

By Swami Jyotirmayananda



Overcoming Self-Pity

*S*elf-pity is a universal disease that consists of developing a degraded attitude towards oneself. The majority of people indulge in self-pity whenever there is frustration of a certain desire, loss in business, quarrel at home, disharmony among friends. Whenever there is any abrupt development in life such as getting into an accident, falling prey to a disease, or encountering any form of sudden frustration or failure, the mind tends to indulge in self-pity—and most people consider this normal.

Aspects of Self-pity

Entrance into Melancholia

Self-pity has two aspects: internal and external. Through internal reflection, you start thinking of the various negative things that have happened in your life. You recall your past days, your past mistakes and, inspired by imagination, you indulge in various negative thoughts. Self-pity is associated with the states of melancholia, depression, grief—a sense of inner instability.

Seeking External Confirmation

The external aspect of self-pity involves seeking others who can listen to your sufferings. If you are a youngster, you have your parents. As you grow up, you may begin this process of seeking sympathy by adopting a miserable stance and a sad face. You do not speak. Soon someone will ask, “What happened?” and then you begin to open up and speak of the miseries you are experiencing and the impossibility of finding a cure for them. Thus, self-pity expresses externally in the search for others who will show you sympathy and confirm your misery.

While all people suffer from self-pity to some extent, there are some who suffer from it more intensely, because they have become obsessed with that diseased tendency. You will find that some people develop a habit of constantly looking down on themselves, and revealing a sense of degradation about even the simplest things. Some are always seeking sympathy from others, wanting to hear words of encouragement. It is a degraded development, however, to perpetually seek someone’s comfort and confirmation, and, in order to do so, to allow expressions of self-pity to develop.

Getting to the Root of the Problem

Unfulfilled Desires Lead to Weak Will

From the point of view of Yogic philosophy, self-pity arises out of lack of will, which, in turn, is caused by the presence of many desires that remain unfulfilled. Since the human mind generates so many desires and expectations, all those expectations cannot be fulfilled. And even when they are fulfilled, there is, on a deeper level, no actual fulfillment. There is only a form of illusion.

Thus, much mental energy becomes involved in pursuing desires, and will becomes weak. And when will is weak, mind tends to develop negative thoughts and becomes inclined towards everything that is negative.

If you indulge in constantly thinking about yourself in a negative way, you create powerful impressions of inadequacy. And as you go on repeating these negative thoughts, those impressions become intensified. So, no matter what happens, even in the best conditions of life, the person who has developed the habit of self-pity always indulges in it.

Lack of Insight into the Divine Plan

The sentiment of self-pity is an immature reaction to a given situation, a sentimental reaction to a condition that your intellect is unable to interpret maturely. A situation of apparent suffering can be interpreted negatively or positively. However, a person who is addicted to self-pity usually interprets things in a negative manner and dwells upon the idea that he is in a miserable state.

From the philosophical point of view, every situation is a Divine development. As such, an apparent suffering is simply a preparation for something that is needed for the soul, and it will pass on when it has fulfilled its purpose.

Therefore, instead of developing self-pity, a person who is healthy will exercise patience, endurance and faith in the Divine plan. They will develop an attitude of austerity towards a difficult condition and wait and watch until that situation passes on. Through that difficult situation, they will be led to a higher state of integration.

Awakening the Negative Around You

If you begin to indulge in self-pity, you keep yourself in a lower state. In seeking confirmation of your weakness, you draw to yourself people who have many negative impressions in their mind. Then, it becomes a kind of mutual assistance in the matter of intensifying negative impressions.

Although it assumes the garb of friendliness and seems delightful, this cozy and comfortable feeling that you can open your heart to others and speak of your suffering must be shunned by a Yogi. It is a degrading development. It is like the situation in which one person is drowning in a river, and another person, who doesn't know how to swim, jumps in to save him. They hold hands, and hand in hand they continue drowning more and more.

One who is obsessed with self-pity not only obstructs their own evolution, but becomes a source of evil association for others by radiating negative vibrations around them. Self-pity is like a magnet that awakens and draws everything negative from the outside.

A person suffering from self-pity creates gloom in the atmosphere—a form of fume, a form of darkness. He is as if emitting smoke from his own negative impressions, burning up his own energy and potential. And the psychological fumes that arise from one who indulges in self-pity always harm others. If people were very advanced, they would prohibit self-pity just as they prohibit smoking. Those who have self-pity would have to sit in restricted areas, so to speak.

Classical Examples from the Scriptures

There are certain classical examples of self-pity in the scriptures that illustrate the debilitating nature of this habit as well as the manner in which it must be overcome.

Arjuna in the Gita

At the very outset in the Gita, for example, we encounter Arjuna, a mighty warrior who has prepared himself for that great Mahabharata battle through years of self-effort. He has worshiped Lord Shiva, secured wonderful weapons, allowed himself to be trained by great teachers in the art of archery and in performing various heroic feats.

