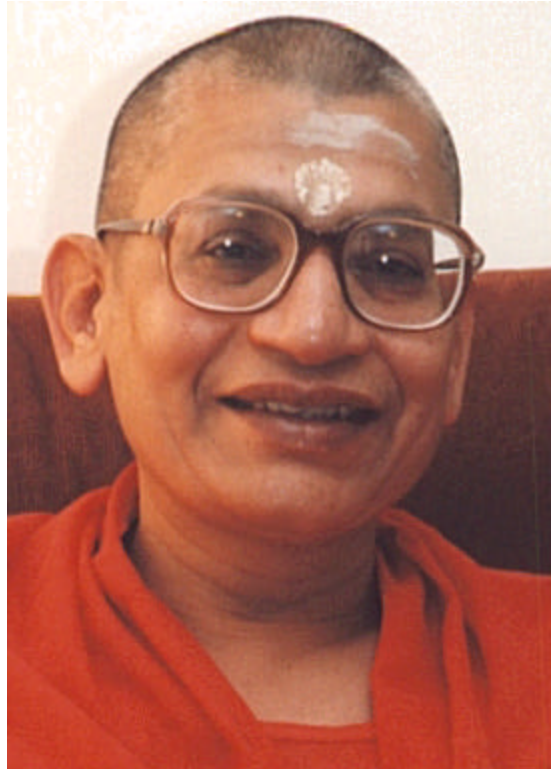


Freedom from Stress



Satsang

with

Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati

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Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati, a disciple of Pujyasri Swami Dayananda Saraswati, is an outstanding teacher of Vedanta. He expounds Vedanta with a simplicity and directness that make it easy to assimilate. Having studied and worked in the United States prior to becoming a *sannyāsi*, Swami Veditatmananda is familiar with the lifestyles of India as well as the West. With this insight, he reaches out to students across both cultures, with equal ease.

Swamiji is traditional in his teaching and preserves the entirety of the age-old wisdom of the Upanishads. He takes a contemporary approach in his lectures, which enables the student to relate to his teaching and imbibe this knowledge without effort.

Swami Veditatmananda is the resident teacher at *Tattoatirtha*, which is situated in the western outskirts of Ahmedabad in Gujarat. As the name suggests, it is a center for learning the *tattva*, or truth, as revealed in the Upanishads and the *Bhagavad Gītā*. Apart from English, Swamiji teaches and writes in Gujarati as well. He also conducts management seminars with a view to illustrate the relevance of Vedanta in modern management.

Swamiji visits the Arsha Vidya Gurukulam at Saylorsburg, PA, every year, to conduct Vedanta classes and camps from spring through summer. At this time, he also travels all over the US and Canada delivering lectures.

Freedom from Stress

The two causes of stress

Stress is a result of various conflicts in us. Anxiety, fear, guilt, hurt, conflicts all are stress. When I am afraid, anxious, or worried, or when there is conflict or guilt in my mind, there is stress. Anger is nothing but an expression of stress. It is often an expression of my frustration with myself. When there is stress within, there is anger or frustration.

One cause of stress is our violation of the obtaining rule or obtaining order of which we are all aware. The other cause of stress, which we will discuss later, is the unpredictability of outcomes and the potential unpleasantness of outcomes.

Violation of basic values causes stress

Stress is caused whenever we knowingly or unknowingly violate the harmony, law, or the rule. There is stress if we violate basic values. Ideally, our life should be lived in accordance with the basic values that arise from the common sense view that I should not do unto others what I do not want others to do to me. I should do unto others only what I would want them to do to me. I am very clear about what I expect of other people. I would like other people to be kind to me, to help me when I am in need, to forgive me. That is my expectation of others and I know that others also expect the same from me. I do know that other people like to be helped when they are in need. When I fail to help others or share with them what I could have shared, a sense of guilt arises, which makes me wonder why I did not do so. Similarly, I am very clear that to hurt somebody is wrong because I do not want to be hurt. As a result, if I end up hurting somebody's feelings through my words or my actions, there is a guilt complex in me immediately. I know that I have done something wrong and violated a value. There is a sense of guilt and conflict in my mind. This contributes to stress.

The Upanishads describe stress as: *kimahaññ sādhu nākaravam, kimahaññ pāpamakaravamiti* [Taittrīya Upaniṣad, 2-9], 'how did I fail to carry out that good action,' or 'how did I come to perform that bad action?' Here, what is meant by bad action is the violating of a value. I have an expectation of myself that I must do that which is right and not do what is wrong. I also have an awareness of what is right or wrong and when I do something wrong, I am aware of it being

wrong. Since it conflicts with my own standards of what I expect of myself there is a sense of guilt. I expect myself to do what is right. For example, I expect myself to be kind, I expect myself to be sharing, and I expect myself to reach out to others. When I fail to meet my own expectations of myself, there is guilt and a sense of dissatisfaction. This conflict within, in turn, causes stress.

