

Crisis to Confidence

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Swāmi Bodhānanda brings the practical wisdom of the Upaniṣads and Bhagavad Gītā to throw light on the present crisis of confidence and suggests ways and means to rebuild faith, virtue, self confidence, and draw on one's inner resources to creatively face life's challenges.

I. Introduction

Normally we say “crisis of confidence,” meaning that we have lost confidence in the system in which we are placed and in ourselves. Then life becomes difficult, and we wonder: Why are we here? We do not know what to do and get into a state of psychological paralysis. All the ready-made solutions we have are found wanting. We did have some solutions, developed perhaps by talking with wise people, so that we knew what to do when any problem – financial, political, family-related, or other – arose. But then some situation arises when even wise people are at the end of their wits – when the salt loses its saltiness, the earth loses her patience, the sun loses its brilliance, and human beings lose their purpose in life. This is what constitutes a crisis. A crisis is always unsettling and painful to begin with.

In this discourse, we shall show how to deal with a crisis in a way that allows us to first regain our lost faith and then gather the energy to address the challenge and, in the process, discover a new dimension in our personality that was unsuspected before. That is, a crisis is an opportunity for a new beginning. Great transformations in human consciousness and behavior do occur when one is faced with life-threatening challenges. A crisis calls for a re-evaluation of our beliefs, assumptions, and values. When one is pressed beyond a certain point, one's inner nature comes out. In other words, crises are opportunities to discover one's spirituality.

We will develop some further thoughts. (a) Success itself becomes a trap. We have developed a winning strategy that has stood us in good stead until the crisis arose. Unlearning this strategy (and learning a new one) requires tremendous spiritual depth. (b) We have the moral responsibility to make the right kind of choices. It is by the choices we make that we shape our destiny. Our destiny is in our own hands, not in the way we were born. (c) No problem was ever solved from the same level of consciousness as that in which it was created.

In the ability to make conscious choices, we differ from animals. Animals react instinctively to life. They may wallow in filth, they may not know where their next

meal is coming from, there may even be a predator lurking near – yet they do not think about problems. It is only us human beings, the roof and crown of creation, that have problems. We human beings act after taking all things into consideration – that is, after due deliberation. The question is: with all the deliberation, are we able to act wisely? This discourse aims to help in this.

We have wonderful books to guide us: *Bhagavad Gītā*, *Brahma Sūtras*, *Yoga Vāsīṣṭha*, *Yoga Sūtras*, *Bhāgavatam*, and many others. Do they give practical advice to one who has lost 75% of his wealth in the stock market? They do, but one needs to know how to ground oneself in the wisdom statements of these texts. Especially the *Bhagavad Gītā* gives practical advice, for it was taught in a crisis situation, in the Kurukṣetra battlefield, to a confused and confounded Arjuna. He had developed doubts about what until then had been a successful strategy for him, viz. fighting to win. Following the teachings of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, whose own life had its full share of crises, Arjuna cleared his self-doubt and confusion and went on to fight and win the war. The message of the *Gītā* is likewise pertinent in dealing with the current problems of lack of self-confidence and the resultant numbing and pervasive gloom.

In America, we have lost faith in our leaders, in our scriptures, and in ourselves. There is economic crisis, environmental crisis, crisis of values, crisis in the family, spiritual crisis – they all seem to have converged on us at once during the financial collapse of September 2008. The solution advocated during previous crises was to consume more, because consumption was believed to be the engine of economic growth. The more we consume, the more the economy grows and also the happier we become. This is “consumption theology.” (Note that “theology” is absolute, something one dare not question, unlike “philosophy.”) This consumption theology has taken us away from our spiritual center. It required a major crisis – the crisis of 2008 – for us to realize that this is not a winning strategy anymore. Hopefully, in dealing with the crisis of 2008 in a more intelligent fashion, America will rediscover herself.

What is the central reason for the crisis of 2008? It is generally admitted that the root cause is greed. In fact, greed is the root cause of all human problems, as *Gītā* XVI.21 declares: “Lust, anger, and greed – this triad leads to the destruction of man’s spiritual nature. They form the gateway to hell; they should be abandoned.” The three traits listed are interconnected, for desire fulfilled gives rise to greed and desire unfulfilled leads to anger. What is the genesis of greed? This is a question Arjuna asks in *Gītā* III.36. It is Self-ignorance, that is, lack of Self-awareness. Ignoring or forgetting our true nature as happy, complete persons, we seek happiness in the outer world. This leads to frustrated desire, anger, etc. Thus ignorance, *ajñāna*, is the root cause of all human problems. This is implicitly contained in Lord Kṛṣṇa’s advice to Arjuna in *Gītā* III.43: “Restraining the self by the Self, O Mighty-Armed One, overcome that most formidable enemy in the form of desire.” This advice gives us the solution about how to come out of a crisis and

get back our lost confidence. The solution is to discover the inner spark of divinity within ourselves and use it to generate a creative response to the crisis. When you think you are a worm, you do not dare show up in front of birds, for fear that they will eat you; but when you realize you are a spark of the divine, you have no fear.

II. Crisis As An Opportunity

In a sense, a crisis is a blessing, for it gives us the opportunity to realize our mission in life. Such was the case for Śrī Rāma when he was exiled to the forest. In those days, the hermitages in the forest were the centers of great knowledge and the sages residing there were the creators of knowledge. Rāma visited all the hermitages of the great sages and thereby built his knowledge base. Similarly, earlier in his life, when sage Viśvāmitra took him and his brother Lakṣmaṇa away to protect the sage's sacrifice, it was a crisis for their father Daśaratha – the first recorded heart attack! – until sage Vasiṣṭha showed the opportunities present in the situation. It was because Rāma went to the sacrifice that he met Sītā and married her, and Daśaratha got an excellent daughter-in-law.

Or take the example of Jesus Christ. Christ, lying on the cross, life ebbing away, tormented and teased by the Roman soldiers, abandoned by his disciples and friends, uttered the most famous words in human history: “God, forgive them.” That is what we mean by converting crisis to confidence – converting unhappiness into channels of self-expression. That situation was absolutely necessary for bringing out the depth of Christ's understanding.

Our spiritual literature says that only when one faces uncertain situations, filled with chaos and ambiguity, does one discover oneself. This can be stated in several different ways: (i) A spiritual response is possible only when we have to respond to an unfamiliar situation, one to which we cannot respond from memory; (ii) one can awaken the Spirit only when one does things differently; (iii) our spiritual life is woven by the way in which we respond to crises. A crisis is an opportunity to do things differently, because when we are in a crisis we cannot act from our memory; we are forced to act from our spirit, and the Spirit's creations are always new. To begin with, we can accept this as a philosophical statement, until our own life experiences confirm its validity. When we ask any successful person from any walk of life – a renunciate (*sannyāsīn*), a politician, a business leader – they will all tell us that their Self-discovery came as a result of some crisis or other in their lives.

Conversely, those who do not face uncertainty do not stimulate their brain. Most of us like to live with certainty and as a result lose a lot of opportunities to discover who we are. God created the world for us to experience it and discover ourselves. The more you crush sandalwood, the more is the fragrance that comes out. Similarly, the more you face crises, the more you develop yourself. That is why Kṛṣṇa told Arjuna: Do not run away from crises.

We should note that the material world is in constant flux and change. The way the sun rises each day is different; the way children play with the same set of toys changes from day to day. That is why our scriptures say that change is to be welcomed as a fundamental reality of nature. The *Gītā* (XIII.6) uses the word *vikāra* for this change, which it recognizes in all components of the body-mind complex. But we human beings do not normally notice the changes because we are lost in our memories. It is only when the change is drastic, as in a crisis, that we wake up and notice it.

III. Creative Response and Finding Oneself

(i) The Cycle of Personality Growth

Let us first discuss the cycle of personality growth: from (1) unconsciously unskilled to (2) consciously unskilled to (3) consciously skilled to (4) unconsciously skilled to (5) unconsciously unskilled, thereby completing the cycle. We will discuss these different states in terms of the skill levels we have at each state. There are two types of skills: hard and soft. The hard skills consist of all types of technical skills. The soft skills are the skills required to deal with people, understand their emotions and motivations, build cohesive teams, etc. The collective term for soft skills is emotional intelligence (EQ). EQ is the ability to manage our emotions in an interactive world, and is as important as analytical intelligence (IQ) for our success in life. For many of us, the left side of the brain that deals with IQ is well developed, but the right side that deals with emotions is not developed.

In state (1), we do not know that we do not have the skills. The strategy that had worked for us no longer works, but we are unaware of that. We live in a delusionary world, not knowing that our skills have outlived their usefulness and domain of applicability. We feel the earth shaking under our feet but we do not know what has happened. We are in a crisis situation – for a crisis is when we know the problem but do not know the answer.

Awareness is important at this point. One has to cultivate an awareness of one's limitations and deficiencies. This requires a lot of humility, the overcoming of the ego. That is the beginning of spirituality. This is state (2): one is consciously unskilled. It is when Arjuna was in such a state that he asked Kṛṣṇa to teach him. Arjuna was 60 at the time, a fully developed person physically, intellectually, and emotionally. But he had realized the limitation of his skills. In this state, one is able to say: "I do not know." [Actually, as the Kenopaniṣad and the Ṛgveda state, this is the wisest thing a person can say – at the end of all his or her reading, discussions, and deep thinking – in regard to the ultimate secrets of the universe. We will expand on this point in section III.vi.]

To get out of state (2) and into state (3) requires the unlearning of old skills and the learning of new skills. By making the right choice and continuous practice, you become consciously skilled. You dig deep within yourself, really meditate, deeply contemplate, and find the answer from your Spirit. In Section V, we discuss in detail five principles you can follow to achieve this. You then translate that spiritual insight into words and actions – that is the awakening of the Spirit. Your actions are then decisive, spiritually enlightened, ethically balanced, and altruistically inspired. You keep drawing from the spiritual well-springs continually to nourish yourself.

We emphasize that one's life begins in the realization of the Self. It is a totally false notion to think that one's life ends with the realization of the Self. This is a mistake that many people make, and it is the reason why most young people do not come to spirituality. They think that spirituality is for the old and the retired. The truth is that, the earlier we take steps to manifest our spirituality, the better off we are. The best age is around 21 years, because before that age one has to concentrate on one's studies and after that age one's ego starts to grow.

From state (3) you move to state (4) when you have internalized all the capacities you have developed. The capacities become a part of your nature and you are unconsciously skilled. You become a virtuoso, an expert. As an example, consider the transformation of a bride who is nervous about cooking even for two people when she first comes to her husband's home but who after some years is unfazed by having to cook for even 50 guests.

It is when one is in state (4) that a crisis comes and the skills one has developed turn out to be inadequate. One is in a very unsettling situation and does not know what to do. One is then in state (5), which is the same as being back in state (1).

In September 2008, America was in state (1). Now, nearly a year later, she is in state (2), and that is a welcome development. In fact, she is already taking steps to get to state (3). People are being sent to China to learn how to work hard and save, and to India to learn how to meditate and keep the mind calm.

(ii) The Two Faces of Fear: the Discipline of Turning Weakness into Strength

It has been aptly said that we live in a circle, the circumference of which is defined by fear. In other words, fear is the constraining factor in how much we grow. The first response of any of us when faced with a crisis is fear. Fear is natural and nobody can escape from it. Even a philosopher who talks about the oneness of all things, when faced with a snarling dog, reacts with fear, just like the rest of us. When fear takes over, four responses are possible: fight, flight, freeze, or faint. The first response consists in fighting with the enemy, and one ends up either winning or losing. The second is to run away. The third response is when one does not know what to do – one is stunned. And the fourth response is

to become incapacitated. These are all predictable reactions to fear. When our life is conditioned by fear, the environment takes over and we are (at first) unable to bring our spiritual nature to bear on the problem. Even a wise man choicelessly responds in one of these four ways when his life is threatened.

The four major challenges of life are: uncertainty, loneliness (which is different from being alone), illness, and death. How do we cope with these inevitable conditions of life? Recall that the greatest crisis in Buddha's life came when he was exposed to three of these conditions (an old man, a sick man, and a dead man). How do we overcome the fear that is our initial response? The final challenge is the way we die. Can we go with a smile, secure in the knowledge that we are immortal, while people around us are weeping, as Ramaṇa Maharṣi did even as surgeons removed the cancer from his arm?

The way to overcome the fear and respond creatively is by going beyond the level of consciousness in which we have been operating up to that moment. In the *Gītā*, in the second chapter itself, Kṛṣṇa gives Arjuna the higher elevation from which to look at the problem facing him. "Be cool," He says in effect in *Gītā* II.11. By being cool, one discovers within oneself the inner stability required to deal with the problem. Once we start to operate at the higher level of consciousness, we have the resources to deal with the problem. And at that point, how we respond becomes a question of choice. Choice is a human privilege that God has gifted us with. It is our choice whether we make or break ourselves. We have the freedom to make choices, and we have to use that freedom to recreate our life. As Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna in *Gītā* XIII.22, "In this body there is also the Transcendent and the Supreme Spirit, who is described as the Supreme Self and Sovereign Lord, the unconcerned witness, the sanctioner, the supporter, and the enjoyer."

(iii) The Power of Conscious Intention and Choice

When fear arises, how should we handle it? By responding in any of the four predictable ways discussed in (ii), we do not create the desired result. To shift from fear to fearlessness, we must consciously choose our response to fear. To do this, we must be very clear about what result we want, i.e. we must be aware of our goals. Our first attempt at a response may be a failure, but with practice and habit, we will be able to make the right choices. From habits, over a period of time, character is developed. When our actions become spontaneously right, that is a sign of character; and we operate from the spiritual dimension. The spiritual dimension will then be manifested through our actions, and that is the state of *jīvanmukti* or embodied enlightenment. We are able to function in the world without losing our spiritual dimension. Be on the balcony and still dance. Or plug and play.

