

Vivek Ramakrishnan: Dialogues with James Swartz, Part 1

Ram (James Swartz)

2013-09-14

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/283>

DIALOGUES WITH JAMES SWARTZ

Introduction

This is an account of my dialogues with James Swartz (Ram), a traditional Vedanta teacher, who showed me the difference between knowledge and experience and freed me from the experiencing entity Vivek. Most of the dialogues are verbatim with a few grammatical corrections along with some thoughts added for clarification. Before I start my essay I would like to pay homage to the ancient seers who understood these eternal truths and codified it in language that accessible to the common man. This sublime paragraph is from the *Chandogya Upanishad*:

Brahman is all. From *Brahman* comes appearances, sensations, desires and deeds. But all these are merely name and form. To know *Brahman* one must experience the identity between him and the Self, or *Brahman* dwelling within the lotus of the heart. Only by doing so can a person escape from sorrow and death and become one with the subtle essence beyond all knowledge.

I have also included a short background about myself to give readers some context about my experiences and also to show that no experience can completely free you. Any experience is essentially time-bound, and whether you see Krishna, Rama and Jesus or feel one with the Universe the key thing to realize is that none of these experiences are permanent. One does not see Rama every second of his life and neither does one feel one with Universe all the time. If one analyses any spiritual epiphany deeply it becomes obvious that these epiphanies are short-lived and despite our best efforts these experiences are essential random occurrences that don't follow a prescribed plan. However, what does not change through these epiphanies is the person who is experiencing these epiphanies. If we reflect on the gamut of all our experiences in this life, the only thing that is constant through these experiences is the entity to which these experiences are happening. Instead, of enquiring deeply on the nature of this experiencing entity, unfortunately most of us start chasing the ultimate experience that will free us from all experiences and make us permanently happy. It took me a while to realise that this is a fool's errand akin to chasing the end of a rainbow. No experience, spiritual or otherwise, can free anyone.

That said, it is obvious that enlightenment cannot be an experience. Why is that? This is because any experience is time-bound, including an experience of the self. Enlightenment cannot make you happy and blissful all the time because happiness/bliss (an experience) is a time-bound event. Enlightenment is the knowledge that you are not the experiencing entity and the non-experiencing entity, i.e. consciousness, *brahman*, or self, is the ground of being from which all forms arise. From the ego's perspective enlightenment is an experience, but from the perspective of the self nothing actually happened because enlightenment never existed in the first place. Nothing exists except consciousness, or the self, which is eternal. This has always been true and will continue to remain true for all time to come.

However, this does not mean that after enlightenment the experiencing entity stops functioning.

As long as we live in this world the experiencing entity will continue to exist. All enlightenment does is put the experiencing entity (mostly the ego, but includes the mind and intellect) in its rightful place. Your conditioning remains; if you liked spicy baked potatoes before enlightenment you will continue to like spicy baked potatoes after enlightenment. If you smoked before enlightenment you will continue to smoke after enlightenment, unless of course you think smoking is bad for you and stop smoking. Your *karma* and bad habits do not automatically disappear; you still have to put in the work to fix your life. All enlightenment does is give you the tools to fix your life. Paraphrasing the Jedi master Yoda from *Star Wars*, you can do *sadhana* before enlightenment or *sadhana* after enlightenment but there is no not-doing *sadhana*.

In case you are wondering why you should bother with enlightenment at all if one still has to do all the work and nothing really changes in the first place, the reason is because the one key thing that does change is the ego's dominant place in the scheme of things. The best way to describe it is that the reflexive grasping of the ego for things it wants and the ego's desire for security goes away. *Nirvana*, a beautiful word, describes it succinctly. *Nirvana* means "blowing out," or extinguish, similar to blowing out the flame of the candle before you go to sleep at night. This does not mean that ego ceases to exist; all it means is that the constant reflexive craving of the ego for security and completeness goes away. It is akin to a cool breeze blowing through your window on a hot summer day, and not a cacophony of drum-beating angels proclaiming your enlightenment. It is really subtle, so subtle that the ego invariably misses it.

