

The Beauty Vasana

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Dear Sundari,

I read the "Ditching the Illusion of Youth" satsang where you mentioned that you changed the color of your hair to align the physical appearance with your true appearance. This actually raised one issue for me that I've been struggling with...

Sundari: Hello Carol, good to meet you, I am glad you wrote in and brought up this point.

The first thing to realize is that I, as the self, do not have an appearance because I am the substrate for all objects—I give rise to all names and forms, including the body that this jiva is walking around in. I do not have a name or a form, I am the only 'thing' that is real, meaning, I am always present and never change. I am whole and complete and nothing can improve or change me.

As the person I appear to be, I have a body that looks a certain way, which was given to me by Isvara, the creator—or, awareness associated with Maya. I am not invested in or identified with 'my' body because I know it is only apparently real (not always present and always changing) and most importantly, it does not belong to me, the person. All the same, I take good care of this body, keep it clean and looking decent because it is a wonderful instrument loaned to me—and, I want to enjoy my body and experience peace of mind. If we neglect the body or abuse it, ill health is the consequence, which does not bode well for self-inquiry or peace of mind.

I did not actually change the color of my hair, I removed the color I had been applying to it, so that it returned to its natural state, which, because I am 60 years old, was turning gray. This is what I meant by aligning with my outer appearance (on the relative level of course) bearing in my mind that as the self, I do not have an 'outer appearance'. I inquired into why I was applying color to my hair and realized that not only was it an unnecessary hassle, it was a binding vasana, which had to go. It was based on an old attachment to the silly idea of youth when I am ageless.

Carol: Is that ok to be changing your appearance to align it with how you perceive yourself inside? For example, I love to dress up, wear high heels, and put on make up... I color my hair blonde and paint my lips bright red quite often... I'm contemplating the start of botox injections as I see some unwanted deep wrinkles starting to form... Is that very bad? Does it disqualify me from Vedanta? As I'm writing to you, I realize that Carol has a very strong vasana for "looks".

Sundari: You are honest, which is very good, and, clearly very attached to your appearance, so therefore, to the idea that you are the body. If you are seriously interested in Vedanta and you understand what the qualifications are for self-inquiry (all explained in detail in James' books, especially the Essence of Enlightenment) then you should know that moksa (freedom) means you do not **depend** on objects for happiness, security, validating or feeling good about yourself as a person, or anything else. It's fine to take care of the body and keep it healthy and attractive, there is no real problem with that. It's good to feel good about yourself on the relative level.

But it is a problem if you think that your self-worth depends on how you look. Your body is an object known to you—and beauty is in the eye of the beholder. It does not belong to you. Fear is not beautiful, it's ugly. What's wrong with wrinkles or gray hair? They are signs that we have lived, that we have reached or are reaching wisdom. This body must age and will die, why pretend otherwise? Who we truly are, as the self, is unborn and undying, and, eternally beautiful. YOU will never have grey hair or wrinkles...J

Carol: However, at this point it is very hard for her to imagine to give it up and go "natural" as some of the "hippie" women in the spiritual world do. Should I just let her keep this vasana as ultimately it does not matter how we look one way or another as long as it aligns with how we feel on the inside? After all, this vasana does not hurt anyone, except perhaps Carol herself, as it obviously requires effort to keep up with what she considers "beautiful".

Sundari: It's true that it does not matter how we look. But it certainly matters how attached we are to how the body looks. If you really believed that it does not matter, you would not be hanging on to youth and beauty. You must fear that you are ugly inside because you need a certain image by keeping the outside young and beautiful. So, where and with what is the alignment? What is really behind this desire? You think an old body is ugly? That's just propaganda. It's a lie. And it makes a lot of money for those invested in keeping women chained to the illusion of beauty and agelessness.

The beauty vasana is a tough one to break because the world is so neurotic about how the body looks. It's so ridiculous, really. It's all vanity. Being so invested in your looks is an impediment to self-inquiry because it is a binding vasana, based on fear. Which does hurt, Carol. That fear binds you to the idea that you will be worth less if you have gray hair, wrinkles, don't dress up or wear make-up. **It is always the motivation for doing anything that is the real issue.** Who says you must look like a hippie by being more natural? How you look is not about your external appearance. It is ALL about your inner knowledge.

There is nothing more beautiful and powerful (and sexy) than the presence and confidence of the self. The most beautiful people are often very ugly because they are so afraid and small inside. Their fear and neurosis is not hidden from anyone. It follows them like a perfume, wherever they go. What you are looking at in the mirror when you look at your perceived flaws is a pale reflection of who you really are. It is fear looking in the mirror, nothing else.

Carol: My husband recently made a sarcastic comment that he doesn't think Vedanta people use botox and it left me feel very conflicted. I don't see how it is any worse than smoking weed or eating chips that you know are not good for your body but "spiritual" people still do those things. I'm a beginner inquirer and I agree with everything I've read so far in Ramji's book, his seminar in Berkeley, and of course all the wonderful teachers at Shining World website satsangs.

Sundari: Your husband is not wrong, for the reasons explained above, but making sarcastic comments is not helpful or kind. The beauty vasana is no different from any other vasanas because it is binding and keeps you identified with the body. As with a binding vasana for bad food, drugs or anything else. You must do inquiry into what matters most to you. What are your main motivations and values? Conduct a fearless moral inventory and determine what underpins everything you value most. Stand naked in front of the mirror and see your Self. Dare to love yourself without any validation from anyone. Don't let your mind be controlled by fear, by outside forces.

Do you want moksa more than anything else, or are your likes and dislikes too strong to break through the identification with the body? If you don't have clarity with regards to your goal, self-inquiry will not work, or at the very least, the fruits will be few and far between. If moksa is what you are after, all binding vasanas must be rendered non-binding.

Carol; So far my only conflict is that I can't seem to imagine giving up on this vasana. Thank you Sundari in advance and I'm sorry if my question is extremely stupid for Vedanta student.

Sundari: It's not a stupid question, but you can't have your cake and eat it, if moksa is what you are after. If not, then go and enjoy the world, indulge your fears and desires, until you don't anymore. If you can't see that nothing can make you ugly because you are the beauty that makes beauty beautiful, then perhaps Vedanta is not for you. This does not mean that you should look like a hippie, wear no make-up or go around in a hair shirt. That's ridiculous too. As I said, there is nothing wrong with looking nice and feeling good about yourself. But if you want freedom from bondage to objects, you must do inquiry into why you are so afraid to give up the beauty vasana and bust that fear with self-knowledge.

Carol: On a side note, I wanted to express my deep gratitude for your article on food and your satsangs. It is so very helpful to read teachings from a female teacher's perspective as sometimes men don't have quite the same insight on certain topics. Children being one of them. I also have a child and I'm very grateful for your satsangs where you mention raising children. I'm very much looking forward to your book release and can't wait to read it.

Sundari: I am so glad that those articles helped you Carol. There is no such thing as gender when it comes to the self, man and woman being the ultimate duality, but I know what you mean. Many women tell me that it helps to hear Vedanta through a female instrument and I am very glad to be of service.

With much love and gratitude,

Carol: Thank you so very much for your reply. I will need to read it again and reflect more on it to assimilate this knowledge. I can tell you right now that I see the unbeatable logic behind everything you said. However, it will take me some time to set aside my beliefs and opinions and let the knowledge you shared to destroy my such deeply rooted, ignorance-based vasana for beauty.

I was afraid to write to you as I thought you'd get very tough on me for such vain "issue". I even let my husband read your reply first and let me know if it was too tough and I need to be more prepared (emotionally) to read it:) After all, there are people in this world that have way more pressing problems than my beauty vasana and they still surrender themselves to seek moksha. Thank you for not making fun of it and replying with so much wisdom.

I will now take my time to conduct the moral inventory you suggested and let the knowledge do its work. After all, the world of samsara does not bring me happiness and that's why I came to find Vedanta in the first place.

Sundari: You may not be aware of it, but your true inner beauty and humility shone so clearly through your email, I could feel it without knowing you. Not only are you physically very beautiful, which I can see from you google pic, you are beautiful inside, honest and very intelligent. After I wrote to you I told James about our exchange and he instantly remembered you. He could see

how bright your light is. We would never make fun of any inquirer and anyway, vasanas are all more or less the same, they are all about the vanity of the ego, they are just ignorance and they are not personal.

You did not make yourself beautiful or give yourself 'your' conditioning, Isvara made you that way. Beautiful people have a problem because everyone tells them how beautiful they are from the time they are little children. It is almost impossible for a beautiful person not to buy into this constant reminder of the value of being beautiful. The world is very invested in beauty, always has been. It is prized in all cultures, although how it is perceived varies from age to age and culture.

Physical beauty has great power in the world. It opens doors that less beautiful people cannot get to so easily. If it is used for the wrong purpose, it can be a very effective tool to manipulate to gain what we want, be it money, power or fame. But physical beauty is the most ephemeral things there is. Just look at the desperate world of modeling, for instance. I feel so much compassion for those dear souls who are so trapped in that ruthless world that will pay homage to them only up until the time they show the smallest sign of aging. Then they are discarded like just another useless object.

Beauty does not last, and if your identity is invested in it, you have a problem. Your self-worth will be tied up in your looks and you will believe that you are not valuable if you are not beautiful. Of course, big business exploits our fears horrendously as women, to their great benefit and our loss. Men are not exempt from it either, but it affects women more than men.

Vedanta is not about denying the existence of the body, but it is about dis-identifying with it as your primary identity. Self-inquiry will not produce fruit if we cannot do this, which is primarily liberation *from* the person, as well as liberation *for* the person so that we live as the self while appearing as a person.

No doubt you have been appreciated for your beauty all your life, but you are clearly ready for Vedanta which is why you came to it, so you do need to look at why you think it matters so much how you look. It's not that you should make yourself unattractive or even necessarily stop doing what you do to enhance your beauty. There is nothing wrong with a healthy appreciation of the physical when we know it does not belong to us and is not real. Sometimes James makes me laugh because he stands in front of the mirror and says 'God, I am so handsome, I just love myself!' J And, he is talking as the self, admiring his reflection in the mirror, knowing it is just a reflection.

As I said, it's the why that counts, the motivation behind it.

James says to please send you his love and a big hug!

Please feel free to write anytime.

Much love from us both, Sundari