



14. DR RAMESAM VEMURI

Dr. Vemuri's current interests include research in the border areas of Physics and Metaphysics. He published several articles in this area. He rendered into English a few philosophical works. He also authored the book, Religion Demystified: Understanding Life's Mysteries in terms of Latest Scientific Findings.

In 28 crisp essays Dr. Vemuri Ramesam covers cutting edge scientific developments in a wide variety of fields from Quantum and High Energy Physics to Cell Biology and Neuroscience, Anthropology etc. in simple terms. He relates these to our day to day life trying to tease out the mysticism behind tradition. The book provides a refreshing look at man and his position in the universe. Dr. Ramesam defines 'comfort' in terms of energy expended and explains 'liberation' as an effortless "zero mind – active body" state. He argues for a physiological basis for Nirvana and proposes a testable model for the idea. The book gives a hope that science may find a way to attain the ultimate goal of "A Happy Individual and A Harmonious Society", a quest man has been after for millennia of years.

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INTERVIEW

Q: Many of the contemporary non dual teachings today seem to stem out of three or four teachers from India: Ramana Maharshi, Papaji, Atmananda Krishna Menon and Nisargadatta. However, it appears that none of these Advaita Indian teachers ever charged any of their western students, who later went on to become quite successful teachers themselves. Many of these latter teachers appear to charge others for these same Advaita teachings. They also advertise their names and claim lineage and so on. What are your thoughts on this?

Ramesam: The thrust of the question appears to be directed at the point whether one should charge for imparting Non-dual teaching.

Before I talk about it, let me quickly say that there are also a number of Non-dual teachers who do not claim a lineage like Peter, Scott, Jeff, Jeannie, Karen and others. (Of course, for some reason, Karen associates herself with Ramana Ashram and so does the young one on the block, Bentinho). I know some of the teachers personally and can say that those with whom I interacted never placed money upfront above the teaching. They were very kind and loving in bringing clarity to me without any charges, whenever I approached them with a question.

The scriptural injunction in general is that a teacher should not levy a charge; at the same time, the student is asked to pay back to the teacher in one form or other - in kind, in service, in gifts and if nothing is possible, take the responsibility to continue the teaching of the Guru after obtaining permission from the teacher. The students used to live in the ancient times in the house of the teacher itself during the studentship. The student was encouraged to earn money to redeem his indebtedness to the teacher after he completed his education. However, he was not expected to have a free ride.

The social structure and cultural milieu being vastly different today, we cannot insist on following rigidly the ancient Indian formula. But, at the same time, we have to bear in mind that the Non-dual teaching cannot be and should not be treated as a commodity of trade.

More importantly, no Non-dual teaching was given without first a question by an ardent student deeply gripped by a desire to seek the ultimate Knowledge. Non-dual Knowledge is not goods for sale and advertisement. A quick example that comes to mind on this point is the teaching of Krishna to Arjun – the famous Bhagavad-Gita. Krishna, considered the Guru of all Gurus, did not talk about the Self-Knowledge though Arjun was his own brother-in-law and both of them spent a whole life time together performing several activities jointly. The teaching was done only after a specific question was posed by Arjun. At the time Krishna taught Arjun about Self-Knowledge, both of them were in their mid-eighties!

Next comes the question about the Guru. Is he really a Guru, a teacher, himself deeply involved in Non-dualism or merely a purveyor of information? Scriptures advise that a dedicated student should approach a teacher who himself has realized the Non-dual Truth. But again, if one is

ceaselessly lost in Oneness (the ultimate stage of a Jivanmukta), he would not be able to see any difference between himself and a student. Obviously, the student cannot expect any teaching from such a teacher. So he has to approach a teacher who understood experientially the Advaita Knowledge but his mind keeps bringing him back to duality out of its sheer habit. Any teacher can impart teaching only if he sees a separation between him as a teacher (the Knower) and another as a student (the ignorant one) – i.e. only in an atmosphere of duality. (The teaching imparted by avatar-s like Krishna or Sages like Vasishta are, however, explained in a different way – the duality in such cases is presumed to be in the mind of the student only, the teacher, the teaching and the instruction being just the imagination of the student).

