

NEVER MIND

Towards freedom of mind

Yoga practice cultivates a gentle and compassionate disposition, this is excellent and a very positive force in the world yet by itself it is fragile. When we teach asana, we teach both suppleness and strength knowing that one without the other is limiting and dangerous. Similarly with the mind, a sensitive and delicate composition of mood and instinct has a delightful purity to it but it is not enough, it will not survive the rigours of the day, we also need strength of mind and this is not always properly addressed.

Spiritual traditions tell stories of the renunciates who achieve marvellous pure states when ensconced in the cave then on coming down to the market, all hell breaks loose. The refined planes of jnana are not compatible with engagement in the marketplace. They are compatible with walking through the marketplace but not with being a trader in the marketplace, a stallholder, a breadwinner and all that means. You cannot maintain an empty mind in those circumstances simply because you have to think, you have to react and you have to deal with the traffic of the senses and the confrontation of other people.

It is naive to teach that the yogi should possess a peaceful and still mind. Now that may surprise you because surely that is an honourable and purposeful goal. Well, I agree and acknowledge that a peaceful, still mind is indeed beneficial, but if you expect a peaceful and still mind in all circumstances; and that's what the naive teaching encourages, you will be frustrated and will spend your time striving for something that is largely impossible and merely provokes tension.

Yoga practices create well-being and whilst the practices are being applied these things are in place and all is well. Nourishing environments and gentle, supportive circumstances also create ease and happiness and whilst they are in place all is well. But for almost everybody neither of these two aspects are sustainable permanently. Life in the modern world is invasive and challenging on many fronts, both inner and outer. You may have had the experience of retreat where deep and exquisite spiritual conditions have occurred. Perhaps at the end of the retreat you yearned to cling on to this state and were disappointed when, after returning to your in-tray or your family dynamic on the Monday morning, the noise and clamour returns. Because you haven't been able to rise above your worries and maintain your pure spiritual state, you judge yourself as having failed or feel hard done by. This becomes an issue and a problem; you worry about it and create more unhappiness and stress. Without realising it, what you are trying to do is to push away and deny difficulties and demands (the traffic of the senses) and that is impossible. In response the naïve teacher may say "Just keep practicing 'til you can remain still and serene in all circumstance". The wise teacher would say "It is bound to be, so don't worry about it; accept it and just get on with it". But it is by no means hopeless; there is a way, a real and honest solution.

Well what is it? Is it control through willpower?

Not quite, that is too tight, too rigid. The negative habits of the mind do need to be turned away from and the will is vital for doing so, but the minds' ability to analyse itself and control itself willfully can easily lead to beating yourself up. The mind fights with itself through a punishing inner critique that saps vitality and causes misery. In unskilful hands the application of willpower produces little more than denial; a deliberate suppression of those elements judged as unwanted. But have these desires and opinions really gone away? Commonly not and they remain playing powerfully below the surface, seemingly overcome but still fuelling fantasy and inner dialogue.

So is it detachment? Not quite, that too is only a partial answer. Through practice you do develop distance and non-attachment which is vital and an essential ally but it's not enough and on its own is lopsided. The danger here is that you become aloof and unresponsive: uncaring prevails that lacks tenderness and affection. This hardens relationship and encounter. This is typified in some within the spiritual community who are chronically insular and paradoxically lack both warmth and love and in others where there is a disregard for event and an absence of sensibility that borders on the cold. Such vacancy is understandable but not desirable when amidst society. So what is it then?

Well, It is freedom of mind and I would like to explain what that means:

"When the senses contact sense objects a person experiences cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These experiences are fleeting, they come and go. Bear them patiently Arjuna. Those who are unaffected by these changes, who are the same in pleasure and in pain are truly wise and fit for immortality". (BG 2:14-15)

Look at this carefully, study each word, is it clear to you? It does not mean that pleasure and pain do not appear, as in the human condition these experiences are bound to appear. What It means is that the spirit in which they are appearing is unaffected by them. That is the truth of the passage, that is wisdom and one of the most profound things that anyone can realise. *"Bear them patiently"* is excellent advice; it can be described as endurance, a word we often use. This does not mean grimly gritting your teeth; it means the resilience to permit the roller coaster of life events to take their course whilst you take security and deep comfort in abiding as the persistent presence of the heart.

"These experiences are fleeting, they come and go". Even the most cursory analysis of your life will show this to be so. The experiences themselves flash in and out, so let them flash, whatever they are. Challenging encounter alongside play and pleasure is inevitable but who is it that is challenged? It is the attitudes and sensibilities that have no substance other than memory, and which have become formed by the residue that experiences leave in the mind (our issues). This residue is fuelled by your cogitating, going round and round in abstract commentary and fantasy. Freedom of mind means not doing this, it means natural and spontaneous responsiveness to event, as it arises and falls, whatever it is and then no residue, no cogitating over and over because the mind has become used to not taking interest in that abstraction of fantasy and dialogue (the commentary). A free mind has learned to relax and defer to the constant presence of being rather than go round and round in its chattering cycles. It has learned to simply switch that tendency off.

O.K. you may say, that's all very well, it's inspiring but I am gripped with emotion, prejudices and resistances, I can't just give them up. Are you sure? Actually, that is exactly what you can do by progressively turning your attention away from them. The mental activity is only mental activity, it is not you. You are that intimacy within which the activity arises and is known. This doesn't mean the movement of thought isn't happening; it has to happen to live a practical life, but outside of when it's necessary for functioning, you learn not to depend on it and that gives you discrimination and perspective. From my direct experience I have seen this happen and am very confident in advising the following as a proven and practical course to take.

1. Watch the mind. Learn to spot the fact that abstraction is happening as a habit of mind (the cogitating).
2. Once spotted, learn to turn your interest away from it by returning awareness to the witnessing itself (being). In other words, don't get into it and don't fuel it.
3. Practice Atma Vichara deeply, which automatically enables the above.
4. Seek out and participate in satsang as a key routine.

Taking that approach patiently across years will definitely bring discrimination. The mind is then responsive and flexible to the moment whether pleasurable or painful but the abstract cogitating will finish, the negative commentary will end and the clarity of the heart will prevail. It is that which is unaffected.

This is Freedom of mind.