

The Long Road Travelled

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Manfred: Dear James and Sundari, I wanted to write to you and thank you for the teachings and the teachers at ShiningWorld. I have no immediate questions here, but just wanted to give a respectful thank you and give a bit of my background (I hope that is okay).

I am reasonably new to Vedanta (within the last few months), but after many, many years of seeking and temporary finding, this teaching, especially the way it's unfolded by you, has really cut to the core of it all for me.

I'll try and briefly sum up "my story" just so you know who this *jiva* is.

I've had a seeking/understanding drive ever since I can remember. I was raised "loosely" Roman Catholic. I always was looking for more than the seemingly drab world around me – so I read a lot of metaphysical, psychological and mystical books – at least what I could get at the northern Minnesota library in the seventies and eighties. I made up a lot of philosophies on my own back then, I guess, picking the best parts of things I had read. I had a drive for devotion to "God" as well, but I intently held the belief that man-made dogma and doctrines were silly and kind of kept out of it as much as possible.

Stage 1

In my mid-twenties I became interested in the occult, or more properly the Western mystery traditions. I went through various initiations in various groups. It was quite fascinating, and I learned a lot of things (astrology, Qabalah, etc.) and really just how "symbolism" could be used in self-study and metaphysics. However, upon reaching so-called "adept-hood" I felt even more lost than I was previously. This was compounded with a lot of egos of those involved, and I yearned for something with more substance and more devotional.

Stage 2

I became fascinated with Sufism (starting with reading Hazrat Inayat Khan). My wife and I also had just been on a long trip to India with her Bharatanatyam dance teacher, and I was able to see at least the Indian side of Islam a bit closer up. I started studying and looking for teachers/groups nearby and found a group in town that was under a Shadhdhuliyah Shaykh. They are considered "sober" rather than "ecstatic" Sufis and adhere very closely to orthodox Sunni practices. As such, I took "Shahada" at a local mosque and prayed and fasted as prescribed, often difficult as a six-foot-tall white guy in America.

At this point, I found another *shaykh* I just adored. Shaykh Nooruddeen Durkee (he was very good friends of Richard Alpert/Ram Dass and was co-contributor to *Be Here Now*, along with setting up the Lama Foundation). He eventually moved to the Middle East and lived and studied under his *shaykh* in Alexandria, Egypt, for 25 years. He really walked the talk and was no-nonsense and kept me going for a long

time (about 10 years or so). I learned Arabic, read the *Qur'an* daily along with various extra recitations from this school and *dhikr*. I even legally changed my name.

In 2007 I went on the Hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. It was this that made me start to question Islam and my faith. Mainly it was due to the incredibly dogmatic way of carrying out the rituals of Hajj, with no explanation as to even exoteric reasoning behind them. I started to bump up against the walls of my "faith."

I started shifting towards ever more fringe Islam, first to Twelver Shi'ism and then to the more gnostic Ismaili version. My *shaykh* put up with much of this and tried to guide me but cautioned me the best he could.

Stage 3

At this point, deep in the study of the Ismaili and their heretical devotion to their "God-Man" – I started to remember my upbringing and another "God-Man," Jesus, but really felt not much affinity for the Roman Catholic Church. I had some acquaintances who were Eastern Orthodox and found out that this thing I knew nothing about was actually very old and "mystical." So, yet again, I dived right in and found another "object" to make me feel like I was doing something to move in the right direction.

After about six months I was baptized (full-immersion style) in a local Russian Orthodox Church. I changed my name legally again to Manfred. I learned Old Church Slavonic and became a reader and sang in the choir at this small but lovely old church.

After about four years of this, I started to bump up against the walls again. I couldn't fit the round peg of my belief into the square peg of orthodoxy. I'm obviously not cut out for "faith."

All along I had been reading church history and became very interested again in my old but not well-understood fascination with Gnosticism. What struck me about (and still does) was the "knowing" part, along with how this answered the question for me regarding the gnawing "problem of evil" (which of course is now seen in a similar but yet entirely different way in Vedanta). I really studied this but left myself as a solitary student because I couldn't find anything that didn't seem like modern mumbo-jumbo with a bunch of false lineage credentials claiming to descend in some way back to the original Gnostics. Even I wasn't going to fall for that. And much of what those folks do is just fill the gaps in what we know about these so-called Gnostics with the same occult stuff I had been doing years ago.

But there was something speaking to me within Gnosticism. The complex myth with its *Brahman*-like "Unknowable God" which splits into every more diverse manifestations in the "Fullness" is still a very interesting map of macrocosmic/microcosmic consciousness. Again and again, at the time it answered for me many questions of why we live in a seemingly imperfect world in which dog must eat dog, a cosmic drama, an accidental sin of thinking by Wisdom herself, the necessity of infinite consciousness to probe all possibilities of existence, even that of self-limitation.

But. A big but: What did these people actually do? We have the map, but little in the way of directions. It gave hints, but you never could tell if you were going in the right

direction. And more than this, there was the implied goal again of an enlightened state that one was supposed to reach to get free.

Stage 4

After a while, I got so fed up that I came to the conclusion that there really isn't anything to do and nowhere to go. We are here as we are, and goals of perfection were delusions. However, this didn't help the current state in, which I felt much was less than adequate.

I have been practicing various meditation techniques all along these many years, on and off, but one that really had seemed to be working was *zazen*. I only learned from a book, but I loved the simplicity and didn't exactly care if I "achieved" anything. This led me to explore all of the various paths of Buddhism and I got drawn into Tibetan Buddhism. Long story short with this part is that I immediately found the beginning practices very beneficial for quelling the ego, but I couldn't get past the end of it being a negative.

Between my own seeking and an old friend who has been studying Advaita Vedanta on his own for 20 years or so, I found my way to reading.

I think I took the red pill. Your book is the most helpful unfolding of the teaching and so helpfully dispels the myths of enlightenment.

I have to continue working on *dharma/karma yoga*, but there have already been at least temporary times of incredible clarity of Self – and now, pretty much at all times, at least the comfort of intellectually understanding and seeing how this machine-like object actually operates.

I do think that all quite often rigorous disciplines I've undertaken over the years have helped qualify me a bit, but I'm sure there are some rough spots and *vasanas* to smooth out. It's hard to get rid of the doer as well. Very hard. And it's paradoxical. But your writing helps me tremendously.

Though I'm not mixing Vedanta with Gnosticism exactly, I still use the forms of Christ and Sophia, Barbelo and the Invisible Spirit/Unknown Father in my devotional practices. They seem very fitting with Vedanta and fit my Western upbringing a bit better than it seems the Hindu pantheon does – just a bit closer to home and familiar, I suppose.

I'm terribly sorry for the very long email, which could have been much, much longer. But the critical information is that I'm doing my best to follow you as a student. I hope to some day maybe even meet you and the other teachers in person, but the information given is a better map than one could ask for. Every question I ask seems to get immediately answered in one way or another – almost in a somewhat eerie way.

Thank you once more for the wonderful and straightforward teaching of Vedanta. I feel like I've finally come to the end of my seeking – what a relief!

Sundari: Thank you for your email and for sharing your story with us. I read it to Ram, and we both enjoyed it, very articulate. I must say, you sure have explored all the possible spiritual options, it seems! And yes, indeed, by the grace of *Isvara* they

took you to the right place – where you gave up seeking. They are what we call “leading errors.” The sure sign that the qualifications for Self-inquiry have developed is finally realizing that there are no solutions in *mithya*, that this world is a zero-sum game. When you get there, there is no other teaching available that offers a valid means of knowledge, a step-by-step teaching capable of taking you right through and explains the whole *mandala* of existence. You are blessed to have found Vedanta, and Ram is, in my view, the best Vedanta teacher alive today, certainly for Westerners.

Please feel free to write to us if you get stuck, although you clearly are dedicated to Self-inquiry and conducting it properly. If you follow the steps as laid out by James in his books, you will not go wrong.

Apologies for not being able to write back straight away; we are usually pretty inundated but will always reply, we are happy to be of service to you.

~ Much love from both of us, Sundari