

It Is and It Isn't

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Kevin: Dear James, for a year now I am following your teachings and I have read *How to Attain Enlightenment*, *The Essence of Enlightenment* and *Mystic by Default*. The logic of those books is very clear and easy to follow, and I am happy to come across the the beauty of Vedanta. It feels like a great present. Now I am reading *Inquiry into Existence*, which is more detailed and has a higher degree of difficulty, and I have some questions about what I have read so far:

1. How can it be that awareness can create matter out of itself, matter which is inert, and how can it be that something whole, complete, without parts, can divide itself?

James: You are not the only person who has trouble understanding the relationship between matter and awareness, because the connection is not obvious. The part of you, awareness, called the intellect (*buddhi*) is conscious, but because it it turned outward and depends on the senses for its knowledge, it only has knowledge of matter. Consciousness is beyond the scope of its knowledge. So it needs a means of knowledge other than the senses. Vedanta is the means. Vedanta defines consciousness and matter and points out certain facts about them and their relationship to each other that make it reasonably easy to identify both. Once they are identified, it says that if you can separate them from each other in your understanding, your sense of limitation will dissolve.

But basically, from the intellect's point of view, the relationship is not logical. This is why *maya*, which causes the apparent relationship, is said to be mysterious, a great wonder. At the same time, you know you are conscious and you know that matter isn't. If there wasn't a relationship, how could you know both consciousness and matter? The bridge between consciousness and matter is attention. If you investigate your attention, you can't say that it isn't consciousness and you can't say it isn't matter. It is a mixture of consciousness and matter. It is consciousness because you can't gain knowledge of something unless consciousness is present and it is present as your attention. Attention means you are conscious. You do not need to be taught that you are conscious. It is a self-evident fact.

Attention is an extremely subtle form of matter because it appears as an object in you, consciousness. Owing to *maya*, non-dual existence/consciousness appears as two ontological categories: a conscious subject and insentient objects. Vedanta points out that they are the same but different (*sat-asat vilakshanam*). Because the intellect has identified with the senses, which are in the body (actually, the body is "in" the senses, meaning within their scope), it finds it very difficult to understand that two (apparently) different categories can both be consciousness.

Kevin: 2. What is logical connection between matter and awareness?

James: See above.

Kevin: For example, can awareness or, for that matter, can I or have I powers to change matter without using the body?

James: No, because awareness and matter are in different orders of the one reality. Things in different orders of reality only have an apparent, not an actual, connection. Consciousness can only act on matter when *maya* is operating. When *maya* operates it creates matter and the body, which seem to be different, but are actually one. The body seems to be conscious because every atom of it is pervaded by a material subtle body which is obviously more conscious than a stone, for instance, but is not conscious enough to know pure original consciousness. It is not conscious enough, because it is a mixture of consciousness and matter caused by *maya*. Two objects in the same order of reality can affect each other. Both the subtle body and the gross body are in the same order (*mithya*), and therefore they affect each other. At the same time, they are not the same, because you cannot just transform matter with your thoughts. The subtle body has to activate the gross body to transform gross matter.

Kevin: Or can only bodies interact?...

James: Yes (see the paragraph above).

Kevin: ...and is there no interaction between awareness and matter? If that is so, how can that be if matter is actually awareness?

James: There is an interaction and there isn't an interaction. From the earth's perspective, the sun goes around it. From the sun's perspective, the earth goes around the sun. Which is true? Both are true, even though they contradict each other. So, how are both true? If you assume a position further out in space, you can resolve the contradiction. The "space" in the case of your question is the knower of these two categories: consciousness and matter. Is the knower of consciousness and matter the same as consciousness and matter or is it different? It is the same but different.

Kevin: How can something that is whole and complete divide itself?

James: It can and it can't. From the point of view of consciousness, it can't. From the point of view of the apparent reality (*maya*) it (apparently) can. You have to keep contemplating this topic until you no longer take the appearance of things to be the reality of things. When I was very young I went to a movie in which a lion killed a little boy. I was terrified because I thought that an actual lion killed an actual boy. But seeing death in a movie now has no emotional impact at all, because it is only movie death. This life, which seems so real to worldly persons, is just a movie life, cooked up by *maya*, the Hollywood of existence. If it is just a movie life, our thoughts about it are movie thoughts.

Kevin: Maybe these questions aren't relevant for inquiry, but maybe they are.

James: They are if they are and they aren't if they aren't. They actually aren't, because if you have faith in Vedanta as your means of knowledge, all you need to do is apply the knowledge to your own mind if you want freedom. People who know don't really care if there is a logical connection between appearances and reality. We are quite happy to have the whole issue be a great mystery. But if you don't really want freedom and you insist that your intellect can solve the riddle on its own, then this apparent contradiction is relevant. But it actually isn't relevant, because you aren't actually doing inquiry unless you have faith in the means of knowledge.

A lot of intelligent people think they can "study Vedanta" and that at some point it will answer all their questions. They don't want to surrender the inquirer to the means of knowledge. For Vedanta to work, you have to assume that all the knowledge you have gathered so far about existence is dead wrong and let it go. You can't let your intellect be the judge of reality. I have always been very smart, but when I was twenty-nine, *Isvara* brought Vedanta to me, and I realized I didn't know anything. So there was a complete break between me and the knowledge I had picked up on my own. I solve the problem – it is more accurate to say that the problem was solved – because the first day I heard Vedanta from the mouth of Swamiji I understood why experience could not produce the knowledge that I am ever-free consciousness.

Kevin: I studied philosophy, for a year, but I stopped because Vedanta seemed to have the complete picture that philosophy lacks. And I would like to gain a complete understanding of non-duality, and I think I need help to achieve that.

James: It has the complete picture. Yes, you need help. The question you asked is the most difficult and important philosophical question there is. You have been led to Vedanta because Vedanta is the only ontological science that has the answer. But the answer isn't an answer that a thinking person will immediately understand. Either/or is easy to understand. Both/and is less easy.

~ Love, James