

Become One to know the One

Excerpted and adapted from “Vision is Veracity” chapter in
Return to the One: Plotinus’s Guide to God-Realization, by Brian Hines

The most important question to ask about any religion or spiritual teaching can only be: “Is it true?” For while there is room in the world for a wide variety of beliefs about the nature of God, all of these beliefs can’t be equally valid.

Science knows that the physical creation is undeniably objective, not subjective. The same laws of nature have been found to operate everywhere. If the creator has gone to such lengths to establish a material reality founded on these all-pervading laws, then it seems reasonable that spiritual reality likewise obeys universal, not personal, principles.

Why is it, then, that after thousands of years of seeking spiritual truth, mankind has failed to arrive at any sort of satisfying consensus about the nature of God? Understandably, this causes many to wonder whether there is any such nature to discover. Perhaps, they say, religions are simply the product of wishful thinking that refuses to acknowledge the insignificance of life and the finality of death.

Plotinus, a 3rd century Greek mystic philosopher, wasn’t one to shrink away from such skepticism or respond with the familiar adage, “Just have faith.” Faith is worthless if it is based on an erroneous conception of reality. Hence, in spirituality as elsewhere in life claims need to be backed up by something more substantial than a glib “Trust me.”

But Plotinus teaches that the means by which we test the veracity of our spiritual convictions has to be in tune with the unique nature of what is hypothesized to lie beyond the reality we know now. Plotinus termed the ultimate reality of God “the One.” The One is, obviously, one—the unfathomable unity from which manyness emanates.

Spirit is the first emanation of the One. This creative power is so closely connected to the One that it is nearly as unified as God. Hence, Plotinus calls the realm of Spirit a “one-

many” where all the separate forms are in the whole, and the whole is in each form. Here he speaks of the soul that has been able to return to the spiritual world:

If you have become this [Spirit], and seen it, and become pure and alone with yourself, with nothing now preventing you from becoming one in this way, and have nothing extraneous mixed within your self...if you see that this is what you have become, then you have become vision. Be confident in yourself: you have already ascended here and now, and no longer need someone to show you the way. Open your eyes and see.¹

Consciousness is its own confirmation. I may be misled about how real something is within my consciousness, since it is possible to sense things that exist only within my own mind. But consciousness itself must be accepted as a given, the bedrock on which stands all else I am and do.

So this is how Plotinus was able to refute the Skeptics of his time (and our time also) who questioned whether purported truths could be validated. Plotinus says that when the soul is purified its spiritual seeing is identical to what is seen. To disbelieve in the sight of God at that point would be to disbelieve in our very seeing, consciousness itself, an impossibility.

There one can see both him [God] and oneself as it is right to see: the self glorified, full of intelligible light—but rather itself pure light—weightless, floating free, having become—but rather being—a god.²

Everything we need to return to the One, or God, is within us and indeed *is* us. The soul already is clear light and divine knowledge, for the essence of each person’s consciousness is none other than the essence of the cosmos. Yet most of us are unaware of the wonder that lies at the spiritual center of our being, for our attention is occupied with the physical and mental periphery.

Plotinus tells us that the means by which we now know the creation must become the end we seek. Like a snake that swallows its own tail, the mystic turns his attention back upon the consciousness that usually attends to outer things and thoughts. A mantra—continuous repetition of a word or words—may be used to close the circle of attention, so that attention attends solely to itself. When introversion is complete, the One is revealed as the ground of the mystic's own soul-consciousness.

*We must believe that we have seen him [the One] when, suddenly, the soul is filled with light, for this light comes from him and is identical with him....This is the real goal for the soul: to touch and to behold this light itself, by means of itself. She [the soul] does not wish to see it by means of some other light; what she wants to see is that light by means of which she is able to see.*³

Presently, we try to know external objective reality through physical sensation and mental cognition, perceptions and thoughts. Emotions are a sort of perception of how we subjectively respond to the outer reality. Thus, perceiving, thinking, and feeling (or emoting) may be thought of as lights that human consciousness shines upon physical reality in an attempt to reveal its nature. Those who can see material reality more clearly than most we admire as great scientists, artists, philosophers, and moralists.

But it is only the mystics, such as Plotinus, who seriously seek to know the subtle nature of that by which the obvious nature is known. Instead of using the energy of their psyche to power flashlights of sensation, cognition, and emotion that are only able to illumine small patches of knowledge about the cosmos, they switch off these limited instruments of knowing. What remains within their consciousness is the powerhouse itself: Spirit, the light by which all lesser lights are illuminated.

The sun, if offered a candle, would refuse it. Why would the source of light need light? The mystic, during his time of inward contemplation, similarly rejects any lesser means of knowing God than direct perception by soul that has united with Spirit.

When it [Spirit] turns its attention to the nature of the things illuminated, it sees the light less; but if it abandons the things it sees and looks at the medium by which it sees them, it looks at light and the source of light.⁴

Almost certainly Plotinus is not speaking metaphorically here. Clearly he means that when a person turns his attention away from external reality and becomes completely absorbed in what lies within, he will see the light of consciousness itself, a real light, the only true light.

From a spiritual perspective the light by which we see matter, whether some natural illumination or a manmade radiance, really is nothing but darkness, for physical light is itself material. Matter can be illumined by matter but not known by matter. So the mystic seeks to be united with the medium, pure consciousness, that is the foundation of all knowing.

This means going far beyond the boundaries of what is familiar. To be spiritual doesn't mean moving this way or that along the customary dimensions of everyday life: time and space. We can't know God by becoming as small and insignificant as an atom or by becoming as large and momentous as the universe. Spirit and the One do not lie in a particular direction, nor is divinity realized by having more or less of anything possessed now.

Returning to the One means embracing mystery, cultivating another way of seeing, leaving aside visions and becoming sight.

Carried off, as it were, by the wave of the Spirit itself, lifted up high by it, as if it were swollen, "he suddenly saw, without seeing how." But this spectacle, filling the eyes with light, did not cause some other object to be seen by its means; rather, what was seen was light itself.

It is not that there were two things within it: on the one hand a visible object, and on the other its light, nor was there the Spirit and then what is

*thought by the Spirit; there is only a dazzling light, which engenders all these things later on.*⁵

There, in the higher reaches of the spiritual world, the light that dazzles the soul doesn't illuminate anything, for manyness has not yet emanated from oneness. Here, in the physical world, we see things that are separate from the light that makes seeing possible. But when all separateness and multiplicity have been eliminated from the soul, what remains is awareness of the conscious power that produces separateness and multiplicity: Spirit, the creative energy of the One.

Such is to be experienced, for it cannot be spoken about.

*For this reason the vision is hard to put into words. For how could one announce that [vision] as another when he did not see, there when he had the vision, another, but one with himself?*⁶

Those who have been able to realize higher truths, and seemingly Plotinus is among this exalted company, know what they know. They tell us how to reach the spiritual heights but cannot bring divinity down to our level, for the One is far removed from many.

Becoming One is the only way of knowing the One.

Master Charan Singh:

*The soul sees clearly by direct perception and does not reason.*⁷

*The Truth can only be realized when one sees the things for himself, within.*⁸

*The real spiritual truths are beyond the understanding of the mind and the senses, but when you have made sufficient spiritual progress, you will know all these things by direct perception.*⁹

*Once one is attached to Nam [Spirit], the darkness vanishes entirely and transcendent effulgence takes its place...The eyes that now see phenomena, then begin to look at Reality.*¹⁰

1. Hadot, Pierre. *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*. Translated by Michael Chase. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993, p. 21.
2. Armstrong, A.H., translator. *Plotinus I-VII*. Seven volumes published by Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1966-1988. Vol. VII, p. 339.
3. Hadot, Pierre. *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*, p. 63.
4. Armstrong, A.H. *Plotinus I-VII*, Vol. V, p. 177.
5. Hadot, Pierre. *Plotinus or The Simplicity of Vision*, p. 62.
6. Armstrong, A.H. *Plotinus I-VII*, Vol. VII, p. 341.
7. Singh, Charan. *Quest for Light*. Punjab: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, 1972, p. 57.
8. Singh, Charan. *Quest for Light*, p. 31.
9. Singh, Charan. *Light on Saint John*. Punjab: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Fifth Edition, 1985, p. 212.
10. Singh, Charan. *Spiritual Discourses*. Punjab: Radha Soami Satsang Beas, Third Edition, 1974, p. 168.

—END—