

Akandakara Vritti

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Marlon: Dear James, in several places in your writings you mention the *akandakara vritti*, the unbroken thought of the self. How does this work to cause liberation? It sounds rather technical and perhaps I am not advanced enough to understand it properly, but I would appreciate any light you can shed on this topic.

James: Good to hear from you again. I've enjoyed our e-conversations very much. I'll see if I can help you make some sense of this idea.

Before we talk about how it works we should probably try to define what it is. It's a big word and might seem a little mysterious. I assure you it's not. A *vritti* is a thought, an idea, and an *adkandakara vritti* is an unbroken thought, a complete thought, or a limitless thought, one that stands on its own and doesn't change. It is the self's thought of itself. It may form into words in such as "I am whole and complete, limitless awareness, I am everything that is, there is nothing other than me, I am fullness itself, I am the cause of the whole universe, nothing can be added to me or subtracted from me," etc. The Vedanta texts are full of formulations of this thought. It is a statement of one's true identity. It may not even form in words. It may just appear as a sense of complete release coupled with an unshakable conviction that I am fine, I have always been fine and I will always be fine.

There are two theories about how the *akandakara vritti* works to bring self-knowledge, i.e. liberation.

The first is the meditation theory. According to this theory liberation does not happen with the rise of *akandakara vritti*, because a *vritti* is only knowledge and knowledge is always mediate and relational, meaning that it doesn't stand on its own but is an abstraction, something that relates to or represents some object. The idea is that the self cannot be reduced to a simple thought, because the self is limitless, immediate and related to nothing. It's true that you can't pack the self into a single thought, but a single thought standing in for the self is all that is needed to destroy self-ignorance because ignorance is the thought that you are limited. In other words, you are not limited, you just think you are. If you think you are only a person named Marlon, this is called "ignorance" in Vedanta.

It is hard to eliminate this thought/belief because it has been reinforced so often that it is now buried deep within the unconscious mind. The thought "I am the self" can destroy self-ignorance because ignorance is not eternal. It may have no beginning, but it certainly does end with the dawn of knowledge. This is true of ignorance of objects in the world and it is true of ignorance of the self.

You don't get the self when you are liberated. You are always the self – liberated or not. Liberation is getting rid of the notion that you are something other than the self. And you get rid of this notion with the "I am the self" notion. It's not a complicated business.

In any case indirect self-knowledge is not the kiss of death. However, the meditation or inquiry

theory says that another step is necessary to convert it to direct or immediate knowledge. And what is that step? It is meditation, or inquiry, or “the practice of knowledge.” What does meditation mean in this context? It means that one needs to gain such confidence in this knowledge that one abandons any other thought of one’s identity. And how does this confidence come about? By proactively using this knowledge to destroy the notion that the “I” is limited as it arises in the mind and enjoying the peace of mind that results. In other words, you are meant to build up an “I am the self” *vasana* so that the knowledge becomes unbroken and works on its own whenever it is called for. Building this *vasana* is a struggle because there is always attachment to the belief in one’s self as a limited entity – even when it is well-known that seeing oneself in this way produces suffering! In any case once this thought is continuous it eats up its opposite and then, because it is no longer necessary, it retreats back to the unconscious and lets you get on with the business of life. If it remained in consciousness every minute of every day, life would be a little difficult. When you applied for a bank loan, for instance, and they asked for your name you would say, “I am limitless awareness.” And if they didn’t throw you out and asked for your address you would say, “I live everywhere – and nowhere.” When your date of birth was requested you would say, “I am unborn.”

So according to this theory there is a gap between the arising of the *akandakara vritti* and liberation. It may be a few days or weeks or months or years depending on how dedicated one is to rooting out one’s ignorance or, to put it another way, how burning is one’s desire to be free and how pure the mind is when the “I am the self” thought arises.

To further complicate matters, the “I am the self” thought may arise any time the mind is *sattvic* for a few minutes. Because even a predominately *tamasic* or *rajasic* mind experiences *sattva* from time to time, the significance of this knowledge may not be grasped when the mind becomes *rajasic* or *tamasic* again – which it inevitably will. And often, if the *akandakara vritti* does not arise again when the mind is *sattvic*, one may forget it altogether – until it happens again, if it does. I’ve met worldly people who in a conversation with me realized that they experienced this knowledge many years before, didn’t know what to do with it, let it die and went on with the business of life. It’s a pity, but it happens every day.

My experience confirms theory number one. The “I am the self” thought arose many times with great clarity over a period of several years starting at the age of twenty-six. At first I didn’t understand its significance and would return to the *samsaric* state when the epiphany that caused it to arise faded and binding *vasanas* took over. But I kept at my practice and dispassion developed, and then I met my *guru* who made me understand the significance of the thought and who helped me establish it in my mind by example. By that I mean that he had completely assimilated this knowledge and lived it every moment – so I knew it could be done – which inspired me. After a year-and-a-half of continuous meditation in which I clung to that thought with great tenacity – affirming it in every situation – it destroyed the notion that I was limited.

If someone is dispassionate toward objects and has a burning desire for liberation and has been consciously doing *sadhana* for a long time the significance of the realization “I am limitless awareness” may be grasped immediately and may become anchored in the mind in such a way that it roots out the remaining sense of limitation at once, as is said to have happened with Ramana.

Although he hadn’t done *sadhana* when he grasped the meaning of the self-*vritti*, it’s not difficult to understand this happening with a young upper caste boy in Indian culture one hundred years

ago because it would have been very difficult for him to develop the kind of binding *rajasic* and *tamasic vasanas* that would obstruct the assimilation of the knowledge. And if he had done *sadhana* in previous births he may have had enough knowledge to grasp the significance of this thought the first time it arose – which he seems to have done. His story illustrates the second theory, which is similar to the first.

Theory number two says that the mind is the self in the first place, so that when the thought “I am limitless awareness” arises it is tantamount to liberation – direct knowledge of the nature of the self which had hitherto been under the impression “I am a limited entity.”

The famous “pot-space” metaphor is used to illustrate how this works. A pot made of clay is full of the all-pervading space as soon as it is made. Filling it with water is the result of effort. You can pour out the water, but you can’t pour out the pot-space.

Because reality is non-dual awareness, when the mind is created it is nothing but awareness. But due to ignorance it fills up with various notions. If the various notions one has about reality are removed, it does not affect the nature of the mind at all. The only “thought” left in the mind once it is emptied of erroneous notions is “I am awareness,” and that thought immediately destroys the idea that the self is limited. If there were some sort of experiential solution to the problem of ignorance, like a particular *samadhi*, there would be no need for the *vritti*. But since ignorance is the problem, the *vritti* is necessary.

In any case pure awareness has no thought, but the mind is awareness whose natural “form” is the thought “I am awareness.” So it is the root “thought” in the mind, the assimilation of which is liberation.

Whether the *akandakara vritti* produces direct or indirect knowledge doesn’t seem to me to be a very important issue. It is one of those things that realized souls quibble about for lack of anything better to do. No blame. Transcendental boredom weighs heavily on the enlightened. What is important is the purity of the mind, how hungry it is for liberation and whether it understands the importance of self-knowledge.

Many people following the Yoga path believe that any thought is useless and should be dismissed. Not realizing that the thought that all thoughts are useless is a thought, and the one doing the dismissing is also a thought, they foolishly dismiss even the thought “I am limitless awareness” and stubbornly try to attain a thought-free mind.

This is a misunderstanding because thought is the nature of the mind and you can’t turn the mind into the self by getting rid of its thoughts. You can’t turn the mind into the self, because it is the self already. In any case the mind is just awareness taking form. The only thought that is a problem is the thought that the “I” is limited because it is opposed to the truth. In other words, when you think you are limited you are out of harmony with reality. Is it any wonder that you suffer?

So the real issue is the destruction of ignorance. How is it removed? Is it some kind of superhuman act of will; one just pours all the limiting thoughts out of the mind all at once, leaving it in its pristine state? Does it require some mind-blowing experience, a once-in-a-lifetime epiphany that somehow miraculously kills the mind once and for all? Or does this situation come about through the patient application of the knowledge “I am limitless awareness”?

Again, we need to bring in meditation, or inquiry – the application of this knowledge. Whether the thought “I am limitless awareness” is only direct and arises only when limited I-notions are removed or whether it is indirect and requires the practice of inquiry, the important issue is that you need a true thought to remove a false thought. If it’s dark and you want to see, you have to turn on the light.

Without a single experience of the *akandakara vritti* one can abandon one’s limited self-concepts. How? Simply by carefully analysis of one’s experience in *samsara*. Growth, or maturity, is basically letting go of self-notions that don’t work. The way you see yourself today is not the way you saw yourself thirty years ago, not that the way you see yourself today is necessarily an improvement on the way you once saw yourself. However, the point is that you can come to a point where you let go of all your roles, the *akandakara vritti* will arise, you will intuitively understand the significance of it, own it and – ta-da! – that’s the end of the whole spiritual business. This is a restatement of the second theory.

You may have a doubt when I say it “arises.” This makes it sound as if it is only a spontaneous action generated by the self solely from within, something that needs to happen before you can get liberation. It may happen that way, but it need not happen that way. Because this thought is always in the mind since it is just the self in its most fundamental form – although it is obscured by other thoughts – it can awaken simply through reading the truth from scripture or hearing it from the mouth of a *jnani* or in other ways. When the truth comes from the outside it immediately resonates with the truth inside, and this may be all that is necessary to remove one’s ignorance. In this way many people who open their minds to the non-dual teachings but have no mystic experience gain liberation.

Because we play so many roles in life we develop many limited identities. I may be a mother, a sister, a daughter, an aunt, a cousin, a wife, an ex-wife, a Democrat, a nurse, a PhD, etc. Even without these relational identities almost all of us are stuck with the human identity – which is the support of all the others – which the “I am the self” thought is meant to dismiss.

To summarize, depending on how you think about it, the thought “I am the self” destroys whatever limited identities are in the mind – assuming they no longer bring satisfaction – or it fills the void left when for whatever reason all limited identities have been worn away by life.

It fills them with a very positive identity. Well, “positive” is not exactly the right word, because identity is neither positive nor negative. But the assimilation of the knowledge “I am limitless awareness” has a very positive effect on every aspect of one’s life in the sense that it destroys all insecurity. You realize that nothing can touch you and you relax in such a way that you are like a big blob of Silly Putty – you effortlessly conform to every situation life presents. Life only hurts because you resist. It is a great river in full spate. It is returning to the ocean and nothing stands in its way. The assimilation of self-knowledge means that you are no longer a small boat subject to the many perils one encounters as one sails across the vast ocean of existence. You are the ocean itself.