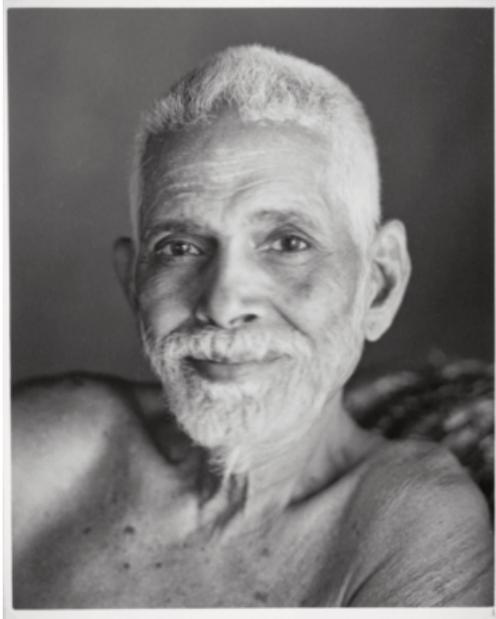


# *Who am I?*

by  
Ramana Maharshi



with comments and  
practice notes

Richard M Clarke

# Infinite Pie Publications

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## Introduction

I write this commentary on Ramana Maharshi's *Who am I?* because it is such an important teaching and deserves to be looked at deeply. This text comes from Ramana's earliest spiritual instructions, when, still in silence, he scratched answers to questions into the sand. These were written down, printed, and the resulting pamphlet was provided to visitors to read when they came to visit him. *Who am I?* came from these answers that Ramana wrote at Guhai Namasavaya Temple in 1899 to questions written by a seeker, Sivaprakasam Pillai.

There are several versions of *Who am I?* that have been published. This "all text" version is the only one that was actually edited by Ramana himself. As such, I felt that it is the most authoritative version.

Why do I write this? I have reflected on this question. The first reason was to more carefully read, reflect, and meditate on this valuable teaching, the first instance where Ramana's teachings were recorded. The second reason is that my teacher, Nome, has helped me understand some of these teachings, so that I could start to use them in my practice. I want to offer to others what I have been taught, so that they might take a deeper approach themselves to the inquiry that *Who am I?* readily invites.

I have found that this kind of spiritual teaching is best absorbed in small chunks, and that is how I will present it, one paragraph at a time, along with my comments on that paragraph.

The ancient Upanishadic method of spiritual practice is:

shravana (hearing of the truth, or reading it),

manana (reflecting on its meaning),

nididhyAsana (meditation leading to the full knowledge of the identity of the individual self and the Universal Self).

The intent is that you meditate deeply on each paragraph. Take it deep within to where it becomes your experience. This booklet is

not about what you understand, but rather what you experience directly.

The comments express my present understanding drawn from my own inquiry, and give the reader one or more ways to approach the teaching being presented. Also included in some of the comments are Ch'an Buddhist and Zen Buddhist quotes. These quotes show parallels between the Advaita Vedanta of Ramana Maharshi, and these other "radical" self-knowledge teachings.

I look at this as a work-in-progress, rather than a fixed, completed book. I am a seeker, not a sage. The first version was done in 2000. A full edit was again done in 2015, resulting in this version.

The translation that I am using is the one from Osborne's *Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*.

I write this commentary as a seeker who has had the Grace of a living teacher, Nome, at Society of Abidance in Truth (SAT), in Santa Cruz, CA. (More information about SAT can be found at [www.satramana.org](http://www.satramana.org).)

If there are any errors, they are due to ignorance or incomplete understanding on the part of this seeker. If there is any wisdom or understanding, it is due to the teaching of my teacher, Nome, and the deep wisdom expressed by Ramana Maharshi.

Any comments or insights that you might have are always welcome.

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### *Paragraph 1*

*Every living being longs always to be happy, untainted by sorrow; and everyone has the greatest love for himself, which is solely due to the fact that happiness is his real nature. Hence, in order to reside in that inherent and untainted happiness, which indeed he daily experiences when the mind is subdued in deep sleep, it is essential that he should know himself. For obtaining such knowledge the enquiry, "Who am I?" in quest of Self is the best means.*

### **Comments**

Where does happiness come from? If we believe that happiness comes from things outside ourselves, or from our activities or thoughts, then this is where we look. When we realize where happiness really comes from, always from within, it intensifies our desire for liberation, and our spiritual practice.

The wise say that the desires of the mind cloud and obscure our innate happiness. So when we get something desired, our mind is quiet for a time and we experience this happiness that we are. After a while, the mind becomes active again, and the happiness is again obscured as if by clouds.

Ramana also uses, again and again, discussions of the three states (awakening, dreaming and deep sleep) to talk about who we are. Who we are must always be true, including in all three states. He calls on the deep sleep state here, since during that state there is no mental activity, and this state is universally seen as one that is deeply peaceful. We still exist, even in deep sleep. From where comes this sense of existence?

### **Practice Notes**

Where does happiness come from? Look within yourself. There are "outer" events that might seem to bring happiness, but where

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is happiness experienced? From where does it rise within you?

What is your actual experience of this happiness? Is the deep experience any different from various kinds of happiness?

Where does the sense of peace come from during deep sleep? If the mind is not active, then can it be from the mind? Where does this happiness come from? We all seek this happiness.

### *Paragraph 2*

*“Who am I?” I am not this physical body, nor am I the five organs of sense perception, I am not the five organs of external activity, nor am I the five vital forces, nor am I even the thinking Mind. Neither am I that unconscious state of nescience which retains merely the subtle vasanas (latencies of the mind) which being free from the functional activity of the sense organs and of the mind, and being unaware of the existence of the objects of sense perception.*

### **Comments**

We are told that the Absolute Self is who we already are, not something that we somehow acquire or are transformed into. Self-Realization is a process of dismissing those things that obscure our own nature. This is called “negation,” often described as bringing a light into a dark room, or “unrealizing the unreal.”

Ramana instructs the seeker to engage in negation to remove the false ideas. There is an example often used to illustrate this: A person walks into a dark room and sees a snake and is filled with fear. Upon lighting the room, the snake turns out to be just a rope that was mistakenly thought to be a snake. The snake is a snake as long as one holds to the idea of rope-as-snake. When the idea of rope-as-snake is thoroughly eliminated, it is a rope, and forever to be a rope. The negated snake was always a rope.

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As Ramana instructs in negation, he directs that the seeker proceed from gross to subtle. First is the body, including the senses, and the “organs of action” (hands, feet, mouth, organs of evacuation, organs of generation and sexual pleasures), then the “vital forces” (*prana*), then the mind and intellect, then the tendencies that lay dormant during deep sleep and rise again upon awakening.

### Practice Notes

When light is brought into a dark room and the room is now lit up, where did the darkness go?

In the metaphor of the snake and the rope, was the snake ever real? When it vanished, where did it go?

Identification with the body is, Ramana tells us, chief among misidentification. That is why he starts this paragraph, “*I am not this physical body.*” You need to know that this is true about yourself. Again and again you should inquire to see if you really are a body. Does the sense of “I” rise from the body? You know the body; does the body know you? The body is always known; who knows the body?

Who are you when the body, senses, breath, mind, and intellect are all negated?

### Paragraph 3

*Therefore, summarily rejecting all the above-mentioned physical adjuncts and their functions, saying “I am not this; no, nor am I this, nor this” — that which remains separate and alone by itself; that pure Awareness is what I am. This Awareness is by its very nature Sat-Chit-Ananda (Existence-Consciousness-Bliss).*

### Comments

Ramana instructs to reject all the “physical adjuncts and their

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functions.” Then what remains is only pure Awareness, which is your Self. He continues teaching negation as key to inquiry; dismiss the unreal, the real will stand, by Itself, with no further effort.

If you are not a body, then who are you?

I would also note that Awareness, your very Being, is described as “Existence-Consciousness-Bliss.” They are hyphenated because they are one, the same, and inseparable, not three things. The experience that Existence and Consciousness are the same is one of many seekers and sages. Sages also say that “Bliss” is one of the inseparable descriptions of Awareness. This seemingly uncaused bliss is the universal experience of those who reach their inner depths. Bliss is who you are.

The negation brings about knowledge of who you are not. This knowledge opens the door to knowledge of who you are. Your true Self stands on its own and is who you are. This knowledge is what makes up Self-Realization.

### **Practice Notes**

What is negation like in actual practice? I have practiced to see in inquiry what is “objective.” ANYTHING that is experienced by the body or senses is objective. It is known. Who is the knower? The life-energy (prana) that courses through the body is objective. Who knows this prana? Every thought is objective. It is known. For whom is the thought? Each of these questions drives the seeker inward.

One gets to a point in the inquiry where it is no longer possible to see the experience as objective in any way. If, from this place, the inquiry “Who am I?” is made, then the only answer possible becomes “This!” I know of no way to describe this further. One thing that I can say is that you will know, without uncertainty, when this is your experience.

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I start my inquiry with noticing, “I exist.” This lets the inquiry flow from my experience either into the “I” or the “exist.” Either can take one to the deepest inquiry. Or I can just stay with the experience, “I exist.”

Where does the sense of existence come from? Where does the sense of reality come from? Where does the consciousness (or knowing) come from? Where does the sense of “I” come from? Where does bliss come from? Where am I? These are all good questions for the inquirer. Each of these can be used in the negation, like this, “Does my sense of existence come from the body?” or “Does bliss (or happiness) come from my senses?” (Then “From where do they arise?” followed by “Who am I?”)

### *Paragraph 4*

*If the mind, which is the instrument of knowledge and is the basis of all activity, subsides, the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases. Unless the illusory perception of the serpent in the rope ceases, the rope on which the illusion is formed is not perceived as such. Similarly, unless the illusory nature of the perception of the world as an objective reality ceases, the Vision of the true nature of the Self, on which the illusion is formed, is not obtained.*

### **Comments**

This is the first of several paragraphs about the mind. The reason there is so much focus on the mind is this: The Self is (and is Who We Are). What stands in the way of our direct experience of being the Self is our ignorance, also known as *maya*, or illusion. (We see the snake not the rope). This ignorance consists only of thoughts, and more complex ideas, thoughts built of other thoughts. We may see the mind as a complex and powerful force. But the mind, if you look closely, turns out to be only

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thoughts. When the thoughts stop (or you do not give them reality) then the ignorance stops, too (at least for that moment).

This is so important. As long as the mind is active, there is a separate world, and ego-”I” identity within it. And this mind view is then projected onto the seeming world and held to be reality. As the Ch’an poet, Stone House wrote, “The mind creates the world.”

The initial focus of all knowledge-based spirituality is quieting the mind. Ramana said that best for this is “Who am I?” With this approach, the path and the goal are one and the same.

When you inquire into the Self, it is not to “gain” the Self, rather it is to eliminate the ignorance. Unless the ignorance is eliminated, you will not have the direct Knowledge of the Self that you are.

### **Practice Notes**

When you have an erroneous idea, then obtain the knowledge that shows the error, where does the erroneous idea go? Was it ever real??

Has anyone ever seen the world without a mind? When your mind is quiet, do you still exist? Who knows the mind? Does the sense of I arise from this mind?

### *Paragraph 5*

*The mind is a unique power (sakti) in the Atman, whereby thoughts occur to one. On scrutiny as to what remains after eliminating all thoughts, it will be found that there is no such thing as mind apart from thought. So then, thoughts themselves constitute the mind.*

### **Comments**

This seems clear: The mind is just a bundle of thoughts. What is the mind but thoughts? How can you verify this for yourself? One

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important element in spiritual practice is that seekers must find the Truth for themselves.

One way that this is done is by the traditional approach:

Listen (or read),  
Reflect,  
Meditate deeply (and make the experience and  
Knowledge your own).

We need to find out for ourselves what is true.

### **Practice Notes**

Can you think about thoughts? How many thoughts have you had in your life? Yogis say that each breath brings a new thought. Is any thought who you are?

Can you see the space between two thoughts? Who are you at that moment?

For whom are the thoughts? Who knows each thought? Do you know the thought, or does the thought know you?

### ***Paragraph 6***

*Nor is there any such thing as the physical world apart from and independent of thought. In deep sleep there are no thoughts: nor is there a world. Just as the spider draws out the thread of the cobweb from within itself and withdraws it again into itself, in the same way the mind projects the world out of itself and absorbs it into itself.*

### **Comments**

Ramana might say, “Has anyone seen the world without a mind?” For some seekers this is where the teachings get difficult. I have seen seekers who are very advanced struggle with this point. The problem lies with identification with the body; as long as you

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think you are a body, then there must be a world for the body to act and experience within. Discover that you are not a body, and then it is easier to know that you are not a thought.

As you relax the hold of your mental concepts, you deepen spiritually. Through the filter of the mind we see existence as separate: world, ego-self, and others. When the mind is not active, there is no separation.

The existence of a separate world also includes the existence of the body, the mind and the ego. Holding to the world and trying to become free of the ego, then, has a basic problem since they appear together and seem to coexist.

What one sees as real is where one places his identity. Some could say that the whole point of inquiry is to see that Reality is “within.” Finally the seeker may be able to use this spiritual knowledge to see that his own identity is Awareness, not with the “ten thousand things” (to use a Buddhist expression).

I have been taught that what one experiences is a matter of where one “takes his stand.” If the stand is as body, there is the world, life, death, etc. If one’s stand is as the mind, then ideas, moods and emotions seem to control and limit one’s experience. If one’s stand is as Being-Consciousness-Bliss, then no more needs to be done. This is where Ramana took his stand and shed his light onto all who visited him (and even those who just read about him).

### **Practice Notes**

It can be useful in your inquiry to look at where your own sense of Reality comes from. Does it come from the objects of your sense perceptions? Or is it something more interior, something that comes from deep within yourself? If you think reality comes from the objects of your senses, what about the sense of reality in a dream? Where does this come from?

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In my practice I see that the knower is never within the known. The Upanishads call this, “the unknown knower of all that is known.” The spiritual conviction of “within” is there. This deepens my practice. In inquiry (both in seated meditation and in daily activities) I see that I continue to place my identity in this body/mind/ego. There are moments where the inquiry goes deeper. Maybe there are a few moments of bliss. And then the stand as body/mind/ego returns. So, back to the inquiry.

### *Paragraph 7*

*The world is perceived as objective reality when the mind is externalized, thereby forsaking its identity with the Self. When the world is thus perceived, the true nature of the Self is not revealed: conversely, when the Self is realized, the world ceases to appear as an objective reality.*

### **Comments**

I don't think Ramana could be any more clear: we see our reality as either “outside” or “within.” When the mind goes out, it gives up its identity as Self, and projects its own reality onto what is then seen as real (the ego and the world). Within, there is only the Self; no ego, not even a mind.

Advaita Vedanta, (the Teaching of Nonduality), the tradition that best describes Ramana's realization and teaching, says that what is real is that which is always, and what is unreal is that which comes and goes.

As long as the world (and ego) is thought to be reality, then the reality of the Self will be obscured. As long as your stand — where you place your identity — is as world/body/senses/prana/mind/ego, then your identity will not be as Self. Likewise, Self-realized sages do not see the world as objective, as anything outside

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of themselves, or as anything other than themselves. The sage sees only the Self.

### Practice Notes

For whom is the world? Has anyone seen the world without a mind? Does your sense of “I” arise from the world? When this knowledge is your experience, reality is revealed within you, as your Self. It is not discovered anew, or created. Reality has always been with you, as your deepest Being, your Self.

### *Paragraph 8*

*By a steady and continuous investigation into the nature of the mind, the mind is transformed into That to which the “I” refers; and that is in fact the Self. Mind has to necessarily depend for its existence on something gross, it never subsists by itself. It is the mind that is otherwise called the subtle body, ego, jiva or soul.*

### Comments

The first sentence reminds me of a yoga teaching on the mind, that the mind becomes that which it focuses upon. Focus the mind on That (Being, Existence, the Self) and the mind will become That.

Ramana calls for more than just some mental focus; he calls for a “steady and continuous investigation.”

The trouble is that the mind grasps only the objective. This is all that it can know, and That (the Self) never is objective. Focus the mind on the non-objective and it loses its “basis” of the objective. To focus the mind on the non-objective, Ramana taught Self-inquiry. Self-inquiry uses the mind to move past the mind. Ancient Taoists called this, “Turning around the light (of consciousness).”

Here, the seeker is also told how to practice: “By a steady and continuous investigation.” He does not say to wait for Self-realization

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to come; he does not say that it is in the hands of the gods, or fate. The seeker is directed to practice “By a steady and continuous investigation.” For practice to be steady, it has to be deeper than the mind. The mind cannot hold anything steady for long. This is practice far deeper than a few minutes each day, at a usual time and place. This extends through what can be called “daily life.”

Ramana also here equates the mind with the ego or jiva (individual self). He says that mind is just another name for ego. What is the mind? A bundle of thoughts. What is the ego? A thought, and a specific one — the first thought, the sense of individuality. Eliminate all thoughts and the ego never rises. How do you eliminate all thoughts? Ramana advised Self-inquiry, to look into the source of the “I”-thought. Ramana taught that all other thoughts depend on this “I”-thought, eliminate this thought and all other thoughts are also eliminated. How do you eliminate the ego? Discover that it never existed to begin with, that it is just illusion.

### **Practice Notes**

What is your practice like? Do you meditate daily? Or do you let your ego run your practice? With daily practice one often finds that the inquiry starts happening in other times and places, and that a kind of Self-inquiry “current” gets going. This is a very good step.

Does your inquiry extend to other parts of “daily life?” Do you inquire of dreams? In the midst of activity? When walking, do you try to know what is always still?

### ***Paragraph 9***

*That which arises in the physical body as “I” is the mind. If one enquires whence the “I”-thought in the body arises in the first instance, it will be found that it is from hydayam or the Heart. That is the source and stay of the mind. Or again, even if one merely*

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*continuously repeats to oneself inwardly, "I-I" with the entire mind fixed thereon, that also leads one to the same source.*

### Comments

Ramana here continues with equating the mind and the ego-I. First he says that what rises in the body as "I" is the mind. This tells us that this "I" is only a thought, a concept and construct of the mind. We are then told to inquire, to look in the Heart for the rising of the "I"-thought. It is important to note that Ramana is not saying to look in the physical heart, nor is he saying to look at the physical location usually equated with the heart-center (this is variously described as "two-fingers to the right of the center of the chest," or "the place in between breaths where breath arises.") In Hinduism, the Sanskrit word for heart refers to the center of Being, from which all existence flows. The Heart to which Ramana refers, he also calls "Reality," by which he means the Absolute or Self. If one identifies Reality with a body-location as the heart, then one still maintains his identity with the body. But the body rises and falls, as in the waking state and in deep sleep, so the body cannot be the changeless.

Ramana here says that even Japa (repetition) of "I-I" will lead one to the same source, if done with real depth. The basic approach continues to be to keep the focus on the "first," (first person, or "I", or "I"-thought), and to not let the mind wander to the "second" or "third" (person, you, she, them, it, the world, etc.).

### Practice Notes

Is there any specific part of the body that is "you?" Where, in your dream, does your body come from? Within "you," from where comes your sense of existence? The sense of reality?

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### *Paragraph 10*

*The first and foremost thought that arises in the mind is the “I”-thought. It is only after the rise or origin of the “I”-thought that innumerable other thoughts arise. In other words, only after the first personal pronoun, “I”, has arisen, do the second and third personal pronouns (“you, he,” etc.) occur to the mind; and they cannot subsist without the former.*

### **Comments**

All thoughts are built upon just one thought. This one thought is the “I”-thought, “I am an individual.” First rises the “I”-thought. Then rises the thoughts of others and of the world. Thoughts then have as their source the first thought, the “I”-thought. So really, to put an end to thoughts, you do not need to eliminate every thought you might ever have. You only need to eliminate one thought, the first thought, the “I”-thought. Eliminate by discovering that it never existed to start with.

This makes it easier for the seeker. One does not need to stop all thoughts. This is a key point in Ramana’s teaching. Just inquire into the source for this “I”-thought. That is all that is needed.

### **Practice Notes**

An exercise that we were given at a retreat was to “catch a thought” (any thought), and “take that thought apart” to see how it is based on the “I”-thought. This might be worthwhile for you to try. Ways to tell the “I”-thought? Well, if the view is one that in any way is of an individual, particular person, in this (or that) time and place, then it is based on the “I”-thought.

### *Paragraph 11*

*Since every other thought can occur only after the rise of the “I”-*

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