



# The Practice of DETACHMENT

by Swami Durgananda

It is impossible to learn detachment from a book or from just one technique. There is no perfect recipe for detachment. However, by learning to confront our fears we begin to see how unproductive the play of the ego really is and we can let go of the fear and move on. [To practice that which we do not really know is in itself already a practice in detachment.]

It is better not to ask, "What will I get if I do this?" Or, "What will happen if I make a mistake?" These worries are simply distractions from doing actions skillfully and joyfully. It is better to be detached from the action. We cannot grow without action—so welcome the challenge; "an ounce of practice is better than tons of theory." We invariably make mistakes when we act. Then we make a note of them, correct them, and we grow. Mistakes are an essential part of growth. A yoga practitioner has to be bold, ready to be laughed at and ready to bear insult and injury—the highest yoga. We have to learn that we are not the doer. Things happen despite all our plans and best efforts. We can only do our best and then "adapt, adjust and accommodate" to the results.

It does not help to say, "Now I am completely detached," and then continue on as before. We must recognize and let go of our worries, our conditioning and our fixed ideas and replace them with more positive thoughts. To achieve this, we need to engage

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in spiritual practice under the guidance of a teacher, [a teacher] who can inspire us and show us the way until we are established on the path. We need someone whom we can go to for small adjustments and corrections in the same way as we might visit a chiropractor to have our body realigned. We will always need guidance on how to correct our mental processes. Once we

learn how to do this, we can put these new ways of thinking into practice when needed. Detachment has nothing to do with race, religion, or nationality. We may have different bodily constitutions and but our fears, worries, or attachments to the past, to family, wealth, position, and ultimately to the body itself—are all the same.

We can look upon the various masters, paths, religions and techniques symbolically as beacons of light, held high in front of us—light that we have but to follow, with no concern for the final goal. The moment we follow the light, we free ourselves from the past and the future, and remain fully in the present. This in itself is already a sign of detachment and we feel lighter as a result.

We will experience tension and anxiety if we fail to practice detachment, if we remain fixed in the past and the future, changing nothing. Look at what happens when we go on holiday. We take just one suitcase with us that becomes our home. We for-

get about everything we have left behind; stacked in our drawers and cupboards, all our books and papers, our coin, stamp, and plate collections, our socks, shirts, scarves and coats, and whatever else we have accumulated. We are actually taking a vacation from our houses full of indispensable objects!!!

When we leave with this one suitcase, we feel wonderful, as free as a bird. But on our return, as soon as the key turns in the lock, everything comes flooding back. Our whole life returns, with all our ties and belts, shirts and shoes. We wonder how we can ever wear all

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this and what to do with it anyway. We want to tidy up, fetch a large bag and give everything to charity. We tell ourselves, now I'm really detached, I am giving everything away. But as soon as the next paycheck arrives, out we go armed with our credit cards and come back laden with shopping, ready replacements for what we have given away.

From this we learn to reduce our possessions gradually. From twenty shirts, we go down to eighteen, then from eighteen to sixteen. Step by step. Detachment has to keep pace with our own inner experience. If the mind and heart do not have real *vairagya*, detachment, then the credit card will not bear it for long. The bank will call: "What's going on? Your account has been constantly overdrawn since you started doing yoga ..." This is not an uncommon experience. Many people go to extremes when they begin a yoga practice and throw everything out—they sleep on a futon on the floor without a pillow. The next morning they are unable to walk! The mind then reacts by going to the other extreme and consuming indiscriminately. This is not detachment.

True detachment consists of letting go of attachment to objects, not in being wasteful and irresponsible. It does not mean that we should give away all of our possessions, nor does it mean that we should find a new

husband or wife just because the person by our side no longer has the kind of looks we want. Through practicing detachment, we learn to live with what life gives us and to go beyond likes and dislikes. Take the body for example. If you want your body to have the shape promoted in the magazines of today but, after trying every diet, nothing has changed, then accept what you have. If God wants you that way, be neither proud nor ashamed about it, just be content.

It is one thing to control the craving for a cake when we see it, but quite another to control the *thought* of a cake. Non-attachment is a state of mind and as such is a continuous process. Slowly we need to sort out our thoughts. A teacher yearns to become a professor. A professor dreams of retirement. A model wants to be an actress. An actress wants to be a producer. A producer wants to be a writer. We are never happy, never really content, until we realise that we have to come back to the miracle of the present. We can never be happy if we constantly chase our own shadow.

