

A Thorn to Remove a Thorn

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Brent: Dear Mr. Schmidt, I am considering devoting myself to Advaita but am highly sceptical as well and taking my time to thoroughly understand it and resolve my doubts before diving in.

Ted: This sounds wise. But as you will see if you decide to stick with it, it will be Vedanta that resolves your doubts. The mistake people often initially make when deciding to expose themselves to the teachings of Vedanta is to measure those teachings in light of what they already know. The irony is that if what you already know was capable of setting you free, it would have already done so and you would no longer be searching for an answer through Vedanta. I'm not saying that you shouldn't duly consider your commitment to any spiritual "path" before undertaking a study of it but just that as you expose yourself to the teachings of Vedanta try to set aside your preconceived notions and previously accrued understanding so that you can truly "hear" what Vedanta has to say. Vedanta is the oldest means of knowledge known to mankind (Buddhism in fact is referred to as "a chip off the tooth of Vedanta"), and it has set countless seekers free for thousands of years. Given its track record, it might be wise to give it the benefit of the doubt.

Brent: To give you some personal background, I'm coming from a highly-speculative, pragmatic take on Theravadan Buddhism but the beauty and robustness of Vedanta and Swartz's articulation of it "got me" though.

Ted: It sounds like you're ripe for knowledge. If so, you've come to the right place.

Brent: His statement in *What Is Advaita?* has me both baffled and intrigued. He said that "Vedanta is not philosophy, it is a means of knowledge," and yet it appears to me that all of the discussions of Vedanta and expositions use philosophy and logic and analysis to validate itself. How is this not philosophy?

Ted: What James means when he says that Vedanta is not a philosophy is that it is not a system of thought that was cooked up by human beings.

Vedanta is referred to as *apurusha-jnanam*, knowledge that did not come from a human being. Vedanta is revealed knowledge. What that means is that ancient seekers just like you and me had revelatory insights concerning the non-dual nature of reality and the limitless nature of the self. These seekers came to be known as *rishis*, or "seers," because they did not hypothesize or imagine or otherwise think up the understanding which came to them. They "saw" it or "heard" it or otherwise realized it. Over time, perhaps hundreds or even thousands of years, there were enough accounts of such insights that people were able to weed out the personal biases and discrete experiences and retain only the bare-boned knowledge that is the truth of existence. In short, Vedanta has been thoroughly vetted and now rests before us as a gleaming jewel of pure

wisdom.

Moreover, Vedanta is not a philosophy that simply seeks to explain the nature of reality. Vedanta is a means of knowledge that is employed according to a systematic methodology that if followed from beginning to end will set the student free. The assertion that Vedanta inevitably leads to self-realization and sets the student free of the wheel of *samsara*, i.e. ends one's existential suffering, is based on the criterion that the student is qualified to assimilate the knowledge. If the student is not qualified, however, Vedanta doesn't leave one out in the cold or cast one aside. As a means of knowledge it provides as well the methods by which one can become qualified. The point is that rather than being simply theory and argument Vedanta is a means of knowledge based on a practical methodology, i.e. *atma-vichara*, or self-inquiry, that leads one step by step to liberation.

Brent: Take this, for example, from Krishnananda's *Introduction to the Upanishads*:

"This is a very important point at the rock bottom of our thinking that we have to recognise. If everything is changing, who is it that is telling us that everything is changing? Are we also changing with the things that change? If that is the case, how do we come to know that all things are changing?"

"Logical analysis of this peculiar analytical circumstance tells us that there is something in us which does not change; otherwise, we would not know that things are changing.

"Contained within his logic is an apparent contradiction: How can something which is unchanging know that which changes? If something is unchanging, then that quality, logically, can have no connection to or with what is changing. If something 'knows' something, however, then it must be subject to the same conditions in order to effect it. The only point at which the teachings of Vedanta do not have internal contradictions (i.e. there is no change, all there is is *brahman*) is the point at which it most drastically contradicts the stance of the aspirant."

So then is the student, during the unfolding of Vedanta, supposed to look the other way when it comes to these contradictions in the teachings? Does that leave much room for integrity?

I find myself continuously stuck on the fact that all philosophies leave you at extremes, and have a lot of difficulty wrapping my mind around the unfolding of Vedanta. It just seems highly philosophical and bound up in apparent contradictions as it attempts to explain or point at the absolute. I tried rereading the article, especially the section "Vedanta Is Not a School of Thought" but still am struggling with the above questions.

Ted: I'm not exactly sure where Krishnananda's comments end and yours begin* but with regard to your doubt about the apparent contradictions in the scriptures/teachings, it doesn't really matter.

*[Editor's note: I did my best to decipher this.]

Here's the low-down.

As mentioned, Vedanta is a systematic means of knowledge. Its fundamental teaching methodology is *adhyaropa-apavada*, or superimposition and negation. The beauty of Vedanta is

that it meets the student at the student's present level of understanding and then takes him or her from there to the understanding of the truth. Invariably, students begin their inquiry under the assumption that reality is a duality and that they are separate, unique, volitional individuals. Such being the case, it is highly ineffective, as Neo-Advaita has proven, to simply tell the student that he or she is whole and complete, limitless, actionless, all-pervasive, ever-present, non-dual, attributeless awareness and that everything is exactly perfect exactly as it is and he or she has no cause for suffering or grief and that he or she should simply wake up and "get it" and end the search and thereafter enjoy life without a care in the world. This is the truth but the student is probably not yet ready to understand it. If he or she was, he or she wouldn't be still seeking.

So what Vedanta does is grant the seeming reality of duality that currently characterizes the student's vision and the apparent predicament of incompleteness and inadequacy that the student suffers and then systematically debunks the erroneous notions the student harbors through a logical analysis of the student's very own previously unexamined (or, as may be the case, inaccurately examined) experience. In this way the student is "shown" the reality rather than simply being told of it. Consequently the student owns the knowledge rather than simply believing in it. In the context of this methodology what the teacher says about reality at one point or to one student may differ significantly from what he or she says at another point or to another student. It all depends on where the student is at in his or her understanding. Hence the reason for most of the apparent contradictions in the scriptures (the others arising from the fact that language is inadequate to comprehensively describe limitless, actionless, all-pervasive, attributeless, non-dual awareness, and so such descriptions as "it is bigger than the biggest and smaller than the smallest," which indicates the all-pervasive nature of awareness, i.e. the self, are used). The analogy that is often used to describe the process of superimposition and negation is that of using a thorn to remove a thorn.

Finally, when the last thorn is removed, the thorn used to remove it is thrown away as well.

Brent: Any further thoughts would be greatly appreciated. Thank you again for your time and your consideration.

~ In gratitude, Brent

Ted: My pleasure, Brent. Please feel free to contact me anytime if you have any further questions.