

Is There Such a Thing as a Discrete Thinker?

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2014-02-04

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/469>

Gallagher: Hi, Isabella and Jim. In this morning's *Economist* an article about the burgeoning assets of BlackRock investment management:

"The last crisis had many causes. One of them which perhaps lay behind all others was that investors stopped thinking critically about what they were buying. Too many decided to trust credit rating agencies which assured them... that packages of... subprime mortgages were extremely unlikely to default. The enemy of critical thinking is of course 'groupthink' in all its guises which, otherwise, is what drives me barmy about liberal, left wingers. Don't any of them think differently?"

It will never happen because the powers of the various media are too strong but I absolutely ascribe to the point of view that everyone should think critically, think for themselves and think differently.

The insights of Vedanta/Oriental spirituality are, of course, a great aid to this process – as testament to the power of inherent consciousness but out here, One-on-One with the Cosmos, the further it goes the more and more hard-edged it becomes. But it's worth it!...

Good to hear Jim's recovery is all on track.

~ Gallagher

Sundari: Hello, Gallagher. Yes, indeed, "the powers that be" aka *Isvara*, or ignorance, work the way they work and it is pointless to rail against it. The thing to ask about critical thinking is this: "Critical thinking according to who or what?" The problem is that critical thinking per se is not based in knowledge or any particular value, it takes place according to the person's value system, or *vasanas*. For instance, even a murderer or a thief could claim that he or she used critical thinking to justify their nefarious deeds.

Critical thinking is to be encouraged and, indeed, aspired to since it is in such short supply in the world the individual, or *jiva*, lives in. However, "critical thinking" is not to be confused with self-knowledge, or Vedanta. Some of the most famous thinkers throughout the ages have been totally ignorant of who they are and completely identified with the field within which they are – seemingly and unknowingly – identified with. Critical thinking without self-knowledge offers no solutions because it takes place in the field – below the line" – in *maya* where there are no real solutions. Critical thinking does not equal *moksa* and it is no substitute for self-inquiry.

Take Descartes: "I think therefore I am." He never asked himself who is the "I" that knows the thinker and proves its existence. Thinking does not denote existence, existence denotes awareness, which is what makes both thinking and existence possible. Awareness, you, exist whether you think or not; awareness is prior to thought or how would thinking be possible? Although one's experience of life, or the "field" (call it what you will), is determined to a degree by the quality of one's thinking however sublime the thinking may be. Unless you know that you as awareness are the knower of the thinker and the thoughts you are still stuck in the

field – with all its inherent suffering and limitations. The enemy of critical thinking is not “groupthink” – the enemy of the individual and the group is mistaking ignorance for knowledge, *samsara*, the superimposition of duality onto non-duality.

Critical thinking as part of self-inquiry is essential for Vedanta to work. Seen from one angle it is a critical tradition. James’ recent success is probably due more to this factor than any other because it is necessary to know what ignorance is before one can remove it. The point, however, is that James is not critical of other traditions that teach awareness necessarily because what they teach is incorrect; any way you come to the conclusion “All is consciousness; I am consciousness” is Vedanta. However, the tradition of Vedanta is just the most efficient way to understanding this fact – and most importantly, of translating this teaching into the life of the *jiva*. This is because it is a complete teaching and not dependent on the teacher. James says that he is not critical but when he (or those of us he has taught to teach) assumes the role of Vedanta teacher criticism of “erroneous notions” is an essential part of the methodology.

So-called “spiritual” people are for the most part religious people who think they are superior insofar as the impulse to know the truth is the same in both the traditionally religious and the “alternative” spiritual seeker. But spiritual seekers are just as superstitious as primitive religious types so before we can actually teach them we need to clear the decks by pointing out the fallacies inherent in their views about *moksa*. For this traditional Vedanta endures charges of elitism, lack of compassion and “duality,” the idea being that if it is all one then one way is as good as the other. But one way is not as good as the other. This is a peculiar notion that has found favour with the rise of democracy. Some ways are better than others and there is always a “best” way, assuming qualifications. By “best” I mean a method that does what it purports to do in a timely fashion.

Fortunately, we do not have to criticize specific “paths,” only the core logic behind them.

As far as dispassion (*viragya*) and critical thinking are concerned there is a connection but they are not the same. *Viragya* is indifference to the results of one’s actions based on knowledge of the nature of reality. Its companion concept, discrimination (*viveka*), is closer to critical thinking but not the same. It is simply discriminating what is real from what is apparently real. If you have *viveka* you will have *viragya*. The platform from which we discriminate is not ego-determined, however. An individual can set up his or her own parameters and think critically within those parameters whereas for *moksa* the knowledge you use to think critically is totally impersonal. It is object-oriented, the object being *moksa*, not subject-oriented, or ego-oriented.

Self-knowledge is always true because it is true to the self, meaning it cannot be dismissed or negated by any other knowledge. It is different from knowledge of objects. It is not knowledge unless it is true to the object. If it is “my” knowledge then it is my interpretation of an object, which is not necessarily knowledge. Ignorance (or my point of view) causes me to see or experience objects as though they are actually there. People believe that ignorance is knowledge because they believe that what they experience is knowledge. It may be knowledge but it may not be.

Moksa by its very nature means freedom from the individual, not freedom for the individual. Perhaps the biggest erroneous notion is the belief that the individual is

going to get this wonderful thing called freedom. But it is not like that. By accepting yourself as an individual – setting yourself up as the authority as an individual, or ego – you accept dependence on *samsara*. *Moksa* is the knowledge “I am awareness and not the individual that I have been led to believe I am.” Awareness is the only thing free of *samsara*.

Of course, the other point to take into consideration is that there is a discrete thinker. Although it appears that I think and awareness makes it possible for me to do so, what is really governing “my” thinking? Unless the mind is subjected to self-knowledge it will think according to its conditioning, and that conditioning is generated by the *gunas*, which govern the *vasanas*. So who is it that is thinking, critically or not? It is *Isvara*. If there is no such thing as a doer then there is no such thing as a discrete thinker. The mind being inert is an object known to me, awareness, and as such incapable of thinking. As self-knowledge removes the ignorance that keeps the mind extroverted and in denial, then thinking becomes purified and crystal-clear but it is still not the ego “doing” the thinking. It is awareness no longer under the spell of ignorance apparently thinking through the purified mind.

Once you know who you are you cannot argue with or defend the position of the ignorant any longer. Before self-knowledge is firm one has to take a stand in awareness as awareness, which requires negating all thoughts to the contrary with great dedication and diligence. Once self-knowledge is firm knowledge, like ignorance, is an object known to you and you are free of both. Nothing is hidden, nothing is unknown, nothing is beyond understanding – because it is all you and arises from you, awareness. You are the essence of everything and that upon which the essence of everything depends. You are free of bondage to objects – and so are free to enjoy objects for what they are without expecting them to deliver something that they are incapable of delivering – happiness – because you are already it. Nothing takes this away; there is no more fine print.

The inescapable truth is unless you gain non-dual vision, which is the perspective of awareness or consciousness, no amount of critical thinking is going to set you free of ignorance. This is because unless the mind is qualified and exposed to self-knowledge, guided by a qualified teacher (such as James), the conditioning that is inherent in the mind will interpret Vedanta (and everything else) according to its conditioning. Thus there are many self-satisfied brilliant minds who think they are so clever but actually they are bound by ignorance as much (if not more) than anyone else in *samsara* is bound.

If you understand that the subject matter of self-knowledge or Vedanta is you – then you would know that Vedanta does not offer “insights” into “your” life. Awareness is the very foundation of life itself – and life is dependent on it, not the other way around. You cannot try to make Vedanta fit into your life, firstly because your life does not belong to you and secondly because the effect cannot know the cause. “Your” life is an object known to you, awareness. Self-knowledge, or Vedanta, is the knowledge that underpins all knowledge; it is the irrefutable logic of your own unexamined experience. Vedanta is the only means of knowledge at our disposal to actualise freedom from ignorance. Unless you dump everything you think you know and ignore what everyone else thinks they know (unless they know that their true nature is unlimited awareness) you will be an ego trying to experience awareness instead of realizing that you are awareness apparently experiencing an ego.

This is why I said to you that it is pointless to argue with James or with Vedanta –

they are one and the same. You would be arguing with yourself, and James does not take part in pointless exercises.

So as you say, "One-on-One with the Cosmos, the further it goes, the more and more hard-edged it becomes..." is true if you take yourself to be Gallagher. There is no end to ignorance and therefore the "cosmos" seems to be infinite and very "hard-edged" indeed. If you realise that you are not Gallagher and that the cosmos arises from and has a dependent existence on you, awareness, then how can there be any edges? Space and time do not apply to you as you are unlimited, you are unborn, you never die and have no boundaries.

Ignorance only ends for the *jiva* - or the self the spell of ignorance - when self-knowledge removes it. Critical thinking is good in that one needs to question everything, in fact the ability to doubt and reason (*manas*) is built into the nature of the mind for the very simple reason that reality is not what it appears to be. Doubting is essential and it is a function given to us by *Ishvara*, by awareness, when *maya* is operating so that the spell of ignorance can be broken. But unless the critical mind is guided in its thinking it is not able to free itself. Ignorance is hardwired, too powerful and too seductive.

Wanting things to be different from the way they are is pointless and a sure recipe for suffering. Enlightened or not, *Ishvara*, or the *dharma* field, operates as it always does, for the good of the whole, as hard as that is to understand at times. Without understanding *Ishvara* and the identity the *jiva* and *Ishvara* share *samsara* is pretty cruel, seen from the perspective of the self under the spell of ignorance, or the *jiva*. None of it makes sense; so much suffering, so many unanswerable questions, so many hard edges. But *samsara* is not real - it is just a dream. It is a mirage on the desert floor.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari