

Freedom from the Doer

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Mark: Hi, James. I write this email to you both as a means of introduction and as an ardent spiritual aspirant seeking guidance from you. I apologize for the long-winded nature of this email, but I wanted to give you a sense of where I am at on the quest for enlightenment.

My name is Mark Thomas. I teach high school English and live in Wilmington, Delaware. I am 47 years old and have been seriously trekking the spiritual path since 1989 when I received *shaktipat* initiation from Gurumayi Chidvilasananda.

Since that time I have devoted myself to a daily meditation practice, have spent time in Gurumayi's *ashram* in South Fallsburg, New York, have been involved in the Twin Cities Siddha Yoga Meditation Center, and have read extensively about Yoga, Vedanta (at least the way it has been presented in the West) and Kashmir Shaivism, most notably the teachings of masters such as Siddha Yoga *gurus* Baba Muktananda and Gurumayi Chidvilasananda; Nisargadatta Maharaj and his exponents Stephen Wolinsky, Sailor Bob Adamson, Floyd Henderson and Ramesh Balsekar; Ramana Maharshi and his exponents Sri Muruganar and Sri Sadhu Om; Atmananda Krishna Menon and his exponents John Levy and Greg Goode; Wei Wu Wei; U.G. Krishnamurti; Ed Muzika; Swami Lakshmanjoo; as well as scriptures such as the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Guru Gita*, the *Avadhuta Gita*, the *Ribhu Gita*, the *Ashtavakra Gita*, the writings of Jnaneshwar Maharaj and Sri Adi Shankara, and several Kashmir Shaivite scriptures. In my zeal to realize the universal truth that is the foundation of all religious paths, I also have explored the teachings of Jewish mysticism (Kabbalah), Tibetan Buddhism, Zen and even studied for a period of time with an African shaman. As you well know, what I discovered through this journey of exploration is that all legitimate interpretations of these teachers and paths point to the same non-dual Reality or Truth.

Though I always considered Gurumayi to be my *guru*, my direct contact with her throughout the past two decades has been rather limited. I have spent some time in her physical presence and have written several letters to her over the years, but I never have had the opportunity to sit down and speak with her face to face. Moreover, her teaching was primarily based on talks expressing generalities regarding non-dual truth, *darshan* and the prescription of *yogic* practices such as meditation, chanting, *seva* and *dakshina* that were in some inexplicable way going to eventually burn away one's *samskaras* and thereby lead one to the experience of self-realization. Little, if anything, was ever said about why or how these practices would work. The vagueness of this process always left me frustrated. For years I chased the experiences of *samadhi* and the ultimate vision of the Blue Pearl, and yet invariably found myself forlorn and with a feeling of failure when I failed to achieve and maintain such exalted states.

I longed for a more systematic study of the spiritual path such as is found in the traditional Vedantic teaching methodology. I longed to sit with a realized master who could unpack verse by verse the sacred Vedic texts that reveal the science of self-realization and the knowledge of our limitless, non-dual nature.

About three years ago, feeling unfulfilled by my Siddha Yoga practice, I encountered

the teachings of the modern Advaita sages Nisargadatta Maharaj and Atmananda Krishna Menon, and within a short time chose to focus my study on their teachings. These particular teachers seemed to me to be the clearest exponents of non-dual Reality as I experience or understand it. Through their teachings I began to see the inherent limitations of all percepts, concepts and experience be they gross, subtle or causal. No longer did I feel compelled to chase, capture, conquer and keep myself contained within a specific spiritual state. They also freed me from the notion that I, this being that, as you say, is the person named on my driver's license, am somehow separate from the whole, the self, the truth. For the first time I realized that this "I" that I had always taken myself to be was no less a figment of awareness than all the rest of the gross and subtle phenomena that seemingly flashes before and within it. Fundamentally, what I realized is that there is no "it" at all in the sense of some separate, independent entity. All is the same one substance, so to speak. All is awareness. All is the self.

Bingo!

Suddenly there seemed nothing more to do. I felt I had reached the final destination. Intellectually, at least. Now all I wanted to do was retreat into my meditation room and sit. I guess I still had a belief that I would one day have a vision of Krishna pulling up to the curb and whisking me away in a golden chariot or that I would no longer find it necessary to eat or that I would sit around all day in a state of transcendental peace and love as Ramana Maharshi appeared to do in all the common depictions of him or that I would spontaneously combust or... or... or... that I would do or feel or be whatever it is that the great enlightened sages of all ages do or feel or be once they are realized. What I might be doing or feeling or being, I had no idea, though I was pretty sure it was something completely different from whatever I was doing or feeling or being at whatever moment in my present state.

