

Have the Courage to Love Yourself

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Melissa: Dear Sundari, it's been a long time since I wrote to you. I've thought about you and James every day and I've kept inquiring, reading and listening as much as this busy life has allowed me to. I took your advice, but I hadn't sent you any emails yet (I started several), because I didn't want to bother you unless I really had something I wanted to run by you. I didn't want to waste your time.

In writing this, I've tried to start impersonally and then bring it home to Melissa's life. This is where it's at. Your comments, remarks... everything, will be very much appreciated.

Sundari: Hello, Melissa, thank you for this blazingly honest and vibrantly intelligent sharing of the inner landscape of your life as Melissa. I find it very beautiful, what you wrote, and very touching. You spare nothing and speak so clearly as both the self and as Melissa. It is so interesting how you actually have it all worked out; there is very little you do not understand or have not grasped. You have gone through the first three stages of self-inquiry with flying colours - and it is the last stage, self-actualisation, that is usually the toughest one.

Melissa: I am. I know I am. What is this "I am" like?

Sundari: It depends on who is asking. As the self, one does not ask this question, because you know that you are all there is and it does not feel like anything; it's just knowledge, though it has the power to totally transform your life as the *jiva*. As the *jiva*, who is of course really awareness, this is the fundamental question to be answered by self-inquiry. You have described it perfectly in the paragraphs below:

"If I investigate this 'I am,' I 'come to my experience.' I can't separate this 'I am' from my experience (whatever it may be at a given moment). It's one. It's total. It's complete. It's partless. It never changes. It's always present. I am appears here as my experience. Now, it seems that this experience happens to this body-mind (*jiva*), but upon further investigation I realize that this *jiva* is itself experienced. In fact everything is experienced. I can't separate my experience of the objects from the objects themselves, so I have no proof of there being anything at all except from my experience moment by moment in the form of sights, sounds, smells, tastes, thoughts, ideas, mental images, sensations, emotions... and all these can be reduced to me, this awareness that I am. Objects aren't real. The *jiva* isn't real. It's all one partless, one-dimensional projection (to call it something).

"I am the awareness in which all experience seems to happen (is being projected). It seems to happen because everything that may happen can be brought back to me through inquiry... so the totality, the seeming creation, *Isvara*, is one with me. I can say that it is all me, or 'made out of me,' while I am free of it all, including the *jiva* through which experience seems to happen.

“This *jiva* is herself ‘part of’ the creation and like all creatures/objects has been programmed/designed to fulfil a purpose, i.e. to serve the totality in some way (*dharma*). However, ignoring that she’s awareness, the *jiva* doesn’t know that she’s whole, complete and one with *Isvara*, and she feels inadequate, small, wrong. She believes that she is separate from the rest of the creation and that the objects (including what she believes herself to be) are real. Following her conditioning (her likes and dislikes), she performs innumerable actions (many of which will be in opposition to *dharma*), as she seeks happiness by trying to obtain, reject, control, manipulate, change, improve, etc. her environment, including herself as a person. She tries to make the totality serve her. And thus she suffers.

“All the actions the *jiva* performs have effects. In fact action and result go together, they can’t be separated, for reality is non-dual. As long as she remains ignorant of what she really is, her actions will reinforce her conditioning, binding her to more actions, causing her likes and dislikes to grow stronger (*samsara*). This is done by the *gunas*, the ‘ropes’ that keep the ignorant *jiva* bound to *samsara* by letting her believe that she is separate and limited, that she should indeed control things. The *gunas* are *Isvara*’s unmanifest face, the mechanisms that keep *Isvara*’s creation cycling and recycling itself. In the case of a *jiva*, they are responsible for her creation, her own projections onto *Isvara*.”

Sundari: This is really good; your understanding is perfect. It sums up exactly what it means to be identified with the person and the existential suffering that ensues, and you have written it from the standpoint of awareness.

Melissa: It occurred to me that it is like it’s all me, but that I look different in different places.

Sundari: It is all you, apparently looking different in different places. But there are no “places” for you and no difference. There is nowhere that you are not. Seeing through the veil of duality to what gives rise to it, yet remaining unconditioned and free of it is called non-dual vision.

