

A Critique of a Neo-Advaita Teaching

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Ram: Dear Terry, as you know, I had no knowledge of X's teaching when you gave me the CD with his *satsangs* and asked me to comment on them. I have over the years spoken with many people who listened to him, but no one seemed able to tell me what he was communicating. I attributed this more or less to the type of seeker that we see these days. They seem to be – and there are exceptions like yourself – more interested in the *sanga* than *sat*, more interested in a feel-good experience than in gaining wisdom and transformation. It seems seeking has become just another lifestyle fad these days and “seeker” another third-rate identity easily purchased from the overstuffed shelves of the big supermarket of limited identities that our societies have become. In any case, I make some general remarks relating X's teaching to traditional Vedanta and then do an in-depth critique of one of the *satsangs*.

From X's increasing popularity it is fair to infer that he has something to offer. Whether it is enlightenment or not depends on one's definition of enlightenment. The traditional Vedantic definition of enlightenment, *moksa*, is freedom from dependence on gross and subtle objects. This is not something that can be determined from the outside, at least not without consistent association with a teacher apart from his or her public appearances. A *satsang* is a very contrived and limited event and people will say almost anything to gain attention and respect, so one can never tell whether a person is enlightened or not from public appearances. If you really want to know, you should be enlightened yourself or have a very good idea of what enlightenment is and then worm your way into the confidence of the teacher and be like a fly on the wall of his or her life – it won't take long to figure it out, because whatever a person is, good or bad, is working out all the time. I also believe one could make the case that spiritual people are at least as gullible as the general public, perhaps more if you consider the strange beliefs to which they are attracted – so popularity cannot be equated with substance. Look at the tens of thousands of people who were attracted to Osho – and we know how he ended up. Anyway, it is of no concern to me whether or not X is enlightened or anyone else – there are certain signs that he is – but I am mildly interested in this Neo-Advaita phenomenon and whether or not it is an effective means of self-realization, so I will confine my remarks to how well I think his teachings reveal the self and shed light on the means of self-realization.

One problem with enlightenment is that it does not qualify you to teach it effectively. For every one hundred enlightened people two or three are effective teachers. Teaching is a skill that requires a valid means of knowledge. Of course a person who realizes the self – or imagines he or she has – is always free to teach the self in whatever way he or she chooses, but such attempts are almost always clumsy, inefficient and redundant – like trying to reinvent the wheel. It is a shame that more awakened people who have an India connection are so blissfully ignorant of Vedic culture because there is a powerful, effective, time-tested teaching tradition that is alive and well today and available to anyone who is willing to expose his or herself to it. The spiritual world has been much confused by people who make their own teachings, like Aurobindo, Gurdjieff, Krishnamurti and the host of spiritual pygmies that make up the modern spiritual scene, like Osho, Da Free John, John de Reuter and many others.

As you know, I was never curious about X or any *satsang* teacher, because I am a disciple of a

great Indian *mahatma* who helped me finish my short and easy *sadhana* a long time ago. It is my view that the spirituality is a means to an end, a correction really, and that once you know who you are you might profitably get on with your life. Turning enlightenment into a profession is a sad commentary on the spiritual materialism sweeping the planet. Recently I was told that it was possible to take a “*satsang* teacher training course”(for a hefty fee) so that you would not have to work out all the messy details involved in becoming a success in the enlightenment business. The point of all this is that I really have no first-hand knowledge of the Neo-Advaita scene; for me to attend a *satsang* would be like going out for a hamburger when I have a filet mignon in the fridge. So I listened to X’s teachings because you asked me, not for personal reasons.

The comments below focus on the teaching – not on X as such, although I make certain tentative inferences about him from them. X is an interesting person and his “enlightenment” – or whatever it is – obviously makes him attractive to people. And I wish him well, although I can’t see how his teachings – which need a lot of work – are going to set people free for the reasons enumerated below.

The teachings are at least as important, perhaps more, than the teacher. Self-ignorance is a highly personal phenomenon and you need to remove it yourself with the help of proven teachings. The teacher can certainly help to point out problems in your thinking and make helpful suggestions, but basically the work involves the practical application of knowledge – and this is something only you can do.

If someone else’s understanding could be “transmitted” verbally or non-verbally then everyone who “sat” with an enlightened person would get enlightened. A teacher is essential but is only one-third of the equation, the other two being the eligibility of the disciple and the effectiveness of the means of self-knowledge.

Obviously, there is a bias to my comments, but it is not a personal bias. It is the bias of traditional Vedanta. Vedanta says that this is a non-dual reality. Therefore there is only one self. Whatever is experienced anywhere at any time in any plane of consciousness is the non-dual self. So the pursuit of a special experience called enlightenment is unnecessary and possibly harmful since experience it is in the dream of *maya* and never lasts. Therefore the freedom that people seek can only be known and appreciated for what it is. To quote Ramana, whose views are in complete harmony with Shankara and traditional Vedanta, “By *jnana*, or spiritual knowledge, alone is this bliss (the self) to be realized, and *jnana* is achieved through *vichara*, or steady inquiry.” So the question of a person’s teaching revolves around the issue of whether or not it delivers direct knowledge of the self. Direct self-knowledge means the (hard and fast) knowledge “I am the Self.” It is a knowledge of identity based on experience that frees you of dependence on objects. “Objects” does not refer exclusively to physical objects but to subtle objects as well: ideas, beliefs, opinions, dreams, memories, imaginations, fears, desires and any and all positive and negative states of mind, spiritual and otherwise. Because there is only one self and reality is non-dual, it is impossible not to experience it always, so enlightenment as self-experience is not enlightenment. If it was, everyone would be enlightened. You may wish to define enlightenment as experience of the self, but what good is it if you still suffer attachment to experience? However, it is quite possible not to know that what one is experiencing is the self and that you are the self. Understanding that one is the self in practical terms means that one knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that one is whole and complete as one is. It is obvious that people suffer attachment because they think they are incomplete. Enlightenment means that you don’t pursue or avoid

objects with the belief that you have something to gain or lose by obtaining or avoiding them.

