

VAIRĀGYA : BEDROCK OF YOGA SĀDHANĀ

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ABSTRACT

In this paper the vairāgya sādhanā - one of the keys to restrain the modifications of mind - has been discussed in its various dimensions and niceties and subtleties ranging from nature, significance, workings/functions, varieties, stages and benefits. In doing so, the vairāgyasādhanā has been delineated in the context of and with the reference to not only pātañjala yoga sūtras, Vairāgya Śataka, Vedānta, Śrīmad Bhagavad Gītā but also rich Tamil classical texts/tradition of yoga with succinct interpretative and illustrative explanations with a view to simplify the concept bereft of mystical connotations gathered around it.

Key Words : yoga, sādhanā, vairāgya, viveka.

Yoga is the ancient art and science that gives us the ability to delve within and discover the deeper reality that is already there in its fullness (**Akhaṇḍa Paripūrṇa Satcitānandam**). We need to go within to find this fullness by dissolving the blocks and obstacles that obscure it due to our arrogant ignorance (**Ajñāna** or **Avidyā**). Every human being has an enormous strength of Divinity latent in them that enable them to do anything that they set their minds upon achieving. The many achievements of humans are mere glimpses of the great potential that is lying latent within their very being. All they need is the will (**Ichāśakti**) and determination (**Kriyāśakti**) to realize (**Jñānaśakti**) this inner strength and Divine potential. One of the cornerstones on the journey of achieving our inherent spiritual potential (**Mokṣa** or **Kaivalya**) is **Vairāgya** or dispassionate objectivity towards life.

What is Vairāgya?

The very term **Vairāgya** is a compound word that may be split up as **vi** meaning "opposite or without" and **Rāga** meaning "attachment, passion, feeling, emotion, interest etc.". Implication from the sense of 'without attachment, passions" gives **Vairāgya** a general meaning of ascetic disinterest in things that would normally cause passionate attachment in most people. This implies

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the complete cessation of desire, attachment and personal cravings in the process of attaining a state wherein one is not influenced by *Rāga* or *Dveṣa* (*Dvandvātīta*). *Vairāgya* is the cultivating of an indifference towards the temporal objects of worldly possessions as well as the egotistic mind (*Ahaṅkāra*) that is the primary cause of the attachments in the first place. It is a "dispassionate" stance on life that creates the power of renunciation (*Tyāga*) by which a Yogī is able to pursue the true reality (*Sat*) rather than the falsities of the world (*Asat*), the eternal (*Nitya*) rather than the ephemeral (*Anitya*). After one has developed an adequate amount of *Viveka* (discerning intellect), the temporary, ephemeral nature of the world and its objects becomes obvious and naturally a lack of attraction to them begins to take root. The one who has subdued all passions and desires is called a *Vairāgī*.

Mahaṛṣi Patañjali defines *Vairāgya* as "*dr̥ṣṭānuśrāvika viṣaya vitṛṣṇasya vaśīkārasamjñā vairāgyam*" implying a conscious and controlled state of mastery, a particular state of mind that manifests in the one who does not hanker after objects that may be experienced through one's special sense such as sight or hearing (Yoga Sūtras: I: 15).

Swāmi Śivānanda says, "*Vairāgya* is purely an internal mental state". He says, "A man may remain in the busy world amidst various luxuries and yet possess perfect *Vairāgya*, while a Sādhū who lives in a cave in the far-off regions of the Himalayas may be keenly attached to his Kamaṇḍalu, walking stick or piece of cloth."

This may be clearly understood through the lovely story of King Janaka and Sukācārya. Suka as a young ṛṣi once went to King Janaka to find out how a great king living in enormous luxury could be known as a Yogī par excellence. As he was busy with the court, Janaka asked Sukācārya to go around the palace balancing a pot full of oil on his head with the condition that not a drop should fall to the ground. When Suka returned after many hours, Janaka asked him to describe what he had seen in the palace. Suka replied that he had not seen anything as his attention was totally focused on the pot of oil and not letting a single drop fall to the ground. "THAT" exclaimed King Janaka is what I am doing even as all my kingly activities are performed by me with my mind focused on the Divine alone.

