

## Satsanga with Sri Swami Veditatmananda Saraswati Arsha Vidya Gurukulam

### VAIRĀGYA, DISPASSION

When we inquire into what has finally been achieved by us or others, we find that no achievement is enough to provide permanent or lasting satisfaction. When we acquire some insight into *brahman* or God, we realize that there is something permanent. There arises *virāgaḥ* or dispassion towards everything impermanent, which is described next.

ऐहिकानां स्रक्कन्दनवनितादिविषयभोगानां कर्मजन्यतयानित्यत्ववदामुष्मिकाणामप्यमृतादि-

विषयभोगानामनित्यतया तेभ्यो नितरां विरतिः - इहामुत्रार्थफलभोगविरागः ॥

*aiḥikānām sṛakcandanavanitādi-viṣaya-bhogānām karma-janyataya-anityatvavadāmuṣmikāṇāmapyamṛtādi-viṣayabhogānāmanityatayā tebhyo nitarām viratiḥ - ihāmutrārthaphala-bhoga-virāgaḥ* [Vedāntasāra, 17].

The objects of enjoyment in the hereafter, such as immortality being as transitory as the enjoyment of such earthly objects as a garland of flowers, sandalwood paste, and sex-pleasures, which are transitory, and being results of action, an utter disregard for all of them is the renunciation of the enjoyment of the fruits of action in this world and the hereafter.

This is called *iha-amutra-arthaphala-bhoga-virāgaḥ*. *Rāga* means passion or attachment and *virāgaḥ* is dispassion or non-attachment; it is freedom from passion. We should also know that wherever there is *rāga* or attachment there is a corresponding *dveṣa* or aversion; they are the two sides of the same coin. There cannot be attraction or attachment somewhere unless there is an aversion somewhere else; or, there cannot be aversion in one place unless there is an attachment elsewhere. Attachment involves gravitating towards one thing or the other. Thus, a person under the hold of *rāga* and *dveṣa* is always gravitating in one direction or the other like a swinging pendulum or a falling leaf on a windy day. The opposite forces of likes and dislikes keep tugging at his or her mind.

#### **Dispassion is freedom from both attachments and aversions**

*Virāgaḥ* means a freedom from both attachment and aversion and *vairāgya* is the corresponding state of dispassion. It is important to understand that *vairāgya* not only means freedom from attachment, but also freedom from aversion. Often, this is not understood properly and, therefore, freedom from attachment is very often interpreted as aversion and an aversion for life is often mistaken to be *vairāgya*. It should be noted that aversion is just as undesirable since it also keeps my mind away from myself. *Rāga* and *dveṣa* have the ability to pull my mind away from myself and throw it into external objects. The result is that I cannot be at peace with myself. Thus, it is necessary that I should be free from likes and dislikes to gain a

peaceful or contemplative mind. We can make our minds free from likes and dislikes through *viveka*.

Why is there an attachment towards external objects and achievements? There is always a fascination in our minds for physical pleasures, achievements, and accomplishments. We have this fascination because of our upbringing. We find the entire world placing a great deal of importance on external achievements and accomplishments. Therefore, we also begin to associate success or fulfillment in life with external achievements. It requires discriminative analysis to understand the limitation of external achievements and this passage explains this analysis.

***Happiness is typically experienced at at the level of the senses, the emotions, and the ego***

All *bhoga* or pleasures are traditionally classified as *srakcandanavanita*. *Srat* means garland, *chandana* means sandalwood paste, and *vanita* means woman. They symbolize the happiness that comes to us at the level of the sense organs, i.e., taste, touch, color and form, smell, and sound. The happiness at the level of the senses comes from sensuous pleasures. The happiness at the level of emotions comes when there is emotional fulfillment, e.g., as in the presence of a friend or someone who is dear. At the level of the ego, we experience happiness through achievements that result in recognition and success. Happiness also comes at the level of the intellect when there is intellectual satisfaction or satisfaction of the ego. Thus, happiness is experienced at different levels: that of the senses, the emotions, and the ego. We find that different people pursue different forms of happiness. People who are very gross pursue sensuous pleasures; people who are emotional go after emotional pleasures, and people who are intellectual or egoistic go after pleasures that result in achievement, success, recognition, etc. Everyone requires all the three forms of happiness; however, different people seek different proportions of these three forms of happiness. It is not that someone is always a sensuous person seeking happiness from sense objects. Even those who may have given up or are indifferent to the objects of the senses may not be indifferent towards emotions or towards their own intellect or ego.

