

Enlightenment Sickness

By Rory Mackay

One of the reasons that Vedanta is intended only for sufficiently qualified, pure minds, is the danger of the ego co-opting the knowledge. Self-knowledge, when properly integrated, ought to humble the ego into submission by realizing that it is, in fact, only *mithya*, an epiphenomenon that has no independent existence of its own.

However, left unchecked, the ego will try to create a new identity for itself out of this knowledge: a super-identity. This is called superimposing *satya* on *mithya*.

The ego is sly and extremely tricky. Its entire purpose is to cement itself and to create a better, firmer, more solid sense of identity. When an immature, unqualified, *rajasic* mind is exposed to Vedanta, the potential exists for disaster.

Indeed, Vedanta is a veritable heaven for the narcissistic mind. The scriptures affirm that, far from being limited and lacking, you are actually the limitless, eternal, boundless Self. The teaching is not designed to aggrandize the ego. Its intent is to neutralize the ego by revealing it, and the instruments of body and mind, to be but *mithya*; appearances in consciousness and entirely dependent upon that consciousness.

By knowing that the Self is everything, and that I am the Self, the ego can potentially inflate itself to absurd proportions. This accounts for what Vedanta calls ‘enlightenment sickness’, where the ego surreptitiously co-opts Self-knowledge for its own ignoble ends.

The ‘spiritual ego’ can be far more dangerous than a regular ego. Such an ego is still under the sway of *samsara*, and still seeking wholeness in the *mithya* world, but it now does so under the guise of being ‘enlightened’ and whatever superiority it believes this confers. Spiritual teachers who abuse their followers and compulsively violate *dharma* are usually victim to enlightenment sickness—which is, in fact, a distortion of true Self-knowledge, and therefore not enlightenment at all.

If the student has a good teacher and has properly followed the *dharma* of the teaching, as well as undertaken the necessary purification of mind (*antahkarana shuddi*), this is less likely to happen. Sadly, however, in a materialistic, often *adharmic* society in which ‘anything goes’ spiritually, it’s not

uncommon for the ego to misinterpret and distort spiritual teaching for its own ends, thus creating the dreaded 'spiritual ego'.

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