

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES IN SPIRITUAL LIFE Part 1

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Swami Yatiswarananda (1889 - 1966) was a disciple of Swami Brahmananda. He spent seven years teaching Vedanta in Europe, where he founded an ashram in Switzerland, though he lectured on Vedanta from Madrid to Warsaw. He left Europe as the second World War forced a closure to the European Vedanta work. The swami then spent ten years teaching Vedanta in the United States, returning to India to head several Centers, eventually becoming Vice-President of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Yatiswarananda was famed for his meditative life and spiritual attainment. His book, Meditation and Spiritual Life, a compilation of his class talks, is considered one of the finest compendiums on spiritual life. The article below was taken from the Jan-Feb 1959 Vedanta in the West.

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What Are the Obstacles?

In spiritual life, we use the word “obstacles” with reference to both the inner and the outer world, to physical and subtle objects, and to conditions and situations which stand in the way of our spiritual progress.

In general, there are obstacles of various kinds producing

misery, or dukkha of various types. In the Sankhya Sutras, Kapila mentions dukkhas of three types: *adhyatmika* or that caused within ourselves—in the body by illness and unhealthy living, and the mind by evil desires, anger, greed, folly, pride, envy, etc.: *adhibhautika* or that caused by other living beings such as beasts, thieves, and evil-minded persons; and the *adhidaivika* or the misery brought about by natural phenomena such as extremes of temperature, floods and storms, earthquakes, pestilences , etc. These may act as hindrances to spiritual life. And we are affected by our troubles all the more when we are not well inwardly.

We are all born with subtle impressions and tendencies brought from previous lives and we also acquire new ones in our present life. While good tendencies help, evil ones obstruct our spiritual progress.

There are different kinds of obstacles, and we come across them in the different stages of our spiritual life. Spiritual life is like a stream and should move towards the ocean of Sat-Chit-Ananda or Infinite Existence-Consciousness-Bliss, call it Godhead, Brahman, the Lord, Allah, or Tao, as you please. Sometimes the spiritual current does not move at all; sometimes it moves for a time and stops; sometimes it tends to move in wrong directions. The task in our spiritual life is to make this current move; move in the right direction and move steadily till the goal is reached.

Obstacles Are Inevitable but Can Be Overcome

This is the ideal. But in actual life, there is no such thing as movement in a straight line. There are ups and downs, breaks or stops, in the movement. Obstacles continue to confront us till we have known God's grace and attain the peace

and blessedness that come from divine realization. Until then, however, we have to persist steadily in our spiritual practices; we have to continue the struggle however insurmountable the obstacles may seem for the time being.

This is a matter of actual experience for many spiritual aspirants. A young man was once asked about this spiritual progress by Swami Brahmananda, his teacher. He said, "Not very well, Maharaj; my mind is restless. I have no taste for spiritual practices yet. There seems to be an obstacle inside me. I feel so unhappy. I must have been born with evil tendencies and these stand in the way of my spiritual progress." To this the Swami replied: "My boy, you must not talk like that. Try to practice japa (chanting the Lord's name) at dead of night; if that is not possible, do it during the early hours of the morning. . . . Waste no more of your valuable time. Lose yourself in prayer and meditation; otherwise, how can the door to spiritual truth be opened? . . . The aspirant should first learn about the spiritual path from some great soul and then follow it methodically. If the person proceeds haphazardly he or she cannot make much progress, and if the person gives up entirely, the effort to begin again will be twice as difficult. But no effort is wasted. Lust, greed, anger, all gradually leave one who practices spiritual disciplines."

When the young man said, "My mind is restless," he was not speaking of ordinary restlessness and unhappiness. Having made some substantial progress in spiritual life, he found inner obstacles standing in the way and these were making further advance difficult. The question may be asked, how do I know the mind of the young man? I know it because the young man was none other than myself.

There is restlessness and restlessness - that of the worldly

man hankering for the pleasures of the world; and of the spiritual seeker yearning for progress, wanting to move from a lower plan of consciousness to a higher one.

Spiritual life is a twofold movement, one of which may be represented as vertical and the other as horizontal. We have to rise higher and higher and also expand more and more in our consciousness.

Most of us may not care to rise to a higher plane. We fool ourselves by thinking that we are all right where we are. We are like Plato's men in the cave who took the shadows to be real and were quite satisfied with the life of darkness they lived. We are quite contented with our life in the cellar.

