

Ken Wilber Confusion: Are Experiential States Necessary for *Moksa*?

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Nick: I am writing you because I am very confused right now – after already having a solid knowledge and experiences of the self.

Three years ago (afters years of listening to Neo-Advaita teachers – I am only 25) I gladly found James on the Web, read his book and for the first time had real clarity about the self and experienced its effects in my life.

Now, Vedanta says that I am already whole, complete, ordinary, timeless, limitless, ever-present consciousness. This I really saw this very clearly many times – which produced immense joy and fulfilment in my body and mind (the reflected self, I guess). It was such an immense relief for me: knowing that I am already the love, the joy, the bliss, the completeness that I am searching in the world! I really had such a strong faith, trust and knowing of the scripture of Vedanta and saw clearly its effects.

Rory: It is the most wonderful relief imaginable when you finally realise that, after a lifetime of assuming yourself to be a limited, lacking entity that you are in fact the very essence of love, joy and fullness! That you responded to this knowledge not just on an intellectual level but at a very visceral level suggests that you had quite a *sattvic* mind, which is essential for properly assimilating this knowledge.

Nick: But now: now I am very confused after reading a book by Ken Wilber.

Rory: Admittedly, I'm not that familiar with Ken Wilber's work. From my understanding, he differs from most Neo teachers in that while the Neos lack a coherent teaching, Wilber has created his own elaborate system of thought. I don't know how his teachings compare to Vedanta. From what I can tell, he has cherry-picked elements and mixed it in with many other concepts and ideas. I've no idea whether people find this effective and whether it's a valid means of knowledge for *moksa*. I have my doubts.

Vedanta works because it's basically a closed system. It's been guarded by the *sampradaya* for millennia because when people start to add their own ideas to it or try to modify it or "evolve" it (which I believe is one of Wilber's predilections), subjectivity starts creeping in and confusion arises.

People trying to come up with their own enlightenment teachings and systems is rather like trying to reinvent the wheel. It's already been invented and it works perfectly as it is. Vedanta covers absolutely everything and has lasted because it works. It's rigorous, scientific and its results are replicable.

However, spirituality is a multimillion-dollar industry, and it's quite easy for a spiritual entrepreneur to take the teaching, shift it around a bit, add and subtract things and market it in an appealing way to entice the many earnest seekers out

there. If someone's charismatic and good enough at marketing and presentation, there's probably a lot of money to be made from it. Now, I'm not questioning Wilber's motive or integrity. I really don't know enough about him. But the problem is, when spiritual truths are converted into a product, the integrity is immediately compromised, so I think caution is always advisable.

Nick: He says that – as far as I understood – that there are four different transcendental states: first, the psychic; then the subtle; then the causal; and at the end and pervading all of them the non-dual state (which is not a state but more the field, consciousness, spirit in which everything appears).

Now, Wilber says that one can have glimpses of the non-dual awareness. But after that one still has to go through all stages of the transpersonal and integrate them. This is what – in my opinion – contradicts with Vedanta and what really confuses me.

Rory: I'm not surprised you're confused. I am too, ha ha.

I'm not sure what Wilber means by "transcendental states" or stages. I had a look at his Wikipedia pages and am still none the wiser. Vedanta uses language with great clarity and precision to avoid confusion or misunderstanding. It's the only way to have a meaningful discussion.

It sounds to me like he's referring to what we call the gross, subtle and causal bodies. These bodies belong to *prakriti*, or the field of matter, which is *mithya* (not real, dependently existent) and are pervaded and illumined by consciousness/the self, which is *satya* (real, independently existent).

We experience the gross level as the physical world of forms and objects. We experience the subtle body as the world of our own thoughts, projections, dreams and imagination. The causal body is not available for direct experience, because it is unmanifest; it's the unconscious seed state. It can only be known by its seeds (*vasanas*) as they germinate and take root in the subtle and gross bodies. These three levels correspond to our experience of waking, dreams and deep sleep.

I don't know what he means by saying you have to "go through" these states and integrate them. We already go through them each and every day, and *Isvara* perfectly integrates our experience for us. *Isvara* is basically doing all the doing at this level.

He is correct in that consciousness/the self pervades these three states.

