

## **THE MAN WHO WASN'T THERE**

(or *The Seeker's Dilemma*)

by

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(with apologies to Ogden Nash)

Yesterday on the stair,  
I met a man who wasn't there,  
He wasn't there again today,  
I wish to God he'd go away.

I had come across this piece of nonsense verse earlier too, and saw it again a few days ago. It had never struck me before that this verse could have any spiritual significance, but this time it seemed to have a special meaning – it seemed to illustrate the typical dilemma of the spiritual seeker.

Let me explain. (To make it more explicit, I will modify the original, with profound apologies to the poet).

The spiritual search is all about getting rid of the false ego, the false sense of separate, individual selfhood and thus realizing the true (Universal) Self within. But the problem is that the ego or separate self doesn't really exist – it is without substance, just an appearance, a mirage. Moreover, to compound the problem, it is the ego itself which desires and seeks its own dissolution, "like a thief turning policeman to catch himself" (Ramana Maharshi), thus creating an impossible situation – a 'double-bind,' as Alan Watts calls it.

This, then, is precisely the spiritual dilemma – *wishing that the man who wasn't there would go away*. In other words, the dilemma of the spiritual seeker is:

There is this fellow in my hair,  
Who actually, really isn't there,  
He isn't there every single day,  
I wish to God he'd go away.

Confounded by this dilemma which apparently defies solution, the seeker finally finds a Master, who makes him understand the situation. The position of the seeker then is:

I am the man who's in my hair,  
I am the man who isn't there,  
I still wish to God he'd go away,  
I wish to God I'd go away.

But how can this be achieved? How can this wish be realised? It is truly an impossible wish. For the insubstantial, illusory ego which doesn't even exist to achieve its own annihilation is, as Sant Jnaneshwar said, "like saying one's shadow will fight with one!" It is a battle which cannot be won, not because it is too difficult, but simply because the object to be destroyed never even existed.

A fable of Nasruddin shows him similarly deluded: Seeing a ghostly white form in the garden at night and mistaking it for a robber, he emptied his shotgun at it, only to realise that it was his own white shirt hung out to dry by his wife. Nasruddin tried to assuage his consort's wifely wrath by pointing out the bright side to her. He said, "Consider yourself lucky that only the shirt is gone and thank God I wasn't in it when I shot at it!"

Equally absurd and ridiculous are the efforts of the `me' to get rid of the `me.' For, any me-based effort is bound to reinforce and strengthen the illusion of the `me,' the exact opposite of the result desired. That is why such efforts inevitably fail. And similarly self-defeating is even the very desire to get rid of the self. For, as the great Taoist Chuang Tzu remarked, "Isn't the desire to get rid of the self, itself a positive manifestation of the self?"

The mightiest efforts, everything I could spare,  
To get myself out of my very own hair,  
All to no avail, there wasn't a single day,  
That I had this dirty fellow out of my way.

But then is there no hope at all? Is there no way out?

There is indeed!

When the teaching of the Master really sinks in, it is realised that if there is no ego or self in reality, where is the sense in trying to destroy this non-existent entity? And, even more important, who is to do this effort? Eventually, it is this understanding which resolves the impossible tangle, which unravels this Gordian knot, undoes this double-bind. As the *Bhagavad Gita* says, only by the sword of Knowledge (understanding) is this tree of *samsaara*, of me-based desires, destroyed. It is by the knowledge, the perception, that the separate `me' never really was – it was just an illusion, like the circle of fire traced by a whirling torch, or the path of an eagle through the sky . . . .

But when this final realisation dawns, there is no more a `me' left to say so!

It's all a mighty joke, it's hugely unfair,  
He never was, this man who wasn't there,  
And so who was to think, who was to say,  
That he had really gone away???