

# Freedom: Understanding Awareness, the Individual and the Total

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Discriminating you, awareness, from your individuality (*jiva*) and the field of life (*Isvara*) is Vedanta's most subtle teaching. It is hard to grasp. Understanding it is freedom (*moksa*). Here is the key to understanding how you as awareness relate to the individual you are accustomed to think you are and the world around you. It is a description of *maya*, beautiful, intelligent ignorance.

Reality, though one, is comprised of three factors: (1) An apparent person, or *jiva*, the "small self," or subtle body. It is an experiencing entity. (2) A causal body produced by *maya*, macrocosmic ignorance. *Maya* is also known as *Isvara*, the power that creates the *dharma* field. The *dharma* field is pure awareness associated with *maya*. *Isvara* creates the experiencing entities and what they experience. Vedanta refers to *Isvara* as the "Unmanifest" because it cannot be experienced. It is known by inference. (3) The knower of both: pure awareness, the self.

Both the *jiva* and *Isvara* enjoy the same identity as awareness, and on inquiry dissolve into awareness because they are impermanent. Awareness cannot be dismissed because it is "permanent." Permanent and impermanent are not actually good words because they imply duality and seemingly set the experiencers apart from the objects of experience. But we need these words and others like them to set up the discrimination that brings about *moksa*, freedom. Awareness is always prior to and free of the *jiva* and *Isvara*, the subtle and the causal bodies. Therefore there is really only one self, or awareness, free of all objects, from which everything arises and into which everything dissolves.

Here is a verse that establishes these three factors from Chapter VI, Verse 17 of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

"Two selves, one perishable and the other imperishable, exist in the world. The conscious beings and matter are perishable, the Unmanifest is imperishable. But other than these is the Self beyond the selves, the limitless, changeless Awareness that has entered the three worlds and sustains them. Therefore I am renowned as the Supreme Being. If you know me in this way you become a knower of everything, the Self of All."

This means the apparent self, or *jiva* (the self under the spell of ignorance), is not real because it is not always present (think deep sleep) and is always changing. Although it appears to be conscious the apparent self is not actually conscious; it is modified by *maya*/ignorance and is perishable because its lifespan in the apparent reality is very brief. *Moksa* is freedom from the notion of doership and ownership, notions that are the essence of *jivas* identified with the subtle body. Identified *jivas* are also known as human beings, or people, although any living being is a *jiva*. Once ignorance of its true nature is removed the apparent person continues to exist in the apparent reality, although as the self (no longer under the spell of ignorance (*avidya*)) it is forever free of the notion of that it is limited, inadequate and incomplete. It knows it is nameless, formless, unconditioned awareness.

*Ishvara* associated with *maya* is conscious (although it is not a *jiva* or person) and is not modified by ignorance/*maya* (the *gunas*). It too is dependent on awareness. *Ishvara* is conscious because with the appearance of *maya* there is something for awareness to be to be conscious of. But *Ishvara* (in the role of Creator associated with *maya*) merges back into awareness at the end of the creation cycle, so it too is not unchanging and not always manifest.

*Ishvara* is always present in awareness but it is either manifest or unmanifest with reference to awareness.

Therefore *Ishvara* associated with *maya* is not real either although in terms of the apparent person *Ishvara* is “relatively” real and eternal. In other words, *Ishvara* associated with *maya* is eternal or permanent with reference to the *jiva* and the objects it experiences, but impermanent with reference to awareness. To say that *Ishvara* associated with *maya* is eternal with reference to the *jiva* does not mean that it is limitless because ignorance, or *maya*, only “operates” on “a tiny fraction” of non-dual awareness and because it is resolved back into awareness at the end of the creation cycle.

*Maya* is eternal because it is a power that exists in awareness and awareness is eternal; this is why *maya* is said to be beginningless. Personal ignorance (*avidya*) ends for the *jiva* when the self is realized to be its true nature, ending its cycle of incarnation and suffering; but *maya*, or cosmic ignorance, continues unchanged although it is not always manifest because the creation is not always manifest. When ignorance, or *maya*, does manifest, *Ishvara* in its capacity as a Creator appears followed by the apparent creation (*Ishvara srsti*), the world of sentient beings and insentient elements.

*Ishvara* as pure awareness prior to *maya* is called *paramatman*. Although *paramatman* is called eternal and imperishable it is neither. “Eternal” and “imperishable” infer non-eternal and perishable, and since *paramatman* is non-dual it is neither. It is “isness,” being. It is simply that which gives rise to everything, that which is self-knowing, and when objects are present knows objects. It is prior to and the knower of both the *jiva* and *Ishvara*. It has no qualities. It is the knowing principle.

