

What is  
Advaita Vedanta?

*Experience and Knowledge*

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## What is Advaita Vedanta?

### *Enlightenment through Understanding*

Western spirituality in the last one hundred and fifty years has seen many expressions of the impulse to experience and know something 'higher' - from the late Victorian New Thought movements through the recent New Age with its plethora of quasi-spiritual subcultures. About thirty-five years ago during the psychedelic revolution in America when traditional religious and social structures were breaking down a migration of export gurus and lamas from India and Buddhist countries imported a raft of metaphysical concepts intended to provide a generation of questioning adults with answers about the meaning of life.

Predictably none of the ideas and practices that arrived from the East survived the contact with Western culture in their original form, not that the form in which they arrived was particularly 'original,' although they seemed quite ancient and authentic to Westerners easily awed by the exotic. Indeed many were hybrids of earlier and purer traditions that had already been corrupted in their native habitats. Two related but separate traditions, Yoga and Vedanta, arrived already corrupted.

Both claim to be 'liberation' philosophies, equally able to free the soul from the suffering that is the hallmark of life in an uncertain world. Both are rooted in the Upanishads, the oldest most authoritative extant texts on the nature the cosmos, the individual, and the Divine.

Yoga promises an experience of oneness of the individual soul with God. To gain this experience certain practices are required which vary depending on the person prescribing them.

Vedanta contends that human beings find themselves limited in many ways and continually strive to rid themselves of limitation. People pursue wealth, pleasure, and merit because they believe it will free them from all manner of physical, temporal and psychological problems. **Vedanta presents freedom from limitation as the most desirable goal of human life.**

The Upanishads,<sup>1</sup> the source of Vedanta,<sup>2</sup> say that before this creation was, the self, limitless being, was. It further says that this self continues to

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<sup>1</sup> The Upanishads are the portion of the Vedas that contain the ideas relating to self knowledge.

<sup>2</sup> Vedanta, 'the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge', is a means of self knowledge sourced in the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gita.

exist outside of time and is therefore eternal. And it states that no action one can perform will ‘gain’<sup>3</sup> this self, even though it is an ever-present reality... because actions are limited while the self is unlimited. Therefore it is at odds with Yoga on this issue. The discovery that one is the limitless self is presented as liberation or enlightenment by Vedanta.

## **Experience of the Self is Not Enlightenment**

One of the erroneous notions about Vedanta, which came about through a confusion of its teaching with the doctrines of Yoga, is the idea that Vedanta is a way to experience the self. Vedanta contends that ours is a non-dual reality in which everything that exists is the self, including everything that seems to be ‘not me,’ meaning everything experienceable. If this is true then any and all experience is already the self. From this standpoint the Yoga doctrine that one needs to engage in certain practices like arresting the thoughts to produce a ‘self’ experience or ‘enter the state of the self’ is unnecessary and, in fact, redundant. The problem, according to Vedanta, is not that discrete experiences of oneness are available or unavailable but that the individual does not know that he or she is already the self...and as mentioned, that whatever experience is happening is the self. **So the problem can only be solved by knowing what the self is...and knowing that I am it.**

Finally, if this is a non-dual reality<sup>4</sup> and enlightenment is the experience of oneness with the self, how does one explain the existence of the experiencer since experience requires an experiencer and an object of experience...an obviously dualistic condition? The self is not going to be experiencing itself because it is itself. Or if it is, it does not need an agent, were an agent capable of experiencing it<sup>5</sup>...which puts paid to the very idea of self experience as an experience unique from any other. The only other candidate for the position is the ego, the individual, and Vedanta says that if it exists it is the self already...so its desire to experience itself is merely the product of ignorance...and can be profitably dismissed.

We cannot dismiss the Yoga view completely because untold millions of truthful persons have ‘experienced’ the self over tens of thousands of years so we need to look for a reasonable explanation for this phenomenon.

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<sup>3</sup> The ‘gain’ is not an experiential gain, like getting a new ‘state of consciousness,’ but the gain of a limitless identity due to the loss of one’s identity as an individual.

<sup>4</sup> This is the Upanishad’s fundamental contention.

<sup>5</sup> An agent, the ego/individual would not be able to ‘experience the self’ because it is a gross manifestation of a much subtler self. The subtle can experience the gross but the gross cannot experience the subtle.

One possible explanation lies in the imprecise use of language. It may be that ‘the experience of the self’ is actually a shift from the individual’s point of view to the self’s...in which case it would be more accurate to say that the self experiences the ego, which is how it actually is. Because the shift is so subtle and language evolved in the experiential world, it is ill equipped to describe this shift accurately so it is forced to formulate the new vision in terms of an ego’s experience of an object.

Another reasonable explanation for the idea of self experience as liberation is the situation where **the ego, the subject, experiences the reflection of the self in a clear mind, the object, and takes the reflection of the self for the self...and declares this experience liberation.**<sup>6</sup> The problem with the idea of enlightenment as self experience is that experience changes... so there will be no ‘permanent experience.’ This accounts for the ‘fallen yogi’ phenomenon where the experience of the self disappears and with it the notion that one is one with the Self. Or, worse...the experience disappears but the notion that one is the self is retained leaving a very unhappy person since the ‘experience of the self’ is pure pleasure.

## **Vedanta is not a School of Thought**

A second and related misconception is that Vedanta is merely an ‘intellectual’ appreciation of the Self, not a deep and abiding experience as is promised by the samadhis of Yoga and many modern gurus. According to Vedanta any deep and abiding experience would naturally be the Self but so would a superficial and transitory experience. Why? Because in a non-dual reality...which this certainly is...any and all experience could only be the Self experiencing the Self. When I brush my teeth it is the Self (apparently) brushing the Self. I say, ‘apparent’ because all experience is apparent, the conspiracy between an apparent subject and an apparent object. It could only be apparent because the Self is non-dual unborn consciousness and everything is it...so there is not actually anything going on at all. Or as Vedanta says, “Nothing ever happens.” And since Vedanta says that there are not two selves...one ego or ‘lower’ self and one egoless or ‘higher’ self, but only one self with apparent ignorance or apparent knowledge of what it is...the idea that an ego, an individual, can somehow ‘experience the non-dual Self’ as a discrete experience is plainly incorrect.

The misunderstanding here lies in the idea that there are two kinds of knowledge: experiential (no knowledge) and intellectual. But actually, since

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<sup>6</sup> This ‘experience of the self’ is the second and necessary stage on the path to enlightenment. A discussion of the three stages appears later in this article.

all knowledge takes place in the intellect, including the absence of knowledge, both knowledge and ignorance are only going to be 'intellectual.' The 'I' is never interested in knowledge or no-knowledge since it is the illuminator of both...and therefore free of both. Furthermore, if the Self were an experience and the problem of Self recognition was due to ignorance of the nature of the Self as Vedanta contends, how could an experience erase the ignorance...except temporarily as happens in various fleeting samadhis and epiphanies? And experience, no matter how 'non-dual' it is (and how long it goes on), does not erase thought patterns...as evidenced by the fact literally millions of people who have 'experienced' non-duality continue to think of themselves as limited beings when the experience wears off. If the experience of non-duality were the solution to the spiritual search no one who had had it would continue to search for 'permanent' or 'total' enlightenment. The spiritual world today is little more than tens of thousands of people who have experienced the Self but who remain locked in their concepts of who they are.

