

# The Value of Experience

Ram (James Swartz)

2011-07-18

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/934>

**Franklin:** James, I'm on a third reading of your book *How to Attain Enlightenment*. It's all very new to me still, yet so fascinating... it reads like a sci-fi novel. I've just now stumbled onto these teachings and all I can think is, "Where have you been all my life?" Where have I been all my life? I was blind and am now seeing the sun rise for the first time. I've read *Mystic by Default* and a few Buddhist books by Steve Hagan. The *satsangs* at your website are helpful, in addition. Also, I've been reading a few of Yogananda's books. My "desire" is for understanding. You say the means to "understand" is the knowledge that I am the self.

Does experience help me to come closer to this knowledge?

**James:** It can be either helpful or a hindrance according to the values you use to interpret your experiences. If you mean spiritual experiences, they can be helpful insofar as they convince you that there is something beyond the visible to be known. They can be a hindrance if you think freedom is experiential, i.e. if you seek spiritual experiences and try to make them permanent. In essence they are no better than worldly experiences because they do not last. You can just as well realize who you are without one spiritual experience because the self is always present. It is you. You are here prior to every experience, worldly and spiritual, and the access to yourself is through knowledge.

This does not mean necessarily that just the intellectual idea that you are whole and complete, ever-present, non-dual, ordinary, actionless awareness will enlighten you. There are always obstacles in the form of beliefs and conditioning that stand in the way of your appreciation of this fact. If spiritual experiences come in the course of self-inquiry, ask yourself how they are known, or "who" knows them. But it is not good to rely on experience to teach you who you are. No experience will change your thinking patterns anyway and it is the way you think about what self needs to be transformed. The self, awareness, cannot be transformed. It can only be known. The apparent ego-self is endlessly transforming according to its apparent actions and the apparent results that come from them. So the only lasting approach is through self-knowledge.

Enlightenment is self-knowledge. It is a thought that destroys the belief that you are small, inadequate, incomplete and separate.

**Franklin:** Does a spiritual experience help me become more aware of my ignorance?

**James:** Maybe, but unless you are free, you can assume you are ignorant of your nature, so the practical solution is to work on removing the things that stand in the way of your freedom. You should not sit around doing nothing, waiting for some kind of big epiphany to sort out your life. You should look at the things that are hanging you up, discover the causes and remove them. If experiences come, fine. But they are not it.

**Franklin:** Will meditation bring me any closer or should I stay away from the marketing in Yogananda's books that seem to be directing me to *kriya yoga*?

**James:** Yes. *Kriya yoga* is entry-level stuff. It is all experiential. There is no proper teaching and the teachers are not enlightened. They are all well-meaning, good people, and their *ashrams* are a good environment for living a *sattvic* lifestyle, but once you get to a certain level, the growth stops. It is more about "community" than liberation.

**Franklin:** Is meditation a form of inquiry?

**James:** It can be if you can fix your mind on the self and inquire. If you practice meditation to cope with stress, no.

**Franklin:** What is the best, most direct means of seeking this knowledge that I am the self?

**James:** Hear it from a qualified teacher.

**Franklin:** What is a legitimate means of this knowledge if it's not an experience interpreted by the mind?

**James:** Vedanta is a time-tested legitimate means of self-knowledge.

~ All the best, James