

Aum Amriteswaryai Namah

The ABC to Peace in Challenging Times

Swami Shubamritananda Puri - april 5, 2020

My infinite salutations at the Lotus Feet of my Master, Beloved Amma, and to all of you dear sister and brothers from different parts of the world taking part in this webcast. Praying that all of you are in the best of health and spirits and so are your near and dear ones. I am sure many of you have read or seen Amma's message to Her children for the challenging times that the world is going through. She has been thinking about all of you, keeping track regularly of the developments in different parts of the globe, and let us remember Her words that we need to live with hope, self-confidence and love and not in fear.

I would like to focus my talk today on the topic: "The ABC to Peace in the present times"

I have been talking to a lot of people from different parts of the world over the Internet these days, and the topic is always about the Corona virus pandemic. A very common phrase that I hear is "I can't believe that this is happening." Recently, a youngster said to me, "I feel that what we are going through is a dream and someone will wake me up from this nightmare soon." There is a big resistance that we sometimes face from our minds to accept the present. So, one of the first things that we need to develop is Acceptance.

A- Acceptance is a must....

This is the A amongst the ABC. The serenity prayer, which is always worth contemplating, is especially important in today's times.

***God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,***

***the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.***

I am sure many of you have heard the 5 stages that most human beings go through when they face grief or difficult situations: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. Even with the alarm that rings in the morning, you go through these phases. There is first denial, that is you turn the other way. Then, there is anger at the poor alarm clock, as if it set the time of the alarm. Then, you hit the snooze button, and start bargaining saying..."2 more minutes." Then, when the clock starts ringing again, there is the frustration and depressed look on your face...and finally comes acceptance to the fact that it is time to wake up. Later we are so relieved that we woke up. Otherwise we could have missed a flight or an important meeting. The earlier the transition into Acceptance, more will be the peace we experience.

We have to accept the present situation; there is no other way to it. This pandemic is like a collective karma that the whole world is going through. Just like we cannot blame the clock for the alarm ringing in the morning, we cannot play put the blame on anyone for the situations that we find ourselves in. We all have learnt in physics about how a wire gets heated up when there is resistance to the current flowing. It can even catch fire. This is true for any kind of resistance in life. Life gets heated up in suffering as we resist to situations.

Serenity comes when you trade expectations for acceptance.

For e.g. there are many who keep their mobile phones on even during talks. Initially I would get irritated, as the sound disturbs your concentration. I also found that the irritation did not end there. I allowed it to spread for a while in my mind. I would start thinking, "What kind of

person is he or she. Shouldn't he have the decency to turn off his mobile when a talk is going on? People have become so insensitive. Where is this world going towards?" But then I said to myself, "You are the one who is suffering with this negative chain of thought. They are sitting peacefully, not affected at all. Better to accept it than grumble about it." Now, when I hear the sound of the phone ringing during the talk, I try to think, "May be they forgot. Or the phone is new that they don't know how to turn it off. Or they are who they are." It keeps me peaceful to a great extent. May it be the irritating phone call, business loss, job lay off, chronic illness, or a massive crisis like this pandemic, acceptance is the only way to find stability and equip ourselves to deal with it in the right way.

Lord Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita talks about the attitude of acceptance as prasada buddhi. There is cessation of sorrow for the seeker when there is prasada, tranquility of the mind. This comes from acceptance. Amma gives the beautiful example: when we receive Prasad in a temple, do we tell the priest, "Not sweet enough...or, not enough cashews..." No. We just accept it with gratitude and love. Such an attitude should come towards situations in life, good and bad.

Acceptance is sometimes misinterpreted by people as giving up or accepting defeat, or setting the bar too low. It is never so. Acceptance is a sign of strength and not weakness. The primary element of acceptance is opening to reality as it is, not how we feel about it. Accepting is a pause, a period of allowing, of clear seeing. This helps you settle inside, which then gives you clarity of what to do to make the situation better, or turn the situation to your advantage by directing our physical, emotional and mental energy to change things that can change through efforts. Acceptance does not mean that you don't have preferences. You can have preferences and surely work towards fulfilling them; but if they are not fulfilled, you accept with it equanimity.

If the external situation may be such that we cannot change it much through efforts, we can surely mold ourselves as who we choose to be in the face of this experience. So, acceptance is always a win-win attitude.

Acceptance is always in the present moment. Even if you hate what is happening, make the present moment your friend and ally, not your enemy. This will miraculously transform your whole life. To accept means to also include or make space for the part of us that's screaming "no" to the situation. So we accept the situation and also the fierce rejection of it at the same time. In the serenity that arises from acceptance, all the disturbances settle down and the mind becomes more silent. Such a mind can think effectively of the right actions to be performed to transform the situation to our advantage. It helps us become the person whom we have chosen to be in these situations.

