

A Courageous Soul

Ram (James Swartz)

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Sarah: Dear James, I'm writing to thank you for shining a light on my *ex-guru's* predicament and for helping so many of us former students (your words have been posted on an ex-student forum) to gain some clarity and a measure of peace in the fallout. I spent the best part of 30 years in a passionate and dedicated pursuit of truth with various teachers, and seem to have fallen into most of the available pitfalls along the way. I thank you for illuminating so clearly both the flaws in the approach of various teachers/teachings and also for pointing out the shortcomings of many seekers ("immature sycophants," I believe you wrote... ouch). It's been edifying and electrifying to read your words.

James: You are welcome, Sarah. Truth – which is virtually impossible to discover without critical thinking – seems to be hard to come by in the spiritual world. It seems that most teachers either don't know what it is or, if they do, are afraid to offend seekers. I have been criticized by Western seekers and teachers alike for daring to say that the emperor has no clothes, in spite of the fact that Vedanta is not my teaching and more importantly, if reality is non-dual as most non-dualists claim, modern "teachings" simply don't hold up in light of the ruthless logic of Vedanta. No blame, all around.

Sarah: Some 10 years ago when I left him I was in a most terrible state. I had very little money and nowhere to live. Far worse though than these practical concerns was the inner turmoil I was in. I had completely given myself to Andrew and the teaching over many years and believed that in leaving him I had gone against goodness and truth and my own soul (as per his teaching). I felt tortured (but not enough to return!). I felt a huge schism within and could not reconcile the terrible division I was experiencing. I had no one to turn to and could feel the ground beneath me opening up. I felt I was in great danger of losing my mind.

James: If you don't have an impersonal means of self-knowledge to rely on, you are forced to rely on the words of the teacher with predictable consequences, particularly if the "teacher" is as immature as Andrew. Our idea is (1) that you be dispassionate and discriminating before we teach you and (2) to turn the role of *guru* over to you as quickly as possible. I cannot imagine creating and nurturing a situation where even one person is dependent on me. It's not a healthy feeling. Attachment is attachment regardless of the context. In Vedanta you may initially develop some attachment to the teacher, but the teaching itself converts the attachment to the teacher to attachment to the teaching. You need some kind of way to evaluate your teacher so you know when he is out of line. But basically, most Western seekers just want to love and be loved, so they are not interested in critical thinking. They are like children who didn't get parented and weaned properly and are therefore at the mercy of unresolved psychological issues.

Sarah: I found a place to live and started to meditate in earnest (I had enjoyed much peace and wholeness in meditation in the community) and found relief and freedom from the crisis there.

However, as soon as I got up my tortured mind and emotions would kick in again. Weeks passed, but the intensity of my predicament did not. The meditations (which I clung to like a life raft) deepened and began to reliably deliver me to exactly the same unchanging place of peace and wholeness each time.

James: You are lucky that you got benefit from meditation and stuck with it because meditation without *karma yoga* usually creates the conflict you describe, which usually results in termination of meditation. *Karma yoga* takes care of the emotions so meditation becomes effortless and continues when you get up from the meditation seat.

Sarah: It began to occur to me that I was living in two completely different worlds: one an agony of isolation, confusion and anguish where nothing made sense, and the other calm, expansive and wanting for nothing. I knew they could not both be true. I knew I could not be both completely lost and in agony and simultaneously free and fulfilled. I had always interpreted the bliss of meditation as an experience I (the ego) was having, but it was now dawning on me that perhaps this unchanging, ever reliable, always available “state” may be more true than the constantly fluctuating and unreliable movements of my mind and emotions. I started to spend more and more time immersed in timelessness both in and out of meditation.

Battered as I was, it was also exhilarating to rediscover every time myself as limitless and already full. I knew I had to make a choice. My situation was desperate and my sanity at stake. Which was true? Who was I? The identification with the limited, painful self as the truth was enormous, but now so unbearable that I knew I had to take a risk, the biggest of my life, and jump to save myself. I chose limitless wholeness as the truth – it was the only solid thing I had, and held fast to that in the bumpy days and months that followed. No matter what the thoughts or feelings, I always knew there was a deeper truth, a refuge to return to. Over time, I became established in this “place” and have remained true to it to this day.

James: Good for you. We call it “taking a stand in awareness as awareness,” i.e. transferring your identity from incompleteness to completeness. There are not two “yous.” Well, there are – at least for a while – but only one of them is real. *Isvara* blessed you with a good brain, and when you exercised your free will and took charge of your own spiritual life, your discrimination developed.

Sarah: I left spiritual life as I’d known it after my experience with Andrew, and had no interest in seeking, *gurus* or the whole darn thing. I didn’t feel I needed anything to be complete and I no longer trusted the spiritual world. I no longer cared about enlightenment or had any idea what it was. I knew, however, I still felt a sense of mystification and confusion regarding spiritual life and my 30-year odyssey. I knew I had made a profound discovery and been transformed by it, but I wasn’t entirely sure how it all worked, just as I knew I wasn’t going anywhere near a teacher again in the hope of finding out.

James: There is nothing spiritual about spirituality. It’s just another bondage. The self has to be discovered, better yet, rediscovered – there is nothing you can do to gain it, because you are it even when you think you aren’t. And discovery is not something you do either. It happens when

you empower yourself and uncompromisingly stick to the search. It is the grace of *Isvara*. I admire the integrity behind your hard-earned words. It's ironic that one seeks relief from suffering, goes to a *guru* with no teaching – just inspiring words – and reaps more suffering. If you are mature, and *Isvara* brings Vedanta to you, you will be liberated in a very short time. You got free on your own, but not quite, because, as you say, "I still felt a sense of mystification and confusion regarding spiritual life and my 30-year odyssey." So *Isvara* sent Vedanta to you. How strange to have to go through all you went through to get the clarity that real freedom confers.

Sarah: Just recently your words on Andrew Cohen began appearing on a website for ex-students, and I was stunned and thrilled by your insights, wisdom and maturity, and also your lack of blame.

James: There is no blame for anything. Andrew can't help being Andrew, and you can't help being you, and I can't help being me. We neither create anything nor do we own anything. Everything is *Isvara*. It is an eternal set-up. We appear here one fine day and we suffer – until we don't. It's amazing that the Andrew people couldn't see that Andrew was a tortured soul. Enlightened people are cool people – they are relaxed, they don't have a bone to pick with the world. They are kind and have a great sense of irony because they are established in the self and know that the world is *mithya*, not real. They are not tricked by the suffering in the world. It is not real, although it feels like it. He was completely seduced by *maya*. He never got out of the starting box. It deludes the righteous and the unrighteous.

His torment will go on, probably for a long time – the poor dear – because he still does not want to look at his motivations. He is one of the most unevolved "enlightened" people in the spiritual world, a classic case of *rajas* (anger) and *tamas* (denial), hiding the wonderful light that he is. He is just a beautiful, narcissistic little boy who can't or won't grow up. I'm sure he is still trying to get his "position" back. *Isvara* put him there and *Isvara* took him down. *Isvara* "makes the rough places smooth," to quote Handel's *Messiah*. We should give him the benefit of the doubt, but his "apology" lacked conviction. Someone brought him to me recently but he wouldn't connect. Can you imagine the pain he must feel when he contemplates the possibility that he was not on the path all along? He was one of the original Neos who got totally misled by Papaji, who had no teaching either. He "talked" non-duality, which put a nice spiritual face on the enlightenment game after Rajneesh gave it a bad name, but that was all. If he had had a proper teaching the people that came to him would have understood *Isvara* and *dharma*, etc. But he didn't. He was never taught. He claimed Ramana for his *guru*, but he was never a proper disciple. He was a greedy, arrogant, powerful man with a strong spiritual *vasana*. When the Westerners showed up at his door he took the opportunity to satisfy his *vasana* for fame and fortune. I know the whole story from the inside. If the *guru* doesn't model humility, compassion and *dharma*, how is the disciple going to know what it is? As soon as Andrew got *shaktipat* he set out on the same path. His whole well-meaning but flawed evolutionary spirituality idea was built on a desire for love and recognition, which he was unable to give himself. If he had any culture he would have moved on the minute he met Papaji. But when you are a seeker you have stars in your eyes. You are easily manipulated. *Shaktipat* is a dangerous drug for people with low self-esteem.

This kind of *guru* avoids *Isvara* like the plague. Awareness is a no-brainer – it's just you. The *jiva* is a no-brainer too – it is a confused person; what's more to know about it? But what is the relationship? But both awareness and *jiva* make perfect sense when you understand *Isvara*.

