

Using the “I-Question”

A great way to begin a DSI session is to generate an “I-question” out of any present issue or situation. It can simply be, *Who is having this present experience?* Try this out now. You might answer, *I am*. But what does the word “I” represent? Is it me now?

Or, you could create a more specific question—for example, *I feel anxious about having to solve all these problems at work. Who is feeling anxious?* Get a clear sense and feel for your emotions (around the problem) by repeating this several times and reflecting on the issue. Notice that in the moment it feels personal, true, and about you.

Continue questioning the sense of “I” in your statement, using your present perception of yourself. Now, find the sense of the “I-cluster,” the various elements that make up your personal body/mind experience. These might be bodily sensations, emotions, a sense of where “you” are located, thoughts, beliefs, or something else. As best you can, isolate and question what each piece represents. For example, maybe you feel a personal sense of “you” in a specific place in your forehead or around your eyes. Or, you have a story about yourself, or a feeling that seems central to you in the moment.

Ask, *Is it what I am?*

Yes, this seems to be part of me; it is appearing now, but is it me?

Yes, the feeling of anxiety is present now, but is it what I am?

Continue, step-by-step, through each of the elements that you’re able to identify, questioning if they are actually part of you, or simply present.

Exploring The Sense of Location

One focus of DSI can be to explore where you feel located, where “you” mostly seem to be. Where is it located? Get a good sense of this center of you and all its details. Note that it might include vague sensations. Is it in this body? If yes, how do you know this? What is the perceived evidence that suggests so? Where are you exactly? Does it feel like you are in the head, or somewhere else? Usually, this center is perceived to be somewhere in the torso, chest, or head; on rare occasions, it could be nearby but outside the body. Try not to think about where you are located; just look to see where it is perceived that you are. Question all the evidence.

Now, consider whether this is actually you. What are you looking at? Does this sense of you actually prove that you are located where you seem to be? What is this that you feel is you? Are you in the sensation you believe is you, or are you looking at it from somewhere else, outside maybe, or from another perspective? Don't assume anything; verify it for yourself. How is it possible that you can look at your center or what is central to you, and see this "sense of you" from another perspective?

If this location is not you, then where else might you be? If you feel as if you are identical to the one who watches all this, where is that "watcher" located? Notice that the location of "you" might seem to move. Can you find the center of this watcher? If you can, just repeat the same questions given above.

If you don't feel located in a body, where are you? Are you sure you are not located in a body? How do you know this? Continue to question where you feel located, using the same process described above.

As you continue questioning in this way, you may find that what feels most like you is "witnessing" or awareness, not something that has a location. If this happens, just continue paying attention, noticing, and reflecting on what this un-localized awareness may mean about what you are.

The Impact of DSI on Beliefs

As you work with DSI, many ideas about what you are will be seen as not true, and fall away. For example, you may recognize that sensations in the body are not "you," they are simply impersonal sensations arising. Increasingly strive to turn your attention to where the strongest sense of "you" is felt, and remain there as continuously as possible. Look for proof; see if you can find any area that feels more "you" than any other. When you can clearly identify the "you center," continue to question this. *Is this really what I am? Is this really me...? Is this a person... or something else...?* Then wait for the answers. If you drift off of that focused point of attention, or get caught up in imaginings or thought, just recognize that and come back as soon as you can. Find the "I-sense" again and bring attention back to it—scanning, probing, exploring, and questioning.

You will notice beliefs about what you are—not as clear thoughts, but rather as a sense that something "feels true." An example of this is the feeling that you are "behind your

eyes" somewhere. It may feel true, but if you look and investigate it, you find this is just a sensation in the head combined with a subtle belief: that sensation proves that I am behind my eyes. As you put attention on the sensation and beliefs, and question whether this is you, there will be a clear sense that these cannot be what you are, and that you are always what is looking at anything that comes up. "You" are somewhere else.

Over time, during your sessions, attention will stay in place for longer and longer periods. The sense of "I" or "me" will change or seem to move around. It might become more subtle. You can also use questions to find it, such as, *Where is the I? What am I? Who is walking or sitting? What is "me"? What is this I?* It's very important to not just think about the answers, but rely on your direct perception to show you what is, or isn't, really there.

The Signature Identities

Early in the DSI process, you may begin to notice what are your "signature identities," or significant I-clusters that feel personal, appear most frequently, and are felt to be most like "you." For example, recurring stories that seem true about you and occur in a typical day. There is typically one primary identity, perhaps around your role at work, or even as a spiritual seeker, that is central to how you most often think of your self. It can also just be something like your tendency to try to control situations, react to things that are judged to be "out of order," or wrong or inappropriate. As you explore this I-sense around controlling your world, you can begin to see how fear and threat to "you" play into many of your behaviors. What is this "you" that feels threatened? As you work with DSI it's important to first identify what your signature identity or identities might be, and then to keep them in mind while investigating experience throughout the day.

