

All Powers Belong to *Isvara*

Sundari (Isabella Viglietti)

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Awareness Is Ordinary Consciousness and Does Not Need Experience to Be Conscious

Sundaresh: I am a long-time Indian philosophy student. In particular, my interest has been in Advaita Vedanta but have been looking for a teacher to teach me, as I understand my knowledge is incomplete otherwise.

Sundari: There is a very good reason why Vedanta stresses the importance of a teacher. Ignorance, or the non-apprehension, of the true nature of reality as non-dual is hardwired and very tenacious. As the mind is conditioned to think a certain way and because non-duality is counterintuitive, unless the mind is guided in its exposure to Vedanta it will interpret Vedanta according to its conditioning, or *vasanas*. There are apparent contradictions within the teachings which need to be resolved by a qualified teacher. Teachings and teachers abound who teach according to their own methods and experience but this is always flawed and limited because unless a teaching is impersonal and independent of the teacher it will be contaminated by his or her beliefs, opinions and experiences.

Sundaresh: I spent some time talking with the monks at Swami Dayanada Ashram and Kailash Ashram who advised me which primary texts I should read. I obtained English translations of the triple canon and Shankara's main works as well as the *Yoga Vasistha*, *Panchadasi*, *Ashtavarka Gita*, *Vedanta Sara* and other texts. As well as introductions from Swami Chinmayananda and Swami Dayananda. I have seen all their YouTube videos and love them a lot. They speak to my soul.

I recently discovered James after watching his interview at *Buddha at the Gas Pump*, reading an interview in *Non-Duality* magazine and watching his teaching series called *Practicing Vedanta*. I am enjoying his teaching very much.

Sundari: James is a lineage-holder in the great Vedanta *sampradaya*, taught by Chinmayananda, Dayanda and Paramarthanada. He is one of the very few authentic Vedanta teachers alive today. We recommend that you read his book *How to Attain Enlightenment* and also read as many of the e-satsangs at our website as possible.

Sundaresh: I have a few doubts though and I am hoping you can address some of them:

1. James says that happiness is not in objects, rather happiness is the superimposition of the self's quality of happiness on the object. Does this mean there is no objective quality in the object which contributes to what we call "happiness"?

Sundari: Yes.

Sundaresh: The chocolate has the quality of sweetness, and the sweetness is sensed as pleasant by the tongue. That this quality is objective (or relatively objective) is established by the fact that most people agree chocolate has the quality of sweetness (just as they agree fire has hotness). The fact that chocolate is objectively desirable to most people further establishes it. Does this not contradict the thesis that happiness is not in the object, or at least demonstrates there is some objective quality in the object that is experienced as happiness?

Sundari: It is true that sweetness is the nature of sugar but this does not mean that anyone who eats sugar experiences pleasure. For some, sugar is poison. This is true of every object. For there to be joy in the object, it should deliver the same joy to anyone who experiences it at any time. But this is not so. The joy happens when the desire for the object is removed by contact with the object. The joy comes from the self, the nature of which is *ananda*, bliss.

It is the superimposition of the self onto objects (duality) that is the cause of suffering. The first teaching of Vedanta is that the joy is not in the object but in the self. But if you want to think that there is a certain kind of bliss in objects when you get what you want, you will have to admit that it is not permanent happiness. Nobody is satisfied with impermanent happiness.

When you are no longer satisfied with temporary happiness, the mind is sufficiently qualified to seek the self. Everything in *samsara* is a zero-sum game. You eat the chocolate and enjoy it but once eaten, where is the enjoyment? Gone. You have to eat more chocolate to get it back. When the mind has reached this point, it then seeks permanent happiness.

The bliss of self-knowledge is permanent. This is called *parabhakti*, where love is known to be you, your true nature – meaning consciousness, the self.

Parabhakti is having all you could ever want and knowing that it will never leave you. It is love loving itself. It is limitless satisfaction – *parama sukka* is the word used in the texts.

Sundaresh: 2. James says he has experienced *kundalini* awakening, *samadhi*, *nirvana*, etc. and that he is self-realized/enlightened, but how can he be so certain that he has really experienced in full *kundalini* awakening, *samadhi* or *nirvana*?

Sundari: James doesn't claim that he is enlightened or self-realized. He is the self, awareness, so he does not have to make claim to particular experiences. *Ishvara* is the cause of experience. He knows this because he is the knower of the James, the one who experienced the so-called *kundalini* awakening, *samadhi* and *nirvana*, etc. Awareness is that by which everything is known. No experience, full or partial, can validate you, awareness. You are always present prior to experience and you are unaffected by experience. What good are James' spiritual experiences now?

