

# Damned by Devotional Dualists

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**Aleksander:** Hi, Ted. I hope you are all right; it is nice to get back in touch with you.

I just came back from my two-week visit to ISKCON [International Society for Krishna Consciousness] farm community on the beautiful small lake island where the deer and peacocks roam freely, where *prasadam* is sumptuous and where there is a strict routine and observance of Vedic codes and regulations.

My main reason for this visit was all the signs and signals telling me to go through this experience for the purpose of developing and building up devotion and humility.

**Ted:** I remember you deliberating quite a bit over the decision to make this visit. At the time it sounded like you were deciding to move away from your familiar surroundings in order to get away from people and an environment that were unsupportive of your *sadhana* (i.e. spiritual practice). Your present comment concerning the true motivation being to develop and build up devotion and humility, however, sheds new light on your decision. It is important to bear in mind that while devotion and humility are necessary qualifications for successful self-inquiry and Vedanta prescribes various methods of spiritual practice (i.e. *yogas*) that help one withdraw the mind from “external” distractions, i.e. thoughts, feelings and sensory experiences, and redirect its focus “within,” or toward the ever-present witnessing awareness in whose scope all objects appear, as a means of cultivating these qualities and generally purifying the mind in order to prepare it for the assimilation of self-knowledge, in a larger sense devotion and humility cannot be established within one’s being through an act of will. In fact the attempt to impose these qualities upon one’s nature is in one sense the antithesis of the qualities themselves. Though devotion is often perceived as a form of emotionally-charged supplication, Vedanta teaches that it is actually a matter of knowledge. True devotion is rooted in the understanding that the essence of all form, both subtle and gross, is awareness and that the entire apparent reality is governed by an impersonal code of physical, psychological and moral law (i.e. *dharma*) that is personified as *Isvara*, or God the Creator. Realizing that the universe is fundamentally benign and that *dharmic* law/*Isvara*/God is taking care of the creation according to what is in the best interests of the whole, one naturally honors the presence of God in all situations, circumstances, conditions and encounters with humility and an attitude of glad acceptance. Devotion and humility, therefore, are not objects that the individual person identified as Aleksander has or can acquire inasmuch as aspects of your true nature as pure awareness that manifest through Aleksander’s attitudes and actions in moments, which occur with ever-increasing regularity as he “progresses” on the spiritual path, when you realize your true identity as whole and complete, limitless, all-pervasive, non-dual awareness. When you understand that you are the only being that is you will rest in your natural humility, for you will know that there is no other compared to whom you can be better, and you will love yourself unconditionally (i.e. direct your full attention “toward” yourself at all times and embrace yourself with complete acceptance), for you will know the non-dual truth that is the essence of love. The point here is that since God is present throughout every aspect of the creation, and the self is the substratum of both existence and non-existence, it is not necessary that one seek out particularly challenging or otherwise conducive circumstances in

which to specifically cultivate the qualities of devotion and humility. Once knowledge is assimilated, its application in any and all circumstances is a naturally humble expression of devotion or love.

**Aleksander:** I am quite easygoing, and was willing to adjust to the rules of the *ashram*, but I was first taken aback by the super-strict rules of cleanliness, and then soon I was flabbergasted by the probing and diminutive attitude towards all the so-called impersonalist and nihilistic philosophies. I never heard the words “*mayavadis*,” “rascals” and “contaminate” being so frequently used, in many cases in the same sentence. Even though I never professed my *advaita* views, they quickly caught it in my expressions, terminology and the like. It all seems like there is huge and open opposition towards the philosophy of Shankara, going so far as to say, “These rascals who are claiming that they are the same as God are taking along all their followers to hell, and they are the worst kind, worse than nihilists, Buddhists and atheists.” That is a paraphrase, but not exaggerated.

**Ted:** It sounds like the same brand of fear-based judgment that characterizes the worst religious fundamentalists of any tradition, always this threat of eternal damnation or at least a slow roasting in the fires of hell. And for what? Recognizing the very omnipresent nature of God that is described in the very scriptures they so vehemently defend as being the authoritative word of God. It is all so nonsensically ironic.

Perhaps this *tamasic* (i.e. dull, dense, dim-witted) approach to spirituality is the result of a fundamental error regarding Vedanta that is voiced in this paragraph. I don't know if it is the ISKONers' mistake or your own, but it needs to be cleared up in order that you can proceed with confidence in your practice of self-inquiry.

Vedanta is not a philosophy...

...much less the philosophy of Shankara.

