

# A Judicious Degree of Wiggle Room

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**Questioner:** I have read the book *How to Meet Yourself*. I understand, I think, about desire, that it's a searching for a return to our natural state of happiness that we are already. But when around women or just bored I start moving toward pornography to get relief from the desire. How exactly can I just access this happiness? Do I not take the desire seriously and not look at naked women or do I need a more practical way to cope and not go down this spiritual route, so to speak?

**Ted:** All desire is rooted in ignorance of one's true nature. You already are the happiness that you are seeking through the fulfillment of your desires. Such being the case, the desire for objects both gross (i.e. material wealth, relationships, physical health, etc.) and subtle (i.e. status, mental and emotional states, etc.) that you believe will bring you lasting peace of mind or permanent fulfillment is gratuitous. No object or action, which is itself an object (i.e. observable phenomenon), can give you what you've already got.

Moreover, it should be understood that what you are is not a state of being. All states are experienceable and as such are limited objects, for all objects/experiences begin, continue for a given period of time and inevitably end. The nature of all objects, indeed, the entire apparent reality itself, is change or impermanence. All states are therefore nothing more than ephemeral phenomena. You, however, are not a temporary entity. You, awareness, do not come and go. The body comes and goes. The emotions come and go. The thoughts come and go. But you remain ever-present throughout their appearance and despite their disappearance. You do not begin when any of these factors first "show up." You do not end when any of these factors "shut down." You are the awareness out of which all objects arise, in which they abide and back into which they subside. You are the eternal witness who remains ever untouched by all that seemingly transpires within its scope. Though the entire apparent reality thus depends upon you in order to be, of it you, limitless, attributeless awareness, remain forever free.

On top of this it is a common misconception that the happiness to which Vedanta refers as one's fundamental nature is experiential. In other words, many seekers harbor the erroneous notion that once they know the self a perpetual smile will grace their face and they will always be in a good mood. Though I hate to be the bearer of bad news this is simply not so. The whole idea, which is quite ludicrous within the context of a non-dual reality, is based on a misinterpretation of the Sanskrit word *ananda*. Though *ananda* does mean "bliss," it is rooted in the word *ananta*, which means "eternal," and is a much more appropriate term with which to indicate the self, i.e. limitless awareness. Given the inherent incapability of language, which is conceptually-oriented, to comprehensively denote that which is at once both formless and all-pervasive, both *ananda*/bliss and *ananta*/eternal, are misleading terms for the self, lending as they do experiential and temporal qualities respectively to attributeless, unborn awareness. *Ananta*/eternal is the more appropriate of the two terms, however, if it is understood to mean that the self exists altogether beyond time and space, which are only yet two more objects, albeit extremely subtle ones appearing in awareness. This limitlessness is your true nature. Admittedly, self-knowledge can and most often does have a positive impact on the apparent individual's

emotional state, because quite simply, freedom feels good. The fact remains, however, that the happiness that is said to be the inherent nature of the self manifests experientially as a rock-solid conviction in one's essential inviolability as pure awareness, the hard and fast knowledge that nothing can enhance, diminish or otherwise affect you, that results from the removal of ignorance concerning one's true identity and the assimilation of self-knowledge. It does not mean that you will rollick through life happily ever after in a perpetual state of grins and smiles and giggles and laughs. Reality, remember, is non-dual, which means that bad moods are just as much the self as good ones.

In light of this, desire itself is not a problem per se. In fact desire is actually nothing other than awareness, or the self, in subtle form. As Krishna, a personification of pure awareness, says in the *Bhagavad Gita*, "I am the desire that is not opposed to *dharma*."

