

“We are such stuff as dreams are made on, and our little life is rounded with a sleep.” – The Tempest, William Shakespeare

THE STUFF OF DREAMS

A Meditation and Two Essays

By Edwin Faust

That which sees the dreamer and the dream world is that which sees the waker and the waking world. That which sees both worlds is me. I am the seer of dreams and the seer of the waking world.

That which sees the darkness of deep sleep is also me. When the waker and the dreamer become the deep sleeper, there is no change in me. I am the witness, even when there is nothing to witness. When the eyes are closed, all remains but all is unseen. When the eyes are opened, all that was covered in darkness is uncovered and seen again. It is I who saw the darkness; it is I who see the daylight.

Do I depend on the darkness or the daylight? Does my existence depend on the witnessed objects? It may seem so, as I think I am the body, or the mind, or the darkness of deep sleep. But these witnessed states come and go, with one canceling the other. Yet, something is there through all the changes: the changeless self, which is me. There is nothing that cancels me. Can this be denied?

Even when I imagine death, it is the death of the body I envision. I imagine my lifeless body, and I become sad. I become a mourner at my own funeral. But if I am there, I have not died. Only the body has died.

And if I believe that my awareness depends upon the body, then there is no reason to fear death, for I will no longer be there to experience the loss and sadness of the passing of my being. Death can only be experienced as an imaginary event, not as a reality.

Let's contemplate these words. Let's sit with them for a while before we go on.

.....

The Siren Song of Experience

It has become fashionable to give gifts that offer experiences rather than objects. Instead of buying a person a painting, we can buy him a “paint night” at which, with some guidance and the help of a few drinks, he can create his own canvas. The idea behind such gifts is that experiences are more valuable than mere objects: experiences connect us to life – they are *real*.

It is natural to equate experience with reality. Experiences come through sense perceptions and the reactions they produce in the mind. Experiences are our principal and, some would argue, our only reliable means of knowledge. Employers are always looking for job applicants with a record of experience. Children are given excursions to zoos and nature trails and historic sites so that they can gather what are presumed to be valuable, i.e. useful, experiences. Life itself is regarded as an accumulation of experiences, most of which we try to make as pleasurable as we can. But we must be prepared to take the rough with the smooth, as the old saying has it, for experiences do not always deliver what we would like.

Nevertheless, life for most of us remains a quest for experience, for we sense that we are lacking in some way and believe the requisite experience will banish that sense of lack. So, our abiding desire is for some event we hope will end our nagging feeling of inadequacy. If we think we are dull, we may crave exciting experiences that we believe will make us interesting to other people, and to ourselves. If we think we are stupid, we may pursue knowledge, perhaps in the form of academic degrees: pieces of paper we can hang on the wall that will proclaim our intelligence has been officially recognized. If we think we are unattractive, we may resort to the gym or the plastic surgeon or to therapies that enhance self-esteem. If we want to become enlightened, we may follow some regimen that promises the experience of liberation – *moksha* – and the presumed bliss that comes with this exalted state.

But if we turn to Vedanta, we discover the shocking statement that all experiences are unreal. What’s more, we are told that experiences are due to *avidya* – ignorance. Rather than liberate us, we are told, experiences will keep us bound to the very sense of lack from which they are supposed to free us.

That experiences are unreal is a radically counter-intuitive statement. Our reflexive response is one of vehement rejection. “If experience is unreal, then nothing in this world is real!” we might respond in exasperation. To which the Vedantin will say, “Quite right! Nothing in this world is real. Well done!” At which point, we may be ready to abandon Vedanta as an absurd denial of the obvious reality of the world. But the experiences the world offers remain unsatisfying. They may be real, but not quite real enough. We want more. And we may pursue spirituality in the hope of a higher, deeper, better, *more real* experience.

The boast of many schools of spirituality, such as raja yoga and kundalini, is that they deliver experience, and experience is self-verifying. This is true on the level of sense perception: if I see a tree or hear a bird chirp, I need no other means of knowledge other than my respective

senses to confirm what I've seen and heard. But when I want to know who is doing the seeing and hearing, my senses and the experiences they deliver cannot provide me with an answer, for I have turned away from the object and turned toward the subject. My senses can only inform me about objects. So how can I know the subject?

When I ask this question, I am presuming that the subject can be experienced, for knowing requires an object to be known. It is the knowledge of objects that constitutes experience. So, I am looking for a means to experience the subject, my Self, as though it were an object, that is, other than my Self. The problem is obvious: the subject cannot be an object, which means I cannot experience the subject, my Self.

