

## REPORTS TO TARIQ

When I was studying Hinduism with Michael Bowen [Baba Kali Das Acharya] in the 1990s, I got to know a Sufi who called himself Tariq. Like Michael, Tariq was part *tsaddik* and part scoundrel, but I learned a lot from him. At one point he began giving me specific exercises which I was to perform and then write a report about. I found them very helpful. Some of these exercises dealt with intensely personal issues, but others were of wider relevance, and for what interest they may have I reproduce the reports on three of them here.

[August 2018]

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## **A: WHAT IS MY ESSENCE?**

Tariq, I am scrambling to get this done on the morning of my afternoon party, so that if you come I can give it to you on the spot. This is also a way to make myself get it done. Unlike the previous two assignments, this has been very difficult because asks for a philosophical speculation rather than a report of my own experience. (If I were a more accomplished mystic that might not be true.) Also, as usual, much of my intellectual energy has been absorbed by mundane responsibilities, and since you instructed me to observe *shabat* and set aside one day a week not to deal with promises, it has been that much harder to get this essay done because I promised to do it and therefore couldn't work on it on my day off. Also I'm lazy.

But seriously, folks. You ask a very difficult question. To answer "what is my essence?" naturally requires an answer to the prior question "who am I?", which has been asked by seekers of all flavors for thousands of years without definitive result. My first thought was to give the orthodox Vedanta answer and then the Buddhist non-answer and call it a day. But the more I think about this question the less satisfied I am with any answer. This in itself is a valuable lesson, as is the realization that I have not been spending enough time with these issues.

One classic Vedanta way into this question is through the famous raja yoga exercise "Am I my body?" Of course, I am not my body, nor am I my mind, senses, intellect, ego, or any of the other intermediate stops suggested in the exercise. According to this view, my essence is *Atman*. And the Vedanta position is very firm that *Atman* and *Brahman* are identical, and only *Maya* makes them seem separate. Overcome ignorance and the identity between God and the individual soul will be manifest. *That Art Thou* is about as basic as you can get in Vedanta.

I find the *Atman* part of this view very useful. Often when I feel my mind or my ego or even my body trying to take over control of my actions, I hear a small voice speaking inside me, always with the purest insight and coolest awareness, reminding me of the correct way to look at the situation and what to do. Whether or not I am doctrinally right to do so, I have come to identify this voice with *Atman*. One of the solidest lessons I have learned in my years on the Path is *always* to listen to this voice, *never* to discount it, *always* to do what it says when it advises me what to do. I never go wrong doing this and I keep out of a lot of trouble that way. I don't know whether that is my essence but it is, it *must* be, in harmony with it. This voice is the same voice which explains to me, while I am on LSD, what is happening and what my visions mean.

The second part of the yogic view of *Atman* is harder to relate to – that *Atman* is *Brahman*. I have no difficulty conceding this on a doctrinal level, but on a practical day-to-day level I find this doctrine inaccessible and therefore not *useful*. No doubt if I were a more advanced meditator (which I might have become, indeed might yet become, if I

were not so lazy) I would be better at integrating this viewpoint into my daily life. But as it is, I have trouble affirming that the voice which talks to me and tells me not to act stupid is the *same* as the Intelligence that created all worlds and Who is dreaming this Dream of Vishnu in which we all appear as characters. And the intellectual (as opposed to the mystical) path to this understanding requires abolition of all categories, which disables the intellect. That requirement makes the understanding useless for concrete action, except to the extent it points up the futility of terrestrial games – but you don't need Universal Consciousness for that. It is not really true, as Shankara says, that a jar is nothing but clay – even if it is 100% clay, it is also a jar. If you forget that part you can break your jar.

In part, also, I experience Atman as less universal than Brahman because the voice which speaks to me is speaking through a filter composed of the elements of my mind, ego, and so forth. That is why it speaks in my own idiomatic English, about ego-level issues such as anger, lust, distraction, compassion, etc. Is this truly Atman, or is it only David thinking clearly? I have no way to know the answer to that for sure. The voice also sometimes gives me the answers to technical legal problems, an unlikely activity for Brahman. (It works a bit better with a little cannabis added, too – what does this suggest?) Perhaps deeper meditation will make it clearer who is speaking.

But for the moment, while I can say with confidence that Atman is *essential*, can affirm it, can even come up with poetic metaphors to resolve the apparent discontinuity between my own consciousness and the Universal Consciousness (sparks, shards of a mirror, etc.), these remain acknowledgments of doctrine rather than expressions of my own experience. Perhaps I am more influenced than I thought by the monotheistic view that God and the creature are very different beings.

