

Chapter II

Knowledge and Experience



How Do I Get Free?

WHEN YOU GIVE up seeking in the world of objects you are ready for the spiritual option. When I was twenty-five and in the grip of a profound despair, I had an epiphany of epic proportions that turned my life around and set me on the path to enlightenment. However, the search needn't begin with a dramatic event. Perhaps a book like *The Power of Now* found its way into your hands and led you to other books until eventually you discovered the idea of non-duality. Or for health reasons you took up *yoga* and subsequently became interested in meditation, which led to the idea of enlightenment. Maybe you found a stone Buddha at a garage sale, stuck it in your garden and at the same time noticed that your mind was no longer preoccupied with the same worldly things. Perhaps somebody took you to see the famous "hugging saint" and something that you could not explain happened. When you are ready, you will discover innumerable paths purportedly leading out of the world.

If you thought the world was a gargantuan market of objects and activities, you soon discover that the spiritual world is also a big market of objects and activities. Like the pitchmen on TV, innumerable *gurus*, *avatars*, *shamans* and *yogis* have just the deal for you! Freedom! Enlightenment! Kundalini! They say a hidden, snake-like energy sleeps at the bottom of your spine. To awaken her from her slumber, you're meant to eat like a bird, do exhausting breathing exercises, chant unpronounceable *mantras* and deprive yourself of sleep. I ate spoonfuls of cayenne pepper and swallowed yards of cotton cloth strips which I retrieved from my innards laden with globs of mucus. Purification!

When she awakens, Kundalini slithers up your spine, passing through various energy centers. It is an exciting path, fraught with danger. She is not easy to control and can wiggle off into one of the minor nerve currents that wind around the central nervous system, hunker down there and cause all manner of mischief. But if everything goes right she continues on her upward spiral. Piercing the heart center, she releases unconditional love. When she penetrates the mind, wisdom flows like a rushing river. And finally – the grand finale! – she explodes through a mystic doorway in the top of the head and merges into consciousness, the limitless Self, setting off a mind-blowing spiritual orgasm that lasts forever and sets you free!

Or maybe you have an austere streak. You take up *vipassana*, an ancient meditation technique, and find yourself sitting alone in a room watching your breath interminably. The connection between this activity and freedom is not always obvious but the teachers say that one fine day you will achieve a state of no suffering – *nirvana*. Maybe you stumble on a modern method and end up in a cult, wired to machines that monitor your brain waves that are meant to “clear” you. They say there are ways to contact ascended masters who enlighten from extraterrestrial planes. Modern life is a veritable supermarket of other-worldly paths.

Spirituality is an appealing, romantic, exotic, mysterious and promising world. But, sad to say, the basic psychology operating in it is no different from the psychology operating in the everyday world you just left: *do this and get that*. You have always worked hard for worldly things, so without much thought you assume that the pursuit of freedom is like the pursuit of any other object – it can be obtained by effort. So you get out your pick and shovel and toil in the spiritual salt mines.

Definition of Duality – Subject and Object

Eventually you find yourself at another crossroads. Lest you fall by the wayside, you need to sort out the issue of action before you can move on.

What is the basis of the idea that you can get freedom by doing something? For all intents and purposes it seems that action can free me because when I get what I want I do feel a sense of freedom. But can it?

The idea that *karma* – doing something – can set me free is based on the idea that reality is a duality. In its most fundamental formulation duality means this: “I am here. Objects are there. They are different from me. They have what I want.” This is how reality presents itself to us and this is what we believe. From this premise my reasoning unconsciously proceeds: “Since I don’t feel free and the experience of freedom is possible, it must be available elsewhere, so I need to do something to get ‘there.’” In this case “there” means a different kind of experience, i.e. the enlightenment experience. Remember, experiences are objects too.

But from our analysis of the location of objects we know that reality is non-dual, *appearances to the contrary notwithstanding*. We said that objects are experienced in me by the experiencing instrument, the mind, and that the mind is an object that is also not separate from me. At the behest of some mysterious power the mind takes the shape of objects that seem to be different from me, the subject. It can do this because it does not have a structure of its own. It is formless.

