

# Vedanta Is Not a Group Thing

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**Sundari:** Hello, Jonathan. I am sorry to hear that you have decided to quit the group. I have not read your entire email, but from what I did read it references other teaching traditions and talks about group dynamics, both of which have no relevance to Vedanta. You have missed the point if you believe that I have been critical of the group integration. I have been trying to get through to you that the main point of gathering is to assist each other's self-inquiry, not to bond as a group. I have also made the reasons clear why there is no direction and no guidance for this to take place. I will reiterate.

The requirements for what it takes to be a qualified Vedanta teacher do not subscribe to any other teaching methods. The qualifications are unique and stand apart from all other teachings. Most importantly, they pertain to a comprehensive understanding of the scripture and the ability to wield it effectively, so that it can do the work of removing ignorance.

The requirements presuppose first and foremost that the teacher is simply a vehicle for the teaching and not "the doer." The knowledge, *Isvara*, is the only doer. As soon as the person enters into the teaching the scripture is contaminated and very soon it is no longer scripture. The *guru*, or teacher, sees himself/herself as a friend and equal to the students. It is not about the teacher in any way.

The issue here is not about the "group dynamics" either. Although traditional Vedanta is taught to large groups of people, again it differs from all "spiritual paths" in that not only is it not a path, it is aimed at the individual. The reason for this is that although ignorance is the nature of the macrocosmic mind, removing ignorance is a personal issue. Only the mature individual with a purified mind can, by sincere dedication to his *sadhana*, have his or her ignorance removed by exposing the mind to the scripture through self-inquiry – and allow self-knowledge to do the work.

Self-knowledge is not a "transmission" and it is not about "group energy." This belief is for people who think they need other people to help them "get something," because they are identified with the person and they are lonely, needy and afraid of facing down their own stuff alone, because they feel so limited and small. They need other people to make them feel safe or valuable.

Vedanta is for people who are very keen to be rid of the person, the doer, and will do whatever it takes to achieve this because they want freedom from suffering. This can only be done alone, with the help of the scripture and a qualified teacher. There are no "others" out there, there is only you, awareness under the spell of ignorance, appearing as many apparent individuals.

Although there may be other groups around the world who meet to watch videos and read scripture, be they Ram's material or any of the other traditional Vedanta teachers, and to discuss what they have learned in this way, I personally only know of one other. There are many people around the world who meet regularly to be taught by qualified teachers, but these teachers teach their own traditional Vedanta programme, and these are not "groups" per se.

Most people who come to Vedanta and become serious seekers are qualified and work alone. This is not to say that the group is a bad idea. There is an advantage to the sincere seeker in

being part of a group; there is also a serious disadvantage. The advantage is that it can help self-inquiry to meet with like minds who gather with the common desire for *moksa*. The disadvantage is that very often these groups have people attending who are at very varied levels of maturity and qualification. Additionally, if the group is “led” by someone who is not firm in the knowledge or has their own agenda, there is a very real danger that the scripture will be interpreted and misinterpreted. This is the case with the group you were instrumental in starting.

Why is this “group” idea so important to you? I understand that your desire is to help the coming together of like minds, and this is a good and noble thing to pursue. You took the initiative and got the group together, which is great, we admire you for that. We are not saying that we are against this in any way, but why has the group become about you?

As you must know, the qualifications for Vedanta are very important; so are the motivations, i.e. the person’s value system. If these are not understood or established, it will be very difficult if not impossible for self-knowledge to stick. The qualifications can all be developed but the importance must first be understood. What is clear with this group is that the essential groundwork is not there and the group is all over the place.

You took over leading the group with very good intentions and with an open heart. You are a highly intelligent and qualified man in many areas of your life. You are kind and compassionate, and it is clear that you are very sincere and earnest about *moksa*. It is also clear that you care about the people in the group. But the “group” is not about you, neither is the group about the group.

The group should be about seekers who are serious about their self-inquiry and whose sole purpose in meeting is to further this aim. Maybe you have lost sight of this. You are not a qualified teacher of Vedanta, Jonathan. I know this is harsh and I mean no offence, it is not personal, just a statement of fact. You are very knowledgeable about many other paths, an intellectual with a highly-developed mind. But you have a tendency to be in love with your own doubts and to weave your opinions and beliefs into the scripture. You “teach” Vedanta according to Jonathan. Vedanta is an independent teaching, it is not about any one person – and it most definitely requires that you leave your stuff out of it. One cannot make Vedanta fit into your opinions and beliefs, it will just not work.

Vedanta is not an intellectual exercise either, although it requires serious thinking. This is because it challenges you to examine the unexamined logic of your own experience in light of the scripture, which is infallible and irrefutable. Vedanta is a complete teaching, it has worked absolutely everything out. It does not come from the mind of man; it is revealed knowledge, *apauruseya jnanam*. No other teaching compares to it. If this fact does not agree with Jonathan, then maybe he should consider that Vedanta is not for him, because the *dharma* of a serious seeker of self-knowledge is faith in the scripture, *shraddha*. If you do not have this faith as the bedrock of your self-inquiry and you keep casting about for “other” takes on the scripture, self-inquiry will not work for you.

I saw this as getting in the way of your self-inquiry, as well as that of the group members. A teacher of Vedanta knows without a shadow of a doubt that he/she is not the teacher, *Isvara* is. And the teacher knows that *Isvara* is the student as well. Jonathan has become identified with the role of “group leader,” and it seemed to me that his ego has co-opted the knowledge to serve this purpose. This is often the case in situations like this, and when one understands *Isvara* and therefore the *gunas*, it is very simple to see how this happens and why. *Rajas* and *tamas*, the

infamous and ubiquitous duo, are very skilled at projection and concealment and are always hard at work.

So, I ask you: Why are you leaving the group, Jonathan? What are the real reasons?

What is it that you did not get out of this group endeavour in your attempts to bring Jonathan into it (*rajas*)? And what is it about Jonathan that you do not love and therefore do not want to see (*tamas*)? Why does Jonathan need the group to recognise him?

Why not see that Jonathan is beautiful and perfect the way he is, love him warts and all. Forget about “leading” the group and show up just like everyone else does, without an agenda, other than for *moksa*. Help with the logistics and organisational aspects, decide on a program as far as watching the videos, set target discussions around them relating to the scripture and nothing else. Keep everyone on topic, practise the knowledge, don’t interpret it. Trust *Isvara* to do the leading and teaching; it really is so much easier and much more effective.

By leaving the group, the statement you are making is that Jonathan believes he is real and takes himself so seriously that he thinks “he” has failed. Who failed and at what? There is no failure other than the lack of understanding that you are not the doer.

If you or the group wish to continue meeting, Ramji is happy to help with Skype meetings and even a webinar on the topic of what is required for self-inquiry.

Whatever you decide, know that Ramji and I love you and we see you.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari

**Jonathan:** Dear Sundari, thank you so much for your extensive and prompt reply and for your kindness and care, indeed. I needed your answer so badly these days. This “group issue” served as a far cry to expose my deeper issues, as it seems. I agree with you on every point. What needs to happen now is that I’ve got to go back to the drawing board. I do not even know how to reply to those crucial points. I need some time to answer these questions for myself. I feel there must be a fundamental change of focus here. I can see it drifted off, and there is an issue of trust in Vedantic teaching. There is a great resistance here as well, “the doer in its full glory.” I studied Kabbalah five years before I meet Ram and fell in love with a simple power and clarity of Vedanta, but the Kabbalistic teaching is deeply ingrained within. I still discriminate as a Kabbalist, as it appears. Through your letter I finally understood the differences. They are irreconcilable. Over time it confused everything. I am on neither side now. The doer profited largely out of this struggle. He is this struggle! I now understand. Unfortunately, it rendered this *jiva* barely qualified to study Vedanta. I suspected that. Horror! To start from the beginning appears to be a solution. I don’t know. What I know at the moment is that I shouldn’t be confusing others. I will share in future with you and Ram, if you don’t mind. Thank you again.

~ Love to you and Ram

**Sundari:** Hello, Jonathan. Thank you for this touching and a very frank reply, it is a tribute to you that you have this level of honesty and integrity. It shows who you really are, and as the self observing itself, I see that you are a beautiful soul. My reply to your email was rather hard-hitting, and I am so glad that you did not take it as the person, Jonathan. You took it as the self seeing

the game that the doer is playing and understanding it. This in itself is high level discrimination, seeing “what is” with dispassion and not beating Jonathan up over it or the ego hitting out because of it. This is *sattva* functioning very well in the mind, seeing the ignorance. Do not identify with it, it has nothing to do with you, awareness. It is very difficult to train the mind to think differently; Jonathan’s conditioning is hardwired. The important thing is that you do not personalise it, which is what it means to negate the doer.

Both Ramji and I are very happy to assist your inquiry should you so desire. Allow the dust to settle and trust that *Isvara* will guide the way.

~ Much love to you from both of us, Sundari

**Jonathan:** Dear friends, I believe the following. In this era of internet and virtual communications, certain traditional ways are under pressure to adjust, not because they are under any threat, but because of new opportunities and many birth pains related to them are being revealed. I think we tasted some of them.

At the center of the path is the teacher who is the living guardian of the knowledge as it comes into the world. Within the heart of the teacher the tradition is held as an uninterrupted line of succession stretching back through his or her teacher and the chain of predecessors. It is through this chain of transmission that the energy of the tradition manifests. If the teacher and the group do not stay within the tradition then the energy ceases to flow. This means that a certain unwritten code of behavior and inner attitude need to be followed, and it is the responsibility of the teacher to keep the group within these principles. Spiritual life without the highest ethics is impossible.

The teacher is also the most visible outer focus for the student. Often when we first come to a spiritual group our inner bond with the Beloved is not yet known. It is experienced as longing, discontent, an inability to fit into the outer world, failure to achieve happiness. It may take years of painful unveiling to discover ultimate belonging.

The bond of fellow travelers helps to hold us until we find the real security of the self. But the relationship with the teacher is usually the most powerful reminder and container of our bond with the Beloved. Furthermore, for many students it is through their relationship with the teacher that they first tune into the energy of the path.

On the inner level of the soul the teacher holds the group within his heart. The group is thus bonded to the teacher as a child is bonded to its mother. It is this instinctual bond of the heart that enables the teacher to be responsive to the needs of the group and keep the group aligned with the tradition. It is through this bond that the teacher comes to know about any disturbances that happen within the group and its members.

In particular it is the function of the teacher to keep a student tied to the path and the whole group tied together within the energy stream of the tradition. The teacher should not allow anyone to disturb this bond, and at times he will have to interfere if the group dynamics become erratic or if the collective attitude of the group begins to stray from the highest principles of the path, in order to keep them consciously focused and thus in tune with the path.

The bond between the teacher and the group is a bond of love, and through this bond the group is both energized and protected. The more a group works and aspires, so the greater the light

that it generates. There are forces in the world which are disturbed by this light and will interfere with the work of the group. The teacher, merged within his teacher, merged within a great succession of the sages, protects the group from any such interference. It is the teacher that enables the grace of this succession to hold the heart of the group on the Beloved. In this way the aspirations of students and their work in the world are protected by them who watch over mankind.

It is not necessary for the teacher to be physically present in the group for this inner bond to function. It is on the level of the soul that the process of belonging and protection takes place. The hearts of the devotees who form the core of the group are bound together as a group soul that spins with the energy of devotion. The self through the teacher watches over this dynamic unfolding. Occasionally it may be necessary for the teacher to be physically present in order to keep the attention of the group attuned to the path and not allow the inner bond to be compromised by personality conflicts or misunderstandings. In the same way the teacher at times needs to help an individual stay focused on the goal.

In this age, spiritual groups function more and more as living organisms generating love and light. The teacher will become a less dominant physical presence and the group will become more responsible for itself. The attitude of a group, being spoon-fed by the teacher, totally dependent upon his presence, will interfere with the energy flow of the tradition as it comes into the world. Inwardly the teacher will always be the custodian of the group, but it is the dynamic of the group that will create a sacred space for those who wish to come closer to the truth. It is the ordinary members of the group who will form the pillars of the love of knowledge, and the bond of spiritual friendship found within a group will become increasingly important. To be a part of such a group is a blessing.

The teacher represents a distant goal, the deepest longing for union. The friendship found within a group of fellow students helps the individual to include his ordinary self within the context of the path. The group holds the energy of the outer world more visibly than the teacher and thus the group helps to bridge the gap between the sacred desire for liberation and the maze of mundane life of an individual.

Although Ram teaches many of the above mentioned values, and Sundari in her letters to us confirms our failure to meaningfully and pragmatically integrate into a functioning team, confusion still persists. Besides that I haven't found any additional Vedantic guidelines on the nature of group work and group dynamics. I based the content of this letter on the teachings of Sufi master Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee and Kabbalist Rav Michael Laitman.

I also believe that I utterly failed to contribute my best to help integrate "the group, the teacher and the teaching of Vedanta" toward affirming this sacred bond and building the safe learning environment. It would necessitate Ram to further clarify the utility, boundaries and purpose of his Vedanta groups, as to avoid the misunderstandings we are going through. At the moment, I have little faith in all three of these fundamentals within the current setup.

Forgive me for deciding to depart from the group.

~ Love to all, Jonathan