

What Is Knowledge?

Ram (James Swartz)

2010-11-18

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/1430>

Seeker: Hi, James. I have been reading your website for a few weeks now trying to learn as much as I can... The question that I would like to ask is: It seems that from reading your website and also my conviction that enlightenment is a combination of experience and understanding; one has to have both? This would be termed knowledge? As experience by itself is not enough, neither is intellectual understanding, but rather both are needed.

James: Yes, indeed. If reality is non-dual awareness then experience and knowledge can only be one. In Vedanta we do not define knowledge as “intellectual,” although I think I know what you mean. Do you mean knowledge backed by experience?

All knowledge is “intellectual” in the sense that it takes place in the intellect. The intellect is the one with the problem in the first place. It thinks it is something other than what it is – the self. If you are experiencing anything you are experiencing the self already because the self is all there is. The problem, however, is the “intellectual” notion that you are not experiencing the self. This is not knowledge. It is simply a belief.

We define knowledge as “what cannot be negated,” meaning what is always true. In a relative sense sugar is always sweet. This is knowledge. The idea that you are limited is backed by your experience – it is how you feel. But it is not knowledge. Or if it is, it is “intellectual” knowledge, that is to say, that it is not actually backed by your experience. It is backed by an incorrect evaluation of your experience brought on by a misidentification of the self with the body-mind entity. Most people believe the sky is blue. That is their experience. But it is a belief that can be negated by investigation.

So you have to investigate to see if your self knowledge is true. You can verify or negate it by looking at your self. But you cannot do this on your own, because your belief in who you are is contrary to the fact. So you need a different way of looking at yourself – we call it inquiry. Inquiry produces knowledge, if it is conducted properly. Vedanta just shows you how to inquire properly. It is not a complicated means of knowledge although it does require a certain eligibility.

We make such a fuss about the knowledge-and-experience confusion because there is a belief that the experiencing entity needs a special kind of experience, let's call it “experiential knowledge” that is somehow different from the knowledge of a tree or a cat or any mundane object. Some people believe that the idea that you are non-dual, ever-present, ordinary, actionless awareness is a theory and that you need to go out and get an experience that proves it. Sometimes you do have experiences that suggest that you are the self. But you have no way of making such experiences happen or of making them permanent if they do. And even if they do, you may not glean self-knowledge from them. In fact most people who have what are called non-dual experiences do not get self-knowledge, because they long for such experiences once they end. If they got self-knowledge, they would not long for anything ever again. The knowledge “I am the self” is true and it is a fact experientially, but confidence in the knowledge may be lacking because they believe they are not

experiencing themselves ever minute. If this is the case then Vedanta recommends that you assume that it is true, live as if it was true, and you will see that eventually experience will back you up – because it is backing you up all the time. So in this sense you may need some kind of experiential validation.

The experience of the self by the self is ongoing. It never ends, because it never began. It is the essence of the experience of the experiencing entity – which happens to be only an object in you but which you take to be yourself. So self-knowledge is: “I am not the experiencing entity; I am the awareness that makes it possible for the experiencing entity to experience.” You should contemplate the meaning of this knowledge until it is known to be true.

~ James