So here I found myself knowing I was the non-dual awareness that transcends all experience and yet still chasing after some indescribable but exalted experiential state.

Hmm...

A suspicion lurked deep within me that I was still missing the boat somehow. I couldn't see how that could be, couldn't understand how I could understand but still be bothered by fears and desires, couldn't understand how I could know that I was the transcendental, impersonal awareness yet remain so attached to the mind-body costume. I reasoned that the problem must be rooted in the quality of my spiritual practice. I reasoned that I must not be practicing with enough intensity.

With this in mind, bolstered by the image I had of such ascetics as Ramana Maharshi and Sri Ramakrishna, I increased my meditation practice to somewhere between three to six hours per day (or more if I could somehow manage it). I also tried to limit my intake of food, as I had heard that food has a great effect on one's meditation, peace of mind and ability to connect with spirit, or the self (kind of a bizarre notion considering that one can't really be separate from oneself). Furthermore, I decided upon and maintained a very disciplined practice of celibacy.

As you can imagine, these disciplines took a rather sizable toll on my marriage. My wife did her best to support my meditation practice, but she grew very upset about my emaciated look and what she refers to as my "dysfunctional" relationship with food and the fact that she was basically being forced into a celibate lifestyle or what

might eventually evolve into one of moral deviancy (her term) if her only recourse was to satisfy her sexual needs elsewhere. Though mainly as a result of my recent immersion in the traditional Vedantic teachings you offer at your website and through your book, I have decreased the intensity and rigid discipline of practice in these three areas, my wife and I are still working through some of the emotional residue left in the wake of the conflicts that arose (and to a degree continue to arise) as a result of my quest for enlightenment.

Most recently in fact I have finally agreed to seek counseling through an eating disorder program run by a local hospital. Though I mentioned that over the past several years my restricted eating patterns were founded upon the fear I have of food somehow interfering with my connection with the self, my issues surrounding food began initially when I was in grade school and was teased by other kids about being chubby. Later this issue was exacerbated by my desire to be a varsity athlete and my dream of becoming a movie actor. In conjunction with my fear of food, I also developed the habit of exercising intensely and with such an intense degree of dedication and discipline that I rarely take a day off and am plagued by guilt and irritation if by circumstances I am forced to do so. I was raised in a very competitive environment, and I developed a belief that in order to succeed or even be worthy to succeed I had to push myself to extremes that other people might feel was obsessive or abnormal. I have therefore always undertaken the pursuit of my dreams with a ferociously one-pointed and disciplined attitude.

I could go on and on trying to justify why I behave the way I do, but the point is that the *vasanas* that have developed around eating and exercising seem to be very strong, and I haven't yet had any success in fully overcoming them. I am embarrassed to admit this after all the time and effort I have put into my spiritual quest and all the understanding I feel like I have regarding my true identity.

The bottom line is that I just don't get how I can know myself to be by the transcendental awareness, self, God, consciousness (call it what you will), yet whenever I encounter challenges that seem to pose some kind of threat to my discipline (i.e. my wife wanting me to eat more or have sex somewhat regularly; the weather, work or social demands imposing on my daily workout schedule, etc.), I get upset. Though I try not to show it on the surface, inside I feel angry, guilty and weak.

I've seen all three bodies and know myself to be beyond them, so why do I still get bothered by experience? Is there a practice I can implement that will burn away these *vasanas* once and for all?

I am willing to do anything it takes to become fully liberated. This is the most important thing in my life. It is really the only thing that matters to me. As I mentioned, I feel somewhat embarrassed that these *vasanas* still have a hold on me after all this time, but I am resolved to burn them away at any cost.

With this in mind, I am wondering if you would be willing to undertake me as a student, to act as a mentor/friend in the way you describe your own *guru* having acted toward you, to develop a dialogue with me through which you can help me with this process? I understand that you live quite a distance from me, but I commit to studying your book and all the information at your website and also undertaking any additional practices that you might feel appropriate. I'm also hoping I can eventually attend some of the retreats you lead. Please know that I am not some freaky stalker or co-dependent personality looking for the magic touch or for some *guru* to do the work for him (already worked through that erroneous assumption

years ago). I have just been deeply affected by your down-to-earth approach and the clarity with which you teach Vedanta. And I am also motivated to work with you because of the classical foundation of your teaching. I think the commercially popular Neo-Advaitan no-teacher, no-practice approach is a bunch of bullshit, and I really want to immerse myself in a valid understanding of the highest teachings.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I look forward to hearing from you.

James: Very interesting email. Yes, I will try to teach you. The first problem is contained in this conclusion. You say, "Is there a practice I can implement that will burn away these *vasanas* once and for all?" and, "...undertaking any additional practices that you might feel appropriate." There is another conclusion you can draw from the failure of the long list of doings you have undertaken to set yourself free besides looking for more activities.

For now, forget practice. You have done enough practice. Vedanta is not theory and practice, although self-inquiry, the application of self-knowledge to the mind, is a practice. But first listen to knowledge. Maybe you will have to go back to some kind of practice later, but no practice, as you understand it, is going to solve your problem. You need to understand something before you practice anything.

So my first recommendation is to eat normally, exercise occasionally and stop meditating. You are an obsessive *rajasic* doer and it is out of control. Oh, yes, listen to your wife. She has common sense.

Now for self-knowledge. It is very simple, and you have got the basic idea insofar as you know you are awareness. But you do not know what it means to be awareness. If you knew what it meant to be awareness you would not be bothered by your *vasanas*. What does it mean? It means you are whole and complete. It means that nothing can be added to you or subtracted from you. It means that action will not get you what you already have, i.e. wholeness and completeness. Contemplate this. See if it is true. This is the only practice for now.

If you can see this, then your fears and desires will dry up. All this frantic doing is based on untrue self-knowledge. You think you are missing something. You think you can attain it by doing something. You can't. This is going to be hard to accept because you have invested so much in all these spiritual doings. You have a huge *vasana* for doing. Your whole identity is as a doer. So the practice is to neutralize the doer with the knowledge "I am whole and complete, actionless awareness."

If this does not work – and it may not – then we will have to analyze *karma* because you do not understand the limitations of *karma*. If you did, you would not be doing so much with the expectations that go along with it. I am not surprised you were a *siddha yogi*. It is a *rajasic shakti sadhana*. It is for doers. It does not free you of doership. It increases it. Guru Mayii is not a proper teacher. She is a *shaktipat guru*.

If the analysis of *karma* does not neutralize the *vasanas* and attenuate your sense of doership, then you can practice *karma yoga*. It will gradually remove the binding *vasanas*. But I hesitate to give you a practice because you are practice-happy and you need to be contemplation-happy. 😊

So think about this and see if it is true that you are missing anything, apart from the belief that you are. I say it is not true. Scripture says it is not true.

Mark: Thank you for such a prompt response to my email. I really appreciate your willingness to help me. Though I fully understand that the teacher doesn't do the student's work, I am very grateful for having encountered someone whose guidance I can fully trust.

Regarding your comment that there is another conclusion I can draw from the failure of the long list of doings I have undertaken to set myself free, it dawns on me that it is high time I accept my true nature as awareness rather than continuing to attach myself to the identity of this character named So-and-So whom I am animating/projecting/abstracting/imagining (whatever term you want to use to describe the way I am reflected as a seemingly independent, embodied entity). When I allow myself this perspective I know that I am not the reflection, neither its subtle nor gross aspects that I see parading around within my awareness. That is, I am it in the sense that as awareness I am everything. Yet, as you say, though everything is in me, I am not in it.

This being the case, the only reasonable conclusion I can draw is that, truly speaking, I am not the doer. As awareness, I do nothing. I simply am.

And therefore no apparent doing apparently done by an apparent doer (who, being only apparent, has no independent volition by which it can do anything anyway) can free me from apparent bondage.

Only knowledge can do this.

It is now so obvious that all I can do is laugh at the folly of having for so long remained so attached to the idea of having to have some kind of mystical or mind-bending psychedelic experience to finally liberate me. What seems weird to me though is that I experienced the shift to the perspective of awareness years ago, but for some reason did not trust that something so simple was the truth, and therefore did not allow myself to fully rest in this perspective. I kept expecting that I would have and, moreover, thinking that I had to have, the kinds of experiences that you describe as enlightenment myths. Ironically, I kept doubting the truth of what I knew to be true and thereby inhibited the realization of the very truth that I so longed to know. The fact that I have put so much time and effort into pretending I am Mark Thomas seems to me now so silly. I can only agree with the Grateful Dead: what a long, strange trip it's been.

Oh, well.

All I can say is, in the true spirit of the ancient Vedic chants, *swaha!*

James: This is so cool, Mark. Beautifully written, by the way. Yes, all that is required when the doer raises its ugly head is have a good laugh. You are the knower of the doer. As you note, what apparently hides the self is the notion that *moksa* cannot be just a simple shift in perspective. One of Vedanta's most famous *mantras* goes like this: "Not by action, offspring or acts of charity can you attain immortality. Only by letting go (of the idea that you are the doer) do you become immortal (because you are already immortal)." This is one of the easiest teaching assignments *Bhagavan* has visited on me of late.

~ All the best, James