

# THE ANSWER

Thanu Padmanabhan

*What is the purpose of Life? What happens after death? Who/What created the universe? Is there a God? What is Good and what is Bad? How to make good pancakes? How should one treat others? This article provides complete answers to all these questions (except the one regarding pancakes which is really tough), in a simple, easy-to-follow language.*

Sections:

1. Taxonomy of non-answers
2. The only possible Answer
3. Attempting the impossible: Upanishads and bicycles
4. The clever falsehood

## 1. Taxonomy of non-answers

It is a good idea to begin with a convenient classification of several conventional (non)answers to these questions.

1. [**Normal-guy**]: Frankly, I don't care what the answers are. I have once in a while thought about these questions but I found thinking was hazardous to my health and so I stopped.
2. [**Agnostic**]: I don't know the answers and I doubt whether there are any answers. Thinkers have wondered about these questions for centuries but they seem to be hopelessly contradictory. I don't think anyone [including the present author] knows the answers. May be we will never know the answers.
3. [**Charvaka (aka Materialist)**]: Life is a chemical unit of no great significance in cosmic scale and Natural Sciences will eventually tell you what you can know. Questions like the ones listed above arise from one's reluctance to accept the insignificance of oneself in the universe. You are born, you live and you die – and in the long run nothing really matters. In a shorter time scale, any set of answers you are comfortable with is good/bad enough for you. I live as I please and sometimes I am happy, sometimes sad, sometimes regretful, sometimes hopeful – all these are part of life and one should not attach any deep significance to anything.
4. [**Einsteinian Intellectual**]: There seems to exist some wonderful harmony in nature which I find hard to accept as mere accident. To me this harmony is god [sure, that is not saying anything because I have not defined either of the terms; but then, everyone talks imprecisely about these

topics; at least, this sounds sufficiently abstract!). Obviously, this god is not concerned with good/bad, reward/punishment, morals etc.....But something in me tells me to be nice to others, be human, kind ....I am not too consistent in it (I have pets I love, but I do eat animal meat) but I attempt to be. I try to be as helpful as possible because of an inner urge and I feel guilty when I can't/don't.

5. [**Philosophy-reader**]: God is Omniscient, Omnipresent and various other Omni I can't spell. That way it sounds more sophisticated than thinking of a God sitting in Heaven up there. I am, however, quite confused as to what this Power is doing - if any! At best, I would like to think it operates in mysterious ways, which we will never know and maintain order.... that already sounds hopelessly naive even to me but I don't want to give up on the existence of a Supreme Power. As far as human dynamics goes, I am with the Einsteinian intellectual.
6. [**Star Wars Fan**]: As evolution proceeds, we go from manhood to supermanhood and such species can exist in other galaxies. It is even possible that they visited us in the past and are keeping an eye on us. We may be able to establish contact or even evolve to that state by processes which are beyond the understanding of present science and technology but nevertheless no more mysterious than, say, radio to a tribal man. Issues of morality belongs to ethics whose only purpose is to maintain order in the world. What works best is right.
7. [**Simple Believer**]: There exists a God who is the Creator of this universe and we have Souls which will outlive the body in death. By being good, moral and all that we could hope to get in touch with God even while living – but at any rate, God will make us accountable for our actions. This could be while we live or after our death in heaven/hell or in the next incarnation. There are guys who get in touch with God in the past and they have told us all about it in Bible/Koran/Vedas and you better listen to these. God expects us to be moral, kind to others and brush our teeth twice each day.

*(Note: Since this set encompasses most of the religions, obviously there are variations in the theme; some Gods expect us to brush the teeth only once a day. Such differences of opinion, of course, have led to major conflicts and wars.)*

8. [**Sophisticated Believer**]: There is God-hood in each man but he does not know it. And this God-hood is the same in all and pervades through the universe [whatever that might mean!]. To realize this God-hood is the purpose of life. Depending on your temperament etc. it might be helpful to be kind, moral .... so that you can move towards that Self-Realization as fast as possible. The world you see is an Illusion and will disappear when you reach the Goal — just as the dreams disappear on waking up. It may be possible to move towards this goal by different routes/techniques and guys like Patanjali/Buddha/Christ/Krishna/Mohammed etc. have given you some of the methods. All religions of the world are merely routes to this goal in essence and the differences/conflict are superficial and irrelevant.

## 2. The only possible Answer

Before we worry about deciding on The Answer, let us worry a little bit about the nature of these and similar questions themselves.

