

Is the World real ?

~~~~~By "Who", a disciple of Sri Ramana Maharshi.

**P**hilosophy is that aspect of religion which consists in devotion to Truth. But philosophy is more or less adulterated, according to the temperaments of its votaries, with what can only be called unphilosophy.

True philosophy implies questioning the validity of every conviction that we have picked up in the course of life; in this sense it is at one with science, but with this difference, that true philosophy goes much farther than science has ever gone or will go.

The first step in philosophy is taken when one realizes that the worldly life is not truly satisfying—when one comes face to face with the tragic side of life. Sri Maharshi Ramana, the Great Sage of Arunachala (Tiru-Annamalai), has often drawn our attention to the fact that when we are seeing pleasant visions in a dream, we have not the least inclination to awake, but, when we happen to dream of something frightful, we awake at once; so too, so long as one finds satisfaction in the worldly life, he has little use for religion, still less for philosophy,—though he may observe the forms of religion for fashion's sake, or dabble in philosophy to satisfy his vanity,—until he realizes that this life is savourless and disappointing. Thus he turns to philosophy and begins to ask questions, the first of which concerns the why of this savourlessness of life, and whether there is any way of escape from this. Herein he is greatly helped by the testimony of a Man of Light, a *Jivanmukta*, who has himself found the Way and the Goal.

Philosophy and the testimony of the Free alike tell us that the absolute Truth is not to be found in this world, outside of us, but only inside; the Kingdom of

Heaven, the Home of untainted Bliss, is in the Heart, the innermost core of our being. In the *Yogavāsistha* we read:

सन्त्यज्य हृद्गुहेशानं देवमन्यं प्रयान्ति ये ।  
ते रत्नमभिवाञ्छन्ति त्यक्तहस्तस्थकौस्तुभाः ॥

"Those who go after other gods, leaving aside the Dweller in the Heart, are like men who throw away the most precious of gems which they hold in their hands, and go seeking other gems."

In order to turn the mind inward, and keep it so turned, until it gets dissolved in the Heart, one has to turn away from the world; so long as the mind remains attached to the world, it cannot realize That which dwells in the Heart.

पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणस्त्वयम्भू-  
स्तस्मात् पराङ् पश्यति नान्तरामन् ।  
कश्चिद्धीरः प्रत्यगात्मानमैक्ष-  
दावृत्तचक्षुरमृतत्वमिच्छन् ॥

(*Kathopanisad* II. i.)

"The Creator fashioned the senses to look outward, and hence the creature looks outside,—not inside, towards the Self; but some heroic one succeeded in realizing that Indwelling Self, turning his senses inward, in order to win deathlessness."

Ramana, the Sage of Arunachala, tells us that the question whether the world is real or not is of no consequence, provided one is sufficiently in earnest to realize the Truth of oneself. This is what He says: "What matters it to thee whether the world be real, sentient and full of bliss, or the contrary? Thy real nature is otherwise; thou art not world-bound; thy True Self is that which revels ever in the Bliss of Utter Solitude, where there is neither ego, nor the world!"

True Happiness is not in and from the world. It is the very nature of the Self. This is hinted in the following verse of *Srīmad Bhāgavata*:

द्रावेव चिन्तया सुक्तौ परमानन्द आप्तौ ।  
यो विमुग्धो जडो बालो यो गुणेभ्यः परं गतः ॥

“Only these two are free from care and ever immersed in perfect joy—the world-ignorant boy and the one that has transcended the world of Guṇas.”

Ramana Maharshi has confirmed this by pointing out that happiness really does not correspond with the possession of objects. If external objects were the source of happiness, then sleep, which is utterly devoid of objects, must be a state of misery to be shunned by all; but it is not so, the common experience of all creatures is otherwise. Nor is there any constant proportion between happiness and possessions; often the poorest in possessions are far happier than those that have immense possessions. Hence the world is *tuchchha*, absolutely without value,—and to renounce it, to turn away from it, ought to be very easy.

But the same Master points out that it is an enormous help to the sincere *Sādḥaka* to know or believe that the world is *unreal*, and therefore incapable of conferring that pure happiness which alone will satisfy him. He says:—

विद्यात्मनोऽतिसुलभा स्वान्ते सर्वस्य नित्यसिद्धस्य ।  
नश्यति यदि निःशेषं देहे लोके च सत्यताबुद्धिः ॥

“To realize the Self, that is ever-present in the Heart of every one, is extremely easy, if the faith, that one has, that the body and the world are real, should die utterly.”