The Necessity for *Vairāgya*

It may be said that *Vairāgya* is the only means to achieve *Mokṣa*. In the Yoga Sūtras, Mahaṛṣi Patañjali states that *Vairāgya* and *Abhyāsa* (regular, uninterrupted practice of a higher nature) are two keys in our efforts to restrain modifications of the mind ("*abhyāsa-vairāgyābhyām tannirodhaḥ*" - Yoga Sūtra I: 12.). Lord Kṛṣṇa in the Bhagavad Gītā also

recommends **Vairāgya** as a key means for bringing control to the restless mind that is as fickle as the wind when he says, "**mano durnigraham calam abhyāsenā tu kaunteya vairāgyena ca gr̥hyate**" - Bhagavad Gītā VI:35.

The restless, uncontrolled senses and mind give rise to uncontrolled and unnecessary thoughts that sow the seeds of wants and desires. When we don't get what we desire, disappointment and frustration occur and these when uncontrolled gradually grow into anger (**Krodha**). The one who is filled with anger can never see things in the right perspective as the vision will be clouded (**Buddhināśa**). In this stage we are not able to decide on anything as we are unable to segregate the real from the unreal, the true from the false etc. this state of confusion, with inability for proper and correct analysis paves the way for ultimate destruction.

What we must let go of is the actual desire for a particular object or a particular outcome that arises from an inner sense of NEEDINESS. This inner sense of NEED is the energy that propels us into this vicious spiral and the only way to let go of it is **Vairāgya**. Living without the inner sense of Neediness - isn't that Vairāgya too? If not, the process of wanting something, needing this or that again creates desire - and the vicious spiral of doom starts all over once again.

Mahaṛṣi Patañjali has given us excellent guidance on the renunciation of even the highest ambitions. The renunciation of the world is through **Apara Vairāgya** but then he says that we must even renounce the desire for **Mokṣa** itself. That is the **Para Vairāgya**. It is only then that we may become THAT. He says, "**tadvairāgyāt api doṣabījakṣaye kaivalyam**" meaning that it is only by the development of non-attachment even to our ambition for the highest state, that the very seed of our bondage gets destroyed and then Kaivalya occurs (Yoga Sūtras: III-51). It is only when we totally let go, the highest state may occur and till then, as long as the smallest iota of 'want' is still there - it cannot occur!

Vairāgya Leads to Renunciation

The **Vairāgya Śatakam** of Bhartṛhari, an excellent treatise on the concepts of **Vairāgya**, was composed by the King who had attained that state himself. He had the mortification of finding out that all is **Asat**, when the special golden fruit he had given his queen was given by her to her lover who gave it to a prostitute who in turn came to give it back to the king himself as it was so special! He gives us excellent advice in the following lines **Vairāgya Śatakam 29**:

**bhoge rogabhayaṃ kule cyutibhayaṃ vitte nṛpālādbhayaṃ /
maune dainyabhayaṃ bale ripubhayaṃ rūpe jarāyā bhayaṃ //**

***śāstre vādabhayaṃ guṇe khalabhayaṃ kāye kṛtāntādbhayaṃ /
sarvaṃ vastu bhayānvitaṃ bhuvī nṛṇāṃ vairāgyamevābhayaṃ //***

In enjoyment there is fear of disease, in social position the fear of falling off, in wealth the fear of (hostile) kings, in honor the fear of humiliation, in power the fear of foe men, in beauty the fear of old age, in scriptural erudition the fear of opponents, in virtue the fear of traducers and in the mortal body the fear of death. All the things of this world pertaining to human beings are attended with fear; renunciation alone stands for fearlessness.

