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## **Delving into the Self**

### **Inquiry as a Method of Investigation of Identity and Self**

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Why, one might ask, is delving into the self important? What can be gained through the process of self-inquiry? This paper examines several different methods of inquiry, all of which have the potential to deepen our awareness of the nature of self and identity. Each of these methods has its basis in philosophies, both Eastern and Western, that value self-awareness and the ability to live more consciously in this world. Through an internal focus on one's own experience, witnessing both how we react and how we respond to experience, we can learn to be more aware in every moment. This process of developing and deepening our awareness can allow us to have more choice in how we interact with our world. We become more present and increasingly mindful of how we respond to the world around us. This creates the potential for us to deepen our sensitivity to others, the environment, and to our own experience.

Each of the methods explored here approaches the process of inquiry from a slightly differing perspective. Authentic movement is a body-centered approach. Its roots are in Jungian analytic psychology that strives, through the exploration of unconsciously held material, to help individuals develop an integrated sense of being (Adler, 2002).

Vipassana meditation supports an individual exploration of one's own consciousness. It is

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rooted in the yogic traditions of India that were developed to refine one's body, mind, and spirit, once again striving for a sense of an integrated, aware, realization of being. The Diamond Approach uses the art of inquiry in an intersubjective manner, often with a questioner/witness and a responder. The Diamond Approach has roots in both Eastern Sufi traditions of spiritual exploration and in Western psychological approaches (Almaas, 2002). Once again the goal is to explore one's self in order to be more fully integrated and aware of both who one is and how one presents oneself. Bohm Dialogue (Bohm, 1996), developed by the physicist David Bohm through his conversations with Krishnamurti, has its basis in both Eastern and Western traditions. It allows one to examine many of the same issues of identity and self, and especially how that informs one's perspective, through a group dialogue process. In each of these methods the development of one's ability to witness is an important part of the inquiry process, heightening one's awareness of one's own self and presence in the world.

Ontologically these approaches intersect where they point towards an underlying, dispassionate consciousness that can become more highly aware, witnessing the experience of the conscious egoic personality. Epistemologically, they each use methods that emphasize the importance of the ability to witness and observe one's own experience to heighten one's awareness of how one is in the world. By moving through these different approaches one can develop a feel for how the inner sense of witnessing occurs at the level of the individual mind, the individual body, the inter-subjective space of dyadic interactions, and at the group level. Each philosophy or method comes to this approach from a slightly different angle: in Authentic Movement the starting pointing is

the awareness of the body; in Vipassana meditation awareness is centered initially in the mind. In the Diamond Approach and in Bohm Dialogue there is more emphasis in the inter-subjective nature of experience, with the focus on one's own experience as it is impacted in interaction with others.

### **AUTHENTIC MOVEMENT**

*“Two women enter a large spacious studio, devoid of furniture. In a moment of quiet conversation they decide who will ‘move’ first, who will witness, and for how long the session will last. Then one woman sits quietly to the side of the room. The other steps into the open space, closes her eyes, turns her awareness inward, opening to the impulses of motion or stillness that originate in her body. Slowly her arms stretch out to the sides and her body begins to turn in an anticlockwise rotation. Turning softly, she follows the lead of her left arm. Gradually the movement changes, slowing, stopping, beginning again. The mover follows the flow generated from her physical body, letting it develop, change, dissipate in its own time and way. The movement surges, changes, pauses, shifts. At the close of the designated time period the witness, sitting silently at the edge of the space, softly rings a gong. The mover completes the motion that is being expressed and returns to the side of the space.*

*Bringing her awareness back to the room and to the witness, she opens her eyes. Sitting quietly, she speaks of her experience of her own*

*movements, recalling with her inner witness what the movements were and what they revealed to her. For her, turning to the left is a centering motion, bringing her deeper into herself. She has experienced this sensation in earlier sessions and recognizes it. She continues, examining each segment with curiosity, sensing its meaning. After the mover is finished speaking the witness talks of her experience, describing only what she felt as she observed the mover, focusing on her own process and responses.” (Howenstine 2009)*

Authentic Movement is a form of self-exploration that developed out of movement therapy and improvisational dance. Central to this form of exploration is the idea that an individual's experiences are not just held as memories in the mind, but also become embodied. By quieting the mind and turning one's focus inward to the sensations and impulses felt in the body, one can become aware of emotions and experiences that have been incorporated into the body, deepening one's awareness of self. The initial inquiring exploration allows the body to express its impulses, revealing aspects of self that have perhaps been relegated to the unconscious. As these aspects become expressed through movement they are reintegrated with the conscious mind (Pallaro, 1999).