Sundaresh: According to the same scriptures James draws on, these experiences are accompanied by *siddhis* – *siddhis* appear as side effects of these experiences. It leads to the full

blooming of the energy body (*pranamayakosha*) and the experience of superconsciousness.

Sundari: This is a common misconception in the spiritual world, one that is emphatically held by many, such as the devotees of teachers like as Sai Baba. These so-called “powers” that seem to come with spiritual practice belong to *Ishvara* and are meant to invoke devotion to *Ishvara*. They do not belong to the *jiva* no matter how apparently “evolved” they may be. Unfortunately, many people make the mistake of ascribing these powers to the person who seems to have them. The powers come about as a result of *sadhana*, according to Patanjali. This is why his chapter on *siddhis* follows his chapter on *sadhana*. If the *siddhis* cause or accompany a particular experience, they will fade as the impact of the experience fades over time. These “powers” do not have the power to remove ignorance; only self-knowledge can do that. But they may inspire the seeker affected by the experience of the *siddhis* to begin self-inquiry. Often though these experiences created by these *siddhis* become an impediment to self-inquiry because seekers misunderstand them unless they are explained within the context of self-knowledge and the student is qualified to hear the truth that they are pointing to. And that truth is that all powers in the apparent reality belong to *Ishvara*, even though *Ishvara* and the *jiva* have a shared identity as awareness.

As there is only one consciousness which pervades all life, one cannot become “more” conscious or “super”-conscious. In fact you are experiencing consciousness all the time, whether you know it or not, because there is only consciousness. You can only lose your ignorance of your true nature as whole and complete, non-dual, limitless, unchanging, ordinary awareness. While it is true that many great teachers through the ages (especially in India) displayed remarkable and seemingly “extraordinary” powers, this does not make them SUPER-conscious. That is dualistic thinking based on the idea that awareness is something special. It is not. It is the most ordinary thing there is because it is ALL there is. If this is really a non-dual reality, which it is, how could there be levels to consciousness, or a “special” kind of consciousness that only some elevated souls reach? This idea is created by sensation-starved and experience-hungry egos in the spiritual world that do not understand what non-duality means.

Sundaresh: James says that these experiences are just transient and changing states that we are “conscious of”; we cannot have an experience of the self because the self cannot be objectified and made an object of knowledge.

Sundari: Yes, that is correct. They are all transient experiences known to you, awareness, as objects appearing in you. You have to ask yourself who the “we” is that is “conscious of” these experiences. Is it the *jiva* who knows about awareness (indirect knowledge) or it is the *jiva* who knows it IS awareness (direct knowledge)? There is a big difference. You seem to be speaking as the *jiva* who knows about awareness.

The self cannot be known as an object of experience, because it is that by which everything is known. The effect cannot know the cause. The only means at the disposal of the mind to know anything are inference and perception. This is a valid means of knowledge for objects but not for awareness. This is why we have Vedanta, a valid means of knowledge for awareness. It offers a methodology which works to remove ignorance, provided the mind is qualified and purified to receive it.

Sundaresh: But the scriptures say experience itself is the self. It is not “an experience,” it IS experience. Like, it is not knowledge of, but verily, knowledge.

Sundari: That is true, but the self, awareness, is not experience. It is the non-experiencing witness of the experiencing entity (the *jiva*). Awareness has no need for experience, because it is not incomplete. Experience is an object known to the self. All objects are made up of the self, arise from the self, dissolve into the self and depend on the self. But the self is always free of the objects, just like the ocean and the wave are dependent on water but water is always free of the ocean and the wave. So it is correct to say that experience is the self, but the self is not experience.

Sundaresh: Then should not our experience of reality on attaining self-realization be different from the ordinary mode of experience?

Sundari: Another common myth. The whole point of self-realisation is to see that awareness is the most ordinary thing there is because it IS all there is. The misconception here is awareness is something “out of this world,” something so special that you need a “special experience” in order to experience it instead of understanding that awareness is what you are. And you are always only ever experiencing awareness because there is only awareness.

You cannot “attain self-realization,” because you are the self, awareness. It cannot be gained by action and you cannot gain something you are. Self-realisation is an experiential term. It is also where the work of self-actualisation begins. Self-realisation is an experience, and because all experience occurs in time, no experience can become permanent. All experiences will end. Experience is therefore not real, in the light of Vedanta’s definition of what constitutes “real,” being “that which is always present and never changes.” Only awareness fits that definition, meaning one can “lose” one’s self-realisation if the knowledge “I am whole and complete, actionless, unchanging, unlimited, ordinary awareness” is not fully assimilated and you understand what that means for the *jiva*. It is one thing to know that your true nature is awareness. It is quite another to live free of the person as the self. Living free is called self-actualisation.

Self-actualisation is the consistent, total application of self-knowledge to one’s life. The “work” of self-actualisation is: (1) that one has fully discriminated the self (consciousness) from the objects appearing in it (all objects, meaning all gross objects as well as one’s conditioning, thoughts and feelings, all experience) and (2) that that knowledge has (a) rendered the binding *vasanas* non-binding and (b) negated one’s sense of doership.

Unless self-knowledge translates fully into the life of the person it cannot be said that self-actualisation has taken place, because the person will still be identified with certain aspects of being a person. In other words, binding *vasanas* and the sense of doership, or egoic belief in separation, will still be causing agitation in the mind. In order for suffering to end and to live free, awareness must become one’s primary identity. The person Sundaresh needs to be free of the idea that he is a person. What is the point of self-realisation if the person suffers under the tyranny of its likes and dislikes (*vasanas*)?

One can only fully actualise self-knowledge when one has understood the identity between awareness, *Isvara* and the *jiva*. This is where most people get stuck (or come unstuck) in their self-inquiry and it is why many self-realised people do not self-actualise. Understanding *Isvara* is the key. If you need help with this, you are welcome to write to me. This is one of the most important teachings in Vedanta.

Another big problem in the spiritual world is that seekers believe that self-realisation, or enlightenment, will make the person limitless. It will not.

As awareness you are and always have been limitless. As the person called Sundaresh you are and always will be limited, even though your essence and true nature is limitless awareness. Removing ignorance of your true nature does not mean that you change as a person or that you have to become perfect or “holy” or that you will have “special” powers. The person never leaves the apparent reality and the apparent reality is limited. The person is fine the way they are; they do not need to be perfected. And *Isvara*’s world is perfect the way it is, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. The person has an ignorance problem because it thinks it is the person.

Being fully self-actualised means that you know that the apparent reality is not real, only you are, so you no longer seek objects to complete you and you no longer seek to change yourself or the world. Spiritual experiences are objects. If you do make changes, it is from the standpoint of peace of mind, not because you are looking for more, better or different objects. You are already whole and complete; your contact with objects is all that changes. You no longer do anything for happiness. You do what you do happily because you are already happy, and to maintain peace of mind, your primary goal. This does not mean that life is always wonderful or great; it is often not. It is what it is, and how it is is not up to you as the person, even when you know that you are really unlimited awareness.

Your life as a person belongs to *Isvara*, and *Isvara*’s creation continues as “before” your enlightenment. *Prarabdha karma* will still play out, people get sick, have accidents, disappointments and the body will one day die. As awareness you take what comes as *prasad*, dispassionate about results because you are not identified with being a person and you know that *Isvara* (awareness plus the *gunas*) takes care of the Total. You are at peace, irrespective of what is happening or not happening in the *jiva*’s life.

When you know you are awareness duality does not disappear, it is just known for what it is: a superimposition onto non-duality. It is like the mirage on the desert floor, still seen even when you know it is not real. You are no longer deluded by *maya* and you enjoy the objects for what they are, sources of temporary and temporal happiness. You do not expect them to give you what they are incapable of giving you (lasting happiness), because you no longer need anything. You know that the joy is in you, awareness.

Sundaresh: I experience my consciousness in only my body in my ordinary mode of consciousness; however, if all is consciousness, then why do I not experience my consciousness outside of my body?

Sundari: This question raises several issues. First, you cannot experience consciousness as an object. Consciousness cannot be objectified. Scripture is very clear about this. Consciousness is

you, the one who knows objects.

Second, who is asking this question? It is the *jiva* identified with the body-mind. Consciousness does not belong to the *jiva*. awareness does not belong to anyone; it is not “your” consciousness, as there is only one consciousness and we are all it. There is nowhere that consciousness is not, because it pervades every atom of existence.

The body-mind (object) and the world “outside” “your” body-mind (all objects) are not real. Taking something to be real that is not real is called imposing *satya* (what is actually real) onto *mithya* (what is only apparently real. As I have said, “real” is defined as “that which is always present and never changes,” a definition that fits only consciousness, the self. The objects exist in a different order of reality to consciousness and depend on consciousness to exist. From the self’s point of view, there are no “levels of reality” and there is no “inside or outside” of consciousness, because there is only consciousness. From the point of view of a *jiva* identified with the body-mind, the objects seem real and separate from it. This is *samsara*, the hypnosis of duality. All objects are inert, value-neutral. They appear conscious only because the light of awareness (YOU) shine on them, just like the moon appears to shine because the light of the sun shines on it. Your discrimination needs some work because you are superimposing what belongs to the self (what is real) onto the objects (what is apparently real).