Most teachers present self-knowledge indirectly. Indirect self-knowledge is the knowledge that the self exists. Indirect knowledge presents a problem because it makes the self seem like a desirable experience. So the language of indirect knowledge is experience-oriented and it gives the seeker the impression that something needs to be done to gain freedom – which raises the tricky doership issue. This is perhaps useful at the beginning of one's spiritual journey when one is unsure of the existence of the self and would be benefited by non-dual epiphanies, if only to get a more clear idea of the goal. But a person who has been conditioned to experiential language runs into a big problem after a while, one that prevents direct knowledge. He or she cannot make the leap from experience to identity, because attachment to an identity as a "knower/experiencer" of the self has developed. If you say, "I am experiencing the self," you probably think that you are someone or something other than it. And this is a problem. It is identity or knowledge that "I am the self" – "alone," as Ramana says – that is *moksa*, freedom.

Although it is acceptable to teach both direct and indirect knowledge, depending on the eligibility of the disciples, a good teacher will make the distinction between these two approaches clear for the reason mentioned above. X does not do this. He switches from one to the other for no apparent reason.

With this understanding you could probably sort out X's teaching on your own, but his *satsang* is undisciplined and his language idiosyncratic, so it is quite possible to be confused by it. Much of this is probably due to its extemporaneous nature and the diverse motivations of the people in attendance. The only thing more or less consistent in the *satsang* is X's state of mind which is rock-solid. The *satsang* topics wander all over the place and the transitions between topics seem arbitrary and very often capricious – to say the least. Much of some of the *satsangs* are taken up with rather silly and tasteless jokes for want of serious questions. In one a woman wants to know how to deal with the beggars in India and a man wants to know if Arunachala has "special energy."

Most of the people I have met who did not like his teaching cite confusion as their primary criticism and its "intellectual" nature second. It doesn't seem that X is confused about who he is, but I do think he is struggling with how to teach effectively. He often speaks very rapidly, as if he wanted to get through with the idea and on to the next. Sometimes he seems quite bored with what he is saying and will add numerous "blah, blah, blah"s to his statements. Sometimes it seems that he is either coming from memory or is trying to improve his formulation as he goes – which is natural for someone outside an established teaching tradition trying to find an authentic voice. Part of the problem is that English is his second language – no blame. But it does add to the confusion.

Teaching is actually education, although this is not a popular idea in the Neo-Advaita world. Self-ignorance, like any other ignorance, does not disappear just because you want it too. The teacher needs to be very patient and have a comprehensive teaching, one that explains clearly the relationship between the self, the world and the individual. It needs especially to deal with the problem of action and its results. It is not helpful to be merely told that you are not a doer, for example. You need to know why action will not produce enlightenment and you also need to know what the value of action is. It is only when you see very clearly that you cannot beat the *karmic* system by experience that you can actually begin to inquire. When I was with my teacher I attended three Vedanta classes a day, every day for two years plus a couple of *satsangs*. I heard

all the major and several minor Vedanta texts unfolded verse by verse, word by word. All the ramifications of every idea were laboriously worked out for the benefit of the students. The people who were into it were into it – for life. They took it very seriously and many people woke up – because the teachings were so thorough, logical, consistent and profound. My teacher would not move on to the next topic until everyone understood the preceding topic. The teaching was built up day in and day out using the scriptures as the basis. In a way it was very difficult not to get enlightened if you paid attention because the teachings were so great and the teacher so professional.

Another common criticism I've heard is that his teaching is essentially negative, and from listening to the *satsangs* I think there is something to it. It is about X breaking down concepts that he feels get in the way of enlightenment. A destructive teaching is always important if enlightenment is self-knowledge. The word "*shad*" in *Upanishad* indicates the destruction of ignorance. But if you have a positive means of knowledge there is little need for a *guru* to destroy ideas; the vision of the self that it brings destroys erroneous notions automatically. But you have to present a living vision of the self in real time, not talk "about" it. Vedanta reveals in startling detail the nature of the cosmos (*jagat*), the psychology of the individual (*jiva*) and the nature of the self (*Isvara*) and the relationship between them. Once this vision has been assimilated *satsang* is useful to address the few remaining doubts. But usually self-realization happens in the course of the teaching, and from that point on the only practical issue is confidence in one's self-knowledge, the unshakable conviction that one can live free of objects.

Yes, a teacher should have clear and well-thought-out teachings, but the teacher himself should be the teaching so that the disciple can see the knowledge in action. Whether X teaches by example as well as precept, you would know better than I because you spent so much time with him – but he certainly seems rooted in certainty. Whether that certainty is due to the nature of his personality – in which case his teachings could be just a matter of an unhealthy dogmatism – or whether it derives from his self-knowledge, it is impossible for me to determine. I suspect that it is a little of both. Occasionally he seems unnecessarily reactive when it appears that he is about to be challenged. As you know, I observed him from the beginning when he was sitting with a few people some years ago. He comports himself well and seems to be a reasonably cultured person – although he has a cruel, sarcastic streak which he gives full rein to in his *satsangs*. It's one of his least appealing characteristics. This does not mean that he doesn't know who he is – only that there are some negative traits in his mind that he seems quite content with. Mercifully, he's not out there to give hugs.

One of the problems that comes with the destruction of the doer idea – which is perhaps X's main focus – is that it provides no way for people who see themselves as doers to work their way out of *maya*. If you say that the person asking the question is illegitimate, you basically leave them in a worse position than they were before. Action is very necessary and useful on the spiritual path and one should learn not only how to act but also learn the spirit in which action should be undertaken so that the *vasana* load can be reduced. The Vedic teaching that addresses doership is called *karma yoga* because doers are into *karma*.

