

# Fighting the Void

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**Richard:** Hello, Sundari, I have come to a sort of “blockage” in my understanding and I hope you can explain where I am struggling, please.

There is only one consciousness/one Self – yet my experience, of course, is through my individual *jiva*. The same consciousness is witness to experiences of “all” other *jivas* separately and simultaneously.

**Sundari:** Yes, there is only one consciousness, the one and only non-experiencing witness, witnessing “all” *jivas*. And yes, it is true that the *jiva*, the experiencing entity, experiences the world it lives in. The *jiva* never stops experiencing as long as the body is alive; life is one long experience seemingly punctuated by discrete “personal” experiences. Yet the *jiva* can only experience because the light of consciousness shines on the mind. The question is, who then is really experiencing? Who are you referring to you when you say “my experience is through my *jiva*”? Is it the Self talking or the *jiva*? Clearly, it’s the latter.

Existence/consciousness/Self does not experience, because there is no duality for the Self, there is only itself. However, when consciousness is associated with name and form (an object, i.e. a thought), experience happens. Experience minus thought leaves pure consciousness. Unless existence is associated with name and form it cannot be experienced. Thus consciousness experiences indirectly, in that no experience can take place without it – it makes experience possible. You are only ever experiencing consciousness, but unless you have Self-knowledge you don’t know this. The Self/consciousness needs nothing to experience itself. When *Maya* appears, there is (apparently) something for consciousness to be aware of, and experience seemingly happens.

But as consciousness sees only itself, the *jiva*/individual is just a lens through which consciousness apparently experiences objects, with the emphasis on “apparently.” Remember, this is a dream world; it’s not real, but it clearly exists because the *jiva* can experience it as a thought. If an image appears in the mind, even without a known name or form, it still appears as a thought because that is the only option. The mind will match it to the closest reference it can find according to your conditioning, i.e. how you see the world, which will be according to your subjective ideas about it.

It’s not that the empirical world around you isn’t there or does not exist. It’s there, but you’ve never lived there. You’ve never even been there for a visit. The only place you’ve ever been is inside your mind. When an image or thought appears in your mind, the mind imagines the totality of objects by inference, but those objects are never directly experienced. All that is directly experienced is you, consciousness, and the properties of objects (shape, texture, colour, size, sound, taste and smell). The only issue left to resolve is whether or not consciousness or matter is primary. Which came first? When we use the word “first” we mean “which stands alone?” Does matter exist prior to consciousness so that we can still have matter without consciousness? No. You cannot separate an object from the consciousness of the object. Therefore, if you remove objects (experience), you are left with

consciousness.

This is born out even in scientific research. Translational neuroscientists have established that the process of observation/experience is the same as what you experience during a magic trick, which is a series of “electrochemical signals going around a bunch of circuits in your brain.” Because there are no windows in your skull, the only way you can get information into your brain is through your five senses, which are our means of knowledge for knowing objects – only. From there your brain draws on past memories and then uses cognition to fill in the details – essentially forming what neuroscientists call “a grand simulation of reality.” Memory plays a big part in experience because you cannot experience something you do not remember.

## **How Perception/Experience Happens**

**Sundari:** Gross objects require consciousness to be known. Human or sentient beings require consciousness, a functioning intellect and sense organs to know anything. The sense organs give rise to the experience of things in the body. Without functioning sense organs and intellect, you cannot experience anything. You would be a “vegetable,” in a permanent coma.

When we look at an object, whether it’s a subtle object appearing only in the mind (like a thought, feeling or image) or a gross physical object with a name and form, the subtle body sends out a thought, a beam of light, a ray of consciousness, to the object. Consciousness shines on the subtle body and illumines the mind and senses, which in turn illumine the object. However, the thought, or ray of consciousness, sent from the intellect to the object is inert, meaning is not itself conscious. You know this to be true because your thoughts do not know you. You know your thoughts. Consciousness is delivered to objects through the mechanical process of reflected consciousness shining or bouncing off a conscious, sentient object – a *jiva*, or subtle body.

So experience takes place. If you cannot see a material or subtle object, no thought can reach it, so no experience of it is possible. Subtle objects like thoughts and feelings are known in the mind in the same way, by consciousness shining on the mind. When you cannot recognize or process your thoughts and feelings, you cannot experience them, and they become “blocked” or suppressed in the unconscious, causing what we call unconscious, or causal body, constipation.

