

PATHS PART 5

Knowledge & Attention

In the Advaita tradition taught by the Shankaracharya the approach is to view the changing world as Maya, illusion, and to seek the unchanging reality. Efforts at self-remembering, meditation and other methods are designed to clarify the mind so that reality can be seen. The Shankaracharya taught those who were intellectual or devotional by nature, but treated them differently. In the intellectual or knowledge (*jnana*) path, discrimination between what is real and what is not real is primary, so methods such as meditation that help to purify the mind so that it is capable of discrimination are important. This approach, the elimination of what is unreal, is referred to as the 'negative' way.

It has a parallel in Christian mysticism, the *via negativa* or apophatic (denying) way, exemplified by Eckhart, St John of the Cross and the unknown author of the *Cloud of Unknowing*:

For when you first begin to undertake it, all that you find is a darkness, a sort of cloud of unknowing, you cannot tell what it is, except that you experience in your will a simple reaching out to God. This darkness and cloud is always between you and your God, no matter what you do, and it prevents you from seeing him clearly by the light of understanding in your reason...So set yourself to rest in this darkness as long as you can, always crying out after him whom you love.

That is, God is ineffable, beyond our ordinary minds, and there comes a point when the ordinary self has to, and is prepared to, give up.

In the school of Ramana Maharshi, there is a different approach, which is to accept the ordinary self as it appears and as a discipline to pursue the feeling of 'I', the idea of the self, to the point where it disappears: then the world is seen just as it is, in Tony Parsons' words: 'This is all there is'. This is the 'affirmative' way.

The parallel in Christian mysticism is called the cataphatic way, but it is not exactly the same as the Indian affirmative way. It is rather an ecstatic embracing of things as they are as part of God's creation. This is more of a devotional path, epitomised by Thomas Traherne and we will come to it soon.

The question for us at this stage is 'what have we been doing with our minds – what works for us and what does not?' We have a number of examples of both of the ways described above. Those who meditate are familiar with the need to leave the ego behind at a certain point, to surrender. Trying to escape one's turning thoughts and reach stillness also entails slipping away from the ego. Most of us at times find the presence of something greater in nature. We may also have predetermined ideas of how we want to be, because of past experiences, and our aim may be 'to be like that always'.

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Though the 'knowledge' in the *jnana* path refers to knowledge of the self, there are of course questions which need answers and for the answers there is a system of knowledge. The Shankaracharya was asked about the place of knowledge:

RA. On the Fourth Way is knowledge essential?

H.H. Of course it is. The Way of the householder is in action. There must be knowledge for any action. We need all knowledge in the worldly life. But one must keep this in mind, that the nature of this knowledge brings in pain and pleasure. What we need is to co-ordinate and harmonise our life with True Knowledge. This should be able to help us to do actions better and more precisely, at the same time binding us no more with pain or pleasure. [Record 10.8.64]

The available or common knowledge is like a well near a river; when the river is full, then the well is full; and if the river is dry, then the well is dry. Common knowledge is available for use as personal knowledge. In contrast, the True Knowledge is always in existence but is not available; it is made available through a wise Man, a realised Man or qualified Teacher. Having come to a Teacher, one gets to know the important part of knowledge. [Record 4.2.71]

Similarly, it is a saying in the System that the teaching came from Higher Mind; it came from the Inner Circle of humanity.

It would be a mistake to suppose that the intellectual path does not have a devotional aspect. The Shankaracharya often used the Sanskrit word Prema in this connection, which is translated as 'Love', but which means divine, unconditional love.

H.H. Love (Prema) and Knowledge (Tattva Jnana [True Knowledge]) are the same thing, but the function of Love is to join together and that of Knowledge is to tell, to illuminate. Love joins the two things, Love joins to the Param-Atman....

Without Love, Knowledge is incomplete and without Knowledge Love is incomplete, because in the absence of Knowledge Love would go away. If there is Knowledge, then Love would be maintained. As Love increases, Knowledge also goes on increasing. Without Knowledge Love is not expansive; and without Love Knowledge is not allowed to play its full part.

Both are essential; Knowledge creates Love and then Love has Knowledge to establish its roots. [Record 26.9.74]

The idea that Love and Knowledge are the same thing needs some digestion!

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We have briefly discussed self-remembering and discrimination. Another attribute of the mind which we need to cultivate is attention, and the next paper will deal with this and its relation to self-remembering.

Exercise. Please continue with the exercise we have been doing, and if you also find you remember about it during the day when you are busy, just be quiet for a few moments if it's possible.

We might also start making some observations about attention. Just watch when you're doing some ordinary task and see how long you keep your mind on the job in hand.