

Five Verses from Kena Upanishad on Enlightenment

Dear Edward,

Your statement "there is also a growing sense of confidence that I know something, or rather know nothing" brought to mind the following verses from the Kena Upanishad.

"1. The teacher said: If you think you know Awareness well, then you only know a small portion of its limitless form. Therefore Brahman, limitless Awareness, is worthy of inquiry.

2. The disciple said: I think I know Awareness. I don't think I know It well, but I don't think I don't know It either. The one who says, 'neither do I know nor do I not know It, knows It.

3. The one who doesn't know It, knows It: the one who knows It, knows It not.

4. To say you know it you must know it in every state of mind. To know it is to realize that you are immortal. By virtue of Awareness one gains life but one gains immortality by knowing It.

5. If a person knows the Self, eternal Awareness, the true goal of life is achieved. Suffering awaits those who do not know. Knowing It the wise let go of worldly things and enjoy deathlessness."

Edward: Thank you for these verses. I'm struck by 1, "If you think you know this well..." It is as if "well" or even "extremely" well is less than a drop in the bucket when what we're talking about is the infinite.

James: Yes. And I think the teacher here is also referring to the power of the *vasanas* to delude the person and rip off the knowledge. Many have some kind of epiphany and are convinced that they are enlightened but because the knowledge that arose with the experience was not properly separated from the experience it disappears when the experience wore off. An experience, 'spiritual' or otherwise would necessarily be the Self because reality is non-dual so knowing it would be knowing the Self. But the Self is not experience. It is 'beyond', meaning something other than experience. It also suggests that if you know the Self as an 'it'...as an object...which one would do if the knowing was indirect...then further inquiry is needed. What I believe the verse is aiming at here is that Self knowledge is actually the Self knowing itself. So for someone to be free of duality it would mean that he or she knew that when he or she says 'I know' he or she is speaking as the Self. It can only be the Self knowing because reality is non-dual. Verse two further elaborates the difference between indirect and immediate knowledge. It's the absolute best reply when someone asks you if you're enlightened.

Edward: And then 3, "The one who doesn't know it..." It seems to say, the one who thinks he is something apart from the knowledge doesn't know it, and the one who has no such prejudice knows he is that knowledge.

James: Yes, indeed. This verse formulates the distinction between direct or immediate knowledge and indirect knowledge in a different way. 'The one who doesn't know it knows it' means the person (who is actually the Self and know it) knows that the Self can't be objectified. "The one who knows it' means" that if you think it is an object, an 'it', then you don't know it as you.

Edward: Verse 4 about "every state of mind" reminds me of how I last described the "growing

confidence," as a leavening or ripening. It feels like, as I relax, this identity as Awareness is moving through me like yeast through dough. It is becoming more the default standpoint, rather than the thing "I" would dip into every now and again, as if to see if it were still there... I don't mean to exaggerate; this feels subtle and quite gradual. But I do find myself smiling, while alone, for no particular reason, more often. Meditation feels like meditation. Ok, so I definitely need to read more of the Upanishads!

James: Again, yes. The Self is 'the default standpoint.' When the mind is predominately sattvic the knowing is there all the time. As the knowledge establishes itself the ego relaxes, meaning it doesn't go with the vasanas any more and they become non-binding, the knowledge shines ever more clearly and confidence in who one is grows by leaps and bounds. At a certain point, however, when you realize that the object of knowledge is you and that you can't forget you because you are you, the state of your mind is no longer relevant. Most are so fixated on the thoughts and feelings arising in Awareness that they simply don't notice Awareness. But it is always present. It is so obvious that it is completely overlooked.

Edward: A few more thoughts on these verses... The disciple seems to demonstrate a remarkable amount of confidence, solidity, in just four verses. By verse 4, where he says that this needs to permeate every mental state, he has already himself shown the understanding from three subtly different "vantage points". By the end, it seems like he's said the same thing four different ways, each potentially speaking to, or from, a different relative mind state. Just riffing on the melody...

James: You seem to have 'got it', Edward. There is no means of Self knowledge that can hold a candle to Vedanta. It speaks from the Self's point of view and comes down into the Maya and looks at the Self from every conceivable relative point of view as well.