**Richard:** I’m sure James has said that consciousness doesn’t think or have an opinion, it is emotionless and therefore simply a witness, yet its nature does have the quality of bliss.

**Sundari:** The Self does not think or feel, but by its presence alone does thinking/feeling take place. Thoughts and feelings are objects known to me, and I only suffer when I wrongly identify with them. All thoughts and feelings are generated by the *gunas*, not by me. The Self has no “qualities” or attributes, it is a partless whole. If it did, it would not be non-dual. The nature of something is different from the attributes of something. People often confuse the two. The nature of something is the essential essence, something that is intrinsic to or inherent in something and cannot be removed, without which a thing could not be a thing. An

attribute/quality is a property, which may or may not be essential to the nature of a thing. The nature of something is the non-negotiable or unchanging variable, whereas a property is usually a changing variable, as the nature of sugar is sweetness. If you take sweetness away, sugar is no longer sugar. Or the nature fire is heat. If you take heat away, fire is no longer fire. Thus the nature of the Self, consciousness, is *parama prema svarupa*. *Parama* means limitless; *svarupa* means nature; and *prema* is the love that makes love possible – i.e. bliss. This is not the bliss most people think, because it is not experiential, though we can experience it.

Blissful implies bliss-less. The bliss of the Self is not a feeling. It is just knowledge. The problem lies in the misunderstanding of the word “bliss.” There are two kinds of bliss: *ananda*, which is experiential bliss which ends; and *anantum*, which is the bliss of the Self and never ends. The bliss of the Self, that which is always present, unlimited and non-changing is not an experience, because it is your true nature, *anantum*.

The bliss of Self-knowledge can be experienced as a feeling though, such as the bliss of deep sleep, which is inferred when you wake up; or as *parabhakti*, where love is known to be you, your true nature, meaning consciousness, the Self. *Parabhakti* is having all you could ever want and knowing that it will never leave you. It is love loving itself. It is limitless satisfaction, *parama sukka*, or *tripti*, are words used in the texts.

When I know I am awareness, I am *prema*, limitless love. This love is knowledge because awareness is intelligent. *Prema* is only known when Self-knowledge has negated the doer. That is not to say that the bliss disappears when Self-knowledge is firm. It just does not matter whether the experience of bliss is present or not. The bliss of Self-knowledge is always present because the Self is always present, regardless of what the *jiva* is feeling.

**Richard:** On that basis, it seems to suggest that the only thinking, intelligence available is when the *jiva* is available to perform that function. Consciousness is witness to the *jiva* explaining and knowing the difference.

**Sundari:** All intelligence belongs only to consciousness, the Self and manifests in the Field of Existence as *sattva guna* when *Maya* appears. Though all the *gunas* are *mithya* and only function in *mithya*, they are eternal principles in consciousness. It is true that thinking as we know it is unique to the *jiva*. But the *jiva* can only think because *Isvara* has provided it with an intellect and the light of consciousness shines on it. Without consciousness the mind/intellect cannot function and is just dead meat. Because of *Maya*, the *jiva* then identifies with its thoughts and believes it is a doer/thinker, separate from the objects/Field of Existence, blind to its true nature as consciousness.

In reality, the only “thinker” is *Isvara*, but not in the sense we understand thinking, because *Isvara* is not a person. It is the ruler/sustainer and destroyer of the world of objects, the *dharma* field. There is nothing like premeditation in *Isvara srsti*, because though *Isvara* is conscious and knows everything happening in the Field of Existence, it does not “think” as such. It is not hiding behind a veil taking score of everything we do, meting out good or bad *karma*. It keeps the *mithya* show going to facilitate the *jiva's karma* with the endless and automatic working out of the *gunas*.

**Richard:** I realize Vedanta isn't trying to negate the *jiva*/doer but simply appreciate its function/role in the dream.

**Sundari:** Vedanta definitely is negating the doer! That is the whole point of Self-inquiry and *karma yoga*. It is not denying its existence though, just acknowledging that it is no more than a fear/desire-driven program – and NOT REAL, “real” being defined as “that which is always changing and not always present.”

**Richard:** However, when *jiva* says it is the Self/consciousness and can eloquently explain the distinction – consciousness is only able to witness that and to know that with the *jiva*'s help. Presumably, without the *jiva*'s instruments, it wouldn't have a clue – would it?

**Sundari:** You really have got yourself into a muddle! Your thinking is backwards, it is reversed by the power of *Maya*. You are saying that the *jiva* is as real as the Self, and in fact that the Self depends on the *jiva* to know itself. This is the superimposition of duality onto non-duality, ignorance, or *Maya*, speaking.

If the *jiva* “says” it is consciousness, it either knows it is the Self or it knows about the Self but does not know what it means to BE the Self. The *jiva* is still identified with the ego/doer and trying to figure out what it means to be the Self as the ego. The inescapable fact is that while it is fairly easy to say “I am the Self” as the *jiva* and quite another to say it as the Self. The Self's experience of itself is qualitatively different from the *jiva*'s experience of the Self as an object or as objects. This realization may well be a painful moment for inquirers who are very convinced that they are enlightened without knowing that they are only enlightened as a *jiva*, not as the Self.

As I said above but bears repeating: the Self is self-aware, it does not need the presence of objects to know itself. In fact, to repeat, for the Self, there are no objects, there is only itself. You are forgetting *Maya* – the power of delusion, that which makes the unchanging appear to be changing. It's a very clever trickster, duality! It makes you stand on your head, which is how you are trying to make sense of the teachings. The whole point of Self-inquiry is to correct the reversal of duality. It's called *viparyaya* in Sanskrit. *Viparaya* is the reversal of misapprehension that *Maya* imposes on the mind which results in the erroneous cognition of reality as a duality – the snake taken to be the rope. *Adhyaropa*, superimposition, is caused by *viparaya*. In both cases, duality (the snake) is there, ignorance is there, for a *samsari*. But for a *jnani*, *viparyaya* is gone and so is unconditioned superimposition. Conditioned superimposition still functions, but the *jnani* never takes it to be real so is never deluded by it.

**Richard:** I'm probably struggling to understand what consciousness is. I can't understand what I am.

**Sundari:** Yes, indeed. How hard is it to understand that you are that by which everything is known? Is it not obvious? How do you know what you know or what you don't know? The hard part is understanding what it means to BE the Self for the *jiva*.

That is where all the work of Self-inquiry takes place. For this, you need a full understanding of the *Isvara-jiva aikyam*, identity. There is no way to escape *mithya* other than through understanding what it is, how it works the way it does. You cannot impose *satya* onto *mithya*, it will not work. The teachings of Vedanta are complete and cover all this in detail, especially *How to Attain Enlightenment* and in more depth in *Inquiry into Existence*.

**Richard:** When I listen to James talk me through the scriptures – all I am left with is consciousness – there isn't a compartment in my brain to go to or to put such information. I am left dangling – searching for something to hold on to or appreciate or to identify with.

**Sundari:** Yes, that's the problem. WHO is left dangling? The doer identified with the body-mind is trying to fit the teachings into its own understanding. There is no "compartment" in "your" brain. The brain is a piece of meat. *Maya* conditions the mind to think a certain way under the spell of ignorance (the hypnosis of duality), which is why it appears as if there is a real person in there. There is not. Why not give up and let go? What have you got to lose? If you had not already established that your current understanding of who you are is faulty and causes suffering, why are you bothering with Vedanta? If you want to be free of limitation, the doer must be understood to be dismissed.

**Richard:** I listened to the latest *Manduka Upanishad* from your site and found it becoming very uncomfortable, almost unbearable at times. It was like being in some sort of weird Hollywood sci-fi movie that was tantamount to a horror movie and realizing that it was my life and I had just discovered the nightmare that had no end in sight – no obvious escape route. My life/experience isn't real – doesn't exist. So, what's the point?

**Sundari:** The *Mandukya Upanishad* is pretty advanced and you may not be ready for it. The teachings are progressive and take you step by step through Self-inquiry, answering every doubt as it arises. Assuming qualifications are present, they definitely work to remove ignorance of your true nature. Vedanta can seem nihilistic and very frightening to the unqualified ego, no doubt about it. After all, Self-knowledge negates the ego and its story, which obviously does not seem to be a winning option for it! Therefore it is imperative that all the qualifications for Self-inquiry are present and the stages of Self-inquiry are properly completed. I sent you a short version of the stages a while back, I think. If the mind is not qualified, Vedanta will not assimilate, and the mind/ego will reject it.

That said, many qualified inquirers "hit the wall," so to speak, when they realize that there really is "nothing out there." We call it "the void," when all objects are seen to be devoid of substance, in particular when the person they once took themselves to be is revealed to be no more than a construct, a mirage, a *guna*-generated program. What to "do" when you realize the pointlessness of all doing and you are not the doer? Knowing that we are the Self does not magically translate into the disappearance of the *jiva* – that can take years and years for some. *Nididhyasana* is the purification of the last vestiges of mental/emotional patterns once Self-realization has taken place. We call this Self-actualization.

The “all is emptiness” stage is created by *tamas*, which presents another Self-actualization problem that usually, but not always, affects older Self-realized people who have had families and/or careers. Jobs and families solve the problem of financial and emotional security, but they don't take care of the doer problem, so the tendency to act has no place to go when you realize the zero-sum nature of life. The risk here is that the doer slips into a depression because you cannot in good faith distract it with the mindless *samsaric* pursuits that previously occupied it, i.e. jobs, entertainment and endless family events, etc.

What we are all aiming for as serious inquirers dedicated to the last stage of Self-inquiry, *nididhyasana*, is to transition straight from firm Self-knowledge directly to perfect doer satisfaction – *tripti*. Unfortunately, this can only take place if you are totally qualified when Self-knowledge is firm. i.e. all the *jiva's* binding conditioning (mental and emotional patterns) have been transformed into devotion to the Self, i.e. rendered non-binding. This is seldom the case when Self-realization takes place, which is why the last stage of Self-inquiry, *nididhyasana*, is for most inquirers, the most difficult and the longest.

Swami Paramarthananda calls *nididhyasana* “requalifying.” You never know when, during the *manana* phase, firm Self-knowledge will take place and you never know how long *nididhyasana* will take. In fact, if Self-knowledge makes you a perfect spontaneous *karma yogi*, it doesn't matter, because time doesn't exist for you. So, if you don't experience perfect *jiva* satisfaction when Self-knowledge is unshakeable, you need to remain humble and keep up the practices that qualified you for understanding as they will eventually remove the obstacles to limitless bliss.

*Jivas* are a flawed bunch and there's not much can be done about it. We are all a mixed bag on that level, knowing how the *gunas* work conditioning the mind. Nobody is doing anything, so there is no blame either. Our *jiva* program plays out the way it does and we are either tied to it or not. At the same time, being free of it does not mean we stop thinking and feeling; all that changes is the import we give to our thoughts and feelings, and how they impact us. To be truly free I must be free to be upset, disappointed, angry, etc. as well as happy and peaceful. But if negative feelings loom large and take up residence in the real estate of my mind for longer than it takes to recognize that they are there, I am clearly not that free. Freedom means I see my thoughts and feelings as they arise and the knowledge kicks in instantly to dissolve them.

**Richard:** When James says you wouldn't harm your neighbour or a stranger because they are you – that doesn't mean anything to me. I hear the words intellectually and understand them. I wouldn't harm anyone anyway, but this *jiva* has been singled out and has been designed to be separate by Creation. The consciousness that I am can only witness this individual *jiva's* experiences.

**Sundari:** You hear the words intellectually, but you are not assimilating their meaning, because the intellect is *tamasic*. The *jiva* has not been “singled out” or designed to be separate. The *jiva* is the Self under the apparent spell of *Maya*. Duality is a superimposition onto non-duality; the separation is a mirage. The *jiva* has an out card from *Maya* with the flawless teachings on non-duality, Vedanta, to guide it out of duality if the mind is qualified.

**Richard:** I mean to say, even if my *jiva* did harm another *jiva* – I’m still not harming myself – am I? Nor am I harming the other consciousness – I’m simply harming the other *jiva*! Neither *jiva* really exists and consciousness is untouchable – so what!

**Sundari:** It is true that consciousness cannot be harmed, but though the *jiva* construct is not real, it lives in the apparent reality, which although it too is not real, functions according to certain rules. This is a lawful universe. If you break those rules, the *jiva* will suffer. As a fully realized *jiva*, you would not harm any part of the Creation, firstly because you know it is all you and secondly because there is no benefit for you to do so. You know there is nothing to gain, so why would you do it? Plus you are *dharma* and therefore follow it automatically. The most fundamental *dharma* is non-injury in thought word and deed.

