

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever quietly wondered, *is this all there is?*

Knowing ourselves alters our relationship with this question – and in doing so, opens doors we didn't realize were there.

How does one even start?

Anyone who explores will quickly realize **there is no one way.**

Today we can access centuries of accumulated wisdom and modern science to support it. This privilege comes with a cost, however. Our information landscape is vast, often contradictory, and difficult to navigate. Wisdom is crowded out by manipulation and spam.

Self-Investigation.org was founded to find the signal in this noise.

We explore widely across traditions, disciplines, and modalities, not to provide answers, but to distill what consistently emerges as powerful and trustworthy ways to know ourselves.

This guide has two major jobs:

Chapter 1: Show why Self-Investigation matters.

Chapter 2: Provide tools so you can begin exploring.

This guide is not (nor will ever be) complete. It's a snapshot of what we know today and will be revised regularly as our knowledge is refined.

This is a community-powered resource relying on people to show up and share their perspectives. A big thanks to everyone who has contributed – in our interviews, our reading clubs, and our discussion forums. The more this carries on, the more our work comes into sharper focus.

Courtesy Warning

Self-Investigation challenges our sense of self, identity, and reality. Taking ourselves apart can feel disturbing. However, this is often a step toward transformative change. Being informed of these possibilities is important.

Self-Investigation can be powerful, but it is not therapy. If you're feeling overwhelmed, highly anxious, or in distress and want to talk to someone trained to help, please see:

<https://self-investigation.org/mental-health>

CHAPTER 1

THE PROBLEM: WHO AM I?

WHY SELF-INVESTIGATION MATTERS



We're All Truman...

In the film *The Truman Show*, Truman lives a relatively comfortable life. He is completely bought in to how the world works. He doesn't realize he lives in a misleading reality. His friends, family, and community are all paid actors. His "world" is literally a giant dome with an artificial sky. It's a gigantic reality show and he's the main character – but he's clueless.

Eventually he gets wise. He catches people hiding things. He suspects there's more going on than he's been told. He demands answers but nobody offers the truth.

Frustrated and trusting nobody, he boards a sailboat and heads out into the ocean alone. He's tossed around in a wild storm.

The storm subsides... Truman's sailboat abruptly smashes into the fake horizon of the dome.

Aha! His suspicions are confirmed. His world is deceptively smaller and more constrained than he ever imagined.

Collecting himself, he ascends a staircase toward the "larger world" that, until now, has been totally hidden from him. His perspective and understanding are irrevocably changed.

We are all Truman. Not in the sense that we live in a mass conspiracy, but that **we can't see beyond our false horizons, because our own mind obscures and distorts our view!** However, our perception and understanding can be expanded much further than we realize...

Finding and overcoming these mental walls, and therefore understanding ourselves more deeply, is the essential aim of Self-Investigation.

AN INNER REVOLUTION

"Merely to ask yourself, genuinely and simply, that vital question 'Who am I?' is to change your life significantly; and it can start a process that will revolutionize it totally."

- Douglas Harding

Revolutionize? Really? Similarly, Alan Watts says asking "Who am I?" is the "*most fascinating problem in the world*". Seriously, Alan? Of ALL problems in the world, how can *this* be most fascinating?

Is this complete BS?

This book will help you judge for yourself.

THE LAKE OF MIND

How do you define yourself?

Do you see a single body of water that can be described in a short bio?

Or do you see numerous layers and depths, always mixing and morphing, nearly impossible to define?



WHY CARE?

“Who am I?”

The problem is we don’t know. Worse, we don’t know we don’t know. Our habits and assumptions distract us, giving us little reason to dig deeper. But even a shallow scratch reveals a mystery. When we see this, something shifts. Not answers, but perspective. Not certainty, but room to see differently:

1. **Sense Your Misleading Mind** – Science, philosophy, psychology, and countless anecdotes show – the human mind is sort of a misleading bubble. Although we can’t escape it, *we can sense it, deconstruct it, and expand it.*
2. **Better Understand Others** – By understanding fundamental human nature and our own behavior, we can better make sense of others.

Example: A friend snaps at you over something small. Instead of taking it personally, you pause, notice your reaction, and sense the larger situation. You realize they’re acting out of stress, not hostility. You stop assuming malice and start seeing human complexity - theirs and your own.

3. **Gain Inner Relief** – Our thoughts and feelings are relentless, which often feels overwhelming and contradictory. Self-Investigation observes these feelings *without being captured and defined by them.*

Example: You wake up feeling dread for no reason. Normally this spirals into “What’s wrong with me?” But you learn to observe the feeling without fusing with it. You notice, “This is just a sensation and a story my mind is telling.” The dread loosens. The day becomes workable again.

4. **Gain Outer Relief** – The outside world constantly manipulates us. We are vulnerable no matter how smart or protected we believe ourselves to be. Self-Investigation notices this and mounts a defense.

Example: A post on social media makes you feel inadequate - like you should look different, buy something, or be more successful. Before, you might have believed this feeling reflected some truth about you. Now you notice: "Ah. My attention is being captured. Someone is trying to trigger a need." The spell breaks. You regain agency.

5. **Prevent Philosophical Suicide** – "Philosophical Suicide" means not thinking for yourself, because an outside idea hijacked your curiosity. Self-Investigation offers a way to protect yourself. ^[1]

Example: A charismatic leader makes a serious claim about "how things really are." You feel captivated. But before swallowing it whole, you catch your curiosity collapsing into certainty. You pause, question, explore alternatives - and keep your mind open rather than outsourcing your beliefs to this single person or idea.

6. **Increase Equanimity** – Self-Investigation helps us feel more content in everyday life. ^[2]^[3]

Example: Nothing dramatic is happening - just an ordinary afternoon. In the past, this part of the day felt slightly dull or restless, like something more productive or meaningful should be happening. But now you notice that you're simply good. The restlessness is quieter. There's a gentle sense of contentment underneath everything - a small but real shift toward feeling lighter, more grounded, even a bit happier. Nothing external changed; your relationship to your own mind did.

MANY PATHS TO INVESTIGATE



What is the **ultimate** way to know ourselves? Throughout history people have approached “Who am I?” from very different angles. Each reveals something real - yet each is only a partial view:

The Meditator

Realizes the voice in their head isn't exactly “true”.

The Scholar

Discovers a common insight across most religion and mythology.

The Artist

Captures the essence of human suffering in an abstract painting.

The Scientist

Demonstrates how our brain constructs reality.

The Philosopher

Challenges the nature of “truth” and ponders the origin of consciousness.

The Historian

Reveals the trajectory of the species for the past 300,000 years.

The Psychedelic / Mystical Experienter

Loses their sense of ego and experiences an unusual sense of relief.

The Poet

Laments how relentless desire drives them mad.

The Seeker

Adopts a contemplative tradition and “awakens” from the illusions of society.

The Nondualist

Sees the division between self and world as a mental construction.
Sees *all* division as a mental construction.

Each person sees something essential about who we are. Yet if any pushed their view above others, something would be lost...

There is no ultimate tool or expert.

Self-Investigation recognizes this and considers any method or perspective as only one part of the bigger picture.