

I Am Not the Doer

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Shanti: I visited Ramesh Balsekar recently, and although I enjoyed the *satsang* and found Ramesh a decent person, I left feeling that his “I am not the doer” teaching is just not enough. What is your opinion about it?

Ram: Well, I’ve never met Ramesh to hear it from his own mouth, but I’ve heard it many times as people come from Ramesh to Tiruvannamalai – the Advaita crowd – so I’m quite familiar with how people take it – which is probably good enough – since a teaching is only as good as the understanding of it.

It seems to me that “I am not the doer” is only half a teaching, the negative half at that. If such a teaching causes you to investigate the doer, it can be very valuable. But investigation of the doer is difficult because it is hiding behind a thick screen of thought. If you can root out the doer and negate it, you will see the self. And if you can identify with the self, you will see that “I am not the doer” actually means “I am the self” which is the positive side of this teaching.

But experience, as you know, does not erase thought patterns, particularly the thought “I am the doer.” Only establishing new thinking patterns erases thinking patterns. Yes, the thought “I am limitless awareness” should be based on direct experience. Simply hearing “I am the self” and parroting it will not do, even though it is true. The question then becomes “What is an experience of the self?” and here we enter very controversial territory. Why? Because, if this is a non-dual reality, then everything we are experiencing all the time is the self, so it is entirely possible that one could realize who one is while watching a sporting event on TV. In any case, at some point in the *sadhana* the positive half of the teaching “I am the self, whole and complete, actionless awareness” needs to become the dominant “I” thought. Applying this thought (the process is called *pratipaksha bhavana* in Vedanta) is self-inquiry.

One sees the doer “I” rise up and one negates it with its opposite, “I am the self (*shivoham, aham brahmasmi*, etc.). When the limited I-thought has been replaced with the positive I-thought, the positive I-thought has done its job and recedes into the background. If the old

vasana, the “I am limited, inadequate and incomplete” idea arises, the affirmation appears automatically and neutralizes it. But if the practice is vigorous and thorough, the limited I-thought will not reappear. This is what Shankara calls the practice of knowledge.

It boils down to changing one’s thinking about who one is. This idea is not popular, because it involves a lot of hard work. People prefer to believe that some extraordinary experience will come along and put them into a permanent state of “I” consciousness. But waiting for the touch of a *guru* or some extraordinary experience is not going to work in the long run. These experiences are fine, perhaps they give an idea of what the self is and inspire one to persevere with one’s *sadhana*, but the effect eventually wears off and the person returns to seeing himself or herself as just another limited person, a seeker, a *samsari*.

Ramana woke up when he was 17, but he did a lot of intense *sadhana* after his awakening. I would imagine that his teaching of self-investigation, which is as old as the *Vedas*, came about because he actually practiced self-investigation. Of course “I am not the doer” is always useful, but without a positive affirmation, “I am the self,” the enlightenment would only be partial. We know that Ramana thought of himself as the self, based on his investigation of the self, and he was not shy in affirming it. One criticism of the idea of affirming one’s self-knowledge when necessary is that it is “only intellectual.” But this is an ill-considered opinion because the conclusion that one is not the self in the first place is equally intellectual. All knowledge and ignorance is intellectual because it happens in the intellect. These teachings are not for the self, they are for the ego/intellect, the thinker/feeler. It is this “person” that has the ignorance and it is this person that needs to get the knowledge. The self doesn’t have a doubt that it is the self. I hope this makes it more clear.

~ Love, Ram