

Sharing Shit Does Not Make It Not-Shit

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Betty: Dear Ram, I am writing for advice. There's huge resistance to writing to you because I'm feeling pretty confused and sad, so I don't really know exactly what I want to say, but I will try.

When I left for India I was very clear that all I wanted was to meditate and to learn what awareness is. That was my only question. Everything else that arose fell into that question. I was meditating around six to eight hours each day during November and December, both on the cushion at Ma's *ashram* and during trekking in Nepal. I had an experience in January, around New Year's Day, in your *satsang*, of seeing who I am (what my Buddhist meditation teacher described as an experience of "not-self"). It felt like a change in perspective and it felt so obvious and ordinary yet utterly free of "shoulds." For a while I fell into some of the traps that I read about in your book chapter on enlightenment sickness. Yet it didn't seem like I could help that. All I could do was watch as the mind tried to claim something, to think that it knew something, and to see the suffering in that. Two particular statements you made in *satsang* helped to quiet the claiming, arrogant mind - when you talked about how when Ramana realised the self, he didn't go and tell everyone about it - he sat in a cave for many years. Also, when you pointed out in a jesting tone that upon realizing who you are and who you have never not been, you should be embarrassed more than anything.

At some point, about two weeks into January, I was completely suffering and I realised I needed to be alone as much as possible to see what was going on. So I spent a lot of time inquiring into how the mind kept creating this illusion of separation. Just watching and being. And this was good.

Now I am home and as I write to you I feel some of the despair clearing. I see a possible way out of this pain of mind. Yet it is really difficult right now. At present I see that I'm attached to the outcome of my actions, I have an idea that I'm actually in control and I am not satisfied with how things are. I am looking outside for satisfaction and creating problems where there are none. There have been a few moments every now and then of realizing that, "Ah, yes, all is okay," yet these are rare at present. I'd like to share a few of these "problems" with you in the hope of gaining some perspective on them.

Work - I am working for my dad full-time and this involves driving around ten hours each day. The job itself is not hard, but being in the car that long gives me a sore neck and being with another person that long is difficult for me. Yet I feel like I need to work to save money so that I can have time to simply be and to travel to India again later in the year. And I also have an idea that I should struggle through this experience and see what is to be learnt and see if I can change my view on it so that it's okay.

I'm in a relationship with a man I met in the last few weeks in India, which at first was very good, as relationships tend to be at the beginning. Yet after some time I see myself becoming completely caught in old habits that are clearly learnt from my family and acting in a way that I absolutely hate. I see myself controlling, wanting things to be a certain way, leaving no space for things to be as they actually are and

believing that I need him in my life. Believing that I need him in my life obscures things because I can no longer see clearly what I need to do, as I'm caught in desire and fear.

I have absolutely no interest in the usual conversations with friends. I would rather be alone most of the time. I have many old friends, yet each time I am with someone I feel utterly disappointed, sad and lonely because I cannot summon interest in what they're saying. And usually what they want to talk about are very normal things - life plans, criticisms, small talk, other people, the world. I just have no interest. With certain friends it is difficult because I end up sharing their suffering because I care about them, yet it seems I absolutely cannot help them in any way. As I write this I realise that this is the situation/story in my life that is most causing me to mis-identify myself as this body, thoughts, mind. I get stuck in thoughts of what my friends think of me, thoughts that I will end up with no friends, thoughts that I should be able to connect with people, that I should be able to be present with people, that I should be able to be kind, that I shouldn't need to be alone most of the time. What a mess!

I am sorry to write to you like this. I just feel I need some guidance.

The memory of seeing who I am, and glimpses since then, tell me that there are truly no problems and that the only answer to any problem is to realise who I am. And I feel that what I need to do now is to continue to enquire and look into the ways that I become mis-identified.

Specifically, I wonder, should I stop working for my dad and take some time to go on retreat alone or at least to live with more space to be alone regularly?

I look forward to hearing from you.

~ Much love, Betty

Ram: Hi, Betty. Sorry that things are not going well. I am glad you wrote to me. I hope I can provide some clarity. The first point - you mentioned it above - is that if you want to be done with the *vasanas*, then you need to have the kind of lifestyle that does not support or encourage them in any way. Yes, you did realize the self in January, but basically you continued on with your plans. I remember a conversation we had about some guy that was interested in you, so that relationship *vasana* was still active then and although you temporarily laid it to rest, it seems it got the better of you. You cannot really have your cake and eat it too on the basis of a deep epiphany. Ramana is an example of how to do it right. In the first place, he was not burdened with the issues that a typical Western person is subject to, and second, he immediately understood that he needed to go into seclusion.

In your case your temperament is *rajasic*, so you need to be in the world until the *rajas* works itself out, so going into seclusion is not going to work. Ramana was *sattvic* and born into a culture where the *karma yoga* view was widely held, particularly among the spiritual types.

You are now seeing how powerful the *vasanas* are, how identifying with them has brought on so much suffering. But the knowledge of who you are is still there. You are not making excuses and you can see clearly what is happening. If you had assimilated the logic behind *karma yoga* this would not have happened, but obviously you are attached to the results of your actions. So the first thing is to get it

clear why you are not the doer and then change your attitude. When it is clear, “shoulds” will disappear because things cannot be other than what they are – considering who you are as Betty. Once you have accepted that the *gunas* are the doer, you will see that control is useless and the emotional stuff will abate. At the same time, you should – sorry for that “should” – think about the relationship. Do you want to get married, have children and become a householder or is this just another relationship designed to handle pressing emotional needs? If it is the latter, you should – assuming peace of mind is your goal – terminate the relationship and establish your feelings in the self. Once you are emotionally satisfied with who you are, then you can take or leave any relationship and it will not be an emotional burden.

Betty: As I write this I realise that this is the situation/story in my life that is most causing me to mis-identify myself as this body, thoughts, mind.

Ram: I don't think so, although it may seem that way. This is a symptom, not the cause. The cause is that you went back to believing that you are incomplete and inadequate. Once you sort this out, you will enjoy everyone.

Betty: And I feel that what I need to do now is to continue to enquire and look into the ways that I become mis-identified.

Ram: I don't think so. There is only one reason. I mentioned it above. You think you are incomplete and inadequate. It is this incorrect view that is causing the mis-identification. You need to determine if it is true.

Now to the question about work and retreat. I don't think you should go on retreat or quit work. I think you should tell your dad that unless he can work out a way to make the job less stressful, you will look for something else. Just working to get money to do something else – particularly to go on retreat – is not advisable. You should find something you like and do it because you like it, even if it is not well-paying. And there is nothing more you need to know about who you are. You have just failed to gain complete confidence in it – and hence you have allowed yourself to mis-identify with Betty's desires. All you will get by going on retreat is another epiphany – another realization – which will make you feel temporarily fine and then the old patterns will come out and you will be right back to where you are.

The key to this issue is the *karma yoga* attitude. You have *karma* and you are in the world and the only way to live happily in this world is with this attitude. If the knowledge of who you are had been firm – instead of wobbly – this attitude would be there naturally. You won't get it living in a cave. The cave experience will just become a source of conflict. Your mind will continually go to security and love and the world will be right there with you on retreat.

All you need is to remind yourself of who you really are. Take this as an opportunity to turn your attention to your self and these problems will not seem very important.

I hope I have not been too tough on you, but you need clarity, not a retreat. I suggest you take your time and reread my book carefully. It makes it very clear that you are not the doer and makes a very persuasive case for *karma yoga*. Don't be ashamed to write. That is what I am here for.

~ Much love, Ram

Betty: Dear Ram, I am so glad I wrote to you. Thank you for being available. I am so grateful to have met you.

As soon as I wrote to you, Ram, things improved. A few days ago as I was driving (most of my work involves driving) the thought came: "All is *brahman* and I am That." What a relief! The day was easy then... driving 12 hours, car almost breaking down, etc. was all okay, simply through realizing that it's not up to me what happens and that the results don't affect me/define me.

You're right - I don't need to change my job, simply my attitude. And already it is less stressful and options have become clear. For example, simply telling my dad that I have been struggling with work and he suggesting that I take more time off or change jobs to something more suitable.

I can now see more clearly that all of those "problems" that have been assailing me are only symptoms of believing that I'm limited and inadequate. And as a result of this belief, almost all of my actions recently have been attempts to quell the fear that I won't get what I want or the fear that I'll lose what I've got. I think the root of this fear was that I'd lost the knowledge of who I am by doing something wrong and that I would never get it back... Your book came in the mail two days ago (I'd lent it to a friend in Spain), and I've now started to reread it slowly... and thankfully the first part is about experience... how could I forget all of this that was clear not long ago? The power of the *vasanas*, I guess...?

Which brings me to the fact that I seem to be in and out of knowing who I am (or at least in and out of realising the implications of the fact that I'm whole and complete), and this seems to be somewhat out of my control. Although the difference yesterday and this morning (compared to the last few weeks) is that instead of searching for the answer outside I am becoming more inclined to look inwards and see where the problem is coming from. And clearly it is the belief that I'm limited. What I see from the last few weeks is that it is unbearable to live believing that I'm a limited, inadequate human being.

Ram: You are on the right track now, Betty. The thing about self-knowledge is that you have to be aggressive about keeping it in mind until it is firm. It was very clear to you when you were in India and for some time afterwards, so you just went about your life and as the *vasanas* slowly took over the mind became extroverted and the knowledge moved to the background and then was apparently lost. Your comment that somehow you had forgotten the implications of the fact that you are whole and complete is particularly insightful. One basic implication is that you do not need to worry about what is going on. You do not expect life to fulfill you, you fill your life with your presence. To repeat: you have to aggressively keep inquiry going until the extroverted tendency of the mind dies or you will keep going and coming, meaning you will alternatively feel great and lousy. In your case, your mind is particularly *rajasic* but you have a great intellect. You grasp the essence of things very quickly. To repeat the repetition: so the mind should be restrained by the knowledge of who you are - until its outward tendency dies, assuming you want to be happy. 😊

Betty: About the relationship with Michael... I'm not going to end this relationship, I

don't think, though I appreciate your suggestion that I look at it. This is a good suggestion. I could make excuses for why not, but it probably comes down to desire?

Ram: It is. Nothing wrong with it. But you have to be smart when you are trying to satisfy your desires vis-à-vis other people. Letting your dysfunctional stuff pollute the relationship is a sure fire way to fail. You should have a way to work on yourself apart from the relationship and then only connect with the person you love when you are resolved and peaceful. Nobody else, particularly someone you love – unless they are enlightened and skillful at psychological work – can sort you. They will become part of your problem. The more firmly you are established in self-knowledge the better. This is not going to be easy, Betty. Juggling work, your *sadhana* and a love relationship is a lot to ask of yourself, so there will be stress. Don't bite off more than you can chew. This is difficult advice for a *rajasic* person because *rajas* is a state of mind that thinks more (experience) is always more. To be frank, it is just greed. More is good, but less is also good, sometimes better. If you are going to be successful in self-inquiry, you need a fairly *sattvic* life, so this is something you should aim for.

Betty: I do want it to be long-term, though when I was more sure of who I am and the implications, I did not care how long it lasted or whether I ever had children at all. Now I am not so sure. When it comes to being in a relationship, are there certain people who are better to choose than others? This particular man at least is more interested in truth than being right and that seems good. For example, when all went badly last week we went through a Byron Katie worksheet, judging each other, with a friend facilitating and this is what turned me back to myself and caused me to realise how lost and dependent I was becoming. It also helped me to see that the person who he was talking about, Betty, is not all that I am, though this was for a very brief time and then all the worries, hurt, etc. came back. I'm at home now and don't see him for the next couple of weeks, so this seems good. He lives a few hours away. I just wanted to share some of my reasoning around this relationship with you to hear your feedback.

Ram: Yes, it is very important for a spiritual person like yourself to see that you have someone who is very sympathetic to your spiritual life and is reasonably free of unresolved childhood stuff. If he has unresolved issues and no way to resolve them, you will spend your whole time trying to sort out his stuff – as well as yours. It does not bode well for happiness. People have this romantic notion that if they love each other they need to share everything. But sharing shit does not make it not-shit. Yes, you temporarily get it off your back when you dump it in some else's lap, but this is not a real solution.

You can't hide your stuff either. So you have to be very mature and judicious. And your partner should appreciate the nobility of your refusal to bring your problems to the relationship. Relationships tend to be very difficult because they are unconsciously an attempt to work out something with someone else that can only ultimately be worked out on one's own – with reference to the knowledge of who one is. If you are enlightened enough to know that the real source of your happiness is only in yourself, then you can take or leave the whole relationship idea altogether. And this makes it possible to actually have a successful relationship. But if you think that you need one to be happy or that you need to stay out of one to be happy, then

you have a spiritual problem. Your relationship with your self is unsatisfactory. In fact you are not that spiritual, because you are saying that what is outside is the determinant of your happiness and not who you truly are. Just wanting the love of another is not enough.

Betty: One thing I'm noticing with regard to this relationship is that my habit has become to turn to him for emotional comfort, even if only in my thoughts. This is based on the idea that he's the source of love and that he's a separate, distinct, solid entity. This is the thing that I am going to try to change. Turning to myself instead and seeing that I'm actually okay and enough now and that he is not the source of my happiness. Then perhaps we could be together without a problem? If this is impossible, then I could reconsider the relationship situation... what do you think?

Ram: This is wise and shows a lot of maturity.

Betty: Thanks again for your words. Is it okay if I email you fairly regularly at the moment?

~ Much love, Betty

Ram: Yes, of course. This is what I do.