

Self-knowledge and Emotional Problems

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The journey of a sadhak or spiritual seeker consists of three stages : 1. Jnanam–yogyata-prapti 2. Jnanam-prapti and 3. Jnanam-nishtha-prapti.

1. *Jnanam-yogyata-prapti* : The first stage in the spiritual journey in jnana-yogyata-prapti or the attainment of the necessary qualification for acquiring spiritual knowledge. What are these qualifications? The basic requirements are knowing the importance and role of spiritual knowledge.

The scriptures talk of two sadhanas or practices for gaining the necessary fitness for acquiring spiritual knowledge : karma yoga meaning leading a religious way of life and following the values prescribed in the scriptures and saguna-ishta-devata-upasana wherein we meditate upon the Lord's from our choice.

2. *Jnana-prapti* : After equipping ourselves with the necessary qualifications. We acquire knowledge (jnana-prapti), specifically jivatma-Paramatma-aikya-jnanam meaning the knowledge of the oneness between the jivatma and paramatma. Again the scriptures prescribe a two-fold disciplines for acquiring spiritual knowledge : sravanam and mananam. Sravanam is the 'consistent and systemic study of the scriptures for a length of time under the guidance of competent acharya'. Every word in this definition is important. Sravanam is a very important stage in the spiritual journey. Mananam is the second discipline. Knowledge is meaningful only when it is free from the obstacle of doubt. Doubtful knowledge is as good as ignorance. Hence doubts should be

removed for knowledge to be useful. We can choose one or more methods for removing doubts including reflection (thinking over teaching or knowledge acquired), persuing texts specifically written to clear doubts (known as manana-granths), participating in study groups, discussing with acharya, etc., By removing doubts, knowledge gets converted to conviction.

3. *Jnana-nishtha-prapti* : The final lap of the spiritual journey is jnana-nishta-prapti or the internalization of the spiritual knowledge acquired. We assimilate the knowledge to such an extent that there is no gap between what we know and what we are. The knowledge is so soaked in us that we need not invoke the knowledge and it is available when we need it. Jnananishtha-prapti brings about a transformation in our lives from a samsari (one who is governed or greatly influenced by his emotions). Again the scriptures prescribe two practices for jnana-nishta-prapti : nididhyasana and anusaranam.

Nididhyasana is keeping the mind on the shastra or dwelling upon the teaching in one way or the other including reading, repeated listening, writing what we have learnt, interacting with other sadhaks and even teaching. Following the procedure described in great detail by Krishna in the sixth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita – choosing a calm and quiet place, fixing a comfortable seat, sitting erect, closing our eyes, meditating on our nature is also one of the methods of nididhyasana. It is important to note that there is a widespread misconception that this is the only method of nididhyasana. We can

choose any of the above methods to keep the mind focused on the scriptures. The essence of nididhyasana is that the mind must be in touch with sastra.

The second discipline in anusaranam meaning imitation. We imitate a jeevanmuktha (one who has fully understood and internalized the scriptures). How does a jeevanmuktha conduct himself in the world? In the Bhagavad Gita, Krishna describes a jeevanmuktha – ‘He hates no being, is friendly and compassionate to all, is free from the feeling of ‘I’ and ‘Mine’ (12.13-14). We imitate a jeevan-mukta because (initially) we do not have the necessary virtues in full measure. How will such imitation help? ‘We fake it and make it’. Imitation will lead to acquisition.

Attainment of jnana-nistha is indicated by a transformation in our personality. The ‘samsaari I’ is converted into asamsaari I’. How do we know we have become an asamsaari? Krishna discusses the behavior of a transformed person in the Bhagavad Gita. The primary definition given is freedom from all emotional disturbances and reactions – ‘free from attachment, fear and anger’, ‘free from intolerance, fear and anxiety’ (2.56, 12.15). Understanding this definition is important because we have to evaluate our spiritual progress on this basis.

How do we know we are progressing spiritually? And how can we measure our progress? We can evaluate ourselves by introspection and analysis. And in so doing we will invariably find that the spiritual journey is neither smooth nor steady. We go through ups and downs. During the day we go through numerous experiences interacting with family members, neighbours, colleagues, etc. Sometimes we are able to maintain our emotional balance in a very difficult situation. We feel we are making progress and are very pleased with ourselves.

‘Vedanta seems to be working’. But after a few days we may find ourselves in a situation wherein our emotions get the better of us. We may lose our temper and blow our top at our child or subordinate. After sometime we are back to normal but feel a sense of regret. ‘Perhaps I could have handled that situation better; there was no need to get angry’ we feel. In this situation, there is a two fold reaction. The first reaction is the primary reaction towards the world and people outside. The second reaction is the secondary reaction towards the primary reaction. We think this is not how a spiritual person will behave and feel dejected that perhaps we are not progressing at all. It is this secondary reaction that is unique and common to all spiritual aspirants.

Primary reaction is our reaction to the world and various situations therein. It is discussed in sastra. Krishna elaborates on primary reaction in Bhagavad Gita (2.55-72, 12.13-20, 14.22-25). The Lord points out that a jnani is free from primary reactions, i.e. reactions towards object, people and situations.

Secondary reaction is based on the judgement of our own mind and its progress with regards to primary reaction. It is based on our expectations from our mind. Secondary reaction does not find much mention in the scriptures. Handling secondary reaction requires another form of nididhyasana. This form of nididhyasana entails looking at our own mind in the light of Vedantic teaching. It is more of a meditation on the mind and its nature.

There are six important aspects of secondary reaction that we must be aware of. A knowledge of these aspects will enable us to evaluate our spiritual progress meaningfully.

1. The mind can never be totally free from emotional disturbances and reactions. Krishna emphasizes this truth in the fourteenth chapter of the Bhagavad Gita.

All the three gunas – sattva, rajas and tamas are present even in the mind of a jnani. No doubt sattva dominates but sometimes rajas or tamas can dominate and cause disturbances and reactions and not totally eliminate them.

2. The reaction of emotional disturbances and reaction can never be instantaneous: it is a gradual process. Disturbances and reactions manifest at three levels – mind, speech and body. mild disturbances express themselves at the mental and verbal level while strong disturbances influence the body – we become violent and use force. As we progress we will notice three phenomena : 1. The frequency of disturbances reduces (how often are we disturbed), 2. The intensity of the disturbances decreases (from strong to mild) and 3. The recovery period (getting back to normal) becomes lesser and lesser. Initially we may get disturbed many times a day, become very emotional and brood for days on end. As we progress, we will find that we rarely get disturbed and if so it is only mildly and further we are able to recover very quickly, perhaps in a matter of minutes or at the most an hour or so. The mind becomes resilient and we come back to normal quickly.
3. The reduction of the emotional disturbance is not a linear process meaning the reduction does not occur uniformly, at the same rate over time. If we think we have reduced our disturbances by 20 per cent in six months, it does not mean we will be able to reduce our disturbances by 40 percent in a year's time. Sometimes disturbances can go down and sometimes they can also go up. Thus reduction is a nonlinear process.
4. Just as our health is influenced by many factors some of which are unknown, emotional disturbances and reactions are caused by several factors many of which are unknowable. When did our 'life' begin? Our date of birth applies only to our physical body. The scriptures say our mind is anaadi – it is unborn meaning it

does not have a beginning at all. The mind stores experiences of all the past janmas. Further, among the factors that are known, many are uncontrollable and remain uncontrollable even after acquiring Self-knowledge. The cause for anger and provocation is an example. That is why we find that sorrow exists at the same time as Self-knowledge.

5. The reduction of disturbances, or stated positively, the refinement of the mind is only the secondary purpose of Self-knowledge. It is a by-product or incidental benefit.
6. What then is the primary purpose of Self-knowledge? The primary purpose of Self-knowledge is not refining the mind but informing us that we are not the mind. This is the most important lesson that the scriptures teach us. Hence there is no need to be obsessed with the conditions of the mind. No doubt we should give importance to the mind (to progress spiritually) but no more than it deserves. The conditions of our mind should not cause anxiety or tension. We improve our mind reach a stage where we enjoy our mind.

Thus we require two forms of nididhyasana – the first to minimize the primary reaction of the mind caused by the world and the second to handle the secondary reaction of the mind caused by the primary reaction. If we follow these two forms of nididhyasana, we will find the spiritual journey to be very enjoyable. And in the process we must not indulge in Self-judgement. More often than not, critical self-examination results in dejection and development of an inferiority complex. The scriptures say we are the poorna (full, complete) atma whether the mind progresses or not. On this auspicious Guru Poornima day, let us invoke the Guru Parampara – the Lord Himself who is the firstguru, all the acharyas and our own guru and more importantly, let us invoke the sastra for our spiritual progress.