



## 6. JAMES SWARTZ

***NDM: Can you please also tell me what exactly is "moksha", the root meaning of this Sanskrit word, as well as how is this manifested, according to Vedanta and the ancient teachings? Who was the first person to use this symbol?***

Ram: It is a Sanskrit word that comes from the word 'muc' which means to release from bondage, to set free. It is impossible to tell who used it first. It is many thousands of years old.

***NDM: What do you see as the distinction between Bodhi/awakening and moska/liberation?***

Ram: Awakening is an experience that happens to the mind, one that gives the individual some kind of understanding that there is something beyond the visible. It is not enlightenment although it is often thought of as enlightenment. Most modern teachers are simply awakened. The self is 'the light.' It never slept. It is not enlightened. Enlightenment is moksa,

freedom from experience, including awakening, and the notion that the self is limited. It is the hard and fast knowledge “I am limitless non-dual ordinary actionless awareness...assuming that it renders all vasanas non-binding and cancels the sense of doership. Chapter 2 of my book deals with this topic in depth. There is a sub-heading in the chapter called Stages of Enlightenment. The second stage roughly represents self realization/awakening, where there is still an individual who has ‘realized’ i.e. experienced the self. There is still the sense of duality, a ‘me’ and the ‘self’ which appears as an object. It differs from the third stage, which is not a stage, called ‘enlightenment.’ The word enlightenment is not actually technically suitable because of its experiential connotations.

***NDM: In your book, 'How to Attain Enlightenment', you go into the history of how Vedanta was brought to this country and somehow became distorted. How this New Vedanta introduced the idea of four paths or yogas: action, devotion, knowledge and meditation. How the traditional Vedanta only focused on action and knowledge.***

***Do you think the reason why the yogic path seemed to take off more than the knowledge path because westerners are hardwired differently and have been conditioned to be fundamentally more corrupted and pleasure seekers, sybarites, through hardcore advertising, television, pornography, Hollywood, Rock and Roll and so on. Essentially programmed from birth and were using yoga experientially, like alcohol or LSD to get high, as opposed to how it was used in India and in the Yoga scriptures of Patanjali?***

James: Yes and no. No, in the sense that the yogic view of enlightenment is the dominant view in India as well and has been the dominant view for thousands of years. People are experience oriented and their suffering makes them unimaginative, so that they cannot connect the suffering with

self ignorance. They just want quick relief and are susceptible to the idea that there is some kind of permanent blissful experience that they can gain by Grace, by yoga, by transmission, etc. This is why they are eager to call an epiphany, an petty awakening experience, enlightenment. But yes, in the sense that materialistic cultures like ours place very little value on self knowledge although they value relative knowledge highly because it is instrumental in gaining worldly things. But it is only a matter of degree. Indian's crave experience like everyone but the society is duty oriented and based on the Vedic model which is knowledge centered. The word 'veda' means knowledge and self knowledge is still respected in India today.

***NDM: . What are your thoughts on Deeksha and Shakipat and the "Oneness school" An Indian school that teaches westerners to give Deeksha? Or a blessing in the form of a mantra, or laying hands on someone's head or other parts of their body?***

James: Shakti sadhanas are useful up to a certain point in that they generate epiphanies, awakenings. Epiphanies can be helpful spiritually or they can be a serious hindrance if they cause you to formulate enlightenment as a kind of permanent feel good shakti experience. Shakti is not liberation because shakti is fickle. It comes and goes and has many forms. Shakti is just a particular subtle kind of experiential energy. I debunk the shakti as enlightenment myth toward the end of Chapter 2. There is a subheading called, "Energy as Enlightenment" in the Enlightenment Myths section that will help with this.

Deeksha, which is similar to Reiki, is a big con game cooked up by a greedy ambitious fellow, Kalki 'Avatar' and his equally greedy wife to sucker gullible do-gooders out of their money. Fortunately the bloom is off the rose and Deeksha is suffering the bad karma that inevitably flows when the idea behind it is incorrect. But you will be happy to know that Kalki and

his wife are set for life. Kalki's son broke with him over money and power and took many of the dasas with him. They have predictably taken up with a big money person, Tony Robbins, who has mined and monetized the lowest levels of spirituality with great success for years. It is a fad that has lost most of its appeal in America and has had to move to other countries to stay alive. It will die because shakti is fickle. You get high from it and then, like any drug, you come back to reality only to discover that the brain rewiring was faulty and you are caught up in your old world view once more. Hopefully, even though you are poorer, you may be a bit wiser. It is hardly worth discussing. I satirize it at the very end of the book in the Chapter on Neo-Advaita.

***NDM: Do you believe it's possible to transmit permanent enlightenment, through shakti, qi, chi, prana, orgone, kundallini or any other kind of energy?***

James: Definitely not. There is only one self and it is already free. If the self thinks it is an individual and bound, no energy i.e. experience will remove this ignorance. Shakti will not change the orientation of one's thinking patterns. Only the application of self knowledge will. The best shaktipat can do is to give you a glimpse of your true nature. Non-dual experience, if interpreted correctly, may give rise to this knowledge but it will only cancel the belief that one is bound in a very subtle, highly mature individual like Ramana. And even then, once the shakti, the experience, has worn off ignorance almost invariably reasserts itself and the self goes back to thinking that it is incomplete and bound. The idea that enlightenment is an experiential something that it can be transferred to another person is a fantasy that appeals to lazy people who do not want to do sadhana.

***NDM: Can you please describe the difference between the self enquiry that Sri Ramana taught and the self enquiry that Papaji and his followers/disciples teach in the west today?***

James: Papaji's very unrefined notion was to simply 'be quiet' and wait for something to happen. His idea suited the level of seekers that came to him. He himself cynically said they were not qualified for moksa and he gave them shaktipat as an indulgent parent gives children 'lollipops'...to use his own words. Ramana's view was that self inquiry was only for highly qualified mature purified individuals. It is an aggressive moment to moment inquiry into the nature of the self. Vedanta's conception of self inquiry is akin to Ramana's but is much broader. It presupposes self knowledge and asks the inquirer to apply the knowledge "I am the self" when the inquiry has revealed a limited dualistic orientation.

NDM: What is the history and Vedanta tradition of charging for satsang or guru instruction? For example do you know if Dattatreya, Sri Ramana or Adi Shankara or any of these sages ever charged for instruction or satsang?

James: There is no history. Wealthy donors who value spiritual culture support the teachers. My guru took care of my room and board for two years and never asked a dime. I charged once in Tiruvannamalai only to keep the gawkers, window shoppers, and lifestylers, away. It worked, but now I use other methods to get rid of them without denying access to the teachings to sincere seekers. A true teacher does not see what he does as a career, a profession. It saddens me to see the terrible exploitation that goes on in the Western spiritual scene.

***NDM: . I would like to ask you about this new school of advaita. Often referred to as neo-advaita. One English teacher by the name of Tony Parsons says "Any communication that supports and encourages the***

***seeker's belief or idea that it can find something it feels it has lost is only reinforcing and perpetuating a dualistic illusion..... There can arise a wish to help or teach other people to have a similar experience. That communication can sometimes seem to be "non-dual" when the teacher describes the nature of oneness, but it contradicts itself by recommending a process which can help the seeker attain that oneness through self-enquiry, meditation or purification, etc"***

***How do you believe that someone like Adi Shankara the Indian philosopher who consolidated the doctrine of Advaita Vedanta, would have responded to this, according to his teachings?***

James: I have a whole chapter on Neo-Advaita in my book, How to Attain Enlightenment, The Vision of Non-Duality. I do not think highly of it. Shankara would have had a good condescending laugh. It is a superficial ill-considered counterintuitive belief system that seems to be reasonable on the surface, but does not hold up when you actually think about it. Tony Parsons exemplifies the worst of the Neo-Advaita teachers. He spouts a plethora of vague advaitic ideas that have gained a certain degree of traction because Westerners are very spiritually unsophisticated and want a quick easy enlightenment. It amounts to little more than the denial that you exist as a human being and offers no methodology for preparing the mind for enlightenment, much less serious experience based teachings that patiently and effectively remove self ignorance. Traditional Vedanta completely disagrees with Tony's statement. He is one of the most ill-informed of the Neo-Advaita types. He has virtually no knowledge of Yoga and Vedanta apart from the recycled conventional wisdom that has been circulating since Papaji's minions infected the spiritual world with their advaita-lite version of non-duality.

It is actually incorrect to see Shankara as a philosopher. He was just a link in the sampradaya, the Vedanta tradition that stretches back to the Upanishads. And Vedanta is only a means of Self Knowledge. It is not a school of thought or a philosophy. Chapter 3 of my book clearly explains Vedanta as a means of knowledge...a pramana...and debunks this myth.

