

ESSAYS ON YOGA

THE CYCLE OF UNHAPPINESS

Swami Suryadevananda

The Yoga Vasistha tells us, “It is not possible to separate the action from the man—the person and the action are inseparable.” Action or behavior comes from your own being just like silk comes out of the spider. Spider silk is a protein fiber spun by the spider. It is composed of complex protein molecules arranged in different sequences. Actions are also similarly spun out of understanding and patterns of thought. How can you separate thought from action?

In the Yoga Sutra, Patanjali tells us that as long as the root of egotism or the ‘I-ness’ feeling exists, it will continue to generate action. These actions can be regarded as either virtue or vice. Actions can at best modify but never eliminate these roots of unhappiness or distress which exist at the core of one’s being. He calls the fivefold ground for unhappiness as *klesa*.

Swami Venkatesananda tells us: “The mind is restless because of the many unresolved problems. The elements that disturb mental equilibrium and thus generate psychic distress are:

1. *avidya*: ignorance of the truth concerning
2. *asmita*: oneself or egotism which seems to be the obvious truth in ignorance, and the belief in the separate individuality,
- 3&4. *raga-dvesha*: psychological and unnatural extension of attraction and repulsion which, as neurological phenomena, are natural, and
5. *abhinivesha*: blind clinging to the present physical ‘life’, born of the ignorant division of timeless eternity into life and death.”

This is the fivefold root of unhappiness, and as long as this exists—you are in the danger zone. They will continue to throw up mental, verbal and physical actions and leave the scars of actions—*samskaras* or impressions. These *samskaras* are going to crave for expression, again forming an endless chain.

As long as these roots are there...

1. They agitate your consciousness.
2. Agitation generates action.
3. Action generates experience.

4. Experience generates impressions.

5. Impressions agitate your consciousness and the cycle repeats endlessly.

As long as you live this so-called ‘individual life’—you will be imprisoned by personality. This illusion of individuality as a separate entity is the seed of most misunderstandings. Limitation and conditioning are inherent in creation. Our senses, for example, only perceive a fragment of the totality. This is just part of their make-up so there is no remedy necessary here.

The mind, however, is heavily conditioned—loaded with memory. It is here the seeds of unhappiness lie in wait—like a nursery for suffering. This loaded mind responds to life mechanically, just like a computer.

The intellect has its own limitations in that it functions within the logic barrier. It cannot solve or remedy our difficulties as it is obsessed with ‘why’s’ or theories which it itself invents to satisfy its curiosity.

Swami Venkatesananda writes, “No amount of physical or mental activity can uncondition the body, mind and intellect. With ruthless perseverance, the seeker must *drop* the conditioning by the ‘*neti-neti*’ (not this-not this) method. Any effort at transforming the mind will leave the problem untouched—even as dough can never be free of form, even if it is just a shapeless mess.”

Neti-neti is not a technique that can be practiced during meditation only for some relief or gain. It is a full-time, ongoing, direct confrontation with all that has assumed the status of ‘reality’ and solidified individuality or ‘I-ness’. Vedanta teaches that there are layers or sheaths to our personality, and the negation of these sheaths is essential to uncondition the mind—sort of like peeling the skin of an onion to arrive at the core of space or the fullness from which the onion emerged, sustained itself and fell back into.

Naturally, this requires full-time, ongoing observation in order for the mind to avoid further conditioning and abide in the truth of the moment rather than in the layers of memory. *Neti-neti* is an all-out approach to deny untruth in all its shapes and forms while at the same time, steadily abiding in the truth.

Throughout the day, we are continually faced with external and internal situations, often at the same time. Things happen and memory rises to push for experience. Can we be extremely vigilant in order to see exactly what presents itself and simultaneously be alert to watch the surge of memory that determines action and self-perpetuation? If we can clearly see what *is*, and what rises out of habit, we can do what needs to be done independent of the limitations of sense perception and the noise of memory. Gradually we will empty the bucket of memory (*me-more-y* or ‘more of me’) by disuse.

The *neti-neti* meditation requires unbroken observation and at the same time confrontation and negation of the deeper conditioning with which it enmeshes self: the body, vital energy, mind, intellect and the feeling of 'I-ness' itself. This is not an intellectual exercise and it is not possible to do this unless the same observation, confrontation and negation is fully active all the time. This is why I have mentioned it is not merely an activity but the full force of *who we are* rising into action *naturally*, and without any friction or resistance.

Our unhappiness and sorrow is not due to anyone or anything but to our egoism, self-conceit and individual existence—this does not exist anywhere but in our heart and mind, as does our unhappiness and sorrow. Yoga, or the way of harmony, is neither easy nor difficult—it requires all-out sincerity. Yoga is not one aspect of our existence but an undercurrent that threads all action with an understanding of the existing unity and the commitment to discover that unity by direct experience.

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