

# To Do or Not to Do? The Paradox of Spiritual Practice and *Moksa*

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**Question:** You say, “By mastering the mind, you come to realize the fullness that is the nature of the Self.”

And then, “You cannot do anything to ‘become’ free. *Moksa* is not a matter of becoming.”

To me those seem contradictory statements.

**Rory:** It is an apparent contradiction.

Here’s an analogy that may help to clarify. I’ve done this myself – say you are wearing sunglasses, and the sun goes away, so you push them up off your face onto the top of your head and forget about them. Then you start to wonder where you left your glasses...

You search high and low, but can’t find them anywhere. You could search the entire world and you’d never find those glasses. You could pray to God and plead for him to give you your glasses back. Let’s say if God could reply to you, he might say: “I created the stars and galaxies and all the sunglass factories in the world. I can do all of that, but I can’t give you your glasses. That’s the one thing I can’t do. I can’t give you your glasses, because you already have them!”

So you didn’t have to do anything in order to get your glasses. They were always there. The problem was simply in the mind, in the form of ignorance. Knowledge isn’t something that happens. It’s not something you have to add to yourself, it’s not a becoming; it’s simply the removal of ignorance.

In the same way, the Self is always there and you are the Self. You can’t not be the Self, because it’s the very ground of existence. That’s why no action can give you what you already are. The problem, as in the glasses example, is simply a piece of ignorance in the mind that prevents you from apprehending this.

So on one level there is apparent action – getting the mind clear enough to understand the knowledge “I’m actually the Self, awareness, and not the body-mind entity.” But this knowledge doesn’t ADD anything to you. It doesn’t change the basic fact that you are and always have been the Self. It’s simply the removal of ignorance. Like the sunglass example, you realise you didn’t have to DO anything to get the sunglasses back. The removal of ignorance made you see they were there all along.

Does that make any sense? It’s a subtle distinction.

**Questioner:** I understand the ignorance part (not truly, of course, or there wouldn’t be any) but not this: “...simply the removal of ignorance. Like the sunglass example, you realise you didn’t have to DO anything”

If you have to remove ignorance it means action. If you didn't have to DO anything it means inaction, so not true, you had to remove ignorance.

On a cloudy day we all know the sun has not gone away, it's always there. The question is, do we simply wait for the sun to come out or is there something we can do to speed up the process? Many say yes, here's a method, and many say no, nothing you do will remove those clouds faster, in fact it will only make the clouds thicker (identification just moves to a different object).

**Rory:** Okay, I see the source of the confusion. It's a nuanced topic, and this is a kind of "yes, but" answer. Whether there's action or no action depends upon your standpoint.

Firstly, the removal of ignorance itself doesn't require a method. The only thing that will remove ignorance is knowledge. If you think my name is Fred and I tell you I'm actually called Rory, you don't need a method to remove your misapprehension. It's removed for you by the light of knowledge. You can't really say you did anything to remove it. All you really did was listen and expose your mind to the knowledge. Which, I suppose, you could argue is an action. But it wasn't the action directly that dispelled the ignorance, it was the knowledge, no doership on your part required.

Self-knowledge works like that. It's not knowledge along the lines of "you need to do X and Y in order to get enlightened." Action is limited by its very nature, and a finite action can never produce an infinite result. The problem, as established, is ignorance of our identity, so only knowledge can remedy that. Exposing the mind to the appropriate knowledge will remove that ignorance.

However, and I think this is what you're getting at - the mind has to be prepared to receive that knowledge. This is where "methods" may come in.

From the standpoint of the *jiva*, you likely will have to undertake certain actions in order to prime the mind for the removal of ignorance. Identification with body-mind-ego is hardwired. It's the "ignorance that does not die a natural death." The mind is habituated to a certain orientation and way of thinking, and - unless you naturally have a highly *sattvic* nature - it has to be primed, by cultivating certain qualities (mainly evenness of mind and discrimination). Vedanta provides tools for doing this: *karma yoga*, *upasana* meditation and the cultivation of a devotional mindset.

When the mind is suitably qualified, you then follow the three stages of the teaching: listening (*shravana*), reasoning and overcoming doubts (*manana*) and integration of the knowledge (*nididhyasana*).

The teaching then imparts the knowledge that you are the Self, limitless, non-dual awareness. Like an acid eating away at metal, this knowledge, once assimilated, begins to rewire your locus of identification from *jiva* to the Self, from the mind-body-ego to awareness.

So there are certain actions that have to be taken to make the mind a fertile ground for knowledge to take root.

This action indirectly leads to *moksa*, but it is not the direct means. The direct means is knowledge alone, and, assuming the mind is fit to receive it, knowledge requires no doing. It's simply the removal of ignorance. Vedanta is saying to us: you're already the Self. You were always the Self and will always be the Self. It's an

accomplished fact, and regardless of what you do or don't know, nothing can ever change that. Which is why Vedanta makes the point that there's nothing you can DO to become the Self.

That's why I said enlightenment isn't a matter of becoming, and that action won't make you free. You were already free. You were simply correcting the mind. And you don't even HAVE to correct the mind. The Self is always completely independent of the state of the mind. They occupy different orders of reality: the absolute (*paramartikha*) and the empirical (*vyavaharika*). So for the Self, it's always free, regardless of what the mind is doing. The mind could be in the greatest *samadhi* or in the throes of depression, and the Self is fine either way. But that's probably a whole other discussion. 😊

## **The Self Is Not a State**

Basically, the Self is not a state, something that can be achieved or attained. If it's something that can be attained, then by implication it's something inconstant that can also be lost. This isn't the case at all. It's the very substratum of existence.

Its "attainment" refers only to knowledge of it, as you state, and this is at the level of mind only.

This is where practices have their use – not for "attaining" that which is always already attained (the Self), but for *antahkarana shuddi*, purification of the mind. The *Gita* makes it clear that the Self is already an accomplished fact, but that "Without a peaceful, stable mind, contemplation of the Self is impossible and freedom [for the mind] is elusive."

This is part of the paradox of spiritual practice. From the point of view of the Self, no practice is necessary, because the Self is always free. From the point of view of the mind, practice may be essential to create a steady, contemplative mind. Otherwise the mind remains at its default, gripped by extroverting desires, attachments and aversions, and forever attempting to seek happiness and fulfilment in worldly things. There's nothing wrong with any of that – but such a mind will struggle to assimilate Self-knowledge. That's why Vedanta and spiritual wisdom means nothing to most people. It takes a mature and polished mind to actualise the knowledge.

Originally, Vedanta was intended for *yogis*, people with highly pure, crystal-clear minds. Such people are extremely rare, especially these days in our chaotic, value-compromised society with all its distractions, social media, gadgets, online shopping, Netflix and porn! The ancient *rishis* had it easy in a lot of ways!

Most people need some kind of *sadhana* just to tame the mind and create the *sattvic* intellect required to "get" the teaching and enjoy its fruits. This doesn't "lead to enlightenment" as such, it just helps the mind grasp the teaching, turn inward and see that enlightenment is already there, beneath the turbulent thought-waves of the conditioned mind.