We should know that in having expectations of ourselves, we are our own judge. We keep judging ourselves constantly. When I judge myself as worthy, I am happy. When I do not judge myself as worthy, there is conflict in me, and I am not happy with myself. Thus, there is stress when I am unhappy, but no stress when I am happy. Therefore, to manage the stress, it is necessary that I should act in keeping with my own expectations of myself. I expect myself to act in accordance with the values and be good, kind, and honest. In being so, I will maintain a harmony within myself. Then there is freedom from stress.

Stress management lies in first understanding the cause of stress. I become aware that the violation of values causes stress in me. It is possible, however, that I may violate the values so often and for so long that I am desensitized and, therefore, that violation may not cause any guilt in me. That is a great loss because when I de-sensitize myself, I lose the capacity to be sensitive to the things around me. I lose the capacity to enjoy things because, for that, I should be a sensitive person. When food is served to me, if I am sensitive to the taste I can enjoy it. When listening to music, if I am sensitive to the melody I can enjoy it. I can enjoy a flower or anything in nature only if I am sensitive to its beauty, and again, I can enjoy this discussion only if I am sensitive to this topic.

It is possible that one can de-sensitize oneself by indulging in drinking or other such excesses. People just cause their minds to become incapable of thinking. Similarly, it is possible that we can de-sensitize ourselves by behaving in a wrong way or an unbecoming way. Thus, there are what we call cold-blooded murderers and hit-men who feel no remorse for what they have done. In fact, they may even get some kind of satisfaction from having killed somebody. There may also be a sense of success. This only shows that a tremendous distortion has happened in their personality.

When we lose sensitivity we may not have the ability to feel, but that does not mean that we are free from stress. It means that we have to grow. We have actually lowered ourselves in the ladder of evolution. Thus, violation of basic values is one cause of stress and its management lies in being able to follow the basic values.

Unpredictability also causes stress

The second cause of stress is the non-acceptance of the realities of life gracefully. There are certain basic realities of life that I generally know of, but am not willing to accept. As Lord Krishna says: '*jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyuḥ*' [Bhagavad Gita, 2-27], death is certain for the one who is born. I know that death is a reality, and yet I do not accept it. '*Sarve samyogā viyogāntaḥ,*' all associations result in dissociation, and '*sarve nicayāḥ kṣayāntaḥ,*' whatever is accumulated ultimately gets exhausted. These are the basic realities of life. They are as certain as night follows day. Our life is made up of *dvandva* or pairs of opposites such as gain and loss, birth and death, success and failure, honor and dishonor, comfort and discomfort etc. When I get honor, dishonor cannot be far away. Similarly, wherever there is success there will be failure. Thus, failure, dishonor, and loss are also realities of life. If there is all comfort, all honor, or all success, there is no problem. But that is not so. There is failure, there is dishonor, and there is discomfort. Stress builds up when I do not accept these realities. Failure, or even the possibility of failure, causes tremendous anxiety in me. Recognizing that these are the realities of life and willingness to accept them gracefully is a way of managing the stress.

Uncertainty or unpredictability is also a reality of life. Nobody can say for sure that when he does something the outcome will be in accordance with his expectations. There is always a probability that something else can happen. Whenever I undertake any endeavor or task, I should ask myself, "Am I emotionally prepared to accept an outcome that may be different from what I expect?" Of course, I do my best to get the outcome that I want. That I want to be successful is fair enough, but I should recognize that there is always a possibility that the outcome may not be what I expect because of the many unknown and uncontrollable variables. One should be prepared for the unexpected outcome. Thus, an effective way to manage stress is to cultivate an attitude of a graceful acceptance of various situations as they arise.

Uncertainty is a reality of life. Many Indians feel greatly stressed in an uncertain situation. Perhaps most Americans are better able to handle stress because they have grown up that way right from their childhood. They appear to be more adventurous and used to dealing with competition, exploring new things, or plunging into new situations. They sometimes enjoy the very stress, the very adventure, and the very challenge that it involves. For people who are accustomed to handling a certain amount of stress, perhaps the uncertainty may be alright. We, however, are brought up in a very protective society and then

thrown into a new society without much protection, and this creates a tremendous amount of stress. When we are not accustomed to living in unpredictable situations, we are always stressed. Thus, unpredictability causes stress. We have to develop a comfort with the fact that we cannot predict everything. It is the quest of human kind to remove as much unpredictability as possible, and make events as certain as possible. Even so, regardless of how predictable we try to make events or things, unpredictability is very much a reality of life because of the many hidden variables.

