THE ESSENCE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Vedanta, the Science of Consciousness

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*Motivations*

Imagine yourself in the springtime in a mountain valley. Many beautiful flowers are blooming. Pick one of each, bring them home and lay them on a table. Each has its own beauty, but if you arrange them into a bouquet, the total becomes more than the sum of its parts. Vedanta takes all our experiences and arranges them in a way that gives us a perfect appreciation of our true nature and purpose.

Many things—wonderful skyscrapers and bridges, cell phones and the internet—are the result of humanity’s collective knowledge. Similarly, our collective spiritual experience and knowledge has coalesced into a perfect bouquet of teachings that has the power to set us free. Nobody owns it because it belongs to everyone. This perfect bouquet, this most refined vehicle, is Vedanta, the knowledge that ends the search for life’s meaning.

The human heart will not rest until it understands who and what it is. Without the vision of non-duality, you will be forced to keep seeking. If you want to understand who you are and live free, you need to sign on to the logic as it unfolds in this book. If you can’t accept the first teaching, you cannot benefit from the second. If you can’t sign on to the second, the third will not make sense. Each teaching fits seamlessly into all the others because reality is one consciousness. Vedanta is its science. To get the most out of it you must be patient, because non-duality is challenging. Knowledge may come in a flash but it does not remain without constant
exposure to the teachings. Incrementally, the vision of nonduality will coalesce in your mind. So read carefully. Never hurry. You will not be disappointed.

It is very important to see reality as it is, not as you think it is or want it to be. Everyone is proud of his spiritual knowledge, so you will have a tendency to evaluate Vedanta according to your own ideas, but this does not work. Once you have heard the teachings, you should evaluate what you know with reference to what you have heard, not the other way around. If you evaluate the teaching with reference to your beliefs and opinions, you will fail. A sense of incompleteness, separateness and limitation will remain.

The Unexamined Logic of Your Own Experience

Vedanta is an impersonal method of self-inquiry. The first stage is listening with an open mind, setting aside your personal views. Listening without judgement is difficult but not impossible. If you find yourself deciding whether or not you like what you hear, you are not listening. There is nothing to like or dislike, only something to know. If you listen without prejudice, the words will make complete sense, but if you are looking only for an explanation of reality that fits your views, Vedanta is not for you.

Once you have heard a teaching in full, as it is, you can let your beliefs and opinions interact with the truth, keeping those that make sense and discarding those that don’t. This, the second stage of self-inquiry, is reflection or contemplation. If you surrender to this process, you will succeed.

You may understand a particular teaching well enough, but to succeed with self-inquiry you need to understand the truth that links all the teachings together in a beautiful necklace of meaning, like pearls on a string. The vision of nonduality is not gained by synthesizing teachings from different
traditions. It is, however, easily gained if you consistently expose your mind to it.

I will introduce a few Sanskrit terms so that you understand that this is not my teaching. I have no teachings. I am simply a person who has been taught. I am not unenlightened, nor am I enlightened. I do not want you to believe me, to depend on me. I ask only that you listen with an open mind to this great knowledge. You will not be disappointed or cheated, because I follow the rules of the tradition. I have no agenda. Teachers outside the tradition, even the sincere ones, are usually unreliable guides to the truth because they know only that part of reality revealed by their own experience.

You will not get partial knowledge or be misled by an “enlightened” person if you listen to Vedanta, because it is a proven scriptural tradition. If you know the source of this great wisdom, you can check to see if I am teaching truth or merely what I think or believe. Teaching scripture protects me, too. If you have an argument with something you hear, the argument will be with the teaching, not with me. Hearing things you do not like is inevitable. Please don’t blame me. I am a good person and I do not wish to upset you, but I sometimes have to deliver bad news.

**What Do I Want? Security, Pleasure and Virtue**

Vedanta’s first inquiry is: what do I really want in life? It is clear that I do not want to be miserable. If misery comes—and it does—it is not because I want it. It is probably because I am incompetent or inefficient in my seeking owing to lack of understanding about myself and the world in which I live.

Everyone wants to be free and happy, to feel whole and complete. If you think there is another reason you are here on earth in this body, self-inquiry is not for you. When peo-
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People want to be free and happy they chase things that they believe will make them free and happy.

