

Love, Self-Esteem, Self-Knowledge and Vedanta

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Love Is Awareness Directed to an Object: An Essay Inspired by the Teachings of Swami Dayananda

Everyone wants to be loved, but an emotionally needy person does not know why. He or she accepts the commands of the longing and lonely self, and sets out to seek the approval and appreciation of others. This is why we value others' opinions, get upset when they criticize us, argue, ignore or gossip about us behind our backs.

We are emotionally needy because we are not valuable in our own eyes. We are not valuable because we do not know who we actually are. Emotions are part and parcel of the of the universal psychological order and are invariably the basic content of an individual's life. Emotions motivate us to accomplish things. At the same time they may easily overwhelm our mind and subject us to a sense of confusion, failure and depression. When emotions rule, life is complicated and we are susceptible to feelings of unworthiness and despair.

As children we have no choice but to trust our parents. Failure to trust would compromise our survival. Trust implies trustworthiness. But parents are not infallible; they are subject to every human limitation and easily make mistakes. Because a child's knowledge is limited, it feels incapable and inadequate. It is the duty of parents to ameliorate this sense of smallness and inadequacy. They should shower the child with love and affection, making it feel that it is as good as they are, that it is capable of meeting challenges happily.

But if parents do not receive a sense of confidence from their parents or if they lose it because they are unable to accomplish their goals, they cannot instill it in their offspring. If they feel small and helpless in the face of the oceanic complexity and rapid pace of modern society – as they often do – they may need to make themselves feel big by putting the child down. Although they think they love the child and verbally affirm their love, parents with low self-esteem end up reinforcing the child's innate sense of inadequacy with criticisms, complaints and unreasonable expectations.

Even reasonably healthy parents are often stressed by the enormity of the task of childrearing. No other creature takes as long to wean as a human. Some never individuate and remain firmly tethered long after the parents are physically dead and gone. Today, when childrearing is so expensive, the parents are often too busy taking care of the family's physical needs – and/or too immature emotionally – to see that the child is self-accepting and self-confident.

Awareness, your true self, shines on your mind and you think. It shines on your heart and you feel. No choice is involved. If you were in control of your emotions you would know what you were going to feel at a particular time and you would carefully select the emotion appropriate to the situation. But that is not how it is. The emotion is in you, it is triggered by some event and out it comes. You may not necessarily be aware of what you are feeling, but you always feel something. Life is love and love is just awareness directed to an object. When awareness illumines the heart, it transforms into the emotion that is arising there at the time. If the heart is pure,

awareness shines as unconditional devotion, and compassion flows into the world. If the heart is disturbed, love becomes anger or jealousy. A depressed mind morphs pure love into sadness and self-pity. And when self-ignorance covers the mind, self-esteem, feeling good or bad about one's self, is our number-one issue.

Symptoms of Low Self-Esteem, a Painful Analysis: Loneliness, Excessive Activity

When I lack self-love, it is painful to be alone. Moments of silence are uncomfortable. So I develop a lifestyle that keeps me continually on the go. I need distractions. I come home tired at the end of the day, but I do not sit on the sofa by the window with a cup of tea and happily think my thoughts. It is dangerous to be alone because I am faced with a sense of worthlessness and failure. To deal with it I get on the internet, play distracting music, watch TV, read a romance novel, even – heaven forbid! – clean the flat to keep myself busy. I drown myself in duties. I concoct hopelessly long “to do” lists. When I tick off one item from the top, two more appear at the bottom. I can never rest. Every day is spoken for by trivial activities too numerous to mention, but that is the point; I do not want to face myself.

Can't Receive Love

If I do not love myself properly, it is difficult to receive love from others even if it is lavished on me. I need the capacity to accept love. I simply cannot believe someone else sees me as a beautiful person. I think he or she is lying, deluded or smitten by too many hormones. I do not realize that love is blind to my faults. It sees the whole me and does not criticize. It does not expect me to be other than what I am. It sympathizes, empathizes and identifies. It is not personal at all. Would that I could see myself in this way.

Comparison

When you do not esteem yourself properly, it is not a problem if you are the only person alive. With whom will you compare yourself? But if there are others who are kinder, smarter, richer, more evolved or in any way different, you may develop a complex. You may become jealous, envious, resentful and angry. The inverse of this complex, arrogance, also reveals a lack of self-esteem. An inflated person feels much bigger than he should by continual comparison with those who have less of what he values. He might think he is very generous because he put a dollar in the collection plate when the worshipper sitting next to him contributed a quarter. But whether you have an inflated or a deflated notion of yourself, you are never happy, because your sense of self-worth depends on what others think, what you imagine them to be or what they have that you lack. And since your situation and the situations of others are always changing, you continually have to adjust your self-image. It is not fun.

