

"You will be annihilated by the grace that you are,
because it will simply take the idea of 'you' away."

If You Wake Up, Don't Take It Personally

*Dialogues in the
Presence of Arunachala*

Karl Renz

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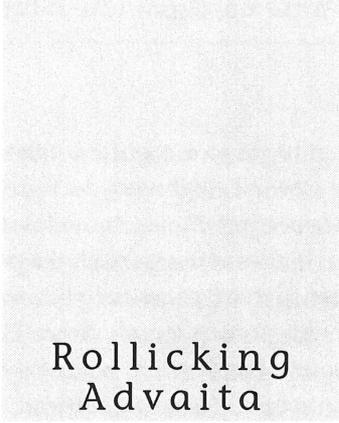
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For All Who Seek Truth



Rollicking Advaita

Vorsicht! Watch out! Karl Renz is as sure to madden as he is to delight—but people keep coming back anyway, because he is so right, or perhaps only because he is so entertaining. With Karl, every idea, every theory, every sacred idol of the mind, is fair game. Sooner or later, he will turn his attack to one of your most cherished beliefs, and his bite is sure to sting, but then, amidst all the fun and laughter and the relaxed atmosphere of acceptance that he generates, you will start to laugh at yourself, and the hardened misconceptions with which you perpetuate your suffering will begin to fall away.

Karl Renz is one of the foremost teachers of non-dual philosophy. “Non-dual” really means non-multiple—all that is knowable and unknowable and also the knower (and non-knower) of all these things are One. We use the term “non-dual” because, in One-ness, no experience is taken to be relative to its opposite, not even existence itself.

Karl is a teacher of non-duality; he recommends no specific technique and advocates no method. His talk will contradict itself, or run in circles, or simply converge into indecipherable paradoxes. The room is full of people determined to understand his system—struggling to figure it out, once and for all, write it down, memorize it, and then walk away “enlightened”—but there can be no figuring out, because any enlightenment you could “figure out” would be a mere idea. Karl always points to something beyond ideas and concepts, and *he takes you there*. Is Karl, therefore, enlightened? I have no idea. What is “enlightenment”? What is “Karl”? I do not vouch for Karl Renz; I vouch for the experience of non-duality that resonates in the words of this book.

As you read, you may begin to recognize a pattern in Karl's way of thinking, but don't try to be clever. Enlightenment is not a matter of cleverness. The important thing happening when you read is not the superficial meaning of Karl's statements, but something much deeper and more mysterious. The "Karl" we encounter in these pages has eliminated the idea of "personhood" in himself and in his perception of others. He looks at those who ask questions, and he responds, but for him, no one is looking, no one is being seen, no one is talking, no one is listening; instead, there is only That which he is, which is also you and everyone. He speaks only to That, not to the person, and by reading his words, his perspective *just might* become your perspective.

The emphasis is on "just might." Karl insists that neither he nor anyone else can do anything to enlighten you, and in fact he claims he can offer you nothing at all. Your true state, according to Karl, is always *in spite of* anything you have done, never *because of* anything you have done. He points out that any enlightenment that someone could give you, or that you could somehow achieve, would be an enlightenment not worth having, because what is given or achieved can be just as readily lost. An achieved enlightenment would, in his view, be a mere mental construct, and only your mind, not the real *you*, has any need for such a thing. Taking this general principle as his starting point, Karl proceeds to obliterate (sometimes with outright vulgarity) every concept of religion, piety, and sacredness that anyone has ever held dear.

But a word of caution is appropriate—though Karl might object. Do not fall into the common trap of renouncing all spiritual effort as mere vanity, and then, after a cup of coffee and a few exciting insights, imagine yourself to be enlightened. One frequently encounters such people wherever non-dual philosophy is being taught, but these intelligent souls have only substituted one persona for another. Non-dualism has been called a "lollipop for the mind," and with good reason; it offers a satisfying answer to every question. Nevertheless, if you want to reach the highest state, you must *strive* and then *strive some more*, just as so many others have done before you. Why? Because you cannot possibly do anything else. As a soul that God has chosen, it is your very nature to seek God with all your strength. But when finally you rest in the ultimate Truth, you see very clearly that all your seeking achieved nothing, it never actually happened, and God was there

all the time, doing everything while doing nothing at all.

One who categorizes religious philosophies might place Karl in a school of thought known as Advaita Vedanta. *Advaita* means “non-dual,” and the Advaita philosophy asserts that there is no true distinction between knower and known; the experience itself is the experiencer of the experience, while the eternal Source remains unaffected throughout the illusory flow of change. Advaita is rooted in the sophisticated musings of the Upanishads, Hinduism’s philosophical distillation of its ancient Vedic scriptures, and hence, it is *Vedanta*, that is, “the end of the Veda.” Some scholars suggest that Advaita Vedanta emerged as one of Hinduism’s responses to Buddhism, and in many ways the ideas of Buddhism run parallel, but non-dual thought is much older than Buddhism and much bigger than its relatively orthodox formulation in Advaita Vedanta. Non-dual thought lies at the heart of heterodox South Asian traditions such as Kashmiri Shaivism, and it is also a fundamental principle in Jewish mysticism. Most important, the Advaita that Karl teaches is not confined to any religion; Karl simply speaks from his inner experience. Nor should we dismiss Karl’s teachings as mere postmodern cynicism or the intellectual musings of a dry heart. True Advaita is pure love, a love grounded in the experience that nothing is different from one’s own Self.

One of the leading classical teachers of Advaita Vedanta was Shankara (686-718 C.E.), and in modern times, the Advaita philosophy was powerfully restated and popularized by Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950 C.E.). At the foot of the holy mountain Arunachala in the South Indian temple town of Tiruvannamalai, Ramana Maharshi’s hermitage continues to attract thousands of students and seekers, and the surrounding village is like the Agora of Athens in the time of Socrates. Under the warm tropical sun, amidst the dappled shade of flowering trees, on temple verandahs, and in the courtyards of noisy tea shops, teachers abound, presenting their competing versions of enlightenment. These are informal gatherings, publicized by word of mouth alone. The seekers are a relaxed mix of tourists and pilgrims, expatriates and native Indians. Many are road-worn veterans of the spiritual path, bringing with them the wisdom of many lifetimes dedicated to seeking God. They have experienced all the striving and the hardships, all the ecstasies and the dark nights of the soul, all the hopes and the crushing doubts of spiritual inquiry. And, at last, they have come to Tiruvannamalai

to be told, and perhaps to realize, that they themselves *are* the thing they have been seeking, for Advaita teaches that in the midst of all the seeking and attaining, you—the true You—have always been content, enjoying an *absolute contentment* that is not relative to discontentment.

It is January in South India. Every day, the sky is the same clear, vibrant blue. Flowers bloom on every creeper, bush, and tree. The warm air swells with the sounds of birds singing, workmen shouting, and peddlers hawking their goods. On a rooftop, under a palm leaf awning, with the holy mountain's commanding presence as a backdrop, Karl chats and jokes, answers questions from newcomers and longtime admirers, and all the time points everyone to something beyond—while insisting he can do nothing at all to help you.

—James H. Cumming