

Practice of Self-enquiry

**from: *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*
by David Godman**

Beginners in self-enquiry were advised by Sri Ramana to put their attention on the inner feeling of 'I' and to hold that feeling as long as possible. They would be told that if their attention was distracted by other thoughts they should revert to awareness of the 'I'-thought whenever they became aware that their attention had wandered. He suggested various aids to assist this process- one could ask oneself 'Who am I?' or 'Where does this I come from?'- but the ultimate aim was to be continuously aware of the 'I' which assumes that it is responsible for all the activities of the body and the mind. In the early stages of practice attention to the feeling 'I' is a mental activity which takes the form of a thought or a perception. As the practice develops, the thought 'I' gives way to a subjectively experienced feeling of 'I', and when this feeling ceases to connect and identify with thoughts and objects, it completely vanishes. What remains is an experience of being in which the sense of individuality has temporarily ceased to operate. The experience may be intermittent at first but with repeated practice it becomes easier and easier to reach and maintain. When self-enquiry reaches this level there is an effortless awareness of being in which individual effort is no longer possible since the 'I' who makes the effort has temporarily ceased to exist. It is not Self-realisation since the 'I'-thought periodically reasserts itself but it is the highest level of practice. Repeated experience of this state of being weakens and destroys the Vasanas (mental tendencies) which cause the 'I'-thought to rise, and, when their hold has been sufficiently weakened, the power of the Self destroys the residual tendencies so completely that the 'I'-thought never rises again. This is the final and irreversible state of Self-realisation.

This practice of Self-attention or awareness of the 'I'-thought is a gentle technique, which bypasses the usual repressive methods of controlling the mind. It is not an exercise in concentration, nor does it aim at suppressing thoughts; it merely invokes awareness of the source from which the mind springs. The method and goal of self-enquiry is to abide in the source of the mind and to be aware of what one really is by withdrawing attention and interest from what one is not. In the early stages effort in the form of transferring attention from the thoughts to the thinker is essential, but once awareness of the 'I'-feeling has been firmly established, further effort is counter-productive. From then on it is more a process of being than doing, of effortless being rather than an effort to be.

Being what one already is is effortless since beingness is always present and always experienced. On the other hand, pretending to be what one is not (i.e. the body and the mind) requires continuous mental effort even though the effort is nearly always at a subconscious level. It therefore follows that in the higher stages of self-enquiry effort takes attention away from the experience of being while the cessation of mental effort reveals it. Ultimately, the Self is not discovered as a result of doing anything, but only by being. As Sri Ramana Maharshi himself once remarked:

'Do not meditate – be!

Do not think that you are – be!

Don't think about being – you are!'

Self-enquiry should not be regarded as a meditation practice that takes place at certain hours and in

certain positions; it should continue throughout one's waking hours, irrespective of what one is doing. Sri Ramana Maharshi saw no conflict between working and self-enquiry and he maintained that with a little practice it could be done under any circumstances. He did sometimes say that regular periods of formal practice were good for beginners, but he never advocated long periods of sitting meditation and he always showed his disapproval when any of his devotees expressed a desire to give up their mundane activities in favour of a meditative life.

Question: You say one can realise the Self by a search for it. What is the character of this search?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: You are the mind and think that you are the mind. The mind is nothing but thoughts. Now behind every particular thought there is a general thought, which is the 'I', that is yourself. Let us call this 'I' the first thought. Stick to this 'I'-thought and question it to find out what it is. When this question takes strong hold on you, you cannot think of other thoughts.

Question: When I do this and cling to myself, that is, the 'I'-thought, other thoughts come and go, but I say to myself 'Who am I?' and there is no answer forthcoming. To be in this condition is the practice. Is it so?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: This is a mistake that people often make. What happens when you make a serious quest for the Self is that the 'I'-thought disappears and something else from the depths takes hold of you and that is not the 'I' which commenced the quest.

Question: What is this something else?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: That is the Self, the import of 'I'. It is not the ego. It is the supreme being itself.

Questioner: But you have often said that one must reject other thoughts when one begins the quest but the thoughts are endless. If one thought is rejected, another comes and there seems to be no end at all.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: I do not say you must go on rejecting thoughts. Cling to yourself, that is, to the 'I'-thought. When your interest keeps you to that single idea, other thoughts will automatically get rejected and they will vanish.