We are all constantly bombarded with stimuli from the outer world. The different (and progressively better) ways in which we can respond to the stimuli are:

instinctively from memory, after due reflection, and spontaneously from the Spirit. We can liken the stimulus-response process to the movement of a wheel, which has its hub in the spirit and its spokes in values. In a *samsāri* or worldly person, the wheel is clogged with memory deposits of fear and the wheel's movement is jarred and grating. The rub is at the center, where the mind meets the spirit – where memory-fear deposits are collected. First we have to remove the deposits of fear (by becoming conscious of fear) and create space between stimulus and response (called reflection) and lubricate the joints with knowledge (of the Self). Here is where we exercise our freedom of choice to overcome the fear. At the reflection stage, our responses are deliberate; and at the wisdom stage, the responses are spontaneous and flowing, without gaps, as the two hemispheres of the wheel move effortlessly. This last stage corresponds to deeper spiritual fulfillment and spontaneous right action; we respond from the Spirit and our responses are spontaneously right. Such was the case for Arjuna when, near the end of the *Gītā*, in verse (XVIII.73), he tells Kṛṣṇa: “My delusions have been dispelled and my memory restored by Thy grace. I now stand firm, with all my doubts cleared, ready to execute Thy command.” We must be careful, however, not to confuse impulsive action with spontaneous response.

Proper mental attitude is very important in determining the outcome. As has been aptly said: *mana eva manuṣyāṇām kāraṇam bandha mokṣayoḥ* – the mind alone is the cause of both bondage and liberation in human beings. The mind can become a means for self-unfoldment or for self-aggrandisement, setting off forces of harmony and love or, on the contrary, forces of disharmony and hatred. It is a powerful tool, through sharpening which one can understand the mystery of existence, and through neglecting which one becomes a victim of circumstances. Most of the time, we are worrying about the future or are lost in the past, thereby missing the present that is full of possibilities and is beautiful. Right understanding, right work attitudes, and meditation help the mind to self-organize and invoke the eternal sources of creative energy and true happiness.

(iv) Two Important Factors: The Outcome and the Process

We stated in (iii) that in responding to fear we must be clear about the result we want – that is, the outcome we want to create in our life. Equally important is the process by which we achieve that outcome. If we miss out on the outcome, we lose the motivation; while, if we miss out on the process, we lose the outcome. Therefore, both factors are important. First, think carefully of the outcome; then put it in the background and develop the process. This is possible, for the human brain has the capacity to accommodate both factors. The better the outcome is defined, the better we can choose the process.

So defining the goals is very important. We can have material goals, moral goals, and spiritual goals. When pursuing any one of these goals, we cannot compromise on the other two. For instance, when pursuing the material goal of making a

million dollars, we must do so by the right means (moral goal) and be at peace with ourselves (spiritual goal).

Strictly speaking, one cannot have spiritual goals, for spirituality is one's nature and is something for us to become aware of or realize, not pursue. One cannot pursue the Self because the Self is one's own nature. According to Vedānta, there are four ways of getting things done, but we cannot gain spiritual realization by any of them. [These four ways – the four functions of action – are: *āpyam* or attainment, *samskāryam* or purification, *vikāryam* or modification, and *utpādyam* or production. Examples of these four ways are: you move from point A to point B and get something; you purify dirty water to get pure water; you modify milk to get curds; and you make a dish by cooking.]

The way to gain a spiritual outlook is to awaken one's true nature. It is by such awakening that great spiritual people have realized their spiritual nature. This was the case with Vālmīki, for example. He was a highway robber in his youth, who thought that robbery was the only way to make his living and provide for his parents and wife. He was reformed by sage Nārada, who made him realize that the cruelty he was practicing on others could happen to him also. He then had a change of heart, underwent severe penance, and became a revered sage.

(v) Spirituality is Expressed Through Altruistic Work

So let us maintain moral values while pursuing material goals. The mind then becomes pure and our spiritual nature increasingly manifests itself. There is no need to ever give up material goals. The right progression is to engage in activity while gradually expanding one's area of concern from oneself to one's community to the whole world. There are two objectives here. One is to help others. The second is to ensure one's own growth by helping others. This means that work never needs to be given up. It is good that this is so, for as *Gītā* III.5 states: "No one can remain inactive even for a moment." We are programmed to be active either physically or mentally or both. That being the case, it is better to channel our energy rather than let it run wild.

The common man's idea of a spiritual person is of one who sits in a corner chanting *Rāma, Rāma* or doing *pūja*. This picture is not correct. If you really want to understand spirituality, it has to be practiced in your daily life. This is the core teaching of the Indian wisdom tradition. A spiritually awakened person is supremely active. The activity can be in any area that interests him. If his interest is in the devotional area, he would probably be engaged in the nine forms of devotional service we will describe in section IV.