*Dharma* is the collection of universal physical, psychological and moral laws that govern both the gross and subtle aspects of the apparent reality and ensure that the mechanism of the universe runs smoothly and maintains its overall balance. In this sense, *dharma* is the coordinating factor that determines the chain of cause-and-effect that we refer to as *karmic* consequence, or the idea that "what goes around comes around." *Dharma* is completely impersonal. It is simply the law that determines the outcome of action. For instance, exposing water for a certain length of time to a temperature below freezing will cause the water to harden into ice. Bad-mouthing someone with a violent disposition may very well elicit from the person a punch in the nose. The higher up the food chain we go the more subtle and myriad the factors become that influence the outcome of action, but *dharma* is infallible. Were we able to account for every factor involved in any event we would see that nothing happens by chance. Everything occurs due to the precise and predictable operation of *dharma*. When we observe and act in accordance with *dharma* positive results are produced. When we disregard and violate *dharma* negative results nip back at us. Though these results are not always immediately forthcoming, they do inevitably arrive for a shorter or more extended stay in our lives and impact us to a greater or lesser degree depending upon the intensity of the action that initiated them.

Such an understanding of *dharma* enables one to see the truth in Krishna's words. Desire itself is neither desirable nor undesirable. We need desire. None of the scientific discoveries and inventions, none of the artistic accomplishments and innovations would have occurred without the impetus of desire. In fact without desire there would literally be neither *jagat*, the apparent reality, nor *jiva*, the apparent person you take yourself to be, for both the macrocosmic *vasanas*, God's *vasanas*, we might say, that have projected the universe as well as the microcosmic *vasanas* that have associated with and express through a particular *jiva*'s mind-body-sense complex and thus "create" the apparent individual's unique experience, are essentially nothing other than desires.

The fundamental *dharma* of a seeker of truth, however, is to remain focused on the pursuit of self-knowledge through the persistent and continuous practice of self-inquiry. Within this context lust can be seen as an *adharmic* behavior because it agitates the mind and "extroverts" its attention toward an objects (i.e. women, fantasies, sex) that inherently incapable of producing permanent happiness and lasting fulfillment. It is not that sexual desire is "bad" but simply that it obstructs one's non-dual vision (i.e. understanding), impedes one's ability to discriminate between the real and the apparent, prevents one from remaining dispassionate and obliterates one's peace of mind.

Desire itself therefore is not the problem. Ignorance is the real issue, the underlying initiator of all the agitation that upsets the subtle body (i.e. the aggregate of mind, intellect and ego). Ignorance is the disease, so to speak, and gratuitous desire merely its symptom.

In order to effectively deal with the disturbances seemingly caused by desire, lust in this case, it is helpful to understand how desires develop and how unconscious compliance with their demands reinforces their dictatorial hold over our thoughts, words and deeds.

Desires sprout from the fertile soil of the subconscious mind, or what Vedanta calls the causal body. The seeds from which they spring are the subtle impressions sown as a result of one's past experiences. These subtle impressions are called *vasanas*. And these impression-based *vasanas* inevitably manifest as our tendencies and proclivities, our likes and dislikes, our attractions and aversions, our desires and fears.

Regarding the *vasanas*, it is important to understand that they are part and parcel of being a person and neither can nor need be completely eradicated. *Vasanas* are the inescapable remnant of experience, at least until you are set free from the experiencing entity you take yourself to be through the assimilation of self-knowledge. As long as you are an apparent person you will have *vasanas*. In fact the only reason you are the apparent person you appear to be is by virtue of the *vasanas*. The *vasanas* not exhausted in a previous lifetime find their way "into" or associate with a "new" mind-body-sense complex through which they can seek expression. In this way *vasanas* are what set your *prarabdha karma* (i.e. the actions you are programmed to execute during the lifetime of the apparent person you currently take yourself to be) into motion and see it through to its end. Despite what some spiritual paths would have you believe it is therefore neither desirable nor necessary to rid yourself of all desire, for had you no *vasanas* the apparent person you take yourself to be would have no life.

Ironically, the *vasanas* are impersonal and not under your control. You, the apparent person, did not choose the *vasanas* that influence and most often compel your actions. While your current indulgence of or resistance to them does serve to either strengthen or weaken their command, you did not consciously choose the preferences and proclivities associated with the apparent person you take yourself to be. What you as an apparent person consider your *vasanas* are actually *Isvara's vasanas* expressing through a mind-body-sense complex "created" by *Isvara* in the first place precisely for that purpose. Understanding this fact, however, doesn't mean that you throw caution and common sense to the wind and wantonly seek to fulfill all your desires without conscience, courtesy, compassion or any sense of self-control. To the contrary, it allows you to take a dispassionate attitude toward your *vasanas*, and rather than denying or repressing them temper their expression with an attitude of intelligent moderation.

As an apparent person you do have apparent free will and with it a modicum of influence within the complex web of factors that influence the results of any action that you can use to cultivate the kind of *vasanas* that are conducive to practicing self-inquiry and assimilating self-knowledge. Though you have no control over the desires and fears that arise within you, you can control how you respond to their demands and thus the degree of influence you continue to allow them over your life. As mentioned earlier, it is not necessary to completely eradicate all desires. What is important, assuming you seek self-knowledge and freedom from suffering, is to neutralize those binding *vasanas* (i.e. those whose directives you cannot resist) that extrovert your mind and prevent you from appreciating the innate fullness and inherent freedom that are your true nature.

With regard to the issue of sexual desire specifically, there are two practical approaches you can

take to neutralizing its powerful influence over your mind.

The fundamental practice is to continually contemplate the inherent defects in object-oriented happiness. When you eventually realize that all joy that seems to come from objects offers only temporary relief from craving and, moreover, that every indulgence in and experience of object-oriented pleasure only produces a *vasana* that exacerbates the desire, the allure of such counterfeit contentment drops away of its own accord. If this practice is coupled with the understanding that all objective joy is actually due to the dissolution of extroverting desire that ensues when you are momentarily satisfied with your lot and allow yourself to simply rest in the peace and happiness that are your true nature, your binding desire for objects quickly abates and eventually dissolves altogether. Fundamentally, “accessing” your innate happiness is a matter of knowledge. Putting stock in discrete transcendental experiences and spiritual epiphanies or, for that matter, sexual gratification, which is itself a sort of transcendental bliss, only serves to maintain the separation of subject and object and leads to inevitable infatuation with such states and repeated frustration over not being able to indefinitely sustain them. Only knowledge can reveal that you’ve already got that which you so desperately seek to get over and over again. A whole-hearted commitment to self-inquiry under the guidance of a qualified teacher therefore is the most effective method by which to gain self-knowledge, permanently put an end to mental and emotional agitation and overall existential angst, and abide in the peace and happiness of pure awareness, which is you.

Because the *vasanas* are not going to simply vanish into thin air, it is vital that, in conjunction with a committed practice of self-inquiry, you also observe the dictum of the great modern Vedantin Swami Chinmayananda who urged seekers to “sin intelligently.” Keeping the goal of self-realization and freedom from *samsara* firmly in mind, you mindfully indulge those desires you cannot resist in moderation and allow yourself to enjoy “earthly” pleasures to the extent that they remain non-binding. The moment you notice them beginning to burden your mind with agitation, bully you about with their demands or blossom into gluttonous behavior, however, restrict their diet, so to speak, until they have returned to a manageable size. Though it is a popular trend among serious spiritual seekers to embrace the practice of renunciation, too often this practice is misconstrued as simply a matter of ridding oneself of worldly possessions and refusing to perform certain profane actions. True renunciation, however, is fundamentally an attitude of dispassion resulting from both the knowledge that the self, i.e. pure awareness, was never attached to nor ever owned any object in the first place and the repeatedly reinforced realization that no object is capable of delivering anything more than temporary peace and happiness. In this regard it is important to understand that neither denial nor repression is an effective means of neutralizing binding desires. Though you might be able to willfully restrain yourself from indulging them for a period of time such powerful desires will inevitably erupt out of the causal body, agitate the subtle body and express through the gross body, quite often in inappropriate and even *adharmic* ways. Figuratively speaking, denial and repression serve only to lock the monster in the dungeon but fail to do away with it altogether. The moment the bolts of your willful control loosen, the monster breaks free and resumes wreaking havoc. It is best therefore to allow your wants a judicious degree of wiggle room until such time as self-knowledge finally lays them to rest.