Because reality is non-dual awareness, there is only one conscious being shining out from behind the senses and the mind, even though it seems as if I am only one among many. Were this fact known it would destroy the basis for comparison and the ever-present possibility of unflattering self-judgments.

Manipulation and Control

When you see yourself as separate from everything you can easily become a controlling person. You do not believe that the world will take care of you, even though you have survived, perhaps thrived, in it for many years. There seems to be good reason to distrust: the world is in a state of constant flux and what will happen is not known. You act, but you do not know what the result of your actions will bring.

Parental love is often largely about control. Parents bring us into life and they know how long they are going to have to look out for us and how difficult it is, so they need us to do what they want to facilitate their task. If they are unfulfilled in love, they push us into careers or activities that will give them the validation they are unable to give themselves. They will ask us what we want to be when we grow up. It is a natural question, considering their desire to help us stand on two feet, but it is entirely possible to misinterpret their words. It is possible to assume that what they mean is that we are not okay now, that who we are is not good enough. Thus we may pick up a complex that can follow us through life like a needy little dog.

If parents do not esteem themselves, the child may easily become an extension of their inadequacies. They want it to succeed where they failed, bring glory on an otherwise unrecognized family. And because we model our parents, when we are ready for our own love relationships, we see love as control, getting our beloved to do the things we want, making sure that he or she is paying attention to us all the time. We need the attention of others because we are not paying attention to ourselves. This kind of insecurity leads to jealousy, envy, anger and even hatred – if the object of our affections does not get with our program.

Judgment and Criticism

If you are a controlling person, you continually judge and criticize others. You think your value system is superior to theirs: you are more pure and just and honest and compassionate than they are. You are vegetarian and they eat meat. You work hard and they live on the dole. You are right and they are wrong. You can judge them because you think you are better than they are. You get angry when they misbehave according to your lights. These projections are just distractions; they keep you from facing your own sense of inadequacy, your failure to love yourself. And although you are very adept at judging and criticizing others, you have a very thin skin: you cannot stand to be criticized and judged because it reminds you of your own unflattering self-opinion.

Unfair Self-Criticism, Idealism

A person who loves himself has an objective view of himself. He knows his good and bad points. But if you do not love yourself you will become unfairly self-critical. Self-criticism usually means that you believe you have to live up some ideal, that if you were truly enlightened you would be a very different person. It may be that enlightenment has a saintly effect on some personalities, but you will never be enlightened until you esteem yourself enough to accept what you actually are in this life – warts and all.

One obvious sign of this kind of control is the desire to have the person you love be different from what he or she is. You thought he or she was wonderful enough when you fell in love, but when the bloom came off the rose you suddenly discovered that your beloved “changed.” He or she did not change. The rose-colored specs just fell

off and you started to see what is.

We are not self-created. Life lives us. At the behest of a mysterious force we grow out life's matrix like weeds in a field. Things happen and unconscious tendencies cause us to respond and these responses become our character. If conditioning turned you into a critical, controlling, judgmental person, you should not blame yourself and add another problem to the mix. You innocently appeared here one fine day and life made of you what it would. If self-esteem was not modeled by your parents or your teachers, if they were critical and controlling, how would you know how to properly esteem yourself?

Dithering

When self-critical thinking born of lack of self-knowledge becomes deeply entrenched, you may become prone to endless dithering for fear of making the "wrong" decision, one that will result in suffering. Even the most insignificant choices may seem gargantuan to you. "Should I paint my room beige or brown? Should I cut my hair short or let it grow?" In a state of high anxiety you phone your friends - "What should I do? I need to know!" You visit the astrologer, the Tarot reader, the psychic down the block. Maybe the stars know what is going to happen. You do not want to make a mistake.

Emotional Neediness

You may become so love-starved that you become an expert at small talk. You may go up to complete strangers on the street asking for directions, making comments about their dress or their pets - "What kind of dog is that?" - offering bits of homespun wisdom. You think you are contacting them because you just want to know something or have something very important for them to know, but actually you are giving them love so that they will pay attention to you - which counts for love in your book. In this way you make friends everywhere. Each time you can get them to engage, you feel that you are a good person. "Somebody loves me!" It is not terribly difficult to get love this way because everyone loves to be loved. At the end of the day, you have a lot of pleasant experiences to contemplate, all of which tell you that you are okay.

At the same time, however, digging love out of people is hard work. And sometimes you do not get the validation you seek. They rudely blow you off or politely listen to you run on, thinking their own thoughts. The constant contact wears you out. It would be much easier to stay home and just love yourself, but you do not know how. Life is not here to validate us. We should not be bothered by its little pinpricks. Life is here for the sake of love, not the other way around. I validate life because I am love.

The point of this tale of emotional tragedy and woe is that you cannot afford to be ignorant of what love is if you want to be happy. And this means that you cannot afford not to know who you are - because your nature is love. When we say that you are awareness, it means that you are love. Love is the attention you pay to yourself and others, the energy you put into everything around you.

Everything I Do Is for Self-Love

If you look at the structure of the psyche of any human being – its *dharma* – you will find that it has four parts. There is the rational, cognitive function (the intellect), the self-image (the ego), the emotional body (the heart) and the unconscious, one's tendencies born of conditioning. It is always best to act from the intellect, with hard and fast knowledge. Sometimes situations are very complex and require a lot of actions to be done in a particular way. Knowledge is power, it helps you get what you want. And at the end of the day, you want what you want because you want to feel good about yourself. You want to be a success. If you are successful you believe you will be able to love yourself. And conversely, if you are unsuccessful it confirms your belief that you are an inadequate person, a failure. So whatever you do is for self-love.

It is very important to understand this. You never do what you do for the ostensible reason. You do it for the feeling of self-love it brings. The anxiety that separates you from the ocean of love that is your nature disappears when you get what you want and love floods your quiet mind, and you are pleased with yourself. At the same time it never occurs to you to define success as self-love. If you love yourself, you are free to do anything – but you need do nothing to be happy.

At the same time that you have an intellect, you also have desires. Desire is awareness after it passes through ignorance. If you know who you are, you know that you need not dig love out of every situation. You are content and you do not stress yourself looking for love – because you see that you are whole and complete by nature. You need not do anything to make yourself feel this way.

If self-ignorance is very deep, you will have many strong desires. And strong desires means that you will have strong emotions, particularly negative emotions. You will have negative emotions because life basically does not care what you want. It does not know that you feel inadequate and incomplete. It delivers your experiences on the basis of the needs of the total. It sees everything equally and does not play favorites. It values the microbes in your gut as much as it values you. So very often it delivers results that you do not want, and you become emotional. The frequency, degree and duration of your emotion is inversely proportional to your sense of self-love. The less you love yourself, the more intense, frequent and long-lasting will be your emotional episodes.

Overly Sensitive Memory

This is another force operating in the psyche. It can be a blessing or a curse. It is a blessing because if you are essentially a rational cognitive person, you can carefully gather and evaluate knowledge and thus increase the likelihood that you will get what you want. But if you are driven by your emotions, it may be a curse because you can remember all the disappointments you suffered in life. Even at sixty you can recall a slight that your best friend gave you in grammar school or a rejection that a love interest delivered when you requested a date in high school. You collect these disappointments and inadvertently allow them to become a reservoir of dissatisfaction that is so painful you may sink into a depressing funk and blame yourself, if you are an introvert. If you are an extrovert, you will project it just to get it off your chest. And when you do, you will actually believe that something outside is responsible for your bad feelings.

This usually pollutes your relationship with others. If you are a refined person, you will do your best not to show your displeasure when others do not behave the way

you need them to behave or when they exhibit a character trait of which you do not approve. But you cannot hide from yourself. Because you know better, your dislikes make you feel guilty.

Guilt

There is invariably a connection between guilt and low self-esteem. In reality, all “others” are just thoughts in your mind, so when you dislike someone you are just disliking your own mind. And since your mind is you, you are really disliking yourself, but you cannot see it. You think “they” are responsible. This is meant to justify your anger, make it respectable. It may even garner some sympathy: everyone loves a victim. It is a very unpleasant cycle. You can only get out of it by understanding how it works and why. When you see the underlying reason – lack of self-love – you can begin to correct it.

How to Develop Self-Confidence

It is actually not difficult to develop self-confidence. First, pay attention to yourself. Second, do the things that you know are right for you. There is a small voice inside that has your best interests at heart, a voice that is accustomed to being ignored. Listen to it. Give love to yourself by simply refusing to abuse your body and emotions with endless rounds of doings. You may be so conditioned to feeling bad that you actually feel bad when you do the right thing – which is to recreate, waste a bit of time doing nothing – or to do exactly what you want, not what your neurotic mind says you are “supposed to” do.

Once you have treated yourself to the luxury of time and quit taking the “shoulds” and “supposed tos” seriously, your sense of self-acceptance will grow. You may argue that you cannot accept yourself if you are not what you think you should be. Of course your thinking is the problem, but it will not change overnight just because you want it to change it. In the first place, you actually believe that how you feel about yourself is true to who you are: “I feel bad about myself because I am bad. If I was good, I would feel good.” There is no actual evidence that this is true, but it feels true and I believe that what I feel is real, so I accept it.

Do I Love You or Do I Love the Way You Make Me Feel?

The first thing I need to sort out when I start to get a handle on my problem is: What do I actually love when I love somebody or something? I always love something. I have no choice about it. I direct awareness – love – through my ego to various objects. I love my cat, my house, my mom and pop. But do I love the object for its own sake or do I love the way the object makes me feel? I love the way the object makes me feel. If the object makes me feel bad, I will not love it. I follow the rule of love: I chase objects that make me feel good and I run from objects that make me feel bad. As soon as my significant other stops delivering happiness and delivers unhappiness, I quit loving. Yes, in the best of all possible worlds it would not be that way. But this is not the best of all possible worlds.

This is reality and reality is not an ideal. In the best of all possible worlds I would continue to love the object when it made me miserable, but I do not. I get rid of the offending object and look for one that makes me feel good.

People are rational. They are in it for themselves. Even if you protest and say that you love everyone, no matter how they make you feel, you only do so because it pleases you to do so. If it did not please you to love this way, you would not do it. Conditional and unconditional love are for one's own self, not that there is actually another self. Even when you think you love someone else, it is actually the self in them that you love. The self is the only love object because there is only one self and its nature is love. You really only love love – which is to say yourself.

It is a pity that we cannot just instantly become something other than what we are. So there has to be another step before we can accept ourselves: self-understanding. Self-understanding means that when I think clearly about the unacceptable person that I think I am, I realize that I got to be this way through no fault of my own. I took everything I was told on good faith and assumed it was true and correct. I did not try to deceive myself. I came to every conclusion about myself and the world honestly, using the information I was given at the time. Even if I misinterpreted the information I received, I did not consciously misinterpret it. I did not have sufficient knowledge to interpret correctly at the time. My intentions were good also. I did not set out to make myself feel bad about myself. I really thought that I was doing the best thing for myself. So I cannot be to blame for this situation. Love comes when there is an understanding that things cannot be other than what they are.

Therefore if lack of self-love is the cause of my low self-esteem, and lack of self-love is caused by faulty self-knowledge, it stands to reason that I need self-knowledge. This is why Vedanta is very useful.

Who Am I?

When I look at my experience objectively, I see that sometimes I am pleased with my self and sometimes I am displeased with my self. One day I say, "I am happy."

The next day I say, "I am sad." Does this mean that there are two selves, one pleased and one displeased? If there are two, which one am I? I cannot be real if I am one thing one day and another one the next. Two contradictory things cannot coexist. There is no such thing as cold fire or dry water. Fire is always hot and water is always wet. If this is so, how can the self be both happy and sad? Why do I feel agitated most of the time and only occasionally feel peaceful? Is it possible that the happy self is what I am and the unhappy self only appears when I do not know who I am?

Before we talk more about which self we are, it is useful to look at a few notions about happiness and see if they correspond with common sense and reason. The first notion is that happiness happens when you fulfill a desire. It is the feeling that comes between fulfillment of a desire and the advent of the next desire. It is true that I am happy when I get what I want, but what kind of happiness is it if it goes away when the next want comes up? So this kind of happiness is not particularly useful insofar as the interval between desires is usually very short, sometimes seconds. It is also not true because sometimes you get what you want and it causes pain. You can also be happy without fulfilling a desire. You hear a good joke and you are instantly happy even though you wanted nothing and nothing objective changed in your life to make you happier.

The next notion that needs inquiry is the idea that happiness resides in certain objects. We know that this is not true also, because the same object can make one

person happy and another unhappy. If happiness is intrinsic to an object, the same object would make everyone happy.

And it is clear that happiness is not an object either. There are many gross and subtle objects in the creation, but not one that can be called happiness. It is not an attribute of an object either; you can have a big or small house, but you can never find happiness sticking to your house – or any other object.

Is there a particular time when you are happy? No, you can be happy anytime. Is there a particular place where happiness resides? No, a bar can make an alcoholic happy and a teetotaler miserable. Is it within? Before you determine that, you need to determine your reference points; within what? Within your heart? You can grind a heart to bits and not find one unit of happiness. Is it in the mind? If that is true, there is no mind when you are sad, but we know very well that the mind thinks like crazy when it is sad.

If I look at the way I behave toward myself when I am happy and when I am sad, it will reveal which self is the real me. Unhappiness is not acceptable to me. As soon as something agitates me, I set out to rid myself of it. I do this because I love myself only when I am happy.

Additionally, when I am happy I do not try to make myself unhappy. I cling to my happiness tooth and nail. This shows that happiness is natural to me and that unhappiness is unnatural. Natural means that it is my nature. It is something I cannot change. If fire tries to be cold, it is ignorant. If I try to be unhappy when I am happy, I cannot do it. I may become unhappy when I am happy, but this is not because I want to be unhappy or because I suddenly became another self. It is because ignorance of my nature suddenly started operating. If happiness is my nature and ignorance of my nature is responsible for unhappiness, it stands to reason that I would want to get rid of my ignorance. If I can see that self-ignorance is my problem, there is hope. This is where Vedanta is useful.

It is generally true that I am unhappy more than I am happy. There are moments of happiness, no doubt, but they are the exception, not the rule. This is why I conclude that I am basically an unhappy person. This is why I do not feel good about myself and why I pursue happiness in objects, activities and relationships. When I say that I am an unhappy person it does not necessarily mean that I am a completely dysfunctional person, ranting and raving day in and day out. It does not mean that I sit for months in a dark room in a depressing funk, although anger and depression are both symptoms of unhappiness. It means that I always want something. It means that I am dissatisfied. Look back over your life and see if you can find an extended period – more than a few minutes or hours maybe – when you did not want something. If you were happy, you would not want anything, the reason being that when you see yourself as the whole and complete being you are – which translates as the experience of happiness – you do not want anything. The only whole and complete thing there is, not that it is a “thing,” is your self.

At this point it is probably wise to abandon the “happiness” word because it has certain experiential connotations that make it difficult to understand the nature of the self. It makes it seem as if the self is an experience when in fact it is free of all experiences – including happiness and unhappiness. So we will formulate the issue differently, although in the end it more or less amounts to the same thing. We will say that happiness is freedom from dependence on objects, freedom from want and fear, freedom from the need to become something other than what you are, freedom

from limitation. This sense of freedom is only possible when you are full. It is not possible if you are incomplete. And it so happens that there is only one self and it is whole and complete. And it is you.

Perspective

What if my experience of myself as small and limited is not actually true? What if I experience myself as a wanting, needy creature adrift in a tyrannical, uncertain world does not correspond to the true nature of my experience but is the result of my point of view?

Experience does not always produce true knowledge. For example, standing on the equator I might conclude that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. But if I am standing on the North Pole at a certain time of year, I would conclude that the sun goes around in a circle. And if I was sitting on the sun, the sun would not seem to be going around anything. I would conclude that the sun is stationary and its solar system is moving – until I had a look from beyond the galaxies, in which case the sun and its solar system would be moving together away from everything else because it is just a tiny fly speck in an ocean of galaxies that are speeding from some catastrophic event that happened trillions of years ago, the “Big Bang.”

A Rolex watch is a marvel of engineering, made of hundreds of tiny parts. If one part is sitting on a table all alone, it means nothing to me. I may not even recognize it as a watch part. But when I see it in its proper place in relationship to all the other parts that constitute the watch, it definitely makes sense. It is no longer isolated and alone. It happily performs a useful function. If you think that you are small, incomplete, inadequate, limited and separate, it means that you are not looking at yourself from the right point of view. What if you are actually the whole? If you are the whole, your sense of smallness – which is the basis of your sense of low self-esteem and inadequacy in the face of what seems to be a mysterious gargantuan existence – no longer obtains. If you find yourself incredulous when you hear that you are the whole, do not stop reading. Have a little faith until Vedanta can prove to you – based on your own unassimilated experience – that you are the whole.

Experience and Knowledge

It is possible to experience something and not know what the experience means. If there is something that includes everything, we can call it “the whole.” If there is such a thing as the whole, does it include or exclude you? It cannot exclude you or it would not be the whole. When you experience happiness, you experience the whole. When you have touched your partner in love, you are happy. You do not feel limited or separate or incomplete, because you are not separate from the whole. When your home team wins the World Series, your sense of limitation dissolves because you are in touch with the whole. “In touch” is not the right term, because it conveys a sense of duality. It is more accurate to say that in those moments, you recognize yourself as whole. You do not disappear; the small incomplete you that you imagine yourself to be disappears into the limitless whole you. Nobody lacks the experience of completeness, limitlessness, wholeness, because everyone has been happy at some time. Is the total into which you dissolve you or is it something else? Is there a total without you? Is there an individual without you?

When you are too unhappy, you cannot think clearly. You may be completely dull,

your mind covered with the dense clouds of sloth and inadvertence. Or you may be so distracted by an agitated mind that you cannot keep more than one or two thoughts in your mind for more than one or two seconds. If this is the case, Vedanta is not for you. As you will notice, there is a logical progression to this teaching. It starts at A and ends at Z. Only when the whole teaching is understood do the individual parts make sense. Vedanta is a set-up. It poses certain fundamental questions and helps you discover the answers in yourself. So it is important to sign on to the arguments at each stage. If you fail to understand the teaching at stage two, for example, you will not be able to understand stage three. It is a complete teaching because reality is a whole. There is a cosmology, a psychology, a "theology" and teachings on the nature of pure consciousness. It discusses action and its results, *yoga* and its results, the means of knowledge and the practice of knowledge. It shows how reality is structured, how each aspect dovetails into each other aspect. It starts at the beginning and leads you right through to the end. It leaves no stone unturned and answers all questions.

A Quick Summary

So far this is the logic: we do not feel good about ourselves because we do not esteem – read: love – ourselves properly. We discussed the psychology of low self-esteem above. Then we said that our lack of self-esteem was caused by our ignorance of the nature of the self. If the self is known for what it is, it is impossible not to esteem it. This led to the idea that we need to investigate the self to discover its nature. Our investigation led to the conclusion that the nature of the self is happiness, which we defined as freedom from limitation. Then we introduced the notion that you are not a part of the whole, you are the whole. Finally, we showed how the knowledge that we gain from experience can be very misleading and suggested that the idea that "I am a small, wanting creature" does not jibe with the idea that "I am the whole." The logic continues.

To say that "I am the whole" is to say that "I am consciousness" because consciousness is all there is. When you say "I" without understanding the nature of the "I," you think it is limited. Yes, if the "I" is the body, you are limited. You end where your skin touches the world. If the "I" is your feelings and thoughts, you are definitely limited because all subjective phenomena begin and end rather quickly. But the "I" is not limited. First of all, this means there is only one "I." Of course this is not how we see it. We think there are a lot of different "I"s. But when you analyze it, experience shows that in this world there are only two things: me, the subject, and a variety of objects. The subject is consciousness and everything else is an object. If it is the same for everybody, is there any difference between the "I"s? The objects are obviously different, but what about the "I"?

You, consciousness, see the body. It is an object to you. Even if you close your eyes, you know your body. If a bug bites you when your eyes are closed, you know it. In this case your skin is your means of knowledge; it transmits information. Even when all of your senses are shut down and no objects are appearing, as is the case in deep sleep, you are conscious of yourself. You are not conscious of the person you think you are in the waking state, because that "person" is not real. If it was real it would be there in the deep sleep state – but it is not there. In the absence of that person and the objects of the world, you just experience yourself and it feels very good. If you are not there you cannot experience anything, because you can only experience something if you exist. Experience requires a subject and an object. In deep sleep you are the subject and you are the object.

If there is an object, it only exists for you because it is known by you. You cannot say that it exists unless it is known to exist. Your means of knowledge – the eyes, for example – objectify whatever is in front of them. In this way objects are known. The eyes are the subject and whatever is in front of them is the object. When you say, “I see X,” you are taking the standpoint of your eyes, your means of knowledge. This is fine as far as it goes, but it does not go very far, because the eyes are not conscious. Remove the eyes from the body and they see nothing. They are just material instruments. They only work because consciousness is behind them. Consciousness is looking out at the objects through the eyes. So to say that “I am seeing” can only mean that consciousness, not the eyes, is seeing. Even the statement “I am blind” is not true, because blindness is known to me. It is an object, and I am the subject, consciousness.

If you wish to argue that the eyes are just a part of the body and that the body is the seer, we need to point out that the body has the same order of reality as the eyes. It is just matter. It cannot experience anything. Of course you will object because this is not how it seems to you. It seems as if you are the body and everything else is an object. But if you think about it, you can only conclude that the body, like the eyes, is a known object. It is there because you have the means to see it. Without your means of knowledge, you will not see it.

So what is the means of knowledge for your body? It is your mind. So your mind is you, and the body is not you? The body is not me, to be sure, but the mind is not me either for the same reason that the body is not me. In addition to the fact that it is not conscious, it is an object that appears in me, in consciousness. I know what I think and I know what I feel. I know what I know and I know what I do not know. The subject cannot be the object.

To say, “I am sad,” for example, is to draw a conclusion that is not warranted. Sadness is a condition that sometimes happens to the mind, but if you are sadness, you cease to exist when you are happy. This is not true, because experience shows that I do not cease to exist when sadness turns to happiness. The most simple, innocent and yet vexing existential problem is this: I confuse the “I,” which does not change, with something that does change. So I think I change. To be a changing entity would not necessarily be all bad if the entity could determine when it wanted to change and when it didn’t – and/or if it could choose what it wanted to be and what it did not want to be. But anything that changes is not in control of its changes. Change happens to all objects according to the laws of change. And the laws of change are impersonal; they are not under the control of the entities that apparently change.

Because you have an intellect, you draw conclusions from what happens to you.

If your intellect confuses the self with the objects appearing in it, it can come to an incorrect conclusion about the nature of the self. You have the experience of sadness and you conclude that you are sad. Or you conclude that you are sad and then you experience sadness. It does not matter which way it is. Both are conclusions born out of ignorance of the nature of reality.

If the self can be different things depending on the point of view from which one draws one’s conclusions, it can be anything because there are infinite standpoints from which to view it. If you view the self from the point of view of your dislikes, who will you become when your likes are operating? If you see yourself as wise with reference to a particular topic, who will you be when you are confronted with a topic

of which you know nothing? If you see it from the body's point of view, then the self is short or tall, depending on the nature of your body. If you see yourself as a mother, who are you when you think of your own mother?

Knowledge does not know itself. It is known by something. When you experience something, you experience the knowledge of the object in your mind. And knowledge implies the existence of consciousness. If you look at your own experience you will see that there is never a time when consciousness is not present. Furthermore, it is common knowledge that no object is present all the time. Even the three states that the mind goes through are variable. One is there for a while, then another, then a third. Sometimes you remember and sometimes you forget. So remembering and forgetting are objects also. In reality there are only two things: consciousness and the objects appearing in it.

When you say, "I am," the "I" is always present and consciousness is always present. Although the words "I" and "consciousness" seem to refer to two different objects, they are synonymous. Both never change. Objects and situations vary, but consciousness, the "I," never changes. When you say, "I" or "I am," you are saying that you are consciousness. If the "I" is consciousness and it is always present, there is nothing that cancels it. There is no opposite principle that can negate it. So when I understand myself to be consciousness I get around the problem that comes when I identify with objects. If I am an object, like an emotion or a thought, I am cancelled when a new emotion or thought appears. If I am emotion or thought, I am cancelled when I go to sleep. All objects are negatable. But since I am not an object, I cannot be negated.

This is all logic so far. If I have signed on to it, I now know that I am consciousness. But what does it mean to say that I am consciousness? Will I suddenly leap tall buildings with a single bound like Superman? Will everyone love me? Will my bank balance never dip into the red? What good is it to know this?

Before we consider implications of the knowledge of myself as consciousness, we need to resolve a common doubt. We mentioned that reality is composed of two things: consciousness and the objects appearing in it. Does this mean that the objects are different from consciousness? It would seem to imply that consciousness, which we can't perceive, and objects, which we can, are two different things, like God and the Devil. If so, does the presence of one negate the presence of the other? If I am sick, I cannot be healthy. They negate each other. If I am tall, I cannot be short. If I am rich, I am not poor.

The Apparent Reality

You cannot separate an object from the material of which it is made. Can you have a shirt unless you have fabric? Any quality that the shirt enjoys is inherent in the fabric. If the fabric is wool, you have a scratchy shirt. If it is silk, you have a smooth shirt. The word 'shirt' does not actually refer to anything substantial. At best it is an idea. And the idea does not give the shirt its texture. In fact, although the shirt does exist, it does not exist on its own. It borrows its existence from the wool. We cannot say that the shirt is non-existent, because it fulfills a useful function. We can, however, say that in essence the shirt is just wool. We cannot say that wool is shirt, because wool can be fashioned into many other things.

So what status can we give the shirt? We can say that it is the same as the wool, but

it is not actually the same, because a skein of wool is not a shirt. We can say that it depends on the shirt because without wool there is no shirt. It is a form of wool. Wool is the substance and the shirt is its form. The shirt is not an illusion, because it has a form and a function. You cannot wear an illusion.

Please follow the logic. If wool is the substance, can we say that shirtness is an attribute of wool? We cannot, because shirtness is not intrinsic to wool. Each time you think of wool you, do not think of shirts. Wool can become any number of things. You can have dozens of different kinds of wool shirts, but if you know them as wool, you might as well know them all. Wool is the substance, the substrate, and the shirt is wool in a certain form. So there is no contradiction between them, because they do not have the same degree of reality. The wool is real and the shirt is apparently real. It borrows whatever reality it has from the wool. So they are one, but they are not equal. The wool has no form and function. It is free of them. And the shirt is only form and function.

It is important to understand the distinction between what is real and what is apparent when we analyze our own experience because reality operates experientially as an apparent duality of subject and object. The subject is consciousness and consciousness assuming various forms are the objects. This means that I am real and what I experience is apparently real. We cannot say life is unreal or non-existent or an illusion. It certainly exists because I experience it. But whatever reality it enjoys, it borrows from me, from consciousness. It is experienced in my mind, and my mind is made out consciousness, so experience is consciousness, but consciousness is not experience. I am always free of experience. And there is no distance between consciousness and the objects appearing in it, just like there is no distance between wool and the shirts fashioned out of it. The shirt is wool, but the wool is free of the shirt.

It remains to speak a little more about my nature. Because I have no form or parts, I have no size. I am not big nor am I small. I am not far away from anything nor am I near anything. I am free of space and time, so I do not change.

When you think of the past or the future, you think of them now. You cannot think of the past or the future in the past or the future. The reality of time is nowness. When you analyze nowness, or "the now," if you prefer, does it stretch into the future or protrude back into the past? No, because any unit of time is subject to further divisions. If you keep dividing, time disappears. So what is time? Time is simply a thought appearing in consciousness. The content of any thought is consciousness and consciousness is free of time and space. Time and space are constructs, ways of measuring things in the apparent reality, but they have no reality of their own. You can think your body's relationship to another object in terms of time or space. Saying that San Francisco is ten minutes is saying that it is ten miles, assuming you are traveling at 60 miles an hour. Time and space are just ideas in consciousness. Consciousness is limitless. If you are limitless, how can you have a self-esteem problem?

How the Teaching Works

Often the self is called bliss, a word that needs to be looked into. Usually, this word is used to denote a happy kind of feeling. But the self is not a feeling. You cannot induce the self in someone else, because they are already the self and they are experiencing it all the time. You can only talk about it. The teaching tradition's

biggest criticism about the modern non-duality teachings, apart from their obvious vagueness, is that they only talk about the self. Talking about the self is not teaching the self. Teaching the self is removing ignorance about the self because the self is already experienced. Self-ignorance is not a simple matter. It is very intelligent insofar as the one who takes it for knowledge is very clever at justifying and defending it. It is deeply entrenched, the foundation of the ego's life. A few vague statements about consciousness and the misguided belief that ignorance can be transcended or discarded at will does not constitute a teaching. To remove self-ignorance you need a sophisticated methodology. Vedanta is a proven method. It is a valid means of self-knowledge. It analyzes a problem with which you can identify, like low self-esteem, and then removes the problem with experience-based, logical teachings. When the problem is destroyed, you see that you are the self. The mind just dissolves into awareness because the mind is just the problem occurring at any given moment.

When the modern teachers tell you that they can transmit enlightenment into you in some mystic way, they are just talking through their hats. All a *guru* can do is communicate his or her vision of non-duality. To do so he or she needs to use carefully chosen words in a certain way. Vedanta is a set-up. It creates a situation that makes it impossible for you not to get the vision, assuming you are qualified and paying attention. For example, if you wish to point out a heavenly body that is apparently indistinguishable from thousands of others, you cannot just point directly at it. There are too many other stars nearby with which it can be confused. So we ask you to look at certain tree. Then we lead your attention up the trunk to a main branch going left, then to the third small branch from the fork that leans right, and so on until we get to the tip. Then we tell you that the star that is touching the tip is the star you are meant to see.

In the case of Vedanta, the subject matter is you, so the teaching creates a problem that you can relate to and then using the logic of your own experience, it dissolves the problem into you. You see that you are quite fine without the problem. You need to listen to the teaching over and over and retain the knowledge of the inquiry that removed your problem so that if the problem resurfaces you can remove it again. And you need to stick with Vedanta long enough until it has covered all the fundamental problems. Then you are home-free. This is only one of the many methods that Vedanta uses to destroy your ignorance and establish the vision of non-duality in your mind.

Perhaps our biggest problem is that we think we are the body. This identification limits us with reference to time, space and objects. If you feel low self-esteem, it is often because you take limitations that belong to the body to be yours. In fact the body has no problems. It is just an assemblage of moving parts, like an automobile. It changes according to certain laws. If I think that I am fat, I have a problem because the "I" has no shape or form, no characteristics. So the fatness does not apply to me. Even the mind does not have any problems. The mind is just a subtle instrument, a bunch of functions operating in consciousness. Where do the problems come from then? Simply from identifying with ignorant thoughts. But since the average person thinks his or her ignorance is knowledge - even wisdom - he or she needs to be taught what ignorance is, especially the ignorance masquerading as the teachings of the modern non-duality world. Nobody wants to remain ignorant once they realize they are ignorant. So once the teaching shows you why your vision is defective, you are free to correct it.

The belief that reality is a duality is due to one simple fact: I take the body to be the

self. When you look at perception from the point of view of consciousness – which Vedanta can show you how to do – your belief in duality disappears.

In any case, this essay is an example of the way that Vedanta works. Vedanta is self-inquiry. Self-inquiry means looking at reality both from the point of view of its substrate, consciousness, and from the point of view of the individual conscious beings appearing in it. Using various methods it removes what at first glance seems to be many different existential paradoxes: How can I believe that I am separate from the whole when I am the whole? How can I feel bound when I am always free? How can I fear death when I am immortal? How can I act when I am actionless? How can I crave love when I am love?