

The Revelation of “Just Noticing”

By Munir Peter Reynolds

I come from the Sufi perspective. Sufism is often thought of as the mystical side of Islam. In fact, the nondual understanding of reality as an indivisible Unity such that everything shares the same being - goes way further back than Islam. So, the Sufi perspective is ancient and universal.

Here I will write about the ego or the separate self, its roots in the human psyche and what we can do to see more clearly this happening in ourselves. It's a little odd to write about because the separate self doesn't actually *exist*. It is an assumed limitation of the only Self there is - aware being, which all of us share. That is why every authentic spiritual tradition teaches effacement of this illusory self as a central tenet. “The first shall be last and the last first.” But even when we genuinely want to follow such a teaching, we can get caught and it can seem very hard to do so.

Why is this, and what is the remedy we need?

Each of us says “I” hundreds of times everyday. The real you is here, for sure. We've investigated this in previous talks I've given. Actually your real “I” refers to the portion of infinite awareness that has borne your name for your entire life. Sufis call it the “ruh” or spirit. That “I” is real and is your true identity, but exists outside of time and space and is not a thing or a noun, no object that can be known by the mind. It's the infinite, timeless, pure knowing of your experience.

Nonetheless, most of us do not know or “remember” that “I” clearly. That's because it has become mixed with thoughts, experiences, memories, images which are woven together into the idea that there is a “someone” living inside your head, separate from everyone and everything else. That wrinkle in our pure awareness is laden with agendas, strategies, emotions and conditioning that hold it in place.

That's the separate self we imagine ourselves to be. When that self is functioning on steroids we call it *narcissism*. Narcissism is defined as a personality trait that's characterized by an exaggerated sense of self-importance, a need for admiration, and a lack of empathy for others. Spiritually, it is actually a compensation for the seeming absence of the authentic self. The narcissist remembers the real self, as if hearing an echo of it, of peace, happiness and intimacy, but goes seeking it through a separate self in activities both subtle and gross. When life seems to thwart this obsession, people get even more agitated.

To open this up some more, here's a Sufi story my sufi teacher often told:

Moses is walking up the mountain to talk to God and he passes the home of the local Rabbi. He's sitting on his porch in his best finery, and his long, white, perfectly groomed beard is all in place. He asks, "Moses, when you speak with God today, please ask him if he has any messages for me." Moses doesn't reply but goes on his way. (As with many jokes like this one, this scene happens several times over several days. One morning Moses is again ascending the mountain and the Rabbi asks if God has any message for him. Moses looks at the Rabbi and says, "As a matter of fact, yes. God said to tell you that you're always thinking about your beard." The Rabbi immediately flies into a rage, jumping up and down, tearing his clothes and pulling out his beard by the roots. God looks down to Moses and says, "You see, he still only thinks about his beard!"

Over the centuries the Sufis have made quite a study of the illusory self and the structure of narcissism. There are different systems, but the most common denotes seven levels of *maqam*, or stations/levels of the *nafs*, or ego or "lower" self. A maqam is like a "spiritual set-point", an indicator of how caught in the illusion of separation a human being may be. Let me give you a bit of the flavor of this.

The ***nafs Ammara*** is the greedy, voracious, commanding self that drives toward degradation. To this one, everything and everyone is an object to be corrupted or consumed in the ego's insatiable desire to fill up the inner hole in their sense of self. It is pure lust - for money, fame, sex and so on. This is considered to be the "lowest" or most dense layer of the nafs.

Next up we have the *nafs Lawwama* , the blaming self which is consumed with criticizing, self-reproach, complaining and contrasting. Whether critical of itself or of others, this level of the ego is blinded in the heart and unable to take responsibility for anything, nor to draw a sense of inherent self worth from within.

The third level is the *nafs Mulhima*, the inspired self which reflects more balance in the heart, enabling the person to receive some inner and outer guidance. However, if there are still too many impressions in the heart, that guidance may be misinterpreted and lead to suffering and misdeeds.

I won't innumerate all of these levels, but going on up we have the secure self, the content self, the gratified self. The 7th level, the nafs Safiyya, the "complete" self signifies a "pure soul." Purified of identification with the impressions creating separation, this self can experience the ecstasy and joy of unlimited life and be a real force of good in the world.

We all have some elements of these levels functioning in us all the time. Our maqam then is really an indicator of how much we have "let go" as well as how much we "hang on". *Simply put, how much are we still thinking about our beard?*

Along the way we may experience what the sufis call a "hal", a temporary spiritual state of the freedom and joy that can appear from time to time in our journey toward God. We might experience a *hal* on a beautiful day in the woods, an evening of dancing or a deep meditation. These are grace experiences. Rupert Spira calls them "free samples" from God that show

what's possible. But the *hal* is usually temporary and we return to the "maqam" that denotes our set point in the spiritual hierarchy.

Where do these impressions come from that determine our maqam, or spiritual "station"? Sufi psychology recognizes two main impressions, the "family hole", and the argument with God.

The "family hole" refers to the tear or wounding in the fabric of our sense of self, usually from experiences in our family of origin, that comes from a lack of intimacy, not being seen, being neglected or abused. Depending upon the impression, the sufi student is given practices to challenge and uproot that narcissistic hold on their understanding. We can actually grab on tightly to something that's painful because it's familiar - the compensation we made in order to cope with a difficult circumstance.