But some of us want to come out into the light and rise to a higher plane with the help of the spiritual current, which may be likened to the elevator which takes people from one floor to another. The spiritual current, when properly roused, takes us from one center of consciousness, or chakra, to another. Sometimes we want to get into the elevator but the door does not open; this is one of the obstacles. The door opens and we get into the box but the box does not move - this is another kind of obstacle. A third one is, we move up but the door does not open. The fourth is the door opens, we get out on the floor, move about for a time, but are not able to find our way back to the elevator when we want to rise higher. Something of this kind happened to me when I spoke to Swami Brahmananda of some obstacles standing in the way of my spiritual progress.

But these obstacles can be overcome. We can undergo spiritual practices, unfold the inner eye, discover the "secret stairs" and move up higher and higher.

Co-existence of Obstacles and Helps

Let us not, however, imagine that life is only full of obstacles. If we come across many obstacles and hindrances, we get also many helps and aids both within us and without. It is essential that we have a correct idea, a balanced estimate, of our conditions and environments.

Never should we weaken ourselves by thinking too much of our shortcomings only. If we have evil tendencies, we also have good ones - even more of the good than the evil. If we have within us such enemies of spiritual life as egotism, sensuality, greed, and anger, we have also such friends as selflessness, self-control, charity, and compassion.

A great help to our moral and spiritual life is the remembering of the supreme truth that we are the Atman. We are the souls eternally in touch with the Oversoul, just as a wave is in constant touch with, and is supported by, the ocean, just as a ray of light is in touch with the infinite light.

And we must beware of morbid theologians who think only in terms of sin, who always speak of humanity as a bundle of sin. There is a story of a new clergyman who started talking too much of sin. One of the congregation congratulated him, "We never knew what sin was until you came!" What a compliment!

All our spiritual teachers tell us that there are two opposite types of ideas working in our lives, the good and the pleasant - sreyas and preyas. We find in the Katha Upanishad:

"The good is one thing; the pleasant another. Both these, serving different needs, present themselves to humanity. It goes well with the person who, of the two, takes the good; but one who chooses the pleasant misses the

end. . . . Both the good and the pleasant come to humanity. The calm one examines them well and discriminates. The calm one prefers the good to the pleasant, but the fool chooses the pleasant out of greed and avarice.”

Maya, the power that has projected this phenomenal world, itself has two aspects, vidya and avidya, which may be compared to the centripetal and centrifugal forces. Vidya is that current which leads us Godward; it manifests itself as discrimination, nonattachment, devotion, and love for God. Avidya leads us to worldliness and expresses itself as the various passions - desire for wealth, worldly ambition, work with attachment, cruelty, etc. Avidya darkens the understanding and binds the soul. Vidya tends to help us towards Self-realization and freedom. Let us choose the path of good and become purer in body and mind. This purity is essential for our spiritual growth and brings us in touch with the cosmic spiritual forces which the devotee calls the grace of God.

Conditions for Spiritual Unfoldment

It is necessary for us to have a clear conception of spiritual unfoldment and its relation to cosmic existence and cosmic forces. Let us try to understand its secret through the illustration of a seed. If the seed is planted in the proper bed and is kept in touch with nature - with earth, water, heat, air, and space - it grows into a plant and finally develops into a mighty tree. The seed must be kept in close touch with nature and also in the proper condition internally, for only then can it profit by earth, water, etc.

The microcosm develops properly when it is in tune with the macrocosm. This is true in spiritual life also. The individual must be in tune with the cosmos. If we look within

Overcoming Obstacles in Spiritual Life

ourselves, we find that our body is a part of the ocean of matter and that cosmic energy is flowing through it and sustaining it. Our individual mind is a part of the cosmic mind, and our individual soul is a part of the cosmic soul. In order to keep the body in good health, we must follow the physical laws. When the body is kept in good condition, it remains in touch with the cosmic forces, which again help the body to maintain good health.

To keep the mind in good health, we must follow the moral laws which stand for harmony and purity. This keeps the mind in contact with the cosmic mind and so in good health. Similarly our soul must also be in a fit condition, in a state of purity and harmony, so that it may remain in direct touch with the cosmic spiritual forces. It is then that the cosmic will or the divine grace flows through the soul and assures its progress.

