

# From a Skeptic to a Wise Man in No Time

Ram (James Swartz)

2010-05-14

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/1634>

**Jacques:** Hi, James. Recently I watched your videos at *StillnessSpeaks.com*. I have a few questions for you...

In one of your videos you say that one of the recurrent questions to be asked in Vedanta is "How do I know what I know?" Could you put this in context (of the process of self-enquiry, I suppose) and elaborate, please?

Also, concerning self-enquiry in the process of meditation, once one holds onto silence, how do you suggest one proceed with inquiry (what questions or means)? Though I've tried a myriad of methods throughout the years, your method is practically identical to the way I was proceeding. When in silence, I then proceeded with Ramana's inquiry (what is this "I"?, etc.). Is this what you are suggesting, and if not, could you elaborate?

**James:** Experience, no matter how subtle, is an object of awareness, the self. It cannot be known unless it is illumined by awareness. The means of knowledge for external objects is the senses, the means of knowledge for the senses is the mind and the means of knowledge for the mind is awareness. When you are in meditation, for example, the presence or absence of thoughts is known by awareness. If the absence of thoughts is experienced as silence, ask how it is known. If you are aware of thoughts, ask how they are known, since they do not know themselves. The idea of asking this question is to point your attention to awareness, the one in whom experience is occurring. If silence is the object, ask how the silence is known. It is known by something other than silence, is it self-knowing? Who knows awareness? Are you knowing awareness? Is awareness knowing you? Is there a you other than awareness to know awareness? Is awareness actually self-knowing even though it seems to have split itself into a knower and thoughts or silence? The "who am I?" question should come in at this point to get you to see that awareness is you. See if you can find a beginning or an end to awareness. See if awareness is actually split into a knower and known objects. See if you can discover a barrier, a line, between awareness and the objects, in this case the silence. By "silence" I mean the field in which the thoughts are occurring.

**Jacques:** Another topic you discuss concerns the *gunas*. On the matter of food, I must admit that I finally abandoned an Ayurvedic diet, because by and large I found I was becoming obsessed with the whole matter. In other words, instead of obtaining a *sattvic* mind, I engendered more stress about the subject than anything else. Under the influence of Transcendental Meditation and Deepak Chopra's books on the subject, I quickly found that almost every other "specialist" on the *gunas* and Ayurveda disagreed with one another on what foods to eat and in what appropriate season (which, if you recall my last letter, only helped foster my doubts about interpretation and what and who to believe). Could you comment on this and maybe suggest a better approach (and/or resource)?

**James:** Yes. You need to connect the food to its post-digestive effect. Forget these

silly generic instructions, these food systems. Any action, in this case eating, has two parts, the apparent result and the unseen result. If you eat a piece of cake it tastes good and lifts your energy level a little. If you let your attention go to other things after you have consumed it, you may not notice the post-digestive effect. Very often the post-digestive effect is the opposite of the immediate effect. A cup of coffee stimulates you but if you follow the energy through the system, you will notice that its post-digestive effect is *tamasic*. This is why you want another cup later. You value *rajas*, but *rajas* from food always involves *tamas*.

The whole issue of the *gunas* is about creating a predominately *sattvic* subtle body, assuming you are interested in self-inquiry. So you have to see which foods cause *sattva* and which do not. There are two long chapters in my new book *How to Attain Enlightenment: The Vision of Non-Duality* that deal with the *gunas* in several contexts, including food. You just start with the foods that you are eating normally and observe what they do to your state of mind. If they make it dull, they are *tamasic*. If they excite it, they are *rajasic*. If they leave it still and clear, they are *sattvic*. As your subtle body gets more *sattvic* a food whose post-digestive effect was *sattvic* when you began may be *tamasic* later. If you want to continue to purify your mind, i.e. increase *sattva*, you would drop that food and find one that produces clarity. This same principle applies to every object and activity in your life, not just food. If you had a *sattvic* diet but associated with *tamasic* people, your subtle body would become *tamasic*.

