Marco: Please can you explain the difference between vasanas and karma, which comes first?

Sundari: It is impossible to say which comes first, vasanas or karma, because they are inseparable. It’s the chicken and the egg story. Vasanas produce karma, and karma produces vasanas. Vasanas are the seeds – the knowledge – that drives creation. Nothing can move in the creation, or apparent reality, without a vasana driving it, whether it is a one-off thing or an often repeated pattern of behaviour. Standing, walking, talking, breathing, eating, sleeping, etc. are all vasanas as well as karma. The jiva, or subtle body, is really just a walking talking vasana/karma bundle. Not all vasanas are bad, and karma is not inherently good or bad either – meaning not conducive to freedom. It all depends on the desire or motivation behind both.

Certain habits are good and certain habits are not, depending on what you are trying to achieve. As discriminating inquirers, we are interested in the psychology behind our behaviour, not the behaviours themselves, although certain behaviours are completely off limits, such as those that violate universal norms, like injury, deceit, theft, etc. The basic psychology operating behind most of our unhelpful behaviours is fear, a sense of lack. A vasana for food is natural. It is Isvara maintaining the body. I eat to live. But when I feel emotionally upset for any reason and use food to calm me, the vasana becomes a problem because it masks my real motivation. I am now living to eat. If my mind is clear, I can understand that I am using food to solve a problem not solvable by food (or anything else) and I can look for the solution elsewhere. However, if my mind is not clear and food works, which it does temporarily, I will repeatedly use food to manage my emotions.

A vasana becomes a good one when it drives you into pleasant circumstances and it becomes a bad one when it drives you into an unpleasant situation. For instance, alcohol is a very nice vasana for certain people. It is a very painful vasana for others. A binding vasana for sex causes suffering but dharmic non-binding sex is a healthy vasana. A commitment to self-inquiry is a very good binding vasana to have, as through it self-knowledge can obtain in the mind. A binding vasana for a healthy lifestyle is good, as is a binding vasana for living according to dharma. But vasanas can also sprout without any previously known tendency or desire because the seeds for all vasanas are Isvara, and therefore exist as potential in everyone. It may seem like “our” vasanas are personal and original, but they are not. All vasanas are eternal because they originate in the causal body. Isvara churns them out over and over because there is really only one eternal jiva, or subtle body, appearing as many seemingly unique individuals with seemingly unique “issues.”

A vasana is the momentum from a past action, the tendency to repeat it. It is purely a technical term. When we repeatedly repeat a vasana, the behaviour associated with it becomes binding. When I keep responding habitually to life, boredom sets in. It is not pleasant to behave like a robot. At this stage, the vasana-driven habit becomes an obsession or a compulsion, which finally morphs into an addiction. We call these states of desire and attachment negative “binding” vasanas. At this point, you are not eating food; the food is eating you; you are not having sex, sex is having
you. Food and sex represents any *vasana*-driven behaviour meant to make you feel good. On and on it goes with all objects we chase in a vain attempt to feel complete.

**Three Types of Vasanas**

There are basically three types or categories of *vasanas* – smoke or fire, grime on a mirror and fetus in the womb.

1. Smoke or fire: These *vasanas* disturb the mind, but are negated without too much effort. Like smoke dissipates on its own and fire is extinguished by water, we can dissolve this type of tendency quite easily. Examples of this are things that we can easily forgo relatively easily – like wanting ice cream, for instance (unless we have a pathological addiction to it!), anything patently gratuitous.

2. Grime on a mirror: Grime on a mirror, which has been there for a while, needs elbow grease to remove it. These tendencies are not so easy to negate and require diligent practise of self-knowledge. Examples of this are habitually talking too much, eating too much, indulging any of the senses too much, frantic activity, manipulating to get our own way – any habit that is binding but we are aware of it.

3. Fetus in the womb: Just like a fetus in the womb takes nine months to gestate in order to develop fully, so these tendencies cannot be removed before they come to fruition. This kind of *vasana* usually creates *samskaras* (conglomeration of *vasanas*) or *pratibandikas* – deeply entrenched, and most often unconscious, habits.

**Karma**

*Karma* is just the impersonal playing out of the *gunas*. As everything in the apparent reality is a *vasana*, so is it also *karma* – and it too is eternal and impersonal. Although there appear to be many individual *jivas*, or people, with unique lives and *karma*, the term “*jiva*” refers to the generic individual. *Maya* makes it look like awareness identifies with the subtle body and then appears as many seemingly different subtle bodies, all with “unique” life stories. It is like a light beam refracted through a prism, appearing to split up into many separate light beams, a spectrum. But it is still only one light beam. *Vasanas* and *karma* are not unique (although the ego likes to think they are). It is impossible to put a timeline to this logic, because as principles the *gunas*, the *jiva*, the *vasanas* and *karma* cannot be separated, as they exist “out of time,” in infinite potential within the causal body, which is infinite because it exists in consciousness.

Anything created by action is *karma*, and it is impossible to be alive without action. Thinking, speaking, walking – even sleeping or sitting still is an action producing *karma*. Actually the *gunas*, which are what generate *vasanas*, precede action, as they are macrocosmic forces that cause the world to change. But action “creates” the *gunas/vasanas* too, in the sense that actions done from a particular *guna* reinforce the tendency, meaning the *vasana*, for that *guna* to express itself again as *karma*. The *vasanas* and *karma* are just two ways of speaking of the same force. *Karma* is *vasanas* manifesting, and *vasanas* are the unmanifest results of *karma*. You can’t separate the *vasanas* from the *karma* in reality. You can say that ignorance appears as *vasanas*, and the *vasanas* grossify to become *karma*, which in turn “subtlelizes” back into *vasanas*.

It bears repeating that *karma* is a matter of identification or interpretation. *Karma*...
seems to be there for the jiva because jiva is ignorant of its nature as awareness and interprets what happens in its environment. There is no karma for animals, for instance, because they do not have intellects, so they are neither ignorant nor do they have knowledge; they are a program run by Isvara. Therefore animals do not interpret their environment; they do not evaluate the things that happen to them, in them and around them. Animals do not think and they act purely on “instinct,” meaning according to Isvara.

Karma itself is value-neutral. It is just action and its results. Karma only becomes meaningful when we evaluate it. We either like it or don’t like it or are indifferent to it. Only in the minds of human beings does action become “karma.” Karma (like vasanas) is real if you think it is real; it is almost impossible to understand because the one trying to understand it is in the dharma/karma field and part of the field. It is like trying to understand the mind of Isvara; it cannot be done. Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita: “On the topic of karma, even sages are perplexed.” This is where dispassion and karma yoga is so important; it is the only way to deal with life from the jiva or jivanmukta level.

Problems arise when the jiva identified with the body-mind (the doer) thinks it can make the person a “better” person through its own actions, which it can to some degree. But there are many things that are not a result of one’s state of mind and are not in the control of the person. Seen from the perspective of the individual, of course it appears to be true that you can act to achieve certain results; but those results are not up to you. They are up to the field, or the Total Mind. As much as it looks like you are the doer, you are not. As the doer you are just one factor in many that are the constituents of action. From the jiva’s, or doer’s, point of view there is appropriate action to be taken, but that still does not guarantee any particular result.

Karma depends on who you think you are. There is no karma for an enlightened person (jnani). The individual, or jiva, identified as a jiva accumulates karma that seems to come to the body-mind-sense complex (subtle body), which a jnani (enlightened person) knows belongs to Isvara. When moksha obtains, the karma burns up. However, one has to look at what “burns up” actually means. Karma does not burn up for awareness, as there is no karma for awareness, because for it nothing ever happened. It is not a doer. Karma is not real; it is an object known to me, awareness.

Karma is just an idea in the mind that causes suffering. So “burning up” karma happens when the jiva is no longer identified with the mind (jīva, or subtle body) and knows that its true identity is awareness. This does not mean that the karma does not still play out for the jīva, because the body belongs to Isvara, the Total. The momentum of past actions (prarabdha karma), which is Isvara delivering the fruits of jiva’s actions, plays out as long as the jīva is alive. When prarabdha karma is finished, the body dies. Karma “burns up” for the subtle body because it is only ever “in” the mind, not in the physical body or the self. The body is just meat; it is inert, so there is no karma for it. It is a counter across which experience is transacted. Karma seems to take place in the physical body because the physical body is “attached” to the subtle body.

The dharma field is a karma field, created for the benefit of the jiva to work out its karma. Isvara is called karma phala datta, which means “the one who delivers the fruits of the action.”
~ Love, Sundari