Question: And so rejection of thoughts is not necessary?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: No. It may be necessary for a time or for some. You fancy that there is no end if one goes on rejecting every thought when it rises. It is not true, there is an end. If you are vigilant and make a stern effort to reject every thought when it rises you will soon find that you are going deeper and deeper into your own inner self. At that level it is not necessary to make an effort to reject thoughts.

Questioner: Then it is possible to be without effort, without strain.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Not only that, it is impossible for you to make an effort beyond a certain extent.

Question: I want to be further enlightened. Should I try to make no efforts at all?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Here it is impossible for you to be without effort. When you go deeper, it is impossible for you to make any effort.

If the mind becomes introverted through enquiry into the source of Aham-Vritti (ego-sense), the Vasanas (mental tendencies) become extinct. The light of the Self falls on the Vasanas and produces the phenomenon of reflection we call the mind. Thus, when the Vasanas become extinct the mind also disappears, being absorbed into the light of the one reality, the Heart.

This is the sum and substance of all that an aspirant needs to know. What is imperatively required of him is an earnest and one-pointed enquiry into the source of the Aham-Vritti.

Question: How should a beginner start this practice?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The mind will subside only by means of the enquiry 'Who am I?' The thought 'Who am I?' destroying all other thoughts, will itself finally be destroyed like the stick used for stirring the funeral pyre. If other thoughts rise one should, without attempting to complete them, enquire 'To whom did they rise?' What does it matter however many thoughts rise? At the very moment that each thought rises, if one vigilantly enquires 'To whom did this rise?', it will be known 'To me'. If one then enquires 'Who am I?', the mind will turn back to its source (the Self) and the thought which had risen will also subside. By repeatedly practising thus, the power of the mind to abide in its source increases.

Although tendencies towards sense-objects (Vishaya Vasanas), which have been recurring down the ages, rise in countless numbers like the waves of the ocean, they will all perish as meditation on one's nature becomes more and more intense. Without giving room even to the doubting thought, 'Is it possible to destroy all these tendencies (Vasanas) and to remain as Self alone?', one should persistently cling fast to self-attention.

As long as there are tendencies towards sense-objects in the mind, the enquiry 'Who am I?' is necessary. As and when thoughts rise, one should annihilate all of them through enquiry then and there in their very place of origin. Not attending to what-is-other (anya) is non-attachment (vairagya) or desirelessness (nirasa). Not leaving Self is knowledge (Jnana). In truth, these two (desirelessness and knowledge) are one and the same. Just as a pearl-diver, tying a stone to his waist, dives into the sea and takes the pearl lying at the bottom, so everyone, diving deep within himself with non-attachment, can attain the pearl of Self. If one resorts uninterruptedly to remembrance of one's real nature (Swarupa- Smarana) until one attains Self, that alone will be sufficient.

Enquiring 'Who am I that is in bondage?' and knowing one's real nature (Swarupa) alone is liberation. Always keeping the mind fixed in Self alone is called 'self-enquiry', whereas meditation (Dhyana) is thinking oneself to be the absolute (Brahman), which is existence-consciousness-bliss (Sat-Chit-Ananda).

Questioner: The Yogis say that one must renounce this world and go off into secluded jungles if one wishes to find the truth.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The life of action need not be renounced. If you meditate for an hour or two every day you can then carry on with your duties. If you meditate in the right manner then the current of mind induced will continue to flow even in the midst of your work. It is as though there were two ways of expressing the same idea; the same line which you take in meditation will be expressed in your activities.

Question: What will be the result of doing that?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: As you go on you will find that your attitude towards people, events and objects gradually changes. Your actions will tend to follow your meditations of their own accord.

Question: Then you do not agree with the yogis?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: A man should surrender the personal selfishness which binds him to this world. Giving up the false self is the true renunciation.

Question: How is it possible to become selfless while leading a life of worldly activity?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: There is no conflict between work and wisdom.

Question: Do you mean that one can continue all the old activities in one's profession, for instance, and at the same time get enlightenment?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Why not? But in that case one will not think that it is the old personality which is doing the work, because one's consciousness will gradually become transferred until it is centred

in that which is beyond the little self.

Questioner: If a person is engaged in work, there will be little time left for him to meditate.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Setting apart time for meditation is only for the merest spiritual novices. A man who is advancing will begin to enjoy the deeper beatitude whether he is at work or not. While his hands are in society, he keeps his head cool in solitude.

Question: Then you do not teach the way of yoga?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The yogi tries to drive his mind to the goal, as a cowherd drives a bull with a stick, but on this path the seeker coaxes the bull by holding out a handful of grass.

Question: How is that done?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: You have to ask yourself the question 'Who am I?' This investigation will lead in the end to the discovery of something within you, which is behind the mind. Solve that great problem and you will solve all other problems.

Questioner: Seeking the 'I' there is nothing to be seen.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Because you are accustomed to identify yourself with the body and sight with the eye, therefore you say you do not see anything. What is there to be seen? Who is to see? How to see? There is only one consciousness which, manifesting as 'I'-thought, identifies itself with the body, projects itself through the eyes and sees the objects around. The individual is limited in the waking state and expects to see something different. The evidence of his senses will be seal of authority. But he will not admit that the seer, the seen and the seeing are all manifestations of the same consciousness – namely, 'I, I'. Contemplation helps one to overcome the illusion that the Self must be visual. In truth, there is nothing visual. How do you feel the 'I' now? Do you hold a mirror before you to know your own being? The awareness is the 'I'. Realise it and that is the truth.

Question: Upon enquiring into the origin of thoughts there is perception of 'I'. But it does not satisfy me.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Quite right. The perception of 'I' is associated with a form, may be the body. There should be nothing associated with the pure Self. The Self is the unassociated, pure reality, in whose light the body and the ego shine. On stilling all thoughts the pure consciousness remains.

Just on waking from sleep and before becoming aware of the world there is that pure 'I, I'. Hold on to it without sleeping or without allowing thoughts to possess you. If that is held firm it does not matter even if the world is seen. The seer remains unaffected by the phenomena.

What is the ego? Enquire. The body is insentient and cannot say 'I'. The Self is pure consciousness and non-dual. It cannot say 'I'. No one says 'I' in sleep. What is the ego then? It is something intermediate between the inert body and the Self. It has no locus standi. If sought for it vanishes like a ghost. At night a man may imagine that there is a ghost by his side because of the play of shadows. If he looks closely he discovers that the ghost is not really there, and what he imagined to be a ghost vanishes. The ghost was never there. So also with the ego. It is an intangible link between the body and pure consciousness. It is not real. So long as one does not look closely at it, it continues to give trouble. But when one looks for it, it is found not to exist.

There is another story, which illustrates this. In Hindu marriage functions the feasts often continue for five or six days. On one of these occasions a stranger was mistaken for the best man by the bride's party and they therefore treated him with special regard. Seeing him treated with special

regard by the bride's party, the bridegroom's party considered him to be some man of importance related to the bride's party and therefore they too showed him special respect. The stranger had altogether a happy time of it. He was also all along aware of the real situation. On one occasion the groom's party wanted to refer to him on some point and so they asked the bride's party about him. Immediately he sensed trouble and made himself scarce. So it is with the ego. If you looked for it, it disappears. If not, it continues to give trouble.

Question: If I try to make the 'Who am I?' enquiry, I fall into sleep. What should I do?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Persist in the enquiry throughout your waking hours. That would be quite enough. If you keep on making the enquiry till you fall asleep, the enquiry will go on during sleep also. Take up the enquiry again as soon as you wake up.

Question: How can I get peace? I do not seem to obtain it through Vichara (enquiry).

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Peace is your natural state. It is the mind that obstructs the natural state. If you do not experience peace it means that your Vichara (enquiry) has been made only in the mind. Investigate what the mind is, and it will disappear. There is no such thing as mind apart from thought. Nevertheless, because of the emergence of thought, you surmise something from which it starts and term that the mind. When you probe to see what it is, you find there is really no such thing as mind. When the mind has thus vanished, you realise eternal peace.

Question: When I am engaged in enquiry as to the source from which the 'I' springs, I arrive at a stage of stillness of mind beyond which I find myself unable to proceed further. I have no thought of any kind and there is an emptiness, a blankness. A mild light pervades and I feel that it is myself bodiless. I have neither cognition nor vision of body or form. The experience lasts nearly half an hour and is pleasing. Would I be correct in concluding that all that was necessary to secure eternal happiness, that is freedom or salvation or whatever one calls it, was to continue the practice till the experience could be maintained for hours, days and months together?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: This does not mean salvation. Such a condition is termed Manolaya or temporary stillness of thought. Manolaya means concentration, temporarily arresting the movement of thoughts. As soon as this concentration ceases, thoughts, old and new, rush in as usual; and even if this temporary lulling of mind should last a thousand years, it will never lead to total destruction of thought, which is what is called liberation from birth and death.

The practitioner must therefore be ever on the alert and enquire within as to who has this experience, who realises its pleasantness. Without this enquiry he will go into a long trance or deep sleep (Yoga Nidra). Due to the absence of a proper guide at this stage of spiritual practice, many have been deluded and fallen a prey to a false sense of liberation and only a few have managed to reach the goal safely.

The following story illustrates the point very well. A yogi was doing penance (tapas) for a number of years on the banks of the Ganges. When he had attained a high degree of concentration, he believed that continuance in that stage for prolonged periods constituted liberation and practised it. One day, before going into deep concentration, he felt thirsty and called to his disciple to bring a little drinking water from the Ganges. But before the disciple arrived with the water, he had gone into Yoga Nidra and remained in that state for countless years, during which time much water flowed under the bridge. When he woke up from this experience he immediately called 'Water! Water!'; but there was neither his disciple nor the Ganges in sight.

The first thing that he asked for was water because, before going into deep concentration, the topmost layer of thought in his mind was water and by concentration, however deep and prolonged it might have been, he had only been able temporarily to lull his thoughts. When he regained

consciousness this topmost thought flew up with all the speed and force of a flood breaking through the dykes. If this were the case with regard to a thought which took shape immediately before he sat for meditation, there is no doubt that thoughts which took root earlier would also remain unannihilated. If annihilation of thoughts is liberation, can he be said to have attained salvation? Sadhakas (seekers) rarely understand the difference between this temporary stilling of the mind (Manolaya) and permanent destruction of thoughts (manonasa). In Manolaya there is temporary subsidence of thought-waves, and though this temporary period may even last for a thousand years, thoughts, which are thus temporarily stilled, rise up as soon as the Manolaya ceases. One must therefore watch one's spiritual progress carefully. One must not allow oneself to be overtaken by such spells of stillness of thought. The moment one experiences this, one must revive consciousness and enquire within as to who it is who experiences this stillness. While not allowing any thoughts to intrude, one must not, at the same time, be overtaken by this deep sleep (Yoga Nidra) or self-hypnotism.

Though this is a sign of progress towards the goal, yet it is also the point where the divergence between the road to liberation and Yoga Nidra take place. The easy way, the direct way, the shortest cut to salvation is the enquiry method. By such enquiry, you will drive the thought force deeper till it reaches its source and merges therein. It is then that you will have the response from within and find that you rest there, destroying all thoughts once and for all.

Questioner: This 'I'-thought rises from me. But I do not know the Self.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: All these are only mental concepts. You are now identifying yourself with a wrong 'I', which is the 'I'-thought. This 'I'-thought rises and sinks, whereas the true significance of 'I' is beyond both. There cannot be a break in your being. You who slept are also now awake. There is no unhappiness in your deep sleep whereas it exists now. What is it that has happened now so that this difference is experienced? There was no 'I'-thought in your sleep, whereas it is present now. The true 'I' is not apparent and the false 'I' is parading itself. This false 'I' is the obstacle to your right knowledge. Find out from where this false 'I' arises. Then it will disappear. You will then be only what you are, that is, absolute being.

Question: How to do it? I have not succeeded so far.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Search for the source of the 'I'-thought. That is all that one has to do. The universe exists on account of the 'I'-thought (the false 'I'). If that ends there is an end to misery also. The false 'I' will end only when its source is sought.

Again people often ask how the mind is controlled. I say to them, 'Show me the mind and then you will know what to do.' The fact is that the mind is only a bundle of thoughts. How can you extinguish it by the thought of doing so or by a desire? Your thoughts and desires are part and parcel of the mind. The mind is simply fattened by new thoughts rising up. Therefore it is foolish to attempt to kill the mind by means of the mind. The only way of doing it is to find its source and hold on to it. The mind will then fade away of its own accord. Yoga teaches Chitta Vritti Nirodha (control of the activities of the mind). But I say Atma Vichara (self-investigation). This is the practical way. Chitta Vritti Nirodha is brought about in sleep, swoon, or by starvation. As soon as the cause is withdrawn there is a recrudescence of thoughts. Of what use is it then? In the state of stupor there is peace and no misery. But misery recurs when the stupor is removed. So nirodha (control) is useless and cannot be of lasting benefit.

How then can the benefit be made lasting? It is by finding the cause of misery. Misery is due to the perception of objects. If they are not there, there will be no contingent thoughts and so misery is wiped off. 'How will objects cease to be?' is the next question. The srutis (scriptures) and the sages

say that the objects are only mental creations. They have no substantive being. Investigate the matter and ascertain the truth of the statement. The result will be the conclusion that the objective world is in the subjective consciousness. The Self is thus the only reality, which permeates and also envelops the world. Since there is no duality, no thoughts will arise to disturb your peace. This is realisation of the Self. The Self is eternal and so also is realisation.