***Every form of acquired happiness is limited***

The scriptures point out that the nature of happiness provided by worldly achievements, pleasures, and sensations is transient because it is conditional; happiness at the level of the senses, emotions or the intellect occurs only when a given condition is satisfied. It is not that I am happy at any time or place. Rather, I am happy only when a certain condition is satisfied such as when I am in the presence of a certain person, object or situation; not otherwise. Therefore, the presence of that person, situation, or object has to be created. Something has to be acquired or arranged as a result of effort. Thus, I find that the happiness I acquire today is the result of an effort, *karma*. Whatever is generated or created as a result of an effort is

limited because every effort is limited. Not only that, everything in the world is limited and its ability to give me happiness is also limited. It does not mean that I hate things or dislike them because they are limited. We can love limited things as long as we understand that they are limited and transient and, therefore, do not expect anything permanent from them. This understanding will enable us to set our priorities right and recognize the place that these things enjoy in our lives.

At present, we make unreasonable demands of life, ourselves, and others. However, what we are seeking is the limitless and we expect the inadequate things of the world to give us that. We expect the objects of our love to give us limitless happiness. Thus, there is disappointment and frustration in spite of so much achievement because of our unrealistic expectations or demands.

A story is told to illustrate this idea. A mullah and his friends were boasting about various things, and there was a bet about who could spend a cold night atop a nearby mountain. The mullah accepted the challenge and spent the night on the mountain. The next morning, his friends asked him how he had been able to do that. He replied that he had stayed up reading by candlelight. At that, his friends declared that he had cheated in having used candlelight to keep himself warm. The mullah wanted to teach them a lesson and so, the next day, he invited them to his home for dinner. All the friends gathered around the dining table. The mullah went into the kitchen to bring out the food. When he did not emerge with the food and had been gone a while, the friends went into the kitchen to see what was keeping him. There was the mullah, waiting for a huge pot of rice to be cooked by the small flame of a candle! What can we expect from a candle? Can it really cook dinner?

### ***Happiness cannot be created***

Every object in the world and every form of happiness that we acquire is like that flame - insignificant and limited; to expect to gain fulfillment from it is unreasonable. We make unreasonable demands of objects and persons, and repeatedly keep getting frustrated and disappointed. A famous verse from the Muṇḍakopaniṣad [1-2-12] says:

परीक्ष्य लोकान् कर्मचितान् ब्रह्मणो निर्वेदमायान्नास्त्यकृतः कृतेन।

*parīkṣya lokān karmacitān brahmaṇo nirvedamāyānnāstyakṛtaḥ kṛtena.*

Having analyzed the worldly experiences and achievements acquired through *karma*, a mature person gains dispassion by discerning that the uncreated (Limitless) cannot be produced by action.

Presently, we make an effort to create happiness by creating certain conditions. We must understand that happiness cannot be created. Happiness is already there, it is simply to be manifested. When we think that we are creating happiness, what we are doing, in effect, is only manifesting the happiness, which is already there. It is comparable to the sun hidden behind clouds; when the clouds go away, the sun shines again. When a given

object, person, or situation makes me happy, it is not that the happiness comes from the object, person, or situation; rather, the happiness, which is my very nature, becomes manifest at that time. Thus, in any experience of happiness, the objects, persons, or situations only become instrumental in manifesting the happiness that is already my nature. We think happiness has gone away when all that happens is that the happiness remains unmanifest. The happiness, which is the Self, momentarily becomes manifest when the mind becomes clear, non-demanding, and quiet. However, any demand that enters the mind acts as a cloud in veiling that happiness. Happiness is not something that comes from the outside. When we analyze our experiences of happiness, we find that happiness wells up from within and every external object or situation is merely instrumental in revealing that which is our own nature. When we understand the nature of happiness, we realize that any happiness that we can possibly acquire from a source other than ourselves is bound to be limited in time, measure, and situation. When I understand that happiness is something to be made manifest, there is *vairāgya* or dispassion towards acquiring happiness from transitory or limited sources rather than from myself.

### ***The pleasures of the world cannot satisfy us***

This hunger for happiness is comparable to a fire that grows fiercer as butter is poured into it. Similarly, the hunger for pleasure only increases as I enjoy more pleasures in life; the hunger for recognition is greater as more and more recognition comes my way, and the hunger for success continues to grow even as more and more success is gained. All these achievements serve to increase our hunger, rather than appease it. This is what one has to see for oneself: the hunger or beggarliness does not diminish and the beggar remains intact.

Usually, we don't pay attention to what we are seeking; we simply do what everyone else does. We follow the values the world has imposed upon us and don't stop to think or examine what we are seeking. Vedanta tells us that what we are seeking is permanent and advises us to analyze our own urges and then decide for ourselves whether worldly achievements have the capability to satisfy our hunger or not.

Over time, *vairāgya* arises towards qualified happiness; when we realize that there is unqualified happiness to be gained, we no longer want qualified or conditional happiness. We don't want happiness that is dependent upon the acquisition of an object having particular attributes. We don't want happiness that is available only at a given time, place, or only in a given thing. When we understand that our need is for something permanent and lasting, we cannot settle for anything less.

### ***The pleasures of the heavens are also limited***

People seek to go to the heavens to enjoy the pleasures of ambrosia, *amṛta*. The *devatās* or gods, the denizens of the heavens, supposedly partake of ambrosia every day and are, therefore, immortal. As a result, people want

to go to the heavens and enjoy happiness there because they know of the limitations of the happiness of this world. It is said that even if there were such a place as the heavens with all these pleasures, the pleasures would still be limited. Just as the pleasures acquired in this life as a result of effort are limited, so also, the pleasures acquired in the heavens, being the product of our efforts, are also bound to be limited. The Chāndogyopaniṣad says [8-1-6]:

तद्यथेह कर्मजितो लोकः क्षीयत एवमेवामुत्र पुण्यजितो लोकः क्षीयते ।

*tadyatheha karmajito lokah kṣīyata evamevāmutra puṇyajito lokah kṣīyate.*

As to that, as in this world the result acquired through action gets exhausted, in the very same way, the result acquired through virtue gets exhausted in the other world.

Lord Krishna says in the Bhagavad Gita [9-21], *kṣīṇe puṇye martyalokaṁ viśanti*, a stay in the heavens lasts until one's *puṇya* is exhausted. The heavens are compared to a five-star hotel. Just as one can stay in a hotel only as long as one has the money to pay the bills, so also, a stay in the heavens lasts only as long as one has the wealth of *puṇya* or virtuous actions. When the *puṇya* is exhausted, one drops back from the heavens to this earth and starts all over again.

***Dispassion implies the cessation of running after worldly objects or pleasures***

In short, *vairāgya* focuses my mind upon myself. It is natural that a person seeks happiness outwardly because God has created the mind and sense organs to be extroverted, says the Kāthopaniṣad [2-1-1]:

पराञ्चि खानि व्यतृणत् स्वयम्भूस्तस्मात्पराङ्मुख्यति नान्तरात्मन्।

कश्चिद्धीरः प्रत्यगात्मानमैक्षदावृत्तचक्षुरमृतत्वमिच्छन् ॥ १ ॥

*parāñci khāni vyatṛṇat svayambhūstasmātparāṅmukhyati nāntarātman,*  
*kaściddhīraḥ pratyagātmānamaikṣadāvṛttacakṣuramṛtatvamicchān.*

The Lord destroyed the sense organs (by making them) extroverted. Therefore, everyone looks outside oneself, not at the inner Self. Desiring immortality, a rare discriminative one turns away his eyes (and) sees the inner Self.

The idea is that the immortality we seek is the very nature of the Self; it is not to be acquired from the non-Self. As this understanding arises, the mind and senses naturally withdraw from their external preoccupations and become focused upon the Self. Thus, when *viveka* matures and becomes a fact of life, the immediate result is *vairāgya*. There is *viratiḥ*, a total cessation of pleasure-seeking. *Vairāgya* does not mean not enjoying objects; it only means not running after objects. It means a cessation of the effort to seek happiness from things other than the Self. This cessation of effort arises from having *viveka*.

***Dispassion endures only when it arises out of discrimination***

There is something described as *śmaśāna-vairāgya*, the disgust towards life that often arises when we undergo unpleasant experiences. People have

that *vairāgya* in *śmaśāna*, cremation grounds. When we see death and cremation, we realize the transience of life and understand that death comes to all; thoughts such as ‘what am I doing here’ and ‘what is the purpose of life’ arise. This *vairāgya*, however, does not last long. As soon as one steps out of the cremation ground, hunger emerges. Similarly, a momentary dispassion arises when we have some unpleasant experiences in our lives, but it does not last long. Dispassion only lasts if it has arisen as a result of *viveka*.

### ***Happiness is the freedom from desire or craving***

Śrī Śaṅkarācārya discusses the nature of happiness in his commentary on the Bhagavad Gita. When I feel happy, what is it that makes me happy? Has that happiness come from an object that I crave? In fact, happiness comes when the tremendous burden of craving goes away. When I acquire an object of my desire, that burden goes away momentarily and I experience a relief or a freedom from that craving. A desire in my head is like a big burden and I experience happiness when I fulfill that desire; it is the happiness of freedom from that craving or that desire. The Mahābhārata says:

यच्च कामसुखं लोके यच्च दिव्यं महत्सुखम्। तृष्णाक्षयसुखस्यैते नार्हतः षोडशीं कलाम्॥

*yacca kāmasukham loke yacca divyam mahatsukham,  
tṛṣṇā-kṣayasukhasyaite nārhataḥ ṣoḍaśīm kalām.*

The happiness attained in the world as a result of experiencing a desired object and the great happiness that one may acquire in the heaven do not equal to even one sixteenth of the happiness that one gains from the freedom from craving.

In the Taittirīya Upaniṣad [2-8], various degrees of happiness are described; *yuvā syātsādhyuvā’dhyāyakaḥ, āśiṣṭho dṛḍhiṣṭho baliṣṭhaḥ, tasyeyam pṛthivī sarvā vittasya pūrṇā syāt*. Suppose there is a young man with all the qualifications and abilities to enjoy life - culture, education, sensitivity, and good taste, he also has at his disposal, the whole world full of every kind of pleasure that he is capable of enjoying. This degree of utmost happiness that a human being is capable of enjoying is described as one unit of human happiness. A *manuṣya-gandharva* is said to enjoy one hundred such units of human happiness; a *deva-gandharva* enjoys one hundred units of a *manuṣya-gandharva*’s happiness; a *pitṛ* enjoys one hundred units of a *deva-gandharva*’s happiness, and so on. The degree or intensity of happiness grows as the *upādhi* or the body and equipment becomes more superior. However, at every level it is said that whatever maximum happiness a particular body can enjoy as a result of acquiring every possible pleasure is the happiness enjoyed by a person who is free of all desire, *śrotṛiyasya cākāmahatasya*. Thus, happiness is ultimately nothing but freedom from desire. It is not freedom from desire in the sense of denying desire or suppressing desire, but a resolving of desire as a result of *viveka*. As Pujya Swami Dayanandaji points out, behind all desire is the desire to be free from desire. It is freedom from desire alone that makes one happy. The happiness that is the result of

freedom from desire cannot be compared to any other happiness that one can gain in this world or the hereafter.

