

The Journey of the Self to the Self

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Grace: Dear Sundari, first, I want to express my gratitude for ShiningWorld, for James' teaching and for *Isvara* that lead me to it. This is the first time I'm writing to you with personal information. I know you both receive a lot of letters and I apologize for the length of this one. I am coming to Trout Lake and would like to introduce myself by way of this letter.

I'm American, 50 years old, an artist by profession, currently living in New York. About two years ago I stumbled onto ShiningWorld via a link to your "enlightenment quiz." I was a bit cynical but thought, "What the hell," and I took the quiz anyway. I got 96 points and didn't really know what that meant, but it got my attention and it exposed some deep doubts I still had after 20 years of seeking. I bought James' book and read it with relief and gratitude. I had no idea the darkest period in my life was about to end...

For my whole life I've been confused about my lack of interest in most of the stuff people around me valued. I was raised Catholic and easily walked away from religion, but I never dropped God. I loved nature; it was the place to enjoy solitude and "be with God." I recall a game I played alone as a child: I would try to sit very still and be very quiet in different places so I could know what that place was like when nobody was there. There was something so thrilling about doing this.

A natural interest in art began very early. As I aged, I saw art as a way to express my love for nature and God (and still do). I studied fine arts in college, then in graduate school.

In 1992 it was like a tornado came through my life. I was 28 years old, in graduate school and a marriage of three years. I was overcome by a terrifying sense of urgency about "what I was doing with my life." I had been reading Zen books by Alan Watts and others for a few years, and suddenly it all became very real. I felt an imperative to live alone and give full attention to a desire to "look into my own face." I had to accept that the "normal life" held no interest for me. It was very painful, but I chose to end my marriage. I had never wanted children. I rejected an academic job in teaching fine art, then I had to face my fears about supporting myself as an artist. I decided the only way I could deal with that anxiety was to keep my life very simple and live within whatever God provided, not looking left or right.

Shunryu Suzuki's book *Zen Mind Beginner's Mind* was my favorite and it introduced me to meditation. I had heard about different meditation techniques but all I wanted to do was "sit and face myself." I started alone at home, then found an experienced teacher that gave me very simple guidance. Meditation became the place where I brought all of my life under scrutiny. It was my "laboratory" to test the validity of my fears, desires and beliefs about everything. It seemed I had turned completely around in the river of my life and started heading back against the current. It seemed like I was dying, but there was no choice involved. I came to appreciate that expression "lifting yourself up by your own bootstraps." In spite of the pull of mundane responsibilities, I knew this work was the most important thing I was doing.

There was one very arresting thing that happened during this time: I was so

confused about what was happening to me that I went to a psychic. I asked why I had no ambition for anything in life. Her exact words were, "You have asked for an opportunity in this life to end the spirit path." I noticed two simultaneous reactions: (1) I had no clue what that really meant; (2) it was the truest thing I'd ever heard, and explained so many things about myself.

I had a very ordinary life and during the next six years everything I did was used as fodder for an obsessive investigation: my jobs, social interactions, my work as an artist and anything that happened. I read nothing but spiritual literature: mostly Zen teachers, but also *A Course in Miracles* and Christian mystics. Prayer had always been part of my life and it became an anchor through much doubt, fear and insecurity. I used it to clarify my purpose and focus my mind. For years my single prayer was, "Dear Lord, help me see the false as false." Though I was open to many teachers, I did not follow anyone or join spiritual groups. A few times doubt made me try but it always seemed like a distraction. I did not seek special experiences or care about "getting enlightened." That seemed so abstract, and I couldn't see how it would help me. I just wanted to understand what was true about myself and this life.

Helpful teachers, books and information just showed up for me. As a metaphor, it was like I was walking alone in the world and finding "breadcrumbs" which appeared in a sequence. There was no mistaking they were meant for me, so I "ate" them and continued walking. Every one of them provided some kind of nourishment on my path.

In 1998, I was 34 and this intense period of seeking ended on its own. Even meditation lost its purpose. My mind seemed clearer and I had more confidence, but there was a odd sense of being without direction or purpose.

