

# The Teachings of Ramana Maharshi



A few years ago, I was interviewed by a friend, Premananda, at my flat in Tiruvannamalai behind Ramanashram, about the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, one of India's greatest sages and presently the most famous symbol of self inquiry in the West. While examining some of Ramana's teachings, I have tried to introduce the reader to the spiritual context of Ramana's enlightenment, because most Westerners, in spite of their appreciation of and devotion to Ramana, have almost no appreciation of it. The centerpiece of this interview is an in-depth analysis of Ramana's enlightenment experience.

Premananda: I have some quotations from Ramana's teachings that I have been thinking about and I would like your take on them. After saying that the self is existence, consciousness and bliss, Ramana is asked "When will the realization of the self be gained?" and he replies, "When the world which is what is seen has been removed, there will be realization of the self, which is the seer."

James: Let me give you a little background on Ramana's statements. There are two great traditions under the umbrella of Vedic culture: Yoga and Vedanta—the science of self inquiry. Yoga deals with the experiential side of spiritual life and is for the purpose of purifying the mind. It is not a valid means for self knowledge, because its stated aim is a particular type of experience called *samadhi*. Yogis sometimes attain enlightenment because they develop curiosity about consciousness, the self, as a result of the subtle experiences their practices generate. They may intuitively draw the correct conclusion about the self and their identity as consciousness during one of their *samadhis*, like Ramana did during his death experience. Or they may gain enlightenment by reflecting on their experiences over a period of time.

Many have epiphanies similar to Ramana's. But almost no one becomes enlightened during a particular experience, because the meaning of the experience or the significance of the one to whom the experience is occurring is not assimilated. The hard and fast understanding "I am the self" needs to come out of self experience to set you free.

The question "when will the realization of the self be gained" is a typically yogic question. Yoga is for doers, achievers. The questioner believes the self is something that is not available all the time, something to be gained. It is natural to want what you do not have, if you think it will benefit you in some way. One of the meanings of the word *yoga* is "to obtain." Obviously, you can only obtain something you do not already possess.

Vedanta, the science of self inquiry, contends that the self cannot be gained at some time in the future, as a result of action. It is a path of understanding and employs a language of identity. For example, it says, "You are consciousness." Notice that this sentence is not an injunction. It is a statement of fact. It says that the self cannot be gained, because you are the self already. If there is anything to gain, it will be self knowledge. Self knowledge is only a loss of ignorance, not a gain of the self.

In any case, Ramana's response is in harmony with traditional Vedanta. Ramana had the greatest respect for the knowledge enshrined in the science of self inquiry. Contrary to the notion in vogue today concerning the irrelevance of the ancient tradition of Vedanta, he was very scripturally astute. He even

wrote a scripture, *Upadesha Saram*, which has been granted the status of an Upanishad by the traditional Vedanta community, a great honor.

This teaching is called the discrimination between the subject—the seer—and the seen—the objects. It establishes the understanding that what you see—meaning experience, including all mystic experiences—is “not-self.” The one who sees them is you, the self. He says that you will realize who you are, meaning understand that you are the self, when you have separated the seer, you, from what you experience.

One thing I admire about Ramana was that he refused, unlike many modern teachers, to cook up a fancy personal teaching on the subject of self realization. His statements were in harmony with the scriptures on Yoga or Vedanta. Even though Ramana died a half century ago, he was a very “modern” sage, if you consider the fact that the Vedic spiritual tradition is thousands of years old.

Why did he refuse to do so? Because no modern teaching is required. The whole enlightenment business was worked out a long time ago. Enlightenment is a simple understanding of the self and its relationship to experience, the ego-experiencer, and the forms the ego experiences. In a nutshell, it is the understanding that while the forms depend on the self, the self does not depend on the forms. This freedom from attachment to experience is called *moksha*, liberation. It is not something you obtain. It is something you are. The operative words in his response (“When the world which is what is seen has been removed, there will be realization of the self, which is the seer”) are “has been removed.” What kind of removal is it? Does the complete destruction of the unconscious tendencies, *vasanas*, allow you to gain the self? Or is enlightenment the removal of the notion that the world is separate from the self?

In Ramanā’s teachings you will find both ideas. The word *world* is actually a psychological term. It does not mean the physical world. The physical world, in so far as it is actually physical, is the self. It is impersonal. No individual created it and no individual is going to remove it. But the world that Ramana says must be removed is that of the psychological projections that make up an individual’s personal world. These projections are based on a belief that the self is separate, inadequate or incomplete.

Ramana's teaching is not Ramana's teaching. It is called *vichara*, inquiry, and goes back several thousand years. The purpose of inquiry is knowledge, not the physical removal of the mind. If he had been teaching Yoga as a means of liberation, he would not have encouraged inquiry, because Yoga is committed to the experience of samadhi, not understanding that one is the self.

Premananda: This is interesting. I never heard it stated this way before. But I thought the goal was sahaja samadhi.

James: Contrary to conventional wisdom, the samadhis are not the final goal. *Sama* means equal and *dhi* is a contracted form of *buddhi*, intellect. So it means a mind that values everything equally. *Sahaja* means continuous and natural, so it is a mind that has continuous non-dual vision. Perhaps you can gain this kind of mind by the long and difficult practice of Ashtanga Yoga. I don't know. But why go to all this trouble, when you actually have this samadhi naturally all the time, without doing a lick of work.

Premananda: Oh, how is that?

James: As the self. Self realization is not continuous, because the self is out of time, but it is natural to the self. It is your nature.

