

Introduction to Vedanta

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2012-10-17

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/462>

Leora: *Namaste*, Sundari. I have been watching James' DVDs (thank you again for those) and would like to seriously study Vedanta and incorporate it into my life. Do you have any tips as to how to tackle that process? I love being a student and learn best by listening, writing down new information, talking about it and then having some kind of task to help it sink in and become relevant. I'm a bit overwhelmed when I watch the DVDs - the content is amazing and makes sense, but I'm unsure of how to break the information down and apply it to my life. Perhaps I just need some direction as to what information to absorb first?

I've been transitioning through new growth lately. After seeing you and meeting James, it was clear to me that engaging with Charles any further - all well wishes aside - was simply an energy-depleting waste of my time. He comes back to the States on the 14th, so I'm nervous about being thrown off-center by his behaviors again, but have been working on *mantras* and visualizing boundaries that will help me stay grounded. I decided to put myself out there and went on a date. I was totally shocked by my emotional devastation to perceived rejection when he (a practical stranger) didn't express a strong romantic interest after a lovely first date. It wasn't until we had an email exchange that I realized, "Wait, I'm not romantically interested in him either!" We've decided to be friends, which I am far more excited about because I felt like our minds were compatible and he's an intelligent, grounded, genuinely delightful person. The fear of rejection and disappointment was debilitating and taught me a lot about how easily I can lose sight of my strength when I put my energy in the wrong place. It's a frustrating process; already knowing too much of my identity was wrapped up in men, I may have gained strength in lots of areas in the years I've been single, but those "dating skills" did not just magically take form in the background. I am ready for a balanced relationship with someone who is also healthy and happy, but dating is a very disorienting process, so I'm practicing patience with myself and the universe. This is a mainly why I want to seriously study Vedanta; I know there are many things I am clinging to that are holding me back and Vedanta would be the ideal avenue for me to learn how to surrender to truth. Knowledge is so empowering and it has always helped me release myself from fears and insecurities. There is much work to be done!

Sundari: Hello, Leora. You are right in being wary of being sucked into the same melodrama with Charles. Why would you want to keep suffering? You know you will; nothing is going to change there, that is guaranteed. Visualising boundaries and chanting *mantras* is not going to help much. At the same time, there is no wrong or right about any of this either. If you need to go back into the same drama and convince yourself further of this fact, go back with your eyes wide open. Just know upfront that neither Charles nor anyone else is going to give you what you are looking for, which is love. How can they? You already are it! Your true nature is love: the Sanskrit term is *parama prema svarupa*, which means the knowledge of your innate limitless nature. This is when love is known to be YOU, awareness. This is why James encourages people who have a burning desire for freedom not to make a relationship into a goal - freedom means freedom from dependence on objects to make you happy. You are young and still have a many things ahead of you; it is

normal to want love, especially at your stage of life. Vedanta is for mature people who have already assimilated their life experiences; this is why the qualifications are so important. In India young people are encouraged to live out their desires and only concentrate on their spiritual growth when they are older, after the householder stage. Western culture works differently and we have many young people who have found their way to this age-old teaching and are ready to take it on. They are natural enquirers, like yourself, and want the knowledge. Vedanta will change how you see everything, that is guaranteed, and you are fortunate to have come to it so young. However, the knowledge will present certain challenges for you because it will set you apart from other minds in which ignorance of the true nature of reality still prevails. Many people who have freed themselves from *samsara* (the belief in duality) find it difficult to relate to typical *samsaric* mentalities.

