

A Vedanta Scholar Is Not Necessarily a Teacher

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Tom: Hello, Sundari, peace be with you.

I was encouraged to write to you by Annette Nibley. After several emails back and forth, she was quite surprised at the similarities in our experience and suggested that I get in touch with you. She was going to mention me to James and you over lunch when you were in Berkeley but out of concern for James' health issues and your busy schedules she did not.

I explained to Annette that I had corresponded with James several years ago and found Vedanta to have the clearest explanation of non-duality that I had read. I also told her that I fell for the thinking that perhaps it was a new day and that new ways of looking at the truth were better suited for the modern world. So foolishly – I see now – I began reading all the modern Neo-Advaita and Direct Path teachers I could find. They all had bits and pieces of the truth but strangely enough, Vedanta – or what I knew of it – was the measuring rod I used to compare them against.

Eventually I found a brilliant but relatively unheard of self-realized teacher named Robert Wolfe who was completely independent of any of the Neos. Robert claims no lineage, never takes a penny for his time or teaching, lives a simple and humble lifestyle and is committed to bringing the message of non-dual liberation to as many as find him and are sincere in their desire for liberation. Through the grace of God and Robert's guidance I was able to realize my true nature as the self.

I began writing emails to selected family and friends who had expressed interest in spiritual matters, and with Robert's encouragement I began to publish a blog in 2011. Exactly one year later I stopped blogging. It's not that I had nothing to say about non-duality but rather that I felt I had no authority to write. I realized I was no different than any other person who felt he had a handle on non-dual reality. There was no order nor references nor method to my writing, so I stopped. However, just last month, after writing back and forth with Annette, I posted this on my blog after a year's absence.

Here is part of that blog:

“When I was in the Christian tradition I spent a lot of time reading the Bible, Bible commentaries, the ancient church fathers, various theological formats, etc. So if I was asked a question or found myself in a religious discussion, I was well-versed and able to give a reasonable answer backed by scriptural references or theological argument. I couldn't do that with non-duality. I could and did answer people's questions regarding the various concepts found in the teachings of non-duality, but was unable to reference any of the foundational scriptures that I knew in my heart had to be relevant. I saw that as a shortcoming.

“Not wanting to be just another non-dual blogger dispensing spiritual-sounding answers without scriptural support, I stopped writing and began a serious study of Vedanta. I happen to think the scriptures are of the greatest importance and am doing my best to study and understand them as they relate to the teachings of Vedanta.”

My study of Vedanta consists of reading James' book *How to Attain Enlightenment* – for the third or fourth time – Dennis Waite's *Back to the Truth: 5,000 Years of Advaita*, listening to Swami Dayananda Saraswati, his disciple Carol Whitfield and occasional correspondence with Vedanta teachers from the Advaita Academy. Oh, and of course reading as much as I can of the scriptures and *satsangs* found at ShiningWorld.

I have always felt compelled to share the “good news” with others, whether in the past as a Bible study teacher or currently as a non-duality blogger. As I wrote to Annette, I am aware that if you publish a blog or any other writing on non-duality there are people who will see you as a teacher or at the very least an expert on the topic. Cognizant of that, I feel that in the teachings of Vedanta I have found my bearings again but wish to proceed with guidance from those I trust before I start writing again. I would be honored if you would carry on this dialog with me.

~ Sincerely, Tom

Sundari: Hello, Tom. James remembers communicating with you some years ago. It appears by your email that you seem to have the right attitude toward Vedanta. I understand your desire and motivation for wanting to collate and correlate the scriptures with your understanding of Vedanta. In order to understand the true nature of non-duality, it certainly does help to study the scripture as part of one's *sadhana*. However, remember that Vedanta in essence is about you, awareness, and so it cannot be studied per se. Vedanta is a tool to remove the ignorance of your true nature. Like ignorance it is an object known to you, awareness. It is not a course that can be taken in order to be a graduate of non-duality.

Anyone can be a scholar of Vedanta. No matter how much one knows about the scriptures, this does mean that someone understands what it means to be awareness and to live free as awareness (a *jivanmukta*) free of ignorance (an apparent individual).

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. This is where the teaching really comes in. It is not that difficult to deduce that your true nature is awareness; after all, without it you, 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. The most difficult part is understanding how this relates to you as awareness, which is always free of both the *jiva* and the world – what Vedanta calls *Isvara*. This is why self-actualisation is the hard part; it involves the work and absolute commitment to self-inquiry. It is also the trickiest and most subtle of teachings, which is why it is the most difficult to grasp and therefore to teach.

There is no denying the person or the world, and one does so at one's own peril. This is why so many seekers are stuck: they do not understand the *jiva-Isvara* identity, or the distinction between the real and the apparently real, *satya* and *mithya*. By focusing purely on awareness, which is what many teachers in the Neo and Direct Path teachings do, they 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 is one freed of ignorance and does existential suffering end. I have attached two articles that I wrote that you might find helpful. One on the *jiva-Isvara* identity. The other one is a very interesting article which explores the use of cutting edge psychological research to explain the causal body and the subtle body, or *Isvara* and *jiva*.

Perhaps you lack confidence in your knowledge because your understanding is not clear and you do not know how to structure the teaching. James has constructed a method of teaching that carefully and meticulously sets out the sequence of teachings from the very beginning to the conclusion, in a logical step-by-step format. While he sticks religiously to the scriptures, he has made Vedanta accessible by putting it in very simple language as well. Follow in his footsteps and you will not go wrong.

It is not necessary to be completely conversant in the scriptures. I have not read them all although I intend to in time. I know who I am though. I know my relationship to *Isvara* and to the *jiva* and I know how to teach this in very simple language. I was taught by one of the best Vedanta teachers alive, James Swartz. He will go down in history as having revolutionized Vedanta for the West. Although James and I spend most of our time teaching and passing on the torch of knowledge to those who come to us for help, we still read the scriptures in our spare time. Perhaps you think that in studying the scriptures you are studying about something other than you. This is a non-dual reality, remember. There is only one principle and it is awareness, you. It is awareness studying itself. When you know who you are you do not need to read the scriptures any longer. One does, not because one needs to, but because it is simply a joy to do so. What could give one more pleasure than reading about yourself?

Perhaps you withdrew your blog because you felt unqualified to teach Vedanta. Even if you do know who you are and could quote verbatim from all the scriptures, this does not necessarily mean you are qualified to teach Vedanta.

Teaching Vedanta is effective when it is one's nature to do so, meaning it is your *svadharma* to be a teacher and one surrenders the role of teacher through *karma yoga* to *Isvara*. If one is identified with being a teacher that means that one is teaching from the perspective of the doer, or apparent self. If one knows that one is not the teacher but *Isvara* is, one can be a pure voice for the torch of knowledge to be passed on to others, without contamination by the ego.

James and I think it is your nature to teach and that you are a humble person, but this is not enough. Teaching means that you only unfold the teachings according to the method of teaching, which involves wielding a well-established logic and proper contextualization of the words. If you don't use the method, you are not teaching. You are offering your own experience, which will undoubtedly be coloured by whatever ignorance you have. To know who you are does not make you a teacher. It only means that you have hard and fast knowledge about who you are. It does not mean that ignorance about all aspects of reality have been removed. Vedanta is a complete teaching. It needs to be taught in its entirety from A to Z according to the method.

So much depends on your motivation for wanting to teach. There are many so-called Vedanta teachers and writers in the spiritual arena putting out their version of Vedanta. But Vedanta is a science and it is independent of any one person or persons. It is never about the teacher or author because Vedanta is *apaurusheya jnanam*, meaning it does not come from the mind of man but it is revealed to us by consciousness. So many of these teachers are looking for recognition or they want to be seen as compassionate or intellectually superior. It does take a good mind to put it all together after all. But a good mind belongs to *Isvara* and not to the *jiva*. And to teach properly you need to be taught properly. You pick up the method by having it worked on you or you extract the logic from certain texts with the guidance of a qualified teacher.

When one person came across James in India many years ago, this person had been the disciple of a famous *guru* now deceased. James took this person under his wing and coached

them for several years, replying patiently and meticulously to their many doubts and questions. James' only interest in teaching Vedanta is passing the torch of knowledge on for the sake of the knowledge, nothing else. He introduced this person and their present partner to the full spectrum of Vedanta and to his lineage and *guru* Chinmayananda, supporting and empowering with self-knowledge, a platform to speak and teaching them his methodology for teaching. This person thinks they are enlightened and wrote a book about Vedanta but neglected to give James credit, not that James wanted it. They have a personal issue with James and did not want to acknowledge his role in their spiritual lives.

How can such a person teach? The whole understanding is wrong. James said that a teacher should make it clear where the knowledge came from, not take credit for it oneself. Teaching is very dangerous because of the tendency to build ego. When the ego gets a little knowledge, there is a great temptation to use it to draw attention to one's small self, not to the source.

My point with this story, which is as old as time, is to emphasise how important it is to examine one's values and motivations for doing anything, especially wanting to help "others" in any way.

Could you explain what you mean by the phrase "found my bearings again"? Does that mean that Vedanta has set you free – or do you believe that you are already free and simply want to use Vedanta to teach others?

And what exactly do you mean by "carrying on a dialogue"? I would be more than happy to help in any way I can.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari