

Sorting out *Satyam* and *Mithya*

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2015-09-02

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/2299>

Gerard: Hi, Ted. I was hoping you could answer this time a good friend's inquiry.

He said: "I look back at my dead parents and feel like I'm losing my mind because if the past has no reality outside my memory, then did those people ever really exist? And if they were never real, then how can I be real? It's not a pleasant feeling. I don't like feeling like I'm not real or that all that stuff never happened, even though most of those years were hard and painful. What are your thoughts? I need your brain right now."

And: "My father existed (past tense) a very long time ago (he died in 1973). He no longer exists outside my very distant memories. But how can existence not exist? How can something exist and then not exist? And if it no longer exists, did it ever have any existence within the illusion of time? Is it like emptiness and form – form being condensed emptiness, so in that regard only emptiness is real? Am I real?"

~ Gerard

Ted: Hi, Gerard. Well, there's good news and bad news, you might say. You can assure your friend that he does exist and that all the people that inhabit his memories did exist and that all the events he remembers did take place. On the flip side, however, none of that stuff – including the person he believes himself to be – is real.

This confusion is universal among seekers. It is a consequence of not understanding the difference between *satyam* and *mithya*, the real and the apparent.

Satyam is that which has independent "is-ness." It is self-luminous and self-dependent. The only "thing" that is *satyam* is the self, pure awareness, limitless conscious existence. The self is the *adhishtanam*, the substratum, of the entire manifestation in both its gross and subtle aspects. In other words, it is both the "substanceless substance" of which all tangible objects and subtle phenomena (i.e. sensations, emotions and cognitions) are made and the knowledge-as-such that informs the manifestation with "intelligent design" and imbues conscious beings with sentiency.

Asat is what your friend finds disturbing. *Asat* refers to that which is non-existent, such as the horns of a hare, the child of a barren woman or a square circle. Some of these non-existent things we may be able to conceive of by means of mentally assembling existent objects that we know of (i.e. we can imagine a rabbit with a rack of antlers because we have knowledge of both of these objects), the objects in combination don't actually exist. Other non-existent objects, such as the son of a barren woman or a square circle are irresolvable paradoxes. In any case, non-existent objects cannot be experienced within the context of the transactional reality, or "external world" (more will be said about this later).

Mithya is that which is neither *sat* (real) nor *asat* (unreal in the sense of being altogether non-existent). The entire manifestation in both its gross and subtle aspects is *mithya*. We can't say that any object is real, because no object has an independent self-nature. In other words, since

awareness is both the material of which they are made and the intelligence that shapes them, so to speak, all objects are entirely dependent on awareness for their existence. On the other hand, we can't say that these objects are non-existent, because we experience them and their interactions produce effects within the context of both the "eternal" world and our "inner" psycho-emotional landscape. Therefore anything perceivable, conceivable or experienceable in any way whatsoever is considered apparently real or dependently real. In a word – *mithya*.

To be clear, *mithya* is not a thing in itself. Rather it is the nature of all names, forms and functions that exist within the manifestation.

By analogy, we can liken *satyam* to water and *mithya* to the waves that arise within it. We would not say that the waves do not exist, but by the same token we wouldn't say that they have any existence independent of or separate from water. Moreover, while waves come and go, water remains ever present. And what's more, no matter what forms the waves take or in what manner they might crash or splash about, the water remains entirely unchanged and unaffected. Similarly, the objects that comprise the manifestation and the events that transpire within its context do exist, but they have no existence independent of awareness. Moreover, while objects and experiences come and go, limitless conscious existence remains ever constant, for what is real cannot cease to exist. And what's more, the quality of the objects and character of the experience or character of behaviors that take place within the apparent reality do not enhance, diminish or otherwise affect the essential nature of limitless conscious existence.

In addition to understanding the distinction between *satyam* and *mithya*, or the real and the apparent, it is also important to understand that existence never ceases to exist. While objects (i.e. forms that are referred to by particular names and that perform particular functions or serve particular purposes) come and go, limitless conscious existence always is. With regard to our recognition of any object, there are two aspects: the "object" cognition and the "is" cognition. For instance, we can say "the carrot is," "the computer is," "the kid is" and so on. While the object cognized in each case is different, the fundamental existence of the object as indicated by "is" remains constant. Even if we say "nothing is" or indicate that something is not, "is-ness," or existence-as-such, remains as the ever-existent substratum.

Such being the case, we only speak of objective phenomena as being manifest or unmanifest rather than existent and non-existent, for actually there is no such thing as non-existence. Everything that ever was, is or will be has its basis in limitless conscious existence. Those objects that are not manifest now are simply abiding in a dormant seed-state within the causal body, the unmanifest realm of pure potentiality. That is, what we might call the "archetypal blueprints" of all objects abide in dormant form in the causal body. The unique individual form of any given object may never appear again, but the objects-as-such will continue to arise and subside within the scope of consciousness. Thus, in more practical terms, while your friend's father will never appear in physical form again, male human beings that perform the function of fathering children will continue to manifest forever. The point is that existence itself never ceases to exist, and while names and forms do exist and are experienced for a given period of time, only existence itself is real in the sense of being both non-negatable and fundamentally immutable.

The distinction between *satyam* and *mithya* also can be analyzed in terms of three "layers" of reality (i.e. three different ontological orders, or orders of existence): *paramarthika satyam*, *vyavaharika satyam* and *pratibhasika satyam*.

Paramarthika satyam is the realm of absolute, non-dual, non-objectifiable awareness, or pure,

unmodified, limitless conscious existence. From this perspective, there is no manifestation, for there is nothing other than awareness. By analogy, this is the realm of water as pure H₂O prior to its manifestation as ocean, lake, pond, pool, cloud, steam, stream, glacier, ice cube, wave, swirl, sprinkle or splash.

Vyavaharika satyam is the transactional reality, the aspect of the manifestation that is available to all. It includes tangible items and consists of sensory stimuli, such as color, shape, pitch, volume, tone, weight, texture, density, malleability, temperature, odor, aroma and the various taste sensations. It is referred to as *Isvara sristi*, or “God’s creation.”

Pratibhasika satyam is the subjective reality, the aspect of the manifestation that consists of thoughts and emotions that arise within the mind of each individual and are only available to the particular individual in whose mind they are arising. This realm consists of the apparent individual’s subjective ideas and the interpretations and evaluations he or she projects upon “God’s creation” that are the consequence of his or her *guna*-based, *vasana*-influence, *raga-dvesha* (i.e. like and dislike) -determined values. Because these interpretations and evaluations and the actions they inspire basically determine the quality of the apparent individual’s experience, this realm is referred to as *jiva sristi*, or the individual’s “creation.” Of course this realm is fundamentally an aspect of *vyavaharika satyam*, for *Isvara* (i.e. *brahman*, limitless conscious existence, conditioned by *maya upadhi*, the power that causes limitless non-dual awareness to appear as the innumerable limited and seemingly separate objects that comprise the manifestation) is the progenitor of the entire manifestation. Because this aspect is exclusive to the apparent individual whereas the transactional reality is the province of all, and because the individual has more control of this aspect of the manifestation, we separate this “internal” aspect from the “external” aspect of the manifestation for the purposes of analysis.

Ultimately, only *paramarthika satyam* is *sat*, or real. While both *vyavaharika satyam* and *pratibhasika satyam* do exist and are experienced, their existence is wholly dependent on *paramarthika satyam*, and therefore they are both *mithya*, or only apparently real.

That should cover all the bases, I believe. If any further questions arise, let me know.

~ All the best, Ted