Change also causes much stress. Whenever there is change, there is a lot of stress because of the unpredictability or uncertainty it brings. For instance, consider the situation of a bride moving into her in-laws' home after her 'arranged-marriage'. She may not even know her husband properly let alone her in-laws or the customs in her new home. This is a very big change and can be a cause for tremendous stress. Perhaps even more stressful is for that bride to go to the USA to join her husband in a completely new culture! Similarly, changing jobs can be very stressful because you do not know what the situation will be in your new job. There is so much uncertainty with respect to success, the ability to fit into the new work culture, acceptance by colleagues etc. Changing jobs, moving into a new neighborhood, transferring between schools or becoming a parent are all situations that can potentially cause a lot of stress. Thus, change brings about stress because of its unpredictability.

Put another way, we do not want the unpleasant. We are not ready for it. We always want things to be pleasant. The possibility of the unpleasant, therefore, always causes stress. How should we manage the stress arising out of uncertainty? We should prepare the mind to accept that unpleasantness is the reality of life. Regardless of what we do, we cannot always avoid the unpleasant. Failure is unpleasant; dishonor is unpleasant; insult is unpleasant; discomfort is unpleasant; death is unpleasant; any loss is unpleasant, and separation is unpleasant. Sometimes association is unpleasant also. Some people create happiness wherever they go; others create happiness whenever they go. But we do know that things may or may not happen the way we want them. Hence, we need to be prepared for the unpleasant or the unpredictable.

There is always a tendency on our part to seek pleasure and avoid pain. Nobody can say that we should not seek pleasure, or that we should not avoid pain, but we should know that despite all our efforts, we may still get pain or

face the unpleasant. Therefore, stress management is being able to recognize that unpleasantness is a reality of life and being prepared for that.

How do we prepare ourselves for the unpleasant? Lord Krishna points out that the unpleasant is a point of view. It is we who brand a given thing as unpleasant, a failure or loss, or discomfort. These are, but subjective interpretations. Lord Krishna asks us not to interpret outcomes, but accept everything gracefully. Rather than defining what good is, accept that whatever is, is good. Whatever is, is right or pleasant. "But Swamiji, I am hungry." "Pleasant." "But, I have pain in my body." "Pleasant."

What is pleasant, and what is unpleasant? Some people enjoy pain, particularly when they work out. After a workout full of pain, some people have a sense of accomplishment. When you work out, you invite pain. When you invite it or welcome it, you do not feel the pain, or feel that to be unpleasant. If somebody causes pain to you, however, there is hurt because you do not want it. Thus, it essentially boils down to whether I like it or not. We, therefore, have to change our whole pattern of thinking. I should recognize that whatever happens, is what I like. I do not want or like that, which did not happen. '*Aprāptam hi parityajya samprāpte samatām gataḥ, adṛṣṭa khedākhedo yaḥ santuṣṭa iti katyate*'. A contended person, *santuṣṭaḥ*, is one who gives up what he did not get, and is happy with whatever comes his way. He looks upon as unnecessary, what he did not get.

Prasāda buddhi is the graceful acceptance of whatever comes our way as being what God brings to us. God creates various situations and does various things to us. *Prasāda buddhi* is accepting His judgment, giving Him the benefit of the doubt that He knows what He is doing, and not judging what He does as good or bad. In responding to the realities of life, the uncertainties of life, and the unpredictability of life our attitude should be one of graceful acceptance.

In terms of being in harmony with the world, the attitude should again be one of graceful acceptance. Comfort with the world implies a respect for the world. Do not keep on judging the world and branding things or events as good or bad. Respect everything in the world and live in harmony with the world.

In terms of being comfortable with my own self, the commitment should be to follow the basic values. Thus, I have to develop comfort with the world and comfort with my self. Of the two, having comfort with my self is much more important. Having developed comfort with myself, I do what I think is the right thing to do and live a life that is free of stress.

Question

The world expects something of me and brands me as a failure. I have no control over what is expected of me!

Answer

What I consider as 'failure' is only my inability to meet my expectations of myself. It is true that the world expects something of me. However, the fact is that I concur with that expectation and hold myself to what is expected of me. I identify with the expectations of the world so completely, and the world's acceptance is so important to me, that the expectations of the world, in effect, become my expectations of myself.

