

Discrimination Is the Determining Factor

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Brent: Hello, Ted. Thank you for your thoroughness and swiftness. It's really invaluable to have someone to talk to about this, and I really appreciate you taking your time to respond, on top of job, family(?) and whatever else you have in your life at present.

The "path" of Vedanta is becoming ever clearer as I discuss and inquire about it with those in the know. As I continue to study it and as your answers reflect, the varying and at times contradictory views found within Vedantic literature and post-Vedanta philosophy attempting to reconcile and explain it all seem to entirely be missing the point.

Ted: I know what you mean when you say "post-Vedanta" but be clear that there is no such thing as post-Vedanta. Vedanta is the means of knowledge that reveals the true nature of existence. It's not a fad that will one day go out of vogue. Actually, any means of knowledge that reveals the vision of non-duality is technically Vedanta. The teachings of Vedanta, though associated with the scriptural texts called the *Vedas*, deals with timeless and place-less truth. It is not Indian philosophy. It is the essential reality of all human beings, and all that is, for that matter. When people "see," or know, the truth what they see or know is what Vedanta reveals whether they call it Vedanta or not.

Brent: I continued reading Krishnananda's commentary on some of the *Upanishads* (I have a lot of free time on my hands, thankfully) and it seems that rather than presenting a discrete set of philosophical tenets the teaching is more a way of exploring, through pointers, the seeker's own experience to guide the them to a recognition of the self. What I wondered then was why no teacher has actually come out and said this!

Ted: Actually, this is not the case. I don't know how Krishnananda presents it but Vedanta is a very systematic and logically-structured analysis of existence. It begins with an analysis of human motivations (*purushartas*), or what we want out of life and how we go about trying to get it, and proceeds from there through a series of further inquiries to explore (1) why we remain repeatedly unfulfilled by our pursuit of joy through myriad gross and subtle objects, (2) why we need a valid means of knowledge rather than "spiritual" experiences to realize the true nature of the self, or reality, 3) what the nature of the self actually is, 4) the qualifications necessary and various *yogas*, or practices, that will effectively help us cultivate these qualifications and prepare our mind for the assimilation of the knowledge should we not at first grasp it and (5) how to apply the knowledge to our daily experience in order to not only realize but actualize our true nature, i.e. how to live with firm conviction from the understanding of our true nature rather than falling back into the quagmire of our old erroneous belief patterns and wallowing in the muck of ignorance and the inevitable suffering caused by it.

Though the teacher does meet the student at the student's present level of understanding and does employ specific teaching methods (*prakriyas*) to remove the particular doubts arising within

the student at a given time, the overall system of Vedanta is quite coherently organized. It is a complete means of knowledge that proceeds from A to Z and gives one an understanding of both the absolute reality that is the self, or pure awareness, and the apparent reality that is comprised of the innumerable objects both subtle (thoughts and emotions) and gross (physical objects) appearing within it.

Initially, Vedanta shows the student through self-inquiry how to discriminate between what is real, which Vedanta defines as “that which cannot be negated” or “that which never changes,” and what is only apparently real, which Vedanta defines as “that which is dependent upon something else for its existence.” This discrimination is the basis of self-inquiry and ultimately self-knowledge. It is called *atma-anatma-viveka*. *Atma* refers to the self, awareness, or what is real. *Anatma* refers to that which exists but is not real because it changes and is dependent upon awareness for its existence. *Viveka* is discrimination, which in this case is the discrimination between the real and the not-real. It is important to note with regard to this distinction that Vedanta does not deny the existence of the apparent reality. It does exist and is undoubtedly experienced. It simply is not real. The ability to make this discrimination is essentially what sets one free. Once you know who you really are and that you yourself are the fundamental security, the true source of the joy you seek in objects, and that your nature is unconditional love (which is not, not, not something you do or feel, though your actions and emotions will be influenced by your recognition of it, but something you are) then you will no longer be duped into believing that anything “outside” yourself can enhance, diminish or otherwise change you in any essential way. Rather than seeking peace and happiness outside yourself you will cut out the middle man, so to speak, and go directly to the source of joy, which is yourself, not Brent, mind you, but pure awareness. And since the relative cause of suffering is unfulfilled desire (the real cause being ignorance, the belief that one is incomplete and inadequate because of which one’s desires arise), suffering is essentially eradicated because one is never without access to oneself, which in fact need not be “accessed” at all because, quite simply, it is what you are.

Once one knows one’s true identity and can discriminate between what is permanent (and thus real) and what is impermanent (and thus not real, or only apparently real) then one is mature enough to understand the more fundamental truth of non-duality, the simple fact that one is all that is and yet at the same time free of all that is. Though all objects, i.e. everything that exists, is dependent upon me, awareness, for their existence, I as limitless awareness am ever free of all objects. Whether objects appear or do not appear I remain completely unaffected. Whether objects appear or do not appear I always am.

That said, there is a teacher who lays out the whole system in logical order and thoroughly explains it: James Swartz. I don’t want to sound like a huckster here but if you are serious about wanting to undertake a study of Vedanta, engage in the practice of self-inquiry, gain self-knowledge and attain *moksa*, or liberation, then I strongly, strongly, strongly recommend that you purchase a copy of James’ book *How to Attain Enlightenment* (you can get it at *Amazon.com*) and read it cover to cover. If you choose to do this be sure to read the book slowly, chapter by chapter in the order they are presented, and to sign on with the logic of each chapter before moving on to the next. In this way you will subject yourself to the systematic methodology that is Vedanta. Moreover, I recommend you do this before we continue our correspondence. I am not blowing you off when I say this. I thoroughly enjoy our dialogue. But you will find that many of your doubts will be answered in the book, and then we can focus on any particular sticking points that still remain after you have been exposed to the overall teaching. Your familiarity with the book and the fundamental concepts, terms and analogies employed by Vedanta will give us, as

well, a common language that will lend our dialogue added precision and clarity and thus make it ultimately more fruitful with regard to helping you assimilate the teachings and thereby gain self-knowledge and freedom, which after all is the whole point.

Brent: Instead, what Krishnananda went on about was just posing various philosophical explanations about the origins of the universe and then, as soon as introducing them, negating their very truth while also pointing to the omnipresent self.

Ted: I haven't read Krishnananda, but who actually knows about the origin of the universe? Even the Vedantic model, called *panchikaranam*, is only a model. The import of creation theory with regard to Vedanta is to illustrate how pure awareness, *brahman*, the self, i.e. you, pervades every aspect of "creation" and to thereby establish the non-dual nature of existence.

Brent: You also said something about "no suffering." This is a big one for me, being a Buddhist and having a deeply personal interest in this body-mind, but I continue to hear so much conflicting information as to what the actual fruits of enlightenment are. What do you mean by suffering? In Theravadan Buddhism it is quite clear: the arising of greed, hatred or delusion within the mind – these qualities cause what most people define as suffering, or a sense of dissatisfaction and unpleasantness.

Ted: You know what suffering is. Suffering is the same for everyone, Buddhist, Hindu, Christian, Muslim or whatever. There is a difference, however, between the Buddhist and the Vedantic approach to suffering.

Buddhists believe that desire or craving is the fundamental cause of suffering and therefore focus on removing all desires or cravings. For this reason Buddhists become preoccupied with ethical behavior, mental purity and making the world a better place and focus primarily on practices through which they can cultivate these traits and contribute to the betterment of the world. And while such a focus does sound righteous and is highly lauded in the spiritual world, it nevertheless has a fundamental flaw that interferes with the understanding of the true nature of reality and ultimately stands in the way of liberation. Placing so much focus on the individual's predicament, condition and improvement only serves to reinforce the idea that the individual is real. In this way the individual never gets free, for no matter how virtuous one becomes there is always room for improvement.

Vedantins agree that desire or craving causes suffering but disagrees with the notion that desire or craving is its fundamental cause. Vedanta points out that desire is the result of ignorance and therefore ignorance is the true culprit. For the reasons I previously mentioned, once one knows one's true nature one will no longer be troubled by "binding" desires. Vedanta asserts that desire is part of human nature and will never fully abate and moreover, that there is nothing fundamentally wrong with desire itself. In fact we would not survive without desire. Desire only becomes a problem when we are bound by it, when its demands become commands that we are compelled to obey, sometimes even in lieu of our better judgment. Vedanta therefore places its emphasis not on self-improvement but on self-knowledge. Knowledge, not action, removes ignorance. And it is only once ignorance has been removed that the problem will be solved. Self-knowledge neutralizes one's binding desires and, moreover, by means of the discrimination

between the real and the not-real eradicates one's sense of doership, for no unreal entity can actually be executing action. Only when such knowledge has dawned will one's innate freedom be recognized. Then everything else will naturally fall into place. Hence according to Vedanta liberation is not for the individual but from the individual. This doesn't excuse *adharmic*, or immoral, behavior or alleviate one's responsibilities but simply frees one from the feeling that one is bound to it and limited by it. Hence one can continue to play one's role in the grand cinematic extravaganza, the three-dimensional kaleidoscopic hologram presented in "sense-surround" that constitutes the apparent reality, while simultaneously enjoying one's innate freedom as whole and complete, limitless, actionless, ordinary, unborn, ever-present, all-pervasive, non-dual awareness.

Again, read the book and all will be revealed.

Brent: Thank you again for your time and thoughts.

Ted: All the best to you, my friend.