

A Valid and Complete Teaching

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Sebastian: Dear Sundari, I apologize for writing again even before giving you the opportunity to respond to my original message. After reading over my self-introduction, I feel some important details were omitted. Perhaps I am guilty of attempting to put my “best foot forward.”

After my first “enlightenment experience” I had over two-and-a-half years ago, I was awakened to awareness as my true nature. This experience was so peaceful and so joyful that when it passed I became obsessed with regaining it, and I did. Then, as you would expect, it passed again. I felt lost, confused and saddened. I embarked on disciplined practice of traditional *yoga* meditation, and while it provided many amazing and wonderful experiences such as spontaneous *kriyas*, sounds, visions, out-of-body experiences, etc. it didn’t reduce my suffering or reproduce that original bliss. The Direct Path teachings have provided the most clarity but something is still missing. I still suffer and I still feel something is needed, even if it is only a subtle feeling. While reading Ram’s book, *e-satsangs* and listening to the free audios I feel like I am burning inside. This fire is consuming me day and night, and I long for a teacher to guide me this last mile.

While I would like to appear as patient and knowing, I have to confess that I am not and I need your help. Thank you so much for time; I’m sure it’s in short supply.

~ Much love, Sebastian

Dear Sundari, thank you for your reply. It brought me great joy to see your response! Here is my original email:

“As I understand from Facebook, Ram has recently undergone surgery. I hope that he is recovering nicely. Since this is my first time reaching out to you, Ram, and the ShiningWorld community, I thought it would be best to tell you a little about myself, just as was suggested on your contact page.

“One might consider my spiritual journey to have begun while I was attending a Pentecostal church during my high school years, although it could be argued that it began long before that. I had some powerful experiences that were then attributed to the Holy Spirit, such as spontaneous dancing, running, fainting and glossolalia (speaking in tongues). This had a dramatic effect on my life, and I felt an intense devotion to God. Fueled by religious fervor, I prayed two hours daily and I read scriptures and commentary incessantly. Regardless, I later become disillusioned with the church, the clergy and even the laymen. Additionally, I began studying the physical sciences and psychology in college, which ultimately lead me to become an atheist. At that point, I attributed my earlier experiences to some form of neurological excitation or an altered state of consciousness. After a painful divorce and financial reversal, I mostly involved myself with alcohol, drugs and women.

“Eventually I would regain balance in my life, my finances and even establish a new, more positive relationship. This provided the stability I needed to once again consider life in a deeper way. I don’t mean I was looking for God. I just thought that much of life and the potential for happiness might have been overlooked. Positive psychology was an encouraging

source of information but I couldn't apply it in a way that wasn't more than just informative. It just didn't transform my life in any meaningful way. Then something happened that changed my course... again.

"I was studying martial arts in France where I met a Russian immigrant who knew an ancient Russian martial art called *lubki*, which means "love." In training, he could easily dispatch me to the ground with seemingly no effort. When I inquired into his methods for such level of skill, he said that the secret to *lubki* is self-knowledge. I had never heard of such but I was definitely open to new suggestions for improving my game. He taught me a method of "purification" called *kresenie*, meaning "holy fire," in which the question "Who are you?" was repeatedly asked. I had no idea where this exercise was going, why he was asking me such a ridiculous question or how I was suppose to answer it. I was frustrated but curious. Eventually, this person returned to Russia, and I returned to the US.

"When I returned home, I began to investigate if other martial artists were using something similar to improve their abilities, and that's when I discovered the Enlightenment Intensive. The EI (for short) is a three-and-a-half-day residential, monastic retreat developed by Charles Berner in the sixties. It drew inspiration from Zen *sesshins*, Vedanta and a new communication technique called a "dyad." I read what I could about the retreat and then decided to take the plunge. I located an EI that was scheduled on a date I could attend, payed the fee, booked my flight and set out into the unknown. That weekend is a grand story in itself. I will say that during the course of that weekend I became de-identified with what I had considered myself to be and I began seeing the Truth of my own being. In that moment of direct knowing, I laughed my ass off. I thought it was the funniest cosmic joke ever told. "That is who I am?!" I realized that I was the unchanging witness who has always been present. It was both amazing and completely ordinary.

"After the intensive I still had some confusion and I wanted to explore the mystery further. I had no real experience in these matters, so I wasn't exactly sure what to do. I tried a Zen sitting group, some spiritual mentoring and some self-styled meditation. Additionally, I began to read anything I could get my hands on that was related to awakening, enlightenment and associated practices. I began to read more about Charles Berner and his life and practices. The EI he had developed proved to be effective; perhaps he had even more to offer. As it turns out, he spent the last few decades of his life practicing Sahaja (surrender) Yoga as taught by his teacher Swami Kripalu. If it was good enough for him, I was willing to give it a try. Since Charles had already passed away, I looked to find one of his students who could guide me along this path. I only found three people who taught this form of meditation, so I contacted all three. Durga Ma was one them and she is the one I choose to be my meditation teacher. I have studied traditional *yoga* with Durga Ma for two years and I deeply appreciate what she has imparted to me. She has given me a love for scriptures, *guru* and a renewed devotion for God.

"Almost simultaneously with meeting Durga Ma I discovered the work of Sri Atmananda through the writings of Greg Goode. Since Greg does not accept students, I studied The Direct Path through what writings were available and by emails with Greg. While meditation has produces some amazing experiences, The Direct Path has done the most to clear away confusion. In fact The Direct Path has deconstructed my meditation. I no longer seek attention, *shakti* or special states. Instead all I see is uninterrupted awareness. I still practice meditation but not with the hopes of gaining or becoming anything. It is simply a love affair with

awareness.

“I am the observer of all things.

“While I have found *yoga* to be beneficial and I love the teachings of The Direct Path, I still find a desire to have a teacher, to belong to a teaching tradition and to have the tools necessary to effectively share the truth with others. I believe this is why I have become interested in traditional Vedanta. I am currently reading *How to Attain Enlightenment* and I am considering the purchase of the Vedanta DVDs. However, as I study I want to ensure that my understanding is perfect and clear. Does Ram take new students? How would you recommend I proceed from here?

“Thank you so much for taking the time to read my lengthy message. I appreciate your consideration, and I look forward to hearing back from you.”

Thank you again, and I look forward to your reply.

Sundari: Hello, Sebastian, I loved your story. It has the vivid textures, tones and the determination of the true seeker of liberation. Thank you for sending it again.

Ram does take on students and has done for many years; however, as he is pretty busy these days, he has trained and endorsed me and several others to teach in keeping with the age-old tradition of Vedanta, in his clear and to the point method. He is one of the few genuine Vedanta teachers alive today and you certainly have been led to the right place, if *moksa* is what you are looking for. Anyone who crosses his path is blessed. He has helped untold numbers of people find liberation from their limited identity and to live free as self-realised beings in this apparent reality.

He has respect for Greg Goode, although in some areas he does not agree with his teaching. The problem with The Direct Path teachers in general is that they have in essence tried to find a shortcut to self-realisation. This often does leads to people realising that their true nature is awareness but it does not teach them how to live as free beings in the apparent reality. It is all very well to know that your true nature is awareness; however, it is only indirect, experiential knowledge.

Indirect knowledge means that the self is only known as an object of experience, not as a direct experience. The self as a direct experience is not what you might think. You, the person, cannot gain it because the self is not an object. It can only be gained by removing ignorance about it. For this kind of knowledge you need a means like Vedanta. To know what the self is and to live as the self in the apparent reality are two different things. We call living as the self-actualisation.

Unless the true meaning of an epiphany is assimilated, the knowledge does not stick once the experience ends. Vedanta contextualizes experience and knowledge by revealing the complete vision of non-duality. Vedanta is not in essence a teaching because it is about you, awareness.

Vedanta offers very specific teaching methods called *yogas* that when applied to the mind help to purify it so that is qualified for self-knowledge. Once the mind is purified, self-knowledge reveals the truth of your nature, whole and complete non-dual awareness, by removing the ignorance that stands in the way of that fact. Unless the mind is qualified and purified, the knowledge will not stick.

Direct Path teachers like Atmananda, who was brilliant in his own right and well within the teaching tradition of Vedanta, do seem to disdain the tradition of Vedanta. He, along with the other Direct Path teachers, do not offer the full teaching method of traditional Vedanta, and most importantly the language they use is experiential. Experiential language creates terrible confusion because it presents the self as an object of experience, when the only access to the self is knowledge. Experience does not remove ignorance.

James has made his mark as a teacher of the traditional methodology of Vedanta because he has focused on the central issue regarding self-realisation: the difference between experience and knowledge, the language of experience as opposed to the language of identity. It cannot be over-stated how important this distinction is.

Neo-Advaita and The Direct Path teachings tend to ignore the world, the apparent reality, and focus only on the self. This invariably fails, because if reality is really non-dual – which it is – the apparent reality needs to be taken into account. The whole point of *moksa*, or liberation, is to free the self – which seems to be under the spell of self ignorance – from identification with the person/doer/ego that thinks it acts and experiences things in “the world.” It is not freedom *for* the experiencing entity but *from* the experiencing entity.

This does not mean that one has to do away with the experiencing entity or destroy the mind or ego; one simply must understand it. Once you understand what it is, it makes no difference who or what you are on the relative level because you are no longer attached to the person as your primary identity or any other object for that matter. An object is anything other than you, awareness. Freedom means that you have discriminated all objects from you, awareness. Thus you know that the joy is not in the objects but it is coming from you. You are full, so you no longer need to chase any object, trying to gain anything, because there is nothing to gain here. You are The Promised Land – just as you experienced yourself to be on your first EI seminar. The trick is to make that realization permanent, and for that you need a complete and valid teaching and a qualified teacher. Vedanta is a complete valid teaching and James is a qualified teacher.

It sounds like you have done much of the groundwork and you are definitely on the right path. By the sound of it you have already mastered many of the qualifications and you certainly do have a burning desire for *moksa*! I would be very happy to engage in a dialogue with you, as would any of the endorsee writers at ShiningWorld. If you would prefer that James coaches you, I am sure he will find the time, but we all teach in the same method he does.

In the meantime, it is very good that you are reading his book. Go slowly with it, sign onto the logic and do not skip. Reread each paragraph as many times as it takes and corroborate with the *e-satsangs*, they are a goldmine of pure Vedanta and just about every question you could ever think of asking has been asked and thoroughly answered there. The videos are invaluable too because hearing James teach is the best way to assimilate the knowledge. Vedanta is an oral tradition, it is about hearing, called *sravana* in Sanskrit. It is an essential qualification, the ability to hear and assimilate. Also, James is inimitable in person and in a class of his own. If you can attend any of his seminars, that would be very good too.

Let me know how you want to proceed, it is up to you. We do suggest that new people who come to us first do their part, which is reading the book, the *e-satsangs* and listening to the videos. There is much you can listen to and download for free at the website and at *YouTube* before you decide to purchase anything. Feel free to write anytime, I will do my best to help you in any way I can.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari

Sebastian: Dear Sundari, I am overjoyed to work with you; I cordially accept your offer! I have been reading the e-*satsangs* online and I simply love how you have answered the questions of others. I especially admire how you answered Isaiah regarding love relationships. I found it insightful, inspiring and completely practical. Of course, I'm not opposed to you sharing any of our letters with Ram or the other teachers if you so desire. Also, I realize that some correspondences are published at the ShiningWorld website. I have no objections to that but if you do, please anonymize any names of other teachers I may have or will mention.

Sundari: Thank you, I owe everything to my teacher Ram for being the pure channel that he is and passing the torch of self-knowledge on to me in the great tradition of Vedanta. We post the-*satsangs* at the ShiningWorld website because everyone has more or less the same questions and they are an invaluable support for those on the path to liberation. We always anonymize them and remove direct references to places and people, although it is useful for people to read the experiences that people have with the plethora of so-called teachers and teachings that abound in the spiritual arena. It helps to develop discrimination.

Sebastian: I am currently listening to the free audios made available at the website. I have found it both valuable and enjoyable to hear Ram speak. It certainly adds a depth of dimension to the teachings. After working through all the audios and the book, I will either purchase the videos or make a donation for the resources you have made graciously available. I'm not looking for a free ride. Also, I'm not afraid of "doing the work." I have an obsessive personality and when I fall in love with something, I reserve nothing. Vedanta is my *sadhana* now and it will receive my full devotion.

Sundari: Wonderful, that is what it takes. *Moksa* has to be more important to you than anything else and requires single-pointed attention if you want to be free of ignorance, which is relentlessly tenacious and hardwired. Ram teaches by donation, as this knowledge must be made freely available to anyone who is ready for it; it belongs to no one and everyone. We are just the vehicles for consciousness to remove the ignorance from minds that are qualified to receive self-knowledge and to actualise the self.

Sebastian: I would like to continue this dialogue, and I will also continue studying the teachings in between communications. You said, "It is quite a different matter to know what being self-realised means and to live it. We call this self-actualisation." "Unless the true meaning is assimilated, the experience ends and the knowledge does not stick."

YES! I want to know the truth and live this apparent life from the vantage point of that truth. This has been my experience. Through intense inquiry I examined everything I believed myself to be, invalidated it and consequently realized what I am, unchanging awareness. This knowing was accompanied by peace, happiness and ease of being. Thoughts that would have troubled me previously no longer did. I would observe them rise and fall and I was unaffected. However, after a few weeks thoughts began to bother me again. This led to further inquiry, which resulted in realizing that everything is awareness, even the things I had earlier discarded as "not-self." After

this, there has still been some confusion. Where is the peace, happiness and ease of being I originally experienced? Why is there still irritability, fear or dissatisfaction?

Sundari: Who is it that experienced the self-realisation and the loss of it? If you know that there is still irritability, fear or dissatisfaction – are YOU irritable, fearful and dissatisfied? So what if the ego is experiencing those things? They have nothing to do with you nor do the thoughts that arise in you have anything to do with you. You are not in control of your thoughts because they do not come from you; they come from the *dharma* field, or *Isvara*. But you can manage them by how you relate to them. If you relate to them as Sebastian, the person, understanding of them will necessarily be inadequate. You need to understand them as awareness, the knower of what Sebastian thinks and feels. There is no solution for the problem at the level of the problem; this is why confusion continues.

Your thoughts and feelings and epiphanies are just objects (like any other object) that arise in you, awareness. Like all objects, they are not conscious; only you, awareness, are conscious. All objects are made up of awareness (like the spider's web is made up of the spider) and they have a dependent existence on you, awareness. But as awareness, you are always free of the objects, just like the ocean is always free of the wave, although the wave is never free of the ocean. Sebastian, the *jiva*, is an object known to you, awareness. He is not real, because he is not always present (as in deep sleep) and is always changing.

Self-knowledge is not about perfecting the apparent person, or *jiva*, nor the apparent reality (*dharma* field) it lives in. Self-knowledge is understanding what the *jiva* and the *dharma* field (*Isvara*) are, the forces and laws that govern both and how you as awareness relate to both. It is not that difficult to deduce that your true nature is awareness; after all, without it you as the subtle body or mind would not exist. It is quite obvious that you are an apparent person living in an apparently real world, and that you and the world exist.

Self-actualisation is the hard part; it involves the work and absolute commitment to self-inquiry. The most difficult thing that anyone can undertake is self-inquiry into the true nature of reality, because self-knowledge is subtler than the intellect, although without an intellect we would not be able to undertake self-inquiry. The intellect does not work it out, self-knowledge reveals itself through the intellect in a purified mind, like a light illuminating a dark room.

