

An Interview with James on Vedanta

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Neo-Advaita, the Practice of Self-Knowledge, the Real and the Apparent

Interviewer: In your talk at the Science and Nonduality Conference, you said that the words “Advaita” and “Vedanta” don’t really go together. So could you define precisely what they mean?

James: *Advaita* means “non-dual.” It’s an adjective that describes consciousness. The only thing that is non-dual is consciousness.

“Vedanta” means “the knowledge that ends the search for knowledge.” This knowledge is enshrined at the end of each of the four *Vedas*. Once you have this knowledge you don’t need to know anything else ever again. It refers to knowledge of yourself as awareness. It does not mean that you know every fact in existence.

Vedanta is a *pramana*, a means of knowledge. Because knowledge doesn’t happen on its own, it requires a means. The self is not going to be known by the ordinary means that we have by our senses, mind and intellect, because they need objects. But the self is not available for objectification.

So the means at our disposal is unsuitable and therefore Vedanta has evolved. It removes ignorance about the nature of the self. It destroys the beliefs and opinions and ideas that you have about yourself that stand in the way of appreciating who you truly are.

Interviewer: Ramana Maharshi likens knowledge to a stick that stirs the funeral pyre, and once the self is understood you throw the stick in as well.

James: Yes, that’s right. Vedanta is a throwaway. Once the self is known for what it is, you do not need to know it again. You cannot forget it because the self is always present. It is not an object to be remembered, like an experience. You can forget something that is not present, but once you know the self you cannot forget it, because it is you. Try to forget you. It is impossible.

Interviewer: So the apparent self embarks upon a spiritual journey, uses the knowledge to reach a point of understanding and then it’s over.

James: That’s right. The *mantra* that people are chanting everyday is, “I am small, I am inadequate, I am incomplete, I am separate.” It is a steady drone in the back of their minds all the time. This is how they think and this is the point of view from which they are thinking.

Those thoughts need to be neutralized because they are not in harmony with the nature of reality.

This method of teaching is called *pratipaksha bhavana*, which means “applying the opposite thought.” It’s called inquiry but you are not asking a question like “who am I?,” you are seeing what kind of thought is in your mind – the thought behind your thoughts and neutralizing it with the truth. The same thought is always in the mind: “There’s something wrong with me, I am missing something, something is lacking, I need something.” It is not true. You don’t need anything. Nothing is missing.

Shankara calls it the *jnanabyasa*, which means “the application or the practice of knowledge,” and it requires a certain degree of faith. It is why faith and devotion are qualifications for enlightenment. Even though I don’t feel that I am whole and complete, I have to fake it till I make it! I have to pretend that I am what I am. It sounds ridiculous, but it works.

Interviewer: Assume a virtue if I have it not...

James: Yes. I have to assume that this is true, then I have to operate from that assumption and see if reality does or doesn’t confirm the truth because when I start thinking like this, when I start seeing myself in this way, I suddenly see a transformation in my life, things start to turn around, and I get this confirmation over and over again from my experiences, from the people around me.

Interviewer: Why is it there this inherent paradox that only a few embark upon the path to self-knowledge? It’s ludicrous!

James: Yes, it is ludicrous from the point of view of the intellect, but it’s not really a legitimate question, because the one who is asking it is a product of self-ignorance. It’s like flashlight bulb saying, “I’d like to know what electricity is, why am I shining and where is my light coming from.” It can’t know, because it is a gross transformation of a subtler energy, and a gross thing cannot understand something subtler.

“How” ignorance works we can say is legitimate to question. But there’s no actual “why” to this, because the one who wants the answer is incapable of understanding that he or she is awareness.

When you see that you are awareness, the idea of asking “why” doesn’t come up. “How” is relevant because it is a process we can describe and indicate. It is subject to analysis and investigation.

Interviewer: But there’s no “why.” It is just the nature of the Absolute.

James: There’s diversity in the unity. That’s the paradox.

Yeah, in *maya* everything is a paradox, it’s a zero-sum game. It’s all set up to frustrate you completely.

Interviewer: In a way, it’s like very advanced mathematics: the paradox is an exquisite

arrangement.

James: Absolutely. It's totally conscious, it's total purposeful, it's aesthetic and it's humorous. How can something that doesn't have a problem imagine that it has a problem, create a whole universe in order to solve its own problem and get out of it again – ha!

Interviewer: But it's the *jivas* that have the problems because of their self-ignorance?

James: There are no *jivas* apart from awareness, so awareness under the spell of apparent ignorance imagines that it has a problem. The ignorance is apparent and the knowledge is also apparent. The knowledge of Vedanta is an apparent knowledge because it operates only in *maya* and it's only useful until it's solved its problem. And then we throw in the stick, we throw the knowledge away. I don't need the knowledge, because it has already neutralized the ignorance.

Interviewer: You are giving the *jiva* some kind of independent existence.

But to say that awareness has a problem, to me, is like saying *brahman* has a problem. But *brahman* doesn't have a problem, because *brahman* just is.

