

Freedom From Helplessness¹

Swami Dayananda Saraswati

There is a definite line that separates modern society from the ancient. In general, I find, life is always modern. *Patañjali*, who wrote the *Mahābhāṣya*,² states, in his introduction³, how the modernists do not follow the old style of learning the phonetics. When I read that, I felt that an era we consider as ancient, was modern for *Patañjali*. It is no different today. When an old person talks to you, he or she always says, “In my days it was wonderful.” When I was in school, the older people in the village used to say, “Our school days were definitely better, not like they are now.” Today, I see people of my age telling the modern students, “Oh! Everything has degenerated. Today’s students have lost their way.” I think the generation gap is not a new discovery. It was always there because a mother is usually 25 or 26 when the first child is born. There would be no generation gap if the child were born the same age as the mother, which is never going to happen.

However, one thing is certain. When we say modern, what we really mean is that, unlike our forefathers, we have to respond to a wide variety of events every day. Definitely our forefathers, a few centuries ago, were better off in one way because they only had a few events to respond to. To the contemporary way of thinking such a situation would be impossible. This is also not true.

You live one day at a time. The ‘one-day’ is always a today. You reach 16 or 61 living one day at a time. In the past also it was a new day when a person got up from sleep; it was always a good morning. It is amazing. It is again one day at a time when you sign off for the day, when you go to sleep. Sleep is a great leveller. Your experiences, your problems, your notions of individuality, your identity with religion, the concept of modern and ancient, even your understanding of Vedanta all these are levelled into one blanket experience of ‘not knowing anything’. The world including the concept of time and space

¹ Edited excerpt from *Freedom from Helplessness*, Arsha Vidya Research and Publication Centre, Chennai, 2006.

² The commentary on Sanskrit grammar *sūtras* of *Pāṇini*

³ *Purā kalpe etadāsīt saṁskārottarakālaṁ brāhmaṇāḥ vyākaraṇam smādhiyate tebhyastattat-sthāna-karaṇa-nādānupradānajñebhyo vaidikāḥ śabdā upadiśyante. Adyatve na tathā. Vedamadhīya tvaritā vaktāro bhavanti. (mahābhāṣya – prayojana-granthopapatti prakaraṇam)*

dissolves in sleep.

When you get up in the morning to a new day, it is like a new creation. It can be new or it can be a continuation of the old problems. You can live the day as a continuation of what happened before, the previous day, because the memories are there. The memories, perhaps, are meant to give a certain continuity. You carry forward what was experienced earlier and look at the day from the previous day's memory. I believe that a modern person looks at the day differently. His or her day needs to be packed to have a sense of achievement.

A day packed with events need not move faster. In fact, with fewer events it is amazing how a day speeds by. You find you have no time for anything, even though the day is filled with events that are predictable. There are no surprises. One's routine is predictable, the food and the eating time is predictable. Everything is well ordered; the whole day is predictable. In spite of the predictability you find a month just flits past.

Our forefathers also lived a predictable life but with fewer events. They did not have a television to watch, a newspaper to read or a radio to listen to. Such facilities were not available then. If there was an event of importance, such as a calamity in the nearby village, the news could not reach the person in the neighbouring village instantly. Probably, he would hear of it ten days later, when it was no longer a current event. It would be an old event, an already wept over event, or an event to which people have already responded adequately. Sometimes, the news would not trickle down at all. Whereas, these days, in the crowded front page of a newspaper, you find there are so many events and to each one of them you have to respond: something happens somewhere in the world, Prince Charles has a fever, President Bush sneezes, somewhere an earthquake claims thousands of lives; somewhere a revolt and many die; somewhere an act of terrorism, many are taken hostages; every day you have to respond to the many varied events.

The world is the same size as it was then, although if one views it from one of the satellites, one would see the poor earth as a small ball spinning on its own axis. In this small globe we find ourselves beset with so many problems. It looks as though the world has shrunk. Once, I flew from London at 11 A.M. by the British Airways Concorde flight and reached New York at 8 A.M. The people who were waiting at the New York airport asked me, "Swamiji, when did you leave?" I told

them, "I have not yet left, for my flight leaves at 11 A.M." I cannot use the past tense here; even grammar becomes a problem. One does not know which tense to use, and one gets tensed up in the process. Modern technology defies the rules of grammar.

