

Yoga Vāsiṣṭha

Swami Suryadevananda

Part 11 (Chapter IV begins...)

Focus: Simple Ways to Increase satva or Natural Goodness

As we discussed earlier, the Yoga Vāsiṣṭha is a dialogue between Rāma and the sage Vāsiṣṭha where Rāma raises different questions to clarify his understanding with the sage. Though questions raised today may appear slightly different, the answers provided by the sage continue to be very useful to us in our lives and in the quest for truth. It is important to try to see, and get a feel for what is pointed to through the illustrations and background rather than get caught-up on the inessentials.

Kindly bring back to mind that the entire dialogue between Rāma and Vāsiṣṭha is on clearing Rāma's doubts concerned: the world appearance, its transcendence while still doing one's duty, reality and its attainment. Though Rāma expresses his doubts in many areas and from different angles, the truth expounded by the great sage Vāsiṣṭha is rooted in one theme—appearances seem to manifest themselves in the absolute in a certain condition but they do not alter the nature of reality which stays absolute and unchanged.

Repetition in our attempt to realize the truth is necessary, not because it just takes repetition or we don't get it, but because the conditioned mind which is very strong, interferes and insists on habitual ways so our attempts may not reach the depth where conditioning is rooted. This interfering mind is itself the problem as it is conditioning itself—trying to act intelligent. To loosen conditionings grip, it helps if one starts seeing everything fresh, as it occurs, and in context of the present situation only. This gives rise to a spirit of non-reliance, non-acceptance and non-cooperation of conditioning and prevents backsliding.

There is a beautiful verse among the early verses, *“Verily, birds are able to fly with their two wings: even so, both work and knowledge together lead to the supreme goal of liberation”*. It is interesting how action is called 'work' in the scripture. This so because it was clear in the minds of the sages that all work was a window to see existing conditioning and an opportunity to rise above it. During any and all work or perhaps we should just call it action, if we are aware of the mind's activity and outer activity at the same time, we should be able to avoid its pull by doing what is best instead. Real motivations of actions often stays hidden beneath the veneer of outer pleasantries and niceties, so much so that we ourselves stop looking at our real motivations and also come to believe what we are communicating or projecting externally.

This loss of continual awareness of our real intent, projected externally or kept hidden, is a great loss in the pursuit of truth. If we are sincere, which means our actions, underlying thoughts and feelings are one – action becomes a window to the most potent latent tendencies of the mind. It is these tendencies that bind us, and, being aware of them while doing what needs to be done while not identifying with these tendencies paves the path of peace and joy that lies just beyond. In today’s politically charged atmosphere, what is seen outside may be quite different from what is actually felt or meant and this seems to be very common. So much so that it becomes harder even for one’s own self to separate outer behavior from inner intent as they seem to blend seamlessly to stay hidden. This loss is a wide gap that will have to be bridged—each for oneself.

Wisdom or teachings must be practiced in life for it to take root and blossom right where conditioning as wisdom has to replace conditioning. When wisdom is practiced, conditioning weakens by disuse and the heart experiences peace and joy as the disturbing thought waves or conditioning subside. This peace and joy is not something new that we come upon, but our own true nature which surges to the surface in proportion to our enthusiasm to be aware of conditioning and let it go. Conditioning exists in the mind as thought waves and these disturb our natural peace and joy. There is no loss in letting it go, only gain—this has to be felt in the heart.

This practice of wisdom is not the practice of some nice theory but the ‘practice of being wise by being vigilant continually’. This practice consists of clear perception of each situation as it happens, and our response if needed in light of what is good – not just for our interests but what is inherently good. The practice of wisdom can also be called the practice of goodness as it calls on us to do what is ‘best’ rather than ‘what is best for us’. The ‘us’ is not a part of best and when we practice what is best, we expand as we stand with things and the ‘us’ weakens by disuse. The more you use wisdom, the more goodness shines in you. Soon, goodness shines as you and finally, you shine as goodness yourself.

When all the disturbing thought-waves in the mind subside, the mind experiences its natural peace and joy.

So where do we start?