We make so many plans. We think, "Once I have done this, then I'll do that. I'll travel there, I'll study this, I'll move there." If anything happens which hinders our plans, our happiness is lost. To adapt to the inevitable changes of life, we need a degree of detachment. We should certainly not forsake foresight and vision, but when we allow our minds to run into the future, we are not allowing ourselves to enjoy life in the present. When we eat, we want to read the newspaper; when we read the newspaper, we want to eat. This is restlessness without detachment.

Please do not think that the practice of detachment is opposed to love and compassion. Though detachment helps us to accept and work with our own karma, if someone falls and gets hurt, we must not ignore them by thinking that they deserve this, and that this is their karma. On the contrary, a mark of our spiritual maturity is for us to show compassion for another's suffering.

Detachment means not only to accept the present moment, but also to enjoy the present moment, unencumbered by memories of the past and worries for the future. This is a very meditative and peaceful approach to life. Fear comes from attachment, and desires. We do not entertain desires when we live in the present moment. But the minute we think of the future, a question arises, "What happens if ...?" Detach from this thought.

If you want to strengthen your ability to detach, then practice meditation. When you meditate try to be in

the moment. Focus on the breath; focus on the mantra; focus on the light. Surrender to a higher energy, beyond body and mind. You can call it God or Jesus, Krishna, Siva, Allah or Buddha, depending on the way your own religion guides you. This is detachment in practice. We free ourselves from our imaginary future as well as from our impressions of the past. We calm our thoughts down and in silence we experience union with the higher mind. Slowly discrimination dawns. "What am I doing here? Why do I run around? I work eight hours a day to earn all this money and then I am busy the next eight hours spending it again." Our free time is eaten up by consumerism. We keep ourselves busy, running this way and that frantically trying to fulfil our desires. Then as soon as we have bought something, we put it away in a drawer. And off we go on holiday again and completely forget about it!

If somebody wants to give you a gift, say, "Thank you, but actually I don't need it." Or as Swami Sivananda used to do, accept it and then pass it on to someone else, not out of disrespect—of course we still feel the love that is behind the gift—but perhaps because somebody else really needs it. We do not have to become collectors. Too many possessions create heaviness and dependency; we start to believe that we cannot live without them.

Once you start taking the time to live in the present, it is relatively easy to give up material objects. Yet this is only the beginning. Being yourself naturally, absolutely free—this is the highest detachment. As yoga teachers we must practice detachment. The heart of yoga is detachment and Self-knowledge. They are the core of both our yoga practice and our teaching. Often you may wonder what a student thinks or says about you. You must give of yourself completely when you stand in front of others. Simply being yourself, honest and humble demands a high level of detachment. Practice this approach at work with your colleagues. You will progress well if, as part of your *sadhana*, spiritual practice, you practice freeing yourself from false identification with work. To train the mind in detachment, first try to simplify your life and develop a pure lifestyle. If you have been practicing a yogic lifestyle for several years, now is the time to practice detachment from identification with the ego. This is not easy, but continue to do what you are doing and as always, give your best without identifying with the ego. Be simply yourself, full of love, patience and respect, without playing around, without too much laughter or too many mood swings. This is our constant school of detachment.

Swami Sivananda says that *viveka*, discrimination, and *vairagya*, detachment, are the most important *sadhanas* that we can practice throughout our entire lives. Because the mind is always active and has new experiences, the ego is always ready to trap us with new attachment. The struggle with the ego can be likened to a war. It is for this reason that many spiritual stories are based around war. The ethical and spiritual teachings of the *Bhagavad-Gita* take place during a war. The war is happening within us, a fight between the good and the pleasant. The good leads us in one direction and the pleasant takes us in another. The war starts immediately upon waking: Shall I get up or shall I stay in bed? What will I eat? What will I wear to work, elegant or fashionable? Or shall I go to work at all? Perhaps I should call in sick. These are the wars that we all experience; the mind plays the same game with all of

us. Swami Vishnu-devananda would say: "the lower tendencies of the mind always like to ride the bicycle downhill, whereas the higher tendencies say: 'No, go uphill and practice detachment.'"

True detachment is being able to accept whatever comes, whatever life brings. If things can be changed, then change them, but if they cannot, then accept them.

Simply tell your mind: "you can say what you want, but I will do what has to be done and I will rejoice in it". This is true detachment. ॐ

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Swami Durgananda is the Yoga Acharya (spiritual director) of the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centres in Europe and the author of a recently published commentary on the 'Yoga Sutras of Patanjali—a complete manual for the exploration and control of the mind.

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