

ACTION AS A MEANS OF PERFECTION

Swami Suryadevananda

We feel that we are doing different things with different purposes and intended results. Are we really doing different things? A closer look will show that this may not be so.

Regardless of whether you are a professional in some field, a homemaker or a student, you think, feel, communicate and act in some way. The laborer and the spiritual seeker, too, does only these and they are not four different things but four forms of the same thing: expression.

All actions are forms of expression—seeds sown which will germinate into blossoming plants of experience in time and experience shapes the inner fabric for better or worse. Are different purposes necessary for us to have in order that we do what needs to be done? Habit may want us to believe so, but not wisdom. Expression results in experience and these are not two different processes but a single flow of energy in accordance with the law of nature: “As you sow, so you shall reap”.

Our concept of time is immediate, but this is not how nature works. We do something and expect to see a return of some sort immediately or in the very near future. Adding anxiety to misunderstanding decreases clarity further.

If we have done something the best we could, what is the need to be concerned about the result at all? Whether it turns out one way or another, we could not have done better, and this allows us to move on to the next thing that needs our whole-hearted attention again. Not doing the best that could be done is the main reason for anxiety, as we look to the impending result thinking we could or should have done something better in order to have seen a different outcome. Why is it that we do not do the best we possibly can with all of our actions?

Also, doing the very best in all that needs to be done leaves no room for thought interference. When something very important needs to be done, we do precisely this—we concentrate by not letting unwanted thoughts interfere and give all our energies to the task on hand till the way to do it excellently is revealed.

Something or the other has to be done from moment to moment—can we do it with all of our heart and being in the best way we possibly can, and then leave it?—the next thing to be done is already there to help you with this. Like a pebble that is thrown to skip on top of the water, it will travel further.

All forms of expression or action (thought, feeling, communication and physical action) are thought manifested. We get another opportunity to see our thoughts by facing our actions and their results. When we learn to look within while doing what needs to be done, we will face a quiet mind, as thought will have been observed all along; this itself prevents its interference in action. All accomplishments, too, start with thought and then take shape

physically. The artist, painter, writer, engineer or gardener first sees what needs to be done in thought and then brings the inner thought to physical view. Objectivizing thought does not change thought, it just gives shape externally to what is already present internally—both of these being vitally connected and therefore one and the same thing. The waters of two vitally connected streams are not different from each other; neither is the air in two adjoining rooms.

Thought stems from understanding and this understanding is at the very heart of a person—that which actually responds to life. What we call intellectual understanding is a concession for our laziness to bring into life what the intellect knows is best. It is a lack of will, because the will or heart is wedded to other things. We never confront this and use excuse and blame to cover our own inadequacy.

Result can then be said to be understanding appearing in the physical or sense plane. We see ourselves finally in the resulting action. Let us remember again that immediacy is our rule and not the rule of nature. An illustration may bring out this point better.

You have a feeling to do some selfless work and volunteer at the homeless shelter in the community. You can deal with your work not being appreciated by the homeless in the shelter, but when those who coordinate or supervise your work tell you a little more about 'how' it is to be done instead of 'what' (which you don't mind hearing at all), you feel offended to say the least. Why? If you were concerned about donating your time to work selflessly, you would welcome everything about 'how', as this is now the ego is revealed in full bloom—never the 'what'. The 'how' reveals secret motives that are brought to the surface in experience—whether or not we wish to show our inner displeasure at being counseled on the 'how' of things. "Who are you to tell me 'how'? I am a volunteer here, offering my time, energy and talents—just tell me what you need and leave me alone!"—this could be the undercurrent of thought. The 'how' is more important if selflessness is important, as the 'how' can awaken the ego in a way the 'what to do' can never accomplish, since the 'how' has much to do with 'you'.

If we really think about it, action has no other purpose than this. Whatever we do gets undone or is rendered obsolete eventually. We make, brake and make. Each day we do the same things—variety is in the value our minds are attached to. Each day we sleep, eat, clean up and attend to some duties—knowing that we must do it again the next day. Action is a great purifier and transformer only if we want change—not to change things but to change ourselves.

For this, we must know how to look inward while working—seeing the inner as we see the outer without falling into the sway of either. Something needs to be done—do it! Most important of all is how we view what needs to be done. Someone who's more concerned about themselves will see what needs to be done to benefit themselves or the ego, and with each action the ego is reinforced and his shrinking vision rapidly weakens his world—even though the money and power he seems to enjoy at the moment suggest otherwise. The smaller your vision, the smaller you are—the larger is the world the greater is the desire to have more to compensate the inner smallness.

When you start thinking universally, as part of the situation in which you find yourselves (which is really how things are), your actions are universal and there is felt an inner expansion which is the experience of universal expression. The more you see yourself as part of the environment, the less you thirst to possess it, as there is no need to possess yourself. This is the healthiest way to thin the passions and calm the outrush of the mind.

If the wisdom of inner expansion is seen by the heart—understanding at the core of your being—there is immediate action and hence, immediate change. You see yourself as a drop would see the ocean—not only as a vital part but the ocean itself. Everything becomes quite clear if this enters the heart and there are no more choices. Each action merits the very best response you can give. There are no more choices as far as quality of response and commitment are concerned, and you let go of much of the inner conflict that comes from having double standards and disharmony.

Actually, we do not even act as such—ideation or the understanding that precedes and moves thought to act is real action. Let's look at another example. You feel thirsty and think of a nice glass of orange juice—what happens? The feet walk to the refrigerator (or to the store) to get some orange juice and the body drinks and digests it. What did the 'you' actually do? Not much—it just decided that it should have some orange juice! Thoughts are real actions, as all that follows is nothing but the actualization of thought. We only feel there is some gap between action or expression and result or experience—but it is not so. Action is result or expression is experience—something goes out and is seen manifested, that is all. It is wise to be careful of all action, as experience returns in its own coin, so to say.

We can see all action the same way—that which precedes the action; the physical effort is only manifesting what has been decided. The stress, worry and anxiety in our lives is caused by errors in understanding and the unnecessary inclusion of thought with action—be it motive or even memory. Thinking that is not charged with feeling is useful; it is data and can aid action. This thinking is a recollection of facts (like flipping the switch to turn on the lights) that contribute to action but never tries to interfere, subvert or thwart action. Memory that is charged with feeling, on the other hand, interferes with action and shapes the outcome significantly. It is this interference of thought that fatigues the body and mind. Let's look at it in a practical setting.

We are both invited to dinner by a close friend who is also an excellent cook. The dinner was great and a most delicious apple pie is served for dessert. You comment that the apple pie is excellent and my response, "It is very good but not as good as my grandma's apple pie!" Just what was wrong with the apple pie served? Nothing at all! It was excellent and it may have even been better than my grandma's apple pie, but because I remembered her pie and my affection for her, the recollection of my feelings, happy though they were, interfered with such a joyful act of simply enjoying really wonderful apple pie baked by a friend. Why did I have to bring grandma into this?

Life is abundant in simple pleasures, delights and joys that can lift the heart and spirits upward instantly, but we do not allow this natural soaring because of the interference of thought in action. Motive is thought, as is expectation. We never stop to examine our

anxieties to see that we are not only the cause—we are the very anxieties in our lives we wish would disappear.

We each experience our own stresses, tensions and anxieties but have never stopped to consider how this is happening? Not by a psychological examination, but by looking directly into the experience to see how this is happening. Something that feels like ‘me’ is experiencing something else that is also within me, and since within me is only myself—it is me only. I experience myself when there is inner joy or stress.

If thoughts that lead to action are good, healthy, and universal—the resulting experience will be of a similar character. As is the seed, so is the tree. The cycle of expansion feeds on itself and propels greater expansion—just as the cycle of contraction which brings a life of turmoil does. The choice is completely ours.

Mental action is real action as it is fruition or result itself, though this manifests physically in its own time. So we are not doing many things regardless of our occupation or duty. Sense of duty is real duty. How do you feel about the entire wide environment in which you find yourself, not intellectually or at the coffee shop, but when in every action—the seemingly insignificant and the seemingly most critical, too? If we truly belong to our surroundings and feel ourselves to be a part of this universe, our actions will be universal actions and the results will be what the universe feels best for our continual evolution.

Why do we give ourselves so much importance unnecessarily? The more we feel completely responsible for our lives, the more life will leave you alone to take care of yourself!—and it will be an uphill battle each moment. This is not to say that one is to be irresponsible, carefree or callous, but instead of connecting what needs to be done with the self, the ego, can we do what needs to be done—period? Just by keeping the ego out of action will put *all* of the energy into action, and the result will be far better. Use the mind but do not be used by the mind.

It is thinking before action that is *real* action—and it is this that shapes both the process of action as well as the result. Something that we feel is well done but is heavily interwoven with motive and expectation can never be called excellent; it will always be mediocre at best. In the Yoga Vasistha, there is a beautiful verse: “*When one has made up his mind to go to a certain place, his feet function without any mental activity; function like those feet and perform action here*”.¹ Our role in action is what takes place in the mind that leads to the physical act which is carried out by the intelligence in the body and the body itself. These series of decisions shape our inner and outer world—they shape us and our destiny. Whether you are a white, blue or orange-collared worker, you do this much only—the body does the rest and the experience resulting is proportional to the ideation that actualized the physical action—not the physical action itself.

That is not to say that we are to live mechanically, without feeling or sensitivity, but just the reverse. It is only when we can keep the past which is memory and the future which is expectation out of the present that we can give ourselves wholly to the present—to that which needs to be done. It is only then that real action is possible, as it is devoid of the interference of thought. Thought does have good use in that it reveals the health of

understanding or the heart—it is here that errors take place which result in much grief. In meditation, we develop awareness to the rise and fall of thought and discover a way to continue our meditation without the interference of thought. Thought is not suppressed; rather, it is understood, and the energy of that which fuels thought is harnessed in meditation. Thought cannot be without energy, and so empty forms remain without the value invested in them. Thoughts that cannot be resolved, must be dissolved.

In the Bhagavad Gita we are told, “*Do what needs to be done, without thought of result*”. Is it realistic for a drop to expect a result from the ocean? The drop has no existence of its own, no existence at all apart from the ocean—the ocean alone is! We are not only a part of the environment, we *are* the environment.

Action is what leads to action, and if this can be free of the ego, of thought, of the self—action can then become a means for discovery and transformation—a means of perfection.

ⁱ Recommend a good study of the beginning verses of Section VI, Part II - The Supreme Yoga by Swami Venkatesananda.