Anyway, no samadhi is equivalent to enlightenment, because samadhis are only states of mind or no mind, no mind being a state of mind. Samadhi helps purify the mind by burning subconscious tendencies and is a great aid to inquiry, but if you remove the mind, how will you make an inquiry? Who will make an inquiry? You make an inquiry with the mind for the mind, so it can shed its ignorance and no longer trouble you. The mind is a very useful God-given instrument. Would God have given us a mind if He had intended for it be destroyed? And in fact, Yoga isn't about killing the mind either, because how will you experience a samadhi if you don't have a mind? The mind is the instrument of experience.

If you argue that you are aiming at nirvikalpa samadhi where there is no mind, fine. Unfortunately, a fly landing on your nose can bring you out of

nirvikalpa samadhi, not that there is anyone there to come out of it. And when the “you” who wasn’t there does come back, as I just mentioned, you are just as self ignorant as you were before. Why? Because you were not there in the samadhi to understand that the samadhi is you. If you are the samadhi, you will have it all the time, because you have you all the time. Therefore, there will be no anxiety about making it continuous or permanent.

Premananda: OK. You’re saying that samadhi is not the goal, that it is just the means?

James: Yes. Not *the* means. *A* means. There are many other ways to purify the mind. Misunderstanding this teaching is perhaps responsible for more despair, confusion and downright frustration for seekers than any other. It is commonly believed that all the vasanas need to be physically eradicated for enlightenment to happen. And many people believe that Ramana had achieved that *extraordinary* state. It may be extraordinary, but it is not enlightenment.

If you study Ramana’s life, you will see that by and large he was a very regular guy, head in the clouds, feet firmly planted on the earth. He walked, talked, cooked, read and listened to the radio. I love the story of him returning to the ashram at one in the afternoon, to see a sign saying the ashram was closed from noon until two pm. What did he do? He sat down outside and waited for it to open. If he did not have a mind, who or what was doing all these things? No vasanas means no mind, because the vasanas are the cause of the mind. How did he go about the business of life? So I think we need to look at the word *removal* in a different way.

Ramana was called a *jnani*, a knower of the self, because he had removed the idea of himself as a doer—it is called *sarva karma sannyasa*—which happens when you realize you are the self. Or you realize you are the self when you realize you are not the doer. “Not the doer” means the self. It doesn’t mean that the ego becomes a non-doer. The ego is always a doer. As the self, he understood that while the few non-binding vasanas he had left were dependent on him, he was not dependent on them. How can a thought or a feeling affect the self? For a person who thinks he or she is the doer, allowing the vasanas to express

or not is not an option. Actions happen uncontrollably because the ego is pressurized to act in a certain way by the *vasanas*. They happen without the will of an enlightened person too, but acting on them is entirely elective.

So the removal that Ramana talks about is only in terms of understanding. He often uses another metaphor that he borrowed from Vedanta, the snake and the rope. In the twilight, a weary, thirsty traveler mistook the well rope attached to a bucket for a snake and recoiled in fear. When he got his bearings and his fear subsided, he realized that the snake was actually only the rope. There was no reason to take a stick and beat the snake to death, which is equivalent to trying to destroy the mind, because the snake was only a misperception. When he calmed down and regained his wits, he inquired into the snake and realized that it was just a rope. And in that realization the snake was removed.

Premananda: My understanding is that he meant the removal of all the attachments to our conditioned mind.

James: That was because he understood he was the self. The way you lose attachment all at once is to understand you are the self.

Premananda: It is often called "a constant experience."

James: Sure, but the self is "constant experience" anyway. Or put it this way, if this is a non-dual reality and this reality is the self, then each and every experience is the self. So nobody is short of self experience, the ignorant and the enlightened alike. The problem is that very few people understand that everything is the self. So they seek all these incredible self experiences.

Premananda: The self is a constant experience?

Ram: No, the self is "constant experience" if there is such a thing. In fact "constant experience" is a contradiction with reference to the self, although experience is constant in the apparent reality. The self becomes experience, but it

does not sacrifice its nature as a non-doing, non-experiencing witness to do it. This means you are free of your experiences. Let's put it a better way: experience is the self, but the self is not experience.

Premananda: When one says "constant experience," would that mean remembering the self constantly?

James: Remembrance is helpful up to a point. But you can never make remembrance constant. Knowledge is constant. When self knowledge takes place, you no longer chase experience, thinking it will complete you. Remembering is a mental activity that implies forgetting. Once you know you are the self, there is nothing to remember any more. How can you remember what you are? You are the one who is doing the remembering. You are prior to the act of remembrance. You cannot forget, because you are always present. If you were somewhere else or someone else, you could forget.

Premananda: The next question Ramana is asked is "Will there not be realization of the self, even while the world is there (taken as real)?" He replies, "There will not be."

James: If I do not take the world to be real, I will not seek happiness in it. When I seek happiness in the world, I expect it to fulfill me, but there is no lasting fulfillment in the world because the things in the world do not last. I want the objects that give me happiness to last when things are going well and I expect them not to last when things are going poorly. But life does not care how things are going for me.

Ramana was a wise man because he removed his self ignorance. I don't think he sat there all day, trying to break his attachments. I would think that because he was so young when he woke up, his vasanas were not entrenched. Indian culture was pretty pure in those days and he came from a decent family, so he did not have deep negative attachments, like sex and money and so on.

Premananda: Yes, when you think of a teenage boy sitting for long hours in samadhi in the temple, he must have been taken care of, so the people there

recognized him, to some extent. But how about him? Would he really know what is happening to him? He never read any spiritual books, never had a teacher, and is sitting there for hours.

James: That's a good question. He probably did know because there were mahatmas running about, role models if you will. So he knew how they lived, and probably got help from the sadhus whom he came in contact with. The Indian spiritual scene is a vast network. Word of someone's enlightenment gets around very fast. Many great men must have shared certain things that would be helpful. After all, he was sitting at the hub of one of India's most holy sites, Arunachala, which has been attracting mahatmas for thousands of years.