When I fail to meet those expectations, I become frustrated, and there is a sense of failure. This sense of failure is a judgment we pass on ourselves. All we can ask of ourselves in those circumstances is, "Have I done the best that I could or not?" If I could not have done any better than that, I should gracefully accept that 'failure'. While walking, I could slip and fall. It happens. But then, I accept the fall or 'failure' without condemning myself, without branding myself because there is no expectation that I should not fall. However, the sense of failure when I do not live up to my own expectations sets off a current of self-condemnation. In that process, I judge myself very harshly. I need not do that. Let me accept that I have failed, that I do not have a given capability, that I have a poor memory, that I am slow, or that I am not very sharp. That is the reality about my self. What shall I do?

Is it alright to be what I am? It is alright to be what I am. I need not demand that I must be the sharpest person in the world, or the fastest person in the world, or all-powerful, or all-knowing. I need not demand that from myself. I can slowly develop some degree of comfort with my limitations. That does not mean that I do not try to overcome my limitations. Nor does it mean that I remain passive or inactive. But, I like to see myself as perfect and my definition of perfect is that I must be the best. My expectation is that I must always be successful, almighty, omniscient. That will certainly never be. Therefore, it is pragmatic to accept the reality that I am a limited being, and at the same time, I am committed to doing my best, committed to overcoming my limitations as much I can. I should also accept that regardless of what I do, I will always remain limited. Therefore I should confront my limitations and accept them gracefully.

I am slow, but that does not mean I am a failure. I am not sharp, but that does not mean I am a failure either. What is failure? As Pujya Swami Dayanandaji says, failure is an arbitrary standard that we have set ourselves. Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that there is such a thing called failure. Let us, then, accept it because the world sets that standard even if we do not. Therefore, the world appears to brand me a failure, even though I do not brand myself as such. Ok, I am not that sharp. Ok, I am not the smartest one. Alright, I am not the brightest. Can I still accept myself as I am? Can I love myself as I am? Should I be so demanding of myself that I cannot love myself? Or, is it that I can love myself only if I am perfect? Love means self-acceptance, being happy with myself. Can I love my imperfect self? Can I be happy with myself as I am? "Swamiji, my hair has turned gray." Ok, that is a reality. "I am getting wrinkles on my face." Ok, that is a reality too. What shall we do? "I am getting old." That is yet another reality. You can color your hair if you want to. You can do that if it makes you more comfortable. You can do what you want if you are comfortable. As Pujya Swamiji says, I can make people believe that my hair is dark, but I know very well that it is not, and cannot forget that my hair is grey. I can cover my wrinkles, but not the knowledge that I have wrinkles. Therefore, the question is, can I be comfortable in spite of these things?

Managing stress means being comfortable with ourselves. I am always the cause of stress and I am the solution for the stress as well. My non-acceptance of myself causes stress and my acceptance of myself is the management of stress, the removal of stress. You may not be able to remove stress, but you can manage it. What is meant by stress management is that we do not become disabled by it, that we are able to function in spite of that stress. There will always be stress because the causes of stress are not going to go away. The fears are not going to go away. The anxieties will not go away. Change can happen only when Vedantic teaching becomes real to us. A wise man has no stress at all because he has no agenda, no demands, and no expectations of anybody. For the rest of us, stress is always going to be there. What we can do is to keep it within reasonable limits so that we can function in spite of that stress.

Question

Why are people so different in dealing with stress?

Answer

Some people are easily stressed out and some are not. This is because people are different. Diversity is the reality of life. Everyone has his or her own history.

We call it *prārabdha*, destiny or '*karma*'. The present is the product of the past in as much as each one of us has a unique past and is, therefore, unique in the present.

Regardless of what we are, it is always possible to change ourselves. It is always possible to change our attitudes, our responses, and our perceptions. We may not be able to change our personality much. For example, we can improve our memory, but only up to a certain point. We can, however, completely transform our attitudes. As we mentioned earlier, we can be in a much better position to deal with our stress by exposing ourselves to the teachings of Vedanta and by gaining more clarity.

Question

It appears as though nothing is under my control, and this causes me more stress. Please comment.

Answer

To expect that we control everything, is wrong. To think that we do not control anything is also not correct. We have been given free will, the freedom to make choices. Thus, making choices is in our control. For example, it is possible that I can tell either a lie or truth in a given situation. I cannot control what will happen if I choose to tell the truth, but I can control the way I respond to that outcome. Life brings us various situations, which we perhaps do not control, or we may have some share in creating some of those situations. Whatever may be the case, once a situation is created, what we do is really up to us. We can definitely control the way we respond to those situations.