There is no denying the person or the world, and one does so at one's own peril. This is why so many get stuck. Understanding the *jiva-Isvara* identity and the distinction between the real and the apparently real, *satya* and *mithya*, is called *moksa*. By focusing purely on awareness one attempts to superimpose the real on the apparently real, and that is a recipe for suffering. It does not work. Only through understanding all the factors involved that make up the field in the light of self-knowledge does one free oneself of ignorance and put an end to existential suffering.

Sebastian: It seems that these are clues that some vestige of ignorance remains; something is still unclear.

Sundari: The problem is that the knowledge is still indirect; you have confusion between the real and apparently real. You have developed great discrimination but because you did not have a proper method for self-inquiry, the knowledge did not stick. The ego knows about the self and

believes that there is something to be done to experience (or re-experience) the self and make that experience permanent, to find the missing link. In reality it is the other way around: the self, the non-experiencing witness, is always the knower of the ego and all its apparent experiences – and it has no problem with it. No experience can take place without the presence of awareness although awareness is always free of all experiences. The ego cannot know the self, because the ego is not real. Any action the ego takes to reveal the self will be limited unless it is taken in the *karma yoga* spirit. How can any action undertaken by a limited mind produce an unlimited result? It is not possible, although self-inquiry, undertaken with the *karma yoga* attitude, is also action, it is capable of producing a limitless result because the outcome of self-inquiry is self-knowledge, which is unlimited. There are things that can be done as a doer to inquire into the nature of the self, which is why Vedanta is so powerful. It is both the pathless path, the knowledge that underpins all knowledge, and it is also a path of action which gives the seeker the tools with which to deconstruct and understand its limited identity and to negate the notion of doership. Without these tools, the seeker is unable to actualise the self.

Only self-knowledge will permanently set you free of the doer, or the ego, the one who acts and thinks it can experience the self and make it permanent. As the apparent person you cannot not act; however, freedom from the burden of doership comes when you understand *karma yoga*; one takes action with the knowledge that one's true identity is awareness and not the doer/ego, and that the results of your actions are not up to you, either as the *jiva* or as awareness; they are up to the field, or *Isvara*. Until one is firm in the knowledge one needs to practice self-inquiry and the teachings as laid out by Vedanta to negate the doer.

Awareness is not a doer, it is actionless. Doing seems to happen because the individual, or *jiva* (the self under the spell of ignorance), is subject to the forces that govern the *dharma* field, and these forces are not under the *jiva*'s control, which is why practicing *karma yoga* is vital. These forces make up *Isvara* and they are called the *gunas*, a word which means “ropes,” because they bind one to objects and therefore to *samsara*, the mind hypnotized by duality. Ram covers this topic extensively in his book. I have attached an article of mine on the subject. Another word for the *dharma* field is *maya*, or macrocosmic ignorance.

Moksa is the removal of ignorance so that as the *jiva* you are no longer conditioned by *maya*, even though macrocosmic ignorance remains “after enlightenment.” It is no longer present for you, because your personal ignorance (*avidya*) has been removed.

However, whether you like it or not, as long as you are an embodied being – enlightened or not – the *jiva* and the world have an apparent existence and the forces that govern both cannot be ignored if you want to be free – and remain free – of the *jiva* and the world. This is why freedom is not only negating the doer but rendering the binding *vasanas* (likes and dislikes) non-binding.

Some people erroneously believe, as they know they are awareness and the *vasanas* are made up of awareness, that the *vasanas* do not have to be addressed because the *vasanas* are “not-self” and therefore they are free of them. That is true, but if a *vasana* is binding it will agitate the mind and freedom will not be that free. There is no easy way out; everything has to be seen, addressed and dissolved in the light of self-knowledge.

The reason your experience of self-realisation did not last is that it was just that: an experience. No experience is capable of freeing one permanently from ignorance. There is no experience that will ever be permanent because all experiences by definition end. You cannot experience the self because you already ARE self. You are that which is trying to experience itself. No

particular experience is necessary for this because you are always and only ever experiencing the self. This is why so many people who have anything from mild to far-out epiphanies are so often disillusioned, like you were. They desperately want them back but even if they do experience them again, without a valid means of knowledge with which to assimilate what the experience is meant to deliver, the knowledge is lost to them.

