

INTERVIEW/DISCUSSION

between (Q) Ben Hassine, and (A) Roy Whenary - (2005)

Q1:

Can you give us a short biographical sketch with emphasis on the spiritual aspect of your life? For example which teachers and teachings inspired you and can you recount some of your encounters with them?

A1:

I don't know if it's possible to do this without over-emphasizing the 'personal' so briefly I will mention my main influences as J.Krishnamurti, Nisargadatta Maharaj and Jean Klein. I came across Krishnamurti when I was 20, and reading his books and attending his talks had a profound affect on me. After reading a lot of varied spiritual literature before that, Krishnamurti was like a breath of fresh air ... uncomplicated, obvious and clear from the start. At Brockwood Park and Saanen, I met many new friends, with whom there would be endless discussions about things, albeit adopting Krishnamurti-like terminology. Then, in the mid-70s I was made aware of an Indian publication, which was not easily available in London at the time. It was called 'I Am That' and was by Nisargadatta Maharaj. I had previously read Advaita books by Ramana Maharshi, but somehow 'I Am That' had more of an effect on me. What that was, I don't know. Maybe it was because it was more contemporary to the time, whereas Ramana's works were from another era. Although I had met a few people who had sat with Ramana, I was often meeting people who had been to see Nisargadatta. However, I was never tempted to go to India in person, understanding from the start that there was nothing that was available there which was not already available here. In the early 70s, I also met Vimala Thakar, who was very popular in Holland. I first met her in 1972, then 1974 and in 1976 spent a week on retreat with her in England. Many of the people I met on that retreat I am still in contact with. I found Vimala to be very attentive to my sensitivity, and awake to my need for personal contact with her, and we had several helpful chats about what now would seem to be very basic questions I had at the time, but her response to me was very warm and open. In 1980, the lady who organized Vimala's visits to the UK, informed me that there was another teacher who was very much worth going to see, called Jean Klein. It turned out that she was organizing his visits too. I went along to a talk he gave at Friends Meeting House, Hampstead, in London, and was immediately impressed by his calm presence and clarity of mind. There was a lot of silence in his talks, and at the time his English was not so brilliant, although it improved over the next few years, as he came to England more frequently. At one time I offered to drive him around when he was here, which was accepted - so I would take him to and pick him up from the airport and drive him to restaurants for meals, etc - a job that I did for a couple of years, quite willingly - although we never talked about spiritual philosophy at all during these times. I found that in his presence there were no questions, and all was self-evident. I really feel that he had no agenda at all. He wasn't out to convince anyone of anything ... it was a case of here it is ... take it or leave it. I couldn't help contrast this approach, and his calm presence, with that of Krishnamurti, who was much more passionate and lively in every sense, and maybe a little angry at times. This was the complete opposite to Jean Klein, and yet Jean, who had spent some time travelling with Krishnamurti many years earlier in India, always heaped the highest praise on Krishnamurti, and Vimala Thakar for that matter. I remember him describing Vimala Thakar as "a beautiful Being".

Q2: You spent a longer period of time with Jean Klein. Can you go a little bit deeper into the affect this teacher had on your outlook on life and spirituality at that time? [Please note I am referring to the affect Jean had at the time you met him, so we are going into history and are not yet covering your current outlook]

A2: Well, I spent just as long listening to Krishnamurti, and they both had a profound affect, maybe in different ways. I don't know even if it is the words that had the greatest affect on me ... because the presence of these two teachers had at least an equal affect. With Krishnamurti one could not ignore how seriously he took the spiritual life and how passionate he was about everything he said. His presence was over-powering in that sense. With Jean, it was his quiet, calm, simple and direct clarity of expression that impressed. He showed, by his own example, how utterly available and effortless 'realization' is. He was not a man of ideas, he was a man of wisdom, and there is a great difference between the two. When you have met a true man of wisdom, you are never again fooled by men of ideas.

Q3: Yes I think I can understand what you are saying. I would like to go into it later on. Still you didn't answer my question. What exactly was this affect you are speaking about? How did Krishnamurti and Klein change the way you saw life and spirituality?