Two individuals working in an open space create the basic form. One person is designated as witness. The other is designated as mover. Given a bounded period of time, the mover quiets herself, looking within, waiting for an impulse to move from the body. Gradually the body expresses itself. The mover allows her body to follow the

movements, simply witnessing them as they occur. The external witness sits quietly to the side, creating a sense of a held space for the mover to explore within. Over time, as the individual reveals and integrates forgotten memories and experiences of self that are held in the body, the inquiry begins to move deeper into the essential essence of self. How does the movement feel, what is experiencing the body, what is witnessing? How are they integrated?

In this process, as in each of the other methods to be explored, the role of witness is key. This role can be either internal, the witnessing one's self and one's own process, or held externally by another individual who is observing, and in doing so, holds the space for the experiencer. In Authentic Movement, after a specified period of time moving, the mover speaks first. She describes what the impulses to move were, what it felt like to follow those impulses, and the images and associations that were stimulated in the mind. The witness then speaks to her experience, expressing only her own experience and responses, being careful to own them as hers and to not attribute her associations and inner experience to the mover (Adler,2002).

Through this process, one can explore one's internal world, allowing movement to reveal expressions of self and identity that enhance the experience of the conscious mind. Early phases of this exploration may uncover buried material from one's childhood, allowing the reincorporation of this material into waking consciousness. Joan Chodorow, one of the original developers of the form, speaks to this:

Powerful images, feelings and memories may arise out of self-directed movement and out of the relationship that contains it. Because the process involves the use of the body to express the imagination, it tends to take the mover to complexes that can be traced back to the sensory-motor period of infancy and early childhood. The experiences of both mover and witness become intricately interwoven because part of the task of the therapist-witness is to hold the mover (psychologically) and to mirror empathically.

(Pallaro 1999,p. 258)

The presence of the external witness allows the mover to feel seen and creates a safe space for them to explore deeply held experiences. As practitioners continue with this form, alternating between the role of mover and witness, they internalize and develop their ability to stand witness to their own experience. The exploration can move from exploring the personal depths of one's own psyche to exploring the nature of the essence of self, very similar to what one can explore in meditation. This is beautifully captured in a poem written by a mover:

“Coming nearer and nearer  
to myself  
discovering no self  
a soft infusion  
I am pure being.  
I am clear silent awareness  
Here for all time

Here for no time

Here, not here

I stay here

Becoming....” (Adler 2002, p. 236)

### **VIPASSANA MEDITATION**

Vipassana is a form of meditation that, similar to Authentic Movement, is centered in awareness of the body. In this method one does not move, but simply observes. Also known as insight meditation, it, like Authentic Movement, develops the art of witnessing one’s own experience.

“Vipassana is a way of self-transformation through self-observation. It focuses on the deep interconnection between mind and body, which can be experienced directly by disciplined attention to the physical sensations that form the life of the body, and that continuously interconnect and condition the life of the mind. It is this observation-based, self-exploratory journey to the common root of mind and body that dissolves mental impurity, resulting in a balanced mind full of love and compassion.” (Dhamma.org, Paragraph 3)

In the initial phases of this type of meditation one is instructed to focus on the rising and falling of the belly as it moves with the breath. This gives the mind a specific place to place its attention as one develops the ability to maintain a single focus, allowing thoughts in the mind and sensations in the body to arise and dissipate on their own. One

sits in witness to these thoughts and sensations, gradually learning not to identify with them, but to simply observe them and let them pass through. It is an alert, passive form of inquiry and exploration that can first lead to insights about one's self and identity, and then, similar to the experience of Authentic Movement, can take one into a deeper experience of the essence of self and consciousness.

*As I sit quietly in meditation, observing the sensations of the body and the movements of thought, I become more consciously aware of what is transpiring in myself. I feel tenseness in various muscles, a tightness in my chest. By simply witnessing these sensations as they arise, with an open inquiring sense of curiosity and observation, they become more consciously held, allowing them to become integrated in an aware sense of self. Gradually I lose my focus on the current moment and begin to wander through the thoughts that are arising in my mind. I begin to feel a sense of constriction in my body and bring my focus back to the present moment, letting the thoughts dissipate. As I do this, the sense of constriction lessens and I feel a sensation of openness and presence. Over time I develop the ability to witness my experience. This allows me to develop a sense of non-attachment to the experiences. I can begin to explore what it is that is witnessing, observing the experience, to deepen my awareness of the essence of self.*

## **THE DIAMOND APPROACH**



Developed by A.H. Almaas (2002), and taught by the Ridwan School, the Diamond Approach is a philosophy that presents another method of inquiry into self. Through the various processes used in this approach, “Self-realization and awareness coincide as a coemergence of soul and identity” (Almaas 2002, p. 374). The goal of this method is to develop a clear awareness of one’s true nature, the essence of self and experience. By inquiring into, and unfolding ever-deeper levels of, awareness one begins to experience transparent awareness. The essential identity of the experiencer becomes the underlying awareness that holds all one’s experiences.

A variety of methods of inquiry are used in this approach. Similar to Authentic Movement and Vipassana meditation, the role of witness is emphasized as a means to develop dispassionate observation of one’s experience. Three of the methods that can be used are as follows: the repeated question; the alternating question; and the monologue.

The repeated question is usually done in dyads. One person is the poser of the designated question, the other is the respondent. The question is repeated numerous times, each time with a pause to give space for a response. This allows the respondent to examine the various ways that he or she both hears and responds to the question.

*“Who are you?.....a mother.....Who are you?.....a  
widow.....Who are you?.....a student.....Who are you?.....clear  
darkness.....Who are you?.....a void.....Who are  
you?.....presence.....”*

*“What did your parents want you to be?..... successful.....  
confident..... capable..... independent.....my own  
person.....happy.....content..... just who I am ”*

As the question is repeatedly posed and repeatedly answered, it can be explored in many different ways and on many different levels. Again, as in Authentic Movement and Vipassana meditation, one can move through the outer layers of self and identity, allowing them to reveal the underlying sense of presence and awareness that both holds and witnesses these experiences of self. During this process the questioner holds the space for the inquirer, standing witness to the inquirer’s self-explorations as he examines how he experiences the question, and what his internal response is.

A second form of inquiry, also usually done in dyads, follows a similar question response model. In this form the questioner and the responder alternate roles. First one asks the question and the other responds. Then they immediately exchange roles with the responder asking the question, and the questioner becoming the respondent. This alternation is continued for the designated period of time. As the dyad moves through this process the individual might not only deepen their own level of self inquiry, but as they alternate with the other respondent, new ways of perceiving might arise stimulated by the other’s response to any given question.

The third form of inquiry that I have experienced with this approach is the monologue. This is often done in triads. Each individual in the triad has about ten to fifteen minutes

(the time frame is specified but can vary in different sessions) to speak on whatever is being inquired into, such as how they are feeling, what they are experiencing right at this moment. The other members of the triad stand witness to the monologue. As one speaks, being listened to but not responded to, one can explore more deeply into the question that is posed for oneself. In the methods of the Diamond Approach it is important that the witness(es) not respond in any way. They are to provide a non-reactive, non-judgmental container for the inquirer's self-exploration.

Each of these methods of Diamond Approach inquiry allow the individual to explore the many levels of self by which they respond to any given question. For A. H. Almaas, the goal of the Diamond Approach is "a matter of being clear about what's happening in our experience by being intimately in touch with it. In other words, understanding is the process of true living.... Ultimately, understanding coincides with the total realization of our true nature." (Almaas 2002, p. 374). The aspects of identity and self are explored through inquiry, ultimately revealing our essential self or nature.

### **BOHM DIALOGUE**

*I am sitting in a circle of twelve people, listening to individuals speak of their perceptions of the nature of reality. I find that, though I am listening intently, I have drawn my knees up in front of me and I am feeling irritated with what is happening in the group. The way the content is being presented by various individuals does not engage me though I am fascinated watching the dynamics at play before me. I find myself less and*

*less interested in participating in the conversation. Eventually another woman in the group speaks up, speaking to the experience of a similar aggravation and disengagement with the content of the dialogue. She speaks to her irritation with how one member of the group, while stating that he is interested in inquiry, speaks in declarative sentences. She feels he is presenting himself as the one who knows and that she is supposed to learn what he teaches. She states her aversion to this kind of presentation. Another member of the group points out how this woman presents her perceptions with an up lilt at the end of her sentences, giving them the sense of questions not declarations, allowing an openness for discussion. I become conscious of the fact that some of my irritation with the didactic style of the first man stems from my own tendency to speak in declarative sentences, thereby inadvertently shutting down the openness of the dialogue. I realize that this is something that I want to bring into heightened awareness to see whether I can change the way I interact in this group and in the world around me.*

This is a form of inquiry called Bohm Dialogue, known as such because it was developed by the physicist David Bohm (Bohm, 1996). A group comes together with the intent of revealing and understanding their own unconscious responses to each other and the various perspectives and biases that they bring with them, exploring how that influences what they perceive and how they react. Sitting together for a bounded period of time that can range from an hour to a full day, the participants are charged with examining their own reactions and responses as dialogue takes form. They are invited to listen carefully

to what is expressed by other members of the group and then, rather than reacting immediately to what is said, to internally inquire into their own response. They can then express that response, owning it as stemming from their particular perspective. As a group, the members each strive to witness the expression of the other members of the group, not offering judgment but holding all points of view as to be equally considered. In this way, a safe container is created where many different ways of seeing can be put on the table, all being perceived as valid. This process can help the individual begin to identify how their own biases not only effect what they perceive but also influence the questions that they ask and the answers that they receive:

...people in any group will bring to it assumptions, and as the group continues meeting, those assumptions will come up. What is called for is to suspend those assumptions, so that you neither carry them out nor suppress them. You don't believe them, nor do you disbelieve them; you don't judge them as good or bad (Bohm 1996, p. 22).

This form of inquiry, though occurring within a group setting, allows the individual to inquire into their own biases and assumptions, bringing different insights into the nature of one's identity and of one's self:

Each listener is able to reflect back to each speaker, and to the rest of the group, a view of some of the assumptions and unspoken implications of what is being expressed along with that which is being avoided. It creates the opportunity for each participant to examine the preconceptions, prejudices and the characteristic patterns that lie behind

his or her thoughts, opinions, beliefs and feelings, along with the roles he or she tends habitually to play. And it offers an opportunity to share these insights (1991 Bohm, Factor & Garrett. 12<sup>th</sup> paragraph).

## **CONCLUSION**

All of these methods of inquiry provide individual practitioners with an opportunity to examine various aspects of self and identity. As various insights are brought into conscious awareness, one begins to integrate and process layers of self that have been held in the unconscious. One may become more adept at witnessing one's own internal experience and processes, becoming cognizant of the deeper awareness that underlies the surface structures of self and personality.

Each method approaches the process of self inquiry from a slightly different perspective, offering a range of ways to explore one's inner being, from the movement impulses explored in Authentic Movement, through the body centered, mindful awareness of Vipassana meditation, and to the interactive explorations engendered by the Diamond Approach and Bohm Dialogue. These methods can make our sense of identity conscious and explicit and encourage a development of a highly aware sense of self.

As I have explored these ways of introspection I find that I am becoming more continuously aware of the sensations in my body. By feeling into the sensations and approaching the emotions and associations revealed by this process I find that I can be more aware of the many levels that I am experiencing in myself at any given moment. It

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is becoming clear to me that when I get lost in thought, not thoroughly present, I feel a visceral constriction in my body, reacting to the worries and fears that perseverate in my mind. By becoming conscious of this physical tightening, I bring my focus back to the present moment and the constriction drops away leaving me open and curious about the world around me.

These methods of introspective inquiry allow an individual to become more conscious of their internal experience, physical, emotional, and mental. With this increased awareness the individual can then exert more choice in how they are in the world, responding rather than simply reacting. As each of the methods described above approaches self-inquiry from a slightly different perspective, it allows me to develop awareness of the multiple levels from which I respond to the world around me. By delving into the depths of my own experience I become more self-aware.

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