

Satya, Mithya and Other Words

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This is an explanation by Sundari to a person who confused what is real with what is apparently real.

Sundari: Mind is not the knower, awareness is the knower of the mind. You are confusing *satya* and *mithya*, the real with the apparently real or the experiencing witness with the non-experiencing witness. Other words, the seer and the seen, *nirguna brahman* and *saguna brahman*, the “opaque” and the “transparent witness.”

When I say that mind is not the knower, I mean that it knows because it perceives. Perception is experience. Perception is one, but two in the sense that it is brought about by *maya* and has two parts: experience and knowledge. There is the raw experience of an object and simultaneous knowledge of the object.

You can't separate the knowledge from the experience in fact but you can be unaware of the distinction. The self, *satya*, knows without perception because, in the absence of *maya*, there is nothing for it to perceive. It has no senses and mind to gain experience and knowledge without the operation of *maya*. So in this case it is only a knower, a self-knower.

The opaque witness is the *jiva* with qualities (mind, seen, *mithya*) looking at awareness through its conditioning (*vasanas*). The transparent witness is pure awareness with no qualities conditioning it. It is the witness of the opaque witness. The opaque witness witnesses sense objects, thoughts and feelings. It is the experiencing witness, the person you think you are.

The adjective “opaque,” which was coined by Greg Goode, has limited usefulness. It is useful in the sense that in common parlance it contrasts with transparent. We need to make a distinction between the two witnesses. It is not a completely satisfactory word, however, because it implies darkness. Opaque is something that does not allow light to pass or perhaps only a very little light. The opaque witness, the subtle body, however, is quite opaque when *tamas* is operating on it but it is incredibly luminous when *sattva* is operating on it. So we need other words to get an accurate understanding of the two witnesses and their relationship to each other. What is their relationship? They are one but they are two.

“The witness really means the light that illumines the seer, seen and the process of seeing.” ~ Bhagavan Ramana Maharshi.

Bhagavan: “‘Witness’ is applicable when there is an object to be seen. Then it is duality. The truth lies beyond both. In the *mantra*, “*sakshi cheta kevalo nirgunascha*,” the word *sakshi* [witness] must be understood as *sannidhi* [presence], without which there could be nothing. See how the sun is necessary for daily activities. He does not, however, form part of the world actions; yet they cannot take place without the sun. He is the witness of the activities. So it is with the self.

“Talking of the ‘witness’ should not lead to the idea that there is a witness and something else apart from him that he is witnessing. The ‘witness’ really means

the light that illumines the seer, the seen and the process of seeing. Before, during and after the triads of seer, seen and seeing, the illumination exists. It alone exists always.”

In the second paragraph above Ramana says the non-experiencing witness (which he calls the witness) witnesses the seer, seen and the process of seeing. The seer in this statement means the opaque witness, the *jiva*, the individual. The *jiva* is the non-experiencing witness plus the subtle body.

Swami Dayananda says in his commentaries on *Vivekachudamani*: “*Atma* is already self-evident and it is *alupta-drk*, a seer that never ceases; it never even winks. It is always a witness. But it is a witness only with reference to whatever is seen. By itself it sees only pure consciousness. This self-evident *atma* is *brahman*; that is the teaching.”

When Dayananda speaks of the witness that never winks he is referring to the transparent witness, the non-experiencing witness. The experiencing *jiva* witness “blinks,” i.e. its consciousness is conditioned by the *gunas* which cause it to change. Sometimes it is conscious and sometimes not.

The non-experiencing witness is also known as *nirguna brahman* and the experiencing witness is called *saguna brahman*. “*Brahman*” means awareness. “*Nirguna*” means without qualities, therefore “transparent.” “*Saguna*” means with qualities, therefore “opaque.” “Qualities” means the three energies/qualities that make up the whole of the manifest world: *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*.

This *nirguna brahman* is the self of everything. It never began or nor does it ever cease to exist. It is the all-seeing eye or “I” that sees only itself because there are no objects for it to see. It is self-effulgent and there is nothing but itself.

One aspect of *nirguna brahman* is *sattva*, consciousness in the form of a pure, clear, still “vibration” that makes knowledge possible. When the mind comes under the influence of *sattva*, the experiencing witness seems to be clear and this clarity, or purity, is what people see as holiness.

When the self is realized to be one’s self, both of these terms are no longer useful because they are dualistic – one implies the other.

It would be more appropriate to say that when *maya* is operating, the self, which sees only itself, knows the seer and the seen, as Ramana says above. The self-aware self appears as a seer but it never actually is a seer, unless seeing refers to its seeing (knowing) its own self. When ignorance is operating the *jiva* thinks that the seer is different from the seen: the subject and object are different. *Saguna brahman*, the seer, is also known as *Isvara*, the ruler, because it operates *maya* (the *gunas*) and is never deluded by them, i.e. it is pure *sattva*.

When *tamas* and *rajas* arise in *saguna brahman* awareness apparently becomes a *jiva* and is deluded by *maya*. *Sattva* seems to be clear and pure – only with reference to the objects appearing in it, which are impure. *Isvara* is the wielder of *maya* but is never deluded by *maya*. Purity and holiness are projected by the *jiva* when it is under the spell of *sattva*. As your experience confirms if you work out the logic, awareness is without parts; being part-less, purity and impurity are dualisms. Yes, they are experienced and continue (because the *jiva* never leaves *maya*) even though purity and impurity are not real.

When *avidya* is removed and your nature is known to be non-dual, duality (*maya*) is no longer an issue even though it still exists, apparently.

Ask yourself who knows purity and impurity. Who knows the witness? Who is aware that I am witnessing (or not witnessing)? You. Awareness. Who knows all the states of existence, bodies, or *koshas*? You. Awareness.