

Love Is Not a Feeling, the Downside of Feelings

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Joanne: Dear Ram, you asked about my practice on the phone the other night and I didn't give a very good answer. The answer is that it has been pointing me to pay more attention to my thoughts, feelings and human needs. It's also pointing me to pay more attention to other people's thoughts, feelings and needs, which is quite a transformational activity.

This is very good work for me. I haven't spent much time trying to understand other people, and understanding that everyone says and does everything out of some need is helping me to see the world as an expression of love.

Ram: I don't necessarily see the connection between needs and love, but I'm glad it's helping you to see the world as an expression of love. I think it's important to pay attention to other people's thoughts and feelings if you want successful relationships. They are at least as important as your own.

Perhaps you mean that concern for another person's feelings is love. I'd agree with that. I don't have any feelings to speak of, but if someone were trying to injure me I would understand that they didn't love me. I said I don't see the connection between needs and love because they have very little to do with each other. And very often excess consideration for someone's feelings can cause you not to be straightforward and truthful or to avoid unpleasant issues. I would imagine that at least some of your reluctance to get out and get on with your life is based on a reluctance to hurt your husband's feelings. You know that he will see it as a kind of abandonment or disloyalty.

Very often "feelings" are just a way to manipulate others. One is constrained to do what one wants for fear of upsetting someone else's feelings. Take, for example, that woman whose feelings were hurt when you declined to help her with the charity work. So much of what are called "feelings" are just frivolous likes and dislikes operating as a kind of fortress around an insecure ego. Look at how shamelessly your sister tries to manipulate you with the threat of hurt feelings. When you know that someone is going to get angry and make your life difficult if you don't do what they want, you often cave in just to keep the peace. It took me a while to work through that one.

The more true to yourself you are, the fewer "feelings" you have because you know that relating to the world through your likes and dislikes is a recipe for suffering. You love, you are sensitive and feel, but you do not have feelings that need to be indulged or that can be hurt. If your feelings can be hurt, you haven't understood who you are. You are taking something that has no power to affect you and allow it to affect you.

Understanding other people is really important if you want a stress-free life. I've been coaching this fellow for a few months now and while he has a lot of positive gifts, he tends to get into problems with people, and the reason, which he finally admitted, was that he just took them as they seemed on the basis of his immediate desire; he did not take time to get to know them. This usually happens because one

is too self-concerned. One is only interested in getting what he or she wants from the person, judges them from some preconceived standard or is just indifferent to them. Perhaps the reason you don't know what my views about emotions and feelings are (because I've certainly stated them many times) is that you haven't been observant. I see that as a lack of love. To me love in relationship is paying attention to the person with the idea of finding out how they see the world. One needn't necessarily sympathize with their views, but one should know what they think and feel if one is going to effectively communicate with them.

Joanne: I have the idea that you think it best to ignore feelings and needs... a kind of absolutist Vedanta perspective. But I don't know that you think that... and I'd like to understand what you do think about it. Would you be willing to try again to explain your perspective to me? What is the distinction you make between feelings and emotions? How do you hold them, etc?

Ram: After all these years I'm surprised to hear that from you. Maybe you haven't been paying that much attention to me. I'm not against any needs or feelings. They are just a normal part of life and, like everything, have an upside and downside. I have few needs (simplicity, efficiency, friendship, freedom, wisdom, beauty and peace) and almost no feelings. About the only thing that generates deep feeling in me is devotion to God, uncompromising honesty and the overcoming of adversity, but I don't have "feelings" waiting to be indulged or hurt. I basically only feel love, but love is not a "feeling" – meaning a sentiment. Sentiments are abstractions of love, the ego co-opting something true and good that it perhaps senses but doesn't really understand. Occasionally, I feel anger, very occasionally, a few times a year – and it is usually *dharmically* justified. I don't ignore anything and I think that people that ignore their feelings do so at their own peril, but this is not to say that I think one's feelings should be pandered to. The positive ones usually indicate that some good and truthful idea is operating in the intellect, and the negative ones suggest that one has a faulty view of oneself or reality. My advice to you about getting out of the house is about helping you to acknowledge and act on a feeling that you must be repressing and ignoring, perhaps out of some imagined sense of duty or attachment to physical comfort – the feeling for freedom and love.

