



3. RODNEY STEVENS

NDM: Rodney, can you please tell me about your background and your seeking and why this began? And did you study any eastern traditions like Buddhism or yoga of any kind?

Rodney: I'm a little tempted to play into the William Wordsworth role of "I wandered lonely as a cloud" and all of that. But actually, I was a loved child, who grew up in a nice, small southern town called Pendleton, South Carolina, which is about four-miles from Clemson University. My mother was a school librarian, and my father was an immensely-skilled electrician and plumber, who had very little formal education.

Even as a kid, I was always asking the "big" questions: How did the universe began? What is the meaning of life? What is true brilliance? I always wanted to get to the heart of things. I never sought out friends. I always went off into the woods to be alone, and to explore and actually immerse myself in that "aloneness." And I was never, ever lonely. I would

sit very still oftentimes for no reason, other than just to "be" very, very still. I didn't have a clue as to why I was doing it. I guess I was thinking, in some undeclared way, that the mysteries of the universe would somehow reveal themselves to me if I managed to stay quiet enough. And I was always reading, particularly Sci-Fi novels and books on mysticism. My favorite subjects were English and science.

NDM: Did you carry those interests with you to college?

Rodney: Oh, yeah. And my majors changed a lot. They included English, pre-med, philosophy, and psychology. And I was a very poor student. I just had no lasting interest in anything (except, of course, the spiritual stuff). At one time, I thought my inability to remain interested in my studies may be because of deep psychological flaw or something. So I took one of the standardized intelligence test. This insightful and compassionate clinical psychologist at Clemson University--who knew of my restlessness and ennui--said, "Rodney, have you ever thought about Mensa? You qualify." So there were a couple years there of going to very pleasant meetings and doing Mensa-related activities. However, the spiritual interests were still there. And I intuitively knew that intellectual discussions, however refined and entertaining, would yield no answers to the Big Questions, especially the spiritual ones, relating to the "heart" of things, to existence itself. I knew, even then, that this understanding had nothing to do with having a high IQ-score. Besides, everyone is extraordinarily gifted in some very specific way.

NDM: It's just a matter of discovering it?

Rodney: Precisely. So I quit college and Mensa, and I held down a long series of odds jobs. The work allowed me to get at yoga teaching

certification from Ananda Ashram (in Monroe, New York) under the then legendary yogi and neurosurgeon, Ramamurti S. Mishra, M.D. He later changed his name to Shri Brahmananda Sarasvati and wrote several books, including The Textbook of Yoga Psychology and Self Analysis and Self Knowledge, which is a commentary on Shankara's celebrated Atma Bodha.

NDM: How was Shri Brahmananda's commentary?

Rodney: I haven't had a chance to read it. So I don't know how closely it aligns with true nonduality.

NDM: I was just curious. Please continue.

Rodney: After my getting my certification at Ananda Ashram (and this was around 1979 or '80), I visited monasteries, explored Catholicism, perused the writings of Meister Eckhart and Heraclitus, and learned Transcendental Meditation. And while I still love yoga (and even continue to do some of the asanas), TM was of no help me. That's when I started to read the beautiful and powerful (at least to me then) works of Osho. Then I went on to read (but not understand) Talks with Ramana Maharshi. That book somehow led me to Nisargadatta Maharaj and his masterwork, I Am That. I loved Nisargadatta's book, but I didn't know why. I just couldn't get the gist of what he was saying. So I started to explore more contemporary teachers of nonduality, which led me Robert Adams and "Sailor" Bob Adamson, and their respective titles, Silence of the Heart and What's Wrong with Right Now Unless You Think About It? And these books--especially Bob's work--began to put the brakes on my conceptualization, as well as my assumption that there was this concrete, individual person that I figured to be me.

NDM: And I believe it was Bob's writing that led you to John Wheeler and your awakening. Can you tell me about how this occurred?

Rodney: I first checked John out on his beautiful web site. And there was something that immediately "clicked" with his writing, his details, and his clarity. We use the word "resonating" a lot in nonduality. But that was unequivocally the case with me and John's words and perspective. I immediately ordered his first book, *Awakening to the Natural State*. From the very moment it arrived, everything about the book felt "right" to me: The title, the prose style, the presentation, and the pointing. That is why, even after re-reading it over a dozen times, I wasn't in the least bothered by any subsequent re-readings. I intuitively knew that I was closer to some genuine understanding of who and what I was than I had ever been in my life. I couldn't articulate that feeling, but in my heart, I knew it to be the case.

NDM: And it happened?

Rodney: One late-spring evening in 2007, I came across a sentence that I had read many times before in the book: "It is all about seeing what is fully present right now." The beauty and clarity of that statement truly struck me this time. It was saying, in essence, that I was already seeing what I believed to be not there. My thoughts were saying one thing, while John's statement was pointing to something else. Then, suddenly, there was this timeless pause--then utter peace and spaciousness....But do not misunderstand: This is not one event happening after the other. The pause is the spaciousness. There is no division between the two. One is simply the other, and the pause is always present...But that was it: The move from a story-focused life to a life-being-lived. But really, there is no true

movement there. There is only the seeing and understanding that you were being lived all along.

