

For about ten years people sent me questions on non-duality by e-mail and usually I answered them. I am no longer able to do this, so I have put some of these questions and answers into this book. If you have a question, I hope you will be able to find the answer here. Alternatively, you could come to a meeting and ask it and you will get a cup of tea and a biscuit as well. Most of the questions have been edited to maintain anonymity. Where names have been given, this is always with permission.

IS AWAKENING A CHANCE EVENT?

Question: You say that there is no separate person and therefore no free will. So is it simply a matter of chance whether the sense of self drops away?

Richard: Answers to questions such as this one will always be frustrating for the mind. Liberation, or the seeing that there is no separation, is either seen or it is not seen. That is all that can be said.

As soon as we suggest that it is a matter of chance, or of fate, or it is willed by God, or it is earned by spiritual striving or purification, or it is the result of karma or grace, we are entering into another story.

Of all the stories that there are about this, I quite like the one that says that it is grace. But that is also a story.

AWAKENING AND PRACTICES

The same experience that you and Tony Parsons describe is very familiar to me from several years ago. At the time I felt very joyful. In fact I laughed out loud. I felt a tremendous sense of peace, freedom and relief. This state lasted for about two years, during which life was simply living itself and there was no searching for anything else.

But then somehow I found myself searching again. I started reading about non-duality, going to meetings, talking to all sorts of people about this. I've become terribly frustrated with trying to understand this and very confused by what different people say about it. Some teachers tell me that I should develop awareness, others that I must become totally present in the here and now. Could you comment?

What you describe is quite common. There can be an unequivocal seeing of This, Oneness, Presence. Then after a while the mind can come back with all its theorising and with its suggestions that maybe, just maybe, there really is something more than This. That is how the mind tries to clamber back onto its throne, or into its Managing Director's chair.

So heigh ho, we are back on the hamster wheel and searching again, with all the terrible frustration that this can entail. Many people who write and talk about non-duality encourage this, wittingly or unwittingly. They may suggest that the seeing of Oneness can be used instrumentally in

a variety of ways, for example to improve our life and our relationships. Often they teach that we can approach closer to Oneness by increasing our Awareness or by practising being Present.

And then off we go on another merry-go-round of inadequacy and searching.

If I gave advice, I'd say "Forget all that and relax."

"Becoming totally present in the here and now" is a phrase which is time-bound and space-bound. It has nothing to do with the seeing of non-duality. It encourages people to think that they can be more present by making an effort. Indeed, some people can, but it usually doesn't last more than a few minutes.

Seeing Oneness has nothing to do with making an effort or being totally present or anything else that a person can do. No amount of effort will reveal presence. There is only This, only presence, which is either seen or not seen.

HOW SHOULD WE LIVE?

Does it matter how the apparent person lives their life? Does it matter if I simply eat, drink and be merry? How free am I?

It is not a question of how free or not you are. Ultimately it may be seen that there is no you, so you can neither be free nor bound. In the meantime, life will be lived as it is lived. I am not sure whether your question is about morality, but if it is, the golden rule covers a lot of eventualities. It says simply "Don't do to others what you wouldn't want them to do to you." It can be written on a postcard and it is simple enough for a child of five to understand.

LIBERATION EVENTS

The event that you describe as liberation happened at a definite time and place. Have you come across other individuals for whom similar events have happened? And if you have, is this becoming more common?

Tony Parsons describes an event. He was walking through a park, then there was just walking through a park but nobody walking. Nathan Gill describes an event. He was riding a bicycle down a lane, then there was just riding a bicycle down a lane but nobody bicycling. I describe an event. I was walking through a country town, then there was just walking through a country town but nobody walking.

Others also report events like these. The realisation of liberation may come with such an event, or afterwards, or not at all. Or the realisation of liberation may come without any event. There are no rules in this, because liberation is all-embracing and therefore excludes no possibilities.

The trouble with hearing these stories about 'liberation events' can be that they set up an

expectation that something has to occur. This can lead to yet more searching. However, if searching for an event happens, then it happens. I know this is a tautology, but it expresses nicely the hopelessness of our case. If that hopelessness is realised, then there might at least be some relaxation.