To begin with, where do these questions originate? They arise in the conscious brain which is trained to think, feel, store memories, analyze, react ... And the questions are related to and supported by past memories/experiences which are stored there as neural connections. The difference between the questions asked by any two individuals are ultimately traceable to the differences in the stored knowledge-base. In short, it is one's rational brain, the intellect, which is asking these questions.

Secondly, what is the system of thought on which these questions are based? Or, what are the limits of acceptability for answers? The intellect, by normal training, resorts to an Aristotelian logic for interpretation. To begin with, it sets up broad linguistic perimeters for the answers; e.g. "What is God?" cannot be answered by "arfgghhhstttt yyyy" which does not make sense within the stored knowledge-base. But what is more important, it sets up a logical perimeter to the acceptability of the answer; e.g.: "What is God?" cannot be answered by "Kellogg is a good breakfast cereal" or "1267" – both the answers make perfect sense to the stored knowledge-base but will be rejected as unacceptable by the logical system which is adopted.

Thirdly, there are also limitations on the acceptability of answers based on predefined, unstated, convictions. For example, "What is the purpose of life?" cannot be answered by either "Kill as many people as possible" or "Produce as many children as possible". These are rejected purely because they contradict (in the Aristotelian logical sense) certain other assumptions which were not explicitly stated. In other words, the questions are accompanied by some subtle expectations vis-a-vis the answers: (1) The question-answer session should take place at the level of the intellect and (2) The answers must conform to some ill-defined but nontrivial limitations of acceptability both from the point of view of logic and from the point of view of previously accepted (though often unstated) postulates.

These considerations are the major difficulties in answering these questions. In fact, any number of answers can be given – all mutually contradictory but acceptable! – but for the restrictions imposed by (1) and (2). (We have not even addressed the question of whether the answers are expected to be "true" or "verifiable"; even without that, the set of acceptable answers is very limited). The non-answers listed above satisfy these restrictions to varying extent. To begin with, they are all verbalisable and operate at the intellectual level. They differ only in the nature of postulates originally held true in the neural database and cater to different perimeters of logical acceptability. Other questions like verifiability can be answered within each system of thought in an appropriate manner. For this reason, the eight type of answers given above are not fundamentally different from each other! Change the set of Postulates, the perimeters of logical acceptability and any one system can be replaced by the other. The Atheist and the Believer are not different from each other in any fundamental sense – they both are right or wrong if one of them is right or wrong!

The crucial point is the basic limitation of human intellect – it works within the boundary of a system of thought based on certain rules of logic; even the so called illogical beliefs are very much dependent on the logical system—in fact,

without the presupposition of a logical system one wouldn't be able to know what is illogical. The human brain is pre-formatted with a system of logic and entertains ideas which are logical or illogical, consistent or contradictory, acceptable or unacceptable based on this format. When the atheist stamps the belief of a God-in-the-heaven as "illogical" or when the theist affirms the existence of God based on his own beliefs, they both are trapped by the rules-of-the-game existing in the conscious brain.

Once this is realized, it is clear why all the answers given above are correct or why all of them are incorrect and – most importantly – why it does not matter. In fact, all those answers – and millions more which can be constructed – are all the same answer in different disguises. In a way, they are not even fundamentally different from the questions! The success and popularity enjoyed by these answers (which, as I said, are all the same) merely reaffirms the fear of the conscious brain to leave the secure terrain and leap into the Unknown; its fear to change the rules-of-the-game to no-rules-of-no-game; its inability to accept the limits of systems of thought including the one which preaches the limits of systems of thought.

From a practical point of view these limitations translate into the following: The guy who asks the questions is scared to give up the security of the system-of-thought and logic which appears to be so successful in the day-to-day life. So he is looking for answers which will not demolish this structure in which he is cosily wrapped up. And therein lies the trouble. Within the framework of the intellect any number of answers can be given; all apparently different but fundamentally the same. They do not force you to come out into the open shedding your armour – and hence cannot lead you to a new adventure fundamentally different from what you are accustomed to.

