

Is Formal Study of Scripture Necessary for Liberation?

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Tom: Hi, James. Not much to report, but I would like some clarification on the relationship between (formal) study of classical texts, the practice of self-knowledge and their relative effectiveness. You have an article at your website by an academic writer who critiques the Neo-Advaita approach and, in that context, he quotes from a second writer as follows:

“In ‘Advaita’ you get enlightenment only through study of *Upanishads* and other Vedic scriptures. All other religious practices, including meditations, etc. are considered at best a preparation of mind to understand the message of *Upanishads* and at worst superfluous... there is absolutely no way of bypassing the study of *Upanishads* for getting enlightened as per *advaitic* tradition. And this is not a casual study I am talking about. This is hardcore religious study comparable to any graduate curriculum...”

Is he correct? I can see how that would apply in a Vedanta *ashram*, but it isn't possible if you are working in an office five days a week which leaves you with limited spare time or spare energy. Other than discrimination between the forms of the self and affirmation re one's identity, along with a questioning attitude towards the stuff that enters my mind, an attempt at *karma yoga*, maybe a half-hour meditation and reading some of the literature, there is not much else Vedanta work I do in an average workday. I would like to study in-depth, e.g. Dayananda's *Gita Course*, but usually I don't have the mental energy in the evening.

James: Formal study of classical texts can be either helpful or harmful. Vedanta was never meant to be “studied.” It was meant to be taught. It is not meant to be studied, because the one who is studying will by definition not know what the text is actually saying. Leaving out the apparent contradictions that you can't resolve on your own but need to be resolved by a teacher, the real “study” is the consistent and persistent application of the teaching to issues that the mind presents on a daily basis. Having said that, assuming *karma yoga* is in place and you are confident that you can discriminate the mind from the self, consistent study of the texts is an excellent practice that will increase your desire to be free, your devotion, discrimination and dispassion.

It helps focus your mind on YOU. The only thing scripture talks about is YOU. It is not an abstract intellectual study. It guides the mind home.

By a very narrow definition it may seem that I am not in the *advaitic* tradition, but it is not true. Being in the tradition does not necessarily mean being a *sanyassi* and going through the *gurukula* system as it is enshrined in Vedic culture. The tradition, the lineage, is more than that. I wear regular clothing and live a normal life, but my book is scripture because every statement is in harmony with the import of the scripture.

There are quite a few people over the years who have been set free by this non-

traditional traditional approach, not by me, although I have played an important role, but by the qualifications of those who came and the grace of the self. And even I did not actually go through the whole *gurukula* system as envisioned in the tradition. But of all the influences that coalesced to set me free – my eligibility, a personal relationship with a *mahatma* and conducive life circumstances – the most important factor was the tradition itself. It was and continues to be an amazing support and inspiration. So, yes, study as best you can considering your *karmic* situation and if you have any questions please write to me and I will help you resolve them. This whole seeking thing will all come around once you are free of that work *karma*, Tom. But you need to see it through to the end with the *karma yoga* attitude. Just know that you are on the bus and can set your burden down. It does not matter when you get free, because the bus will reach its destination. It should be an enjoyable ride. Look out the window and enjoy the scenery.

Tom: An issue re *karma yoga*: you do what you can, say at work, to bring about result X, but accept that result Y may happen and that you may not like Y, but as Y is not up to you, you accept it, and the not liking is due to the ego's desire to control everything and therefore you don't get sucked into a "I'm a success/failure" mentality.

James: Yes.

Tom: Sometimes at work when there is competition for scarce resources, I may have to "defend my territory" vigorously in order to carry out my duties efficiently and to ensure that the people working for me are not put in an impossible position. In that context, if I were to accept result Y and not fight like hell to get result X or at least a blend of X and Y, then arguably I have not followed *dharma* to the fullest extent.

James: You follow *dharma* when you do the best you can until your hands are tied, then you surrender the desire for the result and take X or Y with a glad heart. It is only important that you do your best.

Tom: In the end, I may still end up with Y, but the perceived ethos of *karma yoga* is that I should (passively?) accept Y because it is supposedly not "spiritual" to fight hard.

James: No, if you have a *rajasic* temperament and/or find yourself in a *rajasic* occupation, then you are not supposed to avoid conflict. You are quite within your *dharma* to enjoy it. The *Bhagavad Gita* is clear on this. It says that the political and warrior classes should not avoid conflict. To keep the broader *dharma* alive somebody has to deal with the inevitable conflicts that society generates. So by fighting the good fight you fulfill yourself and bless the world.

Tom: Certainly the point comes when you have to accept the inevitable, but sometimes this can be a spurious acceptance because it is a rationalization by the part of me that can't be bothered trying anymore.

James: This is may be a *tamasic* approach to the situation – or not. One always needs to exercise one’s discrimination. When strife no long produces results, it is intelligent to stop striving. But whether you give up the fight out of exhaustion or out of a reasoned conviction, if you fight the result you will definitely suffer.

~ Love, James

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