If I assume that experience is the measure of truth, and I cannot experience my Self, then I must conclude there is no truth that can be known about my Self. I can never know who I am; I can only know the objects of experience. So, instead of being a means for knowing my Self, experience becomes a dead-end, a spiritual cul de sac from which there is no escape.

But yoga promises an experience of the Self. It even prescribes a rather elaborate means for acquiring this experience: the eight-limbed yoga. Once we have observed the do's and don'ts, learned how to sit and breathe properly, how to withdraw the mind from sense objects and concentrate it on a particular thought, how to hold that thought for a time until it dissolves into blankness, and how to extend that blankness of mind for a certain duration, we will have arrived at *samadhi*. *Samadhi* is very pleasant, but it ends at some point. We do not end at some point. So, can *samadhi* be an experience of the Self? Is it not, rather, an experience of the temporary suspension of sense perception and thought? As experiences go, *samadhi* is unsurpassed, but it is not who I am: it is another object rather than the subject. Anything I can experience is not who I am: it is not the Self, but the not-Self.

Kundalini experiences are no exception, despite their extraordinary nature. The literature, both ancient and contemporary, that has accumulated on the subject of "the serpent power" catalogues the striking sensations, visions and spontaneous movements that are accepted as confirmation that one's spiritual energy has been "awakened." After this awakening comes the cleansing of the *chakras*, the junctures in the subtle body where karma converges and blocks the ascension of the kundalini to the top of the head – the *sahasrara* – where Shiva awaits Shakti. Once the blockages are cleared, the marriage of Shiva and Shakti is consummated and one attains *moksha* – freedom.

All of this occurs in time and is marked by experiences that culminate in a supreme experience that somehow acquires a supposed permanency. But anything that occurs in time is bound by time: it will come and go. No experience has permanency. No matter how wonderful the wedding of Shiva and Shakti, the ceremony and celebration will end. The wedding guests will depart, the daily grind will resume, and the experience, like all experiences, will become a memory.

Gurus able to awaken kundalini are impressive. One famous teacher wrote a spiritual autobiography that catalogued his experiences during the ascent of the *shakti* through his subtle body, including the final moment when it arrived at the “thousand-petaled lotus” at the top of the head. The narrative contained many fascinating episodes and those who read it were willing to pay for an awakening that would initiate their own exotic odyssey. The contributions and free labor of a growing number of disciples enabled the guru to build a spiritual empire with material assets that included millions in cash, cars, real estate, investments and, it was alleged, Swiss bank accounts.

His followers presumed that he had reached the highest possible condition for a human being: enlightenment through a fully awakened kundalini. Inherent in the assumption was the belief that enlightenment comes through an experience at a definitive moment in time. This wonderful moment was thought to be perceptible and capable of description. It was held to manifest in sensations of light, sound, touch, taste and smell. And, best of all, this path to enlightenment was automatic once the kundalini was awakened. The mind played no part in the process and could even pose an obstacle to advancement. What was needed to facilitate the ascent of the serpent power was total surrender to the guru.

Total surrender.

So, if the guru told you to do something, you should do it without question, no matter how seemingly odd or untoward the request, such as lying naked upon a table and allowing him to have his way with you. Such a request could only be for the purpose of advancing your sadhana, for the guru was perfect and needed nothing for himself. He was supposedly indifferent to money and the pleasures of the flesh, so he could only be thinking of you and doing whatever he did for your benefit.

But the guru presumed too much on the credulity and subservience of his followers. In some of the abused, common sense asserted itself. The recognition arose: “I’ve been sexually assaulted.” Rumors became scandals; one allegation begot another. Denials and rationalizations failed to quell doubts. And many began to notice that no one had really become enlightened.

This story is not unique. Many “masters” came to the West and induced their devotees to give them their money, their labor, their bodies and their minds, promising in exchange an “enlightenment” that would dissolve all the miseries that make this world the vale of tears we know it to be. The result was more tears.

And now, we have gurus that are homegrown: Western masters taken to be spiritually perfected. The story of hope, euphoria, doubt and disillusionment continues to play out in the several movements that have arisen and keep arising.

But the gurus cannot be blamed entirely. There is an old saying among con artists: “You can’t cheat an honest man.” Although proffered as an excuse for stealing, there is some truth in

the adage. People who are looking to get rich quick, without honest toil, are susceptible to get-rich-quick schemes. They are willing to believe those who tell them something that is too good to be true.