NDM: Could you speak a little about the difference between awakening and permanent liberation?

Rodney: There are simply no series of "awakenings." I know that some teachers say that there are, but it is not. This feeds into the myth that there is a person there to experience these awakenings, when all there is is the experiences themselves. You see, when people have these experiences (and I had some amazing ones), it provides them with fodder for which to write and talk. It's all about having something to go on and on about. They want to keep their person-hood intact, and yet make some great inner discovery. But there is no person to awaken. Thus, there is no personal liberation for anyone. And yet, your natural state is nothing but Liberation. It is Freedom itself. And once you recognize this true and ever-present immediacy, it isn't something from which you can be flung. You are that pristine awareness, and absolutely everything is That. So where is there for you go?

NDM: Do you see liberation as when you see and know that you are awareness?

Rodney: Yes, when you clearly understand that you are awareness itself. Your body is there, of course; but like thoughts, emotions, and sensations, your body is an appearance. It changes. Awareness does not move. Appearances arise out of it, but the essence of awareness is always the same.

NDM: So, with this understanding, you essentially become a Jivanmukta?

Rodney: Yes, "one who is awake while living," is what I believe the term means. But no thoughts like that come up here. That's just a classic advaitic expression that points to this living reality. And that reality is what radiates for me, not any terms or descriptions for it.

NDM: Did you ever experienced nivikalpa samadhi at any time prior to this shift before reading John Wheeler's book?

Rodney: I did, but it was so brief--minutes maybe. I've pretty much forgot what all occurred. But it was just an experience. That's all! It came, it went. Period. Also, such experiences are not obligatory precursors of or prerequisites to what is commonly called "enlightenment." And I assure you--however spectacular the occurrence might have been--it in no way compares to this pristine and living knowingness. There is simply no comparison.

NDM: Why do you think this understanding happened to you, as opposed to all the other people all over the world who are desperately seeking this? Do you think it was grace?

Rodney: That's a good question. Do I think it was grace? Only in the sense that grace is always available. There is no "special" grace for specific persons. There was no mercy or reprieves given to me, however lovely and compassionate a notion that might be. Awareness and grace are nearly synonymous in my mind, since both point to a salutariness that is eternal and without bounds. As for how this happened to me, that's simple: I

stopped overlooking the obvious. I ceased looking beyond what was directly in front of me. And this "looking beyond" is precisely what most spiritual seekers the world over are doing, and it comes in many guises: Meditation, silence, mindfulness, good works, piety, concentration, self-mortification, celibacy, etc. Seekers won't find any answers through any of those because by the utilization of any of those avenues, you are automatically looking away from awareness proper. So no matter how many years or decades you meditate or watch your thoughts, the Self won't be found. But if that is what you want to do, then by all means enjoy yourself.

NDM: What is enlightenment?

Rodney: I don't know. It's not a term that I use.

NDM: Are you awake?

Rodney: Ultimately, no. For there is no one to awaken. But relatively speaking, yes. But we shouldn't get overly-concerned with labels. We have to communicate, we have to say something. So I try to choose the clearest terms possible. But even the Buddha forthrightly replied, when he was asked, "I am awake," fully knowing that there just the Buddha-field itself, i.e., bare, unadorned spaciousness.

NDM: How would you know if someone were actually enlightened?

Rodney: It's pretty easy. No one can talk or write about this for very long without revealing the depth of his or her understanding. After a few minutes

of conversation or several paragraphs of text, you generally have a clear picture of whether the person is the real-deal or not. But contrary to the myth, you can't just look at someone and automatically tell if this has occurred.

NDM: Why did you feel it was important to speak with John Wheeler about this shift when it occurred? Were you looking for some kind of validation, approval, or confirmation to double check this in some way? Or simple clarity?

Rodney: Good question. By the second day, I knew that this was it. The peace and spaciousness was absolutely unchanged. So I really didn't feel any great urgency to write to John after coming to this understanding. I just continued out the week, gaining some experience with this, and fully seeing that there was no individual person here living a life; rather, there just this body/mind being lived. So by the time I wrote John, it was more of celebration of the recognition that had occurred, than a confirmation of it. That was certainly no needed validation or approval-seeking on my part. Indeed, that would have clearly indicated that this understanding had not taken place! Still, I went over everything that happened, of course. And John did confirm it, in his typical, low-key manner: "Yes, that all sounds good."

NDM: After this liberation or understanding, did you have the urge to rush out there and communicate this to others. To begin teaching, spreading the word and doing satsangs? Or writing a book about it?

Rodney: Well, given that I am a writer, the urge to put fingers-to-keypad came up naturally and quickly. That's how the blog got started. I also attempted to hold talks, putting up flyers in various places around the city,

as well as putting some event-ads on Craigslist. But no one was interested. And that was perfectly okay. I simply focused on the blog.

