

Asaᅅga

NON-ATTACHMENT



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## The Virtue of Non-attachment in Hindu Dharma



One of the cardinal teachings of Yoga and Vedanta is the practice of 'non-attachment' (*asaṅga* or *nissanga*). Most people have great difficulty understanding what exactly is meant by *non-attachment* and most often confuse it with a negative emotion; like 'cold indifference', 'not caring', 'disaffection', etc. And *attachment* is understood as a positive emotion associated with love, connection, affection, sympathy and caring.

One of the major issues in unpacking Hindu philosophical concepts is terminology. So one should begin with the clarification of terms and their philosophical perspective and context.

The technical term commonly used throughout Indian literature for 'attachment' is *saṅga* (*sakta*) which is derived from the root *sañj* which means:— "sticking to, clutching at, grasping, adhering" — it conveys the ideas of fusion and agglutination. *Saṅga* is the bearing of a burden, which is causing suffering, but to which one is so attached that one cannot let go of it.

*Saṅga* also refers to a group of people who are joined together, connected or who have assembled for some common interest or purpose — as such it has a neutral tone to it.

The problem with *saṅga* is that it always causes suffering through limitation, bondage and constraint. Through *saṅga* one is controlled by others, by things and circumstances i.e. bondage — *bandhana*. It is the ball and chain fastened on one's leg.

*Asaṅga* is the opposite — it is freedom, expansiveness and joy, self-determination, liberation — *mukti*.

The causes of *saṅga* are the notions born of spiritual ignorance (*avidya*) that:—

1. "I am the body" (*ahañkāra*). From this notion are derived ideas of self-identity, group-identity, self-importance and entitlement.
2. "I possess" (*mamata*) leading to ideas of proprietorship & acquisitiveness, seeking self-actualization through objects, social contacts and professional pathways.

The Gīta (14:6-7) suggests 4 types of attachment which cause bondage.

*sukha-saṅga* — attachment to pleasure, comfort or happiness. This type of *sukha* is always connected to, or associated with an object. Since all objects of pleasure are impermanent, happiness derived from them is always temporary. This form of attachment results in the inability to tolerate discomfort or hardship. One is never satisfied and is always trying to optimise one's own pleasure. This obsession with personal happiness and comfort eventually comes at the expense of others who are also seen as vehicles for one's own pleasure.

*jñāna-saṅga* — attachment to knowledge causes suffering through pride in knowing. One who is attached to knowledge is always striving to know more, to have more data, more facts and the ocean of knowledge is limitless, hence one is never able to achieve fulfilment, resulting in frustration and disappointment.

*tr̥ṣṇā-saṅga* — *tr̥ṣṇā* (thirst) is longing for an object which one does not have and for which one has a burning desire to possess. These are our cherished goals and happiness projects which we think will bring us abiding joy and satisfaction. All things being impermanent, nothing which we achieve will bring abiding happiness and simply leads to further desperate clinging to goals.

*karma-saṅgena* — all the three previous attachments culminate in attachment to action - because it is through action that one strives and struggles to achieve one's goals. Attachment to action causes suffering because eventually one's ability to work and act diminishes. All outcomes depend on 4 conditioning factors:—

1. One's own effort
2. The effort of others
3. Circumstances
4. Individual and group Karma

Since only one of these factors can be controlled by the individual, success and reward is never guaranteed.

*Saṅga* is a state of being fused with someone or something — either voluntarily or circumstantially.

- Circumstantial attachment is natural connection to family, home, food, community, country, religion, culture, values etc. brought about by our birth circumstances.
- Voluntary attachment is brought about through choice — chosen career, friends, hobbies, recreational diversions, diet, objects, paraphernalia etc.

*Saṅga* is like an addiction — a certain state of euphoria, wellbeing or comfort is experienced in the presence of the beloved person or object but it's absence causes deep feelings of unhappiness, discomfort, discontent, lack of meaning and a craving to be re-united with the object of attachment — since everything is impermanent and separation is inevitable, the stronger the attachment the more intense the eventual suffering.

*Saṅga* is the greatest cause of unhappiness (*dukha*) and limitation (*bandhana*) because it is directly connected with impermanence (*anityata*). The reality is that everything that we cling to will eventual dis-connect and dissolve.

