

Are Thoughts a Problem?

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Ken: Hi, Ram. Yes, I like what you say about the mind being *maya*. I can't see how one can argue against this point. However, Ramana says in other places, in *Talks*, for instance, that the mind is merely a bundle of thoughts. What could he possibly mean by this? Again, I think this just brings us back to the problem of "definitions" and also context. To whom was he speaking, and what was the purpose of the message? Allow me to explain, from my perspective.

Ram: The teaching that the mind is just a bundle of thoughts is meant to help a person dis-identify with it. It means that your thought life is impermanent and you should not build your life on ideas. You should build it on something permanent, i.e. the self.

Ken: In the quote I sent you a while back, he says that there can be no peace when there is a "disturbance" of thoughts. I think this is the key in this discussion. Obviously, the *jnani* must have thoughts in order to function in the world of forms and to communicate the non-dual message to others. I was never suggesting that a *jnani* did not have thoughts. This is absurd. There are examples, however – like "Bench Baba" or the wandering "*masts*" – where identification with the body-mind is so gone that there is no verbal communication or "functioning" to the point where people have to put food in their mouth for the body to survive. This to me is more like what happens when the body dies, or like deep sleep as you say. So this can happen but it is not very "practical," so to speak. The individual might be a *jnani*, but how to tell?

Ram: I think the issue of to whom the teaching is addressed is relevant here. Obviously, if you know you are the self the thoughts, irrespective of their nature, can't disturb you. You are peace itself. The idea Ramana is expressing is Yoga doctrine – it goes right back to Patanjali and beyond. On the mind/ego level thoughts can be a problem if you identify with dualistic ones. I say "can be" because I do not subscribe to the "total annihilation" doctrine. Only the thoughts that are not sourced in non-duality can disturb your peace – the rest can stay since they do not agitate the mind and keep the attention from wandering away from the self. This is why *savikalpa samadhi*, *samadhi* with thought, is the only suitable *samadhi* for *moksa*. Presumably the person to whom Ramana is speaking is a candidate for – or a practitioner of – self-inquiry.

One of Ramana's definitions of self-inquiry is "holding the mind on the self," so one's thought life is important insofar as it impacts on one's ability to do this. However, nobody holds the mind on the self, particularly in the face of strong extroverting *vasanas*, without the thought that it is useful to do this. So some thought is operating in this inward-looking phase of the *sadhana*. However, a person who is advanced in self-inquiry, whose mind is locked on the self, is only really dealing with two factors – the self and the mind. In Vedanta the method of self-inquiry is called *viveka*, discrimination. *Moksa* is simply knowing clearly what is the self and what are the changing forms of the self and not identifying with the forms. When the

difference between the self and its forms is known you are free of the mind. You are free because you understand that identification with the thoughts brings pleasure and pain and that non-identification forces you do identify with the self since it is the only other option. Yes, this “identification” with the self is also a very subtle thought but it is a thought that has great value – it is the centerpiece of Vedantic teaching – since it destroys identification with the thoughts altogether. And it is not a problem, because it is in harmony with reality. When the identification with the thoughts is completely broken the “I am the self” thought disappears too – since it has done its job – leaving you as you are and always were.

As far as the issue of how to tell if a *mouni*, a non-verbal person, is a *jnani*, you can't. You can only tell when he or she opens his or her mouth and starts to speak. Then you can figure out whether or not the “I” is sourced in the self or in ignorance. I'm always suspicious of these *mouna* people. Are they *mouna* out of fear that words can destroy their peace or are they *mouna* because they are so identified with the self that they can't be bothered to think? People easily confuse *mounis* with *jnanis* because they tend to have a lot of *shanti* and *shakti*, both of which are taken for enlightenment by experience-oriented people. But *shanti* and *shakti* are not necessarily the result of *jnanam*; they can come about through *yoga*, control of the mind.

Ken: My sense of it is that the *jnani* is simply identified with the “substratum,” as Ramana called it many times, and not with any phenomena that may be arising – which one could say leads to the firm knowledge and conviction, verified by direct experience, that one is this substratum and none else; so he notices thoughts arising, as they are needed, but there is no identification with them. This is liberation, is it not? There is no “this is MY thought” or “these thoughts are MINE or ME” – this is ego. Thoughts then are simply seen as temporary, ephemeral phenomena arising within or against the backdrop of the substratum with which he is continually identified and which is indeed the self.

Ram: I agree with this completely. This is my experience and pure Vedanta doctrine.

Ken: So my concept (for ultimately this is all it is) is that no thought – even the most sublime, such as “I am enlightened” or “I am liberated” – can be the truth. I do not believe that by merely saying, “I am enlightened,” that this is the case. This is merely a trick of the ego. I agree with you that awakening to the fact that “all there is is enlightenment” is only had by knowledge – verified by direct experience. But an intellectual statement such as, “I am enlightened,” is merely a thought, an egoic ruse.

Ram: Again, I agree that no thought can be the truth. The “truth” is the awareness of thought. But just as Ramana urges, self-inquiry – which is a thought – there is a thought that is completely necessary at the final stage of one's *sadhana* when the war with the mind is in full tilt, and that is the thought “I am the self.” It will destroy the thought “I am limited, inadequate, incomplete and separate” if applied with conviction. And it is important to do this because the thought of limitation – which is basically a definition of ego – is the source of all the mind's dualistic thoughts and negative emotions. So self-inquiry – the classic Vedanta *sadhana* – is not asking a question but it is the application of the thought “I am the self” over and over until

the “mind” – meaning *maya* – dies.

Ken: Anyway, back to the problem of “thoughts.” The way I see it, they are only temporary phenomena that are arising against the backdrop of the self, or the substratum, as Ramana often called it. However, I do agree with you that to the *jnani* these phenomena are also seen as the self, since ultimately all there is is self, which by definition can only mean that thoughts must be included. So once again we are back to the paradox.

Ram: I know you don’t like my “if you can’t make it, fake it” idea, but I’ll try to make the argument in this way. Is the knowledge that the thoughts are the self only useful to a *jnani*? Why shouldn’t an *agnani*, a seeker, use this knowledge to “destroy” the mind? The scriptures are just the thoughts of the *janis* and they unreservedly urge the “practice” of asserting oneself to be the self. Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*, referring to self-knowledge, says, “There is no purifier like knowledge,” and what is self-knowledge but the thought “I am limitless awareness”? The ego can think it because it is true and the self can think it because it is true.

Ken: If I may, I will take a stab at solving the paradox: if one is self-realized, then thoughts must be included (as simply a phenomenal appearance like any other), but there is no identification with them; however, IF one is identified with thoughts, then one cannot be self-realized. The identification is the key. If you are identified with the thought, “I am enlightened,” then you are in a conceptual prison. The Truth is beyond all concepts and yet, paradoxically, is also inclusive of them – again, because there is only self.

Ram: I’m ninety-five percent with you. The only contribution I have to make – which I’ve made above – is the thought “I’m the self” imprisoning? Yes, it is from an absolute point of view, but (here’s that famous “but” again) isn’t this thought rather like the hacksaw that is hidden in the cake and smuggled into the prison by the prisoner’s wife for his birthday? He may be still in jail but with a few strokes of the saw he is a free man.

Ken: Furthermore, the Truth is both noumenon and phenomenon, and neither. This is an insight that came to me recently, while pondering the mystery: “The darkness of the void in which the Light dances is my true nature; and yet, this Light is what makes possible the Knowledge of what I truly am. When seen for what they are, the shadows (forms) that appear because of the Light simply disappear into the immense Void of the Reality. The Light can only Be as a result of the darkness; and the darkness can only Be as a result of the Light. In Truth, I am both and neither.” Sorry for waxing poetic; but this is usually how these insights come to me.

Ram: It’s beautifully expressed and absolutely true. “I am both and neither” means “I am awareness.”

Ken: How this relates to our topic – “meaning of ‘destroy’” – is that thoughts (shadows) disappear back into the darkness of the Void from which they came like

all other phenomena; hence one could say they naturally self-destruct. We can only “see” the arising and falling away of all phenomena, including thoughts, if we are truly identified with that which never changes – i.e. the self – and this is NOT a thought; if it was, it would also be something that is changeable, and therefore by definition cannot be the Reality.

Ram: Good, Ken, you joined the *jnani*’s club. I take the dust of your lotus feet. There is only one small point (just to keep the *satsang* going) and that is this: Is identification a thought? I say yes and no. It can be a useful thought at the stage where one is struggling with the mind, but I say “no” because you only have “identify” until you are one hundred percent certain that you are the self; then it becomes hard and fast knowledge. And that finishes the search. Then you go on living without having to consciously remind yourself that you are the self. If you are asked, however, who you are you certainly don’t have to do self-inquiry to find out. The answer appears instantly in awareness: “I am the self.”

Ken: Wow! Awesome response to the “meaning of ‘destroy’” email, Ram. It seems we are approaching a “space” that one might name common ground. The great thing is that the common ground is neither you nor me nor our opinions but is That which Is.

An example is that I agree completely with your use of the “one” thought that ends the dominance of the thinking mind. Ramana used the metaphor of the funeral pyre stick, which is used to stir the fire so everything burns and then is finally itself thrown into the fire. This agrees with the Vedanta teaching, I’m guessing.

Ram: Yes, it does.

~ Ram