

# Freedom in Relationship<sup>1</sup>

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Our interaction with the world and with people is inevitable. Relating to the world is not an option, nor is it a matter for concern. It is how we manage and respond to different situations that really counts. We can free ourselves from relating to one thing, but we will simply be relating to something else. We cannot free ourselves from all relationships. But it is a different matter if we free ourselves from a constantly irritating relationship that has proven to be unfeasible to continue.

Generally, we want to free ourselves from a relationship because of our emotional incapacity to deal with it, which may be indicative of a problem. It may be the same with reference to any form of relationship—nothing will last. We need to learn how to manage our expectations of others. Also we must know that if others have a problem, it is their problem. Let them manage it. If you can help them manage, please help them. Otherwise, forget about it. In relating, we need to be free. Further freedom is only when there is freedom from agenda.

## **Avoiding friction in relating.**

I am now going to talk about what avoids friction in relating. The word “agenda” is a positive word, not a negative word. It is something to be commented upon because we have agenda. When we are called for a meeting, we have agenda—“These are the items we are going to discuss.”

With reference to individuals, we have certain expectations. There is nothing wrong in that, but these expectations are not merely expectations; they are definite—I have concluded that this person must be like this. And “this person must be like this” is what I call agendum. It is not proper or correct to make a conclusion like that about somebody. There is no person at all that fits into a category.

Even to categorize a person as a criminal is improper. We can only say, “He is a habitual offender.” There is a person who is constantly committing crimes; therefore, we declare to the world that he is a criminal. Those are descriptive words and descriptive words are preferable to a single word like “criminal.” When we say, “He is a habitual offender,” that means that he is given to the habit of committing offenses. We don’t know why; it looks like he is given to this habit. Then we can find out what the causes are. But we cannot say he is a criminal.

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<sup>1</sup> Excerpt from the forthcoming booklet *Freedom in Relationship* by Swami Dayananda Saraswati, classes in August 2003 at Arsha Vidya Gurukulam, Saylorsburg, PA, transcribed and edited by Sharon Cliff

If he is a criminal it means that the person's legs, his hands, and his every action must be criminal. But there is no such person. Even when we speak of a criminal lawyer, there again, the person is not a criminal lawyer all the time. The person is not a criminal lawyer to his or her spouse. Criminal lawyer means that the person is an expert in criminal law. People are just people. We cannot bring a person categorically under one heading. We cannot say this person should be like this. That is what I call having an agendum. It is wrong.

**Grant freedom to the other person to think the way he or she thinks.**

All individuals are given to perceptions. They are free to have their perceptions. They are free to have their opinions. They are free to think differently and do differently. One should be ready for that. In relating and in marriage, it is so important to understand this.

In an Indian marriage, there is a sentence that states: "I give you my heart." Both say this at the same time. Then the next sentence states: "Let your mind be in keeping with my mind." Here it means granting freedom to the other person to think the way that person thinks. That is the proper translation. May you approve of my way of thinking as long as it is proper (*dharmic*), of course. It is not merely thinking; doing is also involved. So may you approve of my way of thinking and acting. That is a prayer for both parties. May each of them approve of the other's thinking and doing and help and validate each other. Thereby, both of them will grow. That is how there is freedom in a relationship.

Let the other person think the way he or she thinks. Even if you know that the person is wrong, it is better that he or she discovers what is right. You need not point it out. Heaven is not going to come falling down. That validation is important, and it is mutual. It is never one sided. Anything one sided is not going to work in a relationship. Therefore, at least on my part, I should grant freedom to others to think the way they think and learn from their mistakes, so that I don't commit those same mistakes myself. If they commit mistakes, I should thank them. If you commit a mistake, that is good because I will learn from you; I won't commit the same one. Therefore, in relating, granting freedom to the other person seems to be the most crucial thing.

**We tend to internalize people that are a source of frustration**

One good thing is: the people that we actively relate to are outside. When I say outside, I mean they are outside our physical body and senses. This 'outside' is a confusing word because we are both outside and inside. We are outside New York but inside the United States. Both outside and inside are relative.

There are people that we are actively related to and people that we are not actively related to. But, really, we are related to all of them because they form the contemporary society. We may not be actively involved with any of them, but, nevertheless, they affect us in one way or the other. We all live a connected life—everybody affects everybody else, and everybody is affected by everybody else. Every person forms one of the members of the community, and each person contributes something and also consumes something. Sometimes we consume more and contribute less; sometimes we consume less and contribute more.

For instance, the Americans form four point five percent of the total population of humanity on this planet, and they consume twenty-five percent of fossilized fuel, oil, gas, and coal. Good or bad, these are the statistics. Also Americans are, in one way or the other, contributing to the wealth of China and also, in a smaller way, to the wealth of India. Therefore, we are all mutually related—everybody is affected by everybody else.

Even unknown people, who are not actively involved in our day-to-day life, may indirectly affect us in some small way. The people with whom we are actively involved and with whom we need to relate, such as a son, daughter, mother, father, other relatives, friends, employers, employees, co-workers, clients, and business competitors are all external to our body. Whether they are sitting beside us, in the next room, or in a different city—let them be anywhere—every one of them is external.

These external people do not really affect us physically unless we are sitting near when somebody sneezes or coughs; then, in terms of health, we can be affected. But people who are away from us cannot physically affect us. Then in what way can people affect us? Well, they can affect us genetically; there are a lot of things that we inherit. But we cannot hold them responsible for our genetic problems because they themselves have been handed down their genetics. The original genetic problem is from God alone. We cannot say they are totally responsible for what we are.

People who are external to us can affect us when they become a source of frustration and irritation. If they are to our liking and contribute to our well being, they don't bother us; but if they are not to our liking and they don't contribute to our well being, they do bother us. The person who says, "I am not bothered by any of them; I don't care," is constrained to say, "I don't care" because he or she cares too much. That is an expression of frustration.

**We have a perception of people, and that perception affects us.**

When we accuse people, they have somehow affected us. More often than not, people affect us emotionally. We have a certain perception of them, and we are affected by that perception. You may say, “My perception is true,” but if you were to ask them how they view you, they would have their own perception of you. It is amazing! They think you are impossible; you think they are impossible; and you both feel justified in your perceptions. There may be some truth in the perception, or there may be no truth at all. A person may be viewed in a certain way and feel, “I am wrongly viewed.” Therefore, there is a response, and then that response is viewed with surprise, and then that in turn is viewed with a certain despair, consternation, or whatever. It goes on building up in each person.

One thing we all know: it takes two hands to clap. Similarly, it takes two people to have these clashes of perception. Both people seem to have a basis for their perception, and both argue that they are telling the truth. So here we have a clear-cut case of lack of communication. There are two perceptions that are entirely different. One person doesn't allow him or herself to understand what exactly the other person's perception is. And the other person doesn't seem to make him or herself understood, even though he or she says, “I have given enough time to make myself understood.” All this will be there. But the net result is there is no communication.

Both people feel justified in their perception, and there is a permanent source of frustration, an irritant; and that irritant is the person sitting there inside our mind. Sometimes, it is an in-law. Brothers and sisters could also be the irritant. There could be a sibling problem. Even Father and Mother, who are connected to the sibling, could be the irritant. Perhaps the mother was partial to somebody—“She was never fair to me; she allowed the boys to get away with everything and went after us girls.”

There is a perception in all of this, and there may be some truth in it, but usually it is the child's perception; then that perception gets confirmed in later experiences. It is like having a wound on our foot. We find that it gets hurt again and again. If our foot had not been injured in the first place, it wouldn't hurt when it hits something; but if it has already been injured and it hits something, the wounded part gets hurt all over again. The wound opens up. Thus, it looks as though the wounded always gets re-wounded and the hurt always gets re-hurt.