The obsession probably comes from an anxiety for results. Give up the anxiety for results and just observe what results a particular diet produces in terms of the quality and texture of your mind. You can get a *sattvic* mind eating meat, if you live in a certain environment, have an active lifestyle, enjoy a particular constitution and a *rajasic* subtle body. It is not about health or longevity. If you get the right *guna* balance and can maintain it by continually adjusting the *gunas* in the food, you will be very healthy and live a long time. I have had perfect health for forty years, since I started manipulating the *gunas*. The *guna* diet is not about food per se. It is about energy, the post-digestive effect of food. When the *shakti* is free of excess *rajas* and *tamas*, it purifies the body and mind automatically. To treat the obsession, take the *karma yoga* attitude.

**Jacques:** Finally, concerning your *guru*, I was very impressed to hear someone say that he had a *guru* who lifted them up instead of sitting on a throne and raining down their “knowledge” on them. However, one of the qualities you attributed to him (in the video) was “power.” From what I’ve related to you until now, you can imagine I rather shriek when I hear that word. Could you explain and, please, give it to me straight (and not what I would “like” to hear)?!

**James:** By “power” I meant the force of energy that is generated by the *yoga* of knowledge, *jnana shakti*. If you keep your attention on the self all the time, the outward-going energies are restrained and retained in the subtle body. This gives the personality great power, radiance. There is nothing wrong with power. I think you thought I meant power over people. What a person does with this power depends on their value system. My teacher was an incarnation of *dharma*, so his power was a blessing for the world.

**Jacques:** Though I won’t burden you with much of my personal history (I barely care

for it myself), suffice it to say that much of the “intensity” you speak of that led you to the beginning of your search is in many ways similar to my own process. Now, however, I’m pretty much at the end of my rope. Though I can’t be absolutely be sure of anything for the moment, I feel somehow that your path is my last chance – not only at *sadhana*, but somehow at life altogether. Sharing absolutely nothing with the values and aspirations of the society that surrounds me, I’ve basically lived like an outcast (barely doing more than commute from my apartment to my job as a health care worker) for the past seven years. I’m not sure if it’s either dispassion or apathy, but in any case that’s around where I’m at.

**James:** Vedanta is for those who are at the end of their spiritual journey, people who have certain qualifications, one of which is dispassion toward worldly pursuits, so on that account you seem to be qualified. In my new book there is a chapter on qualifications. Read it and check up to see how you stack up.

But from the tenor of this letter it seems you are quite ready for a proven means of self-knowledge. Frustrating and disappointing as your experience in the spiritual world has been, you are quite fortunate to have seen its limitations. Think of it as a gift of disappointment. Because the spiritual world is in *samsara*, the apparent reality, it is subject to the same defects that plague everything in *samsara*. Vedanta is also a means of self-knowledge that operates in *samsara*, but because it works differently from every other means, it can actually help a mature qualified individual to get out.

As far as Vedanta is concerned, your disillusionment is one of the prime qualifications for liberation. It is a sign of maturity. Very few people see through the largely unconscious deceptions that well-meaning teachers propagate. There are several more qualifications: discrimination, dispassion, mastery of the mind through observation, self-*dharma*, burning desire for liberation, devotion, forbearance and faith. Since your question is about faith, I will make a few comments that I hope will be helpful.

Here are some passages from my book *How to Attain Enlightenment* that deal with this issue:

Just as I need confidence in my eyes to reveal objects in the world, I need confidence in the means of self-knowledge to reveal the self. If the eyes are defective, they may deliver information incorrectly, but Vedanta is a perfect means because the self is perfect and because it has been evolved by the self in such a way that it has remained uncontaminated by human beliefs and opinions. So faith is required if the teachings are going to work as advertised.

The faith required by self-inquiry, however, is not blind faith. It is temporary faith, pending the results of inquiry. Self-inquiry is not a religious system that encourages you to believe in something you can never know, like a God in a heaven somewhere. It is a scientific method of investigation confirmed by experience that destroys erroneous beliefs about the nature of reality and leaves you as you were before the belief clouded your relationship with the world and obscured your appreciation of who you are.

A belief may be in harmony with the truth or not. Belief is ignorance and implies doubt. Doubt is uncomfortable and leads to indecision and low self-esteem. Beliefs need to be recognized as such and investigated. When a belief is

investigated in terms of your own experience or in terms of the knowledge revealed by scripture, it will be shown to be true or false and the insecurity created by the doubt will be removed.

