

No Permanent Flow, Can't Get it "Back"

Ram (James Swartz)

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Raj: Dear Ramji, I am back with some questions.

What is your take on the notion of "flow"? By that I mean those periods of doing something where any sense of "I" is absent. To me that clearly is the most authentic and natural way of being. Sure enough, there can't always be "flow" in the technical sense of the word, for example, when one is involved with mundane tasks or tasks too complicated to be able to done in a state of flow.

Ram: I think I understand what you mean, but mundane and complicated tasks can flow too. Flow is a state of mind.

Raj: Yet I mean the essence of the state, which is doing tasks without any sense of "me" or any agitation in the mind with respect to the outcome.

Ram: This is the experience when the mind is pure *sattva*.

Raj: I want to share some background. My spiritual journey began in earnest around two years back, when I had an experience of awakening. This epiphany resulted in sense of peace, love, oneness, "untouchable-ness," that lasted for weeks. It caused the understanding that I am not the person, the thoughts, the story I take myself to be, but the awareness, which can never be touched by anything. The other understanding was that while there is an apparent separation at the level of words/concepts and forms, there is a deep underlying connection between things, that this is one connected universe and not discrete objects as I earlier thought them to be. There was a state of a subtle high and I mistakenly I felt that my natural state was to experience constant joy and love... and also purity... because that was the experience for the few weeks this state lasted. Sure enough, gradually the state began to wear off.

Ram: That's right. No state is permanent. All states are *samsaric*.

Raj: When that happened I reasoned that before I do anything else I have to be able to remain in that state because only from that state of joy and bliss does one function naturally. This is because very regularly during this experience I would find myself functioning in a state of flow, where a sense of "I" was absent. But what happened of course is that, ironically, the "I" came back, wanting to "own" this state of its absence. This state was triggered by a practice (done in a very easy and non-expectant manner for a few days) of examining the awareness that lay behind the mind and "being in the present." So afterwards I became obsessed with watching my thoughts and being in the present. It was realized only later that this is another trap.

Ram: Right again. You are a fast learner. I know people who have been trying to “be in the present” for years – to no avail.

Raj: Because the awareness is equally present whether one is in the present or not, whether one is watching the thoughts or not. And maybe equally importantly, it was realized to be a trap because it was done with an intention of “getting” something... and so there was a constant checking, say after a successful meditation experience whether I was “getting” it back or not. And I was in this trap and a downward spiral of anxiety about results for almost an year. I ultimately realized what was going wrong – my really wanting to get back the state and constant checking of progress was in contrast to the initial experience which had come when there was no expectation of “getting” anything... in fact there was an arising of an understanding that there is nothing to get or lose. (The other problem with this seeking, that all states are it, was realized a bit later.) But anyhow, my seeking to get back that state continued... I felt I had no choice, I had never tasted anything like that before.

I then came across Neo-Advaita teachings, which resonated with me to quite some extent in that their message that there is “no individual doer” and no individual controlling their actions, but just things happening... and all experiences part of this oneness. This resonated because it made me drop the “obsessive seeker” mode I had gone into. The only problem I found with the “there is no doer to do anything and hence get enlightened” teaching was that I reasoned that if, in a limited sense, one is able to exercise apparent volition in the material world to get things done, why should it also not be applicable to spiritual seeking?

Ram: Right again.

Raj: All the more so because the only thing I wanted in the “spiritual domain” was to be able to act in a way in the material world in which I was not driven by fear and desire... and so really like any other purpose in the “material domain.” (By this point there was also an understanding that the material and the spiritual are really the same in a way.)

Ram: You can leave off “in a way.” They are just two words to talk about awareness from different perspectives.

Raj: And I thought that this aim shouldn’t be hard to achieve, because the one thing I learned since my initial epiphany was that my overall happiness and contentment did not depend much on what was happening in the material world, which made me see clearly that acting to due fear and desire was happening, for the most part, only due to old tendencies present in me, which were not in keeping with how I had started seeing life (as a place with nothing to gain or lose, ultimately). And so, like other material pursuits which one can “do” something about, my “spiritual search” was in a way a material one, where I wanted to gradually eliminate dysfunctional tendencies.

Ram: Yes, indeed. There is no “spiritual” or “material.” The impulse to achieve

something is born of ignorance of the nature of the self.

Raj: It was around a couple of months after this that I saw your video at *Conscious.tv*, which resonated greatly with my mental attitude at that point. I then ordered your book and since then have also been in correspondence with you.

Okay, so back to my question. I find that being/doing in a state where one has no notion of “I” and no concern about the results (at least none beyond that required for the doing to take place) to be very nice, pure and effective. It’s almost like some spiritual teachings say that the doer dissolves into the doing... and in a way the doing becomes being... natural... without undue effort. Now, I don’t mean the doing to always have to be effortless/easy, but rather the essential point about authentic, natural doing, without a sense of “I” and with no undue mental agitation due to concern about the results. To me, this seems like the enlightened way of being and doing. Am I correct in this?

Ram: No, because you are thinking of it as a “state.” The word “state” is experiential. It should send up a yellow flag and make you think about the way you are thinking. The problem is that the doer in this case is the apparent “I,” the *jiva*. But if you see yourself as awareness, then all actions are effortless because you know that the *gunas* are the doer. So you don’t try to get in the flow. The flow or “not-flow” is in you. They are objects known by you. And you are not affected by whether things are flowing or are all jammed up. Flow is desirable because the doer doesn’t like the not-flow. But when you understand the nature of *samsara*, you are happy with both because you cannot have flow without not-flow. Having said that, if you cultivate *sattva* there will be an apparent flow most of the time. Even advanced *yogis* experience the “not-flow” from time to time.

Raj: I find reasonable that as humans we are afforded a life where, at least for most of us, it should theoretically be able to be like this because beyond certain practical needs we don’t have any real needs and there is nothing really to get or lose as the result of our actions. Just to clarify, I don’t mean an “always productive” state necessarily, but just a natural state of being... in fact a state which often arises for most people on a regular basis, say, for example, when listening to a song, watching a film, taking a walk, having a conversation and sometimes even when getting “real work” done. In these states, one is just naturally “being,” and in fact being and doing are the same, which they actually always are/should be, and there isn’t much concern about results... or a sense of an individual self.

Ram: Theoretically, yes, but in practice it takes a lot of *triguna vibhava yoga* to get rid of the offending *rajas* and *tamas* that inhibit the flow.

Raj: Now, a problem for me is, if the “who am I?” enquiry keeps popping into my head as a *vasana* for that develops, it seems to get in the way of just naturally being/doing in which ideally I don’t want to be interrupted with the thought of “who am I?,” because I am always the doing/being/what-is-happening all around (which is all the self), even without the mind having to analyse that, so to speak. The arising of the “who am I?” enquiry isn’t a problem in most situations, like when taking a shower, because the mind doesn’t need to be engaged freely in the showering

process for it to happen well... but in other cases, where the mind needs more resources, for example, when needing to be attentive to a technically complex discussion, oddly more so when I have to be listening than talking. And in other cases while doing something the mind tries to see that from the point of view of the awareness there is no doer but doing happening on its own, etc. I am not sure, but perhaps this maybe more of a problem for me, due to my lack of ability to regulate attention quickly between things (ADHD-related). And so sometimes I feel it easier to act and be free if I just give up on the self-enquiry. What do you suggest for this?

Ram: Give it up when your mental resources are required elsewhere and indulge it when they aren't. You are a thinking/analyzing person, and this is why you are moving so fast on your path. As I pointed out before, considering your obsessive (*rajasic*) tendencies, it is good to take a more relaxed approach.

Raj: I do ultimately feel that I don't really take myself to be this "person" in any case. The problem still is that when caught up in a thing, dysfunctional patterns of desire and fear automatically show up. Maybe, more than self-enquiry, I should focus on seeing the "sameness" of all situations and outcomes, which will help to act dispassionately and gradually eliminate aversion and desire? (Ultimately, the "sameness" reflecting the fact that who I really am is never affected by what's happening.)

Ram: Self-inquiry is not a particular technique. It is the application of knowledge. The oneness of everything is knowledge. See if you can't see how the flow and the not-flow are the same, how self-inquiry and not-self-inquiry are the same. You can only appreciate this if you are awareness.

Raj: In fact I feel it's also useful to know clearly that to who I am *moksa* isn't any better than the current state... because everything is the same to me, for I am the awareness and not the body-mind. This I find helpful because then there is no "greed" for *moksa*, nor a frustration if things aren't "progressing" well.

Ram: Right again. If your mind is agitated about the result, "*moksa*" inquiry is compromised.

Raj: Finally, a question regarding spiritual "experiences." You say that they temporarily suspend *vasanas*. How does that happen? Isn't it because during those experiences the sense of an individual self goes away? So why are aren't those the states to be cultivated so that one remains in those for most of the time, even when operating in the world, just like you'd say cultivation of a *sattvic* mind is desirable?

Ram: Your attention goes to the experience and you do not identify with the *vasanas*. They burn up in the experience, but when the epiphany wears off, attention reverts to the *vasanas* once more and you start to act them out. Epiphanies happen when the mind is *sattvic*, so it is good to cultivate a *sattvic* mind. However, the danger is that you get attached to the epiphanies. So you need to know that the *gunas* are always changing. If you know that, you will not cling to *sattva*. If you

cultivate a high degree of *sattva* and can keep your attention on the reflection of the self in the *sattvic* mind, the *akandakara vritti* will arise and you can gain *moksa*.

Raj: Maybe I already know the answer... cultivation of those states and cultivation of a *sattvic* mind are the same/similar things... as long as one knows that the absence of an individual self is always the case, and not dependent on a particular "state" which comes and goes.

Ram: Good thinking. The whole issue of experience is only meaningful for the individual self. If there is no individual self, then who are the states, the epiphanies and the *sattva* for?

Raj: Yet I wonder how is it that those states change deeply-embedded patterns of thinking while they last, and why are those states only temporary?

Ram: As I said above, attention goes from the thinking pattern to the self or the experience of the self in the mind. And as I also said above, all states are in *samsara*. No state lasts. *Samsara* is *anitya*, impermanent. Simply knowing that - really knowing that - is tantamount to *moksa* because you will cease any effort and the doer will die. This is the result of knowledge. Unfortunately, doers take their sense of limitation seriously and are not easily persuaded to give up trying to relieve it by action. This is why *viragya*, dispassion, is a requirement for *moksa*.

Raj: I look forward to your reply. Thanks for your guidance. I hope things are good at your end. (I know it always is so for the self, but I mean also for James and his work.) 😊

~ Love, Raj Kumar

James: Thank you. There is no James. I just pretend to be James and whine like the rest of the *jivas* about my miserable life.