

Self-restraint—The Key to Eternal Freedom

The Sanskrit word *samyam* has multiple meanings. It can mean a check, restraint, control, prevention or concentration, depending on the context. It is one of the foremost virtues that can help one counteract the harmful passions such as anger, pride and greed that obstruct our spiritual evolution and eternal joy.

Unruly thoughts, lustful desires and covetousness arise in a person with no mental discipline. If a person cannot direct himself according to his own right will, how can he possibly direct his soul to God and keep his life on the path of righteousness? Thus central to the spiritual life is self-control.

All principal religions of the world such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Sikhism, Christianity, Islam and Judaism stress on the importance of self-control, teaching that conquering one's mind through self-control is greater than conquering the world. A man without self-restraint has been compared to an animal because he cannot distinguish between right and wrong. Illustrating the importance of self-control, the *Gita* (6.35-36) says, "A person without self-control will find it difficult to progress in meditation; but those who are self-controlled, striving earnestly through the right means, will attain the goal."

Echoing the same idea, the *Katha Upanishad* (1.3.3-6) says, "When a man lacks discrimination and his mind is uncontrolled, his senses are unmanageable like the restive horses of a charioteer. But when a man has discrimination and his mind is controlled, his senses are like the well-controlled horses of a charioteer, obeying the rein." If one practises the virtue of self-restraint, all other noble virtues—

forgiveness, patience, impartiality, truthfulness, sincerity, modesty, steadiness, liberality, freedom from wrath and malice, contentment, sweetness of speech, benevolence and others grow in him automatically. He is never bound by attachments that arise from worldly connections.

The *Gita* (VI) reveals the signs of a self-controlled person. It says that a wise man who has conquered his mind and is enwrapped in the Self is just like a lamp that does not flicker because it stands sheltered from the wind. This severance from the afflictions of misery is essentially eternal joy. It needs to be practised with determination, curbing the senses and desires at every point by the power of the mind and with the help of reason.

The ancient seers of Yoga and Vedanta identified unbounded joy as the most fundamental urge of all human beings. The Upanishads tell us that self-knowledge brings the most intense and pure joy imaginable. One who has not yet tasted this highest joy cannot think of any other except the pleasures of the senses that are like nectar at first but like poison in the end. He realizes that appeasing the mind is not the way to peace and happiness because sense desires deplete the vigour of the mind. He then begins to control his thoughts and sense desires in search of his true Self which is immortal and the only source of joy. Emphasizing the need of self-control, Sri Ramakrishna says, "Why is it that people do not see God? It is because of the barrier of 'woman and gold' [lust and greed]." The *Gita* says, "He who is able to withstand the force of lust and

anger even before he abandons the body, he is a yogi, he is a happy man.”

Practice of self-control is most purifying because it transforms the quality of our mind. By controlling his crude impulses and emotions, man develops reason and by controlling reason, he develops intuition which is the purified form of reason. It is this purity of mind that distinguishes a saint from a worldly individual. While a worldly person is guided by instincts of self-love and self-preservation, a saint finds his connection with the entire universe and is guided by the spirit of self-sacrifice. Self-control is asserting our higher Self over our lower self. Life is a rebellion against the laws of nature. Submitting to them would leave us at the mercy of the whims of our mind. Such submission is natural for an animal but not for a human being.

The seers speak of sublimation—channelling all our urges and desires toward a single goal, the attainment of Self-knowledge. When a person advances towards this, he begins to taste the bliss of the Self and finds the pleasures derived from the senses increasingly insipid. In order to express our true self in every phase of our life, we must recover it first by exercising self-control.

While both Yoga and Vedanta regard self-control as the key to success in a spiritual quest, the two schools of thought have differing views on the subject. The Yoga method of self-control is based on the philosophy and psychology behind Patanjali's Yoga. It says that all our sufferings are due to loss of contact with our true Self. Because of this loss, the Self becomes entangled in the world of matter and is subject to the laws of the material world that is plagued by numerous rigid

dichotomies—pain and pleasure, birth and death. The goal of the Yoga way is to establish contact with our true Self. But this contact is not possible without controlling the mind.

