

Spira, Rupert. Presence: The Art of Peace and Happiness, Volume 1. (2011) Salisbury: Non-Duality Press.

Reviewed by John Prendergast, Ph.D.

In this important new book Rupert Spira offers a deeply eloquent, insightful and mature exploration into the heart of experience that takes a subtle step beyond his earlier *The Transparency of Things*. At first he covers the familiar ground of the futile search for happiness and the discovery of true nature from a traditional Advaita perspective, although expressed with an unusual freshness and clarity. For example:

“The history of humanity on an individual and collective scale is the drama of this loss of our true identity and the subsequent search to regain it.”

“Every direction turns out to be the wrong direction. It is like standing up and trying to take a step towards one’s body; every step is the wrong direction.”

“In fact, *all* experience is intimately close to our self; closer than close. There is only our self. Only knowingness.”

“When it is said that awareness is ‘underlying’, it is a half-truth spoken to one who deeply believes in the separate existence of objects. In fact, awareness is not just ‘underlying.’ It is also, as it were, ‘on the surface’. That is, it is not just the witnessing background but also the substantial foreground of all seeming things.”

“Love is normally conceived of as the quality of intimacy that characterizes a small handful of relationships, connecting one person to another, whereas it is, in fact, the natural condition of *all* relationship, of *all* experience.”

There are some enjoyable flashes of humor as well, including speculation that there may one day be a diagnosis of SSS – Separate Self Syndrome:

“The longing for happiness and the fear of death are, in fact, two aspects of the same syndrome. The syndrome is the imaginary inside self. Future generations may one day diagnose SSS – Separate Self Syndrome – from which the vast majority of humanity suffers and which is the main cause of most psychological unhappiness.”

The book becomes most valuable, however, when it breaks from traditional teachings and addresses the reality of the residues that the imagined separate sense of self leaves on the feeling level of the body, even after an initial mental awakening. He frames the matter clearly:

“The exotic name for this understanding is enlightenment or awakening, but it is more simply the knowing of our own being; its knowing of itself. It is the end of ignorance – the ignoring of our true nature. Because this understanding was, until recently, more fully explored and explained in foreign cultures it is often associated with the cultural conditioning with which it was expressed. This inevitably led to many misunderstandings as the cultural conditioning was not clearly distinguished from the universal nature of the truth that was being pointed at. One of the main misunderstandings is the belief that when it becomes clear that there is not a separate inside self, the expressions of ignorance that dominated the body and mind for so long immediately come to an end. This is not so.”

“To begin with, the investigation may be confined to our thoughts, but long after it has become clear that the separate self does not reside in the mind, the feeling that it is located in the body usually remains. In fact, by far the larger part of the imaginary inside self is made out of this feeling. This realization may precipitate a much deeper exploration of the sense of a self inside the body.”

“In most cases this re-orchestration of the body and mind takes place gradually, but occasionally the change is dramatic. As a result of such a dramatic change the body and mind may become disoriented and the loss of the familiar structures in which we invest our identity may result in fear and even panic. At this point the desire to return to the old habits of thinking and feeling as a source of security may be strong and, if succumbed to, will allow the imaginary self to reassert itself again. However, if we have the courage and the love to remain in the openness and unfamiliarity of this new landscape, the fear will subside, leaving us in our true nature of peace and happiness. In time, the residues of the separate self are gradually washed out of the body and the mind, not through any effort or discipline but simply because they are no longer being fed and reinforced by the belief in the reality of such a self.”

This critical point is often overlooked by those who may have broken through identification with thought but for whom this understanding has yet to penetrate deeply into the feeling of the body. The understanding is not fully experiential and a strange denial may ensue which uses the philosophy of nonduality to dismiss or rationalize continuing reactivity:

“In many cases the understanding ‘everything is awareness, there is nobody here, there is nothing to do’ has been appropriated by the inside self and washed like a thin veneer over our much deeper feelings of separation and unhappiness. Hence the new religion of non-duality. In order to account for the feelings of irritation, sadness, lack, agitation, loneliness etc. that still persist and to reconcile them with its new enlightened status, the imaginary self, through a convoluted act of reasoning, persuades itself that all these feelings simply arise in awareness and are made of it.”

“The separate self thrives on inadvertence and these deep, dark layers of feeling in the body are an ideal hiding place for it.”

Spira points out that this bodily conditioning must be penetrated by the light of awareness in order for the ‘not-me-ness’ of the apparently separate world to dissolve as well:

“The sense of a separate self has been laid down over many years, in most cases, as layer upon layer of feelings in the body. It takes time, courage and sensitivity for these layers to be exposed to the light of understanding and for their density and ‘me-ness’ to be dissolved. Likewise, the solidity and otherness of the world takes time to yield its sense of ‘not-me-ness’ and stand revealed as a modulation of the light of our own intimate being.”

In *Presence: The Art of Peace and Happiness* Rupert Spira offers a remarkably clear invitation and deep exploration that springs directly from his own intimate experience with the heart of life. It is a beautiful offering by a gifted teacher and writer that deserves to be added to one’s “brilliant pointers” book list. Listen to the music of these teachings and then let it dissolve.