Spiritual seekers likewise want to believe that which is too good to be true. They want this magical state called “enlightenment” and they want it fast and on easy terms. It is this desire that makes them prey for the Bernie Madoffs of the spiritual world. Someone comes along who claims to have the inside track on the sure thing. He *guarantees* a return on their investment beyond anything that might be reasonably expected, and they surrender their wealth, their bodies and their lives to the “master,” then wait in eager expectation of their soon-to-be-realized dividend: lasting bliss. But, of course, what comes instead is scandal, loss and sorrow.

Such heartbreak is the result of believing that something or someone can make our life whole for us. It is an attempt to shift a responsibility that cannot be shifted. And underlying it all is the assumption that unhappiness can be banished by an ultimate experience. The irony of such an assumption is that nothing in our experience supports it. That is why we place our faith in someone who promises to deliver something we have never experienced. It does not occur to us that all experience shares the same limitations: it arises in time and space and has no lasting reality. And anything that comes from another is not ours by nature. “Enlightenment” cannot be something we acquire from another. It cannot be something we acquire at all.

Once we realize this, we will no longer be susceptible to the get-rich-quick schemes of the spiritual con men. We can keep our money safe and our bodies chaste and our intellect intact. Vedanta tells us that enlightenment cannot be gained by an experience, for it is not produced by an action. It is, in fact, our natural condition. We don’t realize this because of our ignorance. And ignorance is nothing other than looking for an experience that will deliver us from evil, so to speak, once and for all. Ignorance begets action.

Rather than surrender to a guru who promises the ultimate experience, we should surrender our mistaken belief that such an experience exists. Nothing in our lives supports the notion, and some attentive reasoning can dispel its claims. But in giving up our hope in the ultimate experience, we appear to be left with no hope, for what else is there besides experience?

There is truth that does not depend upon any experience.

To know the truth is to have right knowledge. This means that wrong knowledge must be given up. Chief among the fabrications of wrong knowledge is that action will bring us to lasting truth. But action only begets more action in an endless chain of cause and effect. There is no definitive and final action any more than there is a special wave in the ocean that never moves or changes shape, or a cloud in the sky that keeps its permanent place in the heavens.

Some spiritual seekers become addicted to *satsangs*: group meetings in the presence of the teacher. When all are gathered together and there is chanting and soothing words and an aura of peace and love, it seems that we may be on the brink of enlightenment. We feel we are close, so close, to that ultimate experience. But then, the *satsang* ends, the lights go on, we shuffle out of the hall and into the street, and with each passing moment, our bliss fades until life resumes its former unpleasant shape, and we then begin to anticipate the next *satsang*. “Perhaps that will be the one. I’ll leave the hall, changed forever, enlightened permanently.”

“Hope springs eternal,” the poet wrote. But hope is a creature of time: a desire to acquire something in the future that we lack in the present. The hope for enlightenment can be no more than a fond imagination: a mental picture of our self as a wise and happy person: a fantasy. We might as well imagine ourselves as a billionaire or a movie star or Captain America. It’s all the same.

It is only when we stop investing our hope in experience that we can begin to understand the nature of experience. We have to take a step back. What Vedanta calls discrimination – *viveka* – is taking this step back. It is applying our reason to recognize the ephemeral nature of all experience. It is also recognizing that which is not ephemeral but is the permanent ground of all experience: our awareness.

When we are swimming in the sweet feeling of the *satsang*, we are aware of the sweet feeling. When we walk into the street and the sweet feeling fades with each step we take until we wonder whether it was all an illusion, we are aware of our doubt. When we regain our hope in the ultimate experience and long for the next *satsang*, we are aware of our longing. In each successive change, awareness is there. In fact, without awareness, the changes would be unknown. They simply wouldn’t be at all, for their existence depends upon their being known, and their being known depends upon me, the awareness in which they are known. This is discrimination – *viveka*. It is how we come to recognize that enlightenment is not something we can acquire, but what we are: the light that is constant, the light in which all is known.

.....

It seldom dawns on us that what we are looking for in experience is a way out of the world. All is not well here. We know it and we are uneasy about it. Our body, along with the thoughts and feelings that arise in the mind, are what we think makes us who we are; yet, we also doubt this identity, which is ever changing, and think that, perhaps, it is not who we are. Contentment, no matter how desirable our circumstances, eludes us. We want something more, something different, something other than what we seem to be.

