

# Peace—Its Spiritual Foundation

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Everyone wants to be happy. No one wants to suffer. This is so obvious to people, me included, that for a long time I never questioned it. Now I do. The older I grow, the more I am drawn to peace, even more than to happiness. When I am at peace with myself, I see clearly what makes me happy and what doesn't—and this teaches me what I should do and what I shouldn't do. When I am at peace with the world around me, I see clearly why there is suffering—and this teaches me what I can do to minimize the suffering, others' as well as my own. Peace is at once a teacher and a facilitator.

Peace is also elusive. We see very little of it the world over if our only source of knowledge is what makes headlines in the media. If we look a bit carefully though, we will discover peace on the face of a baby sleeping in the cradle, in the movements of a mother as she cooks for her family, in the chants of a priest during worship, and in the eyes of a devotee in deep meditation. Numerous as such instances are, such peaceful interludes in life are also usually short-lived and far-between. Peace is never absent, but its presence is sporadic and unpredictable, both in our own hearts and in the world that we encounter. The existence of peace is beyond doubt, but its fragility causes never-ending concern. Whenever peace is shattered, it leads to stress, anxiety, doubt and, in extreme case, may lead to a fight or even war.

The primary hindrance to peace may well be a feeling of emptiness, sometimes total but more often partial. Feeling 'partially empty' is the same as feeling

somehow not complete or whole, or feeling that there is something lacking. There is no peace if I am consumed by the thought that I lack sleep, food, friends, recognition, or love—or if I lack the ability to protect myself, to assert my being, to fulfil my dreams, or to satisfy my appetites. With such acute sense of lacking, I cannot be at peace. Without peace, how can anyone be happy?—this is what the *Gītā* (2.66) asks.

Unfortunately, the world in which we live, move and grow is not designed to support our deep need for peace. Ambition, greed, envy, jealousy—all of these wouldn't exist if everyone and everything were at peace. Trade and commerce wouldn't flourish if everyone were self-sufficient or had only minimal needs. *Usually those who lack peace most are the ones that won't allow others to live in peace.* The only time most people experience peace is in deep sleep, when they are not even dreaming. A central characteristic of deep sleep is the absence of everyone and everything. There is only one being present in sleep—the person who is sleeping.

Sleep is a natural event, requiring hardly any effort on our part. The peace we experience in sleep is restorative but we cannot control its duration. Is there a way we can re-create the peace scenario consciously, voluntarily, with effort? Since sleep is the absence of all objects, is there a way we can *replicate that experience* when we are awake and surrounded by objects?

The answer is yes, an emphatic yes. The experience can be replicated when we are awake, not physically but spiritually. Being awake spiritually means being awake to the

spirit. At present we are awake to the material world, not to the spiritual world.<sup>1</sup> That is why all that we encounter around us is material and follows the laws of matter. Every object we encounter is composed of particles of matter. These material particles are kept together by some kind of force, giving the object a form. When the force is dissipated, the particles come apart, the form is lost, and the object is said to decompose. The world we see through our senses of sight, smell, touch, taste and hearing has these two alternating processes, composition and decomposition, constantly in action.

But there is another world beyond the senses—call it, if you like, the world of the spirit. Nothing in this other world is composed and hence nothing in it ever decomposes. Because this world is beyond the reach of anything material, it can be reached by neither the mind nor the senses. But these are the only instruments we have. Luckily for us, what we discover is that these instruments, when refined, become more powerful than they are now—and acquire the ability to reveal the spiritual world. Whatever brings about this kind of refinement is called a spiritual practice.

Swami Vivekananda classified all spiritual practices primarily into four groups. Jnana-Yoga was the name he gave to those practices which purify and harness the power of reason. Bhakti-Yoga, according to him, comprises practices that purify and harness the power of emotions. Raja-Yoga purifies and harnesses the power of the will as it operates within us, and Karma-Yoga

purifies and harnesses the same power as it manifests through work in the world.<sup>2</sup>

Through one or more of these practices, the spiritual world is reached. It is a kind of journey, but unlike any journey we have known before. It is a journey not from one place to another in the external world, it is a journey in the internal world through layers of personality, a journey to progressively subtler, greater and more inward layers. When a person reaches the end of this stranger journey, he or she not only *experiences* peace but, we can even say, *becomes* peace.

There is no doubt that peace, both inner and outer, can be reached by other means as well. To achieve peace in the external world it is the social and political tools that are usually employed. To achieve inner peace, people sometimes resort to investing time and energy in things that they are passionate about. Music, recreation, spending time with family and friends—these kinds of things do bring a measure of peace. Peace is also found by those leading an ethical life, a life striving to cultivate moral virtues, a life guided by principles of *dharma*.

All of these methods of attaining peace are mostly effective but usually fragile, since the peace that is attained is shattered sooner or later. Only the peace that comes through spiritual practice, and especially the peace that is experienced when the practice reaches its culmination—called God-realization or Self-realization—is stable and rooted in a firm foundation. Not for nothing is it said that it is the ‘peace that passeth understanding.’<sup>3</sup> ■

#### NOTES AND REFERENCES

1 This is what the *Gītā* 2.69 alludes to when it says that what is night to others is day to a yogi, and what is night to a yogi is day to others.

2 See Swami Tyagananda, *Walking the Walk : A Manual of Karma Yoga* (Chennai: Sri Ramakrishna Math, 2013), 11.

3 The Bible, Philippians 4:7.

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