***Dispassion arises out of an understanding of the nature of things***

It is the understanding of what one is seeking and the understanding of the nature of happiness, objects, and achievements that slowly creates *vairāgya*. This understanding leads to a freedom from the false fascination that we have for objects or achievements. We have a fascination for wealth, honor, recognition, and power. We have an inherent fascination and innate patterns of thinking, which guide our lives. We should analyze these fascinations and understand that they are born of a lack of understanding of the real nature of things. They are born of a lack of understanding of our own desires and of what life can offer. As our understanding grows, the mind slowly becomes free from that fascination, *rāga*. Correspondingly, the mind also becomes free from aversion, *dveṣa*. In the Bhagavad Gita [5-3], Lord Krishna describes a person whose mind is free from fascinations or aversions as a renunciate.

ज्ञेयः स नित्यसंन्यासी यो न द्वेष्टि न काङ्क्षति। निर्द्वन्द्वो हि महाबाहो सुखं बन्धात्प्रमुच्यते॥

*jñeyah sa nityasannyāsī yo na dveṣṭi na kāṅkṣati,  
nirdvandvo hi mahābāho sukhaṁ bandhātpramucyate.*

The person who neither hates nor longs (for anything) should be known as always a renunciate O Arjuna, because one who is free from the opposites (likes and dislikes) is effortlessly released from bondage.

Ultimately, a renunciate is one who is free from ignorance or the sense of ego. The first qualification of a renunciate is that he does not have either aversion or fascination. We have to acquire freedom from *rāga* and *dveṣa*; that alone is called *vairāgya*. Dispassion means freedom.

***Dispassion implies the acquiring of an objective mind***

Dispassion should not be understood as aversion or suppression. *Vairāgya* is often misunderstood as suppression, aversion, disgust, or hatred. When there is disgust for the world, the mind gets disturbed as it thinks of the world. Therefore, we don't want disgust; we don't want attraction or aversion, either; what we want is an objective or balanced mind. These attractions and aversions distort our perceptions. They prevent us from seeing and knowing things as they are. Everyone lives in their own world of likes and dislikes, and the result is that our perceptions are invariably distorted. *Vairāgya* implies getting rid of these distortions from the mind and acquiring an undistorted and objective mind, a free mind.

Distortions and aversions are a big burden; they make us sad and create reactions in us. When the mind becomes free from reactions, it becomes free, happy, cheerful, and objective. Thus, *vairāgya* means freedom, happiness, cheerfulness, and objectivity. This is a prerequisite for a student of Vedanta. To gain any knowledge, the mind must be objective and, to gain

Self-knowledge, the mind must be similarly objective and available. Usually, we do enjoy a certain degree of objectivity with respect to the knowledge of physical objects. Yet, for example, a surgeon who performs an operation very skillfully upon patients may find his hands shaking when he has to perform an operation upon his own son or daughter. Thus, it is necessary that the mind should be objective, not judgmental. We know this very well and yet find ourselves being judgmental about many things. Likes and dislikes are judgments. We judge things as good or bad and right or wrong. These judgments prevent us from being objective and knowing things the way they are.

We are told that *brahman* is the *abhinna-nimitta-upādāna-karaṇam*, both the material and efficient cause; He alone is in the form of this entire creation. However, we do not see God everywhere. We don't see God everywhere not because He is not there or because what we see is not God, but because we do not see everything the way it is. Our perceptions get distorted on account of our complexes and likes and dislikes. Freedom from this distorted perception is *vairāgya*, which comes as a result of *viveka*.

*Vairāgya* is the most important qualification. *Viveka* fulfills itself only when it results in *vairāgya*. When the mind has a fascination or attraction for something, we must know it is bound to be a distraction sooner or later. It will be a distraction, particularly when we want to apply ourselves to meditation or contemplation. The ability to make the mind free from these distractions intelligently and with discrimination is *vairāgya*<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Vedāntasāra lectures. Transcribed and edited by Malini, KrishnaKumar (KK) S. Davey and Jayshree Ramakrishnan.