

# The Impersonal Nature of Spirituality

By Richard Harvey

In earlier articles we have discussed stillness and being, letting go and loss, and non-seeking. These are essential aspects of authentic spiritual practice. Let us now look at the crucial issue that underpins all these aspects of genuine practice: the impersonal nature of spirituality. We will begin with a story.

Bhagavan Das Babaji was a prestigious holy man. His fame had spread far and wide. He lived in West Bengal at the end of the 19th century. Ramakrishna was less well-known and his recognition as an avatar, the personification of God, had not yet been generally established. Ramakrishna visited Bhagavan Das and when he arrived, the holy man was fiercely reprimanding a sadhu. He broke off to welcome the unknown Ramakrishna and then proceeded to speak of himself with profound and egotistical importance, as an example and teacher to his disciples. Ramakrishna, who was always emotionally responsive to matters to do with God and spiritual practice, rose up and chastised the holy man, crying, "Who do you think you are? Do you think you can teach anyone anything? Do you think you can decide anything at all unless God allows it first?" Ramakrishna moved into inspired utterances of impersonal truth and an eyewitness tells us that the loose cloth he was wearing fell from his body as he was speaking. Finally standing naked, his face appeared to be bathed in a divine radiance. Bhagavan, accustomed as he was to receiving reverence and humility, was nonetheless able to recognize that he was in the presence of greatness and it is said that the two of them fell into ecstatic dialogue before lovingly parting.

Spirituality confers no personal status. As I said above, it is a process of letting go and loss, shedding and detaching, and peeling back the layers. Eventually all that is left is the brightness of the heart, consciousness, and awareness. In this story Ramakrishna criticizes the egotism – or the personalizing of the impersonal nature of spirituality – to which, it seems, even an enlightened teacher like Bhagavan Das Babaji may sometimes succumb. Spiritual attainment has no form and no attachments with which to confine or limit it. Spiritual surrender is voluntary participation in the endless permutations of the ripples of nothingness.

The limitlessness, the surrender, and the embracing of nothingness leads to the spiritual knowledge of who we really are. This reality displaces our neurotic worldly concerns and introduces a new priority, which is to awaken. When we are firmly established in this intent, the apparently important issues of worldly life are of less overwhelming concern. The vicissitudes of relative life are of paramount concern to our human form, but the deathless spirit that inhabits our human form as essence cannot be affected by change.

We may be awoken and reminded of this essence with some sighting or experience – a book, a person, a teacher, a teaching, a religion, or a meditation practice – something enters our lives at a time when we are receptive and the doors are opened; both outer doors and inner doors. It can be something small, a look, a touch, a word, or even how a word is spoken. When were you reminded of what is crucially important in life? When was the first time you experienced and witnessed stillness, spirit, and peace?

For me, there was always some intimation of this crucial importance in poetry, music and those people who were true to themselves, true individuals who I could tell were strong in their inner conviction and relationship to their essence. To remain true to some inner gauge was more powerful for them than conforming or belonging to the outside world.

I sensed I could be like that but that I would have to revise my relationship to my individual self in order to attain it. I discovered that the individual self is a celebration and a sacrifice in the name of Truth. This is why Nisargadatta gave up writing poetry. He sacrificed writing poetry to strengthen his spiritual discipline. This is why Osho says that the ultimate challenge for individual personalities is to be joyful, to celebrate, to dance, because the ego-processes are exclusively based on misery and perpetuating resentment and unhappiness in the interest of ego-survival. We cultivate our own unhappiness through clinging and attachment and the individual personality is a fallacy, a misnomer. The same vein of unhappiness courses through you and I as a preservation of ego-resentment and ego-aggrandizement: look how much I have suffered, look how much I have endured, look at what I have to put up with. Very often our suffering appears in the form of unconscious fears, as in this young man's account:

I wish I could live with less fear. I fantasize about getting overwhelmed and there is the constant presence of impending catastrophe in my mind. It's hard to describe the way I fear and get overwhelmed by things. It's not a physical feeling, I never have panic attacks, I never get angry and when things do go wrong for the most part I have learned to accept it, at least a lot more than I used to. It's just I have an inner anxious rumination about the future, a worrying about what can go wrong. It's as if my brain likes to have something to worry about. Once something I have been worrying about for a while is resolved it moves on to the next worry. I know the answer to this is mindfulness and living in the present and I've been really trying to do this through meditation with some success, but I find it very difficult to integrate this into everyday life.

Deepening spiritual practice transforms our relationship to fear and desire over time. Until that time, negative emotions support the creation of the ego-self. But the recognition that we are not merely our ego, paves the way for the realization of our deathless spirit, the eternal essence that animates our psycho-physical form as living, breathing consciousness. No more is our sentience a matter of personal agency than our individual form is personal. Embracing our true nature, we shed our attachment to personal identification and apprehend the impersonal nature of spirituality.

This article is an excerpt from Richard Harvey's book [Your Divine Opportunity](#).