

Ramakrishna and the Steps to Self-Inquiry

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Nicholas: Hello, Sundari.

I've recently devoured your husband's book *The Essence of Enlightenment*, videos and *satsangs* after a decade of seeking self-realization, and became very fixed upon Advaita Vedanta as the correct way of going about this. I live in the Sacramento area. I recently met with Swami Prapannananda of the Advaita Vedanta Society of Sacramento. This was born out of the Ramakrishna and Vivekananda lineage. Do you see this as a suitable environment for *moksa*? I have a burning desire, so any feedback is much appreciated.

Sundari: The Ramakrishna people are good people and they offer a peaceful environment for *bhakti*, which is helpful as an aid to self-inquiry, but it does not equal it. They do not teach self-inquiry. If you have a burning desire for *moksa* you need to have a proper means of knowledge for self-inquiry, so I suggest you keep reading James' books, watch the videos and read the *satsangs* at our website. You are welcome to write to us or book a Skype session if you need some face time with James.

Nicholas: Thank you for your guidance. I will continue reading the material and watching the videos. There is still some confusion about self-inquiry. It seems like all the questions just refer to the basic premise that I am whole, complete and ordinary awareness or just assert objects that aren't me, but are made of me. Are there other things I should be examining in the light of the self?

Sundari: The essence of self-inquiry is an investigation into the true nature of reality as a non-duality (as consciousness) as opposed to a duality (objects) and what this means to the *jiva* living in the world. *Moksa* is only for the *jiva* because the self is ever-free and always has been.

Moksa, freedom from limitation, is the ability to discriminate the real (that which is always present and unchanging, meaning you, awareness) from the objects that appear in you, that which is apparently real, meaning not always present and always changing. This is the main *prakriya*, called discriminating *satya* from *mithya*, or taking a stand in awareness as awareness and practising the opposite thought. If you have mastered this 100% of the time, never confusing what Nicholas thinks, feels or does or any of the objects subtle and gross that present themselves to the mind with awareness, the knower of Nick and all the objects, then you are free. You can go off to enjoy life free from suffering and limitation.

If this knowledge is not firm, as it is for most inquirers who come to Vedanta to start off with, then you need to do inquiry into the true nature of reality as it pertains to Nicholas. Who is Nicholas and what is the world? To do this, you need a valid means of knowledge, which you have in Vedanta. You need a qualified teacher to unfold the teachings (or the ego will interpret them through the filters of the *vasanas*) and you need *mumuksutva*, a burning desire for freedom from

suffering. As you have read James' books, you must have realised that there is a progression to the teachings and a very distinct teaching methodology, starting off with qualifications. This is necessary because ignorance is highly tenacious and hardwired. Without a mind purified and prepared for self-inquiry, self-knowledge will not obtain.

If you are qualified for self-inquiry, at the very least because you have understood that the joy is not in objects and life is a zero-sum game, then you have come to the right place. Many qualified inquirers find it fairly easy to realise that their true nature is the self. It is obvious that you are conscious and you exist, after all. However, knowing what it means for the *jiva* to be consciousness so that self-knowledge translates automatically into its life at every moment is quite another issue. Self-realisation is where the work of self-inquiry begins. Self-actualisation can take years for some people. Self-realisation is what we call indirect knowledge, and it is not *moksa*. *Moksa* is the hard and fast knowledge (which is not a feeling or the result of any particular experience) that I AM awareness. This is direct knowledge.

So to actualise self-knowledge, we need to understand the *jiva*, deconstruct its conditioning in the light of self-knowledge to render its binding *vasanas* non-binding and negate the doer. There is no way to dismiss *mithya*, or the world, unless you first understand what it is and why the mind modifies to it. First and foremost, the most important practice is *karma yoga*, explained in detail in James' books and in many places at the website, especially the *e-satsang* section. You will not get very far with self-inquiry without *karma yoga*, so make sure you understand what it and how it applies to your life as a *jiva*.

Next, you need to understand the importance of a devotional practice, also described in detail at the website. I have just written a detailed *satsang* on the issue, which will be posted this week at the website, but it is all described in detail in James' book *The Yoga of Love*. And lastly, *jnana yoga* or *triguna vibhava yoga*, the *yoga* of the three *gunas*. We are in the process of bringing out two books on this important topic, but again, there is much on this in all James' books and in videos, *satsangs* and other writings.

The short answer to your question, "Are there others things I should be examining in the light of the self?" is yes and no. Yes, if self-knowledge is still indirect, and no if it is direct.

Here is a FAQ written on the basic steps involved in self-inquiry:

Nine Stages to Self-inquiry:

1. *Sravana*: Listening or hearing the scripture. This requires that you leave everything you previously believed or thought you knew temporarily on the shelf. You can take your beliefs back if self-knowledge does not work for you. But for now, leave them on the shelf. This is very important; if you keep comparing Vedanta to all your beliefs and opinions and try to make it comply with them, forget about self-inquiry. Vedanta is a radical teaching; it is counter-intuitive; expect it to challenge everything you thought you knew. Without faith in the scripture (*shraddha*), self-inquiry will not work.

This is not blind faith like religions demand, but faith pending the results of your own inquiry.

2. *Manana*: Reasoning, contemplation. This is thinking about what the scripture is saying, examining the unexamined logic of your own experience. At this point, you look at your beliefs and opinions in the light of what the scripture says, NOT the other way around.

3. Qualifications: One determines if all the qualifications necessary for *moksa* are present. If they are not, one has to develop them. Self-knowledge will not stick in a mind that is not prepared and purified. There is no purifier like self-knowledge (*jnana yoga*) but there are other practices one can do, like meditation for instance – or even sitting in silence. But meditation (or any other practice) is an aid to self-inquiry; it does not equal self-inquiry nor does it take its place.

4. *Karma yoga* – negating the doer. *Karma yoga*, when practiced properly, is *dharma yoga* because every action you take is dedicated to *Isvara*; it is a consecration. It is understood that peace of mind only comes with the realisation that you are not in control of the *dharma* field, yet in taking the appropriate steps to act according to *dharma* and then relinquishing the results peace of mind is produced. If you are not experiencing peace of mind by relinquishing results you are not relinquishing results. It's that simple – the doer is still there, afraid and small, still wanting a particular result because of its likes and dislikes, frustrated and afraid because it believes it needs the result to be safe or whole as it is not getting what it wants.

Karma yoga is not to destroy the doer. *Karma yoga* is simply to destroy the notion that we are doers, of “doership.” *Karma yoga* is meant to clear the mind of enough likes and dislikes until it becomes composed enough to do sustained inquiry. Only inquiry removes the problem of doership because it shows that you, the self, cannot be the ego (doer) that is known to you. When that is clear, the doer can appear in you, even with a trace of doership, but you do not identify with it.

5. *Bhakti yoga*: We need to understand the definitions of God/*Isvara* gradually and systematically until we can see the full vision, the whole Mandala of Existence. The way in which I define God will determine my *bhakti*, devotion. In the first level of understanding, my devotion will be to a personified deity: a personal God. In the second level of understanding, I will worship the Lord in everything, including nature. In the final stage of understanding, I see God as the formless essence of all, both manifest and unmanifest. The final stage does not negate the previous two; it simply completes the full picture. When we appreciate *Isvara* as both form and formless, we can happily worship the Lord/God/*Isvara* as a personified deity, as the totality of nature and as the formless essence of all things. Just as quantum physics does not displace Newtonian physics, both understandings are valid at their respective levels.

The three definitions of God or the three stages of understanding the nature of God can be broken down further into four stages of devotion. In the first stage, God creates the world, in the second stage God is the world, and in the third and highest understanding we see that God appears as the world in its many forms, but does not become them. Just like the spider's web comes from the spider, is made of the spider, depends on the spider but is not the spider.

