

## HOW TO STOP MAKING A MONKEY OUT OF YOURSELF:

### Vedanta 101

For a fortnight every summer, my family escaped the swelter of the city to enjoy the ocean breezes. We rented a home at the Jersey shore and went to the beach by day and the boardwalk by night. The boardwalk was a lavish promenade of garish attractions: amusement rides that induced vertigo, cheap souvenir shops, food of dubious edibility, and games – lots of games.

With change jingling in our pockets, we would walk the gantlet of the gaming stalls and the barkers would call out to us as we passed, inviting us to take a chance and win a prize. We seldom resisted, for who does not want to discover whether he is one of fortune's favorites. The most popular games were not those that required skill, such as tossing bean bags into holes or hurling balls at metal milk bottles. Our fathers played those games. We preferred contests of pure chance: you put your nickel on a name or number, the wheel was spun and, as it slowed – click ...click.....click.....click – and then stopped, you watched your nickel, and your hope, get swept into a trough behind the counter. You were a loser.

But now and then, the wheel would miraculously stop on the name or number on which you had staked your fortune. "We have a winner! We have a winner!" the barker would shout to the crowd. And you were the winner! Everyone looked at you with envy. Your friends slapped you on the back. For a moment, the universe had smiled on you and given you a sign of approbation. You were, indeed, one of life's winners. Then, you received your prize: a small toy monkey stuffed with sawdust.

You took your monkey back to the city and put it on a shelf in your room. Now and then, you would toss it back and forth with one of your siblings or friends. In time, the seam would split and the sawdust spill out. Then, you were left with a crumpled piece of cheap cloth, good for nothing but to be thrown out. Still, when summer came again and the annual emigration to the Jersey shore was made, you had your saved change ready for more spins of the wheel. You wanted to be a winner again. You wanted another monkey.

When we have lived long and taken many chances on life's prizes, we may try to assess whether, in the main, we are winners or losers. We have our shelf of monkeys – those that are still intact – and we may take some pride and comfort in them. But it is not really the prizes that matter: it's the feeling of being a winner, for we have a deeply settled notion that we are losers, and it rankles. We are always trying to dispel this notion in one way or another. We are always chasing the monkey.

Being a loser means not getting what you want. It means being unhappy. Only winners, that is, people who get what they want, are happy. So we want to be winners. There is,

however, no sure formula for success. Effort often appears to be rewarded, but not always, not certainly. And what we call luck plays its role. But luck is just a name for that which defies our notions of cause-and-effect. Luck is a name for an effect to which we can assign no apparent cause. And much, if not most, of what happens in life appears to be due to luck. Still, we put forth effort, hoping luck will cooperate and we will get what we want in the end - to be happy.

It is generally assumed that wealth is the principle source of happiness, so we pursue wealth. If we become rich enough, we can buy our way out of the notion that we are a loser. But how much is enough? Millionaires want to become multi-millionaires; and multi-millionaires aspire to be billionaires; and billionaires work to become multi-billionaires; and there remains the quest for the holy grail of wealth: to become the first trillionaire! Money has this magical property: the more our pile grows, the smaller our pile seems.

And if this is true of wealth, it's true of every desire in this world: sex, beauty, power, fame, reputation, honors, etc. You name it; we can never have enough of it to satisfy us. Why should this be so? The only possible answer is that what we want is not a property of the things we pursue. What we want is not to feel like a loser – not just for a minute, but permanently. It becomes increasingly unsatisfying to win the monkey and bask in a moment of triumph when we know how fleeting that moment will be. “What’s the point?” we wonder. Then follows the question, “But what else is there?”

So we keep plucking down our money, watching the wheel spin, losing and losing and sometimes winning. And when we win, we have a brief respite from feeling like a loser: we hold our monkey tight in our hand and regard it as proof that we are a winner. And we then teach our children that life is about winning the monkey. So the game goes on. The wheel keeps spinning.

The problem with winning the monkey is that it offers us only a flash of happiness, which then disappears, leaving us where we were before: feeling like a loser, unhappy. And such is the case with every prize life offers. Let's go further: it is the problem with life itself, for even the body is but a stuffed monkey and we are leaking sawdust every moment. In the end, we will be thrown out or burned up, and there will remain no trace of who we were: our beauty, our wealth, our triumphs and tragedies, our hopes and ideals – all utterly forgotten. How terrible! The only way most of us can face life is by facing away from it. This is why the world is so devoted to entertainment: the spectacle of fantasy is in great demand. But even the most wonderfully diverting show comes to an end and there we are again: a loser in a dying body, clinging to a toy monkey dripping sawdust, waiting to be erased by time.

This rather bleak picture of the human predicament is really the origin of all hope, for we can only escape feeling like a loser by realizing that happiness does not come with the toy monkey. Happiness is not in objects. This is the recognition that can free us from being tied to

the wheel of chance and change. When we stop coveting the monkey, we can begin to examine the nature of what occurs during those flashes of happiness when we feel like a winner.

It's not the monkey that we prize; it's the self-appraisal. We feel worthwhile when we win, and the world supports that feeling by congratulating us. But why do we need self-appraisal and external confirmation of our worth? Why do we feel unworthy to begin with?

We grow up believing we are the body. And within that body are housed all of the thoughts and emotions with which we further identify. We become, within our small physical frame, a self-contained world. And our world is but one of many worlds, all jostling for prominence. And even if we succeed in securing a privileged position in our cosmos, we know that our world will burn out eventually. It is this impermanence that we find so disheartening. We may become great figures and have our name chiseled on public buildings and our form "immortalized" in statues. But we know there is no lasting achievement. Everything that arises in time will sink in time. History is a collection of ruins.

So we are finally driven to ask the question: is there anything that will not be erased by time? This is really the only important question for an individual facing apparent extinction.

If we believe we are the body, our condition is hopeless, for the body is dying. No matter how strong and beautiful it may be at the moment, that moment will pass. Looking in the mirror becomes less gratifying with each passing year, until we have to prepare ourselves mentally for the shock of seeing what our body has become. Then one fateful day we start receiving solicitations in the mail urging us to consider prepaid cremation and funeral arrangements so that our loved ones may be spared that tedium in the wake of our more or less imminent demise. It finally hits us: we are going to die.

But are we the body? We tend to look at the world of objects as divided into two classes: sentient and insentient; those that exhibit awareness and those that do not. But all objects are really insentient, for they are composed of the same elements, none of which has consciousness as an inherent property. This includes the body, which can be perceived in the same manner as any other object and which is composed of the same elements. When the body no longer exhibits consciousness, we say it has died, which means it is now seen for the composition of elements it always was. Those elements then decompose: ashes to ashes, dust to dust. But it is not that the body dies: it never lived. The body was always an arrangement of insentient matter. It was a temporarily useful instrument for the sentience that animated it, not the generator of that sentience.

Identifying with the body makes no more sense than identifying with any other insentient object, but it seems to make sense, for we perceive objects through the bodily instruments and then believe consciousness is a product of these instruments; but this is much

like attributing intelligence to a tool. The phrase, “dumb as a hammer” illustrates that tools have no inherent intelligence; neither do the tools of the body, i.e. the eyes, ears, etc.

When we dream, the body and its instruments are left out of the picture. Then, all that we experience are remembered images. And these images appear to transcend the physical world; to open the door into a domain beyond that which is available to the body.

This fact may lead us to consider the possibility that the mind has a life that will persist when the physical form is no more. We are encouraged in this speculation by religion, which posits something called the soul: a non-material part of our being that is independent of the body. Perhaps, we are really the soul. But the question then arises: without the body, what sort of experiences might the soul enjoy, or suffer? “In that sleep of death, what dreams may come?” Hamlet asks. Religion tries to answer this question by supplying us with a map of the afterlife: we are given the prospect of heaven and hell.

Heaven is held to be a place or state in which those who behaved well in life enjoy eternal peace and happiness; hell is where the wicked are everlastingly punished. Some posit an intermediate state called purgatory, a kind of anteroom to heaven where those who were good, but not quite good enough, endure temporary punishment before becoming partakers of glory. Dante described these three states in great detail. But an imaginative poem, no matter how grand, is not a demonstration of truth.

The soul cannot be described as anything other than the mind: it is the repository of sense impressions and the desires and aversions these impressions produce.

But the mind as an instrument of knowledge is restricted to the data the senses provide and to whatever might be inferred from that data. It has no access to any information that confirms the existence of a deity or an afterlife. An account of another’s mystical vision in a supposedly “sacred” text cannot be affirmed as true, based on our experience. And mystical visions are non-transferrable. So if we accept what we are told about another’s vision of God or the afterlife, we do so without a demonstration of the truth of the claim. We accept it “on faith,” as the saying goes. But faith is not fact. It may be no more than a conditioned belief or a fond hope or a dark fear, or a combination of all the foregoing.

The emotional intensity exhibited by people who have “faith” is really an attempt to banish doubt. No one fervently proclaims, with trembling and tears, “I believe two plus two equals four! Praise mathematics!” That which we certainly know need not be affirmed by intensity of feeling. This is not to say that certain truths do not evoke emotion, but emotion is not the guarantor of their authenticity.

So if we separate our identity from the body and from the mind, what is left? There is the intellect. The intellect takes the data supplied by the mind – sense impressions, doubt and emotion – and tries to determine the relative worth of the information and what action might

be required. It separates those bits of information that we identify as the self from those we regard as the not-self, that is, the world. The intellect then fashions a personality based on its judgments and we say, "This is who I am."

Our personality then determines how we interact with the world – objects and other beings – in our attempt to be happy. To return to our analogy, it directs us to place our bet on this square rather than that square in the conviction that a particular square offers us a better chance of winning the monkey. But whether we place our bet on becoming a billionaire or earning a ph. D. in philosophy, we are still dependent upon the spin of the wheel. And even if we win the monkey, it won't last. We ourselves, as a body/mind, won't last.

And there is this very large question: what criteria does the intellect use to determine the relative worth of the mind's data? If the world of objects presented us with an encompassing, self-evident truth, the intellect would have no difficulty deciding what we should do. We would all be of one mind, so to speak. But we find instead that humanity is a configuration of warring parties, each with its own notion of what constitutes truth and what should be done. And even within our own intellect, there is uncertainty, debate, wavering and flip-flopping. Where do these multifarious ideas and judgments come from, as they are evidently not from the external world?

There seems to be some internal mechanism at work that disposes us to interpret the data provided by the mind in one way rather than in another. I look at the ocean and think about taking a swim; Debussy looks at the ocean and thinks about composing "La Mer." Why the differing reactions to the same external object? My intellect and Debussy's intellect are obviously governed by tendencies peculiar to us as individuals. Where do these tendencies reside? And how did they originate?

Modern psychology posits something called the unconscious mind: a repository for experiences that determines how we view the world but about which we have no ordinary awareness. These experiences are believed to have occurred in early childhood and to be buried in recesses of the memory that are difficult to reach. For a certain fee, therapists are willing to lead us on an expedition to these hidden depths where, it is supposed, the wellspring of our personality will be discovered. Much time and money can be spent in this pursuit. And there are contending schools of psychology that offer varying interpretations of the unconscious experiences.

Whatever truth psychology may hold, the simple fact is that we all have predispositions which are self-evident, despite their origins. And no individual predilection can be accepted as absolute truth, nor can it offer us what we want: permanent happiness. Psychological explorations are always undertaken to discover the sources of unhappiness, and the results seldom deliver the subject from whatever fears and desires have driven him to open his soul and his checkbook to a therapist. Searching the depths of the supposed unconscious mind is a

bit like pulling the threads out of the monkey's seams and sifting the sawdust to discover why winning it made us temporarily happy.

So if the body, the mind, the intellect, the unconscious (memories) cannot give us a satisfactory idea of who we are and what we should do, what course of action remains open to us? It would seem that the best we can do is to grab what passing happiness we can, knowing that it is slipping out of our hands from the moment we lay hold of it. We are then in a condition of desperate hedonism, which is the general condition of Western society at the moment.

But what exactly occurs when we feel happy? What is it that makes us feel like a winner? It's obviously not the toy monkey. Whenever we place a bet, we hang on the spin of the wheel, hoping and praying it will land on our name or number. Our anxiety mounts as the wheel slows, then it disappears when the wheel stops. If we win, a moment of exhilaration follows; if we lose, a moment of disappointment follows. But win or lose, when the wheel stops, we experience a sense of relief. Our anxiety is resolved. And it is really the end of our anxiety that feels good. It is the release of tension, of desire and hope and fear, that gives us an instant of peace, even if we lose. Of course, we prefer to win, but winning leads to a new anxiety, for now we want to extend the feeling of being a winner, which we cannot do. Every feeling is a creature of time, waiting to be devoured by its creator.

Let's consider the situation more carefully: we feel relief when the wheel stops and our anxiety ends. We no longer wish for anything, for hope has been swallowed by fact: desire, along with the fear that it will be thwarted, is resolved. When the wheel stops, time stops. One moment of anxiety ends and the succeeding moment of anxiety has not yet begun. We are free of time, for the blink of the eye, and it is this freedom that we really want, not the toy monkey.

To be free of time is to be free of desire, to be content. As soon as desire resumes, the clock starts ticking again, the wheel starts spinning again. So how do we free ourselves of desire? When we recognize that happiness is not to be had by winning the toy monkey, we will be able to walk away from the wheel. And this recognition is abiding knowledge, not a state that will come and go. Our sense of well-being will no longer depend on an uncontrollable event and a perishable feeling. We will then be able to step out of time.

There is no way to obtain this knowledge through an experience, for all experiences are but sense impressions and feelings that have no permanence and no inherent wisdom. Sky-diving, climbing Mt. Everest, marrying Miss America, winning the Nobel Prize – none of these things will bring us contentment. They are all toy monkeys. What a wonderful relief to know this.

The person we are does not change with the changing experiences. But we tack our accomplishments onto our resume – our *curriculum vitae*, the run of our life. And we keep

running. We may even have done what the world considers to be great things and thus be regarded as a great man. But in our heart, we remain unconvinced. What people regard as humility in a great man is his realization that he is but an actor; he has played his assigned part in the grand show. The scene is now over, and there he is, out of costume, dealing awkwardly with a celebrity that he suspects is unmerited and ultimately unreal.

“I was just doing my job,” is the oft-repeated comment of the “hero” when he is pressed to make a statement. And it is really the truth. We are all just doing our job. And that job is not of our own making. It is thrust upon us by forces that we do not entirely understand. The web of time is indeed a complex construction, and we move upon the thread on which we find ourselves, doing what we seems good to us until the thread snaps and our time is finished.

But fatalism is not the end of this analysis, for we are not just a creature on the thread of time, but the witness of time. And fatalism is not really an option, for we must act, and that means we must choose. And we will always choose that action that appears most likely to achieve the end we desire. But we can never be certain of the outcome of our action. We may or may not win the toy monkey.

If we believe that a certain outcome is indispensable to our happiness, that if we don't win the toy monkey, we will be a loser, then we will live a sad life. But what if winning the toy monkey is not essential to our feeling like a winner? What if, when the wheel spins, we watch it with detachment, not feeling anxious about where it will land? Winning the toy monkey may then provide a moment of fun, but it will not be essential to our happiness. We will feel as much a winner with it as without it. Then, we will be able enjoy the game, no matter what the outcome; or we may be entirely free of our desire to play the game.

So how do we achieve this blessed freedom? How do we stop coveting the toy monkey and feeling like losers when we don't get it, which is most of the time? The only thing that will allow us to walk away from the wheel is the firm knowledge that winning the monkey will not give us what we want. The illusion that we must become a winner to be happy has to be banished – utterly. But this illusion is very powerful. It makes the world go around, so to speak. It keeps the wheel spinning and keeps our mind focused on the wheel.

So long as we believe we are the body or the mind, we will long for an experience, either physical or mental, that will make us feel good; that is, we will long for a moment of peace. But we usually don't know it is the moment of peace we want: we think it is the event that preceded the moment of peace. We think it is the toy monkey. So the key to lasting peace is to sever the false connection between peace and the monkey. This can only be done by understanding.

The key to peace, which is happiness, is understanding. And the understanding that permits us to stop chasing the monkey will also enable us to discover our true nature. We want

peace because peace is natural to us: it makes us happy. What is natural to us is who we are. It is not something that can be gained through an experience. When we realize that it is the very pursuit of happiness in the form of experiences that makes us unhappy, we can stop working against ourselves; that is, we can stop frustrating the expression of our own nature.

But recognizing happiness as our own nature is not easy. It requires an alertness and analysis that is antagonistic to our accustomed assumptions. It requires us to step out of time, where we anxiously and helplessly await the outcome of events we believe will determine our happiness or unhappiness. But this freedom from all that occurs in time, from being dependent upon experiences, is the only thing that will end the misery of chasing the toy monkey.

Fortunately, we have been given a way to recognize this blessed freedom that is our own nature. It is called Vedanta. It was given to us along with the creation. It has been passed down from teacher to disciple in an unbroken line from time immemorial. It is ours for the asking. But we must ask in the proper way: we must prepare ourselves to receive this knowledge.

The first step is to admit that the toy monkey is an illusion; to recognize that it is lasting peace we want, not the prize, i.e. the fleeting experience of peace that comes when desire is suspended for an instant. When this recognition is clear and more or less consistent, good fortune or Providence or karma (whatever name we give to causes) will lead us to a teacher and the teaching. We will then be standing before the door that will lead us to freedom.

Vedanta is that door. Knock, and it shall be opened to you.