

Benefits of Awareness Practice

Ram (James Swartz)

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Terry: Hi, James. I think the phase I have been going through, where the *vasanas* seemed overpowering, has receded, at least for the moment. I am also making some changes to my average day which should hopefully facilitate a somewhat more consistent practice of self-enquiry. There was a degree of physical and mental exhaustion involved, from other factors which I failed to recognize until recently. Now I have relatively more clarity. I took a few days annual leave from work and am getting the rest and perspective I needed.

Perhaps the most frustrating, almost maddening, thing is that I only have to apply the awareness practice, and maybe some formal meditation, for a relatively short time before I feel the very real benefits, e.g. thoughts and feelings become less oppressive and domineering, the head and heart become more *sattvic*, "difficult" people are not experienced as an endurance test, and most of all, the subtle "knowing" and understanding kick in, in an unmistakable way. The existential weight decreases a lot. In other words, for a small investment, I get a very substantial return. This happens even if, for instance, the previous week(s) have been extremely difficult. There were also quite a few days where the awareness seemed to spontaneously kick in for a day or so, even if I had done virtually nothing to kick-start it. That was really strange.

For the last two months or so I have allowed the *vasanas* too much room to manoeuvre, and let myself become discouraged by the need for what you could call sharp and frequent hand-to-hand combat; I was not fully acknowledging that it was a period where an almost aggressive form of awareness practice was needed; I did not want to get my hands dirty, so to speak. One lives and learns. Paradoxically, though the *vasanas* were intense, they were about quite subtle "spiritual" desires, and so I half-rationalised them for quite a while. Maybe "refined" greed is more dangerous than its grosser forms. It's been... educational.

James: Hi, Terry. Nice to hear from you. I always enjoy your letters, how clearly you express yourself. I understand about the work, physical exhaustion, etc. Actually, the practice you are doing is really only intended for *sanyassis*, renunciants. It is not advised for *karma yogis* (for precisely the reasons you mention), because of strong *vasanas*. You have the lifestyle of a *karma yogi* but you are actually a *sanyassi* by temperament. When the *vasanas* are strong, *karma yoga* is best. I admire your spirit, your dedication. There is no clear-cut distinction between *karma yoga* and the practice of self-knowledge. *Karma yoga* is intended to make a householder, someone actively involved in life, into an *sanyassi*, a contemplative renunciant. It seems you are in between. When you retire, things will go very quickly. In the meantime, use *karma yoga* to deal with the binding *vasanas* and cultivate the practice of self-knowledge for the rest. If you turn up the energy and do intense *dharma* combat, you will probably get sick. Maintaining that kind of vigilance is too stressful unless you are in seclusion.

You are absolutely correct that the awareness practice produces results out of proportion to the amount of effort. It is amazing really. Your observation makes an excellent testimonial to the efficacy of this practice.

Maybe we can meet, although I can't imagine that it would make a lot of difference; you seem to have your head screwed on pretty straight about self-inquiry. Anyway, if it is easy it would be fun. I will be in Europe for three months beginning in September.

Terry: You're studying the *Brahma Sutras*. I think I will instead go with the more straightforward classic texts, Shankara, your writings and DVDs and the *Gita* (got your DVD set on it recently). Coincidentally, I had recently got the Dayananda study course on the *Gita* as a couple of PDFs on DVD by ordering from their website, at a very reasonable price. I would love to have the time and energy to study it systematically, but I cannot see that happening. I also came across online the Chinamayanda commentary on the *Gita*. Would it have the same stature?

James: Yes, let the *Brahma Sutras* be. You do not need all those arguments to convince you. It is more about keeping the Vedanta pure than a practical manual. Stick with the straightforward texts. Although Chinmaya was my *guru* and his *Gita* is excellent, I recommend Dayananda. Read Chinmaya after you have studied Dayananda if you wish, keeping in mind the distinction between the language of knowledge and the language of experience. Before you get into them, read my English rendition sans commentary on my home page. Read it out loud and identify with Krishna. See what that does.

Terry: I came across what seems to me to be an exceptional book, *The Advaita Worldview* by Anantanand Rambachan. It's straightforward, short, scholarly, subtle and deep. My guess is you would probably agree with most of its contents. It seems to me to repackage traditional Vedanta in a positive way, with a clear emphasis on knowledge. I have not yet read it with the attention it deserves. His only criticism of Shankara I have noticed is that Shankara appears to agree with the exclusion of the Sudras (the "untouchables"?) "from hearing, study and knowing the meaning of the *Vedas*" and that seems to have been the traditional viewpoint. He quotes from one of Shankara's commentaries in which he appears to endorse inflicting horrific punishments on Sudras who listen to or in other ways study the *Vedas*. Maybe that was a residual *vasana* in Shankara? Some *vasana*.

James: Actually, a Sudra is a person with a very *tamasic* intellect and a Brahmin is someone who, regardless of their station in life, is predominately *sattvic* and suited to self-inquiry. A Kshetryia is someone with *sattva* and *rajas*, and a Vaishya is someone with *rajas* and *tamas*. The castes are based on the *sattva-rajas-tamas* model. You will see it in the *Gita*. When you take the words "Sudra," "Brahmin," etc. literally you make a problem. It is best to understand the idea of caste in its original psychological meaning. It is still true today. Out of one hundred people who come to me, maybe one is working-class and he or she will not last very long. There is no prejudice in this statement. It is just a fact. You will be born into a *tamasic* environment if your predominant *guna* is *tamas* and it will be reinforced in the present birth such that discrimination is very difficult. There are rare exceptions, however.

Terry: I am extracting the audio files from your DVDs, converting them into MP3s and then transferring them to a portable player to listen to via earphones when

possible during the day. Not ideal, but it helps me focus.

James: Good. Every little bit helps. Keep at it.

~ All the best, James