

The Sorry State of the World Need Not Be Your Problem

Ram (James Swartz)

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Ram: Dear Judith, I didn't set out to provoke a pensive "mood" but I'm glad that my words were stimulating and moved you to share your feelings.

Yes, I was being sarcastic when I used the term "real" world. Of course it isn't real – if we define real as "what endures." It's not that hard to see that nothing here endures – either the good or the bad. Whether or not this is desirable is perhaps beside the point since nobody really has any control over the way things are. Life unfolds mindlessly on its own according to principles that perplex even the sages. I think most people take what happens (either without or within) to be real, but how real are these things? The only thing that endures is you – ordinary, limitless awareness – the one on whom the ever-changing tapestry of life is woven, the knower of the happenings. The person that we imagine we are, this ever-changing bundle of experiences, is not real either. One's thoughts and feeling don't qualify nor do events in the world outside. Nothing except one's own self, one's consciousness, fits the bill. When you investigate it, you can see why – it has no beginning and no end.

Because who we are on the surface – our thoughts and feelings, memories, dreams, fantasies, perceptions, etc. and the world outside – is not up to us, how reasonable is it to involve oneself emotionally with how we feel about the world – or even about how we feel about ourselves? Unless of course an examination of our feelings leads to an understanding of the thoughts in which they are anchored. On one level I understand your reaction to American politics and the American way of life. I probably pretty much share your views and I think my reaction is probably basically the same. "What a shame," I think. But I don't think it is worthwhile to let this feeling set the tone for my life, to let it become a justification for involvement or non-involvement in life. I allow my mind to feel bad for a minute or two and then I move it on. Why should a personal judgment about something over which I have no control and my desire to have it different control my state of mind?

If you ask ten thousand people, "What is America?," you will get ten thousand answers. I never know what to think when people say "America." Why is this? Because there is actually no objective thing called America. It is just a concept. And where does that concept exist? In one's mind. It is just one of many thoughts in one's mind. America will never change because there are too many Americas out there in people's minds and too many ideas of what is right and wrong with it. America will never change because it is just an idea. In fact what is called "America" is just millions of individuals living on a piece of land that has for convenience has been labeled "America." What good does it do to have any feeling at all about it?

If I don't understand how the world is, I will always be emotionally disturbed by it. When I understand how it works I become peaceful – because I know that it is serving a good purpose and that there is nothing I can do to change it. If I want the world to be a better place I need to try to make my mind a better place. An angry or depressed, reactive mind is not adding to the joy or peace in the world.

In the fullness of time nothing changes – things do not get “better,” whatever that is, nor do they get “worse,” whatever it is. Better and worse are projections made by people for reasons known only to them. We should not take life seriously because there is nothing there. What we think is “out there” is just projections of what is “in here.” I’m sure this is what the Buddha meant when he said that life is *dukka*. *Dukka* is often translated as “suffering” but it is really more than that. It is the misunderstanding that one makes about the nature of oneself and the world that results in suffering. What is that misunderstanding? That the world and oneself are substantial, solid entities – i.e. real. If you dig into the etymology of the word you find that it is compound. *Du* means “painful” or “negative,” and *kha* means “hollow.” So it is the disillusionment that one feels when one discovers that what one formerly thought was true or real, solid and substantial, was in fact illusory and empty. Where is the war in Iraq now? Does anybody care? It was a hot issue – for a while. Where are O.J., Bill and Monica? Where is Ronnie Reagan, bane of liberals, the George Bush of the eighties, “the most powerful man in the free world”? He is now a doddering old hey-dad, wracked with disease, soon to be food for worms – like the rest of us. Where are double-digit stock market returns, high interest rates? We don’t know where he will be in five years or even a year-and-a-half, but we know for certain that before long George Bush and crew will not be occupying the White House. And when he is gone – will there not be someone or something else to project our dissatisfaction upon?

Where is the person one thinks one is all day when one goes to sleep at night? Where is the bliss of sleep when one wakes up? What – except one’s own awareness – endures? Judith was cruising along enjoying her hot tub and her grandkids, and then Ram’s letter provoked a feeling of dissatisfaction. Where is that feeling now? Perhaps it has already disappeared – perhaps the antifreeze is drained from the van and Judith is cruising the open road, enjoying springtime in the Rockies. All of these things – Judith and America included – are in you, in your awareness. They are not you. Where do your judgments, your likes and dislikes, occur? In you, in awareness. It all comes and goes, like waves on the shore of an ocean, and yet you endure, a silent witness to it all. You are like the mirror in which reflections appear and disappear. You are like a glowing TV monitor on which all sorts of dramas unfold – and then dissolve. Nothing sticks to you, a Teflon presence.

You might consider a media fast. They work wonders. If you can’t watch the world as a quirky farcical play, then why not switch off your connection to it? Cancel the paper and sell the TV. The whole media machine is like a soap opera. It creates unending miseries which it promises to resolve. Come back tomorrow they say to see how things turn out – but (surprise, surprise) nothing turns out. The misery just goes on and on – as the world turns. In a way the soaps are a perfect metaphor for life – an ever-changing, unresolved drama.

Can I just write it all off, walk away from it? Yes, definitely. There is so much goodness in this world – I am amazed every day by the endless acts of kindness, conscious and unconscious, that I see around me. It is a benign universe, a cosmos, not a chaos. Yes, chaos is there – you’d have to be happy if it weren’t – but it is a subset of a powerful, enduring order, one we paltry humans can never disturb. See if it isn’t so. Even if this is a veil of tears, I don’t need to weep. I am free to choose how I wish to respond. The mind, our likes and dislikes, our fears and desires, is like a concentration camp – terrible to endure. But am I locked up?

Judith: Are Indians spiritual because it allows them to cope with their miserable

lives or because spirituality allows them a way out?

Ram: It amounts to the same thing, doesn't it? Everyone everywhere wants out of the prison of their miserable lives. There is a way out – but it is not what you might think. There is nothing you can do to get out. The more you do – spiritually or otherwise – the more tightly you lock yourself in. Why? Because the doings are motivated by the belief that you are not already free. That you are bound, incarcerated, you take as a fact – but is it true? “Stone walls do not a prison make nor iron bars a cage.” You are already free. The “world” does not encircle you. We invite it into our minds and then complain that it oppresses us. Spirituality is just the understanding that you are always free. This is what I got from India. This is why many Indians are not bothered by the poverty, the filth, the noise. They know it is not real, that it has nothing to do with them. They are more comfortable with it than we are with our prosperity.

Judith: I mean, if you say something is God's will, are you abrogating responsibility for your life's circumstances?

Ram: Yes, definitely. And it is perhaps the best thing you can do. As I said above, how much control do you have? If you could control your mind you would not have felt dissatisfaction with yourself because of the ideas in my letter. But you can't control it. The ideas produced a reaction. The reaction was natural. How responsible are you for your life's circumstances? Did you choose to be born into these circumstances? Did you requisition your body and mind in advance? Are you self-created? The whole vast cosmic machine right down to the neutrinos is regulated and governed by a vast impersonal force. It is just vanity to think that anyone can change it. It changes on its own without any help from us.

Judith: How can we be free if we are a bundle of competing energies that have accumulated over our lifetime and influence our thoughts and emotions?

Ram: I think the problem here lies in the notion that we ARE these bundles of competing energies. Vedanta is saying that we are not these conflicting bundles of energy. The habits of thought and emotion that we observe playing in our minds and hearts do not bind us any more than a tree or a rock or our next door neighbor binds us. Identifying with them binds. Taking them to be me or mine binds. There is free will – in this sense. You can choose how you wish to respond to your life circumstances and to the content of your consciousness. You can take your *karma* as a blessing or as a curse or in any way you want. It is entirely up to you. You are “response-able” but you are not responsible. I am not saying it is easy – unless you make it easy. Attachment is the number one human problem.

Okay, dear Judith, that's Ramji on matters spiritual. Today my Vedanta course finished. Everyone loved it. All the groups – the artists, the poets and the spiritualists – got together for a big dinner on the seashore and a lively time was had by all. A very successful English poet, Sophie Hanna, read some of her poems and we stayed up late chatting and laughing. The weather has been absolutely lovely and the wine-dark sea equally enchanting. I'm working on developing a satirical character for a video, a redneck *guru* who teaches endarkenment. I sit in the morning for an hour or

two and enjoy myself being completely silly and funny, coming up with outrageous, outlandish ideas and acting them out. As one of my friends said, "You ARE bored." Well, sort of. But it is nice boredom.

~ Love, Ram