

# A Nice Long Satsang

Ram (James Swartz)

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**Bill:** Dear Jim, hi. I have been thinking about you a lot lately and missing you. I hope you are well and enjoying what you are doing. I know Sandy is there visiting with you, please give her my best. I know she was very excited about coming to spend time with you.

**Jim:** Hi, Bill. Yes, I am quite fine. In fact if life gets any better I do not know how I will stand it. It was great to see Martina. We had a fine time. I just got an email from her saying how much she benefited from the teaching. She is turned on and moving very quickly forward.

**Bill:** As for me, I am well. Not much new on my end. I am still loving inquiry and giving myself to that process as much as I can. I don't know if my understanding has changed much since I saw you last. Has it deepened? I don't know.

**Jim:** I am not sure what you mean by "deepened," since knowledge is knowledge. Maybe you are talking about confidence in the knowledge that you are the self and not Bill? Understanding is like pregnancy, Bill, you cannot have a little bit or a lot of it. It won't be deep or shallow. You either have it or you don't. It sounds to me like there is some sort of stuckness.

**Bill:** Perhaps there is more confidence, but I can't be sure of that either since my memory is pretty unreliable when it comes to past states of mind.

**Jim:** Well, the way you would tell is if you are more free and peaceful, more happy and non-attached than ever. If you are doing inquiry correctly, there is obvious growth as the binding *vasanas* are resolved. You feel a sense of promise and opportunity, a lightness of being. Things flow and change and it is inspiring as you see how you are more and more in harmony with the total.

**Bill:** As William Carlos Williams said, "No whiteness is so white as the memory of whiteness." That said, just like with facing death or a new year, when it comes down to it, when things are on the line the understanding seems to be there and emerges easily. Still, I have been noticing that I can be pretty lazy. The understanding is often there but I am not always burning with inquiry day and night, stealing every possible moment to inquire into and love the truth.

**Jim:** It seems you are "stuck in *sattva*." You have it made in worldly terms, Bill. You have everything you need. What is there to strive for? As far as "the truth" is concerned, the truth is you, so either you do not understand that or you are not loving yourself totally. It seems there is a sense of separation – you and "the truth." Truth is not an object to be gained. It is just you.

**Bill:** I have times where this is the case, but then it wanes or settles into ordinariness, and the awareness slowly and almost imperceptibly extroverts (and can stay there for a while). This is the closest thing to a question that I have at the moment. How do I not settle for less? For what I already know? How can I keep this thing going and intensify it? This is a paradox that I sometimes struggle with. I can see that the self is always fully present, fully functioning, that there is nothing but the self, and yet I know that if I don't do anything (i.e. keep inquiring moment by moment) that this understanding won't fully consume me, won't become the way that I see – period – as opposed to a way that I see sometimes or when I remember to really look. I think there are a lot of people with some insight into the self walking around, but very few people who have actualized their realization in a complete way. I don't want to settle for less.

**Jim:** The problem is that you are thinking of the self as an object, something to be experienced or gained or actualized. Inquiry is contemplation of the fact that you are the self. You are not something to be actualized. You are just simple ordinary awareness. You are what is. When you understand what that means, you are free. Self-inquiry is not theory and practice. It is contemplation.

Your question, "How can I keep this going and intensify it?," belies an incorrect understanding. If your inquiry was working properly, it would keep itself going. When it is working, the inquiry *vasana* becomes a raging fire and eats you up. I don't know, because we have been out of touch for a long time, but maybe you have become a bit *tamasic*, a bit stuck in the rut of duty, pleasure and happiness. To be honest, it is very difficult for householders to do self-inquiry properly. It is not really intended for householders, Bill. *Karma yoga* is proscribed for them. It is for *sanyassis*, renunciants, people who are free of worldly *karma* and have the leisure to keep their minds on the self at all time. I thought this would happen, but there was nothing I could do about it because your heart was set on it and the *karma* was already in motion. You would have dropped me like a hot potato if I had tried to dissuade you and made an issue about the dangers of marriage and worldly life. You are a bit sentimental, I think. Worldly life, with all its duties and obligations, its putative joys and pleasures, saps one's resolve.

You get a sense of security from it, but you pay a price. It takes the edge off your seeking. What you are actually saying is that you are going to adhere to this structure for a very long time, twenty or thirty years, maybe more. You have defined pleasure in a way that limits your options. Things become predictable, etched in stone as the family *vasana* becomes the dominant force in your psyche and the freedom *vasana* recedes. This is why it is difficult to keep the inquiry up. So the only thing left is to do what you do in a cheerful spirit, take everything as *prasad* and wait for the *karma* to complete itself. It will complete itself one day. And when it does, you Bill be on fire with inquiry.

**Bill:** Here is an example of how I might inquire in case you have any comments or pointers on what I am doing or how I am understanding (or misunderstanding) things:

I lie in bed after waking in the morning and look into what is primary. When my eyes are open there is the world appearing. When I close them the visual world disappears, but the awareness is still present with different objects, sounds, feelings, thoughts, etc.

There is always something happening to be aware of: body, feeling, thought, sound, etc.

I touch the awareness itself and let the objects fade or let them just be as they are, the form-expression of the awareness itself. The awareness is there, and resting in that, letting it recognize itself, gives rise to joy and peace. The awareness itself is unmoving but the objects keep moving, arising and passing away, changing, etc. I sometimes feel all kinds of chills and some shaking, but I stay with the awareness as primary, ignoring the rest. When I open my eyes the world appears and is not separate from what is primary, it is its own reflection, the other side of the coin, awareness taking on a shape, an appearance. Then I have to rush off to work and try to remember everything I need to take that day, and the awareness extroverts. I come back to it in the car or on the bus a few minutes later. Just noticing it for moments at a time, again and again. This is basically what I am doing. I may use different questions to inquire like, "To whom is this all happening?," or, "How could awareness be limited?," or, "What am I?," or I remember and reflect on (as pointers) things that you have said or that I read in *I Am That* or in Ramana's dialogues.

**Jim:** This is very good, Bill, but it is only experiential. Awareness is appearing as an object to you. But this is not how it is. *Maya* has tricked you. The awareness that appears to Bill is actually you. But you maintain the belief that you are Bill, the one who is experiencing awareness. You think something should happen to Bill, something that will transform him, take him deeper into it – or something. Nothing is going to happen to Bill. Bill is actually awareness pretending it is Bill. But Bill doesn't know this. So "he" gets up and goes to work. See the doership.

**Bill:** I started carrying around a *mala* with me and clicking the beads to remind myself. It does help keep things going when there is a lot going on and the tendency for the mind to extrovert and be distracted is greater.

**Jim:** You are pissing into the wind, Bill. On one hand you want to introvert the mind, and on the other hand you have chosen a lifestyle that extroverts the mind. You are fighting against yourself. No *mantra* is going to do the job, sorry to say. You have to take responsibility for the "a lot going on," Bill. A lot is going on because you wanted a lot to be going on. Or you were naive, thought you could eat your self-inquiry cake and have it too. Inquiry is not really something you do. It is going on all the time. This is why you wrote. I am sorry to rain on your parade, but I have to be honest. This is not a judgment, Bill.

**Bill:** Is there a *mantra* that you would suggest for me while doing this? I have been using different ones, some Buddhist, some that I make up. I notice that the *mantra* just gives the mind something to do which is a reminder of (points to) the self, and so the focus is on the self while the *mantra* kind of goes in the background, keeping the mind steady and undistracted. It has been useful. I think having a *mantra* that comes from you might lend it more power in my mind. You mentioned one when we were walking down by the water in Berkeley during your last visit, but it was long and I did not grasp it. I realize that asking for this is kind of conventional. I know that whatever I say that points to the self is adequate. But the faith part does have a powerful affect on the mind, and having something that connects me to you (my teacher) might give it more power. (Having just written that, a voice immediately says in my ear, "How could you ever be separate from your teacher, even for a moment?") And yet I know that the tangibles can be helpful.

**Jim:** The *mantra* is just mind candy, Bill. It is like a pill, a drug. It works for a bit and then wears out. I think you are using it as a coping mechanism, not as it is intended. The question you need to be asking is if you are Bill, the doer, the chanter, the psychologist, the husband and father, etc. You will probably not like this idea for fear that it will disrupt your life, which it probably will. I am not saying to stop self-inquiry. You can't. It is going on all the time because the self wants to free itself from the doer, from the *karma* world. But I sense that "Bill" is just starting to understand the consequences of his decision to settle down and get married and raise a family, have a career, etc. in terms of freedom. Enlightenment is freedom from Bill, not Bill getting some kind of thing called freedom. As long as you identify with Bill, you will be tied down to the *karma* world.

**Bill:** I was reviewing recently the teachings of a thirteenth-century Korean Zen master named Chinul. He talks about sudden awakening and gradual cultivation. I like that he frames it in the reverse from most Buddhist teachers. For him it is the awakening that is the beginning of the path and then there is the gradual cultivation. This is what strikes me as the real work. The awakening is the part that many are focused on, but unless you are Ramana it is probably just the beginning of your path. I think your critique of the Neo- Advaitans (if I understand it correctly) points to this. You still have to do the work.

**Jim:** This is true, Bill. The only question is, what is the work? The work for *karmis* (doers) like yourself is *karma yoga*. I suggest you pack it in on the self-inquiry business for now. It seems to be creating a conflict. It is dangerous to use it as a coping mechanism. It becomes like meditation, calms you down a bit, but does not really attack the *vasanas* that you have placed off-limits. You know everything you need to know spiritually, doctrinally. Just live your life in a cheerful spirit. Consecrate every activity to God and take the results with a glad heart and leave enlightenment out of it. When the binding *vasanas*, the *vasanas* you are building up now are ameliorated by the *karma yoga* practice, inquiry will arise like the phoenix out of the ashes and you will go straight to your goal.

**Bill:** I want to continue doing the work, without doing anything.

~ Much love, Bill

**Jim:** With all due respect, Bill, but the doer cannot become a non-doer. It is always a doer. Only the self is a non-doer and you are already the self, so there is no wanting involved. Only understanding is involved. If you want inquiry, then the only inquiry that will actually solve this problem is, "I am not Bill, I am ordinary, non-dual, ever-free awareness." It is not something you chant. It is something you contemplate. The implications of this statement, which happens to be the truth, can be very liberating or very depressing depending on the degree of attachment you have to the idea of what Bill Kabat-Zinn is.

I suspect that these words are not what you expected to hear, Bill, but it is my duty to tell it like it is. Don't be disheartened. It is actually a positive, compassionate message. I am sure you will see the truth in it.

~ Much love, Jim

**Bill:** Dear Jim, thanks so much for your response. I wanted to sit and digest it a bit before getting back to you. Most of what you said was very helpful, and there are a few places where I have questions and comments.

Your comment about my taking the self as an object (which was spot on) knocked me right back into place. Just in reading your words the shift happened, like knocking a peg back into its hole. When the peg is out of its hole, it is obvious. When it is in place, it is also obvious. When identifying as the doer and looking for something stops, there (here) I am, and it is clear what I am and what I am not. It is amazing how tenacious that *vasana* is and how subtly it creeps up.

Also, your comments about *karma yoga* were very helpful. That *karma yoga* orientation takes care of a lot of (most) mental preoccupation, which leaves a lot of room for inquiry. When it is all in “God’s” hands, inquiry does rise from the ashes.

Now that the peg is back in the hole, I can see why the *mantra* thing was, as you say, “pissing in the wind.” The way I was thinking about it and wanting to use it would have done two things: one is to reinforce and strengthen the doer, and the second is to strengthen the idea that the self is an object to be found or actualized. Both are moving in the wrong direction, with effects perhaps even more severe in the long run than pissing on yourself. Thank you for that! Your corrections really, really help. Each time it wears away at the mistaken conceptions (habitual) that keep cropping back up.

Tenacious little buggers. I really appreciate how keenly you are tuned to what is essential and what is not. Mind candy it is! I was driving my car north when I wanted to go south.

Now some questions:

Your description of inquiry makes it sound like it is a straight, linear process as the inquiry *vasana* gets stronger it burns through the other *vasanas* and eats you up. But does not the path involve getting caught in various *vasanas* and then letting inquiry (activated by suffering) burn through them as they arise? This then would not involve experientially feeling lighter and more free in a linear, straight line, but would involve getting caught in deeper-lying and more deeply-entrenched *vasanas* until these can be burned through one by one. This seems to me the way my various wrong views and deep patterns get dealt with. Some are very hidden, when the circumstances aren’t just so they don’t even arise and thus are not “eaten up” by inquiry. They lurk, hidden until the right conditions arise. So in this way the path does not look linear (experientially) there may be more suffering at a given time and yet it may be a sign of deepening inquiry (really getting into some nitty-gritty *vasana*) rather than a backwards step. Each time you are freed from a *vasana* or wrong view the true knowledge gets more secure.

**Jim:** I am glad my analysis of your situation was helpful, Bill. There is no contradiction between what you call linear inquiry and letting hidden *vasanas* create problems. The more proactive you are with the inquiry, however, the quicker you will root out the deeply-entrenched patterns (*pratibandikas*). It will necessarily be the way you see it because you cannot keep your attention on the self every minute, owing to the nature of your lifestyle. If you were a *sanyassi* and had no daily duties, you could flush out the *samskaras* very quickly with steady inquiry, particularly if you had regular contact with someone like me whose binding *vasanas* have been eradicated. So it will be a more protracted process for you, but so what? These bumps in the road are not the kiss

of death. They add a little spice to the soup of life.

**Bill:** This leads into a further exploration about householder/family life. I know that during the time I was single it was perhaps easier (in a way) to focus on Truth/the self because there were fewer outer involvements. But many of my deep attachment *vasanas* did not arise, because the conditions were not there to trigger them. So I could feel pretty free, but what kind of freedom is that? It still seems to be a conditioned freedom, a freedom that depends on keeping things just so. But that is not what spiritual practice is all about. Isn't the idea to be so secure in the knowledge that that the self is the self, that I am what I am, in a way that it is not affected by any of the conditions of life? It is just a different movie playing, the *sanyassin* movie or the householder movie. I imagine that individual *karma* determines which movie is to play.

**Jim:** Yes and no, Bill. There is no way that you will ever root out all the *samskaras*. They don't actually belong to you in the first place. They all come from the macrocosmic mind, which is limitless. The idea that you present presupposes that it is necessary to root out all the *vasanas*. You can definitely let sleeping dogs lie. If you feel "drawn" or "called" to a certain situation, like the householder life, there is no particular benefit to working it out, insofar as your mind is on the self and it is the primary source of your joy, you can forego any tendency and after a short period the *vasana* will go back to sleep. They only grow and become *karmas* because you dwell on them.

Spirituality is not about Bill feeling free or bound. As long as you are Bill, you will be free of some things and bound to others. Bill is the apparent entity living in an apparent reality. There is no freedom for Bill. He will always be tied to something. Only death takes care of that.

Liberation is freedom FROM Bill. This freedom is your true nature and has nothing to do with Bill's *vasanas* or lifestyle. It obtains in every situation. Almost without exception, the *rishis* were householders, not *sanyassis*, so the argument that you have to confront your *samskaras* to be free is not true. It is true, however, that if a particularly pesky *samskara* gets hold of you before you know who you are, you will have to work it out.

Your statement above about what spiritual practice is all about presupposes that you are the doer. But *moksa* is freedom from the doer, the practitioner, the *karma yogi*, the inquirer. So as long as you think you are that person, you are not free. No action will result in freedom. An action may result in relatively more or less freedom, but more or less freedom is not freedom. The whole problem with spiritual work is that it purports to lead to liberation while at the same time, unless the nature of the self is known, it actually reinforces one's identity as a doer. Yes, you think you are getting lighter and lighter, closer and closer to your goal, but the fact is that the ego is just getting subtler and subtler, more difficult to detect.

**Bill:** It was easy to be unattached when I was single and had no children, but now that I have Teresa and Toby I really care about what happens on this earth in a way I never did before. I am more invested. This feels like it is a boon to inquiry, not an impediment, like lifting weights perhaps. The resistance and difficulty make you (the inquiry) stronger. It feels like a more muscular inquiry (to stretch the analogy), not some airy-fairy retreat (from the world). In a short-term way, in other words, experientially, it might feel like an impediment. I am after all more attached, I feel the pull of the world in a different way than before. But freedom does not lie in

running away from the world or trying to avoid anything. That would be a misunderstanding and an affirmation of the wrong view that freedom (the self) depends on conditions. It would strengthen the fear, or avoidance, *vasana*. I would be giving objects (the world) a power that it does not have. Being careful, trying to avoid this or that entanglement, makes my confidence fragile, the self (seemingly) becomes fragile. But the self is not fragile. The self does not exist more for a *sanyassin* than it does for a householder. It is the same.

**Jim:** Yes, but the logic you apply to avoidance also applies to engagement, Bill.

**Bill:** Entering “the world” in a more full way feels like the right path for me. How can I explain it? I can’t, some things you just know.

**Jim:** It is your *vasana*, Bill. That is why it feels right. There is nothing wrong with it spiritually. I am not arguing for *sanyass*. You cannot get free by renunciation, Bill. You cannot get free by engagement. You can only understand what it means to be free. I think you are unclear about it.

**Bill:** It is the same with inquiry. It is just right.

**Jim:** It is also your *vasana*, Bill. It does not conflict with any lifestyle. Both *sanyassis* and householders are seeking freedom. It is usually easier for *sanyassis*, although in the old days it was easy for householders because of the nature of marriage. In “modern” societies, it is more difficult owing to the emotional expectations of the individuals involved.

**Bill:** If I felt it had to be one or the other, I would choose, but intuitively I sense that it does not. In fact it feels like the one is the other, they are not separate, and to separate them would be to head in the wrong direction. It feels like life calling for a deeper inquiry, precisely because it is more messy, more entangled, and there is more care.

**Jim:** I don’t buy this argument, Bill. Life is not calling for anything. Or if it is, it is because of choices you made. It is just your *karma*. Trusting your feelings is not always the best way to deal with life. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. There is a higher standard.

**Bill:** I don’t think this will be an easier path. I am sure that (as evidenced in my last email) I will stray in my understanding, get caught in various patterns, identify as the doer, etc. and I am sure that my suffering will be greater as my attachments are greater. I welcome that.

**Jim:** I love you dearly, Bill, and I admire your attitude, but I think you are a tad romantic and a bit nuts. But then my whole philosophy of life is opposite to yours. I only do easy. I keep my eyes peeled and avoid everything that slows me down. I am like a fish. Fish never bump into rocks. Or an eagle. I just watch and swoop down to catch the fish when it isn’t looking. Anyway, as Krishna says in the *Gita*, “A wise person follows his or her nature, what use is control?” So it is right to be

what you are and soldier on, taking the bitter with the sweet.

**Bill:** I have a sense that in this way I will have a chance to unearth all of those hidden *vasanas*, all of the most powerful *vasanas*, and be forced into an inquiry that leaves nothing out, that is not world-denying or fragile, but that can stand fearlessly in the midst of life without betraying the truth.

**Jim:** Be my guest. I am sure you will prevail. As for me, I let sleeping dogs lie and nothing forces me to do anything. I don't affirm or deny. Life is in me. I am not in it.

~ Much love, Jim