My Personal Background

My personal breakthrough came when I was talking to one of Ramesh Balshekar's students in 2008. Even though my training was in Zen and I grew up reading Krishnamurti, I was a big fan of Nisargadatta Maharaj's teaching on the absolute. However, I could never understand what the feeling of "I AM-NESS" actually meant. I talked to numerous teachers, Buddhist and Vedantic, but nobody could explain what Maharaj meant when he said, "Stay with the feeling of I AM-NESS." Then one day I met this teacher, and when I asked him the same question, he replied, "How do you know you exist? That is, that you exist is an undeniable fact but how are you aware that you exist?" At that moment my mind turned back on itself and I was aware of the I-sense, or the feeling that allows one to be aware of one's existence. It is an energetic phenomenon that manifests itself in the heart space or at the back of your head. It is not the mind because it is free from thought. The technical term for it in Vedanta is the *jivatman*, the bridge between the experiencing entity and the self. In Zen it is called "clear Buddha-mind," and in Dzogchen it is called *rigpa*.

After this experience I met Anadi, formerly known as Aziz Kristof, in Almora, India, for further clarification of my state. Anadi believed that the I-sense, or State of Presence, was the foundation of spiritual practice in his methodology, and in some cases he personally used energetic transformations to make this state permanent. When he placed his hand on my head there was a beam of white light that shot from the base of my spine all the way to the top of my head to my I-sense, and at that point the I-sense exploded and expanded. For the next couple of hours I felt as if the I-sense was separate from my body, and it had a very distinct energetic quality. This happened to a lesser degree over the next couple of days but it was very clear to me that the I-sense was more or less permanent. It is hard to explain what the I-sense feels like but when solidified; the I-sense almost feels like a dis-identified witnessing state. It is different for everyone but the essential quality of the I-sense is the feeling of a non-discriminating, primordial,

undifferentiated consciousness that is distinct from the mind. The I-sense should not be mistaken for *adkandakara vritti*. *Adkandakara vritti* is an unbroken continuous thought, a complete thought, or a limitless thought, one that stands on its own and doesn't change.

Once I found the I-sense I followed the teachings of Ramana Maharishi and Maharaj's advice. For the next three years all I did was meditate on the I-sense and try to trace the I-sense back to its source. But one day when I was meditating I realised that the person who is trying to trace the I-sense is no different from the I-sense. In a flash I realised that I am not different from the I-sense and the observer is the observed. It was surprising, no doubt, and it was very similar to Ramana's quote when he said, "One day you will realise that all your struggles will be for nothing. It is like a man knee-deep in the river asking for water." Despite this realisation I realised that there was a crucial bit of information missing, and for a while was at an impasse. However, through God's grace I stumbled upon the ShiningWorld website and happened to read the commentary on Ramana Maharishi. I read this article every day for about two months and then decided to write to James.

I was somewhat familiar with Vedanta, considering my background as a Hindu, but other than studying James Swartz's commentary on Ramana Maharshi I had not studied Vedanta. Ironically, I found freedom through Vedanta even without studying it formally. In my opinion, if one can contemplate on the difference between knowledge and experience and truly understand that no experience can free you, your search will automatically end. Knowledge truly frees, assuming the mind is receptive to the truth and sufficiently pure.

When reading these dialogues, if you do end up wondering why this idiot is not getting the obvious, it is because sometimes it is very difficult to see the obvious. The self is the ultimate subject and cannot be made into an object. However, since our birth we are trained to look at the things of the world as objects and therefore it becomes almost impossible to realise the self as the subject.

I have delineated the twelve dialogues that went on for the better part of 2012 into three major parts:

1. Following the I-sense teaching, and the difference between knowledge and experience.
2. The disappearance of the I-sense.
3. Separating the experiencing witness from the non-experiencing witness.

I. FOLLOWING THE I-SENSE, AND THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

First Dialogue, February 24, 2012

Vivek: I recently had my first awakening experience that made realise that the "I" is actually the observer and the observed. I have stabilized in the I AM, and the state is present without effort. I also get that chasing mystical experiences is a waste of time. In one sense I see that the search is over but other times I have doubts because when you look at Maharaj he categorically says

that the Absolute is prior to Consciousness, or prior to the I AM.

James: Well, if this is a non-dual reality, which scripture says it is, then there is only consciousness. This means that there is nothing prior to consciousness. Consciousness is the absolute. It is the I AM in the sense that it is what is, i.e. consciousness, or *sat*. He was probably referring to the subtle body when he said “consciousness.” It is reflected consciousness, and pure consciousness is prior to it, in other words, the source of its reflection.

The problem with Maharaj is that he was not a teacher. He just made statements from his own experience, and one would have had to be there to understand the statements by the context or to question him. It may very well have been a translator’s error too. It is easy to lose a lot when you move from one language to another.

This is a statement that implies that merely the realization of consciousness is not enough, that one has to go beyond it to get to some kind of state prior to consciousness. In fact in your introductory paragraph you use action language and say that you are “stabilized” in a particular state. It may be true, but being in some state does not remove doubt about who you are because there is only one consciousness and you are it, and if that is true then the I AM state is in you. You are not in it. Consciousness is not in any state. As Krishna, speaking as the consciousness, in the *Gita* says, “They (all objects – states are objects) are in me. I am not in them.”

Vivek: I understand that the knowledge leads to freedom and is the only important thing, but if you look at what Maharaj says, he is also talking about an experiential experience.

James: He may be talking about it but who is the knower of the experience? The knower of the experience is consciousness, and is not in any way affected by the experience, including all the so-called mystical experiences.

Rather than imagine that there is some experience that you have not had that will make you happy, why not look into why whatever you are experiencing right now does not make you happy? Why? Because what you are experiencing right now is consciousness – the absolute – and there is nothing to experience beyond consciousness because there is only consciousness.

You have been infected with the experiential notion of enlightenment. Go ahead and keep trying to experience something. It will not solve your problem because the fact that you think you are an experiencer is the problem. *Moksa* is freedom from the experiencer, the subtle body. The only way this happens is by understanding that you are not the subtle body, i.e. that you are non-dual, actionless, ORDINARY awareness. Notice the word “ordinary.” Consciousness is not absolute except in the sense that everything depends on it but it depends on nothing. It is totally ordinary, simple and ever-present. There is nothing special about it at all. This is why so few realize it. They have read all this experiential nonsense about it and they imagine that it is some sort of incredible mind-blowing thing. It is all fantasy.

Vivek: In your books you say that knowledge is everything, and in I agree with what you are saying, but it seems that the *vasanas*, or unconscious tendencies, remain even after awakening.

James: That is correct. Awakening is just an experience. You can get a *vasana* for it too if you go back to sleep, which will happen if you awake. Awakening is not *moksa*. *Moksa* is *jnanam*. What knowledge is it? “I am awareness.” There is only awareness and it never slept. So how is it going to awaken?

Vivek: I get that it is impossible to remove all *vasanas*, but then what is liberation?

James: Liberation is self-knowledge. The self is unaffected by the *vasanas*, so *vasanas* can appear in it and disappear out of it without leaving a trace. If you are awareness, the self, why would you be concerned by *vasanas*? You worry about *vasanas* because you identify with the experiencer and the experiencer is pushed all over the place by the *vasanas*.

Vivek: Is knowledge/*viveka* that there is nothing to do except be is what Vedanta talks about as liberation?

James: Being is not something you do. You are. See what is the nature of your existence. It is awareness. From the *jiva*'s point of view the hard and fast knowledge that you are awareness is liberation, assuming that it neutralizes your binding *vasanas* and destroys your sense of doership.

Vivek: There seems to be some gap in what Advaita is saying and its practical application in daily existence.

James: I am not sure what you mean by “Advaita,” but there is some gap in your understanding of who you are. The first thing you need to determine is whether or not reality is non-dual. If you can sort that out (hint: take the scripture's word for it) then the experiential idea is not workable. It is not logical. It only appeals to you because you think you are an experiencer. Also, your present experience – some kind of exalted I AM state – is not satisfactory. There are still doubts.

Second Dialogue, February 25, 2012

Dear James,

I think you raised some interesting questions that I will follow up later in my email, but first of all I wanted to thank you for your commentary on Ramana Maharshi's teachings at your site. I do have all your books but the commentary on Ramana Maharshi is what opened my eyes to the fundamental flaw in my thinking, which is that I was chasing the experience instead of focusing on the experiencer. There was a fundamental shift when I realised that the person that is seeking is the sought. I was surprised that it was so obvious and ordinary. So thank you for sharing that profound knowledge so freely. That said, I have a few questions in response to your emails that I will try to articulate below. There is some history, so I beg your patience.

A little bit about my background: I had trained primarily in Zen and then met Anadi, formerly known as Aziz Kristof, who now teaches a syncretic version of Zen and Advaita Vedanta. As you know, Buddhism is basically Yogacara , so I was schooled in the experiential understanding of enlightenment.

My first awakening was when my teacher asked me, “How do you know you exist?” You can negate everything but you cannot negate yourself.

James: This is the truth. You need to contemplate on these words to see what they mean.

Vivek: At that moment my mind turned back on itself and I could be cognizant of the State of Presence, or the I AM-NESS as described by Maharaj.

James: The question at this point is WHO was cognizant of the State of Presence (very bad language because the self is not a presence or a state, much less a state of presence). You did not inquire. You assumed it was the experiencer but it wasn't. It was awareness, which is what the teaching that set off this epiphany was meant to reveal.

Vivek: I was told to never let go of this feeling of I AM until it becomes a continuous experience.

James: That was dumb advice because no feeling is under the control of the experiencer, the doer. The teacher is unskillful. I doubt that he is what he says he is, if he is purporting to teach *moksa*. Why? Because he is addressing you as the doer, the experiencer. He needs to reveal awareness first and then bring in the doer so you are not confused. But by this instruction he immediately tells you that you are the doer, the experiencer, and because you do not know better you accepted his advice.

Experience is under the control of *Isvara*, the macrocosmic *vasanas*. Again, in this instance the I is not the self but it is the experiencer. The experiencer and its states are objects appearing in you, awareness. If you are awareness you will not be holding on to any state. You will not care what state is occurring in you.

Vivek: This experience of I Am-ness manifested itself in the back of my head. After some time I realised that the person observing the I AM and the self are the same.

James: This is knowledge. The *jiva*, the individual, who is consciousness appearing as the experiencer and the one observing the experiencer, are the same. The self is self-aware. There are not two of them. But it looks as if there are two selves when you identify with the experiencer.

Vivek: From my understanding and reading of Sadhu Om's book on Ramana, I think what Ramana calls the “I-sense” and what Maharaj calls the “I AM-NESS” are one and the same. This is not a mystical state by any means.

James: This is knowledge.

Vivek: It is basically the energy knot that connects the body and mind.

James: This is half knowledge and half ignorance. The knowledge is the understanding of the connection but the idea that it is an energy knot is ignorance. It is awareness that connects although “connects” is an inappropriate word because it implies action. But awareness is not energy. It is energy-free and the knower of energy.

Vivek: Currently this is where I am, but on reading Maharaj he seems to indicate that the I AM is a reflection of the Absolute and on further enquiry the I AM disappears.

James: Here again, knowledge and ignorance sit side by side. You need the technical language of Vedanta to sort this out. The I AM you are referring to is the subtle body, the *suksma sarira*. It is a mirror that reflects awareness; *pratibimba* is the technical term. And yes, on inquiry the I AM disappears. But “disappears” is a problematic word. It needs to be explained what kind of disappearance it is. It is not an experiential disappearance like the snake and the rope. It is a knowledge, disappearance like a mirage. A mirage disappears as a real object when it is known for what it is. But when it has been negated by knowledge it does not disappear experientially. The I AM is always present in awareness and it is the self but you, the self, are not it. You are the knower of the I AM. The only access to this knower is through knowledge. There is no experiential access.

Vivek: From my experience, focusing on the I AM-NESS, or the I-sense, without doubt gives me a glimpse of a state that is unchanging.

James: You mean the subtle body. When the mind becomes *sattvic* the awareness reflects in the subtle body and awareness becomes manifest – for a length of time – as a state of experience. This is a typical *satori* or fleeting *samadhi*. *Satoris* and fleeting *samadhis* are basically useless because they make the experiencer chase them. Chasing *samadhis* is the same as chasing any pleasant experience.

Vivek: Sometimes there is Me observing the I AM-NESS, other times the Me (observer) and the I AM become one. There is consistent connection to a stability that is beyond the mind.

James: Again, knowledge and ignorance side by side. The Me is awareness, which is unchanging and always present, that because of which the becoming one is known. It is the stability beyond the mind. When you say there is a “consistent connection to the stability beyond the mind” you are stuck in experiential language. The stability beyond the mind that you see is just you, awareness. But ignorance causes you to objectify it as something beyond the mind. You are always beyond the mind, meaning it is always known to you. You will never go or get beyond

the mind. This is the fallacy of the experiential notion of enlightenment.