Shifting From Perceiving To Thinking

Particularly during the early-to-mid-stages of DSI work, there is a tendency for attention to move from directly perceiving experience to ideas about experience. This often happens without recognizing the shift, and is generally due to prior conditioning, habit, and a lack of discrimination skills. With continued practice, reliance on perceptual rather than conceptual evidence should increase as one discovers the importance of basing understanding on direct perceptual evidence over any other source of information.

In some cases, direct perception may trigger fearful emotions, and a less threatening idea will be preferred to perceived reality. This aversion to what is directly perceived is part of an I-cluster, and represented in thoughts like, *I won't consider this as true, or I can't believe this; there must be some other explanation!* In a teaching situation, this often triggers (in the student) a distrust of the guide or an intentional movement toward distracting thoughts. On some occasions this is only temporary and can be worked through. However, in other cases it can be so strong that it stops further progress, ending effective collaboration. This is critical: if the seeker's underlying intention is anything other than to see the truth of no-self or to awaken from the dream of "me," then the impulse to awaken is not fully matured.

Recognizing Awareness

As your ability to investigate develops, you will probably have temporary recognitions of "no self," not being located anywhere. You might perceive a space or vacancy where the center of "you" used to be. This is progress, but just keep noticing and questioning this experience, and going deeper. *Is this really vacant? Who is looking? What notices this "no-self"?* Look, and try to find from where you see all this. You will find that there is no object there. It will begin to feel that what you actually are—more than anything else—is the present seeing or awareness.

Over time, there will be brief or extended periods of "waking" during which the sense of being the body or sense of "I" vanishes, and you feel your existence as simply present, alive awareness. Thoughts may cease completely, and awareness may seem to expand and fill the space around you, accompanied by energetic sensations, bliss, joy, and a deep sense of connectedness to all life. Usually, this is a pleasant or emotionally neutral experience. However, on occasion, the various sensations may feel overwhelming. If the experience becomes uncomfortable, just relax, breathe, and take a break from the exercise until you are ready to resume. My experience is that uncomfortable feelings or energies are quite rare and subside quickly. Eventually, all strong sensations, whether blissful and unpleasant, become less. Clear seeing of the way things are becomes the new normal. As we will discover, however, it is not "normal" at all.

The DSI Question/Perception/Answer Format

Unlike other forms of investigation, we might engage in, Deep Self Investigation does not involve analyzing our experience. The majority of the time spent doing DSI involves simply perceiving or noticing what is actually present in regards to the sense of self. Initially this takes the form of "question-notice-answer" format. You might ask, *What is this sense of me?*, then locate in perception the direct experience of the sense of me. You can now formulate a response describing what is noticed, such as, *I seem to be here in my head.* This answer is followed by a deeper probing question, *Is this sense of me in my head what I am?*, followed by perceiving or noticing what is there, and then completed by describing what is observed, after which we form a new, deeper probing question, look to see what is true, then form an answer, and continue repeating the process. Often what happens during the process is that attention gets drawn off into some unrelated form of thinking. When this is noticed, we simply resume the self investigation. However, as we progress, there will be periodic experiences of no-self or selfless awareness. At this point, questioning may cease naturally with this deeper level of clarity. Initially these moments of clarity will be fleeting, but in time they linger for longer periods of time.

During the early stages of practice, the question/perception/answer steps are relied on heavily to help direct attention to the strongest locale and appearance of our personal existence and away from discursive thinking. But as we become more familiar with the inner terrain and locale of the I-sense, the thought-based question and answer approach will often give way to more of a feeling/perceiving of the sense of self in the moment, and the background to this personal appearance.

The Power of Strong Questions

In the culture of spiritual opinion, it's easy to get the idea that waking up to the reality about your "self" is mysterious and complicated. I don't find it this way at all. The issue could simply be reduced to mistaken beliefs taken to be true. If you are confused about your identity and feel the desire to know the truth about what you actually are, then you must question the assumptions that underlie what you believe yourself to be. Knowing the truth of what you are not, and what you actually are, is really the point of "waking up." DSI involves learning the truth by methodically questioning these assumptions which are the basis of beliefs about you.

Attention can also explore awareness (what you are); however, this process is different because awareness cannot be located as an object, like thoughts or body sensations. Direct exploration of awareness is more like open attention “sensing” itself, noticing wakefulness, presence, or simply “being.”

Eventually, there comes a point where investigation reveals that the combination of any belief in being an individual self, along with sensations, emotions and so on, are nothing like a “person” at all. The person is a cluster of independent, impersonal appearances. This results in a type of shock wave in understanding. With awakening, there is a clear and final understanding that there is no individual self or “me” anywhere. Without self-referencing beliefs dominating attention, identification with thoughts or sensations in the body/mind opens into free attention. There may be an immediate recognition of what you are at this point, or this may reveal itself over a period of time.

