

## **Two Apparently Conflicting Theories of Enlightenment – Yoga and Vedanta**

The best way to resolve the issue is to address the question: what is liberation? According to Vedanta liberation is freedom from ignorance. What is this ignorance? It is the notion that the Self is limited. According to Vedanta there is only one self and it is not limited. It is ever free. So if you think you are an individual, a person, you feel limited with respect to time, money, health, power, security, pleasure and freedom. Because this is a very uncomfortable, individuals work day and night to get rid of it.

This attempt to be free is called ignorance in Vedic spiritual culture. Why? Because you are not actually limited. There is only one Self and it is limitless and you are it. Somehow, however, you have come to believe that you are limited. To put Vedanta's view of the self in positive terms: you are already and always free. It is your nature. So bondage consists solely of the belief that you are limited and separate from everything.

This is where Vedanta comes in. It gives you guidelines, teachings, that help you investigate yourself in such a way that you can determine whether you are in fact limited. When you investigate your self with the help of this wisdom you realize that you were always free. This is why liberation is often called self realization. It is not something you 'get' that you didn't have; it is something that you wake up to and realize. If there is any 'doing' involved in this path it is the use of your intelligence in a practical discriminative way to remove the misunderstandings you have about yourself and the world.

Yoga is an experience word. It means to connect, to join, and/or to obtain. What is to be connected, joined or obtained? You, an individual self, are to be connected to or joined to the 'universal' Self. You are meant to 'dissolve into' or 'merge into' the universal Self (or God) and from that point on you lose your experience of limitedness and separateness and experience freedom.

Vedanta, however, contends that since there is only one self and it is non-separate from the world, whatever you experience is always and only the self...so the idea of finding a special experience and calling that enlightenment is incorrect. Nonetheless the experiences of oneness that Yoga brings verify Vedanta's contention that this is in fact a non-dual reality, all appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. In any case the basic idea of both Yoga and Vedanta is that people want to be free and each promises a way to 'obtain' it.

To find out whether these paths work we need to look into the nature of karma. Karma means action. It means the things you do and the results of the things you do. The nature of karma blows a big hole in the Yogic notion of liberation. Why? Because action depends on a doer and on the motivations of the doer. There has to be somebody there

to do the action. According to Yoga the doer, the one who is practicing Yoga, is limited and wants to become unlimited ( 'merge into the Self ' or 'become one with God' ) through his or her practice. So this person does certain practices, karmas, to produce the desired result. Yoga is a very long hard discipline involving many stages and practices including the practice of meditation and the attempt to cultivate samadhis, certain subtle states of mind. But the problem is: how can a limited person produce an action or a series of actions that will ensure a permanent limitless result? Even thousands of small actions do not add up to infinity. So how will you get free this way? In fact, the problem is more serious than it appears because yogis almost always become addicted to the highs that come from these subtle states of mind and suffer greatly when the mind returns to grosser states. This problem comes from Yoga's inability to accept the fact that experience changes. There is no such thing as a permanent pleasurable experience, no matter how subtle, that lasts forever.

Vedanta solves the karma problem by stating quite clearly that you are the self, limitless awareness, and therefore you are not a doer. If you can see that, or if you can plainly see that action will not produce freedom, then you can see that the problem is not one of gaining an enlightenment experience, but of removing your self ignorance.

Does this mean that I follow Vedanta and throw away Yoga? It is not quite that simple. Actually Yoga is a very necessary part of one's spiritual path. Why? Because Self realization depends on the nature of the mind. Self realization takes place in that part of the self called the mind. The Self is already free and knows it so there is no need for it to awaken to that fact but some part of it has (improbably) come to forget this fact. If the mind is dull or passionate Self realization does not take place. Yes, one might have a glimpse, a quick awakening, but when the mind becomes passionate or dull and again begins to feel limited the realization goes with it. So the mind needs to be clear and still and very alert. This is where Yoga comes in. Yoga is a number of practices, a very sensible lifestyle really, that produces a clear abiding mind, one that is capable of making a sustained and careful investigation to see whether or not the Self is limited or limitless. Yoga works because the mind is limited and karmas can affect it. The only problem, which is always a problem of action, is that you have to keep doing the practices to get the results...at least until they become second nature and involve little or no effort.

So Yoga is an effective means of preparing the mind for inquiry. Because Yoga will have a profound effect on one's experience, one has many epiphanies, what are called 'samadhis' in Yoga. These are special experiences that convince one that there is something beyond the mind, a 'state of oneness,' infinite bliss, etc. When these states have been experienced for some time, many yogis become inquirers. That is they start to ask questions about this 'state' or 'being' that is 'beyond.' Or they start to ask questions about the experiencer, the person, who is having the experience of oneness. Is he or she separate from experience or is he or she actually only experiencing his or her Self?

It is the nature of the mind to inquire into the meaning of experience. Usually people in the spiritual world have a certain amount of knowledge about the Self anyway: from reading, attending satsangs, and from direct experience. In India, where the idea of Yoga developed alongside Vedanta several thousand years ago many Yogis are quite familiar with the teachings of Vedanta and find them absolutely essential in removing the doubts that arise out of their own experience. Ramana is a good example of a Yogi who understood the value of both Yoga and Vedanta. He fell into a samadhi when he was quite young and realized the Self but he sat in meditation for many years making an inquiry into the Self, removing whatever doubts remained, until it was no longer necessary to sit in meditation (Yoga) or make an inquiry (Vedanta). This is why he, like the Upanishads and most Vedantic texts, encouraged both the practice of samadhi and the practice of self investigation.

The central problem with Yoga is that it accepts the idea that the Self is an experiencer, a doer and an enjoyer. This makes it very attractive to people because this is precisely how they see themselves. Yes, the aim of Yoga is to 'dissolve' the doer, the experiencer into the limitlessness, 'merge' the wave into the ocean, but what kind of dissolution is this? Is it dissolution of some solid entity, a real person, into some subtle amorphous mass of consciousness or is it simply the negation of the belief that one is limited? If you believe that you are a real solid entity and have lived many years of your life with this belief how likely is it that you are going to be ready to cease to exist and 'become' some vast impersonal 'state' of being? You are not going to want to do this. This is why people whose practice is motivated by the Yogic view almost always draw back when they reach the gateway to the infinite. The idea of the non-existence scares them and they retreat back into their ego shell. In fact, there is no problem because you can't cease to exist...you only believe you can. When your ego dissolves this is not the end of anything. It is the beginning of a greater vision.

Vedanta solves this problem by stating quite clearly that the Self is not a doer or an enjoyer. If you think that you are a doer and an enjoyer that is quite fine. But it suggests that you have a look to see if you aren't something more as well. Its teachings reveal a much greater identity, one that encompasses and transcends the ego, allowing you to function in the world as you always have without the feeling of limitation. It is a much more appealing approach because you are not striving for your own destruction; you are looking for something greater that does not conflict with anything. The Self does not have a problem with the individual. It knows what limitation is and it is not affected by it. So any experience is fine from its point of view...both the experience of limitation and the experience of freedom. In reality experience changes. A permanent experience is a lot like a permanent job...it does not last forever. But the Self, unborn awareness, is eternal. It never dies or changes. It is perfect and pure. It doesn't need anything to complete it nor does it fear the loss of anything because it already is everything...and more. Vedanta is just the means to realize this fact about your self.