However, he suddenly begins to think about the implications of the impending battle, realizing that he will be fighting with his own dear relatives and destroying them. With a sudden rush of sentiment, Arjuna falls into a dejected state, pitying himself for being placed in the situation in which he must destroy his dear relatives.

Therefore, he starts speaking to Lord Krishna, the Master of all philosophies, about the philosophy of non-violence and renunciation. He reminds Krishna how killing one's own relatives is a highly sinful act, and suggests that rather than confront such a hideous situation it is better that he renounce fighting and live like a monk. Instead of killing his own relatives, he would rather beg and adopt the principles of non-violence.

Responding to this erroneous philosophical position of Arjuna, Krishna says, "You speak like a philosopher, but you are a coward." Elaborating upon this, Krishna then leads Arjuna to an understanding of the mystery of life. Krishna tells him: "These people are already killed; they are simply acting alive for the time being. I have killed them. So, why do you take the idea upon yourself that you are going to kill then? You merely need to perform your duty. No one is your relative, no one is your friend; and, if you do not kill them they will simply ridicule you for your cowardliness."

Lord Krishna's response to Arjuna illustrates the fact that self-pity develops when you do not have insight into the Cosmic Plan that sustains your life. You bring to your mind the wrong notion that you are responsible for certain negative developments.

If, in spite of your best efforts, you encounter failure in a project, you should not blame yourself. You are not entirely responsible for things that happen in your life and in the world around you. You are not responsible for the dark clouds that gather in the sky. You are not responsible for tidal waves, and for winds and storms.

However you are responsible, as a Yogi, for the practice of introspection and self-analysis. If you find that certain thoughts and desires are unworthy of you, you must adopt serious efforts to remove them.

If you start brooding over why certain things have happened in the past, and why you should be the target of all misery, and why nature should concentrate so much suffering upon you, then that process of thinking is backed up by ignorance and immaturity.

Hanuman in the Ramayana

Another classical example appears in the Ramayana. Hanuman, a Divine being assuming the form of a monkey with great power and valor, takes up the task of finding Sita, who is being held prisoner in the orchard of Ravana, the great demon king. After Hanuman crosses the ocean, he enters the land of Lanka and, after great difficulty, finds Sita. He then conveys to Sita a message that brings courage to her heart: that Rama would one day destroy the demons and take Sita back to be reunited with Him.

Overwhelmed with joy at finding Sita, Hanuman celebrated by going to eat the fruit from the garden of the demons. Full of exuberance, he starts eating and breaking branches everywhere until he is captured by the demons and punished by having his gigantic tail set on fire. Hanuman, who is not an ordinary monkey, but rather a deity, jumps out of the chains that bind him and sets all of Lanka on fire, causing vast destruction.

Then he suddenly sinks into immense dejection and sorrow. He thinks to himself, "I have come all the way to find Sita and now I have destroyed

the entire Lanka in fire. Sita must also be reduced to ashes. I have indeed proven myself to be a monkey by destroying Sita, overwhelmed by my enthusiasm in burning Lanka."

But suddenly the breeze blows and gives him the message: "You Hanuman, you have no power to burn Lanka or anything in this world. It was Rama's power that enabled you to express that miracle. Sita, who is Rama's wife, is Divine, the very Spirit behind all that exists. So, how can you destroy Her? She is safe. She is the creator of fire. How then can fire burn Her?"

Hanuman, overwhelmed by self-pity, felt he had done something so bad that he could never remedy it. That type of self-pity develops in aspirants as well and must be overcome through understanding of the Divine Plan.

The Wisdom of the Divine Plan

You must realize that things that happen through your personality are conditioned by the Divine plan. Therefore, do not take upon yourself the responsibility for everything that occurs. Behind all happenings, even those that seem to be negative, there is a Divine plan, and negative developments cannot destroy the Sita in you, the intellect in you, the Divine Will in you. The idea that you have been destroyed due to certain developments is wrong. Your ego and all that is demoniac in your personality cannot drown your own soul. No matter how devilish you may become, you cannot drown your spirit in a state of destruction.

Simply because you are encountering an adverse situation, that does not mean that you have been drowned in adversity. There is an essence within you, a spiritual aspect within you that is always above adversity. By recognizing that, you can control the adverse situation and turn it into a prosperous situation. If that point is understood, the tendency towards self-pity is greatly undermined.

The Spiritual Art of Witnessing

In a practical sense, you should be able to recognize a negative situation, and your mind should be able to react to it and try to overcome it. But, at the same time, your intellect must not become confused. In other words, deep within yourself, there must be a sense of unaffectedness: “I am unaffected by this negative development and by these negative thoughts that arise in the mind. They cannot invade me in my entirety.”

By adopting this attitude, you become a witness to your situations and to your negative and dejected thoughts. And when you do not welcome negativity, it gradually disperses.

As you advance, you realize that there is not a situation that is, in itself, either negative or positive. It is the way you react to that situation that determines whether it is negative or positive. If you do not understand it, it becomes negative. If you allow the situation to thwart your intelligence, to make your intellect dull, then it becomes negative. If you become inspired by that situation, if you allow your mind to flow towards God and to become more involved in spiritual movement, then it is not a negative situation—it is a blessing.

Awakening the Positive

Thus, it is important to develop that spiritual art of witnessing your thoughts, and then substituting a positive movement in your mind whenever the negative is asserting. Watch yourself. Each time you are tempted to speak in a negative way about yourself or even think in a negative way about yourself, check yourself from doing so. In turn, try to generate a positive view of yourself. Feel, “I am becoming better. I have the Divine Power within me.” By presenting a negative image of yourself constantly, you create a negative karmic process

and you find yourself in a degraded condition. By constantly projecting a positive image, you create a brilliant future for yourself.

Positive affirmation is different from egoistic asserting and bragging before people. Any movement that is related to inner advancement must be an internalized movement, a movement that you are sincere about. Neither should you project thoughts of self-pity, nor thoughts of self-praise; but rather, you need to affirm within yourself “I am the Self. I am not the body; I am not the mind. I am the eternal and imperishable Self.”

Overcoming Self-Pity

Seek Satsanga

Some points that are simple and practical must be understood if the tendency to self-pity is to be overcome. The most important point is that you must seek *satsanga* (good association). You should not live without good association even for a single day. This helps build a shield in your mind against negative situations. Simultaneously, do not be tempted to discuss your weakness with others. Do not become friends on the basis of weakness, but become friends on the basis of your eagerness to discover the quality of your soul. Become friends on the basis of seeking spiritual values of life.

Adopt Selfless Service

Another important point is to live a life of selfless service. Do not allow yourself to be confined to a narrow outlook on life. Channelize your energy towards serving others. As you do so, allow your heart to expand by observing how all human beings suffer and how, in many cases, that suffering could have been avoided. As you begin to watch people in different levels of evolution, you find people suffering in a ridiculous manner, running round and round in a small circle, while there is a possibility of greater expansion around them. So, while you practice Karma Yoga and begin to serve

people, you realize the possibility of overcoming limitations, of outgrowing weakness.

Do not Degrade Others

You have to realize that if you want to overcome self-pity within your personality, you should not look at others with the idea that they are degraded. Rather than degrading others, try to encourage others by pointing out their virtues and positive qualities to the extent that is possible.

Watch yourself in your daily life. Observe your words, the manner in which you react to others and deal with others. Overcome the defect of speaking harshly with others, hurting others, laughing at others, or putting others in a condition in which they will pity themselves. By doing so, you create a karma of developing self-pity.

In other words, do unto others as you wish others to do unto you. That principle must be adopted as you learn to adapt and adjust yourself to other human beings around you.

Develop Devotion

Another most important point is developing devotion to God. Learn to dedicate yourself to Divine will, repeat mantra, learn to pray, relax your mind in the awareness that “God abides in me.” With Divinity supporting you, nothing is impossible for you.

You must realize that the sense of self-pity is a form of “sinfulness.” It opposes the great power that abides within you—the power of the Divine Self. It is a denial of Divine Presence.

Discover Who You Are

And in order to root out the problem, you need to have *Jnana*—wisdom. If you develop an expansive heart that is broadened by the effect of Karma Yoga, you will be able to effectively inquire into “Who am I?” and develop true Self-affirmation: “I am not the body; I am the Universal Self.”

In spite of adversity you will not stoop to identification with your physical personality. You will be able to watch sufferings just as you watch the clouds. You will transcend suffering with the knowledge: “The sufferings do not belong to me. They belong to the not Self. I am beyond. I am the Self.”

Dattatreya, the great teacher, wrote in one of his inspiring songs: “Oh mind, why do you weep? You do not belong to me; I do not belong to you. Further, you do not even exist. Why do you weep? Do not grieve. I am immortal, indivisible, vast like the sky.”

If your mind were to understand the nature of the true Self, then that mind would never degrade itself. A practitioner of *Atma-vichara* inquires into the nature of the Self and, as a result, always aspires high, never degrading themselves towards lesser objects of the world.

If you want to hit a target, you must aim at a higher point than the target. Much in the same manner, with Vedantic understanding in view, you gradually train your mind to aspire for things that are sublime, magnanimous. Your mind moves to greatness and majesty and throws off all sense of weakness and wretchedness.

That is the art of overcoming self-pity. And once self-pity is overcome, immense power is generated in the mind, and you can move on with great strides to success. As a result, you become a fountain source of inspiration for all people around. You develop true compassion, and spiritual union with all living things.

*“Oh mind,
why do you weep?
You do not belong to me;
I do not belong to you.
Further, you do not even exist.
Why do you weep?
Do not grieve.
I am immortal, indivisible,
vast like the sky.”*

Sage Dattatreya