

Thought and the Knowledge of Who I Am

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Nellie: Hi, Ted. It was recommended by my friend to send my questions to you.

I first came in contact with James Swartz and his book *How to Attain Enlightenment* in 2013 when I was part of a non-duality study group led by an Irish lady called Tess Hughes. We read one chapter every week, answered questions and had questions to each other by email. It took a while for me to really get the message. It took quite some time to understand the concept of *karma yoga*. Since then I have been reading and listening to a lot from James. I have been “on the path” with different teachers, in person and on the internet since 2004.

I have noticed that things have calmed down. I don't get worked up about things that happen as often as before, maybe once a month, and then I can recognize what is happening and disengage. My life is a lot calmer and I enjoy my life more than ever. The concepts that come with non-duality are still hard to grasp, and I would like to ask you to answer the questions below. I am looking forward to hearing your comments.

How do I notice and know that my knowledge of who I am has become steady and fast?

Ted: The fundamental litmus test for self-knowledge is that you don't want things anymore. That is, the apparent individual person you seem to be (i.e. the body-mind-sense complex with which you – pure awareness – are associated) still has desires and preferences, she is not driven to obtain the objects of these desires and preferences by the erroneous notion that they will complete her or provide her with any lasting sense of fulfillment.

When you know who you are you know that objects are not the source of joy (i.e. deep sense of security, peace and happiness). Rather joy is your nature. So while you may still enjoy objects, you no longer seek to get joy from them – that is, you no longer expect them to deliver joy to you.

Moreover, when you know who you are you know that your true nature is limitless conscious existence, and that such being the case nothing can add anything to you or take anything away from you. Given that you are all-pervasive, you know there is nothing other than you that could be added to or subtracted from you. First of all, there is no other source from which anything else could be drawn. Secondly, even if it were possible to take something away from you, there is nowhere else it could be stashed outside of your own being.

The bottom line is that when you recognize the fact that your true nature is limitless conscious existence you know that nothing can enhance or diminish you in any essential way. Thus you no longer feel compelled to get or keep or avoid or eliminate any object.

To be clear, the apparent individual person still exercises free will and uses common sense and discrimination to navigate effectively and take care of her responsibilities within the context of the apparent reality (i.e. the manifest universe), but at the same time her mind is aware of the fact that her true nature is limitless conscious existence and that as such she will remain essentially unaffected by the character of the objects, encounters and events that constitute her experience

as an apparent person.

Nellie: How can others notice and know that my knowledge of who I am has become steady and fast?

Ted: They can't. Only you know if your binding *vasanas* (i.e. the compelling likes and dislikes, desires and fears, that demand indulgence in order for you to feel you are okay) have been neutralized. It is likely that when you are no longer driven to pursue objects and you know that you are whole and complete as you are, you will be much more relaxed and cheerful, and your actions will invariably accord with universal ethical norms because you won't feel it necessary to break the rules or cut corners to get what you want – or feel you need in order to be okay. But there is no battery of behavioral indicators for a self-realized being.

Nellie: Is this change from not knowing who I am to having a steady and fast knowing fast or slow or can it be either or both?

Ted: Despite the romantic stories of great beings who attained instant enlightenment, assimilating self-knowledge is almost invariably a slow, painstaking process. Or, we might say, that the first recognition of your true nature might come in a flash, but the full assimilation of the knowledge that manifests as the unshakeable conviction that you are whole and complete, limitless conscious existence, and the cessation of all suffering – not the pains and pleasures that are an unavoidable aspect of human existence, mind you, but the emotional upheaval and turmoil that result from the feeling that these pains or the inevitable end of any object-oriented pleasure actually impacts your fundamental well-being – usually involves a rather arduous process of purifying the mind (i.e. neutralizing the binding *vasanas*) through the practices of *karma yoga*, meditation, devotional worship and self-inquiry, which quite frankly takes time and effort.

Nellie: How is this knowing of who I am related to the thoughts that I am aware of?

Ted: The understanding “I am limitless conscious existence” registers as a thought in the intellect, but is not intellectual knowledge in the way we ordinarily think of it. Intellectual knowledge is based on the accumulation of information and requires the memory to retain the information. Self-knowledge is not the accumulation of information, but rather the removal of the erroneous notions of limitation that cloud your understanding of your true limitless nature. It is true that Vedanta uses concepts that point to your limitless nature in order to remove the erroneous notions of limitation, but these are only intended to trigger the mind's recognition of its true nature. Once the self is recognized as limitless conscious existence (i.e. the “light” by means of which all objects are known), it need not be remembered, for it is always present in every cognition.

Be clear that although the self is often referred to as the “knower,” it should not be mistaken as the relative knower of thoughts. As unromantic as the fact is, the self is entirely impersonal and is simply the illumining factor that sets the mind in motion and allows its functions – perceiving, integrating sense data, doubting, deliberating, discriminating, determining, deciding, directing,

remembering, conceiving and emoting – to process experience and thereby know the objective phenomena arising within it.

Nellie: Does it change the content and/or frequency and/or intensity of the thoughts?

Ted: Not necessarily. As you gain greater clarity of your true nature through self-inquiry, the character, quality and score of thoughts arising in the mind will almost certainly change. But that is not to say that thoughts ultimately have any impact on the self. Thoughts are only apparent objects arising within the scope of awareness. As such they are both made of the single “substanceless substance” that is the substrate of all (i.e. awareness) and abide within the “illuminated field” of being (i.e. awareness) in which their existence is known. Hence once thoughts are known for what they are, their particular character is understood to have no impact whatsoever on the essential nature of the self.

Vedanta emphasizes cultivating a *sattvic* (i.e. pure) mind – that is, a mind free of binding *vasanas* – because only a sufficiently clear mind (i.e. a mind whose “vision” is not obscured by erroneous notions and extroverting desires) can serve as a “mirror” that will register an accurate reflection of the limitless, unmodified, attributeless self.

Along these lines, we might liken thoughts to vast expanse of dense cloud cover that prevents us from seeing the sky. Obviously, the sky is that in which the clouds are floating all along, but only once the density of the clouds dissipates to a sufficient extent are we able to see the limitless expanse of sky lying beyond them. It is important to note that the clouds don’t need to disappear completely, but only enough to allow us a vision of the true nature of the sky. Once this has been glimpsed, whether there be clouds covering the sky or not, we will always know the sky’s true nature. Similarly, through spiritual practices, we purify the mind of binding *vasanas* and distracting thoughts in sufficient measure to afford us a “glimpse” of our true nature by means of the implied meaning of the words of Vedanta. Once we have recognized our limitless nature, whether thoughts arise or do not arise in the mind makes little difference. We never forget what we have “seen” (i.e. realized, or come to know) and thereafter stand with unshakeable conviction in our true nature as limitless awareness – not because it is a belief we ardently ascribe to, but rather because it is a fact that we have recognized.

Nellie: I have also read *Standing as Awareness: The Direct Path* by Greg Goode; maybe you know that book?

Ted: Outside of traditional Vedanta, it is one of the few books that offers a valid analysis of experience that reveals its true nature.

Nellie: I bought it several years ago but when I opened it recently there was a deeper understanding of the book. After reading some passages there was a conclusion that practicing standing as awareness could be beneficial to me. What do you think?

Ted: Yes, definitely. Go for it! But keep studying traditional Vedanta as well. Ultimately, you will

recognize that you are the awareness you are practicing standing as.