

## A Thorn to Remove a Thorn

Can this teaching be understood through words alone? Can we recognise our true nature just by reading the words or listening to the recordings of a teacher we have never met? Maybe. But for most of us, it seems that language can be both a help and a hindrance. This is especially so in the early stages, before we have a clear understanding based on our own experience, an understanding that we can use as our guide in subsequent investigation. This paper is about how our inherently dualistic language can be used to convey the understanding of non-duality. It describes the pitfalls of language, and how they can be overcome.

But before going into any of that, it's important to point out that for many, if not most of us, words are not enough; a relationship with a teacher and the silent transmission are necessary. Words then take on the role of helpful supplements.

In this extract from a recent dialogue, Francis discusses how we need to work around the grammatical rules that are used to structure sentences and which reinforce a dualist perspective:

*Q: I have a question about the phrase 'I am'. I understand the 'am' bit as being or awareness, which is also me. With the 'I' part I have this confusion because the English language structures it as a subject, as a noun. But I don't feel the 'I' as a noun.*

FL: Yes. First verbs usually describe actions. In other words, an action is usually a movement, it's something dynamic. But 'to be' doesn't change. There is no dynamism in being. So there is already a paradox in using a verb to describe something which is static. On the other hand, 'I', the 'I' part of 'I am' is a pronoun. A pronoun stands for a noun, and a noun is a word that describes an object. So 'I' is also not well designed to describe or to refer to something which is not an object such as awareness. Isness which is referred to by the verb 'to be' – 'am' in this case, is not well-described by a verb. On the other hand, awareness, 'I', is not well-described by a noun or a pronoun.

By putting these two together, 'I am', we signify that I am is neither described with a noun nor with a verb. So it is neither an object nor an action. And then the problem that remains is that we conjugate verbs – I am, you are, he she it is etc. And because of all this series of various pronouns – first person, second person, third person singular and plural etc., it seems that there is a multiplicity of objects – I, you, he, she, it etc. That also doesn't apply to our experience of 'I', because our experience is that we have only experienced one single consciousness not two. So the language is essentially, by essence dualistic.

So we're never satisfied by any expression. We have to go around it. And the way to go around the language is two-fold. One is instead of using logical language to use analogical, in other words to use analogies, images, metaphors. So the beauty of a metaphor is that it goes beyond the restriction of nouns and pronouns because it is much wider. It is a symbol. It is something that points as a whole, to the whole. When you put more words together, you get more certainty in the expression. And in this way you can more easily point to that which cannot be pointed at simply through a noun or through a verb, because it is neither an object nor an action. So that's the first way to point to the truth, or to point to what we are – through analogy. That's a very powerful way.

Definitions can become circular, for instance if I want to define it, what does 'to be' mean? I can say OK, 'to be' means 'to exist without beginning without end' but then I have to explain what 'existence' means and what 'beginning' means and what 'end' means, so I will be always caught

in a circular series of explanations, because the buck has to stop somewhere. So descriptive language using words will always fall short. That's why another way to overcome this difficulty is to point directly. For instance, if I say 'awareness is whatever it is that is hearing these words right now', then that's different, because I don't define awareness by saying 'OK awareness is consciousness' or 'awareness is reality', or 'awareness is you'. No I define it as 'whatever it is which is hearing these words right now'. So then you have to look. Are these words being heard right now? And no matter how you try to escape this, what I've just said, the more you escape, the more you are going to think, and these thoughts are appearing to the same whatever it is which was hearing the words. So then you have it as a direct experience. So that's a second way – to point. It's the most powerful of all because it kind of bypasses all the language, all the words.

So yes, it's difficult to answer your question. I've tried. For one person to say 'I' suffices, another person says 'I am', another person will say 'being', putting the emphasis on the verb. But remember if there are no objects, there is only one, so there is only the first person. So there is always 'I' and 'to be', meaning 'I am' or 'I' and 'being'. Then the fundamental equation of Advaita, because there is only one reality, the reality of 'I' is also the reality which 'is'. There is only one reality. So 'I' equals 'being', '*atman*' equals '*brahman*'. *Chaitanya*, *chit* equals *sat* – Advaita.

[Francis Lucille 30/4/2022, Online Satsang]

We all recognise that analogies such as the screen and the movie, and the ocean and the waves cannot be taken literally. It's obvious. What is less obvious is that philosophical models also cannot be taken as the ultimate truth. In the following extract from my interview with Bernardo Kastrup for Bill Free's 'Know Thyself' conference, Bernardo explains how his own model of analytic idealism which he has worked on lovingly and carefully elaborated over many years, is nothing more than a model – it is not truth. And in doing so, he implicitly points out that the same applies to any other model of reality, whether realist, idealist or neither:

BK: It's almost inevitable when we want to conceptualize something, create a model, or even when we want to talk about something, it's inevitable that we bring in extension, that we bring in space and time. Because space and time are built into language. Verbs are actions that unfold in time. We talk about tenses – past, present, and future, future perfect and all these things. Spatial limits and separations are built into language – subject and object, things, nouns. Our intellect, our ability to conceptualize and model nature, is fundamentally based on space and time. ...

So the moment I open my mouth to talk about analytic idealism, I presuppose space-time. ... We just have to keep in mind that when we talk about models in space and time we are not talking about the ultimate: we are talking about the penultimate. We are talking about a projection in space-time of things that fundamentally exist outside space time.

Think of it as a shadow projected by a 3D object, say a cylinder. It projects a shadow if you shine a light on it. It projects a shadow that can be a circle or a rectangle depending on how you're illuminating the cylinder. And it's OK for us to talk about the cylinder in terms of its shadows – the shadows being space-time projections of the ultimate reality. It's OK to do that because the shadow is a representation of the cylinder. What is *not* OK is to say the cylinder *is* the shadow. Now you've got very confused, because now you no longer know what you're doing.

It's OK to speak of the cylinder in terms of shadows so long as you know that you're talking about a projection of the ultimate, not the ultimate. But when you say analytic idealism is the reality as it actually is in and of itself, if I were just to do that, I would be betraying myself. Because analytic idealism I think is the best we can do in the world of shadows. In other words, as conceptualizing monkeys on a planet of a peripheral solar system of a peripheral common galaxy, these monkeys can only talk about shadows. So that's what I do. I'm a monkey. I talk about shadows. But the monkeys can know that they are talking about shadows and not the cylinder. Some don't. Some mistake it. And then they go to war with one another, because some of them say the shadow is a rectangle and others say the shadow is a circle. And therefore, we go to war with one another because it's either a rectangle or a circle. Guess what, it's both. Because both are projections of a 3D cylinder that nobody can see. So it's OK to talk about the shadows so long as we know that we are talking about shadows.

[Bernardo Kastrup, Know Thyself Conference 22/4/2022]

Francis often uses models from science, especially physics, to debunk fixed beliefs we may have, such as the belief that the world is made of something solid and is outside of myself. It just needs one coherent model that fits the facts of our experience and gives a different perspective. Since Bernardo had worked at CERN, I was interested to hear his views on this:

*JB: I wonder whether you thought that science also has a role to play in helping to remove beliefs which are blocks in some way?*

BK: If science is consequently done, and done honestly and in accordance with the values and procedures of the scientific method, yes. Because science is keenly aware that all of its explanatory models are just convenient fictions. If you truly understand what science is doing, you understand that theories are ways of thinking about what's going on, and not necessarily what is going on. In other words, they are convenient fictions in the sense that nature behaves as though those fictions were true. But as our exploration of the behaviour of nature advances, and becomes more nuanced and detailed, we realize that previous convenient fictions no longer apply. So we come up with new convenient fictions, new stories, new narratives in terms of which to think about nature.

The problem is that even scientists, many of them, particularly the self-appointed spokespeople of science who are not scientists themselves by and large, they mistake the convenient fiction for the reality of things. And the whole history of science informs us that that's not what science is about. Science has as much to do with experimentation and theorizing as it has to do with a readiness to abandon narratives the moment they prove to not be convenient anymore. You are never married to an explanatory model if you're a true scientist. ... We are always abandoning our convenient fictions. There has never been a convenient fiction that has endured forever in science.

And in that sense science is conducive to a spiritual attitude that our fictions about self and world are convenient, but are not really true. And we need to be able to abandon them as readily as the moment when evidence tells us that what's going on is something else. ...

*JB: There's a principle in traditional Advaita called 'a thorn to remove a thorn'. So you use a convenient analogy and then when understanding progresses beyond that, you have to throw that analogy away. It's really something very similar to that, isn't it, with science?*

BK: I do see echoes in that. You know my own path has not been a spiritual path. I tend not to be romantic about or solemn about any of this stuff. I think nonsense should just be recognized as

nonsense. It's not very difficult to recognize bullshit as bullshit and you just get rid of it. And you adopt a better story and you realize that that too is a bit nonsensical and you adopt a better one. Or you give up on adopting stories, and you just live in a moment – also an alternative. But I don't see this stuff as romantic at all. You know what you might describe as great spiritual insight, I might describe as you just get rid of the bullshit. There's nothing really spectacular or difficult about it, you know.

[Bernardo Kastrup, Know Thyself Conference 22/4/2022]

Living in the moment is living in not-knowing. We need to be prepared to track down whatever thorns have been left in our spiritual flesh from our journey to the non-dual understanding, and allow them to be removed. As Francis explains in another extract from the dialogue quoted earlier, we may initially feel a little despondent when we give up the certainty of knowing, but in fact living in not-knowing is what makes life interesting and enjoyable:

FL: We have to be completely open to this not knowing. It may feel disappointing that we cannot know. But on the other hand, we have to realize that our not-knowing is not an obstacle to happiness, and that happiness or inner peace is really the goal. So the fact that we don't know, in fact makes life interesting. If we knew everything it would be so boring. If we know everything, all the equations of physics, the perfect theory of everything, it will be boring because all physicists will be out of the job. If we knew everything about mathematics, that we could instantaneously verify or falsify any conjecture we could possibly imagine, there is no room any longer to do mathematics. The same thing with music. If you know everything, life would be extremely boring. So this not knowing is an important part of the celebration.

[Francis Lucille 30/4/2022, Online Satsang]

We don't need to worry if some of the words and analogies used by a teacher don't resonate with us. Most teachers have a wide repertoire of analogies and pointers. We only need one pointer to take us to a liberating glimpse of our true nature. Sometimes, just a single word is enough, especially when we are in the presence of our teacher. As Francis explains, there are some words that have a special power to take us to their referent:

FL: There are words in our language that have a peculiar quality. Let me give you a few: I – the pronoun I; consciousness or awareness; reality. What do these words have in common? What they have in common is to appear in their referent. By 'referent' I mean that which they refer to, that which they are mapping. Case in point, the word 'consciousness' – where does it appear? In consciousness. The word 'reality' – in order for it to appear there must be reality first. The word 'I' – to whom does it appear? To me. In other words, in contra-distinction with a word such as 'chair' or 'cloud'. The word 'cloud' doesn't appear in a cloud. It appears in consciousness. The word 'chair' doesn't appear in a chair. It appears in consciousness. Even the word 'brain' doesn't appear in the brain. It appears in consciousness, not in the brain. You open a brain, you look, you don't see the word 'brain'. The word 'brain' doesn't appear in the brain. The brain, when you open it, you don't see B R A I N. It appears in consciousness.

So these words have power. In other words, because they appear in the referent, they deliver. Modern philosophy doesn't deliver. Hair-splitting doesn't deliver. These words deliver. That's a big difference. And you are not a philosopher until you have accepted the delivery. It is the moment when you have accepted the delivery, that the love for wisdom – which is the translation of the word 'philosophy' – the love of wisdom takes birth. When you accept the delivery of the word 'I' or the word 'reality' or the word 'consciousness' or potentially 'God'.

There are words like that.

[Francis Lucille, 26/9/2021: [A Nerdy Day in Temecula](#)]

## Contemplation

*The presence and words of the teacher are the mirror reminding you of, and reflecting, your own open listening, your own presence. Thus the way is shown, the door is opened to grace and you find yourself on the threshold, ready to be taken by your true self.*

[Jean Klein, *I Am*]