



Swami Venkatesananda

The Ego

Swami Venkatesananda
(1921 – 1982)

Swami Venkatesananda was a disciple of the renowned saint H.H. Swami Sivananda who founded the Divine Life Society in Rishikesh, India.

After sitting at the master's feet for seventeen years, serving him and imbibing his teachings, Swamiji left the ashram to share the knowledge he had gained with the rest of the world.

As Swami Sivananda referred to him as 'crest jewel of my mission', Swamiji was the perfect luminary reflecting all that the master stood for.

Although Swamiji gave brilliant lectures throughout the world, he referred to himself only as a disciple of Swami Sivananda. However, because of the light he shed wherever he went, Swamiji became the Guru to many disciples all over the world.

Anything that is done in accordance with the dictates of the mind is a trap. Even the so-called Yogic or spiritual practices undertaken through the incentive of the mind can at best be a golden trap, a prison. The intelligence within has to realise this. It is capable of this, though it cannot get out of it. 'I' cannot liberate itself, but it can see the defect in all these practices, it can see the danger in this trap.

If you are doing Karma-yoga it is glorified social service - which is very good as far as it goes because it is of tremendous use to others. If you choose to practice Bhakti-yoga-Japa for three hours, Puja for two and Kirtan for two-that's also very good because during those seven hours you didn't do any mischief. If you do Yoga-ASANAS, Pranayama and some sort of meditation you enjoy good health and therefore are less of a burden upon others, which is a tremendous contribution. It is a sin to be sick-you are a nuisance unto yourself and an unbearable burden on others. To be healthy is one of the greatest services you can render humanity. If you are thoroughly forgotten by others, you are the greatest servant of humanity. If others are constantly worrying about you, you are a nuisance. But, as a Sadhana for self-realisation or Moksha that is not of great value, unless you are doing it because the Guru says so and not because the mind likes it.

Through none of these is Moksha or liberation possible. All are traps, whatever be one's attitude towards them. Self-realisation is independent of all these.

Gurudev has crystallised the essence of his teachings in a little song

The first line is "Serve, love, give, purify, meditate, realise."

Please, do Karma-yoga to the best of your ability. Above all, love God, do charity, purify yourself through all sorts of Yoga practices - Japa, meditation, and all that. Meditate and realise the Upanishadic truths.

The next line is: "Be good, do good, be compassionate."

The third: "Enquire who am I, know the self and be free."

Combine all these in your daily Sadhana.

Now comes the tricky part of it.

The next line of the song is: "Adapt, adjust, accommodate, bear insult, bear injury, this is the highest Sadhana."

Is that possible in your life? One would expect the ethics to come first and the self-realisation to come last.

In the first part - serve, love, give, purify, meditate, realise - it is possible to indulge in what is commonly called self-deception, thinking that you are doing Karma-yoga, thinking that you are doing Bhakti-yoga, thinking that you are doing Hatha-yoga just because you can do a few Yoga postures nicely - and if you are able to sit on one posture for a considerable time you can tell yourself and others that you are in deep Samadhi. All this is possible.

But adaptability is not so easy because it hits at and destroys the ego directly - whereas all the rest beat about the bush.

It is easy to give up what you think you possess - a shirt, a book, a little money, fruit - because the mind or the ego says, "Oh, I'll get some more", but to abandon one's opinion and ideologies is more difficult, and to abandon one's opinion of oneself, one's self-esteem, is extremely difficult. Of all the images in the world, self-image is the hardest to crack, leave alone break.

Is it possible for you to look at someone with whom you totally disagree and say, without hypocrisy, "Sir, you may be right"? During those few moments watch what goes on within you. There is a combination of an earthquake, volcano, tornado and a tidal wave, all together. That is the ego. You've got it! Don't try to fix it. It hurts, it hurts. Good grief, it hurts. Watch what is happening inside you. That is the ego.

The external situation takes care of itself. Someone argues with you, you say, "You may be right" and then he's satisfied and he goes away - or he's dissatisfied and he goes away. That's not of very great importance.

You are not doing this in order to please somebody - that is another trap.

Nor are you doing this in order to displease yourself - that is masochism, equally useless, and that feeds the ego - "I am a man of tremendous adaptability (or humility)." Nobody is interested in it.

Absolutely nobody in this world is interested either in your happiness or in your salvation, so there is no sense in doing all this to please others or in striving to convince others that you are a great Yogi, Sadhu or holy man. All this is a total waste of time.

Instead, try to adapt yourself to others, to the man who vehemently opposes you. Say to him, "Yes sir, you may be right", or "You are right," and at the same time watch what goes on within you.

When Gurudev Swami Sivananda emphasised the spirit of service He exalted adaptability above all. He emphasised: "The aggressive, self-assertive, Rajasic ego is your enemy." This has to go. Karma-yoga will help you - or, this Karma-yoga may become possible only after you have destroyed the self-assertive ego. Even the little bit of service that you render to others may help you, because in the course of that you will be forced to adapt yourself. There will be opportunities galore of adapting yourself. Bhakti, Raja and Hatha-yoga may help you, but they are only aids, not the master-key. The master-key is "Adapt, adjust, accommodate."

I have never seen a great saint with such a subtle non-ego as Swamiji had. The whole Ashram owes its existence to Him and every brick has been laid by Him. It used to first intrigue some of us youngsters in the 1940's to see Him stand in front of one of his own disciples and ask for his opinion in a tone that would suggest that the master was a subordinate. There was a Swami here known as Swami Vishuddhananda who was our postmaster and also in charge of the construction of the temple and so on. One day Swamiji and this Swami Vishuddhananda were standing a few paces from each other and Swamiji was giving some suggestions for the temple verandah. It was as if he was the subordinate, a new recruit to the Ashram. He asked "Can we do this? Would it be alright? What do you think?" Never have I seen Him lay down the law or give a command. Even when he wanted something done very badly he would merely ask, "Shall we do such and such?" If you began to agree with Him, if you made Him feel comfortable and he knew that you were with Him all the way through, then he might have said, "Go and do this quickly." But, if you raised one objection to it immediately he suspended the whole proceeding. He would give you some fruits and milk, and praise you to the skies, "Ah, you are a marvellous man. No one has such brilliant ideas as you have." Then half an hour later he would come back to it, "You said this should be done this way. I think it may not be so good. What about this?"

First cancel your ego. Here is an opportunity, a contradiction, someone who opposes you. That is a direct challenge to the ego. Let it melt, let it disappear. Then, what has to happen will happen.

"Adapt, adjust, accommodate, bear insult, bear injury." This is the highest Sadhana and the most direct path to self-realisation, because it cuts right through the ego. It does not mean that we should so live or act in this world as to

invite criticism, insult and injury (then, of course, you deserve nothing else!). But to do your very best, to do the right thing at the right moment in the right manner in the right place, is your duty. That is Yoga. There is no compromise on this score. In spite of that, whatever you do you will always find someone who is annoyed, someone who doesn't like you, or what you do or look like. What is your attitude towards such a person? Your first impulse is to eliminate Him or run away from Him, to eliminate, remedy or avoid such a situation. If you do that, you have destroyed the best opportunity for practicing the highest Sadhana.

In one of his very early letters to Swami Paramanandaji, Gurudev had written, "I want around me people who will criticise me, vilify me, scandalise me, even hurt me, injure me." This is not masochism. He did not enjoy being persecuted, nor did he suffer from a martyr complex; he neither invited nor looked for criticism; he was extremely careful in his behaviour; he conformed as far as he could to the norms of society and there was no objectionable behaviour on his part - it was all exemplary, but in spite of it, when he was inevitably criticised by someone or the other, it was there that his uniqueness was seen. There were occasions when even his own disciples openly or covertly mocked at Him or criticised Him - he knew it - but even then you couldn't find the least trace of disapproval or displeasure. His love was uniform. Occasionally the critic would get preferential treatment - only occasionally, because even that was not made a religion. It was not that he relished or enjoyed it - that's another trap. It hurts - it must hurt. If you have done your best to do the right thing and yet you are criticised you don't enjoy it, but you utilise that opportunity to discover this great ego. That is an opportunity to enquire, "Who am I?" Who is it that is hurt, who is it that is insulted, and what is insult?

Gurudev often pointed out that insult or criticism is nothing but so much wind, air. There's another way of looking at it. Most of you are familiar with these Kundalini-chakras and probably you know also that, according to Shat-chakra, nimpana the chakras are supposed to have a certain number of petals. It is said that certain sounds are associated with those and if you add up the whole lot you get the Sanskrit alphabet. The first of the vowels is 'a' and the last of the consonants is 'ha'. Aham in Sanskrit (or I is nothing but all these sounds put together, and all the words attributed to it are also words, mere sounds. 'I' (Aham) is non-existent sound; 'fool' is another non-existent sound and 'idiot' is another non-existent sound. That non-existent sound is attributed to this non-existent sound. What does it matter? It is air blowing on air - absolutely nothing. One who practices this Yoga regards injury as a blessing, not reveling in it, not remedying it, but utilising it to discover this Aham, to discover who this 'I' is.

One should distinguish between physical pain and psychological sorrow. Physical pain may have to be dealt with and remedied. The body itself demands it. Gurudev was extraordinarily careful when it came to the protection of the physical body, and during the last few years he took more medicine than food. Physical pain may have to be dealt with, avoided, treated, cured or got rid of, but psychological sorrow should not be treated, got rid of or avoided. It should be utilised in order to discover that which experiences this sorrow. With each experience if one is able to trace the source of that sorrow - which is the ego - then that ego is got rid of once and for all and there is liberation. Only then is there liberation. Therefore, Gurudev exalted this. When there is a tremendous inner urge to find the ego, in the light of that urge the ego (the 'me', the self) is seen to be non-existent.

In that situation virtue flows effortlessly. All the Yama-niyama take their abode in you, all the disciplines that we have been discussing all these days become yours, effortlessly. You are unselfish, effortlessly - not because you think the unselfish self is going to lead you to Moksha, but there is Moksha already. You are freed from the self and therefore you are unselfish. There is no alternative. You love God, not because you expect to be given a right to heaven. There is no because. That life itself is a continuous meditation. This urge to liberation sought to find the truth concerning the ego, and having discovered its non-existence begins to realise that it was possible for it to arise on account of inattention, and if you are not attentive and vigilant throughout your life it can arise again - so there is constant vigilance.

That vigilant watchfulness of the potentiality of the ego arising is itself meditation. There is no other meditation. In that meditation the ego is prevented from arising. That vigilance itself is the inner light or insight and as long as it is shining bright the demon called ego doesn't arise. That is meditation. And that is also self-realisation, God-realisation or liberation, whatever you wish to call it.