

The Chicken and the Egg

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2019-05-19

Source: <http://www.shiningworld.com/site/satsang/read/3885>

Tom: Hi, James.

I have a few Vedanta questions to ask you. Does *vasana* mean the same thing as desire? I have seen it translated as “tendency.”

James: *Vasanas* are the tendencies left over in the unconscious (causal body) when you do something to satisfy a desire or remove a fear. Selfish actions generate them. *Karma yoga* neutralizes them. Aversions, fears, are *vasanas* too.

Tom: Does *samsara chakra* mean the cycle of *vasana*-action-*vasana* or is it *vasana*-desire-action-*vasana*? In other words, does a *vasana* need to become a desire before it can become an action?

James: Yes. A desire or a fear. This *chakra* is created by ignorance of your wholeness. If you didn't think you were incomplete and inadequate, you wouldn't pursue and avoid various courses of action. You would just take what comes as *prasad*.

Actually, there is no difference between a *vasana*, a desire and an action, because they are mutually interdependent. Think chicken-and-egg. You don't have a *vasana* without an action and you don't have an action without a *vasana*.

Tom: Do we stop *samsara chakra* by using our will power not to allow a *vasana* to become an action that produces a *vasana* that we do not want?

James: No and yes. No because using will power just generates a will-power *vasana* and reinforces one's sense of doership. Yes because as long as you think of yourself as a doer, you need to reclaim your sense of self-esteem from the *vasanas* that are constantly robbing you of it. When you indulge your fears and desires, your self-worth suffers because you are creating dependent relationships with the world. So you have to stand up to self-insulting impulses or you are free in name only. Desire and fear are not your friends, unless they are put in service to your need for freedom.

I think you are losing track of the big picture, Tom. What do you actually want? A different Tom, a different life, or freedom from Tom and his life?

Tom: All our thoughts and feelings come from *Isvara*. However, you wrote in various places about *jivas* being in control of our thoughts, choosing a replacement thought that produces a more helpful emotion and the need for us wrest control of the thought process from the *gunas*.

James: All your thoughts come from *Isvara*, meaning your conditioning, unless you establish different thoughts. It is an appropriate use of free will to change your conditioning in line with your highest value if you think you are a *jiva*. Both *Isvara* and *jiva* are in the *mithya* order of reality, so they impact each other. In fact *Isvara* delivers the results of *jiva's* actions based on the actions that *jiva* does. So, if *jiva* develops a new behavior, *Isvara* will establish it as a habit.

Tom: What is our relationship to thoughts?

James: It depends on who you think you are. If you are Tom, a *jiva*, you live and die by them. If you are the Self, you are not affected by them. Of course you are the Self; there is no other option. But most people think they are people – body-mind-sense complexes – and so they have a very incestuous relationship with their minds. Self-actualized people know they are the Self, so they look at their minds with dispassion. They are not elated when things produce bliss nor are they depressed or angry when unpleasant things happen.

Self-realized people still have a sense of human limitation but they are aware of it and they apply the knowledge that they are actually the Self, which objectifies their *vasanas* and slowly ameliorates the tendency to identify as *jivas*.

Tom: How do we apply our free will to our thoughts?

James: Change your thoughts. The whole teaching of Vedanta is about changing the way you think about yourself, the world and *Isvara*. Most people think their thoughts are etched in granite, so they feel victimized by their minds. But there is no reason, apart from habit, i.e. *vasanas*, why you can't deliberately introduce different thoughts. Remember, your life is only your thoughts. Consciousness plus a thought is an experience. Consciousness minus a thought is consciousness. If you negate, not deny, the thoughts – which is a unique way of thinking – with the knowledge “I am whole and complete awareness,” you rest as consciousness – yourself – which is thought-free.

Tom: Do we apply our free will by letting go of unhelpful thoughts and deliberately bringing on helpful thoughts?

James: Yes. But that is not the end of it, because it still leaves the “who am I?” question unanswered. Why? Because “we” means you are still left thinking you are merely a person. Yes, you are a person with different *karma*, but so what? You still aren't free of *karma* altogether. The only way you get free of *karma* is to stand as whole and complete existence/awareness. You consciously and continuously entertain the thought “I am ever-free, unborn, whole and complete, actionless, ordinary awareness” until the tendency to think of yourself as a mere mortal is ameliorated, in which case you stand alone in the glory that you are.

Of course this is a difficult brief because you are more or less completely attached to the idea that you are Tom, an experiencing entity. You probably have a lot of romantic and not-so-romantic notions about him. You've identified as him for a long time – have a juicy story about your relationship with him – and are more inclined to

improve him than to see him as an apparent entity. Is that true?

