

A Vedanta Vendetta

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Ram: Dear Julia, here are some verses from *Panchadasi* by Vidyaranya Swami on the relationship between the self and experience in response to your request for scriptural authority for the views we spoke about the other day. "Some people" seem to think that my ideas on the limitation of experience and the importance of knowledge are unsupported by scripture, that I'm on some sort of Vedanta vendetta against experience. This is untrue. Insofar as *maya* is nothing but experience, how can one attack experience? Vedanta dismisses *maya*, but if you accept *maya* then we have to frame the spiritual quest largely in experiential terms. If I'm attacking anything it's the notion that there is some kind of special enlightenment experience that will set you free. Vedanta's position, as I'm sure you know, is that everything is already enlightened, that everything exists by the grace of awareness alone and is, in the last analysis, nothing but awareness. We know what we know because awareness illumines our experience. Turn off awareness and you turn off the world, not that awareness can be turned off. It is self-luminous, a light that endlessly generates itself out of itself alone; it does not borrow power from any other source. This is hard to conceive because everything people are familiar with in *maya* depends on something other than itself for its existence. While awareness is free of *maya*, *maya* is not free of awareness. Anyway, I'm getting off the topic.

I copied the verses you requested below. Of course you don't know Vidyaranya Swami from Adam, but I assure you he is one of Vedanta's shining lights. You will notice that the *swami* does not take personal responsibility for the ideas in these verses but makes it clear that they come from scripture - as he does throughout his long text. Vedanta teachers are unique in the spiritual world because they do not take personal responsibility for the teachings. The great Shankara himself considered himself to only be a "link" in the tradition, not the author of the notion of non-duality for which he is often given credit. Non-duality is the central idea in the *Upanishads* - which predates him by some thousands of years. If anyone could get away with taking credit for non-duality it was Shankara. But he didn't. A good teacher should be happy to clarify and contextualize the scripture - but that is all. A good teacher does not want responsibility for people's beliefs or control over their lives. They don't ask you to "surrender" to them but to look to the source for the resolution of doubts. To me this is very beautiful because it leaves one free of the heavy "*guru*" burden that a believer is forced to carry. Yes, you need to have confidence in your teacher and you need faith in the teachings until you are completely confident in your own experience/knowledge of the self. My *guru* specifically told me to check his statements against scripture. Anyway, I very much enjoyed our *satsang* at Usha's restaurant the other day and hope that we can continue the conversation sometime. I could speak endlessly on these beautiful verses, but they really don't need clarification, so I will let them speak for themselves.

Panchadasi, Chapter III: The Differentiation of the Five Elements, verses 13-20:

Because the Self is the essence of experience it cannot be an object of experience. Since there is no experiencer nor any experience other than It, the Self is not known directly by the senses and the mind not because It does not

exist, but because It cannot be an object of experience.

The senses and the mind experience the Self as objects because the Self is everything but they do not know that the objects they experience are the Self. The essence of experience is Awareness even when it is not experienced indirectly through objects.

The Scriptures say that the Self is self-revealing. It requires no instruments to reveal it. Before the universe evolved it was shining even though there were no objects to illumine. Whatever is revealed after the appearance of the universe is revealed by Awareness, the Self.

How can that by which the universe is known be known by anything other than Awareness? By what can the knower be known, except by Itself? The instruments of knowledge can only know what appears in their respective fields, not the light that illumines them and the fields.

The Self knows all that is knowable. There is no one to know It. It is Awareness and is different from the known and the unknown.

How can the nature of Awareness be taught to a person who is a human being in name only and whose intellect is so dull that it cannot see that Awareness is the essence of every act of knowing?

As it is foolish for someone to express a doubt about his or her existence, it is equally foolish to say, "I do not know what Awareness is. I want to know it."