

Why “Enlightened Person” Is an Oxymoron

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Mark: Regarding the word “enlightenment,” at the core of many of my questions is the intention to get a really precise definition of this word. First, I believe you’ve successfully solved my predicament with the word “limitless,” which is extremely helpful.

Rory: I’m glad I was able to help. It is essential to have a clear understanding of words and definitions. “Enlightenment” is one of the trickiest of all. I’ve seen online discussions about enlightenment where virtually every single person had a different definition of “enlightenment” – needless to say, until everyone is on on the same page with regards to the actual definition, meaningful discussion is impossible.

Mark: Some teachers say things like “a person isn’t enlightened or unenlightened” or “how can something that is not real become enlightened?” These answers are deeply unsatisfying to me, even though I get what they are trying to say (I think). It’s similar to how you said “This is not an act of ‘becoming,’ because there was never a time we were not the Self.” However, if these are the types of answers we are going to give students, what is the point of having a word like “enlightenment” if we are going to have it and use it? It may as well mean something specific and useful from the perspective of “where” we are (a *jiva* in ignorance).

Rory: As you’ll know, in Vedanta, the word for enlightenment is *moksa*, which literally means “liberation.” I much prefer using that term because it is specific and doesn’t have all the loaded and conflicting connotations of the word “enlightenment,” a term which means different things to different people, and which I’d happily do away with.

Because *moksa* is the result of *jnanam*, self-knowledge, the term for a liberated person is “*jnani*,” meaning one with (assimilated) self-knowledge. Again, I prefer this term to “enlightened.” It’s technical and specific and hard to get too confused over. It’s also easier to quantify; either the knowledge is there and it’s sticking or it isn’t.

Mark: My reason for this is because language is only relevant from within the subtle body; once the ignorance has been fully removed there isn’t a need for this word, but this word is needed to communicate what we are attempting to do. Now, why do teachers have such an issue with defining enlightenment in terms of a shift in time when the ignorance was removed? It does seem like a gradual process, so I get that we may not be able to pinpoint on our clocks when it happened, but what’s the problem with saying that it did happen?

Rory: The reason Vedanta de-emphasises the idea that enlightenment is a process or an “event” as such is to dispel the idea that *moksa* is a state that can be generated or an action that can something ADD something to us. There’s a tendency to see enlightenment as an addition – when it’s actually a subtraction, i.e.

the removal of ignorance. When this ignorance, *avidya*, is removed, we see things as they are and as they always have been along – we realise that we were always whole, free and untouched by anything in the phenomenal world. The self isn't a state or condition or result that can be generated by an action or event. It was always and eternally there, ever-free and unaffected.

Of course, from the perspective of *jiva*, this occurs as an event in time, i.e. before I was ignorant, but at a certain point the ignorance is removed, thus there is a legitimate shift in perspective. But again, it's simply the removal of ignorance. If I don't know that the capital of France is Paris and someone tells me, in all likelihood I won't make an issue out of that event. Rather than going about telling people that I'm now "enlightened" about the capital of France, I'm more likely to just keep my head down, retain the knowledge and, if anything, be a little embarrassed that I didn't know in the first place.

Mark: You're a person (in regards to who I'm speaking to), and presumably you've assimilated this knowledge and removed ignorance, and that's why I'm seeking your advice, but yet here you are. I also am assuming that when you were five years old this knowledge was not assimilated or even known, so at some point in time between then and now it happened, you became what you are; can't we just say you are enlightened? Why is there a term, *jivanmukta* (James defines it as "liberated while alive"), but we can't say an enlightened *jiva* or person? Because the way I've used the word enlightenment has intended to mean exactly how James defines *jivanmukta*. In addition to that, in James' book, he is constantly using language that eludes to the idea of an enlightened person.

Rory: Yup, the *Gita* speaks extensively about the *jivanmukta*, and how an "enlightened person" thinks, acts and responds to life.

Moksa isn't for the self, which is already free. It is for the *jiva* suffering under the spell of ignorance. But here's the funny thing – self-knowledge frees the *jiva* by negating the *jiva*. It strips away the whole idea of personhood; or at least our identification with that personhood.

That's why it's a misnomer to say, "I'm an enlightened person." The enlightened no longer see themselves AS a person. If they do, they're still hooked into the *maya* delusion and are confusing *satya* and *mithya*.

The self doesn't get enlightened. The self IS the light; the light that has no beginning and no end, self-shining and self-revealing. It just IS.

In the light of self-knowledge, the *jiva*, which is just an assemblage of matter and thoughts, plays out the rest of its *prarabdha karma*, and is viewed as an instrument, a utilitarian object appearing in you with which you can transact with the world.

Of course you still assume the standpoint of the *jiva* for such transactions. Even if you know you're not a *jiva*, other people still see and treat you like a *jiva* and you behave like a *jiva*. But you know that it's just a show. That's the liberation. Hence the *jiva* is then said to be *jivanmukta*. Freedom for the *jiva* is the realisation that you are not the *jiva*.

Mark: So to clarify, literally every part of your answer on this makes sense but when

you say “this is not an act of ‘becoming,’” it becomes confusing. And again, not confusing because I think it’s untrue, but confusing because I don’t get why it’s useful to say. “There was never a time we were not the Self,” yes, but there is a seemingly real time when we were in ignorance of it and unidentified with the true Self, and that’s the point.

You say, “at a quantitative level the *jiva* remains such as it is,” but it doesn’t remain exactly the same, because the subtle body will now have new thoughts arising that are in line with the teachings instead of the previous old habits and limited concepts of themselves. Regarding assimilation of the knowledge, doesn’t this assimilation take place within the *jiva*, the subtle body?

Rory: By that I basically meant that the *jiva* itself doesn’t essentially change. It doesn’t ascend into some superhuman state replete with *siddhis* and omniscience. Whether one is a *jnani* or *samsari*, the *jiva upadhi* is still subject to the laws and limitations of the *mithya* world and its own *karma*.

But yes, the knowledge of course creates changes for the *jiva*. You’re right, the knowledge takes place in the *buddhi*, the intellect. That’s where the problem was rooted, in the form of self-ignorance. What happens is that, over the course of time, with steady application of the knowledge (*nididhyasanam*), one’s thoughts come into harmony with the truth of one’s nature, the *vasanas* are neutralised and managed, and life becomes SO much sweeter for the *jiva*. There’s no longer any need to chase the shiny, shiny objects of *mithya*, because one already feels whole and complete in oneself. Again, however, the *jiva* remains a *jiva*, which is *mithya*. The dream doesn’t get to become real, but it becomes a much happier dream. This is because you’re no longer emotionally dependent upon circumstances or objects being a certain way or giving what they ultimately cannot.

Mark: The way I understand the assimilation of knowledge stage is basically creating new *vasanas* that produce enlightening thoughts and discriminating analysis of experience while burning the old limited-self *vasanas*. I imagine the knowledge being so ingrained that no matter what experiences/objects arise in *maya* the causal body sends to the subtle body thoughts that immediately tell the truth and give the rock-solid knowledge to always identify with existence – consciousness – bliss over the objects that arose.

Rory: You got it. This is a spot-on description of *nididhyasanam*. The discrimination between *atma* and *anatma*, self and objects, becomes so strong that it overrides the old *vasanas* based on ignorance. Whatever arises in *mithya* you feel capable of dealing with because you know it doesn’t impact you, as awareness.

Mark: Again, James’ definition: “the hard and fast knowledge that you are the limitless Self.” I interpret this meaning to be what I described above. The hard and fast knowledge to me means the right thoughts are arising in the subtle body immediately as the contents of consciousness continue to change. If this is the case, then it seems perfectly acceptable to say this person is enlightened, because their *vasanas* are set in a way where this hard and fast knowledge is being sent to the subtle body without fail.

Rory: Again, the problem with saying “I am an enlightened person” is the implication that one is still identified with the person, and therefore one’s knowledge is indirect rather than direct.

Self-knowledge negates the *jiva* as *mithya*. By Vedanta’s definition, *mithya* isn’t real, therefore it doesn’t make sense to identify with that which isn’t real.

From the standpoint of the self, it also doesn’t work to say “I am enlightened,” because there was never a time when the self was “endarkened.” The very word “enlightenment” implies a time of unenlightenment. As the self, you just ARE the light.

As for the *jiva*, of course, that knowledge is either there or it isn’t. Rather than talk about enlightenment, which again is a vague term open to a world of confusion and projection, I think it’s better to use the more specific term of “*jnani*.” *Jnani* means “one who has self-knowledge,” as opposed to the *ajnani*, who lacks such knowledge. “*Jivanmukta*” also works because, again, it’s a specific and accurate term not open to as much misinterpretation.

This distinction may sound very pedantic, but the use of words is so important in Vedanta. The Vedanti uses words with the same precision that a scientist might use mathematical formulae.

Mark: Another way of asking this is, won’t thoughts of language start arising in the subtle body saying things like “I got it,” “the knowledge has been assimilated,” “I am *sat-chit-ananda*,” possibly even “I’m enlightened and I can now help others do the same because I understand what it takes”?

Rory: Generally, when the knowledge is firm, the *jnani* doesn’t think much about the self in terms of words or concepts. There’s no need for them to affirm it in such a way, any more than say, a Caucasian person will go around thinking to themselves, “I’m Caucasian.” They just ARE what they are. Again, the thought “I’m enlightened” is unlikely to arise in the mind of the *jnani* – because, knowing themselves to BE the light, there was never a time (outside of thought/*mithya*) when the self was unenlightened.

Mark: In addition to these thoughts arising, a more *sattvic* and stress-free state will likely be more readily available because now the old thoughts of limited-self and object-identity stop arising. And of course there won’t be any identification to these thoughts arising either, as it is understood all things related to the *jiva* are just more objects appearing in you, awareness.

Rory: That’s the crux of it.

Mark: I’m not suggesting the enlightenment sickness of the crazed *guru*. I admit it can be dangerous to tell a student, “When you have the thought ‘I am enlightened,’ go with it, you got it!” However, if the discrimination has truly developed, this shouldn’t be a problem. How do you interpret what I’m saying about this?

Rory: Again, see my comments above regarding the “I am enlightened” thought. I hope I’ve managed to explain it in a way that makes sense. Enlightenment sickness is always a real danger because the mind, like a caterpillar moving between blades of grass, is always reluctant to let go of one conceptual identity unless it has another to latch onto. The real danger with saying “I am enlightened” is superimposing *satya* onto *mithya* rather than properly discriminating between the two.

That’s why I believe it’s better and more accurate to use the term “*moksa*” rather than “enlightenment,” and “*jnani*” rather than “enlightened person.” There’s altogether less danger of the ego sneaking in there and co-opting the knowledge. That’s a whole different topic though. 😊