Proper food, moral practices, and spiritual exercises remove the obstacles in body, mind, and ego, keep us in tune with the cosmic will and fit to receive divine grace. Divine grace comes to us at first in the form of spiritual yearning and striving. As we become purer and purer, we come more and more in direct contact with the cosmic spiritual current.

In spiritual life, there must be tremendous effort, but it must not be of the egocentric type. All our practices must be carried out in a spirit of prayer, self-surrender, and dedication to the Divine. In our outlook, habits, and ways of thinking, there must be a revolution. Spiritual life, if properly lived, must lead us from the egocentric to the cosmocentric position.

Relation Between Divine Grace and Self-Effort

What we term self-effort and divine grace supplement each other. We cannot have the one without the other. Without intense and unremitting striving on our part, we can never experience divine grace. Mere prayer without corresponding effort will not bear fruit. It will be just like the man who, finding his house on fire, started praying for rain instead of trying to put the fire out through means available then and there. The proper thing is to do all we can and also to pray.

A little girl's brother used to set a trap to catch birds. Thinking this was wrong and cruel, she became very sad and wept. After some time, the mother found her happy and cheerful and was curious to know how such a change had come about. "Mommy," the girl explained, "First I prayed that my brother may be a better boy, then I prayed that no more birds may fall into the trap, and then . . ." she added triumphantly, "I went out and kicked the old trap to pieces." So prayer is to be combined with self-effort to break old unethical habits and form new good ones.

Blinded by their own narrow ideas, theologians make too much of a mystery about divine grace, which they say can be attained only by following their own pet doctrines and dogmas. But the enlightened ones speak in a different language. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God," says Christ in the greatest beatitude uttered by him. This is also the ancient teaching of the sages of India: "The resplendent and pure Self, whom pure and sinless souls, free from evil or impurities, have realized as residing in the body, can be attained by truthfulness, concentration, true knowledge, and perfect chastity."

Overcoming Obstacles in Spiritual Life

The Supreme Reality, or God, is like the sun. It reflects itself on the pure mind. With the help of an illuminating conversation between a devotee and Sri Sarada Devi - the spiritual consort of Sri Ramakrishna, also known as the Holy Mother—we can clearly understand the connection between spiritual practice and divine grace.

Devotee: “Mother, how does one realize God? Worship, japa, meditation - do these help one?”

Mother: “None of these can help.”

Devotee: “Then how does one attain to the wisdom of God?”

Mother: “It is only through his grace. But one must practice meditation and japa. That removes the impurities of the mind. One must practice spiritual disciplines such as worship, and so forth. As one gets the fragrance of a flower by handling it, as one gets the fragrance of sandalwood by rubbing it against a stone, in the same way one gets spiritual awakening by constantly thinking of God. But you can realize him right now if you become free from desire.”

The mind has become soiled by worldliness. Spiritual practices remove the impurities, and then just as the clear mirror reflects the shining sun in all its glory, the Divine Spirit is revealed clearly in the purified mind in a spontaneous way.

Here, one point must be plainly understood. The purity attained through spiritual disciplines may be of a very high order, but it is not perfect. The spiritual seeker is established in perfect purity only after divine realization, when objects of temptation become unreal, and the Supreme Spirit remains the only reality. That is why Sri Krishna declares in the

Bhagavad-Gita: “Sense objects recede from the abstinent person, but the taste for them lingers still; with the realization of the Supreme Spirit, even the taste disappears.”

It is necessary for us to understand the relation of spiritual practice to divine grace and the important part they play in our lives in removing our inner obstacles. Then only can we feel enthusiastic about the disciplines, which we ordinarily undergo in a haphazard way.

Once a disciple asked the Holy Mother about the utility of spiritual practice. She replied:

“Through these spiritual disciplines, the ties of past karma are cut asunder. By these disciplines the turbulence of the sense-organs is subdued.”

Devotee: “Can action ever cancel action?”

Mother: “Why not? If you do a good action, that will counteract your past evil action. Past sins can be counteracted by meditation, japa, and spiritual thought.”

It is a matter of experience that to the extent we succeed in making our mind pure through moral and spiritual struggle, we feel the flow of divine grace. Swami Brahmananda used to tell us: “To obtain God’s grace is the most important aid in spiritual life. The breeze of his grace is always blowing. Just unfurl your sail.” This means that we should keep ourselves open to the divine grace - the cosmic spiritual current - by attaining purity through the performance of regular spiritual practice.

