

# Of Cakes, Bones and Vedanta

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**Sundari:** Here is a beautiful email written by a committed Vedantin.

*Into this house we're born*

*Into this world we're thrown*

*Like a dog without a bone*

*An actor out on loan*

These lines, from a song [*Riders on the Storm*] by the 1960s rock group The Doors, are as accurate and pithy a summation of the human condition as you are likely to find: its often cruelly arbitrary nature; our endless, almost pathological search for satisfaction and fulfillment; the oppressive sense of alienation from ourselves and others; our almost automatic addiction to role-playing in so many situations; and the constant, enervating sense of artificiality, falsity, limitation and mortality from which there is no escape. And like the said hungry dog, we are, collectively, so often savage and barbarous in an infinity of ways.

Vedanta says, yes, that's the way it (apparently) is in this world. In fact Vedanta more or less assumes that we have experienced these existential truths to a harrowing, virtually traumatic, degree or we would not develop a sustained interest in what could, superficially, be seen as an esoteric and rarefied teaching. Actually, the polar opposite is the truth: Vedanta is practical, pragmatic, to a relentless, almost ruthless, degree. It says that when we know directly, automatically and consistently, the reality of our nature and of the apparent world, and the difference between the two, this changes the rules of the existential "game." Fundamentally. Permanently. Effortlessly. This knowledge is freedom/contentment/happiness/satisfaction/peace/and all the other good stuff. And it ain't gonna run away, because it is our nature, our essence, and is therefore that which cannot depart from us. If it can depart, it is not our nature; it is something subsidiary, inferior to it.

The method Vedanta teaches is self-inquiry, or if you wish, Self-inquiry. It aims to show us directly, through logic, reflection, contemplation, through the practise and assimilation of self-knowledge/Self-knowledge, that we are ever-free, full, pure, peaceful, plain and simple awareness. Our intellect is the pivotal tool in this process because any and every type of knowledge is processed in the intellect. But this assuredly does not mean that direct self-knowledge is in any way cold, abstract, theoretical, formulaic. A knowledge which confers complete satisfaction, existential peace and unquenchable, quiet joy, and which is ineffably beautiful, could not be intellectual in any of the usual senses of the word. In fact when this realization is self-sustaining, it means that "head" and "heart" generally get on very well with each other and any "disputes" between them are settled speedily and amicably. A "side-effect" of this realisation is, perhaps paradoxically, an internally assertive sense of humour, a keen and ongoing delight in the auspicious, harmless absurdity of our "personal" egos and "stories." We get to have our cake (firm knowledge of our identity as the self) and eat it (enjoy a mind/ego

which feels secure and contented as a result of this understanding), with the icing on top (sweet freedom from the psychological and spiritual slavery of an ever-changing *samsara* because we know we are essentially untouched by it).

One way of approaching self-inquiry is to look at its underlying “mechanics”; it can be helpful to formulate, so to speak, its most essential features. This does not mean that the practise of self-inquiry is mechanical. Rather it may require a nuanced, subtle and flexible approach because, as the saying goes, “circumstances alter cases.” The following three short, simple, basic points are extracted almost word for word from a *satsang* by James at the website. When applied appropriately, intelligently, they can be of incalculable benefit, a pearl beyond price.

Self-inquiry is:

1. The consistent application of a questioning attitude to everything the mind presents.
2. The consistent practice of discrimination between the self and its many forms; and
3. The consistent affirmation of one’s non-dual identity in light of the mind’s conviction that the self is limited, inadequate and incomplete.

To anyone reasonably familiar with Vedanta, there is nothing at all earth-shattering or “advanced” about this formulation, to put it mildly. Yet, it distills the method of Vedanta with a simple accuracy and a certain elegance. Simply put, it is a reliable, effective means for true, lasting freedom. If practised properly, it removes the existential weight from our shoulders. It works. Of course it assumes we are trying to live in accordance with *dharma* and are developing a *karma yoga* attitude to the results of our actions. One could almost say that it would be become virtually impossible to be attached to objects/results and to not live ethically if we apply with integrity the above three principles.

When the mind no longer needs to affirm its identity, it ceases doing so, as the verbalised knowledge has served its purpose and we are established firmly, directly and ineffably in the self as the self. (If the knowledge is needed at any time, it is directly available to the intellect.) Then the practise of discrimination can become almost automatic, since it is now a truism. So we won’t feel “like a dog without a bone” (though one is allowed an occasional, disgruntled growl). And being, apparently, “an actor out on loan” will probably be a source of frequent, exquisite amusement.

And you won’t run out of cake. Or icing.