

Karma Yoga and the Qualified Mind

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Dear Ted,

I have been spiritually searching for years – felt depression since an early age characterized by an “empty” feeling and therefore becoming very unsuccessful in worldly life, so my search became spiritual. I had some awakening five years ago and since then have mostly had severe anxiety to the point where I cannot work, living in homeless shelter, cannot seem to settle and find a worldly “home,” really no aspect of life that is enjoyable, but throughout that time still seeking until coming across “emptiness” teachings, then Vedanta and James Swartz’ book. I had some awakening again reading this book and I felt relief at seeing that there is some structure to follow after years of only listening to Neo-Advaita teachers.

Ted: Yes, there is definitely a structured approach to gaining self-knowledge that takes all the mystery out of it and makes it a very practical endeavor. It’s a great blessing that you have found it. Be clear, however, that “awakening” is not answer to your problem. I’m assuming that what you mean when you say that you “had some awakening” is that the ideas you encountered in James’ book made sense and thus rang true in your heart and mind. This is understandable because the truth that Vedanta reveals is your own limitless nature as pure awareness. When through the vehicle of the mind-body-sense complex referred to as Jane you hear your name called you perk up, so to speak. Though you have never been asleep, awareness is not an entity that is subject to changing states such as waking, dreaming and deep sleep. It seems as though you have been due to the fact that you have been so strongly identified with the experiences had by the mind-body-sense complex referred to as Jane that you have seemingly forgotten, perhaps overlooked is a better way of putting it, the fact of your own ever-alert presence as the awareness in which all such experiences, both those that are *tamasic* and those that are *rajasic*, have taken place and continue to take place.

Jane: I have sought help with different therapies over the years, the most recent being cognitive-behavioural therapy, but focus on thoughts and the changing of them made things much worse.

Ted: As you are probably aware by virtue of having read James’ book, it is necessary that one have certain psychological qualifications in order to effectively practice self-inquiry. Interestingly enough, however, one of those qualifications is *svadharma*, which essentially entails being true to one’s own relative nature as an apparent individual person. In short, one of the chief aspects of *svadharma* is accepting oneself warts and all, so to speak. Of course this acceptance needs to be properly understood. It doesn’t mean that one should wantonly indulge all of one’s binding *vasanas*, or habitual tendencies, for doing so only serves to strengthen one’s attachment to objects, agitate and extrovert the mind, and thus distract one from identifying the true source of joy, which is one’s own self, through self-inquiry.

Nevertheless, it is vitally important that one also realize that self-inquiry is not a self-improvement program designed to make the relative entity one appears to be a better apparent person.

Ironically, focusing on trying to fix the person actually runs counter to the fundamental truth of non-duality that is revealed through Vedantic self-inquiry. The assumption that the mind-body-sense complex with which you, awareness, have identified should be different prevents the acceptance of the innate perfection and fundamental identity of all objective phenomena as limitless, all-pervasive awareness.

Thus, while it is important to cultivate the qualities of mind enumerated in James' book – discrimination, dispassion, control of mind and senses, self-duty, forbearance, concentration, faith, devotion and a burning desire for liberation to a degree that renders the mind quiet enough to engage in effective self-inquiry – it is not because one's nature or personality is bad but rather because its present state is simply too agitated to allow one to see the truth of one's being.

Jane: Having read about the *gunas* – I see that the depression over the years has definitely been *tamasic* and have been able to counteract that recently and found motivation for exercise but now it seems to be very *rajasic* with restlessness, insomnia, scattered fast thinking, not being able to make decisions and anxiety. I am seeking help from an accupuncturist, doing *karma yoga* in the form of volunteer at charity shop... am able to get out in nature a lot... is there anything else that you would recommend to cultivate "*sattva*" at all?

Ted: Keep doing self-inquiry, or practicing *jnana yoga*. Reread James' book over and over, read the *e-satsangs* on his website, visit my website and read the articles it has to offer and spend time contemplating the teachings as well as the defects inherent in the pursuit of lasting happiness and permanent peace through the obtainment of objects and experiences.

You mention that you are doing *karma yoga* in the form of volunteer work at a charity shop. While the work itself is virtuous, provided you are enjoying it and doing it with a glad heart, it is important to be clear that such charitable deeds are not the basis of *karma yoga*. Though often pitched as "selfless service," *karma yoga* is fundamentally an attitude that one takes toward action and its results that ultimately serves to neutralize one's binding *vasanas*.

In this regard, *karma yoga* is based on the idea that one has a right to act but no right to the results of those actions. In other words, while the apparent individual person cannot avoid action even for a second, for even doing nothing is doing something, which in this case is simply referred to as "nothing," she has no right to expect that she will get the exact results she hopes those actions will produce. Though the apparent reality or manifested universe is governed by a host of impersonal and inviolable *dharma*s, or universal physical, psychological and ethical laws, there are far too many factors influencing any action offered to the *dharma* field for any single individual to be able to control them all and ensure that her actions produce the results she intended. Thus while one can act with a reasonable expectation of a specific outcome if one acts in accordance with *dharma*, there is no way that one can guarantee what results one's actions will produce. Frustrating as it may seem at first glance, the beauty of understanding this aspect of life is that it alleviates one's sense of personal responsibility for the results of one's actions and the consequent deflating feelings of guilt, regret, shame, etc. or inflating feelings of pride, self-aggrandizement, conceit, etc. that so often accompany the sense of personal doership.

This understanding, of course, is further supported by the knowledge that the essential nature of the *dharma* field which is personified as God is benevolent and self-sustaining. In other words, one understands that the *dharma* field is designed to accommodate all the actions offered to it or

executed within it in ways that will produce results that ultimately serve the best interests of the total field. We can liken the manifest universe on both its gross and subtle levels to a giant organic mechanism that is self-sustaining and whose relatively eternal cyclical functioning is designed to allow for certain of its innumerable components, i.e. those in the form of qualified apparent individual persons, at times appropriate to their personal evolutionary process to realize their true nature. Throughout the process of its functioning, the mechanism of the *dharma* field is able to absorb whatever actions are perpetrated within its parameters and reconfigure itself in a way that will ultimately ensure the overall balance, harmony and well-being of the whole. Though the immediate effect of any given action may not appear benevolent or beneficial and may not accord with the intentions of the apparent individual doer, the long-term effects will eventually be what is best, i.e. offer the most spiritual growth for all concerned.

Knowing that the *dharma* field, i.e. God, is the *karma phala datta*, or the giver of the fruits of action, and is thus in charge of the results of one's actions, one is able to offer one's actions to the field with a sense of humility, dispassion and peace of mind. Moreover, knowing that the mechanism of the *dharma* field is equipped, so to speak, with a universal safety catch, or in personified terms that God is a universally beneficent and compassionate governor, affords one the capacity to receive with glad acceptance whatever results ensue from those actions. Because one understands that whatever happens is ultimately for the best, not to mention the fact that no objective phenomena have any affect whatsoever on the essential nature of pure, limitless awareness, one no longer seeks fulfillment through specific objective results and thus is freed from the binding or compelling influence of her *vasanas*, or associated desires and fears. While the apparent individual person will still have preferences, she will know not to expect that a particular result or objective experience will complete her. Thus even though experiences of pleasure and pain will continue to obtain, all suffering, i.e. the unsettling sense of inadequacy, incompleteness and existential insecurity, will cease.

This is the true character and purpose of the practice of *karma yoga*.

Jane: I was also interested in a *satsang* by James replying to a guy in a similar situation to mine, and he suggested to sort his physical stuff in the world before pursuing Advaita. I do not want to pursue traditional therapy again unless it feels right but it feels like I am stuck in the middle – that the *rajasic* feelings with the emptiness makes it nearly impossible to get my life together, but then am also drawn to Advaita.

Any advice would be much appreciated. Thank you very much.

~ Jane

Ted: I don't know you well enough yet to give you certain advice regarding this issue, Jane, but I would say that if you feel drawn to Vedanta it is for a reason. I would suggest that you continue to work on cultivating the quality of mind capable of fully assimilating the teachings while at the same time repeatedly exposing yourself to the teachings themselves. It is a good sign that you are able to identify the *tamasic* and *rajasic* tendencies that arise in you. Remember, however, that these conditional qualities are not you, awareness, and that neither do they affect you, awareness. They are simply qualities affecting the mind-body-sense mechanism referred to as Jane with which you are associated and are at this point identified. Witness them when they arise and neutralize them as best you can through the understanding that they are nothing more than

energetic qualities whose influence has been sustained and bolstered by past actions and habitual thought patterns. See them for what they are and to the extent possible allow them to play out within the mind without granting them further expression through the active organs. Such management will require patience and a certain degree of tolerance, for you may have to allow yourself to “sin intelligently” or allow moderate indulgence in the desires and actions motivated by their influence. But eventually such vigilant and conscious monitoring of the mind will afford you the restraint necessary to allow the *vasanas* produced by these *gunas* to exhaust and cease pestering you. Ultimately, even *sattva* should be seen as only a quality of mind that has nothing to do with your true nature. For now, however, you are correct in assuming that you should cultivate more *sattva*, for only when the mind is pure and quiet will you be able to do truly effective self-inquiry and will you be able to assimilate the self-knowledge that affords you ultimate inner freedom.

Of course, it is also important that you continue to take some practical behavioral steps to cultivate a more *sattvic* mind. The best resource for learning about the nature of these behaviors is the chapter in James’ book on lifestyle. Because your system is out of balance, it may take awhile for it to process and acclimate to the modifications you make concerning your food, diet, exercise, relationships, work, etc. In this regard, don’t fret. Be diligent. Pray for grace and adhere to the guidance offered by the teachings of Vedanta.

~ All the best to you, Ted