

The Different Levels of 'I'

by Swami Nishchalananda

What is this 'I' that we consider so important? What is this 'I' that we spend our entire life-time feeding, pampering, protecting and re-producing? What is this 'I' that we fear for after death? Will the 'I' be extinguished or will something survive?

For thousands of years, yogis, sages and seers, as well as Yogic texts, have clearly stated that there are different levels of 'I'.

All of us know the personal 'I' of daily life. In Yoga, this level of 'I' is called the *ahamkara* – literally, 'I do.' At this level our sense of 'I' comes from our identification with the body/mind and the role or roles we play in life. We have a sense of I-ness and individuality which we fulfil and express by doing and achieving. If we don't achieve certain things according to our desires or ambitions, our sense of self-image suffers and we feel like a failure. If we do fulfil our ambitions and desires we feel we are a success; temporarily we have a positive self-image and the ego or 'I' feels good.

This level of 'I' also includes thinking. Many people, especially intellectual types, get a sense of worth and a feeling of fulfilment by thinking and conceptualising. The doing is in the mind. This is indicated by the dictum of the French philosopher, René Descartes: 'I think, therefore I am.' The individual identifies himself, or herself, as a thinker. Our sense of self-existence comes out of the fact that we think. But this level of identification, which is the stance of modern western ideology, is not the fundamental core of our Being.

On a slightly deeper level comes the sense of 'I' which in Yoga is called *ahambhava* – literally 'I am.' This level of 'I am' is not meant in a mystical sense, but rather the sense of 'I am so and so: John Smith or Brigitte Dupont.' This feeling of 'I' depends more on a self-identification with who we are as a personality, rather than what we do.

The next level of self-identification is called *asmita* which refers to the sense of 'I' on a more existential level. It can be summarised by reversing Descartes' statement "I think, therefore I am" to 'I Am, therefore I think.' According to Yoga and other Indian mystical systems, Being is considered fundamental and thinking secondary. This indicates that *out* of our Being comes the possibility to think as well as feel, intuit and perceive.

We can get a taste of Asmita, the Being aspect of the 'I', during deep states of Meditation, although there is still a sense, albeit tenuous, of ego.

But Yoga goes even further. On a much deeper level comes the sense of 'I' as Consciousness (*Atma*), which can only be realised when all mental processes stop, albeit temporarily. At this point there is a re-identification or merging with the deepest level of 'I'. Then we are able to say: 'I Am' or to use the Biblical statement, 'I Am That I Am.' This is not an egotistical statement, but a state of understanding that transcends the sense of individuality and separation from other beings and things. This state arises beyond Meditation in the state of *Samadhi* (lit., 'Absorption into Reality').

Yoga or any spiritual path will take us on a journey through the deeper meaning and implications of 'I'. Then we discover (or rediscover) the Truth of our existence.