However, analysis of experience, shallow or deep, leading to the discovery that any and all experience is nothing but one's Self, could remove the 'intellectual' notion that experience was superior to knowledge. After all, **someone who strives for the experience of oneness does so because he or she holds an 'intellectual' conviction that experience is the only path to enlightenment.** If he or she is going to dismiss the very reasonable idea that you can only get what you already have through understanding that you have it, he or she will have to dismiss as merely 'intellectual' the much more unreasonable notion that the Self is only available through a particular non-dual experience.

In fact, Vedanta has no quarrel with experience. Experience is a universal experience. And the 'experience of non-duality' gives a glimpse of the Self which can be an aid to understanding. Vedanta merely says that experience as such is unconscious, incapable of delivering knowledge. For knowledge to happen whether it is based on experience or inference **there must be a conscious factor other than experience that recognizes experience for what it is.** This is why enlightenment is not a permanent experience of the Self but is instead the 'experiential' (as opposed to 'theoretical') understanding that one is the Self.

Another corruption of Vedanta exported to the West is the idea that Vedanta is a philosophy or school of thought. A school of thought is always the ideas of a given person or persons and is therefore subject to dispute. If an idea is to be accepted as a fact, not merely a belief or an opinion, it needs to be verified by a legitimate means of knowledge. But the subject matter of

Vedanta, the Self, is not available by direct perception or inference since it is outside time and space, the field in which the senses and mind operate. And because human beings only have three means of knowledge (perception, inference and testimony) and these can only be used to know objects, how can the Self, the subject (which cannot be objectified) and the one who is wielding the means of knowledge, be known through them? So the subject matter of Vedanta, the Self, cannot be a school of thought.

Vedanta looks like a school of thought, however, because it is comprised of a body of ideas that originated in the Vedas. People to whom the Self had never been revealed through the teachings of Vedanta assumed that it was just another philosophy and attributed differing interpretations to different teachers and so it became several schools of thought...for them. Had these people understood that Vedanta was simply a means for knowing the Self, this misconception would not have arisen.

A means of knowledge is not knowledge. It will not remain once the object to be known is known. So study of its ideas and the retention of them as beliefs or opinions is not appropriate to the actual purpose of Vedanta. Philosophies like existentialism, on the other hand, are subject to modification and remain in the realm of ideas as long as they serve some purpose. Vedanta, a means of knowledge that works, will never be modified because it already performs its function perfectly. Nor will it be forgotten because the human mind forever needs to rid itself of its sense of limitation.

### **There is no Advaita Vedanta**

The words *Advaita* Vedanta, like the word Hinduism,<sup>7</sup> are a misnomer because they imply other Vedantas. The word '*Advaita*' means non-dual and implies the concept of duality. Indeed, those who view Vedanta as a school of thought speak of *Dvaita* Vedanta, dualistic Vedanta, *VishistAdvaita* Vedanta, qualified non-dualism, and even *Bhakti* Vedanta, devotional Vedanta. Or they compare it with philosophies or religions that present similar ideas.

The word '*Advaita*' is not an adjective meant to modify a particular type of Vedanta but a word that describes the nature of the Self. Keeping in mind that words are always symbols, although non-dual implies dual, it is more appropriate to refer to the Self as non-dual than as one since one is a

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<sup>7</sup> The terms Hindu came from the Greeks who described the people living in the Indus Valley as Hindus. The ideas and practices that are commonly thought to comprise Hinduism are actually *Sanatana Dharma*, the Eternal Dharma, which are based on the Vedas.

number that implies two, many, and even zero, nothing. Furthermore, it would be inappropriate to label Vedanta, which is merely a means of knowledge, as non-dual because it is in fact a dualistic device operating in a dualistic situation, one that ironically delivers non-dual knowledge.

The ultimate source of Vedanta's teachings are the Upanishads, documents appended to the concluding portion of each Veda. In fact the word Vedanta is a compound. *Veda* means knowledge and *anta* means end. On an exoteric level the term indicates the Upanishads, the texts containing its seed teachings, because they are situated at the end of each Veda. On the esoteric level, it means the non-dual knowledge that ends the belief in oneself

as a limited being. Because of the cryptic nature of the Upanishad mantras, the subtle nature of the subject matter, the Self, and the fact that a single Sanskrit word often has many possible meanings, it is possible to interpret the statements of the Upanishad differently. Over the course of time there have been a number of great teachers of Vedanta who interpreted the statements of the Upanishads in different ways. But this does not amount to different schools of thought because all of them accepted Vedanta as a means of Self knowledge.

Although Vedanta is often erroneously accused of being an intellectual discipline, it operates differently from them because it **does not leave concepts behind in the mind once it has been handled by a teacher**. It uses concepts to destroy false concepts about the nature of the Self. And in the process both the correct idea and the erroneous idea disappear into the vision of oneself as the Self. Since the emphasis is on removal of doubt, any interpretation of a mantra can be applied to remove the doubt, irrespective of other interpretations. For a given person one interpretation may be appropriate while the same interpretation may be inappropriate for another because he or she entertains a different doubt or formulates the doubt in a different way. Irrespective of the interpretation, Vedanta acts as a means of knowledge if it removes one's ignorance of one's limitless nature.

If I want to see an object I need only use my eyes. If my ears do not hear the object while my eyes are seeing it their testimony does not invalidate what my eyes see. If I want to gain the knowledge of my Self I need to dispassionately expose myself to the teachings of Vedanta to see whether or not what it says is true. Because they are concerned with a different reality, perceptions and inferences about things in the world do not in any way invalidate the vision of Vedanta.



## **You are That**

The vision of **Vedanta is an equation of the identity between the individual and God.** God is defined in Vedanta as everything that is. This vision of non-duality, which Yoga claims to achieve through certain disciplines, is not contradicted by direct perception or by inference. Although it is erroneously believed that the self can be experienced, it cannot. Why? Because the experiencing instrument, the ego/mind, can only know objects. What yogis claim to be a direct perception or experience of the self is the ego seeing the reflection of the Self in a pure mind and not the self, since the Self is subtler than the mind and ego.

