

Nobody ever beat the system

Ram (James Swartz)

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Dear Ramji Very interesting to read your thoughts about India and your life. I can see how you would feel that way after all these years there. I was a little concerned when you talked about death and how you could see the end and how it is shaping everything in the present. While you might be looking forward to your death, I'm not! Are you okay? What exactly did you mean by that? Also, I'm curious to hear more about feeling more dispassionate towards life and you ever deepening spirit of renunciation.

Dear Alicia Good questions. They are all pretty much about the same thing so I'll try to explain them all in one answer. If you study scripture, Buddhism or Hinduism, you will find that the idea that this world is empty of meaning occupies a prominent place in their analyses of life. And if you really pay attention there always comes a point when you realize that no matter how much experience you've had, you actually don't have anything tangible to show for it. You still find yourself looking for a new experience to give you meaning. If someone has reached middle age and is still expecting something, like financial security or emotional security to fulfill them it means that this person has not actually understood the nature of reality. As the scripture says, "There is no Self nature in objects." Objects being any situation or person or place or physical thing or idea or emotion or experience. Buddhism calls this world *anitya*, impermanent. Vedanta calls it *Maya*, that which never remains the same, that which isn't. The reason the impermanent nature of empirical reality is stressed is to warn people that if they think that they can get lasting happiness from some objective situation, they are asking for disappointment.

Many people live hard, garnering all sorts of experience, yet at the end of the day are left with the feeling: I am limited, incomplete, and inadequate. Without looking into this feeling, they assume that they haven't been fortunate enough to get what they are looking for. . . so they stubbornly keep trying. They don't realize that the search is misguided and they are looking in the wrong place. They somehow believe that just around the corner is the object that will complete them, make them feel secure, whole and comfortable. . . a relationship, for example. But it never happens. For a reason. And the reason is that there is no permanent happiness in anything in this world. This is a sad fact, but a fact nonetheless. As I say in my book, 'the joy is not in the object.'

Take your own case, for instance. You have a deep need for someone to love and to be loved by someone. There is a Buddhist text that says, "The need to love and be loved is the source of all misery." Why? Because need-based love is exceptionally volatile and causes tremendous anxiety and does not in the long term solve the problem of emotional insecurity. This is so because the need for love from outside is a symptom of a lack of self love. Even if you are lucky enough to find love in relationship, the problem of self love remains and makes itself felt within the relationship, usually by making unreasonable emotional demands on one's partner. This causes a good deal of stress and can very easily sink the relationship.

In fact, if you look at relationship with a clear, honest mind the very idea of a relationship is not satisfying. You always express serious doubts about the guy and about the relationship. You do his chart and the chart confirms your observation; he has a downside. And this knowledge causes doubts. It means along with the good stuff you're going to have to manage your critical

mind, usually by getting him to 'change.' These doubts are not something to be swept under the carpet because I believe that they are just your higher self reminding you, as I said in my last letter, that pleasure equals pain, that you are not going to get over on yourself by having a relationship. Trying to find meaning in life is essentially self defeating because there is no meaning there. The refusal to see that the world is devoid of Self nature is a kind of existential denial. Its proof is a persistent feeling of frustration and an unexamined passion for life.

When I was twenty five I realized that there was nothing here and I started looking for happiness within myself. With the help of the scripture and my guru and a lot of serious self inquiry I discovered that I was the source of all happiness. And I have been deeply satisfied ever since. However, there was a part of me, the ego, that was still programmed with the old belief that there was something in the world worth working for. So I set out to get rid of that voice. Mind you, it was not actually interfering with the constant joy that filled me up from within. But it was a minor irritant, like an insect bite. So I committed myself to a life of renunciation and introspection, and gradually cut back on the ego's programs and plans. I didn't really need to do this but, like Ramana, I felt that cleaning the mind was righteous work. I quit chasing money and women and responsibilities in the world. And little by little the voice that said, "I want/I don't want" started to disappear. The interesting part was that the more I refused to listen to that voice, the more life threw its offerings in my face. I was never short of things to do, good friends, love relationships, money, or anything. So, on the surface it looked like nothing had changed. But these things came unsolicited and so I was free of them. That doesn't mean I didn't enjoy them. I enjoyed them fully. This is the state of dispassion and renunciation. I could be in that state and still enjoy the world because whatever happiness they seemed to have I knew was coming from me. They had no hold on me. I think that perhaps you feel that a life of dispassion and renunciation is very stodgy, unexciting, and perhaps boring. But it isn't. You still 'have it all' but you are not bound to it. Renunciation and dispassion are states of mind, they have nothing to do with one's situations in the outer world.

I'd call this stage of life the 'spiritual' or purification stage. And if you hang in there one day there is nothing left to purify. The voice may disappear altogether or be so faint it is just like any passing thought. I'm copying into this letter a letter to a friend in which I explain it in a slightly different way.

"I'm not sure how to articulate this because it is relatively new but maybe I can explain what's happening with me in this way. As you know when I was younger I suffered a lot because I was seriously out of touch with myself. When I was twenty six I had an epiphany during which I saw both what was wrong with me and what I could become. Shortly thereafter I met the Swami and he showed me who I really was and introduced me to a way of life that could clean up the mess that I had created. That way of life was always associated with India. It was a life of following a principle, not my passions. I stuck with it diligently and it slowly ironed out the crookedness in my personality.

Little by little over the years less and less discipline was required and one day it became natural and automatic. I am quite fastidious by nature and even though I could have reasonably relaxed my vigilance I continued to monitor myself and transform the small things that needed to be transformed. The long and the short of it is that recently the work stopped. I didn't stop it. It just stopped. It stopped because there was nothing more to do. I understand your view that one should never say never because the paradoxical nature of life may cause one to eat one's words,

but this event, or non-event if you will, had nothing to do with my ego and nothing to do with the quixotic nature of life. It was just something that I observed. It's not a big deal but it has stripped all the symbols of my 'spiritual' life of meaning.

There are many Buddhist haikus dealing with this. I wish I could remember the exact wording but one goes something like this.

"When I first began mountains were mountains and rivers were rivers. After some time mountains were no longer mountains and rivers were no longer rivers. Then mountains became mountains and rivers were rivers." It means that when one first comes into the world one sees things without questioning them. A river is just a river, completely self-referential. In the second stage, what might be called awakening, one realizes that there is something beyond the little self and the world of the senses. And, although one does not understand that clearly, one sees that everything here is a reflection, a symbol, of that and strives for what is symbolized. In the third stage, what might be called enlightenment or illumination, there is no longer a separation between the symbol and the things symbolized so things go back to normal, but it's not the normal of the first stage because you've been through a process that leaves you with a true appreciation of who you are and the nature of the world.

The second stage is what I would call the 'spiritual' life, the correction. When you first come in you are not spiritual at all. You are what you are. You know nothing. And then, because you are born into a world that feels compelled to educate you, you are taught that there is something wrong with you. This causes suffering, which is where the *Buddha* comes in. He has to show you how to live so that you can see what is beyond. Ergo, the Eightfold Path. Then, when you are clear about who you are the koan says, "When you meet the *Buddha* in the path, slay him." This means that you need to kill your spirituality. I'm attaching an artwork I did last year, perhaps you've seen it, that shows *Kali* adorned with a necklace of skulls wearing a skirt of severed hands brandishing a bloody sword as she stands victoriously on the chest of a slain Shiva. People love this image, particularly women, but so far I've found no one who knows what it means. Women seem to get a thrill out of the apparent gender implications but it has nothing to do with gender. It is a symbol of the death of spirituality, Shiva being a symbol of the spiritual life. It is achieved by cutting off the limited thoughts of self, symbolized by the severed heads and by realizing that one is not a doer, symbolized by the severed hands. The sword is the knowledge that allows one to discriminate between the symbols of oneself and one's self.

This doesn't have anything to do with practical reality, what I do or where I live. One has to have a life and that life can be anything, including what it has been. So don't worry about my commitment to our project. It's just that there is a great luminous empty space where all that spirituality sat. It is not good. It is not bad. It is just what is."

YOU: Do you think that we leave the body when we have done everything that we have come here to do?

ME: Yes and no. You leave the body whether or not you have completed your work. I think the way to understand the "leave the body" idea is as a statement of maturity, of renunciation. When you see clearly what the body is, that it is only five elements, you leave it. You don't physically leave it as you might in astral travel, but you see that it isn't you. So you leave it in your understanding. You know that no matter what is going on with it, you are free of it.

YOU: I feel very different than you. I still feel that I have much to experience and get in touch with and fairly passionate about life. Of course, I haven't had an enlightenment experience like you have. . .

ME: I know. I'm suggesting that there is a connection between this passion you have for something that can't deliver lasting happiness and your frustrating agitated mind. Some part of you, the Self, knows that you are not going to find what you are seeking in this world, and it is sabotaging your efforts. Not out of perversity, but to get you to look in the right place. Think about it rationally without trying to defend your passion. You've been passionate all your life and yet you still feel frustrated, agitated and incomplete well into middle age. Your work agitates you, and your longing for love agitates you. Perhaps there are other things too; these are just the things you've shared with me. The spiritual teachings don't seem to make an impact on you, the 'I am not the doer/enjoyer' for example and the fact that there is no lasting joy in people, objects, and situations. Why? I believe it is because you are blindly committed to your passions. But you are not going to be the one to prove the scriptures and the realizations of the saints and sages wrong. You will eventually have to face the fact that you are looking in the wrong place. I'm not saying don't live fully, don't do what you want. Go right ahead. But be prepared to take the bitter with the sweet because that is the way reality is set up. Nobody ever beat the system.

Love, Ram