

Punch 'em in the Chops

Ram (James Swartz)

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Andrew: I haven't written in a while but seeing the recent newsletter has prodded me into getting in touch. I hope all is well!

I've been quietly getting on with my life and Vedantic study but have lately hit an "interesting" spot upon which I would be grateful for some comment. The situation is like this: I'm self-employed and a few months ago I took a part-time job because my wife and I really needed some extra cash, and fast. My business had been kind of sluggish and time was of the essence. I pretty much opened the local paper, looked at a want ad and said, "I can do that," applied and got the job in short order. I was very grateful (and still am) and felt that things had lined up at a very opportune time.

Now that I've been there a while I've started to notice that my boss, who I will call Tim, is not the easiest person to work with. I appreciate the fact that he works very hard, and admire that he does do well by his customers - they all seem to think he's wonderful. However, there's a disconnect when it comes to how he treats the staff. He has a very uptight "energy," as my New Age friends would say, and I'm seeing more of the control freak, micro-managing snark come out. By way of comic exaggeration, it feels like this: "Jones, I see you stopped the reactor from going into a core meltdown... however, you didn't initial all seven places in the accident report book. Jeez, I don't know why you want to make my life so difficult."

Because it's only a part-time gig I've got other things to do and to work on but I started to notice a creeping *vasana* of resentment beginning to develop. At first I thought that perhaps I could just "head it off at the pass" and perhaps stop it from forming but I'm finding that very hard and wondering if it's even possible (or desirable). This leaves me with the question, "What is a Vedantically appropriate way to manage discontent?"

I'm probably a sucker in that I typically believe that I can get through an entire day without incident but I'm getting the sense that Tim just cannot have that happen. Something, no matter how trivial or insane, has to be brought to my attention and turned into an "issue." I've been trying to really observe my reactions: "Okay, so that tightening in the solar plexus is an object in awareness... that hot rush of adrenaline is also... the discontented composite of conditioning labeled 'Andrew' is illumined by *atma*... etc."

Frequently, I employ a *mantra* when I notice that self-righteous inner monologue kicks in: "He can't say that to me! I'm doing a good job! He's being a stupid m*****r f*****r, etc., etc." I do think that these techniques and attitudes have prevented me from getting really bound up in this and wallowing as people are often wont to do. I don't usually talk about this much with family or friends because that quickly turns into a bitch session and just feeds the monster. I make a real effort to put all of this into the frame of "*karma yoga*" and think of the "opportunity for spiritual growth" but there's days where I just want to call a spade a spade, remind Tim that he's being an asshole and that the high turnover of staff is not exactly mysterious... LOL...

Having your adrenal glands pinged and your pulse rate surging on a regular basis is not good biological sense. My wife and I have had numerous discussions lately over what we Theosophists call “separating the individuality from the personality” when dealing with people. That is, reminding oneself that the “personality” is a transient kluge of conditioning subject to dispersion and that behind that is the true light of pure consciousness. Easier said than done... LOL...

Question: Am I going about this the right way (that is, *dharmically* and in accordance with non-dual teaching)? I absolutely love reading Vedantic books and listening/watching lectures but it’s all for nought if I can’t bring that learning into the “trenches” of the real world and people like “Tim.”

James: I love the way you write. Anyway, I’ll put my *guru* hat on and make a few comments. You probably think I am going to recommend *karma yoga* but I’m not. It sounds like it is too late for a clever “spiritual” solution like “separating the sin from the sinner.”

There is no sense trying to take care of mental agitation in an environment that produces it wholesale. So either you quickly develop strong dispassion toward the idea that you should be treated a certain way and learn to enjoy abuse or you take him out for a beer and “help” him see his problem, which might get you fired but which might also get you a friend for life and a promotion, or you look into what produced the need for quick cash and adjust your needs so that you don’t find yourself in this kind of pickle again. Or you open the paper, try something else and hope that next time you get a winner for a boss. Or you work on loving said jerk with the understanding that he is the self and can’t help being what he is – *Isvara* made him like that! – and blame *Isvara*. ☺

Discontent is just desire thwarted. You should not beat yourself up about feeling pissed off, because those feelings are completely *dharmic*. The greatest sage would feel exactly the same way. Let me know what solution you come up with.

