

Defining Self-Inquiry

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2014-09-01

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/1304>

Part 1

Shams: I hope my answer will be useful for you. I wrote an extensive text because I don't know the specific case, so maybe you will read things you already knew. If you still have any doubt about it, I think it will be easier if you tell me more details. But I hope this will work. I have divided the text into paragraphs to answer promptly.

Luis: Thank you very much. I'm reading your translation of James' *Bhagavad Gita* and it seems perfect. I had never read a version which I could understand so deeply. It's a book which I had always considered as a heavy one but now I'm enjoying it.

Shams: I think as well that this version written by James is a great thing. There is a practice always recommended by Sundari and him which consists on reading the entire *Gita* (it should take you less than an hour) in the morning (if it can be a daily practice, it would be better). The important thing is to read it from the position of Krishna, assuming that you are Krishna. It's a nice practice and very useful for the mind.

Luis: I also have a doubt that you could maybe solve. For ten years I have practiced meditation without great results, aside from epiphanies that come and go. That is why Vedanta has impacted me so much, especially with the basic idea of the absence of duality, the unity that is always here and the explanation about the absurdity of the searching through experience something that is only gained only by knowledge.

Shams: Good. This implies taking the step from "I perceive the limitless, I seek the limitless, I know the limitless" to "I am limitless," which you do not even have to prosecute because it is already so, but is recognized as such only when ignorance is gone. The beginning of this understanding brings the mature seeker to Vedanta.

Luis: However, sometimes I'm back to the habit of trying to keep a blank mind. I'd like to know how to deal with this. What is better? Rejecting and repressing the habit, focusing on self-inquiry (which is what I'm doing), complementing the meditative practice of keeping a blank mind with self-inquiry, or striving to try to perceive the self in the blank mind, as I used to do, which I know is absurd because I am the self?

Shams: The answer would be go with the first option but taking some variations on account: when the mind is ready, inquiry happens all the time, at every moment. However, inquiry is not something you practice or do not practice. Although you can lead it and motivate it with the exposure of the mind to Vedanta, it's something that just happens when the mind is calm and

carefree. Some say that the natural state of the mind is the total absence of thoughts but if you reflect upon this, it makes no sense. When the mind is free from all worries, the thoughts keep coming but now become introverted, looking inwards, wondering about the nature of all this. That's inquiry and it happens normally, even in children when they have not yet been touched by the small neurosis of society. Therefore, you do not have to "practice" inquiry, only allow it to happen. Read, if you have not done it yet, Chapter 4 of *How to Attain Enlightenment* (the translation is already on the site) which deals with the qualifications required for the mind to be ready.

Ideally, the mind is always doing self-inquiry, all the time, during all activities. So there is no reason to stop it trying to replace it with "another" technique. When there is a specific practice, inquiry is practiced upon that technique. Inquiry is practiced even upon inquiry itself. It's important too to remember that inquiry and meditation are not two different activities. During meditation, the mind gets calmed and automatically observes itself. During inquiry, this happens as well, but vigilance is occurring in the light of knowledge. Therefore inquiry is a kind of meditation, a more powerful one.

Having a blank mind would be like turning off the intellect. Could you get something from that? If liberation comes only through the knowledge "I am limitless awareness," how could that happen in a blank mind? The basic type of inquiry that I recommend, as I said, is to separate you and objects. So even when you are in the deepest meditation, intellect is discriminating between what is you and what is not you until it discards itself. If the mind is often immersed in periods of great silence or apparent absence of thoughts, that is excellent news because it means that there is control over the mind and also the mind is *sattvic* (attentive, pure). Especially there the intellect should not stop exploring, distinguishing between what I am and what I am not. On the other hand, when you feel you are striving for it, it would be better for you to relax, take it easy and observe with detachment the motivation to confront, suppress, achieve, enjoy, understand, etc. Behind that there is always the belief that we are authors of actions and enjoyers of results, i.e. doers. But if you can see it, are you that?

Finally, about the desire to perceive the self, you're right, it's fruitless. It might help you to know that some people, even after having attained liberation, still have that tendency (among many others) in the mind for a while. The small difference is that they do not believe they are people and don't get anguished over what the mind does or does not. They know that they are not the observed but the observer, you.

Part 2

Shams: In this mail I want to establish very well the ideas about self-inquiry. Read it several times and tell me if there are more questions or if you think I interpreted wrongly your practice. If so, I'd like to hear the details. I also inserted a couple of new topics of which I find the most important the self-revealing awareness. Please tell me if you don't find useful the information that I add in this mail and if you prefer for me to go slowly or to clarify more. I did so because I see that your understanding is advanced, that's why there are some areas that must be filled in so the mind could continue firmly. After all, although not always seem so, the mind is performing a Herculean task. James says it's like a little salmon swimming against the vast current of ignorance. At the same time, the arrival of Vedanta announces a time to relax. They call it the "Vedanta bus" because once you get aboard, you can set your luggage on the floor. While you

have a peaceful mind which is absorbing the teaching, Vedanta does everything for you. Therefore at the end of the mail, I talk a little about *bhakti* (devotion). Although we are apparently in the last stage of Vedanta (the part of the inquiry), I think this is the best time to bring well-understood devotion to the foreground.

Luis: I thought about what you're saying and I've noticed that inquiry acts on everything that happens, including a blank mind. It seemed to me that sometimes I tried to suppress the absence of thought, into which sometimes I dive with the thought "I am awareness." However, it's not a repression but a clarification. It's what you say about inquiry, which brings awareness to the meditative state and gives it a perspective. Actually, a blank mind leads to nothing. It's just a state of peace that comes and goes but doesn't destroy ignorance itself.

Shams: Okay. If there's ignorance before the blank mind, there will be ignorance after it. The clarification upon the thought "I am awareness" would aim to recognize any object that arises as just an observed object, separated from you, the viewer. Inquiry is the application of knowledge by discriminating between the observer (you) and the observed (the gross and subtle objects) under the understanding that the observer is not the observed hence breaking the observer's identification with objects. Inquiry is not the repetition of the thought "I am awareness." This is a technique that can help to train the mind and it's part of inquiry, but that is not the self. I think you are clear about this but it's worth emphasizing.

Luis: You made me realize that there is no contradiction between meditation and self-inquiry. That was a misunderstanding, the same misunderstanding that could be associated with the experience and knowledge topic. Although I have read it in the book by James Swartz, I didn't fully understand that experience is not opposed to knowledge but if I'm not mistaken, it helps you to not get lost in it, it gives an address and guides you to realize that experience is another object and not a means to get anything.

Shams: You're right, they are not opposites. Rather, they have different benchmarks. A simple way to explain knowledge and experience is as follows. Ten students are solving a mathematical operation and every one of them live the experience differently, perhaps with some emotion of fear, joy or boredom, or with simple thoughts of logical operation and material experience of the place and time in which they are. Each experimenter has a different experience. Even a single experimenter over time will never experience the same way. Thus we can say that experience is subject-dependent. Instead, knowledge is always the same. In arithmetic $2 + 2$ will never have a different result than 4, regardless of religion, political ideology, age or mathematical preparation of the experimenter. So we say that knowledge is object-dependent. Knowledge cannot be denied, while experience depends entirely on what the subject interprets whether is true or not.

Now I'd like to give you something more to think about.

The thought " $2 + 2 = 4$," indicating knowledge, is just another object arising in the mind. It's not knowledge itself but an experience. Where is the knowledge that it indicates? Can you touch it? Can you see it? However, you know it. There is this security, through experience, that it's knowledge according to the object. Like everything in the world, this knowledge is relative because it depends on analytical and experiential factors. There is only a total knowledge, i.e. a

knowledge that depends on an object that is not relative or experiential. It's the knowledge of you, the knowledge of something that, being not dependent on anything nor is it a relative thing, is one with its object (plus it's not an object at all). Knowledge of consciousness is consciousness. What am I trying to get at with this? I want to explain that you, consciousness, already know who you are and you've always known it. In fact, that's all you know and all you can be sure of. Think about it. How do you know you exist? You know it just because you exist.

