

Knowledge and Experience

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Michael: Dear sir, you don't know me but you said people could write to you, so I am taking advantage of your offer. I am having trouble understanding just what you mean when you speak about knowledge and experience. What is experience and what is knowledge? Would you be so kind as to define experience and knowledge so that it is more clear to me? In the *satsangs* I read at your website I got the impression that the people who you were writing to you already understood what those terms mean, but while I have been involved with *bhakti yoga* for a long time and am not familiar with Vedanta, I think this is a very important topic. I had a vision of Ramana Maharshi. It was quite amazing and it caused me to love him a lot, but I never studied his teachings properly although I know about self-inquiry. I don't see why anyone would be asking questions if they have love for God. But lately I have been having doubts about this love and I'm starting to question what I am actually in love with because Ramana is dead and I really don't know who God is although I am sure there is a God. Then a friend told me about your website and I read the interview about Ramana and I got interested in non-duality. Before, I didn't ask any questions at all, but now I am starting to wonder if I'm not missing something. I'm not unhappy, but I think there is something more than what I am doing. Please don't ignore this letter, as it is important to me.

~ Sincerely, Michael

James: Hi, Michael. Good to hear from you. You are right that this is an important topic. I will try to make it clear for you.

Experience is any transaction between a subject and an object or objects. There is only one self, with apparent knowledge or ignorance of who or what it is. When it doesn't know who it is it – that is, when it thinks it's a person, a body/mind/ego/individual – it is caught up in a state of continuous experience. When I say "caught up" I mean that it approaches life with a sense of incompleteness and separation and usually believes that certain experiences – or the "big" experience (enlightenment) – will erase its sense of limitation. When its ignorance about who it is is removed with the dawn of self-knowledge, it no longer sees experience as something to be desired or feared. When you have self-knowledge you no longer feel like you are an experiencer, a doer. You fall back onto your default identity as the seer, pure awareness. It is like being a witness to experience. You see a part of your self involved with experience but you know that you are insulated from experience and its effects. It is like watching a movie. You know it isn't real, nonetheless you enjoy it. This is what is meant by knowledge. It's not like knowledge of a situation, a person or a fact which may change. It's a lasting sense of wholeness because the seer, your self, is full. Full means complete. There is the very real sense that nothing is missing, that everything is perfect as it is.

Knowledge is "what cannot be negated." It is true at all times, places and circumstances. Sugar is always sweet. Fire is always hot. Water is always wet, to use worldly examples. The self is always whole and complete, actionless awareness. Information, what Vedanta calls relative knowledge, is subject to correction because it is conditioned by various changing factors – so you can never count on it to make

you happy or to remove suffering. Experience only produces relative knowledge because it is in *maya* and subject to continuous change. You may know that your girlfriend loves you when you leave for work in the morning, but when you come home in the evening this knowledge may not be correct.

Self-inquiry, the path of knowledge, means that you think about what is permanent, what is always present, what is constant. No experience or state of mind, no thought or feeling is always present. So what is always present? The answer is very simple – you. Try to discover a time when you did not exist. Even when the body is sleeping and Michael is gone, you are not gone. You are there enjoying your sleep. When you are dreaming you are the light that watches your dream ego play in the dream. When you realize this you relax. You know that nothing can touch you. It's a great discovery. It's a strange discovery too because it is so simple and obvious – but you didn't notice it. Why didn't you notice it? Because you weren't looking for it. You were looking outside in the world of experience, your own subjective reaction to life, and not at the one to whom experience presents itself.

When I said above that the self has “apparent” knowledge I meant that even “absolute” knowledge is limited in the sense that awareness is not a knower. The individual is the knower. Absolute knowledge is only absolute with reference to what is relative. But there is nothing “relative” in our non-dual reality, so the idea of absolute and relative knowledge is actually a form of ignorance. Nonetheless, absolute or self-knowledge is absolutely necessary if the individual, the self under the spell of *maya/avidya*, is going to get free of its notion of incompleteness/separation.

No experience, including non-dual epiphanies, will produce lasting self-knowledge. The experience might trigger the understanding “I am the self” but usually (Ramana and a few others were exceptions) self-ignorance returns with the loss of the epiphany and the self again falls under the spell of “apparent” ignorance. It is never actually ignorant of who it is. It just thinks it is – owing to *maya*, which makes the impossible (self-forgetfulness) possible. The spiritual world is nothing but hundreds of thousands of people who have had non-dual epiphanies but who failed to associate “non-duality” with the “I.” They continue to take the “I” as an experiencer. To convert non-dual experience to knowledge one needs to know the value of knowledge. By that I mean one needs to know (as the scripture and the sages say) that ignorance is the problem and that only knowledge removes ignorance. If you take non-duality to be an experience it will do what every experience does – change into something else. So when you are having one of your epiphanies you need to look into who or what is the source of the experience. The source is always awareness. And then you need to identify with awareness as Ramana did when he had his famous epiphany.

When Vedanta speaks of “knowledge” it is generally speaking of awareness, the self. It is called “knowledge” because it makes knowledge possible. You can't be enlightened or ignorant without awareness. It makes knowledge possible, but it does not need knowledge to survive, to exist. When it is under the spell of *maya/avidya* it is absolutely dependent on (relative) knowledge just to survive. This is why you always want to know what is happening or what is about to happen.

The whole point of self-inquiry is to remove one's dependence on experience. Self-knowledge doesn't stop experience, it just stops the identification with the experiencer. Therefore it is called “*moksa*,” freedom (from the doer/experiencer, from experience itself. A person who does not know what a mirage is will chase the

experienced water he or she sees on the desert, assuming he or she is thirsty (and who in this world is not experience-hungry/thirsty?) But someone who knows what a mirage is will not waste his or her time chasing an experience that will not solve his or her thirst problem.

This is why it is important for people to understand the relative values of knowledge and experience. Vedanta is not against mystic experience at all. It just says there is always another factor involved and that knowledge of that factor is very useful – if you want to be happy. My intention in writing and speaking on this topic is not to discourage spiritual practice or downplay the value of mystic experience but only to draw attention to the issue of the relationship between what is experienced and what is known – and the one who knows.

I hope this is helpful.

~ Ram