

Satsang with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati

Surrender and Freedom

1 of 6

We appear to be limited

Freedom is very dear to us. Each one of us wants to be free. There is a natural love for freedom for the simple reason that freedom is our nature. There is love for one's own nature; it is innate. Therefore, the love for freedom and happiness is natural because it is our nature. Unfortunately, we find ourselves to be not free, but bound. We find ourselves limited in many ways and we cannot accept our limitations. We cannot accept any kind of limitation in ourselves simply because limitation is also not our nature. Hence, there is resistance, a non-acceptance of any limitation.

I find myself to be limited and bound by many laws. Very often, I find that I am not able to do what I want to do and that I am required to do many things, which I do not care to do. For example, I want to drive my car at 120 miles per hour on a road where the speed limit is 65 miles per hour. I start speeding, but slow down when I find others suddenly obeying traffic rules and slowing down because of a patrolman nearby. Even when I am speeding, there is fear because there is a law and I find myself bound by the law. It seems like there are laws everywhere and in every field of life. For instance, there are laws that are evident at the dining table every day. These are the laws that determine what I should eat or should not eat. Very often, I am obliged not to eat what I like to eat because I am told that what I like is not good for me. Then again, I like to sleep late, but I am told that it is not good for me; instead, I am expected to wake up early, meditate, and exercise. I find that I am constantly required to do what I don't care to do, and am restricted from doing what I would rather do. There seems to be tremendous control over my freedom. I always feel as though I am bound and limited and I do not like it.

We are limited in time, place, and attributes

I find that I am limited in terms of time, place, and attributes. I know that I was born and that someday I will die. I do not like that; I do not want to die. When a person seems to want to die, it is because of some difficulty the person cannot overcome. There may be physical pain or some other insurmountable problem in life. If you remove those problems, that person will not want to die

either. Nobody wants to die. It is only out of helplessness that a person may say that he wants to die. Death is contrary to our nature. I find myself to be a mortal being and don't like any of the messengers of death like old age, diseases etc. I do not like the process of aging. That is why there is a fascination for heaven where the *devatās* or gods, the denizens of heaven, always remain young. They do not suffer old age or death. We generally associate old age with helplessness and a proximity to death. That is why etiquette demands that we not ask a person his or her age. Nobody wants to grow old. These are some realities of life, which we call laws. There seems to be a resistance towards these realities in my mind.

I am limited in place. The limitation is that I can be in only one place at any time. Very often I wish to do many things at the same time. It would be nice if I could be here at the ashram and also elsewhere. But that is not possible; in order to be in one place, I have to give up the benefits of being in a different place. Sometimes, I feel guilty that I am in one place and not at some other place where I should be. Therefore, I am aware that I am limited in terms of place.

Being limited in my capacities is another limitation I experience. Many capacities are given to us: *jñāna śakti* or the capacity to know, *icchā śakti* or the capacity to desire or to will, and *kriyā śakti* or the capacity to act. However, these capacities are also limited. I find myself limited with reference to knowledge, regardless of how much I know. Even if I read the entire newspaper, I can never know everything that is happening in the world. Often, I find that people know more than I do in every subject. There is limitation in terms of my ability to act because my skills are limited. While I enjoy the power to know, to will, and to act, it is limited in scope. I am not happy with my limited capacities.

We are not comfortable with our limitations

There would be nothing wrong with limitation if I were comfortable with the fact that I feel limited, bound or controlled. Vedanta would then not be necessary. For instance, Vedanta is not necessary for animals because they seem to be comfortable being what they are. We human beings, however, need Vedanta because we are not comfortable with our sense of limitation or bondage and are constantly seeking freedom from it. Once we understand the nature of this bondage, we will understand the nature of freedom and see how surrender can become the means for freedom.

Our sense of limitation is due to ignorance

Is this bondage a reality about me? Am I really limited or bound? Or do I merely feel that I am limited and bound? The answer is that the sense of limitation and bondage is not a reality about me. It is a notion, which has arisen because of a certain perception I have about myself. The perception is that I am this body, mind, and intellect. My identification with the body, mind, and intellect gives rise to the perception that I am the ego, the individual being. This is my perception of myself. Vedanta teaches us that this perception is not a fact. The body we are not; the mind we are not, and the intellect we are not. We possess them, but these are but the means that are given to us in order that we may live our life and in order that we may grow and become happy; we are not them. However, we do not know this and take this body-mind complex to be our true self. In Vedanta, this is called *adhyāsa*, superimposition. We are born with this *adhyāsa*, which is a product of ignorance. We are born ignorant. This ignorance is not merely an absence of knowledge; it also creates false notions or false understanding.

In Vedanta, the example of the rope-snake is given to illustrate this idea: A piece of rope is lying in front of me. Because of inadequate light, I develop the notion that it is a snake. Seeing a snake where, in fact, there is a rope is called *adhyāsa* or the superimposition of the snake upon the rope. In this, we take one thing to be something else. The snake is not a reality. It is a notion because the snake exists only in my mind; it is a subjective perception. However, if I do not know that it is false or that it is a delusion, it remains a reality for me. The snake is a reality for the one who does not know the reality of the rope. The perception creates reactions like fear. What is important for me, now, is not what it is, but how I perceive it. Similarly, I have false perceptions or notions about my own self.