The argument with God has to do with feeling so beaten down, defeated or victimized that we believe we are abandoned by the divine, and we may therefore have a huge chip on our shoulder about life in general. It can take the form of feeling like a victim of life. Ironically, the only remedy for the argument with God is to *receive the love of God*, which can be quite a leap for someone in this state.

So, what can we do to raise our maqam, this spiritual "set-point"?

In short, *nothing at all*. Our maqam is set by divine law, often by things we cannot see and understand because we are so absorbed in our identifications and conditioning. Ironically, a "higher" maqam comes by becoming nothing at all. As Meister Eckhart said, "Since it is God's nature not to be identical to anything other than itself, we must come to the state of being nothing in order to be one with God's nature."

Spiritual traditions teach various practices and meditation that may lead us to the experience that we are not "becoming nothing" but are actually

already nothing. As an intermediary step, we *can soften our being and* take a stance of surrender.

But, I would like to suggest a practice that can bypass the filter of our habits, assumptions and biases in looking at ourselves. The practice is “**just noticing**”. “Just noticing” is a main practice in therapist Rick Carson’s book *Taming Your Gremlin*, which is a humorous, playful approach to what he calls “getting out of your own way.”

The separate self or nafs *wants* to ensnare you in all kinds of activities, and especially practices and efforts to try to get rid of him/her. It’s like the story of Brer Rabbit and the tar baby...you start throwing punches at your gremlin and you’re going to get helplessly mired. You can’t really take on your ego as a project.

Rick Carson says it’s better to “just notice”.. Don’t look directly at your ego but “just notice” it, as if with your peripheral vision. Noticing is very powerful because we see in an instant, “all at once” the whole picture.

Let’s just pause right here. “Just notice” your total experience of this right here. Take a quick look at the level of thought, feeling, sensation. Do you catch anything that you were missing as you were just listening to me just now?

A great deal can be communicated and known in a glance. In just noticing we suddenly see with:

No judgment

No filter

No agenda

No point of view

No time

No space

Just noticing happens at the level of awareness that could be described as “being aware of being aware”. What is it that is aware of awareness? Why,

awareness itself, of course! Awareness recognizes experience and instantly reveals everything directly to be known about it.

When we drop the filter of a personal self, in that instant of “just noticing”, choiceless, pure awareness is activated. That knowing takes place outside of time and space.

Just noticing has the perfume of nothing, no time and and no one. There is no one who notices, there is just noticing. When you start to play with this amazing faculty of your real Self you may see that “just noticing” supersedes and undermines the thinking and perceiving mind that we normally attribute to a “someone” living in our head. That activity becomes just more of what is “noticed.”

Awareness, or the nonentity that just notices, is always present prior to any thought or idea we might have about how to have a better experience or a better self in the future. If we’re curious, if we’re willing to follow that insight it can lead to a revelation in who and what we believe about ourselves and life itself. Adyashanti calls this a “checkmate”, when we realize that anything we might do to change our experience or attain to something in the future is tripped up by being aware, or just noticing in this case.

Thus, just noticing can be a revelation. Revelation comes from the Latin *revelare* to “lay bare”. When our raw experience is “laid bare” in the clear light of awareness, we’re learning, the mind is evolving, the body is letting go. We may actually be getting in line for another “free sample” from God.

My Sufi teacher used to say “We have to lie down in front of the door we want to go through.” That portal to God is your sense of “I Am”. We pass from the world of time and space into being, God’s being through the I Am. We come back to the activity of being a person through that same door.

Let’s assume for the moment that I am angry. If I “just notice” and see clearly, what’s present in my direct experience?

Pure awareness

One or more sensations
A feeling perhaps of heat
Irregular breathing
Shaking perhaps

But, is there anyone, someone, who is angry? This noticing does not include the angry person. In fact, just noticing starts to pull the plug on the seeming reality of the separate self who is angry. It's seen to be a kind of mask, defensive activity, or an echo from the past.

So to begin to sum up:

1. Our maqam is really a barometer of how much we have shed, how much we have let go of. This is what all of the traditions describe as surrender, letting go and letting be, taking the backward step, and so on. This is where we begin...
2. Don't try to engage or discipline your ego or "gremlin". That's just what it wants - lots of attention. See it. "Just notice" it. Keep noticing, and realize that are really just the *knowing of that*. That's the beginning of a journey of transformation. Just noticing can actually become a meditation that is what you are rather than something you do.
3. DO make fun of your "gremlin". Draw it, poke fun, make jokes about it, give it a goofy name, own the absurdity of it. That de-escalates its importance, and narcissism absolutely hates being made fun of.
4. Ultimately, "just noticing" lays bare our experience and is another name for being aware of being aware. That is the "ruh" or spirit of the Sufis. I will close with a thought about our real self, from Hazrat Inayat Khan:

The soul has no birth, no death, no beginning, no end. Sin cannot touch it, nor can virtue exalt it. Wisdom cannot open it up, nor can ignorance darken

*it. It has been always and always it will be. **This is the very being of man, and all else is its cover, like a globe on the light.** The soul's unfoldment comes from its own power, which ends in its breaking through the ties of the lower planes. It is free by nature, and looks for freedom during its captivity. All the holy beings of the world have become so by freeing the soul, its freedom being the only object there is in life.*

“Just noticing” lays bare the reality of the soul - pure awareness. Taking our stance as aware knowing is the pathless path. We’re discovering our true identity as aware presence or spirit.

As Rumi Says:

“I see so deeply within myself --

Not needing my eyes.

I can see everything clearly!

Why would I want to bother my eyes again???

Now that I see the world ...

through His eyes.”