

Vedanta Is Not a Path

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When I was a kid the world was full of wonder. I assumed that everyone saw the radiance that suffused everything. When I wanted something almost no time passed before the object appeared. I thought that the radiance was somehow connected to my desires. I was not clear about it, as I am today, but I felt there was a connection. I would be walking along and spy the object of my desire and would take it, irrespective of the situation. I had no sense of boundaries or limitation. I learned in time that things belonged to people and that to take them and enjoy them was not right. The criticisms of my parents and teachers were frequent. The adults, for fear of damaging my tender psyche, said I was “different,” and my peers, who were less kind and hadn’t been properly socialized, said I was weird.

Had I been a normal kid I would have probably internalized the judgment and developed some kind of psychological complex. But I was not normal. I honestly thought that there was something wrong with the people who thought there was something wrong with me. I was not narcissistic. I knew something they did not know. Their criticisms had only a very short-term and superficial effect. If I got in hot water I took my licks and went right on being what I was. I had no name for what I was but I was rock-solid. I got into various troubles, mostly out of curiosity and joy, but the world saw it differently.

My poor parents! They were good, saintly people and they loved me unconditionally, forever bailing me out of hot water. At one point I was expelled from university and they sent me to a shrink so I could get a clean bill of mental health. The shrink let me go after about six months. He said that “at worst” I was “slightly maladjusted” but “considering the times” I was okay. I am glad I am not growing up today because they would probably have come up with a fancy diagnosis – attention deficit disorder, manic depression, sociopathic personality, etc. – put me on some kind of nasty drug and washed their hands of me.

I was not sick. I was following my nature. At the time, I did not know that I did not care about what the world thought, because I was awareness. I saw awareness everywhere and in everything but it was so natural I never thought to question it.

It is easy to say you don’t care and it is often thought to be a kind of denial, but I really did not care what people thought of me. I never tried to fit in. The only organization that I ever joined in my whole life was the Boy Scouts, and not because I wanted to. It was my parents’ idea. I hated suck-ups, apple-polishers and do-gooders. I was never popular but I always had a small group of great friends, all of whom I now know were true to themselves.

When I was nineteen my father got me a job on the section gang of the railroad. We had certain duties which we performed in a lackadaisical manner. Little wonder. When the good old boy, my father’s friend, hired me, he said, “Don’t try to do it all in one day.” I thought that was an excellent philosophy and learned to loaf with the best of the regulars. We did just enough to make it look like we put in our eight, but that was all. Mostly we sat around smoking and bullshitting. One day we were told to do a particular job in a particular way. After a couple of days I realized that there was a much easier way to do it, one that would decrease the work time and increase

the BS time. So I went to the boss and told him my idea. He looked at me with disdain and said, "You are paid to work, not to think. You're fired." He was embarrassed to not have thought up the solution himself, I suppose, and I got the axe.

Had I been normal I may have developed low self-esteem and ended up on meds or I may have been plagued with a sense of moral indignation, mounted my white charger and gone on to rid the world of injustice. But I did not weep. It was fine. More time for raising hell.

Eventually, I somehow was weaned away from my true nature, suffered a dark night of the soul and then, because of a wonderful epiphany and the help of a holy man, was re-introduced to me, limitless awareness. It took a while for the asocial habits to disappear, but from thirty onwards I have lived in the world of my youth, the eternal shining world of awareness. When you live in a shining world almost everybody is your friend. It is quite extraordinary. Even people who would not ordinarily like you, like you because they see themselves in you. If someone criticizes you it is because they think you inhabit the same sunless world with all its backwards ideas that they do. They feel threatened by your freedom and confidence and usually take your dispassion - which is inevitable when you know who you are - to be indifference. They often think you are hard and cold and have no feelings. They do not understand why you don't care and they sometimes attack you.

You don't care because there is nothing wrong with anything. In your shining world everything is perfect as it is - the suffering, the strife, the conflict. It is totally logical and cannot be avoided because it flows from an unexamined premise. Vedanta calls it "beginningless ignorance." Nobody living in the sunless realms can be expected to discover it - all things considered. If you are lucky, grace descends in one form or another and reveals it to you, giving you a fighting chance. If not, you will believe what you think. It is generally not good to believe what you think or what you believe.