On the other hand, how do you know that an object is a red pencil? You know it by deduction because you've already experienced pencils and the color red, and you related the experienced object to the "red" and the "pencil" thoughts. Now it emerges as knowledge that is checked. But even there, what is the common denominator in this whole process? You are. I mean, you can get to experience and know a red pencil ONLY because you exist. Certain factors are needed to get the knowledge of anything else but you don't need someone to come and tell you that you exist, you don't need a thought or a mirror. You simply exist. If you don't exist, there is no red pencil and no knowledge of it is possible. Or any other knowledge. You cannot be unaware that you exist. It would be absurd. Your very existence is the knowledge that you exist. You are self-revealing. In fact, you're the only thing that is obvious and the only thing that can be known with certainty. Beyond that, there are nothing more than deductions and assumptions because everything is born in you and will dissolve in you. Now let's see: do you have to be awake to exist? Do you have to have a body to exist? Do you have to be experiencing to exist? Where does your self stop? Can you perceive a limit in you? Is there any experience of your limit? Do time or space define you?

Luis: I used to find it strange to be in meditation constantly saying "I am the self" but I realize that it's necessary to keep this knowledge in mind for me to not get lost in an experience that leads nowhere.

Shams: You don't need to say all the time "I am the self." Maybe you could try just to look in the silence and watch, separating between what is you and what is not you as objects arise. Remember that thinking "I am the self" points to the knowledge but it's not knowledge itself. Knowledge is you. Self-inquiry allows the coming of that thought when an object arrives and you start identifying with it. Disidentify with the mind and its objects. Bring up the knowledge when an opposite thought comes. The opposite thought is always running in the mind. It's what sustains the mind in illusion. This thought must be discovered and destroyed by the application of knowledge. In your case, for example, you have the thought "knowledge helps me to not lose myself in experience." However, if you're the self where can you get lost? Nothing could lose you, nothing can touch you. You are not the mind. You are unbreakable. And the mind, as every object, is completely dependent on you.

You are always there. When you keep your attention on the thought "I am the self," you must contemplate its meaning. Then there is a noticeable change from the standpoint of the ego to the point of view of who you really are. It's usually accompanied by a feeling of spaciousness, peace and separation between you and the mind. But if you are feeling with the usual small ego, mental anguish and concern, would it be different in reality? To think that you can lose the experience is already "getting lost in experience." Could any experience (that was not the end of experience) take your mind away from the eternal observer? When you are taken by desire or fear, it means that you are thinking yourself to be a limited being. Check your thoughts and see how some of

them reflect the belief that you are limited. Self-inquiry is a practical and dynamic process that requires a few concepts and sustained vigilance to destroy little by little that sense of limitation, which is just a dream.

Luis: I guess that only after enlightenment it becomes unnecessary to practice inquiry, and one retains the knowledge of being the self without verbalizing. Is that so?

Shams: Because of the above-mentioned (you're obvious, you always know who you are, you cannot exist without knowing it automatically), there is no knowledge to retain. Ignorance about your identity is the object that is gone forever from the mind, so the sense of limitation in the individual is gone too. The application of knowledge helps you to remove that ignorance. Afterwards, you don't need it because you are the knowledge. When necessary in the world, the thought "I am consciousness" spontaneously arises in the mind of the individual, and so people say that someone is enlightened. At other times, the mind meets its normal functions caused by *karma*. It retains no special knowledge. When ignorance goes, the knowledge of my identity is automatic and therefore security is complete and incontrovertible. For example, do you have to repeat your name all the time to remember that you are Luis? Do you have to inquiry to realize Luis? No, because ignorance about Luis is not here and your knowledge of Luis is hard and fast. The same happens when ignorance of your true identity is gone.

Luis: I have another question: is not there a risk to convert the thought "I am the self" into some kind of *mantra*?

Shams: When you have it in your mind, it is a kind of *mantra*, regardless of the language you use or how many times you repeat it. "*Aham brahmasmi*" is the Sanskrit *mantra* for that statement. It is one of the most beautiful *mantras* and there is no harm in introducing it to the mind as well. But understanding its meaning is what matters.

Luis: Should the phrase be repeated even in situations when you are lost in everyday experiences and not able to understand its real meaning? I guess not, because without understanding the words are empty, isn't it?