Vedanta teaches us how to respond to various situations. It teaches us graceful acceptance. When faced with an unpleasant situation, it is up to us whether to get frustrated, angry, and resentful, or to accept the situation gracefully. For example, if I am sick, I can either be frustrated that I cannot do what I want to do or I can accept the sickness gracefully. When I respond to a situation, I have a choice whether to resist, or gracefully accept the reality. I do have control over whether or not I perform an action, *karma*, although I do not control the *karma-phala*, the outcome of my action. Thus, I have a choice in my response to any situation.

Question

Why do we appear to be impelled by our impulses and influenced by the past?

Answer

We don't have to be led by our impulses. What past actions can do, is to bring up an impulse in your mind. It is up to you whether to follow that impulse or not. Yes, the past impulse can say, 'hit him', 'say this', or 'do this'. But, I have the freedom to be alert and tell my mind, 'no'. I can assert that my value is kindness and, therefore, I will not hurt that person. My value is to be gentle, and therefore, I will not be harsh. Our past actions can impel us, but we still have the freedom not to be controlled by the impulses. It is possible that we may not exercise that choice, and behave in an impulsive manner. In that case, we have not used our free will. But if we choose to exercise our free will, we can restrain our impulses. We can deliberately choose to ignore that impulse, and do what we think is right. Thus, if we have a value for being deliberate, we will not be controlled by our past. We can assert ourselves in the present. This is what is known as *puruṣārtha*, self-effort or free will.

Question

There is so much work-related stress in the USA. How do we deal with it?

Answer

Yes, people are worried about their jobs, "Will I lose my job? Will I perform well?" This job-related stress is due to the unpredictability that is involved. It is a reality of life in the USA.

I cannot control my job situation. If my boss doesn't want me or doesn't accept me, I don't have a job. Should I kill myself? Should I feel frustrated? Should I feel miserable? Should I leave this country? Or should I gracefully accept the situation and plan my next steps? Once a situation has been created, should I not evaluate my options and make the right choices? When I am not sure whether my job will be there or not, should I not prepare myself beforehand?

We have actually raised our expectations so much that we have made many financial commitments and extended ourselves. We have big houses, many cars, etc., which are not easy to maintain. We have stressed ourselves out by imposing a lot of expectations on ourselves. If we are willing to live a simple life, most of this work-related stress will go away.

What will happen if I lose my job? If my company downsizes, I also downsize. I move from my big house into a smaller house, or to a condo. Am I willing to move into to a smaller house or an apartment? Without feeling

humiliated or frustrated, and without a sense of failure, can I gracefully accept it as God's will and move into an apartment? Am I willing to accept what other people say? I feel stressed out, not because of the potential loss of my job, but because I am concerned about what others will say. I am concerned about my prestige, my image. "But, what will my friends say?" It is ok. Let them say whatever they want. Let them enjoy. If my situation makes them happy, so be it.

Of course, there may be some real difficulties. We do have commitments, e.g., our children going to a school or a college. But then, you do not have to necessarily send them to private schools or Ivy League colleges. It is alright if you can do that. If you cannot do that, can you ask your child to go to a local school? "But, Swamiji, our children have expectations." Yes, they do have expectations and you try to fulfill them as much as you can. I am not saying you should not. But can you explain your situation to your children and ask them to attend a local school, if you lose your job? "But how can I accept this? What will my child think of me?"

We always want to look strong before everybody else. We think we are successful or happy only when we are strong, only when we are right, only when we can assert ourselves, only when we are in control. But it need not be so. Can we be happy with whatever the situation is? We can deal with any stress only if we are willing to accept God's judgment gracefully.

Question

Is it ok, then, to accept whatever I get?

Answer

No, it is not ok. As we discussed earlier, acceptance does not mean resignation. It does not mean not doing what is required. It is a learning process. We learn from our experiences and then decide what we should be doing next. Learn from your experiences and move on. You are not going to sit quietly. Your mind will not allow it; it will continue to drive you.

Question

Are you suggesting that people born in the USA do not have any stress?

Answer

No, I am not. There is a lot of stress in Americans too. I was saying that we Indians are perhaps less prepared than the Americans in dealing with uncertain situations. The Americans perhaps are more adventurous, and therefore they do

not mind new challenges. They may have many other kinds of stresses, but they are perhaps able to deal with the stress arising from uncertainty better. They probably care less about what others will think about them. They are more prepared to work at a fast food restaurant or a retail outlet for daily wages. For us, it is below our 'dignity'. We have such misplaced ideas about our dignity. That is our mind set. Our own children, brought up here in the USA, will perhaps have fewer problems than we do. Coming from India, we have a certain mind set.

The culture in the USA is very different from the culture in which we grew up in India. Back then, there was a lot of job security and people were not fired easily, particularly in government jobs. India is a very protective society. We were protected by our parents; we were always taken care of, and we were not encouraged to take risks. We always played safe. Therefore, we come with a certain mind set. There is no protection here in the USA; everybody is on their own. There is no loyalty in the workplace. You are not loyal to the employer, and he is not loyal to you. They can simply fire you one day, even though you may have worked there for 30 years. This is very different from the Indian ideals of protection, loyalty, respect, and reverence. Therefore, many Indians have a hard time in this stressful environment. That is why the first-generation Indians have lot of stress here in the USA. I am not saying that people born in the US have no stress. The entire humanity has stress, but then all these factors contribute to the additional strains and anxieties that people coming from India have because of their particular mind set. That is what I meant.

Question

The best way to manage stress is to be in tune with the realities of life. Is this correct?

Answer

Yes, when you are totally in tune with the realities of life, there is no stress. The ultimate reality of life is that you are limitless and the world is fine as it is. If you are in tune with this reality, there is no stress. Stress exists only to the extent that we are not in tune with this reality.

When describing a stress-free person, Lord Krishna says, '*duḥkheṣvanudvīgnamanāḥ sukheṣu vigataspr̥hāḥ*', [Bhagavad Gita, 2-56], he is one who is not affected by adversities and one who is without yearning for pleasures. All situations can cause us stress. A situation that is unpleasant, of course,

causes stress because we do not want it. A situation that is pleasant also causes stress because we want it to continue. Thus, while an unpleasant situation causes stress because of the possibility that it may not go away, a pleasant situation causes stress because of the possibility that it may go away. But, a wise person is *duḥkheṣvanudvignamanāḥ*, in a situation, which is normally seen as unpleasant he is *anudvignamanāḥ*, unperturbed in the mind. His mind does not resist, it does not reject. *Sukheṣu vigataspr̥hāḥ*, he does not expect a pleasant situation to remain as such. That is, he takes things as they are. He sees that everything is perfect, good, and right. This vision is not a possibility for him, but a reality. Thus, he lives a completely a stress-free life. He has no agenda.

There is stress only when there is an agenda. When you have no agenda either for your self, or for the world, there is no stress. Generally, we have an agenda for everybody. When the world fails to fulfill our agenda, we are stressed. We have agenda for ourselves too. When we fail to meet our goals, then again, we are stressed out. A wise person, on the other hand, is free from having any agenda. He is described as *prajahāti yadā kāmān-sarvānpārtha manogatān* [Bhagavad Gita, 2-55], a person who gives up all the desires even as they appear in the mind. He is one in whose mind all agenda has ceased.

Yes, it is possible to be completely stress-free; that is the goal. Our attempt should be to steadily make progress towards that goal. Freedom indeed means freedom from stress. *Mokṣa* means complete freedom from stress. A journey towards *mokṣa* is one of progressively gaining freedom from stress and being willing to accept situations as they are. Let me illustrate this with a story. There was once a *sādhu* who had long hair. He was walking in a certain direction when the wind began to blow his hair into his eyes and face and he could not see ahead of him. The *sādhu* simply turned around and began walking in the opposite direction. The wind did not bother him anymore and he was able to see ahead of him clearly.

The *sādhu* in this story did not let the turn of events disturb him in any way, or even pause to consider what to do. His reaction in turning around to face the wind was one of unquestioning acceptance. Similarly, can we also accept whatever comes to us as God's will? Can we go along with it and not try to question it or resist it? If we can do that with graceful acceptance, there would be no stress. This change in our attitude is the result of a long and deliberate process of self-growth.

Graceful acceptance

Question

Swamiji, graceful acceptance of the results of our actions is based on the inherent assumption that the results are given by Īśvara. In real life, however, we often suspect that results are not dispensed by Īśvara, but by human beings who are unfair, biased, and sometimes, downright crooked. This gives rise to 'righteous anger'. Is there an inherent contradiction between graceful acceptance and righteous anger?

Answer

Graceful acceptance means understanding a situation for what it is. You can then decide what you want to do. Assess the situation and then decide whether you want to fight it or not. How much are you willing to stick your neck out? How much risk are you willing to take? Be pragmatic and then decide what to do in a given situation. Thus, graceful acceptance does not preclude you from responding to situations.

