

BEING MYSELF

## CHAPTER I

### THE SENSE OF BEING MYSELF

**E**veryone has the sense of 'being myself'. The sense of 'being myself' is our most ordinary, intimate and familiar experience. It pervades all experience, irrespective of its content. It is the background of all experience.

The sense of 'being myself' never leaves us and cannot be separated from us.

If I am lonely, the sense of 'being myself' is present, although it is temporarily coloured by the feeling of loneliness. If I am in love, the sense of 'being myself' is present, although it is mixed with the feeling of being in love. The sense of 'being myself' is equally present in both feelings.

If I am tired, hungry, excited or in pain, the sense of 'being myself' remains present, albeit mixed with the experiences

of tiredness, hunger, excitement or pain. Indeed, *all* experience is pervaded by the sense of 'being myself'.

Just as a screen is coloured by the images that appear on it, our knowledge of 'being myself' is qualified or conditioned by thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, activities and relationships.

And just as the images change constantly but the screen remains the same, so experience changes all the time but the fact of 'being myself' is always the same.

'Being myself' is the ever-present factor in all changing experience.

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Although we all have this sense of 'being myself', not everyone experiences their self *clearly*. In most cases, our sense of self is mixed up with the content of experience: thoughts, feelings, sensations, perceptions, activities and relationships.

There are, as such, two elements to our normal experience of self: our ever-present, unchanging being, and the qualities it derives from our constantly changing experience, which seem to condition and limit it.

All experience is limited by nature, and this mixture of self with the qualities of experience gives rise to a limited sense of self. This is the apparently separate self or ego on whose behalf most thoughts and feelings arise and in whose service most activities and relationships are undertaken.

Divested of the qualities of experience, our self has no characteristics and therefore no limitations of its own. It is simply unlimited or infinite being: transparent, empty, silent, still.

Sharing none of the agitation of our thoughts and feelings, our essential self or being is inherently peaceful. Just as the space of a room cannot be agitated by any of the people or objects within it, so our being cannot be disturbed by anything that takes place in experience.

In the absence of any inherent sense of lack, our being is naturally fulfilled, needing nothing from experience to complete itself, just as nothing in a movie adds anything to or takes anything away from the screen.

Thus, peace and happiness are the natural condition of our essential being, and they inform the thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships of one who knows their self clearly.

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When we allow our essential self to become mixed or identified with the qualities of experience, its natural condition of peace and happiness is veiled or obscured.

Just as water has no taste of its own but assumes the taste of whatever it is mixed with and seems to become, for example, tea or coffee, so our essential self or being has no attributes of its own but assumes the qualities of experience and seems to become a person, a finite self or an ego.

For instance, when a feeling arises, such as sadness, loneliness or anxiety, we no longer know our self as we essentially are: transparent, silent, peaceful, fulfilled. Our knowledge of our self is mixed with and modified by the feeling. We overlook our being in favour of the feeling.

In fact, we seem to *become* the feeling. 'I *feel* sadness' becomes 'I *am* sad'. We lose our self in experience. We forget our self. However, this forgetting never completely eclipses the sense of 'being myself'. It is a partial veiling, for even in the darkest feelings we still have the experience of 'being myself'.

In depression, for instance, our experience is so coloured by darkness that our innate qualities of peace and happiness

are almost completely obscured. Our self seems to be tarnished or darkened.

However, just as the nature of water stays the same even when mixed with tea or coffee, so our essential self remains in its pristine condition even when mixed with the content of experience. It is only necessary to stay in touch with one's essential self or being in the midst of all experience.

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Feeling limited, the separate self or ego is prone to vulnerability and insecurity, and thus it seeks to defend itself. This is the impulse behind emotional reactivity: it is an attempt to restore the equilibrium that is the natural condition of our essential self or being.

Being vulnerable, the separate self or ego is inclined to feel unconfident, inferior and unloved, and in an attempt to re-establish the dignity inherent in our true nature, it seeks to aggrandise itself. This is the impulse behind most complaining, criticising and judging.

And feeling incomplete, the separate self or ego is given to a sense of insufficiency, inadequacy and unsatisfactoriness, and in an attempt to recover its natural condition of

wholeness, it seeks fulfilment through the acquisition of objects, substances, activities, states of mind or relationships.

Thus, the separate self or ego lives in a constant state of lack: a chronic and pervasive sense of insufficiency punctuated by periods of acute distress. This suffering is the inevitable consequence of the overlooking or forgetting of our true self.

The depth of the suffering depends upon the extent of the amnesia, that is, the degree to which we allow the current feeling or experience to veil the peace and happiness at the core of our being.

Just as suffering is inevitable for the apparently separate self or ego, so resistance and seeking are the two activities that govern its thoughts, feelings, activities and relationships as it attempts to restore its innate peace and happiness.

Little does the separate self realise that what it truly longs for is not to defend or fulfil the entity it imagines itself to be, but to be divested of its apparent limitations and return to its natural condition.

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This loss of peace and happiness initiates a great search in the realm of objective experience, which is destined

sooner or later to fail. Indeed, none of us would be reading this book if the search had not, to a greater or lesser extent, failed.

Once we have become sufficiently disillusioned with the capacity of objective experience to provide the peace and happiness for which we long, many of us turn to religious or spiritual traditions, which seem to offer a promise of fulfilment.

To this end, we might devote ourselves to meditation practices, prayer, yoga, visualisation, special diets, disciplined regimes and spiritual teachers. And these may, to some extent, relieve the pain of our longing and restore a degree of balance and harmony to our lives.

However, if our peace and happiness are dependent upon objective experience in any way, however refined or noble, we can be sure that underneath a veneer of peace, the sense of lack is smouldering. Sooner or later we must have the clarity and courage to return from the adventure of experience and come back to our self.

The great secret that lies at the heart of all the main religious and spiritual traditions is the understanding that the peace and happiness for which all people long can never

be delivered via objective experience. It can only be found in our self, in the depths of our being.

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The separate self or ego is the apparent entity that arises from the intermingling of our self with the limitations of experience. The divesting of our being of the qualities it seems to have acquired from experience is referred to as 'enlightenment' in the traditional literature. Our being sheds the limitations of experience that seemed to obscure or 'endarken' it.

Enlightenment is, as such, not a new or extraordinary experience to be attained or acquired; it is simply the revelation of the original nature of our self or being. Nothing could be more intimate and familiar than our being, which is why it feels like coming home. In the Zen tradition it is referred to as the recognition of our original face.

There is nothing exotic or mystical about enlightenment. It is simply the recognition of something that was always known, indeed *is* always known, before it is clouded by experience.

No one *becomes* enlightened. Our being is simply relieved of an imaginary limitation and, as a result, its natural condition of peace and happiness shines.