

Awareness Is Not the Knower

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2015-12-12

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2443>

Henry: Hi, Ted. I was under the impression that awareness was the knower/observer, but I see I was incorrect.

Ted: No worries. This is a common misconception. We refer to awareness as the knower/observer only in the sense that it is the consciousness that lends sentience to the mind and enables it to perform the functions of perceiving, integrating sensory data, deliberating, discriminating and deciding, which we commonly refer to as knowing. In short, awareness is the “light” that enables the relative knower (i.e. the apparent individual person) to know.

In Sanskrit, one of the terms for the self (i.e. awareness) is *sakshi chaitanya*, witnessing awareness. The word “witnessing” has an implied passivity compared to the word “knower,” which suggests an entity engaged in the action of accumulating information. The intention behind the word is to indicate that the “witnessing” done by awareness is not an action, but rather the *svarupa*, the nature, of awareness. In this sense, awareness is like space or light. Whereas relative knowing (i.e. knowledge of objects) is the result of mental modifications (i.e. the mind taking the form of objects), awareness illumines the mental modifications (and in fact is actually the “substanceless substance” or content of which the thought-forms or mental modifications are made). This illumining is not an action, but is the nature of awareness in the same way that illumining is the nature of fire. Fire doesn’t try to emit light. Light is simply its nature. Just so, awareness doesn’t try to illumine the mind – and, moreover, is not a personal entity that processes data and stores information for future reference. Awareness simply “shines.”

Henry: It’s awareness as far as an object, but awareness is not that.

Ted: “It” refers to what? As mentioned, the mind is the knowing instrument. Awareness is the light that illumines the mind and enables it to have awareness of whatever object falls within its scope.

Henry: So a new realization has occurred. What then is it like to know oneself as awareness if it goes even “deeper” than knowledge of objects as simply awareness?

Ted: You have that awareness now. You simply think it is limited. Because the portion of the limitless “ocean” of awareness associated with the body-mind-sense complex that comprises the apparent individual person you take yourself to be is privy only to the objective phenomena arising within that entity’s range of perception and conception, you have identified yourself with that person and think that the physical boundaries and experiences of that body-mind-sense complex defines who you are and makes you different from the rest of you. By analogy, this is like the wave thinking that the water comprising its particular form is different from the water of the ocean.

When you know who you are, the particular body-mind-sense complex with which you are associated does not become all-powerful and all-knowing. Neither does it “see” or recognize something more, greater, different than has always already been there, so to speak. The mind simply realizes that its essential nature is the awareness that is the essential nature of all that is and is not (i.e. it is entirely independent of objects in that while objects are modifications of awareness that depend on awareness for their existence, awareness itself is ever free of all objects and obtains eternally whether objects appear or do not appear within the scope of its being).

Simply put, while the mind will always be limited, awareness itself has always been, is now and will ever be limitless.

Henry: I am also trying to say that if I know objects as awareness, 24/7, uninterrupted, that is definitely not *moksa*, or freedom?

Ted: I’m not sure if this is a statement or a question. But if you have fully assimilated the knowledge that the essential nature of all objects, including the body-mind-sense complex of the person you appear to be, is awareness, and that knowledge has neutralized your binding *vasanas* (i.e. quelled the compelling desires that have arisen from the erroneous belief that you need those objects for your security and/or happiness) and canceled your sense of doership (i.e. erased the notion that you are actually the apparent person you appear to be – and will continue to appear to be – and, moreover, that that person is an autonomous entity that is able to control the results that ensue from its actions), then you (the person) will realize that you (awareness) already are free.

Henry: Awareness makes knowing possible, but it doesn’t know objects in anyway whatsoever?

Ted: Correct. Awareness isn’t an entity with a mind. The mind is an object that performs the function of knowing objects within the “light” of awareness.

Henry: Awareness is simply awareness – end of story.

Ted: Yep.

Henry: Awareness doesn’t know it’s “lighting up the mind” to know objects (including experience itself).

Ted: Exactly. If awareness itself were the knower of objects, then even a rock – given the fact that its essential nature is awareness, for awareness is limitless after all – would think and feel and know. While awareness is both the knowing principle, or intelligence-as-such, that “shines” on all objects, and the “substanceless substance” of which all objects are made, which is evident by the “intelligent design” that informs, or gives structure, to even insentient objects, it is not a personal entity that knows itself as such.

Henry: Enlightenment is the realization (in the mind) that I am that which makes the mind able to know me (awareness) and the objects of the mind's experience.

Ted: There you have it.