

## SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR

Director, Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy

# SELF-AWARENESS AND ULTIMATE SELFHOOD

The fruit of several centuries of rationalistic thought in the West has been to reduce both the objective and the subjective poles of knowledge to a single level. In the same way that the *Cogito* of Descartes is based on reducing the knowing subject to a single mode of awareness, the external world which this 'knowing self' perceives is reduced to a spatio-temporal complex limited to a single level of reality – no matter how far this complex is extended beyond the galaxies or into aeons of time, past and future. The traditional view as expressed in the metaphysical teachings of both the Eastern and Western traditions is based, on the contrary, upon a hierarchic vision of reality, not only of reality's objective aspect but also of its subjective one. Not only are there many levels of reality or existence stretching from the material plane to Absolute and Infinite Reality, but there are also many levels of subjective reality or consciousness, many envelopes of the self, leading to the Ultimate Self which is Infinite and Eternal and which is none other than the Transcendent Reality beyond.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the relation between the subjective and the objective is not bound to a single mode. There is not just one form of perception or awareness. There are modes and degrees of awareness leading from the so-called 'normal' perception by man of both his own 'ego' and the external world to awareness of Ultimate Selfhood, in which the subject and object of knowledge become unified in a single reality beyond all separation and distinction.

Self-awareness, from the point of view of traditional metaphysics, is not simply a biological fact of life common to all human beings. There is more than one level of meaning to 'self' and more than one degree of awareness. Man is aware of his self or ego, but one also speaks of self control, and therefore implies even in daily life the presence of another self which controls the lower self. Tradition, therefore, speaks clearly of the distinction between the self and the Self, or the self and the Spirit which is the first reflection of the ultimate Self; hence the primary distinction between *anima* and *spiritus*

<sup>1</sup> Traditional metaphysics speaks of Ultimate Reality either as the absolutely Transcendent or the absolutely Immanent which however are one, *brahman* being the same as *atman*. Hindu metaphysics, however, emphasizes more the language of immanence, and Islamic metaphysics that of transcendence without one language excluding the other.

See F. Schuon, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, trans. by D. M. Matheson (London, 1953), pp. 95 ff. See also Schuon, *Language of the Self* trans. by M. Pallis and D. M. Matheson (Madras, 1959), especially chapter XI, 'Gnosis, Language of the Self'.

or *nafs* and *rūh* of Islamic thought and emphasis upon the fact that there is within every man both an outer and an inner man, a lower self and a higher one. That is why also tradition speaks of the self as being totally distinct from the Ultimate Self, from *ātman* or *ousia*, and yet as a reflection of it and as the solar gate through which man must pass to reach the Self. Traditional metaphysics is in fact primarily an autology, to quote A. K. Coomaraswamy,<sup>1</sup> for to know is ultimately to know the Self. The *Ḥadīth*, 'He who knoweth himself knoweth his Lord' attests to this basic truth.

There are, moreover, many stages which separate the self and the Self. In its descent towards manifestation, the Self becomes shrouded by many bodies, many sheaths, which must be shed in returning to the One. That is why the Buddhist and Hindu traditions speak of the various subtle bodies of man, and certain Sufis such as 'Alā' al-Dawlah Simnānī analyze the 'physiology' of the inner man or the man of light in terms of the *laṭā'if* or subtle bodies which man 'carries' within himself and which he must 'traverse' and also cast aside in order to reach the Self.<sup>2</sup>

In order to reach the Ultimate Self through the expansion of awareness of the centre of consciousness, man must reverse the cosmogonic process which has crystallized both the variations and reverberations of the Self within what appears through the cosmic veil (*ḥijāb*) as separate and objective existence. And this reversal must of necessity begin with the negation of the lower self, with the performance of sacrifice, which is an echo here below of the primordial sacrifice, the sacrifice which has brought the cosmos into existence. The doctrine of the creation of the cosmos, whether expounded metaphysically or mythically in various traditions, is based upon the manifestation of the Principle, which is at the same time the sacrifice (the *yajña* of Hinduism) of the luminous pole of existence, of the Universal Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), of Puruṣa, of the Divine Logos which is also light, of the Spirit (*al-rūh*) which resides within the proximity of the Ultimate Self and at the centre of the cosmos. The Ultimate Self in its inner infinitude is beyond all determination and cosmic polarization, but the Spirit or Intellect which is both created and uncreated, is already its first determination in the direction of manifestation. It is *māyā* in *ātma* and the centre of all the numerous levels of cosmic and universal existence.<sup>3</sup> Through its 'sacrifice' the lower levels of the cosmic order in its objective as well as subjective aspects become manifest. The human self, as usually experienced by men who have become separated from their archetypal reality, is itself a faint echo upon the cosmic plane of the Spirit and ultimately of the Self, and exists only by virtue of the original sacrifice of its celestial Principle. Hence,

<sup>1</sup> See A. K. Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (New York, 1943), pp. 10 ff.