Shams: Yes, without understanding the words are empty. But remember that self-inquiry is not just repeating words but is performed even when "you are lost in everyday experiences." How is that done? Realizing it. Asking yourself: who could be lost in everyday experiences? An individual, perhaps – but are you an individual? And assuming you think you are an individual, can the individual get lost in experiences? Inquiry reminds you that the individual is an experience. In this case (and in all cases), understanding the meaning of "I am the self" implies also understanding my relationship with objects.

Luis: However, my question is related to the suggestion of reading the entire *Gita* every morning, which is a kind of ritual that necessarily has to become empty. Isn't it more important to understand a single sentence at the time than reading the entire book every day? I also really like

your other suggestion to read from Krishna's point of view. So I will try to do it, feeling that his words are mine.

Shams: If there is *bhakti* (and the fact that you are so diligently inquiring is the best proof), although you would feel overwhelmed at first, the mind will take it gladly. It can't be boring because the mind is focusing on what is ever new, yourself. The aim is to re-educate the subtle body (intellect, mind and ego) through repetition. The *Gita*, although it might look like a military prescriptive or Hindu hagiography, is a book of love. So the key is to read it from your nature, which is love. The inquiry isn't only consistent with devotion, but is the highest form of devotion. Without striving and without stopping inquiry, let the love be the fuel. I don't mean all this just to talk about the practice on the *Gita* (you can choose it or discard it, as you decide) but to explain the right attitude on any practice. God always delivers what is asked but His delivery depends on the availability of the objects. So why not ask for what is always available? Ask Krishna for Krishna and soon you will cease to pretend you're not Krishna.

Part 3

Luis: I printed your email and I've been rereading it a few times. It greatly clarified many confusing points in my practice. In fact, I've noticed I didn't understand clearly what is self-inquiry. Although it has been hard for me to understand some points, I don't think you are going too fast with your explanation. If it's fine with you, I would be immensely grateful for new contributions since I'm thirsty. Your explanations have given me some less theoretical and more practical revelations than the books, so I'm infinitely grateful. After studying your explanation, I understand the metaphor of a salmon swimming upstream. Inquiry is a hard chore but I also feel that is what I had always sought, the latter method to become free.

Shams: I totally agree. Although it seems that the mind struggles against a world of ignorance (and on some level, it is), it's also true that the thirst for knowledge won't let you do otherwise. In that sense, this titanic work is the only possible and therefore it's the easiest.

Luis: If it's okay, I'll tell you what I understand for you to point or clarify something. Sorry if it's a little messy.

Self-inquiry means to systematically separate the real and the apparent, being aware at all times of the difference between me, the subject, which is the only reality, and the objects that appear in awareness, which may take the form of situations, people, thoughts, emotions...

Shams: Right.

Luis: This consists of destroying the identification with everything I'm not, realizing that the objects are subject to change, are ephemeral, and therefore they can't provide lasting happiness. They appear and disappear in me and I am all that remains.

Shams: Yes. Well said.

Luis: When I meditate on this knowledge, which is still a thought that appears in awareness, it's important to contemplate its meaning. This is necessary to reveal the real knowledge, that I am. Thank you, because now I understand what is inquiry. I realize that I have practiced it since I started meditating, for years, without knowing it... but in a clumsy, unconscious way, without having the knowledge or clearly distinguishing the real from the apparent.

Shams: Right! Self-inquiry naturally occurs when the mind is free from fear and desire. As I mentioned, even children practice it. All in general have experienced moments of *sattva* (peaceful, bright and attentive mind). Vedanta is the science of inquiry, the inquirer's map. Because it is also true that we can investigate all we want but without a sign to show us where to look, it's impossible to develop strong knowledge with which to develop the investigation.

Luis: You're right when you say that one does not retain knowledge because knowledge is actually all that there is. Knowing I exist is the real thing that doesn't depend on any experience and it's the one I know for sure it never changes. It's perhaps the only thing worth knowing.

Shams: Yes. However, during the investigation it's necessary to keep the knowledge in mind to remove ignorance (which manifests itself as misconceptions) about my identity.

Luis: I also realize that I can't get lost in anything since I always am. However, how is this confusion that leads us to identify with objects and lose the sight of our essence possible?

Shams: We call it beautiful, intelligent ignorance: *maya*, the power of *brahman* to make possible the impossible.

Luis: Since you wrote I'm focusing on the feeling of being, of existence, watching everything without getting involved. Sometimes I need to use phrases like "I am the self," "this (a situation) is not real," "I'm all that there is" when I fall into the illusion that I can lose myself in some experience. But I often keep the feeling of being without repeating anything, as you have suggested.

Shams: There is a part on this paragraph that is fine: the use of phrases to bring the mind to knowledge (because this knowledge we are looking at is for the mind). But it's important for you to understand that being is not a sensation. The sensation happens in you. It's not you. When there is no feeling of being, you are still being. Realize that you are also free of perception. Dismantle the idea of perception. Note that it is also a belief that is based on the notion that there is an experimenter who is experiencing the world. That is totally adjacent. That doesn't mean that at some point you will not experience the experience. No. It's just a recognition that everything you experience is unreal. Everything you experience is not real. The experimenter is not real. The only real thing is the knowledge that you are real.

Allow the mind to give up the desire to experience something that is infinitely more subtle than it: you. You couldn't be experienced by the mind. It's like if you want a hammer or a screwdriver to have a perception of you. They are just tools for you. It's the same with the mind. It's your tool and as such is perfect. To accept that it has no separate reality from you is in its very nature. Only you are real. You, who are beyond the experience. To be, you don't need to "be being." You already are.

Luis: The ego, or sense of being a limited individual, is a thought in awareness that has come as it will go, because it has no reality and it's something apparent. As well as one day I started to believe I was Luis and I began to create a limited identity around it, one day I will leave that belief and will become aware that I am the self, which actually is constantly happening, again and again, as the flicker of an extinguishing flame.

Shams: Yes, Luis. I think you already knew it in some way, but putting it in dialogue with Vedanta has been essential for the right idea to get aligned in the mind.

Luis: I never thought on self-inquiry as a form of devotion (I always thought devotion consisted only in worship the form of a god, looking for mystical experiences in duality). However, I come to think there is no greater worship of God than this, in which one realizes that he has always been Him. I also thought that prayer was a way to reinforce duality, but as you suggest, now I ask with passion to learn to separate the real from the apparent. I realize that it's me asking it to myself, because there is no duality.

Shams: Yes. It's also a lesson of humility for the *jiva*. Those who learn traditional Vedanta in Indian culture are very clear about the role of the *jiva*, so there are just few cases of people who see themselves as super-*jivas*. That fantasy, of which all of us suffer a bit in the West (driven by a society that promotes the ego), is removed with devotion to God. In fact, when you understand how it is, the result is pure relief to the mind and ego. All you could ascribe to you as individual, all your apparent attributes, in reality belong to Allah. This attitude is also the source of *karma yoga*: all causes and results belong to God and I surrender completely to his will because, after all, it has never been otherwise .

James and Sundari, for example, after several years of having attained *moksa* and being true experts on the teaching of non-duality, as individuals keep doing some devotional practices dedicated to Krishna. Why would they do it if they know they don't need anything? They don't do it to be happy, but because they are happy. Devotion gradually ceases to be a means to seek happiness and becomes a manifestation of that.

Luis: I'd appreciate you to correct me if I'm wrong. You've cleared up a lot and I think I can now have a sustained practice of inquiry, but also ignorance remains and your wisdom is a light for me.

Shams: Correct ideas were rinsed quickly and depth in you. The reward is clarity itself. I have no wisdom but simple application of the impersonal teaching who kindly showed me James Swartz

(and his disciples), which is just one of the masks of *Isvara*. With the intelligence of your mind (that belongs only to God) and knowing the main topics of Vedanta (Vedanta is your toolbox), you also begin to develop the capacity to implement and display the teachings of Vedanta in you. You are the light and the source of all wisdom. Now that you identified that there is ignorance in you, does that ignorance have anything to do with you? Are you limited in any way by that ignorance?

Luis: I understand that you are the self helping yourself, isn't it true?

Shams: Yes, but only in appearance. And you're the self getting help from Himself, APPARENTLY.