I stayed with a great mahatma in Kerala, Swami Abhedananda, who was a guru's guru. Many enlightened people came to see him and he would invite them up to his room and I'm sure everyone benefitted. Many of the Westerners who come to India, even those who have been here a long time and who have been associated only with the "export" gurus, often have peculiar notions about saints like Ramana. They believe that he was a kind of lonely figure, the only one of his kind, head and shoulders above the crowd, lived in a cave like a hermit who sat in silence most of the time, and didn't have a social life. He probably was quite distant and emotionally reserved like most Tamil men, but he had love in spades and if you have love, people come and give you what you need.

And then, too, you have to understand that his sense of himself being the self never left him, so he wouldn't be that concerned about his emotional needs. And finally, self knowledge is not something that you have any doubt about, if it is the real thing. You just know.

Premananda: Did he know the self?

James: Yes. He may have thought of it as an object at first, which is natural. It's hard to tell and it really doesn't matter, although the Ramana devotees bristle at the notion that the reason he sat in the caves alone was to erase whatever sense of duality there was left in his understanding. To me that only adds to



his glory, if it is true. But then enlightenment will come only to a very mature person, regardless of his age. Usually, the self appears first as an object and then, when one keeps the mind on the self and repeatedly inquires into it, the bedrock understanding eventually comes that one is the self that one is enquiring into. This is certainly what he taught. And he taught it with authority that is based on personal experience. But it really doesn't matter because he realized who he was and was a fine example of a realized soul, unlike so many of these modern people claiming enlightenment.

The problem of language comes in at this level. He uses the language of experience more than he does the language of identity. If you read the statement describing his enlightenment experience in the temple, you get the sense that he knew he was it, perhaps a little vaguely in the beginning, but more clearly as time passed. Again, it is very difficult to tell from the words.

It is probably not correct to say that he knew the self. It is more accurate to say he knew he was the self. That is the meaning of the word *Ramana*.

Premananda: That seems like a very subtle distinction.

James: It is, but there is a world of difference. To say that you know the self means that you see the self as an object, as something separate. To say that you are the self means that there is no duality in your experience or understanding of yourself. Let's talk about his famous enlightenment experience now. I think it can shed light on this subject of what knowing the self actually is.

Premananda: Yes. It's right here. I copied it from the board in the Mother's Shrine.

I felt I was going to die and that I had to solve the problem myself, there and then. The shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards and I said to myself mentally without forming the words "Now death has come, what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies." And I at once dramatized the occurrence of death. I lay with my

limbs stretched out still as though rigor mortis had set in and imitated a corpse so as to give greater reality to the inquiry. I held my breath and kept my lips tightly closed so that no sound could escape so that neither the word *I* nor any other word could be uttered. "Well then," I said to myself, "the body is dead. It will be carried stiff to the burning ground and there reduced to ashes. But with the death of the body am I dead? Is the body "I"? It is silent and inert, but I could feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the "I" within me, apart from it. So I am spirit transcending the body. The body dies but the spirit that transcends it cannot be touched by death. That means that I am the deathless spirit." All this was not a dull thought. It flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought process.

"I" was something very real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with my body was centered on that "I." From that moment onwards the "I" or "self" focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination. Fear of death had vanished once and for all. Absorption in the self continued unbroken from that time on. Other thoughts might come and go like the various notes of music but the "I" continued like the fundamental *sruti* note that underlies and blends with all other states. Whether the body was engaged in talking, reading, or anything else I was still centered on the "I." Previous to that crisis I had felt no perceptible or direct interest in it, much less any inclination to dwell permanently in it.

James: First, this is a typical self experience. It, or something like it, happens somewhere to someone every day. Remember that lovely piece of writing by Wren Lewis that you gave me—the guy who got poisoned in Thailand and had what is now called a "near death experience"?

Premananda: Yes, that would be another interesting one to talk about.

James: It certainly would. My point is that there is a vast literature of these kinds of experiences. First, let's take the statement, "the shock of the fear of death drove my mind inwards."

The mind was previously facing the world. Now it is looking inwards.

Next we have Ramana's reaction to the experience. This is important because it reveals the nature of Ramana's mind very clearly. Ordinarily, when we have intense experiences involving great pleasure or great pain, our emotions take over and cloud our appreciation of the experience. We either get so frightened we cannot report what happened accurately, or we get so ecstatic we cannot report what happened accurately. But Ramana stayed cool as a cucumber. He says, "Now death has come, what does it mean? What is it that is dying? This body dies."

I mentioned earlier that Vedanta is concerned with meaning. Here you have an inquiring mind, one not fascinated by the experience, seeking to understand the experience. Although the majority of the people coming to Tiruvannamalai are experience-happy, quite a few have this kind of mind to some degree. They want to know. But very few have it to the degree that Ramana did. This shows that he was a lover of knowledge.

And using logic he draws the right conclusion, "This body dies." Already we can see by implication that he knows he is other than the body. He has completely objectified it. Then he dramatizes it "to give greater reality to the inquiry." The rest of his musings up to "it is silent and inert" are further confirmation of his understanding that he is not the body.

Next we come to the realization of the self. This is the positive side—what happens when the world is negated. He says, "but I could feel the full force of my personality and even the voice of the 'I' within me, apart from it." The word *personality* is quite interesting. I don't know if this was an accurate translation of Ramana's words. But what he probably meant was the *jivatman*, the self embodied as an individual. I'm sorry to use these fancy Sanskrit terms, but there is simply no English equivalent. The self is unembodied, but it is capable of embodiment. It is called the *jivatman*. OK, we can call it the soul or

the person, but it is not quite right because it throws up too many imprecise associations.

So now he is aware of the dead body and the subtle body, what is called the personality, and “even the voice of the ‘I’ within me, apart from it.” You see the whole structure of the self in this experience. Then, he concludes correctly, “So I am spirit transcending the body.” He has answered the “Who am I?” question, which up to this point he had never even considered.

