

# The Glass Ceiling: Vedanta in Action

Ram (James Swartz)

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**(James:** This blog is an email correspondence that took place over some months. It shows how Vedanta works to set you free. Kevin is not the person's real name.)

**Kevin:** Dear James, spontaneously this morning a burst of gratitude arises and here comes a letter to you, thanking you so much for the teaching and the materials you are making available, especially the DVDs. Finally, all my questions are getting answered, all the doubts dropping one by one – and quickly! I had no idea how quickly this could all drop if I had the right information and the right mode of delivery of that information.

Somehow I did not figure out, even after being immersed in non-duality for the last five years (and I even had my own non-dual website!) that there was actually a comprehensive and structured teaching of Advaita Vedanta. Can you believe no one ever told me this? How could my so-called “*gurus*” not have directed me to the scriptures, to Shankara? I'm also floored that I never came across you in those five years either. But it all happened at the right time, since I would not have understood any of this five years ago anyway.

I wasn't too thrown off by the “Neo” people – I really saw through that bullshit of “there's no one to do anything.” But still, without proper guidance, I was doing a lot of reinventing the wheel and that was really exhausting and very, very slow going. I would get brilliant bits and pieces on my own but that “*mandala* of existence” you talk about has a lot of spaces to fill in and without help, it would never have been complete.

I first read your book about a month ago and knew I had hit pay dirt. In all those years, that was the first time I saw the big picture. What a relief! That made me interested in reading the source materials and Shankara, and really starting my Vedanta education for real. I was in chaotic non-dual kindergarten before, not even realizing there was a higher, orderly teaching.

**James:** I am so happy that the Vedanta is working for you. There is nothing like it. You can't really fault the Neos because they have no idea what Vedanta is. A friend told Tony Parsons that he was saying what Vedanta has been saying for thousands of years, minus the methodology, but Parsons said Vedanta was “rubbish.” Neo-Advaita is an incestuous inward-turned world, smug and self-congratulatory. I'm glad you survived it. You wouldn't have come across me because I have kept my head down. I cannot stand the spiritual circus. There is nothing spiritual about spirituality. Only now, with the book, are people starting to hear of me.

**Kevin:** It was really a great pleasure to meet you and attend your *satsangs* this week. There is something wonderful about being there in person, easier to focus on something. I really heard you well while sitting in the room with you. It was definitely worth the trip. You asked about my path.

I first discovered non-duality in 2005 from reading *I Am That* and immediately went looking for a teacher who had studied with Nisargadatta. I found Sailor Bob Adamson in Australia but didn't want to make the trip so I found a person who lived not far from me. She had been holding meetings and had some books and videos on non-duality. I met her and about a week later, got what "this" is that everyone was talking about (I had prepared myself for that sudden recognition, in the twenty years of prior self-work; I was ripe).

So then I became one of those people you talk about who declares themselves a teacher, puts up a website and holds *satsangs*. I did a website for years and some clarity was written there, but mostly it was all mixed up with wrong ideas I had picked up along the way. I guess you could say I could see the self and see that it was clear and peaceful and always here, but I didn't know it was me. I'm still not clear on that fact. I took the website down when I discovered that I was saying misleading things and perpetuating the misconceptions, even though people said they were "helped" by me. Some kinds of help are not help at all.

I trusted my teacher and she is not as "Neo" as Parsons, for example, but still, she will not entertain anything that happens in the world of experience. She is relentless at pointing back to the "I" which is helpful in breaking out of personal seeking-story cycles, but it was not enough for me. "Only don't know" kind of stuff must work for some people, I guess, but it doesn't work for me. Yes, of course, I know that right here, right now, there is only this and in this there is never a problem, a lack or a need. And that it is always available. But I still do not know that it is me. That's where you came in. You were recommended by someone I respect.

I only knew snippets of the actual Advaita Vedanta teaching until I read your book and watched your two DVD sets. Then I started reading scripture for the first time. I was blown away by the beauty of that teaching. It actually addresses the fact that we are having an experience! My teacher would say "there is no human experience" and I get what she means - there is only this experience, and calling it "human" is a label. But still, come on!

**James:** Notice that the knower is always absent from these statements. It is all about experience. Experience implies an experiencer and the self is not the experiencer. So ignorance remains.

**Kevin:** So I am a little bit brainwashed by my exposure to her and the Nisargadatta crew that thinks that the teaching was never meant to be "taught," that it's counterproductive to teach it even.

**James:** A bit of fuzzy logic here: "I say it is not meant to be taught but I will teach you that it is not meant to be taught." They think that enlightenment is some kind of experiential "getting it" and that words are only intellectual. They hold this view because they are in thrall to experience, even though they say that experience is not it and they do not understand that Vedanta is a means of knowledge, not a philosophy. There is nothing intellectual about Vedanta even though it uses words. If your eyes are open you see. No thinking is required. Vedanta is the eye, the "third eye," for the self. It is revealing words, not intellectual words.

**Kevin:** My teacher is totally educated in all the scriptures and all the various lineages, so it's not like she doesn't value Shankara, etc. But the fact that Nisargadatta was sort of a renegade and didn't "teach" and didn't use scripture is really her model. Actually, I would have to say I'm not 100% convinced she knows the self as herself. By the way, she took her website down too!!!!

**James:** It shows that both of you have character, are true inquirers.

I found your story of your teacher and her teachings very interesting. If you want to write an article on the Neos explaining their teachings I would publish it on my website and/or use it to explain why the teachings don't really do what they purport to do. The problem with Neo-Advaita is that it is "Neo" Advaita. It has not had time to study itself, to reflect on what it is doing, so there is no analysis of language. They just use the words that are in vogue at the time. The mistake, apart from the total lack of methodology and purification tools, is found in one small word: "this" as a word for the self.

The problem, as you have probably figured out, is that the word "this" points to an object – the experience of "this" – but not to the subject, the knower of "this." So without a way to reveal the knower you are left trying to "stay with this" or "know this." In fact the "this" is the I. If this is what your teacher is teaching then she does not know the I. She may know about it by inference derived from experience. We call this indirect or objective knowledge because the self is objectified. It is a "this" instead of "I." If your knowledge is direct you teach the "I." But you can't teach the "I" simply by talking about it, pointing at it and encouraging people. You need to take away the ignorance about it. And for that you need a methodology. Anyway, as you have undoubtedly figured out, I am one of the most outspoken critic of the Neos.

You are very advanced spiritually. You have more than enough *sattva* and your *mumukshutva* (desire to know) is burning. Only one tiny thought stands between you and what you seek to know, so you are definitely in the ballpark with Vedanta. Vedanta is like Mariano Rivera, the closer for the New York Yankees and the best in baseball. He comes in when the team is ahead and gets the last three outs.

**Kevin:** I am really smiling as I finish reading your email, loving your comparison of Vedanta to Mariano Rivera, and why. Yes, my team is way ahead and guaranteed to win and a good closer is all I need. I'm also reading a big chunk of your email with a furrowed brow because you've really highlighted an area I do not understand. The thing you say that I've probably figured out by now I most definitely have not, and it's great that you went there. I'm befuddled and hope to get some clarity by mulling over your words.

I'm really reading this carefully, and please forgive my being anal about dissecting it, but I think you've really brought up a key point and I should try to get it straight. You said, "The problem, apart from the (Neos) total lack of methodology and purification tools, is found in one small word, 'this' as a word for the self. The problem as you have probably figured out is that it is completely experiential."

**James:** Yes, it is such an innocent word but it is totally misleading because it points to an object – experience – but not to the subject, the knower of "this." Even though "this" is a lot better than "that" because it is close – like the self – but it does not

point to the self. It points to the experience of “presence” which is only the reflection of the self in a pure mind, but not to the self.

**Kevin:** I see what you mean. No, I had not figured this out before! This is useful! “This,” this consciousness, this experience of consciousness or being-ness, is an object. But what’s the subject? Something definitely clicked when I read that. It’s something I’ve read a million times, but it’s filtering through the layers and I’m hearing it for the first time.

**James:** So without some way to reveal the knower you are left trying to “stay with this” or know “this.”

**Kevin:** Yes.

**James:** In fact, the “this” is the I. But the “I” is not “this.” So what if you know “this”? By that I mean *moksa* is self-knowledge, not “this”-knowledge. You are never a “this.”

**Kevin:** I think you lost me here. Didn’t you say above that the “this” is experiential?

**James:** The word “this” turns the “I” into an object that is somehow seen to be experienced. “This” implies a knower which is not “this.” When you say “this” is “it,” i.e. *moksa*, you are ignoring the real “it,” the I whose nature is *moksa*. If you know your self as consciousness – the I – you will not objectify it. It cannot be objectified into a “this.” People that teach it this way are saying that they are experiencing the self as an object, as “this.” If this is what your teacher is teaching then she does not know the I. She knows “about” it.

**Kevin:** In all fairness to her, she may be saying the right things but I’m hearing them wrong. I kind of think she knows the truth but is not skilled at communicating it.

**James:** If she knows the truth, she does not know the truth, because the truth cannot be known as an object. So she would have to say, “I am the truth.” If you know the I as yourself, you teach the I, assuming you have a means of knowledge for the I apart from your own words. But you can’t teach the I simply by talking about it, pointing at it and encouraging people, although that is what passes for teaching these days.

**Kevin:** The Great Freedom work is a perfect example. “Rest as awareness” is the *mantra*, and I’ve talked to people who have been sooo frustrated by that, and their teachers tell them to just do it more. More of what’s not working!

**James:** Yes, you can’t “rest” as awareness because you are already awareness. Like the “this” idea, it turns the I into an object that you are meant to rest in. Even as an

ego you are resting in it 24/7 whether you know it or not.

If you want to teach it, you need to take away ignorance about it. In this case, the ignorance is twofold: the self is presented as an object and the doer, the “rester,” is taken to be the self. To remove ignorance you need a way of thinking that gets the person to see his or her ignorance.

**Kevin:** Yes, I’m seeing that. The ignorance is all of “my” ideas about how things are, which sits there and obscures the reality.

It’s clear that my questions have suddenly become more pertinent (even just since attending your *satsangs* and having this email exchange), and Vedanta will clear them up. It’s funny, you really can’t utilize Vedanta until you have the right questions.

**James:** That’s correct, Kevin.

**Kevin:** I can’t believe I’ve never even heard of the Vedanta teacher you mentioned even though he lives a few miles from me, considering the amount of networking I’ve done in the world of non-duality. I guess because he is actually teaching Vedanta and is not one of these Unmani/Jeff Foster types, which are a dime a dozen. I will most definitely check him out. I’ll let you know how it goes.

**James:** Neo-Advaita lives in its own hermetically-sealed world and Vedanta lives in its own hermetically-sealed world. The only difference is that Vedanta sees Neo-Advaita but Neo-Advaita does not see Vedanta. To be honest, if you have been led to Vedanta you will just not be interested in inferior teachings. You can see right through them from the get-go. But if all you have is the modern spiritual world, you do not know how limited it is. It is not good or bad, it is just the way it is. I have friends in the Vedanta world who have no idea what Neo-Advaita is. In my case, I bridge both worlds.

My idea for criticizing Neo-Advaita is to help people who have been misled by it. My arguments have been very successful in helping people move on to something better. Needless to say, I don’t have a lot of friends among the Neos even though they need as much help as the people they teach. It is a good thing that I am not out to save them. I would be a total failure. There is no one more conceited than someone who thinks he or she is enlightened. Basically, they are good people but most of them, even those who had teachers, were never exposed to a rigorous means of knowledge. They may be “enlightened” – or not – but all they have to offer is their own experience, which is not the kiss of death, but experience is idiosyncratic and does not transfer.

And having a dead teacher like Nisargadatta is so convenient. You can project what you want. Spiritual people – especially Westerners – are outcasts, misfits and rebels, and tend to hate tradition. They imagine that it is limiting and unspiritual. The truth is free! It destroys everything! Whee! But tradition has its upside, particularly in the case of Vedanta. Nisargadatta is a perfect *guru* for this kind of mentality. I know a lot about it because I was a mindless rebel when I was young. One day my teacher said to me, “You are what you are rebelling against, James.” It exposed that whole rebel psychology, that romantic belief in the individual’s sanctity, its primacy.

Nisargadatta was outside the tradition! Great! There is no teacher! Nobody to get enlightened! Yahoo! In fact, he wasn't outside it, although it looked like it. He had a *pukka guru*. He just wasn't a lifestyle *sanyassi*, although he had the temperament of a *sanyassi*. All the Westerners see is his lifestyle, not his temperament. It suits them to see it that way. He was a realized soul and "his" teaching – "I am that" – is so traditional it hurts. The *Vedas* beat him to the punch five thousand years ago. But this kind of teaching is only useful for those with the temperament of *sanyassis*, inquirers, not for disaffected, undisciplined Westerners out for a bit of instant enlightenment. Ramana is another example. If you are a rebel and you do not understand the value of discipline you can imagine that you are a Ramana and don't have to do anything. You can cook up a whole teaching based on your own psychology. And it will work because it will appeal to the rebel in everyone. It will work in the short run but it won't work in the long run because it is based on an individual's unexamined psychology. Denial of the apparent reality is useful – if you understand the logic behind it – but it is only half the loaf. You need to reveal the self, not just talk about it.

You do not choose to wake up. You wake up. When you wake up, a certain psychology is operating. It is natural to want to ring the bell and save the world but, if you want to really be of service, the best thing you can do is to keep inquiring, to use your non-dual understanding to root out the ignorance left over from before your awakening. I have a lot of respect for you for admitting that some of what you were saying was misleading and you stopped saying it. Anyway, as you have undoubtedly figured out, I am perhaps the most outspoken critic of the Neos.

**Kevin:** Yes, indeed I have! I loved your long essay/chapter about them! I would be happy to contribute an article on the subject but I think I should wait until I'm fully cooked and can really say it with authority. I still have too many wrong ideas and have probably misinterpreted what some teachers have said to me. I'm still a bit too unclear to commit it to writing at this point. But once the baseball game is over and we've got the final score, I'd love to do that. Thanks for asking.

To sum up my "homework," would you say that I need to differentiate consciousness/experience/object from knower/self/subject? Would you say that is correct? Or have I got consciousness on the wrong side of the equation? Is consciousness the subject? Is self conscious? Or consciousness? What knows consciousness? Thank you so much for taking the time to respond and work with me. It's wonderful.

**(James:** I did not reply to Kevin's email right away. Then this came. "Above the line" means the self. There is a distinction, a "line," between the self and the apparent reality. This line is *maya*, the ignorance that causes people to identify with an object – in this case, experience – and miss the subject.)

**Kevin:** Something huge clicked this morning – above the line – I am above the fricking line – this "above the line" thing is simpler than I thought. It's like a glass ceiling. You just never realize you can be up above it, and so you remain all busy in the world of objects below it, looking "up there" and wondering what is wrong. This is huge. Yes, I know it's what you're saying but I heard it as a "below-the-liner" so it was always a "How can I do that?" kind of thing.

You don't need to answer the questions in the earlier email, unless you want to!

Thank you, thank you, thank you for all your help and teaching. It's no coincidence that this happened after seeing you. Glad I came up here! Worth the trip!

**James:** Yay for Vedanta! It got the last out.

**Kevin:** I've been writing a lot about what happened and how your teaching shifted things for me after six years of "non-dual" coaching that didn't do the trick. I'll try to put some cohesive paragraphs together and share them with you. Hopefully, I can come up with something decent enough for you to use on your website. Of course, I don't want to name any names, and I really do think my teacher herself as self. But there were some things that were never made clear, and it's all right there in Vedanta. So I don't know why it didn't come across. It might be a problem of over-simplification. If one says something like "the world is in your mind," it begs a million questions! What is "mind"? Whose mind? What is before mind? It needs to be unpacked, and Vedanta does that.

I can't thank you enough, James. Your DVDs, book and *satsang* last week really gave me the piece I needed. It was nice to be greeted so warmly by you. Your teaching is extremely intelligent and methodical, and yet the humor and the side stories that you tell along the way are so illuminating and really help to explain and flesh out what is being taught. You have a unique gift with this presentation. It's a great blessing to the world.

**James:** Appreciation is always appreciated, but Vedanta gets all the credit. I just crank the wheels of the Vedanta machine. Perhaps your teacher does know who she is and perhaps not. Whether someone knows or not is not really the point. In actuality nobody knows the self as the self. The self knows the self, but this is not news. So you don't get any credit for knowing. My argument is not with any person. Everything is only consciousness. My argument is that knowing who you are does not make your words an enlightenment vehicle. On the contrary, they may very well prove to be an endarkenment vehicle as they masquerade as the answer. At best, they may induce an epiphany or inspire you to work harder, which is not the kiss of death, but is not enough. Ignorance is hardwired and you need a proven means of knowledge, wielded by a skilled teacher.