

#### 4. WHO ARE WE? Identity in the Anthropocene.

*The human form is a microcosm of the universe. All that supposedly exists outside us in reality exists in us. The world is in you and can become known in you, as you. What then is this 'you'?*

Jean Klein, *Who Am I? The Sacred Quest*.

I first came into contact with the Climate Psychology Alliance (CPA) in 2011 at a Psychotherapy and Counselling for Social Responsibility (PCSR) meeting in London addressed by Clive Hamilton not long after he published *Requiem for a Species*.<sup>1</sup> Hamilton is Professor of Public Ethics at Canberra University. He gave a powerful presentation, reiterating the theme of *Requiem*: not just about the urgent need to raise the alarm and take radical action to head off climate chaos but asking why, at this late stage, we continue to ignore the warnings; why we remain in denial about global warming and the mass extinction going on all around us; why, in short, we appear so indifferent to our dying planet. The requiem note of sorrow and grief seemed to capture feelings more likely to get behind the defences of denial and avoidance we are trapped in. Clive Hamilton was inviting us to think about the unthinkable - the demise, if not of all life on the planet, of human civilisation as we know it - and what we feel about it.

His *Defiant Earth*<sup>2</sup>: *the Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene* (2017), thoughtfully reviewed recently on the CPA website by Chris (Robertson), strikes an even more apocalyptic note, in addition to a sorrowful one. 'The Anthropocene Rupture' describes how modern man has interrupted the geological time scale, succinctly but also clearly described and analysed by the eco-socialist writer, Ian Angus in *Facing the Anthropocene*.<sup>3</sup> The Anthropocene apart, the next Ice Age was due in 50,000 years, potentially extending our stable and temperate Holocene epoch fourfold and, hopefully, giving us the time to evolve as responsible and enlightened stewards of the Planet. Instead we may be living in our

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<sup>1</sup> Clive Hamilton, *Requiem for a Species: Why We Resist the Truth About Climate Change*, London: Earthscan, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Clive Hamilton, *Defiant Earth: The Fate of Humans in the Anthropocene*, Cambridge UK: Polity, 2017

<sup>3</sup> Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 2016.

final century since we emerged on Earth 200,000 years ago, condemning at the same time many fellow life forms that have evolved over millions. It would seem with our modern science we have become, in Hamilton's phrase, "hubris on steroids" and now are subject to the nemesis of a *Defiant Earth*.

Some are still hubristic enough to believe modern science can solve all our problems, can still master the planet. Others denounce the anthropocentrism leading us to this potential disaster, preferring to ignore both the impressive power we now have to destroy all life, but equally to protect and nurture it. Clive Hamilton asks in his book how "a new ethics" might lead us to act responsibly rather than destructively. In his last chapter, "The Rise and Fall of the Super-agent" he wonders, speculatively, "whether, in allowing humans free will, 'nature' made a colossal mistake". But earlier he had quoted the idealist German philosopher, Friedrich Schelling, that *freedom is woven into the fabric of nature*, suggesting that ethical freedom lies not outside and independent of nature, as modern scientific man believes, but within it.

In his earlier books, *Growth Fetishism*, *Affluenza* and *The Freedom Paradox*, Hamilton has written extensively and critically about our compulsive consumerism and its failure to bring us happiness or freedom. In *The Freedom Paradox* he identifies our inner freedom as necessarily based in an ethical practice and he covers an impressive range of world thought to illustrate this.<sup>4</sup> In *Defiant Earth* he now suggests that a new ethics "awaits the realisation that this being called human has become something strange and unfamiliar" and he wonders whether human beings will emerge who embody another future than the one we all most fear. He does not pretend to know exactly what this new "being" - "the new anthropocentrism" - would be like, though he is wary of any forms simply of the old transcendentalisms. *Defiant Earth* challenges us to think about this.

## **A new awareness**

I would like to suggest that the contemplation of climate change - and the fact of our own collective transience - can bring a new knowledge about ourselves, what the ancient

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<sup>4</sup> Clive Hamilton, *The Freedom Paradox: Towards a post-secular ethics*, Crows Nest, NSW, Australia: Allen & Unwin, 2011, 2008.

Greeks called *gnosis*, a knowledge which identifies the vital - or divine - spark in all of us. This may not save human civilisation but it could today breathe new life into psychology and transform our modern natural and human sciences. Future generations may be inheriting a very damaged world but is it not crucial we also bequeath them a new self-knowledge - a modern, or post-modern, *gnosis* - so as to strengthen their ability to face whatever the future brings? We surely owe them this.

Perhaps this is already happening. Despite the crude instincts of neoliberalism, there is a growing awareness of the value of a systemic and integral perspective in all our thinking, and a greater understanding of the principle that the whole is always more than the sum of the parts. This perspective promises to integrate many of our disciplines and activities. It could even at last begin to bring together the divided minds of science and the humanities - "The Two Cultures" - and might also lead to a renewal in this 21st century of existential and metaphysical realities we have long come to ignore, amounting, in short, to a neo-perennial philosophy.

What is missed in our linear way of thinking is that, from a systemic perspective, a small, apparently insignificant change can lead to major transformations. Chaos theory bears this out. It is the thermostat principle. The slightest adjustment of the thermostat affects the whole heating system. We know this from our new climate knowledge. Change the ratio of the greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, which control our global temperature, and you move from the Holocene into the Anthropocene. This leads to all the dangers of our age but, if we are wise, it can also work in our favour. If we readjust the thermostat, who knows what changes this may in turn bring about? Are we, ourselves, the new thermostat for our warming globe? There may be no going back to the Holocene, but perhaps we can make more of the Anthropocene than the current despair or pessimism allow. Rather than any technological project of geo-engineering, perhaps a new understanding and awareness of ourselves is the thermostat that most needs adjusting.

Two of the illusions we cling to that are being seriously challenged, in both the modern natural and human sciences, are the notions of an absolute objective, common sense world "out there" on the one hand and the separate, autonomous individual self "in here" on the other. One might be thought to be an ontological or philosophical problem, the other an epistemological or psychological one. But they are very much related. Some of

us may understand this cognitively but, more crucially, do we have an affective appreciation of it? Do we feel it? If the neoliberal assumption of the possessive individual person derives from the feeling, belief and experience of the world as fixed and solid, to break the spell of solidity must lead to a changed experience of ourselves.

### **“Objective” science.**

In the introduction to *The Nature of the Physical World*<sup>5</sup> the physicist, Arthur Eddington, described the “two tables” in his study - one, a practical table that appears made of hard and long-lasting wood on which his books and his tea pot can reliably rest. This is the “empirical table”. The other is the “scientific table”, composed of trillions of atoms and molecules which are mostly space - emptiness - and lack the apparent and substantial boundaries the empirical table has. As Eddington and his colleagues were well aware, the quantum revolution questioned whether things are really what they appear to be. Science and common sense seemed to have diverged alarmingly. What we take to be substantial is only apparently so.

The revolution in physics at the beginning of the last century is well known, though as Richard Feynman has famously quipped, anyone who thinks he understands quantum mechanics clearly hasn't. As Ken Wilber notes in the introduction to his anthology of the mystical writings of the early twentieth-century physicists, what is less well-known is that Eddington and many of his more famous colleagues were, if not religious in the sense of conventional believers in God, mystically-minded men who accepted that the universe was essentially mysterious and not accessible to empirical or human rational thinking.<sup>6</sup> In their view any relative hypotheses and theories they might make about the nature of the universe could never give them absolute knowledge of it. Physics is physics, not metaphysics.

As Eddington reminded us physics may use the symbolic and beautiful language of mathematics to describe the world but it does not go beyond symbols:

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<sup>5</sup> Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World*, New York: MacMillan, 1928.

<sup>6</sup> Ken Wilber, *Quantum Questions: Mystical Writings of the World's Great Physicists*, Boston: Shambhala, 2001

“We should suspect an intention to reduce God to a system of differential equations..... We have learnt that the exploration of the external world by the methods of physical science leads not to a concrete reality but to a shadow world of symbols, beneath which those methods are unadapted for penetrating.’<sup>7</sup>

It’s almost as if, in declaring this, Eddington was suggesting that science was, in an important way, growing up. He was aware of the revolutionary breakthroughs his colleagues were making in their understanding of ‘matter’ but also aware that this was an understanding of the world as we represented it. These were only shadow symbols. Scientists were still all-too-human after all.

