

Dispassion Is Not Desire-lessness

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2015-02-27

Charlie: I think I understand “dispassion” and its importance. I’ve read it described as “even loathing for worldly objects.” But I do have some passions, or so it feels. For instance, I enjoy fabric and sewing “a lot.” Is this just *brahman*? At times it feels like an addiction. I don’t think there are judgments against whatever passion one may have?? I guess I am just a bit confused. I am, I guess, at the beginning of my journey.

Ted: The Sanskrit word for “dispassion” is *vairagya*. *Vairagya* is defined as “indifference to the results of one’s actions.” Thus dispassion is not so much a matter of the absence of desire as it is a matter of not depending on the satisfaction of any desires one does harbor for one’s sense of wholeness, completeness and well-being.

As long as one is ignorant of one’s true nature as whole, complete, limitless awareness, one’s desires spring from a sense of incompleteness and inadequacy. In other words, discomfited by the mental, emotional and physical limitations with which one seems afflicted as an apparent person, one feels that if one obtains certain desired objects, attains a certain desired status, achieves certain desired goals, accomplishes certain desired feats or becomes established in a certain desired state of mind, then one will transcend the limited, inadequate, incomplete person one takes oneself to be and consequently become better or whole or even enlightened.

The problem with this belief is that no limited object can provide permanent or complete fulfillment nor can the performance of any limited action by a limited entity produce a limitless result.

As mentioned, desire – even passionate desire – for objects is not in itself problematic. In fact in the *Bhagavad Gita* Lord Krishna, speaking as the self, declares, “I am the desire that is not opposed to *dharma* (i.e. universal ethical law).” Indeed the myriad scientific and artistic achievements that have taken place throughout history are the fruit of desire. Desire only becomes a problem when it asserts a binding influence over the apparent individual person and compels the person to act at its behest rather than his or her own free will, and so weakens the apparent person’s integrity that he or she is willing to contravene *dharma* in order to satisfy its demands.

The scripture’s endorsement of “loathing worldly objects” is a bit strong and should be taken as a hyperbolic expression of the idea that one should use discretion with regard to the attempt to satisfy one’s desires through the pursuit of object-oriented joy. The basic point being emphasized in such extreme terms is that an attitude of indifference toward worldly objects should be cultivated by one who seeks peace of mind and freedom from the likes and dislikes that serve only to agitate the mind, extrovert its attention and prevent it from turning inward and focusing on the self.

This attitude of dispassion, or indifference toward worldly objects, is born of the discriminative understanding that constitutes the essence of Vedantic self-inquiry: *atma-anatma-viveka*, the discrimination between the self and the not-self, the real and the apparent.

Though the essential nature of reality is non-dual, for the purposes of analysis and to break the apparently deluded self's assumed connection with the objective phenomena that comprise the apparent reality (i.e. the manifest universe), Vedanta delineates two fundamental categories of existence: the subject (i.e. me, awareness) and objects (i.e. everything perceivable or conceivable on both the subtle and gross levels of being). Moreover, it says that the subject alone is real, while all the objects known to the subject are only apparent, including the relative subject, the mind-body-sense complex that constitutes the apparent individual person whom the self when apparently conditioned by the deluding power of *maya* (i.e. ignorance) takes itself to be. The subject, whose nature is limitless awareness, is *atma*, the self, and the objects are *anatma*, the not-self.

This discrimination does not negate the existence of objects. Objects obviously exist, for they could not otherwise be experienced. It does, however, negate their fundamental reality. Vedanta defines as real only that which cannot be negated and is not subject to change. All objects, however, are subject to the parameters of time and space and are thus rendered limited and mutable. Hence no object is real. Moreover, all objects are dependent upon awareness for their existence, for it is only in the "light" of awareness that any object is known and thus can be considered existent.

The bottom line is that only the self, the limitless awareness in which all objects appear, is real, while all objects, both subtle (i.e. thoughts, feelings and sensations) and gross (i.e. tangible items, physical environments and embodied beings), are only apparently, or dependently, real (i.e. have no independent self-nature; are nothing more than apparently independent entities arising from, consisting of, abiding in and subsiding back into pure awareness similarly to the way a wave arises from, consists of, abides in and subsides back into the ocean).

Once the understanding that results from this discrimination is fully assimilated, one stops pursuing objects in the vain attempt to derive permanent fulfillment and lasting happiness from them. One realizes that one is both whole and the whole, and thus requires nothing other than oneself to complete oneself. Moreover, consequent to the understanding that due to the non-dual nature of reality nothing can enhance, diminish, taint or in any way affect one's essential nature as pure, limitless awareness, one no longer depends on specific circumstances to make one happy. Thus dispassion naturally arises. Now one is able to enjoy whatever objects, circumstances and experiences present themselves without seeking to get joy from them.