

The Student

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The student needs to be a psychologically healthy human being. Unfortunately, Western psychology does not have a well-considered definition of a healthy mind. It concentrates almost exclusively on pathology and tries to fix psychological problems with chemistry. Its failure to address the deeper needs of the soul and adequately treat the neuroses of middle-class life drives many to religion and spirituality.

Self-inquiry is not intended to heal neurotic egos. It works on a mind that consciously relates its suffering to a lack of understanding about the nature of reality, not to problems picked up in childhood and compounded by ill-considered choices along the way. It investigates desires and values, for example, topics given short shrift by psychology. Its psychological program involves managing the likes and dislikes that compromise the ability of the mind to inquire into the nature of reality. It is not a discipline meant to make life work for an ego trying to find meaning in the world. Whether an individual has achieved his or her worldly goals or not, a mature person knows that seeking happiness in the world is a zero-sum game.

The qualities listed below are not meant to be seen as ideals. Trying to live up to an abstraction creates conflict and becomes an additional problem that needs to be addressed before inquiry can bear fruit. In fact many of these qualities exist in some measure in most minds. Understanding them makes it easy to pinpoint areas that need work to prepare the mind for inquiry.

An Open Mind

What is a healthy, qualified mind? It is an open mind, one willing to question its assumptions about the meaning of life. An open mind knows that the conclusions the ego draws from experience are not always correct. Generally, as we age the mind becomes less and less open and its native purity is sullied by accumulated prejudices, beliefs and opinions. Even a mind awakened to the truth by an epiphany finds it difficult to stay open and inquiring once the epiphany wears off because it is just the everyday mind dressed up in mystic clothing. A truly open mind will inquire before, during and after any and all experiences, worldly or spiritual. If it thinks a mystic experience is the last word and stops asking questions, it will fail to convert its indirect self-knowledge into direct knowledge. An open mind remains open irrespective of what happens because it is awareness committed to seeking itself without judgments and conclusions. It simply tries to understand what happens as it actually is. It does not attempt to make reality jibe with its likes and dislikes.

Self-inquiry is the knowledge distilled from the experience of countless self-realized beings. Most of us believe we are unique and, assuming we have problems, we believe no one else is capable of devising solutions. We do not realize that the same being inhabits every body, that problems are universal and that workable solutions have been devised millennia ago. So even if we are told by the wise how to solve our problems, we reject the advice and keep experimenting until such time as we give up in despair and ask for help. But an open mind learns from the

experience of others.

A Reasonable Mind

A healthy, mature mind is a reasonable mind, one not inclined to superstitions, opinions and beliefs. This is a particularly important qualification, as the most outrageous and irrational beliefs are regularly passed off as truth in the spiritual world. The Buddha is reported to have said, "Believe nothing you have read or anything you have heard, even if I have said it, unless it corresponds to common sense and reason." Enlightenment is not a mystery. The self is not hidden away behind the mind as conventional wisdom has it. However, when something is not immediately available for perception, it is possible to speculate and fantasize. Awareness is self-evident, simple and obvious if you know where and how to look. It does not contradict perception and inference. It makes perfect sense.

A Discriminating Mind

Life is rarely what it seems to be. A discriminating mind intelligently avoids the petty dramas, conflicts and indulgences of daily life. To the discriminating person life is a tragicomedy to be acted to the hilt, no doubt, but of no lasting importance. "It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing." A discriminating mind sees its likes and dislikes, memories, dreams, fears and desires for the transitory epiphenomena they are. It does not try to avoid action. Action is unavoidable, but it acts for the right reasons. A discriminating mind realizes that action will not produce lasting freedom and avoids pursuits that will only momentarily free it from its concerns, preferring instead to inquire into the basis of its pursuits. It knows that life is a zero-sum game because it sees duality playing out in everything: every gain entails a loss and every loss entails a gain. Because it appreciates the frustrating nature of *samsara*, expectations of object-happiness do not unduly influence its determinations.

The definition of discrimination is "the settled conviction that the self alone is real and that objects are apparently real." Reality, awareness, is what exists in the past, present and future, before the past and after the future. It exists in and beyond the waking, dream, and deep sleep states of consciousness. Everything else, which is everything experienced, is apparently real, or "not-self." With this definition in mind at all times, the discriminating mind will turn its attention away from the world of objects and back to awareness over and over, until attention rests steadily on the self.

Knowing that life passes through you and that you do not pass through life is discrimination. Knowing that things happen to you, not by you, is discrimination. Liberation is discrimination, the knowledge that separates the real from the apparent. One need do nothing more than know the difference between the real and the apparent to free oneself of attachment to the apparent. Until discrimination is perfect, the ego will get entangled in appearances and suffer.

Objects do not stand alone. They depend on the self, but the self does not depend on them. To say that objects are apparently real does not mean that they are illusions. They do exist, albeit temporarily. It means that they depend on the subject, awareness. The self, the subject, stands alone. A rainbow, for example, exists but is apparently real because it relies on a conspiracy between the eyes and certain physical conditions. When the conditions that brought it into being dissolve, as they do, it ceases to exist. The practice of discrimination is a sure way out of

samsara, assuming it is supported by the following qualities.

A Dispassionate Mind

A healthy mind is an objective, dispassionate mind, one willing to abandon sense indulgences, emotional passions and intellectual beliefs for the sake of peace. Inquiry works best in a peaceful mind, although it should be practiced at all times, particularly when the mind is disturbed. Every disturbance should be seen as a statement from the self that your attention is not where it should be. Born of the observation of the defects inherent in *samsara*, a dispassionate individual sins intelligently, walking the tightrope between attraction and aversion, indulgence and abstinence. When indulgence causes attachment, it withdraws the senses. When abstinence causes cravings that cannot be renounced, it judiciously allows contact with the objects until attachment develops. Both unfettered indulgence and fanatical abstinence produce emotional turbulence and hinder inquiry. A dispassionate mind is not an indifferent, cold mind. It enjoys an ironic, humorous ho-hum indifference toward itself and the world. Usually this qualification is listed after discrimination because dispassion happens naturally when you understand *samsaric* pleasures fail to deliver what they purport to deliver.

A Disciplined, Observant Mind

Successful self-inquiry depends on many factors, not the least of which is a clear, still mind. Two basic sources of agitation hinder inquiry: the desire for a particular result and the depressed or angry reaction of the mind to unwanted results. It is impossible to withstand your desires without self-understanding. They come from an unconscious source and enter the door of the conscious mind without permission. Control lies in your relationship to them. An immature person does not consider whether or not acting out a desire is desirable. He or she simply takes the desire or fear as a command and sets out to pursue or avoid the relevant object.

A disciplined mind is not a controlling mind. Just as you cannot directly control your desires, you cannot directly control your thoughts. A disciplined mind is an observing mind because observation produces understanding, and knowledge is power. Thoughts have no intrinsic value, but the value added to the thoughts by a mind that does not know the truth may very well be a problem.

If you like somebody and ask them out and they reject your invitation, you feel hurt, although no hurt was intended; it was simply what reality had to offer at the time. But because it was an unsuitable result, you added the hurt. If you are not observant, you will blame the person or feel bad about yourself and miss an opportunity to discover the source of the pain. This will set you up to experience it again. Had you traced the hurt back to its source and discovered that it was connected to your identification with your desires, you would have lessened the likelihood of hurting yourself the next time. To strip your projections from the thoughts and see them as they are is the purpose of disciplined observation. A mind freed of its projections is capable of self-inquiry.

Observation is not only useful to remove projections, it is also helpful for analysis of the content of thoughts. What you think about yourself and the world represents your knowledge or ignorance. Because the purpose of self-inquiry is the removal of ignorance, it is important to know what you actually think and why you think what you think. A person caught up in *samsara* is more or less

one with his or her thoughts. How can such a person evaluate his or her thinking, if the thoughts are not known?

Mental discipline implies restraint with reference to one's desires and fears. It is not always wise to act on every desire, even if it were possible. For instance, very rich and powerful people often destroy their lives because they have the wherewithal to satisfy all their desires, no matter how frivolous or inappropriate. To gain a mind capable of self-realization, it is important to develop the habit of evaluating desires with reference to priorities. I want to lose weight and my neighbor brings over a big cheesecake. Desire arises and I want to eat it. Is it appropriate to satisfy this desire? Giving up gratuitous desires as they arise, with reference to the goal of achieving a quiet mind, is a necessary qualification for self-realization. If you do not go with gratuitous desires eventually they will no longer disturb you.

Loose lips sink ships. Mental discipline also implies control of the senses. If you find that certain impulses cannot be released at the mental level, through observation and evaluation with reference to your priorities, the last line of defense is the sense organ level. For example, you have a distinct dislike of someone in your office. Every time you are in this person's presence, you have a big urge to express yourself. Perhaps you call it "being honest." As long as the feeling stays in your mind, you are okay *karma*-wise. If you are particularly egoistic and feel that you need to be "honest" with the person, there will be consequences. Perhaps he or she is tight with the boss. A month later you are out of a job. If you are out of a job, you cannot pay the mortgage. The bank forecloses and your wife takes up with the rich guy down the block. Your kids hate you for messing up their lives. If you thought your mind was unhappy before all this happened, think how it is going to feel once it happens. One's whole life can unravel from a very small incident. *Karma* has no sympathy. It does not care what you think. Think what you like, but it is wise to be careful what you do. Even if there are no obvious results in terms of your situation, you will feel agitated because injury in thought and word is also a violation of *dharma*.

Simply refusing to give in to the urge to project the mind into objects is the negative half of mental discipline. The positive half is turning the attention back to the self. Projections like anger, blame and criticism are never about the object. They are opportunities for self-realization. Just as in a dream where all the co-workers in your dream office are your own dream mind, in non-dual reality all others are actually your self. So when you are angry, you are angry with yourself for a reason you do not understand. Convert the emotion into self-inquiry. Ask yourself why you are angry with the object and if it is really true that the object is the problem. Ask why it matters that so-and-so is a jerk. Understand that if so-and-so is a jerk, you are the real jerk, because so-and-so is only in your mind.

In fact you have no control of the anger. Try to get angry when you are happy. Anger comes from an unconscious reservoir of unexamined beliefs and opinions. The object triggers something already in you. Once you have owned the anger, it is necessary to resolve it through continued inquiry into its source. The source of negative emotion is always the belief that you are small, separate, inadequate and incomplete. Ask yourself if it is true. The true you is never angry. Let the mind rest in this knowledge and the anger will disappear. Positive projections on objects should also be analyzed and traced back to the self. In this way positive and negative projections are resolved and the mind becomes objective and non-judgmental. When the mind has been cleared of most of its binding projections, it reflects awareness faithfully and the self is revealed in it.

Self-Duty

Good fences make good neighbors. Need is a fact of life. If you do not see that your needs are met in accordance with your self-duty, your mind will be agitated. Many people, particularly women, have been conditioned to take care of other's needs before they take care of their own. No particular virtue accrues to the one who takes care of other's needs, although much is made of it by society and religion. In fact indiscriminate looking after other's needs or your idea of their needs not only hinders your growth, it hinders the recipient's growth because it keeps him or her from developing self-reliance. If you have children, you have a duty to see that your obligations are fulfilled, up to a point. If you have sullen and lazy adult children living in your home, eating your food and not paying rent, you have boundary issues and need to change the way you see yourself with reference to others.

One of the most egregious violations of this principle is envy, wanting to be like someone else, because it prevents you from appreciating yourself as you are. It is impossible to inquire successfully if you want to be different from what you are. You owe it to yourself to love yourself warts and all. One day a piston and a bolt were having a conversation. The piston was carrying on about its glamorous, dynamic life and deriding the bolt for its insignificance. "I make it all happen while you just sit there unnoticed, doing nothing," it said. "That's true," said the lowly bolt, "but if I don't do my job you and this engine comes off the chassis, you will be out of a job."

To gain self-realization, you need to respond appropriately to whatever life brings. Appropriate response to life is your duty to yourself. To ignore your duty to yourself poisons the mind with resentment and causes low self-esteem. A resentful mind is not qualified for self-knowledge.

A Patient, Forbearing Mind

A mature mind is a patient, forbearing mind. Life often presents unpleasant and relatively intractable situations that will not resolve immediately. Your mother-in-law comes to visit and overstays her welcome. Your wife is particularly attached to her. Irritating the mother-in-law will cause problems with your wife, which can bring on further problems. So you patiently endure the situation until she goes away. A forbearing mind is endowed with the capacity to tolerate sufferings and disappointments without struggling for redress or revenge. A mind that strives to right wrongs is constantly agitated. A mind that feels deprived or victimized is not qualified for self-inquiry.

A Balanced Mind

Equanimity is the peaceful state that ensues when the mind meditates consistently on the self and detaches itself over and over from sense stimuli, feelings and thoughts, as a result of a continuous examination of their defects.

A Motivated Mind

A mature mind is a motivated mind. Everyone wants to be free, but not everyone has the burning desire that will generate the perseverance and determination required to overcome the surfeit of

obstacles encountered on the path.

In fact liberation is usually only one of several priorities for seekers. Most are satisfied with the idea of belonging to a community of like-minded souls and are realistic about their chances for enlightenment. One need not be the sharpest knife in the drawer to see that out of many seekers only a miniscule fraction of them realize who they are. The problem is further compounded by the fact that most of those claiming to be enlightened are so obviously controlled by their desires for love, fame, wealth, virtue and power that they give enlightenment a bad name.

If the teachers still pander to their desires, why should I subject myself to the discipline of self-inquiry to get what I want? Why not just pursue *samsaric* ends directly? In fact seekers are seekers because they are burdened with desires for security, pleasure and virtue. Finally, most teachers tout experiential enlightenment because it does not require qualifications, not even burning desire. Somehow one is meant to just hang out with an enlightened person and it will supposedly happen effortlessly by some kind of mystic osmosis. Were it made known what it actually takes for self-realization, the spiritual world would shrink to the size of a pea overnight.

Furthermore, when spirituality becomes a middle-class phenomenon it takes on middle-class characteristics. A middle-class person is middling in his or her approach to life. He or she is afraid to test the limits and plumb the depths. Middle-class life is essentially a virtuous life; the rules are followed and merit accrues. Merit is rewarded with security, a certain degree of comfort and a sense of virtue. Life may not be terribly fulfilling for the middle classes but the suffering is not terribly painful either, so the sacrifices required for freedom are usually not forthcoming.

Enlightenment, the realization that “I am eternally free,” is the culmination of human evolution. Everything is working against it. The one who pursues it with single-pointed devotion is a salmon swimming upstream in the powerful river of life. The true seeker is someone who has actually lived to the fullest, tested every limit and realized without a shadow of a doubt that nothing here can satisfy the intense craving of the heart for freedom. The desire for freedom of one who takes to spirituality out of hurt, disappointment, the need for community or the romance of an alternative lifestyle will always be insufficient, although it can be cultivated by associating with realized souls.

When you near the end of your evolutionary journey, a raging desire to be free consumes you. It is not actually your personal desire, it is impersonal consciousness about to disabuse itself of the notion that it is something other than what it is. This burning desire, which is invariably uninformed – if you knew who you were you would not desire to be free – almost invariably formulates itself as a desire for experiential freedom. It will generate many intense and amazing epiphanies, but for it to bear fruit it needs to be converted into a desire for knowledge because only knowledge will extinguish it. And although you will not realize who you are without it, it needs to be accompanied in some measure by the qualities enumerated in this chapter.

A Believing Mind

A mature mind is a believing mind. Knowledge requires a means, and since perception and inference cannot reveal awareness, scripture and a teacher are required to reveal it. Inference and perception are operated by the ego, but the ego cannot operate scripture, as we mentioned in the last chapter. Scripture needs to be operated by a skilled teacher until the knowledge takes root. Just reading scripture and interpreting its words with your own understanding – or lack

thereof – is not helpful. In fact the ego needs to be temporarily suspended for self-knowledge to take place. This suspension is accomplished by faith in the teaching. Up to this point faith is placed in the ego to solve the existential riddle, but now it is transferred to the teaching and the teacher. When the teaching works, you either discover that the ego is like a shadow, wholly dependent on you, in which case it is not a problem, or the ego assimilates the vision of non-duality and stands alone with the self as the self – or both.

Self-inquiry requires faith, but not blind faith. If it did, there would be no need for an open mind, discrimination, dispassion and the other qualities listed above. You understand that if you could have set yourself free, you would have done so long ago and you temporarily agree that self-knowledge can do the job. You accept scripture's contention that you are whole and complete, actionless awareness and not the body-mind entity, even though you do not necessarily experience yourself as such. With this in mind at all times, you manage your mind accordingly, destroying any and all beliefs to the contrary until such time as you realize the truth.

A Devoted Mind

A mature mind is a devoted mind. Devotion is the patient willingness to apply oneself wholeheartedly to the task at hand. You may be qualified in full measure and have circumstances conducive to liberation, but without devotion you will not see the inquiry – which may take years owing to the difficulty of dissolving the persistent dualistic orientation of the mind through to the end.

A Masculine Temperament

This quality is not gender-related insofar as men can suffer from its absence and women can be blessed with it. It is a take-charge, seize-the-day attitude, the power to appreciate what has to be done and to do it without dithering. It does not conflict with the feminine quality of acceptance and surrender nor with the wisdom to appreciate the futility of struggling in face of *samskaras* that cannot be easily dissolved by inquiry. In large part, spiritual growth depends on how quickly the inquirer sizes up subjective and objective problems and lays them to rest. Without this quality, the seeker will allow a resistant ego to have its way when it is not in the best interests of inquiry. It is the willingness to show a bit of tough love and resolutely stick to the inquiry. Life is short and every day that you do not move forward is a lost opportunity.