The Chicken and the Egg (Part 2)

Tom: Hi, James. Thank you for taking the time to respond to my questions. I deeply appreciate it.

James (from Part 1): Of course this is a difficult brief because you are more or less completely attached to the idea that you are Tom, an experiencing entity. You probably have a lot of romantic and not-so-romantic notions about him. You've identified as him for a long time – have a juicy story about your relationship with him – and are more inclined to improve him than to see him as an apparent entity. Is that true?

Tom: The answer to your above question is “not true.” I am not trying to improve Tom. I want to lessen his suffering and free him. I feel freer today than before Vedanta came into my life. I am not attached to Tom. I often tell people that I am the best person for them to criticize because I usually do not get offended or mad at the person who criticizes me. I am generally not reactive to criticism, because I generally do not identify with Tom. If there is something of value in the criticism, I use it for my personal growth. If I decide that the criticism is not true, I just let it go without having any negative thoughts or feelings about the person who criticizes me.

James: Good. That's what I thought. I just needed to eliminate the idea of self-improvement.

Tom: Does *samsara chakra* mean the cycle of *vasana*-action-*vasana* or is it *vasana*-desire-action-*vasana*? In other words, does a *vasana* need to become a desire before it can become an action?

James: Yes. A desire (or a fear).

Tom: If I understand you correctly, the *vasana* has to become a thought in the form of a desire or fear before it can become an action. Is my understanding correct?

James: Yes.

Tom: Do we stop *samsara chakra* by using our will power not to allow a *vasana* to become an action that produces a *vasana* that we do not want?

James: No and yes. No because using will power just generates a will-power *vasana* and reinforces one's sense of doership.

Tom: I used the wrong word when I used the words “will power” to phrase my question. A better word for me to use is “free will.” Am I correct that I should use my free will to resist the *vasanas* that want to be turned into a desire or fear that binds me to *samsara*?

James: Yes. Absolutely. Parsing the meaning of words makes my job difficult. *Jivas* have the freedom to use will power. But it is important to consider the reason. Now I understand the question. The answer is yes and no. Yes if you are a doer who wants to eliminate, sublimate or enhance a tendency. No if you are an inquirer, because *vasanas* (fears and desires, etc.) don’t bind you to *samsara*. Why? Because they are not real. How can something that is not real bind something that is unaffected by what happens in the body-mind-sense complex?

Tom is never going to get free of *samsara*, meaning experience. I think you believe that *moksa* will happen when the *vasanas* are non-binding. But it won’t, because there is only one you and it is already free. Additionally, a freedom that begins at a certain point ends at a certain point, so experiential freedom for Tom is going to be frustrating because it will be temporary.

The key to *moksa* is knowledge of *Isvara*, i.e. *mithya*. *Isvara* is a power which is neither the same nor different from awareness, that makes it seem as if you, awareness, are a body-mind-sense complex, and therefore that the feelings it experiences are real.

You mentioned that you have recently suffered a lot of unpleasant emotions, which you feel you survived because of Vedanta. This statement is only true if you think you are the body-mind-sense complex with the name Tom. But you can’t be that “person,” because “he” is known to you. The situation is rather like the relationship between a picture and the camera. You never see the camera in the picture, but you don’t have a picture without a camera. You don’t have Tom and his experience without you, awareness. But you are not taking a stand as awareness, because you are focused on Tom. You believe that Tom is going to render “his” *vasanas* non-binding and set himself free. But *vasanas* – your experience – don’t affect you in any way, because you are both in different dimensions. Tom, the *vasanas*, etc. are in the *mithya* picture, and you, awareness, are outside the picture witnessing it. So you don’t have an action problem. You’re as good as *vasana*-free as you are ever going to be as Tom. *Vasanas* are not the problem. That’s *Isvara*’s world and *Isvara* will keep your *vasanas* going until your *karma* is exhausted, and then “Tom” will die. *Vasanas* are good, your life force. As Krishna says, “I am the desire that is not opposed to *dharma*.”

There is nothing more to do but contemplate the *satya/mithya* teaching that I have just explained. I think you’re ready for it. Have you watched any of my recent seminars?

Tom: I read last night the following you wrote about *vasanas*: “Be careful with your thoughts you have because once they leave your mind they become *vasanas*.” Can you give me an example of this?

James: You want an orange. You eat an orange. You like the orange. You now have

an “orange” *vasana*. When it comes up, you desire an orange.

Tom: Another thing you wrote: “Do not express or repress emotions. Sublimate them.” Can you give me an example of how to do this?

James: Vedanta *sadhana* is a sublimation path. You have so much energy. You can use it to get money and sex, for instance, or you can use it develop a particular type of body or to refine your mind. Sublimation is just converting *rajasic* and *tamasic* energy into *sattva*. All spiritual practices – *karma yoga*, *upasana yoga* and *jnana yoga* do it. You can think about objects in *samsara* – of which Tom and his experiences are one – or you can think about who you really are and manage your mind from that platform.

James: I think you are losing track of the big picture, Tom. What do you actually want? A different Tom, a different life, or freedom from Tom and his life?

Tom: I want freedom from Tom and his life. I want *moksa*. I definitely do not want any variations of a Tom-life, because those lives have not been good.

James: *Moksa* is not an object or an experience that you are going to obtain at some point in time. You are free right now here. You have always been free. So desire doesn't enter into it, only appreciating this fact about yourself. All the teachings of Vedanta reveal this fact. There is not a free you and bound you. There is only one unborn, existent, conscious you, whose nature is bliss. So to get freedom from Tom you have to fully embrace the real you. It's not wise to think about Tom's joys and sorrows. They are unreal.

Tom: I am a practical person. I am not interested in Vedanta as a theory. I study Vedanta so I can take the suffering out of everyday experience so I, as the Self, can enjoy life.

James: You, the Self, are joy itself. You never don't enjoy. Your consciousness, your existence, is of the nature of joy (*anandam*). See the linkage between the Self and doership. You say you want to “take the suffering out of everyday experience,” but there is no suffering in it. So you can't take it out. You are adding suffering to experience, meaning you believe the feeling of suffering is a real feeling. Experience is value-neutral. A man and a dog standing on the street witness a traffic accident that causes death and destruction of several people: blood everywhere, body parts strewn far and wide. The man is horrified, but the dog is unmoved because the dog is not projecting, meaning it doesn't know that things “shouldn't” die “horrible” deaths. There are millions of people who would die to have your life, yet you suffer in it. Where is the suffering? Suffering is just an object, known to you. I recommend viewing the *Bliss Seminar* I have been giving in the last year or so. I did it again in Berlin last month. It is with the editor and should be ready presently.

If this idea is too difficult, and “you” feel that “your” suffering is real, then you must be in conflict with *dharma* in some way or another.

Tom: I asked you the questions about *vasanas* and thoughts because I am interested in ways to deal with *vasanas* and thoughts to achieve *moksa*.

James: You can't "achieve" *moksa*. *Moksa* is an already accomplished fact (see above). The way you "deal" with *vasanas* is to see that they are unreal.

Tom: I spend about three hours each day studying Vedanta because I want to become a Vedanta computer. I have not yet achieved *moksa*, but Vedanta so far has helped me to have a peaceful and joyful *jiva* life.

James: Perhaps you do, but Vedanta is just a tool, a means to an end. It is a throwaway. You are free. You just don't think you are. With all due respect, Tom, you're putting out a mixed message. On the one hand you say you're suffering and on the other you say you have a peaceful and joyful life. Which is it? In fact it is neither: you are the one that observers Tom when he suffers and when he enjoys his joyful life.

Tom: I appreciate your thoughtful and profound answers. Your answers are very helpful to me. I recently went through the two most harrowing struggles that involve my two most binding *vasanas* and I could not have come through it without the knowledge of Vedanta.

James: You are welcome. I hope this *satsang* continues because it seems that you are ready for the next step.

A Dynamic, Ever-Present Study

James: Hi, Tom.

I'm sorry I've taken a long time to reply, partly because I have a full plate of worldly things to do before our first teaching in Spain, but also because the first email you sent perplexed me. The hardest part of *satsanging* is identifying the doubt. After thinking about it and rereading the two previous emails, I think I've put my finger on it. In this email I've picked up and added to themes from the preceding emails.

Vasanas are not the problem.

Tom: Some *vasanas* are a big problem for a *jiva* because they turn into desires which are very painful, as you might recall. I realize that *vasanas* are not a problem for awareness.

James: Okay. They may be a problem for "a" *jiva*, but what about you? If you look at them as awareness, they are not a problem. They are *mithya*, in other words, a big "so what?" This is called meditation, or taking a stand as awareness, because they

don't have any impact on awareness. If you say they have an impact on you, then you are not awareness. But it is impossible that you not be awareness, because there is only awareness, reality being non-dual, meaning there are is not a Tom-awareness and an awareness-awareness.