And then the icing on the cake, he describes self knowledge. “All this was not a dull thought. It flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought process.”

When you have any experience, the knowledge of that experience arises in the mind. This knowledge needs to be grasped, owned, if you will. In this case, he witnessed the knowledge “flashing vividly through me as living truth.” This should quiet the people who say that the mind has to be dead for enlightenment. The operative words are *almost without thought process*. This means there was thought.

Premananda: So how does this relate to liberation?

James: Many people have these kinds of experiences, but do not realize that they are “spirit transcending body.” It is this knowledge that is called liberation. Why is it liberation? Because thinking you are the body is a huge problem. It makes the world and everything in it seem to be real. But to the self, the world appears as a kind of dream, so all the experiences you have in it cannot bind you. In the next statement he addresses this issue of what is real. He says, “I was something very real, the only real thing about my present state, and all the conscious activity connected with my body was centered on that ‘I.’” This is knowledge. The “I” is real. The body-mind entity is not “taken to be real.”

Premananda: Surely, if it is the self, it has to be real, doesn't it?

James: That's a good point. There is a statement in Vedanta that says “*Brahma satyam, jagan mithya*.” It means the limitless self is real and the world—the

body-mind—is apparently real. Real is defined in spiritual science as what never changes, what lasts forever. So experience and the body don't fit that definition. But experience is not actually unreal either. It has a peculiar status, neither completely real, nor completely unreal. There is a famous Vedantic text, the *Vacarambana Sruti*, that explains how it is. I won't digress into it because we are just getting to the meat of Ramana's experience.

There is one more thing to understand in this passage. Ramana is not quite through with the process he's experiencing. He is at the intermediate stage. Before this experience came, and he realized he was the self, he thought that the body was real. But this experience has shown him that with reference to the self, the body is not real. It is important that he completely negate his belief in the reality of the body. So he has to say that it isn't real. Then later, when the knowledge that he is the self is completely firm, he can take the body back as real or apparently real, because it is non-separate from him. The only actual problem with the body is the belief that it is an independent entity and that the "I" depends on it. But Ramana realized that the "I" was free of the body. He says—and this is very important—"all the conscious activity connected with my body was centered on that 'I'."

People who are ignorant that they are the immortal self, what you would call materialists, believe that the "I" is centered on the body, that it is the body that gives life to the "I." But scripture and direct experience reveal that the body is centered on the "I." In other words, the "I" is the living principle, and the body is just matter. Ramana realized that fact.

The next statement is very difficult to understand. In a way, we would have been much happier if Ramana had packed up his meditation carpet and stole silently away into the night. He is the self and he knows it. Shouldn't that be the end? But as usual, life always has another surprise in store. He says, "From that moment onwards the 'I' or 'self' focused attention on itself by a powerful fascination."

Which "I" did what? If I'm the "I," the one without a second, how do we get two "I's" here? Has Ramana lost his realization? How can the self be fascinated with anything? It would be fascinated only if it felt there was something to experience or know. But we know that it is whole and complete, lacking nothing,

so why is it acting as if it weren't? Furthermore, if it is self aware, it is already *focused* on itself.

This experience was not the end. In fact, it was just the beginning of Ramana's spiritual journey. He has just become self realized, but he has not become enlightened, if we take these words at face value.

Premananda: What do you mean by that?

James: The last paragraph shows clearly that he thinks of the self as an object and that he sees himself as separate from it. He is experiencing it, no doubt—it would remain as a permanent experience—but he has yet to see himself solely as the non-dual self. He does. He gets there. We do not know when, probably sometime during his meditation phase when he was living in the caves, but he gains the last little bit of knowledge.

Premananda: How do you know?

James: The language. Let's take the language at face value, although it is very risky to trust a translator. Ramana was a very straightforward person. He says, "Absorption in the self continued unbroken from that time on." So the natural question is "Who is absorbed in what?" Was the self absorbed in the self or was Ramana absorbed in the self? We understand what he means a couple of sentences later when he says, "I was centered on the 'I.'" And one gets the impression that the first "I" was different from the second. This is a statement of the self realization phase of the spiritual journey. If there was no duality left, why doesn't he just say, "I, the self, was centered on myself." This is how it is in non-duality, not that the self is centered on anything. The "I" is self knowing by nature and requires no centering.

And it fits in with the self inquiry that Ramana taught, which was based on his own experience and backed by scripture. One of the definitions of self inquiry that Ramana gives is "Holding the mind on the self is inquiry." So here he is, a young boy of seventeen who did not have a clue about the self, with his mind fixed permanently on the self.

Premananda: So what is the next phase? How does it happen?

James: You keep watching the self. You stay alert, which is not hard because the self is very beautiful. And the more you watch it the more it sets you to thinking. You become fascinated. The words Ramana uses are “a powerful fascination.” When you are in this phase, you need a cave or something like it. You do not want to be in the world. If you stay in the world your connection might be broken.

You fall in love. When you are in love you do not stop thinking. One thing that we need to point out here is very important. You know how I have been saying that this belief that the mind has to stop completely is not true, that it does happen but it need not happen, that having a dead mind can be a big problem?

Premananda: Yes.

James: Well, it is clear by Ramana’s own admission that his mind had not stopped completely. He says, “Other thoughts might come and go like the various notes of music...” This state he is in is *savikalpa samadhi*, to use the Yogic term. It is a state of clear seeing in which *vikalpas*—thoughts—arise and fall. But the thoughts do not obscure the vision of the self. This is very important. Ramana says so.

Anyway, where was I? Yes...love. You fall in love. When you are in love you do not stop thinking. On the contrary, you think more; you want to know where your beloved is, what he or she is doing. This thinking is inquiry. Ramana already had the knowledge from his experience to guide him in his inquiry. He knew about himself and the “I beyond the body.”

You are getting it all straight about who you are and what your relationship is to this beautiful being. And then one day something happens. We cannot say when. It just happens, if you stay focused on the beloved. There is an Aha! and at that moment, the you that was looking at the self becomes the self. There is actually no becoming. You were it all along. The becoming is a recognition, a knowing. But the becoming changes your perspective. You are

no longer the individual looking in at the self, awareness, you are awareness looking out at the individual. And what do you know? That awareness and the individual are one. Or in the words of scripture, “*Tat Tvam Asi.*” That (self) you are. Formulated from the self’s perspective, the words are “*Aham Brahmasmi,*” I am limitless. Ramana the form is limited. Ramana the self is unlimited.

This is what Vedanta calls enlightenment. From that point on, you do not abide *in* the self, you abide *as* the self. You have only one, non-dual identity.

Premananda: That’s a very important analysis that will help many people who are nearing the end of their spiritual journeys. Now let’s consider this. At the end of his book *Self Inquiry* he says, “He who is thus endowed with a mind that has become subtle, and who has the experience of the self is called a *Jivanmukta.*”

James: Here’s a vindication from Ramana’s mouth of what I have been saying about the mind. The mind does not have to be killed. When enough gross *vasanas* are exhausted, the mind becomes subtle. It still has thoughts, but the thoughts do not unbalance it. This kind of mind comes about through simple restrained living and clear thinking. It is capable of self realization.

But I have to take issue with this statement. Experience of the self is not enlightenment. When is the self not experienced? It may be self realization but it is not enlightenment, for the simple reason that it implies that there is an experiencer other than the self. It is enlightenment when the experiencer realizes that he or she is what is being experienced, i.e., the self. Enlightenment is knowledge, not experience of anything. People erroneously believe that enlightenment is gaining some permanent incredible experience of the self. But a *jivanmukta* is free of everything, especially experience. A *jivanmukta* is the self. *Jivanmukta* simply means someone who has realized he or she is the self and has no sense of duality.

Premananda: Ramana goes on to say, “It is the state of *jivanmukta* that is referred to as the attributeless Brahman and as *Turiya*. When even the subtle mind gets resolved.”



James: Well, this is not a correct understanding of *jivanmukta*. In the first place, it is not a "state." States are experience-based and come and go. Attributeless Brahman would not have any states in it, nor would it be a state. A state is an attribute. *Attributeless* and *Brahman* are two words that describe awareness, the self. It has no attributes and is limitless, which is the meaning of the word *Brahman*. The resolution of the mind is simply a resolution in understanding. The mind understands that it is the self and that makes it peaceful, and finishes it as an independent entity. It does not mean that the mind dies, never to think a thought again.

Premananda: "...and when one is immersed in the ocean of bliss and has become one with it without any differentiated existence, one is called a *Videhamukta*. It is the state of *Videhamukti* that is referred to as the transcendent *Turiya*. This is the final goal." So is he saying this is enlightenment?

James: That's the way it seems. He is describing enlightenment in the language of experience or Yoga. If you analyze that language you can find the problem. He is experiencing limitless bliss, yet he is talking about it being a goal, something to be gained. But in the language of identity, it is something that you are.

We have to resort to linguistic analysis because Ramana is dead and we have no idea if the translator knew what Ramana meant and used the correct words. Even if Ramana was speaking to us directly it would be possible to misunderstand the meaning, unless we knew the self. The only way to get the proper idea of the meaning of these words is to hold them up to scripture and see how well they fit. This will be a useful interview for seekers, but it will not make me a lot of friends among the Ramana devotees, because Ramana has attained the status of deity of late and you cannot have your gods with feet of clay. Ramana was a realized soul and a human being of the highest caliber. But we have only his words to go on, and I don't want this to be my opinion on the teachings of Ramana, although it will certainly be taken as such. My idea is to discuss Ramana in light of the science of self inquiry. Mind you, I am not saying that Ramana was not enlightened. But he was not a scriptural master and

spoke to many individuals at different stages of their spiritual journey, and did not issue a “big picture” statement about his teachings, one that would resolve the apparent contradictions.

Let’s pick apart this statement a little more. In the first place, what do the words *immersed in* mean? These are experiential words. They indicate a person having a particular kind of experience, in this case bliss. The next words of interest are “has become one with it.” What do they mean? What kind of becoming is it? If the becoming is experiential, the experience of bliss stops because the one who was experiencing it is no more. In oneness, non-duality, the subject and object necessary for experience are not present. So if somebody is going to lose the experience of “the ocean of bliss,” why will they merge into the self? It doesn’t make sense.

This is why the Bhakti tradition scoffs at the liberation tradition. The bhaktas say, “Why would I want to be God, when I can experience God all the time?” It’s a valid point. However, it doesn’t take into account the fact that you can be God and experience God. There is only a contradiction when you have a flawed understanding of the nature of God and the world.

But what if this becoming is the coming of understanding? By understanding I mean the recognition that the subject, the mind-ego—the one experiencing the bliss—and the object, the bliss, are one. *Bliss* is a common but inaccurate word because of its experiential implications. One way to describe this understanding experientially is that it is a shift during which the foreground—the ego—which has been experiencing the self in the form of bliss, becomes the background, and the self—which has been the object of experience—becomes the foreground, as I mentioned. So now the “I” is the self looking out at the ego, looking in at it. And when this shift takes place there is an instant recognition that “I” is the self. One’s identification of “I” with the ego-mind ends once and for all. From that point on there is no foreground or background, no in or out. The mind is purified of these concepts.

