

Satsang with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati
Arsha Vidya Gurukulam
More on Karma and Duty

Question

The performance of duty often entails a certain amount of pain. How do we reconcile the two?

Answer

While we perform our duty, or do something for others, a certain amount of pain is involved. We have to draw a boundary as to how much pain we can take without hurting ourselves. We all differ in our capacity to bear pain. The threshold of pain tolerance differs from person to person. Our threshold is defined when we begin to hurt or react to a particular level of pain. The more we are able to put up with the pain without reacting, the better it is. One value discussed in Vedanta is *titikṣā* or forbearance, the ability to suffer pain. In the Vivekacūḍāmaṇi (24), it is defined as:

sahanam sarvaduḥkhānām apratīkārāpūrvakam
cintāvilāparahitaṃ sā titikṣā nigadyate

Objectivity to all pains without any anxiety, complaint or any attempt of revenge is said to be *titikṣā*.

The ideal situation is to put up with all the *duḥkha* without complaining, retaliating or lamenting. Many a time, we do put up with pain, but we lament, or are concerned that the pain will recur. Therefore, the pain remains with us into the future and continues to bother us. This is called ‘*cintā*’. We have to learn to put up with the pain or hardship and let it take its own course. We can take it in our stride and continue to do what we have to do. Otherwise, this pain or discomfort becomes an obstacle to us, distracting us from our goal.

For example, when we are doing *japa* or meditation, some discomfort or pain may be there in our body while seated. This should not distract us from doing meditation. Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gītā (2-14):

***mātrāsparsāstu kaunteya śītoṣṇasukhaduḥkhadāḥ
āgamāpāyino'nityāstāṁstitikṭasva bhārata***

Oh son of *Kuntī*, the contacts of the sense organs with the sensory world giving rise to cold and heat, and pleasure and pain, have the nature of coming and going and are not constant. Oh descendant of *Bharata*, endure them.

When we encounter the world, we are bound to experience heat and cold, pleasure and pain, honor and dishonor, the pleasant and the unpleasant, and the desirable and the undesirable, to which we react. Lord Krishna says do not react. These things are not permanent, *āgamāpāyinaḥ anityāḥ*. Let them come and go. Put up with it, *tāṁstitikṭasva*. Therefore, we have to develop an attitude of not retaliating when we are faced with discomfort. If we are indifferent to the pain, we have avoided at least one source of distraction.

Pratīkāra means retaliation or reaction. When something unpleasant happens, I react immediately to make it pleasant. If it is too cold I turn the heat up, and if it is too warm I turn the heat down. It is in the nature of things that something or the other will keep happening. If we pay too much attention to them and keep adjusting things, we will never have time to do what we need to do. Retaliation or reaction is perhaps all right in our day-to-day life, but not for a seeker who is devoted to the pursuit of knowledge. If he is too sensitive to these things, he will have no time to do what needs to be done.

Vedanta teaches us to put up with things *apratīkārāpūrvakam*, so that we are not distracted from doing what we need to do. Therefore, we have to let them go, we have to become hardened, physically as well as emotionally. All the values of Vedanta are towards this one goal. A Vedantin is also interested in renunciation for the same reason – that he is left to do what he needs to do. When Vedanta asks us to put up with things, it is so that we are not distracted, but there is a limit to the extent to which we can put up with pain. Putting up with pain does not mean hurting ourselves in the process. We might bear as much as we can, but if we do not have limits, we cannot live. Thus, we have to draw boundaries from our own experiences.

Question

When somebody is causing me pain, should I wait until I reach my threshold of pain tolerance before I do something?

Answer

When somebody causes you pain you have to talk to that person and let him know the effect of his actions on you. Perhaps some people do not know the effect their actions have on others. I may not be affected by a certain behavior, and therefore, I may think that you are also not affected by that behavior. Since different people have different levels of sensitivity, they may have to be told how their words and actions affect others. Rather than asking, “Why did you do this?” we should say, “What you did has affected me in this way”. By saying this, we are at least giving the other person some leeway to say, “I did not mean it”. He will also know that this should not be repeated. When communication does not work, you can defend yourself by creating a physical distance from the people who cause you pain.

Question

If we are limitless, why do you talk about duty?

Answer

We identify with our body-mind complex and our ego, and believe that we are limited individuals. We have to prepare our mind slowly to discover the fact that we are limitless. The purpose of *karma*, duty etc. is to bring about this disposition of the mind. That is why we need to do our duty.

Karma, duty etc. take for granted that I am the ego, that I am limited, bound and needy. We have to begin this journey from where we are now, and ultimately discover the fact that we are limitless. For this recognition to take place, our personality should become *sāttvik*, calm, composed and pure. Until then, we cannot recognize the fact that we are limitless because our mind does not have that orientation. The purification of our mind, which is the primary instrument, is very important for this discovery. With this, our ego slowly becomes *sāttvik* and we reach a point when we recognize the true nature of the self as being limitlessness.

Question

Would you agree that competition help us excel?

Answer

Competition makes us excel, but at a price. We become more aggressive. Why should there be competition to excel? It is not necessary that we must be better than somebody else to excel. We can have the value for excellence in other ways as well. We can compete with ourselves and do better than we did earlier. Another way would be to compete with the good

qualities of a person. That will be a healthy competition. It will inspire us to become better than we now are¹.

¹ Satsang transcribed and edited by Chaya Raj, KK Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.