Vairāgya burns up the heaviness of the sensual mind and thus thins out the inherent desires. It creates an environment where the mind may turn inward (*Antarmukha Vṛtti*) ultimately enabling one to enter into the state *Nirvikalpa Samādhi*. In the **Bhāgavata Purāṇa** it is said that the Yogis must cut all attachment with the sword of detachment, controlling the breath and the mind with remembrance of the Divine. In this state the mind becomes tranquil and one becomes free of the *Tri Guṇās (Guṇatīta)*.

How Vairāgya Works

According to Ṛgveda, the first book of human kind, Yoga is the path to attain control over mind and the outward going senses (*yuñjate mana uta yuñjate dhiyo viprā viprasya bṛhato vipaścitaḥ vi hotrā dadhe vayunāvideka inmahī devasya savituḥ pariṣṭutiḥ*- Ṛgveda V 81.1) Such control is not possible unless **Vairāgya** is obtained in the first place as identification with the objects of sensual enjoyment leads to subjectivity and loss of control over the mind and senses.

The word **Vairāgya** literally means that which is opposed to **Rāga** (attachment). **Vairāgya** does not mean that we should give up everything and retire to the forest. The real meaning of **Vairāgya** lies in being where we are in life, developing an understanding of the subtle nature of things with awareness and at the same time being able to give up the worldly desires. It implies the ability to be like a lotus that passes through the mud of the pond and yet comes out pure at the top with its mind focused on the divine manifesting as the Sun. To be able to do this, we need to use our discerning intellect that is endowed with the ability to know what we should accept and what we need to reject. Part of the whole process is the development of the ability to recognize the divinity in every object you experience and enjoy. **Vairāgya** is not merely the giving up of things but manifests in the ability to enjoy without attachment those very things that were previously enjoyed with attachment. That is the real **Vairāgya**, the mark of a true humane being.

Tirumūlar, a Contemporary of Maharṣi Patañjali, in his **Tirumandiram** (one of the most important Dravidian classical texts on Yoga and Śaiva Siddhānta) in Section 20 of Tantra One, describes the fact that **Vairāgya** is the only means to ward off the unwanted desires and ignorance. He says, **nūlonrupatri nuniyeramāttadār, pālonru patrinār panbin payankedun, kolonrupatrinār kūda paravaigal, mālonrupatri mayanguhin drārgale** (Tirumandiram 295). This may be translated as follows. Holy books are our guide to scale the heights of Pure Knowledge (that guards us). Fruitless is that learning (which doesn't turn them inwards) that leads to outer things of life. It is only when we lean and climb the rod of **Vairāgya** that the birds of unwanted desires fly away. Men of ignorance, who cling to them, will forever remain in stupor.

Tirukkural, a traditional text in Tamil, written by Thiruvalluvar, is an epitome of such eternal and never-changing values. Hence it is also considered equal to the Vedas of the Hindu Scriptures. Tiruvalluvar has expounded and expanded on this topic in an amazing manner in Verse number 341 to 350 of Chapter 35. He says, **yathanin yathanin nīngiyān nothal athanin athanin ilan** (Tirukkural 341) meaning thereby, whatever desires we are able to get rid of we become free of them. This liberates us from the torments and pains, finally resulting in the ultimate realization. He further states, **patruatra kanne pirappu arukkum matru nilaiyaamai kānap padum** (Tirukkural 349) that means that freedom from bondage of desires mitigates mundane sufferings. Until that happens there is the continuous oscillation between happiness and sadness like a pendulum that goes to and fro.

In another place he says, **adalvendum ainthan pulatthai vidalvendum vaendiya ellam orungu** (Tirukkural 343). This means that the path to renunciation lies in the mastery over the aspirations of the five senses by the sixth sense (the higher intellect) using our strength and willpower in a saintly task.