When a belief is converted to knowledge through investigation or discarded because it is untrue, it has a profound effect on an individual's sense of well-being. The thought and feeling patterns that were put in place as a result of the belief disintegrate, leaving the mind free to enjoy life without prejudice.

A mature, qualified mind is a believing mind. Knowledge requires a means, and since perception and inference cannot reveal awareness, scripture and a teacher are required to reveal it. Inference and perception are operated by the ego, but the ego cannot operate scripture. Scripture needs to be operated by a skilled teacher until the knowledge takes root. Just reading scripture and interpreting its words with your own understanding or lack thereof is not helpful. In fact the ego needs to be temporarily suspended for self-knowledge to take place. This suspension is accomplished by faith in the teaching. Up to this point faith is placed in one's own ego or the ego of others who claim to be enlightened to solve the existential riddle, but it needs to be transferred to the teaching and the teacher. When the teaching works, you either discover that the ego is like a shadow, wholly dependent on you, in which case it is not a problem, or the ego assimilates the vision of non-duality and stands alone with the self as the self; or both.

Self-inquiry requires faith, but not blind faith. If it did, there would be no need for an open mind, discrimination, dispassion and the other qualities listed above. You understand that if you could have set yourself free, you would have done so long ago and you temporarily agree that self-knowledge can do the job. You accept scripture's contention that you are whole and complete, actionless awareness and not the body-mind entity, even though you do not necessarily experience yourself as such. With this in mind at all times, you manage your mind accordingly, destroying any and all beliefs to the contrary until such time as you realize the truth.

If you want to know more about how Vedanta works, I suggest you get my new book. It unfolds the whole logic of the teachings of Vedanta in clear English. It is called *How to Attain Enlightenment: The Vision of Non-Duality* and is available through ShiningWorld by contacting Lida at [lidavangeest@gmail.com](mailto:lidavangeest@gmail.com) or through the publisher, Sentient Publications of Boulder, Colorado, or at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com).

**Jacques:** Hi, James. As I continue to read your book - I read this type of book at a snail's pace (rather than as a thriller, trying mindlessly to get to the end) in order to absorb as much as possible - I've been simultaneously reading *Mystic by Default*. What first attracted me to your website was the clarity of the manner of teaching, and as I've more recently discovered, how similar your thoughts and opinions compare to my own. No worries, I'm not saying this in order to gain your favour (or suck up, to be more blunt), but rather to introduce my next few questions and to underline some lingering questions about - guess what? - the nagging question of belief.

The fact is the people I used to associate with in Siddha Yoga and other paths all started getting tired of me bringing up so many embarrassing questions. For a while I started to wonder if I didn't have enough "faith" (like them) and was just too

critical. In hindsight I'm glad I did ask these questions (and it was about time). In resumé, those questions are almost word-for-word equivalent to what you mention in "The Teacher" section of your book (Chapter IV). I bring this up since, on the one hand, I had lost all hope in spirituality and, on the other, if it weren't for you I'd still be reading sites about neuroscience (as interesting as it can be) and corrupt *gurus* (not so much fun).

As I'm no expert on neuroscience, the fact remains that there is more and more research on the question of consciousness. Also, many of these scientists have been lifelong meditators (who have had past epiphanies) and have simply suspended their beliefs in either hard-headed materialism or spirituality. In other words, they are quite open-minded (cf. David Lane, V.S. Ramachandran, Susan Blackmore, etc.) and contrary to most people, do not feel the need to adopt or come to any definite conclusions as of yet. And, no, it would be just too easy to categorize them as agnostics.

So... get to the point already! My academic background has, among other fields, involved cultural anthropology. I mention this because, as I read your autobiography, I couldn't help but reflect on how culture has influenced the religious and spiritual experiences of every population on the globe. Nothing new or revolutionary in that statement of course, but... here come the questions. How do you size up *siddha loka* (as you experienced twice in your text) with the Christian's heaven and hell/or Yogananda's (and Sri Yukteshwar's) three worlds with some form of astral planet hovering above our own? In the near-death experiences of cultures like the Nambikwara of the Amazon (Brazil), the shamans have visions of underground worlds of caves, tunnels and snakes somewhat similar to the afterworld of the Maya. This is because that's how their geography is built and how their life, environment and consequent cosmogeny relates.

**James:** Hi, Jacques. Reality can be seen from three basic positions. The first is called *paramarthika satyam*. This is the self, non-dual awareness. It is experience-free. You cannot say anything about it, because it is beyond the mind and speech.

The second way to see reality is called *vyvaharika satyam*. It means "transactional reality." This is the level of material science. The senses are the basic means of knowledge and everyone more or less agrees that this is reality. I get in my car and drive to the supermarket and buy milk. When I am in this world I take it to be real. This is the way *viswas*, waking state entities, see reality.

The third aspect of reality is called *pratibhasika satyam*. It is more confusing. It is both the dream aspect of the sleep state and the dream aspect of the waking state. It is identification with the subtle body, the mind. In the dream aspect of the sleep state the dreamer identifies with the dream ego and takes the dream world to be real. The dream aspect of the waking state is more difficult to understand because the physical senses are operating, so it seems to contradict with *vyvaharika satyam*, the waking state reality. But in this state, even though the physical senses are operating, the individual identifies with his or her projections, i.e. the way the *vasanas* present experience. So he or she takes what he or she sees to be real. And it is real for the person who is in this state. It is no less real than the belief that *vyvaharika satyam*, the normal sense-world is reality. Both the waking state and the dream state are not real from the point of view of the self, *paramarthika satyam*, because both are in *maya*, the apparent reality.

So are these visions real? Yes and no. From the standpoint of the state the individual is in, they are real. From the self's standpoint they are not.

**Jacques:** More examples could be given but my questioning brings both your autobiography and your last book together. In the latter, while speaking of the *rishis*, you say that knowledge came to them through visions and voices." It came to me, not from me or through me. I saw it, I heard it." Sorry, but I can't grasp how this sort of revelation is any different from Moses' burning bush or the leader of the Mormon's revelation concerning the interpretation of Christianity. If I read you correctly, you seem to suggest that the difference lies in numbers (that many *rishis* had the same experience).

**James:** Truth is not subject-dependent. It is object-dependent, so anyone who sees it is going to see the same thing assuming his or her mind is clear. It is the same with physical objects assuming no defect in the means of knowledge, the senses. But when an individual is in the *pratibhasika* level of reality and has an epiphany, i.e. sees God in or as a burning bush, for example, we need to look at the understanding of the person who had the vision. If he thinks that only burning bushes are God, ignorance is operating. In other words, he is mixing up the mind's projection with the underlying reality, the awareness that makes the vision possible. Vedanta has been around long enough to have discriminated the form of the vision – the *lokas* of *pratibhasika* experience – from their substrate, awareness. So it is just pure knowledge, uncontaminated by the projections of individuals, just like material science. Gravity is the same for every physical body irrespective of how the individual sees it.

**Jacques:** But what of the Catholics' subtle layers of celestial beings (angels, archangels and saints, just to name a few)? Is one culture's set of subtle layers of reality more credible than another's?

**James:** No, they are all the same. It is just the human mind interpreting consciousness according to its past experience.

**Jacques:** I know there could be a lot of discussion concerning revelations and how one – or many – get them, but they all remain EXPERIENCES. And "God" knows, there are a hell of a number of them out there. Poonja supposedly played with the young Krishna all his life before he met Ramana and Govindan (Babaji's Kriya Yoga and the 18 Siddha tradition), says he encountered "Mahavatar" Babaji in the flesh and blood about 10 years ago while on a trek to the latter's hidden *ashram* in the Himalayas between India and Tibet. Do I believe them? As I once answered a friend who swore he saw a ghost in an old mansion, "Yes, I believe you believe you saw a ghost." So basically, I guess my question to you, James, is how much stock do you put in your past experiences like the one of *siddha loka*?

**James:** None. At the time I saw it as a sign that my mind was getting subtle, but I did not make anything of it. As you rightly point out, experience is impermanent.

**Jacques:** You've said on a couple of occasions that you have no beliefs. Do you believe *siddha loka* really exists, and if so, what importance or relevance is there in it in terms of the big spiritual picture?

**James:** It has a temporary, conditional, apparent existence for the one who is experiencing it. About forty years after that experience I experienced it again. Did it mean anything? It was a pleasant experience, about the same as a good burrito. In terms of the big picture, any experience is only as good as one's understanding of it, i.e. what one makes of it. Because I am not a person, experience doesn't have any lasting meaning for me. It is just like watching a movie.

**Jacques:** What interests me about your (or Vedanta's) perspective is the emphasis on the transience of experience. What I'm getting at is that your autobiography almost comes off as a plea for experience (in many ways it reminds me of both Yogananda's and Muktananda's autobiographies). Don't get me wrong, I know you make the difference between experience and knowledge in *Mystic by Default*. As I've been granted a number of epiphanies myself, my objective is not to put spiritual experience down. However, I do think that chasing experiences is the major delusion of contemporary spirituality. In retrospect, that's why I got into it... substituting one drug (the experiential life of alcohol, drugs and sex) for another (the experiential life of bliss, visions and mystical altered states).

**James:** I have rewritten it a bit and at the end I make the point that no spiritual experiences are necessary for *moksa*. Depending on one's understanding they can be either a blessing or a curse. All that is required is the proper assimilation of whatever experience life has given.

**Jacques:** Anyway, I hope the above makes sense and I'll leave you with a second simple question (since I no longer have the time to elaborate). As I've been quite exposed to the concept of non-doership over the years, I've never as yet come upon someone who reconciles non-doership and free will. I'm sure you've been asked this question before, but how can a ghost - an appearance in reality - possibly have free will? It sort of makes me think of the following analogy: let's say Jacques is REAL. He is the ultimate reality, but nonetheless, his shadow thinks he is real and takes on an ego - a life of its own. Does Jacques' shadow have the power to get up from the ground and push or direct Jacques around?

**James:** Only if Jacques lets it. When you are caught in the apparent reality, free will is real for you. You can choose between ghostlike alternatives. In fact there is no free will, because there is no doer. If there is a doer it is the *gunas*, the *vasanas*, that cause choice and action, not the apparent doer. The apparent reality is tricky to understand. It is not real, but it is not unreal either. It is apparently real. And it is in the apparent reality that apparent action and apparent choice operate.

**Jacques:** I hope I'm not burdening you with too much stuff, James. But if I ask you so many questions it's because before falling upon your guidance there were no more questions or interest to be found in hardly anything.

**James:** No problem, Jacques. I am happy to be of service.

**Jacques:** Hi, James. Thanks once more for such an extensive and elaborate reply to my queries. It is much appreciated. I especially like your response (and humour) when comparing your experience of *siddha loka* to the consumption of a burrito. Though I haven't had a tenth of your experiences, when I used to talk about experiences with others in the spiritual world I often replied: "Hitting a golf ball is also an experience." Anyway, your explanations always seems to correspond, in the end, to what I understand (so far) about spirituality. Maybe I'm wrong, but I get the impression that the discrepancy I've seemed to have seen so far with the statement that you have no beliefs lies in the fact that the limited concepts you use are simply meant as teaching tools. In other words... words (or concepts) can never accurately reflect the self.

Thanks for the help.

**James:** I'm glad I can be of service. Yes, indeed, golf ball, burritos and *siddha loka* are all equivalent.

You are right about my use of concepts. It is just Vedanta. It has nothing to do with me. These ideas work to destroy duality and reveal the self. I don't believe them.

