

Self-Knowledge: Is It Worth the Fuss?

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James: This excellent *satsang* between Ted and a very knowledgeable Vedanta person further clarifies the relationship of *jiva* and *Isvara*. I recommend it.

Ernest: At the end of the day, what does knowledge of self give us?

Ted: It frees one from suffering.

Ernest: It does not help to answer the burning question of why the appearance/dream/*maya* that we are experiencing as humans or animals exists.

Ted: True. There is no reason for experience. There simply obtains the existential irony that inherent in pure awareness is the deluding power of *maya*, ignorance, which makes pure awareness appear to be something that it's not, a circumstance that nullifies the "why" question altogether since nothing is actually happening, given the fact that reality is non-dual. Nothing other than awareness exists and thus no essential change in the nature of reality is possible.

Ernest: I am not clear on this one, but it appears that even though one attains knowledge of self in one birth, he/she can actually become a cockroach in the next due to *karmic* effect, i.e. we are not really liberated from the birth-death cycle.

Ted: Actually, one who attains self-knowledge realizes that he is not the apparent person he had formerly taken himself to be. Rather he knows himself to be pure awareness, which is not subject to birth and death, and thus does not reincarnate.

Moreover, the idea that the apparent person is reborn indicates a mistaken understanding of the concept of reincarnation. The apparent person does not transmigrate to another body. Rather the *vasana*-bundle that was associated with the apparent individual's subtle body creates another subtle body that can serve as a suitable vehicle for any *vasanas* remaining in the *karmic* account from which that *vasana*-bundle originally came.

The logic of the previous explanation leads to the inevitable conclusion that *vasanas* are not personal. They associate with and express through the mind-body-sense complex and are reinforced, neutralized and generated as a result of apparent choices and actions of that an individual makes. The source of all *vasanas* is the macrocosmic causal body, which is personified as *Isvara*, and are essentially *Isvara*'s tendencies manifesting through billions of apparent individuals.

Regarding the concept of reincarnation, therefore we can say that on the one hand the notion is

erroneous, or to paraphrase Krishna's comments in the *Bhagavad Gita*, it is an explanation intended to provisionally satisfy the minds of the ignorant. On the other hand, it is true that the apparent person is never free of the cycle of birth and death.

In order to properly understand this circumstance, however, we must realize that the *jiva* is a universal entity. Though it looks like there are innumerable *jivas*, there is in reality only one, for all *jivas* are essentially the same. All gross bodies are made of the same five elements, all subtle bodies are constituted of the same component functions, and as causal bodies are microcosmic reflections of one universal causal body.

Moreover, *maya* is a power inherent in pure awareness, and which forever serves as the conditioning agent by means of which the apparent reality is projected time and again through interminable cycles of manifestation and dissolution. Hence the universal *jiva* will continue to manifest indefinitely despite the eradication of *avidya*, personal self-ignorance, in any given individual *jiva*.

Ernest: The only benefit I do see in a birth where one attains knowledge of self is that one might lead a life devoid of misery as one sails through good and bad times, even though they may experience physical pain.

Ted: This is the point of self-knowledge. While pain and pleasure persist, suffering ceases. That's a pretty powerful consequence. But you are right. If you don't mind suffering, self-knowledge is not necessarily worth the fuss.

Ernest: Sorry to butt in again here, but this is not my understanding. Causal bodies are on a per-*jiva* basis and there are many *jivas* from an empirical perspective. The concept of a "universal *jiva*" makes no sense. *Isvara* "allocates" bodies to reincarnating *jivas* according to accumulated *karma* of that *jiva*.

Ted: This topic is actually a perfect example of how Vedanta is not an "either-or" proposition, but rather a "both-and" understanding. Understanding Vedanta depends on one's ability to navigate between the relative and the universal perspectives, to understand experience from not only the apparent individual's point of view, but from *Isvara*'s point of view (i.e. the macrocosmic mind) and from the point of non-dual awareness (*brahman*).

From the *jiva*'s, or apparent individual's, point of view within the context of the apparent reality, the *jiva* does seem to be a discrete entity whose subtle body is on a transmigratory journey through a series of gross bodies that afford it the appropriate circumstances through which to express, experience and eventually exhaust the *vasanas* stored in its causal body.