One evening I was invited to an artist gathering to which I reluctantly went. A total stranger walked up to me and handed me a flyer announcing seven days of "Satsang with Neelam" at his home. I had never heard the word *satsang* but I instantly knew I had to attend. For two weeks I anticipated going.

On the first night the small room was full, Neelam entered and sat in silence a couple of minutes. Then she opened her eyes and locked on me for what seemed an eternity. I felt like a deer in headlights and became very uncomfortable and confused. She said, "Welcome," directly to me and I nodded politely. She glanced around the room, then quickly turned back and started staring at me again. Then she yelled, "Don't be shy!" I was mortified. At that moment everything went blank, as if the "world switch" flipped to OFF, yet I was still there. Later at home, I realized that this "blank moment" seemed to be what I had been wanting all my life... but I didn't understand it.

I attended every *satsang* while Neelam was in town, then started listening to *satsang* with Gangaji and Poonjaji. All I had been doing for the previous six years in relative solitude was confirmed and there was an immense relief. I learned about Ramana Maharshi. He's the one I was most drawn to.

A few months later the following happened:

Experience in the Field

For some time I had volunteered to care for seven horses that were living on a retired farmer's property. The place was remote, rustic, beautiful and I was usually the only person there. It was a joy to go there and the horses taught me so much.

One beautiful autumn afternoon, I decided to groom and clean out the hooves of all seven horses in that one visit. I finished the task, said goodbye to all, and turned to walk up the path to my car. As I walked I became distinctly aware of the mechanical nature of my body's movement. Then, as if it was a package falling from the sky, I "saw" the thought: "Don't leave yet, stay a little longer." The body stopped, turned around and walked back to the horses as if it was a puppet on strings. There was no thought or expectation of anything. I just stood there, empty, as if awaiting instructions.

Suddenly I was aware that I was actually seeing from behind my own head. I was looking "through" my eyes, rather than "with" my eyes. It was clearly apparent that this body/personality was not real and never had been. It was merely a focal point being looked through - by me!

Everything I looked at - the horses, the trees, the sky - was seen to be me looking back at me, without differentiation. Then all objects (including my person) ceased to be apparent and I was aware ONLY of me. From this perspective it was seen there is no void, there is no time, no space and no death. All the "things" of life and the world, of the mind and imagination, notions of God and love are all the same. It was clear they are all "out in front" of me, they are "distinct" from me. Nothing exists behind, or prior to, me... Then I saw that I am always there in all the "things" of life and the mind, of God and love. I saw that they actually are not separate from me, but it was clear there actually is only me.

This whole experience was like an introverted u-turn. One arm of the U brought me out of the body/world/mind and, leaving all that behind, I came to know ONLY my self... Then the other arm of the U brought me "back out" with the knowledge that the body/world/mind is not separate from me, that I am there in all of it and always have been.

The end.

I went home that evening and sat for a long time. I knew something important was "seen" and I wrote it down in a journal. It took over part of my mind and was always there. I did not want to talk about it to anyone, but after about two years I knew that I needed help to understand the full meaning of "what I saw."

At that time I had an informal contact with Gangaji, so I wrote to her about this experience. She replied with a very brief note rejoicing in my "experience of true realization." This did not satisfy the need I had to understand it. I was averse to sharing more so I just let it be, but what "I saw" never faded, nor was it ever forgotten, no matter how the mind tried to explain it away. It was like a file was downloaded and the mind tried to understand it by going through it over and over for the next 12 years. It was always fresh and accessible, like an internal living teaching devoid of words.

In 2001 I began to focus on art and ordinary living. It was a relief to not be so obsessed with spiritual seeking, but a nagging sense of "incompleteness" led me to start reading books on *advaita* and non-duality. A new search began for the true meaning of that experience in the field. I listened online to many different people giving "*satsang*" and I joined discussion forums. I told only two other people about that experience. One called it an "apperception," a word I had never heard before, but he didn't offer any more. The other asked to include it anonymously in a book she was writing about "spiritual experiences." I did not get the help I had hoped for

and was still hesitant to talk about it. Eventually I only found help in the talks of Ramana and of Nisargadatta, but even there... it was only in bits and pieces.

By 2005, suffering began again very intensely and I couldn't understand why, because, ironically, my life was pretty good. I thought it was due to the sudden death of my beloved dog. Soon I was in the "darkest place" I had ever known. I felt so much anger and frustration with the "*advaita*/non-duality talk." It was all so vague and useless to me. I lost all motivation for my life and the sense of desolation was deeper than I had ever known. For the next six years, ordinary life went on and I attended to it normally. I was healthy and generally positive so it was not apparent to anyone around me, but inside I felt like a walking dead person. It was very frightening and I tried to find help to no avail.

In 2011 things came to a head. The miserable failure of my spiritual seeking was painfully clear to me. It all seemed like a cruel joke and I felt the passing sting of remorse about "forfeiting" enjoyment of life for some elusive freedom. I seemed more lost than ever and there was a thought to "turn back to the world and just go for stuff." I knew that plan was hollow and my sense of defeat was profound. Then I thought about that experience in the field and was aware of the mountain of doubt I had concerning what it "showed me." Just the thought of it seemed to deliver an amazing resolve to keep searching. I didn't even care if I suffered the rest of my life. I knew I needed help so I simply prayed for help, as always.

A short time later I discovered Dolano by chance on *YouTube*. One thing she said struck me: "There can be an awakening but still the mind is not liberated. God must come out of his coma." For the next four months I listened to everything I could find by Dolano and the lights started flipping on in my darkness – the effect was stunning! I wrote to ask to attend her five-week "Intensive Satsang" in Pune. She sent some questions for me to answer about what I had been doing as a seeker. She accepted me and I went to India for the first time. I laughed at the irony of this trip because I had never had any impulse to travel during my years of seeking.

About a month before I left for India, I discovered the ShiningWorld website and read *How to Attain Enlightenment*. Intuitively, I knew that Vedanta was my next step after returning from Dolano. In her own odd way Dolano expresses many things that Vedanta teaches. I now understand the difference between *smriti* and *sruti* but, nevertheless, I'm so grateful to Dolano. She's a beloved friend that reflected a fierce and solid knowing of her identity as the self. In my personal interchange with her, I was freed of that mountain of doubt about my identity as the self, and there was a moment of intense sorrow and regret that all my life I had been blind to the simplest, most ordinary truth of who I am. For me, Dolano was the perfect set-up to be ready for Vedanta.

For the past year I have read your book and the *satsangs* online. I have watched the *Full Vedanta Set* videos and a couple of webinars. I'm "on the bus" and it's working. Any form of unease I notice seems to vaporize upon noticing it. I don't care if I feel bad, good or indifferent. Now I know who I am. Thank you so much for all that you do.

My understanding of that experience I had is still falling into place. To put it simply: It seems that the truth that Vedanta unfolds was "seen" that day in one fell swoop. Then for 13 years the mind "chewed on it," tried to understand it, tried to find help from others, then faced its own utter failure to do so. Then finally I find confirmation of that experience in the teachings and texts of Vedanta. Is this possible or am I simplifying it too much?

Thank you for taking the time to read this letter. I look forward to the seminar at Trout Lake.

~ All love and gratitude, Grace

Sundari: Hello, Grace. What a beautiful soul you are, and what a wonderful email, thank you for sharing it with us. I am very touched by its sincerity, clarity and honesty. We are so very happy for you that you found your way to Vedanta and to James; you have indeed found the Holy Grail, or rather, it found you. As you said so eloquently, those breadcrumbs were put there by *Isvara* for you.

We meet so many amazing souls all over the world, and we never fail to be moved by the determination and courage it takes to keep going on the spiritual path. We know all about it as we have been there too! Your journey is fairly typical for all whose *karma* it is to be satisfied with nothing less than *moksa* – and who are qualified for Vedanta. As James says, Vedanta is the court of last appeals. Most who arrive at the temple gates have tried everything and given up on the world, given up on seeking. Seeking no longer works, because it is time to become a finder. There is nothing else to know after Vedanta because it is the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge. You are definitely on the bus now. You can put down that heavy suitcase and not think about it again. The relief this brings is hard to describe when one has been on the road, so to speak, carrying all the baggage that seeking entails. Life is simple once self-knowledge has obtained in the mind.