Thus the first step towards Self-realization is to win the conviction that the world is unreal. He also says that there is a sense in which the world is real; for, according to him, the two statements that the world is unreal, and that it is real,

both mean the same thing, if rightly understood. But the average *Sādḥaka* is scarcely able to grasp this profound truth; even able and learned people, who profess to be philosophers, are unable to see how the world can be both real and false at the same time, and hence stick to one of these tenets, vehemently rejecting and condemning the other.

So then we have first to see in what sense the world is unreal.

The world is unreal, because it has no *objective* existence. Says Sri Ramana Maharshi:—

शब्दादिमात्रं भुवनं समस्तं  
श्रोत्रादिबुद्धीन्द्रियपञ्चकेन ।  
एकं मनो यत् समवैति तस्मा-  
जगत् किमु स्यान्मनसः पृथक् सत् ॥

“One single mind perceives all the world,—consisting only of sounds and other sensations,—by means of its five senses; that being so, can the world have an independent existence, apart from the mind?”

Again, he says:—

जायेत सर्वं ह्युदियादहं चेन्-  
नास्त्येव किञ्चिन्न भवेदहं चेत् ।

“The universe arises if and when the ego-sense is born; and, when the ego-sense is not, then nothing is.”

Thus this so solid-seeming and infinite universe is dependent for its manifestation on the functioning of the mind, which, in its turn, rests on the ego-sense; for the mind is but thoughts, and the thought of ‘I’—the ego-sense—is the thread on which all thoughts are strung.

Bhagavatpāda Śankara put the same idea tersely, when he asked:—

‘यदि सत्यं भवेद्विश्वं सुषुप्तावुपलभ्यताम् ।’

“If the world be an objective reality, let it appear in dreamless sleep!”

“Why should it ?” is a question that might be put; the answer is, in philosophy that alone exists in its own right, which is self-shining, *swayamprakāśa*,—not anything which needs the light of something else; but this is an abstruse topic, which we may leave aside for the present.

Not alone the things that are seen or felt, but the very setting in which they appear, namely, time and space, are mental. Says Ramana:—

न देशकालद्वितयं स्वतोऽन्यद्  
वपुर्वयं चेत् तदधीनतास्तु ।

“Neither space nor time is distinct from the ego; there can be (a real) subjection of the self to these, if the body be the self.”

It is interesting to note that Kant, the German philosopher, came to the same conclusion by independent reasoning. And we find very modern scientists, like Sir James Jeans, arriving at the same truth.

The subjective nature of the world is brought home to us also by the consideration that the distinction and contrast between inside and outside is a mental creation. The mind starts from the conviction ‘I am this body,’ and then proceeds to classify sensations as inside or outside accordingly; this classification can have validity only so long as we take this ego-sense at its own value, and refuse to question its genuineness.

That the contrasts of inside and outside, above and below, self and not-self, and the like, are all ego-born and are no more real than their parent, the ego-sense (*Ahaṁkāra*), is finely illustrated in the *Viṣṇupurāṇa*. There we have the description of how the Sage R̥bhu made himself known to his disciple Nidāgha, who failed to recognize him at first; the latter actually mistook the holy sage for an ignorant rustic. It so happened that a royal procession was going along the main street then; the sage asked Nidāgha what it was. The

disciple answered that the king was going, seated on an elephant; the sage asked him which was the elephant and which the king. Nidāgha laughed at this and, seeking to instruct the seeming rustic, jumped upon his shoulders, and then explained that he himself was like the king, above, and the rustic was like the elephant, below. The rustic asked, “What is above, and what is below ?” This opened the eyes of the disciple; for no one, he knew, could so pointedly show up the *relativity* of such ideas, as his own *Guru*, R̥bhu.

The truth of the world, whatever it is, becomes patent only to the Man of Light, who has dived into the source of his ego-sense, and realized Its true Nature, which is beyond thought; such a one sees that Reality which to us appears as the world, diversified by names and forms, which are unreal—the creations of the ego-mind.

That the world is subjective is difficult to understand, because we gratuitously assume,—being dominated by the ego-sense—that the mind is something very small, residing in a fraction of this body, in the brain, and that the world, which is vast, must therefore be outside it; that it is outside is a notion that follows from the ego-sense, the conviction that the body is the self. We have already noticed the teaching, that this conviction is the initial illusion on which rests the whole of this *Māyā*. The Master tells us also that the mind is really infinite, a veritable sky of consciousness; in its vast expanse lies extended this vast universe. In its ample space exist even the worlds of the gods, the Heavens of devotees of God as a Person.

That the mind is so vast can be grasped by us, if we study the close analogy there is between our waking world and the dream-worlds we see in dreams. These are vast, but have no existence apart from the perceiving mind; these subsist in the mind, but are believed to be outside, because the dreamer identifies

himself with a particular dream-body, calls it himself, and the rest not-self.

The same analogy helps to grasp the subjective nature of the waking world. The common notion is that dreams are unreal, but not so the waking world. But this is begging the question; that we are unable to realize the unreality of the waking world, while still subject to the ego-sense, is no proof that this world has a higher degree of reality than the world of dream, because no one is able to realize the unreality of a dream, so long as he does not awake from the dream. Even so, when, by Self-Realization, one awakes from this sleep of *Māyā*, he will realize that the world is *not* what we take it to be; that *till* then it seems real is nothing to the rigorous-thinking philosopher.

These considerations throw the burden of proving the objectivity of the world on those that assert it. Those among them that are philosophers to some degree seek to prove their case by urging that the world appears continuously,—that it is being perceived continuously by some people, though others may be asleep, and unable to perceive it; thus a sleeper can conclude, from the testimony of those that remained awake, that the world existed while they slept.

But who are these witnesses to the continuity of the world-appearance? They themselves are part of the world-appearance of him who slept and awoke,—only sensations of his mind; the objective reality of the world cannot be inferred from the evidence of these, unless *their* objective reality is first proved; but no one has offered any proof of this. Hence we say that this so-called proof is a case of begging the question.

The testimony of the Man of Light also makes it clear that in the State of Self-Realization the Self *alone* exists, not the world. Thus reality is defined as that which subsists in this state—the Supreme State.

This is not to deny that the world is real enough for the purposes of the worldly life—if we can use that word in this connection; the *Advait* has no quarrel with the worldly man for making the most of the world-appearance while it lasts. So, too, the dreamer takes his dream-world to be real, and enjoys it while it lasts. The worldly man and the half-philosopher are entitled to have their own definition of reality, and they do have one; and their definition is not the same as that which is derivable from the testimony of the Man of Light. That definition is thus given by the Master:—

द्वयं सहोदेत्यपि चास्तमेति

मनःप्रकाश्यं च जगन्मनश्च ।

लयोदयौ स्तो द्वितयस्य यस्मिन्

सदोदिते सत्तदवेहि पूर्णम् ॥

“The world, which shines by the light of the mind, and the mind both arise and set together; understand, the Truth is that Infinite, ever-shining One in which these two have their rising and setting.”

That alone is the Absolute Truth, which is, unlike the world, self-shining, and, unlike the mind and the world, beyond time—unchanged and unchangeable. In regard to the Truth that transcends thought, we have nothing to go upon, except the testimony of the *Jivan-mukta*, the Man of Light, who has overcome the *Māyā*—the ego-sense—that compels all the rest of men to take the evidence of the senses for Truth. Knowing that this *Māyā* is deluding us all along, we ought not to be casting about for arguments to corroborate the beliefs it imposes upon us, but should rely on the testimony of him that has gone beyond this *Māyā*; thus alone we shall be steeled to the enterprise—the Quest of the Truth in Its Home, the Heart,—and ourselves get beyond *Māyā*. Then we, too, shall see how and in what sense this world is real; we shall see that it is real, because it is the

Truth itself, diversified by names and forms—that behind the names and forms, the *Dwandvas* (contrasts) and *Tripūtis* (relations of three), there is the One Reality which is Pure, Undifferentiated Consciousness. That is to say, for the *Sādhaka* during his period of endeavour (*Sādhana*)

the world is unreal, because he cannot help thinking, if he believes that the world is real, that it is real as it appears to him, with all its names and forms; but, to the Man of Light, the world is real, because he sees only the Substratum of Consciousness, in which the world-forms appear.

---