

Questions about How to Attain Enlightenment

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Hugh: On a good note, this mind has had some very mild, short-lived experiential understandings that the subtle body is not “who I am” despite the ingrained belief that it is.

Shams: What do you mean by “experiential understanding”? Every understanding is an experience, because it is an object in the intellect. If you’re talking about a special experience, that is not necessary. On the contrary, it could be an obstacle because the mind has the believing that it needs some kind of experiential signal. Do you need it? Right now you can see what your mind is doing, so is it possible for you to be something that you are witnessing? The obstruction is just an idea. You don’t need a special experience to support that you are awareness because that is your constant experience at every moment.

Hugh: Here are a few questions regarding things written in *How to Attain Enlightenment*:

page 34: “Knowledge does not show and is therefore impossible to evaluate directly.”

I have heard James refer to some people as “self-realized souls” or similar terminology. How can he know if a soul is “self-realized,” “cooked,” “enlightened,” etc. then?

Shams: In that quote, James is explaining that you cannot evaluate knowledge “directly” on someone else, i.e. by some specific unmistakable change directly knowledgeable to the subject. However, we can infer it, because we can conclude by the acts and expressions of an individual that he or she knows the self. For example, when you want to know if someone knows math, there is no way you can directly evaluate it, so you have to apply a test to that person which will give you the possibility to infer it: he got a B+ so it is probable that he understands math. Because inference is not direct knowledge, it depends on relative factors. James can talk about self-realized people because he knows what is the self and he can infer that some particular people know it too. However, as it is not direct knowledge, we can never be 100% sure, like you cannot be completely sure if an approved test equals math-knowledge.

Why would we have to know if someone is enlightened? While you are “unenlightened” it is impossible for you to have some certainty about it. You only have trust in the idea that individuals like James or me “got the knowledge,” so we can explain it to you. You don’t have a reliable test, so you have to have some provisional faith, not in the teacher but in the teaching. Vedanta asks you to have faith for some time while you see by yourself if it is true.

James always asks us to remember that individuals have feet of clay, including the “enlightened” ones. He certainly can infer, with some accuracy, if someone knows

the self but the use of that inference is a didactic one, not very important for anything else. When he is clear about the knowledge of a teacher he can endorse it, for example. Also, using inference, he can say to a student when he thinks that his or her knowledge is firm if the student needs confidence. But the direct knowledge will appear only in the individual's mind as "I am awareness."

Hugh:

page 60: "...when taken as one's identity, supplies much more pleasure than the small pleasures that come through subject-object transactions."

There are many times when I'm observing suffering in my life. I know intellectually that I am awareness, and so I can't be the suffering. I wouldn't call that pleasurable though. Besides, even pleasure is an object. This sentence seems like false advertising to me.

Shams: The quote states that to take one's identity as fullness supplies pleasure. You say that you took your identity, but only "intellectually." If you are not taking it completely, you cannot compare this to your experience. First, you have to take your identity thoroughly because although the application of inquiry is driven by the intellect, the result is not only for the intellect, as the main *vasanas* of ignorance affect all aspects of life.

And yes, as is every other experience, pleasure is an object and, as is every other experience, not a special one. It is just *sattva*. The absence of ignorance about your true identity promotes some changes in the *jiva's* mind; the most important one is the change of perspective. Everything keeps appearing in the subtle body as always, but now there is knowledge, manifested as an idea in the subtle body (which obviously appears as an object). So the subtle body allows the understanding that it is only reflecting your self and that you are you, not that ephemeral object called mind. That is interpreted as pleasure in the subtle body. It is pleasurable because the *jiva* stops looking for pleasure in the objects ("small pleasures that come through subject-object transactions"), since it knows that pleasure is in the subject.

Of course, pleasure is also an object, but everything here is an object. Your inquiry is an object, your ignorance is an object and even your knowledge appears in the subtle body as an object. Because the instrument is the subtle body and it is the beneficiary of *moksa*, we have to learn to differentiate the absolute and the relative levels. I see that this confusion is, again, related to the superimposition of the self, so it is good to pay special attention to the problem until it's clear. Of course, pleasure is not for you, and *moksa* is not for you (because you are *moksa* right now), but that is something that you apparently don't know yet. Only knowledge will make that clear, but for the means to work, it is important for the mind to understand the unreal in order to discard it.

Hugh:

page 61: "Consciousness will not rest until it has rediscovered itself."

Why are so few people seeking and finding then?

Shams: On the contrary, everyone is seeking. Every attempt to find pleasure in an object is an undercover attempt to get *moksa*, and people who don't know the self automatically seek pleasure in the object. Freedom is behind every seeking because you cannot seek anything that is not you. And when you know you, the seeking stops forever. Freedom is the only important thing for the beings as they are in reality that freedom, although *maya* makes it appear otherwise.

"Few people are finding the self," you wrote. Maybe, but that doesn't have a logical connection with the assertion of the James' quote. Everybody wants money but more than half of the human population is very poor, so the finding is not connected with the imperiousness of the search. The *Gita* says that only a little portion of the humanity have the qualifications to apply Vedanta and even just a few will do it and have success. That is the nature of *samsara*.

Hugh:

page 71: "Knowing that things happen to you, not by you, is discrimination."

If I am awareness, then nothing happens to me. I would have to be an object for things to happen to me.

If I am awareness, things happen by me because without me, there is nothing. "The doer," "the enjoyer," God, or *maya*, don't exist without me. Consciousness takes the shape of a "doer" and makes things happen.

Shams: In this case, James is pointing to the sense of doership. While you are not a doer, things don't happen by you because you don't act, you only witness the things happening, so we could say that things only happen to you, not by your acting on anything. But I agree with you, this use of the words could be confusing so what you say, in the first part, is right. However, the idea that the doer makes things happen is wrong. This is very important: the doer doesn't make anything. The doer is just the idea that there is someone doing things but inquiry shows that it is impossible, even on the gross and subtle planes. Things are just happening and nobody is doing anything. There are only things appearing and disappearing. Among that things that appear and disappear there is a little idea that says "I do." Because this idea is subtler than the acts and because there are lots of other ideas dependent on this idea (this idea is what we call ego, in fact), it is very difficult to discover that it's only a belief.

So that's why we say that specific things don't happen by you, i.e. by your acting. On the other hand, everything happens by you, in the sense that the world depends on you.