Vedanta also makes things easier in that you get to see everyone as yourself and non-separate from you. My advice to you is don't look for a relationship or worry about possible rejection. How can you be rejected by anyone? How can anyone validate or invalidate you? Putting your energy into men means that you are hoping that an object will give you what Leora thinks she lacks, which is not possible. No one can make you whole, because you are whole and complete already. Only ignorance makes us feel that our worth is determined by anyone or anything other than our own self. Focus on self-knowledge and removing the ignorance of your true nature first; practise *karma yoga* and leave the rest up to *Isvara*. That is what the teaching of *karma yoga* means: take the actions that are appropriate, but know that the results are not up to you. And take the results that DO come as a gift. Then life becomes a prayer to yourself. Watch yourself when you see yourself attached to an outcome, let it go. The total, *Isvara*, God, or the Universe, will deliver what you need. Pray for guidance and make it a prayer of gratitude, not supplication. You are simply invoking the self, YOU. This is what it means to negate the doer; it does not mean that you stop doing, as obviously as long as you are alive you are doing something, even if it's nothing! It just means that you understand who you really are: whole and complete, non-dual, unchanging, unconcerned, ordinary, actionless awareness. And that as an apparent individual in the apparent reality, *Isvara*, or the universe, or the *dharma* field, takes care of everything for you.

I can well understand you feeling a bit overwhelmed at where to start with Vedanta. There is so much literature out there, so many teachers and volumes of material. Vedanta is the oldest scripture known to man, even though modern religious thinking will not even admit to its existence or relevance. James is one of the very few the teachers worldwide who have made it readily available and understandable to Western as well as Eastern thinking.

The thing with Vedanta is that its core teaching is counter-intuitive to most thinking, i.e. that the very nature of life (meaning you) is non-dual. There is only the self (consciousness), out of which everything arises. So although there seems to be a subject and an object and the object appears to be separate from you, all objects arise out of you, consciousness. The aim of Vedanta is to set you free of dependence on objects, not that they disappear (they cannot!), but their reality drops away and you are no longer dependent on any object for your happiness. You can then have contact with all objects happily, not for happiness. There is nothing wrong with objects when you know who you are. You can then truly enjoy them – knowing that you are the source of the joy – instead of trying to suck it out of objects. All objects are value-neutral, i.e. in and of themselves they have no value, just like your body and your mind, which are both objects known to you, are inert without the light of consciousness (YOU) shining on them. Remove you from your body and it is a piece

of meat, lifeless. The same is true of all objects. When you know this you understand your true nature, so you no longer look for happiness where you will never find it (not for long anyway) as you know you are it. No problem, end of suffering. Life will continue as before, with its up and downs. Leora will love and be loved, she will seem to own things and enjoy them, have children (or not), but she will no longer be identified with Leora. Leora will be known to you, she will be known to exist in you, awareness, or consciousness, and whatever she does or does not do will be only relatively important to the self, you. She will know that the joy is not in the objects; it resides in awareness, her true nature. She will be free.

Vedanta stands apart from all other paths to truth in that it is not a path, a philosophy or a religion. These are all based on subjective truth. It is the only one that says that only knowledge, not blind faith, not experience, is capable of removing ignorance of your true nature and thus ending existential suffering. Vedanta is both a means of knowledge – a pathless path – and a path of action, meaning that it provides tools and the instructions how to use them, which when applied rigorously and with dedication will remove ignorance and its effects. Unlike all other quests which can give you, at best, some short-term relief from suffering – or some amazing experience (which always ends or changes unless the knowledge it is designed to deliver is assimilated), Vedanta is a permanent solution to bondage and it will set you free. It works.

It is not easy to remove ignorance; it takes great determination because it is hardwired; the ego is obsessively resistant to change. The self, which is the only thing that never changes and is always present, is nonetheless virtually unknown, although everyone is looking for it even if they do not know it. It is almost impossible to realise the self without Vedanta, because what you are trying to gain knowledge of (YOU, the self) is beyond inference and perception, i.e. it is subtler than the mind and the organs of perception; it cannot be seen, touched, felt, tasted, heard or inferred. This is because the mind/intellect (subtle body) are objects in you – consciousness. Consciousness is the cause of and subtler than the mind. And the effect cannot know the cause. Big problem! Consciousness seems to have done the impossible, which is to forget its own nature. This is why consciousness evolved Vedanta (self-knowledge) so that the self could reveal itself to itself. It is based on irrefutable and timeless logic. It does not come from any one mind or minds. Sounds crazy, contradictory and impossible, but there it is! Everything else that has been cooked up by human minds, is limited by its very nature in that it is based on the subjective opinions or experiences of someone. Take all other religious texts, from the *Holy Bible* to the *Koran*, they all claim it is the revealed word of God and the only way, but all of them are patently the word of God in the image of man. None of them offer knowledge of who you really are, of your true nature, because they don't know what it is. And all of them of course claim to hold the only truth and require your blind faith. It does not take much to realise that none of them provide freedom from bondage to objects or alleviate existential suffering. Not that Vedanta opposes any path or religion, it simply calls to attention what is obviously lacking in them: self-knowledge and a valid means of knowledge.

Very importantly, Vedanta needs to be taught because one will come to it with one's preconceived ideas and conditioning. This is a given, no way around that. Without a qualified teacher one will try to make Vedanta fit into one's thinking instead of the other way around, which will not work. You have come to it with an open mind, which is a very good place to start. Vedanta is not an arcane, complicated and mystical truth laid out by stuffy old men with long beards in some exotic, otherworldly and distant past, discovered in some secret cave, previously hidden

from mankind. Vedanta has always been because it is about you, and you are eternal and have always been. Without knowledge of your true nature you are a walking programme, just like everyone else is. Leora is a construct, made up of the *gunas* that have created her *vasana* load, or her likes and dislikes, her character. *Samsara*, which is a Sanskrit word which is hard to replace, is the belief that reality is a duality; it is a firmly-held notion in the mind, a superimposition, not real. Almost everyone is totally identified with it because they take themselves to be the body-mind. Vedanta says that the only thing that is real is that which does not change, ever, and that is the self, consciousness- it alone always stays the same. ALL objects (which includes your thoughts and feelings and all experiences) change, do not last, decay and die. This is what causes so much suffering, the desire for these objects AND the insistence that they supply wholeness and permanent happiness. All objects are incapable of doing that. Only the knowledge of your true nature is.

Veda means "knowledge," and *anta* means "end," so Vedanta means "the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge." You are very fortunate because you have a naturally enquiring mind, one of the qualifications for Vedanta. It does not appeal to people who don't think for themselves. That is why the qualifications are essential; unless you are mature and have a strong desire to end your own suffering, it will pass you by. This is the determining factor that will separate you from the majority who are so caught up in the movie, the mass hypnosis of materialism, totally convinced that *samsara* is real. Take a look at where you stand in all the qualifications, well-laid-out in James' book *How to Attain Enlightenment*. Write them down, make a list of them, track yourself. See how the programmes that trigger Leora run, what triggers them and why. Observe your fears and watch them as they arise. These programmes are your *vasanas*. Or rather they are Leora's *vasanas*, her conditioning. Everyone has them, they are not real - and they belong to *Isvara*, not to Leora. Study the *gunas*, the three energies that make up all of creation: *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*. If you can keep track of these, they will lead you to your binding *vasanas* (likes and dislikes) because they are what govern their creation. They are all totally predictable; they all have typical thoughts and actions that arise with them, without fail. Freedom is making these programmes, or *vasanas*, non-binding; they may still occur, but they will no longer have a hold on you; you will not have to act them out.

The *guna* teaching is my favourite because I have always been interested in psychology and how the mind functions, as have you. I never found the answers I was looking for in any of the traditional schools of thought in psychology, as with anything else in what the world has to offer, be it spiritual or otherwise. In Vedanta I found home, as do all who are ready for it. James is the only teacher of Vedanta who has expounded on the *guna* teaching, and it is so very important. I am very keen for him to write a whole text on this, as it has not been done before.

I have written an extensive email on the *gunas* and posted it at the website; I recommend that you read it.

Here is a brief overview:

The *gunas* are the three energies that are the fabric of the creation: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*. There are no English equivalent words for them; the West is almost oblivious to their existence, yet they run everything! *Isvara/brahman/atman* are Sanskrit names for consciousness/awareness, or the self. *Maya*, or ignorance, is a power that exists in consciousness. If consciousness, which is all that is, did not have the power of ignorance, it would not be unlimited. Once *maya* (ignorance) is projected, the

creation takes place and all three energies, *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, appear. Without them there is no creation. Once *maya* is operating and the creation exists, *maya* is called *Isvara*, a name which refers to God, the universe, the Creator, the Field, the Total, the macrocosmic mind – or any other name you can think of for it. It is the self under the apparent spell of ignorance, with a subtle body. *Maya* gives rise to *samsara*, or *mithya*, which is also a very important Sanskrit word which means “apparent reality.” It is important to understand that although all objects that make up the world are only apparently real, this does not mean that they do not exist. They do exist, but once you know that they are only apparently real, you do not confuse them with what is real, just like you would not confuse a mirage on the desert floor to be water once you know it is a mirage. It is still there, you can see it, but you know it is not real.

There are natural laws that govern this creation, and although religion has given God a very bad reputation, the fact is there is a field of existence, call it what you like, that is not under any one person’s control. Vedanta calls the Creator *Isvara*, or *Bhagavan*, and even though you as the self are beyond *Isvara*, when *Isvara* is operating *maya*, *Isvara* is omniscient and has all power, whereas the *jiva*, or individual subtle body, has limited knowledge and limited power. The individual subtle body (or *jiva*) is the self under the apparent spell of ignorance. Therefore it is not the *jiva* (Leora) that frees herself, because the *jiva* is an object in awareness. The *jiva* (Leora) is inert, like any other object, and only seems to exist because the light of awareness shines on her. It is the self that apparently frees itself from ignorance and then lives free as a *jiva*, or individual, in the apparent reality. The self is already free and enlightened; it does not need to BE enlightened. Vedanta does not enlighten anyone, it removes ignorance of one’s true nature as the self. What self-realisation means and self-knowledge reveals to Leora is her true nature as the self, so that as the apparent, or reflected self (Leora), she can live free and enjoy (in joy) her life here, while she is in a body. This is why Vedanta encourages a devotional attitude, but not blind faith. You need to conduct your own self-inquiry, which is what you want to do and have already begun. The devotion and gratitude comes when you understand everything to be you.

The *gunas* are what are called the macrocosmic *vasanas*, i.e. they belong to *Isvara*, or the Total, not to Leora. With this knowledge, Leora can do a great deal to manage the *gunas* and aim for peace of mind. Until you know and understand what the *gunas* are, they are in the driver’s seat, driving Leora, so to speak. Leora thinks she is a doer. They will drive her relentlessly until she gains the knowledge of who she is, even if indirectly. They are there whether you like it or not or whether you are aware of them or not. They are not a problem unless you (as Leora) identify with them or if you are unaware of their existence. They come into play and condition the subtle body 24/7. Self-knowledge means you have assimilated the knowledge that you are whole and complete, that the person you seem to be walking around as is no more than a notion in you, awareness. It means that you have negated the doer and rendered the binding *vasanas* non-binding, which means you know that they do not belong to Leora.

Leora’s ignorance of her true nature is called *avidya*, or self-ignorance. When you know who you are, in other words, when *avidya* is removed by self-knowledge, *maya* (macrocosmic ignorance) still obtains and so the *gunas* still operate of course. It is business as usual in the apparent reality. But with self-knowledge, Leora will never be the same again, because ignorance of her true nature will be gone. The *gunas* will still condition the subtle body, the person, until you know that you are not this body-mind (Leora); they will be there but will not touch you, awareness.

The teaching on what the *gunas* are and how to manage them is well-set-out in James' book. It is called *triguna vibhava yoga*. I have also expounded on it in the *satsang* that I have recently posted at the ShiningWorld website. Basically though, what you need to do is undertake a fearless moral inventory and see exactly what your values are and how they underpin Leora's life. Look at lifestyle: nutrition, exercise, work, home environment, what kind of people you attract and associate with, how you relate to everyone and what predominant thoughts/emotions arise, how you manage resources, what you do for entertainment, what gives rise to your likes and dislikes. This is the work.

So, where to start? You have already started! James' books are the best, in my opinion, in that he has truly elucidated these truths in the most accessible way of any Westerner, for the Western mind. I would recommend that you methodically read the books, starting with *Inquiry into Meditation*, it is a little simpler than *How to Attain Enlightenment*. Sign on to the logic and read and reread each chapter carefully, until you understand. Don't skip, they are in the order they are in for a good reason. Go to the website and read the e-*satsangs* that James and I reply to, you will find just about every question you could ask already asked and answered. Go to the publications page, download anything you want, as well as the audio section in the publications, there is tons of stuff available, most of it free or by donation. James is a prodigious writer and has put so much out there, he will be remembered for aeons for his very accessible and understandable contributions to Vedantic writing and thinking. If you have questions, however trivial, write to either me or James, don't hesitate. It takes work and a determination to be free, so keep going, don't give up. What else is there to do?!

Start off by working through what your main motivations are in life. Do you want to be free? How badly do you want it? It is entirely possible because you already are free, you just don't know it. It will take work though because ignorance is very tenacious. You will need to make freedom your main priority. Just keep taking your mind back if it wanders, use the *mantra*, "I am whole and complete, non-dual, actionless, unchanging, unconcerned, ordinary awareness." Write it down, put it where you will see it often. Just keep saying that, even if you have to fake it till you make it! A beautiful Sanskrit *mantra* is, "*Om namah Shivaya om*," means "that which is eternal, unchanging," i.e. the self, consciousness. *Namah Shivaya* means, "I bow, or I prostrate, to Shiva." Shiva which means "that which is always auspicious," i.e. the self, you. "*Aham brahmasmi*," is also a great *mahavakya* (great saying), which means, "I am limitless awareness."

Start a practice of devotion if you do not have one, whether it is meditation, prayer or even just lighting a candle every morning and seeing the light and love that is your true nature living Leora's day for her. See everything as a symbol of the self. Give thanks instead of wanting things to be different. Nothing stays the same, everything changes.

I will tell you my favourite story, the moral of The Fat and the Skinny Frog. One day there was a fat frog and a skinny frog who found a bucket of milk. They knew they shouldn't, but they could not resist and jumped in. They drank and drank and drank. Soon they both got very fat – and they could no longer jump out. The fat frog, who was a useless drama queen, started wailing and whining about how they were sure to die, how unfair it all was, life was over. The skinny frog, who was a cool dude, said, "Just relax, something will happen, it always does, things are always changing in the world. Just keep swimming!" So they swam and swam and the fat frog started wailing again. The skinny frog said, "Just keep swimming, something is bound to

change, something will happen soon!" A third time the fat frog wailed about how tired he was, it was hopeless, and he took a big gulp of milk and drowned. The skinny frog kept swimming and swimming and swimming. He got very tired, but he never gave up swimming. Soon he noticed that the milk was getting thicker and thicker the more he swam - and soon it turned to butter - and he climbed out of the bucket.

The moral of the story: in the world, in life, in *samsara*, things are always changing. Nothing stays the same. Just keep going and stay positive, do what you have to do to face the challenge of whatever is front of you - and you will soon get out of it! SO - make like the skinny frog and don't stress. Your beautiful self is always fine no matter what is happening or not happening. Stay positive and watch those *gunas* as they give rise to your likes and dislikes, your fears and all those pesky thoughts that come with them. Just see them for what they are and they will lose their control. This is managing the *gunas* and your likes and dislikes. It is the most powerful way to purify the mind and prepare it for *moksa*, freedom. If you see it this way, how can you not embrace whatever happens as a gift?

I send you much love and am so happy for you that you want this! Vedanta only comes to those that are ready for it, it just works that way. There is nothing wrong with suffering, it really does deepen the person. But why not step out of it and realise that you are not a person? Why not put an end to the existential suffering with knowledge? The person, who goes by the name of Leora, exists in you, awareness, who has always been, is unborn and undying.

~ *Om* and *prem*, Sundari