Say, we consider a scale of one to seven, one being the stage when a strong desire for liberation sprouts in a man and seven is the stage where he unswervingly abides in Brahman. By about the fourth stage, he will have a clear and unambiguous understanding of Brahman. From then on, sure signs of progress in the understanding of the Self-Knowledge are (i) diminishing desires and (ii) lessening interest to participate in the worldly affairs activities and interactions. A man in the Sixth stage will not even recognize objects perceived by him nor will he consider anything to be external to himself (i.e. he would have lost any sense of separation between himself and any entity including his body). (see: <http://beyond-advaita.blogspot.in/2010/12/yoga-based-and-knowledge-based.html>).

Unless one is by himself experientially clear without an iota of doubt in Self-Knowledge, he can hardly be expected to clarify the innumerable doubts that crop up in the mind of a seeker on his path to Liberation. If he is so much detached that he does not even have a sense of body present to him, he can hardly communicate any teaching.

From the above description, you can see who could best fit the bill as a teacher.

It is also true that there is the possibility that one may attain excellent scholarship on scriptures and be highly intelligent in logical argument that he can answer any question of a seeker. A student will not know if that man is speaking from an actual experiential understanding or mere expertise of textual knowledge. Yogavaasishta calls such people as “Experts on Truth” as against “Knowers of Truth.” The Experts on Truth will consider the teaching as any other worldly profession in order to make a living or to earn wealth, name and fame. They will still be under the grip of desire and “detachment” would not have developed within them. They may feign Self-knowledge but may not have experiential understanding. A seeker will also become an Expert on Truth initially, but he will be enveloped with the quality of detachment. Scriptures tell the stories of many accomplished Jivanmuktas who live in total incognito in torn clothes, shriveled hair lying down in any muddy corner, rejecting all endearments and gifts of utmost value; but they readily teach True Knowledge with love and compassion when a deserving student approaches them. If a teacher is too greedy and runs after only amassing wealth, scriptures advise the seeker to drop such a teacher.

Because of the fact that the Western society has no tradition and culture of supporting a teacher who is on the pursuit of Self-Knowledge (by sheltering and feeding him), one may not grudge if the teacher tries to make enough money to support his body and its immediate needs. He should, after all, not become a nuisance and burden to others because it will only block his own progress toward attaining unswerving abidance in Brahman. Hence if he charges money for his living and teaching tools, that should be okay.

Q: What are your thoughts on practicing dana or becoming a monk, a sanyasin, or a renunciate of some kind and taking the traditional route

and taking up the begging bowl, shaving off the hair and wearing orange clothing? Making a non-dual living this way?

Ramesam: All the scriptures, all the Sages clearly state that one may give alms (dAna = donation), take up pilgrimages, holy dips, ritualistic sacrifices, performance of austerities etc., but none of them yield true Knowledge. Self-inquiry is the only route to realize Brahman.

Restraining the senses from their habit of perceiving the manifold objective world as “a thing to be experienced” is necessary in order to be able to obtain the Knowledge of the Self.

Sage Vasishtha’s advice in Yogavaasishta (Second part of Chapter Nirvana, Sarga 163) for a seeker is: “Normally the mind sees the objects in the world to be separate from the Supreme Brahman. Hence it considers the objects of the world as things that are to be experienced. If the mind is able to take the contrary stand that the objects are non-different from Brahman, the mind will not consider them to be separate experience-able entities. Then the mind is not tempted by any of the worldly objects. Once the mind is not tempted by the objects, it will not anymore dwell on them. The senses will then have no work to do. This is the best way to win over the senses.”

Restrained senses help in the development of a focused mind. A ‘focused mind on Brahman’ leads to the dissolution of the mind in the Pure Consciousness which is the substrate for everything.

The twin keys for the development of a one-pointed focused mind indicated in Bhagavad-Gita are detachment (vairAgya) and its constant practice (abhyAsa).

Performance of works like 'dAna' etc. may help one in the beginning stages to reduce the flux of vacillations in one's mind and train the mind in its ability of focusing which is necessary for an inquiry. A reasonably educated, intelligent and mature individual in the modern day would have got such ability already and it is merely a waste of time to continue such practices. It is better to move on towards Self-inquiry in a systematic manner.

Having said that, I should also say that the practices like 'dAna' come handy at a later stage after Self-Knowledge is fully understood without an iota of doubt, but the mind, out of sheer force of its past habit, keeps coming back to its usual old ways. A mantra or japa or practices like dAna etc. will help in quickly bringing back the mind to focus on Brahman. Similarly, 'dAna' may help in cultivating sustained quality of relinquishment (ability to 'give up') within oneself.

Wearing of orange robes, shaving off the hair on the head, holding a staff and water pot (daNDa and kamaNDala) are merely symbolical. They may serve the purpose of announcing to the world who you are, but that is not sanyAsa. As Bhagavad-Gita defines, true sanyAsa is to give up everything -- even thoughts and intentions. Mere exhibitionism does not lead one anywhere. Though externally giving up certain things for symbolical value, a person may still be wallowing in all sorts of silently entertained inner desires. Such a one ends up in more misery.

Some traditionalist teachings do hold that one has to pass through the four phases of life – brahmacharya (studentship), grihasta (householdership), vAnaprastha (secluded life in a forest) and sanyAsa (renunciate) to be eligible to obtain liberation. The traditionalists opine that opening up the simple and straightforward message of Advaita to one and all may lead the unprepared astray. They think that the teaching could be misunderstood or misinterpreted by the plebs to justify their own undisciplined lives. They

hold that only a sanyAsin is eligible to attain liberation in order that the societal equilibrium is not upset by charlatans.

But unfortunately, people get lost more in symbolism and exhibitionism forsaking the real message of Advaita – to give up everything not only at a gross physical body level but also at the mental level. The shAstra-s, prakaraNa grantha-s (monographs and special treatises) on Advaita never place any restrictions on who could attain liberation. Scriptures themselves give many examples of liberated individuals of all age groups, both ladies and men, from all walks of life – householders, traders, rulers, illiterates, manual workers and even demons.

Sage Vasishtha, in fact, ridicules the blind adherents of tradition. He cautions us to avoid such traps of beliefs in the name of tradition. He decalres: “Some persons stick to a dug well simply because it was inherited from their forefathers. They manage to live with the brackish water of the well foregoing the sacred sweet river waters existing nearby to them. Such people are of low understanding. These people are destined to remain ignorant!”

Q: In the Buddhist tradition, many of these renunciates are dependent on their sustenance from dana. Are not these contemporary non dual professional teachers muddying the waters concerning money and this ancient system of teaching? Also, inadvertently taking the food right out of the mouths of these traditional teachers and making the pickings even slimmer?

Ramesam: To be honest, I have no acquaintance with Buddhist traditions and monkhood. History tells us that Buddha himself observed strictly certain principles - eating food obtained by begging and not begging food

from the same house. He insisted on his bikhus too to adopt this tradition only to inculcate in them the quality of non-attachment. So the noteworthy point here is the emphasis on the development of dispassion and detachment.

Now you are raising in your question the issue of sharing the overall cake available in a competitive climate by the practitioners of Non-duality, the fraudsters taking advantage of the restrained and more disciplined seekers and such other matters from the viewpoint of ideal or optimal economic management of the resources.

If the Non-dual message is truly understood, who or what is there to say this is correct or that is incorrect? Non-duality says "yes" to everything because there are no parts in it. The world which is nothing but Brahman is indivisible. It is Oneness. Judging the world based on some arbitrary contextual criterion of good and bad and desiring to have only one type of world to the exclusion of everything else is still viewing things from an empirical standpoint of a 'separate person.' If a seeker is intensely gripped with Self-inquiry, he/she will know that Consciousness Is All and Consciousness is the one doing everything and there is no scope for anything other than Consciousness to be present anywhere. So Consciousness will appear taking the form of whatever food or other requirement of that seeker who is again none but Consciousness Itself in the form of the seeker.

Q: How do you see this? Is a conditional prepaid donation dana?