Ignorance brings about false perceptions

The notion we all have about ourselves is that we are bound and limited beings subject to birth, growth, old age, and death. We imagine that we are limited in time, place, and attributes. Is this the truth? Am I perceiving myself as I truly am? Vedanta teaches that our perception of ourselves is incorrect. The reality is that I am a whole and complete being, ever pure and ever free. My true nature is wholeness, yet I see myself as being incomplete. My true nature is freedom, yet I see myself as being bound. My true nature is all-knowledge, yet I

see myself as being ignorant. My true nature is immortality, yet I see myself as a mortal being. My perception of myself is totally contrary to my true nature due to my ignorance. It is this ignorance, which brings about false knowledge and false perception. In the rope-snake example, there is not only the ignorance of the rope, but also the false perception of a snake. Similarly, in our case, there is not only the ignorance of our true nature, but also the false perception that we are incomplete, helpless, limited, and bound.

I am born with these false perceptions. I have had this perception about myself from beginning-less time, in this on-going cycle of birth and death. There is thus no answer to the question as to when this ignorance actually began; this is how it is. There is no birth for this ignorance and therefore, there is no birth for this false perception. There has never been a time when we have known ourselves as we truly are. We have always taken ourselves to be limited beings and been trying to become free from this sense of limitation.

False perceptions lead to dependence and sorrow

I find myself to be an insignificant being trying to become significant. Even if I am king and worshipped in my own kingdom, the fact remains that nobody knows me outside my kingdom. I may be a great person in my own home, but the street dogs bark at me when I walk out of the house. The moment I begin to think I am somebody, something else happens to make me feel insignificant again. I don't like my insignificance and I want to be significant. My whole life is nothing but a struggle to prove to the world that I am something or somebody. Vedanta tells me that all this suffering and sorrow has its roots in the false perception I have about myself being limited and bound. Nothing in the world can make me sad or unhappy if I did not have this false perception of myself. If I understand my true nature, there would be no cause for unhappiness. As Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita [2-11]:

अशोच्यानन्वशोचस्त्वं प्रज्ञावादांश्च भाषसे ।

गतासूनगतासूंश्च नानुशोचन्ति पण्डिताः ॥

*aśocyānanvaśocastvaṁ prajñāvādāṁśca bhāṣase,
gatāsūnagatāsūṁśca nānuśocanti paṇḍitāḥ.*

You grieve for those who should not be grieved for. Yet, you speak words of wisdom. The wise do not grieve for those who are living or for those who are no longer living.

Whenever I grieve, it is for myself that I grieve. The grief or unhappiness always pertains to me, although I may think that it is because of something that has happened to somebody else. The sorrow is always centered upon the self even though I feel that someone else is the cause of my sorrow. Therefore, I try to correct or change the world around me so that I can become free from sorrow. As Pujya Swami Dayanandaji would say, "I am the problem and I am the solution." Which 'I' is the problem? The 'I' that has the wrong perception of itself is the problem.

My perception is that I am a needy person. If my needs are fulfilled, I find myself to be a happy person and if they are not, I am unhappy. Whether or not I am happy or comfortable is determined by the world around me. If it obliges me by fulfilling my needs, I am happy. The world becomes important to me because I am seeking happiness and security from the world. The world may not necessarily be a kind and supporting place. There cannot be kindness where there is competition; for every winner, there are many losers. Thus, I am not free to decide whether I am happy or unhappy. If being happy were in my hands, I would never be unhappy. Nobody wants unhappiness. Right now, I do not seem to determine whether I am happy or not; I let the world determine that. If the world is kind and obliging, I am happy; if not, I am unhappy. Thus, I find myself to be dependent and helpless.

I seek comfort from certain happenings or outcomes. When there is an apprehension that they may turn out to be different, there is fear and insecurity. If I have no fear or insecurity, the outcomes would not matter. In that case, I would be free to do what I want to do. All my unhappiness, sadness, or sorrow is caused by my own false perception of myself. Understanding this clearly solves half the problems in life. I will then not blame the world for what is happening to me; I will not react to what is happening to me knowing that I am empowering the world to make me sad or happy. If I do not empower them, nobody can do anything to me. The world tightens my 'screws' because the 'threads' are there. If these threads of false perceptions and complexes born of these perceptions are worn out, it would not matter. All of this is a cause for sorrow.

Freedom or happiness is our true nature

Vedanta teaches that the feeling of dependence and insecurity is not a reality about me. It arises from my false perception of myself. That I am free is

the true perception of myself. That I am bound is a false perception of myself. If I analyze a moment of happiness, I find that at that time my false perception of myself drops off momentarily and I come face to face with the true self that I am. To the extent that I find this true self, I am happy. Happiness is indeed my true nature. It is the unhappiness arising from the false notion of myself that inhibits the expression of this happiness. I should dispel this false notion. Happiness is not something that is acquired. If I understand the nature of the happiness and freedom that I do experience occasionally, I will come to realize that the external objects, situations, or persons who cause the happiness are simply instrumental in helping me gain a glimpse of my own self. They help me experience my true self that is hidden behind the cloud of insecurities etc. My happiness is the result of my true perception of myself. If this becomes clear, most of my problems will be solved. The only cause of unhappiness, insecurity, limitation, bondage, non-acceptance, or dissatisfaction is false perception. My true nature is quite contrary to what I take it to be.

True perception of the self leads to freedom or happiness

What needs to be done to achieve freedom or happiness is for me to get rid of this false perception of myself. It is done in two ways: one, by understanding the realities of life, the world, and God and two, by gracefully accepting them. My perception of myself affects my perception of everything else; if I have a distorted perception of myself, it will only provide a distorted perception of the world and of God.

False perception of the self creates attachment and aversion to the objects of the world

How does my false perception of myself bring about a false perception of the world? My perception is that I am a limited being and, therefore, I feel insecure. This personal insecurity determines how I view the world. Some people and situations appear to be kind, helping, supporting, and conducive to my security and I look upon them as desirable. What I really desire is my freedom, security, and happiness and therefore, everything that I view as a source or means of this freedom, security, and happiness becomes desirable to me. Conversely, whatever I perceive as a threat to my freedom, security, and happiness becomes undesirable. I feel the need to defend and protect myself from such perceived threats. It is the ignorance that results in all false perception, which creates these ideas of desirability and undesirability.

Therefore, I divide the world into that which is desirable and that which is undesirable.

Any source of happiness is important to me. I want to hold on to that because my comfort depends upon that. That kind of relationship is called attachment. Whatever is considered desirable causes attachment. It is a relationship of dependence; in its presence, I feel happy and in its absence, I feel insecure. For example, a little child feels secure in the presence of its mother and insecure without her. Attachment and aversion are bound to be there with respect to the world. Nobody is free from that. Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita [3-34]:

इन्द्रियस्येन्द्रियस्यार्थे रागद्वेषौ व्यवस्थितौ ।

तयोर्न वशमागच्छेत्तौ ह्यस्य परिपन्थिनौ ॥

*indriyasyendriyasyārthe rāgadveṣau vyavasthitau,
tayorna vaśamāgacchetau hyasya paripanthinau.*

There is attachment and aversion with reference to every sense object. May one not come under the spell of these two because they are one's enemies.

Right from birth, I have brought with me tendencies of attachment and aversion arising from my own needs and insecurities. I am not comfortable with my own self since I cannot will to be comfortable, happy, or secure. That seems to depend upon things other than me. I have my own perception of the world arising from my own tendencies of *rāga* and *dveṣa*, attachment and aversion, and I cannot help but judge every person, object, or situation. Therefore, I put a stamp of desirable or undesirable and interact with the person, object, or situation accordingly.

We live in the world of our own perceptions

Rather than being deliberate, my interaction with the world is mostly a reaction. Free will is given to us, yet, it is not very often that we are able to use that free will. It is not very often that my actions are deliberate. More often than not, my actions are determined by my attachments and aversions. Thus, we live in our own private world of likes and dislikes. We do not interact with the world as it is; we live in the world of our own perceptions. Understanding the realities of the world will enable us to drop our false perceptions about ourselves, which

are responsible for our false perception of the world. My perceptions about God must also be clear with reference to the realities of God.

Freedom lies in correcting our false perceptions at the intellectual and emotional level

Freedom is the result of an understanding of the realities of life and developing comfort with those realities. As Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita [2-27]:

जातस्य हि ध्रुवो मृत्युर्ध्रुवं जन्म मृतस्य च ।

तस्मादपरिहार्येऽर्थे न त्वं शोचितुमर्हसि ॥

*jātasya hi dhruvo mṛtyurdhruvaṁ janma mṛtasya ca,
tasmādaparihārye'rthe na tvaṁ śocitumarhasi.*

For that which is born death is certain and for that which is dead birth is certain, therefore, you should not grieve over that which cannot be altered.

I know that death is certain for one who is born, but still I am not comfortable with death. Developing comfort with situations is important.

Our problem is at two levels: intellectual and emotional. Knowing the realities results in the correction of the problem at the level of understanding, the intellectual level, and developing comfort with the realities of life takes care of the habitual or emotional level. There are two major topics in the Bhagavad Gita: *brahma-vidyā* and *yoga-śāstra*. *Brahma-vidyā* is the knowledge of Brahman, which helps us understand the realities of life at the intellectual level. *Yoga-śāstra* corrects the problem of habitual error at the emotional level. This is called surrendering our false notions and our resistance to the realities of life. These are two aspects of surrender, which bring about freedom. Surrender lies in understanding the realities of life, assimilating them, and living a way of life in keeping with that understanding¹.

¹ Transcribed and edited by Swamini Srividyananda, Krishnakumar (KK) S. Davey, and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.