**Jacques:** Hi, James. As I keep reading your book and a lot of your *satsangs* (website), I've come upon what would seem to be an obstacle, though I'm not even sure it really is one. My work environment is one of an exacerbated sense of personal doership. Everyone is stressed out, pushed beyond their limits, overtired... you get the picture. Although I made the choice a year ago to work less (and therefore live with a lower budget, since I never bought into the "work yourself to the ground in order to pay for a second car and two weeks of back-flipping on a Cuban beach" fantasy) and have a less stressful job than my co-workers, I still have to deal with their overstressed and sometimes jealous behaviours. Since everyone is overworked, there is a very competitive and "doershiperistic" (to be noted for the next translation of the *Gita*) mentality of constantly monitoring what everyone else is "doing" and making damn sure I'm not doing more than the others. Or if others are doing less than me, then they are sure going to feel my contempt. A case in point, this attitude has been barreling down at me for the past six months, especially by one co-worker. I knew something was wrong in the way he looked at me, but I got confirmation of his mindset just recently in some of his snide remarks.

So, what to do? He's the type who couldn't give a damn about what I think and even less about talking about it. Like one child sulking about another in kindergarten, he seems to get off on his own negative attitude toward me, the more so at any attempt at resolving the problem (and this type of response is quite common in the blue-collar mentality that prevails at the hospital).

Hence I was wondering if my approach was the correct one, considering the circumstances. Since my attempts to approach him amicably are only responded to by a cold shoulder and a "I won't even look at you" attitude. Since there is precious little I can do with him on a personal level, I engage in self-enquiry, which goes something like this: "I am the one in whom this conflict arises; I am not this conflict.



It is an object in awareness. This object (conflict) is insentient. I am whole and complete, actionless awareness." Sometimes the enquiry clears things away, sometimes not, in which case I apply the *karma yoga* attitude: "I did what I could through enquiry, but the results of the enquiry aren't up to me. Getting further involved in my mind's games would only encourage the sense of doership that this milieu would want me to embrace."

**James:** That's correct. It is very difficult not to identify with the prevailing group mind. It is an unhealthy psychological environment and your mind gets infected. In a way, inquiry won't really solve the problem, because your mind is part of the group mind and even if you can resolve the issue it will return when your concentration is disrupted and you can no longer keep your mind focused on the self.

**Jacques:** But this situation also involves a further investigation or question on my part which remains unresolved: How is one to respond *dharmically* in an environment where *adharma* is sometimes the rule? How does one follow a moral order where no such thing exists? What seems to exist is a various assemblage of likes and dislikes and peoples' manipulative bows and curtsies to get what they want. I've long driven myself to the ground trying to "please" others. Then I'm liked. Since I no longer stoop to the personal psychodramas going on around the hospital, I'm often disliked. Who cares? True... I would just like to get your take on what is the *dharmic* response as well as your commentary on my process of self-enquiry as stated above.

**James:** It's a good question. The presupposition is that you should fit in. But how can you fit in when these people's values are so different from yours? You would compromise your values by doing so and this would agitate your mind unnecessarily. Can you just focus on your job and ignore them? Do you have to kiss ass to keep your job?

Why not just dismiss them as "not-self" and turn your attention to the self. Any emotion, positive or negative, is an opportunity to meditate on the self. You don't have to take them seriously. You are not a child molester, an ax murderer or a strong-arm robber. You are a decent, cultured person. If you make an issue of what you are feeling, you are actually reinforcing the idea that emotions are real. They are apparently real, but they are not self.

**Jacques:** James, I guess we'll have to continue this question upon your visit. I've had a tendency to dispel the importance of emotions (or feelings) for quite some time now. Upon reading some of your *satangs*, I got the impression that you were suggesting that certain people were trying to avoid them, which is unhealthy. I guess I'm a little confused on when to dispel the import of emotions and when it is appropriate to deal with them constructively (hence the dilemma with the co-worker).

Anyway, unless you have anything further on this topic... I'll be able to meet you at the airport. Although the temperature is more than clement these days, don't forget to bring some warm clothing along.

**James:** Will do. I look forward to our visit.

**Jacques:** Hail! O Tantamount of the Highest Supremacy!

How are your divine lotus feet doing? Just a word to thank you another zillion for everything (which of course means literally everything). You undoubtedly know how much appreciation I have for all the self has done for the self in this relative quagmire... and yet, as I expressed to you on a few occasions, it seems both positive and ordinary. I guess this is what Ramana meant when he said realisation was nothing new, what you mention in your book when you say you almost felt embarrassed for not having noticed it before.

~ Love, Jacques