

Attitude Is Everything

by Greg Stein

*“I resolve to keep this truth before me always -
that whatever happens happens for supreme good.”
- Swami Satyananda*

There is a story about a fisherman who is sitting in darkness on the banks of a river before sunrise, waiting for the day to dawn so he can begin his work. He feels something beneath his feet, reaches down and finds what seems to be a bag of small pebbles. Feeling a little bored and looking to pass the time, the fisherman begins tossing the pebbles one by one into the river, listening to the satisfying sound as they plop into the water. As the Sun begins to rise, the fisherman looks down at the last ‘pebble’ in his hand, and beholds a beautiful diamond.¹

Similarly, life is constantly providing us with ‘precious gems’ in the form of opportunities to grow, learn, appreciate, and enjoy our existence. Without the ‘light’ of awareness or mindfulness we are as if shrouded in darkness, and can all too easily mistake these ‘gems’ for mere pebbles. If we are able to understand this truth, and to proactively work with the tendencies of the mind, we begin to realize that *it is possible to adopt a positive attitude amidst any and every circumstance which may unfold.*

It is true that we do not always have control over what occurs in our life. A certain amount of what unfolds in the course of our present life, according to the Vedic philosophy, is the fruit of our choices and actions of the past. This is called ‘karma-phala’ and is, to a certain extent, fixed at birth and can be understood via the natal horoscope.² Thus, some events are said to be fated or destined to occur. Regardless of what destiny may send our way, what we *always* have control over is our attitude - a fact that is hugely significant and important to understand.

¹ Adapted from [Karma Sannyasa](#) by Swami Satyasangananda, pg. 35

² In Sanskrit, “Karma” means action, while “Phala” means fruit. Thus “Karma-phala” refers to the fruit or results of past deeds.

Fate or Free Will?

When one is trying to wrap their head around Vedic Astrology, and to understand the workings of the law of karma often the questions arise: “How much of our lives are fated?”, and... “How much free will, if any, do we have?” In answer to this there is a saying explaining that life is *One hundred percent fate... and one hundred percent free will!*

I believe this is a beautiful response to the question for a number of reasons:

- First of all, life is a mystery which cannot be fully understood by the rational mind alone.
- Second, what is experienced today as fate is but the result of one's use of free will in the past. So our destiny is, in truth, *a self-created destiny*. We are responsible for our own happiness; we have the power to free ourselves from suffering by making positive choices.
- Lastly, part of the wisdom of this saying is that it gives us permission to adopt either perspective - whichever is the most helpful in the moment, depending upon given circumstances.

Thus if something challenging and unexpected happens, we can have the understanding that it was a necessary karmic unfoldment and allow ourselves to move towards acceptance. On the other hand, the fact that we have free will and the power to make choices means that we cannot use the excuse of “oh well, it is my karma” to justify a state of inertia or resignation. We have the responsibility to act, to work, to contribute in some way. We also have the ability to respond creatively to challenges by being *solution-oriented*.

The Blessings of “Right Attitude”

Even when life presents us with challenges, there are always things which are going well and for those we can be grateful. If we never take anything for granted, we realize how precious life is; we see the gems that we hold in our very hand this moment. While this perspective is certainly beneficial, I would also like to invite you to go one step beyond it by considering the option of what we could call *radical gratitude*.

Radical gratitude means to be grateful for even the most trying and difficult experiences of life. For these experiences, and these experiences alone, test our courage and faith, challenging us to dig deeper. It is hardship and adversity which makes us stronger, if only we accept its invitation and rise to the occasion.

When practiced, unconditional or radical gratitude can bestow upon one the priceless gifts of contentment and peace. Like a hero on the battlefield of life, you can stand amidst even a great storm, with an open heart and a cheerful mind. That is entirely possible, all depending upon your perspective.

Pratipakṣa Bhāvana

A very wonderful tool in the tool-box of Yoga and Vedic Psychology is what is known in Sanskrit as “Pratipakṣa Bhāvana.” This means replacing negative thoughts with opposite, positive ones. There is an antidote to every negative tendency of the mind which could potentially drag us down into a state of suffering. The key is to realize that, with practice, it is possible to control the thoughts.

“Controlling the thoughts” does not mean suppression or repression, which would be counter-productive. Rather, we want to *encourage a state of positivity in the mind*. For example, if we are disturbed by thoughts of anger, we can gently encourage ourselves to reflect on the benefits of forgiveness. Another way to get there might be to read a book about forgiveness, or spend time remembering someone who exemplifies this positive quality.

Even if the negative emotions or thoughts run deep and are therefore difficult to let go of, gentle persistence pays off. You are sure to be blessed with more positivity in your life. One can slowly but surely train the mind, altering its habitual tendencies and encouraging uplifted thinking. The benefits are immense. For example, modern

research in the field of *positive psychology* has shown that positive thinking is correlated with improved overall wellness and longevity.³

The Importance of Meditation

Progress towards mastery of the mind takes practice. The tradition of Yoga teaches us that it not only takes practice, but rather consistent and dedicated practice over a significant period of time. Perhaps the most essential tool in the tool-box is meditation. I like to think of meditation as a way of training the mind to remain present and aware. It is an opportunity to spend a little time every day looking within. Just like brushing the teeth clears away the plaque, meditation is a process of clearing the mind.

It is better to commit to something you can do consistently, rather than setting your sights too high. For example, setting aside ten minutes a day either in the morning or evening for meditation and sticking with it is much better than trying to sit for thirty minutes or an hour and then dropping it after a week because of other demands on your time. Light a candle and some incense if you wish. Select a special, comfortable place in your home where you can be free from distractions. Create an atmosphere of peace and healing, in whatever way resonates with you. You might just start looking forward to this daily opportunity!

Conclusion

Many books have been written, and many words spoken about the benefits of meditation and positive thinking. However, the proof is in the pudding - it is only through personal practice and direct experience that these benefits can be fully understood and appreciated.

Oṃ Śāntiḥ Śāntiḥ Śāntiḥ
Peace unto the three sources of karma!

³ <https://www.health.harvard.edu/topics/positive-psychology>