

Knowing or Not Knowing?

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“The movement of thought is always within the limited field of the known. And knowledge is always accompanied by ignorance because there is no complete knowledge about anything. So we are always in this contradictory state of knowledge and ignorance.” ~ Krishnamurti

Dave: When we read and realize what it means, we start doubting about the supremacy of our knowledge and thought and start enquiring into ourselves.

Arlindo: From the standpoint of the absolute truth (*satya*), all objective conceptual knowledge is ignorance (*mithya*). But the problem with such statements is that we exist in the manifest universe (*mithya*) where knowledge and ignorance condition our experience. The absolute is only a concept if not contextualized in terms of our human experience – unless of course we take *nirvikalpa samadhi* as our lifestyle. Most seekers believe that self-knowledge is of the category of “objective knowledge,” which is dualistic by nature and subjective to error and revision. Others confuse self-knowledge with a “body of knowledge,” which attempts to reveal the truth of our absolute nature as free, pure consciousness.

Vedanta is the most complete and sophisticated impersonal “body of knowledge” revealed to us by *Isvara*, the Lord. Nevertheless, it is not the absolute truth but only a tool which whenever properly applied has the potential to produce the phenomenon called self-knowledge. Scriptural knowledge is only a tool to remove or cancel self-ignorance. Once it has done its job, it could be discarded. Self-knowledge is the only knowledge beyond knowledge and ignorance. Is the knowledge of our absolute, independent, essential nature as *sat-chit-ananda*. And it never goes away once it is fully assimilated, because it is the knowledge of one’s own ever-present, self-evident, self-conscious existence as pure consciousness. And one does not need to recall or remember it. It is always good, always present, conditioning our human experience.

Dave: The desire for “enlightenment,” like the desire for heaven, is at root a desire for permanence, of which there is none. To me, there is simply being, of which I am part. The very nature of being is change, permanence is always an illusion. As the old Zen proverb goes, “Sitting quietly, doing nothing. Spring comes, the grass grows by itself.”

Arlindo: You are mistakenly taking your impermanent body and mind and its changing experiences of objects to be you. The self, or pure consciousness, is changeless and ever-present. You can verify it yourself if you follow the logic of the scriptures on self-knowledge. It is a simple but subtle knowledge based on the logic of your own unexamined ordinary experiences of life. The self is “*nivikara*,” that which never changes. That is what you truly are. All change (impermanence) can only exist “against the background” of an unchanging principle; we call it awareness, or consciousness, your true nature.

Dave: I have a different understanding. In my understanding, there is no permanent self; this is simply the ego reacting to its eventual demise. The Buddha himself said there is no permanent self.

I'm not saying you are wrong and I am right. We come from different places and have different experiences. I resonate with Zen and classical Buddhism. There is no permanent self, no "soul," in my understanding. Neither is there some Self, or pure consciousness; this, to me, is just another name for some god. In my understanding, there is simply life, being, not a changeless thing, not an object, not a subject, not something that can be grasped or realized. There is simply this, right here, right now, just as it is, and it is always changing, always in flux, appearing as me, appearing as you. I believe you and I are talking about, pointing to, the same "thing," just from difference experiences, different cultures, different understanding.

Arlindo: No, Dave. We are not pointing to the same thing. I am talking of *satya*, you are talking about *mithya*. I understand your background. You guys say that there is no self/God. You say that all there is an ever-changing, passing phenomenon - a sort of "is-ness" or changing "beingness." This ever-changing phenomenon is an object, it is the manifest universe, which is not the ultimate reality but an apparent reality. I am not pointing to that. What I am pointing to is "YOU," the consciousness in which the entire universe comes and goes. And this can be verified by the Vedantic practice called self-inquiry.

Dave: I think the difference is that you believe in a "'YOU,' the consciousness in which the entire universe comes and goes," while I would say that the coming and going IS the you, IS the universe. For you, God is a noun, for me God is a verb. I guess we'll just agree to disagree.

Arlindo: You are right, we are not here to try to convince one another, but I have a simple question for you. You said before, "...for me, there is simply life, 'being,' not a changeless thing, not an object, not something that can be grasped or realized." Are you what is happening (simple life, as you say) or some other factor that witness the "being" phenomenon?

Dave: To me, this witness is also a part of being; it arises and disappears as conditions change. I think, as humans, we want certainty, we crave permanence. The idea of non-existence scares the crap out of us, so we create these ideas of permanence, of "God," of this "consciousness" that underlies all being.

Arlindo: Okay, good luck and enjoy your changing self. Your belief in impermanence as the absolute reality is the very source of suffering, and as the Buddha stated, suffering is the result of the ignorance of the real nature of the self. Having said so, if your life is free from psychological suffering, I would say that your notions about the nature of reality "work" in removing suffering. But if not, what is the point?

Dave: I'm not saying that there is no self or no God. There seems to be awareness of an ever-changing principle. But to say I'm one or the other is already going too

far. I would simply say I don't know. Mind then goes in and tries to identify with it and define it as this and that, which is fine, I guess, but it doesn't make it true.

Arlindo: Okay, Dave, if I understood you rightly, you now agree that there is such a thing as awareness or consciousness. You also seem to agree that the only other factor in existence is the ever-changing universe. My question then is very simple: What are you, the changing world or the changeless conscious principle perceiving the world? This conscious principle the *Upanishads* call the self/consciousness, that which does not change. Fundamentally, human beings suffer only because they believe that what they are changes. We say that the mind and the world both change, but you don't change. We say that what changes does not affect the real you. It is all a question of identity. Understanding what this "I" which perceives the world is and claiming your identity as this non-dual unchanging "I" is what we call freedom. Self-realization is to realize one's true identity as pure, free consciousness. This is also referred to as self-knowledge, the knowledge that removes the suffering factor from human experience.

Dave: I am aware most of the time. As far as I can tell, I'm not always aware when I'm sleeping. I've also undergone general anesthesia, and I've not been aware during that. In the waking state there seems to be an awareness of an ever-changing phenomenon called life. Personally, I don't separate the two like you have done. But for the way you describe, it can be done. As I said in my response earlier, the answer to your question is "I don't know," as I don't associate with either and even if I do it doesn't really matter. It's just what's happening. You seem to be quite sure what you are though, and that's nice for you. If that gives you a sense of security, that's great.

You asked me what I was, the changing world or the changeless conscious principle perceiving the universe. If you, Arlindo, see things in the same way, what do you call the changeless conscious principle perceiving the universe? I'm sorry if I'm mistaken, but I thought that's what you call "awareness," and the answer I thought you were trying to extract from me is that I am awareness. Maybe I didn't understand correctly, but my answer again for your clarification, even if it's not called awareness, is I "don't know," and neither do I need to. I'm happy not knowing. Is there a reason I need to know this?

Arlindo: No, Dave. Self-knowledge only serves the purpose to set the individual free from psychological suffering, which is considered to be a by-product of self-ignorance. But if you already experience a sense of freedom, limitlessness and happiness in your life without self-knowledge – Vedanta is against suffering and it only has an appeal to those fed up with suffering. If you are happy "not knowing" what/who you are, it could mean that deep inside you may already know who/what you are.

Dave: Yes, Arlindo, life is good – even when "not knowing." Amendment: regardless of what's happening in life, it's all good, or more accurately, it's just what's happening.

Arlindo: The way we respond to what is happening indicates our level of

understanding/knowledge of the nature of reality. When we take what life presents us with gratitude, we call this “dispassion,” a natural quality of someone who knows – a positive indifference regarding what life presents us in a moment-to-moment basis. It is usually rooted in the knowledge that nothing can really affect what I am in my fundamental “changeless” nature. We call it *moksa*, or freedom. You may have self-knowledge or you may not, only you can tell. You may also have it and choose to call it “not knowing.”