Isvara is *dharma*, and *dharma* is *Isvara*. You can't ignore it. But Andrew seems to be completely blind to it. Non-injury is the number one *dharma*. It is based on the non-dual nature of reality. There is a universal expectation of non-injury and he injured people right from the beginning in the name of helping them to enlightenment. It would have perhaps been justified if a lot of people were set free, but as far as I know everyone just got some nice epiphanies and lot of additional suffering from him. I've been hearing the stories for the last twenty-five years.

I once stumbled across an interview with him – I didn't realize who he was, because I had never seen him, only a few posters when he was the young golden boy – and I was shocked by what I saw: the darkness, the anger. I could see that he couldn't see it, nor could the interviewer. He was the great *guru*. It was masked by a grandiose noble sentiment. Well, it must not have been unknown to him because he said, "I am angry because there is so much suffering in the world. I won't rest until the world is free." It's a crowd-pleaser, to be sure, but it's a bogus idea. It was so sad. But what to do? The world has never been anything but ignorance, and suffering is its result. Much greater men than Andrew Cohen have come and gone – Christ and the Buddha included – who were meant to save the world, and it is just the same, not better, not worse. It is what it is. Nobody has ever changed it.

I would have liked to have a chat with him and give him a hand, but how likely is that a do-gooding fame-seeker would listen to anybody? He is "right." He knows it all. He is ENLIGHTENED! That's the thinking of this kind of *guru*. Nobody is enlightened, we are and always have been "the light," i.e. consciousness. No wonder the Neos don't like the *Isvara* teaching – it makes you instantly humble. I recall a clever statement from *A Course in Miracles*: "Would you rather be right or happy?"

There is no blame for anything. It is all *Isvara*.

Sarah: Curious, I started to explore your website and have been reading and watching your videos voraciously ever since. I am not looking for a new teacher or teaching, but I have found in Vedanta as you express it the answers to my lingering questions and remaining confusions. You have clarified SO MUCH. I see now that the "enlightenment" that I sought is actually my own self, and that all the mystical experiences I had that made me feel so special and "on the right track" were glimpses of my true nature, but ultimately just fuel to keep duality in place.

James: Yes, indeed.

Sarah: I saw that my entire spiritual quest was based on this ignorance, as is the majority of the current spiritual world. I recognised so much partial knowledge/incorrect interpretation touted as ultimate truth by so many teachers living and dead.

James: Amen.

Sarah: I found I didn't need convincing or deep reflection – your words struck me as immediately and self-evidently true. It is as though the scales have fallen from my eyes. I would not have been interested in Vedanta before now – I wanted the big bliss experiences and the comfort of

devotion to an “infallible” teacher (father figure), and the apparent security of a community. This is exactly what I got – with, I now see, predictable results. The logical, exacting and precise methodology of Vedanta was just too unglamorous for me.

James: But when you are ready it opens your eyes. There was never any problem but ignorance.

Sarah: I understand that the “place” of unchanging peace and wholeness I discovered during my crisis is in fact my own undying self and is reality itself. I understand why I don’t experience my own “story” (history and identity) as being particularly solid or real. It is, as you say, that the ego and the self change places. You have confirmed for me that living rightly in the apparent reality is the right thing to do and is in accord with the deepest laws of existence.

James: I’m glad you put the word “place” in quotes. Projecting seeking into time is the root of most spiritual suffering. Vedanta is a pathless path because the distance between the seeker and the sought is exactly zero.

Sarah: James, I can’t thank you enough for the contribution you are making and for your tireless efforts. I hope we meet one day. I send you my love, deepest gratitude and warmest wishes.

James: You are welcome. Be sure to thank yourself for sticking with it until *Isvara* brought Vedanta to you. Grace is earned. And thank *Isvara*.

Sarah: As I have spent so long in ignorance while convinced otherwise, please feel free, if you have the time and inclination, to correct any misunderstandings I may have. I haven’t used the language/terminology you/Vedanta use, as it is not my natural means of expression, but I trust my words make sense to you.

James: I always get out my red pencil when I get letters, but I didn’t get to use it. Your understanding is perfect; it is backed by experience and deep reflection. However, keep studying the website and reading my books. I suggest you get *Inquiry into Existence*. It’s Vedanta’s most sophisticated text and will tidy up any stray bit of ignorance left over.

~ Much love, James

P.S. And thanks for the donation. It really helps.