There is a build up all the time. And we have a complete set of arguments to prove why that person has always been like this. But whatever it is, whether there is truth in it or not, one thing is certain: somebody outside bothers us. That is the truth. Everyone who bothers us is outside, including our mother, father, son, daughter, and spouse.

Some of these people that bother us are people for whom we have love and affection, like our father, mother, or sister. If it is an in-law, that love, affection, and care may not be there. They are indirectly connected to us; therefore, they need to be dealt with a little differently. We are talking about all the people with whom we are directly connected. There are people with whom we can continue our connection, and there are people with whom we can snap our connection. If the relationship is bothersome, we can snap our connection. But then we cannot snap the connection with our mother, father, brother, or sister. These are all inborn connections. We have love, care, and affection for them.

There may be a wish that is unfulfilled and that cannot be fulfilled. If it is a child's wish, it cannot be fulfilled anymore, unless the person relives his or her entire life and Mother is now more enlightened. If we put the clock back and we become the child and Mother is more enlightened, then everything would be entirely different. But then, there would probably be some other problem.

There may also be a wish that can be fulfilled. It could be a current-situation wish—"I wish my mother and father were different." Their behavior could change; their value system could change; certain habits could change. I want them to change. Thus, I have a wish, and I am convinced that my wishes and my wants are legitimate. However, if I were to consult them, they would definitely have a list of wants with reference to me. They want me to change. They say that my perception is wrong. Mother and Father say, "We are always taken wrongly." It is an endless thing.

**Lord Krishna advises us to keep the external objects and people external.**

What emerges from all this is: we have to help ourselves by seeing that Mother and Father are outside. Lord Krishna gives us some advice. At the end of the fifth chapter of the *Gīta*, keeping in mind what he is going to talk about in the sixth chapter, he gives us advice on how to meditate.

Lord Krishna says, "*Sparsān bāhyān bahiḥ kṛtvā prāṇāpānau nāsābhyantaracāriṇau samau kṛtvā muniḥ mokṣaparāyaṇaḥ*" and so on. He talks about how one should do meditation and contemplation. He says, "Before you contemplate, make sure you free yourself from these few things, and watch your breathing. Let it be rhythmic (*prāṇāpānau samau kṛtvā*)." Then the mind becomes quiet. In fact, *you* become quiet.

Then he says, "*Bāhyāḥ*." *Bāhya* means external to my senses and body. You are *bāhya* to me; I am *bāhya* to you. Your father, your mother, the Sun, the Moon, the stars, and the whole world are external. They are *bāhya*. He says, "*Bāhyān bahiḥ kṛtvā*"—making the external objects are external. What is *bāhya* can be an object; it can be a person; it can be a house. *Bāhyān sparsān sprīyante iti sparsāḥ* the objects that you come across through your senses, keep them external. Afterwards, meditate!

This is redundant advice. If you have something inside, I can say, “Keep it outside.” But I can’t say keep the things outside that are already outside. I need not be told to keep my father external. He is already external. “Keep Mother external.” She is already external. Father is external; Mother is external; the Sun is external; and the Moon is external. All these are external. If all these are external, I need not be told to keep them external.

If some of these people are inside, we can be told to keep them outside, but we are told to keep the external things external, and they are already external. Perhaps, Lord Krishna meant something else. All the commentaries will say, “Keep all the external things external; don’t carry them inside.” For me, that is not enough. It has to be understood thoroughly. Things are already external. Why should I be told, “Keep them external”? Also, why should I be partial to some of them?

What is to be kept external is not something that is already external. The mountains are external; they remain external. The stars are external; they remain external unless you don’t like your star (*nakṣatra*). Then I have to say, “Keep it external.” The ocean is external, the Moon is external, and the Sun is external.”

**We have allowed people to “get under our skin.”**

There is an English expression: “Getting under my skin.” If somebody is getting under our skin, that means they are bothering us, causing anger or irritation. If somebody is getting under our skin, we need to get him or her out. People that get under our skin are internal. We need to keep them external. This is a necessity. Some of them are unnamed; some of them have names. Some people cannot handle men who wear one earring. Just the look of them is enough to upset the person. Like this, a lot of people are within us. They form a population.

