

Why Does Awareness Suffer?

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Julia: Hi, Ted. Thanks from the bottom of my heart for taking the time to share with me your thoughts about my topic (...and nightmare: suffering).

Before providing you with my reactions to your comments, please keep always in your mind that I am not trying to be mean or smart... I am trying to be honest according to my gut feelings, trying to remember the best that I can the beautiful things that I read from Wei Wu Wei, Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj. Although I don't trust my intellect anymore, I still keep reading these authors just in case a miracle happens making me understand what so far is just only smart readings.

Ted: A miracle is what you will need in order to reach any kind of resolute understanding of the nature of reality and how to function in the world as a liberated being if you read only Wei Wu Wei, Ramana Maharshi and Nisargadatta Maharaj. This sounds utterly blasphemous in the non-dual world, I know, but while undoubtedly these gentlemen were *brahmanishtas* (i.e. self-realized beings, beings who had gained self-knowledge and *moksa*, or liberation), none were *shrotriyas* (i.e. qualified teachers of Vedanta). They had no teaching methodology and did not know how to unfold the implied meaning of the words of scripture nor guide a student through a systematic investigation and logical analysis of the student's previously unexamined experience that would reveal pure awareness as the substratum supporting all experience.

Julia: Ted, when I read your reply the first time, all my alarms went on (remember, alarms equal warning gut feelings). Why? In your answer, you use the word "apparent" fifteen times... and for me, the suffering of seven million people that vanished into smoke in Auschwitz cannot be related to anything close to "apparent." Please notice that neither I am Jewish nor a political person with an agenda. Not at all, I am using Auschwitz (i.e. concentration camps) as an example because for me it's kind of a magnifying glass highlighting the pain and misery of the human race. I can give you another example: a little girl, five years old, is kidnapped from her backyard, sexually assaulted and then finally murdered with a knife... only five years old... can you imagine her terror, her pain, her misery, her isolation, confronting her horrific death alone? You can find Auschwitz around any corner... you don't need to go to Poland.

Ted: Your issue with my use of the word "apparent" seems to stem from a lack of understanding with regard to what this term means within the context of the teachings of Vedanta.

It is true that reality is non-dual and thus awareness is the only "thing" that exists. But for the purposes of analysis, Vedanta divides existence into two fundamental categories: the real (*satyam*) and the apparent (*mithya*).

The term "apparent" does not mean that whatever subject it qualifies does not exist or lacks importance within the context of the manifest universe. It simply means that while the objective

phenomenon referred to as apparent is existent, it is not real.

When we say that something is not real, we mean that it has no independent substantiality of its own. In other words, its existence is dependent on something else. The logical analysis of experience irrefutably reveals that the existence of all objects in the manifest universe, in fact, the existence of the entire manifest universe itself, is entirely dependent on awareness. Remove the “light” of awareness and no objects, events, people, sensations, emotions or thoughts can be known. And only by virtue of being known can something be said to exist. By analogy, we can compare the manifest universe, both its “inner” aspect (i.e. thoughts and feelings) and its “outer” aspect (i.e. the seemingly surrounding world of tangible objects), to a dream. Just as the dream world depends for its existence on the mind of the dreamer, so the manifest universe depends for its existence on pure awareness.

Moreover, Vedanta defines “real” as that which is permanent, unchanging, always present and non-negatable. Therefore, given the fact that under analysis every objective phenomenon on both the gross and subtle levels of being is in a continuous state of flux, the entire manifest universe, including all the people, objects, events, thoughts, feelings, ideas, beliefs, opinions, memories and fantasies, that is, in Nisargadatta’s words, everything perceivable and conceivable, is nothing more than an apparent reality.

The apparent reality operates according to the law of *karma* (i.e. the inviolable law of cause and effect) and is governed by *dharma* (i.e. the universal physical, psychological and ethical laws that imbue the manifest universe with a sense of order).

Isvara is the name used to personify the macrocosmic causal body, which is the subtle storehouse of all the *vasanas*, or impressions (in this context, the conceptual building blocks for creation rather than the individual’s likes and dislikes which arise later as a result of experiencing the objects fashioned out of these impressions), that constitute “creation,” or the manifest apparent universe. *Isvara*, or the macrocosmic causal body, is brought about by the curious conjunction of absolute awareness and its inherent power of ignorance, or *maya*. Though there is no explanation for how, given that absolute awareness or reality is non-dual, or why, given that absolute awareness has no desire, this conjunction occurs, it seems, in experiential terms, that when absolute awareness wields its power of ignorance it seemingly falls under the spell of that ignorance and apparently forgets its true identity and thereafter manifests as the relative universe. Hence the equation of *Isvara* and the macrocosmic causal body, or the body that causes the appearance of the manifest universe. In Western terms, *Isvara* is referred to as God, the Creator.

From *Isvara*’s perspective, many events are taking place and innumerable people are performing actions. Rather than the collected exploits of a vast array of volitional individuals, however, it is essentially *Isvara* alone who is overseeing, orchestrating and enacting all that occurs on both the gross and subtle levels of the field of experience.

The field of experience, or the apparent reality, can be likened to a gigantic intelligently-designed machine with myriad components that contribute to its functioning. These components are essentially the *upadhis*, or limiting adjuncts, the names and forms, that constitute the costumes, we might say, that disguise absolute awareness and make it appear as all of the gross and subtle objects that inhabit the apparent universe. This machine, moreover, has a built-in self-regulating capacity. In other words, it is fluid and in a constant state of flux and is thus able to self-adjust in

order harmonize, heal or re-establish its balance no matter what “anomalies” might occur within its field of being. In other words, whatever actions are effected within it are absorbed by the field by means of its ability to reconfigure itself in such a way as will accommodate the results of those actions and yet maintain the overall balance and well-being of the whole system or field.

Although the immediate effects of any given action may appear to be unjust or throw the system out of balance, the adjustment made by the system itself will serve ultimately to “dole out” the appropriate *karmic* consequences to the apparent doer or perpetrator of the action, and in this way the apparently disturbed or disrupted balance of the system will be reestablished in a way that is in the best interests of the total.

All of the *karma*, or action, that takes place in the field of experience is dictated by two factors: (1) the *gunas*, i.e. *sattva* (purity, beauty, intelligence), *rajas* (passion, activity, projection) and *tamas* (dullness, inertia, denial) or the three qualities that in various mixtures comprise everything in existence, and (2) the *vasanas*, i.e. the impressions one is left with as a result of experience which, depending upon their quality form, eventually manifest as an individual’s preferences, likes and dislikes, desires and fears, and when reinforced through repetitive indulgence become “binding” and compel one to behave at their behest rather than at the directive of *dharma*. Both the *gunas* and the *vasanas* originate from the macrocosmic causal body and therefore are, in fact, brought into existence and visited upon any given individual as the result of the natural design and functioning of the field, or in personified terms, as the result of *Isvara’s* will.

The bottom line of this overview of the dynamics of the apparent reality is that there is essentially no doer doing anything. The apparent individual is actually an inert machine, so it is not executing actions on its own. And pure awareness – due to its all-pervasiveness which allows it no context within which to act, its attributelessness which affords it no instruments with which to act, its immutability which makes it incapable of action since action is defined by change – is not doing anything either. All that can be said is that when awareness illumines the three-bodied arena of the apparent reality, action happens.

Julia: In your reply, Ted, it seems that we agree upon awareness being partless, actionless and all-pervading. Everything is awareness, so because of this unity, I infer that free will is disregarded because, within awareness, it cannot be an agent with a different agenda. Remember, the only thing that IS is awareness.

But you say “Due to the limited mind-body-sense mechanism with which you, awareness, have associated in order to have a human experience, your scope is limited.”

Why does awareness need to associate with a mind-body-sense mechanism to have a human experience? She is everything, including any experience. If awareness is the only thing real, why does she need to create such a mechanism and then wrongly associate with it? I say wrongly because then awareness APPARENTLY forgets its attachment to this mechanism... why does she forget? And if awareness forgets, it is not apparent... either IT forgets or IT doesn't. It seems that the word “apparent” is being used as a filler filling an unexplainable gap. And after ITS attachment, awareness will use the whole life trying to destroy this APPARENT association (i.e. awakening).

Ted: As previously explained, awareness doesn't need to do anything. Again, there is no satisfactory explanation for why things are as they are. They simply are that way. If limitless awareness were incapable of apparently deluding itself, it wouldn't be limitless.

Having said that, however, think about your question. Given that for some unknown reason awareness does have a human experience (though technically awareness itself is not an experiencer, since experience requires the dichotomy of experiencer and experienced object, and from its perspective there exists nothing other than itself to experience), how else would awareness have a human experience except by associating with an apparent human being (i.e. mind-body-sense mechanism)?

And apparently forgetting its true identity as limitless awareness?

Vedanta says that awareness only apparently forgets its true nature because it is not actually awareness that forgets or, for that matter, remembers, anything. Awareness is not a personal entity that thinks. It is the "light" that illumines thoughts, which are nothing more than objective phenomena appearing within the scope of its being that are "sculpted" by the *vasanas* out of the "clay" of the *gunas*. Awareness "knows" itself all along simply by virtue of being itself. It seems to forget its true identity when it identifies with the limited *upadhi* of a particular mind-body-sense complex, the mind of which has been programmed to think of itself as a limited individual. We might liken it to the experience of getting really wrapped up in a movie or a video game. We don't actually forget we are the person watching the movie or playing the game, but we so closely identify with the character and the events transpiring that we think and feel right along with the character we are watching.

Julia: But suppose that awareness DOES associate with a mind-body-sense mechanism to have a human experience...

Ted: It's pretty obvious that it does.

Julia: ...because awareness has the choice to associate...

Ted: Again, awareness doesn't choose to associate with the mind-body-sense complex, as awareness is not a volitional entity. What we personify as choice is simply the affect of *maya's* inexplicable presence. That is, due to ignorance, the association takes place.

Julia: ...I imply, Ted – I don't mean to sound like a jerk but just to be clear, what you mean is that you "infer." Infer means to draw a conclusion from the evidence at hand. The evidence implies something, which you then infer.

...that awareness, being everything that IS, then awareness is also the experience, the experiencer and the experiencing...

Ted: Close, but not exactly. The experience, the experiencer and the experiencing are awareness, but awareness is none of these. What is means is that while all three aspects of

experience depend on awareness for their existence, awareness itself is ever free of experience and objects. Experience and objects can only appear within the scope of awareness. Whether experience and objects appear or do not appear, however, awareness always is.

Julia: So awareness creates the characters in the movie, creates the plot of the movie and becomes the screen where the movie is being projected, being also the light that makes the whole process possible.

Ted: Awareness doesn't create. Awareness under the spell of ignorance appears as the manifestation. As previously mentioned, awareness conditioned by *maya-upadhi* is referred to as *Isvara*, or God the Creator. Awareness is the "light" that illumines the movie projected by *Isvara/God/maya/ignorance*.

From the ultimate perspective, it is true that everything is awareness. But awareness is not the names, forms and functions that comprise the apparent reality. The apparent reality is only a projection. It has no substantiality. It is a subtle point, but that is why *maya* is said to be "that which makes the impossible possible." It is impossible that awareness is anything other than what it is, but it appears to be so.

Julia: So according to my original questions, awareness is the little Jewish kid marching to the gas chamber... awareness also is the SS guard closing the door of the gas chamber... awareness is also the gas chamber itself and awareness is also the Zyklon gas used to exterminate the little kid.

Ted: Yes, so to speak. Technically, these phenomena are awareness but awareness is not them, that is, they do not define awareness. We can say a pot made of clay is clay but it is not equally true that clay is a pot, for clay can take myriad other forms or no form at all.

Julia: I know that we need the whole universe to be created in advance if you want to make a simple apple pie. Well, same here: the Zyklon gas, the gas chamber, the little kid and the SS guard existed potentially in awareness until the time was ripe for them to get all together in the same picture and play the roles according to the script concocted by awareness.

Ted: Awareness doesn't concoct a script, but your statement does raise an issue worth unfolding.

All the circumstances and experiences of the apparent individual person's life, including his or her suffering, are the inevitable consequences of his or her past actions (i.e. *karma*). Thus, harsh as it may sound, the abused child and the Holocaust victim are both experiencing the effects of actions set into motion at an earlier time, perhaps even during a previous incarnation. This is not to say that as individuals these people are personally responsible for their suffering and deserve the horrors being visited upon them.

Despite the romantic notion of there being a particular individual "soul" transmigrating from body

to body throughout innumerable lifetimes who is evolving and growing as a personal entity until one day he or she finally attains saintly perfection, this is not how it is. The subtle body, which is what the scriptures describe as the transmigrating entity, is not exactly a person, though we tend to think of it as such through its association with a particular mind-body-sense complex. Rather, the subtle body is more accurately conceived of as a bundle of *vasanas* that have grouped together, so to speak. As described earlier, these *vasanas* are essentially the desires that cause the apparent person to incarnate. In other words, the subtle body or *vasana* bundle associates itself with a particular mind-body-sense complex whose circumstances provide those *vasanas* with an appropriate context in which to play out. Those *vasanas* that remain unexpressed at the end of a given incarnation then remain grouped together as what we call the subtle body and are ejected from the physical body at the time of the apparent person's demise. These *vasanas* then reside in a state of dormancy within the causal body until a newly seeded mind-body-sense complex presents itself with which they can associate and through which they can seek expression.

Thus it is not the person we currently see before our eyes who is reaping the consequences or rewards of his or her so-called past actions. The present apparent person is simply experiencing the *karmic* consequences cultivated through the subtle body that is now associated with the mind-body-sense complex that constitutes the person's form.

All suffering is rooted in self-ignorance. The condition of ignorance with which a person is born, however, cannot be said to be that particular person's fault. Ignorance is hardwired into us by *maya*. In fact, ignorance is our ticket for the door to the grand experiential extravaganza that is the apparent reality. The only reason we desire objects and experiences is because we are ignorant of our inherent wholeness. Because we believe we are incomplete and inadequate, we seek objects and experiences that we hope will complete us. Though we did not choose to be ignorant, we nevertheless find ourselves riddled with desires due to the erroneous notions we have about our innate insufficiency.

As long as the person remains ignorant, the *vasanas* associated with the individual's subtle body run the show. In the form of desires, the *vasanas* influence the individual's every action and impel him to try to satisfy them. Moreover, when the pressure of *vasanas* or desires is strong enough, they can even compel the individual to transgress *dharma* (i.e. violate universal ethical law) in order to get what he or she wants. This is where the real trouble begins. Such obsession is what leads to the moral atrocities that we see occurring all around us.

In any event, no person is entirely responsible for his or her actions, as he or she didn't choose his or her *vasanas*. Moreover, the events that occur are not, from an ultimate perspective, volitionally orchestrated actions. Rather, they are the inevitable outpicturing of the *vasanas*. By analogy, we might liken any event to a mixing bowl into which are thrown various ingredients. The ultimate concoction cannot help but be the inevitable result of the combination of those ingredients.

This is not to say that we shouldn't act to prevent transgressions of *dharma* or to rectify situations where such violations have or are occurring. Nor is it to say that a person who violates moral law should not be held accountable for his or her actions. Nor is it to say that the individual should abdicate the modicum of free will with which he has been endowed, refuse to work on his character flaws and resign himself to the control of his whims and fancies or, worse, his compulsions and perversions. Understanding the impersonal cause of action simply gives us a

platform from which we can view the world with compassion. It does not give us *carte blanche* to do as we please. Nor does it provide us with an escape hatch by means of which we can avoid the *karmic* consequences of our actions. What goes around will unavoidably come around.

The fact remains, however, that what is happening in the world on a grand scale, both the beauty and the abominations, is beyond our control. Things happen as they do because things are as they are according to the nature of the apparent dualistic reality. By definition, duality is characterized by the play of the opposites and thus includes both good and bad, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, love and hate. In the absence of either side, the coin cannot exist.

Julia: So I still have my burning question unanswered: I don't question death...

Ted: You should. There is no such thing as death. Sure, the apparent individual transforms back into elemental form, but awareness remains unchanged. Altogether beyond the parameters of time and space, which are themselves only the subtlest objects arising within the scope of awareness, awareness is subject to neither birth nor death. Think about it. Awareness is never not present. In order to say there was a time when it was not, awareness would have to have been there to see that it wasn't. Thus the belief in death resolves into an illogical absurdity.

Nevertheless, within the context of your point, I grant that the apparent individual does cease to be.

Julia: ...I question the way of dying, implying misery, suffering, animalizing a person until he/she is not any more recognizable as a human being with only a way out: suicide...

Ted: I'm not sure I follow your reasoning here. I'll assume that you are referring to particular instances when individuals choose to kill themselves.

Julia: How do you explain this suicide? Is awareness killing himself/herself because the pain is not tolerable anymore?

Ted: Awareness is not a volitional entity who chooses to or is even capable of executing actions. Awareness illumines the subtle body (i.e. mind) and whatever *vasanas* reside therein, so to speak, express through the vehicle of the mind-body-sense complex. The machine runs according to its program. If the program tells the mechanism to abort the mission, then the mechanism may very well do so.

To reiterate, however, as Krishna says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, awareness neither kills nor can be killed.

Julia: In summary: if awareness is everything, is awareness also Auschwitz? If positive, could awareness be considered as a perverted part of awareness? But awareness is partless...

Ted: Yes, awareness is everything. Thus from the perspective of its role as *Isvara* (i.e. God the Creator-Sustainer-Destroyer), it takes responsibility for all that occurs, the good and the bad, the beautiful and the ugly.

But again, though all apparent phenomena depend on awareness for their existence, of all objective phenomena pure awareness remains ever free.