

## The Grit in the Oyster

Ram (James Swartz)

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**Kenneth:** Dear Ramji, thanks for your email, it's always a true joy to hear from you. I loved your email, and what you said struck a deep chord.

I remember learning so much from when I was in Tiruvannamalai two years ago. The towns of South India were an unbridled blast of *rajas*, with every aspect of life on full display – from love and devotion to inequality, poverty, filth and occasional cruelty. In amongst that there were the Western spiritual seekers, wandering about the Ramanashram... with a different kind of hunger in their eyes. Sometimes I almost felt it was the Western seekers who were suffering the most. I see it in the faces of people here, an emptiness, lack and craving. Maybe it's just the grit in the oyster that eventually leads to self-knowledge – assuming the conditions are right.

I certainly found Tiru very eye-opening. I saw this Western guy at the Ramanashram who was a few years older than me, and he was so incredibly “yogic.” His posture was rigid, like an ironing board. He had this amazing ponytail and “ethnic” clothes, which seemed like the spiritual equivalent of Armani. Every movement and every breath seemed so controlled. He wasn't relaxed at all, and there was nothing “natural” about him. He was with a couple of women who seemed a lot more animated, and they were talking and laughing, but he seemed unable to engage with them or his environment. He was obviously too “yogic” for that. I don't know whether he was desperately trying to be enlightened or trying to make it look as though he was already enlightened. But I found it sad, and I felt a strange empathy for him. I realised that trying to “be” enlightened is a terrible thing to do to oneself, desperately trying to fight each moment and each impulse, and trying to cram yourself into some “enlightened” box. I learned so much from just watching him and others. I often saw more freedom in the faces of beggars sitting at the side of the road than the *satsang*-hoppers or “spiritual lifestylers.” And there but for the grace of *Isvara* go I...

Vigilance always!

I will never consider myself “cooked.” There's nothing to cook, only an idea. The heat is always on though, and that's the most immense relief after a lifetime of feeling “underdone.” ☺

I'm learning to love *nididhyasana*. My mind is actually fascinated and passionate about understanding self-knowledge in the light of functioning in the world. I'm seeing it as a game now, with all its different levels, challenges and secret tricks. On the *mithya* level, there's always more to learn, more skills to develop and ways of looking at and functioning in the apparent reality. It might as well be fun, I guess.

I hope you are well, Ramji, and enjoying being back in Tiru! I imagine it has changed so much over the years you've been there. I certainly have such fond memories of my time there. Being there was a huge blessing. Thank you for everything. Much love and very best wishes for the “New Year”!

~ Kenneth