As we discussed, the Buddhist approach to all this is somewhat easier – the severe Theravada school I prefer discourages speculations of this sort, insisting that we concentrate instead on meditation, awareness, and compassion. (Even so, the identity of Brahman and Atman lies behind Buddhist metaphors like *overcome death* and *other shore*.) As you pointed out, the deconstruction of ego taught by the Buddhists – the five *skandhas* and so on – really relates to the ego rather than the essence. The void we experience between the thoughts – is that Brahman, or just a human mind in a moment of quiet sanity? How can I say either way? I can hear Lord Buddha admonishing me, saying: “Don't worry about it. Keep your mind on your daily practice. All that stuff will become clear enough in good time. For now just try to master your thoughts and your actions – that's enough to keep you busy for quite a while, *O bhikku*.” (Who is that I'm hearing speak? Buddha, or Atman, or Brahman, or David?)

The Tibetan school accepts the Brahman/Atman identity, but there is so much accretion of demons and lotuses and 100,000,000 bodhisattvas that I have a hard time working with that approach. Not to say it isn't *true*, and all, but I personally haven't learned to use it.

It seems, however, from that school's emphasis on reincarnation that it regards at least an important part of our essence as individual rather than universal. The elaborate view of the passage of the soul, laid out in the *Book of the Dead*, also suggests that there is more to their view of essence than merely abolishing discrimination between categories.

Thinking about this exercise has made me aware how many other viewpoints there are on the question of Who We Are. Some, like that of the Christians, I reject as too obviously batty to be taken seriously. Others, like the pure out-of-the-soup-totally-by-accident-for-absolutely-no-reason-at-all materialists, aren't quite batty but don't conform my experience that the world is far too complex to be anything but purposeful, and that it is sacred and filled with powerful emanations of unifying Intelligence. (That would make me sacred, too, but not necessarily identical with that Intelligence.) But others do make sense, in a limited way, and they do not always conform with each other. For example, I heard you say we are creatures of light whose (aim? purpose? destiny?) is to return to the source. This could be just a metaphor for the Vedanta Brahman/Atman identity, or it could be an entirely different radical science-fiction look at our essence. Again, Tim Leary writes in his books about people as having evolved from DNA templates seeded throughout the universe by a Master Intelligence, hard-wired to evolve further into species suited for space migration in order to disseminate DNA from galaxy to galaxy. Could be! Makes sense! Nothing to disprove it! But if so, it's hard to maintain that Brahman really *is* Atman in the Vedanta sense, unless you abolish all the categories again, and then where are you *intellectually*, where it makes sense even to answer a question at all? (Although again, *mystically* that's the best place to be.) And there are plenty more philosophies where those came from. As the comedian used to ask, "What am I, a philosopher?"

So what am I left with, as I stagger toward the finish line of this essay like an undergraduate rushing to complete a term paper? What do I conclude, as they are setting up the drinks table in my front room for my party about to begin? Probably that I need to experience the identity of Atman and Brahman more personally. This exercise has made me much more aware than I was before of the difference between intellectual and mystical understanding, and I will spend some quality time with that, and with Shankara. I feel a logjam breaking up if only I can have the discipline to spend *time* upbreaking it. So once again this homework turns out to have been very useful, even if not perhaps quite in the way you intended.

## **B: DISCERNING THE RHYTHM OF THE OCEAN**

August 20, 1997

Dear Tariq,

When we last spoke you set me this koanoid: “Walk on the beach and see if you discern the rhythm of the ocean. You’ll be a better Buddhist.”

But I have allowed myself to develop a habit of laziness, so from that day almost to this I have not walked on the beach, even though it is only two blocks from my house. Attempting to break the laziness habit I did finally walk on the beach, and tried to discern the rhythm of the ocean.

At first I heard only chaotic sound. Then I discerned patterns – an inflow with certain properties of length and sound and so on, then a pause, then an outflow with other properties, then a different pause, then the cycle repeated with proportionate similarities and variations, then again, and so on.

As I contemplated the rhythms I saw that these properties and rhythms were only meaningful with reference to me the observer. Half a mile down the beach, or in Samoa, or in a glider, or wherever, my particular observation would not be the same. Indeed the perceived rhythm is so subjective that it does not correspond to any “reality” except in the most arbitrary sense relating to my particular individual eye-ear-brain. And I could see that my viewpoint, my ocean-categorizing-apparatus as it were, was like the rest of my ego – all subjective construct, no reality, a dimensionless intersection. This permitted me to experience loss of ego for a brief time until ... until I imagined it found me again.

I conclude that the answer to the koanoid is that it is pointless as well as impossible to calculate the rhythm even of a small nearby patch of the ocean, for without subjectively imagined arbitrary lines no calculation is possible. As the lines have no reality, neither does the rhythm. The ocean IS – like all so-called random, chaotic systems, the resolution of forces too numerous and subtle to account. Its rhythms are therefore imaginary.