This situation has led to an interesting symbiotic relationship between a set of people who can sell Nirvana (sometimes in 6 easy installments) and the confused seeker who wants to buy it. The entire history of "religions" arising from the eight types described above illustrates how this predator-prey relationship works in practice. Remember that there is no fundamental difference between Buddhist, Christian, Marxist and the Hindu thoughts – they are all the same. They all provide non-answers to non-questions at an intellectual level based on different sets of postulates and perimeters of acceptability. The historical evolution of any of these systems of thought shows the key elements in all of them: a social situation throwing out the questions, a pre-conditioning which sets up the limits of acceptability, an attempt by an individual to communicate something within these limitations, the formation of Predator group which sees an opportunity for interpreting, the Preys who prefer the cosy comfort of obtaining acceptable answers without letting go off the pre-conditioning, gradual shifting of paradigms within the predator group and consequent disintegration, yet another social situation ripe for the next Messiah .....It goes on!

The only possible true adventure, therefore lies outside perimeters of all systems of thought and this is what we shall seek. Begin with a beautiful fact: Nothing precludes the existence of experiences which cannot be communicated, verbalized, transmitted... within the honest-to-God system of Aristotelian logic! Nothing precludes the existence of concepts which cannot be communicated by any system of thought, within any broad based systems of thought. Limitations of logical inference can always be postulated within any logical structure. This is probably the highest peak a logical intellect, a sufficiently well-developed sharp

intellect can take you. And that is enough, in a way. Once the existence of the possibility is recognized, intellect self-destructs and something else, — which, for the lack of a better name, I will call Direct Experience — takes over.

There is, however, an irony in the situation: One needs a reasonably sharp brain (in the conventional sense of the word) to realize the beauty of this possibility and take advantage of it. But yet, sharpness alone is not sufficient — and in fact, it can be a hindrance in most cases. It is rather amusing to note that many of the people who have attempted the non-answers missed this point mainly because they were very intelligent and smart in the normal, conventional, sense of the word — the guy who can solve brain teasers, think clever repartees, get couple of Nobel prizes all that sort of stuff. Their intellect was so well developed that they simply did not have the courage to push the standard Aristotelian logic to its logical end — where it has the glimpse of a Land beyond Systems of Thought and Logic and causes the intellect to self-destruct. The reason for this reluctance is the primordial Fear of the Unknown, the fear to push to the limit where one is scared of the possibility of (literally) losing ones mind — and such a well-stuffed, nurtured mind at that! Quite understandably, the guys who did it are the ones who did not have much of intellect to boast of — fairly dumb sort of guys like princes, camel drivers, carpenters .... What is really needed is a reasonable brain which is also reckless and adventurous!

### **3. Attempting the Impossible: Upanishads and bicycles**

The Direct Experience is the only way to bypass systems of thought, intellectual pre-conditioning and Aristotelian logic. But this Experience, by its very definition, is not communicable by standard procedures. This basic difficulty should be obvious. All standard forms of precise communication are isomorphic to verbalization based on some system of generalized grammar; so how does one convey that which is beyond the systems of thought? No, one cannot communicate it in the usual sense of communication. (And if you are expecting to find the answer to be communicated to you from any external source — like this article — you are wasting your time!) The only two attempts which were somewhat successful in communicating the uncommunicable, in last 10,000 years or so, are found in the Upanishads and the works of Zen masters. The approaches in these are different, but both are quite amusing:

Upanishads use an extremely clever technique of negation. You can always specify what It is not; and if you eliminate all that is not, whatever remains is It — something which Holmes did appreciate in more prosaic matters. This is the best logic can do. So Upanishads keep emphasizing “... That which cannot be described/probed by words or thoughts, That which cannot be arrived at by logical reasoning or powers of intellect...”. You can use thoughts and mind to point to It, like you can use the finger to point to moon; mind has as much to do with It as the finger has to the moon. The danger, of course, is that people grasp the finger and think they have got the moon. Most of the so called religious people belong to the class who have grasped some finger and keep insisting that it is the moon.

The approach by negation is not as mysterious as it is usually made out

to be. When you learnt cycling, you probably thought you “acquired balance” at some stage. No; you can never acquire balance. You can only eliminate imbalance. When you started out, you were struggling to remove every piece of imbalance somewhat consciously. A moment arises when you ‘get it’ and you can correct the imbalances unconsciously. What is left, is your natural state of balance on the cycle. If you are sensitive, you will also realize that it is you who created the imbalances in the first place. Translate this lesson into life at large and you can write an Upanishad.

“Wait a sec”, one might say, “this is a gigantic swindle. After I have denied the existence of all that I know, thought of, seen ... what assurance do I have that something else remains ? It could be null set!”. Sure. *There is absolutely no guarantee that anything beyond what is recognised by the the brain and formulated by Aristotelian logic exists.* You do this at your own risk! This is the Path of the Adventurer who wants to explore with no assurance that he will find anything or even that he will survive the trip. You don’t want to risk it all with no assurance of any kind ? Fine, then. Do continue as you are - may be you should stop reading this article now! I am not in this business to give you assurances. (Aside: While on this theme, what assurance did you have while starting to cycle and falling down innumerable times that you will eventually stop creating imbalances ? You can’t prove it logically because I know guys who never managed to learn this skill who were otherwise normal. Of course you saw a vast majority who could learn to cycle but that is no assurance for any single individual. You probably weighed the pros and cons - the chances of success, the utility and fun of being able to cycle, the number of bones you are willing to break,....- and took a chance. That is the point. There are no guarantees in this life; only probabilities.)

Let us get back to the second attempt to communicate the incommunicable, which Zen Masters tried. Zen tries to get you out of logic using situations which defies logic; the most well-known example being the questions called ‘koans’: like “What is the sound of the single hand clapping?” The student is supposed to meditate on it. Since it has no “logical” answer the mind and intellect grow tired at some stage and — if the guy is still at it! — the attention shifts to a deeper level and he reaches ‘satori’ or nirvana.

The Upanishadic method is more direct and less mysterious but both work. Something which is particularly nice about the Upanishadic method is that anyone could have discovered it on his own over a weekend’s thought and — if he came across the Upanishads at some later stage — tell himself “Oh I see, these guys have also got it right”! In fact, that is the best way to do it; nobody really needs gods, scriptures, god-men or gurus. Instead, if you try to “study” (or much worse, understand!) an Upanishad, you will get absolutely nowhere. This is particularly true of the Upanishads which appear to be very logical (like Mandukya) on the surface! Your situation will be similar to the pole-vaulter who refuses to let go off the pole after reaching the peak. “What a wonderful pole without which I could not have come this far! I will hold on to it and get to the other side” - only to find that him and the pole crashes down. Logic in Upanishads is the pole which can take to this far and no farther - and if you hold on to it you fall back on where you started. *Never read an Upanishad until you are ready to write one.* Zen Masters are more direct in this regard; they attack the logical process right from the start, giving you no illusions.

Is it that easy ? Yes, it is easy. In fact it is easier than most other artifi-

cial things one tries to excel at — say, swimming or tennis or chess or research (I wasn't frivolous in the first para when I said making pancakes is a different ball game). Human body and nervous system are probably not naturally programmed to swim (for one thing, nature didn't provide us with fins) or contemplate weird shapes on a board of alternating colours or study atomic physics. One needs to put in *artificial* effort. On the other hand we are *naturally* programmed to discover the Answer and we struggle hard every moment *not* to see It! This has to do with a deep sense of insecurity one feels in going beyond mind. From childhood, we are familiar with the mind and we feel — most of the time — comfortable with it. As one probes oneself deeply, there will arise a stage at which one simply has to take the plunge into the unknown — with no previous experience or guarantees! One's mind usually resists it and clings on; one has to gently give up the clinging and slide into another state. The rational, intellectual mind is suddenly going to be sacrificed for something which is beyond logic and reason and the rational intellect doesn't like it one bit. Very clear thinking, which requires an ultra-sharp intellect, can prepare you better for this because a such an intellect can (intellectually) appreciate the limitations of intellect. (A sharp but not-so-sharp guy will think intellect is all-powerful!). But even this preparation is not much help - you just need nerves! .

In fact, the key reason for most of humanity preferring the non-answers is that one likes the comfort of ignorance and is too insensitive to the avoidable struggle which goes with it. In a way, all these hurdles can be summarized by one word: "clinging". We cling. We cling to life's possessions, life, our body, our memories, our intelligence, our preoccupation of verbalization. Let go off the clinging and you are done. In fact, Rishis of yore, with the characteristic devotion to details, have formalized the letting-go-procedure, in an ancient ritual called "viraja homam" — which is the last ritual performed by anyone before entering sanyasa. This ritualistic sacrifice in front of a fire, involves a conscious listing of several possessions and taking a vow to renounce them. The mantras accompanying the ritual goes like "I am now burning my clinging to money", "I am now burning my clinging to land and material possessions", "I am now burning my clinging to wife, children and other relatives", "I am now burning my clinging to my body, mind and intellect", "I am now burning my clinging to life and the visible universe" ....., You die so as to live.