NDM: Do you think someone should self-evaluate their awakening or liberation, or do you think it is wiser to speak to someone who is already gone through this process? And knows exactly what this is.

Rodney: There is very little to evaluate regarding this understanding. Is there a beginningless, unchanging, presence of awareness in full evidence? That's it. With that said, being able to write to or speak with someone with whom this is an everyday reality certainly has its advantages. But really, at that point, there are simply no more questions.

NDM: Rodney, yes, but what about when someone sees this "consciousness" as an object. A spirit or waves of cosmic energy. Or when they look within and often describe this as "nothingness, emptiness, the void".

This usually happens when they shift from no longer identifying with their biography and so on. They get stuck in the place of negation, the "neti neti" phase where they see what they are not, through the process of "not this, not this" but still don't know what they are. So they now believe that they are a void.

Others have glimpses of being aware of being aware and see it as being an experience or a "place" or "space" outside of them that they want to get back to.

How do you guide someone or point to the understanding that they are the Awareness that is "aware" of this emptiness, void, being-ness,

oneness, is-ness, such-ness, nothingness? So that a permanent shift takes place?

RODNEY: The idea of emptiness as a void is no "final" understanding. I realized that some teachings say that this is the case, but it isn't. And were this purely a conceptual or theological matter, we would probably have to leave it at that, with the teaching saying one thing, and I another. But one of the hallmarks of nonduality is that it points to a very, very real presence of awareness. And though it is translucent, featureless, and without beginning or end, it is--as the Mundaka Upanishad so beautifully notes--what "the wise fully perceive." It only appears not to be apparent because, among other things, no one may have pointed out the fact that your general sense of beingness is awareness. Also, we are so used to looking to objects (thoughts, feelings, sensations, physicality, etc) as verifications of what is actually present or not that we entirely overlook that which is immediate and self-revealing. Awareness doesn't require anything to make its existence known. For it is Existence, a living and cognizing reality, and you are That.

NDM; But naturally thoughts, sensations, still arise and people get sucked into these thoughts like whirlpools, again and again, so now they are a void, with the same thoughts, sensations, emotions arising and find themselves flying into a rage or acting out the same as before. Then they say, well that's not me doing that, I'm no longer the doer? That is "oneness" or "being-ness" doing that?

The question is what is doing that?

RODNEY: Thoughts and feelings still come up after you have a clear and solid understanding of your identity. But there is less identification with them now. Some you just smile at, and with others, there may be some strong and immediate identification. But then it's over. There is very that

lingers any more. Nisargadatta and U.G. Krishnamurti, just two name two iconoclastic nondual sages, were always having strong reactions to things, especially when they were shouting and ranting at some inane query from a seeker and questioner. But their outward behavior, at such times, clearly belies their inner peace and luminosity. On the other hand, such contemporary master-teachers as Bob Adamson and John Wheeler are two of nicest and most low-key persons that you are ever likely to meet.

NDM; What do you do when you use up all your pointers and they say "yes, I intellectually get that I am awareness, but nothing has shifted. I still get mad, loose it when my boss screams at me, I still gamble, get drunk" and so on.

RODNEY: Essentially, all a teacher can do is correct misunderstandings and accurately point to what is already and absolutely there: Awareness itself. The person may not get it for some while. And that's okay. And when that happens, I tend to suggest a break from the topic. There should be nothing tense or anxious about nonduality whatsoever. And if the seeker/questioner is earnest (which, to my mind, is focused, respectful, and has passionate interest in self-knowledge, and not merely about nonduality), then that person is very apt to come to clear and expedient understanding of who and what he or she really is. Indeed, I'm almost tempted to say that it is a given.

NDM; How would you say that your character or your temperament has changed since this awareness shift?

RODNEY: There has been practically no change. I wish I didn't have my occasional temper and impatience, but they are still there. And I still can't go anywhere without a couple of books and the New York Times, in tow.

But all this occurs from a background of peace and plentitude. I have noticed, however, a heightened sense of compassion, as well as the capacity to love a single person far more deeply than I ever have before, e.g., now there is just this out-flowing of energy, attention, and homage to that person, knowing that the beauty that is speaking to me is presence itself.

NDM; Do you experience bliss at all?

RODNEY: No, thank God. Bliss is an experience, and a brief one, at that. The peace and spaciousness that is ever-present here is quite natural and ordinary, on one hand, and thoroughly magnificent, on the other. Most nondual writers and teachers tend to downplay their descriptions of the natural state. They do this, in part, because they don't want seekers turning awareness into an object or an experience. And I'm certainly sympathetic to that. But I opt to speak about its profoundness, as well--preferring to err a bit on the side of poetry, than reticence. But that's just me. It is neither here nor there, and ultimately means nothing at all.

Part two

NDM: In your book A Vastness All Around: Awakening to Your Natural State you say "Attending talks by someone who is established in his or her true nature can be problematic. He may not be an engaging speaker, he may possess an unusual accent, he may harbor a distracting personality, or he may have near-zero interest in speaking with others about his new-found clarity. Yet, more often than not, conversing with such persons is incredibly fruitful."

What is it about conversing with someone in their true nature that can be problematic? Can you please give me examples of this?

Rodney: No immediate examples come to mind. And I'm not being critical of that avenue at all. In fact, it's probably the optimum way to go about all of this. What often happens though is that seekers will come with the expectation that the atmosphere will be overtly spiritual and that every other word that the teacher utters will be some sort of advaitic gemstone. And since that is not normally how things are at such talks and meetings, seekers are often a wee-bit disappointed. So they end up not giving their full attention to what the teacher is saying. And that's unfortunate, because when you're in the presence of someone for whom this is a living reality, every smile, emphasis, gesture, and pause is bursting with significance. There is no artifice with such persons, no attempts to impress, or to be spiritual. For presence naturally and quietly abounds in the vicinity of such a person--and yes, more so in some than others. Nonetheless, there is a definite stillness there.

NDM: You also say in your book, " Yet, awareness isn't a puzzle; there is nothing to figure out-- only to recognize. Then you will discover a spaciousness that has always been in attendance. You don't need a mantra (free or exorbitantly priced), a spiritual name, a month-long retreat, or an expensive flight to India. Further, Truth isn't hiding somewhere for you to discover it. It is right here, right now-- lustrous and in plain view."

What are your thoughts on traditional Vedanta teachers that say that you need to have qualifications to pursue liberation. For example, Sri Sankaracharya says that the student must be equipped with the four means of salvation. Viveka, (discrimination), Vairagya, (dispassion), Mumukshutva, (intense longing for liberation), as well Shad-sampat,, Shad-Sampat, the sixfold virtues of Sama, Dama, Uparati, Titiksha, Sraddha and Samadhana?

Rodney: Discrimination, dispassion, earnestness, and the numerous virtues are all automatically there at the moment this understanding occurs. You see, when you are paused by a statement, a piece of music, a natural setting, a sound, or a pointer, all of the "four means of salvation" automatically occur. You don't have to first excel at each of those things, so that you can then qualify to seek self-knowledge.

Also, Shankara--one of the greatest exponents and philosophers of advaita (nonduality)--had a penchant for giving full critical renderings of his numerous advaitic works. He could have been more selective in what he chose to include (and to comment on); but for whatever reason, he wasn't. That being the case, you can't tell me--with what I know now--that Shankara actually believed that every single word of those ancient and often brilliant texts were valid. Maybe he simply wanted to pay homage to the works by including everything that was in them. Who knows?

NDM: When you say with "what I know now", Do you mean this regarding your knowledge of ancient scripture, or your personal knowledge, or modern day advaita or something else?

Do you not agree with the teachings in his Atma bodhi, Viveka Chudamani and so on?

Rodney:I mean my personal knowledge, which, ultimately, isn't personal at all. And no, I haven't read Shankara's Atma Bodhi or Viveka ChudamAni. I was going to treat myself to purchasing them a couple of years ago when I wasn't able to view them on the Web because of the dated software in my iMac. I still haven't taken the time to check them out, though I now have a MacBook Pro which, of course, allows me to open practically any site.

NDM: What about the Upanishads and the Vedas, have you read these?

Rodney: Sure, but my reading of them has been pretty scattered. There has never been any sustained effort at perusing them. But I have numerous related titles on my book shelf. They include Eliot Deutsch's *The Essential Vedanta: A New Source Book of Advaita Vedanta*, Arvind Sharma's *The Experiential Dimension of Advaita Vedanta*, and Anantanand Rambachan's commendable *The Advaita Worldview: God, World, and Humanity*. Alas, the books are all crammed with yellow stickers and highlighting.

NDM: Have you read anything by Dennis Waite? He has a book on neo advaita versus Vedanta, entitled *Enlightenment: The Path Through The Jungle*.

James Swartz also has a book that touches on this, *How to attain enlightenment*.

Rodney: I haven't read Dennis's book. Nor have I gotten around to James Swartz's title. But I've had the pleasure of exchanging some very nice emails with both writers. Also, I did an essay (a few years ago) for Dennis that he published on his extensive and informative Web site.

NDM: The Sanskrit scripture, un-authored Upanishads are traditionally believed to be a direct revelation of the “cosmic sound of truth” heard by ancient Rishis who then translated what was heard into something understandable by humans.

Do you believe this is true and what are your thoughts on this?

Rodney: Well, all I can say about that is that it is far more likely to have happened than of someone becoming "enlightened" by meditation, chanting, or memorizing Sanskrit scriptures! And maybe that some of those magnificent Upanishadic authors--during some pause in their thinking or pondering--simply recognized their natural and immediate state. Truly, it can be that simple. This understanding doesn't require cosmic occurrences and fantastical beings. You are what you are at this very moment. To say that some event or intervention has to happen in order to imbue you with Presence or Liberation is complete nonsense.

NDM: So what about the question of Shad-Sampat, the sixfold virtues of Sama, Dama, Uparati, Titiksha, Sraddha and Samadhana? Did you ever practice any of these sixfold virtues?

Rodney: If I did, I did so without my even thinking about it!

NDM: What do you see is the difference with so called "neo advaita" teachers and traditional Vedanta teachers?

Rodney: You know, I hear that there are these various distinctions and all of that. But it really doesn't interest me. I have no idea who is in one camp, and who is in the other. And the categorizations have absolutely no bearing on what I say, do, or write. I simply speak from presence with as much clarity and directness as I possibly can. If I happen to belong to one group and not another--well, so be it. Besides, nonduality--by its very definition ("not two") is--beyond all spiritual groupings

NDM: What about the teaching and communication of this. Traditional Vedanta says that you have to belong to a SampradAya, a lineage of qualified teachers in order to teach this? That you need to be authorized to teach and have studied with a qualified teacher to fully understand the many subtle aspects of this. Learning original Sanskrit for one, knowing how to unfold the text in the right order, step by step and learning the scriptures by heart. Knowing how to relay this knowledge. How to do the practice, sadhana and so on.

They also say that the teaching tradition of Vedanta is as important as even its vision of oneness because the vision is solely dependent on the method of handling the words unfolding the vision. Being that Vedanta, according to shankara, is a word which means to bring one to this knowledge. And these words are in Sanskrit.

Rodney: Which is more important, following a lineage of teachers or actual self-knowledge? The question is a no-brainer. Self-knowledge is infinitely preferable to indulging--for a life-time, no less!--in some practice and sadhana that lead to nothing, except a multitude of more experiences. And as I tell people in my talks, "You can't get Here (awareness) from there (practices and meditation)." It doesn't work that way. You have been thoroughly misinformed by banal books and fallacious teachers. But the good news is that your days of seeking can be over. It's merely a matter of recognizing the fact that you are already That which you are endeavoring to find. And that is good news, indeed.

NDM: You ask which is more important, practice or self-knowledge? If you are going to dye a piece of cloth, do you not remove the stains first, so that when you dip it into the vat, the color shines clear and brilliantly. Or do you take the soiled rag and dip it anyway?

Isn't this is the purpose of the practice or do you believe that this can be circumvented? That this self-knowledge will clean up the person's act after the fact.

Ken Wilber has a pithy Zen like saying "a schmuck before enlightenment, a schmuck after enlightenment"?

What are your thoughts on this?

Rodney: Yes, but you see, the stains are nothing permanent. The sky remains the sky, no matter what clouds, storms, or tornadoes arise. The essence of the sky is spaciousness, and that essence remains untouched. You, as a meditator, can't make the sky clearer; nor can you, as a meditator, polish yourself to such a degree that, at some point or the other, you become presence itself. There is no separation between you and awareness. You and the sky are one. Before anything is, you ARE! (Laughing) And yeah, Ken Wilber's "a schmuck before enlightenment, a schmuck after enlightenment" is so true. There are people who have clearly come to this understanding, but you still have no inclination to be around them!

NDM: What are your thoughts on this and his 4 instructions at the end?

“Question: In meditation, who meditates, the person or the witness?”

Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj: Meditation is a deliberate attempt to pierce into the higher states of consciousness and finally go beyond it. The art of meditation is the art of shifting the focus of attention to ever subtler levels, without losing one's grip on the levels left behind. In a way it is like having death under control. One begins with the lowest

levels: social circumstances, customs and habits; physical surroundings, the posture and the breathing of the body, the senses, their sensations and perceptions; the mind, its thoughts and feelings; until the entire mechanism of personality is grasped and firmly held.

The final stage of meditation is reached when the sense of identity goes beyond the 'I-am-so-and-so', beyond 'so-I-am', beyond 'I-am-the-witness-only', beyond 'there-is', beyond all ideas into the impersonally personal pure being.

But you must be energetic when you take to meditation. It is definitely not a part-time occupation. Limit your interests and activities to what is needed for you and your dependents' barest needs. Save all your energies and time for breaking the wall your mind had built around you. Believe me, you will not regret."

Rodney: A lot of times, seekers came to Nisargadatta pleading for methods and mantras. They wanted to "do" something in order "attain" enlightenment. Nisargadatta, as I understand it, would occasionally accommodate them. Then these seekers would go off, happy and pleased. But I'll wager quite a few returned to get a better feel for Nisargadatta's direct pointing, which he centered on and tirelessly spoke about.

NDM: How much did you meditate before this realization? Was it 30 minutes, 1 hour, or more a day and for how long exactly? Was this a consistent practice or was it sporadic?

Rodney: I was definitely not a good meditator. The only time that I regularly did it was when I was doing TM, and I was then meditating for the requisite

20 minutes. That went on for several months. But I quickly saw that TM would be of no help to me at all. It was such an enormous waste of time and money. But it was my own doing. I wrote the check, and I made the choice. But some good came out of it too: I met many people who had at least a passing interest in self-knowing and deep spirituality.

NDM: Have you read "Collision with the Infinite. The Life Beyond a Personal Self" by Susan Segal. She also practiced TM, then a year later, after she had stopped practicing, out of the blue had a massive awakening when stepping off a bus?

Rodney: Yes, I read Susan Seagal's Collision with the Infinite many years ago. I still have the copy, as a matter of fact. She was into TM far greater than I was. But the book is absorbing, and it has some fine pointers, as well.

NDM: In your book you write. "As the food is cooked, I wash the bowls and utensils to keep them from piling up. During breaks, I peruse her slew of magazines--Time, Vogue, Newsweek, The Economist, Women's Health and my favorite, Entertainment Weekly (give me that over some stuffy Vedanta quarterly anytime)!"

What is it about Vedanta journals that do not appeal to your sensibilities?

Why do you prefer to read Vogue, women's health or entertainment weekly, than reading Sanskrit, or 5,000 year old ancient texts about Brahman?

Rodney: Well, I certainly enjoy Nonduality Highlights and Nonduality Magazine. I wouldn't have consented to this second interview if I didn't find NM to be informative and engaging. The Vedantic publications that I've come upon (and they have only been a handful) were convoluted and philosophically driven. None of the contributors or reviewers had a smidgen of understanding of who and what they were. And it couldn't have mattered less to these writers. But scholastic publications certainly have their place. I'm just not a fan. But then, one could also argue that such journals are far weightier than Vanity Fair and Entertainment Weekly. I would then want to clarify the term "weightier!"

NDM: In your book you write " I was certainly enthralled by U.G's book. I didn't exactly know why at the time; for I couldn't make head-or-tails of what he was saying. Also, he often seemed fatalistic, telling questioners that there is absolutely "no hope for you!"

What are your thoughts on U.G's teaching methods. Calling other teachers of enlightenment "holy hookers" and so on. Using all sorts of profanity? Do you think the use of profanity has a role in teaching or the the unfolding of this non dual message?

Rodney: I get such a kick out of U.G. I read his books and have viewed most of his online videos, and I see exactly what he's saying and why he's saying it. Despite his often outlandish statements, he is so on the mark so much of the time. This is especially the case in the quote that I use from him at the beginning of my book: "It is so simple." I love those words, and they are utter gospel when it comes to nonduality. And I emphasize that simplicity in my own writing and speaking because it is going to be one of the first things that seekers realize when they discern their own natural state. A word more about U.G.: The only thing that feels odd to my ears is his profanity. But that's because I rarely use any. That's just my personality and up-bringing. My parents never used offensive language--at home or out. So swearing always sounds a bit strange to me.

NDM: John Wheeler seems to be hitting quite a few home runs with his books. I have had at least 4 or 5 others who have told me that his books gave them clear understanding about aspects of this. What is it about John Wheeler that seems to be having this sort of effect on others?

Rodney: John's talks and writings are so clear and detailed that seekers are very easily taken to the heart of things--which is their own remarkable self. Also, John's calm and easy manner foster a receptive and comfortable ambience. But the bottom line, of course, is that John speaks directly from presence. And anyone who does that is going to stand out, in terms of his or her clarity, pointing, and resonance. In a word, John Wheeler is one of the most significant sages of our time.

NDM: When you say "In a word, John Wheeler is one of the most significant sages of our time."

Do you make this assessment based on a personal opinion, experience, a relative comparison to some other modern advaita teachers who you feel are not significant sages?

Rodney: I guess it comes under the category of "personal opinion." But I know it to be fact. And it would serve little purpose to list those who are not significant. But as I've said any number of times on my blog, you can't talk or write about nonduality without revealing the depth of your understanding. Either it's there, or it isn't. Either you've got it, or you don't. And the moment some of these writers and speakers who have appropriated the Nondual Banner open their mouths or pen a sentence, it's utter seriousness and spirituality to them, but pure comedy to me.

NDM: What do you mean by sage? Do you mean as in guru?

Rodney: I don't use the word "guru" at all, because of its negative connotations, such as servitude, all-knowingness, and the "I'm Too Precious For This World" kind of nonsense. But "sage" is a perfectly fine term, and--in my mind--it is self-realized person who has had considerable experience in writing about nonduality and/or discussing it with others. They excel in at least one of the above, though a few sages are skilled at both.

NDM: Do you think that this common American/English language is clear enough to give someone more of an in-depth and precise understanding of Vedanta and nonduality?

Rodney: Absolutely. But a "precise understanding" only comes with the direct recognition of your natural state.

NDM: What does this Sanskrit word mithYa mean to you?

Rodney: I didn't know the word, so I had to look it up. It seems to refer to "illusion" and "the unreality of the world." Thoughts, objects, kisses, and supernovae all exist. But they exist in awareness and as awareness. In a word, "All is Brahman." Or "All is That." It really doesn't matter what label awareness is given.

NDM: In your book you write" "Considerably. It is utter peace and spaciousness. At bottom, any form of practice

or meditation is divisive, given that it is based on the premise that you are somehow separate

from Truth. Why struggle to be “mindful” of your body and breath when your own ever-present radiance is directly before you? And who, exactly, is attempting to be mindful?”

Are you saying that you have attained a state of equanimity, at all times. Just by 'knowing' that you are awareness?

Rodney: Yes, I'm saying that precisely. I still have feelings and emotions, thank God. It's just that they no longer define me.

NDM: What are your thoughts on the Zen tradition of meditation? That meditation is also considered a direct path, a short cut to knowledge, self-realization? Also the added benefits. Since it cultivates one pointed concentration, insight, intuition, discernment, equanimity, forbearance, mind and sense control.

For example many neo advaita teachers who invalidate and ridicule meditation tend to get their feathers easily ruffled, Get hot under the collar, angry like U.G for example?

Rodney: Meditation is the very opposite of a "direct path" or "a short cut to knowledge." Methods and meditation distract you from what cognizing what is immediately within you. However, certain aspects of Zen, Buddhism, and Taoism can clearly and unerringly point you to your natural state. Hui Neng, Dogen, and Lao Tzu were master teachers and authors from each respective group.

NDM: In an answer to a questioner, you mention a quote by Buddha.

You say "there is no "you" involved in any way. As Buddha said, events happen and deeds are done, "but there is no doer thereof."

You then say as to why not to practice mindfulness meditation and so on.

However Buddha says there are seven factors of enlightenment.

Mindfulness (sati)

Keen investigation of the dhamma (dhammavicaya)

Energy (viriya)

Rapture or happiness (piti)

Calm (passaddhi)

Concentration (samadhi)

Equanimity (upekkha)

What are your thoughts on this?

Rodney: I have the greatest respect for Buddha. Some of words and discourses point directly to presence, while others do not. As for the "seven factors" above, they are all there-- simultaneously--at the moment of one's understanding. You do not have to separate them out and work at getting good at each one before self-knowing can occur. But if that is what you choose to believe or is the process in which you want to follow, go right ahead. You see, I have absolutely nothing invested in a seeker doing this or that. It does not matter to me in the least what a person does. If someone is bent on doing something that I know won't work, the most you will get from me is a sympathetic, "Well, good luck with that".

NDM: Ok. How about this. In the Nivarana Sutta of the Pali Canon, the Buddha said there are five hindrances to realizing enlightenment. These are (words in parentheses are in Pali):

Sensual desire (kamacchanda)

Ill will (vyapada)

Sloth, torpor, or drowsiness (thina-middha)

Restlessness and worry (uddhacca-kukkucca)

Uncertainty or skepticism (vicikiccha)

He also says that the five hindrances can be overcome through mindfulness, and in particular mindfulness of the four frames of reference below

Mindfulness of body (kayasati).

Mindfulness of feelings or sensations (vedanasati).

Mindfulness of mind or mental processes (cittasati).

Mindfulness of mental objects or qualities (dhammasati).

Do you believe that these 5 hindrances can be overcome by someone simply telling you that you are oneness in a satsang or over the internet in an email, or a book?

Rodney: Sure. If a seeker reads (in an email or book) that there are, in fact, no hindrances to what he or she already is, that person is apt to feel a great and immediate relief! And in the very respite, there is a peace that passes all understanding. This existing and undeniable spaciousness is what is being overlooked. There is nothing blocking or hindering you from seeing it.

NDM: In traditional Vedanta, not neo advaita, they say that what is blocking one from also seeing this non dual truth besides the obvious lack of knowledge (Avidyā) are also the three gunas and other factors. The mind either being too rajasic, (too energetic) or too tamas (dull, negative, sluggish). Not being sattvic. Meaning clear, lucid, bright.

For example, the Triguna are also mentioned in the discourse of Krishna to Arjuna upon the battlefield of Kurukshetra in the Bhagavad Gita. All three gunas are said to delude the World:

tribhirguamayairbhāvairebhi sarvamida jagat | Rodney: Right, just so you point the seeker to the truth doesn't mean that he or she will see it. It may occur some while later, when the person is pondering what was said while having a cup of tea or going to the bathroom or gardening or walking along the beach. There is really no predicting it. It's more a matter of a pause occurring in one's thinking and activities, and of one's seeing the presence of awareness within that pause.

mohita nābhijānāti māmebhya paramavyayam || 7.13||

The World deluded by these Three Gunas does not know Me:

Who is beyond these Gunas and imperishable. (7.13)

Nisargadatta, (Sailor Bobs teacher) also speaks about this very clearly, but notice that some of his American disciples or teachers on non duality do not mention this.

Visitor: What remains then?

Nisargadatta Maharaj: What remains is the Original, which is unconditioned, without attributes, and without identity: that on which this temporary state of the consciousness and the three states and the three gunas have come and gone. It is called Parabrahman, the Absolute.

This is my basic teaching.

Then traditional Vedanta also says there are issues of habits, conditioning, deep psychic imprints and so on (Vasanas, samskaras). In other words there are karmic aspects to this that do not meet the eye.

So in essence you could tell someone they are "non dual presence awareness" until they are blue in the face and they will never come to know this, unless they are "ripe", so to speak. Or if they do realize this, it can be a lopsided realization, meaning half the picture.

What are your thoughts on this?

Rodney: Right, just so you point the seeker to the truth doesn't mean that he or she will see it. It may occur some while later, when the person is pondering what was said while having a cup of tea or going to the bathroom or gardening or walking along the beach. There is really no predicting it. It's more a matter of a pause occurring in one's thinking and activities, and of one's seeing the presence of awareness within that pause.

NDM: What about likes and dislikes? tendencies, proclivities, preferences?

Rodney: You still have the same tendencies, preferences, and proclivities after this understanding occurs. For whatever reason, one's personality isn't affected by this. In fact, one of the sure signs that a person is having an experience rather than true apperception is if he or she is blissful, ecstatic, or stuporous. Ditto with any kinds of visions or streams of energy running up and down one's body. They are all just experiences. Take a clear and easy look at the spaciousness in which all of that arises, and you will have your answer: Awareness itself.

NDM: This description in your book is so beautiful. Is this how it is all the time for you, moment to moment? Or does it come and go?

"My secret place is in one of the five gardens located in the rear of the various buildings. Within the garden's firebrick walls, there are, among other stately features, a snug greenhouse with its opalescent exterior; dormant rose bushes and vines; cropped crape myrtles flaunting their smooth, cinnamon trunks; and, slightly to the rear of the space, a circular, softly-pruned rosemary bush. I dip my hands into the rosemary's leaves and gently rub their evergreen fragility between my fingers. Several seconds is all that is needed before my hands are pungent with the herb's delicious aroma."

Rodney: Oh no, awareness is fully present all the time. If something comes and goes, it's an experience. Also, awareness is always the same: Bare,

spacious, radiant (in its clarity), and brimming with peace. And thanks for your kind words about "Promenade." I've gotten lots of emails on how that essay resonates with readers.

NDM: There is a phrase that is often used in Buddhism, "Half way up the mountain", meaning that sometimes people on this path mistake their realization for enlightenment, when in reality it's not.

They get half way up and reach a plateau , look down at the others in the world and believe that's it. In essence it's a partial, imbalanced realization.

Mariana Caplan wrote a book all about this, Halfway-Up-Mountain-Premature-Enlightenment.

How would you know if someone were fully enlightened or not? What are the signs, symptoms of complete enlightenment/Self realization?

Rodney: It's pretty simple. Is the deep contentment and spaciousness always present? And is it ever the same? There are a few other things too. But those are the main points.

NDM: So can you please elaborate on what these "few other things" are for readers who may be new to non-duality?

Rodney: There is also a lovely depth and stillness within the eyes.

NDM: Can you please tell me about your book, Vastness All Around. How you got to write it?

Rodney: Vastness, it came about when I decided to gather the essays, pointers, and reviews from my blog to see if some publisher would be interested in it. I approached Nonduality Press, but they only wanted to do it as an e-book. Well, I said forget that. Then another nondual teacher that I know suggested I give Lulu Press a try. And that's how that came about. And let me say that it was indeed a challenge, because I had no experience with self-publishing, and neither am I all that computer saavy. Eventually, I got enormous help from Greg Banks, who, on his Web site (www.bddesignonline.com), notes that he is "The Self Published Author's Best Friend." And he is indeed just that. And then the brilliant Fiona Robertson, from Nottingham (UK), came aboard as my editor and proofreader. And it's because of them, really, that I was able to get the book completed. Note: Much to Fiona's horror, I ended up rewriting numerous selections for added clarification. Fiona was on to another project and didn't have time to do another edit. So any omissions and grammatical "oddities" are entirely my own.

NDM: Why didn't you want to do an e-book?

Also can you tell me about the feedback so far on your book? Any impact it has had?

Rodney: Good question. I happen to love books and grew up surrounded by them (my mother was a high school librarian). So for as long as I can remember, I knew that I would end up writing a book some day. I didn't know what it would be about, but I knew that it would be either poetry or nonfiction. And though I'm delighted that Vastness is available for both e-books and the Kindle, I also wanted the trade paperback available to readers so that they could easily afford it and flip-through it at their leisure.

As for the feedback on Vastness, it has been very positive--even surprisingly so. I just wanted to do a "Fundamentals of" kind of book, because those are the ones I gravitated toward when I was growing up. I really didn't expect it to sale more than a few dozen copies. Then I started getting these emails on how Vastness was changing some people's lives and how inspirational the book was to various seekers. Then there was the subsequent rise in the number of copies sold. So I'm greatly moved by all outcomes.

NDM: Would you sum up your message as essentially saying that the good news is to call off the search, You are already the Self, no need to seek for it. That this is all you need to do?

Rodney: Precisely. There is a subtle but sweeping equanimity within your everyday existence that is woefully being overlooked. Come back to presence, to the vastness whose splendor is unremitting. It's like the coolness of a white terrace by the sea. Even the shimmering horizon cannot encumber you. For as Dogen Zenji writes, "The Dharma vehicle is free and unhindered. What need can there be for the concentrated efforts of men?"

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