

# Is Mystical Experience Necessary for Self-Realization?

## Follow *Dharma*, What You Feel Is Irrelevant

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**Maris:** Dear Ramji, thanks for this email. I especially enjoyed the section on living a *dharmic* life, since it is what I need the most reminders about – “to respond to every life situation as if you were the self, that is, as if you have nothing to gain or lose.” It is all about reminding oneself constantly and training the mind to remember. I still have a hard time realizing at a gut level that I can get everything from the self that I thought the world would provide. Do you have to have a mystical, enlightening experience before that becomes gut knowledge? Do you have any tips on how to make that not a cerebral thought, but instead one based on experience and a gut feeling?

Thanks!

**Ram:** Dear Maris, mystical enlightening experiences can be helpful insofar as they help to convince you that there is something more than your own small world, but they do not solve the problem of limitation. You may not know it but the spiritual world is little more than millions of people who have had incredible mystical enlightening experiences yet who still feel limited, inadequate and incomplete, so experience itself is not enough. Take Ramana, for example. He had a mystical enlightening experience, but he had to sit in caves for years on end before he was ready to face the world and live a normal life. A lot of work had to be done. If the experience was all that was required he would have just gone back home to his mom’s *iddlies*, married and raised a family – or whatever.

In a way, mystical enlightening experiences can be a very bitter pill to swallow for this reason: they always end and you find yourself continually longing for and anticipating the next one. Many people spend their whole lives trying to generate these experiences and like junkies live in a state of perpetual craving. Another problem with experience is that any experience is only as good as your ability to evaluate it. And in the mind there are many experiences that seem to be profoundly spiritual but are in fact just psychological detritus. Scripture is forever warning of the danger of getting caught up in mystical experience.

Another point to consider is that this reality is perfect as it is. Why do some people get mystical enlightening experiences and others don’t? Because the giver of experience, the self, knows exactly what you need at any time and only gives you what you need – or what you don’t. You can certainly realize the self without one mystical experience. And on the other hand, you can have hundreds of mystical experiences and build an ego on them that is bigger than Mount Everest. Why do some people who have had mystical enlightening experiences behave in the worst possible way, and others that haven’t behave like saints? Or you can interpret the experience in such a way that you avoid the truly important spiritual issues – like how you are living every day. While my *guru* did not discourage spiritual experience, and in fact his presence generated the most sublime experiences, the policy in my lineage was that experience does not remove the conditioned mind, which is the cause of one’s suffering. Only the understanding derived from rigorous self-investigation (based on the teachings of Vedanta) sets one free.

Your gut-feeling argument is fine, up to a point. But the danger with it is that it can be used as an excuse not to do what needs to be done while you are waiting for your mystical experience. And all that you will come away with from any mystical experience is that you need to pursue your *sadhana* more vigorously. And finally, do you actually follow your gut feelings on any other issues? I'm not putting gut feelings down, but take the relationship issue. Every time you meet a guy – and this goes on throughout the whole courtship – you always say, "I don't know what I feel about X." The anxiety you feel about travel, for example, has nothing to do with gut feelings. You worry yourself to silly about whether or not you should spend three days in place X or three days in place Y. Where are the gut feelings which should supposedly settle the issue?

I believe that you are absolutely right not to follow gut feelings, because gut feelings can cut both ways. You can feel just as strongly about X as you can about not-X from one moment to the next. This is why I'm arguing for following *dharma*. If you follow *dharma* you don't have to agonize about what you feel. What you feel is irrelevant. Sri Ram had his heart set on ruling the kingdom. The coronation ceremony had been planned and the whole kingdom wanted him to be king. His stepmother had saved the life of his father the king in battle and he granted her any boon. Just before the coronation she called in the boon and asked that her son Bharata be made king. When told of the decision (which involved him leaving the good life and going to live in the jungle and giving up his dream), Sri Ram smiled and said, "Fine. It is the duty of the son to honor the wishes of his father." And he went off to live in the forest. The father too, although his whole life had been dedicated to seeing that Ram rule the kingdom, did not flinch in granting his wife the boon. In both cases the gut feeling was not the basis of the decision, *dharma* was. And these men were quite happy to follow *dharma*, since they knew that *dharma* leads to the highest good.

*Dharma* means that principle, not passion, rules your life. Following gut feelings is just another way of saying "what I want." But is what you want what you actually need? Take the relationship issue, which in a way is a kind of symbol of your whole existential confusion. You're a vivacious, intelligent, attractive woman. There should be no problem getting a guy – which some part of you seems to really want. Yet you never seem to get the guy. Why? It think it is because some other part of you – the higher part, the *dharmic* part – knows very well that relationship is not what you need. It knows you need peace. So it prevents you from relationship, since relationship does not lead to peace. I have been suggesting for a long time that you pursue peace, then see if relationship doesn't fall into your lap. Or you might even discover that peace is a lot more fun than relationship. Perhaps you want relationship because you are not peaceful. Perhaps you think that if you have Mr. Right you will just settle down and be happy. What is wrong with this picture?

As I see it, the highest *dharma* is a clear, peaceful mind. If you don't have that, how can anything, particularly a relationship, really work in life? *Dharma* means that some principle other than feelings determines what you do. The feelings are factored in, no doubt. Sometimes your gut tells you what to do, and this is completely in harmony with *dharma* and leads to a state of relative peace. But sometimes your gut tells you to choose something that only leads to misery. So what good is the gut then? Let the gut speak, but don't let it rule the roost.

