

The Way We Serve Life

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Hugh: *Jiva* apparently has parents, but I as awareness don't. That's one way that *jiva's* been addressing the parental issue brought up in the past exchange. Also, looking at the basic thought like "my parents should visit me" and seeing how that's not true.

Shams: Apparent levels of the self are important in this case. At the absolute level of the self, you are always free. At the level of the *jiva*, we have to be clear that it's an object appearing in a world of objects, so it will always be subjected to specific rules, other objects and the *vasanas*. For this *jiva*, there are psychological and ethical laws (*dharma*) that have to be followed in order to live an easier life. The main obstacles are *vasanas* manifested as conscious or unconscious ideas and inclinations that confuse the mind. For example, "my parents should visit me" could be a thought based on ideas that had not been subjected to a dispassionate discrimination yet. Once the mind begins to understand that a thought is mistaken, the best way to transform it in something useful is to apply the right thought, maybe like the ones I suggested in the last email or something that makes sense to heal the emotions, in line with *dharma*.

It's very important to remember that the problems of *jiva's* mind won't suddenly get solved by the applying of knowledge "I am the self." On the contrary, its main concerns should be sorted out before inquiry for the knowledge to do its work properly. The idea that *moksa* will improve your experience is part of the superimposition fallacy.

Hugh: *Jiva* often practises the knowledge that it is awareness, yet isn't so sure that there is any result.

Shams: There won't be an specific result for the *jiva*, except for the end of wanting to find a result. Knowledge is "I am limitless, ordinary awareness." So if you are awareness, you are beyond results. Knowledge won't bring an experience, but a full understanding and consequently a variation in the way the *jiva* is related to the world. But, as I said, the mind should be clear and free of worries for this to work.

Hugh: In a similar vein, it doesn't really understand how James says that the world is benevolent.

Shams: The world is an object. To make a judgment about an object, we need three elements: a subject (the mind), an object (the world) and an idea (the judgement). The idea about the object will never be equal to the object, because it's completely independent of it. That is why we say that the joy is not in the object. The ideas that are not demonstrated as absolute knowledge (as happens with qualifying judgments) are not object-dependent, but subject-dependent. Therefore to say that the world is good or bad is equivalent to placing a label on it. All these concepts

come from the subject and are related to his or her own dualistic standards. The world is neither good nor bad in itself, as well as any object is not beautiful, ugly, pleasant or painful by itself.

For there to be benevolence, there must be malevolence, as we need darkness to have light, etc. Whenever you express a concept, you create the opposite one. That's how duality works. When we say that the world is benevolent, we are, at the same time, building on a judgment about what is good and what is bad. So what is malevolence and what is benevolence? Commonly, the answer depends on the perspective from which the goodness or badness of the object is perceived. For instance, a mother who lost her two children might say that this is bad; but perhaps after losing her children she had another son, which she really loves. Then the "bad" led to "good." Of course nobody would say that the death of the two children is a good thing, and it's certainly not. But is it completely bad? If we say that the death of two children is totally bad, then the subsequent birth of a beloved son would also be a consequence (and therefore a part) of the badness. Because that is not possible, the death of two children is just partially bad? If partially bad, it must also be partially good - that could be right. But where's the limit where the badness stops and the goodness begins? This example can be expanded to consider any other fact that we judge as an absolute thing, just to get lots of parts. That's because in duality no action is completely benevolent or malevolent.

Why would someone say that the world is malevolent? Just check half of Facebook comments addicted to complaint: the human being is limited by events such as war, famine, disease, old age, poverty, corruption in politics, exploitation, slavery and crime, not to mention the evils of the mind and ego. In short, the human being is, by definition, limited (as the Buddhists say, by disease, old age and death). The dualistic mind can easily decide that this is bad because its label of "good" only applies to the other side of duality: peace, life, youth, wealth, respect, morality, love, etc. Of course there is another group of people who claim that the universe is good, while avoiding recognition of the limits of the *jiva* and its suffering. An individual who claims that the world is good because he has never been limited by the suffering of poverty or illness is just ignoring the testimony of other individuals and also has the illusion that he or she, as a person, never will be limited by anything.

