

Self-Confidence and Self-Inquiry

Ram (James Swartz)

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Mike: After our conversation on Skype I am still unclear about inquiry. So how do I do inquiry, James?

James: You are dwelling on a negative self-thought. It has become a hard and fast *vasana* and now it has a life of its own. Inquiry is taking your attention off the thought and putting it on the self, i.e. the thought "I am the self," which is the only true thought about you. This causes the thought to lose its power. Thoughts only have meaning because you pay attention to them. When you remove your attention from the thought it may just disappear or it may shrink and become an obvious object, something away from you, and easily manageable. You can use any thought that is tantamount to the self. For example, "This feeling is an object. I am its knower." Or, "Although this feeling feels real, it is not real. I am the blissful awareness that observes it." When attention goes back to the negative thought, you put it back on the self-thought. Discrimination is a kind of tug of war with your attention.

Our feelings, good and bad, flow from our thoughts. Every thought has a feeling equivalent. When you have a feeling about yourself you can assume that it is caused by a thought. Thoughts that are not in harmony with *dharma* – your own and the total – produce bad feelings. Conversely, good feelings are sourced in thoughts that are in harmony with *dharma*. Owing to the non-dual nature of reality, all feelings are actually feelings about one's self, although they very often seem to be about something or someone else, owing to *maya's* power to deny and project.

Except for criminals, people do not consciously go against *dharma*. If there was an *adharmic* situation in which you found yourself in the past – particularly when you were young – you cannot take responsibility for it, because you did not consciously solicit it. Even if you did come to enjoy it in some perverse way at some point, you cannot blame yourself, because people who have been denied the benefit of a *dharmic* childhood don't understand the benefit of following *dharma* – they usually don't even know what it is. The consequence of repeated violations of *dharma* is low self-esteem, which is just a negative feeling directed to one's self. Sometimes just understanding the value of *dharma* and the knowledge of who you are is enough to correct low self-esteem, but generally it isn't. So if you want to remove a negative self-evaluation, you have to proactively and mechanically attack the thought by remaining alert to the feeling and then move your attention from it and put it on the right thought. In this way you counteract the negative thought and build a positive self-image. You need a strong, positive self-image for Vedanta to set you free of the idea that you are a flawed *jiva*. Constant vigilance is required. You should practice the opposite thought with the first bad feeling so as to break the tendency to identify with the feeling. Constantly dwelling on one's apparent failures – the "poor me" thought – creates a dour personality that tends to work against itself.

Success in life is generally a result of self-confidence. If you present a confident self to the world, the world will worship you, meaning it will take care of you. In the relationship love business (and it is a business, for sure) falling in love tends to momentarily obliterate low self-esteem. You feel valuable because someone loves you. They see something in you that you don't see and it makes it possible to love

them. Of course this is the wrong reason for a relationship, but it passes for the right reason in *samsara*. But experiences don't permanently remove deeply ingrained thought patterns (*samskaras*). So self-doubt starts to creep into the relationship and you sabotage it. Things go wrong, but you can't understand why.

Self-confidence comes from skill, doing what needs to be done well. If you follow *dharma* well, irrespective of the personal cost – loss of wealth (*artha*), pleasure (*kama*) – you feel strong and righteous, and this gives confidence that you can handle whatever your *karma* brings and it inspires others, so they respect you.