

Introduction to Vedanta

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Seeker: What does the self mean to you?

James: The self is me, awareness.

Seeker: And how do you define “awareness”?

James: You are a conscious, awareful being. It is just your ordinary everyday awareness, not the subjective objects – thoughts and feelings and perceptions – arising in it. It is so much you, so natural to you, that you don’t even notice it. You think it is something hidden far away, mystical perhaps, only available by some insight or epiphany. It is just that because of which you experience what you experience. Ask yourself how you know what you know. Ignore what you know, but ask HOW you know. And the answer is so simple that you will discount it immediately. The answer is: “because I am aware.” You are aware because you are awareness.

Seeker: Can you define Vedanta and explain if there is any difference between it and Advaita?

James: Vedanta is a proven means of self-knowledge. Even though there is only one self and its nature is awareness and we are experiencing it all the time, we do not know what it is. So the only access we have to awareness is through knowledge. Knowledge is something that is always here. And access to it is through the removal of ignorance. Vedanta removes our self-ignorance by revealing the unexamined logic of our own experience. When we do not look deeply into how we experience we come to the erroneous conclusion that our selves are separate from other selves and gross and subtle objects, like feelings and thoughts. Using an ancient method, Vedanta shows us how to inquire and remove the misunderstanding that reality is a duality, thereby revealing it to be non-dual awareness.

Seeker: There are many different interpretations of enlightenment. You’ve said (if I heard you correctly) that what you’re teaching is not opinions. What do you believe enlightenment is and how do you know it’s the truth?

James: Enlightenment is the hard and fast knowledge that “I am awareness,” assuming that it renders your binding fears and desires non-binding and cancels your sense of doership. What I teach is Vedanta. It is a completely impersonal means of self-knowledge. James exposed his mind to this method and was set free by it, but it has nothing to do with me. Set free of what? Of the notion that I am James. It is the truth because I am free. The truth is ever-free awareness. It is the nature of everything.

Seeker: What is the difference between experiencing enlightenment and being enlightened?

James: You are always experiencing enlightenment (if by enlightenment you mean awareness) because awareness is all there is. You cannot experience enlightenment as an object, because awareness cannot be objectified. You can experience its reflection in a pure mind, but that is only useful if it leads to the hard and fast knowledge “I am awareness.”

Being enlightened means that you do not depend on any object for your happiness, that you know that nothing can be added to you or subtracted from you. So you do not pursue things in the world, thinking they will complete you.

Seeker: Isn't self-knowledge still just a concept?

James: It is a concept if you think it is a concept. Self-knowledge is knowledge that is true to its object, in this case the self. For knowledge to be knowledge it has to be true to its object. A concept is not knowledge. Self-knowledge is not conceptual, because when it removes your ignorance about who you are you are always satisfied. Concepts do not permanently remove one's sense of dissatisfaction.

Seeker: It's possible to have expert knowledge of Vedanta but still get hopelessly tossed around by desires and aversions throughout daily life, so how does Vedanta really help one realize the truth?

James: You do not want knowledge of Vedanta. You want self-knowledge. Vedanta is just the means for self-knowledge. You throw it away when you understand who you are. This question is based on the idea that Vedanta is a philosophy, a group of concepts cooked up by various individuals. It isn't. It is simply a method of inquiry that removes self-ignorance. It is revealed knowledge that does not come from human beings. It comes from awareness itself.

Seeker: What affect does *karma* have in realizing awareness?

James: It depends on what you mean by *karma*. If you take yourself to be a doer of *karma* and an enjoyer of *karma*, realizing your nature as awareness is virtually impossible unless you are very mature and dispassionate. Most of Vedanta's teachings involve investigation of *karma* and the causes of *karma* to show the doer that he or she is not a doer.

Seeker: Shankara says (unless I've misunderstood or misread) Vedanta is for calm, peaceful people free from cravings, not to mention a whole list of other qualifications. You have to be doing quite well in your practice to truly overcome your cravings, so at that point would these people really need Vedanta?

James: Vedanta is for people who want to be free of the sense of limitation. Simply overcoming your cravings is not freedom. Freedom is freedom from the one that has the cravings.

Seeker: What do you suggest people do to get to that point before practicing Vedanta?

James: Practice *karma yoga*. If you are a *karmi*, a doer, and you have *karma* then you need to neutralize the likes and dislikes that cause you to do *karma* and suffer or enjoy the results. This will qualify you for Vedanta. It will give you the temperament of a *sanyassi*, a renunciant, someone who is willing to expose his or her mind to the teachings and contemplate their meaning until the last doubt about his or her nature is removed.

Seeker: James, for people interested in getting into Vedanta, can you outline the basic steps to this method of inquiry?

James: It is best to get my book *How to Attain Enlightenment*, as it goes into the whole process in detail. When you say, “getting into Vedanta,” it perhaps presupposes that anyone with a spiritual inclination can get on the Vedanta path and follow it, as if it is a matter of choice. In fact it doesn’t work that way. It may work with Yoga or Neo-Advaita, where there are no qualifications, but for Vedanta you need to be a mature person, a qualified, prepared person. When you have the requisite maturity Vedanta comes to you in the form of a teacher who gives you access to the tradition. In this way you “enter the stream,” to use a Buddhist metaphor.

Having said that, the best way for a Westerner is to read my book, study the website and watch the videos. But it must be done in a systematic fashion. Just hopping around will not work. I suggest the book first. There is nothing like it in the Western or Indian non-dual world. It is in clear, simple English and organized in such a way that if you read it carefully and sign on to the logic at every step you will definitely know what Vedanta is and whether or not it is for you. It is helpful to watch the videos with the book. Some people report that the videos are the best place to start and then the book, and I think that is right insofar as the teachings on the videos are rigorously developed and expanded in the book. And you have to more or less surrender when you watch a videos, whereas with a book you can indulge your doubts. Then the website: if you go to the website first, then read the link “New to Non-Duality” first, then start with the *satsangs*. After that you can read *Knowledge of Truth (Tattva Bodh)*, etc.