***NDM: What are your thoughts on "evolutionary enlightenment"?***

James: In so far as there is only one self and it never changes, there is no evolution. Evolve to where? There is no evidence that life is not as evolved or un-evolved as it always was. In the spiritual world it is a long standing belief, made popular by Aurobindo in the last century. In terms of the apparent reality, it is basically a religious belief that ambitious spiritual types like Andrew Cohen tend to promote and exploit to gain fame. Dogooders and world 'saviors' are held in high esteem by gullible well meaning people. Rare individuals committed to truth do tend to grow spiritually, however, but it is not helpful to think of it in terms of evolution as much as purification, getting rid of something unhelpful, rather than getting better, which has the danger of feeding a self righteous ego's sense of vanity. The initial appeal of Deeksha was largely based on the absurd notion that the planet is devolving and that enlightenment could save it when 2012 comes! It is a notion that appeals to worried people who would greatly benefit the world if they quit thinking about the human race...which after all is just a concept...and cleaned up their own problems. If this is a non-dual reality, then everything here is the self and as such it serves the self. How does suffering help? Suffering usually makes you dull at first but if you suffer enough and hit bottom, it can wake you up. This happened to me. I am very grateful for my suffering. Even if you could 'make a difference' and change the world, it will still be a fool's paradise because the absence of suffering is only the negative half of moksa.

***NDM: Do you believe that God is evolving?***

James: In terms of the limited scientific view, it seems nature...which is one aspect of God...is evolving but even this view presupposes that there is some ultimate purpose to life. And there is no evidence that there is such a purpose. If there is any purpose it is to get rid of suffering because that is what people are attempting to do all the time. But God, whatever that means, is not a person. Presumably, He or She is already perfect. So if 'God' means consciousness, it is definitely not evolving. Consciousness is non-dual. Where will evolve to?

***NDM: Or that the human ego is evolving in some way? Becoming less violent, less narcissistic, pleasure seeking, greedy, competitive, war mongering, less deceitful, manipulative and so on?***

James: No. The human ego is just a notion of incompleteness, separation and inadequacy. Ideas do not evolve. However, certain rare individuals do consciously change in line with certain ideals. But there is no evidence that the human race is getting any better. There is no evidence that it is getting any worse either. The light and the dark forces that make up the apparent reality...duality...are always more or less in balance.

***NDM: In your book you say that "Ramana Maharshi gained enlightenment without a teaching and a teacher. Aside from the fact that it is, in very rare cases, possible to realize the self without help, the odds are about the same as winning the lottery, perhaps less."***

***What are the reasons that you believe that it is almost impossible to become enlightened without a teacher? Or the reasons why someone without a teacher is bound to become self deluded, or stuck somewhere?***

James: Because the self is beyond perception and inference and can only be realized by the removal of ignorance. It is completely counterintuitive that you are whole and complete. It does not feel that way at all. And we are so conditioned to take our feelings to be knowledge that we need to be shown how we are actually whole and complete. The one who has the ignorance is almost never objective enough about his or her self to see where he or she is caught up in beliefs and opinions about the nature of reality. We unconsciously interpret what we experience in terms of their ignorance, no matter how 'conscious' we think we are. Ignorance is hard-wired and universal. It formulates itself in many subtle ways. Only collective systematic proven knowledge that comes from an objective source can help. If enlightenment was up to an individual's will anyone who wanted to become enlightened would become enlightened. So you need help. In my case I exposed my mind to Vedanta for a long period and was eventually freed of all the things that limited me. I did this with the help of my teacher and scripture. I had had much experience of Samadhi and every conceivable major epiphany and I am not a stupid person but I could not crack the code without help. I am eternally grateful to God for giving us this tradition.

***NDM: How does karma play into this enlightenment equation? Do you believe that enlightenment is causal, or the result of someone being ripe, due to past actions?***

James: It depends on what you mean by karma. Enlightenment is not causal. No action can give you something that you already have. In fact you do actions to gain enlightenment because you are ignorant of the simple fact that you are already free. However, action...karma...is indispensable for gaining enlightenment if it is used to prepare the mind for enlightenment. The mind needs to be qualified (See Chapter3) for enlightenment. This is where Neo-Advaita is completely ignorant. It

dismisses action and the doer and sadhana as 'duality.' Being 'ripe' is an indirect means of enlightenment. Self knowledge is the direct means.

***NDM: What is the importance of being aware of samskaras, vassanas and vrittis and how do these hinder one from becoming enlightened?***

James: It is very important because they extrovert the mind and keep it from meditating and inquiring into the nature of the self.

***NDM: Do you believe that it's possible to be liberated and still maintain a healthy ego with desires, aspirations, attachments and aversions? In essence to maintain a personal and a separate sense of self? To be Brahman, as well who you always were?***

James: A healthy ego and enlightenment are nearly synonyms. However, if someone is 'maintaining' an ego, whether it is healthy or not, it is definitely incompatible with enlightenment. Enlightenment cancels the notion that you are an ego, so you will not do anything to make the ego healthy or unhealthy. You just see your ego for what it is. You need not tamper with it. If it is sick it will become healthy if you leave it alone and stay with the self. And you will leave it alone when you know who you are. You will love it warts and all. And in the presence of your love it will become healthy.

***NDM: Do you see Neo-Advaita as a form of a depersonalization, de realization disorder, a 'dissociative disorder' a psychotic break of some kind. Or a form of nihilism, or intellectual solipsism. An extremely highly developed and sophisticated egos way to escaping responsibly for ones actions, thoughts and deeds.***

James: No, people are just lazy and denial works well with them. It allows them to continue being the fools they are and imagine that it is somehow hip and cool to pretend that they do not exist. It is actually a pretty harmless phenomena. Most of them are only there because others are there and they don't want to miss out on 'the energy'. It is more about the sanga, the company of like minded people, than a serious spiritual path. It is true that the spiritual world attracts a lot of psychologically wounded people who really belong on the psychiatrist's couch but this has always been the case.

***NDM: Many people believe that being enlightened is a license to teach about enlightenment. In the tradition of Vedanta, for one to become a teacher of this, were there certain guidelines, criteria, tests that one had to overcome to prove without a shadow of a doubt one was enlightened and qualified to be a teacher? Such as a peer group of teachers, satgurus that would make these determinations?***

James: In a way, yes. The sampradaya, the tradition, works in very subtle ways to maintain its purity. This is because you only get access to the tradition if you are qualified. If you just break in off the street loaded with desires and are not mindful of dharma and seeking for the wrong reason, you will not last long enough to be accepted by a teacher. It will not make sense to you. Ordinarily, the complaint is that Vedanta is 'only intellectual.' You will want some kind of emotional connection, some kind of 'heart' connection and you will not be subtle enough to get what is actually going on. So you will wander off. And also you have to be admitted by the teacher and in Vedanta. You cannot just decide that a certain teacher is your guru. It is a two way street owing to the nature of the means of knowledge. If you are not meant to be there you will be out the door very quickly. It is very rare to find an ambitious Vedanta teacher because most of them are really enlightened, meaning that they do not care if they teach or not and are not interested in fame or fortune. I do not want to talk about it in detail. It will give the idea that Vedanta is elitist. It isn't.

***NDM: Some of these neo advaita teachers say things like there is no karma, because there is 'no doer", that everything is acausal, so it really doesn't matter because things just happen. Such as murder happens, lying happens, cheating or stealing happens and it's not happening to a separate person. They say what causes suffering or guilt is the illusion a separate person is lying, cheating, murdering and so on. As if to say that oneness or God is doing it and that once you know its God doing it, there is no suffering nor guilt and therefore nothing wrong with it.***

James: This kind of doctrine is ridiculous. First of all, from awareness' point of view, nothing ever happened. So if you say these things happen they only mean something to awareness under the spell of ignorance, i.e. the doer. So it is the doer who believes that things happen. The whole idea is silly because there is nothing wrong with the doer. Doership may be a problem. As a human being you are definitely a doer but you can do without a sense of doership. There is no choice about action. Yes, you can see that you are the self, in which case, you are not the doer. But the self is limitless and can apparently act. If it could not apparently act it would not be limitless. And the apparent reality, in which doing appears to happen is not non-existent, although it is not real either. This whole topic needs careful analysis. I take it up in detail in my book.

Things do just apparently happen, but conscious action apparently happens too. Doing and non-doing are just concepts that are meant to reveal the nature of That because of which doing and non-doing exist i.e. awareness. Knowing God as the doer does not remove your suffering unless you are God. But the doer, the one who believes these ideas, is not God. God is the source of the ideas of doership and non-doership, and the doer is awareness under the spell of ignorance. We call ignorance avidya when it applies to the doer, the individual, and we call it God or Maya or

Iswara with reference to the whole creation. Awareness is beyond God, the creator. In any case, this whole issue as I just mentioned needs a lot more discussion that we can give it here.