Feelings, which are almost a kind of body-consciousness, are situated at the grossest level of the mind, right next to the senses, so if you are focused on your feelings without inquiring into the ideas that are supporting them, you will not have much success in dealing with them. Recently I met a psychologist who is here doing *sadhana* and she told me that the therapy world has now embraced the idea that the ideas that one holds about oneself and the world are the key to understanding one's feelings. It took them a long time to figure it out, but they are right. For example, if you expect someone to do something and he or she doesn't do it, you find yourself getting angry.

But the anger is not justified. If you understood that the fruits of action were not up to you, you wouldn't invest emotion in getting them. You would do what you do to achieve the result, but you would let your involvement with the process drop at that point. Remember how long you hung onto your anger about that tradesman who ripped you off?

The most fundamental spiritual practice, that without which you cannot gain a peaceful and clear mind, "*karma yoga*," is simply an understanding about the nature

of reality that effectively removes “feelings” from the center of your life and puts them on the periphery where they belong. A person looking for freedom would want a feeling-free mind because feelings are a major cause of disturbance. Or more specifically, placing a false value on the importance of feelings causes the mind to be continually disturbed. By “false value” I mean not understanding the whole picture of the self, not seeing that feelings are just one small part of the puzzle, and therefore placing how one feels about things at the center of one’s world-view. The more dominated by personal feelings one’s consciousness is, the more difficulties one encounters in life.

Vedanta says that *shakti*, divine energy, flows from the self through the causal body, into the subtle body and then out into the world, so all thoughts and feelings are just *shakti*, energy. Energy feels good when it is flowing unobstructed toward the object of desire. It “feels bad” when there is an obstruction and the ego sees that it may not reach the object. I’m enclosing a letter to a friend who asked the question, “What is emotion/feeling?” I think it might be helpful. The word “feeling” can be substituted for emotion. Just so you don’t think that I’m down on feelings, you should note the bit at the end where I talk about sublime and spiritual feelings of *bhakti*.

Joanne: The practice of tuning into thoughts and feelings is quite different, obviously, than just acknowledging them as they pass through awareness. It’s not pointing me to the self as the absolute, but to the self as the self.

Ram: This is very good. You can’t really live as the Self until you have learned who you are as a little self.

Joanne: I am appreciating it as a more alive experience than enlightened passivity.

Ram: This doesn’t make a lot of sense to me, because I don’t think it is an either/or. The body-mind-ego is always alive and the self passively watches. I wouldn’t think you would have very good luck getting the ego to do both. Let the ego-body-mind live to the fullest and watch it dispassionately – as the self. Vedanta is not about turning the ego into the self. The ego is the ego and the self is the self. Each has its nature and each follows its nature. There is nothing to be done about it except to understand which is which.

I’m not sure what you mean by “an alive experience.” Do you mean that you are having “a dead experience”? Perhaps that life has grown a bit dull and uninteresting since you have been cooped up in that small house with a boring husband who does not want you to grow spiritually?

Joanne: The encouragement to look closely has unearthed habits of self-denial and self-deception, and this honesty is invigorating. I got it again the other night that the voice of God is truth... and it’s so purely joyful to me.

Ram: This love of truth is one of the things that I find most attractive in you. As far as self-deception and self-denial goes, I’m very happy you are becoming aware of it. I could have helped you a lot with this, but you are remarkably well-defended and I never felt it was worth it making problems for our relationship by directly pointing it

out. So I just sort of nibbled around the edges with oblique comments, good-natured chiding and a bit of humor. It might be useful to you if you would allow me to just tell you right out front when you are kidding yourself - without the fear that you would take it as a personal attack.

Anyway, that's enough for now. I've got to do some things to prepare for leaving India. I hope you found this helpful and I'll see you in about a month on my way back to America.

~ Much love, Ram