As long as the *jiva* takes itself to be a *karta*, a doer, it reaps the results of its *karmas*, actions, in the form of *punya*, merits, and *papa*, demerits. Essentially, these merits and demerits take the form of *vasanas*, impressions, that add to or reinforce those already stored in the causal body. Inevitably these impressions manifest as *raga-dveshas*, likes and dislikes, that compel the *jiva* to pursue particular objects in an effort to satisfy them.

No object obtained or action executed by a limited entity (i.e. the *jiva*) can produce a limitless result. And no object or action is capable of providing the *jiva* with the permanent peace and happiness that is its essential, albeit usually unconscious, goal. Hence all of the *jiva*'s *vasana*-driven endeavors only cause suffering and the accumulation of more *vasanas*. In this way the *jiva* remains bound to the wheel of *samsara*, the cycle of birth and death, from which ultimately only self-knowledge offers emancipation. Self-knowledge is the understanding that nullifies the erroneous notion of individuality along with doership and enjoyership, thus closing *jiva*'s *karmic* account. Devoid of *karma*, the *jiva*'s journey ends with the dissolution of both the subtle and causal bodies into pure consciousness.

From *Isvara*'s point of view, the *jiva*'s journey never ends. That is, any particular apparent entity's transmigratory quest for *moksa* ends with the eradication of *avidya*, personal ignorance, the microcosmic aspect of *maya*. However, due to the fact that it is an inherent power in awareness and as such is beginningless and hence endless, *maya* itself persists indefinitely and will continue to apparently condition pure awareness in the form of an apparent reality replete with innumerable *jivas*. These *jivas* owe their characteristics to the constellation of *vasanas* they have drawn from the universal pool of *vasanas*, the macrocosmic causal body. For this reason *jivas* will continue to manifest as apparent entities until the time of *pralaya*, universal dissolution. In this sense there is no end to what might be referred to as the "universal *jiva*," the archetypal apparent individual entity.

From *brahman*'s perspective, of course there is nothing other than pure awareness, and therefore the whole notion of reincarnation is a moot point, for nothing is actually happening, no essential change has ever occurred. No entity was ever bound, and no entity need be freed.

Ernest: I'm still mystified by the second paragraph: "From *Isvara*'s point of view, the *jiva*'s journey never ends." This gives the impression that an individual can never gain liberation and will always be subject to *samsara*. Do you mean to say that there will always be *jivas* because new humans are being born from "promoted" vegetable and animal *jivas*? The traditional view is that when a person gains self-knowledge the body-mind continues until the momentum from its past actions (*prarabdha*) is exhausted, and then that body-mind (person) ceases to exist, as the *jivatman* attains liberation at the time of death (*videha-mukti*). That surely signifies the end of that *jiva*'s journey.

I have also not encountered the idea of a "universal pool of *vasanas*." Surely each *jiva*'s *vasanas* are determined by the accumulated, unfructified *vasanas* from the previous lives of that particular *jiva*. How does "universal pool" fit into the theory of *karma*?

Ted: I agree that my statement might be a little misleading. The point is that there is no end to the generation of *jivas* – until the *pralaya*, the dissolution of the cosmos. And even then, *jivas* will again be generated during the next cycle of manifestation. What I am trying to explicate is the fact from a broader perspective, the idea of individuality is nothing more than *mithya*. The seemingly independent, volitional entity I erroneously take myself to be is nothing more than a puppet whose every action is empowered solely by the will of *Isvara*. As Krishna, speaking as the self, tells Arjuna in the eighteenth chapter of the *Bhagavad Gita*, "The Lord remains seated in the intellect, O, Arjuna! By its magic (*maya*) it animates all beings and causes them to helplessly revolve as if they were mechanical toys."

Ernest: This gives the impression that an individual can never gain *moksa* and will always be subject to *samsara*.

Ted: I did point out that the *jiva's* journey ends with the eradication of *avidya*, personal ignorance. Thus, the apparent individual can gain *moksa*, liberation.

Ernest: Do you mean to say that “there will always be *jivas*” (because new humans are being born from “promoted” vegetable and animal *jivas*)?

Ted: Yes. The point is that *jivas* do not cease to be. And that, actually, whether I am incarnate or not makes little difference in terms of *moksa*, for essentially *moksa* is the understanding that I am not the apparent individual person I seem to be. I am limitless awareness, non-dual, actionless, ordinary awareness. Thus while I may still be associated with a mind-body-sense complex, I am not identified with it.

Ernest: The traditional view is that when a person gains self-knowledge, the body-mind continues until the *prarabdha* is exhausted and then that body-mind (person) ceases to exist as the *jivatman* attains liberation at death. That surely signifies the end of that *jiva's* journey.

Ted: You are talking about *vidhea mukti*, liberation at death. I am talking about *jivan mukti*, liberation while alive. According to my understanding, there is no qualitative difference between the two, although a *jivanmukta* still has a body. This explanation, which is scripturally sanctioned as a provisional understanding for those who still take themselves to be *jivas*, nevertheless begs the question, “What does it mean to say that the *jivatman* ceases to exist?”

In order to answer this question we must ask, “What exactly is the *jivatman*?” If it is the *pancha-koshas*, the five sheaths, then it will not cease to exist, because the *pancha-koshas* are the impersonal constituents of all *jivas* and will continue to be so until the cosmos is resolved. If it is *atma*, pure awareness, then it will not cease to exist, because *brahman-atma*, limitless awareness, is the eternal reality, the very essence of existence itself. The *jivatman* must therefore be nothing more than the notion of ownership-doership-enjoyership that is assumed with regard to the *vrittis*, mental activities, that arise within the subtle body of the apparent individual due to the particular bundle of *vasanas* conditioning it.

It would seem then that ceasing to exist as the *jivatman* is primarily a matter of ceasing to identify with the mind-body-sense complex, which in turn nullifies the need for the *vasana* bundle informing the mind-body-sense complex with which it is associated to inhabit any subsequently generated mind-body-sense complex. Thus once the *jiva's prarabdha karma* has been exhausted (i.e. once the bundle of *vasana*-inspired desires slated to play out through the vehicle of the mind-body-sense mechanism presently inhabited by the *jiva*), the idea that the *jivatman* is other than limitless awareness (*paramatman*) ceases to exist.

But again, what exactly is it that ceases to exist? The mind-body-sense complex that “housed” and gave form to the *jiva* was made of the same five causal, subtle and gross elements as all

other mind-body-sense complexes, and since energy (which is essentially what the elements are) cannot be destroyed, these elements will simply return to the universal pool of elements, which will continue to generate *jivas* for as long as *maya* apparently conditions *brahman*. Therefore the body-mind-sense complex will not technically cease to exist, although the elements that constituted it will obviously cease to assume any of the unique variations of its archetypal form they had previously assumed. And of course *atma*, awareness, will not cease to exist, for it essentially is existence. Hence only the notion that I am a *jiva*, my identification with being an apparent individual, ceases.

From the individual *jiva*'s point of view, the journey through innumerable mind-body-sense complexes comes to an end. *Moksa*, freedom, is attained.

From *Isvara*'s point of view, one of its components realized its true identity, so to speak, but the grand mechanism of the manifest universe continues to function as it ever has. Or to employ another analogy, so ends another subplot within the major plot of the cosmic dream.

The question of where the material for the mechanism or the fodder for the dream comes from leads to the subject of your next comments and subsequent question concerning *karma*.

With reference to your statement that you are not familiar with the idea of a universal pool of *vasanas*, they are called called *smasthi vasanas* or *smasthisamskaras* in Vedanta. They are the same as the concept of *Isvara*, which is the totality of all microcosmic or personal or individual causal bodies. It is also personified in the *Vedas*.

We can liken the Macrocosmic Causal Body to the program for a video game in which are contained all possible moves. Within the mind of *Isvara* abide all possible ideas and impressions in a dormant state. These *vasanas* constitute both the initial "blueprints" for all objects and experiences. *Isvara*'s *vasanas* (i.e. ideas, archetypes, forms, of which the three *gunas* are the most primordial) are the basis for the projected apparent reality, and these projections in turn leave their mark on the *jiva*. Furthermore, the *jiva*'s subjective interpretation of these *vasanas* (i.e. objects/experiences) is rooted in the *jiva*'s *vasana*-influenced values, which determine its *raga-dveshas*, likes and dislikes.

In view of this analysis, we see that the apparent reality is essentially a stack of *vasanas*. *Isvara*'s *vasanas* are the basis for the projection of the manifest universe in its *vyavaharika* (i.e. gross-universal-transactional) aspect, including the mind-body-sense apparatus of the *jiva*, and they also provide the archetypal possibilities inherent in its *pratibhasika* (i.e. subtle-subjective-internal) aspect. By means of its interactions with *Isvara*'s *vasanas* the *jiva* then accumulates *vasanas* that become associated with the particular subtle body informing that *jiva*, and these *vasanas* consequently become what we think of as the *jiva*'s personal *vasanas*. These *vasanas* then influence the *jiva*'s values and preferences, which inspire *jiva*'s actions. As long as the *jiva* remains self-ignorant, it will invariably perform actions and reinforce its *vasanas* or create new ones. Those *vasanas* that are sufficiently strengthened through repeated indulgence control the *jiva*, which can no longer resist their influence. Such *vasanas* are said to be "binding," i.e. suffering.

As mentioned, the *gunas* are the basic constituents or primordial *vasanas* of which all objects are made. As such, the *gunas* determine the quality and character of the *jiva*'s subtle body. In turn, the *jiva*'s subtle body or mind interacts with the objects constituting *vyavaharikasatyam*, the transactional reality. The objects in the transactional reality are value-neutral, but the *jiva*

superimposes its likes and dislikes on them (which it unconsciously picks up through its conditioning) and encounters problems. Ultimately the *vasanas* cannot be personal, for the *jiva* is not their creator. Though they seem to be personal, they belong to *Isvara*, the total mind.

Accordingly, if the nullification of the doer-enjoyer and the closing of the *jiva's karmic* account are effects of self-knowledge rather than willful and exhaustive action, then to whom do the *vasanas* belong?

“*Maya*,” we might answer. But *maya* is ignorance, and ignorance is not an entity as such. Ironically, ignorance is *Isvara's* (meaning *brahman* or *paramatma*) creative power, which it wields in its role as a creator, which James calls *Isvara 2* to distinguish it from pure consciousness which cannot create without *maya's* help. It is in this sense that all *vasanas* belong to *Isvara*.

As a final note, the fact that *Isvara* can be equated with what is referred to as the Macrocosmic Causal Body, the total of all causal bodies, is supported by the distinction Vedanta makes between *Isvara* and *prajna*. *Atma* in its association with the *jiva* is referred to as *prajna*, whereas in its association with the total it is referred to as *Isvara*. Simply put, *Isvara* as the Creator is omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, and thus by definition must be the cosmic source of all the possible ideas, which we might call “original or creative *vasanas*,” that manifest as experienceable objects as well as the universal reservoir all the possible impressions, which we might call “resultant or consequent *vasanas*,” that are the remnants of the experience of those objects.

I understand that referring to *vasanas* as “impressions” suggests that *vasanas* can only be the result of an action or experience, but in this regard it bears pointing out that the literal meaning of the word *vasana* is “fragrance.” And while a fragrance is a phenomenon that can linger as an aftereffect, the scent itself is a direct emanation from a causal source.

Ernest: Surely each *jiva's* impressions are determined by accumulated, unfructified actions from the previous lives of that particular *jiva*. How does “universal pool” fit into the theory of *karma*?

Ted: The Macrocosmic Causal Body, which is the “universal pool of *vasanas*,” is like a bank that contains all the money. Just as each client of the bank only has access to the money in his or her account, so each *jiva* only has access to his or her associated bundle of *vasanas*.

Ernest: On the topic of *Isvara's* will, the “will” of the *jiva* is surely the identification of *atman* with ideas in the subtle body of the *jiva* and the subsequent “empowering” of that body-mind. *Isvara* does not will that someone should commit murder. The traditional teaching allows the *jiva* free will to choose to seek *moksa* and follow a notional path to achieving it. Otherwise, what is the point?

Ted: Yes. All my comments concerning *Isvara's* will are simply metaphorical explanations of the impersonal functioning of the grand mechanism of the manifest universe (i.e. apparent reality) which is governed by the inviolable law of cause and effect. I used the word “empowered,” not “directed” or “orchestrated,” to express *Isvara's* involvement. When the “light” of awareness illumines the mechanism of the manifest universe, the mechanism simply functions according to

its “programming” or “design,” which is otherwise known as *dharma*, the set of physical, psychological and ethical laws inherent in the projection of the apparent reality that is cast by means of *maya*.

Ernest: You certainly present an elaborate and well-thought-out system for the *Isvara-jiva* interaction. But it is not one I clearly recognize. This is almost certainly in part due to the fact that you do not seem to use the concept of *samskara*, conflating it with *vasanas*. Although I am familiar with both terms, the former seems to be used more frequently in discussions of *karma*, and the latter hardly ever.

Ted: You’ll have to clarify for me what exactly the difference is between *vasanas* and *samskaras*. My understanding is that *vasanas* are discrete impressions, while *samskaras* are constellations or bundles of *vasanas* that form particular archetypal personalities, such as those associated with astrological signs or enneagram formations.

Ernest: What about the problem that *brahman* (*Isvara*) cannot be responsible for allocating *vasanas/samskaras* to *jivas* because this would mean it would be open to accusations of partiality.

Ted: I do not equate *Isvara* with *brahman* in this context, other than in the broadest sense that there is nothing other than *brahman*, which of course is a perspective that renders our entire discussion moot. By *Isvara* I mean the Creator, which is *brahman* conditioned by *maya upadhi*. Again, James’s distinction between *Isvara 1* and *Isvara 2* is relevant here. *Isvara* is not a volitional entity with a personal agenda. Thus *Isvara* does not allocate *samskaras* to *jivas*. *Isvara* is simply what we might refer to as the realm of pure potentiality (i.e. “universal pool of *vasanas*” or the Macrocosmic Causal Body) from which all *jivas* draw the *vasanas* that are associated with their particular subtle bodies as a result of their apparent actions.

Ernest: It does not make any sense to me to talk about “pools of *vasanas*.” It would be like saying that all possible desires are held in *Isvara*. Surely it is rather *Isvara*’s laws that determine that when a *jivatman* identifies with a particular idea in relation with a particular object, then a (new) desire is formed at that time. It is not that this desire was already present in *Isvara* and was somehow “pulled out” when the interaction took place.

Ted: *Isvara* has three kinds of *shakti*, energy, according to Vedanta: *jnana shakti*, *iccha shakti* and *kriya shakti*. Since everything *jiva* experiences is sourced in *Isvara*, it is correct to say that *Isvara* “desires,” although it does not desire like a *jiva* desires, because it is whole and complete and does not need results of actions to complete it. Therefore it does not accumulate *vasanas* and reinforce *samsarkas*.

But, as I mentioned earlier and as you basically recount here, it is through the *jiva*’s identification with a particular desire that the desire impacts his or her subtle body. Of course if we really want to bottom-line the issue, then we have to say that the *jiva* is not a sentient entity, in that the gross, subtle and causal bodies are composed of insentient matter, which only function when

illuminated/enlivened by awareness. Thus the apparent individual only appears sentient and is not really making choices or actively identifying with particular ideas in relation to particular objects or harboring desires. All such occurrences are only apparently happening due to the apparent conjunction of the three-bodied mechanism identified as the *jiva* and pure awareness, or *atman*.

Ernest: From where does *Isvara* get his “preferences and dislikes” that He can be said to have *vasanas*? For whom is the “projected reality” “apparent”? Are you suggesting that *Isvara* is deluded by his own *maya*?

Ted: *Isvara*'s *vasanas* are not likes and dislikes, because *Isvara* is not a *jiva*. You are personifying *Isvara*, which is sanctioned by *Puranic* scriptures like the *Gita*, but which also creates the problem we are discussing. *Isvara* is simply impersonal “blueprints” for all objective phenomena. In this regard *Isvara* doesn't get “his” *vasanas* from any source outside “himself,” but rather *Isvara* (i.e. the Macrocosmic Causal Body) is the “pool” of all possible *vasanas*. The *vasanas* are the names and forms superimposed on *brahman*, or pure awareness, when it is conditioned by *maya*. When *maya* is operating *brahman* apparently forgets that it is limitless awareness and thinks it is a *jiva*. The *jiva*'s identification with his or her experience and subjective interpretation of the objective projections of *Isvara*'s “blueprints” are what we think of as the *jiva*'s personal *vasanas*.