A philosophy is a theoretical postulate that is cooked up by human beings. In other words, it is their best guess about the nature of the given subject matter, which they then attempt justify through elaborate argumentation as well as trial and error. Vedanta, however, is revealed wisdom that comes directly from the self, or absolute awareness, and was “seen” or “heard” by the ancient *rishis* (i.e. spiritual seekers) as the result of thorough and conscientious inquiry into the nature of experience. Rather than being based on a particular person's concept, belief or discrete experience Vedanta is the distillation of the experience-based testimony of hundreds or even thousands of self-realized beings over a long period of time. It has been stripped of all extraneous personal bias and experiential criteria, and stands with inviolable strength as the essential self-knowledge that removes one's ignorance and liberates one from the seemingly interminable cycle of *samsara* (i.e. the ever-repeating succession of birth and death, joy and sorrow, desire and fear that characterizes the dualistic apparent reality). Vedanta is, therefore, not something in which to believe, but rather a scientific investigation based upon the logic of one's own experience to reveal the truth about the essential nature of the individual, the universe and the absolute as well as the relationship of each to the others and the underlying identity of all three.

And as far as Shankara is concerned, though his genius served as a guiding light within the

context of the teaching tradition of Vedanta and was the vehicle for clarifying the teachings in a way that basically resolved all apparent contradictions and eradicated all erroneous interpretations, even he himself said that none of the teachings were his and that he was only a link in the chain of the *sampradaya* (i.e. teaching tradition).

**Aleksander:** I have painted a dark picture. However, they are loving and kind monks residing there, desiring to reach the same goal, that of liberation, but for them it does not stop there; pure *bhakti* is already liberation, they want to reach the abode of spiritual *Vrindavan* or *Vaikunta*, sporting with Krishna Himself.

**Ted:** The ISKCONers are basically a group of *bhaktas* (i.e. devotional worshipers). Good for them. *Bhakti*, however, is not a viable means of liberation, sorry to say, for the simple reason that in order to practice *bhakti* one must maintain a dualistic vision. One worships an object that represents the awareness that is the essential nature of existence, but almost invariably the deity worshiped, Krishna in the case of the ISKCONers, is seen as an entity separate from and superior to oneself.

While this practice is a valid method of transforming one's emotion into devotion as well as withdrawing one's attention from worldly concerns and craving and redirecting it toward a "higher" purpose, unless it is complemented with self-inquiry and the assimilation of self-knowledge the essential sense of separation from one's chosen deity that characterizes it only serves to solidify one's sense of smallness, inadequacy and incompleteness.

**Aleksander:** Besides that, *japa mantra* does great job of stabilizing the mind and focusing it on the Lord.

**Ted:** Admittedly, *japa mantra* (i.e. *mantra* repetition) is one of the classic methods of purifying the mind and preparing it for the assimilation of self-knowledge. As such it is an indirect means of self-realization. The direct means, however, as stated by scripture is knowledge.

**Aleksander:** I heard Ram mentioning dualists on few occasions, but just briefly, what is your understanding of that?

**Ted:** Refer to my comments on the perspective that characterizes the *bhakti* path.

**Aleksander:** Can you comment on this different view of the same scriptures (i.e. *Bhagavad Gita*, *Vedas* and *Upanishads*), and can you tell me little bit about the *paramparas*, which they say is of utmost importance for the pure transfer of teachings?

**Ted:** First of all, understand that the *Vedas* basically consist of two sections. The section that constitutes the major portion (at least three quarters) of the *Vedas* is called the *karma kanda*. This is the section in which are described all the rituals through which one can fulfill all of one's

worldly needs and desires. Quite obviously, this section is rooted in a dualistic view of reality.

The second section of the *Vedas*, which accounts for at most only a quarter of the total scripture, is called the *jnana kanda*. This is the section in which is revealed the underlying truth concerning the non-dual nature of existence.

These scriptures are also referred to as the *Upanishads*.

The *Bhagavad Gita* is basically an exhaustive encapsulation of the essential teachings of the *Upanishads* delivered by a personification of pure awareness in the form of Lord Krishna to his devoted disciple Arjuna.

Any dualistic interpretation of the *Upanishads* is baffling, given the *mahavakyas* (i.e. great statements) that express the essential message of the scriptures and the quintessence of Vedanta. The four best-known and most important *mahavakyas* are the following:

1. *Prajnanam Brahma* – “Consciousness is *brahman*.” ~ *Aitareya Upanishad, Rig Veda*
2. *Tat Tvam Asi* – “That thou art.” ~ *Chandogya Upanishad, Sama Veda*
3. *Ayam Atma Brahma* – “This self (*atman*) is *brahman*.” ~ *Mandukya Upanishad, Atharva Veda*
4. *Aham Brahma Asmi* – “I am *brahman*.” ~ *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, Yajur Veda*

Each of these *mantras* is a *mantra* of identity rather than supplication. Each equates the individual and the absolute.

*Prajnanam Brahma* (“Consciousness is *brahman*.”) declares that the consciousness, or awareness, that illumines the three-bodied mechanism of the universe and thereby enlivens the individual person is the absolute, or *brahman*. In other words, the same singular awareness is the substratum of both the microcosm and the macrocosm. Just as the same electricity powers a light bulb, a fan, a heater, a microwave oven, a computer, an MP3 player and countless other electrical devices, so the same one consciousness not only illumines the innumerable components of the apparent reality but also constitutes the very fabric out of which it is made.

Moreover, the moniker “*Brahman*” comes from the Sanskrit root “*brih*,” which means “to expand” or “greater than the greatest.” Hence *Brahman* denotes the limitless, all-pervasive, non-dual awareness that is the essential nature of existence. Since reality is secondless, the individual and the absolute are one.

*Tat tvam asi* (“That thou art.”) employs the equation of two pronouns to convey its profound meaning. “That” is *brahman*, pure awareness, “thou” is *jivatman*, the apparent individual person. This *mantra* unequivocally states that the two, *brahman* and *atman*, are identical.

*Ayam Atma Brahma* (“This self [*atman*] is *brahman*.”) asserts the same essential singularity of *atman* and *brahman* as “*Tat tvam asi*” by means of slightly more precise terminology. The word “*ayam*” means “this” and signifies the self-effulgent awareness that is the substratum of the five sheaths, or bodies, that comprise the apparent individual person and which constitutes the true self. This self is the very same *brahman* that illumines and enlivens the entire apparent reality.

*Aham Brahma Asmi* (“I am *brahman*.”) is the most powerful declaration of the essential non-dual nature of reality, because it is made from the perspective of pure awareness itself. This *mantra*

reflects the full assimilation of self-knowledge. The word “*aham*” means “I” and refers to the pure self within, not the limited apparent individual person. This “I” is the same as the absolute *brahman* that is limitless, all-pervading, non-dual awareness.

Though these *mahavakyas* express the non-dual nature of reality with crystalline clarity, the *Upanishads* do contain other references to the truth that upon first glance are admittedly not quite as transparent. Because absolute awareness is attributeless and therefore cannot be objectified, it is difficult, if not impossible, to express with words, which are essentially sound symbols that represent inherently limited concepts and are thus fundamentally incapable of conveying limitlessness. Words can only point to pure awareness. For this reason, figurative language is often employed as a means of describing awareness and explicating/illustrating “its” relationship to the apparent reality. Examples of such are the following:

1. “*Om* is the bow; the *atman* is the arrow; *Brahman* is said to be the mark. It is to be struck by an undistracted mind. Then the *atman* becomes one with *Brahman*, as the arrow with the target.” ~ *Mundaka Upanishad*, M.2, Chapter II, verse 4
  2. “When the seer beholds the self-luminous Creator, the Lord, the *Purusha*, the progenitor of *Brahma*, then he, the wise seer, shakes off good and evil, becomes stainless and reaches the supreme unity.” ~ *Mundaka Upanishad*, M.3, Chapter I, verse 3
  3. “The fifteen parts go back to their causes, and all the senses to their deities; the actions, and the *atman* reflected in the *buddhi*, become one with the highest imperishable *Brahman*, which is the Self of all. As flowing rivers disappear in the sea, losing their names and forms, so a wise man, freed from name and form, attains the *Purusha*, who is greater than the Great.
- “He who knows the Supreme *Brahman* verily becomes *Brahman*. In his family no one is born ignorant of *Brahman*. He overcomes grief; he overcomes evil; free from the fetters of the heart, he becomes immortal.” ~ *Mundaka Upanishad*, M.3, Chapter II, verses 7 to 9
4. “As gold covered by earth shines bright after it has been purified, so also the *yogi*, realising the truth of *Atman*, becomes one with the non-dual *Atman*, attains the goal and is free from grief.” ~ *Svetashvatara Upanishad*, Chapter II, verse 14
  5. “In this universe the Swan, the Supreme Self, alone exists. It is He who, as fire, abides in the water. Only by knowing Him does one pass over death; there is no other way to reach the Supreme Goal.” ~ *Svetashvatara Upanishad*, Chapter VI, verse 15
  6. “Beyond the senses is the mind, beyond the mind is the intellect, higher than the intellect is the Great *Atman*, higher than the Great *Atman* is the Unmanifest. Beyond the Unmanifest is the Person, all-pervading and imperceptible. Having realised Him, the embodied self becomes liberated and attains Immortality.” ~ *Katha Upanishad*, Chapter III, verses 7 to 8