**Richard:** I try to appreciate consciousness/me with or without the *jiva* and struggle. I’ve certainly lost the plot – in fact at times it has become more attractive to find refuge in some part of the dream than it does to try and think out of the dream. I can’t find that place at the moment, it doesn’t appear attractive – it seems to be more cruel and confusing than the place I am trying to escape from.

**Sundari:** Yes, you have lost the plot. *Rajas*, fear, and *tamas*, confusion, reign supreme in the mind. Probably the best thing to do is go back to the beginning. Start with Chapter I of *How to Attain Enlightenment* or *The Essence of Enlightenment* and work slowly. Sign on for our free online courses. Conduct a fearless moral inventory and investigate your values/motivations. See which qualifications you need to develop, as it seems to me you are shaky on all of them. If not, you can always keep the cruel world you are trying to escape from and see if you can make it work for you.

**Richard:** Without the *jiva* I presumably remain as consciousness the “whole” from which I never left, except to experience my take on the dream world using this *jiva*’s instruments.

**Sundari:** With or without the *jiva* you are whole and complete, needing nothing. You do not need the *jiva* or its sense instruments to know yourself, as stated above. The *jiva* (subtle body) under the spell of ignorance appears in front of you one fine day, with a preordained, *Isvara*-given *vasana* orientation, or conditioning. It will suffer and enjoy the dream world until it realizes that the joy is not in the objects, and the desire to know itself develops. Then its attention turns inwards, towards the ever-present Self.

**Richard:** I know who I am as the *jiva* but who is the REAL me without the *jiva*? Nothing, it seems!

**Sundari:** There are two *jivas*: the “small-self” finite *jiva* with a name, a story and an address; and the eternal nameless *Jiva*, *Jivatman*. As both the eternal *Jiva* (*Jivatman*) and *Isvara* are pure awareness, therefore they are *adjata*, unborn. They are also principles in awareness, like *Maya*, and so beyond, or out of, time – *anadhi*,

beginningless, and therefore endless. They are either unmanifest or manifest when *Maya* appears. The small-self *jiva*, while also the Self, is “in time” and ends with the death of the body, though the *vasanas*/subtle body are eternal because the causal body is eternal. The subtle body of that particular *vasana* bundle is subsumed into the causal body at the death of the gross body and will reincarnate at the appropriate time to work out its *karma*, but there really is only one subtle body, the eternal *Jiva*. Everything reduces to the Self; there is no other option.

**Richard:** There is no identity other than a state of bliss. In other words, without the dream world, there isn't anything going on. No experiences!

**Sundari:** It's true that nothing happens for the Self, but consciousness is NOT nothing, which is just an object, a thought, a misapprehension of reality. Consciousness is the fullness that knows nothing. See how identified you are with the doer, so terrified of giving up experience. But all experiences end. Would you not be better served by identifying with something that never ends? Please read again the part on bliss above, as your understanding of what Vedanta means by the bliss of consciousness is way off the mark.

And please note: the Self is not “a state of bliss,” because all states end too. It is that which knows all states.

**Richard:** Could it be then – on that basis, the idea presumably, is not one of escapism from the dream world but one of embracing it with a completely different awareness and mindset. Appreciate it all and experience the joy while you can because there isn't anything else anyway?

**Sundari:** Yes, but it is not appreciating the joy “while you can,” because the joy never ends for you. The joy does not come from objects! You are the source of all joy, *jiva* or no *jiva*. You do not need ephemeral experiences to be joy – full. You seem to have missed the first qualification for Self-inquiry – the realization that the joy is not in the object. And you seem to think that Self-knowledge means the *jiva* is annihilated or stops enjoying. It is not and does not, quite the opposite. The only way to truly en-joy anything as a *jiva* is when you know you are not separate from anything, that everything depends on you, but you depend on nothing. How cool is that?!

The *jiva* and its story are loved as it but simply dismissed as “not real.” When this hits home, and the reversal duality imposed on the Self is removed by Self-knowledge, you see life in all its true beauty for the very first time. Here you finally understand what it means to love without any emotional hooks, unconditionally. You can appreciate duality for what it is and the temporary enjoyment it offers without getting broken when you don't get what you want or “lose” something you have. You hold onto nothing, because you are everything.

**Richard:** I hope I haven't confused you in my ramblings here.

**Sundari:** You do not confuse me, but it seems you have some confusion. I hope this helps.



~ Much love, Sundari