There is an outside and an inside society. Outside there is a benign society of people who don’t bother us. It is the inside people that bother us. Unwittingly, we have allowed all the people that disturb us to enter into us. But they cannot enter without our permission. Then the Swami comes along and says, “You are fullness! You are happiness!” What happiness can there be with all these irritating people inside?

So what shall we do? First, before we proceed, we have to know how we allowed these people to enter into us. “Swamiji, that is because I love them.” It is not that you love them, therefore they enter. You hate them, therefore they enter. “Originally, I loved them.” What happened to that love? “It turned into hatred!” Love cannot turn into hatred. Love remains love. How did you convert love into hatred? “Because I cannot accept the person’s behavior!”

Please consult that person about whether he or she can accept *your* behavior. “I don’t care.” That means you care. Consulting the other person is a good thing to do to get a good look at yourself from his or her perspective. It can be very humbling and enlightening, too. However, you need not do that. But there is one thing that you can do. You said that you allowed that love to turn into hatred because the person’s behavior wasn’t acceptable. All right, the person’s behavior wasn’t acceptable. Is the whole person unacceptable or just the behavior unacceptable? We are great at lumping.

A particular behavior is not the person. The person is much more than a particular behavior. And this particular behavior itself is questionable because it is your perception of the behavior. From that person’s standpoint, it is normal; there is nothing untoward, unbecoming, or strange. That person would say, “I didn’t mean anything; I didn’t say anything; I didn’t do anything,” and he or she would mean it one hundred percent.

**People have a background that causes them to behave the way they do.**

You have to say, “Swamiji, I saw the person doing that; I think the person is unconscious.” Saying that the person is unconscious is better. That means you acknowledge the person’s limitations. The person is suffering from something; therefore, you become more perceptive, and that perception is an entirely different type of perception. Your response becomes a two-step response, not a single-step response.

A one-step response is responding to the behavior according to your perception. A two-step response is going behind your perception and questioning—“Why does this person behave like this? Is there anything wrong? Maybe I perceived wrongly.” Or perhaps the perception is true, according to you. Then ask a question—“What is this pressure? What is the cause?” However, you need not find out what the cause is. That is the job of a therapist. In fact, that isn’t even the job of a therapist. That is the job of the person who goes to the therapist.

The person has to talk, talk, talk and discover the cause of his or her behavior. The therapist only has to point out the problem. At least for you, it is clear that there is a background behind the behavior; and everybody has a background. This is how you become a saintly human being. To be saintly is simply to appreciate and care for the other person with whom you are involved. And *Vedānta* is meant for a saintly person.

One doesn’t turn saintly overnight. Saintliness is decided by being human, and to be human is to appreciate the background of the person. What is the background? Simply appreciating that there is a background is enough. Your response is a two-step response, not a single-step response; and that makes a person human. Generally, people keep on responding with a single-step response. A single-step response is common to all human beings.

Therefore, number one, my perception may be wrong; and, even if it is right, that person has a background that causes the person to behave the way he or she does. I have my background, and others have their background. This is a cognitive change, a behavioral change, a response change. One has to be deliberate in this. One doesn't change overnight. People love to practice, and this is something to practice.

It is clear: in this two-step response, the person sitting inside us goes back to his or her place outside. If we have love, care, and affection, the person doesn't bother us. When we cannot change the person, we feel helpless; and this feeling of frustration and helplessness bothers us. It will bother us, and it will continue bothering us because we have allowed the person to get under our skin.

**We are judged on the basis of our response.**

When we respond to somebody's words and behavior, we are going to be judged on the basis of that response. We have no way of stopping that. Nobody bothers about our knowledge or our accomplishments. When we respond with a single-step response—someone said something and we immediately respond: “How can you say that?” and the other person also responds with a single-step response—there is no communication. This is what is happening. One may have love, care, friendship, concern, and affection behind this single-step response, but all these are lying there buried; they are not recognized. Our response alone is going to be taken into account.

