

# The Psychological Basis for Inner Transformation

by

SWĀMĪ NIḤŚREYASĀNANDA

*Formerly Head of the Mauritius branch of the Ramakrishna Mission, Swāmi Niḥśreyasānanda was in East Africa on a lecture tour in 1954. Before returning to India this year, the Swami worked for some time at Centre Védantique Ramakrichna, Gretz, the Mission branch in France. He gave this lecture at the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, Calcutta, on the 21st May 1955.*



VEDANTA STUDY CIRCLE  
Athens, Greece, 1999

**Source:**  
Bulletin of the  
Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture  
Vol.VI, No.10, October , 1955

This printing  
February 10, 2000

*NOTE: The Swami gave the same lecture in Alexandria,  
Egypt, in 1954, on his way back to India from Gretz.*

JM

*Circulated as a service by:*

John Manetta  
Beles 28 (Koukaki)  
117 41 Athens, Greece  
Phone [+30] 210 923 4682  
email: [jmanveda@otenet.gr](mailto:jmanveda@otenet.gr)  
website: [www.vedanta.gr](http://www.vedanta.gr)

# The Psychological Basis For Spiritual Transformation

The subject matter dealing with the psychological basis for inner transformation is quite vast and must interest one and all. Here only a few salient points can be touched upon. For more information, however, one may refer to Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtra*, the commentary on it by Vyāsa, and the gloss on the same by Vācaspati. The phrase 'inner transformation' has been deliberately used in order to remove the impression in many minds, possibly gathered from childhood and not clarified later by study and independent reflection, that *yoga* consists in stopping the breathing or the thinking process. *Citta-vrtti-nirodha* is often translated as 'suppressing the waves of the mind', and unwary people are likely to jump to the conclusion that it is a 'silencing' of the surface movements of the mind, understanding it in a very crude sense.

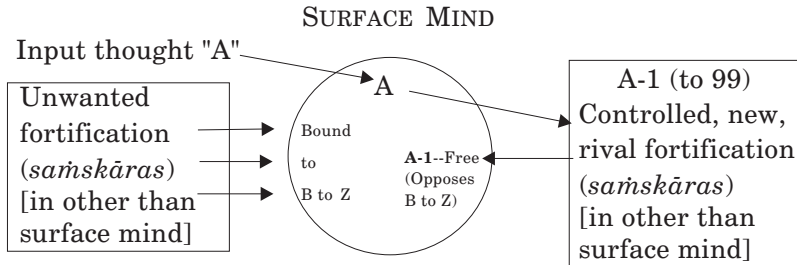
Freedom or the realization of the Self is not possible unless there is a complete overhauling of the personality. As our study and analysis proceed, and as our emotions and values get purified, in short, as we penetrate more and more into the interior of what we call our personality. we may gradually realize the 'cosmic' in the place of the 'individual' existence, or, as one writer puts it, realize ' that, for which the ordinary name is God '.

## THE SURFACE MIND

We shall have recourse to a diagram, thinking it may help to clarify matters and reduce the necessity for more words! We should, however, be cautioned that all diagrams relating to mind can be misleading, since mind is not an object of the senses.

The figure given below stands for our conscious mind or surface mind, meaning thereby that aspect of the personality where we experience the notion of ' I ', the sense of struggle, the shame of failure, the need for a readjustment of our attitudes. and, finally, the glow of achievement.

It is that 'platform' where, on looking within, we perceive all this drama being enacted. We call it 'our' mind, thinking. no doubt, that we have a reasonable amount of control over it. We shall test this belief of ours, using this mind itself as a testing ground. Indeed, our body-mind combination serves the purpose of an ever-ready portable laboratory to test our bondage or freedom by suitable experiments.



Let us take an example from ordinary life. I think this house belongs to me; how am I to verify if it is really mine? I write on a slip, 'This person, the bearer, is my friend; he is entitled to stay in this house for five minutes'. My friend takes this slip and enters the house; but to his horror, twenty people come from somewhere and unceremoniously push him out! As this fate overtakes him every time he enters the house, I have to conclude, for the present at any rate, that I have no control over the house. I must take suitable steps and establish my claim over it, before I can call it my house any more.