Two significant implications might be drawn from these breakthroughs. Firstly that any knowledge we have about the nature of the world depends on our human perspective, as well as the means by which we observe that world - whether we rely on our physical senses mainly, or our minds in addition to our senses. What is often missed, when we think about the wonders of science, is also the wonder of the human animal making those discoveries. Science may be one of our most impressive arts.

## **Practical mysticism**

Secondly the human mind may have other ways, or paths, of gaining access to knowledge than purely rational, or even intuitional, thinking, something which our social and psychological sciences have forgotten, particularly when it comes to ultimate or absolute knowledge. The physicists of that revolutionary period in the first decades of the twentieth century were open-minded about the importance and value of metaphysics, and respectful of the sense of wonder the mystical traditions cultivated.

Contemporaneous with the revolution in physics came the publication of a comprehensive book narrating and illuminating the history of the mystical tradition in our European culture. Writing in the Preface to the twelfth edition of *Mysticism* in 1930, Evelyn Underhill, its author, wrote:

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<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *Ibid.* p 6.

Since this book first appeared nineteen years ago, the study of mysticism - not only in England but also in France, Germany and Italy - has been almost completely transformed. From being regarded, whether critically or favourably, as a by-way of religion, it is now more generally accepted by theologians, philosophers and psychologists, as representing in its intensive form the essential religious experience of man. <sup>8</sup>

This statement of hers, coupled with the beliefs of the physicists, suggests that, in the twentieth century mysticism was beginning to be accepted as a true metaphysical science and no longer the persecuted heresy of the Church or simply the vague and misty fantasy modern natural science assumed it to be.

Mystics are traditionally conceived as set apart from the world, seeking knowledge of a transcendent power experienced in themselves as an immanent reality. But Underhill also emphasised both the practical side of mysticism and its usefulness for everyone.

“Mysticism is the art of union with reality” she explained in a short, very readable book, *Practical Mysticism*, published in the first weeks of The Great War (1914, recently republished 2011), and “the mystic is the person who has attained that union in greater or less degree”. “Union” can mean many things to many people - union with God, nature, or one’s fellow human beings - or all these together. Underhill’s “unitive life” is open to us all.

The First World War may have been an unprecedented occasion of mass carnage and slaughter but it was also a time of great social, cultural and spiritual ferment. In her preface to *Practical Mysticism* Evelyn Underhill writes that the mystical connection with reality is often intensified in times of distress and suffering:

the stronger the forces of destruction appeared the more intense grew the spiritual vision which opposed them....the mystical consciousness has the power of lifting those who possess it to a plane of reality which no struggle, no cruelty can disturb: of conferring a certitude which no catastrophe can wreck . <sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Mankind’s Spiritual Consciousness*, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1961 (1911) p vii.

Many people felt more vitally alive during the Wars, whether because of the proximity of death or the greater social connection they felt with each other. Could it be that when we come to accept the peril that our scientists say awaits us, we will find solace and strength in the contemplative and mystical traditions?

Modernity has rightly turned its critical and analytic gaze on the more sentimental and naive aspects of Christian and Romantic mysticism. But to reject the notion of a mythic Heavenly Father who created the universe out of nothing is not to deny a God who is the ground of all being. Nor should we turn our backs on the Romantic revolution's feeling for transcendent and universal values.

The notion of the human soul has also fallen into disuse in our human sciences. Psychology, after all, was originally an enquiry into the nature of the soul. Perhaps it's time we brought the soul back. Perhaps it needs redefining. Perhaps in the modern world it has been too identified with the notion of the individual mind rather than a quality of awareness we enjoy and share with everything. In his famous essay, "The Over-Soul", the great American transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, described it as "a deep power in which we live":

Within man is the soul of the whole; the wise silence; the universal beauty, to which every part and particle is equally related; the eternal ONE. ....We see the world piece by piece, as the sun, the moon, the animal, the tree; but the whole, of which these are the shining parts, is the soul. <sup>10</sup>

Emerson echoes the perennial wisdom of ancient India.

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<sup>9</sup> Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism: A Little Book for Normal People*, Milton Keynes: Aziloth Books, 2011, 1914 p 7.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "The Over-Soul (Essays, First Series) 1841" in *Nature and Selected Essays*, Edited and with an Introduction by Larzer Ziff, New York: Penguin books, 2003 p 207.

## ***Gnosis from the East***

In the cultures of the Asian east mystics have been revered and followed, albeit often uncritically. But this is not to discount the real wisdom their traditions offer. In the Indian *Vedas*, the sacred Hindu scriptures which are six times more extensive than the Bible, are to be found a kernel of profound philosophical and psychological teachings, consisting of some two hundred *Upanishads*. These were recognised as part of a world-wide intellectual and spiritual illumination in the middle of the first millennium BCE - the *Upanishads* and teachings of Gautama Buddha in India, the Taoism of Lao Tzu and, later, Chang Tzu in China, the Old Testament prophets in the Middle East and the Pre-Socratics in Ancient Greece - which Karl Jaspers called "The Axial Age".<sup>11</sup> People wonder whether we are now, in the 21st century - unbelievably, given the shadow side of the Anthropocene - entering a new axial age.

"Upanishad" means "sitting at the feet of" a guru, or "rishi", a contemplative teacher who is said to reveal the profound secrets of the universe. The *Upanishads* form the final portion of the revealed part of the *Vedas* and are the principal basis of Vedanta - the "conclusion" of the *Vedas* - and the most profound teachings of the Hindu tradition. They are said to be valued by wisdom seekers for their transcendent breadth and powerful freedom of thought.

Central to the Vedanta tradition are two related principles. The Sanskrit word *atman* refers to the belief in the real immortal self of human beings, similar to our belief in the soul, while *brahman*, with which *atman* is identified, is a concept for which we in the modern West, with our dualistic thinking and belief either in a personal God or no God at all, have no equivalent. It refers to an Absolute which, in the *Upanishads*, is known as "eternal and imperishable". This is an abstract concept, and, being nameless and formless, beyond the experience of the knowing mind. Another way of putting it is that it is not an object of knowledge but what we essentially are, our very being.

This may be difficult for us to follow. Nor is it easy to read the *Upanishads*. W. B. Yeats, who, with Shree Purohit Swami, gave us a poetic rendering into English in 1937, was incredulous at how unreadable the original translations were: "Could latinised words,

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<sup>11</sup> Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, London: Routledge, 2010, 1953. p 2.

hyphenated words; could polyglot phrases, sedentary distortions of unnatural English: - 'However many Gods in Thee, All-Knower, adversely slay desires of a person' - could muddles, muddied by 'Lo! Verily' and 'Forsooth' represent what grass farmers sang thousands of years ago, what their descendants sing today?"<sup>12</sup> Perhaps these unreadable translations reflect our original difficulties in understanding ancient texts we were encountering for the first time. Despite our difficulties, Yeats was clear about the poetic and philosophic importance of the *Upanishads* for our time:

Whatever the date, those forest Sages began everything; no fundamental problem of philosophy, nothing that has disturbed the schools to controversy, escaped their notice.... It pleases me to fancy that a system of thought like that of these books.....once overspread the world, as ours today; that our genuflections discover in the East something ancestral in ourselves, something we must bring into the light before we can appease a religious instinct that for the first time in our civilisation demands the satisfaction of the whole man.<sup>13</sup>

## Modern psychology

The practice, if not the theory, of modern psychology - whether cognitive, psychoanalytic, or humanist - is premised on the fundamental sense of the distinct, separate, finitely defined individual person and, in that, it lacks a systemic perspective. A non-systemic approach also emphasises the notion of separate subjects and professions. In the early nineties I did a training in family group and systemic psychotherapy at the Cardiff Family Institute in the UK, where they taught a forward-looking and liberating form of interpersonal therapy. It was an integrative practice, based in what Gregory Bateson called "the ecology of mind"<sup>14</sup> and in the fundamental principle of the unity underlying everything.

Individuality, they impressed on us at Cardiff, emerged in relationship - "I" and "we" only make sense together. In other words, who a person is is initially conjoined with the family as the original and primary group. Subjectivity is intersubjectivity.

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<sup>12</sup> Shree Purohit Swami and W.B. Yeats, *The Ten Principal Upanishads*, London: Faber & Faber, 1975, 1937, (2007) pp 7-8.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p 11.

<sup>14</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind: Collected Essays in Anthropology, Psychiatry, Evolution, and Epistemology*, University of Chicago Press, 2000, 1972.