Melissa: I shine through all these living beings in what you can call the creation (the image is like tubes coming up from the ground, which is not the ground but a non-dimensional everywhere) and illumine “my” experience (i.e. the creation as seen here), while in fact there is nothing but me, the objects being so close to me... as they would shimmer and dissolve at any moment. And it occurred to me how grateful I should be (and am) that the experience of my life is what it is. I can’t control what I see/hear/smell/touch... even what I think is not under my control. It could be something totally different. I was sitting outside in the garden playing with my daughter and looking at the birds and the tall trees starting to grow leaves, and the thought came that I could be looking at violence and devastation. I could be feeling hunger and pain. This is so beautiful!

Yet beautiful or not, it doesn’t limit me. This experiencing, this “I am” of mine doesn’t change when things don’t feel peaceful, I’ve noticed. Frankly, I don’t like the agitation that sometimes visits me. But if I stop and watch, it doesn’t touch this “I am”; experiencing goes on regardless.

Sundari: This is very beautifully put, brilliant, actually!

Melissa: I'm struggling still with very bad thoughts. The man/woman duality, the ageing wife, low self-esteem (fear of failure)... the stuff you wrote was very accurate. The thoughts that surface are incredibly nasty – mega-*rajasic*, violently so. It's war! I am working with the tools you gave me, I've read and reread and re-listened to all the materials... read *The Value of Values*, done the moral inventory... a lot is clearer, stuff coming out "as we go." I go back to square one and notice how I am aware of the agitation, how the "I am" isn't moved a bit by it, and then I say, "If I am aware of it, I'm not it, and it can't limit me. I am free, whole and complete." That's when time doesn't play its own little trick (sometimes it takes me a little while to remember what you wrote to me about how time works).

Sundari: Here the *jiva* is talking as the *jiva* again – the *jiva* who knows about awareness, not yet standing firmly in awareness, still burdened by the pressure of the *vasanas*. You have asked yourself all the right questions; there is not much for me to add. You are so close to being free of the *jiva* and living free as the self while still the *jiva*, but clearly, there is still some work to be done.

Melissa: It seems that at least part of it has to do with hanging onto some identity, whichever identity should be in store for this *jiva* in this "phase of her life." I'm 44, my husband just turned 50... it's time for the nagging wife with the selfish, inconsiderate husband. And because I had these parents and this background, certain sentences, certain feelings, arise. Interestingly enough, it almost would seem that "reality" is fulfilling those stereotypes, it can be so credible! I hear James often say that anger is a sign you're not getting what you (the person) want, and I've asked myself what it is that I think I'm not getting. And I know what it is, and in a way it's very petty because the thoughts and scenarios that arise in my mind are totally disproportionate and the agitation literally blinds me from everything that's going on around me.

Sundari: From the point of view of awareness, all likes and dislikes are petty and none of them real. James is right of course, anger is usually the result of unfulfilled wants. In *samsara*, as long as the mind is run by ignorance and therefore its likes and dislikes, it is inevitable that outcome will be predictable. This is seen in people repeating the patterns they learned from childhood, passing them on to their children ad infinitum. Self-knowledge, if applied, gives us the tools to step out of these destructive patterns and to live free of the person and their likes and dislikes. That anger is a sign of something very deep that has not been given the light of day and is probably linked to why you do not esteem and love Melissa as she deserves to be loved. "Clean" anger has its place at times, but there is very little as destructive as forbidden or buried anger.

Melissa: *Karma* and *dharma* are interesting. I've been applying *karma yoga* as much as I can think of. I've looked into the whole concept of *dharma* and come to the conclusion that it is what it is and this is exactly what I am supposed to be doing: I am a housewife with two kids. That's it. I've realised how much Melissa has struggled with being a daughter, with being a mum the first time, and now that she

seemed to have outgrown those identities, she struggles with the wife one. An ageing wife/mother of a two-year-old and a successful husband who's struggling himself with age and being a dad, and loves his very high-profile job. Friends getting divorced, housing their children... yikes! But this is it. Tough shit, Melissa, "deal." It will be what it must be. I can only do my job, and do it as well as I can, while being as pleasant to those around me as I can. Also interesting is that I think my duty as a mother is one I must perform (Arjuna, fight!) while the wife one involves compromises I might not be willing to make, and while "what I'm not getting" may be petty in terms of Melissa's reactions, it is to me relevant in terms of a lifestyle conducive to happiness and the way I want to be treated (as a person). I am now working on how to express these needs in appropriate ways and then follow through instead of throwing tantrums or building up resentment when I cave in.