Ernest: No, I can't buy this. The world is *brahman*; there is no creation or manifestation. It is “apparent” to the *jiva* because of *avidya* and *adhyasa* and the “naming of forms.” I accept that the tendency of a particular *jiva* to give specific names to specific forms may be influenced by that *jiva*'s *vasanas*.

Ted: What you say is true seen from the *paramarthika* level. I was speaking in terms of the apparent reality that is projected by *maya*. In other words, I was speaking, not in terms of the essential nature of the apparent reality, but rather in terms of its conditional appearance as a projection or dream.

Ernest: Are you saying here that *Isvara* “dreams”?!

Ted: Due to the “magic” of *maya*, the apparent reality is projected, or the metaphorical dream of the manifest universe arises within the scope of pure awareness. It is not right to impute doership to *Isvara*, so we cannot say that it “dreams.” A dreamlike projection happens when *maya* in the form of *avidya* is operating in *jiva*'s mind.

Ernest: How does this happen?

Ted: It happens through the *jiva*'s apparent interaction with the apparent objects that comprise the apparent reality. It is called *jiva sristi* in Vedanta. See *Panchadasi* for a full discussion.

Ernest: I'm sure none of this has anything to do with *advaita*.

Ted: I would say that it does have to do with *advaita* in the sense that what is described here is nothing more than an apparent circumstance arising within the scope of non-dual awareness. Moreover, I'm not clear on how the concept of *Isvara*, the "Creator," manifesting the apparent reality by means of the projecting power of *maya* has nothing to do with Vedanta. It is the essence of Vedanta. The Vedantic texts I have studied, such as the *Upanishads*, *Bhagavad Gita*, *Panchadasi*, *Aparokshanubhuti* and *Panchakarana*, as well as Swami Paramarthananda's teachings, have all accounted for the projection or manifestation of the apparent reality along these lines. I admit, they infrequently use the term *vasanas* when referring to the fundamental conceptualizations of objects within "*Isvara's* mind," or the Macrocosmic Causal Body, but all attribute the "creation" to *Isvara*, the Creator. The underlying truth is that ultimately the *vasanas* cannot be personal, for the *jiva* is not the Creator.

Ernest: My understanding is that *samskaras* result from the actions of each *jiva*. So effectively they ARE personal, even though of course the entire process takes place, if you like, according to the laws of *Isvara*.

Ted: Your comment accords entirely with the points I have been making throughout my explanation. It simply depends on which perspective you are viewing from. If you look at it from *Isvara's* point of view, the *vasanas* and *samskaras* are impersonal. Considered from the *jiva's* standpoint, they are personal.

Ernest: So you also do not accept that there is any free will?

Ted: From *Isvara's* point of view, everything is happening spontaneously according to the impersonal and inviolable law of *karma*. From the *jiva's* standpoint, there is apparent free will. That is, the *jiva* seems to have a choice concerning whether or not to act on the desires arising within him or her. But the relative intensity of these desires essentially determines the choice the *jiva* will make. Chapters II to VI of the *Gita* are concerned exclusively with the topic of free will. The next six deal with *Isvara* and how it impacts on free will.

Ernest: This seems to be just a halfway house to saying that everything is *brahman*. Of course this is so from a *paramarthika* perspective, but if we are talking about how things appear/operate at the empirical level then you have to give explanations at that level. If you accept the existence of *jivas* then you have to allow them to have *vasanas*.

Ted: Actualizing self-knowledge within the apparent realm of experience requires the ability to navigate between the viewpoints of the real and the apparent. So yes, what you say is correct.

Ernest: But why would this be necessary? The *samskaras* remain associated with the *jiva* until

such time as they are allocated to a new gross body. After all, the nature of the body which is to be allocated is determined by past *karma*.

Ted: I don't understand how your comment is in conflict with my explanation. The statement that the *samskaras* remain associated with the *jiva* (i.e. the subtle body) throughout its series of incarnations equates with the analogy that the *jiva* only has access to his or her associated bundle of *vasanas*.

Ernest: This is getting too complicated now to make further comments inline so I will just add a few further remarks here. Firstly, with your additional clarifications, I can see that our essential views do not differ after all. As I guessed, it was your exclusive use of the term *vasana* that principally confused me. So the overall comment seems to be that we mainly agree, but on those topics where we disagreed, you are probably correct – my apologies!

~ Best wishes, Ernest