

Chapter 14. Spiritual Austerity

Q. Can one realise the *Atma* and merge, as You say, in the *Om* (*pranava*) with this material body composed of the five elements? Can the *Atma* be isolated from the body? How is that done?

A. By meditation and other disciplines, and by the recital of the *Om* mantra, one can discover the *Atma* and isolate it from the body. It is something like getting butter from curds, oil from sesame, water from the subsoil, fire from wood. Churning, squeezing, crushing, boring, turning —these processes are needed, that is all. What happens is the separation of the *Atma* from the body, the disappearance of the belief that the body is the *Atma* or the Self.

Q. Swami! Many elders and sages say that we should visualise the individual soul (*jivatma*) as the Supreme *Atma* (*Paramatma*), that we should cultivate that feeling, that conviction. How is that possible?

A. Why do you think it is difficult? Isn't it easier to speak the truth than to speak falsehood? You are now declaring a falsehood as true, so all kinds of difficulties arise. Accept the truth that the individual soul and Supreme Lord are the same, and things become easy. First, recognise the *Atma*, the "Self", as unrelated to the body; you can do this by meditation, etc. Just as scent is separated from flowers, sugar from cane, gold from rock, so separate the *Atma* from the physical body. Then, by means of single-pointed reflection and meditation, etc., you can visualise the individual *Atma* as one with the Supreme *Atma*. That is the consummation of intense spiritual practice (*tapas*), the final freedom (*nirvana*).

Q. What exactly is intense spiritual practice, Swami?

A. It means the end of the activities of the senses; one must be the master of all of them. There should be no trace of craving or appetite. It involves effort to attain *Brahman*, incessant yearning for the end. It must be expressed through moderate food and sleep. It means agony to realise the Principle. Such spiritual austerity (*tapas*) is called pure (*sathwic*).

Q. What then is emotional spiritual practice (*rajasic tapas*)?

A. Those who simply starve the body and make it weak without curbing the senses and controlling emotions are doing only emotional spiritual practice. They don't study or meditate upon the *Atmic* principle (*Atma-thathwa*); they lay emphasis on physical asceticism.

Q. There must also be spiritual practice out of ignorance (*thamasic tapas*).

A. There is. To propitiate the Gods for favours and then, with the favours as instruments, to desire the exploitation of the world —that is spiritual practice out of ignorance. Only that intense spiritual practice is proper that has as its aim the attainment of God, the realisation of *Brahman*, the achievement of the highest wisdom. Only that type of spiritual practice is approved by the scriptures (*sastras*). All the rest will lead you astray, away from the goal. Only spiritual practices approved by the scriptures deserve that name. The others are ignorance (*thamas*), not intense spiritual practice (*tapas*). *Tapas* means "heat"; the heat burns out sin and reduces all fate (*karma*) to ashes.

Q. The scriptures (*sastras*) say that the sages had in their ashrams things like the wish-fulfilling gem, the wish-fulfilling tree, and also the wish-fulfilling cow, which gave them whatever they wished for. I can't understand why they should do spiritual practice at all. Please make this clear to me.

A. Think about it well. Then you will know that the wish-fulfilling gem is not a jewel, nor the wish-fulfilling tree

a tree, nor the wish-fulfilling cow a cow. They are all names for the fruits of intense spiritual austerity (*tapas*). They are powers that automatically accrue to a person as a result of spiritual austerity.

When one realises all that one wishes for, it is called the power of the wish-fulfilling tree. When one subdues all desire, it is called the power of the wish-fulfilling cow. What is the power of the wish-fulfilling gem? It is the stage when you have no worry or mental agitation, a stage in which all sorrow is kept afar. When thought ends and the supreme spiritual bliss (*ananda*) is won, it is the power of the wish-fulfilling gem. Mental agitation must disappear from thought, word, and deed.

Q. They also speak of mental spiritual practice (*tapas*). What does that mean?

A. Observe control of speech; cultivate purity of feeling; practise humility; let your thoughts be always on the Supreme Absolute Principle (*Brahma-thathwa*). Then you can be said to be in mental spiritual practice.

Q. And physical austerity?

A. That is also good, in its own way. Revering elders, spiritual teachers, saints, sages, and God make for purity. Non-violence, sympathy with all beings, straight-forwardness—all contribute to physical well-being, health, and wholesomeness. Mental austerity leads to purity of mind; verbal austerity, to purity of speech.

By these three, the precious possessions of wish-fulfilling cow, wish-fulfilling tree, and wish-fulfilling gem are attained. They are attainments, not just cows, trees, or jewels.

Q. Have any attained the *Brahmic* principle (*Brahma-thathwa*) and the *dharmic* principle with the help of their success in intense spiritual practice? Who are they? Please tell me.

A. Kapilamaharshi attained the *Brahmic* principle, the great sage Jaimini attained the *dharmic* principle, Narada became a *Brahmic* sage, Bhagiratha brought the Ganga down, Gautama persuaded the river Godavari to flow on the earth, Valmiki realised the force of the Rama mantra and was enabled to compose the *Ramayana*, Gargi was established in spiritual studentship (*brahma-charya*), and Sulabha in spiritual wisdom—all through intense spiritual practice alone.

Why go on quoting examples, one after the other? Through intense spiritual practice, even Brahma (the creator) and Rudra (the destroyer) become one's collaborators.

Q. Swami! In order to reach this high stage, do you say that birth in a high caste is necessary? Or is spiritual practice of a high order enough?

A. Caste without character is meaningless; it is just an empty label. Spiritual practice without the base of character is like the journey of a blind person. Morality, virtue, character—these are vital. On the basis of these, if spiritual practice is done according to the scheme laid down for the path one has selected, then there is no doubt of success. But you must take note of a caution that is essential. You must not give place to sloth simply because race is not important. Moral standards also accrue according to birth, so, to foster them, the consciousness of birth is helpful and important.

But, if, through the accumulated merit of past births, one has the treasure of goodness and virtue, then one need not attach much importance to birth. Only those who practised *yoga* in previous births and who could not complete the process will have that type of excellence. The main thing is to acquire the moral standards prescribed for the birth, foster the birth with moral standards, and make yourself fit and full, with a high status in life. For some distance on the path of spiritual practice and spirituality, both birth and moral standards will help. The qualities (*gunas*) will be sublimated through these two.

Q. Therefore, some have attained Godhead through the merit of previous lives. Give some instances, please.

A. My dear man! You should not seek to discover the source of a river or the ancestry of a sage. They may be quite unimpressive. You should be satisfied with their services. Their experience is what is most valuable. Be inspired by them, be led by them to similar efforts. If you go in search of the beginnings, you lose the vital core.

Still, since you raised the question, I will tell you. Vyasa was born of the fisherman caste; Sounaka was of the Sunaka clan; Agastya was born in a pot; Viswamitra was a warrior (*kshatriya*), and Sutha was born in the fourth caste. In addition, we have among those who were virtuous and good, who had their eyes always on their birth and moral standards, who renounced all and stuck to the ideal of liberating themselves from the bondage of birth and death and the illusion of physical values: Sanjaya, Sathyakama, and many more.

My dear man! Self-effort, discrimination (*viveka*), intense spiritual practice (*tapas*)—these qualify people for the highest status. Without purity of the inner instruments, no person, however high their caste, can reach the Highest.

If inferior copper is added to gold, the alloy loses value. Just as pure gold becomes an alloy through contact with copper, the Universal Form gets the inferior ego added to it in this ocean of worldly existence (*samsara*). The Universal becomes transformed into the individual soul (*jivi*). Now, what has to be done to get back the real gold Principle (*thatwa*)? Through intense spiritual practice and vows, through polishing and cleansing the intellect (*buddhi*), the original stage has to be regained.

You wash your feet after walking through the mire; your mind also has to be washed of the mire of attachment to objects. Only spiritual wisdom (*jnana*) can burn the seeds of attachment so that they may not sprout again. So, a person with the treasure of spiritual wisdom gets liberated easily.