

Overcoming Depression

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Life Is . . .

How to remain unaffected by disappointment, failure, and loss, which are an inevitable part of human life, is a challenge that everyone faces. There are no exceptions to it. Since life is bipolar in nature, and success and failure constitute its two enduring faces, the need to learn to live with them meaningfully is a ceaseless quest. As long as one lives, one will have to encounter them. While there is no choice in the type of experiences that life will bring to us (of course, in the larger sense, according to Karma theory, they are our own doing), there is a definite possibility of how we respond to them. As human beings, we are not mere machines controlled by external forces, but have an inherent and inbuilt power and need to decide our responses, whatever be the situation in life.

Though pleasure and pain are inseparable, pain plays a more influential role in moulding personality and character than pleasure. Pain reminds us of our limitations and, if taken rightly, is a means to deepen life. Pain plays the role of a teacher, educating and guiding us towards higher states of being. The difficulty comes when we refuse to learn and instead cling to pain. That is how so many people go on privately fondling their painful memories, nurturing resentments, and planning to set 'others' right, not realising that what must be set right is within and not without.

Depression Is Inevitable

Everyone, at times, feels abused and neglected, or encounters failure and cruelty. The most immediate response to this is a feeling of sadness, a feeling of dejection and depression. But if feeling dejected and depressed is one part of the reality, the presence of strength and resilience in facing life is the other side. There are numerous instances, recorded or

unrecorded, in the lives of men and women, which point to this uncommon degree of courage, calmness and enthusiasm even in the face of most trying conditions. We often wonder at these more-than-ordinary examples of strength and ask: Is it possible? For us?

Though depression or extreme state of dejection and hopelessness has been with mankind right from the earliest days, many current newspaper reports suggest that depression is on rise. Mental depression is more widespread today than ever. This is despite the fact that there is almost an astronomical increase in income levels, comforts and medical care or it may be it is because there is too much to enjoy but little to aim at, ultimately, that we have come to this state of affairs. According to some observers, it is depression, and not deadly diseases like tuberculosis, HIV or heart ailments, that would soon top the list of fatal factors responsible for terminating the human life.

Depression is a feeling of intense loss and inadequacy. It is a state of mind where a person feels deprived, helpless and insecure. Psychologically, depression means either getting what one does not want, or not getting what one wants. Though depression is an effect, it, in turn, becomes a cause, too. A depressed person may lose enthusiasm and interest and want to withdraw himself from others. His responses are often monosyllabic, limited and cold. He seems to be resigned to circumstances and does not want to be disturbed.

There is no definite way in which a person may become depressed. There is no set cause and effect relationship in this. What may cause depression in one person may be the cause of encouragement in others. Take for example Edison's response to his repeated failures at finding the right type of metal filament for the electric bulb. When he finally succeeded and was asked how he could keep his calm in spite of so many (as many as hundred) attempts, he replied it was no failure at all. It was just a 100-step process to success!

Facing Depression

We all know what depression is and need no further discussion about it. What we should seek is how to handle depression.

Like in medicine, one can adopt either of the two measures in overcoming depression preventive and curative. Preventive measures are aimed at making us depression-proof just as we can make watches and pens waterproof, fireproof, and rustproof.

Preventive Measures

1. Cultivating a Healthy World View: We may not be fully aware of how our attitudes affect our responses. But sooner we discover this simple truth, the better for us. Attitudes are the glasses through which we look at the world. If we wear black glasses, everything looks black, and if we wear blue glasses, everything looks blue. So does the colour of our attitude determine the colour of our responses.

To evolve a healthy world view is not a day's work. One develops it through right interpretation of life experiences. This means, outgrowing our immature and self-centred outlook. We must learn early in life that we are not the focal point of the world. If things do not go our way, in the way we want them to happen, we need not throw up our arms and send a cry in the air, 'Oh! This selfish world! These unjust, crazy, difficult times!' The world has been like this, always. We need not cry hoarse about it. Why? The Upanishads say, as long as we remain identified with our body its cravings and experiences and mind (and all its changing states), selfishness is the only rightful thing that we can expect. There is nothing to be surprised about it.

The task before us is not to make others unselfish but to practise unselfishness ourselves first. Any sermons about changing the world without changing oneself are meaningless and ineffective. Whatever we expect others to do, we should ourselves try to do first.

2. Understanding the Nature of Mind: Mind, as we all know, is a bundle of changing states. In the morning, we may be happy, but by afternoon, unhappiness would have set in. In the forenoon, there may be some gloom in our mind, but by evening, all gloom is gone. Or, this week, we are happy; next week, we become unhappy, and so on. We are swimming in the ocean of temporary happiness and un-happiness. Just as water in a river keeps changing, so does our mind keep changing. But if we trap some water, a little rough water, in a can and refuse to let it flow, it begins to stink. So are the experiences of life: we need not become attached to them. Why go on repeating, 'I am hurt,' whereas the situation that caused the hurt is gone forever? We collect and carefully nurture sad moments and depression.

Behind this changing nature of mind, let us remember, there is something that does not change, and the more we cling to that, the lesser

will be the influence of these changes. What is that something? Our true, actual nature the Divine within. We should not forget the underlying ground of existence, the inherent divinity, unaffected and unaffected by anything in this world, good or bad, and think deeply about it.

3. Regular Practice of Introspection: This means keeping a watch over ourselves. We should be on guard about whatever we think, speak or do. All actions leave an impression on our minds. Nothing goes away from the mind without leaving behind a tendency to repeat it. We should hence take care of what impressions we gather, and keep a check on our mind. This requires introspection. One can begin by setting apart a little time for planning or revising whatever we do. This act of introspection is as important as the very act of doing something.

Says Holy Mother Sri Sarada Devi:

'You must at least sit down once in the morning and again in the evening. That acts as a rudder to a boat. When one sits in meditation in the evening, one gets a chance to think of what one has done good or bad during the whole day. Next one should compare the states of one's mind in the preceding day and the present. . . Unless you meditate in the mornings and evenings along with work, how can you know what you are actually doing?'

4. Practice of Prayer, Japa, and Meditation: How could these spiritual practices help us in preventing depression? The simple answer is that practice of spiritual life itself means focussing on the divine side of life. Spiritual practices are not same as religious observations. For most people, religious observations are more or less their cultural conditionings. Spiritual practices, on the other hand, aim at awakening our divine nature and how to manifest it in our daily life. As much as religious observations help us spiritually, they are beneficial. Otherwise, they become mere mechanical habits.

Prayer, japa (repetition of God's name) and concentration on a holy form check the influence of worldly affairs on our mind. They also purify the mind, and keep us focussed. They provide a higher centre for a sustained and healthy focus of mind.

Though it is true that prevention is better than cure, sometimes, we already have had the experience of falling into depression. How to cure it? Almost the same factor that could help us prevent depression can help us cure depression. But these have to be restated in a different perspective. One thing we should not forget is that it is possible to overcome the state of depression, which is after all not permanent.

Depression is nothing but a focus of the mind on something negative and depressive. All that we need to do is to change the focus.

Curative Measures

1. See the Brighter Side of Life: Life is not all a very depressing sight. It has a brighter, refreshing side as well. We must learn to see the brighter side. If you have a healthy body but are depressed, then think of how many millions are sick and diseased. If you are ill, think of how many millions cannot afford medical help, and so on. When we learn to see the brighter side of life, it naturally makes the size of our problems small. By counting the good that we have, and neglecting what we do not have, we can change the focus of our mind and bring a greater sense of happiness in our daily life.

2. Recalling Our Divine Nature: In the Gita, Sri Krishna reprimanding Arjuna who refused to engage in his prescribed duty (swadharma) said, 'Give up this faint-heartedness; it doesn't befit you.' Swami Vivekananda, commenting on this verse, said,

'It doth not befit thee. Thou art that Atman imperishable, beyond all evil. Having forgotten thy real nature, thou hast, by thinking thyself a sinner, as one afflicted with bodily evil and mental grief thou hast made thyself so this doth not befit thee.'

One should, therefore, reflect over Krishna's call for strength and courage. What he meant by saying that it doesn't befit you, is, though we have such enormous reserves of strength and wisdom, we haven't tapped them, and this neglect or inactivity does not befit us. It is like a rich man, under the effect of amnesia, going out to his gatekeeper and begging for a dime to buy a plantain!

We must make it a habit to dwell more and more on our divine Self. This can be done by reading authentic spiritual literature, or listening to talks by competent people, but above all, by thinking deeply over what we have read or heard. When we get up in the morning, says the pratah-smarana stotram, we must meditate on that Effulgent, Sinless Being which resides within us. This leaves a deep impression on our self-image and frees us from the load of body-mind complex to a great extent.

3. Practice of Detachment: Once, late at night, an old man was woken up by some crackling sound and was shocked to see his next-door building

on fire. He stood near the window, badly shaken by what he saw, with tears trickling down his cheeks. A little later, his young son too came there and asked him why he was weeping. The old man replied, 'Look, our factory is on fire and you ask me why I am weeping?!' 'But,' smiled the son and said, 'You have forgotten that we sold away the factory last week.' Soon, the old man stopped weeping and stood there, self-composed and calm.

So are our regrets. It is not the event in itself, but the 'self' that is involved that makes us upset. If we consciously practise detachment, we can overcome bitterness and pain.

4. Change in Life Style: For those who are deep in dejection and bitterness, it can help them if they make some changes in their daily life. Maybe, if they get up early, go for a walk in the refreshing morning air, balance their diet and other activities, and above all, develop a sense of humour, they can help themselves. Sri Ramakrishna used to pray to the Divine Mother: 'O Mother! Don't make me a dry monk.' And indeed, whosoever came in touch with him experienced joy and happiness. 'Despondency,' said Swami Vivekananda, 'is not religion, whatever else it may be. By being pleasant always and smiling, it takes you nearer to God, nearer than any prayer.' As goes the well-known saying, 'Joy in one's heart and some laughter on one's lips is a sign that the person down deep has a pretty good grasp of life!'

Conclusion

Depression is a virulent disease. But when we study its roots, we find that its real source lies in our attaching excessive importance to materialism, gross or subtle. When we overlook our spiritual strength and make too much of our weaknesses and failures, we prepare the way for a sad state of affairs. Sometimes our depression may wear a spiritual cloak and we may feel discouraged to rectify our own attitudes. Warning against these tricks of our impure mind, Sri Krishna counsels us to follow the path of self-transformation, 'This Yoga should be practised with perseverance, undisturbed by depression of heart.'