"That is all fine," you feel like saying, "but what *is* actually the Answer? You haven't told me that". No one can "tell" you the Answer any more than I did, without killing Its essence. You have to do the rest on your own and let your logic and intellect self-destruct without any assurance of what will become of you! You don't have that courage? Then kindly go away and suffer. One could only hope that you suffer really really badly so that you will start searching. The trouble with our upper middle class, uneducated literates, is that they don't really suffer; also they are not intelligent enough to learn from *other people's* suffering. Something which is not appreciated about the Prince Siddhartha — who later became Buddha — is the following fact: that guy was really sharp. The story goes that he led a sheltered life in his palace during his early youth without coming in contact with any misery. One day, when he managed to slip out, he saw an old, sickly man and a dead body and he could draw all the relevant conclusions from it; it probably ranks with the greatest intellectual achievements human beings have made. We should all feel ashamed that though we were never sheltered in a palace and have known old age and death (and much

worse, just turn on the CNN), we continue to miss their significance. We are insensitive cowards (and fairly dumb ones at that, irrespective of any Nobel prizes and wealth we amass; remember, the wealthy and the Nobel laureates die) if we don't search for It. Just shows most of the people are dumber than some prince of north India in the simple, brain teaser, I.Q sense of the word.

And remember that if you *really* want the Answer, you will get it in no time, literally. Most people really don't want the answer. They are generally happy with the world and all these philosophy stuff for them are some kind of side business, intellectual past time to appear cultured on coffee tables; sure, when your child dies or you get hepatitis you brood over Deep Questions for a few days but you will get over it ... until the next disaster comes along. There is nothing you don't have, which Jesus or Buddha or Krishna had, so that they claim they know It - except a honest desire to know and Courage to search. Think very very carefully: Do you *really* want it ? Or is it just an optional extra along with coffee in the morning and PGW in the evening in this broadly-all-right world ? Do you have it in you to walk alone in a long way leaving it all behind with zero assurance of getting anywhere ? Does that sense of adventure grab you ? If not, forget it, get nice jobs, get married, get creative, produce children, do social work (which helps in pretending a "meaningful existence"), try to become a Beethoven/Einstein/....., cry a lot, laugh a lot and die in a few decades worn out, tired, afraid, confused in some nondescript way, adding to statistics of humanity. RIP.

So the key question is: Can you reject your whole world the way you see it now? You have to reject and de-identify yourself, your memory banks, intellect, ...the entire lot. (Except that once you reject it *totally*, you get it all back with a very different relationship! In fact you will find that you never really had it all until you really went through the rejection process.) You don't want to do it? perfectly fine. There are several "answers" available within that framework; I have listed some of them in the first para. Choose any one of them and live happily thereafter and die; you won't be the first or the last to do it; since all those answers are wrong it doesn't matter what you choose. In fact, you can have a different one for each day of the week! It is always easier for people to accept god-men who bill by hour than Zen masters with sticks. Treating cancers with vanishing creams has an appealing gentleness about it.

But where is Love, Compassion, Concern for humanity, Honesty, ..... in this scheme? They all exist in the domain of mind and intellect along with Hatred, Dishonesty .... perfectly balanced. No choices you are capable of making *in your current state*, in the intellectual plane, is any better than any other choice. In fact, you can't do any good to others without first doing good to yourself. Actually, 90 percent of the trouble in the world is caused by the well intentioned, semi-compassionate, ones. If you give your shirt to any beggar you see and walk in the cold, you are a Buddha. If you carefully calculate and give 3.86 percent of your monthly income to CRY you are not a Buddha. And if it gets into your ego, helps to quieten a ill defined guilt feeling, then you are probably worse than the guy who won't give anything. If tears come to you when you hear about *any* death because of your concern for the sadness it has caused to others, you are compassionate; if you cry only when those close to you die, you are selfish. You are crying for yourself- not others.

This is not judging an average person any more harshly than a mathematician proving Pythagoras theorem is judging a triangle with 27, 32, 121 degrees



harshly. He proves that if one angle is 90 degrees,  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$  and leave it at that. You can jump up and down saying “ How dare he says only if one angle is 90 degrees this result will hold? What about all those poor little triangles with 27,32,121 degrees, hoping to have  $a^2 + b^2 = c^2$ ? This mathematician is terribly cruel and harsh and I reject him; I shall lead a life of compassion and love for the upliftment of 27,32,121 degree triangles (without changing their angles, of course)”. You have to realize that the Zen masters and Rishis are as helpless as the mathematician. They can’t but tell the Truth!