Vedanta is not a salvation theology that requires an individual to change. According to it, the soul, the individual is perfect and already free. So the release of the individual from his or her feeling of limitation is the result of understanding that the individual and God share the same nature, limitless awareness. All the other teachings of Vedanta are only meant to prove this equation between man and God. Or, as a great mystic who seemed to have the vision of Vedanta once proclaimed, "I and my Father are one." The 'God' Vedanta envisions is not a bearded old man in the heavens.

The heart of Vedanta is a number of teaching methods, called *prakriyas*, found in the Upanishads and used by the teachers of the tradition to communicate the vision of non-duality. If a system of philosophy is built up out of these teachings it defeats the purpose of Vedanta.

Vedanta does not try to prove that the self exists because the only self evident self existent thing in reality is oneself. Everything that is known is known only because the self, the I, is self-evident awareness. Vedanta concentrates only on removing the ignorance that keeps one from appreciating oneself as self-evident awareness. **Self knowledge is the most valuable knowledge one can gain because it shows that while everything depends on you, you depend on nothing.** This realization is called liberation.

## **Cause and Effect**

*The purpose: to show that the self is limitless and that the world is not separate from it.*

In this important teaching God is presented as the cause of the universe, “that from which everything comes and that to which it returns” to quote the Upanishad. Additionally, God is presented as eternal awareness, what always exists and never changes. The world is seen as an effect of which God is the cause. But the world is of a slightly different order of reality from God. In a famous text, the *Vacarambhana Sruti*, the universe is not said to exist, nor is it said not to exist. What kind of existence does it enjoy then? According to the scripture it has an apparent and dependent existence. **The individual’s body and mind are within the creation and therefore enjoy this peculiar status, but the individual itself is eternal awareness, non-separate from God, and therefore the reality of everything.**

If the effect is just the cause in a particular form, then the cause and the effect are one. For example, although there are many different ornaments made of gold, from the standpoint of the gold they are all the same. If everything in the universe is fashioned by a single cause, limitless awareness, then everything in the universe is limitless awareness. Therefore if I know the essence of any one thing it is as good as knowing the essence of every other thing. To know salt water I needn’t drink the seven seas; I need only take a sip from one. The realization, let’s say recognition, **I am limitless awareness and the whole universe is not separate from me even though I am separate from it** is the result of this teaching. This recognition of myself as the whole removes my view of myself as limited and incomplete and is called liberation from suffering.

### **The Three States of Experience**

*The purpose: to point out that the invariable awareness in the three universal states of experience is the self.*

Another important teaching employed in Vedanta<sup>8</sup> is an analysis of the three states of experience: waking, dream and sleep. In this analysis, which is based on experience, the scripture notes that the waker and waking world is absent in both dream and sleep. The dreamer and the dream world is absent in both waking and sleep. In sleep the dreamer and the waker and their respective worlds are absent. Then it reasons that If the I, the self, is real, meaning eternally existent, it cannot relinquish its status at any time.

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<sup>8</sup> This analysis is found in the Mandukya Upanishad.

Yet, experience shows that these three 'I's' appear and disappear. That most of us consider ourselves to be the entities that experience the waking state and dream states and **that we consider ourselves to be real is incorrect** according to this analysis **because as wakers, dreamers, and sleepers we continually relinquish our existential status.**

Furthermore, what is intrinsic to an object should be present in the object as long as the object exists. If it is not present, then it is an incidental attribute. For example, in the case of a crystal assuming the color of a nearby object, the color is incidental. If it were inherent in the crystal it would not disappear when the nearby object is removed.

If perception, which is a waking and dream state attribute, were native to the self it would exist in the deep sleep state. But the subject-object relationship necessary for perception is absent in deep sleep, yet the self does not cease to exist.

If the self has no attributes is it non-existent? It cannot be non-existent because non-existence is a concept requiring a subject, someone who knows. Investigation of the knower leads us to conclude that the knower is the self. And the self's nature is awareness, a view supported by the scripture.

Awareness is present in all states of experience, although ego consciousness, is absent in the deep sleep state. When scripture describes the self as attribute-free it means that the nature of the self is awareness because awareness is the only thing free of attributes. Attributes, such as a sense of doership and enjoyership, are incidental because they depend on the state in which one finds oneself.

Is there a world without someone to see it? No, if that someone is the ego, a non-essential attribute of the self. The existence of the objective world does not depend on the existence of any individual but on impersonal awareness. It cannot be said to exist if it is not known to exist. To say that it exists independently of awareness is meaningless. Because the self is awareness it is limitless and the world, which depends on the subject-object relationship, is only an apparent reality, neither completely existent, nor completely non-existent.

## **The Five Sheaths**

*The purpose: to point out the universal errors in self understanding that occur at each of the five levels of experience.*

The non-apprehension of the self as oneself gives rise to five misconceptions about its nature. These misconceptions are called sheaths because they apparently hide the self and need to be removed if the self is to be apprehended as it is.

The most obvious misunderstanding we entertain about ourselves is that we are our gross bodies. The notions that 'I am mortal,' 'I am fat,' 'I am male/female' indicate an association of the 'I' with the physical. Association of the 'I' with the physiological systems causes one to say, 'I am hungry,' 'I am thirsty,' when in fact the I, awareness, does not suffer these sensations. The universal statements, "I am happy," "I am sad," show that the I is taken to be the emotional body. When the intellect entertains the idea 'I am a doer,' 'I am a knower' it reinforces the belief in oneself as the body or mind. This idea is untrue because the self is non-dual actionless awareness. Finally, the I is commonly associated with enjoyment, the state of feeling good, which motivates endless activities. The self is not a feel good 'state.' It needn't feel good because it is good, in the sense of what is always auspicious. So the sense of enjoyership is also illegitimate.

The application of this teaching follows a certain type of logic. First the self is introduced as the gross body, a common belief. Then it is shown that there is another subtler body, the feelings and emotions, which also are considered to be oneself. When one's feelings are hurt one will instinctively say, "I was hurt by what she said." This 'self' negates the previous self because for a self to be a self it cannot be two, modern theories of multiple personalities notwithstanding. The word 'self' means essence, that which is not made up of parts. Once the belief in oneself as the physical body is dropped and one accepts oneself as the emotional body, the teaching brings in the intellect 'self' which shows up in experience as the concept 'I am the doer'...which is meant to remove the notion that one is only the feelings and emotions. When one can see that he or she thinks of his or herself as a doer and understands the limitation inherent in that concept, the idea of the bliss body is introduced. The 'bliss body' is responsible for pleasure and its companion concept 'I am an enjoyer.' The doer will give way to the enjoyer in every case because doing is for the sake of enjoying but enjoying is not for the sake of doing. Finally, the self is introduced as the source of bliss. Thus by tracing the 'I' concept from the gross to the subtle one is led to the self, the fundamental 'I'. The realization of the whole and complete 'I' negates all the lesser selves, meaning one lets go of one's belief in oneself as them and embraces the unlimited identity.

