

The Wholeness of You **by Swamini Saralananda**

This is the fourth part of the serial article, continuation from August 2021 newsletter.

Something I Need To Know

When the full self is appreciated as myself then a profoundly free person is there, one for whom there is no sense of lack. This is the one who has recognized the fact of this greater identity. For all of us, that is the ultimate real Self to be 'gained'. And it doesn't happen one day, a coming into being of something new, like a lottery, it is simply the relaxing into a natural recognition of the full self. It is to be had by the one who is willing to surrender his identification to the original ignorance and false sense of self.

Until all of this has been explored and understood, we continue suffering in the ocean of ups and downs, coming up to breathe the air, feeling safe for a moment until the next wave of longing hits and we feel we are holding our breath till the next happy 'fix' comes. Getting out of the ocean is what we really want, to be able to relax on the safe shores of peace and fulfillment. We need to get exhausted of living a ninja life of competition. The only way out is to turn in-ward to find out that all the joy and peace that we want waits for us within ourselves. It is not easy to find happiness within oneself but it is impossible to find it anywhere else.

This is the quest of self-inquiry, self-discovery, the wholeness of you. It is a spiritual seeking in its utmost. It is what this book is about; discovering ourselves to be the closest, dearest, most beloved Being and that Being is wholeness itself.

Understanding Self Ignorance

Self-ignorance is something 'very special', so unique, unlike any other ignorance. The ancient wise men of India, 'seers', teachers of the Upanishads, had a lot to say about it. In the teaching it is said that this particular ignorance is the only problem we have in life. They had done a lot of analysis of ignorance because to be free of it, is liberation from the sense of limitation and consequent suffering.

Different Kinds Of Ignorance

Four types of ignorance are spoken of, the first being a blanket ignorance which is 'blissful' because that is when I don't know that I don't know, it doesn't bother me....and yet the only time we can say that ignorance is bliss is when we are in deep sleep. There

are no dreams, just one long “I know nothing....”. Therefore, my limitations and everyday afflictions are not ‘there’. I am free from all pain, “the blind is no longer blind in sleep”. It levels us all to one same state of being, the beggar and the king are no different in deep sleep. Of course, the minute we awake we pick up all our roles, vulnerabilities and troubles.

The second kind of ignorance is ignorance of specific things like my ignorance of black holes and foreign languages. This kind of ignorance is endless and it will always be so. And the third kind of ignorance is what we can call ‘half-knowledge’ like when a medical student has only finished half his program; he knows something but it is incomplete and so he can make a lot of complex mistakes if he practices medicine with his half-baked training. This is a dangerous kind of ignorance such as can happen with a ‘quack’ plastic surgeon out there.

Self-ignorance is the fourth type which is identified as being unlike any other, it is the ignorance of taking myself wrongly. This ignorance is in the form of a spell, and under a spell we are helpless because we don’t know we are under a spell. It’s like someone who is having a bad drug experience, he has lost himself and is totally out of touch with reality. And this spell which totally conceals the real me, is a creative ignorance. How is it creative?

The Spell Of Self-Ignorance

In Vedanta, a famous metaphor is used to perfectly describe how we are caught under a creative spell and live in this world with a mistaken identity. Then we needlessly suffer. The metaphor is the ‘rope-snake’ story and it shows exactly how creatively the spell works.

A man is walking along a foot path in the semidarkness of evening dusk. He spots an object on the ground, something coiled up, he immediately jumps back, “Snake !!”. As he jumps aside to avoid it he happens to prick his toe on a thorn. Without enough light to see the snake or the thorn bush clearly, he immediately thinks that the snake has bitten him. He is trembling with so much fear that he could actually die of a heart attack. Then along comes another man, who just that morning passed by that way and had seen this ‘snake’; he had seen that it was a good piece of rope and wanted to remember where it was so that on the way home he could pick it up. Seeing the other man so frightened he asked what was wrong. The man told him, “Look there, that snake has bitten me, please see if you know if it is poisonous, I think I am dying “. The second man, smiling, reaches

down and picks up the 'snake' and the stricken man is amazed at this courage. But then, as the 'brave' man lifts the snake up and brings it closer to the 'bitten' man, he sees that this 'dangerous' rope caused all the trouble. He is incredibly relieved but at the same time he feels foolish even while his heart palpitations are still thumping. He says, "But how come my toe was bitten?" Then the seer-wise-man of the moment finds the thorn bush just there near their feet. The mistake is totally resolved.

And it could have happened the other way, that the man could have taken the coiled object to be a rope, reached down to pick it up but it was a poisonous snake; all due to the 'covering' of the semi-darkness of dusk; like a spell.

It was not the man's fault that he took the rope as a snake; the chance for that to happen is just another one of the endless possibilities in the creation. It did have some sense to it because he did not take the rope as a tiger or a thief. In the same way that the man was under the spell of an immediate mistake due to lack of enough light, the teachings reveal that we are similarly caught. We are not able to see ourselves as we are due to this creative original ignorance. 'Creative' because like how it 'created' a snake out of a rope, we take on and live with mistaken identity.

Self-Ignorance, In-born, Natural For All

This ignorance is an inborn, natural phenomenon; we wouldn't choose it, yet it is the profound error of our life that needs to be corrected. Just as how we once naturally took the earth as flat, later with better knowledge, we made the necessary shift in our understanding.

The teaching says that we are asleep to what the enlightened ones are awake to and we are awake where they are asleep. They saw the trick of the mistake then came to know themselves to be full and complete, and so, liberated beings. But we are asleep even to the possibility. And in the world of our karma drama, the sorrow-go-round of doing and getting and losing, here they are not engaged.

The darkness of the ignorance covers us like a veil and who we really are is 'seen' yet missed. When this knowledge is missing, since nature abhors a vacuum, something will come to fill in the blank. The man in the story doesn't see the object and say, "Well, that could be a snake or maybe something else, I'll wait to see it in a better light." No, immediately, without question, the perceived object is creatively taken for something it is not, and that something is frightening. Similarly, we would never say, "I don't know who I am and let's just leave it at that because ignorance is bliss but only in sleep."

First, the darkness of ignorance covers the chance for me to see myself as I am. We can call that a “veiling power” of ignorance, and it allows a second creative power to make the unknown self into something it is not. We can call that the ‘projecting power’ of ignorance. This is a spell where we have no clue of what’s happening. Like even the rope ‘becomes’ a snake, we ‘become’ an ever-wanting being that suffers a lot of fear, confusion and anguish.

We fear that we may not be able to get what we think we need and want; then whatever we do get, we fear we will lose. Fear, discontent and insecurity runs our lives and we don’t understand why. Not knowing the truth of any better self, we are caught in our own web-site of endless drama, acting out so many parts as a false self and suffer needlessly.

How I Pay For This Ignorance In Daily Life

We can bring this closer to home with a realistically possible example: A young woman, newly married, has to drive to the airport for her boss; she is supposed to deliver a packet to someone who is taking off on a flight. As she is leaving she notices some incoming passengers and she spots her husband standing there with a flower garland in hand (this is in Hawaii); he is waiting to meet someone. He does not see her and she stands back, to watch what’s going on because he had not mentioned that anyone was coming to visit. She soon begins to feel insecure and then she sees a very attractive young woman walk straight up to her husband and embrace him and he gives her the garland with some kind of a kiss, (yah, what kind of snake is it?). Her heart drops into her stomach which is now churning with fear. Not wanting to be seen she leaves as the other two are walking off hand in hand. She thinks: Could this be an old girl friend of his or maybe a co-worker?? She can’t leave the blank space open; she’s not secure and trusting enough to walk up to her husband to find out who this person is. So instead, she goes home and curls up in a ball on their bed and sobs uncontrollably. (What agony !!) Then the phone rings. She swallows hard and picks up the phone. “Honey, I have a big surprise for you, my sister Carol, the one who’s been working overseas for so long and couldn’t come for our wedding, she’s just arrived here, I’m bringing her home. I couldn’t call earlier because I had a hard time leaving the office and I just had just enough time to get to the airport.”

The young wife’s pillow is totally soaked with her tears, but she’s now immediately ‘high’ in her relief. At the same time, she’s feeling foolish and shameful for not trusting her husband; he didn’t deserve that. She filled in the blank against herself and fell into agony. What a useless hour spent crying her eyes out.

Where the Wise Ones Are Awake

This kind of mistake is what the wise ones say we need to be released from; it is the only 'bondage'. It keeps us in the shackles of error, limitations and pain.

To recognize this pain as bondage caused by our ignorance, is the first step onto a spiritual path to liberation. We need to be awake enough to the realities of life, to know that we cannot gain ultimate contentment by piling up our winnings in this grabber game of life. It is all based on a false sense of reality.

Ignorance about ourselves is an infinite loss because the teachings are there to tell us that our infinite self is what we are here on earth to discover and own. Ignorance of an Infinite self is an Infinite loss. Not only is it the profoundest loss of all but it is exhausting and painful to live and stay in the delusion of taking myself, things and people for other than what they are. Living from the stand point of a false identity and therefore projecting a mistaken reality, our priorities are merely trivial pursuits. They are way off course from the meaningful life I deserve to have.

Why Is This Ignorance There?

Some will always ask: "Why does this happen, why are we born ignorant of ourselves?" "Asking Why?" won't bring an answer, all we can say is that it just is, it happens that the mind can be and is tricked in this way. All we can do is analyze "the what" of it, and knowing what it is, then I can find out how to get free. Un-enlightened, we take ourselves as "I am only this much, this imperfect aging body, this forgetful mind, agitated because of still so many things to do and get." But the wise teachers and mystics in all cultures tell us we are living a miserably small life. They point to and try to convince us of something totally opposite. If we accept this as at least a possibility, it can put us on the right track of the most meaningful spiritual quest. Otherwise, all that is left to me is to stay on a sorrow-go-round, with a little bit of 'merry' here and there, just enough to keep me on this ridiculously tedious ride. I will look in the direction of the possibility of my free, infinite self when, (and pardon the cliché), I am really sick and tired of being sick and tired of my life as it is.

To be continued...