

# Neither Here nor There

Ram (James Swartz)

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**Art:** Hi, James. I've been doing a lot more reading, and it is all becoming more clear to me. Obviously, the next step is to get serious about self-inquiry.

I find myself coming up against a tendency in myself, a resistance, that goes something like: "I just want a few more incarnations first, so I can experience all the good stuff before I give it up." LOL! I suppose this is a *samskara* that I must work on, this feeling of injustice, that I've never gotten to experience the things that most people do or at least to derive the pleasures from them that most do. I have always had this sense of separation from life, of disconnection, alienation. And I have resented that, and labored long and hard to break through that wall. There's a part of me that feels it is wrong to go even further down the path of introspection, that maybe that is "giving up," not facing the challenge head-on. Yet what has fighting my nature ever gotten me?

**James:** I don't think you should "work on it," Art. To me that means that you are not convinced that *samsara* is a zero-sum game. Either there is something to gain there or not. If there is and this *samskara* really troubles you, then you should get off your your butt and go for whatever it is that you think you have missed out on.

And anyway, you are not "most people." Plus who knows what "most people" experience, apart from the basic joys and sorrows of life? You are a dispassionate person. You came in that way and you will go out that way. It is why you seek. I say pack it in on this vain longing and accept your nature as an inquirer. I agree that you should get serious about self-inquiry. You are very close to freedom. A bit of dedicated effort will bear fruit.

**Art:** On the other hand, I think, "Perhaps the reason I can't derive much satisfaction from life is that I already have, in other lives, and now I am past that. Perhaps the reason I am at a point of such natural detachment and introversion is precisely because I have arrived at a level of qualification for self-inquiry. And therefore the way to fulfillment is to go even further down that path." But there remains this fear of... annihilation. I suppose this is a defense the ego erects, as it does not want to be "seen through."

**James:** The real reason you can't derive satisfaction in life is (1) there is no satisfaction there and (2) you are not satisfied with your self as you are. And getting what you want in the world will not make you a satisfied person.

**Art:** So... that is the knot of *vasanas* I contend with.

**James:** The usual suspects.

**Art:** When I was twenty, I was in Assisi and visited the Carceri Hermitage where Saint Francis lived. I felt so at home there, and would happily have stayed forever. I wrote a letter home to my parents, saying that I knew I was not the kind of person to make much of a success in this competitive society, and would become a monk if it weren't for that pesky Catholicism business, LOL. I knew what my life was going to be like, and I was right: a series of misadventures, throwing myself against one wall after another. Oh, it's been an adventure, I guess, but I never got much pleasure out of it. At least, not when sober. I don't regret the life I've lived, I just wish I could have been really engaged in it.

**James:** Dispassion is a blessing, Art. It is the number-one qualification for enlightenment.

**Art:** But... my nature has always been at one remove from life. I am always analyzing my thoughts and feelings, even as I have them. People are always astounded at how easily I can "read" people, but it's because I spend all my time reading myself! If I understand the qualifications for enlightenment correctly, that is a good thing. But there is this fear of going all the way with it, this resentment that I never got to be like other people. But then I wonder if I didn't, in some other life.

**James:** All you need to do now is to use the gift of analysis along the lines Vedanta suggests. It will bear fruit. And if you get enlightenment you will get to be like other people because there is only one people and that is you.

Even on the dualistic level, you are just like other people, Art. Everyone has the same issues. And if you aren't... if you are somehow different and unique... it is pointless to think about it because it is not up to you. God made you this way and you do not have the power to unmake it and remake you. It sounds to me like lack of self-confidence... a "woe is me" tale. I am appending an article I wrote about the self-esteem issue and the solution to it.

**Art:** Now when I start to look at all this from the point of view of the self, I can see how absurd this line of thought is. If there is no separate "me," what is there for "me" to resent? From the larger perspective, I have not "missed" anything. And I see that this is just a kind of trap, a way to cling to the illusion of separateness. But then the emotion rears its ugly head again. I am trying to look at that emotion dispassionately, to identify with the watcher, not the feeler or thinker.

**James:** Yes, indeed. It is a useless way to think. If you want to get out of it, you have to simply do inquiry, in this case apply the "opposite thought." The "opposite thought" is "I am the self."

When you think about it rationally – and that is the whole point of Vedanta – there is no logical reason why you should accept the thought about yourself that makes you feel dissatisfied when you can accept the thought that makes you feel satisfied. It is very simple. But it is hard work because evidently you are quite in love with the thought that you have missed out. In *samsara* everyone is missing out, Art.

**Art:** These are the answers I expected to receive from you of course. I know all this. Sometimes it

helps me to write things out, that's all.

I see my life as having gone like this: I was born at that place of dispassion, of disconnection, if you will. (My favorite song at age 10 was *Is That All There Is?*) And I can remember coming to the conclusion at a very young age that consciousness is primary. It seemed so obvious to me. But... there seemed to be nothing to do with that knowledge, no life that one could live that, embodied that, in any way. The only choices society offered were either simple-minded, authoritarian "belief systems" or an arid materialism that precluded the very idea of meaning or purpose. So I threw myself into all kinds of experiences, hoping that something would force me to "connect." I became an adrenaline junkie. But in the end, I am still the same person I was born to be. So there is no point in fighting it anymore. To what end? And if this set of attributes puts me that much closer to enlightenment, what am I complaining about?

I keep thinking of that line of Saint Augustine's: "Lord, make me chaste – but not yet." There's always this desire to hang onto one's *vasanas* because they are how we define ourselves, we are comfortable with them, no matter how pointless they are. And we cling to the vain hope that some chunk of *samsara* will make us happy.

**James:** As a friend of mine said when I was encouraging him to get to work on himself, "Well, Jim, it may be shit, but it's warm and it's mine." Not much you can say to that.

**Art:** So... this nature of mine is a gift, and I need to accept it instead of fighting it.

**James:** Mind like a laser, Art. I agree.

**Art:** It's interesting. I'm a writer, at least when I am doing what pleases me the most. And I find that the more I travel down this path, the more pleasure I take from the process. I'm not undercutting myself by getting too invested in the results, and therefore the writing is easier and better. Whether other people enjoy it is out of my hands.

**James:** I sort of enjoy it, but the story of your life so far is not a page-turning airport read. It is rather difficult to say this for fear of offending you, Art, but how can I help you? It seems to me that you have things pretty well sorted about Art and his stuff. I like to hear people's stories, but usually some kind of question goes along with it. It seems to me that you are quite well aware of what you need to do spiritually. I am going to post this email anonymously and should entitle it *Shit or Get off the Pot* because it looks to me like you just like to talk about Art when you might more profitably ask why anyone would be interested in hearing about your problems, not that they seem to be very serious problems, if they are problems at all. It sounds as if you are bored and maybe a tad lonely. As you say above, you pretty well expected the answers you got, which means you must have known the answers already. So why are you writing? I understand the value of writing things out, but if I had a dollar for everyone who wants to tell me his or her tale of hardship and woe I would be a rich man.

I am always available to try to help, but I don't really know where this is heading and I don't want to get into listening to you talk about you, unless you are willing to listen to me talk about me.

Unfortunately, I find talking about me as boring as I find listening to you talk about you. I don't do it unless requested. I wrote my autobiography because I got tired of talking about my apparent self and its peregrinations in the *maya* worlds. However, I love proper *satsang* and would be more than happy to respond to serious questions.

~ Much love, James