The teaching works when it becomes clear that the association of the 'I' with these five basic but conflicting concepts is absurd, since we know

experientially that we are only one being, a view supported by scripture. In fact one need not rigidly employ this model when inquiring into the self because discovery of the association in one's mind of the 'I' with many conflicting ideas should be enough to encourage one to abandon all self concepts. The renunciation of limiting self concepts is tantamount to 'gaining' or 'realizing' the self exists in the absence of all concepts.

One corruption of Vedanta related to this teaching is the idea that the 'sheaths' actually cover the self and therefore a 'transcendental' technique such as stopping the mind to experientially gain access to the self is required. Even if such techniques work, one would only enjoy an experience. And we know from experience that experience is by nature temporary...so no lasting solution to the problem of limitation would result. In fact, **because experience is temporary, 'experience of the self' as distinct from everyday experience just produces frustration in the experiencer, the ego.** To gain a permanent 'experience' of the self, one need only see that all experience is the self. If experience is gained by knowledge one need not suffer the anxiety of trying to 'maintain' it, a common concern of meditators following the path of Yoga.

### **Is Experience Out There?**

One of the problems with the experiential view of life, as opposed to the analytical view, is that experience always seems to be separate from the experiencer. But is it? If a thousand people experience one man giving a lecture in a large auditorium and they experienced him at the point at which he was standing, all the minds hovering around experiencing would interfere with each other's experience and nobody would experience the man as he was. But experience is completely subjective. Stimuli from the man enter the senses and drop into the mind, causing the mind to take the form of the stimuli and this is where our man is located.

So how far is the self from experience? Is there a gap, perhaps a tunnel down which the self must travel from its world to the world of experience? There is not. In fact experience is the self taking form like the ocean takes the form of waves. If I'm looking for the self as an object, a transcendental experience, for example, or taking the experience of the self as an object, I am deluded because whatever experience I'm having is nothing but me. **This, however, does not mean that experience in anyway invalidates or validates me because it depends on me but I do not depend on it.**

## Importance of a Teacher

If Vedanta were a philosophical school of thought all that would be required to grasp it would be that one memorize the concepts. Whatever ignorance about the nature of oneself was in place before one's study began would remain...with a new layer of ideas sitting on top of it. But because it is a means of knowledge it needs a teacher, someone 'abiding'<sup>9</sup> as the Self who can skillfully wield the teachings according to the traditional methods. And, like advanced studies in worldly subjects, the person on whom the teachings are wielded needs to be qualified or prepared to receive the teachings.<sup>10</sup> If the teacher does not know who he or she is, or his or her 'enlightenment'<sup>11</sup> is formulated in terms of experience, then all he or she can do is present the Self as an object to be attained and recommend certain practices which he or she believes will give the student access to the self. Because it is a means of knowledge Vedanta is not a practice that will bring about 'experience of the self,' nor is it a theory about the existence of transcendental 'state.' Its subject matter is awareness and because awareness is the content or essence of every experience, **Vedanta need only reveal the self to grant one permanent self experience...since there is nothing more permanent than oneself.** Discrete experiences come and go but the 'I,' the self, precedes, pervades and succeeds every experience. The 'access' to the self that Vedanta provides is in terms of the removal of ignorance and not in terms of a mechanical technique like arresting the mind.

You can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink. While a teacher is necessary because one cannot apply the *prakriyas* on oneself merely by studying the ancient texts, the teacher cannot willy-nilly grant enlightenment to any qualified aspirant simply by unfolding the teachings. Because ignorance is tenacious the student needs to 'practice knowledge.' The 'coming down' or 'falling back' that one suffers on experiential paths like Yoga also occurs in Vedanta. Understanding the teaching and seeing how the teacher wields it allows the self inquirer to apply the appropriate

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<sup>9</sup> In fact enlightenment is not an 'abidance in the self' since abidance implies a subject and object and enlightenment is the knowledge, backed by experience, that 'I am the Self.'

<sup>10</sup> These qualifications are: discrimination, dispassion, calm mind, buring desire for liberation, faith, devotion, and perserverance.

<sup>11</sup> Enlightenment formulated in terms of experience is not enlightenment. It is a preliminary stage usually called self-realization. A discussion of the stages of enlightenment can be found at the end of this document.

teaching to the mind as needed outside the teaching situation, until every last vestige of ignorance is destroyed.

### **The Self as Bliss Confusion**

Because life in this world without the understanding of oneself as limitless awareness involves considerable suffering, human beings universally want to feel good. This craving has created the belief that there is an experienceable ‘state of permanent bliss,’ *ananda*, that is available through certain practices. This belief stems from an incorrect understanding of the word ‘*ananta*,’ which is used by the Upanishad to describe the self. *Ananta* is invariably mistranslated as ‘bliss’ when the actual meaning is limitlessness. ‘*Anta*’ means end and ‘*a*’ is a negative meaning ‘not’ so the word means ‘what doesn’t end.’ So the actual meaning of the word is the self, awareness.

“The light knows the darkness but the darkness does not know the light.” Like all experience, bliss, which is produced when the mind is temporarily free of fear and craving, is unconscious. It does not know the self. But it is known and experienced because the self, awareness, illumines it. The best one can do with the word bliss is to see it as a symbol of the self, a statement that the self is full, a partless whole. When someone who has been suffering the changes in the body mind initially wakes up to the self, the self seems to ‘feel’ very good. But the ‘feeling,’ which is an interpretation by the mind, is not the presence of a positive self ‘state’ but simply the appreciation of the absence of change. As one abides as the self over time and the memory of suffering diminishes, the feeling of bliss gradually dissolves into non-dual partless wholeness. **As the self I have no need to feel good because I am good**, meaning I am the essence of every experience.

When self realization is touted as the ‘experience of limitless bliss’ it is usually believed that this self bliss is infinitely superior to the transitory blisses one encounters in daily life. But the scripture says that any experience of bliss, whether it is born of sensory experience, the discovery of some unknown object, or spiritual practices such as Yoga, it is just the fullness and limitlessness of the self reflecting in the body/mind.

The recognition of this fact removes the belief in oneself as unhappy, limited and mortal.

### **Knowledge/Realization Confusion**

Another ill-considered belief enjoying considerable currency in the modern spiritual world is the idea that self knowledge is intellectual and that self realization is ‘experiential.’ Because of this confusion it is thought that the study of the scripture is merely for knowledge while other practices, like the *samadhis* of Yoga, are for practical, ‘experiential’ enlightenment.

This confusion between knowledge and experiential realization is caused by not recognizing the invariable presence of the self in all situations. If the self is always present and available, the scripture wielded by the self in the form of a teacher is the most direct way of ‘experiencing the self’ because it reveals the nature of the self. **And if only knowledge sets one free because ignorance is the problem, a technique that is meant to give ‘experience’ of the self would in fact be indirect realization since the experience would have to be converted into knowledge for it to last.** The absurdity of the experiential view is apparent when we consider that whatever experience one is having at any time is the self...but the self is not an experience.

