experience and this fullness recognising itself as emptiness, knowing all the time that in doing so it is holding a candle to the wind.

Mind describes the names and forms through which That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named refracts itself, in order to make itself appear as two, as many, in order to make Consciousness/Being appear as Consciousness *and* Being.

And using the same names and forms, mind describes the apparent process through which That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named discovers that it never *becomes* anything, that it is always only itself and itself and itself.

Each statement that is made here is provisionally true in relation to one statement but false in relation to another. However, it is never *absolutely* true.

The purpose of every statement is to indicate the falsity of the previous one, only to await its own imminent demise.

Each is an agent of Truth, but never true.

Mind, in the broadest sense of the word*, is made of concepts and appearances. It never frames or grasps Reality itself.

However, by speaking in this way, mind is being used to create *evocations* rather than *descriptions* of the experience of Consciousness knowing itself.

These evocations are temporary expressions of That-Which-Cannot-Be-Named, like flowers blossoming for a moment, shedding the perfume of their origin on the Garden of Unknowing.

*The word 'mind' is used in two ways in this book. The first, as in this sentence, includes (a) thinking and imagining, (b) sensing (referring to bodily sensations) and (c) perceiving (referring to seeing, hearing, tasting, smelling and touching, through which the world is 'known'). In this case the body and the world are understood to be projections of the mind. The second refers only to thinking and imagining. In most cases the latter meaning is intended, but occasionally mind is referred to in its broader meaning.

Clear Seeing

All that is happening in these contemplations is the clear seeing of the essential nature of experience. There is no attempt to change or manipulate it, to create a peaceful or happy state, to get rid of suffering or to change the world. There is simply the clear seeing of the true nature of this current experience.

This clear seeing is not an intellectual understanding, although it may be formulated provisionally in intellectual terms when required by the current situation. Rather, it is the direct, intimate and immediate knowing of ourselves resting in and as the formless expanse of Presence, and simultaneously dancing in the vibrancy and aliveness of every gesture and nuance of the body, mind and world.

The clear seeing of what is has a profound effect on the appearance of the mind, the body and the world, but that is not the object of this investigation. There is no object to this investigation.

Even the purpose of 'seeing clearly' turns out to be too much in the end. It is the thorn that removes the thorn, and when even this last trace of becoming has been dissolved in understanding, it too is abandoned, leaving only Being.

However, in most cases this exploration is a prelude to the revelation of Being. We start with experience and stay close to it. We do not start with a theory, a model, a map or a teaching, and then try to fit our experience into that model. Absolutely nothing is taken for granted.

We start with experience and we end with experience. We allow the naked clarity of experience itself to relieve itself of the burden of duality.

We simply look at the facts of experience. "Is it true of my experience in this moment?" That is the only reference point.

The few core beliefs and preconceived ideas that we hold about the nature of ourselves and the world are exposed in this disinterested investigation. We do not do anything to these beliefs. We are not trying to destroy them but rather to expose them.

Belief and doubt are two sides of the same coin. When a belief is exposed it is found either to be true, in which case the belief becomes a fact and the doubt that was implicit in it is dissolved, or it is found to be false, in which case both the belief and the doubt will naturally come to an end.

Any feelings or patterns of behaviour that were dependent on the belief that has been exposed will, in due time, naturally dissolve, simply because they are no longer nourished by the belief. They die of neglect.

These feelings and patterns of behaviour are the counterpart at the level of the body to beliefs at the level of the mind, and their dissolution is accomplished in the same way. What was an investigation at the level of the mind, is an exploration at the level of the body.

In this exploration these feelings and patterns of behaviour are exposed, and in this exposure, their power to separate is revealed to be non-existent. Separation is not simply *understood* to be an illusion. It is *felt* as such.

No longer nourished by belief, these feelings are exposed and, as such, are seen for what they are. They die of the fierce clarity of being clearly seen.

This dissolution of beliefs and feelings has a profound effect on our lives, our ideas, our relationships, our bodies, our work, the world, in fact on everything.

However, the purpose of this investigation and exploration is not to change anything. It is simply the clear seeing of what is, and clear seeing is the shrine on which Being shines.



This line of investigation could be likened to taking several MRI scans of an apple. With each scan the apple is sliced up in different ways, each one showing a new section or point of view.

However, the apple is never touched in this process. It always remains just as it is, whole, untouched, unmodified, undivided. It only appears to be divided, and this appearance gives a more complete picture of its true undivided nature.

It is the same with our experience. The contemplations in this book are like MRI scans of our experience. They look at experience from many angles, spreading it out, opening it up. However, our experience itself is always one.

It is always a seamless, unified totality with no separate parts, and its nature is always only pure Consciousness. That is a fact of experience and it never changes, even if we think it to be otherwise.

This line of enquiry comes from the truth of direct experience and therefore leads back to it. It leads to the Reality of experience, to the experience of Consciousness knowing itself, knowingly. It is ruthless and tender at the same time, and utterly simple.

It is sometimes thought that this kind of enquiry is intellectual and abstract and seems to bear little relation to our day to day experience. However, it is only because our conventional dualistic concepts about the nature of Reality are themselves so densely interwoven with abstract and erroneous ideas that they require some meticulous deconstruction.

In this case it has not yet been seen that what are considered to be our normal, common sense assumptions, are in fact themselves intellectual and abstract – that is, they have little to do with the facts of experience.

By the end of the book I hope it will be clear that it is in fact our conventional ways of seeing that bear little relation to our actual moment by moment experience.

And, by contrast, I hope that the formulations expressed here will be understood as simple and obvious statements about the nature of our experience, albeit within the limited confines of the mind.

For instance, it is usually considered a fact of indisputable common sense that the body and the world exist as physical objects in time and space, independent and separate from Consciousness. Any line of reasoning that suggests that this is not the case, that there may be only the experience of Consciousness knowing itself in and as objects, is sometimes considered to be intellectual and abstract.

However, it is precisely the idea that the body and the world exist as objects in time and space, independent and separate from Consciousness, that is intellectual and abstract. It is not based on experience. And by the same token, the idea that there is only the experience of Consciousness knowing itself in and as objects, becomes a self-evident, obvious and indisputable fact of experience.

Of course the *appearance* of physical objects continues, but appearance is no longer mistaken for Reality.

However, it would be a misunderstanding to think that appearances have to disappear for Reality to be revealed. It is simply that the misinterpretation is no longer superimposed onto experience.

The body and the world continue to appear in the same way, but it is clearly seen that the experience of the appearance of the body and the world takes place simultaneously with the experience of Consciousness knowing itself. It is the same experience, one experience.

The experience of Consciousness knowing itself knowingly in and as all appearances, becomes as obvious and self-evident as the previous, apparently obvious and self-evident experience of objects existing in time and space, independent and separate from Consciousness.

What Truly Is

Whatever it is that is seeing and understanding these words, is what is referred to here as 'Consciousness.' It is what we know ourselves to be, what we refer to as 'I.'

Everything that is known is known *through* Consciousness. Therefore whatever is known is only as good as our knowledge of Consciousness.

What do we know about Consciousness?

We know that Consciousness *is*, and that everything is known *by* and *through* it. However, Consciousness itself cannot be known as an object.

If Consciousness had any objective qualities that could be known, it would be the *Knower* of those qualities, and would therefore be independent of them. We cannot therefore know anything objective about Consciousness.

Therefore, if we do not know *what* Consciousness is, what 'I' am, but we know *that* it is, and if everything that we experience is known *through* or *by* this knowing Consciousness, how can we know what *anything* really is?

All we can know for sure about an object is that it *is*, and that quality of 'isness' is what is referred to here as Being or Existence. It is that part of our experience that is real, that lasts, that is not a fleeting appearance. It is also therefore referred to as its Reality.

We know that Consciousness is present now and we know that whatever it is that is being experienced in this moment, exists. It has Existence.

If we think that we know something objective about ourselves or the world, then whatever that something is that we think we know, will condition our subsequent enquiry into the nature of experience. So before knowing what something is, if that is possible, we must first come to the understanding that we do *not* know what anything really is.

Therefore the investigation into the nature of ourselves and of the world of objects initially has more to do with the exposure of deeply held ideas and beliefs about the way we think things are, than of acquiring any new knowledge. It is the exposure of our false certainties.

Once a belief that we previously held to be a fact is exposed as such, it drops away naturally. Whether or not something further than the exposure of our false ideas about the nature things needs to be accomplished, remains to be seen. We cannot know that until all false ideas have been removed.

Many of our ideas and beliefs about ourselves and the world are so deeply ingrained that we are unaware that they are beliefs and take them, without questioning, for the absolute truth.

For instance, we believe that we are a body, that we are a man or a woman and that we were born and will die. We believe that we are an entity amongst innumerable other entities, and that this entity resides somewhere in the body, usually behind the eyes or in the chest area.

We believe that we are the subject of our experience and that everything and everyone else is the object. We believe that we, as this subject, are the doer of our actions, the thinker of our thoughts, the feeler of our feelings, the chooser of our choices. We believe that this entity we consider ourselves to be, has freedom of choice over some aspects of experience but not others.

We believe that time and space are actually experienced, that they existed before we did and will continue to do so after we have died.

We believe that objects exist independent of their being perceived, that Consciousness is personal and limited, that it is a by-product of the mind and that mind is a by-product of the body.

These and many other such beliefs are considered to be so obviously true that they are beyond the need of questioning. They amount to a religion of materialism to which the vast majority of humanity subscribes. This is especially surprising in areas of life that purport to deal explicitly with questions about the nature of Reality, such as religion, philosophy and art.

The only field available for enquiry is experience itself. This may seem almost too obvious to mention, but its implications are profound. It implies that we never experience anything *outside* experience. If there *is* something outside experience, we have absolutely no knowledge of it, and therefore cannot legitimately assert that it exists.

This in turn implies that if we are to make an honest investigation into the nature of Reality, we have to discard any presumptions that are not derived from direct experience. Any such presumptions will not relate to experience itself and will therefore not relate to ourselves or the world. If we honestly stick to our experience, we will be surprised to find how many of our assumptions and presumptions turn out to be untenable beliefs.

All experience takes place here and now, so the nature of Reality, whatever that is, must be present in the intimacy and immediacy of this current experience.

'I,' Consciousness, is present, and *something*, these words, the sound of the traffic, a feeling of sadness, whatever it is, is also present.

We do not know what this Consciousness is. Nor do we know what the Reality of these words or the current experience is. However, there is the *Consciousness* of something and there is the *Existence* of that something. Both are present in this current experience.

What is the relationship between them?



The mind has built a powerful edifice of concepts about Reality that bears little relation to actual experience and, as a result, Consciousness has veiled itself from itself. These concepts are built out of mind and therefore their deconstruction is one of the ways through which Consciousness comes to recognise itself again – that is, to know itself again.

Consciousness is in fact always knowing itself. However, through this deconstruction of concepts, Consciousness comes to recognise itself, not through the reflected veil of apparent objects, but knowingly and directly.

Concepts are not destroyed in this process. They are still available for use when needed.

In the contemplations that comprise this book it is acknowledged that the purpose of reasoning is not to frame or apprehend Reality. However, it is also acknowledged that the mind has constructed complex and persuasive ideas that have posited an image of ourselves and of the world that is very far from the facts of our experience.

These ideas have convinced us that there is a world that exists separate from and independent of Consciousness. They have persuaded us to believe that 'I', the Consciousness that is seeing these words, is an entity that resides inside the body, that it was born and will die, and that it is the *subject* of experience whilst everything else, the world, 'other,' is the *object*.

Although this is never our actual experience, the mind is so persuasive and convincing, that we have duped ourselves into believing that we actually experience these two elements, that we experience the world separate and apart from our Self, and that we experience our own Self as a separate and independent Consciousness.

In the disinterested contemplation of our experience we measure the facts of experience itself against these beliefs.

The falsity of the ideas that the mind entertains about the nature of Reality, about the nature of experience, is exposed in this disinterested contemplation.

All spiritual traditions acknowledge that Reality cannot be apprehended with the mind. As a result of this understanding some teachings have denied the use of the mind as a valid tool of enquiry or exploration.

It is true that Consciousness is beyond the mind and cannot therefore be framed within its abstract concepts. However this does not invalidate the use of the mind to explore the nature of Consciousness and Reality.

Ignorance is composed of beliefs and belief is already an activity of mind. If we deny the validity of mind, why use it in the first place to harbour beliefs?

By reading these words, we are, consciously or unconsciously, agreeing to accept the validity and, by the same token, the limitations of the mind.

We are giving the mind credibility in spite of its limitations. We are acknowledging its ability to play a part in drawing attention to that which is beyond itself or outside the sphere of its knowledge.

It would be disingenuous to use the mind to deny its own validity. Our very use of the mind asserts its validity. However, it is a different matter to use the mind to understand its own limits.

It may well be that at the end of a process of exploring the nature of experience, using the full capacity of its powers of conceptual thinking, the mind will come to understand the limits of its ability to apprehend the truth of the matter and, as a result, will spontaneously come to an end. It will collapse from within, so to speak.

However, this is a very different situation from one in which the mind has been denied any provisional credibility on the basis that nothing it says about Reality can ultimately be true.

As a result of the exposure of beliefs and feelings that derive from preconceived, unsubstantiated notions of Reality, a new invitation opens up, another possibility is revealed.

This possibility cannot be apprehended by the mind because it is beyond the mind. However, the obstacles to this new possibility are revealed and dissolved in this investigation.

They are dissolved by our openness to the possibility that in this moment we actually experience only one thing, that experience is not divided into 'I' and other, subject and object, me and the world, Consciousness and Existence.

We are open to the possibility that there is only one single, seamless totality, that Consciousness and Existence are one, that there is only *one* Reality.

The edifice of dualistic ideas, which *seems* to be validated by experience, is well constructed with beliefs at the level of the mind and feelings at the level of the body, which are tightly interwoven, mutually substantiating and validating one another.

In the disinterested contemplation of these ideas and feelings their falsity is unraveled. We see clearly that our ideas do not correspond to our experience. This paves the way for experience to reveal itself to us as it truly is, as in fact it always is, free from the ignorance of dualistic thinking.

We begin to experience ourselves and the world as they truly are.

Our experience itself does not change but we *feel* that it changes. Reality remains as it always is, for it is what it is, independent of the ideas we entertain about it.

However, our *interpretation* changes and this new interpretation becomes the cornerstone of a new possibility.

This new possibility comes from an unknown direction. It does not come as an object, a thought or a feeling. It is unveiled, in most cases, as a series of revelations, each dismantling part of the previous edifice of dualistic thinking.

And the unfolding of this revelation, in turn, has a profound impact on the appearance of the mind, the body and the world.



Consciousness veils itself from itself by pretending to limit itself to a separate entity and then forgets that it is pretending.

As a corollary to this self-limitation, Consciousness projects all that is not this 'separate self,' outside of itself. This projection is what we call 'the world.' And thus the separation between 'I' and 'the world' is born.

In reality this separation has never taken place. If we look for it, we can never actually find it. Ignorance is an illusion. It is an illusion that is wrought through the conceptual powers of the mind, through erroneous beliefs.

These beliefs are created and maintained through a process of deluded thinking – that is, by thinking that bears no relation to actual experience. The dissolution of these beliefs is accomplished by exploring and exposing them, using direct experience as the guiding reference.

Nothing new is created by this process of exploration. Its purpose is not enlightenment or self-realisation. It is simply to see clearly what is.

Our beliefs are the root cause of psychological suffering and they are dismantled by a process of contemplative investigation.

What we normally consider to be a line of investigation begins with assumptions that are considered to be implicitly true. In this contemplation we start with the same assumptions, but we measure them against the truth of our experience. We do not build on them, we deconstruct them.

This line of reasoning leads to understanding. However, understanding does not take place in the mind. It is beyond the mind. It is a moment when Consciousness experiences itself directly and knowingly.

Understanding is not *created* by a process in the mind any more than blue sky is created by a clearing in the clouds. However, it may be *revealed* by it.

Understanding is often preceded by a line of enquiry and can subsequently be formulated by the mind. Such a formulation, that comes from understanding and not from concepts, has the power to take us to the experience of Reality.

Through its reasoning powers the mind is brought to its own limit and, as a result, the edifice of mind collapses. This is the experience of understanding, the timeless moment in which Consciousness is revealed to itself.

Consciousness perceives itself. It knows itself, knowingly.