If that disturbed you, the positive side is the following: If you wanted to be an Einstein or Tendulkar, you *probably* can’t. You may not have what is required. But if you only want to achieve some simple thing like becoming a Lao Tse or Buddha or Jesus, why, that is trivial! Go ahead and do it! You have in you what it takes.

“But,” you may ask, “it is crazy to ask one to give up clinging which seems so-o-oo natural! why do you think I cling ?”. The honest answer to this question puts people off: you cling because you are an insensitive, cowardly, idiot. Insensitive, the way I described in Sidharth’s story, viz. you are not affected by misery around you; cowardly because you are afraid of the Unknown; idiot because you don’t think logically.

Is there a more polite, nicer, less hurting, way of saying this? Can one take somebody from where they are (with all the insensitivity, cowardice and stupidity) and “lead them to Light”. The honest answer is “no”. There is no substitute for the Zen Master’s stick. There is no way to sugar-coat the pill since — in the first place — there is no magic pill! All religions, all intellectual philosophies, all gurus — from Krishna, Jesus, Buddha down to the Local God who cures your headache and performs miracles — are dealing in falsehood and Truth is not a minor re-parametrized version of falsehood. No one can take you There except yourself. *There are no methods, no techniques.*

Is there a “less honest” answer ? Well, there is. In fact, there are several, since falsehood is infinitely diverse. Among them, many are so obviously false that it doesn’t appeal to the clever-but-not so-clever guys. One can, however, device a very clever falsehood which is so appealing that it is often taken for the truth. This one is called “meditation” and sells well nowadays. The concept of meditation can be presented in the domain of intellect and hence it deals with verbalisable statements based on standard logic; consequently, it is — in the ultimate sense — totally useless for our purpose. But it is useless in a remarkable way, which is worth analyzing!

## 4. The clever falsehood

Since it is peace and happiness which most people are after, it is best to begin by identifying the cause of the mental disease called unhappiness and investigate the nature of the remedies which we may possess. Let us ask: What makes one unhappy ?

The easiest way to analyze this question is to think about some incident in your life which caused you lot of unhappiness recently. An unfulfilled desire, leading part of your brain to produce repeatedly a sequence of thoughts over which the rest of the brain has no control - this is what all pangs of unhappiness boil down to. It should be clear now that the problem can be attacked only by

either of the following two strategies: (1) The first strategy is completely subjective; it consists of training our brain not to produce any uncontrolled responses when confronted by external stimuli. It is obvious that such a perfect control over one's brain will ensure eternal peace and happiness, totally independent of the external circumstances. (2) The second strategy, which is what we usually try out in our quest for happiness, is centered around the external world: Control our external conditions in such a manner that our expectations and desires are always fulfilled. This solution demands you to constantly work attempting to fulfill all your desires: If poverty is causing you unhappiness you try to acquire wealth; if diseases are the source of your trouble you try to improve your health; if you don't like your boss you either overthrow him or change your job, etc.

It is trivial to prove that the second strategy described above is, in general, inferior to the first thereby demolishing the utility of 99.9999 percent or so of human preoccupation. It is inferior because of two reasons: Firstly it is not universal enough to tackle all situations. Secondly, even when it is applicable, it produces results which are qualitatively inferior to those obtained by the first strategy. After all, Emperors and Kings who had far greater control over their circumstances have been known to be very unhappy. All forms of social and political structures, moral and ethical codes, economic systems, charitable acts ... much of human endeavour towards global and local happiness is illusionary and waste of time. You should transform yourself, not the system. The authors of Upanishadic literature, it would be amusing to note, had considered it beneath their dignity to spend time proving this point! Their attitude is remarkable: 'You think you can achieve happiness by controlling the external circumstances and satisfying your desires?', they would have said, 'go right ahead and try it out! When you are finally convinced it is a stupid venture, come back to me and I will tell you the Right Way'.

Getting back to the main theme, we have asserted that the key to human happiness lies in *preventing the brain from producing uncontrolled responses to external stimuli*. Once we acquire such perfect control over our brain, we can generate in it any state for any long period of time (and go high without drugs!). It certainly seems to be worth exploring further.

The trouble, you will doubtless point out, is that the brain is not a simple thing to control. Unless this idea can be translated into more concrete terms which anyone can put into practice in their day-to-day life, we might as well forget the whole thing. Just stop reading for five minutes to observe your mind and you will know how it functions. If you are an average individual you will notice that your mind triggers a series of thoughts based on previously stored memories or in response to the immediate external stimuli. In fact, most of our day-to-day activities are accompanied by uncontrolled - or at best partially controlled - thoughts in the brain triggered constantly by the environment and memories. Try drinking a cup of coffee thinking only about that cup of coffee. The chances are that, you will fail miserably; your thoughts will roam all over and will cover subjects quite disconnected with the cup of coffee in hand. Similarly, when we brush our teeth, take our bath, read our newspaper, say our prayers, write the important draft which the boss wanted, in all these actions we only involve a part of our brain. The rest of it is having a free ride thinking whatever it wants. Most of the time, these are low intensity, mildly diverging thoughts which does not cause any harm; so we indulgently tolerate

this poisonous habit of distraction. But every once in a while, the uncontrolled part of the brain, viz. the mind, gets stuck at a powerful thought current and repeatedly shoots it forth disturbing the other orderly part completely. And we feel miserable.

Where does the mind find so much of material to produce such a constant background noise of random thoughts ? It gets it from the vast storehouse of impressions and memories locked up in our brain. Usually, every action we perform and every thought which we think leaves a trace in our brain. These traces are constantly collected, co-ordinated and stored in the memory. As the bulk of information to be stored increases, layers of them are pushed down to a subconscious terrain over which we normally have no conscious access. But I am sure you have dreamt in your sleep about people and places of which you have no conscious recollection. In other words, the uncontrolled part of the brain, which we have called the mind, retains access to those pieces of information stored in the subconscious, even though the controlled part, the intellect, couldn't use it. It is this subconscious storehouse of Impressions which propels the mind.

We are thus led to the basic theoretical principle: *The peace can be achieved by killing the mind and eliminating the stored impressions in the brain on which the mind thrives on.* Note there is no such thing as 'peaceful mind'; if you have a mind, you can't be peaceful! The conventional techniques of meditation attempt to do this along the following lines. One is told to provide something for the conscious mind to chew on and keep the mind at it. Once certain degree of concentration is achieved one tries to sink into a state of quietness by removing the original material given to chew on. For example, one may be given a mantra to chant on; as the chanting goes on, at some stage one could halt it abruptly. the time gap between the last chant and the moment when the first stray thought enters again will be a state of quietness. If this time gap can be increased with practice, one eventually can eliminate the chatter. Alternatively, one can try to chant the mantra more and more slowly with larger and larger gaps making sure that no stray thought enters in between. these gaps - as they become longer - will help to reduce chatter. Some tantric and Buddhist systems use the breath as a clutch to concentrate on; prayers etc are yet another means to provide the conscious mind with something to chew on. *This idea does not work; there are three major problems with it.*

The first is conceptual and fundamental. Meditation, described above, rely on falsehood to reach the truth! The mantra or the breath or the chosen idol of the god is inessential in the ultimate analysis but yet one is supposed to practice a lot with it. Surely more direct methods must be possible if any 'method' at all is possible!

The second trouble is the following: you do succeed in controlling your mind for half an hour each day; what happens for the rest of about fifteen hours each day ? The chances are that the mind will be running amok with as much vigour as before. Whatever you achieve in half an hour will be undone in the next fifteen hours and you will be back to square one! The situation is similar to a diabetic who keeps off sugar for half an hour each day but eats whatever he likes for the rest of the time. (This is, incidentally, the trouble with several meditation programmes currently available in the market).

The third difficulty is that the above approach does not tackle the problem of impressions stored in the brain. As long as they are continuously produced, through our day to day activities, you will never be able to really kill the mind;

at best, you will achieve an unhealthy suppression.

To produce any result, the war with the mind has to be a continuous struggle, carried out at every instant of wakeful existence. One has to be constantly on alert; the search should be a 'round the clock' affair - or equivalently, a way of life - rather than some ritual to be indulged in three times a day and forgotten for the rest of the time. Let us briefly discuss the three difficulties mentioned above one by one.