Let us now substitute the surface mind of the diagram for the house of the example. And to test our control over it, the permit and our friend will correspond to a well-selected thought 'A', which we shall expect to send 'in' and retain 'there' for five minutes. The thought 'A' can be of a flower or a

picture, of something which does not require much intellectual qualification from us to enumerate its parts, or to see its colours. If we honestly try to do this mental picturing, with physical eyes closed, we shall find that within a few seconds our thoughts wander, and that a number of unexpected mental pictures or thoughts rush in, preventing 'A' from occupying the field. Let us call these intruders, for convenience, 'B to Z'. Repeated experiment will convince us that our inability to keep 'A' inside, according to our intention, means that the surface mind is 'bound' by the unwanted forces 'B to Z'. What religious books call 'spiritual bondage' is verifiable in this manner as *psychological* bondage by any person who seriously undertakes some of the preliminary exercises in meditation.

#### MENTAL DISCIPLINE NEEDED FIRST

We learn one important lesson from this experiment. We find that our will is ordinarily helpless to resist the 'attacks' of unwanted and unexpected forces in the inmost recesses of our own personality. We all prepare plans and work hard to 'control' men and things in the world outside us. Indeed, at the back of our minds, we have the idea of improving the rest of the world; and we feel shocked and indignant when unexpected forces thwart our intentions. It does not strike us that we are trying the impossible all the time. A little introspection can show us that our own minds are slaves to unexpected and undesirable forces lurking within ourselves. Is it then a wonder that the same opposition is met by us everywhere else when we employ our will? To be a slave within, as proved to our own satisfaction or chagrin, and at the same time to be a master outside is a feat which no rational person can hope to achieve or try to perform. Nevertheless, we all proceed in that line, with no control inside and yet spending our energies to control the unpredictable forces outside, in the domestic, national, educational, social, political, and even religious fields. Our ancient teachers have wisely stressed the need for regulating and harmonizing inner forces to a reasonable extent, if

not cent per cent, as a preliminary condition to attain any success outside. Psychological freedom, psychological transformation, inner harmony – it is immaterial what term we use – is thus of the utmost importance not merely for the spiritual aspirant, but also for those who pursue other modes of life, for the teacher, the doctor, the merchant, and even the military man. In fact, mental discipline, looked at from this standpoint, breaks down the barrier between the usual classification into religious and secular fields.

### MENTAL CONTROL AND CONCENTRATION

Let us return to the fate of the selected thought 'A'. Suppose that we intended to keep it steady for five minutes, but that after two minutes, members of the 'B to Z' group began to rush in. What is the real worth of our attempt? To answer this, a small example is needed. If I clasp my palms together with a force of one hundred pounds, it is clear that you cannot separate them unless you apply upon my upper arms a pressure of something slightly more than the hundred pounds. The separating force must be more than the clasping force. Applying this principle to the mind, we find that if we manage to keep 'A' in the field for two minutes, we are at the same time disconnecting the total hold of 'B to Z' on it for that period. In other words, successful concentration on any selected ideal is equal to complete mastery of all unwanted and unexpected pulls from within, *during* the exercise. Concentration is the application of a powerful, all-conquering weapon from within.

But how are we to look at the failure of our concentration, which is experienced more often than success? The answer is very simple: We then get a chance to observe the enemies who peep across the border, to estimate their number, and to calculate the nature of their combinations and the frequency and pressure of their attacks. Let us not call that part of our exercise 'concentration'; let us call it 'daily observation'. Which military man or financier will not have his daily observation

to help him to formulate his plans for a forward move? Even hourly observations are necessary and will prove profitable.

This leads us, naturally, to the serious question, How long are we going to be on the defensive, using all our energies only to prevent our enemies, 'B to Z', from entering our field? Can we not cross the border ourselves and put their headquarters out of action? And if such a course is desirable, should we not procure some weapon other than 'A' to carry it out? The answer is that **when we repeat 'A', the momentum generated by it comes to our help**. No thought is wasted; it leaves a deposit behind, which we call memory. For convenience, we may call it 'A-1'. In due course, 'A-1' becomes stronger, and by its pull from within, makes future repetitions easier. If 'B to Z' have their own fortification in what we call our subconscious mind, 'A-1' now develops into a rival fortification side by side.

To change the figure of speech, each now exercises its voting power. In the beginning, of course, when problems arise, 'A-1' may not be able to make its voice heard much. At this stage, let us increase the scope of 'A' by giving it a meaning, *artha*, significance, a value to be expressed in daily behaviour. Let us say that 'A' means to us truth, a desire to see the truth, to fight for it, and to expect it alone from others. Previously, when situations arose involving a gain, so called, by telling an untruth, we brushed aside all qualms of conscience and indulged in falsehood. But now 'A-1', from its new fortification, sends up its own representative to protest. Let us say that the 'B to Z' group secures 90 votes, while 'A-1' gets only 10! No doubt it is a defeat. But the next time we sit for concentration, repentance comes with all its force; and with all sincerity fresh resolutions are made to stick to the truth, in spite of possible losses. Nature, being a friend to our evolution, leaves us without further temptations for a time, so that our respect for truth can increase, say to 20 per cent, and in due course to 50 per cent. Each failure in voting, in the interval, acts as a fresh stimulus to reinforce 'A-1' with suitable vows, and even with

what we may call 'penance'. When, however, the voting strength is 50-50, the mind is in a complete excitement. Each time the old, vicious thought raises its head – not only during formal concentration exercises, but also in normal working hours –, the new resolution symbolized by 'A' and 'A-1' automatically enters the field and drives it out.

### PRACTICE LEADS TO PERFECTION

The inexperienced person thinks, quite often, that continued practice has only increased his impure thoughts, whereas in his younger days his mind was much purer and the appearance of impure thoughts few and far-between. The fact is that continued practice has increased his *visibility*. Previously, when he was young and visibility very poor, he was unable to see large hosts of unwanted thoughts dancing in the mind for long periods unchecked. Now, each time the enemy peeps, the loyal soldier 'A' also appears on the scene. Take a funny example: Once in a city ten policemen were working, and they captured one thief every month. Then twenty policemen were employed, and the thieves captured became thirty. Thirty policemen were appointed; to everyone's surprise a hundred thieves were captured in the next few months! It is absurd to suggest that more policemen meant more thieves created! The truth is that thieves were located and caught more easily, because more eyes were engaged in detecting them. At last a stage must come when the policeman catches the thief as soon as he approaches a lock to break it.

Going back to mental control, if the aspirant persists in his passion for truth, the dark period ends; and the voting power of 'A-1' mounts up to 51 per cent, to 60 per cent, and even possibly to 99 per cent. His mental field becomes the proving ground of his victory. He can even call 'B to Z' to come and stay within, but they will be unable even to peep; 'A' and 'A-1' would be all-powerful in the surface and deeper levels. **Freedom can thus be verified.** We once played marbles and wasted our time, as children. Someone now offers us marbles and a few urchins for company; why do we not waste time, as



we did before? Because by conscious repetition of the value of time, we have developed a new habit, an 'A-l' as applied to time; and its representative comes to the surface mind automatically and says with a calm smile, 'I am not a child to do it again'. Without any fuss or struggle, the old habit is brushed aside by the victor! So, too, new virtues can be developed into habits, *samskāras* or *vāsanās*, in the subconscious mind by suitable CONSCIOUS repetitions. 'A', in such cases, would be consciously equated with virtues, like strength, purity, nobility., calmness, compassion, and so on. This way of using symbols to change the personality as desired and fill it with the virtues preparatory to, or expressive of, perfection, or self-realization, or God's grace, is based on the principle of *iṣṭa*, or the Chosen Ideal. We are free to select any *iṣṭa*, make symbols for it, and meditate on them to realize it. Speaking psychologically, meditation raises up new *samskāras* to replace old, unwanted *samskāras*; such exercises may be called *anya-samskāra-pratibandhi*, opposers, and ultimate replacers, of unwanted habits. Meditation thus transforms the personality and makes it a fit channel for the highest virtues man can express in his life.

### IMAGINATION HELPS WILL POWER

The question now arises, What is the best way of presenting 'A' to the surface mind? It is not a matter of sheer will-power, as most people think. This notion of will-power can be corrected by referring to an experiment suggested in an interesting book. Let us place on the ground a wooden plank, say, sixty feet long, less than a foot broad, and one inch thick. It is clear that any one of us can walk over it without any hesitation. If we are clever, we can even ride on a cycle, and coming from a little distance, rapidly pass over its total length, without straying into the mud. Let us now change the conditions of the experiment a bit. Let us fix this plank, strongly of course, in such a way that it will not shake at all, upon the top of two cliffs, about four hundred feet from the ground. If necessary, let us also arrange for a cinema show to impress upon

people the danger of falling over precipices. After all this preliminary set-up, let us take the cinema viewers one by one, remind them about the abyss at the last moment, and ask them to cross the plank. Even the boldest will tremble. He may suggest: with all the will-power at his command that he is determined to walk across, and that, in fact, there should be no hesitation at all, as his legs had carried him across when the same plank had been left on the ground, and so on. But all to no purpose; the least flicker of imagination, which conjures up the picture of a fall, is enough to thwart his will power and make his knees tremble and his teeth chatter! This shows that when will is put in opposition to imagination, imagination is the stronger. Our effort in meditation, thus, should be to take the fullest co-operation from imagination to reinforce the will. That is why in most religious systems, founded by past-masters in meditation, abundant use is made of art, literature, drama, and architecture, as well as of rituals employing lights, colours, music, and various rhythmic movements. In getting 'A' ready for presentation, a wise selection of these aids from the side of imagination is necessary to help the will-power; else the practice is likely to fail through dullness and monotony or dryness.

A minor question crops up now, Why is it that virtue is not granted 100 per cent strength, and why is a small 1 per cent still kept reserved for 'B to Z'? In answer, we may refer to one little lesson we learned, as students, when we studied the air pump. If each stroke of the piston removed one-fifth of the total quantity of air, five strokes, we felt sure, ought to empty the bell-jar of all its air and make it a vacuum. But we realized our folly when the skillful teacher asked how much remained in the bell-jar after the first stroke. Four-fifths would remain, and the second stroke would remove only one-fifth of that remainder; and thus there would be no vacuum! A minute fraction must remain. So, too, a negligible fraction of the old voting power of 'B to Z' would remain. But they would be mere memories, with a laughter value, not real temptation value; they would be like burnt-up seeds. There is no harm if some

one reminds us of our earlier days of time-wasting with marbles; we shall only smile at the memory; there will be no need to fight against it.

### TRANSFORMATION OF PERSONALITY

When truth or purity, as a value for daily life, in this way penetrates into the habit level, so that the compulsion to repeat it no more exists, we may say, in technical language, we have made a *samādhi* on it. Every *samādhi* involves a transformation of the personality, eliminating once for all the need to repeat a formula to drive a virtue in, or to overcome the resistance its opposite presents. Memories, minus their old emotional content, which caused fear or lust, may survive, but their seed-power is 'burnt up'; they are *dagdha-bīja*. Instead, the memory in the new set-up, may call up a natural impulse to comfort and bless. Viśvāmitra as a *Brahmajñānin* would not feel tempted by Meenaka or Rambhā, as he was in his earlier days of struggle; his only reaction, if they met him again, would be to offer them his choicest blessings.

Does not all this look like an endless mountain-climbing? Patañjali, in his *Yoga-Sūtra* (IV. 3), gives us a valuable hint. He says that our practice of virtue does not directly move the creative forces of nature and make us evolve. Our practice in reality helps to break down obstacles (*varanabhedastu tatah*), as in the case of ( the work of ) the cultivator (*kṣetrikovat*). For irrigating his field, the cultivator relies upon the water of a tank on the same level as his field, or slightly higher than it. But when obstructions exist in the canal, owing to stones or fallen trees or thick mud, he uses a spade or a crowbar just to remove the unwanted things. He never pulls the water with his hand, it flows of its own accord when the obstacles are removed. Similarly, concentration too removes the resistances to the free flow of perfection or God's grace, which is potential everywhere and at all times. Meditation is a method of turning unwanted things out, the desired thing automatically flowing in. We also find that the cultivator supplies the water and manure needed for his plants and pulls out weeds, but

does not force the sprouts to grow taller; they assimilate the juices and grow themselves. In the same manner, the aspirant supplies the necessary thoughts and devotion; the inner principle in each person ‘sucks up’ these and transforms them into a more powerful, noble, and harmonious structure, able to meet and overcome all resistances.

Does meditation or *yoga* change us into somebody else? Not at all; we are going to be ourselves only, but with all weakness dropped, with all our original, natural, divine perfection rendered free and fully manifest. In that way, as Swāmī Vivekānanda pointed out in one of his speeches, a student becomes a better student, a lawyer a better lawyer, and even a fisherman a better fisherman. If this principle is followed by more and more people in every walk of life; their transformed personalities will help to solve in a better fashion all existing problems in the domestic, national, international, economic, social, educational, cultural, and spiritual fields. The world, to that extent, will become a better place to live in. Such is the scope of inner transformation.



For similar material and other information  
visit our website:  
[www.vedanta.gr](http://www.vedanta.gr)