<sup>2</sup> See H. Corbin, *L'homme de lumière dans le soufisme iranien* (Paris, 1971). In diverse traditions, the return of the self to Self has been compared to the shedding of outward skin by a snake which by virtue of this unshedding gains a new skin and a new life.

<sup>3</sup> See F. Schuon, 'Atma-Maya', *Studies in Comparative Religion* (summer 1973), pp. 130-8.

it is through the denial of itself or of sacrifice that the self can again become it-Self and regain the luminous empyrean from which it has descended to the corporeal realm.

Self-awareness can only reach the Ultimate Self provided it is helped by that message from the Divine Intellect which is called 'revelation' or tradition in its universal sense. The gates through which the Spirit has descended to the level of the human self are hermetically sealed and protected by the dragons which cannot be subdued save with the help of the angelic forces. Self-awareness in the sense of experimenting with the boundaries of the psyche, with new experiences, with the heights and depths of the psychological world, does not result in any way in moving closer to the proximity of the Self. The attempted expansion of awareness in this sense, which is so common among modern man anxious to break the boundaries of the prison of the materialistic world he has created for himself, results only in a horizontal expansion, but not in a vertical one. Its result is a never ending wandering in the labyrinth of the psychic world and not the end of all wandering in the presence of the Sun which alone *is*. Only the sacred can enable the awareness of the self to expand in the direction of the Self. The Divine reveals to man his Sacred Name as a holy vessel which carries man from the limited world of his self to the shores of the World of the Spirit where alone man is his Real Self. That is why the famous Sufi, Maṣūṛ al-Hallāj, through whom the Self uttered 'I am the Truth' (*ana'l-Haqq*) prays in this famous verse to the Self to remove the veil which separates man's illusory I from the Self who alone is I in the absolute sense. 'Between me and thee, it is my "I-ness" which is in contention; Through Thy grace remove my "I-ness" from between us.'

With the help of the message and also the grace issuing from the Self the lower self or soul is able to become wed to the Spirit in that alchemical marriage between gold and silver, the king and the queen, the heavenly bride and the earthly bridegroom, which is the goal of all initiatic work. And since love is also death (*amor est mors*) and marriage is death as well as union,<sup>1</sup> the perfection of the self implies first of all the negation of itself, a death which is also a rebirth, for only he who has realized that he is nothing is able to enter unto the Divine Presence. The only thing man can offer in sacrifice to God is his self, and in performing this sacrifice through spiritual practice he returns the self to the Self and gains awareness of the real 'I' within, who alone has the right to claim 'I am'. As Rumi has said in these celebrated and often quoted verses concerning the real 'I':<sup>2</sup>

I died as mineral and became a plant,  
I died as plant and rose to animal,

<sup>1</sup> It is of interest to recall that in Greek *τελέω* means at once to gain perfection, to become married and to die.

<sup>2</sup> R. A. Nicholson, *Rumi - Poet and Mystic* (London, 1950), p. 103.

I died as animal and I was Man.  
 Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?  
 Yet once more I shall die as Man, to soar  
 With angels blest; but even from angelhood  
 I must pass on: all except God doth perish.  
 When I have sacrificed my angel-soul,  
 I shall become what no mind e'er conceived.  
 Oh, let me not exist! for Non-existence  
 Proclaims in organ tones: "To him we shall return".

One of the factors which most sharply distinguishes traditional metaphysics from that part of post-medieval Western philosophy which is called metaphysics today is that traditional metaphysics is not mere speculation about the nature of Reality but a doctrine concerning the nature of the Real combined with methods revealed by the Origin or Absolute Reality to enable the self or the soul, as usually understood, to return to the abode of the Self. The Ultimate Self cannot be approached by the efforts of the self alone, and no amount of human knowledge of the psyche can increase the awareness or the consciousness of the self which will finally lead to the Ultimate Self.

The contemplative disciplines of all traditions of both East and West insist in fact on the primacy of the awareness of the self and its nature. As the great thirteenth-century Japanese Zen master Dōgen has said, 'To study Buddhism means nothing other than inquiring into the true nature of the ego (or the self)'.<sup>1</sup> The famous dictum of Christ that the Kingdom of God is within you is likewise a confirmation of the primacy of the inward journey towards the Ultimate Self as the final goal of religion.

Traditional psychology or rather pneumatology, which however must not be confused in any way with modern psychological studies, is closely wed to traditional metaphysics, for it contains the means whereby the soul can understand its own structure and with the help of appropriate spiritual disciplines transform itself so as finally to realize it-Self. This is as much true of the Yogācāra school of Mahayana Buddhism as of various forms of Yoga in Hinduism or of the contemplative schools within Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In the latter tradition for example, a whole science of the soul has been developed based on the progressive perfection and transformation of the self towards the Self. In Arabic the word *nafs* means at once soul, self and ego. As ordinarily understood, the *nafs* is the source of limitation, passion, and gravity, the source of all that makes man selfish and self-centred. This *nafs* which is called the *nafs al-ammārah* (the soul which inspires evil), following the terminology of the Quran, must be transfigured through death and purgation. It must be controlled by the higher self. With the help of the Spirit the *nafs al-ammārah* becomes trans-

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in T. Izutsu, 'Two Dimensions of Ego Consciousness in Zen', *Sophia Perennis* (Tehran), II, no. 1 (1976), p. 20.

formed into the *nafs al-lawwāmah* (the blaming soul) gaining greater awareness of its own nature, an awareness that is made possible through the transmutation of its substance. In the further stage of inner alchemical transmutation, the *nafs al-lawwāmah* becomes transformed into the *nafs al-muṭma'innah* (the soul at peace), attaining a state in which it can gain knowledge with certainty and repose in peace because it has discovered its own centre which is the Self. Finally according to certain Sufis, the *nafs al-muṭma'innah* becomes transmuted into the *nafs al-rāḍiyah* (the satisfied soul) which has attained such perfection that it has now become worthy of being the perfect bride of the Spirit, thus returning to its Lord, as the Quran asserts, and finally realizing the Self through its own annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsequent subsistence (*baqā'*) in God.

The traditional science of the soul, along with the methods for the realization of the Self, a science which is to be found in every integral tradition, is the means whereby self awareness expands to reach the empyrean of the Ultimate Self. This traditional science is the result of experiment and experience with the self by those who have been able to navigate over its vast expanses with the aid of the spiritual guide. It is a science not bound by the phenomena or accidents which appear in the psyche or which the self of ordinary human beings display. Rather, it is determined by the noumenal world, by the Substance to which all accidents ultimately return, for essentially *samsāra* and *nirvāṇa* are the same.

Traditional cosmology also is seen, from the practical point of view of the perfection of the soul and the journey of the self to Self, as a form of the sacred science of the soul, as a form of autology. The cosmos may be studied as an external reality whose laws are examined by various cosmological sciences. But it may also be studied with the view of increasing self-awareness and as an aid in the journey towards the Ultimate Self. In this way the cosmos becomes not an external object but a crypt through which the seeker of Truth journeys and which becomes interiorized within the being of the traveller to the degree that by 'travelling' through it he is able to increase his self-awareness and attain higher levels of consciousness. Again to quote Rumi:<sup>1</sup>

The stars of heaven are ever re-filled by the star-like souls of the pure.

The outer shell of heaven, the Zodiac, may control us; but our inner essence rules the sky.

In form you are microcosm, in reality the macrocosm;  
though it seems the branch is the origin of the fruit, in truth the branch only exists  
for the fruit.

If there were no hope, no desire for this fruit, why should the gardener have  
planted the tree?

So the tree was born of the fruit, even though it seems the other way round.

<sup>1</sup> See S. H. Nasr, *An Introduction to Cosmological Doctrines* (Cambridge, 1964; second edition London, in press), chapter 15.

Thus Muhammad said 'Adam and the other prophets follow under my banner'; thus that master of all knowledge has declared in allegory 'We are the last and the foremost'.

For if I seem to be born of Adam, in fact I am the ancestor of all ancestor. Adam was born of me, and gained the Seventh Heaven on my account.<sup>1</sup>

The process through which man becomes him-Self and attains his true nature does not possess only a cosmic aspect. It is also of the greatest social import. In a society in which the lower self is allowed to fall by its own weight, in which the Ultimate Self and means to attain it are forgotten, in which there is no principle higher than the individual self, there cannot but be the highest degree of conflict between all limited egos which would claim for themselves absolute rights, usually in conflict with the claims of other egos – rights which belong to the Self alone. In such a situation, even the spiritual virtue of charity becomes sheer sentimentality. The traditional science of the soul, however, sees only one Self, which shines, no matter how dimly, at the center of oneself and every self. It is based on the love of one Self which however does not imply selfishness but on the contrary necessitates the love of others, who in the profoundest sense are also one self. For as Meister Eckhardt has said, 'Loving Thy Self, thou lovest all men as thy Self'.<sup>2</sup> The sheer presence in human society of those who have attained the Ultimate Self has an invisible effect upon all of society far beyond what an external study of their relation with the social order would reveal. Such men are not only a channel of grace for the whole of society but the living embodiment of the Truth that self awareness can lead to the Ultimate Self only through man's sacrificing his self and realizing his own limitations and that the only way of being really charitable in an ultimate and final sense is to see the Self in all selves and hence to act towards the neighbour not as if he were myself, but because he *is* at the centre of his being my-Self. The love of other selves is metaphysically meaningful only as a function of the awareness not of our limited self but of the Ultimate Self. That is why the injunction of the Gospels is to first love God and then the neighbour. Knowledge of the self in its relation to the Self reveals this basic truth that the inner life of man leaves its deepest imprint upon the social order even if one were to do nothing, and that harmony on the social level can only be attained when the members of a society are able to control the self with the help of the means which only the Ultimate Self can provide for them. To quote Dōgen again,

To be disciplined in the Way of the Buddha means getting disciplined in dealing properly with your own I. To get disciplined in dealing with your I means nothing other than forgetting your I. To forget your I means that you become illumined by the things. To be illumined by the things means that you obliterate

<sup>1</sup> Rumi, *Mathnawi*, ed. by R. A. Nicholson (London, 1930), iv, Book iv, v. 519–28, trans. by P. Wilson.

<sup>2</sup> *Meister Eckhart*, trans. by C. de B. Evans, 1.139. Quoted from Coomaraswamy, *op. cit.* p. 13.

the distinction between your (so-called) ego and the (so-called) egos other things.<sup>1</sup>

The traditional sciences of the soul deal extensively with all the questions relating to sense perception, inner experiences, contact and communication with other conscious being and the like. But their central concern is above all with the question of the nature of the self, of the centre of consciousness, of the subject which says 'I'. In fact, one of the chief means to reach the Ultimate Self is to examine thoroughly with the help of the spiritual methods provided within the matrix of various traditions the nature of the I, as was done by the great contemporary Hindu saint Śri Ramana Maharshi.<sup>2</sup> As awareness of the self expands and deepens, the consciousness of the reality of the only I which *is* begins to appear, replacing the ordinary consciousness which sees nothing but the multiple echoes of the I on the plane of cosmic manifestation. The consciousness of the only I, which is the source of all consciousness, leads him who has realized this truth to sing with 'Aṭṭār that

All You have been, and seen, and thought,  
Not *You*, but *I*, have seen and been and wrought.<sup>3</sup>

The realization of the Ultimate Self, of the I who alone has the right to say 'I am', is the goal of all awareness. Through it man realizes that although at the beginning of the path the Self is completely other than the self, ultimately the self *is* the Self, as Zen masters have been especially adamant in emphasizing. But this identity is essential, not phenomenal and external. The self is on the one hand like the foam of the ocean wave, insubstantial, transient and illusory, and on the other hand a spark of the Light of the Self, a ray which in essence is none other than the supernal Sun. It is with respect to this spark within the self of every human being that it has been said

There is in every man an incorruptible star, a substance called upon to become crystallized in Immortality; it is eternally prefigured in the luminous proximity of the Self. Man disengages this star from its temporal entanglements in truth, in prayer and in virtue, and in them alone.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Izutsu, *op. cit.* p. 33.

<sup>2</sup> Śri Ramana Maharshi in fact based the whole of his teachings upon the method based on asking 'who am I?'. His most famous work, a collection of answers given to one of his disciples, Sivaprakasam Pillai, who arranged and amplified them, is called *Who am I?* (Tiruvannamalai, 1955). See A. Osborne, *Ramana Maharshi and the Path of Self Knowledge* (Bombay, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> From the *Manṭiq al-ṭayr*, trans. by F. S. Fitzgerald. A. J. Arberry, *Classical Persian Literature* (London, 1958), p. 131.

<sup>4</sup> F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient World*, trans. by Lord Northbourne (London, 1965), p. 117.