The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein described the situation in his notebooks: We recognize that there is something wrong with the world, which has to do with its meaning. This meaning lies outside the world, that is, outside of our usual means of knowledge. Wittgenstein

either did not know, or would not say, how one might pursue this meaning. He could only describe the limitations of our perception and reason. He famously said, “We feel that if all the problems of science were solved, the problems of life would not have been touched.” So, if there is a solution to life’s problems, it cannot be found in the empirical world, which is the realm of experience.

This amounts to acknowledging that the wonder of our existence cannot be contained or explained by laws of nature or logic. These have to do with observable phenomena. We, in our inmost self, are the observer. We cannot get behind who we are and look at our self, as from a distance, as the observed. No matter where we go, there we are – ever present, but imperceptible. We cannot know our Self. We can only be our Self.

So, in the strictest sense, there is no such thing as Self-knowledge. Non-duality swallows all distinctions of knower and known, for there is nothing to be known that is separable from a knower: no object and, therefore, no subject. There is only limitless awareness. That which has no limit cannot be named, for it cannot be distinct and divisible. Every attempt to describe the Self must be regarded as non-literal, suggestive, metaphorical. The thousand-name litanies of Vishnu and other representations of the Self illustrate the impossibility of assigning form to the formless and the exhaustive nature of all attempts at definition.

Whenever we attach a predicate to “I am,” we limit the limitless: we give awareness a shape and name and place it outside of our Self. Objects are nothing other than the Self projected in time and space. But as these projections are nothing other than the Self, they necessarily fall back into the Self. That is, the illusory nature of objects cannot be maintained. Reality reasserts itself. “I am” casts off all of its predicates, or rather reveals them to be mere names for the “I am” which we mistake as having an existence independent of the “I am.”

To rest in the Self is to stay with the “I am” and not to be drawn into the predicates, believing they define us and determine our happiness or unhappiness. As soon as we attach a predicate to “I am” we should realize that the predicate has no reality, no real connection with who we are and can only be provisional, functional, temporarily useful, at best, or temporarily painful, at worst. In any event, it cannot last, so why fret about it?

Recognizing this, we can free ourselves from the terrible striving to become something in this world, to have things in this world, to be always straining to add another predicate to the “I am.” To say, “I am the president” or “I am wealthy” makes as much sense as saying, “I am a coffee pot” or “I am a door knob.” We readily distinguish our Self from objects that we perceive, but we fail to notice that the body and mind are also perceived. We think, rather, that they are the locus of perception, the real Self. But this is only because we have accepted the predicate “I am the body.” Strip this predicate away, and the body will be seen for what it is: insentient matter. It merely borrows the appearance of sentience from the awareness in which it appears. This is called superimposition, which is simply the attachment of predicates to the “I am.” When

the predicate disappears, the “I am” remains, which means the predicate was never essential to the “I am.” The logic is as simple as it is difficult to apply, for habit, reinforced from time immemorial, binds us to the irrational, even absurd identification with objects. “I am dumb as a brick” is an apt description of our usual condition. Vedanta helps us to drop the brick.

Freedom from Experience

Kipling famously wrote: “East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet.” Whatever unbridgeable chasm the poet had in mind, those who have looked into the teachings of Vedanta know a sense in which the line reads true: Religion and morality in the West have largely to do with how one is to conduct oneself in life so as to enjoy happiness both here and hereafter. The Western aim is virtue and its rewards; the Vedantic aim is complete release from virtue and its rewards.

The diametric opposition of these aims is not sufficiently appreciated, especially in the West. This is understandable, as ideas acquired outside of our culture are received in the midst of a bustling life already imbued with beliefs and customs. The values and prejudices which we have fed on from our infancy shape the mental body that metabolizes all later ideas and experiences. Vedanta presented to a Western mind is therefore susceptible to radical misunderstanding.

It is usual to begin the teaching of Vedanta with the basic truth that we all want to be happy. The question then becomes: how can happiness be achieved? The initial argument of Vedanta differs little from that of Christianity: happiness is not to be found in this world “where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal.” But Christianity then counsels us to ensure our happiness in the hereafter by conforming present actions to certain Divinely given precepts. Happiness remains the desideratum, but Heaven becomes the locus.

Vedanta, however, understands happiness in an entirely different sense. In fact, happiness is not really the right word for the aim of Vedanta, which is freedom, *moksha*. Freedom in the West has political connotations and is usually connected to democracy, a loose word that can mean several things. Freedom is not considered in a spiritual context, as it is in Vedanta, where freedom means freedom from everything, even from the hope of Heaven.

