

Worldly Living Isn't Opposed to *Moksa* (With the Right Attitude)

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Susan: As I mentioned, I am always watching as much Vedantic material as possible.

My mind needs to hear the teachings to be re-educated.

Unfortunately, my mind is always very busy: a real monkey mind. In fact my Chinese zodiacal sign is Monkey, as I was born in the Year of the Monkey. What a mean but funny coincidence. And I feel it. I'm always fighting with the monkey, who grabs and holds onto objects like kids would crave for candy.

Rory: It sounds like you are doing things the right way, by continuing to expose your mind to the teaching. The mind is like a sponge, and the key is to just immerse it in the teachings. Shankara used the analogy of putting metal in acid. Just as the acid eats away at the metal, so does the teaching of Vedanta eat away at ignorance.

But yes, the mind is often the greatest challenge we face on the path. A large part of this is our environment. Our fast-paced, *rajasic* society completely overstimulates the mind. I once read a startling claim by a neuroscientist that the average Westerner receives more mental stimulation in a single day than a pre-civilisation human would experience in an entire lifetime. Whether that's true or not, I do think our society is completely out of balance and it does have a very destabilising effect on the mind.

But half the battle is awareness, and at least you are aware of the mind's tendencies and can compensate and work on calming it down. The *yogas* are superb for taming the mind; *karma yoga* and *upasana yoga* - which includes devotional practices such as *japa (mantras)*, meditation, etc.

Susan: Yes, you are so right; our society is so "*rajasic*." It is sometimes unbearable. Isn't it difficult to make our way without being "contaminated" by those tendencies?

Rory: Yes, it is very difficult when engaged in worldly affairs. I'm fortunate in that I have something of a semi-*sannyasi* lifestyle, and like to keep my own space, because otherwise I find the *rajas* and *tamas* tough on the mind. The more *sattvic* your mind and senses the more sensitive you get to the tumultuous noise and madness of what we call civilisation!

Vedanta is so cool in that it provides tools and hacks for living in the world but not getting hopelessly swallowed up by it as happens to most people.

The key is keeping our *sadhana* a top priority, as this primes the mind for knowledge, and also being committed to *dharma* and *karma yoga*, and cultivating a devotional mindset. I love the *Bhagavad Gita* so much because it's addressed to people who have worldly *karma* but still want *moksa*. We can have our cake and eat

it, as long as we go about things in the right way.

Susan: You wrote that you lead a semi-*sannyasi* lifestyle. That really speaks to me because I feel that this is the lifestyle I lead myself. But I never wanted it; life pulled me in that direction. And I sometimes struggle with that.

Rory: I was the same. Mine was due to health problems. I'd had them since I was a child but things got particularly bad when I was only about 19, and I found myself housebound much of the time. Friends and other people my age were all off at university or partying and enjoying life, and I was stuck at home and feeling a little resentful of it at times. Yet it was also where I had to be, and over time the spiritual flame within me began to burn brighter and brighter. As the *samsaric* suffering increased, so too was the desire for *moksa*, and the determination to pursue it.

Isvara rarely gives us exactly what we want, but always gives us what we need. It's often not until we look back that we see how blessed we actually were. We just don't always realise it at the time.

Karma yoga helps immensely. The resistance you speak of comes from the mind's likes and dislikes, which generally run the psyche and determine our entire experience of life. *Karma yoga* helps neutralise those likes and dislikes, and we start to see everything as *prasad*: as a divine blessing.

The desire to play fully engaged in the world and lead a full worldly life collides with the desire for *moksa* in the mind.

Susan: When it comes to worldly objects, ignorance overpowers the mind and my discriminative peace is lost.

Rory: This feeling is very common. A lot of the problem comes down to lack of clarity with regard to our values. I certainly experienced this for quite some time. Yeah, I wanted *moksa*, but I also wanted to play in the world and be a successful *samsari*! We all want to have our cake and eat it.

It all comes down to what we value most. Discrimination reveals that while there are joys in the world, they always come with pain. The sweetness of object-happiness is always beset with pain – the pain of firstly having to acquire the object. Secondly, comes the pain of the having to maintain or keep the object. The third pain, which is the worst of all, comes when we inevitably lose the object.

When we really become clear on the zero-sum nature of object-happiness, our value for it naturally decreases and our value for *moksa*, the freedom which doesn't end, will grow.

Our values determine our priorities. So when you're 100% clear that only *moksa* can bring the happiness that isn't subject to sorrow or limitation, your desire for worldly experience naturally decreases and your *mumukshutvam*, your desire for liberation, increases. Krishna calls this the "desire that is not opposed to *dharma*." It's this desire that motivates us to commit to Vedanta and really put the time and effort into listening to the teaching over and over, working out any doubts and then integrating it into the mind by practising self-inquiry on all self-limiting thoughts.

Until you're 110% committed to *moksa*, flickers of doubt remain and there's inevitable conflict when worldly desires clash with desire for *moksa*.

The fact you're aware of a conflict between these pursuits is a great thing. It shows you have a discriminating mind with clear vision. It's a cliché, but awareness really IS half the battle.

Just keep discriminating and being clear on your highest value and goal, and this conflict will lessen with time.

Susan: I find it difficult because I have to take part in worldly activities to earn money, and on the other hand, I know that I am not an object; I am the witnessing subject that makes objects possible because there are only objects in relation to a subject.

Rory: You have the knowledge. The key is to integrate it, and the only way to do that when you have *karma* in the world is to go ALL OUT with *karma yoga*.

A life of *dharma* and *karma yoga* really takes the sting out of doership because you no longer find yourself "doing." The doing is decided by simply following *dharma*, and *dharma* is basically *Isvara* running the Creation. And *karma yoga*, as I said, neutralises the mind's desires and aversions, and also the anxiety we otherwise have about the future and regrets about the past.

Karma yoga isn't easy for us Westerners! For many people, *jnana yoga*, or self-knowledge, is the easy part. The hard part is having to live and transact in the modern world, which in many ways operates on an axis of *adharma*. *Karma yoga* is an essential practice though, and together with a commitment to *dharma*, it's really the only sane way to live in this world.

The *Gita* makes it clear there's actually no conflict between worldly duties and pursuing *moksa*. In fact worldly duties are generally part of our *dharma*, and *dharma* can't be ignored or avoided. The key is to transform worldly duties into devotion, by practising *karma yoga* and seeing everything – every action and every situation – as *Isvara* looking for your attention. You serve *Isvara* by just doing your duty as best you can and handing up the results, accepting where you are as where you currently need to be.

The more you do this the more tranquil and peaceful you'll find your mind. The apparent conflict between worldly action and *moksa* will disappear because you'll see that every moment and every action is an opportunity to purify the mind via *karma yoga* – and when the mind is adequately prepared, the knowledge will start to blossom like a spring flower.

I think the best way to live is to take one day at a time, one step at a time, doing everything for *Bhagavan* and keeping the knowledge in mind as often as you need to.

Susan: The ambition to achieve something in life contradicts the knowledge that there is nothing to gain in the world.

Rory: The need to achieve something in the life is rooted in the sense of lack that's born of ignorance (i.e. *samsara*). When you fully reorientate your identity to awareness, the self, you'll realise that there's absolutely nothing you can add to yourself any more than the ocean needs more water added to it.

This doesn't mean you won't then do or achieve anything in the world. Swami Paramarthananda makes a beautiful distinction. He says that, as a *jnani*, you will no longer do things FOR happiness, you will do things OUT OF happiness.

Susan: How do you deal with worldly demands?

Rory: I'm in a constant state of wonderment at how *Isvara* deals with them for me! I just learned to adapt myself to my circumstances and to follow my *dharma*, which for the longest time I resisted doing because I was still driven by my likes and dislikes and what I thought was "expected" of me in the world. I still have physical health limitations, but I am able to work on my own terms and according to my own energy levels as a freelance writer and artist – and I basically just do whatever *Isvara* asks of me, assuming it is appropriate.

Dharma, *karma yoga* and self-knowledge really do take care of everything. By following *dharma* and responding appropriately to life with the *karma yoga* mindset, knowledge gradually takes root in the mind, and we come to see how perfectly *Isvara* has set up everything in our life – even the seeming imperfections. In fact sometimes especially them!

Susan: Your past way of life sounds really familiar to me. For years I ignored my *dharma* and I desperately wanted to live a life like everyone else. I tried hard to copy other people's *dharma* and naturally failed in doing so.

Rory: I can definitely relate to that. Our culture is quite conformist when it comes to a lot of things. A general ideal of how we "should" be is conditioned into us from a young age, and it's one based on consumerism, wealth, power and worldly success. That may be appropriate to some, but certainly not all.

We always find, as Krishna says in the *Gita*, that trying to follow the *dharma* of others and not our own always leads to disaster – or at the very least nagging dissatisfaction.

It can be very sobering when we come to realise that we will never be quite what our current society wants us to be – but we are what *Isvara* wants us to be, and that's what's important.

As Krishna tells Arjuna, it's better to do even a half-assed job of your own *dharma* than to excel at the *dharma* of someone else. (He maybe didn't quite use those words. 😊)

Susan: I am an artist and yet I pursued science and did a university degree in science. Crazy. Everyone around me told me, "You are a real artist," but I thought that is not a sane way of living; I want security and a steady income. I failed again. The past year I have finally started to accept my *svadharma* as an artist.

