



## 15. ROBERT SALTZMAN

Dr. Robert Saltzman practices psychotherapy in Todos Santos, Mexico. In discussing the connections and differences between that work and spiritual teaching, he has written this:

As a practicing psychologist, I earn fees for my service and expertise in psychotherapy. This I consider right livelihood. Since people occasionally approach me for what they imagine will be "spiritual instruction," I am obliged to distinguish between my paid therapy work and that other kind of exploration, for which I would never want to charge a fee. Although I find myself unable to state the precise criteria upon which I make such a distinction, I do make it, even to the extent of having said to therapy clients, "Now we have embarked upon matters which I do not see as belonging to our therapy work. We can continue down this road, but, if we do, you will have to give up being a client--your "choice."

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## INTERVIEW

***Q: What are your thoughts on the traditional practice of dana in reference to teachings?***

Robert Saltzman: As I understand this, dana--which means giving or generosity--has been a part of traditional Buddhist practice since early times. Although generosity is not one of the items in the noble eightfold path, the idea often seems to be that practicing dana provides merit or "improvement of karma" for the giver. Since you ask for my reflections, I must say that I do not think in that way at all. I seek neither merit (whatever that means) nor improved karma, but simply allow things to arise as they will without any consideration of choosing, doing, gaining, or improving anything. I would never find myself involved in a practice of dana or any other practice with a view towards acquiring some kind of boon, blessing, or supposed advancement. In fact, I wonder if entertaining such acquisitive thoughts while supposedly "giving" can be considered generosity at all. I doubt it.

***Q: Do you think this same practice should be applied with contemporary non dual teachings, or is it ok for a contemporary non dual teacher to charge and conduct business the way a psychologist or scientist would?***

Robert Saltzman: Your question seems to assume that "nonduality" can be taught. I do not think it can. Really seeing that all phenomena arise only in relation to other phenomena—what the Buddhists call “dependent origination,” or, as John Donne expressed it, “No man is an island”--cannot, I say, be taught or learned, but only noticed now in this very moment. Yes, one can speak those words or hear them, but speaking and hearing words does not make the penny drop. Never has, never will.

This does not mean that nothing can be taught or learned, but that true nature (or what we really already are) is neither taught nor learned, but simply recognized as a sudden abruption in the habitual flow usually called “myself.” Such clear seeing arises when and as it will, and no one controls that nor can make it happen--not in the slightest degree. Neither can clear seeing, which is more precious by far than rubies, be bought, sold, or even transferred gratis.

Further, the very acquisition of second-hand information about some fantasized condition which the “teacher” has supposedly “realized,” and now can teach “you,” gets things in the wrong order entirely. First, I say, one must get to the bottom of one's own situation by means of asking oneself questions--not expecting, I mean, that some imagined expert should provide answers. As the Zen teacher said to the lazy student, “Get the hell out of here, and go make your own living!”

Taking on second-hand “knowledge” (which is really belief, for knowledge cannot be taught--only beliefs can be taught) before being well established in one's own baseline suffering only creates fantasy worlds, giving birth to ever more numerous attachments, and flights of fancy about so-called “enlightenment.” That is escapism, not freedom. There is no freedom on the road of acquired knowledge and second-hand beliefs.

Freedom arises--or perhaps it is better to say, becomes apparent--neither through coming to believe what someone else believes, no matter how supposedly authoritative that source, nor by acquiring knowledge, but through not knowing, through coming up against the limitations of knowing, so that at last one appreciates the mysterious nature of being. I call this blessed event the recognition of the sublimity of the face of human limitation. When first we see that face in the mirror, it is smiling back at us. How joyous that meeting.

That said, the world turns, and things are as they are, so I suppose that just as Zen took on different flavors when transplanted into new cultures, advaita philosophy must have its innings too. Yes, Advaita Western Style

seems to contain more than a hint of entrepreneurship, which personally I find dissonant and a bit sad. But that part of human nature never seems to change very much. Money and so-called "spirituality" have often displayed a troubled co-dependence, and not just in America. Ah well. To quote my old pal, the late Bill Gersh, "You get what you get when you get it."