The journey starts with a firm resolve that comes about by living a vigilant life or an examined life.

Work on the inner perimeter and outer perimeter together. For the inner perimeter, plug inner leaks of the mind, preventing it from strengthening habit pathways and allowing the mind to begin resting in itself. You can do this by always having clear before your mind the ideal you seek and the cost of falling to the pull of habit. For this, you will need a clear-cut ideal etched in your heart.

Work on the outer perimeter by giving the mind better choices instantly which are conducive to the goal instead of habitual ones. For this, you must have a well-conceived program of life.

The mind begins to get concentrated as the gathered rays of the mind start resting in themselves. Self-control is not punitive but positive and gives rise to innate, natural joy which is not dependent on others, things or conditions. As one gets established in self-control, one no longer reacts to outer conditions or inner surges as one has cultivated the practice of doing what needs to be done in spite of them, wholeheartedly—just because it needs to be done.

The time it takes to gather the rays of the mind is proportional to the unwavering firmness of resolve we are able to muster and sustain. Without real inner clarity, it is difficult to muster firm resolve and Vāsiṣṭha advises taking recourse to the knowledge transmitted by the great teachers till our own clarity blossoms and our resolve becomes unwavering.

But, why all this?

The world appearance and conditioning are problems only because of our deep rooted belief and hope in them as sources of joy and happiness. They are not! Joy and happiness surge within and people, things and conditions have nothing to do with it. Therefore, our sadhana or efforts are the breaking free from the inner bonds of habit and should be practical, balanced, methodical and whole-hearted. We are going against the flow of a river we have ourselves created and sustained and unless we create a new current, it is difficult to change the existing flow which has so much habitual energy infused in it. Sadhana is not only spiritual practice but the spiritual way or way to return our true nature.

Conditioning ceases as and when the truth is clearly seen and realized but for this, the truth in all things has to be given a real chance. We cannot abide in habit and aspire for something beyond—it just will not work. The peace and joy we seek is found in abiding in our true nature and towards this, we have to be willing and enthusiastic in the breaking free of habit.

Good foundation and start

In one simple statement, Vāsiṣṭha declares the quintessence of all wisdom, *“Bondage is the craving for pleasure; and its abandonment is liberation”*. We must be clear here that ‘craving for pleasure’ is what is pointed to but, this is a very slippery slope as initially, it is not easy to always discern between simple pleasures that come naturally and even simple pleasures for which we may seek subtly – even if just a little wish. It is this seeking or subtle wishing that is the offshoot of a deeper vein that keeps consciousness restless and so, it is wise to block this by leading a simple life externally as well to get a solid foundation.

We are taught from early on to inquire into things, Vāsiṣṭha once again turns the tables on us and suggests that there is no point in inquiring into how ignorance or conditioning has arisen—but to focus our entire effort on the quest of getting rid of conditioning, root and branch. Why find a reason for everything? Having a reason or an explanation does not give you immunity. When you focus instead on getting rid of ignorance, you also find how it has gained such a foothold and are equipped to prevent such anchoring in the future.

Satva or natural goodness

Satva is purity, natural or innate goodness. It is one thing to do good consciously, it is another to do good naturally. The 'doing good' naturally is not so much a doing or an action of sorts but an expression of being—just who you are, and so, it is natural just as the sun shines not because it is doing something but because it *is* luminous.

Over some verses, the sage gives several ways to increase satva or our own innate natural goodness. I have culled the important ones—they are very practical and simple but can bring about a wonderful change within. Keep in mind that we are not talking about behavioral goodness but a goodness that is the base of spiritual effort which is essential in the quest to realize one's true nature.

Simple ways to increase satva or natural inner goodness

1. Do not grieve or despair in calamities: Wonderful teachings are rolled-up into this one, single, pithy statement. Firstly: do not grieve or despair – remember, we cannot really change the outcome or shape of things but we do have a choice in adding grief or despair and worsening the impact of things. Do your very best and accept the rest is a simple but good way. We have full latitude in doing and we should do our very best, finding satisfaction from 'doing' which is always in our hands – not the way things turn out as various factors beyond our control are involved in shaping the final outcome or shape of things. Doing our best, accepting how things turn out and moving on to once again doing our best will always keep 'best' in the heart rather than disappointment, grief and despair.

2. Do not wish for other than what is present and what is natural: Here, we follow on the lead of what we have just discussed. If we are satisfied with doing our best, we are always satisfied as 'doing' is in our hands – the outcome is not. When this is accepted in the heart, we are also satisfied with what is present or here now and with what is natural. The looking over the shoulder to what others have stops once we associate satisfaction with action instead of outcome. This does not mean we slacken in our efforts but that we find satisfaction in the very act of doing which is always in our hands instead of outcome which is shaped by many other factors and elusive. When the wishing for other than what is present and natural stops, the mind rests in itself and that is the source of more peace and joy that any outcome could give rise to.

3. Rejoice in doing what is right and appropriate: When we do what needs to be done, as is right and appropriate or the best way it can be done – rejoicing is natural and spontaneous. Remember back when you did what was right and also appropriate to the moment and you will recollect a sense of joy and satisfaction. When we include other factors in equation, we complicate things unnecessarily. Each moment looks at us for a response, "Do I need to do something or not?" and it is only after this question is answered, "What is the right and appropriate response?" It is best not to put the cart ahead of the horse by thinking of what should be done and how as these are

only relevant if you have clearly felt that something needs to be done. In the second part, the question of 'right' and 'appropriate' are both important as what is right in one situation may not be appropriate in another.

4. Experience the fullness of bliss and satisfaction within their heart at all times: Once you have rewired yourself to associate satisfaction with action, you eliminate dissatisfaction resulting from the way things work out or the shape they take. This satisfaction blossoms into a feeling of fullness and joy in the heart as you know that you dealt with every situation in the best way possible and you keep going from this 'best way feeling' to other 'best way feelings' and joy expands in the heart. This principle is easy to remember in good times but can be forgotten in difficult times and calamities but must be practiced even in the simplest of actions till it becomes natural and ongoing. The door of right action or doing points to the door of 'being' or our true nature – remember, right always points to right. In this way, right action or doing, becomes a window to the out true nature or self. Walking the outer correctly, we are also able to find the way within to our true nature.

5. Be radiant with noble qualities such as friendliness: It does not cost us anything to harbor noble qualities such as friendliness but it gives us a whole lot. Taking friendliness as an example of many other good qualities, it is important to remember that friendliness must be free of expectations of any sort or reciprocity. Friendliness is not greeting everybody all the time or always opening doors etc. but much more. Friendliness is a way of being without unfriendliness and cannot truly blossom in the heart if we harbor any kind of favoritism or preference towards those we consider 'our people' or 'kith and kin'. Friendliness is not anything we do particularly but an outer expression of an inner vision or just how we see things. It is only when we see all in a balanced way, equally, without any preference or prejudice and as they happen that natural friendliness which blossoms in the heart and is felt by all. The so called friendliness that is associated with 'friendly behavior' is empty as doing is quite different from 'being' or just who we are. When we are friendly, we exuberate friendliness whether it be recognized or appreciated.

6. Be ever in a state of equanimity: Over the past five points, we have been focusing on inner rewiring to associate peace and joy with doing. This peace and joy felt in the heart sources from a deeper well of peace and joy which is our true nature or the self. This rewiring gives rise to inner balance as we no longer sway from joy to despair due to the outcome of things, finding joy in right vision and right action. As we become steady in this, we become steady in equanimity as we see all things of equal value since our all our actions are done equally well. The mind becomes steady and a sense of inner balance or equanimity rises in the heart and mind.

7. Insure your conduct is always good and noble: Now, we go outward even more by ensuring our conduct is always good and noble. This ensuring is a sort of double check or verification as the earlier steps should have given one a solid footing but it is good to insure before and while

we act anyways. Remember, it does not cost any more but can give a whole lot more as the goodness of conduct rises from the goodness of heart and mind or just who we are and if we can use all action to elevate and point to the sense of being – we have come a long way.



suryadevananda.org