It is becoming more common for people to report these events. It cannot be known whether that is because the events themselves are becoming more common or because more people are communicating about them. For other people there is no event, just a gentle gliding into the realisation that liberation is already the case.

EVOLUTIONARY PATHS

I live in Tehran. Today I came across you by chance on the internet. I appreciate the beautiful sharing that you're engaged in. I have a question for you.

I know someone who claims that liberation can be achieved only by following a guru tradition, involving many spiritual techniques that will purify the emotional, mental and body systems of all their accumulated toxins from the past. I've met a guru from such a tradition. He says that those who claim self-realisation without following any method have done many techniques in their past lives and this is why they have now reached liberation. I don't have any way of judging whether they are right or whether this is just another story. I have used spiritual techniques, but I find it hard to persevere with them. They seem to provide temporary relief, but then my suffering returns. And while I'm doing them, I seem to lose contact with the moment.

The seeing of liberation is not something that the person can achieve by following an evolutionary path because the seeing of liberation is impersonal. In other words it has nothing to do with the person. I also agree with you that, while we are doing a 'future-orientated' technique, we may be missing this moment. However, some of these techniques can be helpful psychologically and emotionally. I meditated and engaged with different forms of therapy for about thirty years and I do not regret this.

Of course, as you indicate, there is always a story that can justify to an individual whatever they wish to believe. So if someone believes in rebirth, they can explain 'sudden' liberation as the result of good karma accumulated in past lives. But how would they - or you - ever know whether this was true? It may seem like a reasonable hypothesis, but it is not even testable. So it can never be more than an opinion. Some people would call it a superstition. A superstition is an improbable belief, held without sufficient evidence - often in fact with no evidence at all. Another phrase for this is 'baseless supposition'.

If someone is drawn to doing 'evolutionary techniques', then that is probably what will happen. If not, not. Meanwhile, all there is is This, and in this the seeing of liberation may arise.

PRE-DESTINATION

Is the life of a person already written in advance?

No, the life of a person is not written in advance, because there is no person who has a life.

As soon as we start speculating that our lives may be written in advance, we engage with a story which takes us away from presence, from the miracle that is This. We might also notice that the idea that our life is written in advance is only one of many different possible stories. Why should we choose that story rather than any of the others?

When it is seen that there is no person who has a life, our fascination with stories about the future or the past tends to drop away. Then what is left is this ever-changing play of consciousness.

But I think that what we have to experience from birth to death is already written when we are born.

That is a story which appeals to many people. There are other appealing stories, such as that we can create the reality that we desire through understanding and practising ‘the laws of attraction’ or that we should accumulate good karma and avoid accumulating bad karma.

But what I am pointing to is that there is no person who has a life, or who creates their own reality, or who accumulates or avoids karma. And that there is no birth or death or time. All there is is This, whatever is apparently manifesting in Oneness, this present outpouring of unconditional love.

Then why are there people? Surely it's because Oneness wants to have the experience of being a person.

The mind lives in a world of time and of cause and effect, so it cannot help asking “Why?” It is its inescapable fate. The mind loves to entertain itself with questions about meaning and purpose and it creates answers of ever greater complexity so that it can silence its own doubts. Its answers may be religious or spiritual or existential. They are immensely varied, colourful and entertaining. And they often contradict one another.

If one of these answers appeals to you, then have it. But meanwhile the joy of presence is likely to be missed and this moment becomes a shadow, drained of energy and glimpsed only through a veil of speculation about meaning and the future.

You can have stories about meaning and purpose and endeavour or you can have presence, the simplicity of the leaves rustling in the breeze. You cannot have both.

PRACTICES

I feel that I can still do something to help myself see through my illusory self. It's not that I'm trying to achieve anything. It's rather that I'm trying to let go of whatever it is that keeps me in a state of separation.

Does it not make sense for us to practise letting go, through Zen for example? Can we not learn through daily practice how our mind keeps our illusion of separateness intact?

I am going to try to undercut your question by pointing out that everything simply unfolds of its own accord. If there is an interest in following Zen, then following Zen will probably happen. If there is no interest in following Zen, then following Zen will probably not happen. Neither of these possibilities has anything to do with you, nor any relevance to liberation.

Zen may be followed and liberation may or may not arise. Zen may not be followed and liberation may or may not arise.

If you are drawn to Zen, it probably makes sense to practise it. If you are not drawn to Zen it probably makes sense to avoid it. In either case, I wish you well.

DEATH

What is the difference between liberation and death? If these two events are equivalent, what is the point of even talking to anyone about their realisation? I know there is no point to liberation, but if this body-mind is extinguished at death, why work to see what will happen at that instant?

The difference between liberation and death is that in the first case the dream story continues, but now it is seen to be a dream story. In death the dream story ceases.

There is no point in talking to anyone about their realisation and it is not theirs. There is no point in working to see what will happen at death, but if that happens, then it happens. In other words, everything is exactly as it is and it cannot be any different.

TRANSPERSONAL LOVE AND PRACTICE

I really enjoyed the conscious.tv panel discussion. I noticed a difference in the answers the three of you gave to some of the questions. There seemed to be an especially clear difference in the answers about whether anything can be done to 'get closer' to Oneness, with one of the three of you claiming to run workshops in which people had this experience. Could you comment on this?

The differences about whether anything can be done arose because we were talking about different

things. One of the panellists was describing workshops in which the participants are encouraged to experience emotions which are less egoically based than those we normally experience in 'everyday life'. Sometimes these emotional experiences are referred to as 'transpersonal', because they take us beyond our usual personal boundaries. However, they are still experiences, albeit experiences of a refined kind.

This part of the discussion reminded me of my training many years ago in the transpersonal psychology and human potential movements. From my experiences at that time I know that it is quite easy to take a group of people who are willing, and invoke in most of them an experience of these less egoic emotions.

This can have benefits on a personal level, for example feelings of increased well-being and of kindness towards others. Usually these don't last very long. These practices also often create difficulties on a personal and relational level. I have witnessed this many times. Sometimes this leads to spectacular break-downs of existing relationships and the forming of often very short-lived new relationships amongst workshop participants who have shared a very intense experience. In the heightened atmosphere of the group, it is very easy to 'fall in love' in what seems like a very pure way. But as soon as daily reality hits, there can be a sudden coming down to earth. Mariana Kaplan wrote "You can't stay in God's world for very long. There are no restaurants or toilets there." We could add "And there are no mortgage payments, colour schemes or electricity bills to squabble over either." Ram Dass also describes very well the difficulty of coming down from the spiritual mountain and trying to live daily life from that heightened state.

An Australian acquaintance of mine summed all this up very succinctly. She said "We go on these workshops. We feel wonderful. We're in love with everyone. And then our lives fall apart!"

Nevertheless, doing intensive group work of some kind can be a very effective way of dealing with personal issues.

The seeing of non-duality has nothing to do with transpersonal experiences. Liberation is a paradigm shift which does not relate to any experience we have ever had, whether it be transpersonal or not. It is the seeing that, although experiences of many kinds arise, there is no experiencer.

ASTROLOGY

On the one hand astrology seems to fit with the idea of non-doership, because it suggests that everything that happens is 'written in the stars' and can be found in our horoscope. On the other hand I have the feeling that astrology is just another story. But if it is just a story, why do our horoscopes so often match our experiences of life?

The variety of phenomena that occur in this waking dream are so varied and numerous that if you wish to you can find evidence to support any story. If you wish to believe in astrology, you'll focus on the evidence where it seems to have got things right. If you wish to discount astrology, you'll focus on the evidence where it seems to have got things wrong. The same will be the case for dream interpretation, psychic readings, shamanic prophecies, hand analysis, numerology and many other systems such as the Myers Briggs Type Indicator and Jung's theory of psychological types. These systems go in and out of fashion. Few people try to determine the future through the augury of birds' intestines anymore, luckily for the birds. But many people still have their astrological charts plotted.

We all suffer from a cognitive bias known as the Forer Effect and this contributes to the continuing popularity of these systems. The Forer Effect describes our propensity to rate as highly accurate generalised descriptions of personality when we believe that they have been individually tailored for us. Many psychological experiments have been done which have proved beyond doubt the power of the Forer Effect. For example, in one experiment subjects were invited to supply the date, time and place of their birth and apply for a free individual astrological reading. Most subjects rated their reading as highly accurate. They did not know of course that the same generalised reading had been provided to all of them. Psychics and others adept at the art of cold reading also know - or intuit - the usefulness of the Forer Effect in pursuing their chosen trade.