***NDM: What are your thoughts on Aurobindos "Intermediate Zone" letter to his students about the pitfalls and dangers of seeking enlightenment. Becoming delusional and so on.***

James: Aurobindo and epiphanies. I suffered through the pretentious Aurobindo torture on epiphanies and, when I got over my headache, I concluded that his view about them is more or less correct. But he certainly makes a big deal out of something that is relatively simple. As I mentioned already, they can be helpful or harmful depending on your understanding.

## **PART 2**

***NDM: When you met your guru Swami Chinmayananda, how much of a vasana load did you have at that time and how much were you able to shake off and how long did this take after your realization of the self?***

James: My vasana load was quite light. That is why I was able to assimilate the teachings. I worked out my worldly desires...sex, money and power...by my late Twenties. The tendencies were there but they were non-binding.

Once I realized that I was the Self...it is not actually correct to say that I realized the self...the purification took place automatically as a result of the knowledge, so it would not be completely accurate to say that "I" was shaking off anything. If the knowledge "I am awareness" is firm it does the work. The Bhagavad Gita says, "There is no purifier like (self) knowledge." In so far as there was a functional ego there...a James...I directed him to make certain choices that resulted in the further attenuation of the remaining non-binding vasanas...as a kind of hobby. There is nothing to be gained by being vasana free.

***NDM: When you say "there is nothing to be gained by being vasana free", what do you think Sri Ramana meant when he said "owing to the fluctuation of the vasana s, realization takes time to steady itself. Spasmodic realization is not enough to prevent rebirth, but it cannot become permanent as long as there are vasana s there."***

James: This statement of Ramana's needs a little bit of analysis. Not all vasana s destabilize the mind. In fact there are many...self inquiry, devotion, meditation, etc. that compose the mind and enhance self inquiry and are considered means of self realization. The vasana s that causes violent fluctuations in the mind or that make it cloudy and dull are the vasana s he is talking about, I believe: greed, anger, lust, attachment, hatred, etc. On this score he is definitely correct. The reason you want a composed mind is so that you can assimilate the knowledge that is equivalent to vasanas.

You have to remember that Ramana was not a teacher. He was an enlightened person of the highest character but he spoke one on one to people with specific questions. He did not carefully unfold the complete teachings of yoga or Vedanta in a systematic way in order to resolve both apparent and real contradictions. The idea that vasana exhaustion is

equivalent to enlightenment, which I assume he means by 'prevent rebirth,' is called the vasana kshaya theory of enlightenment. It is best known through Pantanjali's Yoga sutras in which he says 'yoga chitta vritti nirodha.' 'Yoga is the removal of the waves in the mind,' not to put too fine a point on it. Patanjali and traditional Vedanta would both agree that only the binding vasanas need to be eliminated for vasanas. A binding vasana is one that you are compelled to act out. Why do you act it out? Because you identify with it. You identify with it because you think it will complete you, make you feel happy. Why do you identify with it? Because you are ignorant of your true nature, which happens to be whole and complete and in need of nothing, but which unfortunately which is unappreciated by you. To make it simple, the idea is that you have to get rid of some of your psychological baggage if you want to be enlightened.

The vasanas themselves have no power. They are just ideas in awareness. But they become powerful tendencies because of a person's self ignorance. Therefore it is the identification with the vasana that needs to be removed, not the vasana itself. The identification needs to be removed because you should identify with the self if you want to be free. Confident identification of oneself as the self neutralizes the vasanas. So, speaking from the self's point of view the vasanas are not a problem. They are only a problem from the point of view of an individual who wants to realize the self and then only the binding ones need to be dealt with. In that statement I was speaking from the platform of the self.

***NDM: Do you believe it's possible for someone to drop their entire vasana load immediately and all their life times of samskaras, karmic debt, conditioning and so on with realizing the self. Or is shaking off and unwinding these vasanas, samskaras usually a gradual process that takes time, work and additional self-enquiry after one has realized the self?***

James: The complete dropping of the vasana load at one time is a Neo-Advaitic fantasy. There is no reason for vasanas to be a problem when you know that you are awareness. You can easily live with them. The presence or absence of vasanas is not enlightenment because the karmic mind/ego entity is not opposed to awareness. It is merely an appearance in awareness. Those making this claim are fame seekers who equate enlightenment with purity. It is just big talk.

Additionally, nothing like this happens in nature. Everything in nature is a gradual process, some call it evolution.

***NDM: What was it that qualified you to receive Swami Chinmayanandas Vedanta teachings?***

James: The hard and fast realization that there was not one thing in samsara that could make me happy. I would have preferred to die to living another day chasing the things I chased with such a passion before. There are so many seekers and so few finders because most seekers still have hope that samsara will work for them one day. I was one hundred percent convinced that the world was empty.

***NDM: What are the odds that a typical westerner would be qualified, have the right disposition, temperament, intelligence and the other factors to study Vedanta with a satguru?***

James: About the same as winning the lottery. It is particularly difficult for Westerners because the culture presents no alternative to samsara. It is in love with samsara. It tells everyone that they are inadequate incomplete

consumers and it offers enticing sexy solutions. It is unlikely in India too, but there is visible culture there that will respond to the deeper needs of the soul.

***NDM: Do you believe it's a result of one's karma, action in prior lives that someone would even begin seeking, or come across a satguru?***

James: Yes, Although everything prior to right now is a 'past life.' No one knows the answer to this. It is best to think of it as the self throwing off the shackles of ignorance.

***NDM: If someone would like to study Vedanta with a guru. How does one go about finding a legitimate qualified traditional Vedanta teacher outside of the contaminated modern day satsang market without traveling to India like you did?***

James: It is not really advisable to seek a guru. If you are ready, it does not matter where you are, the guru will appear. So the best thing is to do your very best spiritually according to your own understanding, live as pure a life and possible and ask God...however you see it...for freedom. It will happen. The reason the Neo-Advaita scene is so dangerous is because it has only a (half-baked) understanding of the teachings of non-duality and, more important, no road map out of samsara. It denies samsara altogether so it does not deal with karma and dharma and all the other essential knowledge and practice that prepares one for the dialogue with a proper mahatma. Having said that, there are Western people who are realized and who are good teachers, but they have the good sense to keep their heads down and work quietly out of the limelight. Seeking has become just another lifestyle these days. I know several. Please don't ask me their names.

***NDM: What is the difference with going to a satsang and getting Vedanta instruction with a guru?***

James: The way the satsang scene has evolved here is a joke. I was recently given a copy of a book by Mooji who as you probably know is one of the big luminaries in the Neo-Advaitic world. One of his followers wanted me to debate him. I said "OK, if he wants to debate it is fine with me but I have no idea what he is saying" so the person gave me a copy of his book *Breath of the Absolute*. On the very first page he goes into the theory of Advaita quite correctly. Mind you I am not saying that I think Mooji is enlightened or not. He gives five or six sentences...all the usual no this and no that...and then he says, "Here you are not being told that you must be fit for this journey." He may be the Avatar of Avatars but this is just nonsense. Presumably Ramana's famous enlightened cow's offspring could wander into one of Mooji's Tiruvannamalai satangs... which takes place in an area where cows wander freely...and 'get it.' You cannot make it to the feet of a proper Vedanta teacher unless you are qualified. The sampradaya keeps those that are unqualified out.

I know that some will say that I have an ax to grind and it is probably churlish to say this but one day I was channel surfing and I came across Gangaji in satsang on a public access channel. I do have an ax to grind with Neo-Advaita but I have no problem with any person doing what they are inspired to do, enlightened or not, as long as they follow dharma. Anyway, this woman came up to sit in the 'hot seat.' She was an emotional wreck and broke into tears within minutes. Her life was so difficult and enlightenment was so hard and...boo hoo...it was all so tawdry like the 'reality' shows on TV. And Gangaji...of course....was so 'supportive,' so kind and compassionate...like enlightened people are supposed to be. She took her hand and lovingly stroked her hair and said, 'There, there you poor dear' or some sort of equally sappy nonsense. I switched channels

quickly before I was overcome with nausea but I suppose what happened next...as it does in these Neo-Advaita satsang s...the guru dishes up some terribly clever vague 'advaitic' psychobabble and the grateful recipient wanders off 'fully' enlightened.

Secondly, because the satsang here is white bread, meaning it has very little food value, people wander from one guru to another. I never met any of these teachers but sooner or later some of them show up at my doorstep and I hear the list of names...it is always the same. And what I discover is that these people are completely confused by what they have heard. So and so said this and so and so said that etc. But Vedanta has not changed since the beginning. There is only one teaching and it is very refined and sophisticated. All the apparent contradictions have been handled, not denied. It works and it will continue to work forever. Just as nobody is going to invent a new wheel, nobody is going to invent a new Vedanta. It crystallized into its perfect form in the Eighth Century.

Finally, Ignorance is hard wired, persistent and very pervasive. You need many tools to attack it. Vedanta is the complete tool kit. Neo-Advaita is more or less in the same category as religion because without a valid means of self knowledge you can only believe that everything is non-separate from you.

***NDM: So when these neo advaitins show up at your doorstep confused by these satsang teachers. How you deal with someone who is delusional and sincerely believes that they are "fully enlightened" according to neo-advaita standards?***

James: Those who are attracted to Neo-Advaita only come to traditional Vedanta because Neo-Advaita has not worked for them. But 'fully

enlightened' delusional people generally do not show up. I have only had one in the last three or four years. He bided his time and then decided to show his enlightenment to the group. Everyone was completely turned off. Then he wanted to argue with me. I told him I did not argue and when he got aggressive I asked him to please leave. He left. I later asked him why he left and he said, because I said 'please.'

The thing about Vedanta is that the sampradaya, the tradition, works very nicely to keep unqualified people out. I almost never have to deal with it. The interesting thing about Vedanta is that it assumes that everyone who is there is enlightened. It speaks to them as the self. It assumes that you already know who you are but just lack a bit of clarity. And it is such a skillful means of self knowledge that it takes away the doubt quite nicely without giving you a complex in the process. When you approach people with the understanding that they are unenlightened, you make matters worse. You are forced to tell them that there is something wrong with them and that they should do something to get what they already have...like quit thinking and let go of their suffering and surrender their ego and what not. It is not helpful.

***NDM: As a teacher, do you feel it is your responsibly to speak out against misleading neo advaita teachers? Why not just keep quiet, turn the other way and allow these people to take their money and waste their time, to find out the hard way?***

James: First of all I do not think of myself as a teacher. It is not my identity. It is a hat I put on when I am asked a question. As soon as the answer is finished the hat comes off. Teaching is more or less like a hobby. It is not a career.

I do not feel it is my responsibility. I am not motivated by responsibility. I am motivated by desire. I WANT to show the weakness of the Neo-

Advaita teachings...but I think this is what you mean. I have the highest regard for Vedanta and I hate to see how uniformed, deluded and ambitious people corrupt the teachings. Mind you, these are not 'my' teachings. I have no teachings. So I am not upset on my behalf. I'm a very happy person with a great life quite apart from Vedanta.

And although it sometimes may not seem so, I have respect for everyone as the self. Unfortunately certain names are associated in the public's mind with certain teachings...Ramesh Balsekar with the idea "You are not the doer," for example, so Ramesh may have his feelings hurt...well, he won't now because he is dead...when someone criticizes his words...if he is attached to them.

Anyone squawking away in public like myself should be ready to take the heat. I am quite happy to be criticized. Let people say what they think, good or bad. It does not enhance or diminish me in the slightest. I listen to what is said and see if there is truth in it. If there is, I accept it and if there isn't, I don't. And as far as Vedanta goes, you cannot actually attack it unless you are ill informed. The Neos don't really attack it because most of them have no idea what it is, or if they do it is only because they read a few books, not because they subjected themselves to the tradition and heard it from the inside...in which case they would be qualified to attack it. It has endured for thousands of years. In the fullness of time Neo-Advaita will not even rate a minor footnote in spiritual history because it has no proven methodology. It is an unruly Hodge podge of ideas that gained a certain currency in the last fifteen years and is now losing steam as a spiritual force because it is basically a Western fad.

The way I see it, everyone is enlightened. Everyone is the self. You are not special because you say you are enlightened. You are not special because you are a teacher. Mind you, teaching is something you elect to do. You definitely have an agenda. One of my agendas is to help sincere people

understand the limitations of teachings that are not in harmony with tradition.

I do this in two ways. First, I teach Vedanta which is a very positive and complete teaching. When you have been taught Vedanta you can see very clearly which teachings and teachers are unskillful and harmful. Secondly, I feel justified in having a go at Neo-Advaita, not for myself...I could care less...but because I get many emails every day from people around the world who have been through the Neo-Advaita scene and want to know exactly why, in spite of its sometimes seemingly reasonable ideas, it does not work. Since I have started criticizing Neo-Advaita the interest in the way I present traditional Vedanta has increased ten-fold. Mind you I didn't do it for fame. Fame is a big drag. I did it because I could see the harm that these half-baked teachings do.

Second, I explain the limitations of Neo-Advaita. I don't do it because I am an angry self righteous do-gooder out to defend the faith and get the people to come to the church of Vedanta. I give solid reasons based on scripture and the seeker's own experience why Neo-Advaita comes up short as a means of enlightenment. If you read my book you will see that ninety five percent of it is traditional Vedanta with no mention of Neo-Advaita. There is one short chapter in which I take on Neo-Advaita, not because there is anything sinister about it, but because it is an unskillful uninspiring teaching. Why is it uninspiring? Because it denies the existence of the seeker, among other things. You can tell me until you are blue in the face that I do not exist but unless you can prove it to me and give me a way to discover what that means by myself, you are simply frustrating me. I give all the reasons why Neo-Advaita does not work, but I do not leave you there; I reveal the many proven teachings like Karma Yoga, discrimination, the three gunas and many others that do work. It is not mindless criticism. The idea is to stimulate people to think and provide them with a road map out of samsara. Saying that samsara does not exist is not a road map.

The last point I have to make is that my attacks, if that is what they are, are not aimed at the person. They are aimed at the teaching. As I said, it is

unfortunate that certain names are associated with certain teachings...the Buddha with emptiness, for example...and unsophisticated people think that the attack is on the person. The Vedantins and the Buddhists have been going at it for two thousand years. Everyone fights with everyone else. What's wrong with it? It can't be helped. Some ideas work and some don't. For every complaint I get...and there are not many...I get twenty 'thank yous' for saying that the Emperor has no clothing. It a nasty job but someone has to do it.

***NDM: How would you answer the charge that you speaking out about other teachers is shadow projection, or playing game of one upmanship or a negative competitiveness vasana playing itself out?***

James: This is certainly the age of pop psychology and it is very fashionable to psychoanalyze people. In the old days people were busy surviving and did not have time for such frivolities. And when you are a public figure you are inviting projections. As far as the general public is concerned about a third think you are a saint and are happy to worship you, a third don't think anything and a third think you are a scoundrel and are happy to vilify you. I honestly do not care what people think. I am a good person. I live a righteous life. I help a lot of people and I happen to know what I am talking about. I have been a student of Vedanta for forty years. My teachers are the top Vedanta men in India, Swami Chinmayananda and Swami Dayananda. I am part of an ancient lineage. I invite any Neo-Advaita teacher to do dharma combat on the topic of moksa and how to attain it...specifically the way to attain it...assuming we can agree on a definition of moksa and have impartial rules so that it does not end up being just opinions. In the old days, the society reveled in debate, controversy. They had great debates that lasted weeks with all the different spiritual teachers taking on each other. Controversy is healthy.

Mind you there is nothing wrong with peace and harmony. I'm all for hugs and kisses and the warm fuzzy stuff. But there is this notion that spiritual life is about living up to some kind of ideal, living the life Christ or the Buddha and the like. The problem is that nobody knows what Christ and the Buddha were actually like. Everybody thought Mother Theresa was a saint until her letters were published posthumously and people who were out from under her thumb started pointing out certain, shall we say, 'flaws' in her personality. We are all damaged goods. There is a new book out on Ramana in which it is suggested that he was verbally abusive. Maybe he was and maybe he wasn't. I personally doubt it. But it has caused a big fuss in some circles because it contradicts the ideal, the myth we have about enlightened beings. They are supposed to be saints. They are supposed to usher in the Millennium when everyone will be walking around with halos over their enlightened heads hugging and kissing everyone. Is life like that? Was it ever like that? Will it ever be like that? Human beings are a mixed bag. They have wonderful qualities and not so wonderful qualities. Let them express themselves as they are.

***NDM: What about the belief that enlightened people are not judgmental or do not criticize others? That doing this only proves that one has "not arrived" yet?***

James: It is just a belief, but there is some value to it, particularly if you are attacking just to attack and do not have any logic to support your statements. But I do not think that enlightened people are any more important than rock stars or politicians. We are all playing some kind of roles in this Divine Comedy and no role is more important than any other. And people who speak out, like Jesus, had better be able to take the heat. The world of human beings is very beautiful and very ugly. It has always been this way. Trying to sweep the ugliness under the carpet is not helpful.

As far as I am concerned, nobody is getting anywhere. Things are just as they are. I actually believe that to say you are enlightened...that you have

'arrived' to use your words...should be cause for embarrassment and shame, not celebration. Why? Because you have always been awareness. When a morbidly obese person loses four hundred pounds he or she is heralded as an emblem of courage and accomplishment. But is going back to normal an accomplishment? What about the corruption that led the person so far astray in the first place? Enlightenment is not the gain of a special status, it is simply the removal of ignorance. Is this cause for celebration? It is not correct to say that you are enlightened or that you are unenlightened. Enlightenment has nothing to do with you. You are that because of which enlightenment is known.

