

Is the Self Really Limitless?

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Mark: It makes more sense to me to say the Self is whole and complete instead of limitless. At this point in my journey I feel hard and fast knowledge that I am whole and complete but not limitless. I am whole and complete because I don't need anything; literally, whatever happens can happen and no matter how the contents of consciousness change, I remain free, unattached, whole and completely satisfied with existence/awareness exactly the way it is, and this doesn't change and seemingly can't change.

Rory: By definition, to be whole and complete necessitates an absence of limitation. If the word "limitless" doesn't work for you, then I say stick with "wholeness." What happens is that certain words are translated from Sanskrit to English and (assuming there is an English equivalent) those words may already have certain connotations. I agree that, as a *jiva*, I wouldn't say to someone that I feel "limitless" but I would happily say I feel whole and complete. Limitlessness almost sounds like an Avengers-style superpower. 😊

It's not necessary to get hung up on words. If limitless sounds too ostentatious, try the Sanskrit, *ananatam*, or *purnam*, which means "full" or "whole." I think that's probably my favourite, and I love the sound of Sanskrit words.

Mark: However, this wholeness/completeness remains very limited indeed.

Rory: Does it though? If it was limited, would it be wholeness/completeness?

The self is the *adhistanam*, the foundation, basis or substratum, the support and totality of all things. Limitations pertain only to *mithya*. Regardless of the condition of the body or mind and the presence or absence of knowledge, the fullness/wholeness of your own nature ever pertains.

Mark: Can the Self destroy itself? No.

Rory: This is one argument I've never considered before! It depends upon your standpoint. At the empirical order of reality, it actually CAN – for the self, courtesy of the *upadhi* of *maya*, is constantly bringing itself into birth and destruction as the creation of *jivas*, worlds, galaxies and universes. Sure, that is not the self from the standpoint of *paramartika satyam* (the absolute), but is the self from the standpoint of *vyavaharika satyam* (the relative). *Maya* or no *maya*, it's still the self.

Mark: Can the Self witness any possible variation of dependent objects in *Maya*? No.

Rory: Again, it can – the *jiva*, which is the self with the *upadhi* of a body-mind, is

capable of experiencing any possible combination and variation of objects in his or her dreams and imagination.

Mark: Can the Self change the laws of Creation? No.

Rory: The self, as *Isvara*, IS the laws of the Creation. It could conceivably change those laws, and has the power to do so, although the entire Creation functions according to an innate homeostatic balance (aka *dharma*). That's why *Isvara* is unlikely to arbitrarily rewrite the rules and decide one day to make fire cold or sugar sour. But heck, for all we know, there are parallel universes with cold fire and sour sugar. Who knows? Anything is possible in *maya*. *Maya* "makes the impossible possible."

Mark: Now, obviously the Self as it is, being only pure awareness, has absolutely no desire to do any of these things, so the Self can't desire, another limitation. The Self can't DO anything, another limitation.

Rory: The self is everything though. There's nothing but the self. So therefore the self must be that by which all things happen. Like the sun lighting the earth and allowing all creatures to live and flourish while itself doing nothing, the self is that by which everything is done. While ultimately, yes (from the standpoint of *paramartika satyam*), the self is actionless, because there is nothing other than it - in the guise of *Isvara*, the self is that which DOES everything in the entire Creation.

It's a paradox, to be sure. To have a complete understanding, one must consider it from every angle.

Mark: Yet it is fortunate that the Self is limited in this way because that's precisely why enlightenment is even possible and why wholeness and completeness is a readily available awakening.

Rory: IS the self limited though?

(I'm aware I have gone from arguing that the self CAN apparently experience limitation, courtesy of the *maya upadhis*, to declaring it is free of limitation. This is a wild roller coaster ride! - but bear with me).

The entire basis of the teaching is that everything is the self. There's only one factor, one substance in the Creation, and it's the self: the *adhistanam*, the essence and totality of existence. Were it a limited self, enlightenment wouldn't be possible, because it's the *jiva's* very sense of limitation which creates *samsara* in the first place. Going from one limited self to another limited self would only be trading one *samsara* for another.

Mark: Now, I imagine you think I'm quite confused about all this and that's exactly why I'm writing these questions. What am I missing?

Rory: It seems to me that you have a sharp, questioning mind and are willing to consider things in depth, which is vitally important. Again, the topic of *maya* is a heady one and its nuances extremely subtle and seemingly contradictory – the potential for confusion is immense.

I think the source of your doubt comes largely from mixing up the orders of reality. I'm going to attach an excerpt from a *Gita* commentary I've written, which details the three orders of reality. I've found it's such a crucial understanding. It brings everything into focus. Everything is the self, yet within this absolute reality, we have the objective world of *Isvara* (the waking world) and the subjective world of the *jiva* (the world of dreams and imagination) and superimposing one order of reality onto another is the source of much confusion and indeed suffering.

There's a lot covered in this email – Creation, eternity, enlightenment, limitlessness, you name it! I hope these answers have been helpful. Some may inevitably lead to more queries or doubts, so feel free to ask more questions, and I will do my best to help. If you do, it would be helpful to tell me a little about your spiritual background, some of the teachers you have read, followed and which of James' books you have read or any of the other Vedanta teachers. It helps me know how best to "pitch" things.

Mark: Thank you so much for such a detailed response. I must say your answers are very satisfying as well as helpful and really gave me clarification. Your explanation on the three orders of reality is beautifully written, and I'm very happy you sent that.

Rory: It was my pleasure. I'm glad it was helpful.

Mark: In the time since my initial email to you I've started James' book *The Essence of Enlightenment*, and am almost through it. James has a wonderful straightforward style of teaching that fortunately resonates quite well with me.

Rory: James does have a superb style and a wonderful way of making the teaching clear and accessible without compromising its purity. I first discovered his previous book *How to Attain Enlightenment* back in 2011, and it was my first exposure to traditional Vedanta. I was floored. And never looked back!