

Out of the Mud

By Dan McKenzie

What you're sold in this world is a bag of rotten goods. The striving for more and bigger will never, ever lead you to the right place. All of us are following a dream, a toxic dream.

—FLORIAN HOMM, former hedge-fund manager, from the book and documentary “Generation Wealth” by Lauren Greenfield

Vedanta shows us that we're pure even with all that accumulated goo stuck to the inside of our cranium from years of watching TV and movies, listening to popular music and talk radio, reading trivial magazines, books and propaganda, viewing advertisements, checking in on social media, and following the whereabouts of certain celebrities; not to mention all the other addictions we develop surrounding unhealthy foods, abusive relationships, alcohol and drugs, pain killers, sex, wealth...the list goes on and on because as human beings, there is no limit to what we can become attached to. Becoming free of it all reminds us of the now pervasive lotus flower emerging out of the mud. Whether or not images of pretty lotus flowers are your thing or not, we all get a little dirty rolling around in the mud of *samsara*. The trick is to see that you're in it, because there is no end to *samsara*—there's only getting out.

The book and documentary “Generation Wealth” by social anthropologist, photographer and director, Lauren Greenfield makes the point well by showing extreme cases of both rich and poor stuck in the mud. In her documentary, Greenfield has checked in on several people, often over a multi-year span. She interviews a former hedge-fund manager living in exile who is on the ‘FBI’s Most Wanted’ list for financial fraud. At one time worth approximately \$800 million and working 100 hours/week, he believed happiness was money. Greenfield interviews a young porn star who took her profession to the extreme before waking up to the pedophile fantasy she was

perpetuating and the abuse she was causing to her body. She believed happiness was easy money and being a celebrity. Greenfield talks to a woman who on bus driver wages and a loan from her mother, flies to Brazil to have extensive cosmetic surgery. In spite of a family tragedy related to her obsession with appearances, she continues to believe that happiness is the body. "Generation Wealth" paints such an accurate picture of *samsara* that after watching the documentary, you can't help but be convinced the world is nothing but an elaborate setup to frustrate us. One thing those interviewed all have in common is that each had to hit rock bottom before trying to get out. Each one of them had to suffer immense losses before looking for the exit.

For some of us, it takes years to get out of *samsara* for the simple reason that we're unable to convince ourselves that we've had enough. We keep going back for more believing that *this time* it will pay off, that *this time* I will finally get what I want and be satisfied. Little do we know we've been running in place the entire time. We wake up one day realizing that we have gained nothing but total exhaustion from what amounts to years of chasing on a treadmill. *Samsara* is defined differently by different spiritual traditions and can sometimes have multiple meanings even within the same tradition, but for the sake of simplicity we'll say:

Samsara is the belief that joy is in the object

Vedanta teacher, James Swartz describes *samsara* in more serious terms as "the jaws of the crocodile" causing "great pain and the loss of one's emotional and intellectual freedom." And like the jaws of the crocodile, "it is almost impossible to escape." As an extreme example, one only needs to look at the current opioid crisis in the U.S. to know that this statement is true. Vedanta author, Edwin Faust writes about the insatiable nature of *samsara* that "drives us across the desert of the world, where we are offered many things that promise to quench our thirst," adding "but they are all *mithya*, of the nature of a mirage, and no one's thirst was ever quenched by a mirage." It's this constant drive across the desert of the world for 'more, better, different' that eventually makes us drop to our knees from utter, soul-crushing exhaustion.

Joy isn't in the object

Most people are surprised to learn that objects don't actually have the power to make us happy. In fact, all objects are inert and value-neutral. Even if joy were in the object, that would mean the same object would make everyone happy all the time. That's obviously not the case, since each of us has different likes and dislikes and over time, those likes and dislikes change. So where does joy come from?

When you desire an object, you create a sort of mental itch—a subtle or not-so-subtle anxiety. The more you think about the object, the more irritable the itch becomes until finally, by acquiring the object of your desire, you're able to scratch. The apparent happiness of getting what you want doesn't come from the object, it comes from the relief you experience from finally scratching. And once that itch is gone, it's off to the next one. For most people it becomes a perpetual rash so that their entire lives are just itch-scratch-itch-scratch. We can use the same analogy to describe our relationship with objects. *Samsara* is like a mental rash. Objects don't make me itch, *I* make me itch. When you finally become tired of all that scratching, you're ready to get out of *samsara*.

Another way to look at *samsara* is like a whirlpool. It starts to spin us slowly in the beginning as we enter the outer edges of its vortex. As we move closer to the axis of rotation due to centrifugal forces, the speed increases to dizzying levels. The centrifugal force is caused by the erroneous belief that by repeating the same experience, we will eventually be satisfied. Unfortunately, what we are setting ourselves up for is a condition that, like a whirlpool, is difficult or close to impossible to escape.