***NDM: There seems to be a bit of a war going on, regarding Vedanta and neo advaita. For example, Tony Parsons said somewhere that Ramana Maharshi was still living from duality or words to that effect. Even self enquiry is often criticized and questioned For example this is from an interview with Jeff Foster.***

***Q: So, it's okay to continue to self enquire?***

***Jeff Foster: "Yes, if you find yourself engaged in that, then of course. If you find yourself self-enquiring or playing pool, then that's what's happening. All I found ultimately with self-enquiry was three words and a question mark: WHO, AM, I, and a question mark, that is all I found. All I found was the question and what was seen was that the question was already that, the question was just arising in This. It didn't need an answer, no question needs an answer. That is real Freedom."***

***NDM: What do you make of this teaching?***

James: Well, it is true from the self's point of view. But so what? This person does not seem to understand that self inquiry is much more than the question Who am I? That the Who am I question is just a clever sound bite that is meant to encapsulate a vast tradition of Vedic wisdom. Self inquiry

is not a question, because the answer is well known. The answer is “I am limitless non-dual ordinary actionless awareness.” But again, so what? This is something to be appreciated. The person who makes this statement is probably just making it for his own satisfaction, probably to make himself look enlightened or profound, although it is true from the self’s point of view. Self inquiry is a body of experienced based knowledge that, when applied to a qualified mind, gradually removes the doubts standing in the way of the full assimilation of the meaning of the statement, “I am awareness.”

***NDM: What are your thoughts on neo advaitas position on free will, dharma or karma?***

***1) There is no free-will.***

***James: It is true if you look at the individual from the point of view of the total mind. It is apparently un true from the point of view of the individual. Apparently untrue means that as long as you take yourself to be an apparent person, you are confronted with apparent choices in the apparent reality. From the self’s point of view there is neither free will nor the absence free will. It is illuminator of the idea of free will and no free will.***

***2) There is no dharma or karma (no good or bad, no natural order, and no consequences for one's actions)***

James: The same answer applies to these statements. This is a very good example of one of the serious limitations of Neo-Advaita. It does not take into account the apparent reality. It mindlessly denies the existence of experience. It is actually karma to say that there is no free will. If there is no karma, then how does this statement get made? And there is definitely a consequence to this person’s statement; I am explaining what is right and

wrong about it. If there is no consequence, then why is this person making the statement? He is making it because he wants a result. He wants us to think that what he says is the truth.

Let me try to explain it. I hope that some Neo-Advaita teacher with an open mind reads this and thinks about it because it would be immensely helpful, although it is only the first step to developing a serious means of enlightenment. You cannot say that the world does not exist or that it is unreal. Why? Because it is experienced. You have to exist to make that statement and you cannot deny your own existence. At the same time you cannot say that it is real either. Why? Because it does not last. The definition of reality is "that which is unborn and eternal." So what is the world with its free will and karma etc? It is apparently real. The word is mithya in Vedanta. It is one of the most important teachings and it is completely lost on the Neos.

What does mithya mean? It is real for you as long as you take yourself to be something other than awareness. If it is real for me, then I am going to need something more than the statement that it doesn't exist to make it apparently real for me. Speaking like this without the means to back it up is like asking people to believe in the tooth fairy.

In this very rudimentary discussion of an important topic I did not attack this person, although it may seem so. I have no idea who he is. He is just a name associated with an idea. I attacked the idea. I did not willy nilly slag it off and move on as if I was some kind of authority on the topic whose word should be taken as gospel. I gave the reasons why it was OK and why it was not OK.

***NDM: What about people that say things like karma, dharma and free will is in the mind, made up by some characters named Buddha, Christ, Krishna and Shankara in a story. That in essence it's all meaningless, futile, and hopeless and any meaning is simply in the mind and so on?***

James: This is an ignorant statement. It actually makes me laugh. But let's accept it. It says some old fuddy duddies cooked up karma, dharma etc and it is meaningless because it is only in the mind. Isn't the idea that it is meaningless only in the mind too? If that is true, how can we take it seriously?

Turning the mind into a villain is another of Neo-Advaita's extremely silly teachings. The mind is a very useful instrument when it contains knowledge that is in harmony with the nature of reality. When it is stuffed with ignorance it is definitely a problem. But you do not get rid of the problem by dismissing the mind. You cannot dismiss it. It is a fact. It is consciousness functioning in the apparent reality. You handle the mind by giving it discrimination so that it can separate what is real from what is apparent. You have to educate it, cultivate it. The instant enlightenment teaching of the Neos...transcend the mind, drop the mind, etc...is popular because it is meant to be 'instant.' I guess the idea is that you will just wander in to the satsang and 'get it.' Satsang is a great institution but the way it has evolved in the West is a parody of a proper satsang. At best it is a very skimpy and blunt tool that, because of its lack of methodology, only adds to the mind's confusion about the nature of enlightenment. It does not remove the supposed villain in the piece.

Vedanta is a complete science of enlightenment. It has a cosmology, a psychology and for want of a better term a theology. It has a plethora of methods for cultivating the mind...the yogas. It deals with values and ethics and love and every conceivable topic of interest to spiritually inclined human beings. All of human civilization, good and bad, was built by the mind. You cannot just contemptuously dismiss it and hope to be taken seriously. We owe a great debt of gratitude to the human mind.

Neo-Advaita picked up this teaching from traditional Vedanta. It is called neti neti, not this, not that. Basically, all that Neo-Advaita has is neti neti, but it is not actually properly understood by the teachers. Negating the mind can take you quite a way, but it cannot close the deal because the

denial of the apparent reality is not tantamount to the hard and fast realization "I am limitless non-dual ordinary actionless awareness." And the removal of the apparent is not accomplished by believing in this teaching, by mindless denial. It only comes about by intense self inquiry, applying inquiry to everything that happens in you on a moment to moment basis.

This apparent reality teaching is quite sophisticated and I cannot do it justice here. I deal with it carefully in my book.

***NDM: Here is another example on neo advaita and free will.***

***"There is no such thing as free will or choice, there is no doing or destiny, motive or purpose. The belief that there is a seeker (subject) who has the free will to choose to self-enquire in order to discover clarity (object) simply maintains the dreamer in the hypnotic dream of separation."***

James: This is another half truth masquerading as truth. It is true from the self's point of view. But if there is no seeker, there is also no one making this statement that there is no seeker. This contradicts experience. The one who is making this statement has exactly the same order of reality that the imaginary seeker that is being denied.

***NDM: In chapter one of your book, you talk about people chasing objects. Other people, love and so on and how this cannot bring lasting happiness. That human beings are essentially controlled, or governed as a result of their samskaras, vasanas, karma, habits, conditioning and so on.***

***If there are all these pre-existing conditions, how much true free will does a person who is not liberated have if almost everything they do or say is done on auto pilot or in a state of sleep walking?***

James: You have apparent choices in samsara and since you believe that samsara is real, they seem like real choices for you. In this case, if you feel a spiritual inclination, you should choose to follow it instead of worldly impulses. But you really don't have the choice to choose to be out of samsara altogether because you do not know there is another alternative.

At a certain time in the lives of certain people, however, you get a glimpse of another possibility, usually as a result of some kind of existential trauma. At this point you know there is another way to see things and at this point free will becomes real for you. But you still have to exercise it to work your way out of samsara. Because of lack of real knowledge many of the Neo-Advaita teachers...I won't name names...present the idea of determinism in such a way that a seeker can draw the conclusion that even the decision to do sadhana is predetermined and so the seeker conveniently uses the no-free will teaching as an excuse not to do anything for his or her enlightenment. If you do not exercise the free will you have to get out of samsara, according to the knowledge you have at any stage, 'grace' will not descend because the self, being non-coercive, will assume that the choice you exercised not to use your free will was your exercise of free will and it will leave you as you are suffering under the tyranny of your vasanas.

***NDM: How much free will does a person who is liberated have and what is the difference between a liberated persons free will and a non-liberated persons free will?***

James: The problem with this question is the idea that there is a liberated person. Liberation means liberation from the person. This means that you

know you are awareness. Awareness is always free of everything. So the idea of free will is not an issue for you.

But if you want to assume that liberation is something that some people have and other's don't, then a liberated person's free will is exercised without the belief that he or she will be changed as a consequence of the results flowing from the choices he or she makes. In other words, he or she will not be attached to the fruits of his or her actions, whereas an unenlightened person will be happy when the results are favorable and unhappy when they aren't. An enlightened person is happy with the self alone.

***NDM: Have you ever experienced nirvikalpa samadhi or other types of samadhi and can you explain how does samadhi help one to realize the true self.***

James: Yes. I have experienced every conceivable samadhi. Samadhi can be a great help, a 'raincloud of dharma' to quote Panchadasi or it can be a complete hindrance. It is useful for purifying the mind and preparing it for self knowledge. If you equate nirvikalpa Samadhi with liberation, you are really shooting yourself in the foot. It is a technical discussion and there is not time to go into it here. I go into it in my book, How to Attain Enlightenment. Second to the last chapter, I believe.