A3: Sorry to sound so evasive, but I was 19 or 20 when I first came across Krishnamurti, and there wasn't much to change, I suppose. I had not formed any fixed view or attitude by then, so I sort of grew up with Krishnamurti in that sense. It is not like someone suddenly coming across this approach when they are 40 or 50 years old, having lived a life and made mistakes, etc. At 16 or 17, I started reading Kahlil Gibran and some Buddhist and Hindu literature, just out of interest. I came across them in my local bookstore, and began exploring different ideas. I also started reading Plato and the Socratic dialogues ... and when I first came across Krishnamurti I noticed a distinct similarity between his philosophy and that of Socrates. But the effect that it had on me? I suppose it gave me a clear direction, when many of my contemporaries were getting into heavy rock music, relationships, carving out a career, etc. I always preferred a quiet life, and especially walking in nature, to experimentation or planning too much for the future. Krishnamurti clearly helped me in that direction, and Jean Klein deepened that tendency. I suppose that what these teachers were giving was a route into the deeper layers of mind and feeling, which gives rise to conscious awareness.

Q4: Yes. The deep layers of mind and feeling. I feel that at a certain point one will face not only the deeper layers of mind and feeling but also the deep layers of the body. Jean Klein's approach also included 'bodywork' Did this part of his teaching appeal to you? Can you expand a little on this aspect?

A4: Yes, it did appeal very much, and I did a number of residential Seminars with him, in the UK and France, in which Yoga/Bodywork was a major part. There are others who are better qualified to comment on this aspect of his teaching than myself, so I will offer my own personal take on it. In my book 'The Texture Of Being' I often refer to "going into the feeling" of something. There is a tendency, in a mind-dominated culture, to always think things through. This is fine when dealing with practical, mechanical things. But when dealing with personal issues and philosophical subjects, it is helpful if you can not only 'think' things through, but also 'feel' them through. This takes one into the realm of what is usually referred to as 'intuition' or 'gut feeling' But, in order to access this kind of intelligence, which is what it is, it is necessary to be able to go into the body-feeling, which is deeper than just 'thinking' about something. In Jean's Yoga and other bodywork practices, conscious awareness of the 'feeling' was cultivated through gentle exercises. Being in the 'feeling' at each moment, in the body, was encouraged. This was done in a very casual, non-competitive way. Each participant in the bodywork was encouraged to work within whatever limitations their body dictated. Emphasis was always on being

consciously aware of the movement and the space around the body, but also in the expansion of what we felt our physical limits were. He encouraged a stretching of the body and expansion of the limits of the body, in the creative imagination. This had the affect that one did not have the feeling of being confined within the body – there was a feeling of lightness and openness. Others could express this particular aspect more clearly, I am sure. But, it made me very aware that bodywork of some kind – be it tai chi, yoga, free-movement, or whatever, is a good counter-balance to what can become an intellectually dominant philosophy such as Advaita. If one is living in the world of ideas, and not grounding those ideas, not embodying them, then it can be like living in a kind of dream-world, where you may think that you have all the answers, even though you haven't yet explored all the questions.

Q5: I have the feeling that the grounding or embodiment you speak about is all about facing and understanding 'is,' is that right? I feel this is the stage where the shift from the verbal, conceptual level of understanding to the energetic level of non-verbal recognition, understanding and realization of reality takes place. As I see it, the body is also part of 'is' and it is not just an illusion or a bag of bones. How do you see the role of the body in the non-duality you write about?