James: Yes, but if there is a problem, then only *brahman* could have that problem because there is only *brahman*, so what kind of a problem is it? It's not a real problem, it's only an apparent problem.

In other words, the problem is all *mithya* (apparent), it is not *satya* (real).

When *brahman* (consciousness) associates with *maya* (ignorance) it seems to become a *jiva*, an individual. *Panchadasi* and other texts are very clear about this. The *jiva*, the individual, is *brahman*, or consciousness, with a gross, subtle and causal body, i.e. ignorance. And that's what makes *brahman* seem to be an individual when in fact it is not an individual.

This is a linguistic problem, two different words referring to the same thing. You can't have a problem if there is only *brahman*. If there is a *jiva*, it would have to be *brahman*. *Jiva* would have to be another word for *brahman*. But if *jiva* is different from *brahman* you have a problem. It contradicts non-duality.

So Vedanta says it is an apparent problem that belongs to ignorance and can be removed by inquiry. If it's a real problem, then we've got a situation where *brahman*, which is limitless, and *jiva*, which is limited, have the same degree of reality. How would we determine which is real? When ignorance enters the picture one thing seems to be two different things.

Interviewer: This brings me to Neo-Advaita... As I understand it, Neo-Advaita says I don't exist, all is One, there is no separate self. This is opposed to traditional Advaita Vedanta teaching that says there is an apparent self, all is apparent diversity, there is an apparent separate self. Neo-Advaita seems to miss that paradoxical subtlety. So I just wonder how it is that Neo-Advaita is flourishing so much.

James: Well, that's because they want an easy path. What Neo-Advaita doesn't have is *sadhanas*. It has no *guru*, no teaching, no teacher, even though these guys are functioning as teachers, disseminating ignorance. There's no way you can get from where you are to *brahman*. There's no path.

Vedanta is a complete path and provisionally accepts you as an individual and then it gradually, slowly, works you out of the problem of limitation, showing you as you go along what the self is, what ignorance is.

Enlightenment in Vedanta is called *atma-anatma viveka* and it means "discrimination between the self and the apparent self."

So I need to get that very clear what the "not-self" is and what I can do in this relative apparent reality to get the kind of mind that's capable of appreciating the fact that I am awareness.

There's no way the Neos can get their minds prepared for enlightenment, so they just have to believe it on the basis of faith.

Interviewer: So Neo-Advaita is a faith?

James: Yes, it's pure religion. These guys are the latest religious snake oil salesmen. And these people want to believe and belief is easy, until you start thinking. Once you start thinking, it screws up your beliefs.

The bloom is off the Neo-Advaita rose. I am getting a lot of people who realize how hollow it is and are coming back to the traditional teachings.

Interviewer: So the understanding that there is only *brahman* only comes when the mind is ripe to understand it. What Neo-Advaita teachers are doing is taking people straight off the street and giving them the final teaching in a McDonald's Happy Meal, when in fact they're not prepared.

James: Absolutely, instant enlightenment, yes! "I'm not really here, I'm just playing in the *maya*, nothing is really real, that's why I am robbing you and cheating you and telling you all sorts of stories!"

In Vedanta, we have a concept called *adhikara* which means "qualification." The way that these qualifications were arrived at was by looking at enlightened people because all enlightened people basically have the same kind of nature and qualities in their minds: discrimination, dispassion, clarity of mind, devotion, forbearance and so forth and so on. If you do not have these qualities, enlightenment will not be within your reach. Once you have developed them, then you are ready to be taught.

In Vedanta, you just don't get the teaching until you are qualified. For the people who are not qualified, who can't get it, we teach them *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, the *three-guna yoga*, etc. which are subsets of Vedanta, and we also teach them how to use their minds properly and how to meditate until their minds become clear.

If you look at the *Bhagavad Gita*, for example, the chapters up until Chapter VI are basically about *karma yoga*, although in the second chapter the self is also presented.

Arjuna doesn't get the "self" teaching, because he's not qualified; he's *rajasic*, an extrovert, so he needs *karma yoga*. Once he has understood *karma yoga*, he is ready for more, for meditation and self-knowledge.

You cannot just walk in off the street and "get it" as they advertise. They call it *satsanga* (keeping the company of truth) but it's all about the *sanga* and not about the *sat*, although they talk a lot about it. It's talk about it, it's not the self talking. It's all a feel-good thing. They get high on the group energy and perhaps some herbs. It produces a lovely kind of intoxicating feeling which they imagine is spiritual. It's a nice social event, you get your long, attenuated hugs with the other people who are there, perhaps you get the phone number of a cute girl or guy, and well, it's so cool...

Interviewer: You said earlier in your talk today at the SAND Conference that Vedanta is the one and only system that provides everything you need for knowledge. What about the mystical paths? For example, Sufism, Gnosticism, the Kabbalah: are they just as profound?

James: I don't think I said "only." Vedanta is not profound and it's not mystical. It's purely common sense, logic and reason, direct experience and investigation. The thing about Vedanta is that it has a complete cosmology, a psychology, there's a complete description of the self plus there are methods that you can use to transform your mind to make it meditation-worthy, to make it qualified for knowledge. I don't see that in other traditions. I see they only have bits and pieces of it.

Interviewer: So you're saying Vedanta is the complete toolbox for self-knowledge.

James: Yes. It's called *Brahma vidya*, which has several meanings, but one of them is "the science of *brahman*."

Interviewer: So it is something that you can trust.

James: Absolutely. And it's been confirmed over and over again and it's never changed. These teachings have never changed and these methods have never changed. They remain true to the tradition forever because it is the truth and it works.

Interviewer: Some people, I find, who are interested in non-duality, even in the traditional teachings themselves, will say that any kind of teaching regarding the order of the creation, the nature of the mind, is somehow unimportant; in light of the fact that the apparent knowledge must be sublated or dissolved or let go in order to understand that everything is *brahman*, what is the point, ultimately, in devoting so much time to such knowledge?

James: It's true from the self's point of view, from awareness's point of view, that there is no creation. It's called *ajatawada*, non-creationism. Everything is the self and the unborn, therefore there is no creation.

But who understands it that way? Who actually gets that?

But if people who find themselves here in the creation, as *jivas*, as individuals with lives, bodies, minds and problems, and want to grow toward that understanding, they first need to understand their milieu, the environment in which they find themselves, and see how they relate to it.

And *Isvara*, or God, is a name for the rules, laws and forces that are operating in the field and the one who operates these laws. There is the field of existence, and the knower of the field is consciousness.

Interviewer: The *jnani* knows that *brahman* is *samsara* and *samsara* is *brahman*, *satyam* is *mithya* and *mithya* is *satyam*.

James: Right. But this highlights the problem with Neo-Advaita. They intellectually understand that that all is *brahman* and yet they dismiss the field of existence before they even know in what sense it is *brahman*, so they continue to behave exactly like the fools they were before they got the knowledge of *brahman*. So you've got to ask, what kind of knowledge of *brahman* is it?

You know, the proof of the pudding is in the eating. It's how you live, it doesn't matter what you say. You know whether a desire or a fear is motivating you. If you know it's all *brahman*, and that you're *brahman*, you're not motivated by desires and fears, you stand apart from them.

The only way you can really tell with those people is not what they say, but how they live.

The tradition teaches what *mithya* is and the tradition teaches what *satya* is. You don't need to do anything about it, you just need to know what they are. Once you are clear about *mithya* and *satya*, then you won't confuse them. Freedom is knowing which is which. Things will continue as they always have. The world is not going to suddenly merge in consciousness, never to be seen again. Nor are you going to end up floating around in some blissful transcendental sky, free of everything.

Interviewer: What comes to mind is Shankara's three statements: *Brahma satyam. Jagat mithya. Jiva brahmaivah naparah.*

"Brahman alone is real. The world is an apparent reality. The individual and awareness are one, or the individual is limitless awareness."

James: *Brahma* is the truth. It is awareness. It is what's real, true, always here and always present. *Jagat*, the world, is apparent. It looks real, it's a very convincing dream, and *Isvara* has created such a really cool dream that you can easily mistake it for reality. But it is only an apparent reality. You need to investigate and contemplate the meaning of these words, and then you can see though it.

Interviewer: And what do you come to, arrive at? What is the answer to the ultimate question: Who am I?

James: You arrive at the understanding that nothing is missing in you, that you are not lacking in any way, you see?

All this seeking is based upon the idea that something is missing.

Interviewer: That ache that never seems to go away?

James: Exactly. And what you discover is that ache, that longing, that searching, is not valid. You see that nothing is missing.

As Swami Dayananda says, you are whole and complete. "*Purna*" is the word in the *Vedas*.

And therefore my getting and keeping are no longer relevant to me. I am not hanging onto anything, and I'm not trying to obtain anything. However it is fine with me.

I feel adequate to deal with whatever is happening because I am awareness and awareness can handle anything. Nothing can affect me and I know this for certain, not because I am a person who knows that I am awareness, but because I am awareness.

If it's a person who knows that they are awareness, that's a little different situation. You could call that self-realization or something. But there is still someone there who has a conviction that they are awareness.

But at a certain point, that conviction dissolves into the hard and fast understanding that "I am awareness" and then there's no more discussion about it at all. And then it's just "I AM."

Interviewer: I know Ramana Maharshi talks about two very distinct points; there's an initial point where there is "self-realisation" but the *vasanas* are still active; then there's another point where the *vasanas* have burnt out and there is only "I AM."

James: Absolutely. And you no longer assume the point of view of a *jiva*, or an individual. The tension has gone.

One of the great gods in India is called Sri Ram and he appears as a deity with his bow; the bow is always unstrung, the bow being a symbol of the *jiva*, the ego.

And why doesn't it have any string on it? Because there's no tension in it! He's totally free of tension and that's the meaning of that symbol. The tension is born of the belief that "I am limited and incomplete, and I'm in relationship to this world and I've got to negotiate my way through, avoiding this and gaining that," which basically wears you out and doesn't provide you with any real peace.