Abhyasa (spiritual practice) consists in withdrawal within the Self every time you are disturbed by thought. It is not concentration or destruction of the mind but withdrawal into the Self.

Question: Why is concentration ineffective?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: To ask the mind to kill the mind is like making the thief the policeman. He will go with you and pretend to catch the thief, but nothing will be gained. So you must turn inward and see from where the mind rises and then it will cease to exist.

Question: In turning the mind inwards, are we not still employing the mind?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Of course we are employing the mind. It is well known and admitted that only with the help of the mind can the mind be killed. But instead of setting about saying there is a mind, and I want to kill it, begin to seek the source of the mind, and you find the mind does not exist at all. The mind, turned outwards, results in thoughts and objects. Turned inwards, it becomes itself the Self.

Question: Even so, I do not understand. 'I', you say, is the wrong 'I' now. How to eliminate the wrong 'I'?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: You need not eliminate the wrong 'I'. How can 'I' eliminate itself? All that you need to do is to find out its origin and abide there. Your efforts can extend only thus far. Then the beyond will take care of itself. You are helpless there. No effort can reach it.

Question: If 'I' am always, here and now, why do I not feel so?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: That is it. Who says it is not felt? Does the real 'I' say it or the false 'I'?

Examine it. You will find it is the wrong 'I'. The wrong 'I' is the obstruction. It has to be removed in order that the true 'I' may not be hidden. The feeling that I have not realised is the obstruction to realisation. In fact it is already realised and there is nothing more to be realised. Otherwise, the realisation will be new.

If it has not existed so far, it must take place hereafter. What is born will also die. If realisation is not eternal it is not worth having. Therefore what we seek is not that which must happen afresh. It is only that which is eternal but not now known due to obstructions. It is that which we seek. All that we need to do is remove the obstruction. That which is eternal is not known to be so because of ignorance. Ignorance is the obstruction. Get over the ignorance and all will be well.

The ignorance is identical with the 'I'-thought. Find its source and it will vanish.

The 'I'-thought is like a spirit which, although not palpable, rises up simultaneously with the body, flourishes and disappears with it. The body-consciousness is the wrong 'I'. Give up this body-consciousness. It is done by seeking the source of the 'I'. The body does not say 'I am'. It is you who say, 'I am the body'. Find out who this 'I' is. Seeking its source it will vanish.

Question: How long can the mind stay or be kept in the Heart?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The period extends by practice.

Question: What happens at the end of the period?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The mind returns to the present normal state. Unity in the Heart is replaced by a variety of perceived phenomena. This is called the outgoing mind. The Heart-going mind is called the resting mind.

When one daily practises more and more in this manner, the mind will become extremely pure due

to the removal of its defects and the practice will become so easy that the purified mind will plunge into the Heart as soon as the enquiry is commenced.

Question: Is it possible for a person who once has had the experience of sat-chit-ananda in meditation to identify himself with the body when out of meditation?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Yes, it is possible, but he gradually loses the identification in the course of his practice. In the floodlight of the Self the darkness of illusion dissipates forever.

Experience gained without rooting out all the Vasanas (latent impressions or mental tendencies) cannot remain steady. Effort must be made to eradicate the Vasanas; knowledge can only remain unshaken after all the Vasanas are rooted out.

We have to contend against age-long mental tendencies. They will all go. Only they go comparatively soon in the case of those who have made Sadhana (spiritual practice) in the past and later in the case of others.

Question: Do these tendencies go gradually or will they suddenly all disappear one day? I ask this because although I have remained here for a long time I do not perceive any gradual change in me.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: When the sun rises, does the darkness go gradually or all at once?

Question: How can I tell if I am making progress with my enquiry?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: The degree of the absence of thoughts is the measure of your progress towards Self-realisation. But Self-realisation itself does not admit of progress, it is ever the same. The Self remains always in realisation. The obstacles are thoughts. Progress is measured by the degree of removal of the obstacles to understanding that the Self is always realised. So thoughts must be checked by seeking to whom they arise. So you go to their source, where they do not arise.

Questioner: Doubts are always arising. Hence my question.

Sri Ramana Maharshi: A doubt arises and is cleared. Another arises and that is cleared, making way for yet another; and so it goes on. So there is no possibility of clearing away all doubts. See to whom the doubts arise. Go to their source and abide in it. Then they cease to arise. That is how doubts are to be cleared.

Question: Should I go on asking 'Who am I?' without answering? Who asks whom? Which Bhavana (attitude) should be in the mind at the time of enquiry? What is 'I', the Self or the ego?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: In the enquiry 'Who am I?', 'I' is the ego. The question really means, what is the source or origin of this ego? You need not have any Bhavana (attitude) in the mind. All that is required is that you must give up the Bhavana (attitude) that you are the body, of such and such a description, with such and such a name, etc. There is no need to have a Bhavana about your real nature. It exists as it always does. It is real and no Bhavana.

Question: But is it not funny that the 'I' should be searching for the 'I'? Does not the enquiry 'Who am I?' turn out in the end to be an empty formula? Or, am I to put the question to myself endlessly, repeating it like some mantra?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Self-enquiry is certainly not an empty formula and it is more than the repetition of any mantra. If the enquiry 'Who am I?' were a mere mental questioning, it would not be of much value. The very purpose of self-enquiry is to focus the entire mind at its source. It is not, therefore, a case of one 'I' searching for another 'I'. Much less is self-enquiry an empty formula, for it involves an intense activity of the entire mind to keep it steadily poised in pure Self-awareness.

Question: Is it enough if I spend some time in the mornings and some time in the evenings for this atma-vichara (self-enquiry)? Or should I do it always, even when I am writing or walking?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: What is your real nature? Is it writing, walking or being? The one unalterable

reality is being. Until you realise that state of pure being you should pursue the enquiry. If once you are established in it there will be no further worry.

No one will enquire into the source of thoughts unless thoughts arise. So long as you think 'I am walking' or 'I am writing', enquire who does it.

Question: If I go on rejecting thoughts can I call it Vichara (enquiry)?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: It may be a stepping stone. But really vichara begins when you cling to your Self and are already off the mental movement, the thought waves.

Question: Then vichara (enquiry) is not intellectual?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: No, it is Antara Vichara, inner quest.

Holding the mind and investigating it is advised for a beginner. But what is mind after all? It is a projection of the Self. See for whom it appears and from where it rises. The 'I'-thought will be found to be the root-cause. Go deeper. The 'I'-thought disappears and there is an infinitely expanded 'I'-consciousness.

Question: I asked Mother in Sri Aurobindo Ashram the following question: 'I keep my mind blank without thought arising so that God might show Himself in His true being. But I do not perceive anything.' The reply was to this effect: 'The attitude is right. The power will come down from above. It is a direct experience.' Should I do anything further?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Be what you are. There is nothing to come down or become manifest. All that is necessary is to lose the ego. That which is is always there. Even now you are that. You are not apart from it. What do you wait for? The thought, 'I have not seen', the expectation to see and the desire of getting something, are all the workings of the ego. You have fallen into snares of the ego. The ego says all these and not you. Be yourself and nothing more!

Once born you reach something. If you reach it you return also. Therefore leave off all this verbiage. Be as you are. See who you are and remain as the Self, free from birth, going, coming and returning.

Question: How is one to know the Self?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Knowing the Self means being the Self. Can you say that you do not know the Self? Though you cannot see your own eyes and not provided with a mirror to look in, do you deny the existence of your eyes? Similarly, you are aware of the Self even though the Self is not objectified. Or, do you deny your Self because it is not objectified? When you say 'I cannot know the Self', it means absence in terms of relative knowledge that you identify yourself with it. Such wrong identity has forged the difficulty of not knowing the obvious Self because it cannot be objectified. And then you ask 'how is one to know the Self?'

Question: You talk of being. Being what?

Sri Ramana Maharshi: Your duty is to be and not to be this or that. 'I am that I am' sums up the whole truth. The method is summed up in the words 'Be still'. What does stillness mean? It means destroy yourself. Because any form or shape is the cause of trouble. Give up the notion that 'I am so and so'. All that is required to realise the Self is to be still. What can be easier than that? Hence Atma Vidya (Self-knowledge) is the easiest to attain.

The truth of oneself alone is worthy to be scrutinised and known. Taking it as the target of one's attention, one should keenly know it in the Heart. This knowledge of oneself will be revealed only to the consciousness which is silent, clear and free from the activity of the agitated and suffering mind. Know that the consciousness which always shines in the Heart as the formless Self, 'I', and which is known by one's being still without thinking about anything as existent or non-existent, alone is the perfect reality.