Today, events crowd the entire twenty-four hour period. Unrelated to the events, no doubt, my life is very simple. However, I cannot remain a mute witness to what is happening around me, whether I am a simple individual or a Swami. I cannot but be alive to the events. By what is 'around me' I do not mean the mountain or the river or the stars above. It is not the few trees and birds. The sky is the limit for the phrase 'around me'. Even the black hole, whose gravitational influence is so strong that not even light can escape, is all 'around me'. What is around me is what I know, and what I know is enough to trouble me.

One either has to respond to every event or live one's life holed up in a cave somewhere. I do not think that is a life worth living. Even if I live a simple life, it is better lived amidst the world. When I hear the news that two meteorites in the orbit collided, it creates a small fear in me; the debris may fall upon me. So, I find myself in a position where I have to respond to situations which are too numerous and varied. How should I respond to them?

More often than not you find yourself helpless. You read the morning newspaper in the bathroom and you are fuming. You cannot do anything for you are helpless. This helplessness is the modern problem. Not that this is the only problem. Many problems may be there, but this one leads to varieties of other problems. You may have an answer for everything but nobody cares to consult you. That is another problem. You find yourself helpless, for no fault of yours. You can live a very simple, clean life, where you care for people, without trampling upon others' toes, but at the same time you see yourself helpless. You are helpless because you have to respond to every situation that you come to know. Further, as a member of contemporary society, you cannot avoid knowing.

How can we handle this helplessness? If it can be handled, it is no longer a helpless situation. How does one look at situations and yet feel that one is not helpless? Before we deal with that, let us see how each one lives his or her life.

We live in our own world. Even though there is a world available for public

appreciation, public gaze, still each one lives a subjective life. When you see me, the Swami, I am the only world for you at that time; there is no other world. In fact, what you confront is the world. As I talk to you, if you think of something else, then that something else becomes your world.

When you see me, how do you see me? Do you see me as I am? Physically if you are not color blind and your eyes and ears can function well, then you can have some objective idea about the Swami. However, the Swami is not just the physical body, much less the dress that he has; he is more than that. There is someone in this body who is now talking to you and responding to you. How do you know this person? How do you respond to this person? It is always with your scales of judgement.

In today's competitive society, each member seems to be out to get the other. That is how it looks, if the behaviour of people is an indication. You are therefore always wary. You are always ready to defend yourself. You are always ready to fight. You pick up this attitude right from your childhood.

We start our life as a helpless but totally trusting baby. We do not know whether we are with the mother or with some one else; we are helpless. We are helpless when we face certain psychological situations that disturb us, that undermine our trust. The distrust later becomes the core of the child's personality. The distrust is confirmed when we go to school because there are a lot of bullies around who are out to get us. All these influence our response as an adult. When we see people in the society, everybody seems to be out for the kill. Survival itself becomes a challenge. It is not very different in an affluent society. When there is competition, we are braced for any onslaught. We may be taken advantage of, exploited, taken for a ride, and we do not want to be taken for a ride. Therefore, we are wary all the time. It is this cautious person who deals with everybody else, deals with the Swami also. Our distrust and disbelief towards others puts us in a vulnerable situation.

Everyone has a need for someone who is not judgmental, with whom one can relax. It is very difficult to meet such a person in the world. This also makes you vulnerable. It makes you ripe for exploitation. With all your fears, your needs, distrust and disbelief, when you see the Swami, well, he is not going to be the Swami that he is. He is the Swami that you think he is.

This is true of everything else. It is one of the main reasons why the human mind loves nature. The ocean and the mountains, the sky and the stars become so important to us because these are the only ones we can approach without our prejudices. I ask you, “Are these alone considered nature? Is the human being outside nature? Who said that a human being is not nature?” If animals, trees and mountains are part of nature, how is it that such an eloquent species as a human being is not part of nature? My nose, my breathing, my hunger, are they not nature? My thinking, my anger, my love, are these not nature? They are all *prakṛti*, nature. Who says they are outside nature? When human beings also form nature, why do I run away from them to see a mountain? Why should I be under such pressure, that I should seek mountains, valleys, trees and flowers? It is because, other members of my species have hurt me and I can no longer trust them or relax in their presence. It is because mountains and forests are the only ones left for us, which we can look at without prejudice. There again, if you are an environmentalist you have a problem. You would see the mountains and say, “My god! What have they done to this mountain? This is outrageous. They have made it completely bald.” Destruction of nature is another problem because of a lack of environmental awareness in people. Thus, even the mountains can drive you crazy these days. Then, you have to choose some special mountains. You can see how the safe world is getting smaller and smaller for oneself. However, just as we see nature without prejudices, we can also see the world that is available for public perception without subjectivity.

When you look at a mountain, it does not demand or threaten you. You can be as you are, at home with yourself. You accept yourself in the appreciation of the beauty of the mountain. You do not want the mountain to be different, the animals to be different, the location to be different, or the mountain peak to be different. You take the mountain as it is. It seems to resolve all the demands of the demanding person in you for the time being. You come to appreciate yourself, which you had not done earlier. You say that the mountain is beautiful and visit the mountain again and again. However, it is not the mountain that you love, but rather, it is yourself you love when you see the mountain. In the experience of the mountain you see yourself, relatively at least, a pleased person whose demands are silenced and whose self-judgement is resolved for the time being. The beauty is so captivating that there is no room for you to be judgemental; the mountain does not let you have your smallness for the time being. It is able to capture your imagination and you find yourself letting go of all your notions; you see yourself as beautiful.

When you see yourself beautiful, you say that the mountain is beautiful. When you say that the mountain is beautiful it is non-Vedanta. Vedanta says, “When you say that the mountain is beautiful, it means that you are beautiful.” That is Vedanta. When you express that the mountain is beautiful, then you become a poet. You can write a poem about the mountain. Vedanta is not poetry. In poetry there are some facts, but you need Vedanta to understand those facts.

In any captivating situation you see yourself as a non-judgmental person. It means that you are capable of being non judgmental. You neither judge the object of captivation nor yourself. If you judge the object, you also judge yourself. Every judgement leads to self-judgment. When you are not judging the mountain, when you let the mountain be as it is, then you are not judging yourself also, at least for the moment.

When you see yourself as a non-judgmental person, you are in harmony with what you face. It is something that is experientially known to you, but not recognized immediately. When you can relate to the mountain like this, you can also relate in the same way to any other person or situation. If it is possible in one situation, it is also possible in any other situation. We have a basis now to understand ourselves.

When you see yourself as a non-demanding person in spite of yourself, in spite of your prejudices, your likes and dislikes, your demands, then you have made it. This is what you seek in life, after all. What else are you trying to accomplish in life? If you do not need to prove yourself to be somebody, if you do not need to be always cautious and wary in different situations, then you have grown. As long as you have distrust and demands, you are yet to grow. People say ‘I walk on eggshells.’ You are not walking on eggshells, you are in an eggshell, and you have to come out of the eggshell. Your own prejudices confine you, imprison you—they are the fetters.

Your life should be such that you understand facts and see what is in front of you as it is. You need not know the person you face, but you need not look at the person with your prejudices. Even if you come to know something about the person, why should you interpret anything? A person is what he or she is because of his or her background. Understanding and accepting a person as he or she is, helps you get out of the shell of your private world and into the public world. The public world is very bright and beautiful; it is what is, whereas the

private world is not. Our struggles in life are mainly to get out of our own private world and its prejudices.

We think like Indians, we think like Americans, Europeans, but we do not think like thinkers. This is our problem. One can dress like *sādhus*, like Indians. It is welcome; it is cultural. Every culture should be preserved as it is; we need not disturb it at all. Each culture has its own beauty, language, dialect, music and it should be preserved; it is the wealth of humanity. You may not understand it, but it does not matter; it must be preserved as it is. Culture implies language, dress, food, the way of eating food, the way of cooking, the manner of talking, the way of greeting, the way of living in a family and so on. Even ornaments and hairstyle are culture, so they can be as they are. Therefore, everything is cultural. However, there is no Indian thinking, unless there is an Indian truth. There is no American thinking unless there is an American truth. If we are dealing with public truth, then, we should think like thinkers.

We need insight to understand our own prejudices, to know which are prejudices and which are not. To have that insight one needs to objectively look at oneself and the world. Having looked at yourself, look at the world and bring that knowledge to bear on situations that call for responses from you. There can be millions of situations. They need not make you feel helpless. What is required is understanding and knowledge that is distinct from any kind of action.