Some teachings say the mind becomes the objects, but this is not true. If it became the objects, it could not modify to become a different object later, and we would be stuck with a single experience forever. One second you can experience a tree and the next second you can experience a dog or a banana without any change in the nature of the mind. The mind keeps taking different forms without being affected by the form it takes. We say that the mind “appears” as objects. It is like a movie screen on which objects appear, causing no change to the screen. Objects are either relatively static or highly malleable structures in consciousness that have their own peculiar natures. Relatively static structures are the three bodies, about which more will be said later, and malleable structures are the predictable experiences that occur in the three bodies. The relatively static structures – the three bodies, three states, three qualities and the five elements – make the world reasonably workable so that it is possible for us to function. The nature of the mind, the Subtle Body, is to reveal objects. If objects were formless like the mind, purposeful work would not be possible. But the mind is formless consciousness-awareness.

Objects – structures – are formed out of awareness like a spider’s web is formed out of the spider. And awareness, like the spider, is conscious, while the web, like the objects of experience, is not conscious. *Experience is awareness but awareness is not experience*, just as the web is the spider but the spider is not the web. If love or hate or anything else is the object of your experience, it is formed out of your own consciousness-awareness.

Physical objects look real because the senses, which are relatively permanent, organized functions in consciousness, structure consciousness in such a way that they seem to be solid. There is a power* – it is not in consciousness nor is it outside consciousness – that causes this to happen. It is a good thing because without this structuring nobody would get out of bed and go to work, because nothing would follow its nature and life would be completely unpredictable. In other words, the senses make consciousness look like it is solid but it is not actually solid even though it is the permanent substrate of existence.

Because objects are not opaque but are actually the mind appearing as objects, the objects can be reduced to awareness. When you investigate material objects they resolve into atoms, protons, neutrons and electrons, and then into quarks and mesons and even into other infinitely small bits of matter, right down to the Higgs boson. Once you get down to a certain level of matter, particles become waves and these waves appear in and disappear into “space.” We can’t even say what space actually is, because it is not a sense object that we experience. And when you consider subtle objects – thoughts and feelings and memories, dreams, fantasies, etc. – it is obvious that they are not substantial either. So there is nothing substantial for us to experience “out there” except ourselves as consciousness in the form of objects.

Furthermore, experience itself – the container of discrete experiences – is the only object that is permanent. Individuals come and go but experience remains. Discrete experiences are never permanent; what is called experience on the individual level is just the mind reflecting (and interpreting when the intellect is functioning) the objects appearing in it. And the mind is only consciousness, which is me. So I

**Maya*. It will be explained in detail later.

am already experiencing myself with or without gross and subtle objects. The only question remaining is: Am I free or not?

Now that the nature of experience and objects is understood, let's return to the problem of action. Those who tout a path of action to enlightenment say that you can get freedom through spiritual practices: do this *yoga*, do that meditation, chant a *mantra* or go to a *guru* and have enlightenment transmitted to you. It is amazing how much effort is invested in spiritual practice with the idea that it can deliver a permanent state of blissful enlightenment.

Every one of us takes the self to be a doer of actions, so if the teaching unfolded so far is true, we have come to a very difficult moment on the spiritual path. I lived in a mountain cabin once, and it was necessary to kill pack rats if I wanted to stay. One by one I discovered their holes and blocked them, forcing them to run into my traps. Beware, Mr. Rat! The logic of Vedanta is now slowly closing your escape tunnels. The trap is about to slam shut. First you realized you cannot escape down the object hole. Now you are about to discover that you can't escape by running down the enlightenment tunnel. The hyperactive rat-like doer must die so we can get on with the inquiry.

What Is freedom?

It is limitlessness. It means that boundaries don't hem you in, that nothing contains you, restricts you, defines you or modifies you. It is a worthwhile goal. In fact it is the only goal.

As a limited being you act to get results that you wish to enjoy. With action you can get something, maintain something, change something, get rid of something, purify something or create something. But you cannot get what you already have by doing something.

The idea that enlightenment can be gained through action – the experiential notion of enlightenment – does not work, because it is contrary to the irrefutable non-dual nature of reality. It is based on the appearance of things, not on the reality of things. And appearances are not permanent, so an enlightenment that I may gain through action will not last.

There is only one limitless thing, which is not a thing. It is consciousness, your very self. In fact there is only consciousness, appear-

ances to the contrary notwithstanding. Reality is you, whole and complete non-dual consciousness.

This is the essence of Vedanta's teachings. So if you do not understand this – and don't feel bad if you don't, at least not until you have read this book – you will find yourself doing limited actions to get a limitless result, not knowing that the limitless result is you! One of the great sages in our tradition calls Vedanta the "yoga of no contact." *Yoga* means "contact."

Paths Don't Work

Failure to appreciate this basic fact disqualifies nearly everyone seeking enlightenment. Because action does not work and seekers are committed to action, they are forced to rely on fantasies to set them free. Vedanta is not a spiritual path. It does not promise mystical experience. It does not try to connect you to anything, because you are already connected. It does not try to change your experience, although your experience is transformed when you understand who you are. It does not try to fix you, because you are not broken. It does not try to heal you, because you are not sick. It is firmly based on reality. It is common-sense existential knowledge.

Action is inevitable in the everyday world and it definitely has its place in the spiritual world, as we will see, but it is not a direct ticket to freedom. Some argue that Vedanta, self-inquiry, is an action, but it isn't; it is the nature of the self and that is why it is going on all the time in everyone. However, if you think it is we will not argue with you. But you should know that it has a different result from ordinary actions. It produces knowledge, not a particular experience.

To get what you already have, what can you do? You can only know that you have it and know what it means to have it. There is no other possibility. What conclusion can be drawn from this fact? Only one: if you want to be free you need to convert your desire for experience into a desire for self-knowledge.

I Want Self-Knowledge

The pursuit of self-knowledge is different from the pursuit of other kinds of knowledge because if you understand who you are, you will not need to understand anything else, whereas the knowledge of ob-

jects reveals only more ignorance. Vedanta says, “What is it, knowing which, everything else becomes known?” If I understand who I am, my seeking stops.

What is self-knowledge? It is “I am consciousness-awareness.” This knowledge sets me free because there is only me – all objects being only consciousness – and I am always present. If I am always free and always present, all I need to do to become free is to realize who I am.

When am I not present as consciousness? If you possess an object and you believe the object is making you happy, then you have a problem because no object will remain with you all the time. All objects – all states of mind, feelings, thoughts, ideas, circumstances, situations, loved ones and physical objects – come and go.

But I do not come and go. Objects arise and fall in me, but I stay the same. I am even beyond death. To say that I will not exist means that I would have to be present to observe my non-existence. But there is never a moment when I, consciousness, am not present. I am there to witness the death of my body and mind.

If you say that you or I (there is only one consciousness, so you and I are one) are not present in deep sleep, you will be wrong. Why do you prepare your bed and your bedroom with such care? When the kids next door come home drunk and crank up the stereo, are you happy to wake up? If you were not there, you would not be bothered by their noise. You are definitely present in deep sleep. Just because the person on your driver’s license was not there does not mean that you were not there.

In sleep you enjoy yourself without objects. You are happy, complete and whole and everything is fine. When you wake up, you are taken away from the experience of bliss and happiness that is your nature and you are no longer happy.

If I am never not present and my nature is limitless bliss, then I do not have an action or an experience problem as far as freedom is concerned. I have a knowledge problem. If this is true, I need a means of knowledge because knowledge, including self-knowledge, does not happen on its own. It requires a means.

But before we take up the next teaching, the means of knowledge, it is important to put a few more nails in the coffin of experiential enlightenment. If you cannot accept these arguments, you will find that

your path to enlightenment will be very rocky indeed. Most enlightenment teachings fall into the experiential category, so if you follow the logic you are going to be rather lonely once we finish our inquiry. Fortunately, Vedanta is the last man standing and it can set you free.

Debunking popular ideas does not make me popular, but it is my duty to tell the truth. An open-minded person, however, is happy to hear the downside as well as the upside of things, including the enlightenment business. If some of the following ideas are associated with the names of people for whom you have devotion, do not think this is an attack on them. I am not trying to tear anyone down to build myself up. There is nothing personal in it. The logic speaks for itself.

Freedom from dependence on your experience of objects for happiness is liberation. Liberation is difficult because we are almost totally conditioned to the idea that what we experience defines and validates us. Thinking that it does is putting life's cart before the horse. It makes us victims of what happens, when in fact we are always beyond what happens. This profound truth will become more and more obvious as you listen to these teachings.

Enlightenment Myths

We are going to examine a number of popular enlightenment teachings from the non-dual perspective. If they come up short as means of enlightenment, it does not mean that they have no value. Indeed, some may be useful as practices to prepare the mind for self-knowledge. If you find yourself attached to one or more of these beliefs these inquiries will be challenging, no doubt. Ultimately, you will have to determine the nature of reality through your own investigation, but if your inquiry is disinterested and you follow the rules, you can only come to the conclusion: "I am and have always been ever-free, actionless, ordinary, non-dual, self-revealing awareness."

NO MIND, BLANK MIND, EMPTY MIND, STOPPED MIND

As the self is always enlightened, the idea that "no mind" is enlightenment implies a duality between the awareness and thought. To say that the self is not experienceable when the mind is functioning means that the mind and the self enjoy the same order of reality, like a table and a chair. But experience shows that this is untrue. Do you cease to exist

when you are thinking? Is there thought without awareness? In fact thoughts come from you, but you are much more than a thought. They depend on you, but you do not depend on them.

Does the mind hide the “I” and prevent you from experiencing the “I”? For you to know that the mind is empty or thinking you have to be aware. In both cases, with and without thought, I, awareness, am present. If I am aware at both times, I am not hidden by thought nor am I revealed by no thought. Whether thought is present or absent, I, the ever-free, ever-present self, am always directly experienced.

Awareness is always present. You can do nothing about it except know what it is and what it means to be awareness. It is ignorance of my nature as awareness that causes me to believe I can gain my self by stopping my mind or getting into a state of emptiness.

NO EGO, EGO DEATH

This popular so-called teaching vies with the no-thought idea for top spot on the list of enlightenment myths.

Ego is the “I” notion, the idea we have about who we are. The list of identities that humans concoct in ignorance of their true identity is virtually limitless. Aside from the fact that there is no evidence that such an “I” exists, other than the thought that it exists, the absence of a limited identity does not equal enlightenment. If it did, plants and animals would be enlightened. And you would be enlightened in deep sleep because you have no identity there.

The teaching that the ego stands in the way of enlightenment is unworkable because the ego is the part of the self that wants to enjoy the results of its actions. If it killed itself it would not be there to enjoy the result, i.e. enlightenment. So it will not kill itself. The ego is the self under the spell of ignorance; it thinks it is subject to birth and death, but it isn't. And if the ego is not conscious, it can only be a thought in consciousness, and no thought prevents the self from being and knowing itself. So there is no ego to kill, except the idea that the self lives or dies.

If you believe this myth you are a sucker for the spiritual version of the Hollywood ending: the ego kills itself and somehow gets the permanent enlightenment experience and enjoys endless experiential bliss. If you accept the fact that there is only one self and it is already

enlightened and effortlessly and eternally enjoying itself, then understanding, not ego death, is enlightenment.

NIRVANA

This idea is another negative formulation of enlightenment. *Nirvana* is a desireless state of mind. This view is based on the idea that desire is suffering, which it is. To say that you want something means that you are not happy with what you have. This teaching is unworkable because a desireless mind is a contradiction in terms. When, except during sleep, do you not want something? Even at the end of life you want to continue living if life is still good or you want to die if it is not.

On the surface the logic makes sense, but what is the cause of desire? Is it self-caused or is it the result of something else? If it is self-caused, then eliminating desire should eliminate suffering. But what if desire is an effect of self-ignorance? It is an effect of self-ignorance because there is only one self and it is a partless whole. It wants nothing. Will removing the effect remove the cause? Ignorance will not collapse when it is no longer supported by desire. It will just keep manufacturing more desires.

You may argue that ignorance sustains itself, and it does, until it is known for what it is. It will collapse when it is exposed. If we continue to pursue our desires for objects, ignorance remains the hidden motivator for our actions, and is in fact “reinforced” by the desires and the actions that flow from them. It remains hidden because our attention is turned away from the underlying cause of action.

It also remains to be seen whether desire is always suffering. Desire is just awareness functioning as the creator, sustainer and destroyer of the world. As long as my desires do not cause me to violate the physical and moral laws operating in the creation, why should I remove them? I am free to fulfill them. Enlightenment is the hard and fast knowledge that “I am awareness and as such I am already free of desires so their presence or absence has nothing to do with me.” Realize your nature and let desire be desire.

And finally, if I accept the contention that desire is suffering, how will I remove my desires without the desire to remove them? Once they are removed, who is going to remove the desirer?

THE NOW

Not to put too fine a point on it, the basic idea of the “now” teachings is: “I am enlightened when I am present. Living in the past and the future means I am unenlightened.” Aside from the fact that there is no time in a non-dual reality, let us inquire into this idea.

Does the word “now” refer to a period of time, which it certainly seems to, or is “now” a symbol for something else? If it refers to time, is there such a thing as objective time?

It is impossible to determine the nature of time, because time is relative to the desires and fears of individuals and to the intervals between experiences. If my desires are being met and I am enjoying, time passes quickly. If I am suffering terribly, time passes slowly.

Are the past, present and future actual divisions in consciousness or only conceptual divisions? If time is objective, then everyone would be able to determine just when the past ends and the now begins. When I am in the now, how long does the now remain the now? Is it one second? Two? One minute? More?

Assuming I am in the now and want to remain enlightened, I should know when the now begins and ends. I need to avoid falling back into the past and traveling into the future. Perhaps I should hop up out of the time continuum just before the end of the now and jump back into it just before the past appears, keeping in mind how much time passes until I have to hop out again. Even if I am sitting still in the now I need to worry about the past and the future creeping into it.

Let’s assume that there is only “now.” Am I ever out of it? Experience takes place only in the present. How can you experience the past if it is not here? You can experience a memory, but the experience of memory does not take you to the past. The memory appears in awareness and is experienced now. The experience takes as long as it takes and means whatever it is interpreted to mean. The same logic applies to the future. Nothing is ever experienced in the future. You may think about something that you imagine will take place at another time, but if it happens, it happens only in the present, when it appears in awareness.

Direct experience shows that time is not linear. Objects, which are made out of thoughts, which are in turn made out of consciousness, appear in you – awareness-consciousness. They last as long as they last and are interpreted by your desires and fears, and then dissolve back

into consciousness. When they appear in that part of awareness called the mind, they seem to change; but in reality it is only the mind that changes. Furthermore, if time were linear, everything would be evolving toward some kind of utopian state. The same experience would not happen again; but experiences keep repeating themselves over and over, *ad infinitum*.

If this is true, maybe “now” is a code word for the self, awareness. It is the humble opinion of the author that “now” is a misleading and inaccurate term for the self and should be banned from the spiritual debate because it is not helpful to refer to something that is eternal and out of time with a word that conveys a sense of time.

EXPERIENCE OF ONENESS

To refute this idea, let us revisit the “location of objects” teaching. Do you experience objects out there in the world or do you experience them in your mind? I experience them in my mind. How far is the object from your mind? Is it floating off the surface of the mind? No, it is not. Where is it then? It has merged into the mind, and the mind has taken the shape of the object. The mind is formless, like water or air, and can take any form, just as gold can become a specific object: a ring, a bracelet or a necklace. How far are you from your mind? Is your mind floating above the surface of your awareness? Is there a gap between you and your mind? Do you need a bridge to travel over the gap?

I do not. Why? Because my mind is me. It is awareness. If this is true, then what you experience is not only in awareness but it actually is awareness. The objects in awareness and the subject – awareness – are one. If this is also true, then why do I need to experience oneness? I am already experiencing oneness with everything.

I want to experience oneness with everything when I am already experiencing oneness because I am in duality and have identified with the thought of separation, which causes suffering. Duality is not a fact. It is only a belief in the thought of separation. Instead of trying to remove the want by gaining the experience of a particular object, I should inquire into the thought of separation. Is it true? Am I really separate from my self? Or am I already the bliss that the object is meant to deliver?

TRANSCENDENTAL STATE, FOURTH STATE

This myth asks us to experience enlightenment as a state beyond the mind. The mind is an interface through which awareness interacts with itself in the form of the physical objects. It is awareness in a form called *chitta*. The *chitta* makes it possible for awareness to apparently think, will, feel and remember. The mind is capable of a wide range of states, from the gross feelings associated with the physical body, including psychic experiences, up to the most mystical and sublime *samadhis* of *yoga*. All states are in the mind, and all change because they are in the dream of duality.

The self is non-dual and therefore it is out of time. It does not, nor can it, change. It is that because of which the mind's many states are known. It is conscious, but states of mind are not conscious. They are subtle energies that are only capable of reflecting consciousness. The subtler the mind, the more ethereal and luminous the states become. When you get to the interface between the self and the mind, the mind-stuff is so refined and the self so close that radiant "light" and intense bliss is experienced. It is very easy to mistake these higher states of mind for the self and think enlightenment is an amazing heavenly state or a state of endless experiential bliss. Experience belongs neither to the self nor to the mind. It occurs when awareness shines on the mind. Awareness and mind constitute the most fundamental duality.

Enlightenment is the nature of simple, unchanging awareness. It cannot be experienced as an object, because it is subtler than the mind, the instrument of experience. A subtle object can illumine a gross object, but a gross object cannot illumine a subtle object. So how is the ego-mind going to experience something that it is incapable of experiencing?

ENLIGHTENMENT AS ETERNAL BLISS

When someone accustomed to identifying with the ever-changing content of the mind wakes up to non-duality, the awakening is interpreted as a very positive event. But the feeling of bliss is not because it is experiencing awareness as a blissful object. The belief that it is caused by the absence of suffering, not because awareness "feels" good. If you have been suffering a toothache for days, and the tooth is extracted, it is the absence of pain that feels good, not the bliss of the

extraction. You have actually just gone back to normal, not attained an exceptional state. Enlightenment does not feel like anything. It is simply the hard and fast knowledge that “I am limitless, partless, unchanging ordinary awareness.” When this knowledge is firm, it has a very positive effect on the mind, but it does not convert the mind into an endless bliss machine.

However, it infuses the mind with a sense of authenticity, wholeness and rock-solid confidence. Henceforth the individual knows that it can weather any existential storm. When you know beyond a shadow of a doubt that you are awareness, you no longer desire to feel good, because you know you are the source of goodness.

ENLIGHTENMENT IS NOT A SPECIAL STATUS

Enlightenment is not a special status. It is the default, the nature of the self. You are not getting something you do not have; you simply realize that what you sought so frantically you had all along. If enlightenment is an experience, it should be cause for embarrassment, not jubilation. When an obscenely obese person goes back to normal, he is lauded by others as a courageous super-being for overcoming long odds, but the sloth that caused the obesity is conveniently forgotten. Was anything actually gained? Just as overcoming gluttony is not praiseworthy, enlightenment is not praiseworthy, because you are always enlightened; it is your nature.

Much of the striving for enlightenment is motivated by a desire to distinguish one’s self, to excel and convince one’s self that one is unique. You are unique, but not with reference to others. You are no more unique than I am, because there is only one of us.

Here are other strange ideas of enlightenment: that enlightenment conveys amazing superpowers or is some rare “state” achieved by the chosen few; that it can be transmitted from one person to another in the form of some kind of special energy; that there are levels of enlightenment; that you will get everything you want when you are enlightened, etc. We need not address them now. As we proceed with the teachings of Vedanta, the fallacies behind all erroneous notions will be exposed.