We feel that we are not understood by the other person at all, and the other person's response makes us respond again. There is every reason for estrangement and alienation. One's bond of love and concern doesn't seem to have any say in his or her response to the other person. That is a most unfortunate thing. Many a good relationship is broken because of this single-step response. A two-step response, however, will change the whole situation.

**Everybody's behavior has a background.**

Without a background, there is no behavior. There is a cultural background, a family background, a childhood background, and there is a background of perception, which has its own background. So this background is the cause for the person to say something, do something, or respond in a given way that is not acceptable to us.

If I have the inner leisure to appreciate the other person's background or to recognize that there is a background, then I can respond with care, concern, love, and understanding. I can simply be human. In order to bring that concern and love out of me, I need to step back and appreciate that there is a background. That is all I require. I need not know what that background is.



For example, a father, who is holding his baby son, is so proud that his son is kicking his face. He says, “See how strong this boy is. He is growing so well.” The father is proud of his son’s kicking. Why? Because there is a two-step response. The father appreciates the innocence behind the child’s kicking. The baby boy doesn’t know that kicking is bad or that he is kicking his father; there is innocence, and the father has the leisure to appreciate that innocence. Therefore, he is able to enjoy the kicking. Or at least, if he doesn’t enjoy it, there is no problematic response to the kicking. He appreciates the cause behind it, and his response is based entirely upon that. Like this, one can be totally objective.

To live a sane life, a life of reality, we must reduce the subjectivity in our relationships. When we live a life of subjectivity, we fight our own shadows. We fight what we have projected on the other person. The other person becomes the locus. We project something on the person that is not totally true, and then we fight against that. We are projecting our own shadows; then we fight against our own creation, our own projection. There is no reality in that. There is no relating either. Therefore, it is imperative for us to appreciate the fact that there is a background behind everyone’s behavior.

That leisure that the father had responding to his baby son’s kicking is not available to him when the same son, who is now twenty years old, says or does something that is comparable to that kicking. He doesn’t kick, but he says something to that effect. That is enough. But there has to be a reason why the son is angry. There is a background; and, more often than not, the father is part of that background. If the father had the leisure that he had when his son was a child, he would have appreciated that there was a background behind his son’s behavior. But the father expected his son to know better and to behave better now. That was his expectation, his agendum, which is fine. There is nothing wrong in expecting somebody to behave in a particular way. In fact, without expectations, we cannot live our life. But we must be ready for surprises.

**We need to be objective in our perception by constantly saying to ourselves, “This is what I perceive; I may be wrong.”**

All right, we have certain expectations—we expect people to behave in a certain manner. But we must be ready for a surprise. Then there is the possibility of having leisure. The readiness for a surprise is objectivity, and also the readiness to be wrong is objectivity. When you can say, “This is my perception; I may be wrong,” you are objective. That we perceive is one thing; but our perception may not be totally objective. It may be half or totally subjective.

We need not say, “I may be wrong. I may be wrong.” A readiness to be surprised is good enough. That is what I would say is objectivity. Objectivity means that there is more God (*Īśvara*) in your life. Subjectivity means that there is more *you* and less *Īśvara*. What *you*? The ignorant, confused *you*. And the ignorant, confused, mistaken, erroneous *you* is subjective. There is more *Īśvara* in your life when you are objective. At least you can understand what objectivity is. That is enough.

In order to appreciate the other person's background, I first need to know that the other person has a background; then I need to know that my perception is not always correct. In my day-to-day relating, I need to bring this to bear upon all my responses, especially if there is an unpleasant, angry, or disagreeable response on my part. Then, immediately, I need to be cautious—"The other person has his or her own background, and my perception may be wrong." Then I am human.

**We have to become familiar with the simple, non-demanding, appreciative person by "downloading" our prejudices.**

The population obtaining within our head is not only outside; it is also inside. There are a lot of people and things outside because we have no expectation or agenda for them. There are also a lot of people and things inside for which we have expectations and agenda. The mountains remain outside, unless we want them to be different. Suppose you say, "Swamiji, whenever I see those mountains, I feel sad. I saw them twenty years ago, and they were so green. What happened to them? They are bald now." That means that the mountains are no longer outside; they have gone inside. The stars are outside because we don't want them to be different. People are outside because we don't want them to be different.

If we have a prejudice against certain types of people, that means those people have gone inside. People can have a gender prejudice, an age prejudice, a color prejudice, a nationality prejudice, or a cultural prejudice in a subtle or very pronounced way. There is even religious prejudice. By religion I means theology. I don't accept theologies; I find them fallacious and I see that theologians are destroying people by propagating those theologies. But still, I have no prejudice against a religion or a religious person.

If there is a prejudice, we have to get rid of it. It won't go away unless we do something about it. There is a technique, a trick that we can use to "unload" or "download" those people, things, and prejudices from our head. If we are objective, we can do it. If, after "downloading" them, they are still inside, then it is necessary to "download" them again. Every day we need to do this "downloading" until they are no longer there.

Lord Krishna, in the *Gītā*, advised us to do this "downloading" before meditation. What is outside has to be kept outside. First, think of those things that do not disturb you and for which you have no agenda. Think of the mountains that do not evoke a demand or a wish in you. Those mountains are outside. Think of the trees, the birds, the ocean. You are now a simple cognitive, appreciative, non-demanding, objective person minus demands. I want you to become familiar with yourself as this person. This is the basic *you*.

You come across yourself as the basic person only when you meet with something that does not evoke the demanding, wanting, wishing *you*. The basic person is just a simple conscious person, who is one-hundred-percent objective, who is free from tension, who is non-wishing, non-wanting, non-demanding, and non-judging. It is that person who is related to *Īśvara*. What *is*, is *Īśvara*! You are *cognitive* of what is. You do not *respond* to what is. You need to practice this two-step response and bring more *Īśvara* into your life. You need to have that leisure.

**“Downloading” people, things, and prejudices from our head.**

In meditation, we sit erect and close our eyes. When we close our eyes, we can think of anything. When we open our eyes, we think of what we see. That is why in meditation our thoughts can go anywhere. We can imagine whatever we need to in order to become familiar with the non-demanding person. Think of the mountains, the trees, the birds, and the ocean. Think of horses grazing on green grass. The non-demanding person is relating to the mountains, the trees, the birds and so on. If we understand how to do this, we can bring that non-demanding person to bear upon people in general.

Just think of people—black/white, male/female, of different physiognomy [physical appearance], different cultures, different religions, and different nationalities. Can you relate to them as you relate to the mountains? Can the same non-demanding person that relates to the mountains relate to these people as imagined? Can that same person be there? Become familiar with that person. By practice, if that same non-demanding person can be there, then you are finished “downloading” all the prejudices.

We have to become familiar with that simple, conscious, non-demanding, appreciative, cognitive person. It takes practice. Bring that simple, non-demanding person to bear upon the people in your inner circle. It is a concentric circle with a widening radius. Within the inner radius are Father and Mother. Extend the radius a little; then siblings—brother and sister. Extend it further; then uncles, cousins, and so on. Extend it further; then wife and children. Extend it further; then in-laws come into the picture. Don’t be afraid of them. Deal with them! “Download” them! Then there are the employers and employees and so on. Then there is the circle of friends. You can see the widening circles. You need to do this act of “downloading” every day until you can be objective towards all of them.

And we can help ourselves with a general prayer: “Oh, Lord, grant me the freedom, serenity, and maturity to accept gracefully what I cannot change. May I have the courage and will to change what I need to and what I can. May I have the wisdom to see the difference between what I can and what I cannot change. May I have freedom in relationships.”

This person, who grants freedom to others, is free. To the extent we give freedom to the other person, to that extent we are free in relating to that person. This person, who grants freedom, is objective, simple, and free from tension. This is the basic person. One has to be familiar with this person who has the privilege of willing, wishing, knowing, doing, and relating.