All that is left, which is the most elusive part as you know only too well, is to understand what it means to be the self. Self-realization is where the “work” begins. What use is it to know you are awareness if you don’t know what it means for you – as a person? The Neos do not know how to help with this. They can teach about the self, but not what it means to be the self because they do not have a valid, independent means of knowledge – a teaching. And they deny the existence of the apparent reality. But, unfortunately, it will not disappear. Freedom is freedom from the identification with the person and freedom for the person, to live as the self in the apparent reality. The self is already free. That freedom does not obtain in the mind without self-knowledge because only self-knowledge and not experience has the power to remove ignorance of your true nature from the mind. The person and duality do not disappear “after” enlightenment. They are still there but are no longer a problem for you once you understand what they are. As the self no longer under the spell of ignorance, you can even enjoy the objects for what they are because you know that their joy comes from you, not the objects.

What is left for you is *nididhysana*, the application of self-knowledge to every aspect of your life. This is what we call self-actualisation. One is not free until this takes place. I have attached an email for you on the difference between self-realisation and self-actualisation.

You could not be in better hands now. James is the real thing, one of the very few genuine teachers of Vedanta on the planet. It is grace that you have found him – and grace is earned. I have forwarded your email to him and I am sure he will reply to you as well.

It is wonderful to have you “on board” the bus – we so look forward to meeting you at Trout Lake, wonderful that you can make it.

Jai Bhagavan!

~ Much love to you and many blessings, Sundari

Grace: Dear Sundari, thank you so much for your response to my email. It was a bit of a task to get it into a shape that was as close to my experience as possible. After I finally sent it... what a relief! It's so good to be able to share this.

Thank you also for the attachment you sent. To see that topic so specifically addressed is wonderful. It is the very thing I wanted to finally hear about in so many "satsangs" I attended.

As for "what's the use of knowing I'm awareness?": Many years ago I heard that question asked, and the answer given was: "There is no use." What a shame.

Anyway, I appreciate your generous attention and your warm welcome on the bus!

😊

Jai Bhagavan!

I look forward to Trout Lake.

~ Love, Grace

Sundari: Hello Grace, yes, I can imagine it was not a simple task to condense a lifetime search into a few pages, yet you did a great job. I have no doubt you could write a book about it! You write very well. To see it dispassionately as a story means self-knowledge has kicked in.

It is indeed a shame that no one could give you the answers you sought and seemed so primed for, so long ago. You knew you are awareness, but had no way to understand or evaluate what that meant for Amy, the person. The Neos couldn't tell you because they don't know either. And yet Vedanta is the oldest teaching on the planet, preceding any religion or philosophical ideology by thousands of years. It has always been here because awareness has always been here.

There is no way to know the mind of *Isvara*, but Vedanta only comes to you when it is meant to. I felt the same when I "stumbled into" The Promised Land (ME) - and found James teaching Vedanta. It is not called The Royal Secret for nothing - hidden in plain sight, yet you will not see it until *Isvara* wants you to.

Once you enter "The Kingdom of Vedanta," so to speak, it is indeed a true homecoming - the clarity and breathtaking comprehensiveness of Vedanta is truly astounding. It is all there, everything you have ever struggled to understand, all unquestionably logical and irrefutable. It is a million times better than winning the lottery! In the light of Vedanta, there is nothing that is not understood; all is seen, all is known, from the only perspective that counts - you, awareness. And you continue to be the person, loving them unconditionally, knowing that you are free of them. Life continues; it is ordinary. Yet your "inner world" (so to speak) will never be the same again.

We look forward to hearing more from you as you journey with us on this journey that is not a journey, this path that is not a path, to a destination that is where you have always been.

Until we meet in person though as self, we have always known each other.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari