

Beyond Suffering

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The Vedantic philosophical tradition tells us that the true nature of each and every one of us is happiness, not misery. We therefore do not need to go beyond unhappiness and the suffering it brings for we are already naturally, permanently beyond it. The question that we must each now ask ourselves is, 'Do I recognise this to be so?'

The problem of suffering begins when I do not recognise it, but identify myself with things that I am not, believing them to be me and imagining they can provide me with lasting happiness.

Let us consider an example. Say it is afternoon and I experience the desire for a cup of coffee. I cannot concentrate on my work until I have had that drink. But the coffee does not provide lasting satisfaction; soon my mind will be disturbed by the desire for a biscuit, or a walk, or something else equally transitory. Experience has always shown that none of these things can provide me with lasting happiness.

Neither can mental objects make me permanently happy. The joy of an examination success is followed by further hard work, a job promotion is blemished by the envy of a colleague who didn't make it; even 'falling in love' is tainted by the inevitable disagreements and quarrels that characterise a relationship. The mind is thus constantly brooding over events in the past that cannot be changed, or imagining things in the future that cannot be predicted. The constant stream of thoughts going round and round in my head can be likened to a motorcycle stuck in the mud producing much noise, dust and pollution, but going nowhere, making no progress!

Physical sensations, emotions, thoughts and the world of sense-objects are experienced through the instrumentality of my body, mind and intellect. However, my own true self is more than the sum of these instruments for I can see them.

Let us take an example: say there is a chair before me. I can see the chair; therefore I am other than the chair. So too, with my body, mind and intellect; the knower of the object is always other than the object, and so the knower can never be the known!

This being so, who, then, am I?

My true nature can be likened to a mountain, majestic and serene, unmoving and unmoved. The mountain is not always seen, due to thick layers of clouds that sometimes cover it. But that does not mean that it is not there. When the mind is stilled, the clouds of confusion part to reveal the mountain in all its resplendent glory.

The question then arises: if I am of the nature of happiness, why do I suffer? Vedanta says that ignorance is the cause for suffering. Through ignorance of my true self, I identify with the body, mind and intellect - which as we have already seen are merely instruments of experience - and begin to believe that what is experienced through them represents the truth about how things are. Like a dreamer waking from a dream, like a spectator of a 3-D film

taking off her 3-D spectacles, once I am detached from my identification with the body and mind and recognise my true identity, the *virtual* reality of daily life will be recognised for what it is.

Just as I cannot clean myself while thrashing about in a muddy pool, I need to come out of the world of sense-objects to help clear the mind of the feelings and thoughts that disturb it. One of the steps towards doing this is regular meditation. Unconcernedly leaving my thoughts and emotions, having accepted them for what they are - merely transitory phenomena - and resting instead in the awareness in which they arise, will certainly weaken my attachment towards them. This gradually gives me freedom and control over the instruments of experience, and hence helps me free myself from the tyranny of my mind.

Having appreciated all this I may wonder, 'I know the truth now, so why am I still suffering?' When this doubt arises in my mind, I need to remind myself that this knowledge is not an intellectual but an experiential one. Knowing the truth only intellectually is like having a recipe but never having the food. No one ever alleviates the suffering due to hunger by merely reading a recipe; neither is hunger satisfied by just buying the ingredients; nor is it relieved by preparing them; nor by following the recipe; nor even by cooking the dish; hunger is appeased only by actually eating the food. Eating the food is alone the true meaning of the recipe. In a similar way, the real meaning of knowing the truth is to know it in experience. Nothing less will take us beyond suffering.

Brahmacharini Sumati Chaitanya is the Acharya (spiritual teacher) at the Chinmaya Mission, UK. The organisation's aim is: '*To provide to individuals, from any background, the wisdom of Vedanta and the practical means for spiritual growth and happiness, enabling them to become positive contributors to society*'.