

# Self-Inquiry Is the Application of Knowledge

Sundari (Isabella Viglietti)

2015-02-27

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2068>

**Simon:** Dear Ram and Sundari, this is the first time I have written to you, though we have met on a couple of weekend retreats in New Jersey several years ago. I can't imagine a better way to welcome the New Year than to communicate to the both of you what your teachings/website have meant to me and the continuing influence they have, and to share some insights and questions. I have read *How to Attain Enlightenment* and watched your video on *Atma Nirvritti*.

**Sundari:** Hello, Simon, thank you for your appreciation and kind words, much appreciated. We hope to see you again in the US this year.

**Simon:** To give you some context for this email, please know that I am now 60 years old and have for the past 40 years, since starting college, been involved in the "spiritual search." At that time I started with Transcendental Meditation *mantra* meditation practice religiously twice a day for the first 20 years and attended a school that in the United States was called the School of Practical Philosophy, in England known as the School of Economic Science. The head of the school was an attorney in England, whose father had been a member of parliament, and while initially his interest was in addressing economic issues in society, he came under the influence of His Holiness Shantananda Saraswati, the *shankarcharya* of Jyotirmath in the 1960s. Through this school I was introduced to and studied Sanatana Dharma.

**Sundari:** We are familiar with the School of Practical Philosophy. Unfortunately, it sees Vedanta as a philosophy, which it is not. Philosophy is the contention (or firmly held beliefs based on experience) of a person or persons. Vedanta is an independent teaching and not based on opinion or experience but on irrefutable knowledge. It is not a belief system or religion either, based on a prophet or a mystic, such as the Buddha or Jesus. Vedanta predates all known religious or philosophical paths because it is the pathless path that underpins all other paths. It is a *sruti* (scripture), which means that which is heard. Vedanta is called a "*brahma vidya*," which means "the science of consciousness." It is an objective and scientific analysis of the true nature of your existence and your unexamined experience, based on the facts. Like any other science, it is not personal and it has a methodology which, if followed with great dedication and commitment, will result in irrefutable knowledge that is *moksa*, if the inquirer is qualified. Vedanta is simply the truth about you. Not your truth or my truth or anyone's truth: The Truth. Vedanta means "the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge." If you are qualified for it, the seeking ends.

**Simon:** After 20 years in the school I left and also dropped the practice of meditation as a consistent daily routine.

**Sundari:** You dropped meditation, but did you drop the dropper of meditation, the one who

believed that an action/experience like meditation would deliver a desired result?

**Simon:** I did not give up the spiritual search, and have attended retreats on numerous occasions with other teachers, including Dzogchen teachers, Francis Lucille, G, Stuart Schwartz, Rupert Spira, Greg Goode and yourselves. In addition I have co-led a meditation group that meets once a week and started a book discussion group that meets one half-hour before the meditation, and we started with your book *How to Attain Enlightenment* some four years ago, if I remember correctly. I felt then and still do that meditation without a context is really very weak, and I believe as you and Sundari have put it, meditation is a tool for self-inquiry and not an end in itself.

**Sundari:** Meditation is simply a tool to purify the mind and prepare it for self-inquiry. It does not equal inquiry. Self-inquiry is superior to meditation because the doer does not need to maintain a particular state and wait for the knowledge. He or she has the knowledge already and applies it continually. Meditators do not know the value of knowledge whereas inquirers do. That is why the meditators are meditating. Knowledge may arise in meditation or it may not. If it does, we say meditation is a “leading error.” But even if meditation does lead to knowledge of the “unbroken I-thought” (*akandakara vritti* – “I am awareness”), the knowledge does not always stick unless one understands what it means to be awareness.

Self-inquiry is not an experience; it is the application of knowledge. Self-inquiry is thus very different from meditation. Its success depends on the qualifications present in the mind, faith in the scripture and the dedication with which the mind is subjected to the scripture. Self-knowledge reveals that awareness is your true nature and all experience (objects) arise from you and appear in you but you are free of the objects. The objects are you, but you are not the objects. Keeping this knowledge in mind and continually contemplating on it is self-inquiry. This is why self-inquiry is different from meditation, because the knowledge is maintained by an act of will, whereas in meditation the knowledge appears (or not) during a particular experience.

Unless one has realised that one is not the meditator but the one who knows the meditator, meditation can keep one stuck for years trying to have an experience of the self, which many meditators do have, but the problem is: the identification with the experiencer/meditator is still there. Unless the knowledge that meditation is designed to impart is fully assimilated – i.e. “I am whole and complete, non-dual awareness” and not the meditator – the experience ends because it was just that, an experience. All experiences happen in time and so they are subject to change and will end. Only self-knowledge will permanently set one free of the meditator/experiencer because you – awareness/consciousness – are already free.

**Simon:** Your book was dropped after two or three months (not at my election) and we continued at that time with *The Power of Now* by Eckhart Tolle. I just ordered your new book, and maybe if the writing is less dense and more conversational, it will be met with a better reception this time around. At least for myself, I find your teachings with Sundari to be the most comprehensive and deep and hope to share that appreciation with others.

**Sundari:** Vedanta is the most comprehensive teaching and the only teaching with a valid means of knowledge for awareness. If the mind is not qualified it is pointless trying to force Vedanta onto it. It will not be understood or assimilated.

**Simon:** In the past year I have looked more heavily into the teachings of Paul Brunton whom you may have heard of. If you have, I would love to hear what comments you have on his writings.

**Sundari:** He was an intellectual who developed great devotion for Ramana and wrote books about his experiences with him. He had and to some degree still has some influence. Although he had an understanding of awareness, he did not have a teaching, because Ramana was not a teacher, although he was undoubtedly enlightened. It is always hard to say if someone is enlightened or not – it seems to us that Paul Brunton had indirect knowledge of awareness. He could talk about it. Direct knowledge is knowing that you are awareness and talking AS awareness.

**Simon:** I also just picked up a book by Swami Anubhavanada entitled *Let Meditation Happen*. He was a student of Swami Chinmayananda, and I expect you have heard of him and would welcome your comments on that book if you're familiar with it. I am really enjoying it, and it sounds very much like something that you and Sundari would write. One point he emphasizes for meditation is to have a clear purpose/goal in mind when we sit, namely disidentification with the body. For the soup, without a goal we will just eventually get lost and have no sense of obtaining anything with the meditation.

**Sundari:** Yes, we are familiar with Swami Anubhavanada and we like him. Chinmayananda was a great *mahatma*, and James has deep devotion and gratitude to him, but nonetheless his teachings have an experiential slant, which can be misleading. Anubhavanada uses experiential terminology in his teachings as well. For instance, he refers to Vedanta as a philosophy, which is not correct. He is correct in what he says about meditation, although I have no idea what you mean by your statement “for the soup.” The only way meditation is really effective is if it is undertaken with the *karma yoga* spirit in order to purify the mind in preparation for self-inquiry.

**Simon:** To close out this email I like to run by both a few experiences that I had in the past six months, when arising at a one-week silent retreat and the other arising in the last days of my mother's life on earth. There are two strong experiences I came away with from the retreat. One had to do with the discipline that had been offered to not read any books. I had brought a number of books with me, including one by a Buddhist author around the theme of storytelling. After one of the sought *satsang* meetings in which the subject of storytelling was discussed, I went back to my room and sat on the bed and thought that this would be a good time to open up the book on storytelling. Before opening, I reflected on the discipline that had been offered, and after one or two minutes decided not to open the book. The insight came later when I the question arose and I asked myself whether the decision not to open the book was really freely made, and whether I could've just as easily decided to open the book. What was immediately known in asking that question was that mind could never have an answer to that question. And there was no sense of frustration for disappointment with that answer. In fact it felt very freeing.

**Sundari:** I think you should reread Chapter II of *How to Attain Enlightenment*, Simon. Self-inquiry is not based on experience. What difference does it make to the self whether you sat in silence or

read the book? Neither action is opposed to ignorance; neither action (nor lack of it) leads to self-knowledge. Both actions are just experiences.

**Simon:** The other episode on the retreat had to do with a question I put to the teacher during *satsang* about the experience of unification. I asked, how does one come to experience that? And she answered, as I remember it, when you look out ask: show me how you are unified.

**Sundari:** You asked to know how an experience of awareness can prove to you that you are awareness. How is that possible? You are always only ever experiencing awareness, nothing else. How can you gain something you already have? No experience can take place without you, awareness. Self-inquiry into your true nature as awareness simply removes the ignorance in the mind obscuring this truth, through the application of self-knowledge.

Do you not see the duality in her reply "...when you look out ask: show me how you are unified"?

Unification implies that there are two things, the coming together of which "creates" one.

Firstly: Who is looking is "looking out" at the two things?

Secondly: If this is a non-dual reality as Vedanta proves it is, how can there be two things to unify? Non-duality and duality are not two things. They seem to be two because the power of *maya* to delude makes it look that way. Duality is a superimposition onto non-duality – it is not real, "real" being defined by "that which is always present and never changing." No object fits that description, only awareness does, because awareness is the substrate. Duality is apparently real, meaning it exists, but it is not real, because objects are not always present and always changing. Duality is a mirage – a rope mistaken for a snake – because ignorance clouds the mind.

**Simon:** Once alone later on I practiced the instruction while looking at a pretty country scene with beautiful trees, and indeed there was a sense of everything in the vision being unified, but then I thought came in very easily and quickly that I was just creating this out of my own imagination, and that quickly put an end to the practice. I believe the next day I again practiced the exercised, but when I noticed a call coming in about my having created this, I did not listen to it or at least did not believe it, and that seems to allow for a deep appreciation of the experience, and interestingly at the same time there was a knowing that because the experience could be so easily created, so to speak, it was really no big deal. I also found myself thinking that, why shouldn't it be so easy to create the experience if I am the self? Why would I think the self couldn't do such a thing?

**Sundari:** This is an interesting experience in that you had a non-dual experience and the ego negated it because you identified with the sense of doer-ship, the notion that you (who?) created the "vision of unification." No experience can take place without awareness/the self, but the self does not create experience or ever experience anything. It is the experiencing witness (the person/*jiva*) who experiences. Without self-knowledge the experiencing witness believes it needs a "special" experience to prove it is awareness. Unfortunately, no action taken by a limited entity will produce a limitless result. Only self-inquiry, although an action, leads to a limitless

result because it produces self-knowledge, which is limitless. When you know that your true nature is awareness, you know that your true nature is the knower of the experience, not the experiencer. You are confused about the difference between experience and knowledge, *satya* and *mithya*, the real and the apparently real.

**Simon:** With regard to my dying mother, I remember that about seven to ten days before she actually died, when she was off the ventilator and simply lying in bed in a semi-comatose state being given a constant drip of morphine to have her pain-free, I touched her forehead and repeated the words that all is well, and saw her as the consciousness that was beyond the body lying in that bed, and the fact that she may be identified as that body did not change the fact that she was that consciousness. I felt a deep peace for the minute or two just being with her like that. I do not know whether this had any effect on her, but somehow it felt that this was the best that could be offered. My brother who was in the room and heard this could not believe that I said it, as obviously on the appearance/physical level, medical level, all was not well.

**Sundari:** Yes, of course; “mother” is a role your mother played, and her true nature, like everything, was consciousness, not the consciousness. The word “the” implies that there is a special consciousness. There is only one consciousness/self/awareness. Acknowledging her as the self is the only appropriate response, in life and in death. People without self-knowledge have no understanding of this, because they are totally identified with the body-mind, its story and the roles they play.

**Simon:** This experience with my mother raises the issue of seeing others as they are in truth as opposed to meeting them where they are. While we want to recognize the essential pure consciousness that’s always there, in most circumstances don’t we also need to appreciate that that consciousness is identified? The answer is both/and versus either/or. Could you say something about that when you address your students/friends?

**Sundari:** The ability to discriminate yourself, awareness, from the objects that appear in you is the essence of enlightenment. When the knowledge “I AM AWARENESS” is firm and you know what it means to be awareness, you automatically see everything and everyone as the self. This does not mean that duality disappears; you just know it is only an apparent duality, a superimposition onto non-duality, not a real duality like the mirage on the desert floor. You still see the mirage, but you know it is not real. So one lives in the world and understands it to function according to certain laws, or *dharmas*, relating to people and situations both as the self and consciously as the apparent person. One understands that apparent “others” are none other than the self under the spell of ignorance. Nothing changes when self-actualisation takes place other than the way one contacts objects. You see the world from the perspective of non-duality instead of from the point of view of the *vasanas*, your likes and dislikes. To treat people who are not qualified for self-knowledge other than at their level of understanding is pointless – and arrogant.

**Simon:** Again, my deepest appreciation for your writings and presence in person and through the internet, and I look forward to possibly a response to the letter and to meet you again the next

time you are in the United States and hopefully the Northeast.

~ With respect, gratitude and warm wishes for the new year and congratulations on your ever-expanding family, Simon

**Sundari:** You are most welcome, Simon. Once again, I strongly suggest that you reread the second chapter of James' book *How to Attain Enlightenment*. Also, watch as many of his teaching videos as possible.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari