

Words and Awareness

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Robert: Hi, Ted, I hope your doing well.

Ted: Marvelous.

Robert: So I've come to the conclusion that there is only awareness.

Ted: Yes, strictly speaking, this is true. But for the purposes of analysis we make a distinction between pure awareness, which is limitless and actionless, and reflected awareness, which appears as and enlivens all the names, forms and functions abounding in the manifest universe.

Robert: Through awareness the apparent reality we live in was created, then due to the power of *maya* ignorance happens, duality comes into play and we all start thinking we are something special and separate from everything else.

Ted: You're on the right track, but awareness does not create the reality we live in. It would be more appropriate to say that awareness is the reality we live in. But even that statement is not wholly accurate, as awareness is not a place in which we are located. Awareness is the light by means of which the apparent reality we live in is known. By analogy, we might think of the apparent reality we live in being a dream. And awareness? Well, where exactly is a dream located? And since the dreamer's eyes are closed, where exactly is the light that illumines the dream world coming from? Think about it. It's the same in the waking state. Though we seem to see things in the waking state by the light of the sun or some other external light source, awareness is the light by means of which even the sun is illumined.

The apparent reality is a projection or creation if you will of *maya*, or ignorance. Thus *maya*, or more precisely, *maya* illumined by awareness, is the creator. But *maya* doesn't create ignorance. *Maya* and ignorance are synonymous terms. *Maya* is ignorance.

Moreover, *maya*, or ignorance, is an inherent power in awareness. As such it has no beginning. It was not created. Ignorance simply is. Ironic as it may seem, if pure, limitless awareness did not have the power to apparently delude itself, it would not be limitless. Unlike awareness, however, ignorance is not limitless. Though it has no beginning, it does have an end, at least in terms of the apparent individual. For once self-knowledge dawns, the darkness of ignorance is dispelled.

Robert: When, in fact, we as individuals do not truly exist, we only believe we do, due to years of conditioning.

Ted: I think I know what you mean by this statement, Robert, but the language you use to convey your understanding needs to be sharpened. Vedanta is a *shabda pramana*, which means that it is a means of knowledge based on sound (i.e. words). As such, the words we use to reveal the truth need to be very precise, otherwise they can easily mislead. In fact, words shape our thoughts, and therefore are the foundation of our understanding. And our understanding essentially constitutes our reality. Thus we must be quite conscientious with regard to our choice of words.

Having said that, it is important to understand that we as individuals do exist. Vedanta is not nihilistic. It doesn't deny the existence of the world. It simply says that the world is not real, meaning that none of the objects that appear or experiences that occur within its context last. All its myriad parts are conditioned by its defining parameters of time and space, and thus all are but ephemeral phenomena incapable of providing lasting satisfaction or permanent fulfillment.

Quite obviously, we can't experience something that doesn't exist. So if the apparent reality did not exist, we would not experience it. Thus we know that the apparent reality does exist.

Upon analysis, however, we soon reach the inevitable conclusion that not only is the existence of objects impermanent, but it is entirely dependent on awareness. In other words, objects have no independent nature of their own. The essence of all objects is awareness. Not only is awareness the substanceless substance of which all objects are composed, but, moreover, in the absence of awareness a logical impossibility given the fact that awareness is the very light by which the concept of absence is illumined, no object can be known, which is the defining characteristic of existence.

Thus all objects are "apparent." We can't say they don't exist but we can't say they are "real." They do appear, but they don't last and, moreover, they are not what they seem to be. Just as upon analysis a T-shirt is revealed to be nothing other than cotton, all the seemingly discrete objects constituting the apparent reality are ultimately revealed to be nothing other than awareness.

I'm guessing this is the understanding you meant to convey, Robert. But, for the reasons mentioned, it is important that as inquirers we be precise.

Robert: From my perspective then, I see now that I am just a part of the "process"...

Ted: "Process" means what – *maya's* projection?

Robert: ...no different from my dog, the trees, the birds in the trees, etc., etc. It's all one playing out the game, as the cosmic laws dictate. Robert doesn't really have much to do with this, as past *karma*, *vasanas*, play out in life. But he does need a pure mind to see this.

Ted: Yes. We are basically machines functioning according to our programming.

However, from the perspective of the apparent individual, the expression of the *vasanas* feels like free will. Thus we cannot sit back and do nothing – well, we can, but in that sense doing nothing is doing the something we call doing nothing – assuming, that is, we want to make progress

toward gaining self-knowledge. As apparent individuals, we are apparent doers; as awareness, we are actionless. So in the context of the apparent reality, we exercise our apparent free will with the understanding that from a broader perspective that apparent free will is simply *Isvara* enlivened by awareness working through the intellect to ultimately reveal our true identity to the intellect.

This is why we needn't get too uptight about the presence of even the most agitating *vasanas*. Admittedly, self-knowledge will not take place in an agitated mind, so it's not that we should become completely complacent and make no effort to neutralize them. But the truth is that we cannot eradicate *vasanas* simply by giving them the boot, denying or repressing them. We need to understand their cause and continually contemplate the inherent defects in pursuing objects to satisfy them. That is, we need to get clear on just exactly why acting at the behest of our binding *vasanas* and attempting to assuage their pressure by indulging them does not work. When we see for ourselves that pursuing joy in objects does not work, then we don't have to struggle to give up our agitating desires. Rather, they will naturally drop away on their own.

This is why Swami Chinmayananda used to advise people to "sin intelligently." Rather than denying your urges or judging them (and by extension yourself) as bad, indulge them to a moderate degree, all the while inquiring into their limitations.

Basically, what you will find is that while objects do seemingly afford us some joy, our pursuit, and even obtainment of, objects has several fundamental defects. First, it is painful. The pursuit of the object requires effort, involves stress and expends or even exhausts such resources as time, energy, materials and money. And even if we secure the object of our desire, we are burdened with some degree of anxiety concerning how to preserve it. Second, the joy associated with the obtainment of the object is inherently limited. Either the object changes (material objects wear out, break or become outdated; people change in both appearance and attitude) or you change (you outgrow the object, your taste changes or your tolerance for the object increases and you seek more or better versions of it). Third, and worst of all, indulging a *vasana* only fortifies it and thereby increases its hold over you, which obviously runs counter to our goal of freedom.

Robert: So now I focus on awareness, not trying to experience it, just affirming the knowledge that it is. Now I look at my life and think "So much time and energy has been put into this idea of 'Robert' that it's actually nice to just watch and see what happens, not worrying about it." Ultimately, I'm beginning to see that everything is fine as it is, as it can't really be any other way!

Ted: Therein lies freedom.

Robert: I am not the play, there is no "I."

Ted: There is definitely an I. Who else would you be? There is both an apparent I (i.e. Robert) and the real I (i.e. awareness). As was previously explained, the apparent I is not real, but it does exist. In order to fully assimilate self-knowledge, you need to acknowledge the existence of both "I"s but be able to distinguish the real one from its reflection as an apparent individual.

You, awareness, are. So as awareness you can say “There is an I and it is me.” You simply need to understand that when you say that, the I you are referring to is awareness and not the apparent individual referred to as Robert.

Robert: There is still the idea of Robert as it acts out its role and is used to experience duality but it is just a small idea in a vast, infinite sea of possibility.

Ted: Yes. And you, awareness, are the light in which even the infinite sea of possibility (i.e. the macrocosmic causal body or *Isvara*/God) is known. You, pure awareness, are beyond all possibility, all energy, all experience, all ideation.

Robert: There are times when the mind still tries to grasp awareness...

Ted: Good luck with that! ☺

Robert: ...“it has to be something, surely” but this soon gets replaced with “it just is, you know this, now get over it!” Ha, ha.

Ted: That is a good example of applying the knowledge. You need to counter those experiential tendencies over and over and over again, every time they rear their heads. It’s like playing whack-a-mole with your *vasanas*. Eventually, they will stop popping up.

The *vasanas* are like any other beast. They linger as long as there is food to be had. Once you stop feeding them, they go away. It is worth reiterating, however, that neutralizing the binding *vasanas* in this way is not a matter of denial but understanding. If you simply deny them, they will just recoil into a state of dormancy and then pop back up as soon as your discipline slackens and a suitable circumstance arises.

Robert: This answer replaces all the other questions, as the mind tries to keep its role in questioning everything.

Ted: Yeah, it’s funny. The mind actually thinks it knows something.

It doesn’t realize that it is nothing more than an inert object, an insentient ocean of thought waves that only become known when illumined by awareness. It neither perceives nor conceives on its own. It simply sees/knows the thoughts that shine in the light of awareness.

Robert: I know I don’t know all the technicalities but it doesn’t matter. If I need to I’m sure it will be realized when needed.

So I’m just constantly affirming “there is only truly awareness, and everything else is part of the play.”

Ted: Good. This constant affirmation backed by continual exposure to and contemplation of the teachings is the work required to remove the illusory bars of the jail cell of ignorance.

Robert: Just wondering, am I on the right track? It certainly feels good; random bouts of laughter, at inappropriate times, seem to be the order of the day at the moment!

Ted: With the tweaks discussed in this email, you are on the right track. But also be aware that the good feeling and the laughter do not constitute knowledge. I'm not belittling or dismissing them. Hell, bring 'em on. Let's have as much mirth as possible. But don't get hung up on them. Joy is just another object in you, awareness, the light by means of which the joy is known. You are not yourself only when you are joyful. You were there before the joy arrived, you are now experiencing the joy and you will continue to be as you watch the joy go – and then come again and then go again and then come again and then – well, you get the idea. Ultimately, you'll find that you can even be pissed (i.e. angry) and blissed at the same time, as the object referred to as Robert doesn't obscure you, awareness, at all.

Robert: Thanks.

Ted: A pleasure, as ever. All the best.