A5: Without the body, where are you? Any answer that is given to this question is the product of a mind which is connected to a particular body ... which we may call a 'bodymind mechanism' or some such similar term. This bodymind mechanism also contains 'personality' and 'ego'. There is a constant feedback and updating going on between body and mind, from second to second. In facing 'what is' if there is fear at that moment, it will be mirrored in the body. If 'what is' is a poisonous snake, then the body will be prepared, via perception, memory and various chemical changes to respond instantly. In normal everyday life, we are not always facing poisonous snakes, but the memory is so full of conditioned influences that conditioned responses are continuously taking place without our conscious awareness. When I meet someone I have decided I don't like, there is an inner response which relays itself into my body. I may smile and be polite to that person, but my body knows the truth, and in some way, healthwise, I will almost certainly pay for such dislikes. Over the course of many years and millions of such reactions, my body will bear the scars of such unseen reactions. Maybe my joints will seize up, or I will develop an illness related to some other part of my body. There are some very good books which go into this subject more deeply than I could attempt here. But, back to your question: how do I see the role of the body in the non-duality I write about? The bodymind mechanism is a part of the play ... one of the actors. The phenomenal world is the world in which the bodymind mechanism has its apparent existence. Without that phenomenal world, there would be no question, or anything else. For the sage, everything appears out of nothing (including himself) and has no real substance, but he is happy to act out his part in the play of life, responding to whatever arises as appropriate. He knows that 'what is' is a temporary arising in perception, in the moment. Life flows through him, as if he were not there. Ultimately, all is One, but in the phenomenal world it appears otherwise. Identification and attachment within the phenomenal world will create suffering for the identified and attached, but of course this suffering is only apparent. In reality there is no permanent entity to suffer. Suffering arises and subsides, as do all other phenomena. In the sage, there is liberation from suffering because there is no identification or attachment. Ultimately, because he is not a fixed, permanent entity, this absence of suffering could also be viewed as something which arises and subsides within the bodymind mechanism. Ultimately, nothing ever happens, and there is neither duality nor non-duality, which are merely concepts. But in this life, this phenomenal life, the actor does appear to suffer, and a fine-tuning of the gap between body and mind will reduce the experience of suffering in the actor. In this sense, the traditional approaches, such as yoga, that work to refine the bodymind, are very appropriate. They make the life, the phenomenal life, more joyful ... bringing us back

to our natural state, before the mind began impeding the free-flow of energy. Emptying the mind of its 'stuff' its psychological hang-ups, likes and dislikes, resistances, attractions and aversions, is important work in the life of a bodymind mechanism - it will lead to freedom and joy, in this life, here and now. But, if it is entered into with an acquisitive spirit, as a way in which the ego is going to show how clever or powerful it is, then we are not talking about the same thing. The ego is a key part of the problem in the first place. An essential quality of freedom is humility ... a complete letting go, or surrendering, of the egoistic impulse. Many seekers believe that they have 'got it' when they first understand the basic principles of advaita, or non-duality. But understanding and accepting the concepts and living them, are two different things. For the living of them, there needs to be an emptying of the old conditioned thought patterns. Simply believing that 'I Am That' for instance, is not enough, if the memory keeps pushing up, in every moment of every day, 'I Am Not That'. Saying "all is one" then behaving as if all is not one by concentrating all one's energies in self-centered activities, is merely self-delusion. The memories and patterns are not just in the mind - they also appear in the body, in the muscles, the joints and so on. I would say that 'Work' which is essential for a clear understanding, necessarily involves some kind of bodywork that allows for the letting go of dysfunctional thought and behavioural patterns, which get in the way of clear seeing and living in one's true nature. Liberation is not just a flip in one's thinking process, from the belief in the ego to the belief in no-ego. If you believe in no-ego yet still act from ego, then there is an immense conflict in your life, which needs to be addressed.

Q6: What is thought?

A6: I would say that thought is simply a function of the mind, which allows the bodymind mechanism to survive in the phenomenal world of duality. It allows the bodymind to interact with the outside world in such a way that it builds up a memory bank of experience and knowledge, which should help it to function more successfully in the future. Of course this is not always the case, because if you feed rubbish in, then you will usually get rubbish out. So it is important to encourage the right thoughts and experiences, otherwise the memory bank will contain material that may contribute towards its own downfall. But thought always operates within the field of the known, because it must always refer to the past, to memory. But, it can become modified through its interaction with others, such that specific limiting patterns of thought may be completely undermined to the extent that 'realization' may occur. Now, when we understand the limitations of thought, we can also utilize its incredible ability to explore its own environment, by exploring the subtleties of our 'inner' and 'outer' worlds. The mind can easily get fixed into certain patterns of thinking and behaving, but it can also create strategies for disentangling itself from these fixed patterns. Whilst the mind may be burdened with negative thoughts, which may weigh heavy on the heart, it is also possible for the mind to express the most beautiful poetic descriptions of the world we know, and beyond. Thought can be our downfall and source of suffering, or it can take on all the lightness and beauty that there is. When we realize the incredible power of the mind, we will maybe treat it with more respect, and feed it well, so that our thoughts become an expression of the inner beauty that we essentially are.

Q7: What is the thinker, the observer, the controller? How do you see the thinker, or the 'me' comes to an end?

A7: First there is consciousness, then the thinker, the controller, is created in the mind. We are not automatically born with the ability to think. This is taught to us, as we are gradually conditioned into living in the world as a separate bodymind. Always,

underlying thought, there is 'consciousness' which is our fundamental aspect. But the thinker is the product of the past. The past is a synthesis of many strands of social evolution. What strands we become conditioned with will depend on what kind of family we are born into. When you ask somebody "who are you?" they will automatically reply with their name. If you ask them to define it even further, they may say that they are a man or a woman, etc - but all the time they are describing the 'clothing' that consciousness has taken on in expressing itself through their particular bodymind. To think that this expression is a permanent entity in time is a mistake that nearly every bodymind makes. In this life, there is a great effort to accumulate more and more, to reinforce the notion that I am a somebody. But then, a great wave comes along, and suddenly there is nobody there. What you are and what you appear to be are two different things. One is real and the other is an illusion, created within your own imagination. This trick has been taught to almost everyone, because it is tradition not to look at who or what you really are. You are not your name, your occupation, your body, your bank account - these are just tools for consciousness to express itself to itself. It is all a play, a great universal play of consciousness. Fundamentally, you are nothing but consciousness. But consciousness is not an object. You are conscious, you are receptive, but when you begin to think, you then begin also to think you are a separate entity. You then start to get involved and identified with the images that pass through your brain, and you believe that you are a controller, a doer. But who is there to control or do anything? It can be, and will be, wiped out suddenly. All it needs is one great wave, then where is the doer? Then, the doer is itself done. At any moment, we are solely reliant that our next breath comes - and one day it won't come. So, finally, to answer your question as to how I see that the thinker comes to an end. When the thinker comes to an end is of no interest. The thinking process is a natural part of life as a human being. When we see that this is how it is, we can be at ease in the understanding that all this play of the mind will come to an end. It doesn't have to be ended as a deliberate act. Its end is already clear and will certainly happen when it is due to happen. Our true nature lies in consciousness, which is non-specific. When a life is born, it is naturally and automatically imbued with consciousness, because consciousness permeates all. When all this is known, there is naturally no more attraction for the mind to identify itself with what is going on in the play. It knows that it itself is a temporary blip on the all-encompassing background consciousness, so the mind naturally stands back from involvement. There is an awareness of the play, and the actor in the play, and it is never forgotten who or what it is that stands behind the actor.

Q8: You seem to suggest consciousness is a kind of screen on which thought moves. As I see it, thought itself is consciousness. Consciousness is dependent on the body and mind. Without memory and thought there is hardly any consistent notion of existence, which is what consciousness is after all. So consciousness is limited, relative and temporary. When consciousness understands its own nature it is also emptied of the false sense of self or separation constructed and imagined by thought. Consciousness is transformed and empty. This emptiness is not an entity. It is without sense of self. This empty consciousness is like the dew drop in which the moon is reflected; the moon being absolute reality. This reality is beyond being or non-being. It is not an entity and is not a state which can be experienced. It is beyond consciousness and experience. What would you say to this view?

