

Worship of Nature Is Worshipping the Self

Sundari (Isabella Viglietti)

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Vidya: Dear Sundari, I hope you don't mind me asking a more personal question that I have been grappling with.

Lately, I have become very involved in a large permaculture project on our land (www.danyadara.com).

(Please note: anyone who would like to participate or contribute, please read the message below from Vidya, the owner of Suryalila:

If you would like to find out more and contribute to Danyadara (which means "Blessed Earth"), our wonderful permaculture project, we are busy raising funds to plant thousands of trees, build a food forest and educate others to help reverse desertification. Any support is greatly appreciated (<http://bit.ly/FoodForestSpain>)!

Sundari: What an amazing project, Vidya! Well done to you.

Vidya: This project is partly educational, partly to beautify our land and to produce a lot of fruit and vegetables. Ultimately, the bigger goal is to demonstrate how to reverse desertification in southern Spain, which is becoming a big problem here, due to global warming, industrial farming and drought. I have been working with a lot of more expert permaculture people on this project. We always have a group of volunteers helping out with it. I am quite passionate about the more far-reaching aspects of the project but I am having difficulty making it "fit" with Vedanta.

I keep asking myself, since it is all *Maya*, or apparent reality, anyway, why be so passionate about sustainability? If ultimately everything will become dormant again and return to seed form, does it really matter? How much energy should we expend caring about the planet? On the other hand, I know that everyone needs to fulfil their *svadharma*, and mine seems to be creating this beautiful oasis and trying to save a little corner of the planet. I feel aligned with this and mostly at peace, in spite of my very strong drive to create. I think about Krishna telling Arjuna that we have to act, since we are here, we don't have a choice, and then I think, I have to do something, and I am not the "sitting in a cave" type.

Does it make sense that these passions (for being actively engaged in sustainability and passionate about Vedanta) can co-exist happily? Isn't this a little paradoxical?

Maybe there is a simple answer. There is no rush. I know you are really busy.

Sundari: It totally makes sense. Worshipping the environment by taking care of it is one of the five offerings in *karma yoga*, see below. It is our duty as humans to take care of the Field which gives us everything we need to live. An attitude of gratitude is a prerequisite for a happy life. Yes, the Field may not be real, but that does not mean that we should not care about it. It exists, we exist in it from the *jiva* perspective, and it sustains us while we are in the body. The environment, the Field

of Existence, is *Isvara*, is you, the self. Lovingly acting as its steward and contributing to preserving it is a devotional practice and much encouraged. It is your *svadharma*, and to neglect this would not make you happy.

The Five Offerings

Karma yoga is not only right attitude, it is right action. Actions can be classified in terms of how well they serve to prepare the mind for inquiry. They are (1) *sattvic*, those that give maximum spiritual benefit, (2) *rajasic*, those that are neither beneficial nor detrimental and (3) *tamasic*, those that are harmful and lead one away from the goal.

Tamasic Karmas

These actions build unhelpful *vasanas* that take the doer away from liberation. Violence in thought, word and deed, lying, cheating, stealing, gambling, drinking alcohol, taking drugs, excessive sex solely for pleasure, etc. are examples of the third class of *karmas*. They are considered sins because they produce a dull and agitated mind. They are not recommended for anyone and are definitely prohibited for *karma yogis*.

Rajasic Karmas

The second class is desire-prompted activities that basically contribute to our material well-being. These activities do not directly contribute to preparing the mind, but they are scripturally sanctioned because indirectly they make it possible to pursue liberation. They are not considered sins as long as they do not compel the individual to violate *dharma* or ignore the legitimate needs of others, in which case they increase selfishness, a detrimental characteristic. In fact the Vedic scriptures prescribe several rituals for getting money, property, certain types of children, etc. They are not encouraged or discouraged.

Sattvic Karmas

The first class of actions, *sattvic karmas*, are necessary if *karma yoga* is going to bear fruit. They are giving *karmas*, not grabbing *karmas*. The more you give, the more you grow. *Karma yoga* involves actions that add value to every situation, offerings that contribute to the well-being of the *dharma* field. The intention of a *karma yogi* is to enshrine *sattvic karmas* at the forefront of her life, to see that *rajasic karmas* are relegated to subordinate status and to eliminate *tamasic karmas*. Of course it is impossible to eliminate *tamasic* actions altogether. Certain situations demand them. *Sattvic karmas* bring about maturity and spiritual growth. These actions are not based on desires for tangible results like money, fame, status, pleasure, children and so forth. They should be considered compulsory actions - assuming the desire for liberation.

What are these *karmas*? They are called the Five Essential Worshipships (*pancha-mahayajna*). There is no tangible benefit from these *karmas*. One of these practices does not replace the other. Just as eating only dessert at the expense of other nutritious foods is not enough, all five are necessary. Each one affects a different part of the psyche, and the psyche as a whole needs to be healed. These practices are the

essence of *karma yoga* because they directly contribute to spiritual growth.

1. Worship of God in Any Form. *Isvara/Maya*, the creator of the *dharma* field, is God. *Karma yoga* is worship of God. Most modern spiritual people have abandoned religion because so much suffering has foisted on humanity in its name. But the religious impulse, the self loving itself, is as hardwired as the desire for identity. So it is incumbent on a *karma yogi* to choose a symbol of the self that is attractive and uplifting, and worship it regularly. It can be anything because every object is just God in a particular form. It may be a ritual sacrifice or a *puja* in front of an idol or a photo. It can be telling the beads, visiting a temple, doing service or giving money to a church or mosque.

2. Unconditional Reverence for Parents, especially difficult ones. For instance, if you don't feel love when you think of your parents, you should inquire into why you have a problem with them. You should "heal" the relationship in your mind by understanding, for example, that if the other person could have been different they would have been different and that they did their best according to their conditioning. Find a place in your heart to accommodate them and give them credit for the good qualities they instilled in you. They are no longer in your life physically perhaps, but they are still in your mind. They are part of it and it is made out of you. Until you have a loving feeling about that part of your mind, you will not be free to inquire properly. In any case the essence of enlightenment is love, so you might as well start somewhere. Once you have dissolved the negativity bring an image of them into your mind and fill the image with love. Keep the love flowing to the image as long as possible.

3. Worship of Scriptures. The purpose of *karma yoga* is to cultivate devotion, develop your understanding and gain a contemplative disposition so that you can assimilate the meaning of the teachings. You should not think that you will start inquiry one fine day when you are contemplative. You should set aside a half an hour, an hour a day or more for study of Vedanta. Pick a text, read a verse or a few pages each morning and contemplate throughout the day. You don't become contemplative all at once. You have contemplative moments throughout the day and insights all along. Cultivate those moments, and the extroverted mind will gradually turn inward.

4. Service to Humanity. Worshipful service simply means responding appropriately to legitimate, small, everyday requests for help. When someone wants something from you, see if you can't accommodate them, assuming it is a reasonable desire. If you are helping others, at least you are not wasting your time indulging *tamasic* and *rajasic* habits. Service isn't only doing what others want, although it might include that. It is showing an accommodating openness to others, not shutting them out. Because ego, born of a sense of inadequacy and inferiority, looks for opportunities to feel special, virtuous and recognized, humble service keeps these tendencies in check. It is based on a recognition of the essential oneness of all. It is also wise because everything we need comes through others. Service-oriented individuals are generally well looked after.

5. Worship of All Sentient Beings. There is no distance between us and nature. We are born in it, live in it and die in it. Worshipping nature is continual mindfulness of our environments, beautifying them and contributing to them always, including the body, our most intimate contact with nature. How we relate to everything in our delicately balanced ecosystem has a powerful effect on our state of mind. Recycle. Reduce your carbon footprint. Go green.