Repeatedly throughout the *Upanishads* there are references made to the seeker attaining, reaching, becoming and merging with *Brahman*, the Supreme Self, the Unmanifest, the *Purusha* and various other names denoting pure awareness. In all cases, however, such references to experiential achievement should be understood as figurative representations of the attainment of self-knowledge. Any reasonable consideration of the context in which such experiential imagery is used and to what end leads to the inevitable conclusion that knowledge is the only means by which ignorance can be removed and that understanding is the essence of permanent liberation.

As is stated in the *Mundaka Upanishad*, “He who knows the Supreme *Brahman* verily becomes *Brahman*,” and in the *Svetashvatara Upanishad*, “Only by knowing Him does one pass over death; there is no other way to reach the Supreme Goal.”

While figurative language and comparative imagery can be effective in pointing to the ineffable nature of reality, the figurative language used in scripture has often been misinterpreted as testifying to a separation between the individual (i.e. *atman*) and the absolute (i.e. *brahman*). Beyond the obvious duality that characterizes any comparison of objects, the chief means through which this erroneous concept of separation is expressed is what we might call the “language of experience” whereby it is implied that the apparently separate individual person must somehow merge or unite or yoke himself or herself to the absolute pure awareness, which is characterized as some sort of “Supreme, All-Powerful, All-Knowing, All-Pervasive Person,” or attain and thereafter sustain some discrete experiential state of perpetual grins and smiles and giggles and laughs. The latter is basically the experiential state of bliss in which the ISKCONERS hope to establish themselves while they rock out with Krishna, “live in *Vaikuntha*.”

Quite simply, this whole issue boils down to the question, who is that knows all this the apparent separation, the means of knowledge, the devotion, etc?

That ever-present, non-dual awareness is the absolute *brahman* that pervades and is thus identical with the entire apparent reality, including the apparent individual person. Provided one is qualified to assimilate self-knowledge, self-inquiry, which is the conscientious investigation of the nature of existence using the logic of one’s own experience rather than the blind acceptance of faith-based assertions rooted in *tamasic* emotions such as fear and guilt, proves the identity of the individual and the absolute awareness beyond the shadow of a doubt.

Regarding the *paramparas* (i.e. the teaching tradition, or lineage of *gurus*, that extends back to time immemorial), the ISKCONERS’ reverence for the teaching tradition seems self-contradictory. If sheer devotion is all that is necessary for the highest attainment, which is apparently sporting with Krishna in some heavenly realm, then what knowledge need be taught and why is a teacher necessary?

According to Vedanta, self-realization is not defined by a particular state of experiential joy that can be induced and permanently sustained by even the most intensely devotional practice, for it is the very nature of experience to constantly and continuously change. Only knowledge can reveal the eternal and immutable truth of one’s being.

Because, as earlier mentioned, Vedanta is revealed wisdom that has been culled from the direct experience of myriad seekers and polished over a long period of time into a purified jewel of knowledge, however, it is not an understanding that can be easily derived from one, two, ten or even hundreds of discrete epiphanies. Though the knowledge of the essential non-dual nature of reality and the inherent identity of the individual and the absolute is available through such epiphanies, it is often not gleaned because the individual, who is as yet under the spell of ignorance, is so overwhelmed by the experience itself that he or she fails to assimilate its message. A person under the spell of ignorance is also not able to accurately decode the often rather enigmatic utterances of the scriptures or properly interpret the figurative language employed in them as a means of illustrating points vital to a sound understanding of the self. For these reasons a qualified teacher is invaluable in guiding one through the process of self-inquiry and unfolding the teachings in a way that makes them accessible to a degree that effectively removes the student’s ignorance and facilitates his or her assimilation of self-knowledge rather

than leaving one lurching through a woodland of mere intellectual understanding or, even worse, a forest of blind faith.

Vedanta would therefore agree that the validity of the teaching tradition and the legitimacy of its teachers is of utmost importance, but the reason for this is rooted in the fact that self-realization is a matter of knowledge rather than experience.

**Aleksander:** Thank you dearly.

~ With love, Aleksander

**Ted:** Love to you as well, my friend.