What is the difference with a "voluntary donation" or with charging a conditional prepaid donation? I ask this because some will ask for a "prepaid donation" by PayPal of \$125 per hour. However, without the "donation" being prepaid, there appears to be no atma vichara or

satsang instruction because you can't schedule an appointment without prepaying. Please see example below.

Private Satsang Appointments with Spiritual Teacher: So and So is available for in person, phone or Skype appointments. To make an appointment, please pre-pay by credit card by clicking the PayPal donation button below. PayPal will notify us of your payment. After payment, please click EMAIL to notify us when you wish to schedule your appointment

If you require paying by check, please click EMAIL to request the mailing address. We accept personal checks drawn on a US bank or money orders in USD. Please mail two weeks prior to your appointment.

When you click the "Make a Donation" button, you will be asked to enter the amount of the donation.

One Hour Session \$125 - Prepaid

(If you are registered for an upcoming Weekend Satsang Retreat, the donation is \$75.00).

Three One hour Sessions at \$115 or \$345 Total - Prepaid

Ramesam Vermuri: To call "pre-paid" amounts a dAna (= donation) is a preposterous euphemism.

Strictly speaking, giving away (parting with) things that are of no value to one, donating disposable goods/monies, charities aimed at gaining social prestige/status, or giving done under compulsions etc. are not called 'dAna', if I remember right the scriptural directives.

I would like to quote Swami Krishnananda of The Divine Life Society regarding (i) Expectation on the part of the giver and (ii) Why human beings at all are encouraged to give in charity.

Expectation:

When you give charity to somebody, do you give it thinking what that man will give back to you? That is like a brother-in-law giving to a brother-in-law. It is not charity. If a father is educating his son under the impression that he will take care of him in old age, he is not doing any charity. It is some kind of social work or family work. Total joy has not gone. He expects something. If charity is given with the expectation of return, it is not charity. When you arrange a banquet, a large feast, it is said not to invite only your friends because you know they will also invite you to a banquet one day. This is no good. If you give a banquet to your own relatives and invite all your friends and relations, know the motive behind it. Your ego swells more and more on account of the expectation of a very good result. If you arrange for a function in your house and your relatives come and pour gifts upon you, they will also expect you to give the same when they arrange for a feast or a function in their own homes. Otherwise, what will they feel? "This fellow has not given anything." This is not charity; this is not giving. This is not spiritual action at all. Hence, mere giving in a mechanical or commercial way is not to be considered as charity. Thus, the Bhagavadgita doctrine of duty, giving, participation, is minus expectation of a recompense that will follow.

(From: http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/gita1/bhagavadgita_05.html)

Charity:

Human beings are greedy. They want to grab everything. Hoarding is their basic nature. "I want a lot of money"; "I have got a lot of land and property"; "I want to keep it with myself"; "I do not want to give anything to anybody". This is how they think. So, to them 'Da' meant Datta – 'give in charity'. Do not keep with you more than what you need. Do not take what you have not given. Do not appropriate what does not belong to you. All these are implied in the statement – be charitable. Charitable not only in material

giving but also in disposition, in feeling, in understanding and in feeling the feelings of others. So, to the human beings this was the instruction – Datta, give, because they are not prepared to give. They always want to keep. Greed is to be controlled by charity.

(From: http://www.swami-krishnananda.org/brdup/brhad_V-02.html)

I may also add here that:

1. Dharma shAstra-s like that of Manu spell out for the guidance of the society the broad principles behind such injunctions like charities etc.
2. The to-do instructions in terms of actual practices are derived from the commentaries and interpretations by accepted authorities on the above shAstra-s.
3. Usually dAna (charity, donation) is classified into four types.
 - i) Superior
 - ii) Medium
 - iii) Inferior and
 - iv) The lowliest.
4. The superior dana is one when a donation or charity is made without any sort of expectation of fruit/reward.

The medium type is one when a donation is made with a desire for obtaining "merit" (punya).

The inferior type is one when donation is given seeking worldly comforts.

The lowliest one is when a donation is made to cause trouble to others.

5. Donations (charities) are made principally because of four reasons: a) Out of vairAgya (giving up any claims of ownership) b) Out of desire for comforts c) out of love (like a mother for its child) and d) out of fear (like paying the ruler).

6. A Guru is never supposed to impart Self-knowledge for a price. If the Guru is so destitute, he may seek food when the body needs it with total indifference whether one gives or not - i.e. no blame if he does not get it nor thanks for one who gives it.

7. A cost marked upfront for teaching Self-knowledge will amount to be a "charge" only and cannot be a donation.

8. Because of the social structure and cultural difference of life in the West, a Guru may collect necessary funds for carrying on with his/her life and for imparting the teaching but just enough to do the job, but not for amassing. If one does hoard wealth, it amounts to using his/her knowledge like any other worldly profession - he/she loses his/her own progress on the Path of Knowledge.

Q: What about traditional gurus?

Ramesam Vermuri: First off, I want to point out certain aspects which do not get highlighted - particularly about the so called globetrotting, image conscious, empire building Gurus who call themselves "traditional", but hve off with their own pretty outfits and petty ambitions at the first opportunity. It applies to many Indian Gurus - including the very popular ones whom you make a mention of.

"Traditional" refers to carrying out a particular lineage of a Guru-disciple tradition. If they are to carry out things in the name and methods of their Guru, why is it they have established big organizations and nurture huge retinues of sycophants and obedient pupils? The less said the better - the same sort of questions can be raised about those traditional gurus similar to the doubts expressed about the Western Gurus by you.

Q: What about the karmic aspects of this? Some of these non dual teachers tend to speak about it on an absolute level and say "charging happens". "Charging is being-ness" or "charging is aliveness". That sort of thing. Is this a form of not taking responsibility for the empirical decision of charging, vis a vis not charging?

As if the "God is doing the charging" and "God is also enjoying the money". On an absolute level, yes this is true of course. This also ties into the question of free will.

Ramesam Vermuri: It is disingenuous if these teachers knowingly paint their actions in Non-dual mumbojumbo. They are cheating themselves in their belief that there is "no one" doing it.

If the "individual" within them is so truly annihilated, they will not be even conscious of the fact that there is another who is ignorant and seeking a teaching from them. They will lose all sense of differentiating objects and they will not be even conscious of their own bodies (something like the sixth stage on the Sevenfold Knowledge Path of Sage Vasishta).

Most commonly, a teacher will be able to teach only in duality. Obviously this means that he sees himself to be distinct from the other, the student. It means he has some trace of "ego" in him. A totally egoless individual will see neither anything to communicate about nor any body to communicate with. When a trace of "ego" is still left, the ego goes with a gross body and there is a need to take care of the gross body.

An individual without ego will live with whatever comes by "effortlessly" as Bhagavad-Gita says (yadrucha IAbha santushTah). Effort means intentional action and such action in turn implies ego. So, indirectly, the level of "effort" can be used as a parameter, if one has to assess oneself on the path.

Now let us see what's with this business of "karma theory". You know very well that karma theory is a fiction - a fiction to satisfy an inquisitive mind. When and if an individual has a clear understanding of the Advaita teaching, one can see that things happen from moment to moment, there is no one to do. (We can go into it in detail separately why this happens 'moment to moment' and how).

The fact is each individual lives in his/her world. As Rupert puts it so well, it is not seven billion people seeing one world; it is rather one Consciousness seeing seven billion worlds. So the world I see is the world of my imagination, my fantasy. There is no 'other' creating this world for me. If I see a cheerful world, well, that is the world I created. If it is a cheerless world, well again, that is my illusory world. If there is a Byron Katie with a billion dollar house, well, she is within my world I created by my fantasy. I am the hiraNyagarbha of my world. My world ends with my awakening. Whom can I blame when there is no other?

The question of free will comes only when I imagine myself to be existing as a separate entity. When there is no other, and all is One, there is no free will. It is for this reason that the ancient Indian scriptures describe even "ignorance" as Brahman. When all is One, there cannot be some separate entity "ignorance."

I often give the example of a man. There are hands which look different from legs or nose, eyes differing from ears etc. But I do not see these parts and get confused if a hand is covered or folded or lifted. I see only the totality of the man as one. So also the totality of the world is One - why to fragment it and see the separate limbs?

END OF INTERVIEW