

Grinning Like an Idiot

Ram (James Swartz)

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Louis: Dear Ramji, thank you so much for the Berkeley seminar this past July 25-27, 2014. *Isvara* cleared the way for me to fly up there to hear you unfold the *Bhagavad Gita*, and you closed another sale. I'm on the Vedanta bus and have set down the baggage. I'm ever grateful to you for doing what you do, presenting Vedanta with such simple clarity and compassion to Western intellectual dummies like me. I'd made a careful study of the important texts (major *Upanishads*, the *BG*, the *Brahma Sutras*, etc.), and felt I had understood intellectually. But actualizing the knowledge had proven to be another story. Something was still missing and I wasn't quite sure what. As you said, a person on their own isn't going to figure it out.

In that first session on Friday night, during your recap of the first six chapters of the *BG*, you talked a good deal about *karma yoga* and *Isvara*. That was the missing piece for me. I'd read your book and e-satsangs on this subject, but for some reason still wasn't quite clear. You used the word "consecrate" when talking about dedicating one's actions to *Isvara*, since

the *jiva* has no control over outcomes anyway. That's a word that resonates deeply with me, for reasons having to do with my pre-Advaita *sadhana*. For whatever reason, what you said helped me to finally grok the *karma yoga* attitude.

I had written to you a few months back about having to sell my beautiful house due to financial problems, etc. We discussed Vedanta lesson 101: "Financial security is no security at all." Ironically, the day I finally managed to put my property up for sale was the same day I got on a plane to come see you. The timing was unintentional, but could not have been more appropriate. I had been working every day for months to get the house ready for showing, felt completely exhausted on all levels, and had even thought about skipping the trip. Yet I really needed a break and also very much wanted to come listen to you in person, so I let go of the "house thing," made the flight, and suddenly found myself walking around Berkeley on a gorgeous hot afternoon!

This was my first *satsang* ever, by the way, and I admit I felt pretty strange coming to the studio. But after that first session on Friday night, as I left your seminar and walked back to my hotel room, I realized the house I had been agonizing over was not even really my house. What I finally "got" was that it's *Isvara's* house, not mine. Duh. I'm just a temporary steward, that's all. Someone else might actually be more in need of this home now than "I" presently am. (All this is from the relative perspective.) There is no happiness in a house or view or any other object anyway, so why did I care so much? What a relief to finally have that sink in! My skull is apparently so thick *Isvara* had to beat me over the head with a house before I finally understood.

You are so very patient, James. I watched you sit there hour after hour, answering all the questions put to you, with nary a hint of impatience or frustration. I found I couldn't disagree with a single thing you said over the course of the entire weekend, so I apologize if I seemed like a grinning idiot as I sat there, continually nodding my head up and down while I soaked up the teaching. I'm just really grateful to *Isvara* for giving you this *vasana* for teaching Vedanta and bringing the tradition to the

West.

What a great audience too. I was very impressed with the group. Many of the questions led to side discussions that were quite helpful in their own right, like the excellent question about how to act “appropriately” (i.e., in accord with *dharma*) from moment to moment as life unfolds. I understand the whole *satsang* thing much better now. There is a synergy there that’s hard to capture on the printed page or even via recordings. Something about being there live does make a difference. After I returned home, my wife asked me what it was like, and I told her it was like sitting in front of a slow-motion hurricane of Vedanta over the course of a long weekend. Your energy was subtle but also very intense. I didn’t have any “experience” or anything like that. Not talking epiphanies here, but I do understand why someone might have one during one of your *satsangs*. I loved the story about the woman who laughed and laughed when she realized she’d been looking for herself for 70 years.

I also had the pleasure of talking with several attendees during the breaks, and really felt privileged to be among such quality people. I spoke with some who had practiced Buddhism for many years yet were curious enough to come learn about Vedanta, and others that were completely new to the teaching. But everyone there seemed to be a mature individual, and it was refreshing to be in *satsang* in that comfortable environment. I came out knowing my karma can’t be so bad if it led me there.

Anyway, I know who I am (ordinary, actionless, non-dual awareness), yet I still have a *vasana* to continue studying Vedanta, simply because I’ve fallen hopelessly in love with it. So I’ll read more and watch your videos, and I hope to attend more of your *satsangs* in the future just because I want to keep soaking it in. But the *karma yoga* attitude is what really makes the difference. Taking that devotional stance toward *Isvara* seems to make life flow more easily. For the apparent *jiva*, the zero-sum game of life continues, of course, and “the hits keep coming,” but instead of my long-held attitude of cynicism and world-weary disdain, I find those *tamasic* reactions almost wholly replaced with the sense I’ve been blessed – truly blessed to have the life I’ve had – the “rare human birth,” as Sri Shankara called it. There is a quiet joy that comes with that grateful understanding, a feeling of freedom from a long-held burden. That shift happened over the Berkeley weekend, so there you go. Another satisfied customer.

Just a technical question, if I may: In the triple canon, I’ve of course encountered the *Isvara* teaching, but also seen material on *Virat* and *Hiranyagarbha*. I take *Virat* to be the totality of the apparent gross body, the material “universe” in Western terms. You made *Isvara* very clear as the totality of the *dharma* field, that *Isvara* is the wielder of the power of *Maya*, and also that since reality is non-dual we are not different from *Isvara*. From the relative point of view, I’m a little fuzzy on *Hiranyagarbha*, but believe it is with reference specifically to the macrocosmic equivalent of the subtle body? Is that correct? And do you find this *Virat-Hiranyagarbha-Isvara* distinction to be of significant value to students? Or is it perhaps better to simply use the *Isvara* expression to subsume all three “levels”? I doubt it makes any difference from a *karma yoga* perspective anyway, but would appreciate hearing your take on this part of the traditional teaching.

~ Love and peace to you, Louis

Ram: Hi, Louis. I very much enjoyed your recent email. I love to hear people’s

stories. You are wonderfully articulate. I am so happy that Vedanta found you, that you appreciate its value and that the *karma yoga* attitude is now clear. It makes all the difference. It seems you have pretty well understood everything to be understood. It is a tribute to your maturity that you will continue with Vedanta. Sometimes people rest on their laurels and try to live off the inspiration alone. There is nothing more noble than a life dedicated serving the truth. I hope to see you again in the not-too-distant future.

Louis asked: From the relative point of view, I'm a little fuzzy on *Hiranyagarbha*, but believe it is with reference specifically to the macrocosmic equivalent of the subtle body? Is that correct?

James: Yes, indeed.

Louis asked: And do you find this *Virat-Hiranyagarbha-Isvara* distinction to be of significant value to students?

James: Not particularly.

Louis asked: Or is it perhaps better to simply use the *Isvara* expression to subsume all three "levels"?

James: That is all that is required. *Isvara* is the big picture and *jiva* is the little picture. The nature of their relationship from the point of view of the *jiva* and the self should be clear.

Louis wrote: I doubt it makes any difference from a *karma yoga* perspective anyway, but would appreciate hearing your take on this part of the traditional teaching.

James: It doesn't make any difference. *Jivas* need to take what the world wants into account when they act. It doesn't mean you can't say "no" to *Isvara* because *Isvara* also appears as *adharmic* situations. And subjectively in terms of the impulses in your mind, you sometimes need to say "no" to *Isvara* because *Isvara* is also responsible for bad ideas and ignoble inclinations. *Karma yoga* is appreciating that things are the way they are for a good reason, whether or not that reason is known. And you need to know that the attitude of gratitude is *Isvara* itself. It is the way creation is set up - everything looking after everything, appearances to the contrary notwithstanding. Basically, *karma yoga* is all you need because it will relax you completely and then things will make perfect sense.

~ Much love, James