The first three stages of *bhakti*, or devotional practice, are called *dvaita bhakti*; all three involve free will and the *jiva*, the person, which is why these stages are called dualistic worship. The purpose of these stages of worship, or *bhakti*, is that these practices reduce subjectivity and neutralize *vasanas* – likes and dislikes – as well negate the doer. It takes care of the childish ego. The last stage and fourth stage of devotion, non-dual *bhakti*, takes place once the doer is negated, and is based on knowledge

6. *Triguna vibhava yoga*: Once the mind is clear and established in *karma yoga*, the next step is to examine and identify one's conditioning in the light of self-knowledge, i.e. the *gunas*. This means you take an objective view of the programmes (*vasanas*) that modify the mind and make up the *jiva*'s “stuff.” If you do not have a good understanding of the *gunas*, what they are and how

they function, I recommend that you go to the ShiningWorld website and use the search function on this vital topic. All the Shiningworld writers have written extensively about this.

7. Establish a *prakriya*: Vedanta offers several practices that can be used very effectively to negate the doer and render the binding *vasanas* non-binding. The most effective is to practise the opposite thought. Whenever a toxic thought arises in the mind, or a thought that contradicts your nature as awareness, immediately employ the opposite thought. For instance, if you have someone in your life that you have very bad thoughts about, think loving thoughts. If the toxic self-negating thoughts arise about you, think the opposite thought. You keep up this practice for every thought that arises in the mind that is contrary to your true nature as awareness.

8. *Nididhyasana*: Self-realisation is the full understanding of your true nature as awareness. This means you apply the knowledge to your life and take a stand in awareness as awareness. If the mind is still agitated by *rajas* and *tamas* because all the qualifications are not in place and binding *vasanas* still condition the mind, one must go back and requalify. There is no other way to negate the doer and render the binding *vasanas* non-binding in order that self-actualisation – the final “stage,” which is perfect satisfaction (*tripti*) can take place.

9. Self-actualisation: Once the knowledge is firm, one sees everything from the point of view of awareness first, second as the *jiva*, and one never confuses the two again. This is discriminating the self, you (*satya*), from the objects that appear in you (*mithya*) always, regardless of how the person is feeling. Self-actualisation is the consistent, total application of self-knowledge to one’s life. To be self-actualised means (1) that one has fully discriminated the Self (consciousness) from the objects appearing in it (all objects, meaning all gross objects as well as one’s conditioning, thoughts and feelings – all experience) and (2) that that knowledge has (a) rendered the binding *vasanas* non-binding and (b) negated one’s sense of doership.

Unless self-knowledge translates fully into the life of the person it cannot be said that self-actualisation has taken place, because the person will still be identified with certain aspects of being a person. In other words, binding *vasanas* and the sense of doership, or egoic belief in separation, will still be causing agitation in the mind. For existential suffering to end and for awareness to be one’s primary identity, the person needs to be free of the idea of being a person to live free as the Self. What is the point of self-realisation if the mind is still under the tyranny of its likes and dislikes (*vasanas*)?

One can only fully actualise self-knowledge when you have understood the identity between awareness, *Isvara* and the *jiva*. This is where most people get stuck (or come un-stuck) in their self-inquiry and it is why many self-realised people do not self-actualise. Understanding *Isvara* is the key. This is probably one of the most important teachings in Vedanta and why we call this *jnana yoga*, knowledge *yoga*.

These steps are not necessarily linear; one can jump around a great deal until self-knowledge has removed all ignorance and the knowledge is firm. Many inquirers go through a stage when the knowledge is on or off, what we call the firefly stage. They get disheartened and start to criticize or feel bad about themselves when the knowledge is not constant, or they “slip up.” Don’t get discouraged by this, as it is a pretty normal stage for everyone to go through. Lifetimes of ignorance will take what it takes to dissolve. And *prarabdha karma* (the momentum of past actions) will play out as long as it plays out. It is not up to the *jiva* but to *Isvara*. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance – so, day by day, brick by brick, allow self-knowledge to do the work of removing every vestige of ignorance.

And lastly and very importantly...

Nididhysana* Never Ends for the *Jiva

While it is true that there is a definite “shift” in how one sees life and relates to objects once self-knowledge is firm, it is also true that the *nididhysana* stage never ends for the *jiva*, because it is always changing and interacting with the field of existence – which is also always changing. The price of freedom for the *jiva* is eternal vigilance. Macrocosmic ignorance does not end when personal ignorance (*avidya*) ends and the *jiva* is always limited by *maya* (although no longer conditioned by it) even though its essence is known to be limitless awareness. If this were not true, the *jiva* would become *Isvara* “after” *moksa* – which clearly and irrefutably is not the case. The fine print on the enlightenment certificate that many miss is that there is no “post-*moksa*” stage for the *jiva* even though as awareness you are *moksa* and not the *jiva*. A *jivanmukta* is someone who has resolved all their conditioning through contemplation, assimilation of the knowledge and transformation of its habitual emotional/thought patterns (*vasanas*) into devotion to the self. This is the essence of *nididhysana*. As Vedantins we never stop “working” on the *jiva* even though we do not censure it or expect it to change. Of course we follow *dharma*, personal and universal, without question; but not because we want to improve the *jiva* but only because we want to enjoy a peaceful mind.

A common myth in the enlightenment game is that enlightenment is another object to obtain, and when it is, the *jiva* will be different, better. It may or may not be. It will still have its *Isvara*-given character and tendencies; it will still be a pain in the ass to itself and others sometimes. It will still suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, feeling joy, pain, loss, grief as well as the constant bliss of self-knowledge.

When *moksa* has obtained in the mind one may and usually does feel experiential bliss regularly, but one does not depend on it, because you know you are the bliss. The bliss of knowledge does not feel like anything. Experiential bliss is an object known to you, and you are always blissful, whether experiential bliss is present or not. In fact you could be sick, in pain, half-dead, broke, jobless or stuck in a situation you do not enjoy but cannot change – and be totally blissful because who you are is not influenced by what is or is not going on in your environment. You feel blissful regardless of what is going on in the mind.

The subjective reality never ends for the *jivanmukta* and it can and often does still project its subjective reality (*pratibhasika*) onto *Isvara*. It will always have its way of relating to *Isvara*, which will be unique to its *Isvara*-given *vasana* filters. The difference will be that a *jivanmukta* knows when it is projecting, instantly dissolves the projection in the knowledge and is instantly free of it. Thus it does not create “new” *karma*. It keeps its *karma* like a little dog on a very short leash, right in front. No *karmic* drag, ever. No unfinished business or drama. Every moment of every day is complete. There is never another person involved in its interactions and transactions in the world of objects/experience. The *jivanmukta* knows in the moment that it is transacting only with itself because there is no “other.” There is only awareness.

Once the mind is purified, humility is its natural response to everything in its environment (*Isvara*) because it understands there is only itself, awareness. It no longer sees “otherness” as awareness, even though it observes the *jiva* still apparently experiencing it. Duality is understood and appreciated for what it is – enjoyed even. But as it is not expected to deliver something it is incapable of doing, i.e. happiness, duality is never a problem for the *jivanmukta*. This takes so

much pressure off the *jiva* because there is no need to make it conform to some silly “spiritual” ideal. It is just known and loved for what it is: a reflection of the self in a mirror, which is also the self.

As the *jiva* is a product of the *gunas*, belongs to and is always subject to *Isvara*, the *jiva* is never going to be perfect. But you, as awareness, are free of the *jiva* and you know it arises from and depends on you and not the other way around. Then life makes sense and it is possible to see beauty all the time, even when things are not pretty.

~ Love, Sundari