It would be impossible to underestimate the importance of *karma yoga* in the Vedic tradition. In fact the *Bhagavad Gita*, which has the status of an *Upanishad* as a scripture on liberation, devotes many verses to the practice. *Karma yoga* is an attitude that one takes with respect to one's actions and the results of one's actions. It is based on the understanding that a person has every right to act in this world with the idea of getting a certain result, but that the result is not

under the control of the doer of the action. The result is a consequence of the appropriateness and timeliness of the action and the nature of the field in which the action happens. In religious terms, it is up to the “grace of God.” Or in New Age terms, “the universe” or “existence.” Because the results of one’s actions are not up to the doer, whatever result, positive or negative, comes should be gladly accepted as a “gift” from God. Because it is the identification of the doer with the action and its result that produces binding *vasanas*, the *karma yoga* attitude reduces the *vasana* load and eventually causes the attention to turn inward and meditate on the self. A mind that has operated with the *karma yoga* understanding for a long time becomes peaceful, pure, and rock-solid. It takes pleasure in itself and is indifferent to the temporary joys that come from the senses and their objects. A mind prepared by *karma yoga* is definitely capable of enlightenment and one that isn’t subject to an endless series of spiritual ups and downs.

X teaches “surrender,” although I can’t recall that he uses that word. He says that basically you are “helpless,” that you can’t control experience, so you had better give up on it. “Surrender” is a poor man’s *karma yoga* because it doesn’t take desire into account. If you don’t address the issue of desire you force yourself to have to surrender because you just keep on producing *vasanas* that generate experiences that you don’t want. Nobody “surrenders” to pleasant experiences. The value of addressing the issue of desire lies in the fact that it forces you to inquire into your belief about who you are. Desire/fear is a compelling statement that you do not understand that you are a partless whole, that action and its results cannot affect you. Basically “surrender” is an idea that has evolved to help emotional people who are incapable of connecting their desires/fears with unpleasant *karmic* situations – in other words, people who are prisoners of their *vasanas*. In reality you can exhaust both gross and subtle bad *karma* and generate gross and subtle good *karma*, and create a very positive mind and an interesting life. You are helpless with reference to who you are and experience in general, not with reference to the nature of your life experiences. Therefore action is useful.

In any case a teaching that doesn’t “come down” to the level of the the doer is not very helpful. X does not come down; he rains down his version of the truth from above and leaves it up to you. But as you know, teachings that do not encourage *sadhana* and *vasana* exhaustion produce spiritual frustration and no growth. Yes, in the end all *sadhanas* result in the understanding that action and its results are not enough, but you have to go through it until you see it. You will not give up action just because some *guru* tells you that you are not a doer. You need to transform yourself into a mature, positive person before you are capable of self-knowledge. Just living off the feel-good buzz from *satsang* is not enough.

In one *satsang* a woman says she wants peace of mind. This is a legitimate spiritual desire. But X comes from the position of the self, ridicules her and tells her that anything she would do to get peace would only reinforce her idea of herself as a doer. This is absolutely true. However, a person whose negative *vasanas* are causing them pain is not going to suddenly become free of agitation because she has been told to “be what you are.” She needs to be taught the *karma yoga* principle, as do 99% of Western seekers. Our societies teach desire-prompted action solely for the sake of the result and this is an attitude that is completely spiritually counterproductive.

X does not encourage *sadhana*. *Sadhana* means preparation of the mind for enlightenment by the removal of *rajas* (passion, agitation) and *tamas* (sloth, inertia, dullness) with a subsequent increase in *sattva* (clarity and peace). The purpose of it is to allow the mind to turn inward and fix its attention on the self with the idea of getting self-knowledge.

Vedanta comes from the same point of view as X but it does not dismiss *sadhana*, because the mind has to be made capable of understanding who one is. X is attempting to deliver understanding, but the minds of most of the people he is addressing are dull and passionate. They have been in the worldly dream for a long time and have strong *vasanas* and good justifications for them and they are not going to just leap into “That” with a by your leave. So X’s “one size fits all” teaching is not skillful or helpful. Even if you don’t want to help people with *sadhana* you should explain how *sadhana* works, its value and encourage entry-level people to take it up – with, yes, an understanding of its limitations. *Sadhana* is a means to an end. It will only give you a pure, happy mind – but this is not the kiss of death as X seems to think. Gaining and retaining the knowledge “I am limitless awareness” really only happens to a mature person with a prepared mind. Yes, eventually even this knowledge has to go, insofar as it is the “thorn to remove a thorn,” but enlightenment is a process and you can’t just skip from the consciousness of limitation to limitlessness overnight.

Occasionally a very ripe seeker who has done good *sadhana* and who has seen the limitations of practice is ready for the “you are not the doer” teaching. But most of the people who attend these Neo-Advaita *satsangs* have not done *sadhana*, don’t know what it is and wouldn’t do it anyway. In general they are looking for instant enlightenment. So it is easy to “teach” them. Just tell them they are not the ego and that they are “That” and leave it up to them to sort it out. But an unprepared mind will not accept the words of a *guru*, no matter how authoritatively they are delivered.

This brings up another issue: a teacher’s authority should derive not only from his or her direct experience/knowledge but from the fact that the teachings are in harmony with a body of knowledge that has passed the test of time. Ramana is a case in point. After his realization he made a comprehensive study of the Yogic and Vedantic tradition into which his experience initiated him. In addition to writing scripture himself, he even copied verbatim with his own hand Shankara’s introduction to *Vivekachoodamani*, not only because it represented his view about *moksa* but to make sure that his enlightenment would be seen to be in harmony with Sanatana Dharma. Ramana’s enlightenment was important to him and others – like the enlightenment of anyone – but its larger significance was that it was another confirmation of Vedic teachings. Thus it kept the great tradition of Vedanta alive.

The *Vedas* are called *sruti*, or *apurusheya jnanam*, knowledge that does not come from the human mind. It comes directly from the self through the purified minds of the *rishis*. Thus it is “divine” in origin. Another valid means of spiritual knowledge is called *purusheya jnanam*, or *smriti*. *Smriti* is “remembered” knowledge. This is knowledge that comes from human beings based on personal experience. X’s teaching is *smriti* because it is based on his personal experience. There is nothing wrong with it but there is a danger with personal experience: the knowledge that comes from it is subject to error and distortion if the intellect is impure. So if you are asked to accept a teaching solely on the basis of an individual’s authority, you should check to see if it jibes with *sruti*, i.e. Vedanta. As I mentioned, Ramana made sure that “his” teachings were not thought to be unique but that they confirmed and supported the *sruti*. In X’s case there is no attempt to justify his teachings with tradition, so we are asked to accept what he says solely on the basis of his own authority. My analysis of his teachings is based on whether or not they are in harmony with tradition and whether or not they are an effective means of self-knowledge.

Rather than speak further about X’s teachings, in general I listened to several *satsangs* and then transcribed one I hadn’t listened to word for word, assuming that during the course of an hour I

would be treated to the essential X. I understand that this approach is not particularly scientific, but it yielded interesting results. On balance I'd give X an "A" for enlightenment and "C" for his teachings, which are pretty much garden-variety Neo-Advaita. It is really absurd to think that even a brilliant person like X could come up with a comprehensive means of knowledge and wield it skillfully in his short lifetime. Shankara realized at a very early age and completely revolutionized the spiritual life in India by the time he died in his early thirties, but this was possible because he had at his disposal the Rolls Royce of teachings, Vedanta *pramana*.

Questioner: If I cannot know myself and there is no other, what is all this?

X: What? Yes, what!?

Questioner: What I know [ha, ha ha].

X: That one who thinks he knows is still something what is known.

Questioner: Hmm. But he's not knowing. You told me that he can never know him.

X: Yes, what? That what is knowing that what... is an idea... the idea of a knower cannot be known. So the knower which is something that can be known is already something that cannot be that what is knowing the knower.

Questioner: Ha, ha! [uncomprehending nervous laughter]. You can put all these knowers in an ark and float away [ha, ha].

The questioner wants to know what the world that he perceives is if he cannot know himself and this is a non-dual reality. The Vedantic answer is that he can know himself and the world because he is awareness and what he sees/knows is awareness because in a non-dual reality ("there is no other") the knower, the known and the knowing are awareness, the self.

X sets out to destroy the idea of the knower, but I can't see that he accomplishes it. He makes a glaring contradiction when he first says, "The idea of a knower cannot be known," and then he says, "So the knower which is something that can be known..."

In the first place, if the idea of the knower cannot be known, how does X know it? An idea can be known. It can be known because it appears in awareness. The knower can be known also because the knower appears in awareness. And awareness can be known because it is self-knowing.

Then X says, "So the knower which is something that can be known is already something that cannot be that what is knowing the knower." I believe what he means is that the knower cannot know the knower. He is positing two knowers. At this point a good teacher would make it clear what was meant by the two knowers. Since X does not make it clear, we are forced to speculate.

It seems reasonable that he means that the ego/intellect, reflected awareness, cannot know the self, pure awareness.

This is true and it is untrue depending on our point of view. So this idea needs an explanation. To explain it we need to examine our definition of enlightenment. If enlightenment is defined as experience of the self, then it is true. A gross object cannot experience something subtler than it. For example, there is a wide range of subtle light energy that the human eye cannot see, because the rays are subtler than the eyes. The first knower, the ego/intellect/experiencer, cannot know the self directly, because it is a gross unconscious manifestation of the self.

But if enlightenment is *jnanam*, knowledge, as Ramana and traditional Vedanta says, then this statement is false. Why? Because knowledge takes place in the first knower, reflected awareness, the ego/intellect. The second knower, the self, already knows what it is. It is not in ignorance. The first knower believes it is not the self, so it needs to know that it is the self.

If you tell somebody that they are not the ego/intellect they will not try to gain self-knowledge – because they will think that the one who is trying to gain it is illegitimate. This accounts for the foolish and persistent notion among modern seekers that knowledge is only “intellectual” and is therefore to be avoided at all costs. So in this case the negation of the ego/intellect will prevent enlightenment. If you are giving *satsang* you are giving it to doer/knowners. How does it serve to inform them that they are not doer/knowners?

If you listen to the tape after X's statement you will hear nervous uncomprehending laughter and the fellow who started the dialogue will quickly accept what X has said and move on with a bit of a joke.

Then X says, “Yeah. Maybe all these knowers disappear in this chain of knowers and knowing (chuckles). No it's... again to this... what we started with... yeah, again to the knower, the knowing and what can be known. There is no separation. That's all. To see that you are that, that and that.”

This statement is fairly straightforward and I can find no fault in it. It is a statement of non-duality, but we suddenly develop a problem with the next statement.

X continues: “There is... to be it. But there is no knowing it. You are that, if you like it or not.”

X says “to be it” This formulation makes it sound as if “being it” was something you could do. But being is not something that can be done. First he tells the person that the ego doesn't exist and then he says that the ego can “be” it.

Next he makes another incorrect statement. He says that you can't know it. But being can only be known. It can be known directly by itself because it is self-knowing, self-luminous awareness. Is there anyone who does not know that they exist? It can also be known directly by the intellect as the knowledge “I am limitless awareness.” This knowledge is in fact what traditional Vedanta and Ramana call *jnanam*, self-knowledge. If this is a non-dual reality, then the ego, insofar as it exists, can only be the self.

The last sentence is direct knowledge: “You are that,” he says. The only thing missing here is what “that” is. In case there is any doubt, it is *chaitanyam*, awareness. It is really important to know precisely what “that” refers to. As long as it is a “that” it is undefined and cannot be investigated and known to be one's self. And if this teaching is going to have its desired effect,

you need to see that the mind of the person you are teaching is fixed on the self. It is not direct knowledge and will not set you free unless this condition is met. To say it to someone whose mind is not locked on the self is only an indirect teaching, an “intellectual” teaching. You come away knowing that you are “that” intellectually, but there is no experience to back it up.

Now he comes up with a strange idea. He says, “And not to be it, you have to make an effort. You have to create an idea of separation. This effort is like the first that you... have to make an effort, yet you separate yourself as a knower by knowing something what can be known.”

For someone who says there is no ego/doer, he is certainly giving the doer a lot of teaching. He has just told us that we have to “be” it, and then he tells us that not to be it is an effort. So “who” is not being it?

In any case this statement is either an incredibly sophisticated and brilliant formulation of the idea that self-realization is very easy, so easy that you have to make an effort not to be the self, or it is a statement that is completely contradictory to experience.

It is an effort to not be the self? Vedanta says that not being the self is the result of *maya*, or “beginningless ignorance.” The self exists, then a big blackout comes – *maya* – and then the *jivas*, the individual souls, appear. They are already in the dark. But because they were not there before the blackout happened they don’t know they are ignorant of the self. So how hard is it to be ignorant of who you are? It is so easy and natural that 99.999% of the human race has accomplished it without even knowing it. In reality it seems that “being the self” is a gargantuan effort insofar as so many people put out so much effort to “be it.”

The purpose of the path of inquiry is to question this idea of separation to see if it is true. But maybe I am being unfair to this idea. Maybe I am taking the words too literally. Words are real problem with X because he is talking about a very subtle subject in his second language.

But wait a minute! Maybe his statement is true. If the “you” that he is speaking to is the self and we assume that he is speaking poetically his statement might be something like this: “As the self it is an effort to limit yourself.” If we take his statement literally it cannot be true, because ignorance is never the result of an effort. Efforts are a result of ignorance. Ignorance is the result of a lack of knowledge and knowledge is never an effort. It happens automatically when a means of knowledge is operating. But if we grant him a little poetic license he might be saying that what is limitless, i.e. the self cannot limit itself. But even then we run into the problem of omnipotence. The *sruti* says the self is omnipotent. This means that although it is not a doer it can do anything. If it can’t forget what it is, then it would be limited by its inability to forget and would therefore not be omnipotent as experience shows and scripture claims. This is the only way that we can justify the idea of self-ignorance in a non-dual reality.

Still, it is anybody’s guess what X actually means and how deep his knowledge is because he does not explain himself. When you ask people to accept what you are saying on the basis of your authority you are not inclined to explain yourself for fear of appearing to be fallible. If you don’t reference your statements to some larger context you are free to say anything.

X: So this effort to identify with the first knower is an effort.

I'm not sure what he means by the "first knower" but let's run through this statement from both points of view. If the first knower is the self then he is saying that the second knower, reflected awareness (the subtle body, or *chidabasa* in Vedanta) has to make an effort to identify with the self (the first knower). This view is completely in harmony with traditional Vedanta. In fact it is the Vedantic view of enlightenment. When the second knower stops thinking it is limited, inadequate and incomplete and identifies with the self it "becomes" the self. It doesn't "become" it experientially, because it is already the self. It "becomes" it by identifying with the self. This identification is simply the loss of its ignorance, or the gaining of self-knowledge.

If the first knower is the ego the statement is not true, because the self, which is self-luminous and self-knowing, would never put out an effort to identify with the second knower, because it knows it is free of everything. It knows that it is whole and complete and the identification would not bring it anything it didn't already have.

X: And I ask you be the laziest bastard you can be because that is what you are. The most lazy bastard what can be is the self... [it] never did anything. Simply be what you are.

If there is no doer, then who is going to "be" the self? Who is going to be that lazy bastard? How can you "simply be what you are" if you are what you are? The problem with this instruction is that it does not take into account the actual problem: the doer doesn't know that it is the self. X seems to understand this because he now says, "Simply rest in that... what you cannot rest in."

"Rest in what you can't rest in"? If you can't rest in the self, then why tell people to rest in it? Okay, you say "rest in what you can't rest in" to stop the mind and free it of concepts.

Fine, but what good is a mind without concepts? If a mind free of concepts was enlightenment, everyone would be already enlightened because who has not slept? Enlightenment is the absence of ignorance about one's nature, not the absence of thoughts.

X: Rest in that restlessness. Be absolute satisfaction and totally be never satisfied. See in being never satisfied that that is satisfaction... that what you are can never be satisfied by whatever. That's satisfaction. Any idea that you can get satisfied... is hell. That you can get satisfied by something else, that's hell.

Again, you can't "be" absolute satisfaction, because you are absolute satisfaction (*parama sukka*). In the third sentence he gets the language right. He says, "See [that] in never being satisfied... etc." In this case the word "see" means to realize or to know. A simple way to say this is, "Know that nothing outside yourself can satisfy you."

In these statements you can clearly see a conflict in X's teaching. He asks us to rest, which is an action, and then he asks us to "see," by which he means to know. If enlightenment is an experience then we need to rest. If it is the removal of ignorance then we need to know. If "resting" does the job, then what use is it to know anything?

You might argue that you need to rest before you can see, but I don't think this is what he means. I think he is saying that by relaxing or letting go – the popular word is "surrender" – you can attain

enlightenment – which is a common view. But there is nothing you can do for enlightenment except inquire. Yes, inquiry is a kind of doing but only if your mind is exceptionally dull or passionate. Inquiry is the nature of the mind. It always wants to know. Even when it gets a mind-blowing experience, it is not content with the experience. It wants to know what the experience “means.” Once you understand something surrender happens automatically. The reason the enlightened are so relaxed is because they know that they are whole and complete. They did not get relaxed by learning to relax, although it is pretty hard to realize who you are unless you are relaxed.

Questioner: It’s also crazy.

X: That’s the most crazy idea... that you are an object in time that can be unsatisfied first and then the idea that you can get satisfied is another, second crazy idea. First, the idea that you are born and that you are an object in time which is unsatisfied. And the second crazy idea, that there is a hungry one who can be sated... the stopping of longing. That there is one who is longing already is the first crazy idea and that longing can be stopped by something... the second. So go to the first... is there any truth in the first idea?... does it need the slightest, the most subtle, effort to identify?

The idea is in harmony with Vedanta. It would perhaps be more clear to say, “You, the self, are whole and complete. Therefore there is nothing that can complete you. Your desire for things is completely gratuitous.”

X: Falling in love with yourself. There was the idea of falling in love with me... yourself Could you avoid it? No.

Here X makes a leap that is impossible to follow. He seems to be taking up a new topic without even finishing up the first or showing any relationship between the idea of wholeness and self-love.

Questioner: When I wake up in the morning there is a moment when I haven’t picked up on my junk, but there’s still somebody who has not picked up on the junk.

X: But the junk is still there, picked up or not.

Questioner: The junk is only there because I make the junk to be there.

X: Needs one who defines junk. Otherwise there will be no junk.

Questioner: Well, we can call it the paradise also.

X: Yes, you can all it whatever. A definition needs a definer. If you wake up and have an experience of oneness it needs one who calls it oneness, calls it a gap, calls it a separation. So that first definer...

Here he is trying to point out the ego which he calls a “definer.” He makes a statement that begins with, “If you wake up...” etc. and then he says, “What I mean is that you cannot not wake up.” So what is it – can you wake up or can’t you wake up?

Again, the answer is that you can and you can’t. If the “you” he is referring to is the self then you can’t wake up, because you never sleep. You are beyond waking and sleep whether it is actual physical waking and sleep or whether you are using waking and sleep as a metaphor for knowledge and ignorance. But if you take yourself to be an ego, a limited being, then you can “wake up” to the idea that you are limitless, that you are the self. The ego is by definition “asleep” spiritually, so its state can change. Or to be more accurate, you may come to understand the value of the idea that you are free.

Questioner: ...is experience, is the first experience, is the idea that something experiences, is already in the shit? [heh, heh]

X: What I mean is that you cannot not wake up. So the first awareness is the first falling in love again. You cannot avoid falling in love with yourself. You cannot avoid to fall in love with the image of yourself.

Here’s another one of those bumpy transitions. He seems to want to talk about love, so he cuts short the waking up idea and returns to love.

Questioner: It is love at first sight.

X: This is love at first sight. Every morning again. Ha, ha, you’re that, what is total helplessness. You cannot help yourself, even yourself. Every morning you fall again in love the image of yourself. There is no way out. So you become a lover, the loving and the beloved. Every morning it starts again. In deep sleep there is resting of it. But every morning the lover wakes at first and the lover in loving creates a beloved. The I, me, myself and I. My treasure. My precious me wakes up. My precious... ahh [sarcasm]. Ha, ha. And then you become egocentric because you’re so in love with yourself because you’re wanting all the best for this me. Which is my soul... all the best for my body and my life, then comes my mother and my children, but first me... but that’s love. Totally caring about the beloved. This is love at first sight and you cannot escape it. You always fall into the same trap into that love for yourself. It is unavoidable. This is meditation. Every morning you start to meditate about what you are. You rest in that what is prior and then meditation starts. Meditation is loving yourself.

Okay, this is straightforward. Everybody is a narcissist. This is a fairly accurate observation about

human nature.

Questioner: If love for oneself manifests as what the mind recognizes as love, then there is no problem. The problem is that the love for itself manifests as analysis of imperfections of oneself.

X: Yes, but so what? But this is love.

Questioner: Yes, I understand. It is caring.

X: It is caring because you only want the best for yourself.

Questioner: Yes, yes.

X: What else could you want for yourself?

Questioner: But if I woke up in the morning in love with myself and knew it then... that's it. That's all.

X: No [ha, ha, ha].

Questioner: It's not enough? [ha, ha, ha]

X: No. You better don't wake up [ha, ha, ha]. Now I go one step further.

Questioner: Okay, okay, okay.

X: That what wakes up is already waking up inside what you are.

Here we have the self ("what you are") and within it ("inside") something that is waking up. As always when dealing with such a subtle topic, language is very important. In this case we are dealing with the waking and sleeping metaphor. What actually is meant by the words "waking up"? Because X does not explain what he means by waking up, we can only speculate. Is it some kind of spiritual experience or is it some kind of understanding that is involved in waking up? Neither? Or Both?

Questioner: And it doesn't have a self to fall in love with?

X: No. So the first I image of your self falls in love with the second image.

How an image that is not conscious falls in love with an image that is not conscious I'm not sure, but we will let it pass under the aegis of poetic license. This is an example of a person who has not taken time to think a lot about what he is saying. The words just rush out of him in a torrent and there is very little peace in them – although he himself carries a peaceful vibration. This contradiction is interesting. It gives one a sense of the self beyond “X” and is perhaps why people are attracted to him. Anyway, the next statement is worth thinking about.

