

Is Vedanta Complex?

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Carl: I don't think anyone can accuse Vedanta of not being complex! Just read some of the Vedantic commentaries if you want to be exposed to some mind-boggling displays of logical thought! ☺ I'm surprised you say there is no other complete scripture-based teaching. All teachings, Vedanta included, have changed and developed over time as far as I can see. For example, you mention the *gunas*, which were not part of the original Vedanta (they are not really mentioned in the *Upanishads* or even the later *Brahma Sutras*). My understanding is the *gunas* are a Samkhya teaching and were only later incorporated into Vedanta with the rise in popularity of the *Bhagavad Gita* much later on. There are also some wonderfully complete Buddhist teachings that have developed – just take the Tibetan Buddhist scriptures which cater to a wide variety of seekers at different stages on the journey and are at least as complete as Vedanta (in my view), arguably more so. I'm genuinely interested in your thoughts on this.

James: Vedanta incorporated the *guna* idea from Samkhya, but it endorses knowledge about the apparent reality that is based on observation and inference. For instance, knowledge of the causal and subtle bodies expressed by Daniel Kahneman in his prize-winning book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. I devote several pages to his findings in my book *The Essence of Enlightenment*.

As far as complexity is concerned, Vedanta is not complex at all. The apparent reality is complex, particularly the human personality.

Vedanta is very simple. It is encapsulated in Shankara's statement, "*Brahma satyam, jagan mithya; jivo bramaiva na parah,*" which means that the self is real, the world is apparently real; there is no difference between the consciousness in the *jiva* and the consciousness in everything. If you understand this one simple statement every teaching makes perfect sense.

It's true there are other scripture-based traditions, but to my knowledge none have a proven means of self-knowledge, although a couple of Buddhist schools come close. You might call other scriptures "paths," but not means of knowledge. The similarity of some Buddhist "schools" is due to the fact that they evolved from the *Vedas*, although they do not accept the *Vedas* as a valid means of knowledge for existence, i.e. consciousness and matter (*satya* and *mithya*). Hence they are considered by us to be heterodox Vedic schools. Vedanta is not a school of thought or a philosophy, which would put it in a complex world of opinions. It is a very simple means of self-knowledge. It does, however, seem to be complex to people who have not been properly taught. So it is not a path, insofar as either relative knowledge or self-knowledge takes time because it is based on the simple fact that reality is non-dual, and therefore there is no distance between the seeker and the sought. Vedanta is thought to be a path because it recommends *yoga*, i.e. techniques for the purification of the mind, which only prepare the mind to understand the simplicity of *brahma satyam jagan mithya*.

Carl: I appreciate your detailed response – thank you. Yes, I know most of what you say already, but it's still good to hear it from you. A lot of the way I teach is basically

“Vedanta 101,” but I could probably learn a lot from how you are sharing this. You’re right – Vedanta can seem to be very complex if not taught correctly, and there are certainly many detours to follow (perhaps this line of questioning of mine being one of them!), whereas the essence of it is actually very simple. For what it’s worth, I think you do a great job of getting to the point of it all, keeping it simple and actually making the teaching of genuine practical use for seekers of freedom.

James: Appreciation is always appreciated. The doctrine is not the hard part, if one has been taught properly. And one doesn’t need more than *karma yoga*, a more or less *sattvic* lifestyle and knowledge of the difference between the self and the not-self for direct knowledge. The hard part is *nididhyasana*, which presupposes *moksa*, direct knowledge. It is often a difficult battle with the *vasanas*, as they prevent *tripti*, perfect satisfaction, for the *jiva*. Swami Paramarthananda says that *nididhyasana* is “requalifying.” Most Western people have a lot of *rajas* and *tamas* owing to their lifestyles, so there is still frustration once they are doubt-free about who they are.

Carl: Speaking of Buddhism, whilst the *Vedas* do pre-date Buddhism, many (actually most) of the *Upanishads* (upon which Vedanta is based) do not. It is clear that there has been much interchange of ideas between Buddhism and Vedanta over the centuries – not only do most scholars agree this is the case, but it’s fairly easy to see for yourself if you read the Buddhist and Vedanta texts chronologically. For example, Gaudapada (Shankara’s *guru’s guru*) borrows several phrases and styles of argument from Mahayana Buddhism in his commentaries on *Mandukya Upanishad*, and also defines many terms in a Buddhist way. You mention *satya* and *mithya*, which is a case in point – *mithya* is not even mentioned in the *Upanishads* at all, but is very similar to the “two aspects of truth” teachings of Mahayana Buddhism, so much so that when Shankara first started to talk about *mithya*, many Vedantins at the time accused him of being a closet Buddhist! (In fact many still do!)

I just point this out, as whilst I think Vedanta is a truly wonderful teaching and highly effective means of knowledge, I don’t think it has the monopoly on truth. Your own *guru*, Swami Chinmayananda, went on record stating that the Buddha taught the highest truth (alongside Vedanta). The Buddha himself talked about what it meant to be a “true Brahmin,” as he evidently felt many of the Brahmins of his day were corrupt. I know all of this is a detour from the actual teachings themselves, so I hope you don’t mind me blathering on.

James: I never got into the history of the *sampradaya* much, because I was completely focused on *moksa* and because the time issue is really irrelevant insofar as reality is non-dual. So the issue really becomes the means of knowledge. Is it simple, clear, and effective?

Buddhism, like Yoga, is very good at the preparatory aspect, but comes up short on the *moksa* aspect. I realized this through contact with every one of my students who came from Buddhism. They had no clear idea of the self. But once they hear Vedanta they tend to get *moksa* quickly and don’t have much trouble with *nididhyasana* owing to a preponderance of *sattva*.

Chinmaya was a very amazing person, a mystic non-dualist with a great appreciation of non-mystic Vedanta. In this regard I have copied in a *satsang* based on a talk by Swami Paramarthananda on this topic.

Mystic and Non-Mystic Non-Duality

In the Vedanta *sampradaya*, there are two basic approaches to non-duality, mystic non-duality and non-mystic non-duality. When you first become interested in non-duality the distinction is unimportant, but as your understanding becomes more sophisticated, the distinction becomes important.

Mystic and non-mystic non-dualists agree on three points: (1) *karma yoga* is for purification of the mind, (2) direct non-dual knowledge, not indirect non-dual knowledge, liberates and (3) the world needs to be eliminated. Indirect knowledge is knowledge of something that one can't perceive. Direct knowledge is knowledge of something that is present.

But they disagree hereafter. The mystic non-dualist says that because you are in a dualistic state when you get non-dual knowledge, the knowledge is indirect, and so you need to enter the non-dual state to convert it to direct knowledge. He says that to enter into the non-dual state you need to remove the world so that you exist as the self alone.

The non-mystic argues that it is not in the power of an individual to eliminate the world insofar as only the Creator could do that, assuming something is to be gained by the world's elimination. The mystic's argument that the world is eliminated in deep sleep doesn't hold water, because common sense tells us that the world exists when I'm asleep. In fact I only go to sleep happily because I know my worldly life goes on. My wife and kids and job are still there when I wake up. So non-perception of the world is not elimination of the world. Furthermore, the law of the conservation of energy says that if I do destroy something it just appears in a different form.

How can you say that the mystic state, where there are no objects to divide the state, is a non-dual state? It isn't a non-dual state, because there is an object present and that object is the absence of objects. If there is only you, how will you know that there are no objects? And even when you come out of your mystic non-dual state, the world is still present. So it was not eliminated.

The mystic tries to wiggle out of this fact by saying that you can't talk about this state because it is transcendental, meaning inexplicable, so you just have to enter it and see for yourself.

But the non-mystic argues that getting in this state is a lot of work and he would like some kind of assurance that it is worth the trouble. To this argument the mystic says that the experience of mystics everywhere is proof, so get to work meditating so you can convert your indirect knowledge to direct knowledge.

The non-mystic, however, argues that the world is not real in the first place. Something that is not real is as good as non-existent. So how can you eliminate it? He argues that the belief that the world is real needs to be eliminated. In fact the "non-dual" mystic is very much a dualistic mystic because he gives equal status to the self and the world. Therefore if you have one, you don't have the other, like day and night, cold fire, etc.

But the non-mystic non-dualist says that the world and the self are not in the same order of the non-dual reality. Both exist as consciousness but one is real and the other isn't, so there is no contradiction. Just as you don't count your image in a mirror as a second you, you can't count the world as a second object.

If this is true, then the mystic's contention that I was in a state of duality when I heard the non-dual teachings of Vedanta is not true. So there is no reason for me to meditate to convert indirect knowledge to direct knowledge, because if I am paying attention, the teaching simply removes the ignorance of ever-present, ever-experienced, non-dual self and the experience of limitless bliss, which is always present, is now available; it was only "hidden" by the belief that reality is a duality.

If a qualified inquirer needs to meditate at all - and most require some meditation - it is not to eliminate the world, it is to internalize self-knowledge.

Summary: There is no dual or non-dual "state." There is only ever-present, non-dual consciousness, which means that I am non-dual consciousness with knowledge of who I am or ignorance of who I am. If this is true, which scripture claims, I am always only experiencing non-dual consciousness. Any attempt to gain a discrete mystic non-dual experience is not only redundant; it is impossible.