The family cannot be conceived separate from society - it is essentially social and political. Nor can it either be separated from wider and more universal contexts. As Ken Wilber might say, a person may be egocentric, but his egocentricity leads to ethnocentric, “worldcentric”, even “Kosmocentric” realities, all nested in each other. And the practice in Cardiff of working with family networks - as well as individuals - and analysing related social and political perspectives, mirrored their eco-systemic premises.

Perhaps surprisingly, Freud also theoretically recognised this truth. In her introduction to *Mass Psychology - Group Psychology* in Strachey’s Standard Edition - in the new Penguin Modern Classics translations of Freud, edited by Adam Phillips, Jacqueline Rose questions ‘the commonplace assumption that psychoanalysis only deals with individuals’. Freud himself pointed out, in the first paragraph of *Mass Psychology*, that without the presence of the other there can be no mental life:

The antithesis between the individual and social or mass psychology which at first glance may seem to us very important, loses a great deal of its sharpness on close examination.

And, interestingly, Rose comments: “We only exist through the others who make up the storehouse of the mind....The mind is a palimpsest in which the traces of these figures will jostle and arrange themselves for evermore. From the earliest moments of our lives.....we are ‘peopled’ by others. Our psyche is a social space.”<sup>15</sup>

It’s helpful to remember that Freud was always developing his ideas, consciously or unconsciously, and that psychoanalysis itself was evolving, alongside other psychologies and cultural formations. The difference between the first and second halves of the twentieth century can be gauged, for instance, in the development of thinking between Freud and Jacques Lacan. Unlike Freud, Lacan was notoriously obscure. but his notion of the three orders of the “Imaginary”, “Symbolic” and “Real” turned psychoanalysis inside out, as it were. By defining the individual person as imaginary or “fictive”, and language,

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<sup>15</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Mass Psychology and Other Writings*, edited by Adam Phillips, translated by J.A.Underwood, Introduction by Jacqueline Rose, London: Penguin, 2004 p vii.

like the unconscious, as something that lives us rather than something we have complete control over, Lacan offered a more developed interpretation of Freud's central concept - "the unconscious".

Interestingly, Lacan's concept of the three orders was known to the Tibetans a thousand years ago, for whom the Real was the essential and ultimate meta-physical reality. And Buddhism has always taught that a person is not a separate, autonomous individual. Hence its notion of *anatman*, or no-self. *Anatman* doesn't deny a self, only that we shouldn't limit it to the personal self.

### **The Self of the *Upanishads***

The *Upanishads* conceived a greater sense of self than the individual self, which can be described in an infinite number of ways. In Vedanta it is known as *atman-brahman*, while buddhists call it "buddha (or awakened) nature". Realising - making real - "Self", in addition to the personal self, may be as important in these apocalyptic times as our activism to reduce carbon emissions. Perhaps climate psychology is as much about redefining the self as the importance of de-carbonising society.

All the *Upanishads* return again and again to this theme of realising the true - or unconscious - self. In Eknath Easwaran's more accessible Arkana translation (1988), for instance, he gives the *Kena Upanishad* the title "Who Moves the World?" The *Kena* looks beyond the mind:

*The student inquires:*

"Who makes my mind think?  
Who fills my body with vitality?  
Who causes my tongue to speak? Who is that  
Invisible one who sees through my eyes  
And hears through my ears?"

*The teacher replies:*

"The Self is the ear of the ear,  
the eye of the eye, the mind of the mind,

the word of words, and the life of life.  
Rising above the senses and the mind  
And renouncing separate existence,  
The wise realise the deathless Self.”<sup>16</sup>

In the resonant refrain of the *Chandogya Upanishad*, *You Are That*, “That” is the Self. The Self is “you”. The “Self” is also viewed as the whole universe, the Life and Spirit within all things - *brahman*. Therefore, in this sense, “you” are the universe. Wordsworth had a feeling for this in nature when he wrote his *Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey* (1798):

.....For I have learned  
To look on nature, not as in the hour  
Of thoughtless youth, but hearing often  
The still sad music of humanity.....  
.....And I have felt  
A presence that disturbs me with the joy  
Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime  
Of something far more deeply interfused,  
Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,  
And the round ocean and the living air  
And in the blue sky, and in the mind of man:  
A motion and a spirit, that impels,  
All thinking things, all objects of all thought,  
And rolls through all things.....