Vivek: From the reading of your email and your books you seem to indicate that the self is all, or consciousness is all, that any state is by definition embedded in this consciousness. If that is true, how can consciousness be conscious of itself? It is like the eye seeing itself, it is not possible. What am I missing here?

James: You are looking at the self from the position of the experiencer. The experiencer is using experiential language and confusing itself, and therefore self-knowledge cannot take place. Self-knowledge is *moksa*. There is nothing experiential about it. The self does not require an instrument, an experiencing entity, a subtle body, to be known. It is self-knowing, self-revealing, self-luminous, self-existent, etc. You obviously have not read Vedanta scripture. For you, the experiencer, there is nothing but experience. You have not been able to objectify experience and the experiencer because you do not know you are the self. The self knows the experiencer but the experiencer cannot know the self as an object because the self cannot be objectified.

Vivek: In summary, I totally agree with you that experiencer (the key operative word) is more important than the experience and the focus should be on the "I" having the experience.

James: This is incorrect. The focus should be on how the I having the experience is known. There is another factor that you are ignoring. It is you, awareness.

Vivek: You have also clarified the importance of *sadhana* and why having a pure mind is so important.

James: The *sadhana* you need is to get rid of the experiential language and start from the beginning. You have ensnared yourself in the thicket of experience. Did you read *How to Attain Enlightenment*? I don't think you did. Or if you did you did not understand the second chapter. If you did you would not be writing this letter.

Vivek: However, it seems to me that there should be a balance between practice and knowledge of the self because, as you have often said, only a pure mind can reflect the self. The mind needs to be purified and hence meditative traditions are useful.

James: Meditation traditions are useful for steadying the mind but not for purifying it. Purifying requires other methods, *karma yoga* being the first and foremost. Don't take it as an insult but your mind is polluted by experiential language.

Vivek: Or do you think it is mainly a philosophical difference between the Yogacara and Samkhya schools? I look forward to meeting you in Vancouver this year.

James: *Yoga* is for purifying the mind and *Samkhya* is for *moksa* since self-knowledge is *moksa*. It won't take place in a confused mind so the mind needs to be freed of its confusions, the main one for you being the experience/knowledge confusion.

Third Dialogue, February 26, 2012

Vivek: Thanks for your detailed replies. I am reading Chapter II again with new eyes. Just for clarification, is your position a philosophical difference between the two schools of thought, *Yogacara* and *Samkhya*, or do you think it has epistemological origins? I am fine either way but I am curious to know what you think.

James: It is not my position, *Vivek*. It is just what *sruti* says. *Vedanta* is the means of knowledge for both; consciousness is beyond matter since you cannot not operate perception and inference without consciousness.

Vivek: Despite being born and raised in India most of my education was in the U.S. so I am not so solid on *Vedanta*. Most of my reading was on *Krishnamurti* (J.K. and U.G.), *Maharaj* and *Sadhu Om/David Godman* on *Ramana*. However, I am unclear on what *Ramana* said in the original *Tamil*. I have been following *Sadhu Om's* writings for a while.

James: This problem is that none of them taught *Vedanta*. You only get bits and pieces based on their personal experience and the interpreted knowledge, which is not always knowledge. To crack the ignorance code you need a comprehensive means of self-knowledge. The arguments in my book are not my arguments. They are just the arguments of *sruti*, i.e. *Vedanta*.

Vivek: From my understanding and reading of *Sadhu Om's* book on *Ramana*, I think what *Ramana* calls the "I-sense" and what *Maharaj* calls the "I AM-NESS" are one and the same. This is not a mystical state by any means.

James: This is knowledge.

Vivek: How is this knowledge? This is recognition of a state, like "I am awake" or "I am feeling happy." For any state to exist there has to be recognition of that state, otherwise there is no way you can know the existence of a particular state. Is recognition is an experiential process?

Are you trying to tell me that the recogniser of any state is awareness? If that is true then there is nothing much left to do except be in it.

James: That is precisely what I am saying. But you cannot be in it. You can only be it. Your language is hanging you up, *Vivek*. It is totally experiential. *Vedanta* is just statements of fact. You either get them or not. There is nothing for you to be or do, just something to understand.

Vivek: I was told to never let go of this feeling of I AM until it becomes a continuous experience.

James: That was dumb advice because no feeling is under the control of the experiencer, the doer. The teacher is unskillful. I doubt that he is what he says he is, if he is purporting to teach *moksa*. Why? Because he is addressing you as the doer, the experiencer. He needs to reveal awareness first, then bring in the doer so you are not confused. But by this instruction he immediately tells you that you are the doer, the experiencer, and because you do not know better you accepted his advice.

Vivek: This is exactly what Maharaj says in his teaching, so did Sadhu Om and Annamalai Swami. They all said grasp the I-sense and trace it back to the root. Robert Adams, who is a student of Ramana, says the same thing. However, I am not clear if this is what Ramana said.

James: They were all addressing the ego, the doer. Once the doer has grasped and traced it is still a doer, isn't it? *Moksa* is freedom from the doer. The reason they say this is because they have no way to negate the doer because they do not have a proper means of self-knowledge. They only have their own experience, which is all only interpretation according to what they know or don't know. You cannot establish the self on the basis of an experience. Analysis of experience reveals it by implication but it is not revealed by interpreted experience. If you are the authority then anyone can be the authority. I can say the self is X and you can say it is Y. If you can experience the self, then do it. But you cannot do it. The doing is for purification of the mind, not for *moksa*. Ramana says emphatically that only by knowledge is the self to be gained.

There is a difference between a *jnani* and a *srotriya*, someone who can wield a valid means of knowledge like Vedanta. They were all *jnanis* but they were not proper teachers.

You will notice that I am not addressing you as a doer, an experiencer. I am addressing you as awareness. You can only understand this as awareness. The doer cannot understand. To teach the doer is a waste of time. Vedanta works because it speaks to awareness and objectifies the doer. When you speak to the doer you have to objectify awareness but you cannot objectify awareness. It is not an object. It is you. You are not an object.

Vivek: Maybe continuous experience is a wrong word. "Abide" in the I AM. Is that a correct word? Without doubt, the experiencer is cognizant of the I AM. I am using "experiencer" and "the ME" synonymously; please correct me if I am wrong.

James: "Abide" implies a duality, someone that abides and something that one abides in. So both words are unhelpful.

But you finally got to the crux of this issue. "ME" and the "experiencer" are not the same. They are both consciousness but they are not the same. The experiencer is not conscious. It seems to be conscious. The ME, awareness, is conscious. It lends awareness to the experiencer, the subtle body, and when *maya*, ignorance, is operating awareness thinks it is an experiencer.

Vivek: In summary, I totally agree with you that experiencer (the key operative word) is more important than the experience and the focus should be on the “I” having the experience.

James: This is incorrect. The focus should be on how the I having the experience is known. There is another factor that you are ignoring. It is you, awareness.

Vivek: Maybe I misunderstand “knowledge”? How are you defining knowledge?

James: What cannot be negated is knowledge. The experiencer can be negated insofar as the subtle body does not exist in deep sleep and awareness has no bodies. The self is knowledge because you cannot negate it. It never ceases to be. You never cease to be.

Vivek: How is the “I” experience known?

James: By you, awareness. For experience you need a knower (*Gita*, Chapter XII). Experience is awareness but awareness is not experience.

Vivek: If I understand you correctly, this is it. There is nowhere else to go except be. The very effort to change something or become something means that you are not acknowledging your self-existing awareness.

James: Yes, indeed. Now you are thinking. This is why the exhortations by those *gurus* that you refer to above are not useful. They make it seem as if you can attain awareness, experience awareness as an object. You are awareness. There is nothing you can do about it except understand who you are.

Vivek: Awareness exists by itself, it is free. I get that. But I am not able to tease out the awareness from the experiencer. I am sorry but I have no idea how to recognise the difference between awareness and the experiencer.

James: Now you are onto something! This is the crux of *moksa*. When you can discriminate awareness from the experiencer you are free.

Vivek: I should go back and read your book again.

James: Yes, but this time throw out everything you know about spirituality and read it with an open mind. You need to sign on to the logic at every step. It is good if you get the hard drive with the videos of the teaching to watch as you read the book. There are one hundred hours of Vedanta, starting with the basics, including *Atma Bodh*, *Vivekachoodamani* and the *Bhagavad*

Gita. Vedanta is a complete means of self-knowledge. It is way beyond any teacher's experience. But a *jnani* can teach it if he or she learns the methodology. The *janis* you mention did not know the methodology, so they say things that are confusing. The methodology resolves the many apparent contradictions that appear when you have two apparently different things, i.e. the subject, awareness, and the objects appearing in it.

Vivek: In summary I agree with your approach but I find it hard to believe that knowledge can solve the condition of a human being. Adi Shankara was an ascetic, practised austerities and was probably influenced by the Yogacara school since his teacher Gaudapada took elements of it for his teachings. I really get what you are saying but I am not sure if I had met you 10 years ago whether I would have grasped the essence of your teaching. Surely my meditation and practice must have helped reach a state where I can understand your teachings?

James: Yes, indeed. Practice is absolutely essential but it only prepares the mind for *jnanam*. Once the mind is prepared it is capable of understanding. In your case, you are ready but you got confused on the knowledge and experience issue. This is a universal confusion, so don't feel bad. My book has been successful, and prepared people are flocking to hear Vedanta from me because the experience/knowledge argument makes complete sense to them. To beginners it makes no sense. Once you quit trying to abide in the self or experience the self or grasp the self, you are well on your way. Then you can expose your mind to a proper teaching.

I am not putting down these great souls. They were probably *janis* but they are not proper teachers. Ramana never said he was a teacher. He made no attempt to resolve the contradictions in his statements. Vedanta has resolved every possible contradiction.

I don't know how you can use Shankara to buttress your argument. There is no one more clear about self-knowledge being *moksa* than Shankara.

Vivek: Thank you for taking the time to clear my doubts.

James: It is my pleasure, Vivek.

Fourth Dialogue, February 27, 2012

Dear James,

I actually understand what you are saying. For the first time in my life it makes complete sense, and I think the teacher does make a difference. There are many teachers who teach Vedanta, and my father was a follower of Swami Chinmayanada but I don't think it helped him all that much. Yes, you are teaching from scripture and I respect that, but the way you elucidate the teachings is different from traditional Indian teachers, and for me coming from a Western perspective, it makes complete sense. I have Adi Shankara's *Vivekachudamani* at home but I had no idea what the book meant until I spoke to you

Questions:

A. In one sense the search is finished because this is it. I thought enlightenment would be some mystical, blissful state but actually it is very ordinary. There seems to be actually a little bit of sadness because I expected the clapping of drums and lightning from the sky, but it is right here with you all the time. It is actually a bit of a letdown in some ways.

James: Yes, it is. Now you have to figure out what to do with your life. Seeking becomes an identity, a friend. When it goes it can be a bit disconcerting.

Vivek: How did Ramana and Maharaj attain *moksa* without following Vedanta? Obviously, they could distinguish between the experiencer and awareness, otherwise they would not be *jnanis*, so how did they figure it out on their own?

James: Ramana was a one-off. He must have been already qualified from his past lives and had the maturity to somehow understand that knowledge is the key, not an experience. Maharaj just contemplated on the *mantra* "I Am That" until it made sense. Traditional Vedanta is not the only way, but it's the best. If you understand what it is and you are qualified, it is very easy.

Managing Daily Life after Awakening

Vivek: How does one manage your daily life after the awakening experience?

James: Same as before, Vivek, but happily. *Karma* is *karma*. It does not know what you are thinking and feeling. The knowledge "I am awareness and not the experiencing entity" should produce a happy, dispassionate state of mind that allows you to enjoy daily life. The likes and dislikes will still come up but they will be seen for what they are, and taken as *prasad*. You will not indulge them because you will know that there is nothing to gain.

If you are thinking of this as an "awakening experience" you are going to be somewhat disillusioned, I think, because it is just knowledge – unless the awakening experience you are talking about is a consequence of hard and fast self-knowledge. If it is then you are free to manage daily life as you see fit. The essence of this knowledge is that you are free of experience and the experiencer, so daily life can be anything you want. However, it is wise to just run off your *prarabdha* and allow it to slowly exhaust. Why should anything change now that you are no longer Vivek? Any problem that belongs to him belongs to him, not to you.

Vivek: I really feel like I need to take a month or so to just enjoy being consciousness.

James: The trick is to enjoy being consciousness in the midst of your daily life. However, the desire to take a month off is natural when you realize who you are. I took my whole life off because the completeness I felt – and still feel forty-some years on – never left because it is the result of hard and fast knowledge.

Vivek: I also have this strong desire to be alone and just abide in awareness.

James: This is natural. There is still a bit more understanding to be gained. You say “abide in awareness.” This means that you are still looking at it from the experienter’s point of view. For complete non-experiential *moksa* you need to be able to say “abide in awareness AS awareness.” The first statement is indirect knowledge, the second direct. Only direct knowledge will set you free. Now, it is a relief that you are not Vivek and therefore he feels free. Next you have to take a stand in awareness AS awareness. When you can say “as awareness” there are no rules and there is no *karma*, no daily life to deal with. Daily life is seen for what it is, a concept in you, and you are free to treat it any way you want.

Vivek: Does this go away after a while?

James: Probably not if the knowledge of who you are is firm. It is implied by the knowledge. If the knowledge is firm then you will patiently adjust your life to accommodate this feeling, not let your life constrain it. If you see this as just another experience then the feeling of aloneness – which is the experience of the self AS the self – will probably disappear. And you will long to have it back because aloneness is the nature of the self. There is only one self. It is always alone. This is a good thing. It is not loneliness.

Vivek: The reason I ask is, in my line of work I might be able to take a week off but one month is probably beyond my ability.

James: You have to think long-term when you wake up in the middle of a *samsaric* life. Take a week off. It may be that you can see daily life as yourself in which case you will not need to take any time off. Or if you can’t, then you will have to plot your escape. This kind of dispassion is natural when you realize you are not the experiencing entity.

Vivek: I am happy just being awareness but I do have a family to support and make a living.

James: See how you can eliminate the “but.”

Vivek: In your book there is no mention of the heart/soul that is found in ecstatic Bhakti and Sufi traditions. I understand that self-knowledge is paramount in any traditional path but how come Advaita does not have a heart component to it?

James: Vedanta is all heart and only heart, Vivek. The subtle body is the soul, and when it understands that it is the self it loves the self, heart and soul. The self is the heart. It is love, *parama prema svarupa*. You are love. Love is simply consciousness, what you put your attention into. You take care of your family because you love them. Your seeking is the highest form of love because it culminates in self-knowledge. You seek because you love yourself and you want to

know yourself as the freedom that you are. You are thinking of *bhakti* as a special feeling. It is just *jnanam*, self-knowledge. If the knowledge is firm and clear you cannot help but love everyone and everything. *Bhakti* is not something you do, a particular experience. It is what you are. Look around. You will see that everything is love, even the things that do not look like love. Two people who don't like each other try to communicate because beneath the surface they love themselves and each other.

Vivek: Or is it possible that any expression of the path I chose to follow is okay as long as I understand I am awareness?

James: Yes, but you need to know that there is no path when you know you are awareness. The path is you. There is nothing to follow, nothing that leads anywhere but to you. You are everything that is. This means that the very idea of a path is just a thought appearing in consciousness manufactured out of you, consciousness. I started my response to your question with "yes," and the "yes" means that as Vivek you are free to express yourself as you see fit, assuming such expressions do not violate *dharma*, which they won't if the knowledge is firm because as the self you are *dharma*.

Vivek: How does one deal with the *vasanas* that still arise after awakening? I know you mentioned *karma yoga* but are there other ways? Your unconscious tendencies drag you down.

James: You know they are just *vasanas* and that they cannot affect you, consciousness. If you are Vivek, the person who is addressing me in this email, they can drag you down. What to do? Practice the knowledge "I am whole and complete, actionless, ordinary, unborn, non-dual awareness." What does that mean? It means that you dismiss the fears and desires, the likes and dislikes – the *vasanas*, in short – as they arise by taking a stand in your true identity. If your self-knowledge is firm it will be easy to burn out your *vasanas* in a reasonable time. If not, you will have a protracted war on your hands. *Karma yoga* is just knowledge, a different way to formulate the knowledge. It is how the self handles *karma* when it is awake to its nature and finds itself in a human body.

Vivek: I liked the story in your book where you said you met an honest person who said that he awakened to the self 500 times. That makes me hopeful.

James: Good. The self is always present because it is you, so it is always available. You can reawaken to it over and over until you understand that you are it. Then there is no awakening. The self, you, cannot awake because it never slept. Vivek, the experiencing entity, wakes up and goes back to sleep as the case may be. Life is a funny drama.

Continued in Part 2...