The whole problem with American society is that it is based on the principle of small-self satisfaction. Your supreme duty, according to the Gospel of the American Way, is to get what you want, do what you feel. Yes, you should follow *dharma* whenever possible, but when *dharma* gets in the way, fuck *dharma* and go for it! It's all about "me and what I want." It's all about my feelings.

Forgive me if I am too bold, but I think that your question “Do you have any tips on how to make that not a cerebral thought, but instead one based on experience and a gut feeling?” is misguided, Maris. You know what you need to do. If you sit around waiting for some gut feeling to motivate you, you will wait a very long time. And even if you get a gut feeling that tells you to get to work spiritually, it will only be minutes before the opposite gut feeling (fear), the one that causes you to mindlessly doubt everything, arises and paralyzes you.

You are a cerebral person, Maris. This is just a fact. There is absolutely nothing wrong with it. In fact it is one of the things that I find attractive about you. A mind is what you have, so why wish you didn't have it? Why imagine that you need to get off this level into a feeling level? I'm sure you liked *The Power of Now* because of its exhortation to feel and not to think. The mind is not the enemy. How you use the mind is what is important. You can either use it to think your way out of this existential predicament or not. Trying to kill it, discard it or move away from it into a feeling dimension will not work. Use it to think differently. When your thinking is in harmony with truth, your feelings are unambiguously good. This is so because the mind is much more powerful than the emotions.

Okay, let's say that you reject my argument completely and want to do it the feeling way. Eckhart Tolle tells you how. He says, “Focus attention on the feeling inside you. Know that it is the pain-body. Accept that it is there. Don't think about it don't let the feeling turn into thinking. Don't judge or analyze. Don't make an identity for yourself out of it. Stay present and continue to be the observer of what is happening inside you. Become aware not only of the emotional pain but also of the one who observes, the silent watcher. This is the power of the Now, the power of your own conscious presence. Then see what happens.”

But wait a minute! Know that the feeling inside you is the pain-body? Right off he is telling us how to think about (certain) feelings. They are painful. He continues: accept that, he says, don't think about it. Don't think about it? He is saying think not to think. Who but the thinker is there not thinking? During this whole process he is telling you how to think. It is a very cerebral process. It has a specific goal, to become aware – of the silent watcher. There is a lot to commend this idea and there is a lot to criticize too, but the important point, as I see it, is that he is not telling you to wait for some gut feeling to start your *sadhana*. He is saying just do it.

Much as he says it, and much as it has been said for centuries, you cannot just permanently switch off your mind (if that is actually what is required for enlightenment) without a very long and arduous *sadhana*. Notice that Eckhart is not telling you how hard it is to do this. Notice he is not saying that this is the end of it either. He puts it this way: “Then see what happens.” Aside from the seductiveness of it all, he means that this is just the very first step in spiritual life. He is just trying to give you a technique to get you to see that there is a self, “a conscious presence,” he calls it. Once you see it, your problems just begin. But this is the subject of another *satsang*.

So here's a *sadhana* put forth by Eckhart, whom you admire so much. Why not do it? Are you waiting for a gut feeling to get to work? You are not even sure you are interested in doing what it takes to realize the self. You said yourself on our recent walk around the lake that you were not seeking liberation. When you know what you want – this applies to any field – you simply do not have doubts about what to do in life. You just go for it. Did Bill Gates trouble himself about whether or not he wanted to get rich? Did George Bush trouble himself about whether or not he wanted to be President of the United States? I don't think so.

I'm not saying you should go for enlightenment – this can be just another greedy, self-centered

endeavor. I'm saying use your mind to catch your mind fooling you. Stop just accepting these tired beliefs you have about yourself. Take astrology, for instance. Astrology is fine, up to a point. But it is only as good as your use of it. If you use it to convince yourself that you are the way you are because the stars have decreed it – that you have to be this way because Venus is squared Mars or whatever, then your mind is playing tricks on you. No mystical experience is going to stop the mind playing its tricks. Pay attention to this “I want” *mantra* that the mind loves to chant. Look into this notion that relationship is the be-all and the end-all. See if you don't already have everything you could ever want – you.

Enlightenment is not getting some experience of a conscious presence. You are the conscious presence. There is nothing to be done about it. The reason you don't appreciate yourself this way is because you think of yourself in other ways. So contrary to all the non-thinking advice you hear nowadays, I say think clearly. Think from the self's point of view. This is not to say that you can't also practice any kind of experiential *sadhana* that you are attracted to. There is no contradiction between thinking and feeling, between thought and experience. Contradictions arise when you use the mind in the wrong way. Look at Ramana. You will rarely find someone with a more clear mind. His knowledge was vast and his ability to express it shows that he carefully trained and cultivated his mind. I say pay attention to your feelings, pay attention to your thoughts and use some standard other than how you feel about them to put them in their place.

Okay. As an old girlfriend of mine once said, “My, how you do run on!” I didn't even get to the real juicy email coming up, the one where you take me to task for being a hypocrite. Don't worry, I'll get to it soon. Be ready for some good arguments. And don't feel guilty about it. There is absolutely nothing you can do or say that will stop me loving you.

~ Ramji