

All Gods Have Feet of Clay

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Brenton: In our *Upanishad* group we read a disturbing passage in the *Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad*, where husbands are scripturally sanctioned to use violence against their wives if they want to have sex with them and the wives refuse. I know that we should understand that this was the “spirit” of the times and culture, but that doesn’t cut it for me. Time and culture should not trump the first and foremost value of Vedanta, I would think! The *rishis* forgot that for a moment? They also forgot for a moment that these wives were their own mothers? To “beat them with a stick”?! That is pretty sickening. It’s a few weeks ago now that we read this, so my upset has calmed down a bit. Now, there’s a simple acknowledgment that my most highly revered “*rishis* of old” are also fallible human beings, capable of saying idiotic things. In scripture no less! No wonder there is such excessive violence against women in India. But that is a universal issue, unfortunately, even though particularly bad in India.

I want to ask you if there is another way of looking at this? Am I missing anything?

Sundari: You need to take the context of the times into account. While this in no way exonerates such behaviour to us, it was considered normal then, as shocking as that is. I know it is hard to swallow because non-duality is not subject to the times, to social customs, nor has it anything to do with gender, so how can this be justified? We must remember that the *rishis* were human like anybody else, and though the scripture was revealed to them, it did not come from them. They still maintained their identity as *Isvara* made them. No human is perfect. Even Ramji has personality traits that many don’t like and says things that upset some people. We all do this. All *jivas* are a flawed bunch. You cannot allow this to contaminate the scriptures, because they are inviolate and irrefutable, they have absolutely nothing to do with anyone.

Historians use the word “presentism” to describe the tendency to judge historical figures (or anyone) by contemporary standards. As much as we all despise things like racism, sexism and gender abuse, these isms have only recently been considered moral turpitudes. Thus, for instance, condemning Shankara for referring to the opposite gender as “mere women,” Thomas Jefferson for keeping slaves or Sigmund Freud for patronizing women is a bit like arresting someone today for having driven without a seat belt in 1923 or in centuries past. And yet the temptation to view the past through the lens of the present is nothing short of overwhelming for everyone. There is no ready solution to this, except the ability to live with contradiction and to see everything from the Self’s point of view. This is the mature, knowledge-based response to all things *mithya*.

This brings up the topic of time and of how the mind naturally functions. It is human nature to see life in the context of your own life and experience. We are all “futurists” in this regard, and presentism is an even bigger problem when people look forward rather than backwards. Because predictions about the future are made in the present, they are inevitably influenced by the present. The way we feel and think right now exerts an unusually strong influence on the way we think we’ll feel later. Because time is such a slippery concept, we tend to imagine the future as the

present with a twist, thus our imagined tomorrows inevitably look like slightly twisted versions of today. The reality of the moment is so palpable and powerful that it holds imagination in a tight orbit from which it never fully escapes. Such is the power of *Maya*!

Brenton: What you say makes sense re the *rishis* of old, and of today too and human evolution in general. And of course the scriptures stand alone and remain unblemished. But my God, what humankind has not thought up as strange and disturbing ideas, while you would think we could just live a simple life and enjoy this beautiful world, *mithya* as it may be.

And still – I do have a lingering thought that says, “When *ahimsa* is the number-one value, how could they embrace violence towards women? (Not to mention the practice of *sati*.) But no need to respond, I’ll just sit with that one.

Sundari: I respond because your doubt is actually an important one in the evolution of your Self-inquiry. It relates to accepting that *Isvara* is both *dharma* and *adharma*, which is a difficult shift for most inquirers. It is the final stage of devotion, when you see that all is perfect the way it is because it cannot be any other way, *mithya* being what it is. All gods and men have feet of clay.

It does seem strange that humans cannot simply enjoy life without doing harm, but remember, nobody is actually doing or thinking anything. All ideas are not the result of humankind’s propensity for good or bad but the result of the way the *gunas* work. As you know, they must have the ability to work from one end of the spectrum to the opposite for the game of duality to function. If they did not, there would be no field for *jivas* to work out “their” *karma*. “Humans” are just the puppets who play out the forces of knowledge and ignorance, endlessly. One can only look at the Field with compassion for all, the injurers and the injured. *Maya* is very difficult to understand fully; one must just keep in mind that none of it is real. The only way to live with the seeming injustice is to step out of *Maya* as the Self.

Big hugs!

~ Much love, Sundari