In the Western conception, happiness is always dependent upon an object, something outside of us. Even the beatific vision, supposedly the ultimate happiness, is in the nature of a perception: we see God, whether visually or intellectually makes little difference. The separation of subject and object remains. And Heaven, in popular imagination, has little to do with intellectual vision and is conceived more often than not in terms of the physical senses: we will meet our loved ones and enjoy their company; there will be sweet music; good health will be perennial; hunger and thirst will no longer be a bother, etc.

In India, something similar in the imagination of the afterlife can be found in the Vedas, in the *karma kanda*, which deals with meritorious actions. But *Swarga*, the Hindu Heaven, is not eternal. It is a pleasant sojourn for the transmigrating individual whose persistent desires will eventually draw him back into a body and subject him again to the travails of the world. It is illustrative of the difference between East and West that many Westerners find the idea of reincarnation appealing while Indians regard it as a great misfortune.

More than misfortune, reincarnation is seen as the source of all miseries. It is desire that draws the soul back to Earth, where it will suffer so long as it falsely identifies with a body and attempts to find its beatitude in satisfying this imaginary self. Heaven is a respite, not a final resting place. Freedom, or *moksha*, is freedom from the body, from all that makes one an individual, separate from all others, including God.

For the Westerner, the loss of individuality is dreaded. The death of the body looms like a devouring darkness, the mouth of the void waiting to swallow us. We sometimes wake in the night and fear grips our heart as we contemplate our annihilation. Heaven, for those who can believe in it, offers a way through the darkness. We can keep our personalities. Even our bodies, according to some theologies, will be transformed, spiritualized in some way, but still ours, still intact. The absurdity of this hope is revealed by a cursory examination of all that constitutes individual identity: our aging flesh, our fleeting thoughts, our status in society, our money, our power over other bodies, our worldly titles and accomplishments. None of these things can have any meaning beyond the brief moment of our earthly transit. And even now, they are poised perilously in time, subject to immediate destruction in any number of ways.

These marks of identity, so precious to us in the West that we cannot imagine existing without them, are regarded in the East in the light of reality: they are seen for passing imagination. So, the whole impetus of Vedanta is not to retain our individuality, but to free ourselves from its brief and illusory existence, which depends entirely upon something beyond it, on the all-encompassing awareness in which it appears and in which it will disappear.

The whole point of Vedanta is not to live more happily in this world or the next, but not to live at all. This may sound shocking to the Western ear. "What? Who would not want to live? Life is everything!" Life is, indeed, everything, but the individual personality is not life: it is temporary imagination. It is, in fact, what keeps us from realizing the real life on which it depends. We mistake the shadow for the true being and we then want to cling to the shadow as to life itself. But the shadow will disappear, for it is a mere negation of light with no life of its own. When the shadow dies, where does it go? Nowhere. It simply ceases to appear, for it was never more than appearance. Was the shadow happy? Was it sad? Did it accomplish much in its life? These are pointless questions about something that never lived.

To compare what we take to be our life to a shadow contends with our usual sensibilities. Shakespeare made the comparison famously in Macbeth's despairing declamation:

“Life’s but a shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage...” We take all this for metaphor, but it is truth; and like Macbeth, we feel the terrible emptiness of worldly life, that is, of the pursuit of happiness through objects, for we know at bottom there are no lasting objects and, therefore, no real happiness to be obtained through them. We may not articulate this knowledge to ourselves. For most of us, it remains an unexpressed but abiding sadness at the heart of all we do, of all we hope for, of all we achieve. It is the slave whispering in Caesar’s ear during the triumphal procession through Rome, “*Sic transit gloria mundi.*” (Thus passes the glory of the world.) It is the dying of laughter, the first wrinkle, the mockery of youth for age; it is the loss of memory, the cooling of passion, the deadweight of routine. It is the dreaded acknowledgement that all we take to be real is a mirage appearing in the mist of the mind, rising from the heat of desire. But where is life then to be found, if not in this world or the next?

The Western mind, even when it renounces religion, finds it difficult to renounce the idea of creation. And we have the deeply ingrained belief that if we can understand our beginning, we will understand our end. Whether the origin of the world is attributed to a Big Bang or to a Creator God, the notion that it all started at a certain point in space and time persists. The distance between East and West is perhaps no greater at any point than in their respective understandings of the origin of the world and man.

In the West, time is considered objective and real. Despite Kant’s demonstration of the subjective ideality of time, the common man assumes that time is absolute: it exists independently of our conceptions, and our lives are measured from beginning to end by the ticking of the cosmic clock whose hand we neither set in motion nor are capable of arresting. This idea of time requires a starting point, which involves us in an absurdity which science generally ignores. The starting point has even been calculated: about 13 billion years ago, when the Big Bang is supposed to have first boomed.

