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DAMA, THE RESTRAINT OF THE SENSE ORGANS

दमः - बाह्येन्द्रियाणां तद्यतिरिक्तविषयेभ्यो निवर्तनम्॥

damaḥ - bāhyendriyāṇāṃ tadvyatiriktaviṣayebhyo nivartanam [Vedāntasāra, 20].

Dama is the restraining of the external organs from all objects except that.

Whereas *śama* is the restraining of the mind, *dama* is restraining of the sense organs. The sense organs, e.g., the eyes, ears, nose, the faculty of touch, and the tongue, habitually have a craving in themselves. The tongue has a craving for a certain taste, for example, a craving for sweets. If you don't get the sweets, you miss them; your mind craves them and your tongue craves their taste. Sometimes, the faculty of touch craves a certain touch. The ears crave a certain sound. This habitual craving of the sense organs makes them engage or indulge in the sense pleasures or the experience of the senses, again and again. *Dama* is *nivartanam*, the bringing back of the sense organs from their cravings and focusing them on *śravaṇam*, *mananam*, and *nidhidhyāsanam*.

Restraining the mind and the sense organs is essential for the pursuit of self-knowledge

Here we are talking about a person who is either committed to or wants to be committed to knowledge. Ideally, the only activity such a student should have is *śravaṇam*, *mananam*, and *nidhidhyāsanam*. However, to be able to listen and reflect on the scriptures for a certain length of time requires certain preparations in the mind. Our commitment should be to prepare the mind. Lord Krishna discusses many values and qualities that prepare the mind and are a part of the spiritual pursuit. Some of these qualifications are *amānitvam*, humility, *adaṃbhitvam*, unpretentiousness, *ahiṃsā*, non-violence, *ksāntih*, forbearance or forgiveness, and *ārjavam*, straight forwardness or honesty [Bhagavad Gita, 13-8]. Thus, a commitment to knowledge means a commitment to the study of the scriptures, which also means acquiring a certain frame of mind that can commit itself to the study. Developing that frame of mind requires one to develop values like *amānitvam* and *adaṃbhitvam*. This preparation is necessary for the mind, sense organs, and body to be available for the pursuit of study. This is the reason for prayers such as:

आप्यायन्तु ममाङ्गानि वाक्प्राणश्चक्षुः श्रोत्रमथो बलमिन्द्रियाणि च सर्वाणि।

om āpyāyantu mamāṅgāni vākprāṇaścakṣuḥ śrotramatho balamindriyāṇi ca sarvāṇi.

May my limbs grow (strong). May the organs of speech, *Prāṇa*, eyes, ears, and all the (other) organs as well as (their) power (grow strong).

Speech, which does not cause agitation, which is true, pleasing, and beneficial, and the daily repetition of one's own Veda are (collectively) called discipline of speech.

Lord Krishna gives us three criteria for speech. The first criterion is that my words do not perturb or hurt anybody. Secondly, whatever I speak must be truthful. Further, my speech should be pleasant and useful. When we exercise *dama* or control at the level of speech, we can bring about austerity in our speech. Since many things that we say are not useful, we have to limit our speech. When we speak too much, very often, we hurt people. We also say things that are not right or true. Thus, austerity of speech will automatically limit our speaking. What do we do with our speech? The Lord says may we engage our speech in the repetition of the scriptures, mantras or the Vedas. Speech should be engaged in repeating the glories of the Lord.

The tongue has another function, namely, taste. *Dama* is a sense of proportion with reference to food. It means that I eat, but not out of force of habit or to please the palate. Very often, we eat because something is nice to eat. We enjoy eating whether the stomach requires it or not. It requires discipline to eat only that which is required and in the quantity that it is required.

Ultimately, one needs to be disciplined with reference to all activities

Dama implies that a person is disciplined with reference to all activities. Lord Krishna talks about an alert or self-disciplined person in the Gita [6-17]:

युक्ताहारविहारस्य युक्तचेष्टस्य कर्मसु। युक्तस्वप्नावबोधस्य योगो भवति दुःखहा ॥

*yuktāhāravihārasya yuktaceṣṭasya karmasu,
yuktasvapnāvabodhasya yogo bhavati duḥkhahā.*

For one who is moderate in eating and other activities, who is moderate in effort with reference to one's duties, (and) to one's sleeping and waking hours, (for such a person) meditation becomes the destroyer of sorrow.

An alert person is described as having a sense of proportion in eating and movement; he neither consumes too much or too little food, nor walks or moves too much or too little. He has a sense of proportion with respect to how long he sleeps; he sleeps neither too much nor too little. Similarly, he keeps awake neither too much nor too little. There is an alertness or awareness about every action that is performed. This self-awareness brings about discipline. Such a person is an organized person, who does not waste his movements or his faculties. He puts his faculties to proper use.

Dama is discipline at the level of all our activities and movement. We find that we don't have that discipline. We have not been alert while performing various movements and activities. We have not had the discipline while thinking or applying our minds to various pursuits. Discipline does not mean restraint or suppression; it is a value that calls for us to be organized

and focused. When we find that the sense organs are distracted in their various sense pursuits, we should rein them in and apply them to *śravaṇam*, *mananam*, and *nidhidhyāsanam*.

Śama and *dama* help us in whatever we want to do. Even when we sit down to meditate, we find that if our sense organs are disciplined, our body is also disciplined; our hands, legs, eyes, and ears remain quiet, otherwise they themselves become a distraction. A disciplined mind also helps us in meditation or in whatever we want to do¹.

¹ Based on Vedāntasāra lectures. Transcribed and edited by Malini, KrishnaKumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.