

Self-Inquiry Requires a Mind

Ted Schmidt

2015-10-04

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2333>

Quentin: Hello, Ted, I just got back from Trout Lake. Ramji held a terrific *satsang* on *advaita bhakti*. It went well despite the nearby fires. *Isvara* kept them on the other side of Mt. Adams.

Ted: Glad to hear you were able to attend the campout – and that *Isvara* kept the fire from intruding on the festivities. I'll bet it was fantastic. What better topic than love?

Quentin: Anyway, a Ramana Facebook site sent out an excerpt from a David Godman (Ramana's biographer) commentary. I put in CAPS the part I objected to:

"If you use the phrase 'practicing the teachings,' the following sequence is assumed: that Sri Ramana speaks of some goal that has to be attained, that he gives you some route, some practice, to reach that goal, and that you then use your mind to vigorously move towards that goal."

Ted: This is the starting point. If the *jiva*, the apparent individual, didn't take himself to be a separate, independent, small, incomplete, inadequate person, there wouldn't be a problem to begin with, and hence the solution – i.e. self-inquiry – for the problem would be necessary.

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

"The mind wants to be in charge of this operation. It wants to listen to the *guru*, understand what is required and then use itself to move in the prescribed direction."

Ted: Yes, this is what happens. How else are we to conduct self-inquiry than with the mind? Even Ramana's "awakening" experience was essentially a thought process. He lay down and pretended he was dead, and considered his identity in terms of the absence of the body and the mind. Though the self-recognition to which this exercise led was not the result of the formal systematic study of Vedanta, the inquiry that led to his "enlightenment" involved thinking. The ultimate realization was that the self is beyond the mind, but ironically the mind is the instrument through which the *jiva* gains access to this knowledge, so to speak. That is, the mind is the instrument that enables us to gain *atma-jnana* (self-knowledge) and *jivanmukta*, liberation while in the body.

Godman's comment seems to be confusing the *buddhi*, the intellect, or discriminative capacity of the mind, with the *ahamkara*, the ego, the I-sense, that claims ownership of the functions of the *karya-karana-sanghata*, the body-mind-sense complex, and gives rise to the sense of *kartritva*, doership, and *bhoktritva*, enjoyership. But these aspects of the mind are not the same thing. There is nothing wrong with thinking. The problems of *samsara* and suffering are not the result of thoughts, but rather the consequence of harboring the wrong – i.e. incorrect – thoughts about

one's true nature.

Again, it is true that pure, limitless, attributeless awareness is beyond the mind in the sense that it is not limited by nor affected by the modifications of the mind. But as an object appearing within the non-dual scope of awareness, the mind – which is not actually an object itself, but rather the name we give to the modifications that arise within the scope of awareness – is actually nothing other than awareness. Just as the waves are no different from the water of which they are composed, so thoughts are essentially nothing other than awareness. And just as the quantity and quality of the waves does not change the essential nature of the water in any way, so the quantity and quality of thoughts does not affect the awareness that is their substrate in any essential way. Thus thoughts only interfere with the appreciation of the self as long as their true nature as awareness is not recognized.

It is true that the essential nature of the self, pure awareness, is *nirvikalpa*, thought-free, but that doesn't mean that self-inquiry involves no thinking or that one is only truly appreciating the self or is only imbued with self-knowledge while in some comatose or zombie-like state. When we say the nature of the self is *nirvikalpa*, thought-free, we mean it in the sense that no particular thought or even the collective of all thought comprehensively defines or constitutes awareness. Awareness is both the substance and the limitless conscious existence in which thoughts appear. But while thoughts come and go, awareness always is – even in the absence of all thoughts, for existence-as-such cannot cease to exist. If existence did cease to exist in the absence of thoughts – or for that matter, all objects – it could never again exist, and moreover could actually have never come into being in the first place given the fact that something can't come out of nothing, which is why awareness is unborn or beginningless and eternal.

At any rate, the mind does need to listen to the teacher, understand the teachings and engage in the meditation/contemplation necessary to fully assimilate them. These are the three fundamental aspects or phases of *atma-vichara*, self-inquiry, or what is called *jnana yoga*. The ego will initially want to co-opt this process and claim itself to be the doer, but ultimately the ego will be revealed as nothing more than an erroneous notion and in that way its power will be negated. Thus the ego is eradicated, not through denial or avoidance of thought, but through understanding.

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“ALL THIS IS WRONG. MIND IS NOT THE VEHICLE ONE USES TO CARRY OUT THE TEACHINGS...”

Ted: Yes, it is. How else would the *jiva* “carry out” anything – especially teachings, which appeal to the intellect?

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“...IT IS, INSTEAD, THE OBSTACLE THAT PREVENTS ONE FROM DIRECTLY EXPERIENCING THEM.”

Ted: Aha. Now we get to the heart of the misunderstanding. The self to which the teachings point

is limitless, non-objectifiable awareness, and therefore cannot be experienced. The closest we can come to experiencing the self-as-such is as a reflection in a pure mind. But even for that we need a mind to recognize the nature of the reflection.

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“THE ONLY USEFUL, PRODUCTIVE THING THE MIND CAN DO IS DISAPPEAR.”

Ted: Not so. The mind essentially disappears each night during deep, dreamless sleep. In this state, we experience the limitless bliss that is our true nature. But because the intellect has resolved into the causal body and is dormant, no understanding takes place. This is the reason we awaken every morning riddled with the same degree of self-ignorance as when we went to bed the night before.

It is true that we want a mind that is sufficiently still to “catch” an accurate reflection of the self, but the mind still needs to “see” the reflection and recognize it for what it is.

Truly speaking, we cannot directly perceive pure awareness, because awareness has no attributes and thus is not available to be known as an object. What happens as a result of self-inquiry is that a mind that is sufficiently still registers a reflection – or has an “intuitive vision” – of the limitless, unmodified nature of pure awareness. Though the reflection is still a thought and not pure awareness-as-such, because the mind is unmodified and the reflection is accurate, the reflection is as good as awareness itself. This unmodified thought, which is invoked by the words of scripture, is referred to as *akhandakara vritti*, the “thought of limitlessness.” Being a thought – albeit an extremely subtle one – even *akhandakara vritti* has a limited shelf life and eventually gives way to other thoughts. Once the substratum of all thought has been recognized, however, even when other thoughts arise, their true nature as well as the underlying reality of the entire manifestation in both its subtle and gross aspects is recognized and the self is continuously appreciated thereafter. Thus even the scriptures tell us that the mind is necessary for the assimilation of self-knowledge.

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“SRI RAMANA HIMSELF ALWAYS SAID THAT HIS TRUE TEACHINGS WERE GIVEN OUT IN SILENCE. THOSE WHO WERE RECEPTIVE TO THEM WERE THE ONES WHO COULD GET OUT OF THE WAY MEANTALLY, ALLOWING SRI RAMANA’S SILENT EMANATIONS TO WORK ON THEM.”

Ted: As mentioned earlier, Ramana’s realization did not come as a result of teachings – at least not in this lifetime. He happened to be the one in ten million who was spiritually mature enough (most likely because of formal scriptural study in previous lifetimes) to spontaneously gain an understanding of his true nature. And while this understanding qualified Ramana as a *brahmanishta*, a knower of the self, it did not qualify him as a *shrotriya*, one who knows how to properly wield the tried and true teaching methodology of Vedantic self-inquiry in order to give a student access to the knowledge. In other words, Ramana knew who he was, but he didn’t know how to effectively reveal the true nature of the self to others.

Moreover, self-knowledge cannot be transmitted by “emanations.” Awareness is not energy, for energy is an object that obtains within the “field” of limitless conscious existence. Also, cultivating the stillness of mind capable of assimilating the teachings is a matter of neutralizing binding *vasanas* that extrovert the mind with desires and compel the person to pursue objects, and no one can neutralize the *vasanas* of another.

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“In the benedictory verse to his philosophical poem *Ulladu Narpadu* Sri Ramana wrote, and I paraphrase a little: ‘Who can meditate on that which alone exists. One cannot meditate on it, because one is not apart from it. One can only be it.’

“This is the essence of Sri Ramana’s teachings.”

Ted: Good enough. It’s true that awareness-as-such doesn’t need a mind to know itself in the sense that it “knows” itself by virtue of being itself. However, in order for the *jiva* to know its true identity, the mind is required.

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“Be what you are and remain as you are WITHOUT HAVING ANY THOUGHTS.”

Ted: This is a bit tricky. As mentioned earlier, the self is already thought-free. And the appearance of thought-forms, mental modifications, is not under the *jiva*’s control. Thoughts sprout spontaneously in the mind from seeds in the causal body. The only control the *jiva* has with regard to thoughts is whether to follow them. As a result of the teachings, the *jiva* can begin to create space between himself and the thoughts and see them as objects that do no in any way affect his true nature as awareness, which is in this way “free” of the influence of thoughts.

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“Don’t try to meditate on the Self, on God. Just abide silently at the SOURCE OF THE MIND...”

Ted: Sort of mincing words here. Okay, don’t try to “meditate on the Self,” but abiding requires a focused attention just the same. It may not be a matter of efforting, so to speak, but the mind is nevertheless present and alert and observant. How else would one recognize that one was abiding silently at the source, the awareness that is the substrate of thought forms?

Quentin (continuing to quote Godman):

“...and you will EXPERIENCE that you are God, that you are the Self.”

Ted: You will recognize, or know, that you are the self, but you won't perceive it as an object. The self isn't a particular state of mind. It takes a quiet or still mind to recognize the true nature of the mind, but once the substratum is recognized, it no longer matters what forms are superimposed upon it. By analogy, once you know gold, whether it appears in the form of a ring, necklace, anklet, statue, brick, bar or lump doesn't matter.

Quentin: Let me know what you think.

Oh, by the way, when I got back on Sunday, I went to a Ramana Group *satsang*. The last thing the moderator said as we were ending was to forget about reading scriptures, just do self-inquiry. He said reading scriptures was just as *samsaric* as getting involved in lot of worldly activities.

~ *Namaste*, Quentin

Ted: Sorry to have to be so critical, but this person doesn't know what he or she is talking about. Self-inquiry is based on the scriptures. Ultimately, once scripturally-based self-inquiry has done its work and you have realized your true identity, neither scriptural study nor self-inquiry is necessary and can be done away with. But until that time scripturally-based self-inquiry under the guidance of a qualified teacher is necessary. If one tried to do self-inquiry on one's own, one's own innate self-ignorance will cause one to misinterpret the words. The implied meaning of the words of scripture need to be unfolded in a logical so that the student can actually "see," or recognize, their truth in terms of his or her own nature. In this way, the mind of the student will gain self-knowledge and the student will stand with unshakeable conviction in the understanding of his or her true nature as limitless awareness.

~ All the best, Ted