The first maxim of Patanjali states, “Yoga is control of the thoughts of the mind.” Control is different from repression. Control is positive; it is control of the mind's lower urges for the sake of the greater goal of Self-realization. In contrast, not having any such goal, repression proves to be negative and reactive. According to the Yoga system, there is no yoga without self-control and such self-control must be made through self effort. It prescribes an eightfold practice—*yama*, *niyama*, *asana*, *pranayama*, *pratyahara*, *dharana* and *samadhi*.

The Yoga system seeks to modify our subconscious mind indirectly with the regulation of breath, posture and diet. Modern psychology explains how our conscious thoughts and actions are heavily influenced by the deep-seated desires and urges of our subconscious mind. But the Yoga system further shows us how we can modify our subconscious mind by the efforts of our conscious mind, how repeated exercises of the will on the conscious level can influence the subconscious depths and modify them permanently. It states that to achieve the goal of Self-realization, the seeker must have full awakening of his mind which is in deep slumber at the base of his spine. His mind must be raised to the upper centres of consciousness and for that purpose, the impurities blocking the *sushumna* canal, through which it has to travel upward, must be cleared. Conversion of physical energy into *ojas* (spiritual energy) through the practices of continence, concentration and

meditation provides the seeker with the strength.

The second view is that of Vedanta. The goal of life according to Vedanta is Self-knowledge which is never possible without self-control. Self-control endows a seeker with a steel-frame foundation of a mind on which the structure of spirituality is raised. Through self-control a seeker converts his raw libidinal energy into spiritual energy. Without it, prayer, meditation and the desire for Self-knowledge are meaningless.

The Vedanta system advises gradual control of mind rather than its forcible control, so that the mind does not react violently; its process is the way of least resistance. It may be slow but it is sure. It seeks to control the gross body and its urges, by controlling the subtle which is thought. Vedanta relies mainly on the practice of dispassion and believes that the master urge in all of us is the need to move towards the divine and experience unbounded joy. Through spiritual practices of prayer and meditation, we build the spiritual scaffolding to help the mind move upward.

Control can be imposed in two ways—violently and gradually. The first is done by blocking the senses by force, assuming that this will help one control the mind as well. But the mind cannot be controlled in that way and establishing control gradually is the only option.

Vedanta interprets the practices of Yoga differently. *Yama* (self-control) of Vedanta is restraint of all the senses by thinking 'all this is Brahman (the Supreme Self)'. Rejection of the illusory universe of multiplicity by knowing it as Brahman, is true renunciation. Practice of silence is not a restraint of speech but dwelling on Brahman. Solitude is experienced in

interiority and does not imply the physical absence of others. Real posture is that in which the mind flows towards Brahman spontaneously. The blessed vision is directing the mind to the knowledge of Brahman, not fixing the mind on the tip of the nose. *Rechaka* of *pranayama* is breathing out the thought that is not Brahman; *puraka* is breathing in the thought of Brahman; and steadiness of thought thereafter is called *kumbhaka*. Those who do not know this only torture their nose.

Steadiness in contemplating the Brahman is concentration. Constant awareness of the fact that 'my true Self is verily Brahman' is meditation. All obstacles on the way are overcome only by dissolving the mind in Brahman. By thinking of an object the mind fixes on it; by thinking of void it becomes blank. But by thinking of Brahman it strives towards perfection. The goal of Self-knowledge in Vedanta is not just release from the world of matter but the realization that all beings and things that are perceptible are nothing but Brahman. To attain Self-knowledge, one has to remove ignorance and not fight against the tendencies and desires.

Which is the preferred way to achieve self-control? The arguments in support of forcible control of the Yoga system and those in support of gradual control of the Vedanta system are equally strong. The two ways are equally time-honoured and proven. The fitness to pursue one way or the other depends upon the competence of the individual seeker. A human being should not think that he would practice self-restraint at a later stage of life because death keeps no calendar. "O Mortal Man! Practise self-restraint to obtain true bliss; for one who has subdued his self becomes happy in this world as well as in the next!" ❀