*Videhamukti* exoterically is usually taken to mean liberation when the body dies. Why would you have to wait until the body dies to realize the self, since the self is always present when you are alive? This liberation at death is just a belief. Death is just a belief. The actual meaning is “freedom from the body.” *Vi*

means *without* and *dehi* means *the body* and *mukti* means *liberation*. So it is not an experiential term; it is a statement of knowledge. It means that when you realize that you are not the body, you are free. The realization that one is not the body, if it is a hard and fast knowledge, is enlightenment. We can include the mind-ego in the word *body* too because it is a body, albeit a subtle one. Body means embodied. This experience and the understanding that arises with it means that from this point on, you are no longer embodied. The bodies are in the self but the self is not in the bodies. This is why it is called liberation.

Premananda: You have always been the self; it's like a recognition.

James: That's right.

Premananda: It's an embracing.

James: Yes, one owns it.

Premananda: It's the moment the wave sinks into the ocean. It's when the wave stops being this wave.

James: Yes, but—here's that famous “but”—the wave can be there. If there is a wave in the ocean, you know that it is not just an independent wave; it is the ocean as well. It won't be a wave unless it is the ocean. The wave depends on the ocean, but the ocean does not depend on the wave. So even if there is a wave, it has no effect on the ocean. Enlightenment does not destroy dualistic experience. One just realizes that experience depends on me, the self, but that I am always free of experience. Acting in the world with this knowledge is quite different from acting in this world without it.

Premananda: Right. What you are saying now is very important. It's completely contrary to what I have been led to believe. It's a vital point. I can remember talking about this elsewhere. Recently, a woman came to me quite disturbed

because she could not do anything about her mind. She had the idea she must kill her mind completely.

James: All that so-called teaching does is deflate people; it doesn't give them encouragement and is patently untrue. Mind you, you need to get some mind out of the way—your neuroses, your binding likes and dislikes—and for that you need to do some work. The mind is not the problem, the mess you have made of it is. That's why Ramana encourages spiritual practice. This is what Vedanta says too. The mind needs to be quiet, but that does not mean that the mind has to disappear completely. It may disappear momentarily, but it always reconstitutes itself.

If self realization only happens when the mind is non-existent, then the self and the mind enjoy exactly the same order of reality, like sickness and health. When you are healthy you are not sick. The scriptures say that this is not so. Experience shows that it is not so.

The self is knowable directly when the mind is functioning. The self doesn't need any knowledge. The mind needs it and to get it, it has to be functioning clearly. But when the mind is overcome with heavy activity and dullness, it is impossible to know the self.

Premananda: So the mind does experience the self, then? This seems contrary to what you were saying before.

James: That's good, picking up on an apparent contradiction. The answer is yes and no. What is experienced is the reflection of the self in a pure mind. The pure mind is like a highly polished mirror and the self illumines it, so it is experienceable there. There can be no direct experience because the mind and the self enjoy different orders of reality. The self is subtler than the mind. Ramana defines inquiry as holding the mind on the self, which means keeping your attention on the reflection of the self in a pure mind.

You hold your attention on it to get knowledge. When you get knowledge, you can relax. You are trying to figure out what it is and what it has to do with you. And if you do not involve yourself with the modifications arising in the

mind, there will eventually come a point when there is the 'Aha!' And that 'Aha!' is simply the recognition that what I am experiencing is me, not some consciousness other than my own.

When you grasp the knowledge "I am the self," you are no longer excluding yourself from the experience of the self. As long as you are experiencing the self, you are excluding yourself from the self. You are saying "I am here, the self is there and I am experiencing it."

Premananda: Ramana makes a strong statement when asked, "Will there not be realization when the world is there (taken to be real)?" He says, "There will not be."

James: I think we spoke about this before. The statement means it will seem to be real if you see the world as an independent reality. They put the phrase "taken to be real" in because "is there" makes it seem that the world has to be physically not seen for realization to happen. One might believe that perceptually, experientially the world is going to disappear. It's a common belief among spiritual types.

Premananda: That's right. And that makes it even worse. It makes it scary.

James: They think that if it hasn't disappeared they aren't enlightened.

Premananda: And they also think that the enlightened are walking around in some sort of deep grey void.

James: Maybe that's what all these zombie types that congregate at the spiritual centers are doing. Maybe they are the only really enlightened ones. Language is very important, because these people are getting their ideas from somewhere. Failure to understand explains why so many seekers do not become finders. There are many people in the spiritual world who would be classified as self realized, according to the stages of enlightenment mentioned above.

This is what Ramana calls *antar mukha*, turning the mind inward, watching or realizing or experiencing the self.

But, rightly, these people are not satisfied and continue to entertain doubts about their state. Usually, the doubt has to do with making the state permanent, which is impossible, since the person and his pure mind are still in the realm of time. In other words, there is always the realistic fear that the experience will not last. And even though they are so close to enlightenment experientially, it still eludes them.

And the reason? Because they are prisoners of the language of experience. The language we use indicates the way we think. And at this stage, when the experience is more or less continually available, the only barrier to converting the experience to a “permanent” state, not that enlightenment is a state, is the way one thinks. What needs to happen at this point is that the individual needs to convert the language of experience to the language of identity. The language of identity states that the experiencer and what is being experienced are not two separate things, that they are in fact the same. When any object is experienced the knowledge of that object arises simultaneously in the intellect. And if the mind in which the reflection of the self appears is pure, the knowledge of the self will arise with it in the intellect. This knowledge is in the form of an insight, an *akandakara vritti*, that I am the whole and complete, actionless awareness that I am experiencing. Let’s recall Ramana’s statement of this situation. “All this was not a dull thought. It flashed through me vividly as living truth which I perceived directly, almost without thought process.”

If the person is accustomed to thinking of the self as an object, he or she will be reluctant to surrender the experiencer, and the self will continue to remain as an experienced object. The surrender is in terms of letting go of the idea of oneself as an experiencer and embracing one’s limitless identity. This is the “destruction of the mind” that yogis talk about. This phrase “destruction of the mind” is very unfortunate. It should be “destruction of ignorance.” The destruction of ignorance does not destroy the mind.

Were the person to be trained in the language of identity, this problem would not arise. In fact the person would immediately recognize the content

of the experience as “I” and that would finish the work. Clinging to experience is hanging on to the container and sacrificing the content. It is like a person pouring the Coke out of the bottle and drinking the bottle. We can throw away the container. It is non-essential. We need the contents, the self.

The whole of Vedanta can be reduced to one simple equation found in the Upanishads: “You are that.” *That* is the self and *you* is the self in the form of the experiencer and the verb *are* indicates the identity between the two.

Premananda: Probably that is where Premananda is struggling right now, existentially speaking. Because I think that’s probably true of me. I see everything as an experience.

James: That’s what I’ve observed. You describe everything to do with you in terms of what’s happening. I believe that “Nothing ever happened” teaching of Papaji’s is meant to neutralize the belief that what happens has something to do with you.

Experience isn’t bossing me. I’m bossing it. Without me it doesn’t amount to a hill of beans. That’s freedom. I don’t have to erase it. I just take it as I please. This is why bad days are good days for the enlightened. They can see themselves in everything. Looking to experience for validation is the tail wagging the dog. We’re trying to set things straight and get the dog to wag the tail. That’s how it is. Dogs wag their tails, not the other way around. Yoga says that if you get this experience, nirvikalpa samadhi, then you are enlightened. Vedanta says that you are the self, no matter what experience you are having.

Premananda: Here’s another of Ravana’s statements on self inquiry that I think is very interesting. “How could this search be done in books? All the texts say that in order to gain liberation, you must make the mind quiet. Once this has been understood, there is no need for endless reading. In order to quiet the mind, one has only to enquire within oneself what oneself is.”

James: This statement may lead a person to conclude that no scriptural information would be useful in self inquiry. But you can’t make an inquiry without

knowledge. In fact he supports scripture with the statement “all the texts say...” You can’t perform inquiry without the knowledge that I am not the body, mind, etc. You can’t just sit there without any information like a dodo and say, “Uh... Who am I? Duh... Hey God... who am I?” This is not going to work, even if the heavens are rent asunder with the booming voice of God... “YOU ARE PURE CONSCIOUSNESS!!!”

Premananda: Ha ha ha!

James: Even if He tells you to your face, you will have no way to evaluate this information. “Uh? I am? What does that mean?” I need knowledge. I need to know how who I am relates to my body and mind and the world around. It has to be contextualized, or it is useless. Scripture does an excellent job of contextualizing the “I,” telling you what it means to be the self. And anyway, Ramana is only dissing “endless reading.” In fact, you should not *read* scripture. It should be taught to you. Then you should reflect on it until its truths are assimilated. Nothing, except perhaps inspiration, will come of just reading.

Premananda: I’ve mentioned several times that we should talk about self-inquiry as a practice, and I came across an interesting question and answer that addresses this issue. Someone asks Ramana “What is the method of practice?” and he replies, “As the self of a person who tries to attain self-realization is not different from him and as there is nothing other than or superior to him to be attained by him, self-realization being only the realization of one’s own nature, the seeker of liberation realizes, without doubts or misconceptions, his real nature by distinguishing the eternal from the transient and never swerves from this natural state. This is known as the practice of knowledge. This is the inquiry leading to self-realization.”

He seems to be saying that self inquiry is more than just asking “Who am I?”

James: That’s right. From speaking with people who come here looking for self-realization, I’ve learned that many think all one has to do is say “Who



am I?" and somehow the answer will be revealed. But this isn't how it is. The fact is that the nature of the "I" is well known. If you have a doubt, just read the Upanishads or Shankara or any Vedantic text. It is very clear. Even these Neo-Advaita teachers have it right on this issue. There are many words that indicate the self and there is a brilliant proven methodology that can destroy your self ignorance.

There is a peculiar belief that the self is some mysterious unknown presence, only apprehended through mystic means, about which one can say nothing. Unspeakable. Indefinable. Beyond words, etc. But actually, the self is the only thing one can speak about with precision and certainty because it is the only reality. All the rest of it, what people think of as real, cannot really be described because it is neither completely real nor is it completely unreal.

In this statement Ramana uses perhaps the most common word to indicate the nature of the self. He says it is eternal. This distinguishes it from the body-mind-ego complex and the world around, which is constantly changing. We think of the body as real, but when you look into the body you cannot come up with anything substantial. It keeps resolving into subtler and subtler elements until it disappears altogether. But no matter how much you analyze it, you cannot reduce the self to anything else. It cannot be dissolved.

Premananda: So inquiry is not a matter of getting knowledge then, it is a matter of applying it?

James: Yes, Ramana says that inquiry is separating the real from the unreal, the eternal from the transient. So it is a practice. Before you can practice you need to know what is real and what isn't. Twelve centuries before Ramana, Shankar uses the exact same words, "practice of knowledge (jnanabyasa)" in *Atma Bodh* and elsewhere to describe this process. And it was already part of the tradition when Shankar came along. The practice is called *viveka* and it is the proven method of liberation.

Premananda: It seems quite intellectual. How does it work?

James: It isn't "intellectual" in the pejorative sense that one hears the word used today. But it definitely relies on an astute use of the intellect. There is this notion that Ramana taught in silence and that only by sitting in silence, not by using the mind in any way, can one realize the self. This is patently untrue. Here Ramana is not recommending silence. Mind you, meditation, sitting in silence, is a very useful practice, but Ramana himself makes it very clear that in self inquiry, the intellect is the instrument of realization.

In his description of his own awakening, one can see that he was obviously conscious and thinking and discriminating. And there is no reason one cannot think when the mind is silent. In fact in that state, conscious thinking is beautiful, a real joy. There is even a yogic term for it, *savikalpa samadhi*. It means samadhi with thought. *Vikalpas* are thoughts.

Premananda: This is quite surprising. The common notion is that the intellect needs to be shut down for the self to be realized.

James: That is the view of Yoga. Controlling the mind is useful to prepare the mind for self realization, but it is not tantamount to self realization. We need to remember that the mind is transient and therefore unreal. So how are you going to control something that is non-eternal? The one who is trying to change, the ego, is non-eternal and what is meant not to change is non-eternal. Therefore, how can there be any permanent change? Even if there is change as a result of your efforts, you will have to keep up the effort to keep the changes operational. So you find yourself having to do all these things to be what you want to be. This is always the problem when you try to change the mind or stop the mind. Inquiry is not a question of controlling the mind. It is a question of observing the mind.

Premananda: So how does this discrimination work?

James: Well, first we need to know that not any Tom, Dick or Harry can just practice inquiry. In the first line of the very next paragraph Ramana says, "This

is suitable only for the ripe soul." You need to be prepared. Prepared means mature, indifferent to the blandishments the world has to offer. And secondly, one needs a burning desire to be free of his or her own mind. This is different from saying that one needs a dead or different mind. The mind is going to be with you in one form or another, whether you like it or not, so the only sensible question is how to live happily with it. When you realize what the self is and that you are it, you see that you have always been free of the mind.

Discrimination or inquiry is the moment to moment practice of the understanding that the experiencer and its experience are not real and that awareness is real.

It works like this: whenever an impulse to do something, possess something, feel something or change something comes up in the mind, as it does all the time, one does not just mindlessly set out to manifest the desired result. Instead, you think "What lasting benefit will I get by doing, getting, experiencing this? Will I be more, better, different? Will I gain lasting happiness or will I still be what I am?" Assuming that the one doing the practice is the ego, which it would necessarily be, will that person be any wiser with reference to his or her own self by doing/thinking/feeling/experiencing something? And the answer is always no. True, you may be wiser with reference to a specific idea, but will you actually become whole and complete and free of your mind by doing what you are contemplating doing? For example, you may invest in the stock market and lose a bundle because the corporate fat cats are cooking the books. So you learn to not trust people's word concerning money, but are you fundamentally different because you don't have the money you once had? Or are you fundamentally different because you are more wary? You are still what you are.

Premananda: So self transformation is not self realization.

James: It may be useful to clean up your ego a bit before you set out to set it free, but the very fact that you are trying to change means that you are not free.

Premananda: A friend and I rented a house we found on the internet recently from a woman who was going on vacation and when we moved, I noticed a collage on the wall celebrating her recent spiritual awakening. And pasted on the collage were different sized words from different periodicals that said, "One day I got tired of being the same, so I made the BIG JUMP."

James: What you have here is a spiritual awakening, but not self realization. This is a person who has been stuck with some bad values, and consequently caught up in some unhealthy habits, who finally gets the courage to confront herself and make changes in the way she lives. And this is very good, an important first step. But this is not self realization. Awakening is not self realization, although during an awakening you may come to experience and understand that there is a self.

Premananda: This is an important distinction, I think.

James: Yes it is. This experience is not self realization because the one who landed is the same one who made the jump. Once the proper values and good habits are in place, a new problem will surface: is this all? Because you haven't addressed the fundamental problem, you have just corrected some karmic mistakes the ego made. I'm not saying that spiritual awakenings aren't good, but once you are awake to how foolish you are and the possibility of getting out of it, then you can perhaps start to seek wisdom, which at some point will entail asking who made the jump.

Now, if Ramana is saying that the self never changes and you are the self and the self is endless bliss, then you will never want to jump out of yourself. So what we have in the case of this woman is an ego changing itself. And no matter how much the ego changes for the better, it is never going to change into the self. When you realize that you are the self, it doesn't matter to you what the ego is. You accept it as it is. You understand that it wouldn't be the way it is if it could help it and you let it be. Or you work on it dispassionately, if that is your karma. When you no longer see yourself as the ego, it will

gradually become more pure and radiant but it will never become the self. So thinking that you are going to become different is not the way to go.

Premananda: I have another teaching that I would like to discuss. Ramana says “As the self of a person who tries to attain self-realization is not different from him and as there is nothing other than or superior to him to be attained by him, self-realization being only the realization of one’s own nature”...etc.

James: I think this statement should be required reading for anyone who wants to understand what enlightenment is. Ramana makes it very clear that it is not about being different from what you are or getting something that is better than what you already have—like a high state of consciousness. He uses a very interesting word here—*only*—to make the point that incredible spiritual experiences or altered states of consciousness or transforming oneself is not enlightenment. He says it is “only” realizing what you are.

Premananda: But isn’t this realization something unique?

James: No. What is being realized might be considered unique if you had been ignorant for a long time, but this realization is no different from realizing or understanding or knowing anything. When it happens, there is always a sense of irony because it is something that has always been known. What could be more familiar to you than you? It may seem like a big deal because something that is so obvious can easily be taken for granted and forgotten. So self realization is always a re-discovery, not a discovery.

Premananda: So this is the whole cosmic joke idea.

James: Yes. To solve the riddle you need a trick, a technique, which Ramana calls inquiry or *viveka*. You need to be reminded that you are eternal, that nothing can be added to or subtracted from you, that experience is impermanent and that you need to start paying attention to your own mind and its ideas to the contrary. Then you get to work dismissing them. As long as you

hold erroneous views about yourself, you will not hold the right view about yourself.

Premananda: Which is that you are whole and complete.

James: Yes, that experience depends on you, but that you do not depend on experience.

Premananda: That nothing can affect you.

James: That you don't need anything at all to make yourself happy.