

Practice, Action and Detachment

"Not by abstention from actions
Does a man attain the state beyond karma"

The Bhagavad Gita, chapter three, verse 4
Winthrop Sargeant translation

"Not by avoiding actions
does a man gain freedom from action"

The Bhagavad Gita, chapter three, verse 4
Stephen Mitchell translation

I have struggled with the principles of action and detachment. If we become immersed in the divine source of life, how do we remain fully engaged in our lives? How do we combine non-attachment with a commitment to action? And if we are detached, do our actions become robotic, cold and uncaring? As I work to remove my mental barriers and move toward clear understanding, countless teachings have become my tools and talismans. How hard it is to pick just one of these! And yet I believe if I lost all of my books, my internet connection, and my ability to learn from my teachers, there is one point of knowledge that could be an eternal resource:

". . . develop a one-pointed practice embedded in daily life to reach the ultimate truth."

The Eternal Soul, Chariot Analogy
Brahmrishi Vishvatma Bawra

This teaching resonates deeply and guides me in multiple ways. The idea of developing a one-pointed practice steers me toward steadfast and focused commitment. It also serves as a reminder that practice must be built in to each day. Practice is not something we dally with, it is the entire

point of our lives. And perhaps the most powerful encouragement of all comes from my own quirky reading of this phrase. When I think about "practice embedded in daily life" I imagine that practice can be planted like a seed into every action we take. This has helped me clear away a lot of misunderstanding about duty and detachment. It helps me to see that practice, action and non-attachment are not distinct, isolated efforts. We can celebrate the bliss, knowledge and eternal existence that is the source of our lives in the midst of the most miserable circumstance or mundane action, and we can disconnect from the trappings of the material world while sharing a profoundly intimate moment with another person.

Practice and non-attachment are not an escape from the challenges of life, they do not involve denying the delights of life, and they do not require a suppression of the intense emotions that arise in our human experiences. Non-attachment is practiced skillfully when we remain rooted in awareness of the source of our lives while engaging with life in all its messiness. By establishing ourselves in our true foundation, we are better able to remain openhearted, honest and present in every situation. We function at a higher level physically, emotionally and intellectually.

I used to think non-attachment must be cool, heartless and distancing – it seemed like a way to unplug from human relationships. I am beginning to understand that just the opposite is true. Attachment is what keeps us stuck in selfish, ego-driven disconnection from others. The farther we fall from our source, the closer we come to using other people as things in our lives. In our fallen state, we try to prop ourselves up with our status in society and our material possessions. Our lives become focused on how our situation looks to others and how satisfied we are physically. This creates a seesaw between the fear of losing and the desire for gaining the things (including people) that offer us fleeting relief from our self-imposed desperation.

The antidote to this instability is always available. Practice provides healing. We settle our minds by sitting in stillness and turning our awareness back to our source. As we experience the peace and wellbeing that arises from practice, we use this stability as inspiration to fully live life instead of building a lifestyle. We inhabit the awareness that our identity is not dependent on the people and things around us. We are a manifestation of the source of life, which is blissful infinite knowledge. And everyone we encounter is also enlivened by this divine source.

When we are awakened to this reality, our actions begin to be inspired by devotion to our source rather than the desire for certain outcomes. We are able to meet our responsibilities with peaceful contentment. Once we understand that there is no point in hungering for selfish gains, we do not try to fulfill ourselves through other people and things. Detachment in action does not disconnect us from others. Instead it makes true compassion possible and it strengthens our resolve to work directly with whatever confronts us.

Each right action we take helps to create a healthy internal environment for developing stable wisdom, and stable wisdom inspires us toward right action. We begin to spiral up, not to higher ground, but toward higher groundlessness. We are no longer propped up by the stuff of this world, we are rooted in awareness.

Sources

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