

Seven Questions about the Self and Experience

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Question 1: As a *jiva*, is any part of me real?

Ted: No.

Vedanta defines “real” as that which never changes and cannot be negated. The body-mind-sense complex is in a constant state of flux and it will inevitably “die.” That is, the physical elements that constitute the body will return to the grand reservoir of gross elements that comprise the tangible world, and the subtle body will experience the aspect of the subtle realm that is warranted by a certain portion of its merits and demerits and then eventually transmigrate to a new physical body.

The *jiva* is an apparent entity. Vedanta defines “apparent” as that which has no independent nature of its own and whose existence is entirely dependent on something else. In terms of a traditional analogy, just as the pot’s existence depends wholly on the clay, so the *jiva*’s existence – as well as the existence of all objects and in fact the entire manifestation in both its subtle and gross aspects – is wholly dependent on awareness.

The *jiva* is a composite entity consisting of the physical body, the subtle body, the causal body and awareness. In the absence of awareness, no *jiva* exists. But awareness is not a part of the *jiva*. Rather the *jiva* is, figuratively speaking, a holographic appearance projected within the scope of limitless conscious existence. Moreover, from the ultimate non-dual perspective, awareness is both the material of which the objects are made and the “light” by which they are made known. Thus there is nothing other than awareness.

And in that regard, we could say that the essential nature of the *jiva* is real.

Question 2: As a *jiva*, do I have any opportunity to experience my real self, ever?

Ted: No.

Experience is by definition an interaction between a subject and an object.

However, you – the self – are limitless conscious existence. As such, you are non-objectifiable, for that which is limitless has no qualities, characteristics, attributes, boundaries or edges by means of which it can be delineated as a discrete object. Thus you cannot be experienced as an object.

That said, in light of the answer to the previous question, we could say that the essential nature of all experienced objects is awareness, which is the self. So in that sense you are never experiencing anything but the self.

Moreover, though you cannot experience the self as such as an object, you do know that you

exist and you know you are conscious. So in that sense as well you do experience the self, simply be virtue of being the self.

Question 3: If no to the above, doesn't that mean that, as a *jiva*, I should simply get used to the idea that I am unreal, and also embrace my certain passing into non-existence?

Ted: Yes and no.

You should get used to the idea that the *jiva* is unreal.

You need not embrace your "certain passing into non-existence," however, for there is no passing into non-existence. The *jiva* will resolve into the unmanifest state, and the ego, which is nothing more than a thought in the intellect that gives rise to the feeling of being an independently-existent volitional entity, will cease to claim ownership-doership-enjoyership with regard to the particular body-mind-sense complex with which it is presently associated. But there is no such thing as non-existence. If there were, then the fact that what you are considering as "real" – i.e. the *jiva* – could resolve into it would establish non-existence as the fundamental reality. But if non-existence were the fundamental reality, then nothing could have ever come into existence in the first place, because something can't come out of nothing.

Question 4: Is there something that transmigrates?

Ted: Yes: the subtle body.

Question 5: I realize that, as awareness, these questions lose their bite. But if I cannot learn to "be awareness" as a *jiva*, then the best I (as *jiva*) can hope for is an accumulation of *sattva*-merit that opens the way for moments of peace, without the opportunity to "be" my true self uninterruptedly? In other words, as a *jiva*, is there a path leading to enlightenment? I have a hard time accepting knowledge as the brass ring, because it appears to fluctuate in time.

Ted: You don't have to learn to be awareness, because you already are awareness. And you are so uninterruptedly. Though the particular *jiva* you appear to be stops being the particular *jiva* you appear to be during the dream state and certainly during the deep sleep state, and will one day stop being the particular *jiva* you appear to be altogether, you – i.e. awareness – never stop being you. As mentioned in the answer to the previous question, you cannot stop being you, for as awareness you are existence itself. As everything depends on awareness for its existence and awareness itself is obviously existent, awareness and existence must be inseparable aspects of the fundamental nature of reality. And since there can be only one fundamental reality, that reality must be the real you.

Knowledge is the brass ring because only knowledge can give you what you've already got – or in this case, only knowledge can afford you the apprehension of what you already are. Actually, you already know the self, for you know that you are, and you know that you know you are. What you don't know, however, is that you are limitless.

Vedantic self-inquiry is the means of apprehending your limitless nature. The words of scripture serve as pointers to that which is beyond words. Though the *jiva* cannot experience limitlessness as an object, by continuously contemplating the words of scripture, the mind is led to the apprehension of the limitless substrate of all objective phenomena, the “light” of conscious existence in which all objects appear. And when that apprehension is fortified by the understanding that all objects depend upon that “light” for their existence and that no object can exist outside of its scope, then the mind cannot help but see through the ego’s false claim of limited individuality.

Knowledge of objects fluctuates in time because objects fluctuate in time. But intelligence-as-such – i.e. limitless conscious existence – does not fluctuate, for it is wholly beyond the realm of time, and it is only in terms of time that change – i.e. fluctuation – can be measured. Thus when limitless conscious existence is understood as one’s true nature, the knowledge sticks, even in the face of appearances to the contrary.

The bottom line is that self-knowledge is not the accumulation of information, which we could say is an ever-fluctuating phenomenon given that information is always changing. Rather self-knowledge is the recognition of an already-existent fact.

Question 6: In moments where I let go of my personal history and identity, and feel the I-awareness energy alone, am I not then experiencing my true nature? Or is that just a *jiva* trying to masquerade as something it is not?

Ted: You – awareness – are not energy, because even energy is a subtle objective phenomenon known to you – i.e. appearing within the scope of your “illumination.” However, the limitlessness you apprehend in those moments is an accurate reflection of your true nature. The question is whether you recognize the limitlessness as you or as an object you call awareness.

Question 7: If I understand the book *How to Attain Enlightenment*, it maintains that true knowledge or understanding is the true measure of enlightenment as a *jiva*. But other teachings maintain that emotions are a higher state of knowing than intellect or thought. Knowledge of “Buddha nature,” for instance, seems to me to pale next to the experience of what it feels like to “be the Buddha.” I am thinking that the book is in error on this point. The book, it seems to me, chooses the intellect over the emotions. Am I missing something?

Ted: Yes, you are missing the substrate of all experience – knowledge. Ask yourself: How is “the experience of what it feels like to be the Buddha” known?

Vedanta doesn’t choose the intellect over emotions, but rather knowledge over experience. In this regard, knowledge does trump emotion. Emotions are limited experiences that come and go, while knowledge – once assimilated – remains. It is true that relative knowledge – i.e. knowledge of objects – can come and go as well, but both emotions and relative knowledge are objects appearing within the “light” of awareness, which is the ever-present witness of all objects. And that to which all coming and going is known does not itself come and go. Hence when the mind knows awareness, there is no chance of its forgetting it, as it is always present in every cognition, and there is no chance of losing it, as it is one’s very own essential nature.

Be careful not to confuse the relative knowledge of objects gathered by the *jiva*, the relative knower, with the apprehension of the knowing principle – i.e. the “light” of limitless conscious existence. When “the experience of what it feels like to be the Buddha” ends, the limitless conscious existence in whose “light” the experience was known will remain constant as the “light” by means of which the next experience is known.