

God Is the Self, but the Self Is Not God

Ted Schmidt

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Ingrid: Dear Ted, I have some questions regarding *Isvara* and *brahman*.

I will speak from my understanding, not the Vedanta teaching, although that fits.

I dream not much, but I get information from *Isvara* in dream quite often, which has been what steered me towards Vedanta.

Ted: To be clear, *Isvara* is not a personal entity who sends messages, but in the sense that *Isvara* is the personification of both the manifestation in both its subtle and gross, “inner” and “outer,” subjective (relatively speaking) and objective, aspects and the law of *karma*, or infallible sequence of causes and effects by which it operates, it can be said that *Isvara* delivers messages in the form of thoughts and dreams.

Ingrid: I got a sentence in a dream a year ago maybe: “Only God is real.”

This is aware consciousness for sure. So I guess this word “God” can be translated to the Sanskrit word “*brahman*.”

Ted: If the word “God” is referring to that which is *sat*, then the word can be equated with *brahman*, or limitless conscious existence. But if the word “God” refers to the *shrishti-sthiti-laya karta* (i.e., the creator-sustainer-resolver of the manifestation), then it refers to *Isvara*.

Ingrid: But *brahman* is also the whole.

Ted: The whole (i.e. total manifestation) is *brahman*, but *brahman* is not the whole. This is a provocative way of saying that while the manifestation depends on *brahman*, *brahman* as pure awareness (i.e. limitless conscious existence) is independent of all objective phenomena. We know that *brahman* is self-existent because only by means of the “light” of awareness are objects known to exist. Thus the existence of all objects depends on awareness, yet awareness itself must exist prior to all objects.

(Note: “provocative” means it provokes you to question the idea and think more deeply about it.)

Moreover, since awareness is the *adhishtanam*, or substrate, of all objects, it must be both the material of which the objects are made and the intelligence that molded them into the forms in which they appear, for there is no other source than “itself” from which it could draw the material of which they are made, nor is there any other intelligence that could make them.

This is not to say, however, that *brahman* is the Creator. *Brahman* is pure awareness. As such, *brahman* has no attributes or parts. In other words, *brahman* is all-pervasive, a partless whole.

Thus *brahman* is incapable of acting for three reasons. First, it has no “arena” greater than itself in which to act or against the background of which any movement or change, which is the hallmark of action, could be measured. Second, it is wholly impersonal and thus has no agenda to fulfill by acting. Third, even if it were capable of acting, it has nothing to acquire or protect by means of action due to the fact that there is nothing other than itself and thus no other place from which any other thing could come or to which anything could go. Therefore *brahman* is not the Creator, but rather the “cause” of the manifestation – which includes God-the-Creator – in the sense that all objective phenomena (i.e. anything perceivable or conceivable) depend on *brahman* for their existence.

Ingrid: So it cannot mean the whole, but solely the pure consciousness/*satya* part of God or *brahman*. Or both? Is really everything real?

Ted: It seems that you have said that *brahman* is the whole and at the same time is not the whole, but rather the *satya* part of God, which is *brahman*. It is rather confusing.

I’m assuming that you are wondering about the difference between *brahman* and *Isvara*, which I will explain. Before I do, however, please understand that *brahman* does not have parts nor is *brahman* a part of anything. There is nothing other than *brahman*.

The confusion about how *brahman* is the essential nature of everything, but no particular object or even the collective whole of all objects can be said to be *brahman*, arises due to a lack of understanding concerning the three orders of reality: *paramarthika satyam*, *vyavaharika satyam* and *pratibhasika satyam*.

Paramarthika satyam is absolute awareness. In a word, it is *brahman*. This order of reality is the substrate of the other two orders, which comprise the manifestation, but it is not a part of the manifestation, and its existence is wholly unaffected by the manifestation. Just as the forms and actions of the waves have no effect on the essential nature of the water of which they are made, so the forms and actions of objective phenomena have no affect on the essential nature of awareness.

Vyavaharika satyam is the empirical or transactional reality, the realm of objects that are accessible to all, or what from the *jiva*’s perspective constitutes the “outer” or “surrounding” world. This is what is generally considered God’s creation, and what Vedanta refers to as *Ishvara-shrishti*.

Pratibhasika satyam is the subjective realm of sensations, emotions and cognitions that is available only to the *jiva* in whose associated body-mind-sense complex they are arising. Technically speaking, this realm is also part of God’s creation, but it is different from empirical reality because not only is no other *jiva* privy to what is happening within it, but also the experiences had within it – both its interpretations and evaluations of the empirical reality and the imaginings, ideas, fantasies, memories, etc. that arise within it – are colored by the *jiva*’s *guna*-rooted, *vasana*-based likes and dislikes, desires and fears. For this reason, *pratibhasika satyam* is referred to as *jiva-shrishti*, the apparent individual’s creation. Though no objects are created, the individual’s projections do “create” his or her experience.

Only *paramarthika satyam* is *sat*, or real – i.e. self-existent and not subject to negation or change.

Both *vyavaharika satya* and *pratibhasika satya* are apparent – i.e. dependent on *paramarthika satya*, which is *brahman* (i.e. limitless conscious existence), for their existence. Though the term *satya* is attached to both *vyavaharika* and *pratibhasika*, in their case it refers only to an apparent reality or realm of existence.

As mentioned, both *vyavaharika satya* and *pratibhasika satya* are *Isvara-shrishti*, or God's creation. But how exactly does God create?

Within *brahman*, which is pure awareness, there exists a power referred to as *maya*. Though *brahman* does not have parts, *maya* is the material aspect of *brahman*. Though *maya* is not an object, it is the capacity within *brahman* to project the manifestation within the scope of *brahman's* being, almost like a hologram. *Maya* effects this cosmic magic trick by means of two powers: *avaruna shakti* and *vikshepa shakti*.

Avaruna shakti is the veiling power by means of which *maya* causes *brahman* to apparently “forget” its true nature.

Note: To be clear, “forgetting” is only a figurative way of expressing *maya's* conditioning effect on *brahman*, for *brahman* is not a personal entity with a mind that can forget.

Brahman is often referred to as the Knower, but this is only another figurative term that indicates *brahman's* nature as intelligence-as-such. That is, *brahman* is the intelligence that (a) by means of *Isvara* is evidenced as the inherent order of every aspect of the cosmos, including inanimate objects – i.e. those objects that don't have a subtle body – and (b) is the “light” that illumines the mind and lends it the sentiency to perform the functions of perceiving and processing information that we call knowing and refer to as intelligence.

Vikshepa shakti is the projecting power by means of which *maya* throws up the hologram-like apparent reality within the scope of limitless conscious existence.

In this way, *maya* “conceals” *brahman* and “creates” the manifest universe – both its subtle and gross, “inner” and outer,” subjective (relatively speaking – i.e. from the perspective of the *jiva*, or the relative knower) and the objective – by making *brahman* appear to be something it's not.

When *brahman* is so conditioned by *maya* – or figuratively speaking, when *brahman* is wielding the power of *maya* (which of course *brahman* doesn't literally do, since *brahman* cannot act) – we refer to the combination of *brahman* and *maya* as *Isvara*, or God-the-Creator.

Ingrid: I have also been questioned in dream, “Are you that?” and shown the word, and I can say no, since that is inside me and not who I am.

Ted: You are obviously not *Isvara*, or God-the-Creator, for you are not all-powerful and all-knowing. Neither are you *jiva*, the apparent individual person you appear to be, for every aspect of the *jiva's* being – physical body, senses, *prana*, emotions, perceptions, thoughts, fantasies, memories, decisions, actions, I-sense (ego) and even the ignorance of deep sleep – are known to you, and thus based on the fundamental principle that you cannot be what you see (or perceive with any of the senses), cannot be you – other than from the perspective of *paramarthika satya* of course. You are the limitless conscious existence in which all objective phenomena appear/arise, of which they are made, by means of whose “light” they are known and back into

which they resolve.

Ingrid: I understand *Isvara* to be a grand machine that is a living organism, which is the totality of *mithya* where this *jiva* is not a part but in fact not separate from.

Ted: Your understanding is generally correct. *Jiva*, however, is a part of *Isvara*. And both *Isvara* and *jiva* are objects appearing within *brahman*.

Ingrid: This being/creation (creator?) I can also love and be devoted to. It is an intelligent programming.

Ted: Yes. *Isvara*, or God-the-Creator, is the personification of *dharma*, which in this sense refers to the collective physical, psychological and ethical laws that govern the apparent reality.

Ingrid: I wonder if this gives, sustains and takes away or if it is an intelligence above that decides this.

Ted: Figuratively speaking, *Isvara* is the *karma-phala-datta*, or the giver of the fruits (i.e. results) of action. Truly speaking, however, the results of actions are the inevitable effect of the *dharma*-governed law of *karma*, which is simply the impersonal, infallible and inviolable chain of cause and effect. In this sense, our actions are our prayers. While no limited entity can control all the factors that produce the results of any given action, our actions do contribute to the web of factors that produce the result. And the results of our actions do inevitably – sometimes immediately, sometimes at a later time within our present lifetime, and sometimes not until a subsequent lifetime – are visited upon us in a manner that directly corresponds to the intention that informed the action.

Ingrid: To me it is still weird if the real consciousness is not able to decide anything when it is the greatest. Just be. But I experience myself as only the seer, so real consciousness cannot do any action. That I understand.

Ted: Yes, it seems weird, but that is how it is.

Ingrid: I feel I have been shown the inside of *Isvara* like being the inside of it/me, like an organism where all is linked, like it is one program.

This must be the *mithya*.

Ted: Yes, reality is non-dual. The apparent reality is a grand organic mechanism made up of interdependent parts that all share the same essential nature.

Note: There is no “the” *mithya*. *Mithya* is not a thing. *Mithya* means “apparent.” It is the character of *vyavaharika satyam* and *pratibhasika satyam*.

Ingrid: Three years ago, approximately, I got to see an intelligent light in my dream that said

I am a power. I understood this light was love and intelligence saying it is a power. I understood this as God. But when only God is real as pure awareness, God cannot be this power.

Ted: *Isvara* is intelligence (i.e. the total intelligence that contains all the information necessary to manifest and operate *vyavaharika satyam* and *pratibhasika satyam*) and power. This is what we call God. *Brahman*, however, has no power, but is rather the source, “cause,” or substrate, of all power. In this sense it is the principle of intelligence that underlies and allows for the knowledge of information.

Ingrid: In Vedanta the power is *maya*.

Ted: Correct. Not to confuse matters, but *maya* is the aspect of *brahman* that produces *Isvara* and *Isvara*’s power to manifest is *maya* in the “form” of *avaruna shakti* and *vikshepa shakti*.

Ingrid: But this was an intelligent living light, which is pure awareness as well. Is this not then just knowledge? Consciousness?

Ted: Yes, *Isvara* is consciousness (i.e. *brahman*, or pure awareness), but consciousness is not *Isvara* in the sense that even *Isvara* does not comprehensively define or represent *brahman*, for *brahman* is self-dependent and *Isvara* is only an object – i.e. the grandest, most intelligent and most powerful one – whose existence depends on *brahman*.

Ingrid: How do this relate to *Isvaras* 1 and 2? The organism is maybe *Isvara* 2 – *mithya*. My body is not separate from this. The light that is an intelligent loving power – is that *Isvara* 2 or *Isvara* 1?

Ted: *Isvara* 1 is *brahman*, or limitless conscious existence, which is *paramarthika satyam*. *Isvara* 2 is *Isvara*, or God-the-Creator, who by means of the power of *maya* manifests *vyavaharika satyam* and *pratibhasika satyam*.

It can be confusing because sometimes the scriptures refer to *brahman* as *Isvara*. This is done because those scriptures were written from a perspective that assumed that the student would know the difference between *brahman* and *brahman-in-maya-upadhi* (i.e. *brahman* conditioned by *maya*, as explained above) and would understand that the essential nature of *Isvara* as *shrishti-sthiti-laya karta* (i.e. God as creator-sustainer-resolver of the universe) is *brahman*.

Ingrid: I cannot see if this is the same as the real or not, since I learn about *Isvaras* 1 and 2.

Isvara 1 is then pure awareness, which fits with “only God is real.”

Ted: For the reasons that have been articulated, *Isvara* is not real. Only *brahman* is real.

Ingrid: But if I say, “Only God is real,” people in Vedanta usually think I get it wrong, for to them God is *Isvara* 2.

Ted: Yes, for the reasons previously explained, this is what Vedanta reveals.

Ingrid: Then if I should believe 1 and 2, then the light that is *sat* is a power must be *Isvara* 2, since it is light and love and intelligence that can be pure *sattva* as *Isvara* 2 is. When *Isvara* 2 in my dream teaches me that only God is real, that means *Isvara* 2 must know of God as pure awareness.

NIT: How can it be aware of its source? I am aware of the known, that *Isvara* 2 is in me. Is *Isvara* 2 also aware of the source the self? I thought *Isvara* 2 is not aware of itself.

Ted: God (i.e. *Isvara* 2) is not pure awareness (i.e. *Isvara* 1). But *Isvara* 2 is pure *sattva*. It “knows” its source because it is its source. *Isvara* 2 is not a personal entity that knows things, and *Isvara* 1 (i.e. *brahman*) is not a thing that can be known as an object. Nevertheless, *brahman* can be known because it is self-evident. Even the mind of the *jiva* knows it exists and is conscious. The only issue is that due to the limitation of the body-mind-sense complex with which it is associated, it doesn’t know it is limitless. By analogy, it is like the space inside a pot. Because of the existence of the pot within all-pervasive space, the space within the pot takes itself to be limited. The reality, however, is that the space obtaining within the pot is the same space that pervades and surrounds the pot. Just so, the awareness that is the fundamental reality of *jiva* is the same awareness that is the fundamental reality of *Isvara* (i.e. *Isvara* 2), for *Isvara* 1 is all there is. Thus, in a manner of speaking, *Isvara* 2 does know of itself (i.e. God) as pure awareness (i.e. *Isvara* 1).

Ingrid: Also, I do not see how *Isvara* 1 cannot be a power when it is pure existence. Prior to all that is “alive” *mithya*. This consciousness must be the strongest underlying power. Why not?

Ted: This was explained previously. As you observe, *brahman* is pure awareness (i.e. awareness “as yet” unmodified by *maya*). Thus *brahman* has neither attributes – such as power – nor a greater “arena” in which to act, and so is actionless. *Brahman* is not power and doesn’t have any power per se. *Brahman* is the substrate of the objective phenomenon we call power.

Ingrid: And if so, then the real God is the same as this loving intelligent power.

Ted: Yes and no. The essential nature of God (i.e. *Isvara* 2, the creator-sustainer-resolver of the universe) and *brahman* (i.e. *Isvara* 1, or that which your reference to God seems to indicate) is the same. You have been using the term “God” to indicate what Vedanta refers to as *brahman*.

Brahman is the sole reality. God is the grandest apparent object within that reality. As explained, however, God (i.e. *Isvara* 2) is apparent, not real. Thus from the ultimate perspective *brahman* and *Isvara* are the same, but it is not true to say that *Isvara* the Creator is the nature of *brahman* (i.e. what *brahman* is). *Isvara* is a loving intelligent power, while *brahman* is the limitless conscious existence in which that power appears.

Ingrid: Can you please tell me what you think?

I feel deprived of using the word “God” for the self when it really is God, not just this wonderful Creator/creation we have inside.

Thank you.

~ Best regards, Ingrid

Ted: God is the self, but the self is not God.

~ All the best, Ted

Ingrid: Thank you so much, Ted. Nice meeting you too. I will read this soon. I just saw the last sentence.

But God is also *brahman*, pure consciousness.

How can that not be the self? *Isvara* as God is God as *mithya*, not the “pure self.” God, *brahman*, is the self. I have seen you use *brahman* for pure consciousness yourself. Andre thought you would understand this.

I saw a plate that Ramana had been quoted the same after my dream. It was a saying in for sektens and it said exactly only God is real, translated from his language to English, so then *brahman* must be the word translated from that which has become “God” in English, I assume.

So one can say only *brahman* is real. Is only God is real. Only the self is real.

So “only God is real” is not false. But as I say, I have not read the rest of it yet but just see you say God is in the self, in other words. I know *Isvara* is not equal to self. But *brahman* is. That is real, can be God then. Why cannot the “highest” be the self, the Lord? Krishna, or the self, cannot be called God for me? Just Indians can be allowed to use *brahman*, which means God? This is not right in my understanding. I know *Isvara* and *brahman* are different terms. But anyway, the highest source must be possible to look at as God. The One, not the Creator. That is Knowledge, Consciousness, *mithya*.

I speak of this as God, Knowledge, Consciousness. *Brahman* is real. Then it is right that God is real.

Ted: Hi, Ingrid.

There is no problem with you using the word “God” for the self as long as you know the difference

between *brahman* and *Isvara*.

To be honest, Ramana's statement was likely mistranslated. This often happens when the translations are rendered by someone who has not yet gained self-knowledge. This is why it is important to have a teacher.

I think you will understand the final sentence of my response once you have read the entire explanation that leads up to it. The answer is fairly complex, and as I comment at one point, Vedanta makes some provocative statements in order to provoke the seeker to consider the issue more thoroughly. Sit with it a while and give it due consideration.

At any rate, if you are still unclear about why it is said that only *brahman* is real and *Isvara* is apparent after you have read the text, you can let me know.

One thing I did think of adding after I sent the text is that, ironically, the limitation (or perhaps it would be better put to say "modification") that *maya* seemingly conditions *brahman* with its omniscience (i.e. all-knowingness) and omnipotence (i.e. all-powerfulness). Seemingly conditioned with omniscience and omnipotence, *brahman* assumes the role of *Isvara*, or God-the-Creator. You might think this would equate to *brahman*, but as explained in my response, *brahman* is pure, attributeless, actionless awareness.

This might all seem like nothing more than a mincing of words, but the practical significance of knowing the difference between *brahman* and *Isvara* is that equating the two precludes any possibility of liberation for the *jiva*.

If *Isvara* as God-the-Creator is posited as a real entity, then it means that either God is a second entity other than the *jiva* or that *Isvara* and the *jiva* are identical. The latter is clearly not the case, since the *jiva* is not omniscient and omnipotent. Such being the case, we would be left with the circumstance of *Isvara* being something other than the *jiva*, and given the fact that the essential nature of an object cannot change, the *jiva* would never be able to attain *Isvara*-hood, or God-hood. Thus the individual would always be a limited entity in comparison to God, and so would never be free, which by definition means beyond all limiting factors.

You seem to understand the difference between *brahman* and *Isvara*, but I just thought it important to clarify why Vedanta makes the distinction. Rather than it being simply a matter of English versus Sanskrit, the differentiation between *brahman* and *Isvara* indicated by these terms reflect an understanding that is vital to the assimilation of self-knowledge and the attainment of *moksa*.

~ All the best, Ted