

Is Experience Needed for Self-Realization?

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Seeker: Dear Ram, to continue our discussion about the self, do you also think that experience is a necessary part of self-realization? I am thinking that experience confirms our thinking... that on knowing the self we experience bliss, peacefulness, contentment, etc. confirms that what we know. Of course moments without any of this doesn't alter what we know... but moments like this are understood by most of us to be some sort of confirmation that we are whole, complete, fulfilled, etc.

Ram: Experience is valuable, but experience depends on the nature of the mind, so for the conclusion that one is okay to be owned, one needs to have the kind of mind that produces positive experiences. This is why values are so important for someone seeking to be free; the right ones bring about a happy, well-adjusted person with a peaceful mind. And it is why spiritual practice, the means of attaining a clear mind, is defined as the removal of the relative proportions of *rajas*, agitation, and *tamas*, dullness, from the mind.

When the mind is *rajasic* and *tamasic*, it produces negative experience (frustration, anger, greed, sloth, etc.). When your experience is unpleasant, you can easily conclude that there is something "wrong" with you. Actually, there is nothing wrong with you, there is something wrong with your values. I know it is a subtle distinction, but actually no experience, good or bad, can change the "I."

The mind is the instrument in which knowledge takes place. We need knowledge not only to function in the world but to know the self. Please don't argue that the self cannot be known by the mind. It is the mind that allows ignorance of the self to guide it through life. This same mind can remove its ignorance and live perfectly free. So the state of the mind, experience, is crucial for anyone seeking freedom, i.e. enlightenment.

When the mind is depressed, for example, the emotional cloud is so heavy that the self is completely unknown. When you experience craving, the mind is so extroverted it cannot look into the "Heart" and see the self shining there. If the mind is *sattvic*, you are much more likely to see yourself in a positive way and you will not abandon this self-knowledge even if the mind occasionally becomes negative.

But experience is only a part of the equation. How one interprets experience is more important. There are people with awful lives that have beautiful personalities, and conversely there are those with excellent lives and miserable personalities. If one wants to be free of the personality, one needs to have an impersonal viewpoint. This would be the view from the self. The self is not an experience. It is the ultimate experiencer, the one to whom experience is presented.

It does not generate experience – because it lacks nothing – except indirectly by its presence. But when it illumines unconscious content – which is all the time – experience is produced. This is why life is an unbroken stream of experience. The ego is little more than the values that cause the self to interpret experience. If the values are based on "what is," if they are *dharmic*, the quest

for self-realization will be successful. But if they are not, it won't, because bad values cause so much distraction that the mind cannot effectively seek the self.

The experience you are talking about here would be called an epiphany, a peak experience, I believe. Yes, these are very helpful because they reveal the goal. Or to put it more accurately, they show that the self is whole and complete, and this keeps one seeking. But if one's epiphanies cause one to conceive of enlightenment as a permanent epiphany, a constant experience of the self, one is swimming in shark-infested waters because freedom is not something one gains through a particular kind of spiritual experience. This is so because first of all the self is already free, it only seems not to be. And secondly, if this is a non-dual reality as scripture and our epiphanies suggest, then each and every experience is the self already, and no striving for experience is necessary. If any striving is to be done, one should strive for understanding, since the problem that causes me to seek for happiness in the first place is the misunderstanding that "I am bound."