What Is Self?
A Study of the Spiritual Journey in Terms of Consciousness

BERNADETTE ROBERTS
Contents

Foreword by Jeff Shore ix
Foreword by Ric Williams xxi
Introduction xli

PART I: What Is Self?

Definition of Terms 3
Consciousness and the Senses 5
The Function of Consciousness 7
  The Knowing-Self 10
  The Feeling-Self 11
Unity of Consciousness 12
Summary of the System of Consciousness 14
The Ego 17
No-Ego Experience 20
Beyond Transformation: The Pathless Path 26
The Critical Turning Point 29
Beyond the Turning Point: Unmasking the True Self 34
Ecstasy: The Vehicle of Crossing Over 40
No-Self Experience 44
Distinguishing Between No-Ego and No-Self 49
Conclusion 53
One Way to View the Passage 55

Appendix I: The Divine Experienced by Consciousness 57
Appendix II: True Nature of Death and Resurrection 61
Appendix III: Compendium of the Self Experience 65
  The Knowing-Self 65
  The Feeling-Self 66
Unity of Consciousness 67
Consciousness and Senses: Two Separate Systems 67
Ego-Self 67
True Self 68
Phenomenal Self 68
No-Self 69
Beyond No-Self 70

PART II: *Three Views of Consciousness*

Introduction 75
Three Views of Consciousness or Self 77
Three Views of Ego 85
Different Views of the Unconscious 92
The Archetypes 101
Conclusion 104

Appendix I: Essence of the Divine 109
Appendix II: Personal Discovery of Buddhism 111

Part II Bibliography 119

PART III: *The Christian Passage*

Chapter One: An Overview
Introduction 123
Christ’s Revelation 127
Two Different Types of Oneness 129
Limitations of the Historical Christ 131
Experience of Oneness and Beyond 135
The Eucharistic Christ 136
The Unitive Mystery of Christ 137
The Fine Line between Two Dimensions 140
The Divine beyond the Unitive View 142
Experience vs Reality 146
Knowing Without a Knower 150
Did Christ Know He Was God? 154
The Ultimate Mystery of Christ 156
The Eternal Body of Christ 158
Chapter Two: Steps in My Christian Passage

Introduction 163
God as Immanent 164
God as Immanent and Transcendent 166
Transformation Process or Dark Night of the Spirit 173
The Marketplace 174
Falling Away of Union: No-Self 179
Resurrection 182
Ascension 186
Incarnation 188
In the End 191

Appendix I: How Is Christ Different from Ourselves or One of a Kind among Men? 193

Introduction 193
Two Sides of the Incarnation 194
Experience and Manifestation: The Difference 204
Summary 207
Postscript 207
Introduction

After writing the account of my journey,¹ I began a third book in order to present a complete overview of the psychological-spiritual journey from beginning to end. Without the opportunity to complete this work, however, I wrote several shorter pieces in immediate response to those who had read the books in print, but had misunderstood the true “no-self experience” and its place in the journey. The present book, What Is Self?, consists of three of these shorter pieces. While this writing cannot compensate for a more thorough and detailed study of the journey, I hope that it will help to resolve some of the immediate questions and misunderstandings that have arisen because of the previous works.

From the beginning, the sole purpose of my writing has been to put into the contemplative literature an entire stage and final event (the no-self event) that presently is not there. Despite objections to the contrary, this particular stage and final event have not been accounted for in our contemplative literature, East or West. To search a hundred or more classics in the field and find only a few hidden suggestions of such an event is not sufficient. My affirming that it is not in the literature, however, has been the cause of some ridicule. The impression is that I am illiterate, have no formal knowledge of the path, or am totally ignorant of the available classics. The whole problem is that until

¹. The Path To No-Self covers a period of twenty years and begins with the account of the Dark Night of the Spirit (falling away of the ego-center) that culminates in the unitive state. After this the journey moves up to the point at which the unitive state and true self (not the ego) falls away. The second book, The Experience of No-Self, begins with this latter experience (falling away of the unitive state and true self) and covers a period of two years. (Shambhala Publications, 1985 and 1984 respectively.)
we come upon this final event we do not know it is missing from the literature; thus we have no way of knowing what, specifically, to look for. In other words, until we know first hand or by experience exactly what to look for, we are not in a position to judge whether or not this event is in the literature.

This does not mean that millions of people have not come upon the no-self event; indeed, sooner or later everyone will do so. All it means is that an accurate, distinguishable or clarifying account is not in the literature. The challenge of providing such an account is what my writing is about. Attesting to the difficulty of this challenge is the fact that my first two books failed in this matter, so here, now, is a third attempt. I might add, the fact this book was not acceptable to a trade publisher further demonstrates the difficulty of putting the no-self event into the literature. It may be that for centuries our various censors have eliminated any event they did not understand or which they thought too upsetting to their clientele. I can only speculate about this.

In general, our contemplative maps of the journey come to an end with the discovery of the true self and its oneness with the divine. This unitive state—known by various terms in different traditions—follows the falling away or transcendence of the ego (self-center) and entails a radical change or transformation of consciousness. Beyond this, however, our maps do not go. But this unitive or transcendental state is not the end of the journey. It may be the end of the ego-self, but by no means is it the end of self—either the true self or the phenomenal self. For this, we have much further to go.

This is saying that our completed journey consists of two very different endings: first, the falling away of the ego or self-center and, second, the much later falling away of the true self and divine-center (and consequently the phenomenal self). In one of my earlier books I referred to these two different endings as the “two major movements” of the journey. While this may not have been the best wording, the reference was nevertheless the same—first, no-ego; second, no-self. Nowhere does our contemplative literature make this specific distinction; instead, it speaks of only one major movement or ending, which ending is always indicative of a unitive state no matter how variously it has been described. The final event, however, is the falling away of the unitive state; in fact, the whole purpose of the unitive state or stage is to bring us to the final no-unitive or no-self event. It is imperative, then, to make a clear distinction between first getting to the egoless unitive state and from here going forward to the eventual falling away of this same egoless unitive state. To make this distinction as clear as possible and leave no doubts or questions is what this book attempts to do.

The true no-self event or falling away of the unitive state is bound to alter our traditional maps and paradigms of the journey. It not only pushes our
previous boundaries by presenting us with a totally new view of self or consciousness, but it necessitates a change in our usual perspective and understanding of the completed journey. The major change is that the unitive state of oneness is no longer regarded as the ultimate goal but, instead, is seen as the midpoint of the passage and a state that moves on to a more final end. This means that a long portion of the journey, between arriving at the unitive state and its eventual falling away, must now be accounted for. It means that the subtle, largely unconscious movement between the beginning and end of the unitive state has yet to be considered and described.

As matters stand now, however, it seems that the very idea that the unitive state eventually falls away strikes the mind as incomprehensible, unbelievable—impossible in fact. For this reason the no-self event has been variously misinterpreted as: (1) the “no-ego” event, (2) a mistaken interpretation of an experience, (3) a misunderstanding of the traditional path, (4) a semantic error or improper use and definition of terms, (5) a kind of mulish pride and prejudice on the part of the author. The list of misinterpretations goes on. At bottom, however, the whole problem is that, by its very nature, self or consciousness is incapable of conceiving its own non existence. It cannot possibly imagine any kind of life without itself because that which could imagine such a life IS self. So the true difficulty of understanding the no-self event is not one of semantics; rather, it is consciousness’ (psyche or self’s) own inability to go beyond itself; it is impossible. It is also a problem of understanding the true nature of self or consciousness, the nature of its movement and the final cessation of this movement. In some ways it is also a problem of belief. We cannot believe experiences we have not had or are unable to conceive or imagine; much less can we believe any experience we cannot find verified and described in our traditional literature. But our literature, as I have said, is almost exclusively concerned with how to get to the egoless unitive state. It says nothing about the next twenty or thirty years in the marketplace and how this state works to make possible the eventual falling away of all self and its unitive state. To account for this vital and necessary stage in the marketplace—between the beginning and end of the unitive state—is another purpose of my writing.

The following pages are divided into three parts. Each part answers the question “What is Self?” from a slightly different perspective, though always in terms of experience. What I know about the true nature of self has not been derived from any theory, speculation or academic study, but solely from experience or what has been learned for having made the journey. If the reader lacks similar experiences or cannot recognize a given perspective, then it is inevitable that much of this writing can only be given an academic under-
standing. In lieu of experiences there seems to be no other choice in the matter.

Part I presents an overview of the journey with particular emphasis on its major milestones or turning points. As a shortened version of a larger work in progress, however, this part is not intended to be a detailed or thorough account of the journey. Beginning with the structure and function of consciousness we will follow the self-experience (which IS consciousness) as it changes in the course of the journey. Viewing our psychological-spiritual journey as a passage through self or consciousness, this overview illustrates how self or consciousness works to bring man to his ultimate destiny.

Part II, “Three Views of Consciousness,” was written primarily for those who mistook my view of self or consciousness for that of either Carl Jung or orthodox Hinduism. Since these two views are essentially different from mine—and even different from one another—it was hoped that by putting these views side by side their differences would become obvious. The purpose of this format is not to put down the beliefs and experiences of any individual or group of people; rather, the use of contrast is simply a way of presenting an alternative view or perspective.

Recently someone asked if there was anything beyond no-self or if this was the ultimate goal of the journey. The question is important because no-self is by no means the ultimate goal or final revelation of the journey. Rather, the no-self event is the necessary means for coming upon final Truth—Truth, however, as it lies beyond all self or consciousness. Part III, “The Christian Passage,” is a brief account of what I learned of this Truth for having made the passage. We cannot treat the subject of God and self apart from one another; not only does one necessitate the revelation of the other, but the deepest or furthest experience of which self or consciousness is capable IS God. What is more, in proportion as God increases, self decreases. Thus the gradual revelation of the true nature of self is by its decreasing or absence which, at the same time, is the further or increasing revelation of the true nature of God—for the Christian, God’s Trinitarian nature. So there is no way we can disconnect the eventual falling away of self from the revelation of God. They are, as it were, two sides of the same event.

Part III is what I learned of Christ both in the course of the journey and, more especially, when it was finished. The second chapter of this section is an account of the major turning points in my journey wherein the truth and reality of Christ were gradually revealed. I think this account is the clue to a true understanding of the eventual falling away of self. Outside the Christian context I do not see how it would be possible to have a true understanding of the no-self event, or of how and why it comes about. Apart from Christ’s death such an event might be viewed as nothing but an incomprehensible tragedy.
Now I think enough has been said to give the reader a general idea of what this book is about. If the content and purpose of this writing seems to be in total contradiction to the reader’s beliefs and expectations regarding self and the journey, then he or she is advised to read no further. Those who do read further are advised to keep in mind that the Christian path is the only one I ever lived; thus what I know of other religious traditions and psychological paradigms is solely by way of reading and discussion with others. So, although I speak of Hinduism, Buddhism and the psychology of Carl Jung, I have never had their particular experiences or shared their perspectives. I trust readers will allow for this just as they allow for those who, never having lived the Christian contemplative path, nevertheless continue to give us their views on it.
PART I What Is Self?
Definition of Terms

No one knows the true nature of self as long as he is living it, or is it. The true nature of self can be disclosed only when it falls away and becomes known in retrospect, by its absence or what was. As it turns out, self is first and foremost an unconscious experience and only secondarily a conscious experience. Thus the self we know is the conscious-self, and the self we do not know is the unconscious-self; together these constitute the entire human dimension of knowing, feeling and experiencing. In essence, self is what it means to be human. As a dynamic but non-eternal experience it is in passage, a passage that is our life. Thus we might say that what self or consciousness IS, is a passage through human existence. With the falling away of self, it becomes possible to get an overview of this passage along with its major milestones. From this particular perspective we will be discussing the experience that we consciously know as self, but unconsciously cannot recognize until it is gone.

Before we begin, however, it should be pointed out that beyond the human dimension of knowing and experiencing lie other dimensions of existence: animal, plant, mineral, elemental, as well as the dimension of ultimate Truth, the divine—Absolute, God, or whatever we wish to call the alpha and omega of all possible levels of existence. What keeps human beings locked within the centrality of their own experience is self or consciousness; while man knows about other dimensions of existence he cannot experience these dimensions because consciousness precludes his doing so. Thus no one, for
example, can know the immediate experience of a bird or a lump of sugar. In order to BE a bird or a lump of sugar there could be no human experience, and thus there would be no one to give us a report. Consciousness then precludes the experience of other dimensions of existence, and it does so in order to make the human experience possible. If consciousness had not come into existence, the limit of experience would be that of the animal; if the animal or purely sensory experience had not come into existence, the dimension of experience would have remained that of the plant; and without the plant, existence would be purely elemental, and so on, back to the ultimate source or beginning. The point is that consciousness is only one dimension or level of existence and this dimension is our unique human way of knowing, feeling and experiencing.

Because the terms “self” and “consciousness” express the same experiences and because nothing can be said of one that cannot be said of the other, we use these terms interchangeably and affirm that the true nature of self IS consciousness. The study of self, therefore, is equally the study of consciousness. But since we cannot use two interchangeable terms to define one another, we must derive our definition of self or consciousness from the experiences that give rise to these terms in the first place. As everyone’s most immediate knowing (“I exist,” for example), self or consciousness is first of all an experience and only secondarily a word or an idea that expresses this experience. Thus if there were no experiences to back up the terms “self” or “consciousness” (and all their subsidiary expressions: I, me, you, etc.), these terms could not have arisen. It is solely by experience that we know self or consciousness; as a mere word, concept or theory held in the mind, we can never know it.

In these pages we use the term “consciousness” (or “awareness”) to include the entire system of consciousness with its various levels of experience from the unconscious to God-consciousness. By “consciousness” or “self” we mean the whole of the psyche, which, in Jungian terms, includes the conscious ego and unconscious self. In Eastern terminology it includes the “true Self,” “Atman,” or “Pure Consciousness,” at least as I see it. All of these experiences fall within the experiential boundaries of self or consciousness. To realize an abiding oneness with the divine is the highest potential of self or consciousness; in this case the deepest experience of self IS the experience of the divine. But this realization or awareness is not outside the boundaries of self or consciousness. Throughout these pages the word “consciousness” always includes both the conscious and unconscious levels of consciousness. Although we will be going into the primary experiences that constitute the self-experience, our first interest is to find out what makes this experience possible in the first place.
Consciousness and the Senses

Although we say that man is unique by reason of consciousness and not by reason of the senses—which belong to the animals as well—the problem with excluding the senses from man’s unique way of knowing is that as long as consciousness remains, man never experiences “pure” sensory perception (as the animals do). This is because these two systems, consciousness and the senses, are intimately connected and function as a unit or singular whole. Thus from the day we are born (or conceived even) the development of consciousness depends on the simultaneous development of the senses. Despite this developmental priority or dependency (of consciousness on the senses) we cannot equate the human sensory system with that of the animal whose sensory system has no potential for functioning in conjunction with consciousness. This means that the human sensory system is unique to man and must not be equated with the sensory system of the animal. Where the human sensory system has the potential for functioning in conjunction with consciousness, the animal sensory system has no such potential because no consciousness is present. To say that animals are not conscious beings frequently raises objections. These objections, however, are based on the fact that consciousness is incapable of experiencing pure sensory perception—which is knowing without consciousness—and thus it underrates, because it does not understand, any way of knowing other than its own.

For the most part it rarely occurs to anyone that the human sensory system can function without consciousness. Usually people believe it is the other way around—namely, that consciousness can function without the senses. This latter belief, however, is based on the notion that consciousness is eternal or an immortal soul perhaps, but in truth, matters are actually the reverse. Man, like the animal, can function without consciousness, but neither man nor animal can function without the senses. Thus while it is quite possible for man to go on living and functioning without consciousness, once the senses cease to function the result is a purely vegetative mode of existence. While plants can thrive in such a dimension of existence, neither man nor animal can do so. The whole point is that as long as consciousness remains, it functions in conjunction with the senses and does not allow for “pure” sensory knowing. Thus we must keep in mind that apart from consciousness or separate from it, the senses have their own way-of-knowing and partake of a dimension of existence not available to consciousness.

Although it is not our intention to go into the nature of “pure” sensory knowing, it is important to note that once consciousness falls away sensory knowing turns out to be quite different from what we had previously believed
it to be. Where we thought the senses had been responsible for discriminating the particular and singular, and believed that consciousness and the intellect posited the universal or whole, it turns out to be the other way around. The senses do not know, and cannot focus on, the particular or singular; it is nowhere in their power to do so. Consciousness alone has this focusing and discriminating power. Thus by themselves the senses cannot discriminate the singular or particular, and without the singular there is also no plural, no parts and wholes, no one-and-the-many. Sensory knowing is not derived by reflection, intuition, feeling or any such experience; instead, whatever is to be known is simply “there”—quite flatly with no thought or feeling. The senses merely apprehend “what is” with none of the distinctions, discriminations and labeling that are so indicative of the function of consciousness. As it turns out then, consciousness is a discriminator, discriminating the particular and multiple, the knower and known, subject and object. Its dimension is entirely relative, while the senses are non-discriminating and non-relative, knowing neither parts nor whole. Also, pure sensory knowing is neither a different type of consciousness nor a different level of the same; rather, it is a totally different system or way of knowing—virtually a different dimension of existence. Pure sensory knowing bears no resemblance to the knowing, experiencing dimension of consciousness. Obviously there are more ways of knowing than that of consciousness.

Similar to the senses, consciousness is a physiological function integrated with the total body-mind functioning. From this integration man derives an unconscious subjective sense of physical form, or experiences himself as a discrete, separate entity or being. In the absence of consciousness, however, the experience and awareness of physical form dissolves, resulting in the unusual experience of bodilessness, a condition to which man would have to acclimate if consciousness were permanently to fall away. So form as it is experienced by consciousness is quite different from form experienced by the senses alone—and different as well from Form known in the absolute sense of the term. Thus when we have occasion to say that “form is void,” we are not speaking from the experience of consciousness and its way of knowing (or even its way of not knowing); rather, this statement is made first of all from the experience of “pure” sensory knowing. Then ultimately, when we have realized that void IS absolute, this statement is made from the perspective of absolute knowing. For now, however, we wish only to emphasize that for mankind sensory knowing as it lies beyond consciousness is not the same as the animals’ sensory knowing. The movement beyond consciousness is a forward step for man, not a backward step into the animal dimension of existence. Our human passage to the divine is an irreversible forward movement; it cannot reverse itself or move backwards to any lesser dimension of existence.
The Function of Consciousness

The fact that man is not always conscious of his own awareness (self-conscious, that is) attests to the rootedness of self-awareness in the unconscious. This rootedness is responsible for the continuity of self-consciousness across all levels of consciousness, including the level we call “unitive” or “God-consciousness.” There could be no self-awareness if this awareness were not, first of all, unconscious. As someone once noted, nothing rises to the conscious level that is not first on the unconscious level of consciousness. This fact tells us that self-awareness on the conscious level is not sufficient to account for self or consciousness, and that we must look to a deeper level if we are to find the true source and origin of self-awareness.

This deeper level, of course, is everything we call the “unconscious,” a level we often think of in terms of content and storage, or mysterious energies and powers—in a word, everything we do not know about ourselves on the conscious level. But far more important, on this unconscious level consciousness functions automatically, spontaneously, almost mechanically and beyond our conscious control. Also on this level, consciousness as a physiological function connects with other physiological functions and is integrated with the total body-mind. This integration is such that changes in either the function of consciousness or in any bodily function is reciprocally experienced by the body and consciousness alike. Sometimes we forget this fact and believe, instead, that consciousness or self is somehow separate from the body, suspended in it, or can exist apart from the body. If this were so, consciousness could never be integrated with body-mind functioning or affect our lives in any way, which is obviously not the case.

The great importance of the unconscious is that it is the root level of physiological functioning for the whole system of the psyche or consciousness. On this physiological level consciousness is the reflexive mechanism of the mind (or brain), which is the mind’s ability to bend on itself in order to know itself—know its own functions, experiences, thoughts and content. The act of bending on itself IS the act of self-awareness—the mind’s own awareness of itself. Because of this bending action we have the subject-object poles of consciousness, which is the mind knowing itself as object to itself. Thus subject and object are the same, the same mind knowing itself. Self-knowledge then is the subject-objectified or subject-as-object, and all “self” words are expressions of this reflexive act, expressions of the mind’s own experience of itself. Although the word “self” can become a mere concept or content of the mind, the spontaneous origin of all self words are the experiential expressions of the reflexive mechanism of the mind. Everything else that can be said of self is secondary to the act or function which IS self-awareness on the unconscious level. Thus
the reflexive act of the mind is what the knowing-self IS; self is not the result of a reflexive act; rather, self IS this act.

Because the reflexive mechanism or act of self awareness is an autonomous mechanism it is not under conscious control—we cannot stop or start it, or alter it in any way. Thus on a totally unconscious level, self-awareness goes on whether we are conscious of it or not. Only when we become aware of our own awareness (self-conscious, that is) do we move to the conscious level of consciousness, which is a “reflective” level (as opposed to the unconscious or “reflexive” level). Unlike the unconscious, we have some control over the conscious or reflective level. Here we can deliberately reflect on ourselves, look within (introspection), or remain in the state of simple self-awareness—there are various levels of reflectivity. In simple terms, self-awareness exists on both the conscious and unconscious levels of consciousness, and thus all consciousness is self-consciousness.

The self-awareness we know most about is the experience of the reflective or conscious level of consciousness; the self-awareness we know little about or may not know at all, is the experience of the unconscious level of consciousness—virtually the level of its physiological functioning. This tells us that even if we could do away with reflective self-awareness (conscious level of the psyche), we still could not do away with reflexive (unconscious) self-awareness. As a physiological function the reflexive mechanism underlies all levels of consciousness; thus to do away with one level would be to do away with all levels—which, of course, would be the end of all consciousness. This means that if consciousness (self) ceased to function, it would have to cease across all levels because, at its physiological root level, consciousness functions on an all-or-none basis. The mind does not “half bend” on itself.

Because self or consciousness is first and foremost a physiological function, nothing short of the cessation of this function could account for any state or condition we call “no-self” or “no-consciousness.” Thus if the reflexive mechanism of the mind were to cease functioning it would cease across all levels of consciousness, from the conscious to the unconscious as well as God-consciousness. So long as the reflexive mechanism persists, however, self persists because this mechanism IS consciousness; it IS the mysterious unconscious self. The reflexive mechanism is not a function that may or may not give rise to the experience of self; rather, on the unconscious level, self IS this function. When we consider all the experiences and content to which this mechanism gives rise, we become so wrapped up in these secondary aspects of self or consciousness that we sometimes forget its physiological roots. Even though most of our passage through consciousness consists of dealing with its various experiences and content, our present interest is to focus
on the true nature of self prior to all secondary experiences and content.

It is not difficult to see why the deepest self is virtually an unknown, or why we constantly experience its profound unconscious mystery. Because its deepest nature and experience is unknown some people identify self or consciousness as the mystery of the divine, or identify it as the divine. Indeed, we do this without knowing. Thus, for example, we believe our experiences of the divine to be the divine when, in fact, what we experience is the unconscious responding to the divine. We might compare this to the experience of being stuck with a needle—our experience is our response to the needle, which means the experience is only ourself; it is not the needle’s experience. We do not know the needle’s experience or its particular dimension of existence; in fact, we do not know if the needle experiences anything at all. So too, when we experience the divine, the experience is our response to the divine, which means the experience is only ourself—our unconscious self. Our response (the effect), however, is not the divine’s experience, just as it was not the needle’s experience. We do not know the divine’s experience or dimension of existence. While the divine (or needle) may be the cause of our experience, the experience itself is the effect. Thus no matter how divine our experiences may appear to be, we cannot justify the leap that claims our experience is the divine or the divine’s own experience. We have to admit that all we can know and experience of the divine—and the universe for that matter—is limited to our human dimension of knowing and experiencing and that this limited way of knowing and experiencing is the boundary of consciousness.

Although we say that experiences of the divine are virtually experiences of ourselves—the unconscious self as it touches upon the divine—this does not mean that consciousness is totally separate from the divine. On the contrary, so long as anything lasts, nothing is separate from the divine. The divine is the unknown of matter itself—not matter, however, as it is known and experienced by consciousness or the intellect and senses. But if consciousness as a structure and function is not divine, it is also not separate from the unknown divine substance from which it is formed. That which is truly divine about man and the universe is beyond any particular form, structure or function, and therefore beyond anything we can point to. Though consciousness has its own unique experience of the divine, the divine is beyond the knowing, experiencing dimension of consciousness.
The Knowing-Self

So far we have mentioned only the reflexive mechanism of the mind, which is the “knowing-self” and one of the two experiential dimensions that make up self or consciousness. The other dimension is the “feeling-self,” which is equally mysterious and rooted in the unconscious. Although the knowing-self and the feeling-self are two different experiences, they nevertheless function together to form the inseparable wholeness of self or consciousness. This functional unity is such that if there were no feeling-self there also would be no knowing-self, and vice versa; we cannot have one without the other.

We have already said that the mind bending on itself is responsible for all self-awareness. When the mind bends on itself what does it see? It sees itself, of course. As an automatic function, this seeing or self-awareness is first of all unconscious and only secondarily conscious. The developmental process is the movement from one level of awareness to another while the reflexive mechanism remains stable throughout. Because the mind bends on itself it sees or is aware of itself; thus we have the knowing experience “This is I,” “I am myself,” and so on. Self is not a socially learned or conditioned experience; it is not a mistake or an illusion. Rather, self or consciousness is a concrete function of the human brain; without it, man would not be man.

If we can understand the reflexive mechanism and how it works we can see that the mind knows itself solely as object to itself. This is a reflexive type of knowing in which the subject-self is no different from the object-self; either way the mind bends, it bends on itself. There are not two selves, of course, one an object and the other a subject. On the contrary, if the object-self changes, it is only because the subject-self changes. In the course of our journey, then, it is not the reflexive mechanism that changes; rather, it is the level of self-awareness that changes. Thus we can know ourselves on a superficial level (through the eyes of others, for example) or we can know ourselves to the depths of realizing we are not separate from the divine. What makes these changes in depth possible is the stability of the autonomous reflexive mechanism.

So we have to keep in mind that the reflexive mechanism underlies all levels of consciousness and self-knowing, and that its physiological roots constitute the unconscious or unknown aspect of self or psyche. It is not possible, however, to discover the true depth of these unconscious roots until the reflexive mechanism has permanently ceased to function. Thus to the very end of the journey, the final boundary of consciousness remains totally unconscious and unknown. When the reflexive mechanism has permanently ceased to function, however, the true unconscious nature of this mechanism becomes known—known by its absence.
About the Author

Bernadette Roberts is one of the most extraordinary contemplatives of our time. The child of a devout Catholic family, Bernadette Roberts’ contemplative experiences began at an early age. At fifteen, they began to fit into a frame of reference within her Christian tradition. Ten years of seclusion in a monastery followed, during which Bernadette realized an abiding state of oneness with God. According to the Christian mystical tradition, this egoless, unitive state is as far as one can progress in this life.

Upon leaving the monastic life, Ms. Roberts returned “to the marketplace” and led a life as a wife and mother. She is the author of three books, The Experience of No-Self: A Contemplative Journey, The Path to No-Self: Life at the Center, and What Is Self: A Study of the Spiritual Journey in Terms of Consciousness. She offers retreats and seminars periodically and lives in Santa Monica, California.
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