In short, much of the malevolent/benevolent judgments based on personal inclinations and aversions are unable to see the whole picture but are totally submerged on duality (and personal likes and dislikes). However, it is clear that, in all cases, the criterion for declaring that something is good or bad is the presence or absence of limits. The limitless is good and the limited is bad. But even this can be confusing in a world of multiplicity and changes. Drugs can generate a very pleasant experience of absence of limits, which many people consider good. However, it is known that drugs bring very limiting consequences to life, which is why society takes for granted that drugs are bad in themselves. Both judgements are labels that can be useful or useless for the mind when categorizing for making a decision; however, nobody can say that the object called "drug" is benevolent or malevolent by itself. You cannot say that about any object.

So the judgment we make about an object is not the object; it is just that, an idea. There are schools of relativistic thinking that expand and generalize this vision, assuming that therefore all labels are interchangeable. Of course the position I am expressing is not a relativistic one, because I assume that, while all the labels are to some extent arbitrary, there are "truer" or subtler labels than others. For this

reason, there is the idea of *dharma*, which allows the mind to decide which actions and objects manifest better the self (and the self is not relative). Unlike the inclinations and dislikes of the mind, *dharma* is an impersonal set of ethical standards that could help us to decide whether an object is good or bad, according to the moment and the situation.

So is the world benevolent or malevolent? From the perspective of the self, it's just an object, neither good nor bad; just something that has no independent existence. Good and bad are only ideas, as the world itself is just an idea. And from the perspective of the individual? Swami Dayananda says: "With birth, certain defects come: death, old age, disease and pain of all kinds. There is no escape from them. Therefore bear in mind the nature of life. It is uncertain, painful and swiftly moving towards old age and death." There are even individuals who, early on, are "punished" with all the limitations and suffering of life. How can James say then that the world is benevolent? Maybe because the world has only been kind to him and he doesn't care about the others' experiences. Of course this is not the answer.

As I assert, bad is what limits us, and the world is, by definition, the sum of all limits (because "life is uncertain, painful and swiftly moving towards old age and death"). So we could say that the world is pretty malevolent. However, we know that the world is only apparent and its true identity is only you, who are limitless, completely benevolent awareness. Then we can say that the world is evil in appearance and good in truth because all evil is only an illusion and the true identity of the world is the goodness. And James knows that this is the only true world.

There's something else to add:

The ideas of the mind about the world are projections of what's inside. *Moksa* is not mandatory in order to have a mind that sees the world as benevolent. What is needed is a pure mind and therefore a devoted, full-of-gratitude mind. Even the world of duality is full of grace, but only a clear and dispassionate mind is able to see it without effort. *Rajas* and *tamas* will only make us focus on experience, on what is limited; *sattva* naturally focuses the mind on the limitless knowledge. Thus, curiously, world events, the experience, are seen as easy, benevolent and full of love, but not because the objects are good and full of love by themselves, but because your identity is love and goodness, and your emotions and ideas are expression of that. Objects are empty, they don't mean anything more than what we think of them. If the mind is grateful (independently of the good or bad events that are happening), it is impossible to see something different outside.

In conclusion, the world's neither malevolent nor benevolent, because the world is an illusion, and "good" and "bad" are simply labels. However, to the level of the mind, these labels have a fundamental value and must be understood in the most impersonal possible way, that is, as *dharma*. A clear understanding of things as they are (with all the apparent limitations) is part of the *dharma*, but so is the understanding that the limitation and suffering are illusory, and also cultivating a grateful mind. Dayananda says that life is full of limits, but never says that it is bad. It's just an invitation to get a more global view, not just one based on beliefs and personal views. With this understanding and with this kind of mind you can only see the world as benevolent. And yet, when this vision is still unclear, to focus attention on the benevolence of the world is much more useful than focusing on limitations and pain.

Actually, if we made a comprehensive and impersonal calculation, there would be

only a 0.01% of things to regret and 99.9% to be grateful for (and we would have a margin of error of 0.01%). I'm completely sure about this, though I'm writing from the suburbs of Mexico City. 😊

Hugh: *Jiva* seems to have no calling. There are many things that *jiva* has pursued in life. *Jiva's* enjoyed doing all sorts of things. Of course they end up not going the way *jiva* expects or wants. Like anyone, *jiva* tries to do the right thing to the best of his knowledge for the circumstances that are present. One thing that *jiva* has learnt is that happiness is not the result of pursuing any particular thing.