To begin with, it is indeed possible to use meditation more effectively, which is described in some Upanishads. The central theme behind all these is a direct frontal attack on the question: Who am I? Since it is easy to see that I am not the body, the next stop is clearly the mind. But "I" really cannot be the mind! To begin with I don't even control the mind! Not all the thoughts in the mind are those I want. Often the thoughts come and go without I being able to do anything. At a more logical level, mind is nonexistent in the deep, dreamless, sleep but "I" still know that "I slept". Similarly, very often, one is clearly aware of a thought in the mind without identifying oneself with it. Whenever you can notice a thought in your mind, without becoming one with the thought, your mind is playing a dual role. If you want you can even say that one part of the mind is watching the other. Suppose you could prolong this state. Every time a thought arises in the mind, you watch it and let the thought parade go on. That is, the "I" in you does not identify with the mind but with something still deeper - the One that is awake even in dreamless sleep, the One that watches the thoughts.

This is hard to describe but - fortunately - not difficult to understand. We all have a feeling of "I" and the idea is to keep attention on it. But remember, you don't make progress in this by degrees - nirvana grade 1, nirvana grade 2 ... is ridiculous. You have not got it and - suddenly - you get it! Just like in learning a skill like cycling.

The two elementary techniques — called 'mindfulness' in Zen and 'karma yoga' in Hindu philosophy formalizes these ideas - *while still dealing in falsehoods*. Each asks you to put your mind entirely on the task in hand. We are now talking about elementary awareness: do everything in your life being totally conscious of what you are doing. Zen monks have been taught traditionally to make tea or wash dishes in a very conscious manner. In fact, there is a Zen story in which the master asks the disciple "why are you washing the dishes?". When the disciple says "to make them clean" the master hits him on the head and says "you wash the dishes to wash the dishes - not to make them clean". This tells you how to run the life. At this level, you actually are identifying with one thought at a time; so you are not quite there but keeping one thought at a time is great progress compared having million random thoughts which is the normal state of affairs. Incidentally, the Karma Kanda of the Vedas contains detailed rituals and chantings which are associated with even such simple everyday acts like taking a bath, plucking flowers or milking the cow! The idea behind this is similar: the ritualistic acts and chantings make the individual fully conscious of the act which he is performing and decrease the chances of his attention wandering. This was, of course, possible only because the chantings were in a language and context which the individual understood and appreciated. It is true that several of these actual rituals have lost their significance over the span of time because of changed circumstances — you probably have never milked a cow in your life; I don't intend to — but the principle behind them is eternally true.

This idea of doing every little action — which includes simple things like washing your face or making your bed — in the perfect possible manner with full attention concentrated on it is true Karma Yoga. It transforms the mundane Karmas - activities - of your life into a yoga. If you are concentrating on each action - and only on the action - while it is being performed, it is clear that you will have no chance for worrying and brooding over the results of these actions! In other words, it will be impossible for you to develop an attachment to the fruits of your actions. You live your life to the full, enjoying each moment of your existence and doing everything which you have to do - may it be a small task or big - in the best possible manner.

You may ask: “What about the stored Impressions? How does this approach tackle that problem?” It annihilates the Impressions by blocking the accumulation of new ones and burning out the already existing ones. Our brain does not just randomly store information. With every piece of information, it associates a ‘weightage factor’ which is positive for pleasurable sensations, negative for painful memories and is effectively zero for items towards which you have no attachment or aversion. The Impressions with large positive or negative weightages are the dangerously distracting ones; they last longer, produce more intense disturbances and are repeatedly used by the mind in its martial dance. The practice of Karma Yoga, as explained above, does not allow you to have any strong attachment or aversion towards any of your actions. You act serenely and methodically, instant by instant, doing what has to be done in the perfect possible manner. The traces left by these actions will have zero weightage in the brain. Mind cannot feed on these and thrive. The best your mind can do is to keep using the Impressions which are already stored with large weightages; it does it but this process cannot go on for ever. All you have to do is to patiently watch the parade of past Impressions without getting involved. With each use, the stored Impressions lose certain amount of its poison. Very soon, the mind, starved of food, dies.

If you don’t have the nerves to jump into the unknown but want to adhere to the least harmful of all falsehoods, then the above description may be of some use. And — one day — you may realize that your the natural state is one without mind or thoughts! The state of mind you are constantly aware of is like a state of your stomach you are constantly aware of — very unnatural and unhealthy! The processes of digestion should proceed without your intervention. Similarly, the intellectual and mental responses for every situation life throws at you should come from you naturally, spontaneously and without the mind — as you know it today — playing any role.

Once you get there you will also realize that, all these ‘mindfulness’, ‘karma yoga’ and ‘meditation’ were all also useless falsehood; but beautifully clever falsehood. You never had a mind and you never performed any karma — mindful or otherwise! Yes, you didn’t drink the coffee either.