Without becoming involved in the intricacy of these calculations, we can recognize the huge problem such a proposition presents: time is tied to the beginning of matter, and matter necessarily has its location in space. So, time and space are linked, are indeed identical, at least in their theoretical starting point. But the underlying assumption that such a starting point exists depends upon time and space pre-existing themselves. How can time have begun at a moment in time, or space have originated at a point in space? Can anything give birth to itself? The illogicality of the question stares at us and we can only turn away from it by pretending that we do not see it. It’s akin to bad manners to mention it among materialists.

But the idea that time and space had a starting point, though now expressed in the language of mathematical physics, is nevertheless rooted in religion. God used to be the Big Bang. For many, God remains as such, and clever minds have set themselves to the task of reconciling the competing representations of religion and science. But this is merely to

substitute one mode of expression for another. The core idea is the same: *creatio ex nihilo* – creation from nothing.

The idea that nothing once existed, when carefully considered, may sound rather silly and contradictory, but it is proposed in all seriousness by both scientists and theologians in the West. It is an idea that is generally accepted by most people and it has tremendous implications for the way we understand the world and our place in it.

If the world came from nothing, so did we. But as it is impossible that something should come from nothing, this mysterious origin of all things is given a name, God. God, then, is the point in time where time began and the place in space where space began. All was brought forth from nothingness by God, which is much like saying, by the x factor, which is much like saying nothing at all. The Big Bang is simply another x factor, a creator God in the guise of science.

God can only be described as the negation of all that characterizes the world we know, including our bodies and minds: omnipotent, omnipresent, omniscient. This is to say that the limitations that accompany all that we experience do not inhere in their cause. There arises then another problem: how can that which is limitless give rise to limitation? How can a cause produce an effect which is entirely different from it? How can time come from timelessness or space from spacelessness? Theology makes its entry here and waves a magic wand at the problem by dubbing it “a mystery.” We are back to the x factor.

Swami Dayananda used to remark that theology exists to make silly things sound sensible. The same observation may be applied to certain aspects of scientific cosmology. But what affects us more than any cosmology is the notion that we are created from nothing. This makes our entire existence gratuitous and contingent upon something external to us.

That we did not exist before our physical birth involves the belief that awareness is a product of the body, i.e. consciousness is material. But we know that matter is insentient, and that would include our bodies, which are composed of the same stuff as the rest of the perceptible world. Neurologists can demonstrate that certain sensations have a locus in the brain, but they cannot explain the ultimate nature of a sensation, which involves consciousness itself. It is not that an object transmits consciousness to another object. All objects are inert, including bodies and brains. Objects are perceived; my cognitions are perceived; therefore, my cognitions are objects. But an object requires a subject. Who or what is the subject? Whatever it may be, we cannot perceive it, for it would then become an object and not a subject.

On the level of phenomena, no criterion for Self-knowledge can be found. No object is self-sufficient. No object is self-luminous. No object is sentient. No object is permanent. All phenomena are perceived by that which cannot be perceived: me. Why can't I perceive myself? Because I would have to be other than myself to perceive myself, in which case, who could I be?

The world of dependent objects, the world of perception, is entirely dependent on me as the source of perception. And I am not contained in my senses or my brain, which are also dependent objects, things I perceive or conceive.

So how can there be Self-knowledge? As the Self is not an object, it cannot be known by the senses or conceived by reason, for all concepts are also objects to the intellect in which they appear. The senses cannot be a means of knowledge for the Self; neither can the intellect. Can we experience the Self emotionally? As all emotion is but a particular kind of thought and, like all thought, a creature of time, it cannot be a means of Self-knowledge, although it can manifest as a reaction to insight about the Self. Many who experience exultation in contemplating spiritual things identify the Self to be this emotional upliftment. But, like drug-induced euphoria, insight about the Self is not established knowledge: it is like a flash of lightning in the dark, not the steady light of the sun. But when it occurs, we lose our usual sense of limitation, of identification with objects, including that most engaging of all objects, the body. This is why exultation is described as being taken out of oneself. It is something we all desire: not to be who we usually think we are.

Now, we usually think we are a human being made from nothing; that our awareness is a function, an epiphenomenon, of bodily matter. For a time, this awareness persists, but its ultimate destiny is to return to the oblivion from which it arose when the body is no longer alive. While the body lasts, the awareness inherent in its matter will produce perceptions and sensations, some pleasurable, some painful, which will register in the brain. But the whole experience of human life, if it arises out of nothing and disappears into nothing cannot have any significance in its brief appearance in ... what? A something born of nothingness?