A8: Consciousness is the substratum of all existence. It underlies everything in the physical world. At least, this is one use of the word. I am not attached to any particular concept regarding Consciousness. As far as I am concerned, consciousness is not an object. What we point to in our discussion can never be it, because 'it' is not an 'it' at all. It has no separate existence. Now, I know that one of Krishnamurti's favourite phrases was "consciousness is its content" This is a totally different concept, and use of the word. If you are saying that thought, mind is consciousness, then I can

accept that, but we are not talking about the same thing. We are attributing different meanings to different words. Maybe you use different words to describe what I am trying to describe? From my starting position, consciousness is not dependent on the body and mind - in fact, quite the opposite. But I am also happy to use your concept of consciousness. Both are valid. These are not opposing views. We are merely using different concepts in different ways. In the sense that I am using it, consciousness cannot be transformed, because it is beyond time-space and causation. It is not an object. If we say that consciousness is its content (i.e. memory and thought) then we maybe call what I call consciousness "God". I am happy to do that. Or we can call one 'Consciousness with form' and the other 'Consciousness without form' - as you wish. There is black and there is white. Without black there is no white, and vice versa. Without the relative there would be no absolute, without me there would be no you, and so on. But is there something beyond this? Or do we simply need to accept that there is existence and there is non-existence? Today we converse ... and tomorrow we are not here. Today we read Rumi, Hui Neng, Buddha, Jesus ... where are they now? Are they not merely concepts in our minds? Tomorrow ... In ten thousand years, maybe someone will read our dialogue, and it will be relevant then, as it is now, but neither Ben nor Roy will be around any more. Where have we gone? Who in fact are we? Or is what we take ourselves to be merely a wave arising in the great ocean of consciousness?

Q9: In all schools of traditional Buddhism and Vedanta precepts for moral and ethical conduct are the cornerstone on which the more advanced teachings are founded. In popular Advaita these basic teachings are often frowned upon. What is your view on this?

A9: The precepts are there for good reason. The mind, the ego, is very adept at deluding itself into thinking it has grasped the ultimate truth, when in fact it has only grasped the basics of the philosophy. I would not suggest that everyone practice traditional spirituality as it has been laid down through the ages. It may be appropriate for some, but is not necessary for everyone. However, I have become aware of a number of people who consider that once it is realized that the ultimate nature of reality is non-dualistic, that there is then no need to question one's behaviour or attitudes at all - that, basically, any kind of behaviour is acceptable, as there is no one there in ultimate terms. So, such people become unwilling to question their anger, their fear, their sexual behaviour maybe, or their offensive use of language. As all is One and as this 'person' here really doesn't exist in ultimate terms, anything goes, according to this view. Whilst there may be a certain amount of philosophical truth in this view, in terms of helpfulness for daily life, I would say it is a way of burying the head in the sand, whilst at the same time claiming to be able to see beyond the stars. If there truly is 'realization' in the traditional sense, there is also transformation on every level. It doesn't just affect one's ideas and concepts. If there really is selfless awareness, then where is the room for selfish behaviour? The mind and emotions are automatically transformed by 'realization'. Otherwise, it is a new meaning that is being attributed to the word 'realization', to suit a less demanding group of people. Realization, in the traditional sense, changes the centricity of the 'person' entirely. Yes, his behaviour may then be unpredictable, but how can it ever be ego-centric again? This is the difference. There is freedom to do anything (the new approach), and there is also freedom from the need to do anything (the old approach).

Q10: What is the nature of reality? Can it be experienced?

A10: It may sound like an evasive answer, but I would say that the nature of reality cannot be accurately described. It can be experienced, but not by 'you' and not by

'me'. When there is mindfulness, but no sense of me or you, there is a meeting with reality. It can be hinted at in poetry or art, but not directly, not by way of trying to pin it down, describe it or somehow grasp the meaning of it. It has no meaning, as we know it, and it is not fixed in such a way that any philosophy can accurately represent it in words. Anything that we say that reality is is merely a concept, a poor representation. When we truly have been touched by reality, we will completely let go of trying to pin it down.

END