

Identified with Being a Woman

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Reeva: Dear Sundari, I recently came across James' website and his YouTube clips while researching Vedanta and enlightenment. I have some questions that particularly pertain to women. I just saw at John's contact page that you might be willing to converse with me. If that would be the case, I'd be delighted. Maybe you (and/or James) could assist on shining some light on issues I can't seem to resolve that pertain to living as self in the apparent world.

Here is just a tiny bit of background. I had been aware of Zen Buddhism and enlightenment for several years, but knew nothing of Vedanta, which is obviously where Zen eventually was developed from. Not having had any knowledge about "spiritual awakening" and "enlightenment," I had a direct-seeing one day in 2005 that human beings are empty of a personal self and that working on the personal self would never get us truly free.

Sundari: Being "aware" of enlightenment is what we call indirect knowledge. You know about it, but you don't know what it means to BE awareness. I am not sure what exactly you mean by "direct seeing," but I take it to mean that you had a spiritual experience, an epiphany, which partially revealed your true nature as awareness to you. By "personal self" I assume you mean you saw that the person you took yourself to be is not real, "real" being defined by "that which is always present and unchanging," a definition that does not fit anything other than awareness. You correctly assimilated the knowledge from this experience that trying to perfect the person would not lead to freedom. What you do not seem to have investigated is, who is it that had "direct seeing"? If it is not the personal self, who is it that knows what the personal self experienced - the "direct seeing"? Who saw what?

Reeva: Since I had been a professional for 15 years in the field of self-help, individual growth and personal development, that direct-seeing made no sense, although something inside of me knew it was true.

Sundari: When self-knowledge arises in the mind by whatever means, it is usually counter-intuitive to the conditioning that runs it. Nonetheless, the self - your unlimited and true identity - is always present, and of course it responds to the knowledge because it is the truth about who you really are.

Reeva: Within a month of the direct-seeing, a process started of completely emptying "me" out, out all concepts, ideas and beliefs about who I was as a person, what the world was and how life functioned. I became ever more empty and hollow, and also the solidity disappearing of the world and my body were frequent occurrences. I lost everything material in the process as well and have been living since 2006 always guided from nothing, with nothing and as nothing. "Nothing" is the term that best describes my experience, although I think James would call it self.

Sundari: “Nothing” is not a good term for the self, because it implies something, and both are objects. The self, you, is not an object of perception. It is that which knows all objects – and the dissolution, the feeling of emptiness, the “nothing,” are objects arising in you, known to you, awareness. What you know cannot be you. This process of dis-association with the material world, and particularly the body, is a common occurrence with epiphanies like the one you had. It can be quite disorienting and even disconcerting if one does not understand what is going on. All epiphanies are experiential; they occur in time, so can never become a permanent or continuous experience. If freedom from the person is something you are really after, then you want permanent freedom, which comes only with self knowledge. You do not want the temporary or limited kind – the kind all experiences offer.

The beliefs and opinions you picked up in life will not help interpret your epiphanies either, because you picked them up when you were ignorant of who you are. You will see them as you want to see them, through the filters of the conditioning present in the mind, not as they really are. Self-knowledge is seeing things as they are, not as how they appear to you. This is why Vedanta says you do not have an experience problem, you have a knowledge problem. In order to be permanently free – which is what enlightenment is – you need to shed self-ignorance. To do that, you need a proven means of self-knowledge and you need to be properly taught by a qualified teacher who can wield the knowledge correctly and independently of their personal views and opinions. If not, as stated, you will interpret your experience according to your own conditioning, or ignorance. Being properly taught will help you make sense of what happens to you spiritually and otherwise.

Epiphanies are useful if they are accompanied by self-inquiry. Self-inquiry does not mean asking, “Who am I?,” because the answer is known. You are consciousness, awareness, the self – the one who knows the experiencing entity, i.e. Reeva, the person. Your epiphany produced this knowledge. If it is not properly assimilated, however, it cannot set you free of the person permanently.

Self-inquiry is applying the mind to a systematic body of proven knowledge that looks at experience and knowledge from the point of view of consciousnesses (the self) and from the point of view of the person, i.e. from all the basic *samsaric* (worldly) reference points. Self-inquiry enables the mind to discriminate between what is real (i.e. the self, meaning what is unchanging and always present) and what is only apparently real (i.e. the person, or what is not always present and always changing). Self-inquiry with a proven means of knowledge properly taught will result in self-knowledge, which removes the ignorance of who you are. Self-inquiry does not summarily dismiss experience and knowledge as illusion. It allows you to assimilate their true meaning, i.e. that YOU are the big picture.

If you cannot see yourself that way, it shows you how you fit into the big picture. You need an impartial guide, not your own interpretation of experience, because ignorance can make what is false seem to be real. You are the last person who should be an expert on who you are.

Reeva: For me though, none of it has ever been mystical, the way James describes his many experiences. For me, the living of and with and as nothing has always been practical, happening in everyday life as a “natural” occurrence of life – and not something special or out of the ordinary or lofty or otherworldly.

Sundari: You are correct – awareness is totally normal and ordinary. You are completely wrong about what James has to say about his experiences. Nothing about James’ teachings are experiential or mystical. In fact he goes to great lengths to explain that it is NOT experience but knowledge that sets you free. He totally demystifies experience, mystical or otherwise, and makes it very clear that awareness is practical and ordinary. In fact he is probably the only Vedanta teacher on the planet to emphasise this very important point – and to refer to awareness as ordinary, something you would discover to be true if you inquired into what he teaches. He had more mystical experiences than almost anyone you will ever meet, but it is this very fact that made him give up on them because he realised that they do not set you free. Experiences simply keep you stuck thinking that the experience is what is important when what is actually important is the knowledge they are meant to impart, i.e. that you are not the experiencer but the one who knows the experiencer.

You don’t seem to realise this yet, but you are very fortunate to have found Vedanta, James and ShiningWorld. It is no accident – it is grace and grace is earned. You will not find a better teacher more capable of helping you understand what is unfolding for you, nor will you find another teaching that works to remove ignorance like Vedanta does.

Reeva: I won’t go into any details now, since I do not want to assume that you are willing to communicate with me. If you are, I would be most grateful. I will await your reply. In advance, thank you very much.

Sundari: Yes, of course I am happy to communicate with you. We do have some requirements, however. I will answer your email in detail, but first please go to our website and check out what we ask of people who write to us, as it will greatly assist your inquiry. From what you say, you are very much in the ballpark for self-knowledge.

Reeva: Thank you for writing right back. I really appreciate that, especially since you are traveling. Before I wrote to you I saw the requirements James had put forth as far as communicating with him. I did not realize that you have the same requirements. In all honesty, I will most likely not fulfill these requirements, as I am not really interested in Vedanta or self-knowledge.

Sundari: The qualifications and requirements to communicate with ShiningWorld apply to all teachers and to anyone who writes to us. I find it very interesting that you say you are not interested in fulfilling the requirements we set out – which are the guidelines to help you with self-inquiry – because you say you are not interested in self-knowledge. Yet why write to us if you are not? Are you not trying to understand what happened to you? Self-knowledge is simply who you are, how can you not be interested in it? Are you not interested to understand more about your true nature? Vedanta is a valid means of knowledge for awareness, but it actually means the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge. Anyone who truly wants to be free cannot be so without self-knowledge.

Reeva: I had a complete dissolution happen to me that transpired on its own without me actively doing anything to make it happen or knowing that living without a sense of self exists and that it is something people in spiritual and religious circles are seeking to get to.

Sundari: That is the whole point of self-knowledge, Reeva – to negate the doer. It is not possible to “make” an epiphany (or any experience) happen. The doer is a limited entity, identified with the body mind and the objects it has contact with, which include all gross and subtle objects, like thoughts and feelings. It hopelessly believes it can do something to obtain what it desires, and because it inherently feels inadequate and threatened by the world it lives in (because it knows only too well that the world of objects is not predictable and always changing), so it chases experiences (objects) to complete it or make it feel safe. This is a futile quest because the doer is not in charge of results, only the field of existence is (what Vedanta calls *Isvara*). This belief in doership is the cause of all existential suffering. Self-knowledge reveals that your true identity is not the limited entity, the doer or person, but awareness. As awareness you are whole and complete, actionless, unchanging and unlimited– and ordinary. You are the knower of the doer and all experience. There is nothing you CAN do to gain this knowledge, it occurs when the mind is reasonably qualified to receive it – i.e. it has primarily gained some dispassion (indifference to results) and discrimination (the ability to discriminate you, awareness, from the objects that appear in you). No action taken by a limited entity can produce a limitless result. Although self-inquiry is in a way also an action, it differs in that if one subjects the mind to a valid means of knowledge with a qualified teacher, it is only self-knowledge that removes ignorance, no doing on the part of the doer. So the result of self-inquiry is limitless because it produces self-knowledge.

Chasing enlightenment as an object to be gained is another fallacy and one that is rampant in the so-called spiritual arena. Vedanta teaches that, as enlightenment is your true nature and always has been, how can you gain something you already have? You are only ever experiencing awareness because awareness is all there is – reality is a non-duality, not a duality. You cannot gain enlightenment, because you are the already the light.

Neither is *moksa*, or freedom, about negating the person, or “personal self,” as you call it. Enlightenment is not about living “without a sense of self.” It is knowing you ARE the Self (capital “S”) and living without identification with the small, or “personal,” self, i.e. the limited person. Freedom is understanding the conditioning that runs the person in the light of self-knowledge and thus living free of the person – AND living free as the person who knows they are really unlimited, ordinary awareness.

Reeva: Because of my process and how I see life now, I have a very particular question in regards to living in the world from no-self in a woman’s body. If you are willing to communicate with me about that to help me understand things that I do not see addressed in any of the enlightenment literature out there, I would greatly appreciate it. If not, I understand.

Sundari: We quite often get asked about the gender issue with regards to Vedanta, usually by women wanting to know how to relate to being the self functioning “as a

woman” in the world. Your asking why this issue is not addressed in any of the “enlightenment” writings has the implied meaning that this is a serious omission on the part of the scriptures. What is peculiar is we don’t get asked this question by heterosexual men wanting to know how to relate as the self in a man’s body. Sometimes we get asked this by homosexuals, men usually. It appears that the identification with gender is strongest in women and secondly so in homosexual men. Overall, it appears that women have the most invested in – and the biggest problems with – their gender identity.

Vedanta stands apart from all cultural, philosophical and so-called spiritual scriptures because it alone proclaims reality to be non-dual, making the gender issue a moot point. This means one sees everything as non-different from you, awareness, “man” and “woman” being no more than concepts arising in you, awareness. What is interesting is that this question comes up with reference to Vedanta at all. Asking it in itself reveals a lack of discrimination. This is because as the self one acknowledges that the body appears in a certain form, with or without certain extra bits and pieces, programmed by *Isvara* with different universal *vasanas* called man and woman, among others.

As long as one is identified with being a man or a woman, one will see everything through the filters of that program; it is impossible not to, as the gender overlay is unconscious. Even though one has many other identities other than gender, like mother, daughter, father, sister, work identity, play, etc. these are all sub-identities subsumed by gender. What is usually not seen because the identification is unconscious is how limiting it is to respond to life through these filters. Even taking the self out of the equation, everyone has a deeper identity that overrides all other identities, and that is being a human being. If one has not developed the dispassion and discrimination to relate to so-called “others” as the self rather than relating to others through the gender filter, one can choose to relate to everyone as belonging to the human race, regardless of who they are.

As long as a body appears before you, as the self one cannot but continue to live within the limitations of being a person, because even when self-knowledge is hard and fast, the *jiva*, or person, remains “in the world” – although known to be not of it. The essence of *moksa*, or freedom, is to dis-identify with objects and to no longer be dependent on them for your happiness. However, in the world, the idea of being either a man or a woman cannot be avoided. After all, the body is not suddenly going to become androgynous when self-knowledge reveals your true nature to be awareness. “Femininity” and “masculinity” have their charming attributes, along with their negative connotations and historical baggage.

However, as the self one does not buy into or identify with either man or woman (or any other identity), because one recognises them to be no more than ideas, universal archetypes in the mind of *Isvara* – the ultimate duality – and to have nothing to do with who you really are as awareness. One is thus no longer limited by association with any identity.

As an inquirer into the true nature of reality, assuming one wants to be free of bondage to the person and their inherent limitations, it is paramount that one recognises as soon as possible that identification with any identity is not helpful. When the mind is exposed to self-knowledge, reality reveals itself to be a non-duality as opposed to a duality. The idea of man, woman, Jew, Hindu, Moslem, Christian, etc., etc. melts like frost on a windowpane when the sun rises. One then sees clearly that one does not need a particular identity; any identity is fine because

none of them matter. One is no longer identified with the body or the person, as one's primary identity is known to be whole and complete, actionless, unlimited, unchanging – and ordinary – awareness.

Reeva: Thank you again for taking the time to writing back to me.

~ Warm greetings, Reeva

Sundari: You are welcome, Reeva, anytime.

~ *Om namah shivaya*, Sundari