

An Interesting *Satsang* with a Qualified Inquirer

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Tom: An online book, *Path of Sri Ramana, Part 1*, seems to describe the method of self-attention I have kind of intuitively adopted (or I may be deluding myself), though at a far less exalted level than that described in the book (in Chapters VII and VIII). Okay as a guide?

James: It depends on the effects.

Tom: I try, for 30 minutes, self-attention twice daily. And I try (and frequently fail) during the day to question the source of emotions, thoughts, attitudes, etc. in the context of self-enquiry. Sometimes, the 30-minute self-attention, when it is particularly intense and focused, is reminiscent of wordless prayer. Or maybe I am just confused.

James: I think that is right. I am not sure why it is useful to question the source of the emotions, etc. It is always the *vasanas* which are there because of self-ignorance. So the source is ignorance. I think it would be more useful to just turn your attention back to the self, the one to whom these emotions, etc. present themselves and stay with that. The idea is that if it is an object, aka a thought or feeling, it is not-self and is not worth examining. Maybe this is what you mean when you say you question the source. The difficulty I have is with the word "question." Just know that they are meaningless epiphenomena and keep the attention on the self.

Tom: Sometimes I seem to dive in under the ego or jump over it; other times I seem to be observing or scanning a kind of subtle, waveless calm, almost but not quite spooky. Sometimes there is what I call "apophatic shock," when I "hit against" an ineffable something and I cannot speak or really think for about five minutes afterwards (this has not happened in the last week or two).

James: That would be the self, probably. As the *Upanishad* says, "I sent my mind there and it returned."

Tom: Sometimes it's just a mess and my mind is the proverbial monkey, and I fail to ask who is thinking these thoughts. When the practice is focused, there is often a subtle, apparently causeless, quiet joy or happiness which sometimes expresses as laughter or smiling. I assume it is to some extent a reflection of the self in the mind.

James: Yes. Bliss is a consequence of a focused mind.

Tom: It happens sometimes too during the day when I ask who is thinking these thoughts. I

assume it is due to a kind of sped-up, temporary understanding that the ego is not really real. I hope this makes more sense to you than it does to me.

James: It makes sense. By objectifying the mind, you automatically identify with the self.

Tom: Self-enquiry seems to also apply to reflecting on and understanding that we are not the five sheaths. Does this require a detailed knowledge of what constitutes each sheath? Or is it a more intuitive process? Ramana, if I am reading correctly, seemed to hold the view that the practice of self-attention was sufficient as a way of realising “I am not the body,” and that the five sheaths approach was unnecessary, because it is limited to purify the mind and that this could be achieved by self-attention anyway. On the other hand, traditional Vedanta seems to emphasize discriminating between *atman* and five sheaths as an essential practice, so there must be good reasons for doing so.

James: You only need a general knowledge. You can reduce the whole idea to a discrimination between the seer and the seen, the subject (the self, awareness) and the objects. If you can see it, it is not you. This applies to gross and subtle matter.

Tom: Regarding study of classic texts, is there a core of recommended texts that should be studied and in a particular order? Or should one just try to reflect on and slowly assimilate the main teachings? A kind of “*lectio divina*” approach? I don’t have an aptitude for “technical metaphysics.” Should one reflect on the four *mahavakyas*? I have recently got copies of *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Shankara’s *Crest-Jewel of Discrimination* and *Upadesa Sahasri: A Thousand Teachings*, *Talks with Ramana Maharshi* and *Collected Works of Ramana Maharshi*, a book of extracts from *Yoga Vasitha*, *The Lamp of Non-dual Knowledge*, *Kaivalya Navaneeta: The Cream of Emancipation*, an anthology of quotes from classic non-duality texts and *Panchadasi*, which seems to cover a lot of ground. I also downloaded a lot of online translations. I have read most of your online book on meditation and got a copy of your *How to Attain Enlightenment*.

James: I think it is best to keep it simple and stick with one text at a time. Usually we start with *Tattva Bodh*, then *Atma Bodh*, then *Vivekachoodamani*, but probably you need teaching (see my Chapter III in *How to Attain Enlightenment*) because the seeker’s ignorance will cause him or her to interpret the words of scripture incorrectly. There is only one way the words are meant to be understood – no interpretation allowed!

Tom: You say somewhere in your writings it is only by diligent practise of the knowledge “I am limitless, ordinary awareness and not this body-mind” that the mind’s understanding of reality gets in line with the nature of the self. What precisely does this practice consist of?

James: The whole of my new book is the practice of knowledge, but the specific method depends on an individual’s eligibility. Read the chapter on knowledge (XI or XII, I think) and see what you make of it. Then get back to me. But basically when you find your attention caught up in

any object, you apply the knowledge “I am awareness” to dis-identify. There will be a qualitative existential shift away from experience and back to the witness. You just keep at it until you no longer identify with objects.

Tom: I came across this comment in an online article in context of Vedanta methodology: “... processes or stages... emphasized in the scriptures, i.e. listening, discussing, reading (*sravanam*), removal of doubts (*mananam*) and assimilation of doubt-free knowledge (*niddidhyasana*).” Do all these terms have a specific Vedantic meaning/application? Are they extended forms of self-enquiry? (I find it almost impossible to remember the meanings and connotations of most Sanskrit words.)

James: They are different stages in the process of inquiry. See Chapter III, about page 64, “listening,” etc.

Tom: Now for what may be a daft question: Is it unrealistic to work at self-enquiry and have any expectation of the veil dropping away in X years from now, in the limited time available for study and meditation outside of my job, other necessities etc? Is it all dependent on the quality and quantity of *vasanas*?

James: It depends on the degree of your desire for liberation. It is probably somewhat unrealistic in your present circumstances, although I need to know more to make a judgment. If you do what you do with the *karma yoga* attitude and consciously plan to do self-inquiry and follow a self-inquiry lifestyle when you retire, it is very realistic. This is not to say that you should abandon your present efforts. They seem to be bearing fruit. It seems your desire for liberation is pretty good. It would be good if you could come to one of my seminars sometime. I am going to do several in Europe in the fall. And you should study my book carefully. In a way it is all you will need, as I have taken the essence of the scripture’s of non-duality and organized them for maximum effect and written the essence in clear English. But you make the quickest progress when you hear the teachings from a qualified teacher. Three people who I did not know who attended my talks in India this year – mind you, they were highly qualified – told me that the Vedanta finished the search. And many others moved forward significantly.

Tom: I have a bit of difficulty with the ethos or tone of some traditional Vedanta texts (not necessarily its technical teachings), as they seem to denigrate, even hate, physicality in general and embodiment in particular as a particularly nasty form of *maya*, kind of reminiscent of guilt-ridden, fundamentalist Christianity. It seems to create a duality between nasty body/the not-quite-so-nasty mind and the *atman*. In a sense, are not the body and mind ways that reflections of the *atman* shine forth? Or is it a rhetorical device to help the student understand he is not the physical appearance? It occurs in Ramana’s teachings also.

James: It is rhetorical.

Tom: I am not an experience junkie and not chasing spiritual experiences, not consciously

anyhow. Experiences seemed, for about a month, to be chasing me. I have an intellectual appreciation it is actually all what could be called “nice *maya*,” the self reflected in the mind.

I have also been aware that my ego several times tried to feed on the experiences, during and afterwards; some things never change. At this point the details of the experiences have kind of blurred together. Having said that, the depth, intensity and frequency of them in the last month or so made me almost lose perspective at times. (There was often a palpable sense of grace that made me want to weep with gratitude.) They now seem to have mostly stopped. I had read a little about “Eastern” non-duality in times past, so I had a frame of reference to some extent.

James: That’s a sign that your practice is bearing fruit. It is very good. You are on the right track.

Tom: Could you comment on the following extract from *The Lamp of Non-dual Knowledge*? Are *rupa* and *arupa* standard Vedanta teaching? Is it saying in a more technical way what you say in your writings about the so-called “death of the mind”?

25. **Disciple:** Experience can be of the mind only. When it is destroyed, who can have the experience “I am *Brahman*”?

Ramana: You are right. The destruction of the mind is of two kinds (*rupa* and *arupa*), i.e. in its form-aspect and in its formless aspect. All this while I have been speaking of destroying the former mind. Only when it ceases to be in its formless aspect experience will be impossible, as you say.

Disciple: Please explain those two forms of the mind and their destruction.

Ramana: The latent impressions (*vasanas*) manifesting as modes (*vrittis*) constitute the form-aspect of the mind. Their effacement is the destruction of this aspect of mind. On the other hand, on the latencies perishing, the supervening state of *samadhi* in which there is no stupor of sleep, no vision of the world, but only the Being-Knowledge-Bliss is the formless aspect of mind. The loss of this amounts to the loss of the formless aspect of mind. Should this also be lost, there can be no experience not even of the realisation of Supreme Bliss.

James: This is mostly true, but not completely true. It is a peculiar doctrine called *videha mukti*, liberation at the time of death. It is a very confusing statement that needs considerable explanation. He is right that *moksa* is freedom from both form and formlessness. You, the self, do not cease to exist when the mind is thinking or when it is dead, as it is in *samadhi* or deep sleep. Both thought and the absence of thought are known by you, awareness. The purpose of this statement is to debunk the myth that *nirvikalpa samadhi* is enlightenment. But Ramana seems to go off the rails in the following statement.

Disciple: When does this destruction take place?

Ramana: In the disembodiment of the liberated being. It cannot happen so long as he is alive in the body. The mind is lost in its form-aspect but not in its formless one of *Brahman*. Hence the experience of Bliss for the sage, liberated while alive.

James: In the first place, why is this desirable? He does not say. Even if it is desirable, you can have the same effect when the body is alive. It is called *jivan mukti*, liberated while alive. It is simply the hard and fast realization “I am awareness.” Why does this do it? Because the I, the self, is always beyond form and formlessness, even when the body is present.

The problem may have been with the translator. There are obvious verbal contradictions. For example, the mind does obviously get lost in the form aspect, i.e. objects, but how could it get lost in the formless aspect, since it needs forms to be a mind? Without form it is simply the self.

Secondly, what does it matter what the mind is doing if you are the self? A self-realized person has no problem with the mind’s involvement in forms because he is always prior to the mind. So the mind has no effect.

The last sentence seems to come from Mars. It does not fit with the rest of the statement, even if the preceding sentence is true. It is not clear what the experience of bliss has to do with enlightenment. The sage is the self and the self is bliss, but not the experience of bliss, unless we understand bliss as the knowledge that the self is full, whole and complete.

The *sampradaya*, the tradition of Vedanta that stretches back to the *Upanishads*, accepts Ramana as a *brahmanistha*, a realized soul but not as a *srotriya*, a proper teacher. To be fair, he never said he was and it is clear that he did not take any pains to resolve the obvious contradictions in his statements, not that he should have, because they were spoken to different people with different degrees of eligibility at different times. I hope that this has been helpful.

~ Sincerely, James

Tom: Hi, James. Thanks for replying and for the straightforward replies. I will use your *How to Attain Enlightenment* book as my main text for study and spend as much time daily on self-attention as I can. I will read Chapter XII on knowledge and will get back to you as suggested, and Chapter III. The method in *The Path of Ramana* book seems to suit me; overall, there seem to be subtle but definite improvements. I will keep it under review though.

James: That’s good. The important issue is whether or not your mind is gradually getting more and more steady and peaceful. People want quick results but the mind is a very conservative instrument. You never know exactly when all your doubts will be cleared, so it is wise to make use of every day seeing to it that you are happy unenlightened.

Tom: You said I “probably need teaching because ignorance causes one to interpret the words of scripture incorrectly. There is only one way the words are meant to be understood... no interpretation allowed!” Does this mean it is pointless to study even basic classic texts on one’s own?

James: Not necessarily. You can get insights and inspiration from scripture . But scripture's meanings are not always the ostensible meanings. More often than not the real meaning is implied. So you have to read between the lines. Let your mind go with the idea and contemplate steadily until the meaning is revealed. It is important not to be too eager to understand or you will jump to conclusions.

But what is generally not known about Vedanta, which is a scriptural tradition, is that these teachings – like the three states analysis in the *Mandukya Upanishad* – involve the application of a certain logic. So they need to be worked on you by a competent teacher if you want the full impact. And then, once you have the fundamental meaning, you need to contemplate on it on your own until it is assimilated. You can read a teaching or read someone's commentary on it and get the idea that you are awareness, but if you can be led to understand why you are not the experiencing entity it is much easier to accept yourself as awareness. This teaching proves logically that you are not the experiencing entity. Faith is important, but only faith that you can understand. The danger with ideas is that one is tempted to believe them – and leave it at that – when the meaning is not assimilated.

Or you can read that you are not the doer, which is another important teaching, with the same import as the three states analysis, but not understand why. The reason is fairly simple but you would not necessarily think of it, because of the veiling nature of ignorance. But when you are walked through the teaching it makes perfect sense and then it is easy to let go of the idea that you are a doer.

Tom: I honestly don't know where I am when it comes to being "qualified." I know there is little in the world that impresses me, to put it mildly; I know I cannot "unknow" the recent experiences/insights but I also have them in perspective; I know in my gut that the whole subject-object approach has never satisfied and will never satisfy. I have no hope or faith in any kind of "spirituality" and in a way am heartily sick of it; I know Vedanta has got under my skin and it's like this big rock that has landed on and smashed the few remaining ideas that pretended to offer even temporary solutions. Compared to non-dual knowledge everything else is peanuts, very small peanuts. I don't have an alternative, because I have in one way or another disproved all the alternatives. It can take a while in my case for the penny to drop, but when it does, it stays dropped; so I am in it for the long haul, not because I have some extraordinary qualities, but simply because I cannot fool myself that there is any viable alternative. I'm too old to be enthusiastic, but I'm not too old for the right kind of stubbornness. I have nothing to lose, so I may as well concentrate on self-inquiry and study Vedanta. God gave me a good brain, so I may as well use it, the apophatic approach laid the foundation and I have solitude in my spare time and the only thing really worth doing is working towards waking up. Here endeth my curriculum vitae.

James: This is very helpful, Tom. You seem to be well-qualified.

Tom: I can accept, as you say, that the condemnation of physicality in the texts is rhetorical but its effect is actually counter-productive.

James: I suppose it is, although I never thought of it that way. It always seemed to be rather

humorous to me. I don't use this approach, however. It is better to use logic like "the body is an object to me, therefore it cannot be me."

Tom: The strange thing about Vedanta is that, when I am focused, it doesn't feel strange at all.

James: Vedanta is just common sense, Tom. It is very simple and direct. There is nothing mystical about it. I'm not trying to flatter you when I say that only highly-qualified individuals are attracted to Vedanta. The rest never hear of it or if they show up they last for one *satsang* and go. And quite often only a little direct contact with the teacher and the teaching is required to end a person's seeking.

Tom: The book *Lamp of Non-dual Knowledge* I copied an extract from for your comments was not actually written by Ramana, but is supposed to be at least 500 years old. Apparently he did recommend it, however.

James: The problem with most secondary sources is translation. Translators are almost invariably not enlightened and tend to be enthralled by experiential language, so – I hate to say this – most secondary sources are misleading, particularly so-called teachings of persons who supposedly got enlightened outside a proper scriptural tradition. I am attaching a short essay written by a fellow I have been coaching for about a year that should help you see how Vedanta works.

~ All the best, James

Tom: Hi, James. The essay you attached and your comments re scripture put a lot of things in context and clarified the Vedanta method. I have started into *How to Attain Enlightenment* and it's so straightforward that it makes the reader focus on the main issues. I am reading it relatively quickly first time round and will then begin a detailed study. I expected to have lots of questions but so far I have been able to grasp it relatively easily. Probably if I had read it prior to contacting you I would have had fewer questions. It certainly helps me psychologically to have a tried-and-tested approach built on a foundation of logic and examined experience. Otherwise, I think I would just be floundering around, wasting time and energy. The book's absence of hype and its matter of fact approach are really what a student needs, not page after page of subjective vagueness.

There were two things recently that I would like your comments on. I had finished a 30-minute period and was relaxing when I gradually got a strong "I am awareness" type of experiential insight that lasted for about 15 or 20 minutes. I was able to own it and apply it to myself. But what was extraordinary about it was how ordinary it felt – natural, no big deal. (It was quite late at night and my brain started closing down for sleep at that point.) Would it be correct to assume that it is this type of experiential understanding, repeated many times over many years, which the mind would require before the knowledge sticks and remains permanently?

James: Yes and no. This kind of insight is indeed valuable. The more the better. But why waste

the time between insights waiting for one? Why not keep the idea in your mind all the time – assuming you have a lifestyle that favors it? I don't mean to repeat the idea over and over like a *mantra* but to apply the knowledge “I am awareness” whenever the mind becomes unsettled. If you do this you will notice a positive shift from the relative point of view to the self's point of view.

Tom: The following night there was a much more intense one, almost ecstatic at times, lasting about two hours; it kicked in towards the end of the 30 minutes. In summary, it was I suppose “bliss/joy of knowledge” or “informed bliss/joy.” My mind was quite clear throughout and focused, though a bit slowed down. The whole thing was definitely knowledge-based. It seemed to be a strong reflection of being-conscious-bliss in my mind; I was able to own each aspect of it and know it as an expression of myself. My mind was engrossed but not overwhelmed, though it seemed like it was going that way at times. There was also an experiential recognition that there is no doer, just the *gunas* doing their thing in the world. I could intuitively understand and verbalise the insights to myself. What is the purpose of these types of transient experiences?

James: You are definitely qualified in the dispassion department. The clarity with which you report the workings of the inner self is remarkable. And the insights are the ones required, particularly “I am not the doer.”

If you think about it, the you that is reporting these insights can only be the self because the intellect, where the insights happened, is an object.

Experiential insights are valuable for the knowledge they bring. Once you are convinced that you are the self, you can practice knowledge all the time as I suggested above. It is the most direct way to burn out the binding *vasanas* if indeed you have many left. The idea is to make the self-inquiry *vasana* constant. By “inquiry” I mean looking at the mind, determining what kind of thought is operating there and neutralizing it by looking at it in light of the knowledge “I am whole and complete, ordinary, actionless awareness.” The word “ordinary” is confirmed by your experience. Enlightenment is no big deal. It is just a shift in perspective.

Tom: Encouragement/motivation/confirmation that one's practice is going in the right direction/a way of slowly re-educating the mind and creating new patterns/inexplicable?

James: Yes, indeed. Epiphanies do not change thinking patterns, i.e. the dualistic orientation. Changing the way you think changes thinking patterns. What the intellect knows should be in harmony with the nature of reality.

Tom: Something that long is not something that honestly I would want on a daily basis. Probably because of the study I have been doing recently, I was better able to understand, appreciate and facilitate it.

James: I think you are right.

Tom: However, I wonder if, paradoxically, the shorter experience of the previous night was actually the more significant of the two.

James: They are both equally valuable, but as I pointed out above, if you keep the idea of who you are in your mind all the time, there will be no need for the self to create the experiential conditions that bring on the knowledge. You can rely on knowledge alone. Experience is just the container, not the contents.

It may be that your lifestyle will not permit this kind of intense inquiry, in which case you should take the *karma yoga* attitude in your work until such time as your binding *vasanas* are neutralized. Based on what you have told me, you are very close to what you are seeking. The important thing is the desire and the devotion to inquiry. It should be smooth sailing from now on.

Tom: In your translation of the *Bhagavad Gita*, at Chapter VI, verse 24, it reads: “With all thought-motivated desires renounced and the senses restrained by the mind, hold the mind on the Self with great perseverance and think of nothing else. Gain control of the mind by bringing it back to the Self over and over again.” Would it be correct, at one level, to read the underlined portion as a description of self-attention?

James: Yes, absolutely.

Tom: If so, is the *Gita* giving explicit approval to it as a form of meditation, and on that basis should self-inquiry be a lot more popular than it is?

James: This method is only for *sanyassis*. You have the temperament of a *sanyassi*, so it is suitable for you. But most people are *karmis* (doers) and they cannot practice it, because their minds are extroverted owing to binding *vasanas*.

Tom: As you suggested, I have been practicing applying the I-am-awareness knowledge for the last seven days or so. I wanted to try it for a reasonable length of time before reporting back. All in all it went well, quite smoothly the majority of the time. I seemed to be able to incorporate it into my lifestyle quite successfully. My mind has been calmer and quieter as a result, and the emotion pendulum for most of the time has not swung widely. Once or twice there were brief moments of an ineffable stillness. The practice does lead to the average day being a qualitatively better experience. The stream of thoughts moves at a somewhat slower rate, and the thoughts themselves usually seem less oppressive, less assertive or demanding, less sticky. The sense of alienation or existential bewilderment recedes more into the background. I didn't know if I would be able to apply the practice on a regular basis during an average day at work, but for the most part I could. It leads to a subtle change in perspective which is not easy to describe with any precision; it could almost be said to slowly change the context of daily life. Obviously, no two days were the same, but there did appear to be a degree of consistency in the experience of daily life. I am beginning to see how it strengthens the self-inquiry *vasana*; I had been overly orientated towards formal practice. The formal meditation itself is going okay, usually quite focused.

James: Good. This is exactly what one should expect from the practice of knowledge. Just keep at it. The mind will gradually get more and more settled and the new perspective will become the only perspective.

Tom: I am still working through your book and there are a couple of technical issues, but I will leave them till I have a better grasp of the subject and then I should then be able to formulate a few precise questions. The whole Vedanta thing has been a steep learning curve. On the other hand, it does feel like my mind has streamlined into studying Vedanta.

Tom: Good again. Keep at it. You are obviously suited to it. You won't regret it.

Tom: I appreciate the time and guidance you have given me. It has made a substantial difference.

James: It is my pleasure, Tom. It is very nice to coach a mature person.

Tom: In general the awareness practice is going well. One day I had a bit of a shock about something and lost focus for a while, but was able to refocus over a few days. At work, I seem sometimes to be able to think more clearly, more quickly and astutely when doing self-enquiry, including navigating the minefield of office politics.

James: Good. Results come incrementally and gradually. If the mind is becoming more agile the practice is bearing fruit. Keep it up.

Tom: Once recently, when I was beginning a formal meditation practice, I suddenly got a clear understanding that effort, including any kind of meditation practice, cannot lead to liberation, and specifically, how can you make yourself into what you already are? It was not a discouraging insight, but actually illuminating. For the next 30 minutes or so I could see this with a kind of energizing clarity, and literally could not practise for that period of time. On the other hand, effort is still needed to purify the mind, so the practice must continue.

James: Excellent. This has to happen before the realization "I am non-dual, ordinary actionless awareness" sticks. And you drew the right conclusion – it is common for some who come to this understanding to renounce action – because you should continue to purify the mind with self-inquiry until there is one hundred percent confidence in the knowledge.

Tom: Could you comment on what the Vedanta approach to "free will" is? There is no equivalent term in Vedanta?

James: From the self's point of view there is no free will, because the self is not a doer. And from

the individual's point of view there is limited free will. The individual finds himself or herself in a field of experience that basically determines everything that happens. And the causal body, the individual's conditioning, pretty much causes the individual to dance to its tune. But because the individual is actually the self, he or she is free to choose between various alternatives in the field and to choose whether or not to respond to his or her conditioning. He or she can direct attention away from the subjective and objective spheres to the self. Is the decision to do this predetermined? Yes, but this does not mean that the individual should wait for this to happen because it has no control. On the contrary, he or she should continue to exercise the apparent choice to put his or her attention where he or she pleases. In the case of someone who wants *moksa*, he or she should always choose to keep the mind centered on the self or on the idea "I am limitless, non-dual, whole and complete, ordinary awareness," which amounts to the same thing insofar as the thought "I am awareness" takes you to awareness if contemplated. There is no journey as the words "takes you to" imply, but you become aware that you are awareness by this practice. It only seems like you moved from one place to another.

Tom: We can choose to attempt self-enquiry in the broadest sense, and attempt to apply *dharma* to the *karma* we experience?

James: Yes. This is the proper application of free will for someone who wants *moksa*.

Tom: Your *How to Attain Enlightenment* book assumes we have a measure of free will; could you explicate this a bit more? Every cause has a cause, which has a cause, which has... etc?

James: When you analyze action, you see any individual act is the result of all the factors operating in the whole *dharma/karma* matrix, not just the desire of an individual. If you take any one of these factors out – see the chapter on *karma* and *dharma*, the discussion on the *karakas*, the causes of action, specifically – no *karma* is possible. There is no *karma* for animals, because they do not have free will. They are just what the causal body causes them to be. And it turns out that even the individual's desire is actually predetermined too. If ignorance is operating it runs toward objects. If knowledge is operating it runs to the self. Humans are a strange phenomenon – they are in a kind of existential twilight zone. They neither know who they are nor are they completely ignorant of who they are. So there is scope for free will to operate.

Tom: From the non-dual perspective, neither free will nor determinism would be acceptable concepts, because they would be two opposing "realities"?

James: Yes, both imply duality.

Tom: Every effort to do anything is the *gunas* in action, even the *sattva guna*, so, for example, even the work of purifying the mind is not something "I" do?

James: That's right. But it seems as if you are doing it.

Tom: So there is no free will, including the typing of this email? This would be a basis for *karma yoga* because the ego cannot really claim to have achieved anything?

James: Got it in one, Tom! Good for you. This is knowledge behind *karma yoga*.

Tom: Not a lot to report in terms of changes, “big” experiences, etc. I have been keeping up the awareness practice, some days more successfully than others. However, overall I have kept focused. Sometimes there is a gentle sense of irony about everything and a subtle feeling of completeness and strength; other times there is a hard fight with the *vasanas* but I never expected it to be easy. I think the struggle happens because it takes me a while sometimes to adjust and to apply self-enquiry to situations/issues that arise. But there is no other approach to life that interests me anymore.

James: Steady as she goes, eh? You will have a body and mind and a life for another thirty some years, so it is wise to use self-knowledge to grease the wheels. It gets easier and easier as the *vasana* for inquiry gets more entrenched. Eventually, discrimination comes automatically and naturally. Good for you. You have the right view: What else is there to do with your mind?

Tom: The following extract from one of your commentaries seems to sum up the whole thing: “Self-inquiry is the consistent application of a questioning state of mind to everything the mind presents, the practice of discrimination between the self and its many forms and the consistent affirmation of one’s non-dual identity in light of the mind’s conviction that the self is limited, inadequate and incomplete.” I try to use it as a guide, as one of its three parts can be applied to most daily situations. The essence of practical Vedanta could be described as a cognitive therapy technique?

James: That is a good definition. It covers the whole idea. Yes, it is cognitive therapy. It is generally not appreciated in the modern spiritual world. Most believe that there is some kind of ultimate or final experience that will cause a cognitive shift. Consequently they pursue experience and ignore the way they think. They think the mind will die or they will transcend it or something else. But the *vasanas* do not care what happens. They control the thinking patterns. They were built up out of thoughts. And the only way to ameliorate them is to build up a more realistic thinking pattern that will crowd out the old way of thinking.

There is a famous Vedanta text called *Panchadasi* in which Vidyaranya Swami, the author, makes an interesting statement. He says if you think you are enlightened, you are enlightened. On the surface this seems quite stupid, considering all the grandiose views of enlightenment that perennially clutter the spiritual world. And it does not mean that thinking you are enlightened without understanding what it means is enlightenment. It points at the most essential element in the enlightenment game: the intellect. This is where ignorance manifests first. Then it filters down to the emotions and flows out into the world of *karma*. So unless you introduce a new thought system, a new source for the thoughts, an idea that is in harmony with the nature of reality from which the thoughts can emanate, you will just run off old patterns of thought.

Very few actually succeed, because they do not have the dedication it takes to eliminate the dualistic orientation with right knowledge. They all want something to happen. So I admire your patience. Stick with it. You will not be disappointed. It was good to hear from you. I think of you from time to time and wonder how things are going. Keep in touch.

~ James