***NDM. When did you first experience nirvana and what was this like for you?***

James: It depends on what you mean by nirvana. We experience thousands of mini nirvanas through the year when our minds become resolved. So probably the day I popped out of the womb and suckled on my

mother's breast. There is a very nice sub-heading in the third section of Tripura Rahasya "On the uselessness of fleeting samadhis and the way to wisdom."

If you mean the 'big spiritual nirvana" again I can't recall, although the first time I had an orgasm probably qualifies.

Sorry for being purposely obtuse, but if you mean nirvalkapa Samadhi, it was in my thirtieth year. But then it would not be accurate to say that I experienced it, if you think I am a person, an experiencing entity, because in that nirvana you are not there to experience it as a person.

If you mean savikalpa Samadhi I experienced it unconsciously on and off for about three years from twenty six to about twenty eight. By unconsciously I mean I did not know what it was then but now that I do I can look back and see that did experience it. For the next two years I experienced it about 95% of the time. Since my guru erased the veil I am in savikalpa Samadhi all the time. It means nothing however, except continuous peace, because I am not actually 'in' Samadhi. Samadhi is 'in' me. In other words, it is an experience that appears in me, because the mind that I formerly thought was 'mine' is locked permanently on me.

***NDM. Can you please tell me about an epiphany that helped you to realize the self and do you believe it's possible to realize the self without some kind of an epiphany?***

James: Here is the passage from my autobiography, Mystic by Default, that describes it in detail.

“Since I am not an accomplished writer and cannot describe my feeling of self-loathing well, you will have to take it on faith that I finally hit bottom, my consciousness peppered with thoughts of suicide. Then, on a lovely tropical morning, after a drunken and debauched night with a woman whose husband was out of town, I` was sluggishly lumbering through the International Market Place on my way to the Post Office, the pavement glistening from a light morning shower, the sun playing hide and seek with big billowy clouds as the plumerias sprayed their erotic fragrance and gentle trade winds rattled the palm fronds. I noticed a jaunty old man, a vacationer or pensioner come to Hawaii to idly pass the sunset years, appropriately attired in Bermuda shorts, aloha shirt, tennies and a straw hat, perusing his mail as he ambled my way. As he got closer I realized we were on a collision course and sent a message to my feet to move left, but nothing happened! Panic stricken, I tried to move out of the way a second time but the body wouldn’t respond!

I had completely lost control.

A couple of seconds before impact the bodies stopped face to face and I heard a sweet voice speaking through me.

"Excuse me, sir, may I ask you a question?" it said.

Someone else had taken over!

Since I had no idea what the voice was about to say, I tried to apologize but the words wouldn’t come.

I wasn’t connected at the mouth either!

The old man looked up, unaware of my distress, a kind smile on his wrinkled face. "Yeah, sure, sonny, shoot."

Then the voice, flowing like nectar from a deep place within, resumed, "Out of curiosity, sir, how old do you think I am?"

Since I already knew the answer and didn’t have the slightest interest in the opinion of the doddering old codger, I was completely flabbergasted.

Certain that I was going mad, I ran frantically around inside my mind looking for the control panel but reality, which had a mind of its own, was completely uninterested.

The old man stepped back, pulled on his pipe, gave me the once-over, and judiciously replied, "Well, sonny, I'd say you're forty-three."

A long history of untruth meant I could spot a lie a mile away; he was deliberately underestimating my age to spare my feelings.

"Well, yes, thank you very much," the voice said sweetly.

"Don't mention it, sonny," he said, proceeding on his way.

I seriously considered the possibility I was losing my mind, but the experience was permeated with such a sense of clarity, I didn't indulge my fear. And then I regained control and proceeded toward my mailbox, the mind settling on the concerns of the day.

But as I entered the foyer I lost it again! Instead of proceeding into the Post Office proper as programmed, the body confidently turned left, entered the men's room and parked itself in front of a big mirror over the wash basins, eyes glued straight ahead, feet welded to the floor.

"Oh no, not again! Am I flipping out?" I thought anxiously.

But I wasn't going mad. I was having a good look, courtesy of God, at what I had become. I don't know how long I stood there, unable to move a muscle - perhaps a full five minutes - aware but unaware of the stares of the men coming and going, the flushing toilets and the irritating flicker of the neon light over the mirror. But it didn't matter because a brand new world had miraculously opened up, an inner world illumined by a powerful light in whose presence I saw every last bit of the sin and corruption that I was.

The moment of truth in the post office lifted a monstrous weight, like Saul on the road to Damascus. Though I still looked a wreck, overweight and run-down, my face etched with deep pain lines, I felt young again, inspired by the conviction that I might find an exit from my dark labyrinth. And for the

first time in my twenty-six years I realized there was a compassionate God.”

Is it possible to realize the self without an epiphany? Oh yes, definitely. Epiphanies can be very useful or they can be a complete impediment. In my experience about half the people who get moksa through Vedanta have not had an epiphany.

It is what kind of experiences you have had in life that matter. It is how you assimilate them, what they mean to you.

***NDM. Do you think there is a neurological aspect to enlightenment? For example some neuroscientists believe that there are changes in the right amygdala and the left hippocampus and other regions of the brain, such as the anterior commissure, a bundle of nerves connecting the two cerebral hemispheres.***

James: I don't know what they are trying to prove, but I bet that they are in the 'chemistry is destiny' camp. So the answer is no. However, the state of your mind, which is the result of your knowledge or ignorance, does have an impact on your cells.

Vedanta says that these people, who are materialists with a dualistic mentality, have got the cart before the horse. Consciousness causes matter, not the other way around, although as I suggested, there is a connection. But they are not equal principles. Matter is a subset of consciousness. Their view, which purposely ignores common sense, is that consciousness is a subset of matter.

***NDM: What was your experience like living in a cave with a python and your guru. Did you sleep on some kind of make shift bed, where did you get your food and water from?***

James: I slept on the sand wrapped in my dhoti. Sadhus and local kids brought me food and I sometimes walked to Laxman Jhoola to get it myself. I drank from the Ganges. My guru was downstream a couple of miles in his very comfortable ashram.

***NDM. Do you believe there is there such a thing as a third eye and is this connected to the pineal gland?***

James: I suppose you mean a physical third eye? You have to read Lobsang Rampa to find about about that . There is a chakra in the third eye location between and slightly above the eyebrows, but what it is meant to do I am not sure. In Vedanta we say that the scripture is the third eye. It is knowledge that cures the disease of ignorance that is the result of looking at the world with two eyes.

***NDM. What is your take on the chakra system and can one be enlightened if there are blockages or ethereal knots of some kind in the chakras? Such as Brahma Granthi, Vishnu Granthi and the Rudra Granthi?***

***Here is an email and my reply that deals with this question.***

***I have a question. When I was reading the book "Play of Consciousness" by Swami Muktananda...maybe you have read the book also...it caused a question. Swami is talking much about the Kundalini and the process of awakening that snake energy so it can get up through your chakra's. He is supposing that it is necessary to awaken the kundalini for getting enlightenment. I searched your Vedanta-CD and found little about it. Just in one of your satsangs you pointed something out which gave me some more insight. But while I already had the idea of laying the question at your feet, I still want to do. It might still help give me more stable view at the topic. On the CD you said, "The Self is everything and everything is the Self, so why bother working on kundalini? It will happen when it needs to happen, and when it doesn't happen it doesn't need to happen." Is that your answer? What use is it anyway?***

James: What does it mean to say that the kundalini is awakened? When most people think of kundalini they think of the incredible psycho-spiritual 'mystical' experiences that happen when the kundalini awakens and passes through the charkas on its way to union with Shiva. Additionally, people often believe that if these experiences do not happen in the way that they have read about them or heard about them from others that they will not get enlightened. So they take up certain practices that they believe should initiate the shakti and start this process in motion. As they are described these experiences are almost always incredible, fantastic, and exotic. Considering that most people feel sensation-starved the they are attracted by this kind of shakti sadhana.

But trying to wake up the kundalini is a little like the tail wagging the dog. If they happen...and it is not necessary that they do happen for enlightenment contrary to what Swami Muktananda says...they should be the result of the spontaneous awakening of the kundalini.

The kundalini does not awaken in the same way in every person. It often produces dramatic experiences but in most cases it does not. You can assume that your kundalini is awakened if you have an interest in religion, mysticism, meditation, etc. If you find yourself attracted to chanting, reading holy books, associating with spiritual people, going on pilgrimages, etc. then your kundalini is awakened. If you have experienced altered states of consciousness it means your kundalini is active.

What actually is the kundalini? It is the Self creating experiences that shake you up and cause you to seek answers to the basic existential questions: what is this world and who am I? The kundalini of everyone in the so-called 'spiritual' world is active to varying degrees; they all have had 'spiritual' or 'mystical' experiences that have caused them see the world and themselves in a different way. It is not giving you experiences just for the fun of it.

An awakened kundalini is not enlightenment. It just means that the mind has become somewhat subtle and can now experience 'inner' states, not just sense objects, emotions and thoughts. These inner experiences are of every imaginable type, positive and negative, gross and subtle. The type of experience that an individual has depends on the nature of his or her vasanas when the kundalini wakes up. What cause her to wake up? Usually the person has had enough worldly experience. They are fed up with the world, bored perhaps. They know there is nothing in it but they don't know where to go. The Self is awaiting for this to happen. When it does it illumines the latent vasanas for spiritual experience and something dramatic happens...one's life starts to flow in a different direction.

There is nothing mystical about the 'chakras.' They are just general categories of experience. For example sexual energy means that the kundalini is associated with the root charka and this causes creativity and

sexual desire, is a gross desire for union. An experience of great power means that the kundalini is associated with the manipura chakra. An experience of universal love means that the kundalini is associated with the heart chakra, the anahata. And so on. Spiritual literature is full of these experiences. You may have read "Mystic by Default," my autobiography. In it there are many 'kundalini' experiences. In fact every experience that we have, inner or outer is kundalini, the Self in the form of matter and energy. It is important for a spiritual person not to turn the idea of kundalini into a big romantic fascination. Ninety nine percent of people, Eastern and Western, who are practicing 'kundalini' yoga are not qualified for kundalini sadhana and will not see it through to the end. In fact most of the 'kundalini' sadhanas you find in the West are not proper kundalini sadhana at all. The kundalini symbolism is very beautiful and very dramatic and mysterious and so people are attracted to it. It has become a fashion now and almost completely corrupted by the Westerners.

Enlightenment is the knowledge "I am the Self, limitless awareness." It is the hard and fast knowledge that all my experiences are me but I am something more than my experiences, subtle and gross. Kundalini Yoga says the enlightenment is the union of shakti and shiva, the energy of Consciousness, the Self, with Pure Consciousness. So the next question is: what is this 'union?' Supposedly it is an experience in which the subject and the object 'become' one. This tempts us to ask: what is this 'becoming?' A 'becoming' means that something that was in one form before changes into another form. To use the yogic metaphor, the individual soul that 'merges' into the universal soul. In short, something limited inadequate and incomplete 'becomes' limitless adequate and whole. This is all very fine as an idea but it presents a very real problem: experience, 'becoming' is subject to change. It never stops changing. This means that there is no such thing as a 'permanent experience.'

So what happens is that the person who 'became' the Self, 'unbecomes' the Self after the experience of union has run its course. This is what one might call 'temporary' Self realization. These temporary Self realizations or ephiphanies are useful in so far as they give the experiencer an idea that there is a Self (Shiva) and maybe some insight into its nature. But, if the person believes that enlightenment is the 'permanent experience of the Self' he or she will simply develop a vasana for Self experience by practicing a sadhana designed to produce Self experience. There are many sadhanas beside kundalini sadhana that give experience of the Self. In fact sports, accidents, sex, and many fear related activities produce Self experience. Any practice that you do with great faith, concentration, and devotion will awaken the kundalini and produce a 'spiritual' experience. But you should know that if something wakes up it will definitely go back to sleep. This is karmic law. This is why you have so many frustrated people in the spiritual world. However, if you pursue the sadhana that awakens kundalini with incredible intensity, day and night without a break, forgoing every worldly attachment and desire, the mind, which is what is waking up, will eventually become so energized with shakti that it will only fall back to sleep for very short periods. This is important because most of the time it is in direct contact with the Self and this is desirable if you want Self knowledge. This is why the yoga shastras encourage the pursuit of a sattvic mind. Remember, the Self is not awake because it was never asleep. It is the awareness of waking and sleep. It is the knower of the mind. It is the knower of the kundalini. So as the Self you are already beyond the kundalini. It will not turn you into the Self...I think this is what people believe. They think they will be 'transformed' into the Self, like a larva becomes a butterfly...but this is just imagination.

Nonetheless, this sadhana is so severe that only one person in ten million can practice it successfully. The desire for liberation has to be one hundred percent. If you have even a small attachment to your body or to worldly things it will not work.

Vedanta questions the whole idea underlying yoga. It says that the problem with this 'union' idea is: anything that was caused by action, karma, will only last for a finite time. When the energy that generated the experience plays out the experience ends and one returns to a state of separation, limitation and incompleteness. Kundalini is a karmic force. It is the Self operating in time. It may lead you to the Self or it may lead you far away. It may even cause madness in people who are weak minded. Much of the mild insanity you see in spiritual people is caused by their inability to integrate their spiritual experiences into everyday life. So the kundalini, the energy of the Self, is a very mixed bag and not something to be sought after. If it comes, it comes and you must learn how to deal with it. But rather than cultivate it, it is better to cultivate devotion for God. Yes, bhakti is a dualistic path, just like kundalini, but cultivating love for the Self in some form is more natural than forcing the body and mind to do a lot of very complicated and potentially dangerous practices. Vedanta says that experiential sadhanas may purify the mind but they will not produce enlightenment. This is so because enlightenment is the removal of Self ignorance. Experience will not remove ignorance. Only the knowledge that arises with experience can do that. If you don't know this you can have all sorts of amazing mystical experience and be as Self ignorant as an animal.

Vedanta says that there are not two separate selves that must become one. It says that there is only one Self that has been misunderstood to be two or many. Now, who is it that misunderstands that he or she is separate from the Self? Is it the kundalini? It is not the kundalini, the shakti, because the kundalini is not conscious. Activated by the Self it moves, it changes and causes all sorts of things to happen but it does not know anything. It has (is) a strong feeling that it is missing something and so it works its way through many experiences (the charkas) seeking for freedom from this sense of limitation. This is not a conscious seeking. It is trial and error. Sometimes it goes into a positive experience (Pingala nadi) and sometimes it goes into a negative experience (ida nadi) (I may have these names reversed). And it can get stuck in an experience which is very pleasureable or very painful. That it gets stuck indicates that it is ignorant, unconscious.

It foolishly clings to pleasureable experiences because it doesn't realize that experience is changeable and that the pleasure will eventually disappear. When it gets stuck in a painful experience, this shows that it doesn't have discrimination or it would have avoided the experience in the first place. Discrimination is the most important function of consciousness. Without it you cannot function in this world nor can you separate the pure Self from the moving Self, the kundalini shakti. Kundalini is just a force, a power, an energy. It is not real. The Self alone is real. Yes, the kundalini is the Self but the Self is not (only)the kundalini.

So who is it that takes his or herself to be limited? Who is it that wants to erase this sense of limitation and is therefore open to the seductive message of kundalini yoga? The common answer is that it is the ego. But Vedanta says there are not two selves, a higher enlightened Self and a lower ignorant ego Self. There is only one Self.

Now we come to the most difficult thing to understand. If there is only one Self and this Self always knows who it is, i.e. that it is limitless and whole and therefore does not need any particular experience to erase its sense of limitation and make it whole, how can it forget who it is?

Vedanta says that it can't forget but that it can forget. Or to put it another way it says that there is only one Self, pure Awareness, and that this Self is capable of both knowledge and ignorance. It would not be limitless if it were unable to be ignorant. This capability of being two opposite things at once is called Maya. The definition of Maya is: that which is not. You can see the problem in the definition. How can something that is not, be? Well, strangely, it can.

Now the question that arises with reference to the process of experience, which we can call kundalini, is: does the experience of union with the Self erase ignorance and produce knowledge? Knowledge means that you understand that you are whole, complete, limitless and free. And the answer is that it may produce knowledge and it may not produce knowledge. Whether it produces knowledge or not depends on what you think enlightenment is. If you think enlightenment is the permanent experience of the Self then you will not 'get enlightened.' You will experience oneness, wholeness, and limitlessness for a time and that experience will wear off and you will then experience duality, incompleteness and limitation once again. This is why kundalini yoga and all the other yogas rarely bring about enlightenment.

But it is possible for yogis to get enlightened if they develop inquiring minds as a result of their spiritual experiences. When the experience of oneness happens one needs to remain alert and try to determine what one is actually experiencing. This is what Vedanta calls inquiry. If you are trained to observe and draw the correct conclusions from your observations you will see that the 'oneness' that you are experiencing is you, not some incredible state of consciousness, unless you understand that incredible state of consciousness to be you, the seer, the experiencer. If you understand that what you are experiencing is you, you have freed yourself of experience. You never have to practice yoga again. Why? Because when are you not you? How far are you from you?

What kind of knowledge is it? It is immediate 'experiential' knowledge. This means that when ignorance tries to rise up and tell you that you are missing something and you see your desires being activated, you have a good laugh and can let the whole process of desire die before it produces karma. It means you are the master of your mind, not the other way around.

Is it possible to 'attain' enlightenment without an awakened kundalini as it is presented in the kundalini shastras? Yes, absolutely. Is it common. Enlightenment according to Vedanta is the removal of Self ignorance brought about by the understanding that the Self is limitless actionless awareness and that I am that Self. I have met perhaps twenty enlightened people whose kundalini was not active in that it was not producing mind altering inner experiences. I have also met at least one hundred people who were having intense kundalini experiences...sometimes for many years...and who were actively seeking ways to turn the experience off...since it completely disrupts one's life. You won't be able to accomplish anything solid or real in the world with this going on. It is too disturbing and it often has a strong negative impact on the people you come in contact with. You say and do things that make normal people think you are nuts. And in a way you are. The spiritual world is full of people who have had it going on for varying periods and it does not rise up and 'mate' with Shiva. It just bounces around in the chakras. Shakti sadhanas can be very dangerous without the right teacher and the right karmic situation.

It is also important to know that kundalini does not generate the same experiences for everyone. It generates the experiences that are necessary to stimulate inquiry. Certain people have developed very subtle minds as a result of the way they have lived. So for these people the Self as kundalini awakens inquiry, leads them to a jnani, and their ignorance is removed by the non-dual teachings. Their enlightenment is in no way inferior to the people who have realized who they are during or after an intense kundalini sadhana. Enlightenment is enlightenment; it has nothing to do with the way it came about. Ramana, for example, did not practice kundalini sadhana although his kundalini was obviously active; it produced his 'death' experience. He is an example of a yogi who had an inquiring mind and practiced vichara, Self inquiry, not kundalini sadhana.

Muktananda does say that enlightenment can only come through kundalini sadhana but he knew that this was not true. He was very smart about psychology and he was trying to build a big religion...Siddha Yoga...and it does not help to give people too eclectic a view of enlightenment...it just confuses them...so you say it is the only way. It is very much like the Christians who say Jesus is the only way. Well, Jesus may be 'a' way but the only way? I don't think so. The same with Kundalini. It may work...there is no sense putting it down...but I would bet my bottom dollar that of all the enlightenments that happened since the beginning of time not more than one or two percent were the result of a classic kundalini sadhana. Look at all the great enlightened people that have come out of Buddhism and other paths...and they are not talking kundalini.

The truth is that everyone is basically in love with experience and this is all we have to our credit when we awaken. But experience is only as good as one's ability to understand it. So when you begin consciously searching you are naturally drawn to yoga because it promises a spectacular experience that is supposed to solve all problems. In a way this is true but in another way it is not true.

What should happen when you take up an experiential sadhana like kundalini is that your mind should become subtle and inquiry should start to happen. But what usually happens is that you get addicted to experience. You want to meditate all day and go into trances and have transcendental experiences. You want to hang out with powerful gurus and get shaktipat, etc. And so you build up a vasana for experience and you fantasize the big one...enlightenment...which you always imagine is just around the corner. It's like going to Las Vegas and pulling the long arm of one of those big slot machines. You pay and pull and pay and pull and in your mind every minute you are waiting for the big Ka-Ching! and a flood of money to bury you. It never happens. All that happens is that you get a big experience vasana.

Question: How do you see kundalini and trying to work with that in relation to Vedanta and Self-knowledge. "The Self is everything and everything is the Self, so why bother with working on kundalini? It will happen when it needs to happen, and when it doesn't happen it doesn't need to happen". Is that your answer? But what is the use of it anyway?

Ram: I would not advise 'working on kundalini.' Vedanta says that kundalini is just another name for the Self. So everything is already kundalini. Every experience you have is kundalini, the shakti. Why limit it to a particular set of experiences or a particular process? You can have all sorts of amazing experiences and never learn anything about who you are and you can also have very boring ordinary experiences and suddenly understand who you are ... because you were thinking clearly. If you had a certain experience and you found yourself walking out of the house without saying goodbye to your family and getting on a plane that was going somewhere and when you got off you met a strange man in a café who invited you home and you started to spontaneously perform kriyas and have visions and felt amazing things taking place within yourself then that would be kundalini and you would be into it and there would be no question of 'working on it.' It is not something you work on. It is something that happens. And it is not something that needs to happen. So don't long for it and imagine that you are spiritually incomplete unless you have had it happen. I had it happen and it all stopped many years ago and I am very happy that it all stopped.

You - the Self - are the source of the energy. Without you there is no energy. You are not this little body/mind instrument that perks up with the influx of energy and wilts when the energy leaves. Kundalini is a very fickle bitch. She is completely unfaithful and inconstant. One minute she is seducing you and driving you wild with passion and the next minute she

abandons you without so much as a by-your-leave and you end up angry and depressed. Aim for shanti, it beats shakti every time.”

***NDM: Can someone be enlightened/liberated if their Sahasrāra (Crown Chakra) is not opened?***

James: Yes, of course. This presupposes that enlightenment is some kind of special experience that depends on certain conditions. Enlightenment is the nature of the self, meaning it is the nature of everyone. The question of enlightenment can be solved very simply when you understand this. As I said above, it does not depend on your experience. It depends on how you assimilate or interpret your experience. If you understand the value of understanding and how ignorance works and you expose your mind to a valid means of knowledge like Vedanta, that is all that is required for moksa. Westerners have almost no idea of the great Vedanta sampradaya and of the many people that gain enlightenment through it.

***NDM: Buddhism has the eightfold path that addresses moral issues. such as right view, speech, thoughts, conduct, occupation, concentration, mindfulness and so on. What does Vedanta have to say on moral and ethical issues such as these?***

James: It agrees with Buddhism completely on these issues as indirect and secondary means of enlightenment.

***NDM: What are your thoughts on other paths of enlightenment like Buddhism, Sufism, and Christian Gnosticism? Do you believe that they all lead to the same place?***

James: I don't have any beliefs. I do not know. I fell into Vedanta when I was very young. It finished my search and I have had no interest in other paths. They may work. I have met many enlightened people all over the world who did not come through any of the traditional means. In the end, it is an individual thing. If you are completely fed up with samsara and you earnestly strive to be free, the self will see to it that you realize who you are irrespective of your karmic situation. Why? Because it is actually the self waking up to itself and it its will cannot be denied.

***NDM: What is the difference between sin and negative karma?***

James: None, in practice. The word 'sin' means to miss the mark. It means that when you take the self to be the body/mind entity, you have missed the mark. That is to say, you failed to see yourself as you are, as awareness. When this happens you make many dumb choices that lead to inappropriate and untimely actions which fructify as unpleasant experiences.

***NDM: What is the difference between Khrisna, Christ and Buddha consciousness?***

James: It depends on what you mean by consciousness. Krishna, Christ and Buddha were supposedly people that realized they were consciousness but we have no way of knowing whether they did or not because they are not here to testify to their realization. Vedanta says that there is only consciousness appearing in many forms. So in that sense they are just forms of consciousness who supposedly realized that they were consciousness.

***NDM: What about attaining knowledge from the self through gnosis, insight and not just from external sources such as gurus or teachers.***

James: Yes, indeed. There is no one way. It can happen in any way. It is not really up to the person because there really isn't someone other than the self. So when, for whatever reason, the self gets fed up living in an ignorant form, it will wake up and realize who it is irrespective of the situation. Because I have been more or less sheltered in the great Vedanta sampradaya and know of many of the many successful inquiries in that world I have not...until about six or seven years ago when I put up shiningworld...had much knowledge of enlightenment outside of the tradition. But the website attracts maybe eight or ten enlightened people a year. I almost always manage to get their stories and it turns out that it does happen quite frequently outside of any established tradition...all over the world. Some make perfect or near perfect scores on my enlightenment quiz.

***NDM: Doesn't the Self, the sat guru, also shine light on the ignorance of the mind?***

James: I'm not sure what the import of the question is. Perhaps you are implying that nothing needs to be done, that the self will just do it without any outside assistance? Yes, it can. But the problem with this argument is that the self is not a person who is suffering under the spell of ignorance. It is the illuminator of ignorance. And it is just as happy with ignorance as it is with knowledge. It views everything equally. It does not need to enlighten itself because it is already enlightened.

If it suffers under the spell of apparent ignorance and thinks it is a suffering person, it will have to invoke itself (see how silly this sounds...but that's

Maya!) to generate an awakening. Usually the best way for it to do this is to 'hit bottom.' That gets its attention and starts the process of evolution. A proper teacher and a valid teaching is helpful because not everyone has the purity and maturity to inquire and remove his or her own ignorance. Many people do 99% of the work on their own and then show up at the feet of a teacher for the finale. This type is well suited for Vedanta and can finish the search in a very short time.

***NDM: Isn't the self the source of infinite knowledge, and intelligence?***

James: The self in its capacity as Isvara, God, is infinite knowledge, and intelligence. It has all qualities. But if reality is non-dual, then there is no such thing as the creation and no knowledge, power, desire, etc. These things apparently exist as long as ignorance is operating, but the self is free of them. So it is "beyond" God, beyond the limitless creation. It is that because of which limitlessness and limitation are known. You cannot actually say what it is or that it is the source of anything.

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