

Welcome to Paradox City – Enjoy Your Stay, Enjoy Your Mess

Guest

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It is easy to get lost in Vedanta-speak: *mithya*, *samsara*, *purusha*, *prakriti* and a hundred more such terms, each more unpronounceable than the previous one. It is also easy to be misled into thinking that the precision Vedanta elucidates is a facile one: it is tempting to succumb to black-and-white explanations of *Maya* and its effects. It is comforting to think that self-knowledge will annihilate complexities that are hardwired into life. It is intoxicating to believe that self-realisation will be an automatic panacea.

It may actually be a very good thing to come to Vedanta as a cynical realist, with some deep and bitter scars that still sting. Scars can be educational – very educational, if properly understood – because we are more likely to test and scrutinise the quality and quantity of the peace, felicity and joy that self-knowledge engenders; if life has already mercilessly opened our eyes to the individual and collective nihilism of a psychotic and psychopathic world, then our approach to Vedanta will not be naive or simplistic.

This is by way of prelude to the theme of this essay: Vedanta is fundamentally paradoxical. It abounds in them. Paradox does not necessarily imply complexity; but it does place a responsibility on us to examine carefully the context and circumstances we find ourselves in at any given time. Generalisations are important and necessary; but they can also be misleading if we do not apply the necessary discernment and discrimination to such statements. Like living or working in a *rajasic-tamasic* city, it pays to be constantly alert to potentially dangerous, misleading or ambiguous situations.

The fact is that life is irredeemably messy, with a frustrating abundance of grey areas and situations. (Blame the perversity of *Maya* for that.) It is therefore virtually inevitable that a mature understanding on any Vedanta topic will contain apparent contradictions, seemingly irreconcilable statements. Vedanta is not baby food; it requires a careful appreciation of what we are digesting, a discerning palate, if you will. And life will ensure there is plenty to digest. Yes, it is important to remember that “the devil is in the details.” But so is the self. Every Vedantic paradox is, ultimately, benign. The *samsaric* world of “smoke and mirrors” with which we interact is a form of the self, whether we like it or not.

One unavoidable paradox is that, whilst we may know with a certainty beyond words that we are the ever-free self, and enjoy the concomitant benefits, our *vasanas* don't know and don't care. But this is not to say that we do not understand that our desires and aversions are merely part of a (very) crazy game, and are without substance. (“Crazy” appears to be *Maya*'s default setting.)

Inside the paradox of the apparent limitation of the self by the human condition lies another paradox: no matter how deep or ancient the scars seared into the subconscious, they have no reality. Of course they have an apparent effect (which is sometimes profound), and when *karma* seems to press the chaos button, we are not required to smile a plastic, beatific smile and pretend that head and heart are somehow above it all. They are not. Yet we continue to somehow know our own true nature, and we somehow know that as the self we are always

untouched and complete, and perfectly whole. This may be a paradox both bitter and beautiful, as far as the head and heart are concerned. But, as the self, we are unconcerned. And the whole apparent mess somehow resolves and dissolves into the reality of the realised self. And it is possible to smile or laugh at it all. Really. No matter how primal the emotions that may have been triggered, it is an experiential fact that, as the *Gita* famously states, nothing purifies like knowledge.

There is another verse in the *Gita* which states that the self is that from which words/concepts “recoil.” One could likewise say that anything in this *samsaric* mess “bounces off,” so to speak, our understanding of our real nature. There is a fundamental, unbreachable buffer between the two, in other words. We could call it a guarantee of sanity, and there is nothing “metaphysical” about it; it is about as practical as it gets. So the said mess may not be enjoyable, but paradoxically you may find yourself enjoying your stay in the mess. It may in fact be difficult not to enjoy it. A paradox too far? I think I’ll stop now.