

The Reflection Teaching

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Mike: Hi, James.

I was reading a website that said that insentient things have consciousness. Is it valid Vedanta?

James: This guy is pretty knowledgeable Vedanta-wise. I took out my red pen, expecting to use it liberally, but couldn't fault with the meaning of his statements. However, I fleshed out the reflection teaching a bit. It explains how the inert subtle body becomes sentient.

It is correct that the universe doesn't have consciousness. The universe *is* consciousness.

Mike: He says, "*Advaita* teaches that reality is limitless, non-dual consciousness. By definition alone, something that is non-dual cannot be 'in' anything, including a universe or a body. This is from the level of the *Brahman*."

James: Correct.

Mike: Then he says, "However, to talk about it from the relative level, it appears that there are sentient and insentient beings. *Advaita* teaches that the only difference between a so-called living thing and a so-called non-living thing is that the living thing has a medium for the reflection of *Brahman*, while a non-living thing, like a stone, does not. The appearance of sentience and consciousness only occurs when the body has a reflecting medium."

James: Yes, again. This is *pratibimba vada*, the reflection teaching. The reflecting medium is the subtle body, which reflects consciousness because it is made of *sattva*.

Mike: Next he says, "In the case of sentient bodies, there is a subtle body aligned with a gross body. The gross body alone is like the stone. Without the subtle body, it would quickly turn to insentient matter, absorbing *Brahman*, if you will, rather than reflecting it, because the subtle body is where the media of reflection are located. Since there can be more than one medium of reflection in the subtle body, it is more like a body of mirrors, plural."

James: Yes. However, it's not clear what he means by "more than one medium of reflection." He is probably referring to *manas*, *buddhi*, *ahamkara* and *chitta*, the emotions, ego, intellect and memory. I prefer to think of them as mechanical, inert functions that seemingly disturb subtle body, not as separate mirrors, although they

are different.

Mike: He also says, “When we are talking about the *koshas*, we are talking about these media of reflection. The first medium of reflection, then, is the *pranayama kosha*. This is the energy, or physiological mirror. The reflection of this mirror is what we normally mean by ‘life.’ It allows for the appearance of assimilation, growth, reproduction, etc. All the major kingdoms of life have this mirror, beginning with plants.”

James: The *kosa* teaching that follows is correct, keeping in mind that all the *kosas* are one mirror, appearing as five.

Mike: “The next mirror is the *manamaya kosha*. This is feeling, or movement mirror. We recognize that plants do not seem to have feelings, while animals generally seem to. This is because plants do not have this mirror. It is responsible for feelings and movement. The presence of feelings means movement is now possible because the arising feelings are able to produce a desire and an action toward or away from the feeling. This is why one of the hallmarks of an animal versus a plant is that the animal has the capacity toward movement.

“The next mirror is the *buddimaya kosha*. This is the intellect, the mirror that allows discrimination. We all recognize there is something different about humans from other animals. If you tie a mature dog to a tree, does it even know of the knot? What if you tie even a six-year-old human child to a tree? It is this mirror that accounts for the differences because it allows discrimination of a kind that is primitive in other animals.

“So neither sentient or insentient bodies have consciousness. Having evolved the necessary reflecting media, however, means that sentient bodies can appear to have their own independent consciousness, just as your face in a mirror appears to be a separate, other face. These mirrors are not so much structural mirrors, like the kind we are used to seeing, they are more like functional mirrors that allow ‘more’ of *Brahman* to shine through.”

James: He expands his point above when he says the mirrors are “functional.” The last phrase, “allow ‘more’ of *Brahman* to shine through,” is good because of the quotes around the word “more.” The degree of shining is due to the action of the *gunas*, which are the substance of the subtle body, not to *guna-free Brahman*, the original consciousness, nor its reflection.

He would do well to explain the sentient/insentient teaching in this way.

When (or where) *Maya* – matter, or *prakriti* – is manifest “in” pure existence/consciousness, it reflects awareness. In the second “stage” of Creation the *jivas* appear when the *rajas* “aspect” of *Maya* seemingly “shatters” the pure *sattvic* mirror of *Maya* in which are programmed the *vasanas/karnas* of all beings. These “shards of consciousness” from tardigrades to human to whales reflect consciousness. It is the reflection striking on the reflecting medium that creates sentience. The Self is not sentient. *Maya* – matter, the three *gunas* – is not sentient. But when they come together, sentience – life – appears. So a *jiva* is three elements: original pure consciousness (*brahman*), its reflection (*pratibimba*) and the reflecting

media. The original and the reflection don't change – they are both pure existence/consciousness; the reflecting medium changes (apparently). The differences between *jivas* are due to their *karmas*, which are embedded in the *sattva* “aspect” of the reflecting medium.

Finally, although stones, for instance, are consciousness, they don't reflect it, because they are made of *tamas*, which “absorbs” the reflection. You can understand that they are consciousness, however, because they exist. Existence and consciousness are non-different, because you don't exist unless you know you exist, and you don't know you exist unless you exist.

Mike: Should I think of the sheaths as “coloring” the reflection rather than the media of reflection?

James: They are media that reflect consciousness. But they “reflect” in different ways. The physical body “reflects” food, the *pranamaya* “reflects” energy, the *manomaya* reflects emotions, the *vignanamaya* reflects thoughts, and the *anandamaya* reflects bliss. But each sheath is made of different reflective material. The *ananmaya* is made of *tamas*. The *pranamaya* of *rajas*, the *manomaya* and *vignanamaya* of *sattva*, and the *anandamaya* is made of *tamas*. As such it is called the sleep aspect of the waking state, i.e. the place you go when you get what you want or avoid what you don't when you are awake.

Mike: I realize the mirror analogy is an analogy, but how far can it be taken? He described the *koshas* as functional mirrors rather than mirrors as we normally think of them. They seem to be another of those “as-if-so” things, their functioning acting as a mirror nonetheless. Yes? No?

James: Yes, “coloring” is a good word. The *Maya* “mirror” is pure *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. When *sattva* is dominant it reflects reflects brilliantly and truthfully. But certain subtle *vrittis* are embedded in it, which don't affect *Isvara* but affect *jiva*. In *Isvara* they are called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, but in *jiva* they become “ropes,” or *gunas*, that bind *jiva* to various attitudes, values and activities: *sattvaguna*, *rajoguna* and *tamoguna*. If you look at them from the *guna* level, the word “coloring” is good. The colors associated with them are gold for *sattva*, red for *rajas*, and black for *tamas*. If you look at them from the downside, the word “distortions” or “influences” is useful insofar as they cause *jivas* to identify with the *vrittis* embedded in them.

The *koshas* are definitely “functional” in that they cause *jivas* to suffer and enjoy according to the nature of *vrittis* in them. For instance, *sattva* causes a person to see reality in terms of truth, justice and beauty. *Rajas* inclines the *jiva* to activity, and *tamas* to sleep. In the *ananmaya kosa*, the physical body, *tamas* predominates, in the *pranamaya*, *rajas*, etc. Check the charts in *The Yoga of the Three Energies*. The way they color is extremely complex insofar as there are five sheaths and three colorings, so the permutations and combinations account for the tremendous diversity in the lives of plant, animal and human *jivas*.

The mirror analogy is intended to point out the difference between pure original consciousness and the consciousness experienced by human *jivas*. It is meant to point out that freedom, *moksa*, is only gained by identifying with pure original

consciousness, since it is free of the *vrittis* that produce experience. And furthermore, that the freedom conferred by Vedanta, i.e. Self-knowledge, is only accessible through scripture, which needs to be taught by a competent teacher insofar as inquiring *jivas* are subject to the colorings induced by the *gunas*. In other words, knowledge produced by *jivas* is subject to error, whereas knowledge produced by scripture isn't, assuming a qualified inquirer and a competent teacher.

So the mirror teaching is a valuable aid that allows a non-eternal *jiva* to separate itself from original consciousness and begin the process of transferring its identity from the reflection to the original.

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"You don't have problems; you are the problem." – Swami Chinmayananda

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Keeping in mind that we are situated in Spain (European Standard Time), we are available between 10:00 am and 2:00 pm and from 8:00 to 10:00 pm most days. To schedule, contact Sundari at sundari.shiningworld@gmail.com or James/Ramji at swartz.jb@gmail.com. Once we agree on a date, make a donation at the website.