Meanwhile there is only This, presence, in which any kind of story about life and its meaning may arise. All these stories are essentially meaningless, an entertainment with which we structure time and try to inure ourselves against the pain of separation.

BEING IN A DESERT

I have experienced a spontaneous shift in perception, and it is clear now that I'm not this body-mind organism, but awareness itself which witnesses everything. This has brought a great sense of freedom. It is clear that there is only 'now', and that the past and the future are just present thoughts. It is also clear that everything is simply happening, so there has been a dramatic reduction in the sense of responsibility and guilt.

Nevertheless there is still a sense of separation. I relate to what you write about a period of being in a desert, without hope, help or meaning. I see that nothing can be done to bring about the end of searching, but I am still waiting for it to happen, and this is sometimes very painful.

I would be really grateful if you could comment on my hopeless situation.

In awakening it is clearly seen that there is no doer, there is only the unfolding of whatever is apparently happening, and you give a very clear description of this. But awakening is only seeing the emptiness from which everything arises. The fullness, the loving unconditionality of Being, is not

seen in awakening. This leaves a sense that there is still something to be realised, yet it is also known that there is nothing that we can do to realise it. Hence the sense you have of being in a desert, without help or hope, still waiting for liberation.

I don't give advice, but if I did it would be to relax and take enjoyment in some simple everyday thing that you like doing. It could be a walk in the park, a cup of coffee, a trip to the cinema, a drive in the car - whatever it might be for you. You'll recognise, I think, the paradox in my writing this, because of course there is no one who can choose to do any of this. But if it should happen for us, then we are really blessed.

DISAGREEMENTS ABOUT NON-DUALITY

I've just been reading a book by Nisargadatta and I'm very confused. On the one hand he states quite clearly that there is nobody and that all there is is This. Several other books on Advaita say the same. But then he says that there is something prior to consciousness. Another contemporary writer on Advaita tells me that there is the 'I', the 'I am' and the 'I am Sarah'. He also says "It never ends" and "Next time you may be born as a worm." This seems very different to what you say.

I find the messages given about this very confusing. They are like the contradictions found in religions. Are these all just concepts? After many years of searching, I feel that I know nothing more than when I started. But paradoxically, I cannot give up the search.

The mind will spin endless stories about Advaita and make them ever more complicated. These stories are indeed like religions and some of them actually become religions. As long as the mind takes an interest in these stories, there will be confusion.

However, when the sense of being a person collapses, or is seen through, or evaporates, then it is seen that there is just This and the stories that the mind tells become irrelevant. Then statements like "You may be born as a worm next time" or "There is something prior to consciousness" or "There is the I, the I am, and the I am Sarah" will probably lose their fascination.

If I could recommend anything I would say forget about all these stories and take a walk in your local park. But of course there is no one who can choose to forget about these stories. They will be there till they are not and then they will be gone.

CHANNELLING

In a recent talk you briefly mentioned angel channelling. I suppose that the existence of angels is a story of the mind, so I am wondering where the channelled words come from.

For some time I seemed to be channelling messages. These were full of advice about what people should and should not do. Now I feel that there is no need for such advice.

Where does channelling come from? Does it come from the mind? My channelling sounded different to my usual speaking style and I've noticed the same with others.

1

Yes, angels are a story of the mind and channelling comes from the mind. This is the same as saying that it comes out of Oneness like all other thoughts. Psychologically, channelling comes from a somewhat deeper level of the mind than everyday conscious thoughts do, but not from a deeply unconscious level which the everyday mind cannot access so easily.

What channelling requires is that we simply open ourselves up to this slightly deeper level of the mind. Almost everyone can do this quite easily if they simply relax and allow the thoughts to begin to flow. Of course most channelled messages are obvious and banal. "Be nice to one another." "Be kind to one another." "Try not to destroy the planet." "Deal with your fear if you are able to." "Try not to kill one another." These are not revelations of deep spiritual wisdom that require the intervention of angels, archangels or cosmic beings from beyond the dog star Sirius.

