

From Darkness to Light

Swami Suryadevananda

The Spirit of Discipleship

The beautiful prayer from the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad asks, “Lead me from the unreal to the real; lead me from darkness to light; lead me from death to immortality.” Lead me! —not take me there. There is a big difference. When we are being taken somewhere, we simply have to get in the car and enjoy the drive but this is not what is implied in the prayer.

Lead me from the unreal to the real;

Lead me from darkness to light;

Lead me from death to immortality.

Brihadaranyaka Upanishad

Chapter I, Section III, Verse 28.

If we have lost our way, we stop and ask for directions, but before this, we have to unequivocally feel lost and want to find our way—both these exemplify the spirit of discipleship.

There is a difference between a disciple and a follower. The latter does not require much and may not give much, as the spiritual path requires each to work out their own salvation. We start from different starting points and have different apparatus. What worked for one, may not work for another.

A disciple seeks light on the path—accepting full responsibility for exerting effort and being enthusiastic about doing what needs to be done. The dedication to exert effort is what summons the energy needed and stays the course.

Change

Can change be given to us as a gift? Some loose change perhaps. The world is not going to change for us any more than the ocean is going to change for a drop. We are to change and how is this to happen if we are not eager to work towards change?

We cry for change but are not willing to change! Everything and everyone else should change—is this reasonable? Is it reasonable for the drop to want the ocean to change? What if every drop had the same sentiment? If you were the ocean, could and would you fulfill these demands from confused drops?

Everything made by God is pure, good and perfect. Our misuse is the cause of all problems. The mind is a magnificent faculty if used well. Misuse of the mind has rendered it to its present condition and we must roll up our sleeves for the task of bringing about the change.

For lasting change, one must see clearly the harm in staying the course: “I must see that selfish living hurts me and others.” The clarity with which I see that pain and sorrow results from ego-centered living will summon the energy for the effort that must be put forth. If suffering is experienced in me, its source must also be in me only. The effect is simply the cause returning home after a short stroll.

Self-Responsibility

All change is self-change and proportionate to the effort I am ready to put forth. Nothing and no one is here for my entertainment and none can do the work that I must do.

The little personality can only muster enough energy for its limited activities and does not have any endurance to stay the course. Fickle in nature, its efforts are fickle too. When one sees the danger within, the intelligence is roused into action, as the solution must come from within only—this is self-responsibility. Existence itself is roused and it musters all the energy needed as it is free of flimsiness—it is steady, clear and unwavering!

If we feel or hope that someone will either do the work or can assist, there is no need to draw greater energy. The you that wants to change has to change the you that needs change—and the energy for this comes from within only. All this has to be seen very clearly to avoid wishful thinking and more pain.

Aside from seeing the danger in staying the course, it helps greatly to have love for the change sought—love for God. Now we have two powers that exert at the same time: seeing the clear and present danger keeps one from succumbing to habit; and a path free from sorrow and pain gives a ready channel for the redirection of energy. Life is energy and energy can never stay in a vacuum.

The mind has been made the villain, but is it really so? What about the operator of the mind? Is he or she not the real problem? If we make the mind the villain, we either play the blame-game or feel victimized and search frantically for help. These perspectives do not work as they add to confusion and a feeling of helplessness—great strength and courage is needed, as self-correction entails: correcting our own selves.

Sincerity, The Key to Success

The same mentality of day-to-day living is applied here too—always looking for a good deal! We keep shopping around for someone who can show us how to bring about change without

changing, or rather, change things for us. The only good deal can be culled into one word—*sincerity!*

Confucius says in his analects, “Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles. Then no friends would not be like yourself (all friends would be as loyal as yourself). If you make a mistake, do not be afraid to correct it.”

The dictionary tells us: *sincere* is derived from the Latin *sincerus* meaning *clean, pure, sound*. *Sincerus* may have once meant “one growth” (not mixed), from *sin*—(one) and *crescere* (to grow).

Not much is needed for cosmetic change as it does not involve changing one’s self. To change one’s self requires tremendous sincerity which alone can summon the energy and stay the course. To raise the self by the self requires self-responsibility, and this gives rise to maturity. Then only can the higher mind or reason take the helm and aspiration rises to guides habit.

Past and Future

Lessons learned are most useful—a price was paid for each of them. Remembering the futility of the old ways and the benefit of the new will help in staying on course. Here is where a little time in study becomes very useful. We can learn from the observations of others and then contemplate their thoughts for ourselves. This may save unnecessary trips to the store of experience where all things are always more expensive. Reading the lives of great ones can lift the inner vision to try to understand better ways of living.

The past is your own self of yesterday—it is not some unseen monster who harasses you without purpose. If you clearly see pain in the ways of the past, it can be let go at one stroke and will never surface for air again. If it does keep surfacing, it could well be that we are holding its apron strings for some strange reason and wondering when we will be free of them. You are free of the past when you have fully embraced the present—the new.

The past is not something to let go of in the new year or with milestones but in every moment. The content of the past is memory, which is made up of thought; similarly, the content of the future is imagination, also made up of thought. We hold on to these thoughts which only torture us, as they can never return, and we lose the golden waters of the present stream which flows by us full of opportunity for anything and everything.

To let go of the past and future—you must have a *present!* Our life is a steady stream of presents which we ignore because we have been positively or negatively impressed with the past. Holding on to the past necessitates a future for its working out. The future is a mental playground for memories we are not willing to let go.

Present

Why do we get impressed in such a way that the glorious present is rendered unimportant? If our lives are guided by one clear single aim, every fresh moment is valuable as it is the route and means to the single aim. There is enthusiasm in the present, as it is in its pathways alone that can one shape and mold a glorious future. Tomorrow will be taken care of if today is well attended to—one need never worry about it. One need never worry at all! Give the present the very best without clinging to it, as a fresh present immediately follows! To give yourself to the ever present is to receive presents.

One cannot let go of the past and future unless one learns how to separate thought from perception. For this, we must cultivate the ability to look within and develop vigilance. We will address this topic separately. We often say, “If I had known... I would not have...”—quite right, but why didn’t you know? Distraction is the noise of the mind that does not allow the whisper of wisdom to be heard. No one else has created this rumble, we ourselves are wholly responsible.

The Oneness of Simplicity

The first step to reclaiming one’s self is to simplify one’s life and then, to simplify one’s self or mind. This is not a mere cosmetic, external simplification (though that may also be needed), but a getting rid of clutter which helps keep the mind distracted. External clutter reflects in internal clutter and they act on each other.

The simplest number is one and to be simple is to be—one. Can I first be one with everything and all? Can I live in such a way that I do not consider some as ‘my people’ and others as ‘not mine’? Sometimes called cultural identity, this ‘my people business’ is a polished form of tribalism only. I live in America and when asked, I reply as such. I also live in Florida and can reply as such. I live in a smaller town and when asked, reply as such. But, do these define me? Which am I? —an American? . . . a Floridian? . . . or some other label? All are right in their own context, but before the ... ‘am so and so’, there is the ‘I’ that is constant. The ‘I’ in you and me is the same, the labels are add-ons.

This ‘I’ that exists is not exclusive to the human species—it is the selfhood of all being, beings, of all things. Can I act in accordance with this sameness and remember that the labels are only for conversation and do not define (*de-fine*: fining another who you have decided is not like you) anything? To treat others as inherently different, I have to be different inside, and these are the seeds of conflict which must follow as differences vie with each other. Why is all this necessary at all?

Can I treat with all with respect, dignity, kindness—the same way I would like to be treated? Can I use the best ethical and moral code with all and let go of all the turmoil differences create? These are bold strides in external simplicity and will pay you back handsomely with peace,

happiness and the elimination of a rear-view mirror in the car of life that can now look always ahead at the present.

Internal simplicity is practiced along with external simplicity. Can I become one within and not fractured or fragmented? Do I say what I believe and practice? Can I bring about a revolution within to say only what I know to be true and do that which I say? Can I get rid of all inner hypocrisy or duality and become one—become simple?

To be simple is not to be a doormat—they are different things. Simplicity is guided by one single clear aim and that becomes the guiding principle which removes all conflict. A doormat tries to be everything to everyone and has no compass in life. Having a single aim does not make you any better than others either—you have taken a stand and this makes you more all-embracing.

Simplicity is a positive discipline as it is guided by wisdom of the harmony of all things. It is an insistence on abiding in truth as unity and the harmony of all and everything as truth. Our senses and social patterns may say differently—what does it matter? You are not a leaf that sways in the winds of conditioning or opinion! There is huge treasure of natural goodness in each just waiting to be used in life.

Goodness is its Own Reward

We are not asked to cultivate virtues because they are nice things to have and perhaps wear as badges—but because a virtuous life is a blameless life, the best protection, and most of all because goodness then resides in me. Swami Sivananda's aphoristic instruction, "Be Good. Do Good.", contains all the instruction one needs. If I am completely good, I must be incapable of bad or evil—goodness will be my only response to any situation. However, I can do good but not be good, like a wolf in sheep's clothing.

There is a wonderful story to illustrate this point. Darkness or night asked for an audience with God along with light or day against whom there was an accusation. God asked darkness to speak, and he answered that he was being harassed and bullied by light relentlessly. "I am forever being chased by light and have no place to rest. Wherever I go, he comes and I have to leave. It is most unbearable!" God asked light to speak, and he said, "I hear a voice but do not see anyone. How can I chase this so-called darkness as I have never ever seen him. I travel far and wide and wherever I go, he is never there."

We cannot change the world, it is what it is and will be what it is; but we can change ourselves so completely that we are incapable of knowing bad or evil. Does a rose who is fragrance itself, know odor? Does water which is self-quenching, know thirst? Similarly, light can never know darkness, as it itself is light. To 'be good' completely will similarly make us incapable of knowing evil. Evil will simply not exist for one who 'is good'. We have heard that beauty is in the eye of the beholder; evil too is in the heart of the beholder.

Among the many virtues, Swami Sivananda asks us to make every attempt to cultivate: selflessness, straight-forwardness, courage, serenity, generosity, mercy and self-restraint—stating that this is in reality Divine Life or life in God. These virtues are difficult to practice at the same time, so we are asked to take them up one at a time and practice them consciously for a period and then the others systematically. While practicing a virtue, we are asked at the same time to eradicate a vice. His spiritual diary form has a line for both: the virtue being practiced and the vice being eradicated. He asks us to put this in writing on a resolve form or letter and keep it where it can be seen often. All this to make sure the past does not derail the present—so that habit does not douse the flame of aspiration. He has a beautiful small song that tells of all the virtues a spiritual seeker must possess. It is called, Song of Eighteen ‘Ities’ because the 18 virtues all end with ‘i-t-y’. The emphasis is on self-change—completely and irreversibly.

Song of Eighteen ‘Ities’

*Serenity, regularity, absence of vanity,
Sincerity, simplicity, veracity,
Equanimity, fixity, non-irritability,
Adaptability, humility, tenacity,
Integrity, nobility, magnanimity,
Charity, generosity, purity.
Practice daily these eighteen ‘ities’,
You will soon attain immortality.
Brahman is the only real entity,
Mr. So-and-so is a false non-entity.
You will abide in eternity and infinity;
You will behold unity in diversity;
You cannot attain this in the university.
You can attain this in the Forest University.*

Swami Sivananda

Conscious effort is focused effort and carries urgency. The virtues needed and vices to be rid of must be remembered and seen often so that we can use every opportunity without slipping. The first few steps are always rough but with practice, conscious effort gains momentum and enthusiasm soars as we feel the increase of goodness within.

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