***Q: Did your teacher, Walter Chappell, charge you for the knowledge?***

Robert Saltzman: Walter taught primarily by example--by living his truth, not by talking about it. Walter never once uttered the term "nonduality"--not in my presence at least. Anyway, the point of our studies was not about attaining anything--particularly not, for example, some putative state in which "nothing was ever born and nothing ever dies" (pure speculation), or becoming a so-called "realized being," (total oxymoron)--but only about being honestly and exactly as one really is in this moment. This, in Walter-speak, is "your obligatoire."

Walter gave me one basic instruction which was, as George Gurdjieff (Walter's teacher's teacher) put it, "Life is real only then when I AM." Apart from that, he just kept showing me how far away I was from continuously living my own "I AMness." Walter taught without using many words simply by living I AM himself—his obligatoire--no matter what the circumstances. His crazy wisdom pranks and acerbic ridicule, aimed at highlighting my foolish egotism, stung a lot at the time, I recall. Painful work, but well worth it.

Walter had been given a similar working over by his teacher--gratis of course--and would never have thought of accepting any payment from me as the wheel turned making him the teacher. In my gratitude, I served Walter in various ways--cooking meals, bringing firewood, etc., which I suppose could be called dana, but money was never part of the equation, and Walter, a free spirit, had little interest in money anyway. He was a giver, not a taker.

***Q: Many of the contemporary non dual teachings in the west seem to derive out of three or four Indian teachers: Ramana Maharshi, Nisargadatta, Papaji and Atmananda Krishna Menon. However, it has***

***been documented that none of these advaita teachers in India charged any of their western students; some of whom went on to become well known teachers in the states. Some of these western teachers appear to charge in some ways for the teachings.***

***Is there anything wrong or right with taking something for free from one culture and then turning around and making a profit in another?***

Robert Saltzman: I prefer not to think in terms of wrong and right or should and shouldn't. In this moment, things are as they are and cannot be any different no matter what judgments arise. Naturally, this "things as they are" includes the irony of wiseacres prattling about "liberation" while clinging, not just to money and possessions, but to prestige, fame, power, and sensual pleasure as well. From here, that already seems a fool's paradise, and asserting that one deserves to make a living from such vanity, or even to become wealthy while standing on the shoulders of giants, hardly seems compatible with claims of self-realization.

If you only sit on a throne parroting the ideas of Nisargadatta or Ramana, why charge a fee at all? How did you earn it? And why would I want to hear your parroted version when I can simply read the published words of Nisargadatta if I like? Or, if Nisargadatta's descriptions of his own situation are not sufficiently didactic, one can always read--gratis of course--the "Detailed Instructions" of Han-Shan (14th century), or the "Platform Sutra" of Hui Neng (7th century). It's all there. Just google.

All of this "nonduality," as you well know, John, has been said before, and beautifully. The professional nondual teacher, who simply buffs it up with a 21st century gloss--often, by the way, screwing it up through oversimplification (the nonsense about "presence," for example) or frank misunderstanding--and then sells that "product" at a profit, seems a bit parasitic, don't you think?

Freedom and equanimity are here and now--always here and now. Money cannot buy them. In my experience, this is shared gladly and with open hands. The very sharing is a joy in and of itself. No one ever paid to sit with Ramana, and he even fed and sheltered those who came to see him.

Nisargadatta would not accept even the smallest gift, I have heard. Like Walter, they were givers, not takers.

Still, if someone gives a talk and asks for a small donation to offset the rental of the hall or whatever, OK by me. Life is life, after all. But when a teacher makes a cash-flow business of dispensing so-called "nondual truth" for profit, I say look elsewhere. How could a mirror distorted by such ambitions ever fairly reflect true nature?

***Q: What are your thoughts on the following quote?***

***Arjuna Ardagh said "There's a common saying in India that if a teacher charges money for "the dharma" (loosely translated, "teachings about the truth") he or she will go to a special section of hell set aside for spiritual entrepreneurs, an area cornered off and designed to be much nastier than the areas for axe murderers, rapists, and the like."***

Robert Saltzman: If taken metaphorically, I guess it's OK in a way. But if anyone takes it literally--believes, I mean, in future punishment in "hell"--that would be foolish, don't you think? And millions of people around the world do take such words literally.

Hell, if you want to call it that, must be, along with everything else, here and now. It could never be some pending punishment awaiting the "sinner" at some later time. There is no "later time." So hell, which we see all around us, inheres simply in the ordinary mental, physical, and emotional sorrows of human life unredeemed by wisdom and ease of the ease of loving kindness.

Belief in future punishment for sins and reward for following the rules is a credulous fantasy, I say, and the Hindus, for all their vaunted Vedanta

seem as oppressed by their superstitious beliefs as Christians or Moslems by theirs. It's a sad, sad picture, and I have zero interest in any of it.

I say discard all belief, including any theory about what "will happen." No one knows anything about all that, and anyone who claims to know is, as I see it, either deluded or a charlatan.

But the dance of buying and selling is a pas de deux, is it not, John? Why focus on vilifying the greedy entrepreneurs for doing only what most animals do--trying to feather their nests—while giving a pass to the greedy seekers who are equal partners in this foolishness?

Yes, the professional teachers, for the most part, sell a bunch of bombast, balderdash, and meaningless verbiage, masquerading as something worth hearing, but they get away with it only because the “students” act like junkies waiting for the next fix. Some of them even know that the product is poison, but just can't keep themselves from jonesing for the next book, video, workshop or satsang.

If any of that palaver were really useful, why are there not millions of "enlightened" students by now, and why is the SAND conference not out of business due to non-attendance? As if!

A fool and his money are soon parted, so if one self-anointed dharma teacher doesn't grab the cash, another surely will. To put this another way, a glutton for "spirituality" who demands, and is willing to pay for being spoon-fed a bunch of warmed-over mimicry, will surely locate an expert wielding a spoon. True hearts are not so easily swindled.

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

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

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

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Robert Saltzman: Some "teachers," both in the last century and in this one, have devoted great energy towards acquiring name and fame—now called “branding”—to be systematically “monitized.” There is not enough double speak in any language to camouflage that kind of transaction. The dollar signs seem to jump out from the page in that advert, don't they?

Now, people have always wanted to market their philosophies, views, and opinions—authors write books, professors deliver lectures, pundits opine on talk shows. In this conversation, you have focused upon selling "spiritual" teaching--specifically selling the findings of many centuries of Vedanta by teachers who learned the jargon without paying for it, but now feel justified in charging for parroting that jargon.

It does seem a curious kind of business. As a flowering shrub automatically perfumes the entire bower, Ramana, Nisargadatta, and the others simply scattered, and often with laughter, their gems. Now their imitators want to rearrange a few words here and there, invent some catch-phrases, perhaps stir in a little psychological and relationship mumbo-jumbo, and market that pastiche to the naive eager beavers. Fortunately, I am not in their shoes, so this is only a hunch, but what if, while learning the words of Ramana and Nisargadatta-- or the Buddha, or Jesus, for that matter--these apprentices failed to understand the heart of what was being said?

Someone who really gets it, I suspect, would not be able to justify selling that sublimity. The real thing cannot be sold anyway. If you paid cash for it, I say, most likely you bought a fugazi.

That said, I have little interest in judging what others say or do. In my view, no one is to blame for anything. Finding myself in the throes of this mysterium tremendum--being human, I mean--I imagine that everyone is doing the best he or she can, no matter how bad or "evil" that might appear from to an outside observer. Think of the six realms in Buddhism: human being is one kind of dance, and hungry ghost quite another. And no one gets to choose in which realm one finds oneself, or to choose anything else for that matter.

All of this is entirely subjective. No one is in control of anything. When seeing changes, behavior changes—not because someone tries to change anything, but because that's just the way the cookie crumbles.

**END OF INTERVIEW**