The difficulty modern science faces in trying to define life is rooted in its insistence that life must be confined in matter. It can then find nothing in matter that can be said to be alive in itself, for all matter is reducible to inert constituents. Indeed, it is reducible to energy, which is immaterial and only mathematically describable. The poor scientist stares at his calculations, hoping to discover life in the numbers he arranges with such painstaking precision. He wants to explain his being and consciousness in an equation.

But life is not mathematically expressible. Neither is it reducible to logic, which depends on premises that are the unproven starting point rather than the proven result of logic. Life is also not reducible to a first cause, for such a cause cannot be a cause at all, for it would have to exist outside of space and time, in which case it could never enter into space and time, which is the essence of causality. There is also no way we can discover who we are through the senses or through thoughts abstracted from the senses, for the senses direct the attention outward, toward something that is perceived and which, therefore, cannot be the perceiver. And we know we are the perceiver. The senses can only be instruments of perception, and thoughts can

only be derivative of sense perception. So, it would seem that our available means of knowledge cannot help us to know who we are, only what we are not.

But there is Vedanta, which tells us who we are: brahman (*Aham brahmasmi* – I am brahman). But what is brahman? Does the great saying, the *mahavakhya*, merely beg the question?

We may know what we are not, but negative knowledge cannot tell us who we are. I know I am not a giraffe, but what does that tell me about what I am? There are many things I am not. In fact, everything I can perceive is what I am not. I can affirm that I exist and I am conscious, but beyond these bare affirmations lies a land of mist and mystery from which arise the great questions: How did I come to exist? Will I die when the body dies? What is the purpose of my being? How should I regard the world and other creatures? Is there a God?

When we ask these questions, we are looking outward, at the world, and at ourselves as part of the world. We are looking for origins in space and time from within space and time: we are staring at the walls of a windowless room in which we are locked, trying to determine what may lie outside the room. The agnostic has some justification for his position: knowledge of what is outside perception is impossible from within perception. But is there anything outside perception? There is the perceiver. And the perceiver is not a particular thought, an abstraction from perception, but a constant presence in which all perception and all abstraction takes place. We can only perceive something from outside the perception, just as we can only gauge motion from the standpoint of that which does not move.

Vedanta counsels us to look inward, to the perceiver; to turn the mind to its source. It directs our attention to the one who asks the questions. It is for the sake of questioner that answers are sought.

The one who asks the questions is not the body. My arms and legs are not curious. My kidneys and liver are not given to pondering. Even the brain matter is still matter and, as such, insentient. The senses do not inquire about the meaning of things: they are mere instruments that gather data. And our emotions, what we metaphorically call our heart, are no more than reactions to fear and desire, usually arising from the notion that we are the body and subject to harm or gratification from other objects. What about the intellect? It seems it is this mysterious entity that makes us discontent with mere phenomena and drives us to seek that which underlies the passing show of the world. But what or where is the intellect?

It can only have a location if it is material, i.e. positioned in space. As we know it is not the body, it has no physical substance and, therefore, no locus. It is experienced, however, so it must have some form of existence, for all experience has form. Its form is thought. A thought is an image, but it need not be a sense image. I can think with my eyes closed, and I can dream when the bodily senses are not operating. So, a thought is an image, but one not necessarily

dependent on external objects. I can have mathematical thoughts and logical thoughts that are not sense-based. But what makes thoughts intelligible? What lights up the intellect and, for that matter, the entire sensible world? What lights up the world of dreams, in which there is no sun and no eyes? Vedanta says, "We do. We are the light of the intellect, the light of dreams, the light of the waking world. We make all things intelligible. We are the being and consciousness of all things, material and immaterial."

Now, when we use words such as being and consciousness, we are dealing with abstractions that are universal; in fact, we are dealing with the limit of abstraction, a point at which meaning becomes so removed from perception it is in danger of disappearing into the ether. Western philosophy often deals in words that are so vaporous we simply cannot take hold of them. We then have words that evoke no image and refer to nothing in our experience. But Vedanta returns us to experience by telling us that being is us, consciousness is us. These words, then, are not abstractions, but the reality we experience always and everywhere.

Shankaracharya says that perceptions of sensible things are indirect, rather than direct, knowledge. This reverses the usual way we think about perception, which we take to be the primary data of experience. What does he mean? He says that our most intimate experience is not that of objects, but of our own awareness. This awareness is what is primary. It is what makes the perception of objects possible. What's more, it is not only awareness that can be said to precede or be the ground of all perception, but it is awareness that is perception itself. We don't see objects; we see thoughts. We have no contact with objects, but only with our thoughts. So, objects are not the cause of thoughts: they are the thoughts. And the thoughts are known to me. That is, thought appears in my awareness, not as an object extrinsic to it, but as awareness itself. Strip away any particular thought, and awareness remains. Take away awareness and nothing remains.

So, all of our experience and our reasoning about experience points to awareness as the ground and substance of perception and thought. This is who we are, for this is all that is: *Tat twam asi* – Thou art that. This is what Vedanta makes clear to the mind.

Now, when we realize that we are not created out of nothing by a deity about whose purposes and nature we have no verifiable information, we become real, so to speak. We were always real, but we mistook ourselves to be the phantoms of the mind: thoughts that we borrowed from so-called sacred texts (whether religious or scientific) or from our parents and teachers and the larger society into which our bodies were born. We are no longer one of the blind being led by blind guides, with all of us doomed to fall into a pit. We can walk with our eyes open, knowing who we are. This is freedom – *moksha*.

It is difficult to talk or write about this freedom, for in attempting to express it in words, we confine it to concepts: we step back inside the boundaries of perception, from which we abstract concepts. Words are place markers. They help us to find our way about in the world of

experience, but they also tend to make experience appear as though it has a permanence, a substance, which it does not. Words arrest the flow of motion, of ceaseless causality in space and time; words freeze motion in universal concepts that do not move and, therefore, do not correspond to actual perception, to experience as we know it. And when words are used to express our identity as awareness, they tend to arrest that freedom that is our nature and to fix it in some definition, some boundary, and thus to refer it back to the limitation of a concept, with perception being the source of all concepts. So, by a circuitous route, words tend to lead the free awareness back into the windowless room where the intellect stares at its walls and wonders what may exist outside of them. We must remember that words that attempt to describe our Self can only be used analogously or metaphorically, never literally. This is why Vedanta is a means of knowledge: its *mahavakyas*, or great sayings, are not so much definitions as springboards.

Into what do we spring? The metaphor here is one of motion. In fact, we don't really spring into a space or condition that is new or different from that in which we always exist; we simply see what is and what always was and what always will be *in saecula saeculorum*, as the ancient Christian doxology expresses it. Time no longer limits us, as it does all physical bodies and all thoughts. We escape duration, which is death. And once we know we will not die, for we were never born, fear falls away from us: it drops into the abyss of ignorance from which it arose, and we know we are free and beyond time. This allows us to love, which is to say, it allows us to know the bliss that is our nature and that most of us only glimpse in rare moments, when our sense of separateness – of individuality – dissolves. Love erases boundaries. When Vedanta says that reality is non-dual, the statement may strike us as abstract and dry: a concept difficult to take hold of. But what it means is that love is our nature: there is nothing that separates me from others, from the world. The poet William Blake wrote, "If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. For man has closed himself up, till he sees."

To see everything as infinite means to no longer see everything as finite, that is, separate and time-bound. It is to see everything in awareness as awareness; not as thoughts but as the light in which thoughts appear, the light that is constant, the light that is me. In rare moments of insight, we can have this vision. In psychedelic experiences, we can have this vision. But Vedanta takes us beyond these transitory experiences to the abiding knowledge of the infinite. And this infinite is not some far-away God or an exotic experience: it is the here and now; the ordinary experience of our Self. We are the infinite. And we are beyond the infinite, if such a thing can be grasped, for the infinite is a mere negation of the finite. And we are not a mere negation. God is a collection of negations. We are not God. We are that in which God exists, in which all is and is not. Words have limits. We have none.

There are *mahatmas* – great beings – in India who are said to be Self-realized. Many of them speak little or not at all. This reticence arises from the knowledge that words cannot

express reality, cannot give voice to the infinite love that is who we are. But there are *mahatmas* who do speak, who teach, and they invariably teach Vedanta. It is these great souls that show us who we are. Shankaracharya likens Vedanta to “a thousand kind mothers.” Until we come to it, we are like orphans in the storm, tossed about, defenseless against the elements, that is, against the ignorance that makes us believe we are this frail body and tormented mind. But once we hear the truth, we are taken under the wing of a kind mother who shelters us from the storm. There, we are protected and nourished until we mature into the understanding of who we are: a *mahatma*. And there is only one mahatma, as there is only one awareness, one love, no second thing – *adwaita*.