But if you insist on looking at them as Tom, as I said in the previous email, then the only way to deal with them is to sublimate the desire into *sattvic* habits or to use will power to not indulge them until they burn out, which is also painful. The difference between this kind of pain and the pain of indulgence is that it ends, whereas when you surrender to desires pain continues endlessly and demolishes your self-esteem. For instance, a smoker who takes up jogging is going to feel a lot of pain when he starts running – this from personal experience. However, as the body is purified of the tobacco, the craving goes away and jogging becomes very pleasant, as it increases *sattva*. So when you decide that it's time to eliminate the idea by taking a stand in your wholeness, there is pain but it gradually disappears.

Have you watched any of my recent seminars?

Tom: I generally do not watch your seminars. I prefer to read. I read your writing, pause, contemplate and make an effort to commit to memory what I want to keep in mind to help me remember who I am.

James: Maybe this is the problem. You are not really meant to take notes and commit the teachings to memory, because we are not studying Vedanta; we are studying life. You don't take notes when you watch a sunset. You absorb it because it is meaningful, and a memory is created by *Ishvara* because what you experienced is meaningful. You "get it." *Ishvara* says, "I remember and forget," meaning doership is not involved in meaningful memories. But because Vedanta is intellectually brilliant, people sometimes think that it is an academic pursuit. They often ask me for a recommendation of an *ashram* in India where they can go to "study" Vedanta.

This *satsang* started with some questions about *vasanas*, desires and *karma*. When I first received it, I thought, "Why is Tom asking me this question, because he should have understood this six years ago; it is the ABCs of Vedanta?" It is in every book and every seminar. It is carefully explained. There are hundreds of *satsangs* on it. You should have been able to easily answer all the questions in the first *satsang*, considering how long you have been with Vedanta – unless you were *tamasic* when you wrote and couldn't remember the basics. This is a really important issue. What jogged me to finish this *satsang* was one I wrote today that brought up this issue. Here it is:

Joe: Sometimes the details of Vedanta are perfectly clear and helpful and other times they seem burdensome and the intellect is stuffed full.

James: Well, *nididhyasana* is getting rid of Vedanta as a means of knowledge. If you are the Self, you don't need it. The teaching shouldn't stuff the intellect. It should empty it. Maybe you're trying to remember all the teachings. The teachings consume impurities and then eat themselves.

You can't read your way to *moksa*, because Vedanta is not an academic study. It's a dynamic, ongoing, ever-present inquiry into your mind, keeping your attention

on who you really are all the time. It is filtering everything you think feel through the thought “I am whole and complete existence/awareness.” People read because they are ignorant and don’t realize that the ignorance is very intelligent and makes you misinterpret and remember the interpreted meaning, not the knowledge as unfolded by the *guru*. Vedanta is an oral tradition, a *shabda* (sound) *pramanam* (means of knowledge).

The first stage of Vedanta is listening, not reading. At almost every seminar I spend at least a half an hour explaining the value of listening and how to listen. It’s best to listen live, but video works very well too.

Why don’t you like to watch my *satsangs*?

Finally, the statement in your first email that you want to be a Vedanta computer tends to support my analysis. Computers don’t think. They memorize. When I say that, it is only an aggressive joke meant to intimidate the intellectuals who want to challenge me on the doctrinal level. I am like a computer insofar as I do know every teaching from every angle, but not because that is what I set out to do. As the teachings removed my ignorance, bliss came and along with it the memory of the teaching. It was all *Isvara*. And when I teach, it is not “me” teaching. It is *Isvara*, who does the remembering. I invoke *Isvara*, and *Isvara* takes over, and it just flows out. It surprises even me. When you listen (*sravana*), you need to discount the teacher’s body and assume that the words are coming from the Self. If they don’t make perfect sense, then they are coming from a *jiva*’s mind. They are interpreted. They are not meant to be interpreted by the student. They are meant to be heard. If you are not adept at *sravanna* you listen through the filter of your conditioning.

You can think about who you really are and manage your mind from that platform.

Tom: This is exactly what I did with my two most binding *vasanas* recently. I reminded myself that I do not need an object to complete me and the loss of an object cannot change me.

James: Okay. Good. So knowledge works. This statement is confusing in the context of your original question about *vasanas*. The idea of *vasanas* is only to point out that what your fears and desires needs to be continuously questioned, not just accepted at face value because of the sense of urgency that they create.

You say you want to “take the suffering out of everyday experience,” but there is no suffering in it.

Tom: My suffering comes from my binding *vasanas* in the form of painful desires. I experienced the suffering because I identified as a *jiva*.

James: So why did you identify with the *jiva*? You know that the *jiva* is an object known to you and therefore can’t be you.

With all due respect, Tom, the *vasanas* have no power to bind. *Maya* makes you think they do. It reverses the relationship between the subject and the object so that you value the object more than the subject, i.e. the Self. It makes you think that you

need a particular experience – object X – when you don't realize that object-love is a means to an end, the end being love of yourself. This means that you don't love the object for the object's sake but for the sake of the Self, which just goes to show that Self-love is the highest form of love. And since there is only one Self and it is always present as you, the ever-experienced "I," you already have what you are attempting to gain from the world.

If love or sex or money had an intrinsic value, then anyone who experienced them would be bound or liberated by them. *Jivas* don't know that *Maya* is adding value to them, which makes them seem to bind you. For instance, the idea of a given object – money, sex, power, etc. – is totally pleasurable for some, totally painful for others and a matter of complete indifference for others. Why? Owing to different priorities and values. So inquiry is stripping the projection away from certain behaviors, objects, thoughts and feelings and rendering them value-neutral. All objects, activities, etc. are *mithya*, meaningless, apart from the value we assign to them. After a certain amount of experience, you begin to understand that experience is zero-sum. You can't win. Nor can you lose. It is just a dream. This understanding is the primary qualification for *moksa*.

If this idea is too difficult, and "you" feel that "your" suffering is real, then you must be in conflict with *dharma* in some way or the other.

Tom: I know that my suffering is not real, in that it does not last.

James: Then what is the problem? I don't get it, because that is the definition of a Self-realized person. *Panchadasi* says that anyone who understands *satya* and *mithya* understands Vedanta.

You can't "achieve" *moksa*. *Moksa* is an already accomplished fact (see above). The way you "deal" with *vasanas* is to see that they are unreal.

Tom: I see now that *moksa* is not a goal.

James: The operative word is "now." It means that you didn't understand it before my last email?

Tom: It is discrimination. You wrote: "In a healthy, integrated person the three centers are yoked together and cooperate with each other to help the *jiva* achieve its goals." What are the *jiva*'s goals?

James: This is an odd question, Tom. It makes me think that your knowledge is memory-knowledge because the very first teaching of Vedanta is an analysis of human goals. You can't get to Lesson 2 until you have assimilated Lesson 1. What are your goals?

With all due respect, Tom, you're putting out a mixed message. On the one hand you say you're suffering and on the other you say you have a peaceful and joyful life. Which is it?

Tom: I first learned about Vedanta six years ago. For past six years Vedanta has helped me to have a life of minimal mental agitation, irritation and dissatisfaction. Earlier this year, two of my most binding *vasanas* came back to bite me. I experienced great mental agitation continuously for at least two months. This is the first time I experienced great mental agitation in six years. Using my Vedanta knowledge, I was able to let go of my mental agitation.

James: That's great. So Vedanta works because it destroys sorrow.

You are welcome. I hope this *satsang* continues because it seems that you are ready for the next step.

Tom: What do you mean by "the next step"?

James: Well, after this *satsang*, I'm no longer clear, because my take from the previous *satsang* was that that you didn't understand that the world and Tom are unreal, i.e. *mithya*. Tom is a concept, not a real person, and the *vasanas* are conceptual too. They are not real. *Maya* makes it seem that you are Tom and that Tom has binding *vasanas*. But in this *satsang* you definitely state that Tom and the world are unreal. If that's true, then all your doubts should be resolved and you are a Self-actualized person, unless your idea of knowledge is memory. If it is memory, you seem to know it, but you don't really know it.

There is another option, however. Perhaps you have no doubt that you are the Self but you wonder why those old *samskaras* have come back? In the *nididhyasana* phase of Vedanta *sadhana*, one's Self-knowledge is firm but the *jiva*-doer is still present and subject to obstacles (*pratibandikas*), basically deep-rooted childhood stuff that has escaped the light of awareness and pops up unsuspected out of the blue.

Finally, in a previous *satsang* you said that you weren't interested in the doctrine because you are a "practical" person. But Vedanta is not theory and practice if the idea that you are a *jiva* is driving your inquiry, because it strengthens the doer/ego. But it is theory and practice at the *manana* stage insofar as the teaching gained in the *sravana* stage is the doer. The knowledge does the work. In other words, complete faith in the teachings allows you to dismiss beliefs and opinions that are contradicted by the teaching. The teaching, not the doer, is the boss at this stage. This is surrender.

Tom: I am very grateful for your guidance and engagement.

James: Appreciation is much appreciated, Tom.