

Excerpts from Paul Brunton *The Wisdom of the Overself*, “The Secret of the I” -- with supplements from *The Notebooks*, and *The Quest*

Past, future and present

4. If all our past personal experience... turns out in the end to be a series of ideas, what are we to say of our coming life.... What of the vivid present? ... They will then appear to possess neither the same reality nor the same value which they possess now.

...Because past, present and future constitute the whole of our human existence what else is demonstrated by it than that our own wakeful existence is itself only a thought-series and that our personal experience is a mentally-constructed affair? . Yet this day, this minute, this very moment through which we are now passing must actually possess precisely the same characteristics which they have before or after.

7. ... For what are we really aware of? We are aware of a series of physical sensations, separate changing mental states and fluctuating emotional moods which follow each other throughout wakeful life. But of a self apart from the totality of this series, we are not ordinarily aware. As a person we are, in the end, what other things are - a thought.

12... The whole mental life is a continuous flux and unrolling film of momentary thoughts. Those which are held most strongly within the focus of attention at any particular moment constitute the self at the time... If this world extended in space and changing in time is really a thought-structure and if the person is a part of the world, then it logically follows that we are just as much a thought-structure too. When mentalism reduced the world to an idea, it inevitably reduced everything and everyone contained within it to an idea too. The world-idea springs from the same root as the person-idea but both flower in contrasting colors.

If past and future are now only ideas, the present must be idea, too. So runs the mentalist explanation. But this can and should be carried still farther. If the experiencer of past and future is (because he is part of them) now an idea, then the experiencer of the present (and in the present) must be idea, too. As anything else than idea, he was (and is) only a supposition, which is the same as saying that the ego is only an apparent entity and has no more reality (or less) than any thought has. Notebooks 8.2.2

Everything remembered is a thought in consciousness. This not only applies to objects, events, and places. It also applies to persons, including oneself, he who is remembered, the “I” that I was. This means that my own personality, what I call myself, was a thought in the past, however strong and however persistent. But the past was once the present. Therefore I am not less a thought now. The question arises what did I have then which I still have now, unchanged, exactly the same. It cannot be “I” as the person, for that is different in some way each time. It is, and can only be, “I” as Consciousness. Notebooks 8.2.3

The ego thought is like a string upon which our multitudinous sense-memories, interests, desires, fears thoughts and feelings are threaded. And when one speaks of the

surrender of the ego, it is not the surrender of one particular bead which is meant, but rather of the entire string which holds together all the diverse beads and without which all would collapse. This is effected, and can only be effected, by turning the mind inwards, and by concentrating deeper and ever deeper within the heart until individual beads of thought and feeling no longer engage our consciousness, but only the single thought of self-existence. Then we discover that we are really angels fallen from the empyrean. Quest of the Overself

There are certain rare moments when intense sorrow or profound bereavement makes a person sick at heart. It is then that desires temporarily lose their force, possessions their worth, and even existence itself its reality. One seems to stand outside the busy world whose figures flit to and fro like the shadowy characters on a cinema screen. Worst of all, perhaps, significance vanishes from human activity, which becomes a useless tragi-comedy, a going everywhere and arriving nowhere, an insane playing of instruments from which no music issues forth, a vanity of all the vanities. It is then, too, that a terrible suicidal urge may enter his blood and he will need all his mental ballast not to make away with himself. Yet these black moments are intensely precious, for they may set his feet firmly on the higher path. Few realize this whilst all complain. The self-destruction to which he is being urged by such dread experiences of life is not the crude physical act, but something subtle--a suicide of thought, emotion, and will. He is being called indeed, to die to his ego, to take the desires and passions, the greeds and hates out of his life, to learn the art of living in utter independence of externals and in utter dependence on the Overself. And this is that same call which Jesus uttered when he said: "He that loseth his life shall find it." Thus the sorrows of life on earth are but a transient means to an eternal end, a process through which we have to learn how to expand awareness from the person to the Overself. (1:2.170).

Self-inquiry: what is the I?:

13. The first of our thoughts is 'I'. All other thoughts follow its arising. It does not stand alone but instantly associates itself with the thought which next follows. And this is the body-thought....

Consequently the original 'I' thought becomes converted into 'I am the body.' After this there arises the world-thought. The 'I' unconsciously provides the particular space-time characteristics through which the world must first pass before it can emerge into its consciousness. Thus the 'I' veritably holds as its own thought both the body and then the world outside the body. But because it began by deceiving itself about its own relation to the body, because it took the body for what it is not, it ends by deceiving itself about the things outside and around the body and takes them for what they are not too. Hence the arising of a triple error: the world, the body and the 'I' are all regarded as non-mental.

14. The 'I' every person knows is indeed his self but it is not his ultimate self. When he discovers that his own personal existence is no less a thought-structure than that of his physical surroundings, that everything including himself has an imagined existence, he comes close, very close, to the gate of initiation into a higher world of understanding. He who witnesses the events of a dream, who participates in them, and who creates them are one and the same entity.

15. We have found that thoughts and sensations constitute the person. But does the person constitute the whole of the 'I'? Can we separate self from the ideas, the perceptions and the memories which it holds?

16. Although the 'I' changes from instant to instant we feel somehow that it knows itself indirectly through its thoughts, acts and experiences, and that something remains constant and stationary through all these changes. If in one sense, there is a continuity between what we once were and what we now are, then this persistent core must be a deeply buried mental one. What is this mysterious core? Can the "I" know itself directly?

17. The fact that he could examine his own thoughts showed that there was something in him which was itself deeper than them, for it could not simultaneously be both the owner of the thoughts and the thoughts themselves, both the examiner and that which was examined. What is this 'something'?

17. It is, it must be a still deeper 'I' which although usually ignored, must matter most of all.

And this, when traced through the conventional confusions and unconscious processes which habitually surround it, is nothing else than that intangible principle of awareness itself whose own existence makes the existence of all the multiple items of awareness itself possible. ... What the hidden teaching says is that the awareness is itself a separate principle.

22. The part (of awareness) which thus acts is the part which is projected into a particular space-time existence and which thenceforth imagines itself to be an entirely complete and self-sufficient being. It is indeed what we know as the person. It is this projected fraction of awareness which is what we ordinarily term consciousness, that is the sum of all our personal sensations, thoughts and feelings.

31. Indeed it is impossible to advance farther in this metaphysical study unless the ability is developed to separate analytically two opposing concepts - the self from the not-self, the observer from what is observed.

32. The present examination of the wakeful self has shown us that it points beyond itself to a principle of awareness which makes possible all conscious experience - and consequently the personal 'I' along with it - but which is itself hidden deep beneath the threshold of consciousness.

33. When we believe that we are conscious of ourselves we are really conscious of a heavy disguise of the powerful complex of thoughts constituting the conscious 'I' which the unknown self puts on and takes off. ...

Thinking, being itself a part of the field of our observation, unfortunately cannot break through into the consciousness of the observer which transcends that field. The consciousness which knows cannot itself be included in what is known. ...

The 'I' is indeed a symbol which stands for something immeasurably wider than itself.

Trace Ego To Its Lair: (Notebooks)

This unusual interrogation of yourself, this demand to know what you are, may take a full lifetime of the deepest examination to satisfy. 8.1.42

So long as we persist in taking the ego at its own valuation as the real Self, so long are we incapable of discovering the truth about the mind or of penetrating to its mysterious depths. It is a pretender, but so long as no enquiry is instituted it goes on enjoying the status of the real Self. Once an enquiry into its true nature is begun in the proper manner and continued as long as necessary, this identification with ego may subside and surrender to the higher. 8.4.386

To trace the ego to its lair is to observe its open and covered manifestations, to analyse, comprehend, and note their everchanging ephemerality. Finally it too turns out to be but a thought structure--empty, and capable of dissolution like all thoughts. 8.4.387

Be still and know! This is to be done by practicing the art of meditation deep into its second stage and then--for it cannot properly be done before--tracing the ego to its hidden lair. Here it must be faced. Being still involves the achievement of mental silence, without which the ego remains cunningly active and keeps him within its sphere of influence. Knowing involves penetrating to the ego's secret source where, in its lulled and weakened condition, it can be confronted and killed. 8.4.390

There would be no hope of ever getting out of this ego-centered position if we did not know these three things. First, the ego is only an accumulation of memories and a series of cravings, that is, thought; it is a fictitious entity. Second, the thinking activity can come to an end in stillness. Third, Grace, the radiation of the Power beyond man, is ever-shining and ever-present. If we let the mind become deeply still and deeply observant of the ego's self-preserving instinct, we open the door to Grace, which then lovingly swallows us. (8:4.417)

He will advance most on the Quest who tries most to separate himself from his ego. It will be a long, slow struggle and a hard one, for the false belief that the ego is his true self grips him with hypnotic intensity. All the strength of all his being must be brought to this struggle to remove error and to establish truth, for it is an error not merely of the intellect alone but also of the emotions and of the will. Perspectives p. 198

Think! What does the "I" stand for? This single and simple letter is filled with unutterable mystery. For apart from the infinite void in which it is born and to which it must return, it has no meaning. The Eternal is its hidden core and content. 8.1.8.

The "I" is not a thought at all. It is the very principle of Consciousness itself, pure Being. It is neither personal mind nor physical body, neither ego nor little self. Without it they could not exist or function. It is their witness. Notebooks 8.1.72

"I am not I." These words are nonsensical to the intellect, which can make nothing of them. But to awakened intuition they are perfectly comprehensible. 8.1.19

We all think, experience, feel, and identify with the "I." But who really knows what it is? To do this we need to look inside the mind, not at what it contains, as psychologists do, but at what it is in itself. If we persevere, we may find the "I" behind the "I." 8.1.73

The faculty of attention is interiorized and turned back upon itself. 23.7.216

Why I chose "What Am I": (1) Because I wanted to start with the idea of a non-"I" consciousness instead of their own "I" with which they are continuously occupied; (2) Because the word Brahman is of neuter gender, neither masculine nor feminine. Brahman in us is Atman, the Self--but utterly impersonal. "What" lends itself more easily to this impersonality than "Who"; (3) The answer to "What Am I?" is multiple but it begins with "a part of the world!" and is followed by another question, "What is my relation to this world?" The answer requires the discovery of Mentalism, leading back through the thought of the world, thinker, and consciousness, to Brahman. 8.1.36