Which is not to say that there are not real rhythms in the ocean, or that they cannot be calculated. As an environmentalist you know that there are lots of them to which meaningful numbers can be attached – rhythms of temperature and salinity and boundary, of current and sediment and wind and tide and wave and gas and population and on and on. That’s what makes your koanoid a paradox.

So thank you for that experience. I think you were right and that I am now a better Buddhist, as advertised.

## **C: LISTENING TO THE SOUNDS**

TARIQ: As instructed, on my trip I worked on this assignment:

**LISTEN TO THE SOUNDS; NOTE HOW THEY AFFECT PEOPLE.  
BE AWARE OF YOUR OWN LIMBIC SYSTEM SWITCHING ON AND OFF.**

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Before leaving home I learned from a home medical encyclopedia that the limbic system controls autonomic nervous system, emotions, smells.

### **NEW YORK**

Second Avenue traffic. Noise similar to wave sound on the beach but somehow different-- inorganic but still organic-- chaotic like the ocean but driven by people instead of wind and wave.

Sleeping on 7th floor of 74th Street apartment house-- window open to the street. *Whoosh* in the night (a truck?) startles me out of a doze. I can't return to sleep because I find myself forced (by whom?) to pay attention to the noises from the street. Listening for predators! A small tasty mammal does not sleep on a forest path! The sound kicks in the autonomic nervous system just as a smell would. I get back to sleep only by putting plugs in my ears.

The limbic system directs me: fight! flee! hide!

The sound-warnings of the city streets are distracting, while the sound-warnings of the ocean are not because they don't trigger an urge to flee (except thunder might...)

I enter a taxi and the instant I sit down loud words come from a hidden speaker behind me. I leap up startled! It turns out after this happens two or three times that the voice is one of five or six celebrities telling me to fasten my seat belt. But before I get used to this I am shaken each time, and yelp to driver. I would not be so shaken if the voice were not coming unexpectedly from behind.

Yet background noise of drinks and clinks and chat on roof garden is not threatening. So it must be processed automatically below conscious level. No action required. But I'll bet a rattlesnake at much softer volume would cut through the soft sound and jerk me alert. (Mothers can hear baby whimpers in next room that no one else can hear...)

I begin to understand why I felt the way I did in Calcutta. It was my limbic system, kicked in and turned on all the time (by clamor and perilous traffic noises) and always either in charge or competing for control of my attention.

I step out onto the roof of my brother's building on East 74th Street. When I get close to the vent fans they reach out enveloping waves of sound to commandeer my attention. I go to the edge near the street and observe the whole cliff-dwelling culture of primates in balcony

rookeries over the river of sound below (East 74th Street) and the wider noisier river to the east (First Avenue).

Riding that river of sound down Fifth Avenue on a bus, my hand grips tightly on the rail. Even when the bus is at rest the engine pants, ready-- I'm riding a huge beast. I avoid the back seat where the engine sound comes from-- I'd rather stand at a distance. When I get off, relief as if someone turned a switch.

Cyclists whiz past.

After a few days in New York I stopped listening. I had been listening carefully, as part of my assignment, but after a while there was nothing *new* being added to the experience so I tuned it out. What does this mean, getting used to it? Did I adjust to higher noise levels, so the limbic system didn't kick in (OK), or did I adjust to a higher level of limbic involvement in my everyday consciousness (not so OK)?

In the waiting room at Penn Station, leaving New York for Philadelphia. Quasi-classical Musak. I respond with exhausted anger to relentless Renaissance dances pouring implacably over my head. Stop that! (A Chopin nocturne would not have caused the same reaction.)

## WASHINGTON

Adventure with an aggressive cab driver. He arrives but refuses to accept a changed destination, speaking to me rudely, aggressively, threateningly. I get out of the cab and go back inside the house. I call the dispatcher to complain and to get another cab. The complaining thing becomes a bothersome ritual of being on hold and I abandon the project. Although angry, I am able throughout to stay in control, decide consciously how much I will indulge myself in anger (like ordering cheesecake-- objectively bad for me but I allow myself an occasional taste.) I control how much energy I will assign to the discretionary project of complaining about the driver. I can feel the anger as a different state of consciousness. I am deliberately and consciously controlling the powerful energy which came over me when the conflict with the driver began, and stayed with me as I spoke with him, then left and called the office, then hung up from hold and called back, etc. It is as if my limbic system, roused by threat and by thwarting, tried to seize the bridge of my small ship, but was repelled by awareness which managed to hold its ground. It is like a battle: Atman v. Mad-man.

It would be wonderful to be able to *control that force and use it for conscious purposes* rather than *just* being able to prevent it from seizing control of my awareness and will (however fine an achievement that may be ... ) I wonder: is this the "control of energy" Tariq spoke of?

The next day I call the same company for another cab and the smooth gentle voice of the operator guiding me through the order inspires smooth gentle emotions.

Continual clamor of five-year-old nephew gets annoying-- feel assaulted by sound.

I call the Library of Congress and get lost in a series of annoying phone prompts. I feel the limbic system rising again. I indulge myself to the extent of making insulting responses to the (non-recording) taped messages but stay aware and in control and even amused by the sight of myself letting off steam by insulting a tape.

Rhythmic drumming of Africans in the park-- compelling, seizes attention, almost compels movement. This time I don't resist, but instead allow myself to be moved by the music. It has the same *feel* as these other experiences-- sound triggers strong but dumb emotions which unless resisted take over awareness. I link the involving quality of music with this other state of consciousness I have been studying on my trip.

My friend and I are sitting a quiet restaurant when suddenly and unexpectedly a loud and really awful jazz band starts playing. I feel like I'm being beaten. Just to keep enough concentration to hear what my friend is saying requires huge effort, like leaning into the wind to stay standing in a hurricane. I am carried off, helpless, and swept away by this huge vomit of sound. To respond to my friend is sometimes more than I can manage with conscious attention repeatedly shattered by awful music. My friend has a remarkable ability to compartmentalize these things, to talk and pay bills while watching TV. It would be great to be able to control my attention to that level (controlling attention when there is no competing stimulus, as when meditating, seems like quite a different problem ... )

It can't be right to think of the limbic system as *bad*-- it is part of the equipment, so it can't be bad in itself, and it keeps me from being struck by cars the way it kept my ancient ancestors from being eaten by leopards. Since it is not *bad in itself*, an attitude toward it based primarily on an adversary view, on conquest and control, *must* be too simplistic, even though control is absolutely necessary. There is a secret to be learned here.

This is what Tim Leary in was talking about in *Exo-Psychology* in his discussion of the lower, terrestrial levels -- especially level two (emotion/locomotion), lying below the symbolic and social levels three and four.

Also Carl Sagan wrote in *Dragons of Eden* about the limbic brain underlying our conscious primate frontal brain.

Moment of panic when I thought I'd lost my little notebook-- in that instant I passed totally into a limbic mode, as if I were in the fist of a huge gorilla. It is a *physical* sensation of suddenly being inhabited by someone else, like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Can I learn from Tariq how learn to control the limbic rush of power (anger-power, fear-power, the force that can instantly pick me up on its paw when signaled by a sound or other stimulus)? Perhaps there is a way not only to bring this force under conscious control to avoid thoughtless behavior (which I know how to do pretty well) and to use it for other purposes (the secret at which Tariq is hinting, perhaps) but even how to surf the *difference* between the two modes as an energy source, the way energy can be obtained from the boundary between warm and cold levels of the ocean (thermal energy transfer/conversion). Getting very speculative here ...

## SAN FRANCISCO

On the arrivals bench at the airport, waiting for my ride home. The roar of the traffic dominates my consciousness (how to free my consciousness from such hijacking?) Then huge ventilator fans, which had been adding an extra level to the roar, shut off and I feel an element of release, just like when I got off the Fifth Avenue bus.

My cat awakens me in bed, trying to play. I say no, try to push her away. She persists. I shout at her. A flash of anger suddenly has me wide awake, lifted on a big limbic paw, and I can't get back to sleep. Bad cat!

I'm driving on the San Mateo Bridge, window open. Suddenly a loud van passes me-- for those seconds of passing new loud sound dominates. I am taken to another level, ready to react. Sound triggers this new sense-regime.

As I write up these notes, I look up the limbic system in an elementary brain book and learn that the olfactory bulb is specially tied in to those structures (that's why smell is included); that the amygdala (which causes my cat to purr) also controls rage and aggression (and sexuality). The limbic system continually monitors incoming stimuli and (I was right to observe this!) controls fight/flight reactions. But the technicalities of brain structure are too complicated for me to understand (and probably not necessary for my purposes).

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**So I conclude that the lesson Tariq wanted me to learn in New York goes something like this: Powerful energies operate autonomously within the brain. They are mediated by the pre-human limbic structures and create states such as rage, fear and so on. Sound is their principal (although not their only) trigger. Sounds continually influence limbic consciousness even when we are not aware of this happening. Although powerful, these energies can be brought under control and prevented from dominating consciousness or behavior. The key question is how to harness these energies and use them for conscious purposes.**