As to the different style of these communications, this is very common. For example, many people channel in archaic English, which they might hope will make them sound much wiser than they really are. J. Z. Knight's channelling Ramtha is particularly amusing in this way. Get her (or him) up on youtube, sit back and enjoy a good laugh.

By the way, I understand that the latest fashion is to channel unicorns. But I may have got this wrong.

REALITY, APPEARANCE AND ILLUSION

I have heard you say that this is an appearance and it is very convincing. Could you explain in more detail how it is that we think that this is real but it is not?

Sometimes I suddenly have the realisation that of course there is nothing, that this is simply obvious. These moments make my 'reality' wobble.

And what do you mean by "There is no mind"? Some people describe the mind as an energy field surrounding the body. But if there is no mind, then what are thoughts? Are they simply brain activity?

I do not say that we think that this is real but it is not. The closest I can get to explaining this is to say "It is both real and unreal", rather as quantum physics suggests. A metaphor that I like to use is the quite traditional one of comparing this to a night-time dream. While we are having a night-time dream, it is utterly real. Or we could say that its appearance seems utterly real. To the one who is having the dream, it makes no difference whether it is real or whether it only seems real. However, as soon as we wake up we can see that actually nothing happened.

Some people call this waking reality ‘the waking dream’ and some call it ‘an appearance’. I like both those expressions. Others call it ‘an illusion’. I don’t like that expression, because, as most people understand the word ‘illusion’, it is misleading. If the word ‘reality’ has any meaning, which it clearly does, then this is the only reality there is. By ‘this’ I mean whatever is happening in presence, right here, right now. Of course whatever happens can only happen in presence in any case. There is no other time and no other place for it to happen in.

Most of us think we have a mind because thoughts come so thick and fast and they have so much energy that they create the impression that there is an entity, the mind, thinking them. But actually thoughts arise out of nothing, or No Thing. We could say that there is a brain which transforms the pure energy of Being into thoughts, and then we imagine that there is a personal mind thinking these thoughts. As a metaphor we could say that the pure undifferentiated white light of Being enters a prism (the brain) and emerges as the differentiated colours of the rainbow (thoughts and other perceptions).

You ask what thoughts are. Thoughts are Oneness thinking. Feelings are Oneness feeling. You are Oneness ‘Mary-ing’ and I am Oneness ‘Richard-ing’.

Thank you for your reply. It seems as if the thoughts which arise out of Oneness are based on the past experiences of the body-mind, as if our conditioning causes our thinking to be a certain way. Is this true?

Yes, within duality there certainly seems to be cause and effect, and past experiences apparently condition present thoughts and feelings. When Oneness is seen, it is quite likely that this conditioning will be seen as less important or not important at all.

LSA AND OTHER PSYCHO-ACTIVE DRUGS

I have some friends who take LSD for spiritual reasons, although I’ve never tried it myself. Do you think psycho-active drugs can help people destroy their concepts about being a person?

I last took psycho-active drugs over three decades ago, so I’m not very up-to-date. Their effects are very individual, but for myself, I would say that taking LSD revealed that our normal experience of reality is provisional. In other words it is just one possible version of reality. So how reality is experienced can depend greatly on our individual circumstances. If you meddle with the brain even slightly, an entirely alternate reality may appear.

Later on I took Thai magic mushrooms, and I described that experience at the time rather pompously as “Knowing God and understanding the nature of the Universe”. Of course, by the next morning I had no idea what this meant.

Taking psycho-active drugs can profoundly alter our concepts of who we are as a person. But this has nothing to do with the seeing of non-duality. Drug-induced experiences are still experiences - that is, they still happen to a person. The seeing of non-duality is not an experience, because it doesn't happen to a person. And our concepts about ourselves and about non-duality have nothing to do with the seeing of non-duality.

I was recently invited to take part in an ayahuasca ceremony but I turned the invitation down. I am no longer interested in taking psycho-active drugs. The experiences they offer are another ride in the fun-fair of life. Sometimes they are an exciting ride like the ferris wheel, sometimes they are a frightening ride like the ghost train. But once Oneness has been seen, the ordinariness of life tends to be seen as so extraordinary that an interest in fair-ground rides usually dies away.