X: But you are which never comes out of it, of what it is. You never wake up. There is no waking up for you. There is no such action as waking up. And then there is no second action of falling in love. All that is a dream. But the absolute dreamer that you are is never part of it. So you never fall in love with anything. This uninterrupted peace you are was never in any falling in love or any bullshit dream. So you are here now what you were as a baby and in every given moment in your so-called life. In deep sleep, in dream sleep, in this dream... whatever... there is always that what is never interrupted... this omnipresence which has no presence, there is no presence of it.

The first sentence is incomprehensible, but the rest is truth. He is talking about the self. His teaching is in harmony with *sruti*. First, he debunks the waking up idea, then the falling in love idea. Then he attacks the idea of “presence,” which is much needed, as it has become one of the much over-used buzz words in the New Age and Neo-Advaita worlds.

What's missing are the reasons why you can't fall in love, can't wake up and can't experience presence. You can't fall in love, because you are love. You can't wake up, because you were never asleep. And you can't experience presence, because you are neither present nor absent. You are the awareness of what is present and what is absent.

As you mentioned, what is missing in X's teaching is the positive side. And I agree. He is a rebel, an iconoclast. This is useful, but just destroying concepts is not enough. Destroying concepts does not destroy the mind – conventional wisdom notwithstanding. The mind needs concepts. It needs concepts that are in harmony with the nature of external reality and the nature of the self. To expect someone to let go of something dear without giving him or her something better to hold onto – at least in the *sadhana* phase – is poor psychology. Let people contemplate on the love that they are, let them appreciate their own spiritual energies, teach them the value of knowledge. The mind should entertain truthful, peaceful, positive ideas – not be starved of concepts. When you are happy you are much more likely to let go of unhelpful ideas than when you are stuck in a concept-free void.

If you insist on stripping the mind of everything you had better be there to help the person interpret the absence of supporting concepts in a helpful way. Otherwise they will become despairing and depressed. The correct interpretation of emptiness is that it is the gaining of freedom, not the loss of support. It takes time for even the most non-attached person to understand in what sense freedom is the only true support. At the very end all concepts need to be dropped – but this does not apply to the entry-level people who attend these Neo-Advaita *satsangs*. Many of these young and inexperienced *gurus* want to make sure that they are

perceived to be enlightened, so they feel compelled to come from an incredibly lofty point of view and be very powerful and ruthless with ignorance. Yes, it is necessary to speak from the self as the self, but not at the expense of rolling up one's sleeves and getting down in the trenches and patiently helping people work their way out of *maya*.

X: It is a total absence of anything you can experience. But the experiencer experiencing what is experienced, that presence appears in that what itself has no presence. But without that there would be no presence of the experiencer or lover, loving and beloved. So be that which is neither that or that, but it is that and that.

Statements like the first sentence make me think that X's understanding is pretty good. This is perhaps the most important spiritual issue: the limitation of experience and its unsuitability as a candidate for enlightenment. Again, the language is just plain terrible and I'm not sure how anybody could fail to be confused by it. I had to replay it over and over capturing a few words at a time until I figured it out.

Why is it important for seekers to understand the limitation of experience in realizing freedom? If they don't they will not pursue understanding. *Moksa* through understanding (the word *Veda* means "knowledge" or "understanding") is possible because you are already free. All that is missing is the understanding. To get free through knowledge you have to inquire because knowledge is the result of inquiry. Inquiry is not about gaining experience but about understanding the meaning of experience. If you see the value of inquiry you will be forced to consider the *sruti*, the scriptures, because they reveal the method of inquiry. Inquiry is not about sitting down with your eyes closed asking, "Who am I?" The jury is not out on this topic. The answer is simple and the same for everybody: "I am limitless awareness. I am whole and complete – a partless whole. Nothing can be added to me. Nothing can be subtracted from me. I do not change. Experience does not validate or invalidate me. I determine the value of experience." Etc. You can study the *Upanishads* and more recent Vedantic texts to get the full picture.

If this is true, then how am I going to use this knowledge to set myself free? I will use this understanding to distinguish pure awareness from its forms. The scripture tells us that all forms, everything that changes is "unreal," or "not-me." The purpose of this practice is to destroy the idea that "I am not free." When I can see that I am whole and complete, I am automatically freed from dependence on objects – which is the definition of *moksa*, liberation, or enlightenment. Experience is the ultimate attachment, so it will be dismissed by inquiry. It should be dismissed because the self is not experience. Experience is the self, but the self is not experience.

X does not flesh out the idea of inquiry. I don't know what his views are actually, because there was no discussion of it in the *satsangs* I listened to. Even if he does, his teaching style does not encourage independent inquiry or thinking for oneself. He seems to expect people to accept his words as the truth. Scriptural-based inquiry is a real *guru*-killer because it gives the inquirer a way to check the words of the *guru* to see if they are in harmony with reality. Anyway, it is good to see that he is teaching that the self is not experience.

I dealt with his teaching to "be that which is..." above, but I might add that it shows that his teachings are not having the desired effect. If a teaching is valid and it is delivered skillfully it will reveal the self clearly – assuming qualified students. But if it isn't then the teacher can only offer

inspiration and instructions – which is not at all bad. However, a skillful teacher never tells people what to do. People have had enough doing. If they hadn't they wouldn't be interested in enlightenment. A skillful teacher's words reveal the self, a revelation that is not a doing but is a wordless appreciation of who one is.

X: There is no falling in love. Love is anonymous. But the dream starts like this. First there appears an image of a lover, a me, an I. And the second is a space, I am, and the third is I am so-and-so, or that which can be experienced.

This X's idea of a creation theory. I suspect that he got it from studying Kashmiri Shaivism.

X: It's interesting. The image that lover falls in love with is not the image of the body that appears in the mirror, because that is a later projection. So that the one that is fallen in love with is invisible. It is the space which is never known. Even that which is loved in that first loving never appears in consciousness either.

I wouldn't go to X if I had love problems. The obvious problem with this statement is that actually people only fall in love with things that are known to them. If you don't know it, how can you fall in love with it? If this is true then the last sentence is untrue.

If he's saying that you can only fall in love with the self, which seems to be his meaning, then why call it invisible and not known? In fact the self is the only visible thing there is – everything that is the self – and it is the only thing that can be known with certainty. The "dream" that he is speaking of cannot be known with certainty – although it can be experienced – because it is always changing. So all love is self-love, however you define self – whether the object is visible or invisible.

X: It never appears in anything. It has no appearance. It's only pointers. To be that absolute dreamer which is not the relative dreamer, the dreaming and what can be dreamt of. It's a pointer to that which is in spite the dreamer, the dreaming and what can be dreamt of. But it's not separated from it. You cannot separate that what you are from the dreamer, the dreaming and the dreamt. You are that. And that is your realization or that is consciousness which is like is playing this game like it. But you are not that because you are in spite of it. In spite of that experience of an experienter experiencing what can be experienced, you exist. That is unconditioned existence or unconditioned knowledge which is in spite of one who knows or doesn't know. That what is that "in spite" is what you are. Not because. So be "in spite," that is all. Don't be a spitting image of yourself. Don't be a shadow of yourself. Be that which is with and without shadow... what it is. With and without the idea of light you are. With and without whatever experience you exist. So you are in spite of the experienter and whatever can be experienced what you are. Never because. So be that what you cannot not be. That what you can imagine is depending on that what you are, but you are not depending on that imagination.

This is a pretty eloquent and powerful statement of the self and it seems to be more than book

knowledge. I could pick it apart sentence by sentence, but that would not be fair. I particularly like his statement about the relationship of the self to experience, which is the second time it occurred in this *satsang*.

This statement also reveals a teaching weakness that has been covered above: giving instructions. Teaching is about seeing, not doing. He says “be this, don’t be that.” It’s great advice, but impossible to follow. As I mentioned above, this kind of teaching fails for want of a valid means of knowledge. By its very nature a valid means of self-knowledge wielded skillfully forestalls the giving of instructions. As Ramana says, “A *guru* is not someone who tells you what to do.” Why? Because the removal of ignorance (the word *guru* means “the one that removes ignorance”) allows you to see the truth as it is. If you see it, you see that you are it, and it is very clear that you can’t do anything about it. If the mind is present behind the senses, knowledge cannot but take place. It is not a doing. It happens.

Even if it was possible to “be That,” you need to tell the person how. I’m not sure why this has escaped X, but if the person could just “be That” and it was desirable to be it, he or she would have done it already. Actually, X has fallen into the experiential linguistic trap without knowing it because he contends that you cannot know who you are – which is obviously untrue – so he is forced to turn enlightenment into an act of will – “be That” – in spite of the fact that he dismisses effort.

Furthermore, what is X attempting to give but understanding of the self? At the same time he contends that the self can’t be known. So why would anyone with a brain take his teachings and instructions seriously? This business of not knowing the self is brought out clearly in the next quotation.

X: Thank God you’re not something that can be known. That’s the beauty of your absolute existence. If you were known you would be an object which would make you dependent on being something. But that you cannot be known is the beauty of your existence. So enjoy that you cannot know yourself, because you are that absolute unknowable. Be that what you cannot know. Whatever you know, that you cannot be. How can you not be what you are?

If you are something that cannot be known, how do you know that you can’t be known unless you know yourself? The self is not only self-knowing – who does not know that they exist? – it knows what can be known and what can’t be known – if there were actually something that couldn’t be known. But there is nothing that can’t be known, because the self illumines all of existence. In a non-dual reality whose nature is absolute awareness it can’t illumine non-existence, because there is no such thing as non-existence. There is a concept called non-existence which can be known or not known by the intellect. But the intellect is not the knower. It is merely inert subtle matter, a reflector of awareness. The knower, what X calls existence, is awareness, *chit*. *Chit*, the self, is immediate knowledge.

There are two kinds of knowledge according to Vedanta, mediate and immediate. Mediate knowledge is the kind of knowledge X is talking about when he says that “you” can’t be known. He means you, the self, can’t be known by media, in this case the intellect, because the self is subtler than the intellect. It is the cause and the intellect is the effect. For the intellect to know the self would be analogous a light bulb trying to illumine electricity. Immediate knowledge is knowledge that does not require a media. This is how you know yourself. You know yourself

because you are yourself and for no other reason. The reason he says you can't know yourself is because he is trapped in the experiential view of enlightenment.

There are other Neo-Advaita themes in X's teaching, like predestination and surrender, but I've invested enough time in this project. To summarize, I'd say that X is an intelligent guy who seems to be self-realized. For the audience that he is addressing he has enough knowledge – coupled with an authoritarian personality, an aggressive, take-it-or-leave-it style and a sense of humor – to keep his *satsang* going.

But is his “teaching” really a valid means of self-knowledge? I don't think so. I can recognize the Vedantic source of some of his ideas, but it is clear from the way he uses them that he has not made an in-depth study of Vedanta. And I don't think he will, although it would markedly improve his teaching. When you know who you are and you are making a nice cozy life out of it there is no incentive to go further. He gets a lot of attention, moves around the world, pulls the pretty women and generally has it made. So he will probably be a more or less permanent fixture on the Neo-Advaita circuit for the foreseeable future. I wouldn't be surprised, however, if one day he just walked away from it all and did something else.

As the fellow I met this morning at breakfast said, “Why listen to X and break your brain trying to sort it out when you can read Shankara or the *Gita* or any of the classic Vedantic texts and get it in simple, clear, accurate words?” I hope this is what you wanted. Keep in touch.

~ Much love, Ram