

What's Right and What's Wrong with the "No Doer" Teaching

Ram (James Swartz)

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Nick: Douglas Harding's books were a sort of lifeline for a long time. I came across U.G. Krishnamurti's writings a few years ago and found my spiritual aspirations put into a context that I suspected was completely accurate. You yourself say that ultimately exactly the thing that prevents you from realizing your true nature is the effort to realize your true nature, since it's what you are. It does seem that there is nothing you can actually do.

James: This is true from the point of view of awareness, but there is another side to the doing debate. You can't separate your doings from the motivation behind them. If you work on yourself patiently without anxiety for the results of your actions, the mind will become calm, inward-turned and will be capable of grasping the truth of who you are. Doing won't result in self-realization, but doing with the right spirit invokes grace.

This is where traditional Vedanta disagrees with Neo-Advaita. The Neo-Advaitis speak exclusively from the point of view of the self, denying the doer and doership completely. This is temporarily liberating, but once you leave the *satsang* and return to the life of the body-mind (as you inevitably will), there is no teaching to guide you back to the vision of non-duality. You can deny doership all you like, but this does not relieve you of the burden of your *karma*.

You can always get the vision back because you are what you are seeking and therefore you are always available. But to get "back" and stay back you need a particular kind of mind, one that is not kept quiet by denial. To get this kind of mind you need to work. *Yoga* is the work. Several *yogas*, methods, are required if you want the kind of mind in which the self will reveal itself, the kind of mind that can retain the knowledge of truth: *karma yoga*, *bhakti yoga*, *jnana yoga*, meditation (*ashtanga yoga*) and the *yoga* of the *gunas*. Neo-Advaita, in its insistence on "no doer," "no work," is an uninformed, unskillful and misleading teaching. It can give you an experiential glimpse of the truth, but these glimpses soon become little more than inspiring memories or sources of acute frustration.

Nick: The self knows me, but I do not know the self. I can never know the self since thought is what obscures the self. If your thought world is structured around a recognition of this fact and you follow the reasoning of Vedanta, can you arrive at a point where your mental activity becomes somehow transparent and the self actually appears in it clearly?

James: Yes, absolutely, but you have to work to get there. The knowledge of the self – i.e. Vedanta, is a perfect, time-tested means to reorient the mind's dualistic orientation to a non-dual orientation. Again, this is where Neo-Advaita is confused. It dismisses traditional Vedanta as "only intellectual." It says no *sadhana* is necessary, because it does not understand the value of the mind, summarily dismissing it as the

enemy. If *sadhana* was not necessary then Tony Parsons and the Neo-Advaita crowd would not be advocating the *sadhana* of no *sadhana*. They would not be giving *satsang*, because *satsang* is a *sadhana*. Even their idea of *satsang* is not really *satsang*; it's a poor Western approximation. Neo-Advaita appeals to those lazy people who want it all now without any effort. I call it the Las Vegas syndrome: just put your nickel in the slot machine and pull the lever (oops, that's a doing too! - can't get enlightened that way) and out pops millions. Problem solved.

It is impossible not to do. As long as you are here in this body you are a doer. If you pursue frivolous goals or sit around pretending to do nothing, waiting for enlightenment to just happen, nothing will happen, including enlightenment. As I pointed out above, doing will not produce the self, but it can produce the kind of clear mind that is capable of inquiry. If the object of one's inquiry is the self and one conducts one's inquiry along scriptural lines, it will result in self-knowledge. Self-knowledge is enlightenment. This is true because you are already the self. You simply don't know it. Once you know it and gain confidence in it - run your life from that perspective - that is the end of your seeking.

Nick: The self is everything, isn't it? It is the self which allows me to think these thoughts now. Awareness is what allows this world to appear. It allows time and space to happen. It allows me to identify a birth time when I came into being and a narrative which I can call my life, but isn't that a complete illusion since it is only the working of memory within awareness?

James: You cannot dismiss yourself and life as complete illusion. This is another major fault of Neo-Advaita. It tells you that your problem is that you exist. It says you need to realize that you don't exist. When you do that, you're enlightened, free of "you."

Apart from the fact that you do exist (I'll deal with this presently), the idea that there is something wrong with you as you are does not stand up to scrutiny. It is merely a false belief, an uninformed judgment. This whole "get rid of the ego" is a bogus teaching because there is nothing wrong with your ego. The ego has been somehow conditioned to think that there is something "wrong" with it and the Neo-Advaitis and many other spiritual paths exploit this conditioning.

This unrealistic teaching asks the ego to get rid of itself. How likely is this? It is just ignorance passing itself off as knowledge. You don't need to get rid of your ego, the ego needs to investigate the self along scriptural lines. In fact there are not two selves, an ego self and a true self. The ego is just the self under the spell of ignorance. There is just one self that either knows who it is or apparently doesn't. When you investigate the self you see that the self is limitless. When you realize your limitlessness the idea that you are limited - which can be called ego - just falls away.

Let's assume, however, that there is a special, separate, unique ego/individual called Nick. In what sense does Nick exist? You can't say that Nick and the world are non-existent - because you experience yourself and the world. You carry on your life with a strong conviction that you are Nick and it works to some degree because everyone else thinks about themselves in the same way. How can you experience something that doesn't exist? Vedanta says that while you and the world are not ultimately real, meaning you don't last forever, you are not ultimately unreal either.

What is the nature of your reality? You have a conditional and dependent existence. This existence is called "*mithya*" in Vedanta. *Mithya* means that you don't absolutely exist but you apparently exist. It means that you and the world are here all right, but neither you nor the world stand alone. You depend on awareness, the self, for your existence. When Ramana says the surrender to the self is equal to self-inquiry he is assuming that there is a separate individual.

So as long as you can't see that you are the self you'd better take yourself to be apparently real and do what is necessary to survive and thrive in this apparent universe, to wit either surrender to the self, i.e. take the fruits of your actions as *prasad* or practice self-inquiry - or both. If you sit around like a vegetable waiting for enlightenment to happen because you have been told you can't do anything to get enlightened, you will remain a vegetable.

A person with a clear mind who wants to know the truth will get to work on himself or herself. He or she will reorient the apparent mind around the non-dual principle until the mind "becomes" one with the self. It can "become" one with the self because it is already one with it. The "becoming" is a recognition of this fact.

Nick: That gives me a lot of difficulty because if I think of my birth I have to either think of it as the beginning of awareness or that awareness already existed before my birth and I was somehow born into awareness and then mistook it for a personal possession. If it was the beginning of awareness then death is the end of awareness. Other awarenesses may sustain awareness but my personal awareness will dissolve. If I was born into awareness then it is the same awareness that all are born into forever. It has witnessed all human history, the Big Bang and beyond. All this is arising in awareness. The self seems to confound all. There is only the self. There is no time, no human history, no destiny, only what is now arising in awareness, no thing. No *karma*, no rebirth. No enlightenment, no person.

James: This is true from awareness's point of view, but it does not negate your personal awareness. It is a both/and, not an either/or situation. Let me answer this way: there is only one awareness but that one awareness seems to be a limited and separate awareness when it reflects on the mind/ego - what we call the subtle body in Vedanta. It is like the sun and the moon. The moon has no life of its own. It reflects the light of the sun. So this apparent person that I think I am is borrowing his or her awareness from the self. The self is not born but reflected awareness - Nick - who was born at a certain time and will die some time later. The reflected awareness is the self, pure awareness, but the self is not the reflected awareness - Nick. You don't need to get rid of Nick, the reflected awareness, at all. You simply need to understand that he is reflected awareness and appreciate his limitations, knowing that they don't belong to you, pure awareness. Reflected awareness is never going to "become" pure awareness. They are different orders of reality, the self. One is conscious and the other seems to be conscious. The problem is that the one who seems to be conscious doesn't realize that he is consciousness. So he labors under the belief that he needs to experience consciousness, to know consciousness.

Yes, in pure awareness there is no world, no *karma*, etc. But pure awareness manifests the world and *karma*, etc. They arise out of it and are non-separate from it. And insofar as they exist and are causing you problems, you can solve the problem, not by dismissing them as unreal, but by seeing them as non-separate from the self. Your body is the self. *Karma* is the self. Nick is the self. It's just that

you, the self, are not Nick. Nick – his life – is known to you. It is an object in you, pure awareness. Therefore it cannot be you.

It is like your hand. Your hand is you, but you are not your hand. You know your hand, but your hand does not know you. It is insentient, created by *maya* out of pure awareness. You do not need to get rid of your hand to be Nick.

Nick: I would really appreciate it if you could reflect this back to me from your own perspective. How does rebirth happen if I am a fabrication which will vanish without trace when there is no mind to sustain it? My body dissolves into the elements. I am probably going to be reincarnated at a quantum level, eventually in quite a few living organisms. Will they embody my style of suffering?

Ram: Go to *ShiningWorld.com*, click the Books button and read the commentary on the twelfth verse of *Self Knowledge*. It explains reincarnation, and get back to me if it doesn't solve the problem. You should probably carefully read *Meditation: Inquiry into the Self*, as it will clear up most of your questions.

Nick: I came to your site via watching videos at YouTube of non-dual teachers that you wrote about in your piece on Neo-Advaita. I feel that someone like Tony Parsons is communicating something very real and he does it very uncompromisingly. He seems to answer everything from the position that there is only awareness giving rise to everything and he undermines the idea that there is anything you can do to get any special state.

James: Tony is a typical Neo-Advaiti. He's right on one level, but his approach to enlightenment is only half the story. He may be self-realized, but self-realization doesn't make you a proper teacher. It may make you attractive and inspirational – no blame – but a lot more is needed to lead someone out of their self-ignorance than speaking only from the self level. This kind of take-no-prisoners *advaitic* fanaticism fills your *satsang*, to be sure, but a good teacher will patiently come down into the dream and show the student the way out. That's compassion, non-duality in action. And to do that he or she needs a proper means of self-knowledge that addresses the question of action and doership in a realistic way, not just dismisses it as non-existent.

Simply shouting from the top of the mountain is fine – up to a point – but in the long run it only creates frustration. This is why Neo-Advaita is losing its appeal. It had its brief moment in the sun, but now the bloom is off the rose. It will stick around because it presents enlightenment in the idiom of the times: easy and instant. Just a bit of denial and you're free. Yes, if you can deny your relative existence one hundred percent it's about the same as self-realization, but it is impossible to do it, because you can't deny the one who is doing the denying.

Traditional Vedanta is time-tested, scientific and efficient way to working your way out. Neo-Advaita is half the spiritual loaf. Whether this is from contempt, laziness or just ignorance – probably the later – is not clear. But this approach is very limited. It's okay in any case. One has to go to kindergarten before one can attend grade school, and Neo-Advaita is a nice, happy, fantasy kindergarten. Of course we all need to go to kindergarten, but the teachers need to realize that they are

kindergarten teachers and not proper *mahatmas*. In the land of the blind the one-eyed man is king.