However, this is a key point – one can't have "glimpses" of non-dual awareness, because one IS non-dual awareness. Awareness isn't available for objectification. If it were it would just be another object of experience belonging to the field of *prakriti*, which is *mithya*. Awareness can never be an object of experience, because it is the eternal subject. It can only be known as that which knows.

Nick: Also, many traditions say that one has to have a solid understanding and integration of the three states before one can know about the non-dual. He says that in many traditions one has to already have integrated the psychic, subtle and causal before even thinking or mentioning the non-dual state. This also contradicts Vedanta. Which one is true now?

Rory: Again, it's hard for me to comment without knowing what Wilber means by these three states.

Is it possible he is speaking about qualifications? Vedanta makes it clear that in order for self-knowledge to set the mind free, the mind must first be sufficiently purified, refined and integrated. So this may tie in with what he says about "integrating" these levels as a necessary prerequisite.

These qualifications have nothing to do with attaining certain experiential "states." Shankara outlines the qualifications clearly in *Tattva Bodha* (specifically, the "four Ds" - discrimination; dispassion; discipline of mind, senses, etc; and the burning desire for *moksa*). These are achieved by steady practise of *karma yoga*, adherence to *dharma* on all levels and *upasana yoga*. This is basically a program for the refinement and mastery of one's body, mind and entire psychology.

Nick: So my question is, is it okay for me to set my mind to Vedanta and conduct myself to absolute self-knowledge (clearly, I already experienced the effects) or should I first have clear understanding and integration of the psychic (nature-mysticism), the subtle (god-mysticism) and the causal (formless mysticism), and go through them step by step, one after another before being qualified for self-knowledge or even *moksa*?

Rory: I would definitely recommend that you stick to Vedanta. Vedanta covers everything you need to know in a clear, logical and systematic way. It seems to me that Wilber is mixing up *yoga's* experiential notion of enlightenment (i.e. the attainment of certain states) with a distorted and confused/confusing misinterpretation of Vedantic concepts such as the three bodies and three states. Again, I'm basing my interpretation of his teaching on what you are telling me, but his definition of these "states" and "steps" seems confusing and doesn't make a whole lot of sense to me.

Vedanta lays everything out with immense clarity and precision. The core concepts are unfolded in a logical, step-by-step manner. Vedanta is a body of knowledge, a true science of consciousness. It works and will continue to work. The great thing is the teaching is freely available to sincere, qualified seekers and there is support in place to help you along the way too. It's a gift to mankind, and we are blessed because it's only been in the last century that Vedanta has even been available outside of India, and in English too!

In terms of "understanding and integration of the psychic, the subtle and the causal," all you need to do is brush up on the qualifications mentioned above. Even if you do no more than that, and forget all about *moksa*, you're still gonna have a very happy and enjoyable life, so it's win-win. 😊

Once those qualifications are in place, Vedanta works its magic in three stages:

1. The first, *sravana*, is simply exposing your mind to the teaching.

Work your way through James' books if you haven't already, and check out this complete multi-part seminar available on YouTube, which covers everything from A to Z.

2. The next stage is called *manana* and is about resolving any doubts or questions you have about the teaching. You basically work it all through in your mind until you're totally on board with it. I'm happy to answer whatever questions might come up.

3. The final stage is called *nididhyasana*.

This is the key to converting the knowledge into conviction and reaping the benefits of that knowledge. It's about actualising that knowledge and systematically applying it to the mind on a moment-by-moment basis until it "sticks."

It can take only hours to learn Vedanta but years to actualise the knowledge. You've had a clear taste that it works though – and this sense of liberation and limitlessness you experienced is the natural state of the mind when freed from the ignorance-induced bondage of *samsara*.

Right now, I strongly suggest sticking with Vedanta (it works!) and avoid exposing your mind to other teachings. The "butterfly approach" (flitting between different teachings and picking what seems best) is something that doesn't work in the latter stages of inquiry. It just creates confusion and doubt. I genuinely believe there is no teaching out there comparable to Vedanta in its power, scope, clarity and efficacy.

Nick: Futhermore, there are so many Eastern traditions which differentiate many, many states of the transpersonal. Did Vedanta leave here something out for *moksa*? Is it incomplete in this regard? Is it necessary to experience and go one after another through the former transpersonal and mystical states before *moksa*?

Rory: No. Again, this confusion is born of *yoga's* experiential model of enlightenment. It can be tantalising because many spiritual seekers are experience-hungry. But, if anything, this is the long route to *moksa* because it's so easy for people to get lost in this endless experience-seeking.

Experience-seekers are basically dissatisfied with their current experience, owing to self-ignorance. Trying to change their experience is not tackling the underlying problem (ignorance) and, if anything, just strengthens the sense of doership and ego.

I sometimes used to lurk on a forum dedicated to Buddhist meditation. There was a lot of talk of the "*jhanas*" and levels of *samadhi*. You know, it all sounds amazing. I've even experienced some of them. But what I ultimately realised was that virtually no one on that forum had the slightest clue who they were. No one seemed to know that they were awareness and were free of experience. Many of them were anxious and agitated about why they weren't experiencing a certain *jhana*, while others were subtly boasting about theirs. Most of those guys, I realised, were just *samsaris* in spiritual clothing. They weren't chasing after fame, fortune and physical riches, but they were chasing after subtle experiential highs, which is just a different, more "spiritualised" form of *samsara*.

Swami Dayananda said that worldly people manipulate the world to gain happiness, while *yogis* manipulate their mind to gain happiness. Both are bound to *samsara* (which is dependence on objects for happiness).

Vedanta makes it clear that mystical visions or cosmic experiences are not

necessary for *moksa*. They may, in fact, be a hindrance, because they have the ability to bind you. Furthermore, any experienced object and any mystical state is still only *mithya*; it's nothing more than *maya* – and *maya* will never be able to take you out of *maya*.

The key to liberation is not the attainment of better and more rarified experiences, but the realisation of your self as the eternal experiencer.

Nick: I really don't know what to believe right now and set my mind to, because many traditions require absolute solidity with the former transpersonal states before even mentioning the word "non-dual."

Rory: Again, I'm not sure what this means. I think it's all part of the confusion of *moksa* as some kind of ultimate state to be attained.

In actuality, *moksa* is simply the removal of ignorance about your nature as non-dual awareness.

You're already the self, and you can't attain what you already have/are. Because the self is non-dual, it means there is nothing other than it. So it's impossible not to be the self – and impossible not to be experiencing the self. You're no more the self when you're experiencing some mystical vision than when you're sitting picking your nose. 😊

The key is to just get/keep the mind qualified and to work with the teaching.

When this self-ignorance is removed and the knowledge assimilated, your sense of identity gradually shifts from the body-mind-ego to awareness. As I said, all that's required is a qualified mind, exposure to the teaching and steadily reflecting on the knowledge until it becomes a hard and fast conviction.

Nick: I also really hope that I must not worry about these states and that I can carry on with setting my mind on Vedanta and self-knowledge.

Rory: You've already had a taste that Vedanta works, which is wonderful and should give you the motivation to stick with it. Exposing your mind to conflicting and contradictory teachings has just created some confusion and should therefore be avoided. Stick with what you know works, the tried-and-tested. If you put in the necessary work, you'll get the results.

Nick: Thank you so much for your detailed and clear answer! My doubts have been removed and I am back on track again! 😊 I have now clarity again about the nature of awareness. **I am awareness/consciousness regardless of the states and experiences that appear in me.** And I am already whole and complete, ever-present, all-illuminating consciousness. I am the essence of joy, love and fullness!!

Rory: You totally got it!

The bit you highlighted in bold is really the key. States come and go, and it's all just

maya - the *gunas* at work. As awareness, you are prior to and beyond all states and experiences - they're just like clouds in the sky; there's no point hanging onto them or chasing after them, because they're constantly shifting and changing anyway!

Just keep applying this knowledge to the mind. The mind, being what it is, will keep churning out old ignorant thought patterns for some time, but that can be neutralised with steady inquiry and discrimination. As Swami Chinmayananda said, eternal vigilance is the price of freedom. Keep up your inquiry and *sadhana*, and apart from that, enjoy the freedom and fullness of your own self!