

The Limitations of Seeking Security and Pleasure

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Vinay: I always get the sense that the emotional satisfaction one gets from friends and relationships is like a treadmill, that no matter how much you get it is never enough. Do you think that only people with insecurities and inadequacies look for appreciation, attention and approval?

Rory: Nice to hear from you again. To answer your question, yeah, everything in *samsara* is a treadmill. Because the phenomenal world is a duality, life is basically a zero-sum game – everything has a upside and an inevitable downside. It's simply impossible to get the good without the bad. Object-based happiness (in this context, object means anything external to yourself – people, relationships, money, possessions, circumstances, etc.) is always precarious because everything in *maya* is impermanent and subject to constant change.

Vedanta stresses the limitations of object-based happiness to cultivate our *viveka* and *vairagya* – discrimination and dispassion. The key to true and lasting happiness is turning within and seeking the joy and satisfaction that exists with you – that is, in fact, your very nature as *sat-chit-ananda*: pure consciousness/awareness. In fact all happiness is simply the experience of the self in a tranquil, *sattvic* mind.

Given that everything in *maya* is unpredictable, always changing and impermanent, it makes sense to base your happiness on that which is always present and unchanging, i.e. the light of your own Self, the awareness in which this entire world appears and subsides. This is the fullness and bliss you might experience in meditation or when your mind is very tranquil, and it's the joy of your own being: a joy independent of anything that's going on in the world around you.

This changes relationships in a wonderful way. It means you can enjoy being with others, but you're no longer dependent on them being or behaving a certain way – or giving you attention, approval, appreciation, etc. – because you already feel completely whole in yourself.

Obviously, it takes a little work to get to that point, but when you do, you no longer look to relationships to bring you happiness, because you are already happy in yourself. You can enjoy relationships and social life as a way of sharing the happiness and joy that's already within you. That way you let others off the hook, in a way, because you no longer expect them to behave a certain way (I love this quote from the *Gita*: “All beings automatically follow their nature; what use is trying to control?”). You also let yourself off the hook because you're no longer troubled by the fact that people can be fickle and unreliable and subject to their own likes, dislikes and conditioning.

Vedanta in a nutshell is basically about ceasing our desperate struggle to find scraps of happiness in the *mithya* world, and instead turning our attention within and realising that our very nature is *purnam*, complete wholeness. That's the only permanent happiness there is, and no one else can give it to you, because it IS you.



Vinay: Hey, Rory, if the reason people are going after *artha* (security) is their innate sense of insecurity, is the reason behind the pursuit of *kama* (pleasure) dissatisfaction and unhappiness? Is this why people can't live without crutches of relationships, friends, etc?

Rory: Each *purusartha* (human pursuit) does have its place, depending upon one's stage of life. For instance, we all need a certain level of security and wealth in order to just survive in the modern world. And *kama* generally follows this because once our basic needs are taken care of, the mind naturally turns to pleasure. So it's not that there's anything inherently wrong with *artha* and *kama*. For the householder, *artha* and *kama* have their place.

Dharma is even more important and should always lead the first two - i.e. whatever we are doing with regards to money and pleasure, it should never be at the expense of *dharma*. Ideally, everyone should live a life directed by *dharma*. *Dharma* is our moral compass, whether it relates to situational *dharma* (always responding appropriately to each situation as it presents itself); universal *dharma* (truthfulness, non-injury, etc.) and our personal *dharma* (being true to our nature and not trying to be who we're not, etc.).

The average human being, the *samsari*, is more or less confined to these first three pursuits. In fact a lot of people simply swing between *artha* and *kama*, forever chasing wealth and pleasure regardless of *dharma*. Mature people recognise the importance of following *dharma*, which is to say doing the right thing and making a positive contribution to life.

Those who seek *moksa*, however, have realised the limitations inherent in seeking happiness in anything worldly. Again, it's not so much that there's anything wrong with seeking wealth and pleasure, it's just there is no lasting fulfilment to be found there.

You're right when you say that we seek *kama* because we feel dissatisfied and unhappy. There's nothing inherently wrong with relationships and enjoying life. It's just that it's not the ultimate solution to our sense of dissatisfaction and lack of wholeness. The only permanent solution is self-knowledge, which leads to *moksa*.

The *jnani*, the one with self-knowledge, is still free to enjoy the world; they just don't expect situations, objects and people to provide them with lasting happiness. They don't need them to, because they're already found the source of happiness within themselves.