

# Overcoming Fear

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## Fears and anxieties

**O**ur subject today is overcoming fear. There is fear inside all of us. Fear is one thing that we can say is universal. Sometimes, when you have some free time, it maybe a good exercise to ask yourselves: What are the things I am afraid of in life? Surely, there is fear. But what exactly I am fearful about? We may discover that there are different kinds of fear and at different levels—physical, emotional, moral, intellectual.

Everytime we feel a threat at any of these levels a fear seizes the heart. There is an ancient book called *Vairāgya Shatakam* by Bhartrihari. There is a very beautiful verse in which it is pointed out how everything in life is filled with fear. The Sanskrit verse goes like this:

*Bhoge roga-bhayam kule cyuti-bhayam  
vित्ते nripālād-bhayam  
māne dainya-bhayam bale ripu-bhayam  
rupe jarāyāh bhayam /  
Shāstre vādi-bhayam gune khala-  
bhayam kāye kritāntād-bhayam  
sarvam vastu bhayānvitam bhuvi  
nrinām vairāgyam-evābhayam //*

—*Vairāgya Shatakam* 31

In Sanskrit *bhayam* means fear. The meaning of the verse is, in enjoyments, there is the fear of disease; in social position, the fear of falling off; in wealth, the fear of hostile kings; in honour, the fear of humiliation; in power, the fear of enemies; in beauty, the fear of old age; in scholarship, the fear of learned opponents; in virtue, the

fear of slander; in body, the fear of death. All the things in the world are associated with fear. Detachment alone leads to fearlessness.

That's the theme of the book. What it tries to show is that detachment alone leads to fearlessness. From this it follows that our attachments, our clinging to things, to people, to objects, to places are the source of all problems. The moment I cling to something and fear that I may be separated from that thing then somehow I feel threatened. I feel my own existence is at stake. That's the source of all fear. Although all people may not have the same kind of fear, everyone experiences it in one form or another.

When the cause of fear is not very clear, it produces anxiety. Anxiety is a kind of fear, but with no clear object. It is diffused. There is another Vedanta text, the *Pancadasi* which compares anxiety to a kind of poison. Just as a poison can eat away our vitals and threaten our being, anxiety drains away all our energy and joy in life.

## The sense of separation

According to the Upanishads, the primary cause of fear is separation. The Upanishad says, the moment we separate ourselves from the rest of the universe, fear comes. That separation occurs just at the very moment of birth. Immediately, after birth, the first thing that the baby does is to cry. There could be many explanations why

the baby cries. One of these may be that as long as the baby was in the womb of its mother, there was no separation. But the moment the baby gets separated from the mother after birth, it starts crying. So, life begins with crying.

All the creation-myths in different traditions are basically separation-myths. There are different versions of creation in different traditions. After creation we are no longer a part of God. This is mythologized in the story of the Garden of Eden. As Adam and Eve were expelled, there was agony of separation, which, in its turn, created the whole existential experience of humanity.

In one form or other, all separations lead to fear, anxiety, suffering. One way in which we try to overcome fear in our lives is by trying to stay away from the object of fear where the object of fear is known. But when the object is unknown and intangible, then it is not easy to escape the unknown fear. We also try to overcome fear by expanding ourselves. By expanding, I mean, developing relationships in life or becoming part of a larger group like a social circle or a country. We then become a part of a larger whole and we are able to deal with causes larger than those of a lone individual. When I have a support-group, a larger entity I can derive sustenance from, I automatically feel a little stronger. If there is a problem, it is not that it is just me against the world. My family will stand by me. My friends will stand by me.

But we know, while these things might work sometimes and to some extent, we never really are without fear at all times. There will always be something which will make us fearful, and none of these methods of escaping fear might work. So we need to look a little bit more deeply to see what exactly is the cause of this fear. If we can go to the root-cause and remove that cause, then it might be easier to deal with it.

### **The fear of non-existence**

We can see that there are two basic processes which give life its dynamism and diversity. One is a sense of impermanence. Everything in life is temporary. Nothing lasts. Sometimes it is very difficult to accept this, especially when we are very young. But as we grow older, and especially when we begin to see people whom we have known, maybe elders in the family, pass away, we begin to see that things don't last. Living or non-living, things keep on changing. Impermanence is a reality in our lives.

Moreover, this destruction of things is a slow, continuous process. Although we tend to see death as an event, as something that happens, it can be seen as a process. We start dying from the moment we are born, and what we call death is only the completion of the process. The slow destruction of the body is spread over decades so that we are not able to see that change. And because of that, the second important process in life is the struggle for existence. For, impermanence threatens our existence itself. These are two basic realities of life—impermanence, and the struggle for existence, a struggle to exist.

Philosophically, impermanence means non-being. Because of that, the struggle for existence is about asserting my very being. When my existence feels threatened I try to assert that, no, I do not want to be non-existent.

The struggle for physical existence in a civilized society has now almost come to an end. People nowadays feel physically threatened because of terrorism but, by and large, unless one is paranoid, we feel that physically we are mostly okay. But there is a struggle of another kind, the struggle to maintain the ego. The ego may feel threatened in many different ways. It can occur through misunderstanding, quarrels,

personality-clashes, and so on. The most common form of reaction when the ego is threatened is anxiety. Anxiety is an indication that my ego is feeling the threat of non-being and then I try to assert my being, which can take different forms in different people. The anxiety, which is a natural form of reaction to this perceived threat, is mainly of two kinds. One is a natural anxiety which every living being has. The other kind of anxiety is what we might call a pathological anxiety. Pathological anxiety, which affects a relatively small number of people, occurs often due to some catastrophic events in life for which we are not prepared. Such events often produce a repressed anger, or shame, or guilt in the mind. This, in its turn, produces an anxiety which is not a general anxiety but a special kind of anxiety that may degenerate into abnormal psychology. In extreme forms it might even need psychiatric treatment. But the majority of us do not have pathological anxiety. We have a general anxiety, a common anxiety, or existential anxiety, if you like, which is a very natural anxiety about the nature of existence itself.

### Three primary anxieties

Ideally, the kind of threat that occurs naturally can be taken care of by anyone, all by himself. This anxiety can be subdivided into three primary anxieties: 1) the anxiety of guilt and condemnation, 2) the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness and 3) the anxiety of fear and death. These three kinds of anxieties can occur at any stage in life. It is generally found that each of these kinds of anxieties is associated with a specific stage in life. The anxiety of guilt and social condemnation occurs in early youth. Somewhere in the mid-life, there is the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness. Sometimes this is characterized as a mid-life crisis. Everything seems pointless. Then, as

we get older, death and afterlife, which seemed like distant reality when young, no longer appear to be so distant. As a result, anxiety related to fate and death becomes more and more real.

Besides categorizing these anxieties, the question that we, as students of Vedanta, ask is: How will my understanding of my life and life's lessons and all that I have learned from Vedantic teachings help me deal with these anxieties? We have said time and again and will continue to say it time and again that our true nature is purity, freedom; and the body and the mind, ego, are mere coverings over Ātman, my true identity. The nature of the indwelling spirit is that it is birthless, deathless, pure and fearless. The question that always comes up is, if that is my true nature, why is it that I do not experience it right now? Why should there be fear and anxiety at all? The answer is not complicated. If I forget who I am, then my being someone does not help me. Suppose, a billionaire goes to sleep. Sleep, by definition, is capable of making me forget who I am. In his sleep this wealthy person begins dreaming that (s)he is homeless, hungry and without any money. Unfortunately, at that dream moment (s)he is not aware of being wealthy. So the pain, the suffering and the hardships that this billionaire is experiencing in the dream seem very real. If at that moment someone says in the dream 'Why are you so worried, you are a billionaire', the person would either be very angry or feel that people are making fun of him. So that's what I mean when I say that unless I know who I am, I cannot help myself. By being forgetful of my infinite nature, I have made myself finite. By forgetting that I am immortal, I have made myself mortal. I have forgotten that I am without birth and there is no death for me. Since I have

forgotten that I can never fall sick, I am worried about my illness. I try to eat organic food and do exercise, but a much simpler way is to know that there is no sickness for me. That forgetfulness has caused all these anxieties. These anxieties, in other words, are a direct result of that forgetfulness. For instance, the anxiety of guilt and condemnation is a negation of the essential purity of the Self. If I know that my true nature is purity, that the spirit inside me is pure and that is who I am, then that anxiety should not really come. The anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness is a negation of the inherent perfection of the spirit, perfection of the Ātman. I am perfect. I am full. How can I be empty? It is the negation of the perfection of the soul that produces the anxiety of meaninglessness. Finally, the anxiety related to death is a negation of the very existence of the Self. One of the anxieties associated with death is that I am being non-existent, that I shall cease to exist. Generally, in fact, we tend to treat life and death as opposites. But life is not the opposite of death. The opposite of death is birth. Life really has no opposite, although we say life and death. If it is just the body that is going, does anything survive the destruction of the body?

Often the characteristics of the Ātman get encapsulated in the term *Sat-cit-ānanda*. These are not exactly qualities of the Ātman. Philosophically, Ātman is beyond qualities. You cannot say exactly what Ātman is because language is too limited an instrument to be able to express the inexpressible. Even when we say that the Highest Reality is the Absolute Being, Absolute Consciousness and Absolute Bliss, we are actually negating the opposite of it. When we say that the Ātman is *Sat*, it means that it is not *asat*, it is not non-being. When we say it is consciousness or *cit*,

what we are really saying is that it is not insentient. Bliss means that there is no suffering. So we can just say what It is not. We cannot say what It is.

The anxiety of guilt or condemnation is a negation of the *ānanda*-aspect of our true nature. The anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness is a negation of the *cit* aspect or consciousness. And the anxiety related to fate and death is a negation of the *Sat*, the Being Itself.

#### Four sources of courage

There are four different sources of courage or strength. The only way fear can be countered is through strength. What are the sources of courage? From where can I get strength in life? The first source of strength in life is a strong ethical life. We can call this moral courage, moral strength. If someone can live with genuine values and principles in life, or live by whatever ethical values he or she believes in, that person can be truly strong. That strength need not show in your biceps. We are talking about inner strength. One way of seeing how much inner strength I have is to know how far I am able to deal with the inevitable ups and downs in life. Sometimes they speak about riding a wave. When you are deep inside an ocean and huge waves are coming, you cannot fight the waves. Life similarly sends huge waves, sometimes as huge as the Tsunami. I may not be able to fight what is too strong for me, but I *can* find a way to survive by holding on to some pillar of stability. A moral life gives us that pillar. For this, one does not have to believe in God, does not have to be religious.

It is really difficult to find a genuine atheist. Swami Vivekananda once said, I am willing to crawl twenty miles on my hand to find a real atheist. One may be disillusioned with the religion that one is exposed to, but may still hold on to a strong moral ethical

life. When a person says I am not religious, it does not necessarily mean that he is an immoral person. Morality and spirituality are connected, but they are distinct. It is possible to be moral without being religious. What does moral life give you? When the ego feels threatened, it takes refuge in the power of moral life, in the life of *Dharma*. There is a saying in the *Mahabharata* which says *dharmo rakshati rakshitah*. If you protect *dharma*, *dharma* will protect you. If I hold onto ethical life, the power of moral life, that moral life itself will protect me. So if my ego, overwhelmed by threats coming from all sides, takes refuge in the power of *dharma*, it will be able to deal with these threats and acquire courage. That is one way of dealing with anxieties and fear—by taking refuge in *dharma*.

It is very easy to say, I am a believer, I have faith in God. If there is genuine faith in God, then half the battle is won, as Sri Ramakrishna says. It is not that we do not have faith, but sometimes our faith falters. There are people who stop going to church or a temple and, if asked, would say, 'I prayed but nothing happened.' This is a fragile faith. If the faith is strong, it can give enormous courage. Throughout history, in every part of this planet, we have seen people from different traditions, who, with a strong faith in God, have done amazing things. They are not afraid of the challenges, of the hardships. They could do so much, because, out of love for God they faced all challenges and hardships in a calm way. That courage, that strength comes from the conviction that God is there to protect me.

God is always there to protect me. When we forget that God is there, fear comes. If I truly believe that God is all-pervading, not just in terms of philosophy, theology, but in my daily life, then there is no reason why I should feel afraid of anything. Just as a baby is never afraid when it is in its mother's lap,

we too should never feel afraid when we know we have God the Father, God the Mother with us. Swami Ramakrishnananda, the great disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, used to say that the presence of fear and anxiety in the mind is a sign that my faith has not become strong yet. A strong faith would eliminate all fear and anxiety. When my ego takes refuge in God, then, fortified by religious courage, I am able to deal with any kind of anxiety. If I truly believe that the Divine is here to protect me, to guide me, then all fear and anxiety will leave me.

The third source of courage is what is called the courage to *be*, when the ego asserts its own real being. It is the courage that *Jnāna Yoga* speaks about. The first step is *Karma Yoga*. Then comes *Bhakti Yoga* or taking refuge in God. *Jnāna Yoga* is about affirming one's real self. By affirming that Ātman, and by never forgetting that I am the birthless, deathless, pure, free Being, I take refuge in my essential identity as the Spirit. When that happens, all the associated fears go away.

These are the three ways in which we can deal with anxiety and fear—through *Karma Yoga*, *Bhakti Yoga*, *Jnāna Yoga*—with my ego taking refuge in moral life, in *dharma*, in God, and in its own true Being.

Now there is a fourth way which is partly helpful and that is by allowing the ego to take refuge in a larger group. Although it is not a foolproof solution, it does work. For instance, in the case of a threat of terrorism, I know security is the concern of a larger group of which I am a part. By being a part of a larger whole, however, I gain something and I lose something. For instance, on account of my being a citizen of a country, the country as a whole provides me with the security and other privileges that all citizens have. That's what a person gains. What we lose is a certain amount of freedom. I can't do whatever I want. I have to abide by the

constitution, and the laws. I might want to drive hundred miles per hour. And they say, no, sixty-five. Then where is my freedom? You have chosen to be a part of this group. So that's the downside of it.

It is, at any rate, important to know what group I am a part of. Because, not all larger wholes are necessarily wholesome. When people become part of larger movements like communism, nazism, fundamentalism, they, as individuals, find that with their egos taking refuge in these larger movements they get rid of some of their fears and anxieties. But, at the same time, depending on what kind of group one is a part of, larger problems may occur. We need to be careful that by aligning myself to a group I am not creating a larger problem for the society. The fourth category, thus, is one that involves me in a relationship of dependence on some other people.

### Conclusion

Now to summarize. When I feel that the general anxiety relates to a sense of guilt, I may in a theistic way say God loves me, and God has forgiven me. That would help me deal with the anxiety of guilt. In *Jnāna Yoga* approach, my attitude would be that I am pure and blissful and no sin can touch my true nature. So by affirming ourselves, either from the knowledge-perspective or from the devotional-perspective, we can deal with guilt and slander in our life. To confront the anxiety of emptiness and meaninglessness, a devotee can say God fills my heart with His love and I don't feel empty. If my heart is filled with love for God there is no reason why anything should appear empty. If I can see the play of the Divine everywhere then there is no emptiness in me, and around me. It is not a theoretical formulation. We see this

exemplified in the lives of great mystics and saints. Sri Ramakrishna found the Bliss of the Divine in whatever he set his eyes on. Even in things not apparently holy he saw the play of the Divine Mother in some form or other.

Finally, with regard to the anxiety related to fate and death, a devotee can say, God is eternal, and being in His presence, I live through eternity. If I am with God and God is with me, my eternal existence is guaranteed. That's how a devotee looks at it.

For one treading the path of knowledge, death is only an event in an unbroken life. I am one with Existence itself. A body and a mind may perish but not Existence itself. In fact the Upanishad says as much:

*Sadeva somyedamagra  
āsidekamevādvitīyam /  
Taddhaika āhurasadevedamagra  
āsidekamevādvitīyam  
tasmādasatah sajjāyata //*

—*Chandogya Upanishad*, 6.2.1

Somya, before this world was manifest there was only existence, one without a second. On this subject, some maintain that before this world was manifest there was only non-existence, one without a second. Out of that non-existence, existence emerged.

Existence alone exists. The Upanishad points out that if someone says, God does not exist or Brahman does not exist, it would be like saying, I am not sure whether I exist. The Upanishad says, we can question anything apart from the existence of our own selves. We simply cannot question our own existence. It's just logically not possible. Because if I say I am not sure whether I exist or not, the first question is: Who is not sure and who is the one that is asking the question or having that doubt? ■

\* The article is based on a lecture delivered at Vedanta Society, Boston on 21 April 2020. Swami Tyagananda is Minister in Charge, Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, USA, and Hindu Chaplain at Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.