

A Mid-Life Crisis: Surrender the Doer

Ram (James Swartz)

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Jack: Dear Ram, I feel like I'm approaching a crisis – perhaps mid-life, but maybe something more fundamental – all this time for reflection has allowed me to see very clearly how my whole life has been one big negation. Both negation in the big sense of not having any drive to “accomplish” something worthwhile with my life...

Ram: I know the feeling. I was programmed for greatness and ended up an aging hippie. I was lucky to have my spiritual *vasana* explode when it did because it taught me that the main accomplishment in life is happiness – and I went for it directly, inwardly. I'm not saying that one can't attain happiness by pursuing one's desires – attaining success in one's chosen field – but (and perhaps you feel this way) I never could find an endeavor that I resonated with for more than a short time. Everything the world had to offer seemed rather pointless and meaningless – requiring so much non-essential activity.

I know coming to this realization is rather painful – but it's good that you can see it and confront it.

Jack: ...but also in the sense of not being able to live the moment by engaging in my whole being with any one of the countless actions, either outer or inner, that are always waiting for me as a potentiality – a kind of depression, in other words.

Ram: Yes, you've been depressed for quite a long time, lacking confidence. Alcohol is one of the signs. It's difficult to maintain inspiration when one lacks a clear goal. Just facing the endlessly demanding world of action is not inspiring – unless you can let go of the “I am the doer,” the facer, concept. One can't really get rid of the actions themselves, although they can be pared down, but one can do them without a sense of doership. I know this is a subtle point but it makes all the difference. By this I mean one can unload the responsibility for one's fate/*karma*/destiny by seeing that everything is happening on its own. When you really look into it you can't find a somebody there making all this happen. It is just the outpicturing of impersonal forces and has nothing to do with Jack. If you are actually the author of activity and its results then you can worry about how it comes out – but you aren't – so you can relax and let it be what it is. If it were up to Jack things would be different, but it's not up to Jack. If it were up to Jack, Jack would be different – but it isn't. The only way you can make it different – neutralize the *karma* and the bad feelings that go with it – is to change the way you see it – and yourself.

Are you actually a failure? Is there really cause for depression? I wonder. Sometimes people have to go through a lot of heartache to face themselves – and I would suggest that the very fact that you are no longer in denial and are actually admitting this – not just to yourself – I'm sure this feeling isn't new – but to me (which takes courage) is the whole point of life. Most people, accomplished, successful people, just distract themselves so completely with hard work and/or endless diversions that they never face themselves. So I would define this moment as a victory and take heart.

As far as I can see, the whole business of life boils down to one's attitude. You can't change the *karma*, at least not what is in the pipeline, but you can change the way you see yourself. The reason I like Vedanta so much is that it states unequivocally that you are just fine as you are, that you have no responsibility to be something or do something to make yourself be something. Yes, this involves going back to the point where you are prior to Jack and seeing that the whole Jack-overlay is essentially redundant – you don't need it.

It may be that there is some attachment, some familiarity, that keeps you attached to Jack (I was talking with Michael once on this topic and he said, "That's all well and good, Ram, and yes, it's shit, but it's warm and it's mine.") but if you actually look into it, what Ramana calls self-inquiry – you can't actually find a Jack. There is nobody there to hold responsible, to blame for anything. I'm not saying this is easy, but I think it might be a useful shortcut because the prospect of eating away at the bad habits of a lifetime is daunting indeed.

When faced with this idea I've found one that can neutralize it; you've got to have some habits, so why not accept the ones you have? Sure, you can patiently work on undoing some of them but you shouldn't hold your happiness hostage to accomplishing it – until you achieve the perfect Jack. What you have going for you is that you know these habits don't work, so it shouldn't be that hard to let them go. At the same time you start developing positive habits. Trying to quit smoking is a real bitch, but if you take up jogging, the jogging *vasana* will pretty quickly root out the smoking *vasana*. You get the same health benefits from grape juice as you do from wine, without the depression, etc.

The other way, if you can't see that Jack isn't you, is to forgive him. He wouldn't be what he is if he could help it, nobody would – I'd be lounging on the Riviera with a couple of busty babes and a jeroboam of Dom Perignon, my yacht bobbing lazily in the distance – instead of rotting away in this God-forsaken people-less suburb. He made some mistakes – so what? – it's a new day and – well, life could be a lot worse – Jack's got a roof over his head, three square meals a day, his health, a couple of great kids, is eight thousand miles from one ex, the other isn't that bad after all, and he doesn't have to put on a suit and tie every day and ride the Tube to some awful cubical and sweat and slave for the man – etc.

Jack: It seems like a huge task to try to eat away at the bad habit of a lifetime, and in reality it is. I think "one step at a time" is a good motto in trying to balance the passive, seeing mode with activity moment-by-moment that feels genuinely worthwhile, as long as each step is a real one. Your prayers and thoughts would be appreciated on this.

Ram: I'm with you, Jack, always have been. I didn't say anything about it all these years, because you weren't ready to hear it – it would have sounded like self-righteous hectoring, and somehow you had to go through what you had to go through to come to this point – but I've been sending affirming messages to you for as long as I've known you and now that it's out in the open I'm happy to converse with you about it – should you wish. And honestly, although it may be difficult to see – this existential crisis is just what the doctor ordered – in the self-help literature they call it "hitting bottom." I know it sounds awful, but it's actually a great day – because the only way you can go is up.

The main thing is not to beat yourself up about the past, about Jack. One day at a time is good.

~ Ram