The knowledge “I am whole and complete, non-dual actionless, unchanging awareness” is not firm for you. As I said above, what remains unclear for you is what the *jiva* and the *dharma* field really are. In order to negate the doer and render the binding *vasanas* (conditioning) non-binding, you will have to understand what they are in the light of self-knowledge. This requires subjecting the mind to self-inquiry and to let self-knowledge do the work of removing the ignorance. It is not up to the *jiva*, or subtle body/mind/ego, to set itself free, because the *jiva* is not conscious. It appears to be conscious because the light of awareness is shining on it, but it is really the self under the spell of ignorance, an inert reflection of awareness. The image in the mirror can never understand what it is that is casting the image. The self is not an object of perception, because it is that by which all perception takes place. The object cannot know the subject because it is subtler than it; the sense organs that the *jiva* has at its disposal to know anything are too gross to know the self.

Consciousness/awareness/the self revealed and developed Vedanta, the science of self-knowledge, or Vedanta, so that it could free itself from the apparent spell of ignorance and thus live free from object identification and the illusion of duality as *jiva*. Awareness is already free so it does not need *moksa*. *Moksa* is for the *jiva*, the self under the apparent spell of ignorance. In simple language, freedom is forever being able to discriminate that which is real (awareness) from that which is unreal (all objects or anything other than you, awareness). In this way one can unconditionally love and worship all objects for what they are: simply reflections of you.

Sebastian: From that first realization, Vedanta is what I have been looking for, I just didn't know it. I have complete confidence that Vedanta is the vehicle that will carry me the final mile. I agree that the other teachings do not offer the comprehensive scope of Vedanta. That is one of the reasons I am drawn to it. I have served as an admin for a Direct Path study group at *Facebook* and I know from personal experience that while it is a powerful method of self-inquiry, it is not a complete method. Thankfully, all of these have led me to Vedanta.

Sundari: All *jivas* consciously or unconsciously seek Vedanta, because it is the truth of who they are. Not all minds are purified or qualified though; Vedanta comes to you when you are ready, it is that simple. It is grace and grace is earned. And you are right, once you are on the Vedanta bus you can put your bags down and relax because it most definitely can and will take you all the way, as long as you want liberation more than anything else and you stay on the bus until it takes you to your destination – which is not a destination – but simply the understanding that there is nowhere to go because there is nowhere that you are not. In the words of the poet Sylvia Plath, there is no there there – because there is only one principle, awareness, and you are it. Duality is then seen for what it is: a superimposition onto non-duality. And even though duality still apparently exists, you know it is not real, like the mirage on the desert floor is not real, even though you can experience it because you can see it.

Vedanta does not appeal to the unqualified mind because such a mind is still convinced that

there is something to be gained through objects. You already know that this is not true, as you have negated all the objects as not-self.

As you now undertake your *sadhana* with great dedication and commitment, make it your practice to take a stand in awareness as awareness; whenever the opposite thought comes up, practice negating it by simply repeating this statement: "I am whole and complete, non-dual, actionless, ordinary, unchanging, unconditioned, ever-present awareness." And whenever you find yourself thinking or feeling anything, ask yourself, "Who is it that knows this? Is it the *jiva* identified with being a *jiva*, is it the *jiva* that knows the self or is it the *jiva* that knows it is the self?" Then ask yourself, "Which *guna* is operating here: is it *rajas* (projection), *tamas* (denial) or is it *sattva* (calm and clarity)?" If you can answer these questions correctly, it will change your life forever.

Sebastian: I'm so very excited to be working with you. Thank you for your willingness to guide and support seekers such as myself. It is deeply appreciated.

Sundari: You are most welcome, Sebastian, it is a great pleasure to meet you and to dialogue with you, as you are none other than the self, me.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari