

Neo-Advaita Is a Third-rate Religion

Ram (James Swartz)

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Jeremy: Hi, James. Thanks for your extensive answer. In that *satsang Am I a Nutty Guru or What?* you would have replied differently if I had written it. Is it that the qualifications of the student and the circumstances cause a different response to the same question? Does the teacher have stricter guidelines for someone who is more advanced in self-inquiry than a neophyte? I guess it's just that I sometimes entertain the fantasy that the "truth" is a one-way street.

James: People are constrained by their ignorance. Some are very ignorant and others are barely ignorant. Before you can rain down "the truth" you need to establish the individual's capacity for truth. Most you have to spoon-feed little by little. Some you can let it rip and they will understand.

Jeremy: But as you say, it all boils down to the sense of doership, the ego's involvement in *maya*. The problem with that view is that the ego is *maya* (the ego is really nowhere to be found), which brings me to a certain unease about writing a text on sham *gurus* as you suggested because it would only be "my" opinion on the issue.

James: My idea was that you show how, in light of the teachings of Vedanta, the teachings of many of the contemporary so-called enlightened beings don't stack up.

Jeremy: The question that can arise is, what or who cares? Only the ego is bothered about its involvement in anything. The self couldn't care less, which is the problem with so much of the New Age and Neo-Advaitic tirade against the ego. Eckhart Tolle, Wayne Dyer, Deepak Chopra, et al. waste their time harping about observing and trying to get rid of the ego. It leads to reinforcing the very thing you are trying to get rid of. I sort of fell into the same trap while reading that text about enlightenment by your friend. It's not a big deal, probably just a perceptive lag from all the crap I read in the past.

In any case, I'll get into a bit of what has been spinning around in my apparent mind's head for the past several years, which could eventually be part of a text on what I've read and experienced in the so-called spiritual world before coming upon authentic Vedanta.

For the past several years I've been more (than less) aware that Jeremy – what I now call the apparent "I" – is not a doer. It just became obvious from my inquiries into both neuroscience and *jnanis* like Ramana, Nisargadatta and even Ramesh Balsekar. Contrary to what you say in the *Aparokshanubhuti* DVD, I think Balsekar did have it right concerning non-doership (which he seems to have gotten more from his devotion to Ramana and Wei Wu Wei than he did from Nisargadatta). Or to put it another way – and I gather this is what you really meant – non-doership is not a teaching for someone who just walked through the doorway of spiritual practice and thinks of himself as a doer.

James: That is correct. You have to explain why it is incorrect to take yourself to be a doer. I don't know if Ramesh explained it clearly. It does no good to just say "I am not a doer." When you understand the nature of all the objects in the field you will no longer think of yourself as a doer. Without knowing the reason you just have to take it on faith. It just becomes a religious belief. The smug way that Neo-Advaita palms off the "I am not the doer" teaching makes my blood boil. How is an entry-level seeker – which is all that Neo-Advaita attracts – going to take it, except on the basis of faith? And even if you can unfold the whole macrocosmic teaching, the "I am not the doer" teaching needs the support of other *prakriyas* to really put the nail in the coffin of doership. But Neo-Advaita has no methodology. It is just a bunch of half-truths presented as if they were the truth, without a map to the goal.

Jeremy: It is just as ineffective as telling a seeker that everything is consciousness – the seeker included – with no detailed teaching as to why (hence the importance of Vedanta). If anything, only a belief is created. One moment the person is telling himself that he is not the doer – that he is consciousness – and the next he feels himself doing actions as a separate individual. It not only doesn't work, it ends up breeding frustration. It is the opposite of *karma yoga*. In my case, it slowly dawned on me (maybe five years prior to our meeting) that I never chose this life, my circumstances or my environment. In fact the concept of cultural relativity that I picked up when I was into anthropology is not that far from the notion of non-doership.

James: That's right. We are all conditioned by our environment to a large degree. Our environment is nothing but macrocosmic *vasanas* appearing as apparent "past lives" which make up our psychic environment.

Jeremy: That's when I gradually started becoming more and more of a loner, at least in terms of sincerely relating to most people. I realized people did not understand who they are and just carried on replicating the cycle of *samsaric* life: house, home, children and riches.

Then I came on neuroscience where many researchers also portray the individual "I" as an imaginary fabrication. Incidentally, I didn't know you had come across the research demonstrating how decisions are already made by the brain before the individual "I" is actually conscious of them. I have some of that research at home. To summarize, the research basically says that wanting to initiate an action is simply the consequence of the fact that the brain has already executed that initial impulse without the individual's prior knowledge of it. This is actually not all that new, since Terence Gray (Wei Wu Wei), one of the in-crowd of Neo-Buddhists (around the sixties with Alan Watts, Paul Reps, Philip Kapleau and by extension Kerouac and Ginsberg), knew from studies in neurology (from Montreal's Dr. Wilder Penfield) that it took the brain roughly half a second to register an action after the fact.*

[*Editor's note: More recent scientific research has indicated lag time can be up to six seconds.]

So why all this elaborate discourse on the evidence for non-doership? Because at the time I was aware of this and yet I had no idea of what or who or whatever was operating this machinery... what was sometimes called the famous "ghost in the machine." Little did I know that it was the other way around: the machine is in the ghost.

James: Correct.

Jeremy: When I fell upon U.G. Krishnamurti, I could only concur with him that the only honest thing was to say that I didn't know. But that is maybe in part where some of "the Unknown" and the "no-mind" shtick that was cooked up by the Neo-Advaita crowd, among others, came from.

James: Yes. The Neo-Advaita is just a hodgepodge of ideas picked up from contemporary *gurus*, many of whom were not even enlightened, like J. Krishnamurti, but who looked enlightened to naive Westerners. Their words sounded profound and spiritual – and to be fair, there was a hint of truth to them – so they became "teachings." Most of it is what we call *smirti*, remembered knowledge, i.e. experiential knowledge. They had some experiences, interpreted them according to their own lights and this is meant to pass for teaching. Some of it did correspond to the *sruti*, but a lot of it was untrue or distorted truth. But what do the totally ignorant know? In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king. This Neo-Advaita thing is just a bunch of visually-impaired *samsaris* carrying on as if they had both eyes open.

Jeremy: Actually, U.G. admitted that he got much of his thinking from Jiddhu Krishnamurti. Moreover, I get the impression that this "Unknown" business was picked up by Jiddhu from the Buddhists. You won't find many a Buddhist that doesn't have a soft spot for Jiddhu K.

James: People love this "Unknown" business. It is so mystical and romantic. Again, it is another half-truth. The self is not known, nor is it unknown. There is a lot more to it than that. But when your only means of knowledge is experience it certainly seems to be unknown.

Jeremy: And that's about when none other than the wonder that is you, His Incommensurability, came into Jeremy the Non-Doer's life. Once again, far from me to have suspected that a traditional teacher would have swung my perspective around, or should I say, outside in. It was not something I did. It is true that I longed for it in the past; I simply no longer believed it was possible. So much for belief.

I didn't expect to have my life turn 180 degrees almost instantly on a dime. Though Jeremy may have been unwittingly prepared for this encounter, he hardly could believe himself going through the movements of trying to meet the Great Kahuna himself.

Fast-forward to now... I'm aware that Jeremy has a hard time adapting to his true nature. Sorry, but little Jeremy doesn't have James' vast experience and wisdom of wielding self-knowledge in the ups and downs of *samsara*. That is, there is still a lot of relative ignorance in the way. That's why I refer to integration (or call it adaptation or any other such notion). So when you say that I'm the only one who really knows what's right for me, that's true, but it is also a novelty for me.

James: Well, non-doership is not the whole truth. It is a useful half-truth to get the self under the spell of ignorance, what is referred to as the ego, to examine the causes of action and understand that while the doer may be one small factor in the chain of causality, it is not the actual initiator of

action. In fact if you know you are the self you can act with confidence as an apparent doer. The concept of doership includes subtle actions, like thinking, willing, imagining, discriminating, etc. So you are free to choose between various alternatives in the *dharma* field without developing binding *vasanas*.

Jeremy: It may sound strange for one who had such self-confidence early on in life, but I've been more or less drifting along for as long as I can remember. I just followed whatever came up – quite oblivious to right or wrong (except concerning the law) – whatever the consequences. No, I wasn't an axe murderer or a wife-beater or what have you, but life was pretty darn absurd to me... all things considered. Hence my gratitude for having been given the opportunity to meet an apparent someone who has wisdom to spare and share. Meanwhile, I still maintain a certain perspective on life that borderlines with the absurd. I mean, who the hell knows why things are the way they are (theories like *lila* notwithstanding)? From that perspective, I can hardly care less. By that I mean whatever happens happens. It's clearer than ever that I'm not driving the boat and wherever it goes on the ocean of *samsara* is pretty much the same to me. Things seem equal one way or the other, issues and stuff notwithstanding.

Other than a little more peace, I yet have to discover this bliss stuff that scripture alludes to so often. As you've often said, how is the self suppose to feel? Beats me. Then why so much talk of love and bliss as the nature of the self. Or are the scriptures only referring to the knowledge of the self and not how it appears to feel?

James: It is not experiential bliss that the scriptures are touting, although they do that to lure the seeker toward self-knowledge. One of the very last verses of *Atma Bodh* goes so completely overboard about it that you can see it is intended to be a metaphor. Self-knowledge is not some kind of permanent existential orgasm. But there is an experiential component to the knowledge. As the mind clears one feels a steady stream of very pleasant *shakti* flowing in the body-mind. If the mind achieves a high degree of *sattva* the feelings will be quite intense at times. But it is more like sleep, conscious sleep.

Jeremy: Anyway, far too much about me. What about Ram – James' life? If you're up to it, I'd be interested in hearing about how things are going for you every now and then (among other things, with all your *satsangs*, courses and meetings. Though the subject has never really come up, I do consider you a friend, as well as my self in the appearance of a teacher of course. Then again, I don't want to impose and I know you're over your bloody crown *chakra* in emails.

James: Things are very fine. Everything is sliding along as if on greased wheels. The *satsangs* are very well-attended. In the last one there was an overflow and two people had to sit in an adjoining room. I got last year's emails edited and posted. The book is doing well. The website is working nicely. I am getting to the point where it looks like I will have to devise another way to answer questions, and it is happening – Skype video chats are increasing. The seminars in Europe are filled up, the campout in July is booked, etc. My health is good and my spirits are fine, although I am working hard. Nonetheless, I can stand the hard work because in less than five weeks I'm more or less off the hook. August is camping month and September 2 I fly to London. By that time there should be a lot of video on the web, etc. and we will have another set of videos

done, *Atma Bodh*. Life is just grand.

Jeremy: Thanks for the update. It's the first time I get a clear answer concerning this matter of the self as bliss, and very pertinent to my interrogations. What intrigues me, however, is that you say "It is more like sleep, conscious sleep." This seems to be closest to my experiential feeling of the self in the waking state, now and then, when the subtle body is the most *sattvic*, something akin to very light sleep, with a sleepy quality to it. Is there anything more to this as evidenced in scripture or otherwise? Of course I can see the obstacle of wanting, or worse, expecting, this as an experience... since then one is just caught back in pursuing a state (an object, albeit a subtle one).

James: Yes, that's it. It is just *shakti*. It is operating the body all the time, but you don't feel it unless the mind is still. Most *jnanis* have *sattvic* minds, so they feel blissful most of the time. Anything experiential depends on the nature of the instrument of experience.

Jeremy: One last question. With all the anxiety bolstered by both seekers and teachers alike on the topic of getting free of one's *karma*, if my understanding is correct it seems that only when one knows oneself to be awareness can the question of *karma* be annulled. That is, only awareness is free of the three types of *karma*.

James: Correct.

Jeremy: That being said, many *jnanis* died while suffering quite heavily in the throes of cancer, Ramana being one of the latest well-known cases. When you told us about what you experienced with the truck accident – that was supposed to be your predicted end – it doesn't exclude, I presume, that both good and bad outcomes can happen to even the most *sattvic* of *jnanis* (again, one thinks of Ramana). In other words, you can know yourself to be the self and yet the body-mind complex in the apparent reality can suffer just as anyone else. Please correct me if I'm wrong. I get the impression that this is just one of many topics (like the question of bliss above) that relates to the fact that people are just afraid of what life has in store and basically just want to "feel good."

James: This is correct. But for *jnanis* there are no good and bad outcomes. There are just outcomes. The problem is that people think that the body belongs to them. But the body is *Isvara*, the five elements, and it is not under the control, except indirectly, of the *jiva*, the *jnani*. Many *jnanis* experience physical pain because of *prarabdha karma* or failure to change *tamasic* and *rajasic* habits. But they do not suffer, meaning all the emotional grief that normally accompanies physical pain does not happen or if it does it is witnessed and known to be unreal. I have virtually no physical pain at any time and experience almost constant bodily bliss, but it is only because I have mastered *yoga*. If you are in the Vedanta world and meet *jnanis*, they refer to the body as "the five elements," which simply means that it belongs to *Isvara*, meaning it is a part of nature and subject to all the factors in the field. I got bitten by a *Culex* mosquito, got filaria and could have died. But there was nothing I could have done to prevent it aside from living in another environment. All environments – the five elements – are in a state of disequilibrium all the time,

so pain is inevitable. On the other hand, you can manipulate your environment to a large degree to prevent pain. It rarely happens because I have good discrimination, but I had to write off an old friend recently. I didn't write her off forever, only until she got a grip on her emotions, which were polluting our relationship. Even though ultimately it is limited, there are many choices you can make in *samsara* that will minimize pain and suffering.

~ Love, James