

What is Visistha Advaita

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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 3 years and have read 'How to Attain Enlightenment' and 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 gained by just hearing YouTube / audio and reading books / satsang 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 moksha, 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 e.g. I have a thought " I want to eat xxx". Another thought says " last time you ate, you have stomach issues". I choose not to eat xxxx. 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 Visheshadvaita philosophy. Does it also say there is only one consciousness? How does it differ from ours?

Sundari: Vishishtadvaita is one of the 6 orthodox schools of Vedanta that teach according to the Vedas. Vishishtadvaita 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 the 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 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 moksha. 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 Brahman and that only bhakti or worship 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 practice *bhakti* because bhakti gives liberation.
- (8). So first do karma, then get knowledge, then practice *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 Panchadasi book /cd given my current understanding (Have read 'How to attain Enlightenment' more than a year ago). Are 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 it's set of Q&A.

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

Om, Sundari