*sarve kṣayānta nicayāḥ patanāntāḥ samucchreyāḥ |*  
*saṃyoga viprayogāntā maraṇānta ca jīvitam ||*  
*tasmāt putreṣu dāresu mitreṣu ca dhaneṣu ca |*  
*nāti-prasaṅgaḥ kartavyo viprayogo hi tair-dhruvam ||*

All compounds end in dissolution, everything raised will fall, all unions end in disunion, and all life ends in death. Therefore, do not be excessively attached to children, spouses, friends and wealth because you will (eventually) be separated from them all. (Ramayana U.K 52:11-12 )

*jātasya niyato mṛtyuḥ patanañca tathonnateḥ |*  
*viprayogāvasānaśca saṃyogaḥ sañcayāt kṣayaḥ ||*

Death is the end of everything born, fall the end of exaltation, union terminates in separation, and growth tends but to decay. (Viṣṇu Purāṇa 5: 38:87)

*anityam yauvanam bālyam śarīram dravya sañcayāḥ |  
bhavād bhāvāntaram yānti taraṅgavadanāratam ||*

Childhood, youth, the body and the accumulations of wealth are transient. They go from one state to another continuously like waves. (Yoga Vasiṣṭha 1-28-10)

*anityāni śarīrāṇi vibhavaḥ naiva śāśvataḥ |  
nityam sannihataḥ mṛityuḥ kartavyaḥ dharma-saṅgrahaḥ ||*

All bodies are impermanent, wealth too is unstable, death is always present, one should therefore accumulate Dharma [as it is the only thing that remains with one].

## How should one practice Non-attachment?

Knowing the dynamic process of attachment is one thing the problem is "how it put it into practice?" The Gītā gives us some hints at how this can be achieved.

*karmany-evādhikāras te mā phaleṣu kadācana |  
mā karma phala hetur bhū mā saṅgo'stv-akarmaṇi || 2:47 ||*

To work alone you have the right, and not to the fruits. Do not allow rewards to be your motive for action. Nor be attached to inaction.

*yogasthaḥ kuru karmāṇi saṅgam tyaktvā dhanañjaya |  
siddhy-asiddhyoḥ samo bhūtvā samatvam yoga ucyate || 2:48 ||*

Abandoning attachment and established in Yoga, perform works, viewing success and failure with an even mind. Equipoise is said to be Yoga.

*saktāḥ karmany-avidvāṃso yathā kurvanti bhārata |  
kuryād-vidvāṃs-tathāsaktāś-cikīrṣu loka-saṅgraham || 3:25 ||*

Just as the ignorant act with attachment their work, O Arjuna, so should the wise act without any attachment, and only for the welfare of the world.

These three verse sum up how one should act with non-attachment (*asaṅga*). One should pursue the three goals of life — career (*dharma*), prosperity (*artha*) and pleasure (*kāma*) as best one can. One should do one's bounden duty to support and care for one's kith and kin. One should engage in a useful career which will benefit the world. One should enjoy the pleasures that are in accordance with Dharma — but *all* of this should be done without "attachment" to their outcomes. One should not become "addicted" to them. One should relinquish the drive to control and direct everything.

Surrender is the letting go of hope and expectation which are reflections of an imaginary world. One should prefer to live in the *real* world in which one moves and has one's being. A world with its own direction, and with its unpredictable outcomes governed by factors over which we have no control.

### The Benefit of cultivating Non-Attachment

When you understand the true meaning of non-attachment:—

- Expectations no longer rule your life.
- Emotions arise, but you have space to observe them. You have perspective. You're no longer entrapped and tormented by your emotions.

- You relate to the world as it *is* rather than to your concepts about it, which can never bring lasting happiness.
- You have a clarity of mind so you're able to see the true nature of all things.
- You're not bothered by anything, but that doesn't mean you tolerate harmful behavior.
- The problems of this world evoke compassion rather than anger.
- You don't relentlessly pursue happiness. You just enjoy it when it's present, and release it when it dissolves.
- You're able to allow life to unfold without needing to control everything.
- You don't stop loving. You love even more and more sincerely.
- Your heart only expands, when you see all the unnecessary suffering in this world.
- You feel naturally compelled to help, to alleviate suffering, but you're not emotionally and spiritually invested in the outcome.
- The sense of spaciousness and freedom you feel bring a genuine contentment that can never be found in temporary experiences.

You are free because you're in charge of your mind and emotions instead of them controlling you. And, with this freedom, you can taste the distinct flavor of every experience with no need to clutch at it, to cling and grasp.

## EXAMPLES

#1. Health practitioners care deeply about their patients and want only the best for them they will stand by them until the last minute, never abandoning them, but when they fail to heal or die — the health professional remains UNATTACHED!

One can be affectionate and caring WITHOUT attachment - these two things can be separated.

#2. You're holidaying in an exclusive resort. You arrive for a week's holiday - you say MY room, MY bed, MY room-attendant, MY towel, MY sheets, MY cupboard — you enjoy the experience using all the facilities — but do you become attached? Do you experience pain and suffering when you leave? No you do not. Why? because you knew all along that one day you will leave and that nothing that you call your own actually belongs to you. Everything has been lent to you for some time only.

#3. A friend asks you to look after his pet-dog while she is out of town — do you care for it less because it's not yours? Do you not play affectionately with it, take it for walks, feed it? But you do not become attached. Why? Because you know that it is not yours and one day it will return to its owner. You will of course feel some sadness and loss - but you will have to let go.

#4. A friend takes a job overseas and asks you to live in, and take care of her house, pet and belongings until she returns. After 5 years she returns and you need to leave — how do you react?