

# Mental Health, Depression and Vedanta

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**Roberto:** I feel guilty writing sometimes, but then feel it is such a valuable thing you do, I have to take advantage of your advice.

I realize the truth that James talks about in so many ways. I watch his videos, and he makes me laugh out loud, and in my quiet moments of reflection, I dwell on my life and relive many thoughts and questions I have had over the years. I can look back over those times and now understand why I was struggling and questioning much of my existence. Nothing made any sense to me, it seemed as if I was the only person that had questions like mine!

**Sundari:** This is pretty standard for most people who arrive at the gate of the teachings on non-duality. It's almost always with a mixture of wonder, humour and fascination that the truth of who we are has been staring us in the face our whole lives, twenty-four hours a day, without us realizing it.

**Roberto:** I have just read your *satsang* that features on the website entitled *Squatters in the Mind*. I found it very interesting.

I am writing again so soon because I spend every day listening and watching the ShiningWorld material. The *satsang* was the only one that came under the heading of "depression." I realize now that I have probably been depressed most of my life to some greater or lesser extent, depending. At the moment I find benefit from a basic medication.

So my question is regarding depression. There is so much of it about and the more I have listened to the Vedanta teachings I can't help but think to myself, if we all realized who we were, there would presumably be no need for antidepressants?

**Sundari:** Yes, if we all realized who we are there definitely would be no need for antidepressants! Depression is *tamas*, beginningless ignorance. It is the feeling of hopelessness that the illusion of duality creates when it becomes apparent that this is a zero-sum world. It is the exhaustion and existential angst of the doer. You cannot win in the apparent reality, because it's not real, and when the mind realizes this, it can fall into the dark night of the soul, the void. It does not matter how successful you may be, depression can still take hold and often, it kills. Look at famous people like Anthony Bourdain or the designer Kate Spade, who killed themselves last year. They had everything: fame, money, people who loved them, but despair at the meaninglessness of their lives was unbearable nonetheless. Nothing makes sense in the *mithya* world without Self-knowledge, and it's the only way to step out of duality. We have emotional problems in life because it does not always oblige to give us what we want, and this makes us very unhappy, despondent, depressed.

Vedanta's take on the cause of unhappiness is very simple. It says that all unhappiness is caused by dependence on objects for happiness. But if you research

what makes people happy, a very complex topic outside of the teachings of Vedanta, you might think that human beings are either hopelessly Panglossian and unfailingly see the upside of life or depressingly saturnine and unfailingly see only the downside. The truth is that the world works the way it works, it does not care how we see it. It can seem brutal, seen through the lens of duality. Though we may wish the world was the way we want it to be, our experience of the world – how we see it, remember it and imagine it – is a mixture of stark reality and comforting illusion. We see the world as we are, not as it is, out of necessity, when deluded by *Maya*.

If you are deluded by duality and identified with being a person, and if you were to experience the world exactly as it is, you would be too depressed to get out of bed in the morning. Equally, if you were to experience the world exactly as you want it to be, you would be too deluded to function. We may see the world through rose-tinted coloured glasses, but to afford us a functional life, they must be neither too opaque nor too clear. Each imposes a limit on the influence of the other, and our experience of the world is the artful compromise that these two forces negotiate, until we can dismiss duality altogether, that is.

Then we automatically accept the world exactly as it is without imposing our subjective reality onto it because we understand that it cannot be any other way. Everything in the Field of Existence is as it must be. We have our feet on the ground, a sense of humour and automatically live *karma yoga*. Making the transition to accepting both *dharma* and *adharma* as the inevitable playing out of the *gunas* is a tough step for most inquirers, but it can only truly be done with full knowledge of how this reality functions, which enables you to step out of *Maya*. It is very difficult to do for non-inquirers, hence many are depressed. Religion plays a big part in blunting the facts of life; most philosophy is an attempt to make sense of it all and psychology attempts to measure and fix it.

As *jivas*, what we all need is a strong psychological immune system that defends the mind against unhappiness in much the same way that the physical immune system defends the body against illness. While there does not exist a stronger immunity to suffering the blows of life than Self-knowledge, for those without it, the metaphor of the physical immune system works well. Our immune system must strike a balance between two competing needs: the need to recognize and destroy foreign invaders, such as viruses and bacteria, and the need to recognize and respect the body's own cells. Analogously, when we face the pain of rejection, loss, misfortune and failure, a healthy psychological immune system strikes a balance that allows us to feel good enough to cope with what life throws at us and able to respond appropriately to what is required of us in the moment.

If our psychological immune system is dysfunctional and we are not lucky enough to be established in Self-knowledge, this can lead to the breakdown of the mind. Depression can mean you need to adjust your worldview or it can mean you are mentally ill. Seriously mentally ill people are not qualified for Vedanta. But we have come across inquirers with underlying mental fragility who are quite capable of understanding the scriptures, in fact have a highly refined grasp and speak about them quite competently. But though they are spiritually advanced, they are not able to bridge the gap between their intellectual spiritual acuity and their underdeveloped mind/emotions.

They often impose *satya* on *mithya*, taking their dissociation to mean they are free of the body-mind, but in fact they cannot apply the teachings to their lives, because they have not addressed the damaged part of the psyche. In this case, though they

may think they are free, as they have realized the Self, and as the Self they are *moksa*, but *moksa* cannot obtain for the *jiva*. *Moksa* requires a mind that is fully mature and qualified to not only assimilate the teachings intellectually but for them to translate fully into all aspects of life. For this to happen, the mind must be capable of understanding and freeing itself of its conditioning. There is no fine print to this.

The inconvenient truth about depression or other mental health issues points to the fact that the cause is never purely chemical, as it is never purely environmental/situational. Scientists and psychologists are divided on the nature/nurture issue, with science leaning towards nature as the primary cause of our conditioning. Yet one cannot separate the mind and its environment; it's a two way, not a one-way, street; and it's all one Field. The science of epigenetics proves this. In most cases, in our view, the main causes of mental problems are primarily psychological, i.e. how you relate to what has or is happening to you determines your chemistry and your chemistry, in turn, affects your psychology, in a vicious circle. It is not that your brain is inherently faulty and can simply be "fixed" with a magic pill.

Your brain is a thought-producing machine that will eat you alive if you cannot manage your thoughts and emotions. If you do not understand the forces that govern the mind and create the thoughts and feelings behind its binding fears and desires, have no objectivity about yourself or life and cannot apply the teachings of Vedanta to your life, the chances are very good that you will become depressed, maybe without even knowing it. You almost certainly will have normalized the abnormal and be totally identified with the body-mind – your life story. Depression is not just one thing, it is usually the result of a combination of factors in a sliding scale or spectrum of feelings, such as fear of the world, anxiety, sadness, loss, inadequacy, low self-esteem, etc.

Our premise is that there is no permanent solution to our psychological suffering other than with an independent, valid means of knowledge that allows us to depersonalize our story with reference to the big picture and the forces that run the Field of Existence so that we can be truly free of the *jiva*. This requires all the qualifications to be in place.

**Roberto:** I just needed to explain all this and ask for your input, in order to keep my thoughts in line and understand the best I can. There is no one else who has a clue what I'm talking about. I even plucked up the courage to mention *kundalini* to an Indian doctor, and she had never heard of it, much to my surprise!

**Sundari:** It is something we often shake our heads over, but there is no getting around the fact that most people have no clue about the true nature of reality, such is the awesome power of delusion that *Maya* wields. If you rely on your sense organs to interpret life for you, you will not find non-duality. You are one of the lucky ones, live in gratitude.

~ Much love, Sundari