The first thing we chase is security. It stands to reason, because life is insecure. You can’t expect anything to last. There are many forms of security, the most obvious of which is financial security. Few feel they have enough money. It is a fact that everyone wants more money because desires are endless and money is required to get what you want. It is natural to believe that the more money you have, the more secure you will be, but it is not true.

Seeking is based on a sense of insecurity and insecurity has many faces. If you are financially secure, rest assured that you will feel insecure in other areas of life. You may be insecure socially or morally. When I ask if anyone has enough love, almost no hands go up. You always believe that you could love yourself more or receive more love. If you want attention, it means you are emotionally insecure. Before I go on enumerating the things we seek, you should know that not all necessarily apply to you. This is just a general list on the basis of which we are going to expose certain facts about the reality of worldly pursuits.

There is a famous book in the Vedic tradition on the topic of pleasure, the Kama Sutra. It is there because pleasure is something that people feel they need to know. Once you are financially secure, you want to enjoy life, so various forms of pleasure may become your goal. Western societies are financially successful and therefore we are obsessed with entertainment. Security is a necessity; pleasure is a luxury. Westerners don’t see people sleeping on the streets as they do in India, where luxuries are virtually nonexistent and people have no time to pursue pleasure. In our world luxuries have become necessities.

When you are emotionally insecure, you want to have a
good time. See how much energy is put into entertainment: internet, sports, gambling, travel, music, sex, drugs—you name it. We don’t really need these things, but they are available, so we want them. Sundari, my wife, calls them “weapons of mass distraction.” I go through airports all the time and have to walk through a gauntlet of shops with all manner of tempting things: thousand-dollar handbags, mountains of chocolate and electronic toys too numerous to mention. A sane person does not need even one of these items. I bought a small digital scale on the plane yesterday to weigh my luggage so I would not get charged extra to carry my useless luxuries from one country to another. They printed a receipt from a tiny computer.

Pleasure is not a goal that is conducive to happiness, because moments of pleasure require three factors that are not always available: (1) an object capable of giving pleasure: sometimes I am out in beautiful nature surrounded by mosquitoes (2) an appropriate, effective instrument for the enjoyment of said object: sometimes there is beautiful music playing but I have an earache; and (3) the presence of the proper frame of mind for enjoyment: sometimes I am feeling randy in the presence of a sexy, willing person but I am worried about losing my job. Because pleasure is dependent on these ever-changing factors, moments of pleasure are occasional and fleeting. This fact should—if I am a thinking person—lead me to conclude that there must be more fruitful pursuits.

Let’s say you are secure financially and you are uninterested in pleasure because your life is good by the usual criteria. However, you don’t feel that you are good enough as a person. You feel selfish, vain, arrogant and self-indulgent; perhaps you are cruel or none too honest. You know you have a moral problem and you feel guilty. Consequently, you would like to be more honest, pure, holy, sweet, generous and lov-
ing. What do you do? You pursue virtue.

In Christian cultures you learn that you are a sinner more or less as soon as you pop out of the womb. Yes, there is a grace period when Mom and Pop think you are God’s gift to the human race and lavish affection on you, but before long they start to tell you that there is something wrong with you. It’s news to you, a rude awakening. Before you know it, you start to have a complex. You believe, without a shred of evidence, that you are not good enough. These days many people with low self-esteem work hard to become holy and good. This striving to be virtuous is very sad because there is nothing actually wrong with you.

Some people feel weak and set out to seek power. They tend to make the lives of others miserable because they feel miserable inside. There are many other things people want, but the last one I will mention is fame or recognition. You feel small and unimportant because there is a small person inside—an inner child that never grew up, a small person that wants to be noticed and appreciated. So you become a needy pest, always seeking attention. You develop sophisticated strategies to get people to notice you.

There is no need to discuss all human pursuits; these are the basic ones. All are meant to make you feel adequate, whole, complete, happy and free. Let’s see if they work.

We have now arrived at a very important point in our first inquiry. Some part of you is not going to like what comes next, but try to take this on board. Examine the logic carefully. Failure to understand the next teaching may disqualify you for enlightenment.

**Does Happiness Exist?**

Everybody has been happy for a minute or two, an hour, a week or a month. This proves happiness exists. But where
does it come from?

**IS IT IN OBJECTS?**

When you get what you want, you feel free, happy, complete and whole. Does this mean that the feeling of happiness-wholeness-completeness-freedom comes from the object? You do not chase things to make yourself unhappy. You pursue what you pursue because you believe the joy is somehow contained in the object.

But is it true? Is there happiness in objects? If it were true, the same object would give everyone happiness. A granny who knits socks and little wool caps for her grandchildren is not going to enjoy bungee jumping. Can you see granny standing on the edge of a bridge with bungee cords attached to her legs? And how happy is her teenage grandson who loves jumping off bridges going to be knitting socks?

If objects are the source of joy, it is reasonable to chase things in the world. Let’s analyze the situation and see where the joy lies. You have a well-developed fantasy about the perfect person—your soul mate. You believe your loneliness will end and happiness will come when she appears. You go to a meeting. You see someone who fits your fantasy. Your eyes meet across the room. You feel an exciting buzz.

What happens to the fantasy when you actually connect? It disappears! Why? Because the object is present. A great feeling of love and happiness floods over you. You assume that the joy is coming from the object and immediately become attached to it. But your assumption is incorrect. *When the desire for the object disappears, the love that is the nature of the self immediately floods the mind.* The object is not the source of the feeling; it is just a catalyst that releases your inbuilt joy. The only reasonable conclusion I can draw leads me to ask: if happiness/love is my nature, why am I looking for it in objects?
If you cannot accept this fact right now, we can still teach you. Let’s accept your contention that joy is in objects. Before we move on, let me ask you this question: what kind of happiness is it? You cannot claim that it is permanent happiness. When the experience ends, your sense of incompleteness returns and you try to reconnect with the same object or you seek a new object. You may argue that objective happiness works if you can stay connected to the things that seem to make you happy. But objects come and go. No object remains permanently in your life. The only constant is me, the subject! Vedanta contends that the nature of the subject is limitless bliss. It is a contention that we will prove in many ways. But if you are attached to your belief in the value of objects for happiness, please tentatively accept our view as a working hypothesis and listen to these teachings. You may change your mind.

Objects don’t work as the source of happiness for a very simple reason: I seek completeness when I am already complete. I do this because I do not know who I am.

We should consider one more sad fact about objects: you do not get rid of the seeking when you get what you want, because the effort that went into obtaining the object is required to keep it. Everything is going south all the time. If you get a good job, your troubles have just begun; you must work hard to keep it. If you are lucky enough to have someone fall in love with you, you need to reciprocate more or less constantly or the love will go elsewhere.

Finally, not only are the objects inherently flawed in terms of their happiness content, the field in which the objects appear is set up in such a way that lasting happiness is impossible. The field of my experience, which is just my mind, is a duality. This means that because I do not know the non-dual nature of reality, I think in terms of opposites. For every up-
side there is a downside. Every gain entails a loss. For example, you fall in love and discover intimacy. But you also suffer attachment. To live in the house of your dreams makes you happy, but to do so you have to take a mortgage and pay through the nose for thirty years, which does not make you happy. Life is like that. There is no way to beat the system and get only the upside from life’s experiences. As the poet says, life is “joy and sorrow woven fine.” It is a zero-sum game.

**Definition of an Object**

An object is anything other than me, the subject. My body appears as an object in me. My feelings appear in me and are known to me. They, too, are objects, as are my thoughts, beliefs and opinions. Absolutely anything that I experience is an object, including the past, present and future. Experience itself is an object known to me. Please do not forget this definition because it is the essence of self-inquiry; you will need it right up to the end of your inquiry—and beyond. It is the basis of the practice that will set you free.

**I Am Not an Object**

If something is known to me, it cannot be me. Physical objects, thoughts and emotions and my experiences in the world are objects known to me.

**Am I Separate from Objects?**

Let’s deepen our inquiry. Where do I end and the objects begin? Is there a separation? If there is, what kind of separation is it? If you analyze perception, you will see that the objects are not actually separate from the subject, me.

Light strikes objects and travels through the eyes, and the experience and knowledge of the object happens in the mind. The knowledge of the object is true to the object. If a dog is
walking in front of you, you do not see a cat. What is the experience of the dog made of? It is made of your mind, the perceiving instrument. The mind is your consciousness taking the shape of various objects. It can know anything because it is formless and limitless. If you think about the experience of the dog, you can see that from an experiential point of view the dog is actually in your mind, not outside walking on the street. It looks as though it is outside, but if you try to experience it outside, you cannot. No matter how close you get to the dog, it is always an object. You cannot just jump out of your body-mind and experience objects, because objects are not located where they seem to be. They always seem to be away from us but they are not.

Here is one of Vedanta’s counterintuitive assertions: objects are not real. When we say they are not real, we mean that they never stay the same from second to second and they are made up of parts. Which part of the dog is actually the dog? The hair, the teeth, the paws, the nose? And if the dog is the nose, what is the nose? It is an aggregation of particles changing according to various natural laws. So which particle is the nose particle? When you get very close to the dog, the dog is only a patch of hair.

When you investigate, all objects ultimately break down to the space in which the particles appear and the observer of the space. The observer is conscious of space and objects sitting in it, or they could not be known. And the consciousness of the observer is the consciousness that knows everything.

**Definition of Real**

Something is real if it never changes. Objects are not real because they change. If you think about it carefully, this fact will upset you because you would not pursue objects if you knew they were unreal.
In any case, we are trying to determine where objects are located and the relationship I have to them. Here is another exhaustive analysis of the relationship between the subject, me, and the objects that present themselves to me. This inquiry shows that the objects we identify and think we are experiencing through sensory perceptions are essentially nothing more than specific sensations created by the sense organs. The sensations we experience do not constitute the entirety of the object with which we associate them. For instance, the hardness we feel on our rear end when sitting on a wooden chair does not constitute the knowledge of the entire chair. The chair becomes a chair only because we make an inference based on an idea of what a chair is. What we experience is only certain distinct sensations in the body, which in turn are interpreted to mean something by the mind, which like the body, appears as an object in me, awareness. These sensations and the knowledge that arises with them do not equal either the experience of the chair or the knowledge of the chair. All we experience is hardness or softness (if the chair is upholstered) and an idea of chair. Greg Goode’s book *The Direct Path* presents many concrete experiments that prove that objects seem to be out there but are not really located where they seem to be.

If you investigate further, you will see that the chair is nothing but the experience of the particular sense organ through which it is perceived. Furthermore, the independent existence of any sensation cannot be verified by an organ other than the organ that experiences it. For the chair to be objective and subject to common knowledge, it would have to be verified by some other organ of perception. But it is only when a given sensation appears in me that I experience what is called seeing, hearing, tasting, touching, or smelling.

Continuing to inquire, we discover that sense organs are
essentially nothing other than me, the awareness that sees them. I do not experience them as instruments sitting around waiting to be used by me. I do not think, “I want to smell the rose. I wonder where I left my nose? I had it yesterday but it seems to be lost. Let me call my wife, maybe she misplaced it.” Analysis reveals that each organ is a unique function of awareness by virtue of which a particular type of perception occurs.

Finally, since awareness is required or the sense organ cannot sense, it is clear that the senses are dependent on awareness for their very existence—but awareness does not depend on them. You, awareness, exist whether or not you are sensing objects, as in deep sleep, for example. If they have no independent existence, the objects the senses seem to report—which is the basis of our knowledge of them—have no existence apart from me, the witnessing awareness, about which much will be said as we proceed. If the objects exist only as sensations and sensations exist only as me, the joy that is apparently caused by contact with objects is coming only from me. If we think one step further, it will become clear that I cannot separate the happiness I feel from me, the subject. Just as a wave is never separate from the ocean in which it “waves,” the joy that waves up when I get what I want is just me, consciousness.

So we see that objects are not away from us in a world “out there.” They are experienced and known “in” us. If we take our inquiry a bit further, we come up with the fact that is the basis of Vedanta, the knowledge that sets us free from dependence on objects: we discover that reality is non-dual and that we cannot depend on objects because they are us. If our analysis is true—and it is—then the objects we experience are not separate from the consciousness that makes the experience of them possible.
THE OBJECTS ARE ME

Let me ask a million dollar question. How far are you from your experiencing consciousness? And the answer is: you are not far at all. In fact, there is no difference between the real you, the non-experiencing witness consciousness, and your experiencing consciousness, the person you think you are. Although the person you think you are is an object known to you, like the physical objects are known to it, it is non-separate from you, the non-experiencing witness—the real you—just as a ring made of gold is not separate from the gold. If this is true, the objects are you! This is what we mean when we use the word *non-duality*. Duality, the distinction between the subject and the object, breaks down when you investigate the nature of perception.

BUT I AM NOT AN OBJECT

The fly in the ointment of duality is this: the body cannot be you because it is an object known to you in the same way that any other object is known to you. Like the body, you are not your emotions or your thoughts or anything that happens in you, because all these objects are known by you. My hand is me, but I am not my hand. If my hand is removed, I am still the same. Of course, if I am the body, I am not the same. I am a body with one hand.

This is an incredible fact to appreciate because it means that I am never in conflict with objects and I am free of them—particularly the unpleasant ones—at the same time.

**Definition of Non-Duality**

It is vitally important at the beginning of the teaching to understand the meaning of non-duality. It is easy to understand when you undertake the inquiry into perception, but it is very difficult to accept because it is contradicted by ex-
We do not think deeply about the process of experience as we experience. We take the appearance of experience—that the subject and the object are separate—to be the reality and build our lives on it, when in fact nothing is separate from us at all.

It makes a huge difference to know that everything is actually you, not someone or something else. Conflict virtually disappears and the small conflicts that do develop are easily laid to rest. Furthermore, it makes an equally big difference to know that you are free of objects.

Finally, the icing on the cake of life is the fact that you are happiness itself. If happiness is not in the objects and there are only two categories in existence, the subject and the objects, then happiness can only be you. When you appreciate yourself as the subject, you will be blissful because you are always present.

If I am not happy, it is not due to the presence or absence of an object, it is due to a failure to distinguish myself from the objects that appear in me. Vedanta is a workable method for discovering both our oneness with everything and our freedom from everything.

Non-duality does not mean that you walk around in some kind of ecstatic, orgasmic spiritual daze unable to distinguish yourself from the objects and the experiencing consciousness—the “little” you. It doesn’t mean that the person you have taken yourself to be for so long is not there. You hear spiritual people saying that a particular “enlightened being” is so “not there,” as if there were virtue in being nonexistent.

For the record, that person—the one you are trying to change or rid yourself of—remains when you know who you are. It is just known to be an object non-separate from you, awareness, the non-experiencing witness. That person, the one that gives you so much trouble, is a problem only because
you identify with it. When you understand clearly that you are not exclusively that person and identify with who you really are, he appears as a good friend, a toothless enemy, or at worst just an amusing bundle of irrational tendencies.

You may feel a little silly when you realize that you were tricked by duality and that you are actually awareness, the non-experiencing witness. Don’t berate yourself for taking yourself to be the experiencing awareness for so long. Everyone is fooled by duality.

So far I have equated the understanding of the non-dual nature of reality with the word *happiness*. Maybe happiness is not a precise word to describe the result of the discrimination between the subject and the objects. The happiness we are talking about is not the result of a happening, getting what you want or avoiding what you don’t. It is not “ha ha” happiness. Or “I won the lottery and fell in love” happiness. The kind of happiness that is the nature of the self is a subtle simple sense of wholeness and completeness, a quiet contentment born of an unquestionable sense of self-confidence: knowing that no matter what happens, good or bad, I am always OK because I am a partless whole. I am adequate. There are no divisions in me, no boundaries or borders separate me from anything.

So the self-inquiry process boils down to determining if I am whole and complete—and therefore free—or if I am incomplete, and therefore not free. If I am complete, then I needn’t chase objects. If I am incomplete, I must keep chasing objects.

Self-inquiry is an existential, not a philosophical, intellectual, religious or mystical issue. The basic question is: what am I doing here on Earth in this meat tube? Who am I? What is life all about? If I could figure it out on my own, I would have done so by now. But the problem is too tricky. I need
help. I need a means of self-knowledge. Vedanta is a means of self-knowledge. It reveals the hidden logic of our own experience and convinces us that if we are rational, it is to our advantage to abandon the pursuit of objects and to go for freedom directly.

We are almost at the end of the first teaching. If you want to move to the second teaching, you need to have signed on to the logic so far. If you can’t accept it, the next teaching will make no sense, because you will still be expecting some kind of object—usually changed circumstances—to make you happy. If this logic is not enough—and it often isn’t because of the ego’s pig-headed insistence that objects are the source of happiness—please consider one last fact…

*Life Is a Zero-Sum Game*

As previously mentioned, the lid on the coffin of the object happiness idea is the sad fact that life is a zero-sum game. It is a zero-sum game because the world of objects is a duality. You cannot win every time. You lose as much as you win. I need money for security, but my desire to spend (what good is money if you can’t spend it?) makes me insecure. The more pleasure I get, the more pleasure I want. Wanting is painful. I want power to be free of my sense of inadequacy and smallness, but power depends on circumstances not under my control, causing me to feel powerless. I want to be perfect, but the more perfect I become, the more hidden imperfections come to light. I want to enjoy the intimacy of a relationship, but to get it I need to be attached to the object, so I lose my freedom. If I want to be free, I have to sacrifice intimacy. The list goes on.

*The Fourth Pursuit*

We divided experience into three basic pursuits: security,
pleasure and virtue. Objects can give us the first two, and the way we go about pursuing objects can give us the third. But actually, there is only one pursuit, the pursuit of freedom. Why? Because I want an object for the freedom that comes when the desire for the object goes. I don’t want security. I want freedom from insecurity. I don’t want pleasure, I want freedom from suffering. I don’t want virtue, I want freedom from sin.

There is nothing wrong with objects, per se. But they are only an indirect means to temporary happiness. Since the real object of pursuing objects is freedom, I need a direct path. On this path, I go directly for happiness. I understand clearly that objects will not help. You are not a mature, spiritually healthy person, one qualified for inquiry, unless you understand this teaching on objects.

This is the point where the rubber meets the road, spiritually. Everyone wants freedom, all right, but they want freedom plus the objects. They want to keep all their stuff and add the freedom object to their object pile. It doesn’t work, but that does not stop them from thinking that it does. It doesn’t work, because freedom is not an object that we can get as an experience. If we can, then it is not freedom at all, because all experiences come to an end one fine day.

Understanding that there is a direct path to freedom is perhaps the most important moment in life. To pursue anything properly, whether it is security, pleasure or virtue, you should commit yourself to it 100%. The more things you pursue, the less likely you are to get any one of them. You can get only so far with a particular desire before it conflicts with another desire. The next goal seems more attainable, so you drop the first. People hop from one thing to another, never finding success in one thing because they believe that something else will work better or faster.

If you are actually awareness and not the needy, wanting
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creature you think you are—and awareness is non-dual and always free of the objects known to it—pursuing anything else is not going to work. If you want to pursue security, pleasure, or virtue, or power, or fame, or whatever, then go for it. But there is no substance in those things. They give pleasure and pain intermittently, but not the self-confident happiness that comes from knowing that freedom is your nature.

1 *Veda* means knowledge in Sanskrit and *anta* means end. The compound word *Vedanta* has two meanings: 1) the knowledge that ends the search for knowledge and 2) the knowledge enshrined at the end of each of the four Vedas. The Vedas are the oldest extant texts on the topic of consciousness, the self.

2 The words *consciousness* and *awareness* are synonyms. Both refer to me, the subject. I have purposely avoided using the Sanskrit terms, Brahman and Atman, because we have no way to evaluate them outside the Sanskrit tradition. Both words refer to consciousness (*chaitanyam, chetena*) viewed from slightly different angles. And there is no difference between them. I tend to favor the word *awareness* because the Western mind tends to view consciousness as subjective objects appearing in consciousness, which creates a problem because the whole point of self-inquiry is to distinguish consciousness from objects.