There is no other life for me.

Rory: The world needs artists – and I’d say the world especially needs artists that know who they are.

Self-knowledge and artistic ability are the most wonderful combination, and something sadly missing from most art. Rather than a mere expression of the mind/ego, art can be an expression and celebration of the self – and, when it is, it brings a true gift to the world.

Sadly, our society doesn’t have an enormously high regard for artists or those in the creative fields (unless perhaps they’re lucky enough to make a lot of \$\$\$). But a true artist can never really be happy unless they’re living their *dharma*, as you have found.

If we want to be happy in life, we have no choice but to BE what we are. To be anything else is to go against *Isvara*, because *dharma* is *Isvara*. The Christians use the expression “get right with God,” which basically means following your *dharma*.

Susan: The tricky thing is that my burning ambition feels really exhausting sometimes and keeps me stuck, unable to decide what to do. My mind constantly tells me: “You have to be successful. Hurry! Hurry! You have no time...!” Some people have told me that I’m too ambitious.

Rory: Perhaps this “burning ambition” would be a good thing to do some inquiry on, especially if it’s causing your mind agitation and unrest.

What you’re describing – the pressure to succeed, the indecision and exhaustion – is symptomatic of *rajoguna*. The mind naturally thinks it’s in the driving seat and puts itself under immense pressure to succeed and to prove ourselves to others and to the world.

I wonder if it’s possible that, because you’ve switched careers, you feel an extra need to prove to others that you’ve made the right decision and that you can “make it” as an artist. Just a thought, and possible line of inquiry.

The only problem, as I see it, is that this psychological pressure to succeed might not be hugely conducive to your emotional well-being, nor your creative life.

This is where *karma yoga* comes in. *Dharma* and *karma yoga* are two sides of the same coin. Even if you’re following your *dharma*, if you’re not doing it as *karma yoga*, you’ll be subject to emotional tensions and anxieties about the results of your work.

Some people, on the other hand, are good at *karma yoga*, but perhaps don’t have as strong a handle on *dharma*, in which case they’re doing the wrong actions with the right attitude.

Both must be in place, and this is particularly essential for an inquirer.

You’ve identified your *dharma*, and you’ve committed yourself to it, which is wonderful. Now you just need to do that with a strict *karma yoga* attitude, meaning

you now do your work as a gift to *Isvara* and you accept whatever the results come as a gift from *Isvara*.

As I said, it can be tough being an artist today. You can pour your heart and soul into a project, and it may or may not be successful. There's no getting around that, other than to completely hand it all up to *Isvara*. It's not up to Susan to "be successful." That's not her responsibility at all – her responsibility is to do the work and let *Isvara* do the rest.

Isvara is *karma phala data*, the giver of the results of our actions. In my own experience, *Isvara* will bless some projects and undertakings with success, and not others. It's all up to *Isvara's* grace and whim.☺ The results we can never quite fathom, so we have to accept it all as *prasad*.

As for the feeling of not enough time – there's actually eternal time. Time is a gift from *Isvara*, and there's always enough for what we need to do and what we're meant to do. You can rest assured, if something is meant to be done, it will be, and if it's not – no sweat, because it wasn't meant to be.

I know it can be hard to switch to this mindset, especially when the mind is already quite wound up and feeling the pressure of expectations and anxiety over results – but it really is essential. Not only for your well-being and your ability to keep your mind qualified for inquiry, but also for your creative well-being.

In my experience, a *sattvic* mind is an artist's greatest asset. Way too much of the art out there comes from *rajoguna* and *tamoguna*. It's obviously not for me to tell you what kind of art you should be doing, but I will say that a *sattvic* mind is hugely conducive to creativity and that wonderful state of "flow" to which all artists aspire.

The steady application of *karma yoga*, and acknowledging your creativity and artistic skills as not yours but a blessing from *Isvara* will help neutralise these agitating *rajasic* worries and enable you to just love and enjoy your new career as an instrument for *Bhagavan* (which is what artists really are).

Susan: But it is clear that by folding my hands and just breathing I will never ever fulfil my *svadharma*.

Rory: Indeed. The key is not inaction, but to act without attachment to results, and to perform action for *Isvara*, as a blessing to the Creation. Chapters II to V of the *Gita* beautifully describe the application of *karma yoga* as it applies to *dharma*. It takes effort and consistency to begin with, but in time it becomes second nature: a natural response to life.

Susan: Why does Krishna tell Arjuna to "see action in inaction...?"

Rory: This basically means that even as we perform action in the world, we know that the self, which we truly are, is actionless and beyond doership.

Action belongs to this empirical order of reality – the material world of objects – and everything here is governed by *Isvara*. *Isvara* "runs" the Creation through the laws of *dharma*.

By living *dharmically*, we're basically living our lives in line with *Isvara*. So, in spite of the *jiva's* sense of doership (which comes from the *ahamkara*, ego, or "I-sense"), by following *dharma* we're really not doing anything at all. We're letting *Isvara* "do" our lives, and this always takes away the stress and struggle. It creates a deeper sense of psychological ease and well-being by eliminating the guilt and stress that results from *adharmic* living.

So "actionless action" means playing your *jiva's* part in the Creation by following *dharma* and responding appropriately to the needs of each situation. While doing this you keep your mind on the self, knowing that even as you appear to be taking action, your nature is actionless and beyond the sense of doership and all notions of "I," "me" and "mine."

In this way action no longer binds you.

Susan: How can I apply this? I mean I have to be successful in a way so that I am able to maintain a lifestyle where I can be independent and continue my Vedanta studies.

Rory: Absolutely, whatever we do we should aim to be successful at. After all, why would we start something if we didn't care about whether we succeeded or not?

Karma yoga means that whatever you do you do your best because you're doing it as a gift to the Lord. If you're making a gift for someone, you obviously want it to be as good as it can possibly be – especially when the recipient is the Lord! A divine gift surely deserves a divine effort.

It's quite appropriate that, at this point in your life, *artha*, or wealth/security, is still a legitimate life pursuit. We all need to eat after all.

However, the notion of "success" can be a sticky point for people. It's always helpful to question exactly what success means to you. Having an unrealistic ideal of success can cause stress because you're then forever trying to measure up to that ideal and invariably falling short.

It's important to understand that the *karma yogi* doesn't act for material success but for a peaceful and pure mind. Success for a *karma yogi* is simply doing the best you can and then accepting the results *Isvara* dispenses with good grace. This neutralises the mind's binding likes and dislikes and creates a very stable and contemplative mind in which self-knowledge is easily established.

I'm not saying that you shouldn't work hard to make good money, only that you do this as a committed *karma yogi*. My advice would be to let this be your ideal of success: doing good work as an offering to *Isvara*, and cultivating the pure and contented mind in which in the fruits of self-knowledge can flower.

Susan: Independence is maybe the only thing that money can buy. This is why I want to be successful, not because to show anyone my university degrees, no, only to be totally independent and free.

Rory: While I understand what you mean, I wouldn't say independence can be

bought. If independence is dependent on anything, then it's not independence at all, merely the illusion of it. A person can be a millionaire and still feel nowhere near independent, because they're dependent on the money. Life can be twisted, huh?

True independence is the freedom from lack of emotional dependency on objects.

The best way to achieve is to follow *dharma* as best you can and go all out with *karma yoga*. Whether the cash rolls in or comes in dribs and drabs, you just do your duty with love and allow *Isvara* to take care of all the results. This is really the only sane way to live in this world. The real success is living simply, doing your *dharma* and keeping your mind as *sattvic* and pure as possible.

Susan: You wrote that "*Isvara* deals with worldly demands for me." Could you explain that to me?

Rory: This is pretty much just how you feel when you apply *karma yoga*. In fact, after a time, it's not even *karma yoga*, it's just knowledge in action.

I just do my duty as best I can. By following *dharma*, I know that I'm doing what *Isvara* wants me to do; I absolutely trust *Isvara* to take care of me. It's a "you scratch my back, I scratch your back" kind of arrangement. 😊

Krishna makes it clear in the *Gita* that if you keep your mind and heart on Him, on the Self, He will take care of your getting and keeping. As Ramji once said, those aren't just idle words, it's a legally binding contract!

It took me a while to fully trust this. I had to learn to be adaptable. I certainly didn't always get what I wanted, but I always, always got everything I needed. As someone in the creative field, I got to a point where I stopped trying to do work for "myself" or whatever market I was trying to tap into, and I consciously decided to do all my work for *Isvara*. I took Rory out of the equation entirely. It wasn't until I did this that things began clicking into place, my long-standing struggle with self-doubt began to melt away and my creativity flourished – and so did my ability to relax and enjoy life for what it is.

I never put conditions on my work or my life. I just put in the work. I don't have any idea of how much I "should" be making, but I just allow *Isvara* to be my accountant, and sure enough, I always have enough. Freelance jobs and projects appear when I need them without me even seeking them out, and connections appear out of the blue.

I'm not doing it at all – neither as the *jiva* nor as the self. It's all *Isvara* doing the doing. All I need to do is just stay on *dharma* and open myself to whatever *Isvara* wants me to do. I'm just a slave to *Bhagavan*, but I'm a well-kept slave, so it works out for both of us!

It's such a sweet feeling too, such an enormous relief, because you realise – *Isvara* is doing everything, and so long as you get with the show, you're off the hook.