

What Is Visistha Advaita?

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Kumari: *Namaste* again! I had communicated once earlier during the start of the year to which you gave a very detailed response. To give you brief background, I am half Hindu but not raised as one. I have been following James for three years and have read *How to Attain Enlightenment* and watched YouTube videos.

I have few further questions; kindly respond when you find the time.

1. James says *guru* is necessary, and I understand he says this is because we may not interpret the scriptures correctly on our own. Can enlightenment be gained by just hearing YouTube audio and reading books, *satsangs* or do I need to physically be with a *guru* as some people say?

Sundari: Vedanta should not be interpreted **at all**. It must be unfolded correctly so that the true meaning can be assimilated by the intellect. That is often a difficult task because the mind automatically wants to interpret according to its conditioning.

Sravana is the first step of self-inquiry, and very important. It involves listening to or hearing the scripture. This requires that you leave everything you previously believed or thought you knew temporarily on the shelf. You can take your beliefs back if self-knowledge does not work for you. This step is very important; if you keep comparing Vedanta to all your beliefs and opinions and try to make it comply with them, forget about self-inquiry. Vedanta is a radical teaching; it is counter-intuitive; expect it to challenge everything you thought you knew. Without faith in the scripture (*shraddha*), self-inquiry will not work. This is not blind faith like religions demand, but faith pending the results of your own inquiry.

Reading the scriptures and signing on to the logic every step of the way, watching the videos and reading the *satsangs* does constitute a valid *sadhana*. Whether we are with you in person or connecting via technology, the knowledge is wielded in the same way by us because we are qualified teachers of Vedanta. If the mind is prepared and qualified and you are firmly dedicated to self-inquiry, self-knowledge will do “the work” of removing ignorance. We are all here to help you with any questions that arise, but ultimately self-inquiry can only be done alone. James has taught thousands of people around the world and helped many of them find *moksa*, most of whom he never met. There is no real boundary between you and the *guru*, because a *guru* literally means “the one who dispels the darkness” – and in doing so, reveals that the Self is the only *guru* because this is a non-dual reality.

Kumari: 2. I know that thought is insentient, but then who chooses among options? For example, I have a thought, “I want to eat xxx.” Another thought says, “Last time you ate, you had stomach issues.” I choose not to eat xxx. Also, sometimes I am in a bad mood due to something that happened earlier, but now I forgot it during the course of the day. However, something in the background seems to be feeling bad... not sure what it is. Would you be able help here?

Sundari: Managing our thoughts and feelings so that they are in accordance with *dharma* and with the scripture is what self-inquiry is all about. It is also what a happy life is all about – as well as a healthy body-mind. All thoughts and feelings arise from *Isvara*, in other words, from the three *gunas* – *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. Each *guna* generates very specific thoughts and feelings, and the words and actions that accompany them. Understanding the *gunas* and how they govern the creation of all *vasanas*, your seemingly personal *vasanas* (conditioning or tendencies) as well as all the universal *vasanas* that run the field of existence, is imperative.

The *gunas*, in brief, are the three energies or forces giving rise to our likes and dislikes, the psychological order of existence and the motivators of desire and action. They are attributes, qualities or characteristics inherent in human nature we can all relate to, also called “the ropes” because they bind us to identification with the body-mind. As long as identification prevails, there is no escaping them. Freedom from bondage means that we can identify, understand and step out of destructive, habitual patterns of limitation through self-knowledge. There is no other lasting way to be free. Therefore whether you are conscious of the *gunas* or not, your life is *guna*-managed. When you are aware of the *gunas* and do not identify with them, you can make intelligent life choices to maximize the positive aspects of all the *gunas* to ensure happiness and peace of mind.

We call it having an “enlightened lifestyle.” James has written extensively about the *gunas* in all his books, and we are both in the process of finishing books specifically on this vital teaching. James has just recently taught the outline of the *guna* book in the UK, and the video is available on the ShiningWorld website.

Kumari: 3. What is Vishesha Advaita philosophy? Does it also say there is only one consciousness? How does it differ from ours?

Sundari: Vishista Advaita is one of the six orthodox schools of Vedanta that teach according to the *Vedas*. Vishista Advaita is behind the whole *bhakta* movement, which claims that liberation can only be attained through *bhakti*, devotional practice. It does teach that there is only one consciousness. However, it qualifies the non-duality of Shankara (non-dual, or *advaita*, Vedanta) by stating that *maya* (the *gunas*) affects or qualifies consciousness because it says the *jiva* and *Brahman*, although different, are both real. Therefore, indirectly, it is saying ignorance is real. It does not have the teaching on *mithya*, the apparent reality, so it does not understand the difference between *satya* (consciousness) and *mithya* (the effects of ignorance).

Vedanta says consciousness is a partless whole, that everything is consciousness and is never qualified by anything. It teaches that ignorance is a power in awareness or awareness could not be unlimited, but ignorance is not real and it can only be removed by self-knowledge, nothing else. Vedanta also says that *Isvara* in the role of Creator is not conditioned by the *gunas* (whereas the *jiva* is conditioned), that both *Isvara's* and *jiva's* identity is consciousness, but neither *Isvara* or *jiva* are real with reference to consciousness, because they depend on consciousness to exist. But consciousness depends on nothing to exist. In other words, there is only consciousness.

When *maya* manifests, awareness in association with *maya* (the *gunas*), operating as *Isvara* in the role of Creator, brings about creation. But *maya* never covers awareness, because awareness is the knower of *maya*. The creation is a projection, which means duality is just a

superimposition onto non-duality. Because ignorance is not real, it can be removed by self-knowledge. If ignorance was capable of modifying consciousness (*Isvara*), it could never be removed. Vedanta says that no action taken by a limited entity is capable of producing a limitless result, such as *moksa*. Devotional practices or any other practice designed to achieve liberation are all limited means, carried out by limited entities, or people identified with the doer. Only self-inquiry into the true nature of reality with a valid means of knowledge for awareness (Vedanta) can produce a limitless result, i.e. *moksa*.

Vedanta says that there are two orders of reality: (1) *satya*, or consciousness, that which is real (always present and unchanging), or non-duality, and (2) *mithya*, the objects, or duality, the apparently real (not always present and always changing), the *jiva*. These two orders of reality are not in conflict with each other, because nothing hides or qualifies awareness. But Vedanta destroys the notion of duality with non-duality. It does not destroy the world or say it does not exist. It just destroys the idea that it is real, whereas Visishta Advaita does not destroy the *jiva*/doer/the world – it says it remains and qualifies *Brahman*. Therefore it says that the *jiva*'s identity is as real as *Brahman* and that only *bhakti*, or worship of *Isvara*, will remove ignorance. Vedanta says that *bhakti* is an important and essential aid to self-inquiry but it never equals self-inquiry, and without *karma yoga* and *jnana yoga* cannot remove ignorance.

Here is qualified non-dualism's (Vasishadvaita) argument against non-dual Vedanta (Mayavada):

1. Ignorance cannot be located in awareness, because they cannot exist simultaneously.
2. Without ignorance, how can there be concealment of the self?
3. If there is no concealment, how can there be projection (*vikshepa/adhyasa*)?
4. If there is no *avarana* and *vikshepa*, how can you say *samsara* is a projection (*adhyasa*)?
5. Therefore *samsara* is real.
6. So you can't get *moksa* through *jnanam*, because knowledge will not remove what is real. It will only remove ignorance.
7. After knowledge of the self, you must practise *bhakti* because *bhakti* gives liberation.
8. So first do *karma*, then get knowledge, then practise *bhakti*, which causes *moksa*.

The argument is simple and logical, **but it is erroneously based on the notion that awareness and ignorance cannot coexist**. It is true that ignorance and knowledge cannot coexist in duality, but awareness is not in conflict with knowledge or ignorance, because they are not in the same order of reality. The second fallacy of this argument is that action can produce limitlessness.

Kumari: 4. Would you recommend me buying James' *Panchadasa* book/CD, given my current understanding (I have read *How to Attain Enlightenment* more than a year ago). Is there any material on *karma yoga* available?

Sundari: *Panchadasi* is a very advanced text. I would say you first need to reread *How to Attain Enlightenment* or better still, read *The Essence of Enlightenment*, which is the same material but simpler. It is also available on our website as a 12-month teaching course, with each chapter having its set of questions and answers.

I have attached a *satsang* I recently wrote on *karma yoga*, but it is extensively covered in James' books mentioned above.

~ Om, Sundari