

# Vasanas Inspire Self-Inquiry

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**Layne:** Ted, I ran across this at Annette Nibley's website:

**Annette:** Quite right! It's fine to have a *vasana* for self-inquiry; in fact, it's the only good *vasana* but ultimately the knowledge reveals that this inquiring person is not you and that no matter how far the inquiry goes, no matter how much is revealed to the inquiring person, and no matter how "clear" that person gets on his identity, that it is still not you. That personal identity is the mistake, the ignorance, and is what creates all limitation and sense of separation. It's like the wave and the ocean... ha, ha, ha, just kidding.

**Ted:** I'm not sure where Annette's comment ends. Did she make the wave and the ocean comment along with the "just kidding" bit or was that you? But the statement as a whole is correct. The apparent person and by "person" I mean the mind-body-sense complex including all the sensations, emotions and thoughts that are experienced by it and seemingly belong to it, is just an object in awareness like any other object. Thus the apparent person is actually inert and insentient and therefore incapable of knowing itself. The mind-body-sense complex constituting the apparent individual person we take ourselves to be is actually nothing more than an elaborate mechanism that, when illumined by awareness, generates the experience we know as the person's life. The point is that while the self-knowledge registers in the intellect and thus seems to be known by the apparent individual, the actual "knower," so to speak, is awareness.

This last point is rather tricky, however, because awareness neither needs the intellect to know itself – for awareness "knows" itself simply by virtue of being itself, such as is the case in the deep sleep state – nor knows itself as a reflection in the intellect as one knows an object, for awareness itself is non-objectifiable and thus cannot be experienced as a discrete entity or event. The intellect is the component in the subtle body or mind in which the *akhandakara vritti*, or "thought of limitlessness" which is a reflected awareness rather than pure awareness itself, occurs. It is "seen" not as some kind of unfathomably large phenomenon, but as the quite ordinary understanding that everything that is known is known only because it appears within me, awareness, and that since nothing exists separately from me, awareness, I am both whole and the whole.

Certainly, from the limited scope of the particular mind-body-sense complex with which you, awareness, are associated and at this point still identified (meaning you take it to be you) this does not seem to be the case, for when you adopt the perspective of that limited entity all the objects seem either to be phantoms cavorting about within the field of "your" mind or tangible objects inhabiting the empirical reality that seemingly surrounds you. When the mind is calm enough to "take a step back," so to speak, and see things from the perspective of awareness, you "see," i.e. realize or recognize or understand, that all the objects and experiences take place within the scope of your being. This understanding doesn't make you in association with the mind-body-sense complex of the apparent individual person you take yourself to be suddenly omniscient, as many assume, believe, expect or hope it will. Due to your – awareness's – association with the mind-body-sense complex, you – awareness – are limited, experientially

speaking, to the scope of that particular mechanism. In terms of the wave-ocean analogy referenced earlier, just because the wave realizes the ocean doesn't mean that it assumes the physical enormity of the entire ocean. Rather, it knows that its essential identity is the same water of which both it and the ocean are made. While this understanding is a huge disappointment for the personal ego, which hoped to assume a level of Lordship, it does grant one ultimate inner freedom and immortality, for while the mind-body-sense complex will experience any number of pleasures and pains throughout its lifetime, you know that none of it has any affect on you, awareness, whatsoever. Even when the particular mind-body-sense complex with which you are presently associated gives up the ghost, you will remain entirely unaffected, for you know that you are the awareness in which all the mind-body-sense complexes that have ever appeared, are appearing now or ever will appear only appear in and are essentially nothing other than you just as all the waves that have ever arisen, are arising now or ever will arise only arise in and are essentially nothing other than the ocean.

To recapitulate, while self-realization is for the intellect, so to speak, it is not exactly the apparent individual person who realizes the self. It is rather a matter of the self recognizing itself through the intellect of the mind-body-sense complex or apparent individual person with which it is associated. The self is not a "knower" in the sense of being a subject within the apparent context of the subject-object dichotomy that characterizes all relative knowing within the apparent reality, but rather is simply the awareness in which all objects appear or the "light" by means of which all objects can be seen and known by the intellect. Technically, however, the intellect is not a knower either since it is nothing more than an inert object made of subtle matter whose function it is to discriminate the relative worth of objects in terms of the *vasana*-determined values of the apparent individual person whose mind-body-sense complex it is a part, and make decisions concerning how the apparent person should respond to the objective stimuli with which the person is faced when it is illumined and thus set into motion by awareness. In short, the intellect does not think for itself. Thus we might liken self-realization to a game that awareness plays with itself though, technically speaking, awareness is not an entity imbued with personal volition nor, due to its all-pervasive, attributeless and desire-less nature, is it capable of executing action in which it assumes the identity of a limited apparent individual person, and through the mechanism of the intellect that is part of the apparent person's mind-body-sense complex recognizes its limitless nature from the perspective of the apparent person by means of the reflection of its limitless nature appearing as a thought in the apparent person's mind.