There is a funny story about a devotee who was always chanting *Rāma, Rāma*. When the devotee died, Yama, the Lord of Death, thought that he must be sent to Vaikuṅṭha, the abode of Rāma. But Rāma told Yama that he did not want the

devotee there, because with his continuous chanting he would not give Rāma any peace of mind and would disturb Rāma in his work. The moral of the story is that God loves those who are engaged in work, performing their duties and sharing the burden of the world with Him. God is not moved by hearing Himself praised. The real purpose of chanting a text such as *Viṣṇu-Sahasranāma-Stotram* is to gain purity of mind.

The Indian wisdom tradition combines worldly activities with spiritual pursuits. This is illustrated by the great metaphor in the Mahābhārata where Arjuna, in a test given to him by his teacher Droṇa at the end of his training in archery, had to shoot an arrow through a small hole in a rotating wheel and hit the eye of a bird, and that too by looking only at the reflection of the bird in surging water. The eye of the bird represents the spirit. The surging water indicates the turbulent world. Reflection of the bird stands for the goals that we seek in the world. The bow represents a disciplined body-mind. The arrow represents supreme concentration. The metaphor says that while you are working in the world fulfilling your worldly goals, you will simultaneously be able to realize your spiritual targets by having the right attitude and vision. In order to highlight this idea of spirituality-work convergence, a few years ago (around 2005) I created a slogan: *Goal realization is God realization*.

(vi) The provisional nature of knowledge and the need for continual update

Kenopaniṣad II.1-2 relates in terse language the story of a student and his Guru (teacher). After he had taught the student the nature of Brahman for many years, the Guru asks him: Have you understood? Student: Yes, I have understood. Guru: Fool, you have understood nothing. The student then goes back to his studies. After many more years, the Guru asks the same question. This time the student, being more careful, says: No, I do not understand. More years of study follow, at the end of which, in answer to the same question, the student gives a beautiful answer (Kenopaniṣad II.2):

*nāham manye suvedeti no na vedeti veda ca
yo nastadveda tadveda no na vedeti veda ca*

“I do not think I know (him) well; but not that I do not know; I know too. He who among us knows it, knows it, and he knows not too that he does not know.” In other words: “Between you and me, let me tell you: I have understood.” The ability to thus qualify one’s words is the mark of a wise person.

Again, near the end of the Ṛgveda, the sixth verse of the creation hymn (Ṛgveda X.129.6) states: “Who verily knows and who can here declare it, whence it was born and whence comes this creation? The Gods are later than the world’s production. Who knows then whence it first came into being?” The key words here are: *ko veda – who knows?* Even the gods may not know, for they came later. The sage who wrote (or, rather, to whom was revealed) this *mantra* is

humble enough to admit his ignorance, and that is actually a sign of his profound wisdom. Compared to the average person, this sage knows everything. But after a lifetime spent in study, reflection, and self-discovery, he realizes that in regard to the ultimate secrets, he does not know.

The sage has understood that all knowledge is provisional. In fact, as we have seen in section III.ii, knowledge can become outdated and obsolete and one has to keep updating one's knowledge base. For most of us, it is possible to do this until we reach old age, when we lose the capacity to learn new things. Even without a crisis, we have to learn new skills as we progress through life. That is why in Hinduism we have the four stages of life, each with a distinct winning strategy.

For the average person, the only way to acquire knowledge is from a Guru, even granted that the Guru's knowledge is provisional. Our spiritual literature is indirect, metaphorical, mystical, and symbolic. Our scriptures explain spirituality through symbolic words. It is easy for anyone trying to interpret the symbolic language to be misled. That is why a teacher is necessary. As Chhândogya Upaniṣad 6.14.2 declares: *ācāryavān puruṣo veda*, "one who has an ideal teacher will attain knowledge of Brahman". The same passage also points out two other important requirements for learning. The student must be a *paṇḍita* (one able to understand) and a *medhāvī* (one able to use his or her discretion to fill the gaps).

Even better than listening to the Guru is to follow the example set by his conduct. As Yudhiṣṭhira says in the Mahābhārata (Vāna-parva 313.117), in answer to the Yakṣa's question as to what the right path is:

*tarko'pratiṣṭhaḥ śrutayo vibhinnā
naiko ṛṣir yasya matam pramāṇam
dharmasya tattvam nihitam guhāyām
mahājano yena gataḥ sa panthāḥ*

"Logical reasoning is inconclusive; Vedic revelations are all different, one from the other; there is not even one sage whose opinion can be accepted as infallible; and the truth about religion and duty is hidden (in the heart). So that alone is the path along which great men have walked." In other words, watch how the wise people live and draw your wisdom from that, not simply from what they say.

(vii) Summary

When faced with a crisis, be aware of your fear, realizing that it is your unconscious response to the crisis. Replace the fear with choice. Shift gears and go to a higher level of consciousness so that you have the resources to deal with the situation. Respond from the Spirit. Spirit-based response is spontaneous, so be natural in your response. Have a plan for your own obsolescence. Understand that you have to constantly challenge yourself to realize yourself.

