

Self-Knowledge Only Takes Place in the Present

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Mark: Hi, Sundari.

Namaste! A very happy new year to you.

Sundari: Greetings and a happy “new” year to you too.

Mark: Kindly respond to my questions. This is my first email to ShiningWorld.

Let me give you a brief introduction to myself. I have gone through James’ book *How to Attain Enlightenment* and watched quite a lot of his stuff at YouTube.

I am also planning to watch the *Bhagavad Gita* videos also, as they are elaborate on *karma yoga*. However, I have things that I have difficulty in reconciling. Could you please help?

1. I understand that this is only at person-level (not at level of the self); however, this is my question: When we die, our *vasanas* take a different body to express themselves; however, there have been so many cases of people recollecting their past lives; are these incorrect or is there a way of tapping into past lives memories?

Sundari: What would be the point be of “tapping into past life memories” if you know that you are not the person but awareness? The subtle body is called the “traveller,” and it is the binding *vasanas* that may or may not reincarnate (find another vehicle in which to express themselves) through “another body.” The “next” person, or subtle body, will be a completely different person with a different set of life conditions, or *karma*. Some people do have “past” life memories, it’s true – but what difference do they make in the here and now? Knowledge of past lives will not help the mind render the binding *vasanas* non-binding. Only self-knowledge has the power to do that.

Once ignorance has been removed and the knowledge of your true identity as awareness is firm, then you understand that the person is no more than a conglomeration of tendencies (likes and dislikes, or *vasanas*) given to them by *Isvara* that create a certain personality and a life story. But both *Isvara* and the *jiva*, or apparent person, are objects known to you, awareness. “Your” conditioning belongs to *Isvara*; therefore as awareness you do not claim it, nor do you set out to perfect the apparent person. What for, if the person is not real? All you need to be free is to understand the *jiva*’s conditioning in the light of self-knowledge, so that you can free of the limitation of identification with objects. Liberation is freedom from the apparent person, not for them. This is because the apparent person will always be limited, as they will never leave the apparent reality, meaning that the *jiva* is always subject to *Isvara*, even though as awareness they are free of *Isvara* and the *jiva*.

The subject of reincarnation is not such a big topic in Vedanta, because self-inquiry

is about negating the notion that you are the body-mind, or the doer. Once you understand that you are not and why, it is not terribly important to understand past life experiences or know whether the person reincarnates or not, because you know that you, awareness, are eternal. The person is just an idea that appears in you, awareness. This does not mean that the person does not exist; it just means that he is not real: real being defined as “that which is not always present and always changing.” Only awareness is always present and never changes. Why bother with who the last or next person was or will be when he or she is no more real than this one? Awareness has no past, no future and is beyond time. If reality is non-dual awareness, which we know it is, then there is nothing other than awareness “in” it. Time is a construct, an *uphadi*, or limiting adjunct. It is created by fear and desire, and if you are identified with it, you are looking at the changeless through a changing instrument, the mind. This is ignorance. Nothing is ever experienced in the past or the future, only the present. Nothing ever happened. So what difference does it make if the *vasanas* are experienced in this life or an apparent “past” life? Without self-knowledge the *vasanas* cannot be dissolved and remain binding.

Mark: 2. Is there any meditation/*bhakti* technique that will help with the *karma yoga* attitude? I am struggling a bit there. I do light the candle and say some prayers, but somehow I think my technique is not quite complete, as even though I consciously do not worry about my results, I think it is continuous in the background (subconscious mind). Please help.

Sundari: Perhaps you do not understand what *karma yoga* is. Saying prayers or doing *pujas* is important as a devotional practice and is an important aspect of *karma yoga* because *karma yoga* really is devotion to *Isvara*. There are a number of practices or *yogas* that work to purify the mind, like mediation, *tai chi*, *japa*, sitting in silence, etc. But these *yogas* are an aid to self-knowledge, they do not replace it. *Karma yoga* and *yogas* in general are essential for purifying the mind, but there is no purifier like self-knowledge, *jnanum*. My advice would be to keep subjecting the mind to self-inquiry with total dedication and love; read as many of the e-*satsangs* at the ShiningWorld website as possible. Use the search function to help you with specific questions. And very importantly, keep watching as many videos of James teaching as possible, along with reading his books. Remember that ignorance is hardwired and very resistant to change. It takes total commitment to self-inquiry to remove lifetimes of ignorance. Do whatever it takes.

Here is the teaching on *karma yoga*:

Karma yoga is an attitude one takes towards actions and their results.

It is:

Karma yoga is an attitude of loving consecration of one’s actions based on the understanding that life is a great gift that requires reciprocation.

Karma yoga is the understanding that the results of any action are not up to the individual but depend on the field of existence.

Karma yoga means responding appropriately to what life asks on a moment-to-moment basis. It is consecrating every thought, word and deed before one speaks or acts to *Isvara*, the Field of Existence, which is to say to the self, whether or not you see that both the person and the Field of Existence share a common identity with

you, consciousness.

Karma yoga says that we can take action to gain a given result (which may or may not give us what we want) but whether we like it or not, the Field of Existence alone determines the result. It is possible to take the right action with the right attitude and still get a result we do not want, because the Field of Existence, or *Isvara*, considers the needs of the whole before it takes our individual needs into account. However, we can definitely maximise the chances of getting a positive result with appropriate and timely actions. *Karma yoga* is not about not taking action, but about surrendering the results of action to life.

How we relate to results determines how peaceful our mind is. If we are very attached to the idea of getting what we want (strong likes and dislikes), life will soon prove to us that we lose as much as we win, maybe more. At best we will be happy half the time and unhappy the other half. More likely though, when one is driven by likes and dislikes, the mind is agitated whether or not we get what we want, because nothing ever really satisfies the mind for long other than self-knowledge. It is the contention of Vedanta that happiness is our true nature and exists independently of winning or losing. Actualising this knowledge is freedom.

We can never stop acting as long as the body is alive. Action itself can never fail us; it only produces results. A given expectation may be said to have failed, but the one with the expectation has not failed. That "I have failed" or that the action has failed is the wrong conclusion; the expectation is the problem, so nobody fails. It is only a matter of wrong judgment because we are not omniscient and we cannot have the knowledge of all the factors that shape the results of the actions. 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 Field of Existence, no new likes and dislikes are created and peace of mind is maintained. With this attitude towards results actions born of likes and dislikes become the means of eliminating the likes and dislikes. The mind becomes free from the agitations of elation (*rajas*) and depression (*tamas*). Such a mind is tranquil and contemplative.

If peace of mind is the aim, taking whatever results that do come as a gift will be the attitude one brings to everything. Sameness of mind (towards success and failure) with respect to action is another definition of *karma yoga* and is the essence of peace of mind, *sattva*. In cultivating the right attitude toward life, one performs one's duty by conforming to the pattern and harmony of creation and thus one becomes alive to the beauty of the cosmic order. When the mind becomes clear, one is able to see the order.

Karma yoga, when practiced properly, is really *dharma yoga* because 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 and it is not getting what it wants.

But the point of *karma yoga* is not to destroy the doer, or "wanter," 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 self-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. Wanting or desiring results is not a problem if they are in harmony with *dharma* and they are pursued with the *karma yoga* attitude.

If you understand what *karma yoga* really is, you will know that life always works no matter what result you get. This is because life is not about getting what you want; it is about the one who does not want. In the beginning of our spiritual practice, *karma yoga* is an attitude we have to work hard to cultivate, but eventually it is simply knowledge, so it becomes natural.