

Inquiry Is a Lifestyle

Ram (James Swartz)

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Don: Dear James, I was a very serious Buddhist meditator for 20 years and then had a very shattering awakening five years ago following my father's death. The whole structure of Buddhism fell apart for me – I tried desperately to hold onto it, but then spoke with a friend who suggested I stop looking at transience and start looking for what doesn't change – this obsessed the mind and later that day there was a massive shift.

James: I'm not surprised. Buddhism seems to have an aversion to the idea that there is a self that never changes and that everything is it. Vedanta cuts to the chase. Once you can identify the self as you, there is a basis for meaningful work.

Don: I have searched around in the spiritual marketplace for the last few years: Neo-Advaita, other forms of Buddhism, etc. I know at one level that there is nothing to find more than I already have, but still feel the need for some deeper understanding of how to navigate *samsara*.

I feel the need for some solid spiritual way again, and this looks like the best thing I can see. I have read *How to Attain Enlightenment*, I have watched many of the talks, I am halfway through *Mystic by Default* and have had many conversations about James and Advaita Vedanta. I was wary at first about being involved with a group again but that seems to have passed.

I would like to begin learning from the group and from James if I can. I am a vegetarian, non-drinking, non-smoking daily meditator (*vipassana*). I was in youth an active alcoholic and hell-raiser – this began slowing down at age 25 on contact with Alcoholics Anonymous and with Buddhism. What I want is a real spiritual way and am asking for advice on my next step. I look forward to hearing your response.

~ In friendship and with respect

James: We're not a group, actually, although it may seem so. Vedanta is scripture-based. But you can't "learn" it. In other words, it is not up to you, because if you are trying to learn something, you are admittedly ignorant of the topic. In this case the topic is you – the ever-free self – and how both the "you" you think you are and the world of objects relates to it. Vedanta is a subjective science. You need to be taught. But your ability to receive the teachings depends on your eligibility, your maturity and state of mind. Discrimination and dispassion are the cornerstones of inquiry. So to gain this state of mind, you need a means and the means is *karma yoga*.

Vedanta is a completely solitary path. It really has nothing to do with your associations in the world, although it is helpful to associate with mature individuals who are committed to the teaching. If you are coming from a Buddhist background, you are more or less at a disadvantage, because Buddhism is a heterodox Vedic means of enlightenment, which means that it modified and rejected certain doctrines which are essential for liberation. Vedanta is a complete means of

knowledge; you need to understand the whole thing from A to Z, so there must be a serious commitment. I don't know how much you know – probably quite a bit – but knowledge in *samsaris* is always mixed with ignorance and they usually don't know the difference.

Short of attending my seminars, follow the suggestions on the website. Start with an elementary text, *Tattva Bodh* or *Vedanta: The Big Picture*. It will familiarize you with the concepts. Then move on to the *Bhagavad Gita*, *Vivekachoodamani*, etc. You should read the books and watch the videos slowly. Once you feel that Vedanta is for you, there is a USB stick of 220 hours of video for \$150 with all teachings from A to Z. There is also a subscription service that gives you access to thousands of hours of audio and video for \$150. If you still have questions once you have done your homework, you can write to me or my wife, and we will try to help you with your questions. We cannot start from scratch with you. The good news is that once you have the foundation, your *sadhana* is in your hands and you grow beautifully. Vedanta is a very logical path, you have to work through the steps. Once you are conversant with the language and the concepts, read the *satsangs* on the website. Come to one of my seminars in Europe this spring, etc. It is a lifetime pursuit, inquiry is a lifestyle.

~ Love, James