

# The “Experiencing Witness” and the “Non-experiencing Witness”

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Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2898>

Ted,

I got your email address off the ShiningWorld website. I had a question maybe you can help directing me with.

I was hoping to find more discussion (either written or video) about the distinction between the 'experiencing witness' (subtle-body) and the 'non-experiencing witness' ('pure' Awareness).

Not being able to distinguish any difference between the two, used to be a major cause of confusion ... In fact, hearing things like: "Awareness is a non-experiencing witness" made no sense at all ... But now the clarity of this seems to 'zoom in and out of focus' for me.

I was wondering if you knew of any sources where this topic is discussed more thoroughly?

Thanks for any help you may be able to provide.

Xavier

Hi, Xavier.

Your question is excellent. The distinction between what you refer to as the “experiencing witness” (i.e., the subtle body) and the “non-experiencing witness” (i.e., pure awareness, the nature of which is limitless conscious existence) can be confusing.

The scripture that most readily makes the distinction between these aspects of awareness is Adi Shankara’s *prakarana grantha* (i.e., explanatory text) *Drg-Drishya-Viveka*, or “The Discrimination Between the Seer and the Seen.” There is an excellent translation of this text with a commentary by Swami Tejomayananda published by Central Chinmaya Mission Trust and available on Amazon.com.

What is most important to understand with regard to the reference to pure awareness being a “non-experiencing witness”—a phrase that admittedly makes no logical sense, for witnessing is an experience—is that it is purely figurative. Due to the limitations of language—the fact that words by definition denote objects (either subtle, such as abstract concepts, emotions, sensations, etc., or gross, such as tangible items)—we can only point to or imply the nature of that which is limitless and, thus, without defining or distinguishing characteristics.

In that regard, perhaps the following explanation will help you understand the difference between the two “witnesses,” or “knowers.”

We begin with the observation that awareness is not a personal entity with a mind that can know objects, so awareness doesn’t know itself in the same way that the mind knows objects. Awareness simply is. We say that awareness is aware of itself in a figurative sense. As

awareness, awareness is aware, but not of objects. Awareness is the “light” that illumines, or lends sentience, to the mind and thus allows the mind to know objects.

The “light” doesn’t know. It simply is. The “light” is conscious in the sense of it being the principle of intelligence, the consciousness that lends sentiency to the mind and allows it to perform the various functions that we call knowing.

The mind knows the “light” because the “light” is self-evident. That is to say that we exist and we know we exist. This knowing takes place in the mind of the apparent individual, and thus the self is not the knower. But the self is the “light” of consciousness that enlivens and illumines the mind and thereby enables the mind to both perceive objective forms and apprehend its essential nature as limitless conscious existence through the mental negation of all objective phenomena that results from self-inquiry.

The self is awareness. But the self is not the mind.

That is, the self is not the mind in the sense that the mind is an object (i.e., something perceivable, or knowable) in awareness (i.e., the self) and no particular limited object can comprehensively define or represent limitless conscious existence. Of course, the mind—and all other objects as well—are essentially the self/awareness, as there is nothing other than awareness for *Maya*, which is itself a subtle object that depends on the self/awareness for its existence, to draw the material from in order to make limitless conscious existence appear to be the vast array of limited objective phenomena that comprise the manifestation in both its subtle and gross aspects. By analogy, though we can say that all waves are water, we cannot say that water is defined by “wave-ness.”

Having said that, the self is not a knower of objects. As I previously explained, the self/awareness is often referred to as the “knower” in a figurative sense. But that reference is made with regard to the fact that the self/awareness is the “field of illumination” or simply the “illuminating factor” that lends sentiency to the body-mind-sense complex and thereby enables the mind to conduct the functions that result in what we call thinking and knowing. Since the mind wouldn’t be able to know without the presence of awareness, Vedanta refers to awareness as the “knower.” The Sanskrit term from which this moniker is derived is *sakshi chaitanya*, which means “witnessing awareness.” Though the words “knowing” and “witnessing” are basically synonymous, there is a subtle difference suggested by the passive implication of the word “witnessing” that points to the impersonal nature of the self/awareness.

Ironically, rather than a personal entity, the self is limitless conscious existence. The conscious nature of limitless existence is what imbues the body-mind-sense complex with sentiency and the enables the aspect of the mind referred to as *ahamkara*, the I-sense or ego, which is actually nothing more than a thought, to claim a sense of individuality. But awareness itself, or what we might call the principle of knowledge or intelligence-as-such (i.e., the capacity for knowing or the quality of intelligence), is not the mind informing or associated with the apparent individual person. Again, awareness illumines the mind.

Vedanta reveals that limitless conscious existence (i.e., awareness) is the fundamental reality because limitless conscious existence is the fundamental substrate that cannot be resolved into anything subtler than itself. Limitless conscious existence, therefore, is not only the essential nature of all that is, but it is also referred to as the self because it is the fundamental substrate into which the gross, subtle, and causal bodies that comprise the apparent individual person—along

with all other objective phenomena—resolve.

The bottom line is that all references to awareness being the “knower” or the “witness” are purely figurative. The mind has the capacity to know its own contents and to apprehend that there is something “greater” than itself in which all objective phenomena, including itself (i.e., the mind) are appearing. Still, this knowledge isn’t had by the self, but rather is simply illumined by the “light” of awareness.

I hope that helps.

All the best,

Ted