Got that?

**Layne:** I've been listening to and watching James' DVDs and reading some of the *satsangs*. The question I have is related to a doubt I have about thoughts and thinking, especially what I think of or categorize as "intentional thinking" like self-inquiry type thoughts versus random song lyrics, emotions or strings of words and things that just "pop into my head." But could it be inferred from Annette's comments above that the inquiries themselves are just *vasanas*?

**Ted:** The inquiries are not *vasanas* but the apparent individual person's practice of self-inquiry or performance of any action, for that matter, is inspired, influenced or compelled by the *vasanas* associated with and expressing through the mind-body-sense complex constituting the apparent individual person.

*Vasanas* are the impressions of one's past experiences that are stored in unmanifest or dormant form in the causal body, and when given the appropriate circumstances sprout as desires and fears in the subtle body or mind. Pleasurable *vasanas* manifest as desires, painful *vasanas* as fears. There is a degree of universality concerning what constitutes pleasure and pain, but these phenomena are also influenced by the subjective values of any given apparent individual person. At any rate, *vasanas* essentially translate as one's likes and dislikes. So a *vasana* for self-inquiry means that one is attracted to self-inquiry, perhaps even compelled or driven to practice self-inquiry depending on the strength of the *vasana*.

Such is the nature of the relationship between *vasanas* and actions. Simply put, our likes and dislikes compel us to a greater or lesser degree to act in accordance with them.

*Vasanas* start out innocently enough as preferences that we can choose to indulge or not. Through repeated indulgence, however, they soon become habitual tendencies and even addictions that wrest control from the intellect and compel us to act at their behest.

**Layne:** Are we being "lived" to that extent?

**Ted:** Yes, but there is more to this circumstance than meets the eye. For reasons we will momentarily discuss, the fact that we are being "lived" translates into neither a complete abdication of personal responsibility for one's actions nor an apathetic attitude toward life rooted in a sense of personal impotence.

**Layne:** Even self-inquiry, one of our keys to freedom, is sort of programmed and beyond our control?

**Ted:** Yes. But from the apparent individual person's viewpoint, free will does seem to be the driving force behind his or her actions.

Regarding free will, there are basically three perspectives from which the issue can be viewed.

The first perspective from which the concept of free will can be viewed is that of pure awareness. Of course, from this perspective, which is actually not a perspective as such since it is altogether non-locatable, there is no doership for the simple reason that since nothing has ever happened, there can be no doing that was ever done and thus no doer to have not done it, which ironically would be a doing in itself had it been done. In other words, from the perspective of pure awareness, nothing is being willed, whether free or not, for pure awareness is not a person possessed of the capacity to will. In short, awareness neither wills nor does, awareness simply is.

The second perspective from which we can view the concept of free will is that of *Isvara* or God the Creator. When for some unfathomable reason pure awareness "wields" its inherent power of *maya* or ignorance and in so doing projects the entire manifested cosmos in both its gross and subtle aspects, the creative power formed by the "conjunction" of pure awareness and ignorance is personified as *Isvara*. Or in more technical terms, we can say that *Isvara* is the personification of the macrocosmic causal body or field of pure potentiality from which all forms both gross and

subtle emanate, which results from pure awareness having inexplicably fallen under the apparent influence of its own inherent power of ignorance. Either way, the apparent practical effect is the same: the manifestation of an apparent transactional reality and the emergence of an apparent individual doer. In other words, there arises a context in which discrete deeds seem to be done and individual doers seem to do them. And while these apparent individual doers seem to be doing what they do by means of their own independent volition, such is not the case. All action is actually orchestrated by *Isvara*.

In order to comprehend the machinations of *Isvara*'s "will," however, we need to first understand what *vasanas* are and how they impact one's desires, decisions and deeds.

The Sanskrit word *vasana* literally means "fragrance." It is used to denote the impressions left in the mind as a result of one's experience. Rather than every detail of each experience being retained, however, the mind filters out all but the essence of the experience, those impressions that give it a pleasant scent or a putrid stink. These fragrances or impressions are thereafter stored in the causal body, or the subconscious memory, and from there they potentially wield a powerful influence over one's actions. Basically, these impressions are the basis of all our attractions and aversions, likes and dislikes, desires and fears. Each time we are faced with a decision, the intellect consults the causal body for advice on how to respond, and invariably the causal body instructs us to act in accordance with the character of our *vasanas*. In other words, it tells us to do what has produced a pleasurable result in the past and to avoid doing what has produced an adverse consequence. Moreover, each time we satiate the desire or circumvent the fear evoked by the *vasana* we strengthen it. Rather than remaining mild preferences and proclivities, the *vasanas* we have accrued and reinforced soon become demanding overlords who compel us to act at their behest and in such ways as will satisfy their voracious appetites. Hence, instead of being masters of our destiny, we become slaves to our desires. When a *vasana* becomes so strong that we are unable to resist its influence, we call it a "binding" *vasana*. Because the binding *vasanas* extort one's attention, it is these *vasanas* that need to be neutralized before one can successfully practice self-inquiry. Despite the grim manner in which they have just been presented, however, it should be noted that *vasanas*, by which we mean habitual tendencies that are based on one's likes and dislikes, are not all bad. Some *vasanas* compel us to do things that are quite helpful to either our enjoyment of the world or our inner spiritual growth. Whether positive or negative in character and despite the greater or lesser degree of their influence, however, *vasanas* are the fundamental impetus of our actions.

The *vasanas* themselves are not independent sentient entities with a will of their own. Rather, they are merely cogs in the organic machine that is the mind-body-sense complex. They are both the fuel and the by-product, we might say, of the machine's regenerative operation. That is, not only do they feed the machine the information it needs to carry out its functions, but they are also the subtle residues of that functioning that are stored in the form of informational energy that in turn fuels the continued functioning of the machine.

As is the case with all manifested objects, the *vasanas* are time-sensitive and progress through a predictable series of stages during their lifespan. In other words, like all objects, they are born, grow, mature, decay and die. Thus once they are born of experience, they gain a greater or lesser degree of strength as they are reinforced through subsequent action until they reach the peak of their power. In the case of certain *vasanas*, this means that they become irresistible tendencies or binding habits that compel one to satisfy and thereby sustain their strength, and thus they take a longer period of time to weaken and eventually wear out, as all *vasanas*

inevitably do.

While this process follows a predetermined pattern though the variations within its general progression are innumerable that is part of the operational design of the mind-body-sense machine, the machine itself (i.e. the apparent individual person) believes it is functioning according to its own free will. The ideas, opinions, intuitions, interpretations and impulses that arise in the mind prompted by the *vasanas* seem to the apparent individual person as though they are his or her own spontaneously-generated thoughts and feelings. Thus when one feels a decided like or dislike for certain objects, behaviors or experiences, it means that the *vasana* driving that attraction or aversion is currently “ascending” through the growth and maturation phases of its lifespan. Conversely, when one is dispassionate toward these same objects, behaviors or experiences, it means that the *vasana* that formerly drove one to seek these things is currently “descending” through the phase of decay and making its way toward “death,” which is essentially the complete neutralization of that preference or proclivity’s power to compel our actions.

The progressively-patterned “lifespan” of all manifested objects is part of what we might call *Isvara*’s “will.” As mentioned earlier, *Isvara* is basically a personification of the fundamental field of pure potentiality out of which the manifested universe arises. As such, *Isvara* can also be understood as the laws that govern the operation of that vast macrocosmic machine. In other words, everything that occurs in the manifested apparent reality is a predictable result of the impersonal and inviolable chain of cause and effect that is personified as *Isvara*. Hence from *Isvara*’s perspective there is no such thing as individual free will. The process of individual spiritual growth, self-inquiry and the eventual assimilation of self-knowledge is thus simply a predetermined progression of ever-expanding understanding occurring within the mind or subtle body of an apparent individual entity who is nothing more than a mechanistic component functioning within the larger macrocosmic machine that is *Isvara*.

From the apparent individual person’s perspective, however, this process of self-realization does not seem to happen spontaneously. Rather, it most often appears to be the result of painstaking effort put forth over a long period of time. In other words, the inevitable unfoldment of *Isvara*’s “will” reveals itself through the apparent choices and actions of the apparent individual person.

It is in this understanding that we at last find the reconciliation of determinism and free will.

Though the apparent individual person is completely controlled by the *vasanas*, it appears as though he enjoys free will. That is, while the decisions that the *vasanas* compel him to make and the actions they compel him to take seem as though they are freely chosen on the basis of his personal preferences and proclivities, the *vasanas* themselves did not originate with the apparent individual person. Certainly, they seem to belong to a particular mind-body-sense complex, but the *vasanas* themselves actually come from *Isvara*, so to speak. In fact, it is the *vasanas* that mandated the manifestation of an appropriate mind-body-sense complex through which they could find expression, and not the mind-body-sense complex that generated the desires and fears that seemed to result from its experiences. In other words, while an apparent individual may like a certain object due to a pleasurable experience he had in association with it, that apparent individual did not choose to find that particular experience pleasurable. Thus the *vasanas* and their influence come unbidden to the mind-body-sense complex at the behest of *Isvara*.

For all practical purposes, however, the apparent individual person will seem to possess free will as long as he is associated with the mind-body-sense complex, and thus appears as a functional

component within the context of the apparent transactional reality that is the manifested universe. Thus the apparent individual person is not “off the hook” with regard to the apparent choices he or she makes. From his or her point of view, the apparent individual person needs to exercise his or her apparent free will with discretion in terms of the goal he or she intends to reach. The only difference in terms of the self-realized or enlightened one is that he realizes that the whole apparent happening is a cosmic ruse, that when he apparently makes decisions it is actually *Isvara* in the form of the *vasanas* deciding through him and, moreover, that even *Isvara*’s orchestrations are only apparent happenings within pure awareness. Or as Shakespeare put it, life is nothing more than “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”

Since taking life to signify something causes so much suffering, however, and the endless pursuit of object-oriented happiness inevitably proves fruitless in terms of providing permanent peace of mind and lasting happiness, all apparent individuals (i.e. all subtle bodies) eventually come to the realization that the thing to do is to get free of it. And here, of course, is where self-inquiry comes into play.

Ironically, object-oriented *vasanas* eventually inspire one’s practice of self-inquiry, and one’s practice of self-inquiry in turn cultivates and strengthens the *vasana* for it that sustains one’s practice until it bears the fruit of *moksa*, or ultimate inner freedom.

**Layne:** Maybe I’m confused about what *vasanas* are and how they get formed or what the relationship between the causal body and the *vasanas* is. I think this is a real doubt. It seems more serious than the “chicken-and-egg quandary” and I don’t want to stew unnecessarily in an existential paradox if I don’t have to.

**Ted:** Hopefully, the explanation just rendered has laid the issue to rest. If not, let me know.

To be clear, however, there is no “chicken-and-egg quandary.” The *vasanas* come first. All *vasanas* belong to *Isvara*, or God – i.e. awareness – “wielding” its own deluding power of *maya* or ignorance by means of which it projects the apparent reality like a hologram within the “arena” of its own being. To put it in anthropomorphic terms, the *vasanas* are essentially God’s ideas or desires that form the blueprints of all the objects subtle and gross that appear within the scope of awareness and constitute the apparent reality. The *vasanas* become the apparent individual person’s “personal” *vasanas*, the intellect’s identification with those *vasanas* from the macrocosmic pool of *vasanas* that have been drawn to and become associated with that particular apparent individual person’s mind-body-sense complex due to its circumstances being conducive to their expression.

**Layne:** On this last round (starting from the beginning of the DVD set again) of listening to James’ talks, I find I’m developing a sort of *bhakti* for the concept of knowledge, being more thankful for and appreciative of it. I don’t know if I’ve fully given up the experience-ghost yet but I think I’m becoming more of a believer in knowledge. I picked up on the idea of *jana shakti* (hope I’m spelling it correctly)...

**Ted:** *Jnana* (pronounced “gyana”) *shakti*.

**Layne:** ...and I get how the knowledge can be transformative.

**Ted:** Knowledge is actually the only thing that transforms. Though we often think experience transforms us, it is not actually the experience itself that does the trick. This is obvious due to the fact that there are many experiences, even “spiritual” epiphanies, that have no lasting transformative effect on us. Truly speaking, the transformative effect of any experience is due to the knowledge we extracted from the experience rather than the experience itself, for it is the knowledge that lasts after the experience has ended.

**Layne:** Thank you.

**Ted:** My pleasure. I hope the comments help. All the best to you.