

Does the Dark Night of the Soul End?

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2017-09-15

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/3390>

Rob: That was extremely helpful, a spark in the dark.

This recent relationship issue was accompanied by some recent *adharmic* behaviour. I hadn't drunk or smoked in eight months. To put it into context, I started drinking and doing drugs when I was seven years old. For this reason, I sometimes questioned whether it my *dharma* to use drugs recreationally. I see now that it was my *dharma*, but the ultimate *dharma* is to overcome these binding *vasanas*, which I have done to a large degree. After some very premature non-dual experiences as a child, I spent much of my life mixed up in drink and drugs seeking the same, until eventually it became so painful I sought refuge in spirituality about ten years ago. Since then, the *vasana* has been burning itself out.

Sundari: Vedanta is unambiguous about the use of hallucinogenics, as it is about everything. I have never used drugs, but I have witnessed many people use them and most of them made claims about their power to produce insights and spiritual experiences. I don't doubt this, but I saw the negative effects and the distortions that resulted from reliance on drugs, the gap between the real and the apparently real more often than not widening. Ramji is one of the few people I have met who passed through the drug experience unscathed and managed to use them to enhance his understanding of his *vasanas* without reinforcing them, but then he is an exceptional case. It is a dangerous way to self-inquiry, fraught with self-delusion, such as believing that it was your *dharma* to go that route from such a young age.

The simple fact is that whatever outside means you use to help you gain what you already have will, in the long run, become an obstacle if you start relying on it. There is no shortcut to or chemical solution for self-inquiry. The very impetus to take a mind-altering substance is dualistic by its very nature. If you are looking for peace of mind, it is a fact that all drugs, whether used sparingly or repeatedly, make the mind *tamasic* (dull/in denial). They seem to produce *sattva* (peace) if your mind is very *rajasic* (agitated or extroverted) when you take them, but it is not actually true. It is really *tamas* masked as *sattva*.

The *tamas* slows down the mind and you experience relief and temporary clarity, but it is not *sattva*. The best drugs can do for you is to give you some idea that reality is not how it appears to be to "normal" sense perception. This is often why drugs, just like any far-out so-called "spiritual" experience, become a trap because you start believing that you must do something to achieve this "altered state," as you experienced. And then you go chasing after the experience, as you well know. Drugs can be used intelligently for pain relief or even to sleep better, but they are not an ultimate solution to anything. Only self-knowledge is, and for that you need a clear mind and freedom from dependence on experience.

It is true that everyone reacts to drugs differently and if used recreationally and infrequently it is not such a big deal. But you need to be very honest with yourself because a lot of users claim their use is recreational or provide "spiritual" insights to escape subjective problems and low self-esteem. I am not saying that one can't gain insights while using mind-altering substances,

whatever they are. If you have read James' autobiography you will see that he had many mind-blowing experiences on them. However, to rely on them is dangerous, reinforces and builds very strong *vasanas*. Vedanta is for mature people who have firmly established that they need knowledge, not experience, to set them free of bondage to objects.

Rob: Tobacco is the tough one, as the feeling in the chest constantly seeks relief through it, but equally it serves as a powerful stimulus control for inquiry. I've been using tobacco as a crutch ever since my childhood. This was the longest I'd managed not to smoke since I was eight. The problem is it felt so good to smoke last weekend that binding *pratibandika samskara* was being relieved, yet the relief just reinforces the idea that it is real.

Sundari: Many people say giving up tobacco is harder than any other drug. What you are really seeking relief from is fear, low self-esteem, smallness. Since your addictions started so young, as it true of almost everyone, your issues must have arisen from lack of love or attention as a kid. It must be what drove you to inquire into the mind and study psychology. Most of our problems as *jivas* are not unique at all; lack of love is usually the underlying drive behind all our attempts to self-medicate through objects, whatever our drug of choice – substance or otherwise. Our desires (positive fears) keep us doing the same things repeatedly, to no avail. The drugs or tobacco provides temporary relief but the blowback *karma* compounds the feeling of worthlessness because you feel guilty about “tripping up.”

Rob: It's hard to equate what I felt with the bliss of the self, I guess because the bliss of the self is beyond feelings.

Sundari: Getting a taste of the bliss of the self is what everyone is after, consciously or not. Your statement above: “It's hard to equate what I felt with the bliss of the self, I guess because the bliss of the self is beyond feelings,” sums it up for you. This is the hard and fast truth: there is nothing that gives this bliss to you or takes it away, because it is you. But standing in the truth of this as the self when *Isvara* is pushing to the surface all “your” *jiva* “demons” seems almost impossible, deluded, fanciful even.

Rob: Anyway, I've managed to man up, after a very shaky *tamasic* week. I'm guessing the best advice is to completely renounce this gratuitous action?

Sundari: Way to go. You have answered your own question. Freedom has no fine print, if you really want freedom. Reserving some binding *vasanas* and justifying them because they “feel good” is totally contrary to self-inquiry. *Moksa* is freedom from dependence on objects, remember? All objects, all experiences. No exceptions.

Rob: I remember reading the *satsang Full Jiva Assimilation*. This certainly wasn't the case for me, but most likely because my relapse was accompanied by a very tricky set of relationship circumstances.

Sundari: This is true for almost everyone. Before self-knowledge fully obtains and *nididhysana* is over, there will be relapses; it's inevitable because of the nature of ignorance. *Nididhysana*, self-actualization, is the hardest part; it takes as long as it takes. Swami Paramarthananda says 15 years, depending on qualifications. Self-realization is the easy part. Self-actualization, well, that takes gritting your *jiva* teeth and facing *Isvara*.

There is no easy way to resolve what is hidden in the unconscious – and no way to stop it from emerging when the time is right. Take a bow for facing it with such honesty and courage. Nobody said that the road to freedom is easy for the ego. It is, more often than not, brutal. Self-knowledge is not an instant panacea. While it undoubtedly works to end suffering, the *jiva* must walk the talk and apply the knowledge to every aspect of its life. There is nothing to forgive yourself for, because nobody did anything. There is only something to understand and let go. Trust that *Isvara* is guiding your life and whatever happens now, you will be fine. Sometimes *Isvara* sends us a necessary wrecking ball to shatter the barriers that ignorance and fear erect around us.

Taking a stand in awareness as awareness means taking a stand in our fullness, not in smallness. The *jiva* can never compete with the self, obviously. So the *jiva* overcomes its smallness by living as the self and consciously doing battle with the “voices of diminishment” as they arise. It does not try to defend them. To do so only gives them life. And arise they do! It is difficult, especially in our darkest moments, because you feel like a fraud, that you are trying to be something you are not. However, if the turbulent thoughts and emotional patterns inherent in being a *jiva* hook us, even in seemingly small day-to-day issues, we will never be free of them. The ever-changing and limited idea of who we try to keep alive as the person is just a memory, a guilt-inspired thought. For the most part, it is a toxic program. Vedanta says get rid of it, pay it no heed! This may seem to contradict the admonition to love the *jiva* unconditionally, but it does not. We must love the *jiva* and accept it as it is because we did not make it that way, it is useless trying to perfect it, as it does not belong to us. It belongs to *Isvara*. But to be free of the *jiva*, we need to dismiss it as not-self when it tries to take over, which is why binding *vasanas* must be rendered non-binding and the doer negated. It's all about conditioning the mind with new thoughts that are true about you – practising the opposite thought. It works, but takes determined practice. Freedom is about owning our primary instrument, the mind, understanding that involuntary thoughts run it, and teaching it to think deliberately through *guna* management.

Even though I had realized the self a while ago, my problem for a while was thinking that as the *jiva* never disappeared, it had to be catered to, as it is. This may be true – the *jiva* will remain as *Isvara* made it, for the most part – even with *moksa*. Nevertheless, *satya* and *mithya* is duality if you think the *jiva* is as real as the self. Taking a stand as the self means the *jiva* is as good as non-existent. You are the self. You are not The Self and the *jiva*. So when *jiva* appears with all its smallness, dismiss it. This final realization only fully sank in fairly recently for me, and what a tremendous relief it is. Self-actualization is not for the faint of heart, that is for sure!

Rob: In hindsight, it was amazing to see how the *vasanas* are what's in relationship. In foresight, as the *sadhana* increases the presence of the *sattva guna*, it is important to be cautious of *rajas* and *tamas*. It was shocking to see just how blinded I could still be to the self, like a fish out of water indeed.

How many dark nights of the soul can there be?

Sundari: The Dark Night of the Soul ends permanently when self-knowledge is firm. Once it is, whatever goes on in the *jiva's* life is known to be not-self, and it no longer touches you, even though self-knowledge is not a magic bullet for the ego. It will still suffer the slings and arrows of life, but with dispassion. The ego still feels deeply, especially because it understands everything about life, how seemingly heartbreaking it can be for the *jiva*. It is a zero-sum game. But as life is understood from the viewpoint of non-duality because you are no longer identified with the ego/doer/*jiva*, "you" no longer get sucked into the dream and the dark underbelly of the *gunas*. You are *triguna-atita*, beyond the *gunas*, beyond the world, beyond *Isvara* even. You are pure awareness, observing the show.

Sattva is always the *guna* to aim for, as it is the springboard for self-knowledge, but never forget, it too is an object known to you. As the self, you are *triguna-atita*, beyond the *gunas*. But to be free of the *jiva* requires understanding how the *gunas* condition it. *Rajas* and *tamas* are usually the biggest troublemakers, and they always go hand in hand. It requires a great deal of courage to face the demons that awaits us in the causal body, to free ourselves of the *jiva*. When we do, we see the demons for what they are, just paper dragons, not real at all.

Relationships are so tough because most people do not understand that they are in relationship with *vasanas*, hence the inevitable disappointments and heartbreaks. As long as I try to turn the "other" into "my" husband/wife/son/daughter, etc., and try to work things out with him or her on the personal level, I am keeping the concept of duality, smallness, limitation, alive. As this is a non-dual reality, there are no others. Everyone we have contact with in our lives is the self, exhibiting slightly different versions of the same influences, the *gunas*. When we have a reaction to or an issue with someone else, it is never about them, no matter how trying the circumstances. Seeing the less-than-fabulous parts of ourselves is never easy to swallow, even if we have self-knowledge and know that they do not belong to us. However, if we want to be free, peace of mind will never be permanent until we have transformed all our emotional/psychological disturbances into devotion to the self. It seems very clear that you are committed to doing this. Don't make the mistake of being too hard on Rob. Love him fearlessly, as he is right now. It's tough being divine in human form!

Here is a poem about this I think sums up the courage required to face the causal body, written by our friend Colleen-Joy Page in South Africa. I think you will relate to it.

"Take a stand."

A writing on being human and willing to be awake...

The place no one wants to visit. The place no one wants to look. The darkest terror, that threatens to capsize the fragile mind and its theatre kingdom. The terror of insignificance wrapped in becoming nothing.

"Don't take my crown," cries the ego, as the slaughter of light lays waste the clinging.

Mothers to babes. Rich men to gold. Vanity to her curves, her pleasure trap of sex.

She is not always pretty, enlightenment. She is a ghost-maker. A throne-taker. A joker laughing in a hall of mirrors. And she will end you. Thank God.

I say let her. Let her throw back the veils of my heart, and tear the nails from their clinging to

the vapours of life's hollow promise.

You, who threaten me – you thief. You who hijack my nights with your Hollywood productions of hell in my head. Life, do your worst. Crush my heart with your grief-boot. Tear my guts open with your fear-razor. But know this, you cannot touch the real me.

This that knows itself in the eyes of all the beloved eyes, the touch of all skins, this that sings itself awake, for this love is a medicine that I will pay for.

Throw open these doors and let the storms rage on.

Take all you want from this little life, from the little child who lives in the echoes of this story.

I am willing. I am willing to bleed, to cry my eyes dry. To hurt. To live. I am willing to live. To live as this truth. To be both untouchable and crushable. To be mortal and boundless eternal truth. Your price is steep. I am willing to pay.

Rob: I imagine the experience will serve to keep me rooted on the path of *dharmā*. Hopefully, now I can combine my psychology and Vedanta *vasanas* in order to align *jīva* and *Īsvara* more harmoniously.

Sundari: Trust in yourself, Rob, you are doing just great. The steps to “get there” are the qualities of being there. Have compassion but do not waste time on self-indulgence or self-pity. It may seem painful for the beleaguered *jīva*, but none of it is real. Only you are.

~ Much love, Sundari