Spiritual Life - The Preparation for Receiving Divine Grace

All our spiritual teachers declare unanimously that the

soul in its essential nature is pure spirit. Owing to ignorance, the spirit forgets itself and becomes identified with the ego, with the mind and the senses, with attachment and aversion, with the sense objects, with the body and its functions - all products of ignorance. The Atman puts on the masks of the causal body, the subtle body, and the gross body. It is the masks that become impure, not the Atman. The ego, the mind, and the body may be defiled but the spirit ever remains pure, enlightened, and free.

An illustration of Sri Ramakrishna helps us to understand this better. The body is like a vessel, the mind is like the water in it. Brahman is like the sun that is reflected in the water. The water may be impure and disturbed, but the light of the sun ever remains shining and pure. The Katha Upanishad declares: "As the sun, which forms the eye of the universe, is never defiled by the external impurities seen by the eyes, so the one Self that resides in all beings is never touched by the evils of the world."

No impurity can affect our primary nature, which ever remains pure. It is our second nature that becomes impure, and it can and should be purified. Spiritual life is the cleansing of this second nature of ours, the cleansing of the masks - the coverings of the ego, the mind, and the body. So there is certainly hope for every one of us. It is rightly said that even as every saint has a past, so has every sinner a future.

In the Bhagavad-Gita, Sri Krishna gives this categorical assurance: "Even the most sinful amongst people, if that person worships me, the Supreme Spirit, with unswerving devotion, must be regarded as virtuous, for that person has resolved rightly. Soon the person becomes righteous and attains eternal peace. Proclaim it boldly that my devotee is

never destroyed.” “Giving up all other duties, take refuge in me alone. I will free you from all sins; grieve not.” The Lord himself removes all obstacles for the devotee who has completely surrendered to him.

The Transforming Power of Divine Grace

A glorious illustration of how a most sinful person can become righteous and attain the highest illumination and peace through the grace of the Supreme Spirit is seen in the life of Girish Chandra Ghosh, the famous actor-dramatist and a great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. According to his own statement, there was no sin that Girish did not commit. At one time he considered religion a fraud. Later, however, a great change came over him and there grew a deep yearning for spiritual light and peace. It was then that he was drawn to Sri Ramakrishna. Gradually his mind became purified, though he had to go a long way. Once the following conversation took place:

Girish: “Sir, please bless me.”

Master: “Have faith in the Divine Mother, and you will attain everything.”

Girish: “But I am a sinner.”

Master: “The wretch who constantly harps on sin becomes a sinner.”

Girish: “Sir, the very ground where I sit becomes unholy.”

Master: “How can you say that? Suppose a light is brought into a room that had been dark a thousand years, does it illumine the room little by little, or in a flash?”

Girish: “I have no sincerity; please grant it to me.”

Master: “All right, you have faith.”

Young Narendra, who later became Swami Vivekananda, was very friendly with Girish and was warned by the Master not to associate with him too much: “Girish is like a cup in which garlic is kept. You may wash it a thousand times but can never get rid of the smell altogether.” Girish heard this and felt offended. He asked the Master if the “garlic smell” would go at all. The Master assured him, “All the smell disappears when a blazing fire is lighted; if you heat the cup in the fire you will get rid of the smell,” and he declared that people would be astounded at the marvelous change that would come over Girish. The garlic smell did disappear in due course, and he became wonderfully transformed.

Directed by the Master, Girish followed the path of absolute self-surrender to the divine will - a path very few can follow. He would not promise to undergo even the simplest spiritual discipline, and was very happy when Sri Ramakrishna asked him to give “the power of attorney” and promised to assume all responsibility for his spiritual life.

Girish at that time thought that the path of self-surrender was the easiest but later on realized what a most exacting thing it was. He had to practice self-surrender every moment! As a result of this, however, he felt continually the presence of the Lord, and became a man of God. The Lord had removed all his vices - his obstacles in the spiritual path - and filled his soul with his loving, divine presence.

The last time some of us saw Girish, he told us: “As I move my hand, I feel that it is not I but the Lord who is moving it.” His eyes and face were radiant with the glow of his inner illumination and unbounded love for the Lord. This is one of the most sublime illustrations of transformation brought about

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the divine grace, which flows into the spiritual seeker as he strives to his utmost.



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