



Svaroopā® Vidya Ashram

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Big Questions #7

Is All This Real?

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When you're happy, you don't ask if it's real. Happiness is its own proof. Happiness has inherent value. It's only unhappiness that makes you ask questions. When you're unhappy, you don't feel good inside your own skin. You're not you. Most people merely complain, but a few ask questions.

You can use questions to try to wriggle out of the situation, but sometimes you really want to know what's going on. And why it's happening. These are spiritual questions that lead to the biggies: Is the world real? Do I really exist? What if this is all just a big video game being played by aliens?

I first considered this question when I was seven years old. Heading to a neighbor's house, I was stomping on every crack in the sidewalk on the way, chanting aloud, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back." I was angry, very angry. I don't remember about what.

Suddenly I felt that I was being watched. I looked at the windows in the nearby houses but no one was there. I looked behind me and all around, then finally up in the sky. I felt that there was someone bigger than me watching every move, even knowing my thoughts. I postulated that there were some giants or aliens who saw my intense frustration as humorous. I felt like an ant in an ant farm.

Yet I was sensing a bigger reality. My child's mind didn't know what it was. My anger evaporated as I pondered about who owned the ant farm. I wondered if they might tip it over one day, making life as I knew it simply disappear. The uncertainty was scary and yet thrilling. Then I arrived at my friend's house, knocked on the door and forgot all about it until years later.

I remembered after I got Shaktipat from my Guru. This initiation gave me a profound inner opening to my own Self, but it was a familiar experience. I finally realized that this is the greater reality I sensed when I was stomping down the sidewalk. It was me, my own Self, watching me. My understanding grew gradually, both from my morning meditations as well as my studying with Baba. He taught Kashmiri Shaivism, the only meditative system that explained the inner experiences he got from his Guru. Please notice that he did not get it from Kashmiri Shaivism. He got it from his Guru. What he got was far beyond what he'd learned in his 25 years of Sanskrit studies prior to receiving Shaktipat.

I hadn't done the studies; I was like a kindergartener when I got Shaktipat from Baba. He made up for it in the next 7 years. He opened up inner experiences for me and pumped me full of the teachings that explain them. Now I share them with you.

Some meditative philosophies say the world is unreal, that it's an illusion or that it's real, yet merely mundane. Kashmiri Shaivism says the world is real. It's not only real. It's Divine. Let's begin with exploring "real" — what does that mean?

Everything you can pick up, hold and move around really does exist. Even things that don't exist, well, actually do exist. For example, when you worry about something that will never happen, that event happens in your mind. It affects your body by triggering adrenalin and other stress chemicals. It affects your relationships when you voice your fears or change your behaviors. The consequences of your thoughts ripple outward.

Physicists study reality at very subtle levels, measuring and analyzing things like gravity, dark matter and black holes. You're not going to bump into these at a traffic signal, but science assures us they are all very real. Even things that don't exist anymore are real. A building that I lived in decades ago has since been torn down and replaced by a new one, yet the old one lives on in my memory.

When you wonder if your life is real, you're asking one of the Big Questions. This is a quest for the sacred, the ultimate human frontier, one that you investigate by looking inward. You quickly realize that many of your ideas, opinions and memories are only worth the paper they're written on. What is real?

One meditative system says only the eternal is real. Everything that had a beginning point will come to an end. Our Ashram retreat center is a historic building in our little town. I can imagine what was in that spot before the building was built — empty land or probably trees. Then a road was built, leading to the nearby log cabin and the bridge across the river. Other people moved nearby and our building was constructed.

One day it will all be gone. This makes it temporary, even though it's already lasted 140 years. While all this is true, to me, "temporary" does not mean the same thing as "unreal." The building is real. I can walk in the door, sit on the floor, climb the stairs, even sleep in one of the many beds.

Another yogic system says the world is all illusion, analogous to a holographic image. It is true that everything is made of energy. But it produces a reality that our eyes and ears can perceive, in which we can move and function. So we experience the world as being physical forms, even though they're made of energy.

The word "illusion" has a different meaning in another philosophical system. Let's return to our retreat center, Lokananda. Now the word "illusion" means that the building is there, but you ascribe meaning to it that is not inherent in it. It's true, this building has meaning to me and many others. But if we moved to another building, we'd use it for the same functions, so the new building would have meaning. It's not inherent to the building. We create the meaning.

Yoga has many meditative systems, coming from different perspectives. Another one describes the world as real but merely mundane. The reason it exists is to distract you from your inherent Divinity. It's doing a really good job at that. The challenge is for you to see if you can look beyond the world, inward, to find what you are made of.

Kashmiri Shaivism says that everyone is right. What each system sees is correct but incomplete. It's like the blind men and the elephant, one man having touched its tail, another describing its trunk, another who felt its ear and so on.

Yes, the world is made of energy, so it is illusion. But it's Divine energy, so it's a Divine Illusion, perceptible to our senses which are perfectly attuned to it. Yes, it is temporary. Don't take it as being the Primordial Reality, ever-existent and all pervasive. You can cherish temporary things. They are real while they are here.

Yes, you are ascribing meaning to things. You say "my book," "my dog," "my favorite sweater." But you are you, whether you're holding that particular book or walking that specific dog or not. You can even give the sweater to someone and you'll still be you. While you ascribe meaning to things, they don't make you who you are.

Yes, you can get entangled in the world, chasing after some things while running from others. Not all your worldly efforts succeed. You haven't been able to avoid everything you wanted to nor acquire all you desired. And you've made it through this far. Here you are, probably wiser due to the experiences you didn't want to have. Rather than the experiences, it's the wisdom that yoga values. And yoga asks, can you learn the lessons without having the world beat them into you?

Yoga answers: Yes, but you have to look inward. This is where all the real answers come from. This is where you find the eternal in the midst of the temporary. Inside is where the meaning comes from. Inside is where you find your Self.

While the world is made of Divine Energy, so are you. Look inside to explore what you are made of. Who are you really? You are the One Reality, that which makes everything real. That was who I sensed watching me on the sidewalk that day. I sensed that my actions were registering on a tally somewhere. It's called karma. What I remember most is the feeling that someone was always witnessing, always present, always knowing me. Yes, that's me. That's the Self.

THIS IS AN ARTICLE IN A YEAR-LONG SERIES, "BIG QUESTIONS"

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