

Sense of Separation

by Bart Marshall

~From a presentation delivered at a Self Inquiry Group meeting

Whenever there is a sense of individuality, personality, or a separateness, you have so many wants. You want to see a movie, you want to hear music, you want to play, you want to have sex, you want to eat fancy foods, you want to consume intoxicant, but when that sense of separateness is not there, when you are one with the totality, these things are not desired. And spirituality or what you call "religion" is mainly to understand this: that you don't require anything, you are a part of the totality, or reality. When you grasp that, you don't have any of these needs. But so long as you are separate from things, you need everything.

To exist as a separate individual constitutes the entire problem. And all these things, the various sense caterings, all reading, search for knowledge, for pleasure, everything is related to that. Once all that subsides, there is no more problem. Then the bliss you experience is true bliss. The foregoing, however, is not a ban on activities. Do whatever you want, but never forget the reality, never forget what you really are. You are not the body, you are not the food, you are not this vital air (prana). Whatever has appeared is a state, and as such it has to go.

~ Nisargadatta Maharaj

He (Nisargadatta Maharaj) puts his finger on the one main problem that we're facing. All spirituality is mainly to understand this one thing—that you don't require anything, that you are the Totality, that you grasp that you don't have any of these needs you think you have. But so long as you think you are separate you need everything. The much-talked-about problem of separateness in this work, in these teachings—non-duality and really all religion and all spirituality—sometimes gets talked about so much that it loses impact. We tend to say, "Yeah, yeah, that's the problem, I think I'm separate."

But there's no remedy. It's just been with us so long it seems impossible to think otherwise. There's no direct way to go at it. We get into this stuff to begin with, into spiritual work or whatever you want to call it, to enhance this separate character. We find ourselves alive in a life that causes us mostly anxiety, worry, troubles and suffering punctuated by occasional moments of happiness here and there.

Most of life is work and responsibilities, and our gratification, our happiness is always deferred. "When my schedule clears up, when I get this out of the way, when I get the lover I want, when I get enough money and all these things, then maybe I'll be happy." But it's always for this separate thing, this separate character that has all these needs before it can be happy, before it can settle in any way. It has hundreds of different things that it has to have in place before it can have peace, before it can be content. And it's just way too big of a project.

I don't think anyone knows of anyone for whom that has ever worked, that the separate character is ever fulfilled. The separate character can never be fulfilled, can never have peace, can never be

content. So we get further and further into this, and try to find ways to meditate ourselves into contentment, yoga ourselves into peace, and to order our lives in such a way that somehow this squirmy animal that has all these needs is going to be calmed down and say, "All right, I'm happy finally. I'm going to stay that way."

But there are just too many to-dos in that project. We gradually come to accept that this thing that has all these needs is the problem. The problem can't be solved on the level of the problem. The problem can't be solved by satisfying this needy, whiny ignorant—so ignorant that it doesn't even know what's good for it—thing. It knows what it wants, like a little two year old kid that has whims that get satisfied and then, "No that's not enough." Then the next thing gets satisfied and, "No that's not enough." It has those kinds of things. But it doesn't even know really what it wants. It doesn't really know what's good for it in the long run. It doesn't know what's ultimately good for it.

So it's a fool's errand to keep tossing it yet another toy, and yet another toy. Eventually we admit the thing itself is the problem. Now what? Because this thing, as much trouble as it causes, is that which we love the most. It's the nearest and dearest thing to our existence. This separate vehicle that we get to drive around in—to even trifle with the notion that it's the problem, or that perhaps it's not real, or that perhaps it has never existed in the first place....

All this churn is just the little dust devil that is spinning in the mind. Everything that we complain about is just a thought. All of our problems, all of our worries, all of the things we think stand in our way are just a passing thought, as Nisargadatta points out in here. He uses the example of sleep, but we'll just say that as long as those thoughts aren't there, whether it's sleep or sitting quietly not thinking about anything or worrying about anything, or not attached to any particular aspect of the character—in other words when the I-thought is not there—ALL IS WELL.

There are no problems when the I-thought is absent. You can be in the midst of an incredible amount of churn in your life, having crisis in every corner of your life, and yet in those moments where you forget that, ALL IS WELL. When the "I" that thinks it has all these problems is absent, even for a moment, ALL IS WELL. Those things that seem to have such substance, imperative and urgency completely disappear when the I-thought is not there. They have no power unless the I-thought is there to attach to.

So it seems like an insurmountable project—how to do disabuse yourself of the notion that you are a self. How does that happen? How can you take that on as a project and approach it directly? Well it's very difficult. So we have lots of practices that kind of dance around it and kind of weaken us to the idea that that might be the case. But there is a way to just go after it directly, too. And that is, just look at that I-thought and constantly ask, "Does it have any validity?" Does it have any substance? It's wreaking havoc, and when it's gone ALL IS WELL. And it's just a thought." That's literally all we need to see, that the separate individual we have come to know and love for all these many years, is just a thought.

Even the body, substantial as it seems, is just a thought. That which you truly are is none of it. When the I-thought is absent, there is no body to be owned. It's all just a part of Totality. Nothing can be separate from Totality. And yet that's what we think is going on. We think that we're so special that we stand apart from All That Is, suffer its slings and arrows and appreciate

its beauty and all that other stuff. But that's the essential thing, that we are so SPECIAL that we stand apart from all else, we stand apart from the entirety of Creation, we stand apart from whatever our concept of a higher power is, we stand apart from everything, isolated and victimized by it—all because of this little thought, that "I" am separate from It.

Quite literally, all that happens when someone wakes up, becomes Self-realized, becomes enlightened, all that happens is that the I-thought goes away. And lo and behold, ALL IS WELL. All that remains is All That Is, and You are That. There is nothing else! There is no one to be anyone else. There has always only been just this, this one... let's say "Life", this one Awareness, this one Existence. And it is alone but it's not isolated because it's All That Is.

It's a solitude magnitudes different from the solitude of this imagined individual character. We hold on to this fragment of an idea of life at the expense of True Life. Nothing else has to happen for True Life to be our experience—the experience that dominates Awareness, instead of the experience of individuality.

There's great things about individuality, certainly when there's triumphs or something good happens in your life and you have moments of exhilaration. It has things to recommend it. If we wanted to answer the question, "Why is there something instead of nothing?" it's for the entertainment factor of being an individual in a wonderful creation, a beautiful game that's been laid out for us. But when we get to the point where the game is no longer of interest, or at least not of sufficient interest to counterbalance the downside, we start asking questions. The questions lead us down a path that maybe we don't want to look at at first, the path of, "Wait, I can't have the answer. That which I think I am can never be happy. That which I think I am can never know Truth. That which I think I am can never be other than what it is, an imaginary thought passing through Awareness."

Am I willing to allow myself to become vulnerable to the leap that will be gifted to me, granted to me when I'm ready? The leap from an imaginary existence to True Existence, True Life? Once that happens, as the scriptures say, all else is added unto you. This imaginary life is given back to you, but now it's seen for what it is. You still get that, too. You get it all! But first you have to lose it all. Lose everything. You literally lose your life.

There are ways to make ourselves vulnerable to Grace. As Rose used to say, "Enlightenment is always an accident, but there are ways to make yourself more accident-prone." That's kind of what we're up to when we embark on this enterprise. How do I make myself more accident prone? How do I make myself vulnerable to the gift of Grace?

So, here we are.



~ Transcribed by Augie Monge from a talk Bart delivered at a weekly SIG meeting in Raleigh, September 12th, 2012. Visit www.selfinquiry.org for more information.