Shams: See, you sound like you are in contact with your calling, you have a way you follow, an inclination in life (or at least you have a calling for finding the calling). That's the way you serve life. Maybe that is a little obscure right now to the intellect, but there's no way someone can seriously come to Vedanta without being close with their *svadharma*. So you are and you can get closer every day. That won't make you free, but it's the only way the mind can start getting calm and in its place.

Hugh: *Jiva's* curious if Shams knows what James means when he says that the best prayer is for God to reveal himself. (Sorry for the Lucknow Disease way of writing.)

Shams: That is the best prayer because it's the only direct prayer. When you ask for an object (a car, a job, a relationship, etc.), in reality you are asking for God appearing as one of those objects – because God is everything. Asking God for God is to stop caring for substitutes and start looking for the essence. Also, it's the best prayer because God is always available, unlike a car, a house or a wife/husband, which are things that are subjected to the same rules as all the objects. God (the self) is not an object, it's you, so sooner or later the mind will be able to know it.

Hugh: So *jiva's* praying day after day, hour after hour, for *Isvara* to reveal Him/Her/Itself, then what's the revelation? An epiphany?

Shams: The revelation is (are you ready?) this: you don't need God (the self) to reveal Himself, because you are It. It can come as an epiphany or as slow understanding and removal of ignorance. That doesn't matter. What does matter is that the realization should be firm and incontrovertible.

Maybe you are not getting it, yet. What would be the reason? The mind is not completely ready. Why? Because of the *karmas*. What to do then? Work on the *karmas* and the mind, through *sadhana* and devotion. Asking God for him to reveal Himself is a great kind of devotion. So you are doing it right. How to improve the devotion of the mind? In my experience, it's fundamental for the mind to recognize that mother and father are your first connections to God. When the mind is able to feel absolute gratitude and love for both of them and stops asking for anything more than what it got in the past, it's already clear and devoted to *Isvara*.

Hugh: Is *jiva* supposed to be seeking for meaning in every little thing that happens?

Shams: A *jiva* that is applying Vedanta should remember that “every little thing that happens” is an object in you. So there are no meaning in things. All the objects in the world have only one meaning, and that is you. But you don’t have to look for yourself in the objects (experience), but in the knowledge.

Hugh: *Jiva* gets excited by the woo-woo factor and hopes for a woo-woo answer.

Shams: *Moksa* is just metacognition, so you will be dissatisfied if you look for that. It’s just getting to know that even the mind is an object, and you are the witness. There won’t be anything new, because that’s the way things are always. It’s just a subtle insight. Knowing.

Hugh: James’ autobiography is exciting to *jiva*. Life is fun with a bit of woo-woo. *Jiva’s* just curious why this would be the one prayer that James says is the most important one.

Shams: Life is fun with woo-woo (extraordinary experiences), depending on the likes and dislikes of the *jiva*. It might be that some *jivas* don’t find them particularly interesting. It all depends on mind’s inclination. However, when it’s clear for the mind that joy is not in the object, the presence or lack of woo-wooness in experiences becomes irrelevant. Maybe James’ *jiva* had some strong *vasanas* for extraordinary experiences but, when ignorance about his true identity got removed, then even that strong *vasana* began to lose its power.

When you want God to reveal Himself, it’s better to understand what you are asking for. You are not asking for a big deity to appear in front of you or to manifest some kind of miracle. That would be just another substitute, another form. You don’t need *Isvara* to appear here, because right now everything that appears is *Isvara* as the Creation. The “woo-woo” label is an arbitrary judgement (due to the programming of the *vasanas*) because what is extraordinary for me could be a common and boring fact for you, as the Creation remains impersonal. When you ask for a revelation, you ask for knowledge, understanding.

Hugh: *Jiva* wonders about strong *vasanas* that may need to be exhausted. For example, most people on this planet have an intimate relationship, often marked by marriage. Obviously that isn’t needed in life, as there are *swamis* that are single.

Shams: You are right. When you know that you are actually complete and adequate, why would you need someone to make you feel better? In the case of an inquirer, you value knowledge more than a relationship, and you focus your attention on it.

However, a relationship is not a bad thing or a good thing per se. That depends on the *svadharma* of everyone. Clearly, the way of a *swami* is to live without a partner or a family, but that’s not an obligation for everyone.

Hugh: Although *jiva’s* been single for a long time, it seems natural that he will end up in a relationship again at some point, quite possibly marriage.

Shams: And that would be in line with *dharma*, if that is the nature of the *jiva*.

Hugh: It seems though that most people would not want to be in a relationship with someone who values Vedanta, *swamis*, spiritual teachers, etc.

Shams: I think that your opinion is a generalization and maybe a self-fulfilling prophecy. ☺ I know a lot of realized Vedantins who are married or have a relationship. Some of them have a partner who doesn't know anything about Vedanta. Maybe it works because Vedanta is not a personality, and they are not talking about it all the time. Besides, loving Vedanta doesn't equal following *swamis*, speaking Sanskrit or dressing in saffron robes. It's just an internal, practical thing that, one day, will cease to be required. So Vedanta shouldn't be an obstacle. On the contrary, it is a tool for discrimination. And, thanks to discrimination, the inquirer can decide if the desire for a relationship is stronger than the desire of freedom, and take action according to that, knowing that the desire of freedom should be the most important.

Here's another thing: as a result of the right application of *sadhana* and Vedanta, you get a *sattvic* mind. It's true that, when you have that kind of mind, you are not very interesting to most of the (*rajasic* and *tamasic*) people, but that's not a problem, because the *sattvic* mind would only want to be close to other *sattvic* minds. Or better, in solitude. So you stop thinking about what the ladies want and you don't have, but focus on who you are and what better expresses your essential happiness.

Hugh: *Jiva* has a fear of *sattva* when it comes to diet. *Jiva* perhaps overvalues *tamas* in diet. When specifically dieting, trying to cut down on *rajas* and *tamas*, *jiva* experienced some strong negative emotions, and since then has been cautious about getting too *sattvic* with food. Yet on the other hand, it seems that manipulating the *gunas* through food could be a good thing. *Jiva's* a bit confused about this.

Shams: *Guna* manipulation is a very subtle and difficult topic. There's a multiplicity of factors, like each body reacting differently. You know that a diet is a *sattvic* one because your body and mind feel relaxed, clear, light and full of vitality. You might experience negative emotions as a result of clarity in your mind, but it sounds strange to me. Furthermore, if, as a result of a clear mind, those negative emotions got released, why would you feel the inclination to obscure the mind again? Maybe the diet that you call *sattvic* is not completely *sattvic*, and the diet that you consider *tamasic-rajasic* has some *sattvic* elements. In my experience, eating (for example) just lettuce and drinking water sounds very *sattvic*, but it's absolutely necessary to get carbohydrates, oils and proteins from different sources, otherwise the body-mind will become weak and tired, i.e. *tamasic*. So *sattva* is the result of the balance of different elements for your body and mind. If there is a release of violent emotions, maybe the whole diet is more *rajasic*. If you are sure that the diet is *sattvic*, because actually your mind becomes more *sattvic*, then why would you avoid the unpleasant emotions instead of looking and integrating them? After all, you are not it. You are the self.

I'm pretty sure that you have the right attitude and a big desire for knowledge, so

this is part of your soul's path. In order to advance in the inquiry, the mind should get rid of (or at least keep in suspense) most of the old ideas about God, life, experience, etc. The first step is to understand intellectually and organically the whole picture of Vedanta, and then you can question your own ideas. At the same time, the mind must get qualified for Vedanta to be properly understood. With Vedanta you are in good hands (the best hands), but that is why it's very important to really understand what the impersonal means of knowledge (Vedanta) says and not what your *vasanas* like or your thought habits assume. It would be a good idea to read this *satsang* more than twice, until every doubt is gone. Also, it would be useful to do something about the negative emotions because it seems that there is some psychological stuff waiting to be integrated on the psyche. How can you know that the mind is becoming ready to learn? If your heart is 100% grateful.