IV. The Nine Forms of Devotional Service

In *Bhāgavatam VII.5.23*, Prahlāda describes nine steps to *bhakti* (devotion). We shall first quote what he says and then comment on each of the steps.

*śravaṇam kīrtanam viṣṇoḥ smaraṇam pādasevanam
arcanam vandanam dāsyam sakhyamātma-nivedanam*

“Listening to the holy names of Lord Viṣṇu, chanting them, remembering Him, serving His feet, worshipping Him, offering Him prayers, being His servant, considering Him one’s best friend, and surrendering everything to Him – these nine processes are accepted as pure devotional service.”

(i) *Śravaṇam* (listening): God, for whom the general term used in Hinduism is Īśvara or Bhagavān, is not available for our direct perception or for our inference from logic. So how do we know God exists? Either we have to be told by somebody (our parents or a Guru) or He is revealed to us in a scripture. The first way requires us to listen and understand, and that is where *śravaṇam* comes in. The second way is called *śruti pramāṇam* or revealed truth.

We are told that God is the creator of the world. In all religions, that is the definition of God. He is the creator, the sustainer, and the destroyer of the world. The purpose of spiritual listening is to understand one’s relationship to God. We can relate to Him in several ways. (a) He is the master, we are the servant. Whatever He wills, we accept; whatever he commands, we obey. (b) He is the father, we are the children. (c) He is the lover, we are the beloved. The reverse relationship, with the devotee as the lover and the Lord as the beloved, is also possible. Sometimes the devotee and the Lord may even switch roles serially. (d) We are a part of God. We are partners with God in the divine mission. (e) We are one with God. (f) When any one of us meets God, the two cancel each other, and what remains is a big silence or emptiness – what Buddhists call *sūnyam*. This last one is an extreme way of looking at God, which is why Buddha was excommunicated from Hinduism. These are the things we have to learn by listening to a teacher. Whenever we are connected to God in any of these ways, we have a purpose in life. Which way is appropriate for us depends on our state of mind.

(ii) *Kīrtanam* (chanting): Sing the glory of God. Constant connectivity to God is important, and singing His glory is one way to be connected. Live in this world without forgetting that connectivity. This is what we meant by the phrase “plug and play” in section III.iii, and this is what makes you a devotee. If someone tells you that you did a wonderful job and your reply is “who but I could have done it?,” you have forgotten the glory and the grace of God, and the punishment will surely come. Even the ability to eat food, with the food going into the food pipe and not the windpipe, is by the grace of God.

(iii) Smaranam (remembering): By this means, God becomes fixed in your memory and thinking about Him becomes fixed a habit.

(iv) Pādasevanam (serving His feet): Service is an important concept here. How do you serve God's feet? You do this by serving the world for, as *Puruṣa Sūktam* declares, *pādo'sya viśvā bhūtāni* – one quarter of the Lord is the manifest world. Serving the world means serving one's immediate community, by activities such as planting trees, taking care of elderly people, etc. Remember the saying:

mānava sevā, mādharma sevā; nara seva, nārāyaṇa sevā

“Service to humanity is service to God (Lord Mādhava and Lord Nārāyaṇa).”

Remember also the motto of the Rāmakrishna Mission: *ātmano mokṣārtham jagad-hitāyaca* – for one's own liberation and for the well-being of the world.

(v) Arcanam (worshipping): Continuous *pādasevanam* is *arcanam*. Worshipping God in a temple is a prime example of *arcanam*.

(vi) Vandanam (saluting): Whatever you get from the world, accept it with respect. Keep doing good things even if the community does not express appreciation. Lack of appreciation and reciprocation is one of the hardest things to handle.

(vii) Dāsyam (being His servant): Be a servant of the Lord. Just do your work and forget the rest. As a servant you do not have any worries, for the master will take care of the problems, such as paying taxes, keeping the electricity running, etc.

(viii) Sakhyam (friendship): Note that it is not offensive to look upon God as a friend, for the Lord himself has said in the *Gītā* that he is our friend. This was the relationship that existed between Arjuna and Kṛṣṇa.

(ix) Ātma-nivedanam (surrendering oneself): Here one has total oneness with God, and it is difficult to distinguish between one's wish and will and God's. This is a wonderful state, where one is a partner with God. Our mission and God's mission become one. All our activities become a joint enterprise with God. The joy of working in partnership with God is what the final *śloka* of the *Gītā* describes: “Wherever there is Kṛṣṇa, the Lord of Divine wisdom, and Arjuna, the man of dedicated action, there will surely be prosperity, success, well-being, and universal justice” (XVIII.78). Some people from other religions, or even from Hinduism, may be scared of this type of relationship with God, one in which the devotee does not exist separately. But our spiritual literature admits the possibility of such relationship. This is the reason why Rāma took help from Sugrīva and Hanumān. As Rāma said to Sugrīva: You do my work and I will do yours. A mutually cherishing, nourishing, and growing attitude is at work here. This is the

meaning of synergy, the win-win situation. The phrases “Plug and play” and “be on the balcony and dance,” used in section III.iii, are based on this same idea.

V. Five Principles of Personality Growth

In this section, we shall describe five principles that we can practice throughout our life for personality growth and unfolding our inner potential so that, when we are faced with a crisis, we would already possess the tools necessary to deal with it effectively.

(i) Invoking the Spirit

We are not just this body. There is a spiritual dimension in us. In fact, we are a Spirit with a body. We need a paradigm shift from the attitude “I am the body” to the attitude “I have a body.” We are pure consciousness. That is what the sages meant by the mantra *Śivoham* (I am Śiva – auspiciousness). It is only if this vision dominates our thinking and determines our self-image that we can correctly evaluate ourselves and begin the process of personality growth. It is our choice whether we say “I am Śiva,” (“I am life”) or “I am *śava*” (“I am death”) – this is the choice between asserting oneself as an autonomous person and condemning oneself as a dependent thing. It is the choice between space saying “The pot is in me” and “I am in the pot, I am limited by the pot.”

When we go to an Indian Guru to talk about our problems, he gives us a single piece of advice, and that is to chant the *Śivoham* mantra. By telling us to chant *Śivoham*, the Guru is trying to effect a cognitive change in our self-perception. This does not mean that we have to dress up like Śiva, with snakes around our neck and ash on our forehead. It means that we have to realize that we are pure consciousness, a field of infinite potentialities. Śiva sits in meditation and then He emerges into His cosmic dance. The whole universe becomes manifest as Śiva dances, and collapses into Him when He meditates. So Śiva has the power to create, to sustain, and to destroy. So do we.

The paradigm shift from body to Spirit – the invoking of the Spirit – is achieved through contemplation, meditation, inner calm, and other creative processes. Repeated assertions of who we are will eventually transform our thought processes and make us courageous, risk-taking individuals. Use the power of the word to recast ourselves. We do need the basic discipline to sit down each day for 5 minutes to repeat the mantra. Let us now make two side remarks.

- Meditation is not easy. The problem usually is that our minds become filled with thoughts. Thoughts are like the monkey king Vāli in the Rāmāyaṇa, who had the special power to draw half the strength of his opponent. So do not resist the thoughts. The best way to deal with them is to just watch them without reaction.

- If you are reluctant to say “I am Śiva,” you can instead say “I am a field of infinite potentiality” or even just “I am okay” – any positive statement, repeatedly contemplated, will help you to change your self-perception, enhance your self-worth, and experience the world differently.

This vision of oneself, that we are basically the Spirit, has to be propagated. The Spirit, it is true, is invisible. We cannot see it with our eyes. But it can be experienced in terms of health, intelligence, and energy. The Indian wisdom tradition teaches us that every human being has this hidden reservoir of energy that can be invoked for creative activity. We are talking about a Spirit that can be contacted, invoked, and translated into daily living. The Spirit can be morphed into products, which can be anything from a smile to a consoling word, a thought, a service, or a consumable good. I can pick up a piece of leather and meditate on it and invoke my Spirit and come out with a pair of shoes for human use. That is how our ancient sages understood the Spirit.

(ii) Personality Grows from Inside Out

Personality development starts with one’s self-image or awareness. Our awareness determines our intentions, our intentions determine our thoughts, our thoughts determine our words, our words determine our deeds, our deeds determine our habits, our habits determine our character, and our character creates our destiny. This is the power of conscious intention. All of this begins from the little seed of self-image. Unless we have the right self-image, that we are the Spirit and therefore a field of infinite potentiality, the change that we aspire for in the world is not possible.

So what should our intention be? We discover that it should be one of giving and sharing and helping others to grow. The more we give, the more we will be given. Likewise, an intention to exploit others will backfire. As Vyāsa says: “*paropakāraḥ puṇyāya pāpāya parapiḍanam*” – “Helping others is merit; harming others is sin.” The fact of the matter, however, is that this economics of gaining by giving has been forgotten. This is largely due to the fact that we are still operating in a field of limitless needs and limited resources. Another problem we have is that we are not able to work as a team; we create neergy, not energy, when we get together to work on a project.

Most of us operate from the three lowest energy centers (*cakra*-s) in the body: *mūlādhāra*, located at the base of the spinal column; *svādhiṣṭhāna*, located at the root of the reproductive organs; and *maṇipūra*, located in the navel region. They are the seats of insecurity, pleasure need, and ego (respect) need, respectively. It is only when one goes beyond these three energy centers that other, more noble, forces arise.

(iii) Growth by Facing Challenges

This has been the subject of this entire article, so we will review only a few key points here. Growth is determined by the way one faces challenges. Challenges are necessary to unfold our spirituality. If we simply sit in a cave and do nothing, we will never realize our full glory. So the third principle of personality growth is that we have to welcome challenges. A spiritual person will never run away from a challenge. Further, we must show the proper response to the challenge, as will be discussed in (iv) below. If you remain fresh and your happiness neither increases nor decreases as you respond to all the demands of the world, you are a spiritual person.

(iv) Detached Engagement: Renouncing Reaction

How do we ensure that our actions do not bind us? In other words, how do we ensure that our responses are to our spiritual benefit? The principle of detached engagement allows us to combine actionlessness with supreme action. The competitive world is necessary to challenge and invoke the human Spirit. But at the same time, when we engage in the competitive world, we have to keep our health, sanity, and balance. Satisfactorily addressing both these concerns is a big issue, which we can also state as follows: If we simply detach, we will be worthless to the world; but simple engagement is also dangerous because we become overwhelmed by the challenges we face. The answer to this issue, according to the Indian tradition, is that we have to engage in the world with a detached mind.

It is not by giving up action that we become actionless (the state of egoless actionlessness called *niṣkāma karma*), says *Gītā* III.4. Nor is giving up the fruit of our action an option, for once we do an action the fruit will invariably come to us. This is the Law of Karma – an ironclad rule that states that the doer of the deed alone reaps its fruit, for events in the world can never be unjust and it would be unjust for anyone else to get the fruit of the doer’s action. (Further, God has no desire for the fruit of our action, according to Śrī Kṛṣṇa in *Gītā* IV.14.) Thus detached engagement, *niṣkāma karma*, does not mean action without desire but action without reaction to the fruits of the work. And non-reaction is not total indifference but appropriate response or controlled response. Śrī Kṛṣṇa advocates mental poise in success and failure. He advises Arjuna in *Gītā* II.38: “Treating alike pleasure and pain, gain and loss, victory and defeat, be ready for battle. Thus you will not incur any sin.” By not reacting to the fruit of the action, we neutralize the effect of the action, just as Lord Śiva neutralized the effect of the poison by containing it inside his throat.

The same philosophy of detached engagement is advocated in the first *śloka* of Īśāvāsya Upaniṣad: *tena tyaktena bhunjīthā*, “therefore, renounce and enjoy.”

Work gives us dignity and purpose in life and an active life is a healthy life. So we must be engaged in the world but we should not react to the fruits of our action.

(v) Follow Your Bliss

The final principle of personality growth is: Follow your bliss. At the end of the Gītā, Kṛṣṇa tells Arjuna (*Gītā* XVIII.63): “Whatever I have said, think about it, but do as you see fit. Follow your bliss.” This is a fundamental element of Hinduism: we must think for ourselves and do as we wish. We are responsible for the choices we make. We can consult everyone, but we alone have to process all the information based upon our life goals and ambitions and our innate dispositions and talents, and make decisions and own up responsibility for our decisions.

The principle “Follow your bliss” is the answer to the question “What is my duty?” Whatever we enjoy doing, whatever creates our sense of well-being, that is what we should do – that is our *dharma*. At least, this is a sufficient answer for normal human beings, those with some sense of moral behavior. (By this restriction, we exclude psychopaths and other deranged people, who may find their bliss in acts of violence or doing harm to others. Such abnormal people should not be allowed to follow their bliss.)

The type of bliss a person follows will in general depend on his disposition (*guṇa*). Persons with predominantly *sāttvic*, *rājasic*, or *tāmasic* quality will follow happiness that is *sāttvic*, *rājasic*, or *tāmasic*, respectively. *Sāttvic* happiness is happiness that is painful in the beginning and pleasurable in the end. An example is spiritual *sādhana* or any type of discipline that is painful in the beginning but pleasurable in the end. *Rājasic* happiness is happiness that is pleasurable in the beginning and painful in the end. An example is the pleasure one gains from watching a cricket match while ignoring one’s examination studies. *Tāmasic* happiness is a delusional happiness that is painful in the beginning as well as in the end, but that the enjoyer thinks is pleasurable. An example is the pleasure one gets out of smoking, drinking, or substance abuse; the pleasure is delusory.

While one has the freedom to follow the bliss dictated by one’s *guṇa*, one can also transcend one’s *guṇa*. There is some internal mechanism in us, say the conscience, which tells us constantly how we have to act. The purpose of spiritual education is to awaken this conscience, the inner light, the inner voice, the path of true bliss. The ability to understand and follow our true bliss and act courageously and freely has to be cultivated.

When all these five principles are followed, we achieve real personality growth. We become very dynamic persons. When challenges come our way, we are able to spontaneously respond without any reaction. We expand our horizons at every turn. May all of us follow these five principles and discover our inner potentiality.