

The Spiritual Scientist

An ezine for those who think!

Is Doubt A Virtue ?

Doubt
Faith

Question: Is doubt an intellectual virtue that saves us from being misled or is it a spiritual failing that deprives us from being led to the right path?

Answer: It is both. Let's understand how

Doubt as a virtue: Contrary to the stereotypical condemnation of doubt as embodied in the phrase "doubting Thomas", the Vedic scriptures recognize the value and even the necessity of doubt on the spiritual path. The ancient devotional classic, the *Srimad Bhagavatam* (3.26.40), explains that doubt is one of the five characteristics of intelligence, with the other four being misapprehension, correct apprehension, memory and sleep. Let's understand these five characteristics with an example:

1. Doubt: Most people unthinkingly believe that they are their material bodies because that's what they have been taught since infancy and that's what everyone around them believes. Only intelligent people can doubt whether there may be more to their self-existence than the biochemical bags – their material bodies – that they are feeding, dressing and parading in cars and planes.

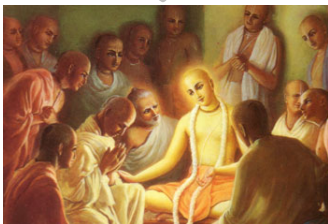
2. Misapprehension: Using this doubting faculty, intelligent people can recognize that identifying oneself as one's body is a misapprehension.

3. Correct apprehension: When they take guidance from the scriptures and practice the spiritual techniques offered therein, such intelligent people arrive at the correct apprehension: I am an eternal soul.

4. Memory: Memory enables intelligent people to remember their correct apprehension – not just in an intellectual sense, but in application and transformational sense.

5. Sleep: During sleep, we undergo many experiences – some joyful, some fearful, yet our bodies lie in bed experiencing nothing. Who is the experiencer? To intelligent people, sleep makes it obvious that the experiencer is not the body, but someone else: the soul, as explained in the scriptures.

Doubt as a failing: When patients don't use their ability to doubt and uncritically take treatment from anyone who claims to be a doctor, then they make themselves susceptible to be cheated by quacks. But if due to such sad experiences they give up trying to find a good doctor, then they cheat themselves of their right to good health. Similarly, when spiritual seekers don't use their doubting ability and uncritically accept anyone to be a spiritual teacher, then they make themselves susceptible to be misled. But if due to such unfortunate experiences, they give up trying to find a true spiritual teacher, then their perpetual doubting deprives them of their right to the everlasting spiritual happiness that comes from following the right spiritual path.



To summarize, doubt is a virtue when it saves us from accepting any passing fad as a spiritual path and doubt is a failing when it imprisons us in perpetual skepticism and prevents us from finding the true spiritual path.