The *Upanishads* and Buddhist texts were only just available in Latin translation in Wordsworth’s time, unlike today when there are many english translations available. *The Isha Upanishad* - “The Inner Ruler” (Easwaran) - describes the Self in only eighteen verses but it catches the mystery with poetry that speaks across the millennia. In Yeat’s words:

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<sup>16</sup> Eknath Easwaran, *The Upanishads*, translated and with a general Introduction by Easwaran and chapter Introductions & Concluding Essay by Michael M. Nagler, London: Arkana, 1987 p 68.

The Self is one. Unmoving, it moves faster than the mind.

The senses lag, but Self runs ahead.

Unmoving, it outruns pursuit.

Out of Self comes the breath that is the life of all things.

Unmoving, it moves; is far away, yet near; within all, outside all.

Of a certainty the man who can see all creatures in himself,  
himself in all creatures, knows no sorrow.

How can a wise man, knowing the unity of life,  
seeing all creatures in himself, be deluded or sorrowful?

The Self is everywhere, without a body, without a shape  
whole, pure, wise, all knowing, far shining,  
self-dependent, all transcending;  
in the eternal procession assigning every period its proper duty.<sup>17</sup>

Easwaran translates that last line: "He (Self) it is Who holds the cosmos together."<sup>18</sup>

## **A twentieth century sage**

The spirit of the *Upanishads* has found expression throughout the centuries. In the East Asian traditions there have been many understandings of the immaterial self, while in the West we have focused on the material self. In the nondual, *advaita* - "not-two" - tradition material and immaterial are a continuum, linked by the thread of consciousness that runs through both. It is thought that the revival in the West in the last century of the nondual teachings of the East promise to unite the material and mind sciences of the West with the metaphysical idealism of the East.

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<sup>17</sup> Yeats 1975 op.cit. pp 15-16

<sup>18</sup> Easwaran 1987 op.cit. p 209

In 1896 a sixteen year-old schoolboy, named Venketerama, living at the tip of southern India, walked out on his family and made his way to Arunachala, a holy mountain and pilgrimage centre that he had always felt drawn to. On his arrival he gave away all his money and possessions and, in the words of David Godman, a later student of his, “abandoned himself to a newly discovered awareness that his real nature was formless, immanent consciousness”.<sup>19</sup>

So intense was this awareness he just sat in silence for a number of years in various caves on the mountainside, oblivious of his body and the world. He neglected to eat and his hair and fingernails grew to unmanageable proportions. Eventually he began to look after his physical state but his awareness of himself as consciousness remained undimmed for the rest of his life. Godman explains: “In Hindu parlance he had **‘realised the Self’**: that is to say, he had realised by direct experience that nothing existed apart from an indivisible and universal consciousness which was experienced in its unmanifest form as beingness or awareness and in its manifest form as the appearance of the universe.”

After some years his inner awareness became an outer spiritual radiance and attracted a small circle of followers, which grew as the years passed until he eventually became quite famous, not only in India but around the world. So impressed were other spiritual figures with the maturity of his wisdom that he was given the title Bhagawan Sri Ramana Maharshi. What attracted people to Ramana was not only his way of sharing his unassuming life and spiritual vitality with whoever came to see him but the simple and practical profundity of his teaching, which took the form of self-analysis, or personal inquiry, a contemplative practice which is potentially very effective in modern Western culture.

Hence the fundamental question, “Who Am I?”, which forms the basis of his teaching to anyone who came to see him. It is the title of the opening chapter of *The Spiritual Teachings of Ramana Maharshi* (1988) - which has a foreword about Ramana by Jung,

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<sup>19</sup> David Godman, editor, *Be As You Are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, London: Arkana, 1985 p 1.

initially published as a foreword to Heinrich Zimmer's book, *Der Weg zum Selbst* (Originally 1913, Jung's foreword comes later) - "The Path to the Self".

To inquire of oneself "Who Am I?" is based on the perennial Upanishadic principle of *neti, neti* - "not this, not that". It is the principle of negative discrimination or detachment, by which you distinguish the infinite number of "me"s from the one "I" which is asking the question - am I the named person, born in a certain time, in a particular place; someone with a national, racial and gender identity; a married, a professional person; someone of a certain age, ability, or inclination, etc? The answers to these questions provide a lot of information about oneself as "me", but do they amount to the "I" a person essentially is? Does this collection of "me"s add up to what "I" am? In the East what "I am" - the one essential assertion we can make about ourselves - is a changeless, timeless being and awareness, beyond any conditioning and objectification. In a Western culture the conditioned, contingent self is the one we mostly objectify and analyse.

Ramana asked people simply to continue asking this question, wherever they were or whatever they were doing. The more, it would seem, you understand who you are not, the nearer you come to the realisation of Self. From this perspective our psychologies, for instance, would seem to analyse and focus on who we are not. But, paradoxically, before you can be who you are, you need to know who you are not. And, then, who you are not - your contingent self - is recognised also as an integral part of who you are. This is the paradoxical nondual way.

Ramana never wrote anything down but his many students made notes of his talks and their discussions with him. One student who wrote about him was the Englishman Arthur Osborn. David Goldman was the later librarian of his ashram, while the Frenchman, Jean Klein, wrote in the *advaita* tradition of Ramana. In all his life Ramana never went further than two miles from his beloved mountain at Arunachala ever since he had arrived there as a teenager but, in his Foreword to the Inner Directions 2000 edition of his *Talks*, Wilber titles him as "the Sage of the Century".<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> *Talks with Ramana Maharshi: On Realising Abiding Peace and Happiness*, Foreword by Ken Wilber, Carlsbad: Inner Directions, 2001.

In their preface to the 1988 edition of *The Spiritual Teaching* Joe and Guinevere Miller describe how free of doctrine or traditional meditation observances Ramana's teaching is and therefore how suited to our busy times:

Beyond that which you think is that which you are. Realising this does not involve specific practices or attitudes other than Understanding. No withdrawal is necessary - no change of present time, place or condition - only a change of viewpoint, which you bring about yourself for your Self.<sup>21</sup>

It is not possible to describe adequately what is beyond description. By simply acknowledging what you are not, the beauty of the nondual approach is that you are not losing yourself but gaining a freedom which leads you to be who you really are. The trick is simply to be aware of this and at the same time recognise that you are an integral part of everything and everyone else. This is the way of Evelyn Underhill's Union, the unitive path of all mystics, and the realisation of Self the Upanishads celebrated.

### **In conclusion: contemplating the abyss**

In the age of the Anthropocene the problem, and the solution, as Clive Hamilton argues, surely lies with us, humanity. Naomi Klein, in the introduction to her book *This Changes Everything*, asks what is wrong with us that we seem to be doing nothing to help ourselves.<sup>22</sup> One answer may be that we do not know who we are. Or, as the mystics would say, we are not aware of who we are. The truth is we do not even know that we don't know who we are. This must be a central challenge for any social and psychological climate initiative.

We dare not imagine what the world - this planet - will look like in 2100. Hence the resistance to thinking about climate change. We prefer to ignore or deny it. But as more people fear, we are looking into an abyss - a void - and for most of us that is a terrifying prospect. But the "abyss" - the "emptiness" - may hold the truth about ourselves. *Homo*

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<sup>21</sup> *The Spiritual teaching of RAMANA MAHARSHI*, Foreword by C. G. Jung, Boston, Shambhala, 1988 p vii.

<sup>22</sup> Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate*, London: Allen Lane, 2014. See the Introduction.

*sapiens* - ourselves - is a mere 200,000 years old on a planet that goes back some 4.5 billion years. We are very transient. We are reluctant to think about this, but at the same time we have lost sight of what is timeless in us.

In the buddhist view “emptiness” - *shunyata* - is not empty in our sense of the word. It is a fullness. Another way of thinking about it is as the absolute interdependence of everything, and of ourselves as an interdependency rather than a finite, fixed species. Is it so difficult to contemplate that, as the product of the Earth, we may be said, in some way, to be as “old” as it, or even as the universe? That we have all of nature in our bodies and our minds, and all its history, even its future, written in us? Cosmologists say many of the elements in our bodies were forged in the stars. Is it too fanciful to imagine we even contain an image in our minds of the origin, mystery and future of the universe itself?

The great philosopher, Baruch Spinoza, advised we consider everything *sub specie aeternitatis* - in the light of eternity. He wasn't just pointing to an eternal universe out there, but to something timeless is us all. It falls to us in this Anthropocene Age to rediscover this. Whatever the turbulence and suffering to come, is it not an awareness we should bequeath to future generations?

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