How we program ourselves to want

Vedanta calls our conditioned tendencies, *vasanas*. Every action (*karma*) leaves behind a trace. Due to our thoughts, a momentum from a certain trace can form into a like or dislike. With each repeated action, the momentum becomes stronger forming a self-perpetuating cycle or wheel (*samsara chakra*), so that *karma* leads to a *vasana*, which leads to more *karma*, which just reinforces the *vasana*, and so on. This vicious cycle can progress to the point where it's not clear if you're in control, or if the *vasana* is controlling you. This is how addictions manifest. When we lose control of our ability to

discriminate and do what's best for our wellbeing, we're deep in the mud.

For example, let's say a friend takes you out to eat sushi. You've never had sushi so it's a new experience for you. Your friend orders the "Me So Happy" combo and at first, you're impressed with the visual presentation—the way the rolls are cut, the beautiful colored sauces, and the multi-layers of fresh ingredients. You pop a piece in your mouth and your senses turn on like a light bulb from all the interesting textures and irresistible mixture of sweet and salty. From that moment, you're hooked. The memory of the visual presentation along with the texture, smells and tastes have left a lasting impression. A couple of days later you return to the same restaurant to order the same rolls, and sure enough, *bam!*—you have the same experience of utter delight. You can't stop having thoughts about sushi, it's like a program in your head that won't stop running. You wish you could eat it everyday! Your sushi *vasana* is humming along without interruption until one day your wife complains that you're spending all your money on sushi. You try to justify your indulgence, but she doesn't buy it and reminds you they are eating mac and cheese from a box every night, while you eat expensive sushi everyday. Furthermore, you begin to have stomach problems and suspect it's from all the raw fish you've been ingesting. You become even more concerned after watching a news report about a guy who developed a 10 foot tapeworm in his intestines from eating too much sushi! You don't know what to do. "How can I live without sushi?" you whimper quietly to yourself. Slowly, you try to make a transition and break your sushi *vasana*. It takes a lot of work, but eventually you swear off sushi and return to life as it was before.

The strongest *vasanas* often come from that which was previously out of reach. These types of *vasanas* are often developed at a young age when we are most impressionable. Adults who grew up with friends who were well off financially, but whose own family was limited, often have certain *vasanas* for material items and the status they apparently bring. In her book, Greenfield interviews a woman who spends \$1,000 using her modest teacher's wages to buy a Louis Vuitton handbag. When a friend finds an identical imitation of the handbag at a New York street market for \$150, she wakes up to her folly and becomes dispassionate about the "piece of leather," eventually giving it away to a cleaning lady. Such are life's lessons.

Certain *vasanas* are hard to shake. It's a pity that so many of us must check into rehabilitation centers to try to re-program tendencies that we no longer have control over—drug and alcohol *vasanas*, sex *vasanas*, internet and social media *vasanas*, eating *vasanas*, shopping *vasanas*, body image *vasanas*, money *vasanas*...but that's the way *karma* works. We learn—albeit, slowly—through our suffering. In the end, our *vasanas* are not our fault. Who would choose self-entrapment over freedom? What's characteristic of all those controlled by their *vasanas* is that they know they are in not control. Sadly, it's for this reason that so many who suffer from addiction must hit rock bottom or worse before their behavior can change. The felt pain of continuing must be exponentially greater than the pleasure derived from the object before one can begin to escape the jaws of the crocodile.

All desire is not bad

Just to make it clear, desire is not bad, nor is the enjoyment of objects. We needn't be ascetics and shun the world. We only need to understand the limitation of objects. One of the great pleasures of life is enjoying and experiencing things, including relationships. We delight in objects, people and experiences and the albeit, temporary pleasure they provide us. But we can still enjoy life's experiences without becoming attached to objects and people, and losing all self-control. Furthermore, it takes desire to get out of *samsara*—maybe even a burning desire depending on how stuck you are and whether or not you want a little freedom or total freedom. With some knowledge and the right attitude, we can enjoy objects and experiences without causing ourselves pain and suffering.

Looking for the exit

Getting out of *samsara* can be hard work. Many will receive multiple scrapes, bruises and maybe even a few broken bones before they are convinced that *samsara* is fool's gold, while many others will wait until old age or to be on their death bed before realizing it was all just a "chasing after the wind." The system is built to frustrate us by eventually exhausting and forcing us to find freedom from objects. After all, everything

we do is for freedom. For example, we might seek knowledge because we want to be free from ignorance, we might seek a relationship because we want to be free from loneliness, or we might seek money to be free from insecurity. Everything we do is consciously and unconsciously done in the name of freedom. And yet, *samsara* is not freedom, it's entrapment—it goes against our very nature to be free.

Life is a zero-sum game, for every up, there's a down. You can't win (paradoxically, you can't lose either). Greenfield's book is full of people who thought they could beat the system, tried and failed, and got hurt. *Samsara* will suck the life out of you and leave you without a soul, as evident by the measures people will take to hold onto their money, power and celebrity. We want more money, but with more money comes the anxiety to spend it. We want celebrity, but with celebrity comes lack of privacy. We want to appear more beautiful, but with cosmetic alterations come health issues. That life is a zero-sum game is no secret, we simply choose to ignore the fact because we don't want to spoil the dream. Like all of *samsara*, we gladly partake and want to believe in the illusion. We play along in spite of the obvious clues that none of it is actually real.

Samsara's allure is not unavoidable and it's trap isn't inescapable. With even a little discrimination and discipline, we can develop a dispassion for those objects that ultimately, cause us to suffer. When we desire something, we filter out reality to only emphasize the positive aspects of the object. Projecting this subjective value on an object is called superimposition and it's how the mind fools us into believing we need what we desire. If we are able to also see the negative aspects of an object, we might be able to begin to tame our desire. For example, a certain beautiful body may have great appeal until you realize it's one pin prick away from oozing itself all over the ground. Owning a Lamborghini might seem like a wonderful idea until you imagine all the flying gravel that will be inevitably pecking at it, not to mention the jealous people with sharp keys. Discrimination means being able to tell the difference between illusion and reality. It requires an inquisitive mind that doesn't let emotion get the upper hand. When we are relentlessly truthful about what reality is presenting to us, we can see the defects in any object and maintain a sense of self-control.

Vedanta teaches discrimination by defining what's real. 'Real' is that which is always

present and never changes. A second definition is that which is independent and not made of parts. All objects are impermanent, uncertain, and changing from one moment to the next. Furthermore, they are made up of other objects. Because our sense of time is relatively slow, objects appear stable, and because we are unable to see how the parts of an object come together, objects appear solid. In truth, all objects are only apparently real, or *mithya*—that is, they have an ephemeral quality without any independent substance of their own. The ability to see objects in this way further erodes the belief that joy is in the object. Vedanta asks, why chase something that is not real?

We are not actually in control of our thoughts and feelings. If we were, we would choose to have only good thoughts and never bad ones, and we would always know what our next thought would be. If we believe we are our thoughts, we put ourselves in the uncomfortable position of justifying each and every one of them. If we are not our thoughts, we can treat them objectively. We can't be that which is known to us, so we must not be our thoughts. If we have the discipline to watch the mind and not identify with thoughts and feelings, we can begin to create some space. Creating distance between me and thoughts is a great practice for separating myself from strong desires. Become like a scientist and examine your thoughts and feelings. When do certain thoughts arise? What is their emotional texture and weight? How do they lead into another thought or feeling? This is why some people meditate, so they can get to know their thoughts better and learn to discriminate and create distance from them.

We must also watch the senses. We mostly associate pleasure with the senses and seek to gratify them at every opportunity. Each one of the senses is capable of producing a pleasant feeling when making contact with certain objects we've conditioned ourselves to like. Again, it's Ok to experience and enjoy the world, but we needn't be gluttons trying to squeeze maximum pleasure from objects and experiences. There's a good reason we aren't able to eat an entire sheet cake in one sitting, because if we could, human beings would consume the whole planet in no time (which now exists as an actual threat thanks to our sheer numbers and expedient technologies). Enjoy sensual pleasures, but don't over-do it. As Swartz likes to say, sin intelligently, but don't be a pig!

Getting to the root of it

Samsara comes from ignorance. We've all tasted *samsara* and have trapped ourselves in it in little and big ways. We all experiment with rolling around in the mud for a while, especially when we're young and lack the wisdom experience provides. Society is constantly promoting a *samsaric* lifestyle with its relentless advertisements, consumer-centered holidays, social media and endless chanting of "more, better, different." In life, you can decide your course of action or let society decide it for you. But the latter is a fool's run because society is mostly just interested in your money, not your wellbeing. Advertising, in particular, is such a powerful force because it emphasizes our feeling of poverty. Through repetition we are brainwashed to want things we didn't even know we needed. The result is a world obsessed with constantly trying to improve itself via gadgets, diet fads, personal trainers, self-help gurus and cosmetic surgeons.

This feeling of limitation is Vedanta's starting point. It's our ignorance about objects and our feeling of never being whole that drives us to ultimately chase after objects, including relationships. We are all trying to fill a hole that cannot be filled. Using logic and a methodology, Vedanta teaches us that our feeling of limitation is due to not understanding who we are. If we believe we are the ego and that we must consume experiences to make ourselves feel good, we're always going to be hungry because all experience is only temporary—it's *mithya*. If we understand that the essence of who we are is whole, complete, limitless and changeless—in other words, if we understand that we're already full—we will eventually lose the insecurities we have about plenty never being enough.

Vedanta tells us that we are that which is witness to all experience and objects. We are that which has watched the baby you once were turn into an infant, then a teenager, and then an adult. It is that which has witnessed you go to college, get your first job, find a partner, get married, have children and perhaps get divorced. This witness is that which never changes because if it did, you would never know that you were once a child. You can't observe change if you are the change, just like you can't tell you're on a moving train if the train next to you is moving at the same speed. It's only by being still against a moving foreground that you can recognize change. And that's what you are—

the stillness, awareness, the *self*. In contrast to *mithya*, which includes all objects, the self is *satya*—that which is real, is always present and never changes. Once you identify with the self *samsara* loses its grip, because if you are the immutable, changeless and limitless self, then there is nothing more to add to you. While this truth may be difficult to grasp, once realized it becomes your ticket to freedom. And that is the difference between having a little freedom and total freedom in a world that is too often trying to sell us a bag of rotten goods.