

The Self Can't Avoid Itself

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2013-07-24

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/1249>

Amelia: Hi, Ted. I want to thank you for your well-thought-out reply to me and for putting into words so well what I also have intuited, and that is that the afflictions “I” suffer are in fact merely appearances and that the real “I”, awareness, am not touched by them. I know it will take some time for this to in fact become reality in my experience, but meanwhile I find it very easy, especially on good days, to be the aware observer and everything within the field of awareness, both inner and outer, as data.

Ted: I get what you are saying, Amelia, but it also seems like an opportune moment to stress the importance of language within the context of Vedanta. Vedanta is what is termed in Sanskrit as a *shabda pramana*, which means that it is a means of knowledge (*pramana*) whose vehicle is sound (*shabda*). In simple terms, this means that Vedanta relies on words to convey its message. Because the self, awareness, the true you, cannot be objectified, it cannot be known in the same way one can know a person or a thing or an experience or a feeling or a thought. All of these can be seen or experienced either visually or by means of the other sense organs. Relative knowledge, i.e. knowledge of objects, is gathered mainly through perception and inference. In other words, we either directly experience the object or we make inferences (logical, informed guesses) based on the clues at hand. For instance, we can either directly perceive a fire burning before us or we can infer that a fire is burning, because even though we don't actually see the fire itself, we see smoke rising beyond the tree line and we know that smoke is only produced by fire. The self, pure awareness, however, has no attributes and therefore despite the fact that it is never not present (how else would you know that you exist, much less anything else, unless you are aware?) can be neither perceived nor inferred.

This is where Vedanta comes to the rescue. Vedanta is referred to in Sanskrit as *apta vakya*, which means “the testimony of a reliable witness.” Despite what some people think, the ancient *rishis* (seers) didn't think up Vedanta. The insights or knowledge that constitutes Vedanta was revealed to them. They saw it or heard it. In other words, Vedanta is not a man-made philosophy. It is the revealed wisdom that has come directly from the self to help the self free itself from the apparent ignorance it has inexplicably imposed upon itself. It's a weird situation, I know, but there is a way out. Even though, as mentioned, we can neither directly see the self nor infer its existence based on perception-based data (i.e. the smoke that indicates fire), we can gain an understanding of our true nature through the words of Vedanta. In other words, Vedanta acts as a word mirror that reveals our true nature through the implied meanings of the words employed for that purpose. Though we cannot see the self, the words ring true and remind us of our true nature, because essentially it is a matter of the *atman* (the term used to denote the self, pure awareness, when it is associated with a particular apparent individual entity) recognizing its identity with *brahman* (the term used to denote the absolute, or universal, nature of the self, pure awareness).

The point is that words are vitally important in Vedanta and need to be used both consciously and with precision if one is to realize one's true identity. So when you say “I know it will take some time for this to in fact become reality in my experience” it is important that you recognize (or

at least contemplate, which will enable you to eventually recognize) that your identity as awareness is already the fact, the reality, of your experience. The only reason you are able to know you are having experience is because you, awareness, are aware of it. Similarly, when you say “I find it very easy, especially on good days, to be the aware observer” it is again of vital importance to recognize that you are already, always have been and always will be the aware observer. Speaking in terms of becoming or being something that is somehow different from what you always are suggests that you are not already who you are, which is not true. Moreover, both becoming and being in the sense that you are using them imply that the self is an object, in this case, a state or way of being that is different than or separate from you and that you can attain, acquire or achieve it through an action. The irony, however, is that you can't do something to get what you've already got. You are the self, whole and complete, limitless, actionless, ordinary, unborn, all-pervasive, non-dual awareness. When you get this, you get that there is nothing to get. In other words, the getting is a matter of understanding, not acquisition. We are so conditioned to seek experience and to think that self-realization will be some experience, that despite its utter simplicity we struggle with simply accepting that we are already the self. We don't become the self by means of Vedanta. Vedanta simply removes our ignorance and reveals to us what we have always been all along. Of course, just because we understand the movie on the screen is nothing more than flickering light doesn't mean the movie stops or that the images cease to appear as people and places and things. In the same way, just because I know who I am doesn't mean the apparent reality that I refer to as my life suddenly disappears in a blazing flash of light or that the events apparently transpiring within it change in any significant way (though they might). Self-realization is simply that. I realize, know, understand, who I really am rather than continuing to be suckered into believing I am some small, inadequate, incomplete worm. To reiterate the initial point, language is vitally important in assimilating this understanding and making it one's own.

As I previously mentioned, the price of freedom is constant vigilance. Observe your words, whether they be spoken, written or thought. Make sure that you are using them wisely. That is, make sure they are truthful representations of who you really are rather than a mindless repetition of assumed conditioning. Excuses are acceptable no more. Now that you know you are not the objects appearing in you, it is your responsibility to apply that knowledge, assuming you want to be free. Challenging as it can be at times, it is time to take a stand as awareness. So think, speak and act accordingly.

Amelia: Your understanding of the difficult emotional states of PTSD was quite correct. I can see that maintaining vigilance during those episodes will be my real work.

Ted: This is sound understanding, Amelia. Though you can't do anything to become who you are, you do have to do something remain vigilant, practice *karma yoga*, continually expose yourself to the teachings and contemplate their implications in terms of your life, apply the opposite thought when you catch the mind playing its old tricks to purify the mind of its conditioned, habitual way of thinking and reacting. Note, however, that by purifying the mind I don't mean you have to kill the mind or eradicate every single negative or limiting thought. Do the best you can to manage the mind, and when it reaches the appropriate degree of purity it will naturally recognize the light that has always been shining within it and will cease its identification with the objects on which that light awareness, you!!!, is shining.

Amelia: I have an added dimension of awareness, with the dissociative disorder.

Ted: Again, I think you mean awareness in the relative sense here, but it is worth calling attention to your use of language within the context of our discussion. To be clear, there are no degrees of awareness, assuming by awareness we mean the self. The self is the self. Awareness is awareness. You don't gain more awareness when you know who you are. You simply understand that the ordinary awareness by which you know what you know and know what you don't know is the unchanging, limitless, consciousness/awareness in which the entire apparent reality, both its gross and subtle aspects, appears and of which it is made.

Amelia: This body was subjected to multiple types of abuse from both parents in utero up to about age eight. In order to survive, I left my body and had no memory of many of the events until age 43 when memories started flooding into my consciousness. In previous times this type of thing was called multiple personality disorder. Nowadays they call it DID, or dissociative identity disorder. The ironic thing is that we all suffer from DID in the sense that we have all dissociated from our true identity to take up a false one, don't you think?

Ted: Good point – and I like your wry humor.

Regarding the childhood trauma that Amelia suffered, you might be interested to know that Vedanta doesn't require that we process all our past stuff before we can assimilate the truth. Though past experiences no doubt contributed to and/or reinforced our conditioning, the experiences themselves are no longer present, i.e. they are not happening now, and therefore only have the power to affect us inasmuch as we continue to give them attention through our thought patterns. I'm guessing you know this already given that you referred to the one who suffered those traumas as the body, but it is worth contemplating this idea in order to lay the effects of the conditioning to rest if you haven't already done so.

I'm not a psychologist and have little scientific understanding of the anatomy of conditions such as PTSD and DID, and I'm not suggesting Vedanta can cure those conditions. What I am saying is that you don't necessarily have to look at your present reactions to life in terms of past traumas. Vedanta says the essentially our present suffering is a result of not getting what we want or not avoiding what we don't want. Again, our likes and dislikes, desires and fears, were born out of and/or shaped by our past experiences, and therefore it may or may not be helpful to gain an understanding of their cause, but basically they manifest now in terms of triggers in our present environment that correspond to our preferences.

The import of this understanding is that it frees us from having to be slaves to our past circumstances and experiences. Moreover, it reveals that the key to overcoming the negative effects of the conditionings that were instilled or sustained by traumatic events is self-knowledge. Once you know that you are not the body or the mind or the intellect and certainly not the phenomena influencing them, and thus not the apparent person who apparently suffered the apparently traumatic events, then you are empowered to let their influence go. Or perhaps more aptly put, you simply no longer identify yourself as the one who is conditioned by them.

Then, whether their influence continues or not, you are not bothered by it in the same way as

when you thought you were the one suffering their influence. Often this cognitive shift is enough to change the intensity and/or appearance of their influence or even quell it altogether, but of course there is no guarantee. If you have a stand confidently in the knowledge of your true identity as pure awareness, however, then even should the pain continue, suffering ceases.

Amelia: I have a mild case, only two “alters,” or alternate personalities, very young ones that carry traumatic memories, one containing fear and the other anger and hatred. I do my best to see these as just more data, but many times the emotions color my whole being. I know I sound like I’m on a self-pity trip but I am just explaining what DID is and how it can affect the “host” personality. I can see, from the Vedanta perspective, the host personality, or Amelia and each of the other alters, have no difference in that they are all objects of awareness and are not who I really am.

Ted: This analysis is quite interesting in that corresponds directly with the Vedantic teaching concerning the three *gunas*, which are the three basic qualities that intermingle and combine in various configurations to comprise every aspect of creation, the apparent reality. These three qualities are *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. The nature of *sattva* is light, clarity and knowledge. The nature of *rajas* is heat, passion, desire, activity and projection. The nature of *tamas* is darkness, dullness, inertia, sloth, stupidity and denial. These three qualities not only comprise the outer world but they color every aspect of our subjective experience, i.e. thoughts, feelings, memories, perceptions, fantasies, desires, fears, interpretations, judgments, etc., as well.

It is quite obvious that these three energies are playing out a complex experiential drama within your being. Fears are related to aspects of reality with which we don’t want to deal, and thus the fear aspect is *tamas*. Anger arises due to thwarted desire, and hatred is the immature projection of blame on an other which/whom we believe was responsible to a greater or lesser degree for our not getting what we want, so the anger/hatred aspect is *rajas*. Discrimination and dispassion are essential ingredients of the ability to see oneself as the substratum of pure awareness that is the ever-untainted screen upon which this drama is unfolding, so you as awareness are *sattva*.

The fundamental problem associated with the *gunas* is the disturbance caused by excessive *rajas* and *tamas*. In order to have enough calmness, focus and clarity to engage in successful self-inquiry, one needs to have a predominately *sattvic* mind. The chief characteristic of *rajas* is projection, and so too much *rajas* extroverts the mind and prevents it from turning within to find contentment. The chief characteristic of *tamas* is denial, and so too much *tamas* clouds the mind and prevents its apprehension of the subtle nature of the self. Moreover, these two qualities are insidious bedfellows that work in tandem to sustain ignorance. The excessive activity and agitation caused by *rajas* leads to *tamasic* states of exhaustion, inertia and sometimes apathy.

This is not to say that *rajas* and *tamas* are all bad. We need and actually cannot avoid having a bit of both qualities in our system. *Rajas* gives us enough get-up-and-go to take care of our responsibilities and realize our ambitions (yes, you may very well still have ambitions when you know who you are, you simply won’t be driven by them or seek lasting happiness through their fulfillment). *Tamas* sees to it that we can sleep and gives us enough grounding to maintain a degree of practicality in our approach to life. As mentioned, however, a predominately *sattvic* mind is necessary for the assimilation of self-knowledge.

James devotes two whole chapters of his book to a more detailed description of these qualities

and their influence as well as providing practical tips for balancing and managing them in a way that supports self-inquiry. I strongly suggest you pay close attention and give ample consideration to the information in these chapters. Coupled with the application of self-knowledge, an understanding of the *gunas* might provide you with effective means of more effectively preventing and/or dealing with stressful circumstances and the consequent arising of excessive *rajas* and *tamas*.

Amelia: I don't know if I will ever find lasting peace and happiness, but I am sure motivated to try with everything that is within me.

Ted: Motivation is a huge factor when seeking freedom. Vedanta calls this factor *mumukshutva*, or burning desire, and says it is among the most essential qualifications of a student. It seems like the time as come for the self to recognize itself through you. Trust in the teachings of Vedanta, vigilantly watch your mind and apply self-knowledge to every experience of Amelia's life. As you are essentially the self telling yourself it's time to reclaim its true identity, the self has no choice but to respond. The self can't avoid itself.

Amelia: Thank you for your wisdom and your caring.

Ted: Any time, Amelia.