Knowledge is only direct or indirect. Direct knowledge arises simultaneously with perception. Indirect knowledge is inference. I see smoke and infer fire. The derogatory adjective ‘intellectual’ is completely unwarranted unless there are other kinds of knowledge like physical, emotional, intuitive, etc. In fact all knowledge is ‘intellectual’ because the intellect is the only instrument capable of knowing. Because it is the product of unconscious impersonal forces, a feeling or an intuition is not self-knowing. It becomes known because the self illumines the intellect in which feelings and thoughts arise.

Usage shows that what is actually meant by the word ‘intellectual’ is knowledge not backed by experience. A person can intellectually know what love is without ever having been in love. But the self is not an experience like love. If I exist I am the self so I am not short of self experience. Therefore the need to experience myself is illegitimate and I need another way, knowledge, to gain the ‘experience’ that I already have. **The many seekers of self experience that eventually become disillusioned because they are unable to obtain a permanent experience of the self need to convert their quest for experience into a quest for understanding if they wish to free themselves from bondage to their attachment to experience...which prevents them from enlightenment.**

## **Multi-path Confusion**



The idea that self knowledge can be gained in four different ways is a corruption that took place in India long before Vedanta was exported to the West. According to this idea, each path is called a yoga and is different from the other three. Each was meant for a different type of person. The path of devotion was meant to serve the needs of predominately emotional persons. The path of action was intended for extroverted action-oriented people, and the path of knowledge was designed for those with an intellectual orientation. And Raja Yoga, the eightfold path, was for a person who was anyone who was not one of the other types.

That one can gain self knowledge through action is an obvious absurdity because knowledge requires a means and action is not a valid means of knowledge. **In fact action to gain something someone already has is motivated by ignorance.** Rather than erase one's ignorance of oneself, it will only serve to reinforce the ill-considered belief in oneself as a doer of 'selfless' action, a devotee of God, or a knower of truth...all egoic identities.

The Vedas actually only prescribe two lifestyles relevant to the quest for liberation; that of the householder and that of the renunciate. The renunciate pursues self knowledge exclusively and has no obligatory duties. The householder is enjoined to perform action in a certain spirit to prepare his or her mind for self knowledge.

If someone thinks of his or herself as a devotee exclusively, this identity is not warranted because devotional practices like pujas, chanting, and meditation/prayer are all *karmas*, activities. So, in fact this person is just a *karma* yogi, a doer of ritualistic actions. Additionally, devotion is not a quality unique to any individual or path but is found in anyone pursuing a spiritual goal. One does not pursue self knowledge or self experience without devotion, for example. So the idea of devotion as a particular path is not found in the Vedas.

Although not found in the Vedas proper, the idea of integral yoga became associated with Vedanta in the last century primarily through the writings of Sri Aurobindo. According to this view, because the subtle body has three inner centers, the mind (emotions/feelings), intellect, and ego which are often in conflict, three 'techniques' are necessary to fuse it into an instrument capable of knowing the self and retaining that knowledge permanently. Devotional practice is meant to be useful in transforming gross emotions into devotion for God who is non-separate from the self. Action yoga is helpful in identifying ego and wearing away its concept of itself as a doer. And the practice of knowledge trains the mind to think from the Self's point of view, rather than the ego's, eventually harmonizing the

individual with the natural order of things, thus reducing stress and conflict. At best this view is helpful in preparing the mind for self knowledge but it does not, for the reasons mentioned above, qualify as a valid means of self knowledge.

### **Liberation is a Thought-Free Mind?**

One of the most popular and misguided views at the heart of Yoga doctrine<sup>12</sup> that became associated with Vedanta is the idea that liberation is the elimination of all thoughts in the mind. This idea came about because the scripture describes the self as thought free and because experientially many epiphanies occur when the mind is temporarily arrested in the waking state. **But if a thought-free mind was liberation everyone would already be enlightened...because who has not slept?** Even between two thoughts there is a tiny gap, an absence of thought. If absence of thought for a split second is not enlightenment, absence of thought for an hour or two is not going to amount to the liberating knowledge ‘I am limitless awareness.’ Realistically, the idea that no thought is enlightenment means that there is no such thing as enlightenment. Finally, if one is enlightened only when the mind is thought-free, what happens to enlightenment when the mind begins to think? The mind is not going to free itself of thought because it is not capable of knowing that thought is a problem. So someone else would have to do it. The only someone capable of removing the thoughts would be the self but the self is already free of thoughts so there would be no reason for it to destroy the mind. From its non-dual point of view although the mind is a lesser order of reality it is still the self and therefore not a threat.

Because enlightenment is the nature of the self the idea that no mind is enlightenment implies a duality between the self and thought. That the self does not exist when the mind exists means that the self and the mind enjoy the same order of reality like a table and a chair. But this is untrue. If one exists only in the absence of the other they enjoy the same order of reality, like illness and health. But does the existence of thought deny the existence of oneself? Is there thought without you? In fact thoughts come out of you but you are not just a thought. They depend on you but you do not depend on them. So whether they are present or absent you, the ever-free ever-present self, can always be directly known.

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<sup>12</sup> A famous scripture, the ‘Patanjali Yoga Sutras,’ is the basis of this view.

## **Elimination of Unconscious Tendencies is Enlightenment?**

The thoughts and feelings in the mind are not self-generating but are the effects of subtle causes called *vasanas*, 'sub' or unconscious tendencies accumulated from past experience. The sum total of these tendencies is often said to be the individual. And since they are the cause of all the individual's habits they are prior to the individual and therefore bind the individual to a repetitive cycle of experience. To free oneself of this bondage it is believed that the *vasanas* must be completely exhausted. Since there are no longer any tendencies to constitute an individual or to keep the individual together it is believed that the individual dissolves and the self, which is what remains, is realized by default. But if the individual is gone who is there to realize the self? The self obviously does not need to realize anything because it is already realized.

A second problem with this theory is that nobody knows how many *vasanas* are stored in the unconscious, perhaps billions or more, so it might take millions of lifetimes to exhaust them. A third is that in a non-dual reality there are not two separate principles, the self and the *vasanas*. If the self alone exists as scripture says, and the *vasanas* exist, they would only exist as the self. In other words they would be dependent for their reality on the self, just as a clay pot is dependent on clay for its reality. Anything that depends on something else for its existence is not real. Experienciable, yes, but not real, meaning unchanging. If *vasanas* are the self but the self is not the *vasanas*, it is already free of them and no work needs to be done to 'gain' the self.

