

Four Sadhanas – Part V – Obstacles to Nirvikalpa-Samadhi



SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction - Three Adhikārins

The *uttama-adhikārins* (the highly accomplished seekers), who are fully endowed with *sādhana-catustaya* (the fourfold qualification) - *viveka*, *vairāgya*, *samādhiṣaṭkasampatti* and *mumuksutvam* - do not require *samādhi-abhyāsa* (practice of absorption) or even *manana* (reflection) or *nididhyāsana* (contemplation) for establishing themselves in Self-Knowledge. For these highly accomplished *adhikārins*, *śravaṇa* alone is sufficient. The moment the Guru bestows the *Mahāvākya-jñāna* they become established in Self-Knowledge and get liberated. It is keeping them in view that *Vedānta* declares: “*śravaṇamātreṇa jñānaṁ bhavati* — merely by *śravaṇa* one attains Knowledge¹”.

The *madhyama-adhikārins*, i.e. those whose proficiency in *sādhana-catustaya* is of the middling type, go through the dual stages of *śravaṇa* and *manana* and, as soon as their doubts are dispelled, become established in Knowledge.

¹ This declaration “*śravaṇamātreṇa jñānaṁ bhavati* — only by *śravaṇa* one attains Knowledge”, has one more classic interpretation. The Knowledge gained by *śravaṇa* is the source as well as the basis for all the other *sādhana*s be it *manana*, *nididhyāsana* or even *samādhi*. To explain: *śravaṇa* is the determination of the import of *Vedānta* as the identity of the Self with *Brahman* (*jīvabrahmaikya*). In the stage of *manana* one reflects on this identity known from *śravaṇa*; in *nididhyāsana* using this Knowledge gained from *śravaṇa* one tries to put an end to *viparītabhāvanā* (notions contrary to Self-Knowledge); in *samādhi* one gets established in this *jīvabrahmaikyajñāna* (Knowledge of the identity between the individual Self and *Brahman*). Since *śravaṇa* is thus the very source of Knowledge and the very foundational undercurrent in all the *sādhana*s, it can be truly said that “only by *śravaṇa* (*śravaṇamātreṇa*) one attains Knowledge”.

The *manḍa-adhikārins* whose proficiency in *sādhana-catuṣṭaya* is low, implying that *citta-śuddhi* and *citta-ekāgratā* (purity of mind and single-pointedness of the intellect) are found wanting, will have to go through all the four stages of *śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana* and *samādhi* to attain *jñānaniṣṭhā* (establishment in Knowledge)².

The *Upaniṣads* do refer to students attaining the Knowledge of the Self even without *upadeśa* from the Guru. The *Itareya Upaniṣad* makes a mention of Sage Vāmadeva who, even while in his mother's womb, attained Self-Knowledge. In modern times we know of Sri Ramana Maharshi who realised without going through the steps of *gurūpasadana* (reaching the Guru) and *śravaṇa*. After attaining Self-Knowledge, as evinced in his well-known recollection of the 'death-experience', he did revel many years in *samādhi*; but that *samādhi* was not that of the seeker trying to establish himself in Self-Knowledge through *samādhi*, but rather, that of a liberated *Mahāpuruṣa* (great soul) spending his time in *samādhi*³.

None but we ourselves shall be the losers if we were to befool ourselves that we too are like these rare spiritual prodigies and thus insist that Knowledge can be attained even by skipping one or more of the above-mentioned steps of *śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana* and *samādhi*.

² This classification and analysis are not to belittle the *manḍa* or *madhyama-adhikārins*. To be even a *manḍa-adhikārin* is a rare accomplishment unattained by the vast majority of seekers.

³ Vide *Bhagavat Gītā* (7.19) "*Bahūnāṁ janmanāmante jñānavān māṁ prapadyate* — the spiritual journey is an unfoldment stretching through many lives — we notice the above-mentioned spiritual stalwarts being endowed with the clarity of *Vedāntic* wisdom without having put in any effort to gain it in the present life-time. They must have become *sādhana-catuṣṭaya-sampanna* (accomplished in the fourfold means) by the diligent practice of *karmayoga* and *upāsana* and must have gone through the stages of *gurūpasadana*, *śravaṇa*, *manana*, *nididhyāsana* or even *samādhi* in their earlier life or lives before *prārabdha* in the form of death put a comma (and not a fullstop) to their spiritual pursuit. Thus it is not that they have skipped these stages, but only that they have already completed them in their earlier lives. Vide *Bhagavat Gītā* (6.43): "O Arjuna, such a person automatically regains in the present birth the spiritual insight of his previous birth."

Importance of *Nirvikalpa-Samādhi*

Saints and all *Acāryas* of Vedānta who have walked this razor-path to Godhood advise seekers to practise all the four *sādhanas*. They state in unequivocal terms the importance of all these *sādhanas* – especially that of *nididhyāsana* and *samādhi* – for seekers often tend to deceive themselves into thinking that they are realised, without having actually accomplished the abidance in Knowledge (*jñānaniṣṭhā*). For all realistic purposes one may summarily state without any reservation that for attaining a firm *brahmākāraṁṛtti*, which alone puts an end to ignorance, and to abide in Self-Knowledge, all seekers have to practise *nirvikalpa-samādhi*. The following two verses from *Kaṭhopanīṣad* (2.3.10,11) clearly state the importance of this practice of *nirvikalpa-samādhi*:

यदा पञ्चावतिष्ठन्ते ज्ञानानि मनसा सह ।
बुद्धिश्च न विचेष्टते तामाहुः परमां गतिम् ॥
तां योगमिति मन्यन्ते स्थिरमिन्द्रियधारणाम् ।
अप्रमत्तस्तदा भवति योगो हि प्रभवाप्ययौ ॥

*yadā pañcāvatiṣṭhante jñānāni manasā saha,
buddhiśca na vicesṭate tāmāhuḥ paramām gatim.
tām yogamiti manyante sthiramindriyadhāraṇām,
apramattastadā bhavati yogo hi prabhavāpyayau.*

When the five organs of knowledge are at rest together with the mind, and when the intellect too does not function, that state they call the highest. The firm control of the *indriyas* (senses and mind) they regard as 'Yoga' (Union or Establishment). Then the seeker becomes free of the vagaries of the mind; for 'Yoga' (read it as 'Establishment') is subject to growth and decay.

The *Upanīṣad* warns the seekers: "Yogo hi prabhavāpyayau — Establishment in Knowledge is subject to growth and decay." That being the case, no seeker should become complacent. In place of deeply ingrained erroneous notions that exist now such as 'I am a man', 'I am a woman' etc., the understanding of 'I am the pure indivisible all-pervading Existence-Consciousness-Bliss' should take root for *jñānaniṣṭhā*

(establishment in Self-Knowledge) to happen. Till that is attained there is room for apprehension and fall. It is the practice of *nirvikalpa-samādhi* that bestows *jñānaniṣṭhā* and takes him to the realm of no fall.

Obstacles to *Nirvikalpa-Samādhi*

Great *Advaita Acāryas* like Srī Gauḍapādācārya (*Paramaguru* of Sri Sankaracharya), Sri Swami Vidyananda and others speak about four specific obstacles to *nirvikalpa-samādhi* and the means to overcome them. These four obstacles are:

1. *Laya* or stupor
2. *Vikṣepa* or distraction
3. *Kaṣāya* or *vāsanā* upsurge
4. *Rasāsvāda* or savouring of joy.

In this essay we shall take for study these four obstacles and the means to overcome them.

I. *Laya* or Stupor

'*Laya*' is defined by Sri Swami Sadananda in *Vedānta-sāra* as follows:

लयः तावद् अखण्डवस्तु-अनवलम्बनेन चित्तवृत्तेः निद्रा ॥

layaḥ tāvad akhaṇḍavastu-anavalambanena cittavṛtṭeḥ nidrā.

Laya is the lapse of the mind into stupor because of its failure to rest in the Absolute.

'*Laya*' is stupor or the state of unconsciousness of the mind wherein thoughts cease and one enters a state similar to that of deep-sleep. Such a meditator, obstructed by *laya*, though spending many hours overtly in the practice of *samādhi*, is actually in a state of inertia. In this state, he experiences neither the world of objects nor the bliss of the Self; he is in '*jaḍa-samādhi*' (*jaḍa* = inertia; *samādhi* = absorption).

When the mind becomes imbued with inertia the seeker has to beware (to beware is to become aware!) of this slumber and conquer it by consciously invoking the thought 'I am *Brahman*'. This waking up of the languid mind by invoking a

continuous stream of 'aham brahmāsmi' thoughts is termed 'sambodhana' (rousing).

II. *Vikṣepa* or Distraction

The dispassionate mind, after having given up the external objects, goes within in an attempt to become established in the Self. When this 'introvert mind' finds it difficult to be established in the Self – because of the very subtlety of the Self – and hence turns outward, it obviously becomes defocussed from the Self. Such extrovertedness of the mind, due to its incapacity to be persistently focussed on the Self, is termed '*vikṣepa*' or 'distraction'. *Advaita Acāryas* give the following example to illustrate the nature of *vikṣepa*: the hens which are chased by a cat run into the house to escape their predator. But finding no room to stay within they come running out only to be caught by the cat and become its meal! In the same way the mind, understanding the painful nature of the pleasures of the world, goes within in an effort to attain the Self, but experiencing the difficulty of going any further, becomes extrovert, only to fall a prey to the thoughts pertaining to the world.

The following is the definition of '*vikṣepa*' given by Sri Swami Sadananda:

अखण्डवस्तु-अनवलम्बनेन चित्तवृत्तेः अन्यावलम्बनं विक्लेषः ॥

akhaṇḍavastu-anavalambanena cittavṛtṭeḥ anyāvalambanaṁ vikṣepaḥ.

'*Vikṣepa*' is the resting of the mind on things other than the Absolute, because of its failure to rest in It.

The method to overcome *vikṣepa* is this: the meditator should 'recall the defects of worldly pleasures' (*doṣadr̥ṣṭi*) and with fortitude bind the mind to the Self. Bhagavān Sri Kṛṣṇa explains this above method of overcoming *vikṣepa* when He guides the meditator (*Bhagavad Geeta* 6.25.26):

शनैः शनैरुपरमेद् बुद्ध्या धृतिगृहीतया ।
 आत्मसंस्थं मनः कृत्वा न किञ्चिदपि चिन्तयेत् ॥
 यतो यतो निश्चरति मनश्चञ्चलमस्थिरम् ।
 ततस्ततो नियम्यैतद् आत्मन्येव वशं नयेत् ॥

*śanaiḥ śanairupamed buddhyā dhṛtigr̥hītayā,
 ātmasaṁsthaṁ manaḥ kṛtvā na kiñcidapi cintayet.
 yato yato niścarati manaścañcalamasthiram,
 tatastato niyamyaitad ātmanyeva vaśaṁ nayet.*

Slowly and steadily let him (the meditator) attain quietude by the intellect held in firmness; having made the mind established in the Self, let him not think of anything. From whatever cause the restless and the unsteady mind wanders away, from that let him restrain it, and bring it back and fix it on the Self.

The *Advaita Acāryas* term this effort at controlling the mind 'śama' (mind-control).

III. Kaṣāya or Vāsanā Upsurge

"Śreyāṁsi bahuvighnāni — all noble endeavours are fraught with many obstacles" – is a famous adage in Sanskrit. Even when the meditator has conquered *laya* (stupor) and *vikṣepa* (distraction) by 'sambodhana' (rousing) and 'śama' (mind-control), respectively, obstacles could arise by an abrupt manifestation of attachments and aversions due to sudden *vāsanā* upsurges. The term 'kaṣāya', literally meaning 'dirt', in the context of *samādhi-abhyāsa*, stands for these unexpected bursts of *vāsanās* of *rāga* (attachment), *dveṣa* (hatred), *kāma* (desire) etc.

To explain, the seeker even in the earlier stages of cultivating *viveka*, *vairāgya* and the other *sādhana-catustaya* (fourfold means), would have already conquered all the manifested and known desires, attachments etc. But the *kāraṇaśarīra* (causal body) being a storehouse of impressions (*vāsanās* or *saṁskāras*) collected from many past births, one never knows when new likes, dislikes, desires, attachments, hatreds etc. can manifest. In the advanced stages of meditation, when a seeker is desirous of advancing into the realms of *nirvikalpa-samādhi*, obstacles could arise all of

a sudden, because of the unexpected manifestation of a *vāsanā* gathered in some past birth. It is these unforeseen bursts of *vāsanās* (*udbhūta-vāsanā*) that are termed '*kaṣāya*'; and not the *vāsanās* which do not manifest, but lie dormant (*anudbhūta-vāsanā*) or the *vāsanās* that the meditator has already overcome in earlier stages of his *sādhana*.

When such an obstacle occurs all of a sudden, the mind becomes stunned and stupefied and refuses to move forward. It neither becomes extrovert, nor goes ahead to become established in the *Atman*. It is in an utter state of suspension or stupefaction. The following example has been used traditionally to explain the nature of *kaṣāya*: a particular noble, a new appointee, goes to meet the king. When he is about to enter the king's court, the guards, ignorant of his recent appointment, stop him. Now he can neither go in, nor return without having an audience with the king. This state is similar to the meditator being accosted by the *vāsanā* upsurges which prevent him from 'meeting' the Self. Such a meditator neither becomes extrovert, nor finds it possible to get established in the Self. He is in a state of shocked immobility. Sri Swami Sadananda explains '*kaṣāya*' as follows:

लयविक्षेप-अभावे अपि चित्तवृत्तेः रागादिवासनया स्तब्धीभावाद्
अखण्डवस्त्वनावलम्बनं कषायः ॥

*layavikṣepa-abhāve api cittavṛtتهḥ rāgādivāsanayā stabdhībhāvād
akhaṇḍavastvanavalambanam kaṣāyaḥ.*

Even when *laya* (stupor) and *vikṣepa* (distraction) are absent, the failure of the mind to rest on the Absolute, because of becoming suspended due to the presence of impressions (*vāsanā*) of attachment and so on, is termed *kaṣāya*.

The meditator has to overcome *kaṣāya* by not panicking about the sudden manifestation of *vāsanās*. This is done by just becoming conscious of the fact that the mind is under a '*vāsanā*-attack' (similar to a terrorist attack!). The meditator, by exercising one's *dhṛti* (will) and *viveka-śakti* (power of discrimination), should

also not give further scope for the *vāsanās* to ramify and with patience put an end to these *vāsanā* upsurges.

IV. *Rasāsvāda* or Savouring of Joy

The term '*rasāsvāda*' literally means 'savouring (*āsvāda*) of joy (*rasa*)'. This *rasāsvāda* can be of two types:

- (1) Enjoying the absence of *vikṣepa*
- (2) Enjoying the bliss of *savikalpa-samādhi*.

(1) Enjoying the absence of *vikṣepa*: When an individual, who is carrying a painful heavy load on his back for a considerable duration of time puts it down, the very act of unburdening gives him great pleasure. Relaxation is evident on his face and he contentedly exclaims, "I am so happy."

In the same way, the meditator, who has put an end to the troublesome *vikṣepas* (thought distractions) that have been described herein as the second obstacle, could have a tendency to become contented and satisfied at this triumph over the *vikṣepas* and stay complacent and smug without advancing to the final stage of *nirvikalpa-samādhi*. This satisfaction arising out of the destruction of *vikṣepas* (thought distractions), leading to complacency in putting forth efforts towards the attainment of *nirvikalpa-samādhi*, is termed '*rasāsvāda*'.

(2) Enjoying the bliss of *savikalpa-samādhi*: *Savikalpa-samādhi* is the delightful absorption occasioned by the presence of the triad of the meditator (*dhyātṛ*), meditated (*dhyeya*) and meditation (*dhyāna*). In *nirvikalpa-samādhi* this triad disappears to bestow the unitary experience of *Brahman*. *Savikalpa-samādhi* precedes *nirvikalpa-samādhi*, and is therefore an unavoidable

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step in attaining *nirvikalpa-samādhi*. If a meditator becomes addicted to the happiness of *savikalpa-samādhi* and is hesitant to progress further and get established in *nirvikalpa-samādhi*, he is said to be obstructed by '*rasāsvāda*'; the very savouring (*āsvāda*) of joy (*rasa*) of *savikalpa-samādhi* has become the obstacle for his further progress.

We find the following definition of *rasāsvāda* in the Sanskrit translation and commentary of Sant Niścaladāsji's *Vicāra-sāgara* by Sri Vasudevabrahmendra Sarasvatī:

विक्षेपनिवृत्तिजन्य-आनन्द-अनुभवो वा
सविकल्पसमाधि-आनन्द-अनुभवो वा रसास्वादः इत्युच्यते ॥

*Vikṣepanivṛttijanya-ānanda-anubhavo vā savikalpasamādhi-
ānanda-anubhavo vā rasāsvādaḥ ityucyate.*

Rasāsvāda is the savouring of the happiness born out of the annihilation of the *vikṣepas* (thought distractions) or the savouring of the happiness of *savikalpa-samādhi*.

Rasāsvāda happens due to one's losing sight of the ultimate goal of *jñāna-niṣṭhā*; the seeker's goal is not just mere happiness, but to become established in the Blissful Knowledge of the Self. All joys are finite, including the happiness of *savikalpa-samādhi*. This *rasāsvāda* is to be overcome by bringing to mind the goal of *nirvikalpa-samādhi* and directing one's efforts to gain Self-Establishment (*jñānaniṣṭhā*). The meditator should invoke the grace of his Guru and the Lord and become detached (*niḥsaṅga*) from these *super-sāttvic* forms of happiness. Refuse to be lured by the satiation arising out of the destruction of the *vikṣepas* (thought distractions) or beguiled by the bliss of *savikalpa-samādhi*. One should move forward with utter detachment and focus on the goal of *nirvikalpa-samādhi*.

Prescription from the Master Physician

Sri Gaudapada, the great *paramaguru* of Bhagavan Adi Sankaracharya, out of immense compassion to seekers, lists these four obstacles to *nirvikalpa-samādhi* and summarises the

afore-mentioned methods to surmount them (*Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣhad Kārikā 3.44,45*):

लये सम्बोधयेत् चित्तं विक्षिप्तं शमयेत् पुनः ।
सकषायं विजानीयात् शमप्राप्तं न चालयेत् ॥
नास्वादयेत् रसं तत्र निःसङ्गः प्रज्ञया भवेत् ।

*laye sambodhayet cittam vikṣiptam śamayet punaḥ,
sakaṣāyam vijānīyāt śamaprāptam na cālayet.
nāsvādayet rasam tatra niḥsaṅgaḥ prajñayā bhavet,.....*

When the mind is torpid, rouse it; when it is distracted, bring it back to calmness; when it is sullied (by *vāsanā* upsurges), be aware of it; when it is established in equipoise, do not distract it any more. Do not savour the happiness, but rather maintain an unattached awareness.

Conclusion

The state of the meditator's mind in *nirvikalpa-samādhi* has been compared in *Vedānta* to a lamp's effulgent and steady flame, when the lamp is placed in a windless spot – “*yathā dīpo nivātastho neṅgate sopamā smṛtā* (*Bhagavad-Geeta 6.11*).” In *nirvikalpa-samādhi* the *Brahmākāravṛtti* becomes radiant, steady and powerful and becomes imperceptible when it reaches the very depths of one's personality, while putting an end to ignorance. The meditator, meditated and meditation become the one indivisible *Brahman*. The glory of this *nirvikalpa-samādhi* state is indescribable. It is the very sanctum sanctorum of *Brahman* and the one who has reached there becomes a *jīvanmukta* – one who is liberated even while living. *Nirvikalpa-samādhi* is the chrysalis wherein the ugly caterpillar of the *jīva* metamorphoses into the enchanting butterfly of *Brahman*!

To polish the mind and to protect and guide it along healthy lines is the sacred function of our intellect.

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