In the twilight of the sunless world it is possible to confuse ignorance and knowledge. If you fancy yourself to be "spiritual" you probably believe you should not make judgments. Even though consciousness evolved the intellect for precisely that purpose - because reality is never what it seems to be and you need to sort out the truth or you will suffer - somehow you are meant to mindlessly and unconditionally accept everything. But accepting things without understanding the why of things is not wise and may very well hide the truth. For example, if a person is a jerk and you think he or she is a jerk, it is not a judgment. It is the truth. But if you refuse to critically evaluate people you may very well get taken for a ride. I get emails regularly from angry and disillusioned people who thought it was wrong to question their *gurus* when said *gurus* were obviously cutting corners. If you also refuse to critically evaluate the statements of so-called enlightened people you will definitely be misled.

Another spiritual belief is the idea that "all roads lead to Rome." Every path is as good as every other path. It is partially true. If you read spiritual literature it is clear that all kinds of people in all kinds of situations in every age wake up to the truth, some by following a well-worn path, some not. It totally stands to reason because consciousness is all. Because it knows in some vague way that it is actually limitless it will not stop seeking until it has rediscovered itself. It finds itself apparently locked within the prison of the human mind and it wants out. So wherever you find human beings you find truth-seekers. And where there are seekers there are finders.

People always think that the path they are following is the best, so they hate it when you have the temerity to suggest that your path is the best for you. Most Christians are good people who live good lives, for example, but they are very easy to dislike because of their condescending view that Christ is the only way.

The purpose of this blog is to set the record straight about my views relating to the efficacy of other paths vis-à-vis Vedanta. Before I get into the argument I should mention that of the scores of emails I get every month and the many hundreds of people – probably more than a thousand – I meet every year, rarely does anyone have a problem with the idea that Vedanta stands out as the granddaddy of all paths. But once in a while I get asked if I think that Vedanta is the only path. Once in a while I hear that someone thinks I am dogmatic. I can understand the criticism. I do not take it personally for the same reason that I did not take criticisms personally when I was growing up.

One reason it is easy to think that I believe that Vedanta is superior to other paths is the confidence with which I teach. I have great confidence because when my *guru* worked it on me, Vedanta set me free and over the years I have seen it set quite a few people free who come to my Vedanta classes. It is important to understand that I am not claiming credit for anyone's enlightenment. There are four factors that go into it and the teacher is only one. The factors are: the qualifications of the seeker, an adequate, proven means of knowledge, a qualified teacher and the grace of God.

In my mind, Vedanta gets all the credit. I only teach because I love to teach. It has nothing to do with the results. This may be hard to accept but Vedanta will set you free if you are properly qualified and if it is properly taught – even if the teacher is not free! Of course, it is more efficacious if the teacher is free – it gives you great inspiration to see the knowledge functioning in a living human being – but it is not absolutely necessary. This is so because Vedanta is totally impersonal. It is a proven method. It does not depend on the teacher's personal experience.

Before I get into the argument, it is also necessary to examine the difference between awakening and liberation. Awakening is a kind of temporary liberation. It is an experience that needs to be assimilated properly. When you realize that the world is empty of meaning and that you are not the doer – but you still identify with the doer – your awakening is not the end of it. It is just a preliminary step on the path although it is often thought to be the end. There is an interesting book out by Adyashanti, *The End of Your World*, that more or less attempts to guide people who have had awakening experiences. You can make a good case that the numerous “enlightened” teachers who fell from grace were people who stopped inquiring when they “awakened” and set out to enlighten others based on the idea that enlightenment is some kind of experience.

Vedanta is not interested in awakening experiences. Although I had many, my *guru* right at the beginning of my discipleship made it very clear that he was not interested in what I was experiencing or had experienced. And if you study the texts there is not one experiential qualification listed for liberation. This is so because the self is always present and all you need is a means to reveal it. When it is revealed in the context of the teaching it is easy to understand what it means and what it doesn't mean in terms of your life here in *samsara*. When you are on your own or in the presence of a teacher who is not qualified to teach, you can easily draw conclusions that are not warranted. A good example would be the thankfully now deceased Adi Da Avabhasa Samraj Ruchira Buddha Da Free John Avatar's Avatar, etc., etc. to whom the self was revealed many years ago. He made such a caricature

of his experience that anyone with a lick of sense would definitely be uninclined to seek it.