But if enlightenment is the knowledge "I am the self, limitless awareness," this knowledge would necessarily take place in the mind. Furthermore, if the mind were excessively disturbed by thoughts and feelings in the form of likes and dislikes and these likes and dislikes, fears and desires, were conscious effects of which the *vasanas* were the cause, as scripture states, then the mind could be brought to a clear, calm state, by exhausting the *vasanas* disturbing it...making it fit for knowledge. Therefore, ***vasana* exhaustion is useful to prepare the mind for self knowledge but is not tantamount to enlightenment.**

## **Stages of Enlightenment ?**

If the problem is ignorance and enlightenment is the understanding backed by experience that I am limitless, to say that there are stages of

enlightenment is like saying that a woman is a little bit pregnant. Contrary to popular belief no enlightened person<sup>13</sup> is more or less enlightened than any other because the self is one unchanging awareness.

Then how does one account for the apparent differences in understanding and experience that one sees from one enlightened being to another? There is no question of enlightenment from the self's point of view because there is no ignorance. And because the self is non-dual there is no experience in it. But the self is capable of creating the appearance of duality. Just as a spider is both the substance of its web and the intelligence that shapes it, the self appears as the world and shapes the individual entities in it. What is called experience is the self functioning through the various entities (plant, animal and human) just as electricity functions through various appliances. Expressing through a bulb it produces light, through a heater heat, and through a radio sound. Though the manifestations are superficially different all are just electricity transformed by its contact with the appliance.

There are no 'enlightened beings' because there is only one formless self. So when knowledge destroys a person's sense of individuality, the individual 'becomes' the self by default. The 'becoming' is not a physical change or the experiential removal of the individual. It is a change in understanding. **Just as knowledge of the nature of a mirage will prevent one from taking it to be water, the knowledge that I am the self allows one to understand that the experiencer, the individual, is only an apparent, not a real self.**

An 'enlightened being' is just the self functioning through a mind whose self ignorance has been removed. But the removal of self ignorance does not automatically remove the *vasanas* in the mind although it eventually renders them non-binding since they bind only because of ignorance. Since from the self's point of view all the *vasanas* are known to be only the self, it has no preferences as to the type of *vasana* it illumines. Therefore it works through the existing *vasanas*. Because the *vasanas* are the cause of the mind's energy, attitudes and opinions, ignorance and knowledge and every mind has unique and varied experiences, the self

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<sup>13</sup> The concept 'enlightened person' is not strictly correct, unless the self is thought of as a person. In fact in some scriptures the self is referred to as the 'universal person' but this does not mean that the Self is a person as we understand it. 'Impersonal' or a 'state' are perhaps more accurate words to describe the self but certain minds have trouble with abstract concepts so, to make it understandable to this kind of mind it is sometimes called a 'supreme person,' or God. The word 'person' is used because people are the most conscious objects in the creation and the self is consciousness. Enlightenment is the loss of the sense of limitation that characterizes a person, so it is not correct to think of the person as an individual any more. The loss of the person's sense of limitation is the appreciation of oneself as everything that is.

seems to be unique and varied. This ‘seeming’ is caused by lack of discrimination, the power to separate the real from the experiential, so that an indiscriminate person will wrongly assume that there are many types of enlightened beings and many stages of enlightenment.

## **The Stages of Enlightenment**

### *(1) Endarkenment*

Nonetheless, from the individual’s point of view there are three ‘stages of enlightenment.’ The first stage might well be called ‘endarkenment.’ We come into this life experiencing our limitlessness and oneness with everything but, because the intellect has yet to develop, we do not understand what we are experiencing. When the intellect does develop it is trained to think of the self as a limited, incomplete, inadequate creature and encouraged to solve the problem of inadequacy by picking up experience in life. At a certain point, the individual comes to realize that no matter how much experience he or she can garner, the experienced objects and activities do not do the job. This is usually an unpleasant realization, often resulting in a profound disillusionment with life and is frequently referred to as the ‘dark night of the soul’ in religious literature or ‘hitting bottom’ in popular culture.

Most react to this existential crisis by sinking into distracting habits, mind numbing substances and/or frivolous entertainments, but for unknown reasons a few begin to enjoy a variety of peculiar and invariably confusing religious or spiritual experiences that lead them to the idea of God or some sort of ‘inner light’ or ‘higher state.’ And at some point during this period the person becomes convinced that he or she can find happiness ‘within’ or in some relationship with God.

### *(2) Self Realization/Self Inquiry*

The second stage might be termed the ‘seeking’ or ‘questing’ phase and usually heads off in two apparently separate directions. The religious road leads to the development of a personal relationship with God who is conceived as a pure and perfect someone other than one’s self. The idea of the self as inadequate, incomplete, and separate is retained and often conceived of as corrupted by sin. Salvation is meant to lie in invoking the grace of God through prayer and the study of scripture and working hard

here on earth for a place in the ‘promised land,’ a heaven far from this veil of tears which can only be accessed by relinquishing the physical body. The religious life offers a positive alternative to the belief in the world as a source of meaning.

The other branch of the road leads in a less doctrinal and belief-laden direction into the experience of the ‘inner’ world and an investigation of the self. In its worldly form it may incline one to the study of psychology but in its ‘spiritual’ form the person experiences epiphanies, fleeting samadhis, satoris<sup>14</sup> and the like that give rise to the conviction that the ‘the truth’ dwells ‘within’ as the ‘higher’ or ‘inner’ self or as some transcendental state of consciousness.<sup>15</sup> He or she will probably characterize the changes during this phase as an ‘awakening.’ Although the experience of the inner self/truth/state is invariably uplifting and intensifies one’s quest, it is always confusing because the information one gathers challenges the habitual view of oneself as a needy, incomplete, inadequate, separate creature. Many of these experiences can truthfully be described as the experience of oneness with all things, limitlessness, and of transcendent bliss.

During this stage which might be also called the meditation stage, the mind, formerly riveted on happenings in the outer world turns inward and fixes itself on the self, the ‘light within,’ and at some point, usually after intense investigation, ‘realizes’ the self, since the self is the source of all experience. This ‘realization’ is always in the form of an experience and is thought by many to be the end of the search...and the ultimate ‘state.’ But Vedanta says that while this is a welcome and enjoyable ‘state’ it is not the end because there is still a sense of separation between the experiencer and the object of experience, the self. When there is separation there is doubt and the doubt is always that this ‘state,’ like all states will end, plunging the experiencer back into darkness...which invariably happens because what is actually happening is that the experience is actually not the experience of the self but a reflection of the self in a still mind and since both the experiencer, the ego, and the mind are in time they are subject to change.

This doubt is due to the failure of the experiencer to understand that what is being experienced is just his own self...in which case it could never be lost. The failure to convert the experience to knowledge is usually caused by the belief in the experiencer that knowledge is merely intellectual and that there is such a thing as a permanent experience. So when the experience happens the intellect gets submerged in the bliss, peace, and radiance and

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<sup>14</sup> Terms from different traditions that indicate an experiential glimpse of God, the Void, the inner self, etc.

<sup>15</sup> Often persons who have had ‘out of body’ or near death experiences see the self in this way.

switches off, as it does in most intense sensuous experiences, and stops inquiring.

To enter the 'final' stage, which is not a stage, inquiry must continue during the experience of the self. In ordinary perception a thought wave arises in the mind that corresponds to the nature of the perceived object. You see a tree and you know it is a tree because the self, awareness illumines the thought of tree as it arises in the intellect. Similarly when the ego experiences the reflection of the self in a pure mind a thought corresponding to the nature of the self, called an *akandakara vritti*, an unbroken 'I' thought arises, and this thought needs to be owned. When it is taken as one's own, it is this 'I' thought, backed by experience, that destroys the notion in the ego/mind that it is limited, incomplete and separate.

### (3) *Enlightenment*

At this point everything stops and there is a subtle shift in awareness in which the foreground becomes the background and the background the foreground. The ego/mind, the subject, meditating on the self, the object, becomes the subject and the subject, formerly the object, becomes the subject. **And this never changes because it was obtained through the knowledge that what I experience is me but I am not what I experience.** In other words, one 'becomes' the Self. Unlike an experience, the self can never be lost because it is me, the basis of everything...and there is nothing other than it to lose it.

### **Enlightenment as Energy?**

A major misconception brought on by human being's fascination with and craving for experience is the belief that enlightened beings have a special kind of 'energy' and that that energy is a consequence of their enlightenment. But experience confirms and scripture states that the self is energyless, so if I am the self I have no energy. Then how does it appear as if it were energy?

The self does not appear as energy until it illumines a given mind. The mind is just the *vasanas* of a given individual entity. These *vasanas* are subtle matter. Matter is inert. But when it is illumined by the self it becomes dynamic, just as a seed will remain dormant until it gets water and sunlight. The *vasanas* are conditioned by three types of energy: *sattvic*, *rajasic*, and *tamasic*.

*Tamasic* energy<sup>16</sup> is a heavy, dull, sleepy energy, as if the mind were under a cloud. *Rajas*<sup>17</sup> is a projecting energy, a passionate, dynamic, outgoing unsettling energy. And *sattva*<sup>18</sup> is the state when the mind is luminous, clear, still, and aware. When the self illumines the *tamasic vasanas* the person appears to be ignorant and sleepy and lack motivation. When the self illumines *rajasic vasanas*, the person is exceptionally dynamic and powerful, often highly motivated. When the self illumines *sattva* the person is clear and bright, very knowledgeable and loving.

Most beings, because of their sense of incompleteness, chase *tamasic* objects (physical things and sensual pleasure) with *rajasic* passion. Therefore their *vasanas* are predominately *tamasic* and *rajasic*. So if a person who has *tamasic vasanas* somehow wakes up and discovers that he or she is actually the self, his or her energy will be predominately *tamasic* and *rajasic* even if the knowledge is firm...unless work is done to transform the *vasanas*. A small class of people realize that *tamasic* and *rajasic vasanas* produce the unpleasant experiences of craving and aversion and evolve methods to rid themselves of them. If and when they realize the self, they will be exceptionally luminous, because the mind is so still it accurately reflects the radiance of the self.

There is one more so-called spiritual phenomenon, the *shaktipat* guru, a person with exceptionally powerful and radiant energy, energy that is capable of creating intense experiences in proximate minds. It is often assumed that such gurus are enlightened. They may be if they have the firm knowledge that 'I am limitless awareness' and the mind is particularly *sattvic*, but there is another way to account for this phenomenon that has nothing to do with enlightenment.

There is a group of scientific yogic practices handed down from antiquity that accumulate energy. The practice of accumulating energy is called '*tapas*' or 'heat producing.' The idea behind *tapas* is that energy flows from the subtlest layer of reality, the unconscious mind, into the conscious mind, and out through the senses into the world at large. The source of this energy, the self (which is not energy) is limitless so the energy is limitless. This is why the universe, which is just energy, is limitless.

In any case, if the energy is blocked at the sense level, not allowed to flow into objects (activities that dissipate it), it will accumulate in the mind which is also limitless because it is just the self in a particular form of energy called *chitta*. The practice involves considerable will power because

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<sup>16</sup> Avarana shakti

<sup>17</sup> Vikeshpa shakti

<sup>18</sup> Jnana shakti



the *vasanas* are dynamic and need to express themselves so when they are frustrated they remain in the mind in the form of heat. When enough energy accumulates in the mind it produces light. This kind of mind energy is like water behind a dam. It appears still and luminous but it has a tremendous potential. So when it is allowed to escape from the mind it flows into less dynamic minds and lifts them up, just as water flowing fills a hole in the ground.

The primary purpose of this practice is to incinerate *vasanas* for the purpose of gaining the kind of pure mind necessary for enlightenment. When the mind accumulates energy in this way, the energy can activate latent tendencies in the *chitta* and certain miraculous ‘supernatural’ powers may appear including the power to spiritually ‘awaken’ others. In fact, there is nothing particularly ‘spiritual’ about the experience (‘spiritual’ awakenings happen in every conceivable ‘worldly’ circumstance more often than they do in apparently ‘spiritual’ settings)<sup>19</sup> except the association with such a person in a ‘spiritual’ setting. If the aspirant is unclear about the goal, enlightenment, he or she may be tempted to capitalize on this situation to impress an ever-gullible sensation-seeking public who has no idea of the true nature of enlightenment. And, because the goal has not been reached, the yogi often assumes that the experience of intense energy is the goal and propagates the belief that enlightenment is a particular kind of experience. The New Age culture and the recent *satsang* gurus are especially guilty of spreading this frustrating<sup>20</sup> belief.

But because a person has extraordinary energy does not mean that he or she is not enlightened. Indeed, if the person has purified the mind before enlightenment, he or she will have energy and enlightenment. If the enlightenment came in spite of the condition of the mind, the mind can be quickly purified from the self’s position, rendering the person energetic and wise.

Very often an unenlightened person with a particular gift attracts many people. Being the focus of many minds increases the energy in his or her mind and that energy flows back into the surrounding minds producing a range of experiences from sublime to demonic...depending on the condition of the mind channeling and the minds receiving the energy. This person, like the *shakti-pat* yogi, is often considered enlightened because he or she

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<sup>19</sup> The author’s spiritual awakening happened in the Post Office at Waikiki Beach, Hawaii.

<sup>20</sup> The belief is frustrating because the experience of the self invariably ends and the person is returned to his or her previous ‘state’. Because the experience was uplifting it causes the person to court it again and again so that in the spiritual world you find a class of people who could only be described as spiritual junkies, continually craving what they have just lost.

seems to be very powerful. Because the mind has not been properly purified it is incapable of functioning normally at high states of vibration and it becomes unstable. Then the person loses his or her discrimination and makes foolish decisions that effectively ruin his or her life and the lives of those who associate with them. Recent spiritual history is replete with tales of this sad phenomenon.

It is quite possible, and indeed the rule rather than the exception, that a regular person with a normal state of mind wakes up and goes on to 'attain'<sup>21</sup> enlightenment. In this case the person, who is actually the self and knows it, operates through a very ordinary life, and anyone coming into contact with him or her would have no idea of his or her 'state.'<sup>22</sup>

### **The Problem of Language**

Two languages obtain in the spiritual world. The most popular and most imprecise is the language of experience which has been propagated by the yogic tradition. The least popular and most precise is the language of identity or knowledge employed by Vedanta. In the best of all possible worlds there should be no cross-pollination. Each has its value and is specific to its view of enlightenment.

Because the yogic view of enlightenment is 'experiential' it employs a dualistic language because experience is dualistic, the relationship between a subject and an object. According to this view enlightenment is a unique, permanent experience of the Self. The problem with this view is that the Upanishads, the ultimate authority on the nature enlightenment, describe the self, which is everything that exists, in the language of identity as a 'non-dual' reality and enlightenment as the knowledge 'I am the limitless self'<sup>23</sup> based on the discovery<sup>24</sup> of oneself as such.

The usual progression in understanding takes one from the language of experience to the language of identity. There are many people in the spiritual world who have had considerable experience of the reflection of the self in the mind when the mind was in a *sattvic* condition and who would be classified as self realized according to the stages of enlightenment mentioned above. But, rightly, these people are not satisfied and continue to entertain doubts about their 'state.' Usually the doubt has to do with making

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<sup>21</sup> Enlightenment is not attained as an experience or an object is attained. If it is an attainment at all it is the gaining of the hard and fast understanding 'I am the self.'

<sup>22</sup> In fact enlightenment is not a 'state.' A state by definition changes and the self does not change. Because the mind is in duality it is subject to change and can therefore entertain many different states.

<sup>23</sup> Aham Brahmasmi

<sup>24</sup> Actually enlightenment is always a redicoverly because the self is never new.

the state permanent, which is impossible since the person and his pure mind is still in the realm of time. In other words there is always the realistic fear that the experience will not last. And even though they are so close to enlightenment experientially, it still eludes them. And the reason? Because they are prisoners of the language of experience.

The language we use indicates the way we think. And at this stage, when the experience is more or less continually available, the only barrier to converting the experience to a 'permanent' state, not that enlightenment is a state, is the way one thinks. What needs to happen at this point is that the individual needs to convert the language of experience to the language of identity. The language of identity states that the experiencer and what is being experienced are not two separate things, that they are in fact the same.

When any object is experienced the knowledge of that object arises simultaneously in the intellect. And if the mind in which the reflection of the self is pure, the knowledge of the self will arise with it in the intellect. This knowledge is in the form of a thought, an *akandakara vritti*, an unbroken idea that I am the whole and complete actionless awareness that I am experiencing. **If the person is accustomed to thinking of the self as an object, he or she will be reluctant to surrender the experiencer, and the self will continue to remain as an experienced object.** The surrender is in terms of letting go of the idea of oneself as an experiencer and embracing one's limitless identity.

Were the person to be trained in the language of identity, this problem would not arise. In fact the person would immediately recognize the content of the experience as 'I' and that would finish the work. **The whole of Vedanta can be reduced to one simple equation found in the Upanishads 'You are that'** where 'that' is the self and 'you' is the self in the form of the experiencer and the verb 'are' indicates the identity between the two.

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Although Vedanta is in the public domain many of these ideas were culled from an obscure pamphlet written by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, perhaps India's foremost teacher of Vedanta, entitled 'The Teaching Tradition of Advaita Vedanta.' It was written for persons well versed in both Sanskrit and Vedanta, perhaps his many students, and would not be considered an easy read for anyone unfamiliar with traditional Vedanta. The need for a return to traditional Vedanta arose because of the hybridization of

Vedanta and Yoga over the last one hundred years which has produced considerable confusion about the nature of enlightenment.

This mixture is no more evident than in the teachings of my guru, Swami Chinmayanda, an extraordinary personality and one of the most famous and effective teachers of the last century who spearheaded a renaissance of Vedanta in post-colonial India. The Swami, who was a national figure, promoted himself as a ‘modern’ Swami and his teachings came to be known as ‘modern’ Vedanta, perhaps to widen their appeal in a backward country struggling to enter the modern era.

Swami Dayananda, who served the Chinmaya Mission for many years and was groomed to head the mission when Chinmayananda died but later separated from it and went on to teach Vedanta independently, begins his pamphlet with the sentence “I call myself a traditional teacher of Vedanta” and goes on to analyze many of the contentions of ‘modern’ Vedanta in light of the traditional teachings.

And while Chinmayandana was my guru and his teachings are responsible for my enlightenment, after many years of reflection I find myself in complete agreement with Swami Dayanada about the need to purge Vedanta of the ideas that invariably keep creeping into it, particularly the idea of enlightenment as a transcendental experience or an experience of the self. If the traditional teachings are not maintained, in a few generations Vedanta will no longer be an effective means of self knowledge.

Traditional Vedanta means that none of the ideas belong to any individual but can be traced back to the Upanishads, Brahma Sutras, and the Bhagavad Gita and that enlightenment is ultimately a problem of understanding, not experience. Swami Dayananda is a brilliant teacher of Vedanta skilled in the traditional teaching methods and it would be impossible to find fault with his presentation of Vedanta.

Because it was responsible for my enlightenment, for more than ten years I did not question Chinmaya’s modern Vedanta and propagated it with zeal. But as I cooled down and the self illumined the farthest reaches of my mind I re-entered the ancient texts I began to understand that at the highest level of spiritual evolution Yoga and Vedanta need to part company. So when I came across Swami Dayananda’s pamphlet it confirmed my own thinking.

I used the structure of the pamphlet, was faithful to Dayananda’s logic, translated much of the Sanskrit into English, shamelessly used and improved some of his language, and fattened the text by bringing in a number of ideas relating to popular misunderstandings about the nature of enlightenment. I believe it is important to stand up for Vedanta nowadays

because it has been co-opted by Europeans and Americans and mightily corrupted. Rarely do Westerners take the time to learn any ancient tradition as a whole from the inside as it is, preferring instead to pick and choose only the easy ideas that appeal to them. Once they have plundered what they want they tend to mix them with popular ideas drawn from disparate sources to create weak and laughable hybrids.

It is important to keep Vedanta pure because it is a time-tested means of enlightenment. And when it becomes corrupted it can no longer do its job...erasing the ignorance of the limitless nature of the self.