Those who cannot get rid of bonds and desires will end up in disappointment and distress. Grief and endless suffering cling on to them. Those who can truly renounce themselves from the bondages of worldly life are great. Those who are reluctant are caught in the net of desires and suffer. People become deluded by unlimited desires and live in a dream world. It is most important to keep one's desires under control. Curtail your desires, for materialistic desires lead to a restless and disastrous life. Desires are a prison. One can be freed only by limiting one's wants, through the practice of **Vairāgya**.

Tṛṣṇā means an intense craving or sense-hankering. Through constant repetition of enjoyment

of an object, the longing for the object becomes very keen and acute. This is *Trṣṇā*. In the *Yoga Vāsiṣṭha*, Maḥarṣi Vasiṣṭha tells Lord Rāma, "You can even uproot the Himalayas, you can even drink the waters of the whole ocean, you can even swallow balls of fire, but it is difficult to destroy the *Trṣṇā* that are the cravings that cause incessant trouble in so many different ways. These cravings are the seeds of this *Samsāra* that can be overcome only by *Vairāgya*".

Detachment (*Vairāgya*), faith (*Śraddhā*) and love (*Prema*) may be said to be the pillars upon which the edifice of peace (*Śānti*) rests. Detachment alone can make our spiritual discipline (*Sādhana*) effective by helping us to be content (*Santoṣa*) as we begin to realize that nothing can happen against the will of the Divine.

Wherein Lies Vairāgya?

Vairāgya, dispassion, really comes when one knows that the source of happiness is WITHIN US. As long as we look for happiness in the external objects (both of the gross and subtle nature), we are stuck to the reality of those objects thus limiting our spiritual progress. Unless we are able to give us our grasp on them, we cannot get out of the prison of sensory enjoyment that always ends in pain and suffering.

According to Vedānta, everything in life has its own place and spiritual upliftment and progress has the supreme place. Most of the time we find that humans in their blissful ignorance of their own true Divine nature, vainly try to secure happiness in the perishable objects of this illusory sensory universe. Every one is restless, discontented and dissatisfied until they can live and follow the path of *Vairāgya*, as it is the raft that enables us to swim across the ocean of *Samskāra* and realize the Divine Self that lies within us. This is the only way we can finally attain spiritual fulfillment (*Mokṣa*). Isn't that the Goal of our very human existence?

Vairāgya is usually categorized with three other important spiritual attributes that make up the *Sādhana Catuṣṭaya*. These are the four-fold qualifications that are necessary for every spiritual aspirant to succeed. These four essential qualities of a true *Sādhaka* are:

1. **VIVEKA**: This is the intellectual ability to discriminate or discern between the real (*Sat*) and the unreal (*Asat*).
2. **VAIRĀGYA**: This refers to a deep sense of dispassion, detachment, non-attachment and objectivity. There is a logical order in the four means. After sufficient practice of *Viveka*, the temporary, ephemeral nature of the world and its objects becomes obvious and a natural lack of attraction to them takes place. This is *Vairāgya*. One should then

endeavor to become more dispassionate in order to purify the mind and improve one's concentration and steadiness of mind.

3. **ṢAṬ-SAMPAT**: This refers to the six noble virtues or qualities that are essential for self-development. Even if we don't have such qualities, we must make the attempt to develop them as much as possible.
 - a. **Śama** - Tranquility or control of mind. Calmness.
 - b. **Dama** - Control of the senses, not letting the senses run out towards the sense objects.
 - c. **Uparati** - Renunciation of unnecessary activities that are not our Dharma.
 - d. **Titikṣā** - Endurance, forbearance of the pairs of opposites. Creating a strong mind that doesn't waver in the face of the opposites such as success and failure, hot and cold, pleasure and pain, sunshine and rain, etc.
 - e. **Śraddhā** - Intense faith that is defined by Śrī Ādi Śaṅkara as faith in one's Guru, God, the Self (*Ātman*) and the Scriptures (*Śāstras*).
 - f. **Samādhāna** - Perfect concentration and one-pointedness of the mind.
4. **MUMUKṢUTVA**: The intense longing for liberation. When this stage is reached, **Mokṣa** (liberation) is the only aim of the **Jñanī**.

Vairāgya is an important part of these four fold qualifications that are achieved only with sincere, dedicated and determined practice that is done with awareness and consciousness.

Varieties of Vairāgya:

It can be said that **Vairāgya** is of two kinds: **Kāraṇavairāgya** (on account of some miseries that come momentarily with a reason) and **Viveka Pūrvaka Vairāgya** (on account of discrimination between the real and the unreal). While the detachment of the first type is of a temporary nature and is lost when opportunities for sensual gratification arise, the second is of a permanent nature as it is through the intellectual higher discriminatory understanding.

On the basis of the effort, **Vairāgya** may be said to be of three kinds viz., dull (**Manda**), intense (**Tīvra**) and very intense (**Tīvratara**). Maḥarṣi Patañjali echoes this idea too when he says, **tīvrasamvegānāmāsannah** (Yoga Sūtras-I: 21) meaning thereby that the highest states can be achieved most rapidly by those whose desire to achieve is intensely strong. According to the degree of effort on the part of the aspirants, **Vairāgya** may be classified as mild (**Mṛdu**), medium (**Madhya**) or intense (**Adhimātra**).

In ordinary Vairāgya (*Apara Vairāgya*) there are still traces of *Vāsanās* and desires left that need to be destroyed but in *Para Vairāgya* all *Vasanas*, *Samskāras* and desires are fried up and decimated in totality. Perfect desirelessness is *Para Vairāgya*. Patañjali says, "*tatparam puruṣakhyāteḥ guṇavairiṣṇyam*" meaning that *Para Vairāgya* or supreme non-attachment is that state wherein even attachment to the qualities of nature (*Sattvas*, *Rajas* and *Tamas*) drops, owing to the knowledge of the *Puruṣa*." (Patañjali's Yoga Sūtras : I:16).

Vairāgya that is born of discrimination (*Viveka Pūrvaka Vairāgya*) is ever lasting and steady. One way to work on developing Vairāgya is to seriously contemplate about the various kinds of *Samsāric* pain such as birth, death, worries, depression, suffering, disease, loss, hostility, disappointment and fear etc. Once we are able to clearly understand with inner intelligence the defects of the sensual life (*Doṣa Drṣṭi*) and become aware of the transitory and perishable nature of all worldly objects, *Vairāgya* will immediately dawn.

Stages in Vairāgya

According to the traditional views, there are said to be four stages in the development of Vairāgya:

1. *Yatamāna* - This involves the attempts to control the mind and prevent it from running into the usual sensual grooves
2. *Vyatireka* - In this stage, though some objects create a sense of attraction we endeavor to consciously cut off that sense of attachment and attraction. Slowly *Vairāgya* develops for these objects and that sense of dispassion matures. In this stage we are conscious of our degree of Vairāgya towards different objects.
3. *Ekendriya* - In this stage, the senses stand still and are subdued, but the mind (the super sense or sixth sense) expresses either *Rāga* (attraction) or *Dveṣa* (revulsion) for objects. In this stage it may be seen that Mind is the only sense that has capacity to function independently.
4. *Vasīkāra* - In this highest stage of Vairāgya, no object can tempt us any longer. There is no sense of attraction to anything under the sun. All the senses are found to be perfectly quiet and even the mind is free from likes and dislikes (*Rāga* and *Dveṣa*). In this stage we attain conscious supremacy or independence.

These four stages of Vairāgya correspond to the development of the lower *Apara Vairāgya*. The fifth stage of Vairāgya may be said to be the one in which there is transcendence into the

ultimate final stage of *Para Vairāgya* wherein the aspirant moves beyond all aspects of the universal manifestation into the state that is known as *Guṇātīta* (beyond the three *Guṇas*) or *Nirguṇa* (unaffected by the *Guṇas*) where we are one with the *Para Brahman* itself.

Benefits of Vairāgya

Lord Buddha says: 'On the whole, life is sorrow.' Patañjali says something that is very similar when he says '*duḥkhameva sarvam vivekinaḥ* - all indeed is painful suffering to the one endowed with discerning wisdom.' (Yoga Sūtras-II: 15). We must remember that this is not the philosophy of mere pessimists but is tinged with wonderful optimism for the universe that can induce a great and deep sense of *Vairāgya* in our very being. This helps to wean our mind away from the sensual pleasures and motivates us to direct our awareness and consciousness towards the Divine in order to ultimately realize the eternal infinite Bliss (*Nitya-Ananta-Ānandam*).

It is said that the Divine power assumes numerous forms. In devotees, it shines as the *Jñāna Agni* (fire of wisdom) while in non-devotees, it burns as *Krodha Agni* (the fire of anger) or the *Kāma Agni* (fire of desire). Man today has this fire (of anger, etc) in his heart and has become a victim of fear and delusions. The only sure way to extinguish both *Kāma* and *Krodha* is by the practice of *Vairāgya*.

Dispassion can be triggered by sorrowful events in life but sorrowful events need not be precursors for *Vairāgya*. King Yudhiṣṭhira (Dharmarāja) is known as a wise man but he too has a fatal flaw, his addiction to the game of dice. This makes him lose everything. He is blinded by passion and falls into confusion. The spiritual meaning of his character is that even very highly evolved souls can be destroyed by a single vice, but given the knowledge this may be burnt out by *Vairāgya*.

In his excellent book, 'Yoga in Hindu scriptures' Dr Kumar Kaul says that *Ābhyāsa* is the basis of Haṭha Yoga while *Vairāgya* is the base of Jñāna Yoga. He also quotes the Bhāgavata in saying that *Jñāna* and *Vairāgya* are the two sons of *Bhakti* (*aham bhaktirati khyāta imaume tanayo matau vairāgya namanaou kalyogana jagjarau* - Bhagavata 1:45). He also explains that Hanuman was the perfect embodiment of both of these qualities. In fact, we can say that Hanuman is the perfect Yogī with all *Siddhis*.

In the Bhagavad Gītā, Lord Kṛṣṇa says that Yoga is a state of harmonious equilibrium (*samatvaṃ yoga uchyate*-BG-II 48). Such a state where one is unaffected by success or failure (*siddhyāsiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā*-BG-II 48) may be only attained if one has a dispassionate and

detached attitude towards the world. It is also said that one is established in the state of Yoga when one is detached from the material desires and anchored on the Self alone (*yadā viniyatam cittamātmanyevāvatiṣṭhate niḥsprha sarvakāmebhyo yukta ityuchyate tadā*- BG VI 18).

Conclusion

Dr. T. R. Anantharaman in his excellent treatise on "Ancient Yoga and Modern Science" quotes a Sanskrit verse that means, Having ascended to the tower of *Prajñā* (transcendental wisdom) and gone beyond all sorrow, the discerning sage views his sorrowing fellow men like a person on the mountain top viewing those below at the ground level (*prajñā prasādam āruhya aśocyaḥ śocato janan bhumistān iva sailasthaḥ sarvan prajño nupasyati*).

This metaphor that found in the Mahābhārata and the Ahirbhadanya Saṁhitā helps us to understand that having attained the state of steadfast illumination (*Sthitaprajñā*) we may view everything in its totality and integrally with an understanding of the inter-relatedness, thus having the objective knowledge of the unified whole.

May we all develop this wonderful state of mind that helps us move from a lower animal state of existence to human and then humane as we evolve consciously into Divine Beings capable of understanding the universe itself as we merge into that ultimate union with the universality in *Kaivalya*.

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