Sundari: Yes, I can relate to this. I believe many parents/wives/husbands could too. Although being a parent most often comes with many issues too (depending on the *vasana* match or mismatch between parent and child), generally the *dharma* to follow and role to play as parent is more clean-cut than being a wife - or husband, for that matter. Who we partner with reflects pretty accurately who we (consciously or unconsciously) think we are, so it is potentially more positive or negative. With children, although clearly as a parent we have a huge impact on how our kids turn out, the nature they are born with is not up to us. Without the ability to communicate on the same page with a spouse or partner, it is almost impossible to express oneself clearly and be heard. So many couples try unsuccessfully to do this and end up as diminished versions of who they are. I don't think you need the standard advice, but it sounds to me like you and your husband are fundamentally very different, and you are unhappy, trying to convince yourself that if you try harder to be "better" things will improve. Perhaps because you are not in a terrible situation and have the good fortune to have your physical needs well taken care of, you feel you are not entitled to being unhappy - and feel guilt about it? Although you think what you are not getting is petty, it sounds like you resent your husband deeply on some level. Actually, it is probably not your husband that you resent. He could be a symptom of a much deeper issue.

You loved your husband once. What so many people actually love is the idea of relationship love, but once the excitement and intimacy is gone, it is all just duty. This is the pattern in most *samsaric* relationships unless they are based on common values. It is the same with trying to find joy through any object, which at best is only capable of offering a very temporary kind of bliss. Your husband looks for and finds what satisfies his ego through his high-profile job, and you don't relate to the shallowness. Now what you are longing for is a real connection with him, and it is not there. So the nagging thoughts infest the mind, leaving you feeling inadequate and hating yourself for having them. The only solution is to love yourself because you know, with or without the object, you are adequate, which you can't do, because you identify with your bad thoughts.

You should not hold your happiness hostage to your suffering. Nothing in nature changes radically. It takes time until these patterns ameliorate. In the meantime, non-identification with the thoughts and taking a stand in awareness is the only solution.

Melissa: This brings me to another thing: becoming perfect. In this image I mentioned above, it's clear to me that the *jiva* is actually "not that important"...

while absolutely necessary. I don't know how to phrase it. You keep saying that the *jiva* will always be limited, that she can never be perfect, that we have to love her warts and all. I'm not there yet, but I finally see what you mean by it. I see how when there's a job to do, it's not "this other person" that wants this or that from me. I see how it's the totality of me, asking me to do something so it can all move on. And it's asking me the way I am, the way she was created, and understanding it's all one with me, I'm (as the person) not that important (how I feel about it), while it is essential right now. At the same time I've also noticed that I can say "no" and keep up the "no" without feeling too bad about it – the agitation I would have felt, the second thoughts, the resentment... also, lately, in the instances where I'm not being *dharmic*, i.e. when I react cruelly (e.g. say something meant to reinforce the "I have to do everything around here and no one cares" *vasana*, which seems to be a big one) almost instantly there's a replay in my mind where I actually see Melissa (her face, her expression) saying it and I can hear what it objectively means and how it's received... and it's ugly, and it achieves nothing; it actually harms Melissa.

Sundari: There is no escape from the *jiva*; she is the way she is. But if freedom and peace of mind is what you are after, you need to render the binding *vasanas* non-binding. Being able to see the conditioning playing out is the biggest part of being free of it. In order to dis-identify with the *vasanas* to render them non-binding, one has to first identify how they play out for the *jiva*. Only through understanding can you bring the mind in line so that it responds *dharmically* and not from its fear/denial (*rajasic/tamasic*)-based programming. You are onto it. Just keep up the self-inquiry. Ignorance does not disappear overnight. It's been conditioning the mind for longer than time, so do all you can to moderate behaviour, keeping your mind on the self as much as possible. And be kind to Melissa, she's great! 😊 The knowledge works, but you have to keep applying it. The momentum of past actions – or the blades of the fan – play out as long as they play out.

Melissa: Which brings me to one final point: devotion. I've never really been religious, although I've spent years in or close to religious institutions. It has occurred to me that I am the Father, the Mother and the Son. As awareness, I am the Father, in the background, uninvolved. As *Isvara*, I am the Mother, I create and keep everything going; I give birth to the Son, my experience. So I as the *jiva*, aware, one with a creation that's one with me, am the Son of God. The spirit pushes me to enquire and find the truth and unity about myself. Every day I pray to live as the innocence and the goodness of a pure child. I was visiting my parents recently, and in my childhood bedroom I found a little Baby Jesus figurine, one we used for nativity scenes, and this is the image that came, so I took it home with me and now it's in my bedroom here.

Sundari: How we worship the self is not important; any symbol will do because everything points to the self. Devotion is important, not because *Isvara* or the self need worshipping; why would they if as the *jiva* we share a common identity with *Isvara*, as awareness? Devotion is gratitude. And the ability to be grateful is purely a gift for the *jiva*. We encourage an attitude of devotion because it is a very good way to negate the doer. You are only ever worshipping yourself, whether you know it or not. But it is hard to worship yourself if you don't love your *jiva*. You did not fall in love with the wrong man. You felt incomplete and tried to solve the problem with a relationship. No blame. We all do it – at least once.

I find your father/child metaphor interesting, more so because as the *jiva* you see yourself as the “son” of God, not as God/awareness. What is also interesting about your choice of metaphor is that you see awareness as the uninvolved father figure. I would imagine that is pretty much your background conditioning as a child growing up with your own father, and now as a woman with a husband who possibly does not understand her or her needs and perhaps uses his work as an escape, maybe like your father did too?

I don't know if this is true for you, but generally a person using the father/child kind of metaphor has yet to properly individuate. It is typical of the most undeveloped form of *bhakti* – God the big daddy in the sky. I can't help but think that the word you use, “uninvolved,” could actually mean “unloving” or “unloved” in your mind. It sounds like you are longing for love. If you are incapable of transforming your circumstances in light of what you know, it could mean that you don't love/esteem yourself enough either to make the requisite changes or to negate the *vasanas* that prevent you from loving Melissa as she is.

Melissa: I think this is enough for now. I'd love for you to comment on these paragraphs. Any insights/explanations you may want to add will be very useful. For practical reasons, I need help understanding the story about the wife/man-woman duality. The archetypes being universal, you must have encountered these very often.

Sundari: I thought we spoke about the man/woman archetype in our last email – but if not, the man/woman idea/archetype is the ultimate duality. Other than religious wars, there is not much that attracts a bigger charge than this one. As James says, the man/woman, love/hate thing is the coin of the realm of *samsara*. Of course from the Vedantic perspective gender has no relevance, because the self is neither male nor female, being non-dual. This archetype is so burdened with religious, cultural, social, political – and every other overlay one can think of – that without self-knowledge it is very difficult to unravel. If one is identified with being the person, and then on top of that identified with being a man or a woman – well, we know where that leads. There is no solution to this in *samsara*, as is so clearly evidenced by the sad state of most relationships. The only solution is through self-knowledge. We have counselled many dedicated seekers who live with partners that will never be on the same page with them, and it is not an easy road. If you love your husband and want to maintain a peaceful co-habitation, you will have to see him as the self under the spell of ignorance, conditioned by his *vasana* load without any ability to gain a true outside perspective on this. He is the way he is, and I am sure if he could be different, he would be. Compassion, not anger, is the only solution. I think you are unconsciously angry at yourself for making a “mistake,” although you did not think it was a mistake at the time. And of course it isn't. It is just what is. It is natural to feel regret and anger when you know the self – because had you known who you were back in the day, you would have gone into the relationship with your eyes open or made a more fitting choice of partner. I have been there, done that!

If on the other hand, you have been making excuses for being unhappy, normalising the abnormal, trying to convince yourself that the blame is all yours because you “should somehow be more enlightened,” you need to ask yourself why you are doing that. If your buttons keep getting pushed maybe it is because you are living with a situation that is just not conducive to peace of mind – and not because there is

something wrong with you. Your life has to serve the truth, not the other way around. There is no fine print to this, if *moksa* is what you are truly after. Why do you not love Melissa enough, why do you put her down and minimise her? The idea that she is an ageing, nagging woman at 44 is crazy. I am almost 60, and for decades I have witnessed so many women much younger than me decide they are worthless and old just because they subscribe to some ridiculous consensus view about who they are. You are the self, you have no age. You are not only beautiful – you are the beauty that makes beauty beautiful. Stop believing nonsense about yourself. That is not who you are.

I have attached a beautiful article that James and I co-authored on the different kinds of love and devotion. I think it will help you.

Melissa: I am very grateful to you for your making these teachings available. I'm looking forward to your upcoming book on *Panchadasa*. I love the Trout Lake recordings.

~ My sincere love to you and James, Melissa

Sundari: We are so happy to be here for you, Melissa, and really glad you wrote back. Our reward is knowing that this knowledge truly works to transform people's lives. Don't give up on it; you are so clear about the knowledge. It just needs to be continually applied. I have attached below the four stages of self-inquiry, just so you can track your inquiry. You are in the last stages, where the "work" involved in assimilating the knowledge is the toughest. You have done a lot of work, well done to you. Please stay in touch, don't be a stranger. 😊

With much love from both of us and thank for your appreciation, it is much appreciated.

~ Sundari

Four Stages to Self-Inquiry

1. *Sravana*: Listening or hearing the scripture. This requires that you leave everything you previously believed or thought you knew temporarily on the shelf. You can take your beliefs back if self-knowledge does not work for you, but for now leave them on the shelf. This is very important; if you keep comparing Vedanta to all your beliefs and opinions and try to make it comply with them, forget about self-inquiry. Vedanta is a radical teaching; it is counter-intuitive; expect it to challenge everything you thought you knew.

2. *Manana*: Reasoning, contemplation. This is thinking about what the scripture is saying, examining the unexamined logic of your own experience. At this point you look at your beliefs and opinions in the light of what the scripture says, NOT the other way around. One determines if all the qualifications necessary for *moksa* are present, one examines and identifies one's conditioning in light of self knowledge, i.e. the *gunas*.

3. *Nididhyasana*: Applying the knowledge to your life; taking a stand in awareness as awareness. If the mind is still agitated by *rajas* and *tamas* because all the qualifications are not in place, one has to go back and re-qualify. There is no other

way to negate the doer and render the binding *vasanas* non-binding in order that self-actualisation – the final “stage” – can take place.

4. Self-actualisation: Once the knowledge is firm, one sees everything from the point of view of awareness first, second as the *jiva*, and one never confuses the two again. This is discriminating the self, you (*satya*), from the objects that appear in you (*mithya*) at all times. Self-actualisation is the consistent, total application of self-knowledge to one’s life. To be self-actualised means (1) that one has fully discriminated the self (consciousness) from the objects appearing in it (all objects, meaning all gross objects as well as one’s conditioning, thoughts and feelings – all experience) and (2) that that knowledge has (a) rendered the binding *vasanas* non-binding and (b) negated one’s sense of doership.

Unless self-knowledge translates fully into the life of the person it cannot be said that self-actualisation has taken place, because the person will still be identified with certain aspects of being a person. In other words, binding *vasanas* and the sense of doership, or egoic belief in separation, will still be causing agitation in the mind. In order for existential suffering to end and for awareness to be one’s primary identity, the person needs to be free of the idea of being a person in order to live free as the self. What is the point of self-realisation if the mind is still under the tyranny of its likes and dislikes (*vasanas*)?

One can only fully actualise self-knowledge when you have understood the identity between awareness, *Isvara* and the *jiva*. This is where most people get stuck (or come un-stuck) in their self-inquiry, and it is why many self-realised people do not self-actualise. Understanding *Isvara* is the key. This is one of the most important teachings in Vedanta.