The reality of “no-self” is recognized when beliefs in “you” are seen through. There is a realization that you do not exist as any thing—and yet a sense of existing—or aware presence—remains. Not *your* aware presence, just impersonal aware existence. Awareness and attention move freely in this condition. DSI is no longer necessary. Seeking of teachers and teachings ends and life becomes more a process of childlike exploration and discovery.

A Sample Round Of Questioning

Start by taking a few deep breaths and notice what is going on in your present experience. Turn attention to where you feel the strongest sense of “I” or “me.” Below is an example of what a DSI session can look like: a series of questions, answers to those questions, and then questions about the answers, and so on. What is not evident in this script are the pauses to allow perception to do its work, but try to imagine them between statements as you read along. Remember that this process is mostly perceiving rather than thinking.

Who is having this present experience?..... I am.

Where is the sense of "I" located...?..... It's always right here..... hmmm? Where to look? I'm not sure, seems like that sense of me changed...

Well, am I here or completely gone?..... I'm here...yeah, definitely feel present somewhere... not sure where. Looking..... Wait!, go back one level...

Who is doing all this stuff I'm doing?..... There does feel like a "me" is here, now, in or behind all my actions doing these things...

What is that feeling of being here?..... Somewhere around the upper body... or mind space..... looking around, feeling around.

Where do I feel located the most?..... I feel this "me-ness" now, here, riding high in the body.....okay locked in it, kind of nebulous in the upper part of the body, now I'm looking into that hmmm?..... can't find anything... No, there it is, very subtle...like smoke, a feeling of location..... gone now...

Does that feeling of being here actually prove anything?..... Now it seems I'm still here watching all this stuff.

Is there another sense of "me," the watcher?..... Sometimes I think I find the "I," then it moves or changes or.....?.....

What is watching as me?... (looking)..... I now have a feeling that I'm the watcher somehow, seeing from somewhere...Feels like I'm around the eyes..... is that true? No, behind the body..... yes, up above the head ...

What is that exactly?..... Need to look closely..... a sense of "me" there, watching.....

Is that true, am "I" there?..... Yes, it does seem like I am there..... seems I am positioned there..... checking it out..... yeah..... there... keep checking it out.....

The key is to keep the tempo up: ask a question, notice what's happening, answer, notice again to verify, then ask a deeper probing question and explore that. Move back and forth between questions and answers, all the while staying grounded in your direct perceptions. Just notice what is true. Notice what direct experience—just what you are aware of now—presents to you as the answer. The answer is not what you think it should be; it's what reality reveals to you.

Early on, attention will slip back and forth between direct perception and thoughts about what is happening, without being aware of this shift. DSI involves simply looking and reporting what is there, where you expect yourself to be most present. *What is at the center of this I-ness?* It seems like I am there. *Is this true? Do I actually reside there? Am I experiencing life from there? Am I identical to that?*

Vary the questions. Most will drill down into some specific assumption about the self, challenging a belief. Sometimes a question will go to the wider view: *Who is walking on the road?* or *Does it feel like I am working on this project?* Watch for the sense of a doer, a you behind the actions. Try using questions that trigger an emotional response—something that triggers a personal feeling or sense of “ownership”—and then look for the personal me in it. What does “me” refer to in experience? As the process gets refined, look for very subtle assumptions about your identity: *Is there any “I” here at all?* Be ready to see if there is a recognition of “no-self.”

It’s important to be persistent and keep at self investigation in every area of your life. It can go on for a minute or two, or for longer periods. In my case, I rarely planned to do DSI. For example, I didn’t schedule a daily time, but eventually I practiced every day in many different situations, whenever I remembered to look. There are literally hundreds of opportunities throughout the day to look for this separate person that you seem to be. As you progress, you will notice new perspectives on the sense of a separate self. All of life becomes more like a stage play that you simply observe from outside the performance.

Making Use of Potent Statements

Another DSI tool is to make strong, sometimes even speculative, “statements” to check your assumptions for truth, accuracy, and validity. These kinds of statements can guide attention deep into experience. An example of a potent statement is, *There is no one here. Is this true?* Then explore that experience through perception. Follow with questions like, *How do I know it is true?* Or, *Is this statement false? How do I know it is false?* Keep looking for evidence and move toward clarity and certainty. Other potent statements are: *There is no you, only this. Is this true?* Look at your experience and see if this is true. *I am this awareness. Is this true?* How can you confirm it? What is awareness? Find awareness in your experience. Get a feel for the obviousness of being consciousness. It may seem very subtle, but keep trying to sense that it is here, now. *Is this awareness (that which allows me to experience what is going on) what I am ultimately looking for?* Look and search throughout the body, mind, and the experience of the world around you to confirm if there is any present evidence to support or contradict any of these statements.

Finding I-Sense Through Issues

Begin by recognizing any concern you have in the moment and make it into an "I-statement." For example, "I am worried about finding a new job." Notice what the word "I" in the statement represents. Question what this term "I" represents in your experience. *Is it what I am? Is it a person? Is the "I" something?* See that the "sense of I" is only that: a thought interpreting other appearances and stating, *This is me!* The sense of "I" is not a person, not what you are, not an actual "I." When this sense of "I" is seen as just what it is, what remains of you?

Alternatively, notice that this present awareness is aware of the I-cluster. What is it that knows this sense of you with its various elements? Does it seem like this present sense of you is what you actually are, or is it simply another appearance to what you are? Feeling/noticing the sense of being awareness, rest in its simplicity. Notice this condition is devoid of: being a separate person, future or past, thoughts, concerns, and suffering.

D. EXERCISES FOR RECOGNIZING AWARENESS

Exercise 1: Timeless Awareness

Notice that you are aware now. Remember some situation, such as on a playground, when you were a child. Consider that the awareness that witnessed your child body and mind there on the playground is the same as this present awareness. That is, it appears to "see" in the same way, and unlike the body and mind having changed dramatically since that time, it appears virtually the same. There is not "child awareness" different from this present "adult awareness." Notice which of these appears to be more what you are, the changing body and mind, or the unchanging awareness here now?

Exercise 2: Noticing Where You Are

Notice the room around you. There is awareness of this room now. Close your eyes and notice that what awareness is aware of changes, but the "seeing" of the darkness is the same "seeing" of the room. Awareness did not change during the transition. Sense the presence and nature of this unchanging awareness. Notice that, as scenes and events change throughout the day, this awareness remains the same.

Exercise 3: This Experience Without You

Imagine what this experience would be like without you.

Everything here just as it is, but you are not present, only the awareness of the experience without someone who is aware.

Just this.

All sense of personal is gone.

No story about you ever having lived.

Imagine that what you are has always just watched everything.

Not you watching, only watching happening.

Exercise 4: No You, Just This One Being

This exercise is experiential; it's about looking right now at what experience is like as you consider this story.

Imagine there is a hyper-intelligent being that exists. You could call it God, or Supreme Intelligence, but we'll just call it the Awareness. It's neither singular nor multiple. Let's consider that this Awareness is present as you now. This is your actual experience.

What you experience, the actuality of what you are, this present consciousness—is that being. And right now, it is using this character, this body/mind, as a vehicle to have this experience. This that you are, the very presence that you feel here, the existence that you feel here, is that hyper-intelligent, infinite, omnipotent, being-ness manifesting right now. And everything that you think you are—everything that is thought to be your separate self—is really just that vehicle. Being a vehicle is not bad; it's actually good.

The vehicle is awareness manifesting as a person. When you're paying attention and you're seeing beyond the sense of self—when you're experiencing that sense of alive awareness—you may recognize *that which you actually are*. Not "a being," just being-ness. The character that you seemed to be is recognized as just another appearance, like a tree, or a dog, or a stone, or a trash can.

Exercise 5: Self Investigation While Walking

One of my favorite practices was to find a trail and work with DSI while walking. You can combine strings of questions like those presented earlier in "A Sample Round of

questioning to keep the inward-directed attention going, or keep repeating the same question, looking for the answer.

Find a place with safe paths where you can easily walk without tripping or negotiating around things, and won't see too many other travelers.

Walk at a moderate, comfortable pace. Relax your gaze as you both watch your body moving on the path and the surroundings, and also watch what is going on inside your body and mind.

As your body walks on the trail, become aware of the inner spaces in the body and mind and any sense of you being there in the body, in any form. Find the strongest sense of you, wherever it is. As you sense a location, an "I" sensation that you believe is you, begin to investigate this using your favorite DSI questions. Or you can ask, Who is walking? Where is the I? Alternatively, you can just look without asking questions and sense whether you feel that you're anywhere in the body. What you will find, even if you start with many questions, is that the mental questioning will slow or stop. You will be just looking and noticing what is there.

Continue walking and looking inside, scanning the body for any sense of you, holding attention there as long as possible. If you drift into thought, just come back to looking for the I-sense when you notice you are not investigating any longer. If you can't find any sense of I in the body, notice this state of "no I." Question it: What does this mean that there is no "I" here? What is it that is here? As noticing continues, allow the actual condition of experience to sink in. What is the nature of the noticing? Is there a "noticer"? What is the relationship of noticing to that which is noticed? Does noticing seem localized or simply like an "atmosphere" of awareness? Awareness can begin to become obvious and pervasive in experience at this point. Continue to notice whatever happens.