Four Sadhanas –
Part V – Obstacles to
Nirvikalpa-Samadhi

SWAMI ADVAYANANDA

Introduction - Three Adhikārins

The uttama-adhikārins (the highly accomplished seekers), who are fully endowed with sādhanas-catuṣṭaya (the fourfold qualification) - viveka, vairāgya, śamādhīsaṭkasampatti and mumukṣūtvaṃ - do not require samādhi-abhyāsa (practice of absorption) or even manana (reflection) or nididhyāsana (contemplation) for establishing themselves in Self-Knowledge. For these highly accomplished adhikārins, śravaṇa alone is sufficient. The moment the Guru bestows the Mahāvākyā-jñāna they become established in Self-Knowledge and get liberated. It is keeping them in view that Vedanta declares: “śravaṇamātreyena jñānam bhavati — merely by śravaṇa one attains Knowledge”¹.

The madhyama-adhikārins, i.e. those whose proficiency in sādhanas-catuṣṭaya is of the middling type, go through the dual stages of śravaṇa and manana and, as soon as their doubts are dispelled, become established in Knowledge.

¹ This declaration “śravaṇamātreyena jñānam bhavati — only by śravaṇa one attains Knowledge”, has one more classic interpretation. The Knowledge gained by śravaṇa is the source as well as the basis for all the other sādhanas be it manana, nididhyāsana or even samādhi. To explain: śravaṇa is the determination of the import of Vedānta as the identity of the Self with Brahman (jñeva brahmāna), In the stage of manana one reflects on this identity known from śravaṇa in in nididhyāsana using this Knowledge gained from śravaṇa one tries to put an end to viparītabhava (notions contrary to Self-Knowledge); in samādhi one gets established in this jñeva brahmāna (Knowledge of the identity between the individual Self and Brahman). Since śravaṇa is thus the very source of Knowledge and the very foundational undercurrent in all the sādhanas, it can be truly said that “only by śravaṇa (śravaṇamātreyena) one attains Knowledge”.

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The maṇḍa-adhikārins whose proficiency in sādhana-catuṣṭaya is low, implying that citta-suddhi and citta-ekāgrata (purity of mind and single-pointedness of the intellect) are found wanting, will have to go through all the four stages of śravaṇa, manana, nididhyāsana and samādhi to attain jñānaniṣṭhā (establishment in Knowledge)².

The Upaniṣads do refer to students attaining the Knowledge of the Self even without upadeśa from the Guru. The Itareya Upaniṣad makes a mention of Sage Vāmadeva who, even while in his mother’s womb, attained Self-Knowledge. In modern times we know of Sri Ramana Maharshi who realised without going through the steps of gurūpasadana (reaching the Guru) and śravaṇa. After attaining Self-Knowledge, as evinced in his well-known recollection of the ‘death-experience’, he did reveal many years in samādhi; but that samādhi was not that of the seeker trying to establish himself in Self-Knowledge through samādhi, but rather, that of a liberated Mahāpuruṣa (great soul) spending his time in samādhi³.

None but we ourselves shall be the losers if we were to befool ourselves that we too are like these rare spiritual prodigies and thus insist that Knowledge can be attained even by skipping one or more of the above-mentioned steps of śravaṇa, manana, nididhyāsana and samādhi.

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² This classification and analysis are not to belittle the maṇḍa or madhyama-adhikārins. To be even a maṇḍa-adhikārin is a rare accomplishment unattained by the vast majority of seekers.

³ Vide Bhagavat Gītā (7.19) “Bhūnāṁ jnananjnanam jñānajnanah māṁ prayatya— the spiritual journey is an unfoldment stretching through many lives – we notice the above-mentioned spiritual stalwarts being endowed with the clarity of Vedāntic wisdom without having put in any effort to gain it in the present life-time. They must have become sādhana-catuṣṭaya-sampāna (accomplished in the fourfold means) by the diligent practice of karma-yoga and upaśana and must have gone through the stages of gurūpasadana, śravaṇa, manana, nididhyāsana or even samādhi in their earlier life or lives before prārabdha in the form of death put a comma (and not a fullstop) to their spiritual pursuit. Thus it is not that they have skipped these stages, but only that they have already completed them in their earlier lives. Vide Bhagavat Gītā (6.43): “O Arjuna, such a person automatically regains in the present birth the spiritual insight of his previous birth.”
Importance of Nirvikalpa-Samādhi

Saints and all Acāryas of Vedānta who have walked this razor-path to Godhood advise seekers to practise all the four sādhanas. They state in unequivocal terms the importance of all these sādhanas – especially that of nididhyāśana and samādhi – for seekers often tend to deceive themselves into thinking that they are realised, without having actually accomplished the abidance in Knowledge (jñānaniṣṭhā). For all realistic purposes one may summarily state without any reservation that for attaining a firm brahmākāraūrtī, which alone puts an end to ignorance, and to abide in Self-Knowledge, all seekers have to practise nirvikalpa-samādhi. The following two verses from Kathopaniṣad (2.3.10,11) clearly state the importance of this practice of nirvikalpa-samādhi:

यदा पञ्चावतिष्ठते ज्ञानानि मनसा सह
बुद्धिः न विचेष्टते तात्माहः परमां गतिम्॥
तात्योगमिति मन्यन्ते स्तिथरसिद्धियादरणाम्।
अप्रमत्तत् भवति योगो हि प्रभवायणौ॥

yada pañcāvatīsthante jñānāni manasā saha,
buddhiśca na vīceṣṭate tāmāhuh paramām gatim.
tām yogamiti manyante sthiramindriyadharaṇām,
apramattastād bhavati yogo hi prabhavāpyayau.

When the five organs of knowledge are at rest together with the mind, and when the intellect too does not function, that state they call the highest. The firm control of the indriyas (senses and mind) they regard as ‘Yoga’ (Union or Establishment). Then the seeker becomes free of the vagaries of the mind; for ‘Yoga’ (read it as ‘Establishment’) is subject to growth and decay.

The Upaniṣad warns the seekers: “Yogo hi prabhavāpyayau — Establishment in Knowledge is subject to growth and decay.” That being the case, no seeker should become complacent. In place of deeply ingrained erroneous notions that exist now such as ‘I am a man’, ‘I am a woman’ etc., the understanding of ‘I am the pure indivisible all-pervading Existence-Consciousness-Bliss’ should take root for jñānaniṣṭhā

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(establishment in Self-Knowledge) to happen. Till that is
attained there is room for apprehension and fall. It is the practice
of nirvikalpa-samādhi that bestows jñananiṣṭha and takes him to
the realm of no fall.

Obstacles to Nirvikalpa-Samādhi

Great Advaita Acāryas like Sri Gauḍapādācārya (Paramaguru
of Sri Sankaracharya), Sri Swami Vidyaranya and others speak
about four specific obstacles to nirvikalpa-samādhi and the means
to overcome them. These four obstacles are:

1. Laya or stupor
2. Vikṣepa or distraction
3. Kaśāya or vāsanā upsurge
4. Rasāsvāda or savouring of joy.

In this essay we shall take for study these four obstacles and
the means to overcome them.

I. Laya or Stupor

‘Laya’ is defined by Sri Swami Sadananda in Vedānta-sāra as
follows:

रूप: ताबद्र अस्वंद्वस्त्र-अनवलम्बनेन चित्तवर्ते: निद्रा॥
layah tāvad akhaṇḍavastu-anavalambanena cittavṛttेऽऽ nīdṛa.

Laya is the lapse of the mind into stupor because of its failure to rest in
the Absolute.

‘Laya’ is stupor or the state of unconsciousness of the mind
wherein thoughts cease and one enters a state similar to that of
deep-sleep. Such a meditator, obstructed by laya, though spend-
ing many hours overtly in the practice of samādhi, is actually in
a state of inertia. In this state, he experiences neither the world
of objects nor the bliss of the Self; he is in ‘jaḍa-samādhi’ (jaḍa
= inertia; samādhi = absorption).

When the mind becomes imbued with inertia the seeker
has to beware (to beware is to become aware!) of this slumber
and conquer it by consciously invoking the thought ‘I am
Brahman’. This waking up of the languid mind by invoking a
continuous stream of ‘aham brahma'asmi’ thoughts is termed ‘sambodhana’ (rousing).

II. Vikśepa or Distraction

The dispassionate mind, after having given up the external objects, goes within in an attempt to become established in the Self. When this ‘introvert mind’ finds it difficult to be established in the Self – because of the very subtlety of the Self – and hence turns outward, it obviously becomes defocussed from the Self. Such extrovertedness of the mind, due to its incapacity to be persistently focussed on the Self, is termed ‘vikśepa’ or ‘distraction’. Advaita Acāryas give the following example to illustrate the nature of vikśepa: the hens which are chased by a cat run into the house to escape their predator. But finding no room to stay within they come running out only to be caught by the cat and become its meal! In the same way the mind, understanding the painful nature of the pleasures of the world, goes within in an effort to attain the Self, but experiencing the difficulty of going any further, becomes extrovert, only to fall a prey to the thoughts pertaining to the world.

The following is the definition of ‘vikśepa’ given by Sri Swami Sadananda:

अक्षण्डवस्तु-अनवलम्बनेन चित्तवृत्ते: अन्यावलम्बं विक्षेपः ॥

akṣaṇḍavastu-anavalambanena citta-vṛtthe anyāvalambanam vikśepah.

‘Vikśepa’ is the resting of the mind on things other than the Absolute, because of its failure to rest in It.

The method to overcome vikśepa is this: the meditator should ‘recall the defects of worldly pleasures’ (doṣadrṣṭi) and with fortitude bind the mind to the Self. Bhagavān Sri Kṛṣṇa explains this above method of overcoming vikśepa when He guides the meditator (Bhagavad Geeta 6.25.26):
Slowly and steadily let him (the meditator) attain quietude by the intellect held in firmness; having made the mind established in the Self, let him not think of anything. From whatever cause the restless and the unsteady mind wanders away, from that let him restrain it, and bring it back and fix it on the Self.

The Advaita Acāryas term this effort at controlling the mind ‘śama’ (mind-control).

III. Kaśāya or Vāsanā Upsurge

“Śreyāmsi bahuvighnāni — all noble endeavours are fraught with many obstacles” — is a famous adage in Sanskrit. Even when the meditator has conquered laya (stupor) and vikṣepa (distraction) by ‘sambodhana’ (rousing) and ‘śama’ (mind-control), respectively, obstacles could arise by an abrupt manifestation of attachments and aversions due to sudden vāsanā upsurges. The term ‘kaśāya’, literally meaning ‘dirt’, in the context of samādhi-abhyāsa, stands for these unexpected bursts of vāsanās of rāga (attachment), dveṣa (hatred), kāma (desire) etc.

To explain, the seeker even in the earlier stages of cultivating viveka, vairāgya and the other sādhana-catuṣṭaya (fourfold means), would have already conquered all the manifested and known desires, attachments etc. But the kāraṇaśarīra (causal body) being a storehouse of impressions (vāsanās or sarīnskāras) collected from many past births, one never knows when new likes, dislikes, desires, attachments, hatreds etc. can manifest. In the advanced stages of meditation, when a seeker is desirous of advancing into the realms of nirvikalpa-samādhi, obstacles could arise all of
a sudden, because of the unexpected manifestation of a vāsanā gathered in some past birth. It is these unforeseen bursts of vāsanās (udbhūta-vāsanā) that are termed ‘kaśāya’; and not the vāsanās which do not manifest, but lie dormant (anudbhūta-vāsanā) or the vāsanās that the meditator has already overcome in earlier stages of his sādhana.

When such an obstacle occurs all of a sudden, the mind becomes stunned and stupefied and refuses to move forward. It neither becomes extrovert, nor goes ahead to become established in the Atman. It is in an utter state of suspension or stupefaction. The following example has been used traditionally to explain the nature of kaśāya: a particular noble, a new appointee, goes to meet the king. When he is about to enter the king’s court, the guards, ignorant of his recent appointment, stop him. Now he can neither go in, nor return without having an audience with the king. This state is similar to the meditator being accosted by the vāsanā upsurges which prevent him from ‘meeting’ the Self. Such a meditator neither becomes extrovert, nor finds it possible to get established in the Self. He is in a state of shocked immobility. Sri Swami Sadananda explains ‘kaśāya’ as follows:

उत्तरिश्वेतो अमावे अपि वितत्रुते रागादिवासनाया स्तव्यीभावद्
अरकवंदवस्तवनवलम्बनं कषायः ॥

layavikṣepa-abhāve api cittavrtteḥ rāgādīvāsanayā stābdhibhāvād
akhaṇḍāvastuvalamvalambanam kaśāyaḥ.

Even when laya (stupor) and vikṣepa (distraction) are absent, the failure of the mind to rest on the Absolute, because of becoming suspended due to the presence of impressions (vāsanā) of attachment and so on, is termed kaśāya.

The meditator has to overcome kaśāya by not panicking about the sudden manifestation of vāsanās. This is done by just becoming conscious of the fact that the mind is under a ‘vāsanā-attack’ (similar to a terrorist attack!). The meditator, by exercising one’s dhrīti (will) and viveka-śakti (power of discrimination), should
also not give further scope for the vāsanās to ramify and with patience put an end to these vāsanā upsurges.

IV. Rasāsvāda or Savouring of Joy

The term ‘rasāsvāda’ literally means ‘savouring (asvāda) of joy (rasa)’. This rasāsvāda can be of two types:

1. Enjoying the absence of vikṣepa
2. Enjoying the bliss of savikalpa-samādhi.

(1) Enjoying the absence of vikṣepa: When an individual, who is carrying a painful heavy load on his back for a considerable duration of time puts it down, the very act of unburdening gives him great pleasure. Relaxation is evident on his face and he contentedly exclaims, “I am so happy.”

In the same way, the meditator, who has put an end to the troublesome vikṣepas (thought distractions) that have been described herein as the second obstacle, could have a tendency to become contented and satisfied at this triumph over the vikṣepas and stay complacent and smug without advancing to the final stage of nirvikalpa-samādhi. This satisfaction arising out of the destruction of vikṣepas (thought distractions), leading to complacency in putting forth efforts towards the attainment of nirvikalpa-samādhi, is termed ‘rasāsvāda’.

(2) Enjoying the bliss of savikalpa-samādhi: Savikalpa-samādhi is the delightful absorption occasioned by the presence of the triad of the meditator (dhyātra), meditated (dhyeya) and meditation (dhyāna). In nirvikalpa-samādhi this triad disappears to bestow the unitary experience of Brahman. Savikalpa-samādhi precedes nirvikalpa-samādhi, and is therefore an unavoidable
step in attaining niroikalpa-samādhi. If a meditator becomes addicted to the happiness of savikalpa-samādhi and is hesitant to progress further and get established in niroikalpa-samādhi, he is said to be obstructed by ‘rasāsvāda’; the very savouring (āsvāda) of joy (rasa) of savikalpa-samādhi has become the obstacle for his further progress.

We find the following definition of rasāsvāda in the Sanskrit translation and commentary of Sant Niścaladāsji’s Vicāra-sāgara by Sri Vasudevabrahmendra Sarasvatī:

विशेषप्रिवृत्तियाः-आनंद-अनुभवो वा
सविकल्पसमाधिः-आनंद-अनुभवो वा रसास्वादः इत्युच्चते ||

Viksepaniorttijanyā-ananda-anubhavo vā savikalpasamādhi-
ānanda-anubhavo vā rasāsvadāḥ ityucyate.

Rasāsvāda is the savouring of the happiness born out of the annihilation of the vikṣepas (thought distractions) or the savouring of the happiness of savikalpa-samādhi.

Rasāsvāda happens due to one’s losing sight of the ultimate goal of jñāna-niṣṭhā; the seeker’s goal is not just mere happiness, but to become established in the Blissful Knowledge of the Self. All joys are finite, including the happiness of savikalpa-samādhi. This rasāsvāda is to be overcome by bringing to mind the goal of niroikalpa-samādhi and directing one’s efforts to gain Self-Establishment (jñānanisṭhā). The meditator should invoke the grace of his Guru and the Lord and become detached (niḥsaṅga) from these super-sattvic forms of happiness. Refuse to be lured by the satiation arising out of the destruction of the vikṣepas (thought distractions) or beguiled by the bliss of savikalpa-samādhi. One should move forward with utter detachment and focus on the goal of niroikalpa-samādhi.

Prescription from the Master Physician

Sri Gaudapada, the great paramaguru of Bhagavan Adi Sankaracharya, out of immense compassion to seekers, lists these four obstacles to niroikalpa-samādhi and summarises the
afore-mentioned methods to surmount them (Maṇḍākya Upaniṣhad Karikā 3.44,45):


laye sambodhayet cittam viśṣiptam śamayet punah,
sakaśyam vijāniyāt śamapraśpana na cālayet,
nāsvādayet rasam tatra niḥsaṅgaḥ prajñāyā bhavet,.....

When the mind is torpid, rouse it; when it is distracted, bring it back to calmness; when it is sullied (by vāsanā upsurges), be aware of it; when it is established in equipoise, do not distract it any more. Do not savour the happiness, but rather maintain an unattached awareness.

Conclusion

The state of the meditator’s mind in nirvikalpa-samādhi has been compared in Vedānta to a lamp’s effulgent and steady flame, when the lamp is placed in a windless spot – “yathā dīpo nivāstastho neṅgate sopamā smṛtā (Bhagavad-Geeta 6.11).” In nirvikalpa-samādhi the Brahmākāra-vṛtti becomes radiant, steady and powerful and becomes imperceptible when it reaches the very depths of one’s personality, while putting an end to ignorance. The meditator, mediated and meditation become the one indivisible Brahman. The glory of this nirvikalpa-samādhi state is indescribable. It is the very sanctum sanctorum of Brahman and the one who has reached there becomes a jīvanmukta – one who is liberated even while living. Nirvikalpa-samādhi is the chrysalis wherein the ugly caterpillar of the jīva metamorphoses into the enchanting butterfly of Brahman!