Someone attributed India's lack of progress to Mahatma Gandhiji's principle of non-violence; he should have fought his enemies rather than propagating non-violence. He was indeed a great fighter. He was never a docile person. He never failed to fight against injustice. His method of fighting, however, was different. He fought through the means of non-violence. He was definitely a fighter. That is what he taught the people. Thus, fighting against injustice is considered to be a righteous way of doing things.

We need not necessarily become angry in order to be able to fight. But you need to be firm. You must have a firm conviction. The cause must be worthwhile too. Sometimes, fighting is not worth it. You can just let it go. If the cause is worthwhile, it may be alright to put your energies into fighting for it. Thus, you have to be pragmatic and decide whether it is worthwhile to put your efforts and energies into fighting for a cause.

Acceptance does not mean resignation. It means understanding. When you fail the first time, you accept it gracefully. Then, you decide what you want to do. Did you learn something from this first experience and can you do it differently the next time? If you want to try again, go ahead and do it. It depends on how important the goal is. If the goal is worth investing your energies and emotions in, you may want to try repeatedly. Some of these goals may not be that worthwhile. Or there may be other options available. Or you

may feel that the goal is perhaps not attainable. You are the best judge of what needs to be done in a given situation. I don't think there is a rule as to whether you keep trying repeatedly or you quit trying. Each individual and every situation is unique.

Whatever decision is to be made, make it with an objective mind. Graceful acceptance gives us an objective mind, a non-reacting mind, and a non-blaming mind. That is what is meant by graceful acceptance. Resigning to a situation is not graceful acceptance. When I resign to a situation, it means that I have not accepted it gracefully. I have accepted it grudgingly, not gracefully.

Question

Swamiji, when we try to practice graceful acceptance, doesn't it actually increase our ego to the point where we think we are the doer and that we have the will and the power to control our reactions? Doesn't it create an attitude that is opposed to surrender?

Answer

Acceptance is the ability to see the reality for what it is and to drop your resistance. It means dropping your resistance to the reality. Dropping the resistance implies dropping your ego. When you resist a situation, you essentially want the situation to be different from what it is. That is ego. On the other hand when you gracefully accept the situation, you are, in effect dropping your resistance, which means you are dropping your ego. Therefore, graceful acceptance can never amount to strengthening the ego.

If you are able to control your reaction, that is good. You can, in fact, derive a satisfaction from your ability to control your reaction. It is not ego, but a genuine satisfaction. You can enjoy your ability to exercise self-control. Being thankful to Īśvara for achievements like self-control, will enable us to keep our ego under check.

Question

How do we accept all the injustice done to animals by human beings?

Answer

By our acceptance, we are not sanctioning or condoning events or situations. Acceptance really means understanding the situation as it is, being objective, and responding to the situation appropriately. It does not mean that

we should not do anything about it. That is not what we mean by acceptance. Acceptance means that we do not react out of anger or frustration.

On relationships

Question

Swamiji, with regard to human relationships, it is said that one should receive like a rock and give like a flower. If this is the attitude one should have, how will the other person realize that he or she is hurting someone?

Answer

Well, if the behavior of the other person is hurtful you can perhaps let it be known that you are hurt, in a manner that does not hurt the other person. Often, when we are hurt, we react and hurt the other person in return. That is how it goes on. It is a good idea to communicate. If you are feeling hurt, it is a good idea to let your feelings be known. If you choose not to do so right away, you can perhaps express it when the mind becomes quiet, or when the other person is in a position to listen and realize that a given behavior has hurt you. I think that when you wind up hurting somebody you do become aware that you have hurt him or her; it is quite evident from the expression on their face or from their body language that the person is hurt. One would have to be very insensitive not to know that one's behavior has hurt some other person. However, in case the person does not already know, it is a good idea to communicate that his or her behavior has hurt you. If the hurtful behavior continues, you have to decide what to do. You have to determine whether to allow that person to continue to hurt you or put a stop to it by creating a distance. You can decide what to do depending upon the situation.

Question

To what extent should we sacrifice for others?

Answer

We have to learn to sacrifice for others to the extent that we do not hurt ourselves too much. In sacrificing for others, we will have to undergo some hardship, some pain. We hurt ourselves a little bit when sacrificing for others. That is why it is called sacrifice. Sacrifice means that I let go of something to make somebody happy, to help somebody. I let go of something which I would have otherwise liked to have. It does involve pain. There is some pain, when I go out of my way.

To what extent should I sacrifice? I should sacrifice to the extent that I can bear the pain involved in that sacrifice. I should not hurt myself in the process of the sacrifice. I should not sacrifice to the extent that the pain becomes unbearable, or that my own feelings are hurt.

I should sacrifice using my free will, not out of my helplessness. If I sacrifice deliberately, I will not hurt myself. If I do it out of compulsion or helplessness, I am likely to hurt myself. A deliberate sacrifice will be conducive to my self-growth. If I do it out of compulsion, it will not help me grow.

Sacrifice is an essential part of everyone's life. We always sacrifice for our loved ones and relatives. The more willingly we do it, the more helpful it is. The idea of sacrifice is *yajña*, an offering. It is described in the Bhagavad Gita as a process conducive to self-growth. I do it willingly only if I have a value for it. When I do it willingly, it is not a sacrifice anymore. It actually makes me happy.

The word sacrifice typically has a negative connotation. It usually is taken to be something that I have to do against my will. But, sacrifice should mean reaching out. An act of reaching out, done willingly, is conducive to my self-growth. Even if it is done, not willingly, but with a value for it, it is okay. If it is done out of helplessness or compulsion, it is not helpful.

Question

How should I overcome the fear of interacting with certain people?

Answer

I guess some people make us feel small, some people humiliate us, insult us, or control us, and we don't want to interact with them. Then there is fear. Basically, fear exists because I don't want to be controlled or dominated; I don't want to feel small. When certain people make me feel helpless in their presence by their behavior, or whatever, there is fear.

One way of handling it is to prepare the mind before we interact with the person who is likely to act in a certain way or make me feel small. Prepare the mind to accept the person as he or she is, without reacting to their behavior. If I feel helpless or afraid, those are my reactions because I give too much importance to that person's behavior. Instead, I can say that it is the nature of that person to act in that particular manner. I need not take it personally. I need not internalize it. I am then able to see the person's behavior for what it is and not take it upon myself. For this, I might visualize how that person may walk,

talk, or act, and how I might feel then. I can visualize it beforehand, and tell my mind how to respond. The response should not be one of retaliation.

When we feel that people try to intimidate us, what happens is that we are forced to confront the problems we have with ourselves. I am not comfortable with aspects of my own self, such as certain limitations that I think I have, or certain shortcomings that I may have which I can't accept. These other people make me aware of them and I feel unhappy. Some people have an uncanny knack of pushing some buttons and make me confront something that I don't want to face. So I can also learn from this. Why do I feel this way? Why do I feel dominated? Why do I feel frustrated? Why do I feel unhappy in the presence of this person? Okay, given that the person's behavior is what it is, what does it mean? What does it do to me? How does it affect me? What does it provoke in me? Thinking along these lines will give me an opportunity to learn something about myself. And perhaps also make me examine those aspects of myself that I am not willing to confront.

Some people force us to confront ourselves while we may be constantly trying to avoid confronting ourselves. So, in that sense, some of these people can in fact be helpful to us by showing us what it is that we are trying to avoid. I can ask myself, suppose the person insults me why do I feel hurt or humiliated? I will see that there is an aspect of myself with which I am not comfortable. The fear of facing somebody is, therefore, really a fear of confronting some aspect of my own self, which I do not want to confront. I am uncomfortable because that person forces me to confront it. All of this amounts to settling an account with our own selves.

I should visualize what happens to me in the presence of that person. I should become aware of what aspect of me comes out and why I feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. Can I confront myself? Can I confront my shortcomings? Can I confront my limitations? Maybe somebody else is very smart and I am not smart enough. Maybe somebody else is very well informed and I am not so. Maybe somebody else has a dominating power that I don't have. I don't like these things. Can I bring myself to accept that I am not assertive, that I am not smart enough, that I am not as well informed? Can I accept it?

I can make all the efforts to become free from that or accept myself as I am and be comfortable with that. I don't have to impose things upon myself and think that I am necessarily different from what I am. To the extent that I accept

myself and to the extent that I am comfortable with myself, to that extent will I be comfortable in the presence of other people. I will know what I am before that person tells me. It's alright with me. So, the fear of interacting with certain people arises entirely from the fear of interacting and confronting certain aspects in ourselves. Let us pay more attention to ourselves; let us understand ourselves, and let us learn to be comfortable with our own selves. This will also help in our interactions with other people¹.

¹ Transcribed by Chaya Rajaram and Jaya Kannan. Edited by Jayshree Ramakrishnan and Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey.