

Conflicted with Buddhist Ideals

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Frank: Hello, Sundari.

I have a question that's been bugging me for a while.

Sundari: Hello, Frank, my apologies for the delay in replying to you; we have both been travelling.

Frank: Over the past seven years I've had various epiphanies, sometimes lasting for two weeks at a time, which were powerful and inspiring.

I ended up moving into a large Buddhist community near my home for over two years. The teachings were great and the *sangha* were beautiful people. The *shakti* around the place was/is incredible, and the mind became mostly peaceful with a feeling that one had plugged into some unseen power source.

My problem is that I've taken *tantric* empowerment and am not ready to keep the commitments. Now I'm saddled with all this baggage that I'm going to the Vajra Hell, as they say, broken Samaya is the worst thing one could do!

Sundari: This sounds like just the limited and dualistic Christian mindset of having to reach some "spiritual" ideal as set out by an outside force which is meant to give you access to "*nirvana*" and the failing of which sends you to "hell." It is complete poppycock.

Frank: The thing is that after the epiphanies it became clear to me that I was always essentially free from all paths, as I had the realization that I was always already home and even if I forgot for a while, I would always come back home to the self, me.

Enter James and Vedanta!

The teachings make so much sense and don't really contradict what I learned from Buddhism. All the practices are for purifying the mind of its ignorance and to realize the non-dual in apparent duality?

Sundari: Yes, indeed you have understood correctly; except self-inquiry and the methodology Vedanta offers as a means of knowledge is not to realise the non-dual "in the apparent reality." It is to realise that duality is not real, which is why we call this reality "apparently real," real being defined as "that which is always present and never changes," which can only be applied to the knower of the apparent duality, you, awareness. Duality is a super-imposition onto non-duality brought about by the power of *maya* to delude, making the changeless appear to be changing.

Frank: On one hand, I love the Buddhist place, the teaching and most of the people there. On the other, I can't stand the bureaucracy and constant drive to recruit more and make money to "spread the *dharma*" because of the *shakti*, or blessings, as they call it. I'm always being drawn back there for a "hit" despite feeling like a fraud because I disagree with so much of what goes on.

It's like I created a *vasana* for this *shakti*, but also have a gut feeling that I'm being a hypocrite because, through watching Ram's Vedanta teachings, I see a way to liberation which makes sense and doesn't have all the peaceful and wrathful deities or endless *pujas* and commitments, just "here's the knowledge, use it."

Sundari: Your frustration and confusion with Buddhist practice is very common. Many Buddhists think there is something wrong with them instead of something lacking in their spiritual practice. You have already found the answer to your question (and all questions) in Vedanta, but clearly you do not have the confidence to follow through with it. It is not easy to move away from a path that has conditioned the mind to believe that it has to work at perfecting itself to gain something it does not already have. You know this to be untrue, as you have understood that you are already all that you seek.

Buddhism is a beautiful path in many ways and works as a means to an end for some, but it does not address the main problem, the doer. Vedanta is a means of knowledge; it is the pathless path that underpins all paths because it is the knowledge that informs and underpins ALL knowledge. We have many ex-Buddhists who have tried for years to become "better people" through rigorous and demanding practices, such as *vipassana*. *Moksa*, or freedom from limitation, does not involve perfecting the person. It is about realising you are not the person/doer but awareness. The person is made the way they are made by *Isvara*, and trying to change this is futile.

Why bother trying to perfect the person if the person is not real? Without understanding the conditioning that runs the mind, where it originates from and what it is governed by (the *gunas/Isvara*) in the light of self-knowledge, there is NO way to be free of the person, no matter how many *vipassanas* you subject the mind to. This is what causes the inevitable feelings of failure that come with trying to be a "good" person. Freedom from limitation means you are free of the person and live free as a person.

The problem with Buddhism is that no one really knows what it teaches; there are so many different traditions and opinions about what it really stands for that it is totally open to interpretation. Buddhism was born out of Vedanta and it is referred to as "a chip off the tooth" of Vedanta. Buddhism split off from and disagrees with Vedanta as a valid means of knowledge, so it is called heterodoxy.

When Buddhism speaks about "self" and says there is no self, does it speak from the perspective of the apparent reality, meaning the person, or from the perspective of the Self? No one seems to be sure about this. In contrast, Vedanta is not open to interpretation, because the whole point of the teaching is to negate the doer, the ego that interprets according to its own beliefs and opinions which are based in ignorance of its true nature as awareness, meaning that the doer interprets reality through the screen of the *guna*-generated *vasanas*.

Vedanta teaches that in order to be free, two things have to take place: the interpreter of experience, the doer, has to be understood in the light of self-knowledge and then negated as only apparently real, even though it clearly does exist because you can experience it. The second thing is that the binding *vasanas* need to be rendered non-binding. The doer is only a problem when it is identified with its “story,” which is made up of and a product of its *vasanas*, the conditioning given to it by *Isvara*, the *gunas*.

Many Buddhist interpretations say that “no-mind” is the key to “*nirvana*” – but who is it that knows the no-mind or *nirvana*? If you know something, it can’t be you, can it? The knower and the known share the same identity as awareness, but they do not exist in the same order of reality, because the knower (awareness) is the subject and the known (the person) is the object. The mind is an object known to you, awareness. One cannot get rid of the mind – and even if one could, there is no need, because the mind is not the problem.

Identification with the mind is the problem. The mind is a product of the *vasanas* – and Buddhism does not address the conditioning that runs the mind and creates the mind, the *gunas* – and it ignores the Total Mind, or *Isvara*, altogether, so it has no teaching. The best it has to offer with its gruelling methods to get rid of the mind is perhaps a certain calm and peace. There is a lot to be said for living a *dharmic* life – but unless the conditioning that conditions the mind is understood, the *vasanas* are still binding and as soon as the peace wears off, which it will sooner or later because it is based on experience and not knowledge – the person—the doer, or the mind – is back, the *vasanas* are still there and therefore the problems are still there. So one has to go back to meditation or *yoga* or whatever one does to try to get rid of the mind. It never works, not for long, no matter how much one tries to contort the mind into conformity. As stated, this is because it is not the mind that is the problem, and even if it was, it is not in control of the results of its actions. *Karma yoga* is what is needed.

Karma yoga is an attitude one takes towards actions and their results. It is an attitude of loving consecration of one’s actions based on the understanding that life is a great gift that requires reciprocation and that the results of any action are not up to you, they are up to the Field of Existence, or *Isvara*. *Karma yoga* means responding appropriately to what life asks of you on a moment-to-moment basis; consecrating every thought, word and deed before you think, speak or act to *Isvara*, the Field of Existence, which is to say to yourself, whether or not you see that both the person and the Field of Existence share a common identity as consciousness.

Failure to appreciate the truth of *karma yoga* often results in low self-esteem, the feeling that “I am a failure.” This seems to be part of your problem and it also seems that you have a tendency to beat yourself up about your apparent “failures.” The solution to low self-esteem is to follow *dharma* with the understanding that one’s knowledge of all the variables in the field that produce results is and always will be limited. Therefore the results of one’s actions can never be known.

Action can produce likes and dislikes (*vasanas*) only if the result is looked upon as a success or failure. When the result is looked upon as a function of the invariable laws of action or what is even better, if it is looked upon as the grace of the *dharma* field, no new likes and dislikes are created. The existing likes and dislikes will no doubt create desires and produce actions, but new likes and dislikes are avoided. With this attitude towards the result actions born of likes and dislikes becomes the means of eliminating the very likes and dislikes themselves. The mind becomes free from the

agitations of elation (*rajas*) and depression (*tamas*). Such a mind is tranquil and contemplative.

Contemplation is not something you do. It is the nature of *sattva*, which is the nature of the mind when it is not conditioned by *rajas* and *tamas*. When the mind is *sattvic*, you automatically think dispassionately about things. *Karma yoga* produces a *sattvic* mind. A person who has been on the spiritual path for a long time but whose mind is still *rajasic* does not understand the value of *karma yoga*. As Krishna says, "A little *karma yoga* removes a lot of agitation."

Buddhism talks about the Four Nobles Truths: (1) Life is suffering, (2) desire is the root of all suffering, (3) the way to remove suffering is to remove the mind through the Eightfold Path and (4) this achieves a "state" of "no desire" called *nirvana*, which is a Sanskrit word that means "without flame." But answer this: If consciousness is all there is, there has to be someone there to know that the mind is gone, so why not concentrate on teaching who the knower of the mind is instead of trying to get rid of the mind, which can't be done?

The Four Noble Truths reinforce the idea prevalent in *yoga* that you have to do something to achieve a "state" which is "enlightenment." In other words, this is a totally dualistic approach based on the idea that the self, or awareness, is something other than who you are and something that has to be gained because you don't have it, which incidentally is why desire is there in the first place: the need to make one whole instead of realising your true nature is wholeness. This is the problem with trying to be a "good" person instead of just being who you are and doing what is right for you. This will lead to peace of mind, the only "state" of mind where one is incapable of taking *adharmic* action, because for a *sattvic* mind, it is too painful to NOT follow *dharma*.

Buddhism says desire is the problem. Well, what Buddhism does not address is exactly what Vedanta teaches: Who is the knower of desire? There is no way you can get rid of desire as long as you are in human form, because life is about experience, which is based on desire. There is nothing inherently wrong with desire; in fact one needs a desire for freedom in order to be free of limitation. It is a question of knowing WHO desires WHAT. Krishna says to Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*: "I am the desire that is not opposed to *dharma*."

Buddhism says that all is emptiness – and what does it mean by this? It is true that all objects are not conscious – and an object is anything other than you, awareness – which includes thoughts, feelings, intuition, epiphanies, spiritual experiences, STATES of being as well as gross objects, such as the body. All objects are therefore inert – they arise from consciousness/awareness, depend on consciousness to exist and dissolve back into consciousness – but consciousness is always free of the objects, just like the ocean and the wave depend on water to exist, but water does not depend on either the wave or the ocean to exist. All objects are made up of consciousness, but in another form – that of the apparently real. Only consciousness is real – real being defined as "that which is always present and never changes." Awareness is not a state – it is the knower of all states because a state is subject to change and awareness is not, so consciousness is the fullness that knows the emptiness.

Emptiness is not a problem when you understand that duality is not real, it is just a superimposition onto non-duality, which is the true nature of reality. This is what Vedanta offers: a valid, independent means of knowledge with which to understand

the true nature of the mind and its environment, the apparent reality, which if the mind is purified and qualified will remove not the mind but ignorance of its true nature.

The main problem that most of the people who have drifted from Buddhism is that it teaches that enlightenment is based on experience and not knowledge, which is where it parts company with Vedanta. Vedanta teaches that only self-knowledge removes ignorance, not experience. This is because experience is an object known to you, awareness. It is not real and it always ends. Buddhism teaches that enlightenment is a “state” to be achieved by action. Vedanta teaches that you are not the doer and you do not need any particular experience to experience awareness, because YOU ALREADY ARE AWARENESS and you are only ever experiencing awareness – you just don’t know it, because you have an ignorance problem.

Vedanta teaches through irrefutable logic, getting you to examine the unexamined logic of your own experience that you cannot gain something you already have. There is no such thing as an “enlightened” person. There are only beings whose ignorance has been removed by self-knowledge, who have discriminated themselves, awareness, from the objects that appear in them and who know that their true nature is awareness, not the person with a name and a story.

Buddhism teaches kindness and compassion to all beings, which is a very good and noble thing because non-injury is the highest *dharma* value. However, this has been extrapolated by many Buddhists to mean that one must “do good” because the world and people in it need saving or you need saving. Vedanta teaches everyone is fine the way they are, they just have an ignorance problem. Non-injury, being the highest value, means following your true nature and living in accordance with *Isvara*, which follows that you will see everything as non-different from you, awareness, and therefore everything perfect the way it is, even your God-given nature. *Isvara* is in charge of the apparent reality and there is a reason for everything to be the way it is that no one mind understands; *Isvara* is the giver of the results of action, no matter what we do. How can you ever harm any part of life when you know it is all you? You don’t need to go out and try to be something you are not. If it is not your nature to be all-loving, the epitome of kindness, compassion and helpfulness, then that is how *Isvara* made you. Some people are cut out to be caring helpers, some not. Trying to be anything never works.

And there is no need to change anything, because the apparent reality is not real; it is a play of the *gunas*, *maya*, that has created the hypnosis of duality. This is the cause of suffering, taking duality to be real. Freedom is knowing the difference between what is real and what is only apparently real and never confusing the two again.

Frank: So, to my question... finally. 😊 Why has *Isvara* placed me in this position of conflict?

Sundari: *Isvara* is not a doer and has not really placed you anywhere. What placed you in a “position of conflict” is *maya*, ignorance, or the power in awareness to delude, which has given rise to the *vasanas* that condition “your” mind. Your spiritual *vasanas* led you to Buddhism and through that have led you to Vedanta and James. It is grace that you found Vedanta and James; it’s like finding the Holy Grail

because it is the knowledge that ends the quest for knowledge. Buddhism will not work to free the mind of ignorance, because it does not have a teaching. Why bother about the conflict in the mind? See it for what it is, just fear born of ignorance. Trust the knowledge that has already revealed to you the truth of who you are.

If freedom from limitation is truly your main aim in life, I highly recommend that you read James' books if you have not done so yet. Read them slowly, sign on to the logic and do not skip. Combine that with reading the *e-satsangs* at the ShiningWorld website; you will find a wealth of the highest-level Vedanta teachings there in the form of question and answers. Watch as many of the videos of James teaching as possible. The qualifications for *moksa* are of paramount importance. I have attached a chapter on the qualifications; make sure you know what they are and track the mind on a daily basis.

To assist you, here are the eight stages of self-inquiry as I have formulated them from the Vedanta scriptures:

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. Without faith in the scripture (*shraddha*), self-inquiry will not work.

This is not blind faith, like religions demand, but faith pending the results of your own inquiry.

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.

3. Qualifications: One determines if all the qualifications necessary for *moksa* are present. If they are not, one has to develop them. Self-knowledge will not stick in a mind that is not prepared and purified. There is no purifier like self-knowledge (*jnana yoga*) but there are other practices one can do, like meditation, for instance – or even sitting in silence. But meditation (or any other practice) is an aid to self-inquiry; it does not equal self-inquiry nor does it take its place.

4. *Karma yoga* – negating the doer: *Karma yoga*, when practised properly, is really *dharma yoga* because every action you take is dedicated to *Isvara*; it is a consecration. It is understood that peace of mind only comes with the realisation that you are not in control of the *dharma* field, yet in taking the appropriate steps to act according to *dharma* and then relinquishing the results, peace of mind is produced. If you are not experiencing peace of mind by relinquishing results, you are not relinquishing results. It's that simple – the doer is still there, afraid and small, still wanting a particular result, frustrated and afraid because it believes it needs the result to be safe or whole, as it is not getting what it wants.

Karma yoga is not to destroy the doer or, in some cases, even its sense of doership. *Karma yoga* is meant to clear the mind of enough likes and dislikes until it becomes composed enough to do sustained inquiry. Only inquiry removes the problem of doership because it shows that you, the self, cannot be the ego (doer) that is known

to you. When that is clear, the doer can appear in you, even with a trace of doership, but you do not identify with it.

5. *Triguna vibhava yoga*: Once the mind is clear and established in *karma yoga*, the next step is to examine and identify one's conditioning in light of self-knowledge, i.e. the *gunas*. This means you take an objective view of the programmes (*vasanas*) that modify the mind and make up the *jiva's* "stuff." If you do not have a good understanding of the *gunas*, what they are and how they function, I recommend that you go to the ShiningWorld website and use the search function on this vital topic. All the Shiningworld writers have written extensively about this, as has James in his books.

6. Establish a *prakriya*: Vedanta offers several practices that can be used very effectively to negate the doer and render the binding *vasanas* non-binding. The most effective is to practise the opposite thought. Whenever a toxic thought arises in the mind or a thought that contradicts your nature as awareness, immediately employ the opposite thought. For instance, if you have someone in your life that you have very bad thoughts about, think loving thoughts. If the toxic self-negating thoughts arise about you, think the opposite thought. You keep up this practice for every thought that arises in the mind that is contrary to your true nature as awareness.

7. *Nididhyasana*: Self-realisation, which is the full understanding of your true nature as awareness. This means you apply the knowledge to your life and take a stand in awareness as awareness. If the mind is still agitated by *rajas* and *tamas* because all the qualifications are not in place and binding *vasanas* still condition the mind, one has to go back and requalify. 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.

8. 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, regardless of how the person is feeling. 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 probably one of the most important teachings of Vedanta.

These steps are not necessarily linear; one can jump around a great deal until self-knowledge has removed all ignorance and the knowledge is firm. Many inquirers go through a stage when the knowledge is on or off, what we call the “firefly” stage. They get disheartened and start to criticise or feel bad about themselves when the knowledge is not constant or they “slip up.” Don’t get discouraged by this, as it is a pretty normal stage for everyone to go through. Lifetimes of ignorance will take as long it takes to dissolve. And *prarabdha karma* (the momentum of past actions) will play out as long as it plays out. It is not up to the *jiva* but to *Isvara*. The price of freedom is eternal vigilance – so day by day, brick by brick allow self-knowledge to do the work of removing every last vestige of ignorance.

And lastly and very importantly: *nididhysana* never ends for the *jiva*.

While it is true that there is a definite “shift” in how one sees life and relates to objects once self-knowledge is firm, it is also true that the *nididhysana* stage never really ends for the *jiva*, because it is always changing and interacting with the field of existence – which is also always changing. The price of freedom for the *jiva* is eternal vigilance. Macrocosmic ignorance does not end when personal ignorance (*avidya*) ends, and the *jiva* is always limited by *maya* (although no longer conditioned by it), even though its essence is known to be limitless awareness. If this were not true, the *jiva* would become *Isvara* “after” *moksa* – which clearly and irrefutably is not the case. The fine print on the enlightenment certificate that many miss is that there really is no “post”-*moksa* stage for the *jiva*, even though as awareness you are *moksa* and not the *jiva*. A *jivanmukta* by definition will have resolved all its condition through contemplation, assimilation of the knowledge and transformation of its habitual patterns (*vasanas*); this is the essence of *nididhysana*. As Vedantins we never stop “working” on the *jiva* even though we do not censure it or expect it to change. Of course we follow *dharma*, personal and universal, without question, but not because we want to improve the *jiva*, but only because we want to enjoy a peaceful mind.

A common myth in the enlightenment game is that enlightenment is another object to obtain and when it is, the *jiva* will be different, better. It may or may not be. It will still have its *Isvara*-given character and tendencies; it will still be a pain in the ass to itself and others sometimes. It will still suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, feeling joy, pain, loss, grief as well as the constant bliss of self-knowledge.

When *moksa* has obtained in the mind one may and usually does feel experiential bliss regularly, but one does not depend on it because you know you are the bliss. The bliss of knowledge does not feel like anything. Experiential bliss is an object known to you and you are always blissful, whether or not experiential bliss is present. In fact, you could be sick, in pain, half dead, broke, jobless or stuck in a situation you do not enjoy but cannot change...and be totally blissful because who you are is not influenced by what is or is not going on in your environment. You feel blissful regardless of what is going on in the mind.

The subjective reality never ends for the *jivanmukta* and it can and often does still project its subjective reality (*pratibasika*) onto *Isvara*. It will always have its particular way of relating to *Isvara* which will be unique to its *Isvara*-given *vasana* filters. The difference will be that a *jivanmukta* knows when it is projecting, instantly dissolves the projection in the knowledge and is instantly free of it, thus it does not create “new” *karma*. It keeps its *karma* like a little dog on a very short leash, right in front, no *karmic* drag, ever, no unfinished business or drama. Every moment of every day is complete. There is never another person involved in its interactions and

transactions in the world of objects/experience. The *jivanmukta* knows in the moment that it is transacting only with itself because there is no “other.” There is only awareness.

Once the mind is purified, humility is its natural response to everything in its environment (*Isvara*) because it understands there is only itself, awareness. It no longer sees “otherness” as awareness, even though it observes the *jiva* still apparently experiencing it. Duality is understood and appreciated for what it is – enjoyed, even. But as it is not expected to deliver something it is incapable of doing, i.e. happiness, duality is never a problem for the *jivanmukta*. This takes so much pressure off the *jiva* because there is no need to make it conform to some silly “spiritual” ideal. It is just known and loved for what it is: a reflection of the self in a mirror, which is also the self.

As the *jiva* is a product of the *gunas*, belongs to and is always subject to *Isvara*, the *jiva* is never going to be perfect. But you as awareness are free of the *jiva* and you know it arises from and depends on you, and not the other way around. Then life makes sense and it is possible to see beauty all the time, even when things are not pretty.

I hope this helps, Frank.

~ *Namaste*, Sundari