*Ishvara* and *jiva* are often said to be non-existent but this statement is only true from the *paramatma* perspective. If we take *maya* into account it is untrue because *maya* produces *Ishvara* and *jiva*, the gross and subtle objects and the entities that experience them. When you add *maya* to pure awareness two existential categories are created: sentience and insentience. Experience is only possible when these two factors are present. The gross and subtle material elements come from *Ishvara*, and the sentiency comes from *paramatma*, awareness. *Ishvara* is a combination of both, and *jiva* is also a combination of both. *Jiva* is like a little *Ishvara*, “cast in the image” of *Ishvara*, but limited in all respects whereas *Ishvara* is limitless. This similarity is responsible for the belief that *Ishvara* is a big *jiva*, a Supreme God person somewhere beyond the world of *jivas*. But *Ishvara* is impersonal and not influenced by experience. *Ishvara* is everything that is.

You cannot say that *Ishvara* and *jiva* don’t exist, a common statement in the modern spiritual world. It is a bogus statement because you cannot experience something that does not exist, like the horns of a rabbit. To explain the status of the world of experience, *Ishvara* and *jiva*, Vedanta introduces another concept: *mithya*. It means “apparently real.” A person who is completely identified with his or her body and mind (*samsari*) thinks that what he or she experiences is real. But experience is not real. It is apparently real. Thinking experience is real when it is apparently real causes suffering.

“Real” means “permanent, unchanging, always present.” “Apparently real” means “impermanent, subject to change.” Experience itself, which is brought about by *maya*, is relatively permanent with reference to *jiva*’s perspective but impermanent with reference to *paramatma*’s perspective because it ends when the creation no longer exists. We know that there will be a time when creation is no more because it began at a certain time. What is born dies. While experience is relatively permanent the discrete experiences that make up the *jiva*’s existence are exceedingly impermanent. *Jiva*’s body lasts on average 75 years but *jiva* does not experience its body continually for 75 years. It only experiences it when its attention is put on it. When its attention is elsewhere the body does not exist for it. It is bodiless for at least one-third of its life (sleep). In fact *jiva*’s experience is just what *jiva* thinks and feels about the events that *Isvara* generates during *jiva*’s lifespan. These thoughts and feelings are exceedingly short-lived. They exist for a moment and cease to exist when they are replaced by new thoughts/feelings. But because *jiva* is unfamiliar with *paramatma*’s perspective – which is real and which gives the lie to the belief that its experiences are real – it thinks that what it experiences is real. Something that appears and disappears is not non-existent, it is “apparently real.” It is taken to be real but it is not. Insofar as *jivas* exist they cannot dismiss the apparent reality. They have to deal with it. Failure to deal with it means suffering.

Dependence is another fact about *mithya*, the apparent reality created by *maya*. The appearance of events presupposes a substrate. The substrate is pure awareness (*paramatma*). Both *Isvara* and *jiva* are dependent on *paramatma*, pure awareness. So they are not real either. Although it depends on *paramatma*, *Isvara* does not suffer because *Isvara* is not a person. *Isvara* is *paramatma* plus *maya*. It is just the factor in awareness that makes experience and therefore suffering possible. But *jiva* has a will of its own (apparently) and suffers because it is completely dependent on the objects created by *Isvara*. To say that *jiva* and its world are dependent means that *jiva* is not free. The purpose of this teaching is to set *jiva* free by revealing its nature as *paramatma*. When *jiva* realizes it is free of objects it is free to understand that it is actually *paramatma*, free of *jiva*.

As long as the apparent entity, the *jiva*, is embodied in the apparent reality, enlightened or not, it is conditioned by *Isvara*, the Creator. In the apparent reality a liberated person is called a *jivanmukta*. A *jivanmukta* is not actually a person as we think of a person. He or she is actually *paramatma* appearing as a human being freed of the idea of personhood and free of attachment to objects. Both *Isvara* and *jiva* appear as objects – simply thoughts – to him or her. He or she knows that a power in awareness (*maya*) creates the ever-changing appearances that make up the worlds. Insofar as this understanding is *moksa*, the *karma yoga sadhana* that leads to this understanding no longer obtains although the *karma yoga* attitude remains without effort.

The distinction between these three factors is crucial for the *jiva*’s *moksa* because it disentangles *jiva*’s psychology from the objective world. It shows that everything it could claim to be the author of belongs to *Isvara* and that anything that it thinks it owns also belongs to *Isvara*. At the same time it makes it clear that it is not under the control of *Isvara* because *Isvara* is not real. How can something that is not real actually create or control anything? Furthermore, it separates its awareness from both *Isvara* and *jiva*, the Creator and the created. In so doing it reveals the simple fact that its ordinary awareness, which is the essence of its identity, is limitless. With this understanding suffering is no longer possible and *jiva* enjoys the endless bliss of self-knowledge.