Andrew: I’m glad that you enjoyed the email. My rants are available for weddings/funerals/bar mitvahs, etc. ☺

So a lot has happened since I hit Send on my last missive. I will give you a quick summary and then add what thoughts came up from my contemplation of the matter...

Right after I wrote to you I continued to think the matter over to see how I could apply what I have learned from Vedanta. The next day at the office (Thursday) was worse than Wednesday. Right after I got done with a client Tim appeared and after asking me a question (which I answered) he unleashed on me. It was a total set-up and I walked right into it. Crap. I waited until he was done spouting, and then with as much calmness and diplomacy that I could muster I pointed out that he was not helping matters and was making my job confusing and frustrating. I brought his attention to the fact that he has failed to give consistent instructions and that if he asks me to do “X” he shouldn’t then interrogate me the next day as to why I did “X.” I also mentioned how frequently his instructions contradicted each other and that it’s on him to decide whether “X” or “Y” is a priority because you can’t have both.

Well, he backed off... a lot. He apologized and admitted that he was totally wrong,

inappropriate and unjustified. Then he went off to his office to deal with clients. A little later in the morning he came back, apologized some more and pleaded with me not to quit! I hadn't mentioned quitting nor was I hostile or aggressive in my earlier response but clearly, the high staff turnover issue became somewhat less mysterious to him in that instant. I said, "Okay, no problem, I am over it," and truthfully, I was. After his initial blow-up I felt that the swelling *vasana* bubble of resentment had deflated. It occurred to me that his next appointment was with the chick who seems like an extra from *Jersey Shore*, so I figured if he wanted to atone for his sins thirty minutes with her was punishment enough. Being able to laugh did much to wipe all that stress and apprehension from my system. The rest of the day went without a hitch.

This week, Wednesday went by without incident but yesterday he flared up at me while I was on the phone with a client. So I'm trying to talk to this guy on the phone and smooth his issue out while I have Tim flapping around in my other ear getting all excited over a non-event. Thankfully, I managed to get the client straightened away without any ruffled feathers and Tim skulked off somewhere. At the end of the day he calls me into his office, apologizes again and says that he really really stressed, overworked and that he knows he's been a jerk lately. He even said that he wants to see a therapist. I said that was a "positive" step. He told me that he does actually think I do a good job, and thus in best James Swartz mode I said, "Thank you... appreciation is appreciated," which is an excellent and useful phrase! 😊

And so it came to pass that by my not doing very much (other than politely calling him out over his X versus Y confusion), Tim is realizing the need to take it down a couple of notches and seek help. The rusty hamster wheel of the *gunas* turned from *rajas* to *sattva*!

Right after I wrote I thought over the matter and discussed it with my wife. I was reminded of Swami Dayananda's trick regarding "expectation management." In fact it was this little gem that made me go, "Aha! I definitely want in what this guy teaches," basically, that desire and expectations are entirely normal. They can't be dispensed with but they can be managed. With regard to expectation pretty much only four things can ever happen to you. Things will turn out (1) better than expected, (2) the same as you expected, (3) less than you expected or (4) the opposite of the expected.

I realized that I was greatly contributing to my own suffering by having expectations that were contrary to the evidence at hand. I was hoping for Tim to be easy-going, positive, etc. where all signs indicated that he was uptight, terse and explosive. I had set myself up for frequent disappointment. However, if I modified my expectations and assumed that he'd more likely be cranky, then I'd have the satisfaction of being correct much of the time and pleasantly surprised on the days when he was in a good mood. Simple solution: lower the bar... LOL...

Later on I was browsing through Swami Tadatmananda's meditation book and happened upon a section about dealing with difficult people. He cited an example, also from Swami Dayananda, that boiled down to this: we ("normal" people) give young children all sorts of slack, and we're not troubled by their tantrums because we understand that they are immature and lack awareness. However, we assume that adults are by default mature and self-aware, which is a big assumption and one that is frequently wrong.

I appreciated your reply because you pointed out a variety of different

directions/responses that I could take rather than being stuck in a mode of “give me *karma yoga* or give me death!” Also, it was good to be reminded that being pissed off when people are acting up and busting your chops over nothing is *dharmic*.

I think perhaps that I might still have some unrealistic views/expectations (ha!) about enlightenment and enlightened people. Maybe I’m still stuck on the idea that pursuing Vedanta will accord me a Christlike ability to be unruffled by people being assholes.

Thank you for donning your *guru* hat!

James: I’m glad you got it sorted, Andrew. To quote an unnamed source: “The way is indeed difficult for the one with expectations.” It really does not pay to care what happens. *Isvara* has set it all up and *Isvara* will have its way no matter what. What use is caring?

One more little bit of *guru*-ing, if you don’t mind: it is best to give up the idea of enlightened people. There is just the self in which “people” appears as an idea around which there are many, many notions concerning how they should act. To set enlightenment up as some sort of ideal is not helpful. It is best to think in terms of *dharma*. This guy injures people. He injures you. He violates the basic *dharma* of reality. He is a jerk, an “asshole,” as you so indelicately put it. Sometimes it is completely reasonable – nay, *dharmic* – to punch said asshole in the chops. This is one lesson one can garner from Arjuna’s predicament in the *Gita*. Duryodhana broke the rules, was unrepentant and continued to inflict misery on others. He needed to be disciplined. It is the right thing to do. Enlightenment does not make one a saint. There are certain qualifications for saints and knowing “I am awareness” is not one of them. I suggest you pack it in on sainthood – the bar is very high – and stick with self-knowledge and *dharma*. ☺

Andrew: I most certainly don’t mind the extra “*guru*-ing.” I am grateful for your input. ☺

Expectations can be tricky little devils. I can’t get rid of them but I can manage them. I think it’s a matter of consistently reminding oneself and reinforcing the teachings on why expectations and reality are frequently at odds with each other. It’s funny, there are so many areas in life where I can see that with ease, and find that there are many, many things that really don’t bother me at all... until I hit a blind spot. Now that I know that it’s there I can work on better management.

James: Yes. You should have a consistent spiritual routine that you follow every day that keeps the mind *sattvic* and the knowledge at your fingertips, head the problems off at the pass, as it were.

Andrew: After getting your email I was reminded of the issues around “enlightenment as an ideal.” You covered that in your book, so I am going to delve back in and reacquaint myself with that chapter because it seems that I have not sufficiently killed off the notion of, “Wooo... enlightenment is so mystical and sparkly!!!”

James: The mind that is waiting for some kind of mystical experience is a dissatisfied mind. One should investigate the source of the dissatisfaction. It is always the untrue thought “I am not okay.”

Andrew: I got a big laugh out of the title *Punch 'Em in the Chops*... I'd hazard a guess that this phrase doesn't occur too much at Eckart Tolle discussion groups... anyways...

James: Yes, I don't do very well with the warm fuzzy crowd but there is truth to it. The *Bhagavad Gita* says that if you have a *rajasic* temperament you should not avoid conflict. There is a belief that conflict is bad and one should not develop a taste for it but there are times when you need to bust 'em in the chops. It always ends up well if you are committed to self-inquiry.

Andrew: Thinking in terms of knowledge and *dharma* sounds like a better way to go. As I said, I need to disentangle the enlightenment/sainthood concepts from each other. I had to admit the distinctly ugly possibility that perhaps somewhere in my psyche there's a poorly formulated desire or belief that I can “get enlightened” and that would make me more saintly. Ouch. Oh well, good to know that is there and that it's something else to be burned away by the laser beams of Vedanta!

James: It's a very pervasive and pernicious belief, one that keeps the smallness, the unworthiness, firmly entrenched. One should love oneself as one is, warts and all. From the jiva's perspective that is all the liberation amounts to: “I'm okay with what isn't okay about me.”

Andrew: Thus I hereby renounce any attempts at “ye holie saintliness”... (pew).

James: I'll hold you to it, Andrew.

~ Love, James