

CHAPTER 3

The Way to Know Yourself

Who am I?

Have you ever looked into the mirror and wondered who is that person looking back at you? Did you ever think about how complex you are as a living human being? Have you ever imagined yourself as a very different person? Do you ever dream about the great potential that lies within you or consider all the different qualities that go into making you what you are?

We want to understand ourselves, both the qualities that make us human and those determining our individuality. We desire to transcend the routine of our daily lives and reach into a realm seldom explored — the realm of self-knowledge. Only then can we better understand other people and the life that surrounds us; only then will we be able to reach the goals that we have set for our lives.

How to begin to understand our inner life

The beginning of self-knowledge is awareness — that is, becoming aware of the things you do and your reasons for doing them. We can begin to explore life with this focus, either by examining our thoughts or by being more conscious of our actions and the way others relate to us (more on this later).

Imagine that you have the assignment to get to know someone whom you have never met before. If you were meeting that person for the first time, how would you begin the conversation? Let's say you were able to visit his home while he was away. You could look around and tell something about his likes and dislikes, his habits and lifestyle. What is his home like? Is it neat and tidy or messy or something in between? What do you feel in being there? Does it have a warm and welcoming atmosphere, a dark and dismal feeling, or is it nondescript? What colors do you notice? How are the walls decorated? What kinds of books does he read? Do you see any photos of his family or friends on a wall or a table, or do posters of popular rock and movie stars predominate?

Now imagine that you will spend a few hours with this person. You don't want to ask him questions directly about himself. You would rather discover things indirectly by observing how he reacts to you and others. What does he look like? How would you describe his facial expressions? What can you deduce about his inner feelings? Does he look you in the eyes when he speaks or does he look away? Does he look at his watch

when you are talking to him? What does his voice sound like? Do you think he really means what he is saying?

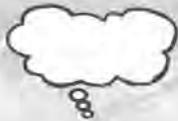
Imagine that you and he are waiting together for a bus for thirty minutes in a snowstorm; how does this person act? Does he become upset that the bus is late and start to complain, or does he ignore the inconvenience? When you part, how does he say goodbye to you? What is your overall impression of this person?

Imagine now that you have to write several paragraphs about the way this person thinks. Of course, you don't really know how he thinks, but based on your observations and the experiences you've had with him, what would you write? Do you have any idea what he thinks about, what kind of mind he has? Do you believe that his thoughts and his actions are related? What could you conclude, from his actions, about what is going on in his mind?

You could actually do this exercise-if you have the endurance and curiosity. In fact, we do this kind of thing all the time, though we may not be conscious of it. We are constantly evaluating whether a person is trustworthy, intelligent or interesting by observing the way he behaves. Finally, we judge a person's character not only from what we observe directly but also from what others say about him.

The same holds true for us as well. Other people judge us according to the way we act, which in turn is determined by our attitude and way of thinking. All of this creates an image of us in the eyes of our family, friends, acquaintances and even passers-by on the street. So, if we want to understand who we are, then perhaps it would be wise to start by attentively observing ourselves, to understand how we appear in the eyes of others. This is the starting point of self-awareness.

What Do I Think?



An exercise for the mind

There are many ways to look at your thoughts and the way in which you have developed particular thinking patterns. One exercise which may help you to see what you think about is as follows: Sit in a quiet place, in a comfortable position. For several minutes focus your attention only on your breathing. Take a deep breath in and exhale slowly. Do this repeatedly. As you focus on your breathing, try not to think about anything. You will soon find that many thoughts come to you. Try not to allow the thoughts to develop any particular significance. Let them flow in and out, like a gentle breeze carrying autumn leaves. Do this for several minutes. At the end of the exercise immediately write down as many passing thoughts as possible. Don't worry how important or unimportant they are; just write down everything you remember. Now reflect over the notes you have taken. What did you think about? Are these thoughts common to you? Were you aware that so many thoughts appeared in your mind? What does this exercise tell you about yourself?

Getting to know yourself

You can begin to understand something about yourself through many different ways. One of the quickest is by exploring the way you think. Every second of every day hundreds of thoughts are running through your mind — some which you respond to; others which you may just barely recognize. What do you think about and how do you think? Do you generally think good things about others, or do you usually find fault with or mistrust others? Do you tend to see the good in a situation or do you complain a lot? What do you think about yourself? Do you usually think about your weaknesses and problems or about your good side? Do you ever try to think about another person's situation, or try to imagine yourself in someone else's position?

If we compare the difficulty of knowing another person to that of knowing ourselves, we can see that it is easier to discover real information about ourselves. We not only have our actions as well as others' attitudes toward us to review, we have our own conscience and intuitions that confirm the truthfulness of our own thoughts and motivation. Because of this special benefit we should be able to know who we are better than anyone else. We could say that besides knowing the "what" and the "how" about my actions, I can also know the most important thing, the "why."

Thinking and doing: cause and effect

The idea that your thinking is directly connected to your behavior and health is not new. Many philosophers and thinkers have explored this connection on their own course of self-discovery. Many look upon the relationship between thinking and doing as one of cause and effect. In other words, the way one acts is the result of the way one thinks. That seems like a reasonable statement, but because we can't see others' thoughts, their behavior may surprise us at times. For example, if a boy who never stole anything in his life suddenly becomes a thief, stealing everything in sight, his family and friends would be shocked. However, it is possible that this boy entertained thoughts of stealing for some time before finally acting upon his thoughts, as is often the case with criminals.

On the positive side, an honest man who generally acts in a good way similarly does so because of his thinking. Because he has thought well of others, he has cultivated the habit of treating them with respect. If he holds a view of himself as capable and intelligent, he will likely pursue a career he enjoys and in which he can advance. If he thinks of his wife as a tender, caring person, he is more likely to trust her with his deep feelings and share openly with her. Of course, there are many other factors involved in these examples. Nevertheless, the way a person thinks plants very important seeds for the kind of life he will lead.

Fortunately, we can change our thinking, if we decide that we don't like the way we're thinking. We are by no means destined to a life of unfulfilled dreams and negative behaviors. In fact, just by changing our thinking, in a moment we can change our mood, our situation, even our life. It's not uncommon for people to wake up in a bad mood: "Oh no, not another day! This is going to be the worst day of my life, for sure. I feel terrible. I have that awful class, and have to play in that blasted hockey game tonight." Our experience of the whole day can be affected by the way we begin it. Suppose that instead, the same person wakes up saying, "This is going to be a fantastic day — the best day of my life! I feel great! I'm going to study hard today and play my best ever in tonight's game." Isn't it funny how the quality of life can be determined by just such a simple change of attitude?

Positive thinking: a tool for building good character

Finding the good in every person and in every circumstance is not easy; if it were, everyone would do it. We tend more often to notice a person's flaws or the problems with a given set of circumstances. As with everything else, thinking in a positive way is something that has to be learned, and it takes time to become good at it.

You may begin by pretending for a couple of days that you are on an undercover mission. You have to notice and write down three good things about the characters of two of your classmates whom you regard as the most difficult to get along with (it may even be a teacher or someone in your family!). At the end of the day read through your notes at least two times. Consider three good things about your own character as well. The next day when you see these people again, review in your mind the good qualities you've noted, especially when their behavior appears offensive. This is a good test of your self-control. Try to ignore those critical thoughts and feelings in that moment, and think instead of the things that you wrote about them.

Through this simple exercise we can see that it is not always easy to focus on the good in people or in our surroundings. When we do, we feel ourselves changing for the better. It's possible

By the right choice and true application of thought man ascends to the Divine Perfection; by the abuse and wrong application of thought, he descends below the level of the beasts. Between these two extremes are all the grades of character, and man is their maker and master.

— James Allen
British philosopher

therefore to train yourself how to think, and thus determine your own state of mind.

To really understand ourselves, it is helpful to see from the perspective of where we came from, where we are and where we are going. Within this context of past, present and future the reason for our lives and the meaning of important events in our lives often become clearer.

Where do I come from?

Every individual is at the same time a human being and a unique being unlike any other human being who has ever lived. In addition, each of us was born from the union of a man and a woman, our parents, who in turn were born from a similar union. So, while we are unique human beings, we are also intimately a part of those who gave us birth, inheriting not only elements of their physical features but also elements of their character. If you know your grandparents well, you may have noticed many of their features — physical and spiritual — in your parents and even in yourself. If you were to delve into your ancestry a few generations back, you might recognize some qualities — noble and ignoble — that are common in some of your immediate family members. Therefore, while we may like to emphasize our uniqueness, it is also important to appreciate our connection to those who preceded us.

Where am I now?

Now imagine that your life is a movie and you are the star. What does your feature film — the movie about your life — look like? Some of the following questions may help you to determine this:

- ✗ How do I see myself?
- ✗ What are my character strengths?
- ✗ What are my character weaknesses?
- ✗ How do I generally see other people (in a good light or in a bad light)?
- ✗ What makes me work harder?
- ✗ What frustrates me?
- ✗ How do I relate to my friends and my family?
- ✗ How can I see what my values are (or were) by looking back over the decisions I made in the past?
- ✗ How do I react to stress or confrontations?
- ✗ Do my values change depending on whom I am with?



Where am I going?

The next — and possibly the most difficult — question we should ask ourselves is: “Where am I going?” Although some of us have a vague idea of the quality of person we want to become, few of us have a solid plan of how to go about it.

When we are uncertain, we are often pulled this way and that by circumstances. That is, instead of focusing on the object of our desire, we can be distracted by many things along the way.

To know where we are headed is a difficult task. To reach this point, we should develop an image of the kind of person we wish to become, and how we wish to develop our inner selves. What are we willing to sacrifice in order to reach this goal? Our answers will reveal what is really valuable to us.

Individual Exercises



- ✎ Go to a mirror after reading this chapter. Look yourself in the eyes (in the eyes, please! Don't look down or away). Talk to yourself out loud. First tell yourself three things you *don't* like about yourself. Now tell yourself three things that you *do* like about yourself—real compliments to you! You may feel awkward, but look at yourself and talk to you (yes, you). Don't look away.
- ✎ Look in the mirror, full length, if possible. Say nothing at first. Now try to adopt a warm, caring, compassionate, or at least, very friendly smile. Is your whole face smiling and radiant? Are your eyes soft, warm and tender?
- ✎ Switch to a remote, dispassionate, critical stare. Now look coldly and judgmentally. Now glare menacingly. How did each feel? Which came most naturally?
- ✎ The eyes are said to be the windows to the human spirit. What do your eyes tell you about your spirit?

Something to think about



With this understanding, we are led to consider the nature of the human being. Although we are all so different, could it be possible that there are common threads that hold us all together, similarities within the nature of man which are present in every person despite geographical location, nationality or family creed?

For Your Journal



"Treasure Map"

Close your eyes and ask: What is my buried treasure? What are the potential qualities that lie hidden within me? Using some kind of imagery, think of your buried treasure.

Draw a picture of your buried treasure. Then draw a map with a path leading to the treasure. The path is your life. Show the obstacles (blocks, hindrances) and the helpers (people, resources, assistance) you have encountered along the way. Label these if you wish.

Have a conversation with the obstacles and then with the helpers. Write down your conversation.

This is an excellent exercise for further exploring your latent talents, abilities and wishes. It can help you confront your limitations and make use of your resources toward reaching your goals.

Evening

by Ivan Bunin

We only recollect happiness,
But happiness is everywhere.
Maybe it is in that autumn garden,
In the clear air in the window.

In the fathomless skies a cloud
Lifts its light white edge.
I look at it... We know so little,
And happiness is given to those who know.

The window is open. A little bird
Alighted on the windowsill with a song.
I take away my weary look from the books.

It is evening, the sky is empty.
I hear the sound of a threshing-machine...
I see, I hear, I am happy. Everything is in me.



To read

Sophie's World, by Jostein Gaarder