

A Funny Buddhistic Notion of Enlightenment

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Mike: Dear James, I just wanted to write and thank you for the *How to Attain Enlightenment* book. It's been one of those books that has made a very deep and lasting impression on me. I tend to read a lot, so this doesn't happen very often! It clarified many points, and I appreciate the fact that you were able to pop many "enlightenment fantasy bubbles" that so many people (myself included) get caught up in.

I was first exposed to Vedanta through my involvement with the Theosophical Society. One of our members read a section from the *Bhagavad Gita*, and it occurred to me that not only was it a fantastic text but that I was sorely ignorant of Hindu tradition. I went off looking for *Gita* translations and commentaries and read up on *swamis* Vivekananda and Shivananda. From there I found out about Pujya Swami Dayanada Saraswati and various people connected to him. Aha! Finally, something that makes sense. ☺

Anyway, I don't have any specific questions about Vedanta (at least, not at this present moment) I just wanted to thank you for your excellent book. I feel that it spared me years of blundering about and that I've shed many completely unproductive notions. Knowing that Vedanta has a precise definition of enlightenment and an eminently logical and pragmatic system of laying it out was a huge relief.

~ Best wishes, Mike

James: You are most welcome, Mike. Appreciation is always appreciated. Yes, you can't go wrong with Vedanta. It is cut and dried. You might enjoy my videos on the *Bhagavad Gita*. There are about forty hours for under a hundred dollars on a USB stick that plays on your computer. It is a very popular series. Check the website.

Anyway, if you have questions, feel free to write.

Mike: Hi, James, Happy New Year and thank you for the swift reply!

The "cut-and-dried" attitude of Vedanta is something I've been seeking for a good while now. I'm glad that you addressed the issue surrounding the use of intellect and knowledge in your book. I've been told by more than a few people in my life that I "think too much" or that spiritual pursuit is something that is a touchy-feely, fuzzy, emotional experience. Vedanta comes along and throws all that out of the window. Phew! I found that to be a tremendous relief though some people might find that disappointing. (What? No visions of singing angels?? You mean, I'm just like everyone else!??)

Not long after I clicked "send" on my first email, I started to think of questions. I've read your meditation PDF and *How to Attain Enlightenment* book as well as a number of the *satsangs*, so apologies if you've covered this already and the info is already out there. The first thing that came to mind is this: Does a person have their enlightenment verified by others who have attained?

Does the *guru* have a benchmark by which they can say, “Oh, yes, Mrs. Jones gets it... shame about her husband”? Back in my teens and twenties I was interested in Buddhism and had heard about monks having their attainments “confirmed” by their teachers. Does this happen in this tradition or is that more of a Buddhist thing?

This is not really a question so much as a comment which I cannot explain easily to anyone else in my circle of family/friends because it'll be met with blank stares... LOL... Being somewhat familiar with Buddhist teaching, I can see how there are many areas of agreement and overlap with what I'm finding in Vedanta. However, there's just something about Vedanta that's clicking with me in a way that Buddhism did not. I don't know if that makes any sense.

~ Many thanks and best wishes, Mike

James: Hi, Mike. The answer is yes and no. We start from an entirely different premise than the other “paths.” Actually Vedanta is not a path or if it is, it is a “pathless” path. It is just self-knowledge. Knowledge is not a path. Knowledge is what you can't negate or dismiss. You can't dismiss the fact that you are conscious and, with a bit of thinking, that you are consciousness. So “enlightenment” is not a matter of you attaining something special and having an experiential attainment verified by an objective source.

We start from the point of view that you are already enlightened. And you need to agree that this is true until you have been able to verify it through your own inquiry, conducted according to the impersonal logic of the teaching. You need a teacher to expose your ignorance to. He or she will show you why it is ignorance and it will go away when you understand. The presupposition of your question is that enlightenment is experiential and you need to find out if what you are experiencing is “it.” But what you are experiencing at any moment is never “it.” You, the awareness of experience, are “it.” So this is a very simple matter. Once it is clear what you are, the *guru* and the teaching are no longer needed and you can accept whatever your body-mind equipment is experiencing without prejudice. In short, enlightenment is not experiential. If you want a particular kind of experience, then you can manipulate the *gunas* in such a way that you feel good most of the time, but there is no discrete attainable experience that lasts. Only you, awareness, last. You are so “lasting” there is no way you can unlast. You are unborn awareness.

Seeking experiential enlightenment is an exercise in futility. How can you attain something that you are? You can only attain something that you aren't. So this funny Buddhist notion of enlightenment is basically endarkenment. It leaves the experiencing entity untouched and turns “you,” awareness, into an “it.” You are never an “it.” These paths basically boil down to ambitious, status-driven endeavors by people with low self-esteem who are dissatisfied with their lot in life and want to distinguish themselves in some special way. The spiritual world is full of very ordinary people who are terrified of being ordinary people.

The only question relevant is whether your knowledge is complete. So you need to expose yourself to the means of knowledge until there is no more doubt that you are ordinary, limitless awareness. Does this mean that there is no experiential benefit to Vedanta? Definitely not. Knowledge purifies the *samskaras* that produce suffering so that as the knowledge firms up the tendency to act out the impurities that produce suffering gradually ameliorates and the body-mind entity experiences increasing satisfaction.

~ Love, James