Awakening can happen at any place, at any time and in any set of circumstances. Nobody knows why it happens except to say that it a blessing – or a curse if you don't know what to make of it. Awakening is not liberation because liberation is self-knowledge and the self never slept. Liberation is liberation from the one who awakened, assuming that person was actually asleep. In fact, waking and sleep are just metaphors to describe knowledge and ignorance. Probably 99% of those claiming to be awakened and/or liberated do not understand this point. They maintain the limited perspective and claim that they got an experiential something extra – liberation! But the self is always free. It has always been free. So there is no gain. There is a loss – of self-ignorance – but that is all. You are not wonderful because you got what you always had. You are not entitled to worship from the world. You should rather be ashamed that it took so long to figure it out and you should be happy to keep your mouth shut.

You can compare apples and oranges because they are both fruit. But you cannot compare apples and computers because they are not in the same category. Now for the bombshell: Vedanta is not a path. So you cannot compare it to the various paths to enlightenment. Vedanta is a *pramana*. *Pramana* is a means of self-knowledge. A path requires effort. You have to walk. To walk you need to be a doer, a walker. Vedanta sits above all the paths. It is the knowledge that sets you free irrespective of the way you come to it. Anyone who has this knowledge, gained with or without a teacher, assuming that it cancels his or her sense of doership and neutralizes the binding *vasanas*, is a Vedantin whether or not he or she has ever heard of *vedanta pramana* and the *vedanta samprdaya*, the lineage. Knowledge is knowledge. It has nothing to do with people and their experiences.

If your eyes are open, you have no choice but to see what is in front of you. If you listen to Vedanta with an open mind, self-knowledge takes place. No effort is required. Effort may be required to get your mind to the point where it can suspend its beliefs and opinions for a while and let self-knowledge sink in, but once it is open, the knowledge will remove your ignorance about who you are. In other words, knowledge, not the doer/ego, does the work. If the ego/doer does the work, it can claim to be enlightened. But it cannot make such a claim because knowledge does the work.

“Vedanta” is a compound word. *Veda* means “knowledge” and *anta* means “end.” So it means “the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge.” Knowledge here means self-knowledge. All the Vedanta scriptures make this point from the very beginning. If you have no trust in scripture take Ramana's statement, “It is by knowledge alone that the self is to be gained,” as the truth. It is the truth because reality is non-dual, so you are already the self and whatever you are experiencing at any moment is the self. So if you are seeking liberation, you will stop seeking when you understand why and how the seeker is already free. In other words, you have an ignorance problem. If you have an ignorance problem, no path is going to work. Only knowledge will work. There is one self. There is one problem – ignorance. And there is one solution – knowledge. These statements may seem to be dogmatic but they are just statements of fact. If you are situated in duality and think there are many doers and many paths and many truths, you will not like this statement and you will say that I am dogmatic.

It may also seem like I am dogmatic because Vedanta is usually confused with yoga,

which is a path. *Yoga* is for doers. If there is something you can do, then there may be many different ways to accomplish the self and then you might argue that the certainty that informs my words – which are not my words – is arrogance. There is no way you can come up with another view if you start from the assumption that reality is non-dual.

You might also argue that self-inquiry is for doers. For inquiry there needs to be someone doing the inquiry and the action of inquiry. So seen from that perspective, Vedanta is a path. It differs from *yoga*, a generic term that covers all attempts to gain freedom through action, however, in that the fruit of inquiry is knowledge, not a change in one's experience. It is a knowledge that cancels the doer, unlike other paths which leave the doer intact. When the doer is left intact, we say that doer has "enlightenment sickness." He or she thinks he or she has something special or different from what he or she had before or from what "unenlightened" people have.

You might also argue that self-knowledge is useless because it does not change experience and that the only reason people seek enlightenment is because they suffer. But knowledge changes your experience in a way that action or experience can never do. Because when you know the truth of your nature, you cease to seek experience, your binding *vasanas* dry up and your mind, which is the instrument of experience, becomes pure. When the mind is pure, it enjoys a nearly constant state of bliss that you can never obtain through the pursuit of objects in *samsara*.

Vedanta is very unusual in that it cancels the doer but also leaves the doer intact. Most experiential paths say that the doer needs to be destroyed for liberation. It is an erroneous notion because the presence of ego does not cancel the existence of the self. The self is present when the ego is present. So the ego can keep right on doing and you can be free of it simply by knowing that it is a function in you, not your identity.

In my next blog I will explain why, if Vedanta is a path, it is better than every other path.