I am sure many of you have heard of Dr. Viktor Frankl, a very famous Austrian neurologist and psychiatrist, and one of the heroes who survived the Nazi concentration camps. He has written a beautiful book called 'Man's Search for Meaning.' As he saw people around him dying, including his near and dear ones, and himself being put to all kind of torture, he said to himself, "They might be able to control my external freedom. But they cannot touch my inner freedom. It is totally in my choice whether to be peaceful or distressed." These are the words coming from the mouth of somebody who had developed acceptance and was clearly in charge of himself.

When you ask Amma, "What is surrender?" She says, Surrender means acceptance. It is acceptance of pairs of opposites in life (success and failure, joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain) as complementary, without any rejection or protest."

In Amma's biography, we see how Amma accepted all the challenges that came Her way. There were no complaints that Amma made to the Universe as to why She was being tested. There were so many detractors in the early

days, who did everything to stop Amma's mission. Many of them now have turned into ardent devotees. When Amma is asked about how She sees this transformation, She says, "In those days they threw stones; now they throw flowers." Amma's acceptance is without any kind of judgmental attitude.

Accept what is, let go what was, and have faith in what will be. Acceptance is the pathway to peace.

Practical takeaway: Introspect and see what are the things your mind is resisting in these times. Make a note of them in your personal diary and take one of them at a time. Notice the emotions within you when you are resisting. Now, trying to see something good in what you are resisting, and slowly start embracing it. For e.g. 1. you are bored with my talk...the good thing is that you realize that your hearing is proper. 2. You are tired with all the hand washing you are doing nowadays...it also means you have access to running water. Notice the emotions in you when acceptance has come in. The happiness that comes from acceptance is something that you can notice very tangibly.

B. Be flexible to changes

Such situations where we find ourselves in demand some changes that has to come to our lifestyle and to our attitudes. Let us not be stiff with our likes and dislikes and let us try to be flexible.

Have you seen the way the bodies of small children bend? They are totally flexible. They make take their legs around the neck and suck the big toe. They have no problem in doing it. As you get older, the body gets more and more stiff and if you try the posture that the child easily does when you are above 40, then you will need an ambulance to take you to a doctor to get you out of it. Have you noticed the body of a person when he or she dies? It is totally stiff. It is hard to straighten the hands and legs if they are bent. Flexibility is the companion of life and stiffness is the companion of death.

We, Indians, are very good in flexibility at least in our headshake. It is sometimes very confusing for the West. They cannot understand if it is 'yes' or 'no' and in reality, it can be both.

Let us not be so stiff in life, which will take us totally away from true joy. If we can be in the flow, there is nothing more joyful than that. Now, flexibility is not just external but internal as well. A flexible mindset is a relaxed mindset and a stiff mindset is the opposite.

I remember an incident that happened after the Tsunami. It was amazing to see the way Amma directed the whole rescue and relief operations. The University campus across the backwaters in Amritapuri became a relief camp in a few hours after the Tsunami struck. Thousands of people were safely brought there. When they reached the campus, they had a set of clothes to wear, hot food to eat, toiletries, and a mat to lie down. Amma made sure that all their needs were met right from the time they reached the campus. That evening, I was helping with the tea serving in the campus. One person who took the tea from me, made an odd face after sipping a little. I asked him if there was any problem. He said, "Not enough sugar." I said to him, "Do you even realize how lucky you are that you just survived a great natural calamity like the Tsunami? You have everything arranged here for you in a few hours' time. Don't you think you can also be a little flexible from your side." This is how our likes and dislikes govern over us.

There has hardly been a time like this when human beings have to be confined to their homes without moving anywhere much. I know this is not easy for many. It is a good time to practice patience and flexibility. Many have become *karma-rogis*, that is have been afflicted with the disease of doing karma. One may not need to be doing something, but still the restless mind pushes you into action. Real mastery over the mind is also the ability to remain still and silent when needed. Till now, we were always told by our parents and teachers, "Don't just sit, do something." Life

is now telling us, "Don't just do something, sit." The words of Blaise Pascal, the French philosopher comes to my mind: "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." As flexibility increases, you will see that the mind does not react much to external changes happening around. It becomes more peaceful and happy.

Practical takeaway:

Flexibility in Mindset- From Lockdown to becoming Open-minded

Mind under lockdown state

I am stuck at home.

An open-minded person

I am safe at home.

I am spending more time with my family.

I am having my Private Retreat.

Mind under lockdown state

I will run out of necessary items. I cannot buy anything new.

An open-minded person

I have enough at home. Let me use things wisely.

Let me reduce, recycle, re-use.

Mind under lockdown state

Everything is shutting down. I'm panicking.

An open-minded person

The most important places as grocery store, medical facilities are still open.

My Distance Learning is still happening. I am not missing on to my learning.

Mind under lockdown state

There is too much of insecurity. I feel anxious and unsafe.

An open-minded person

While I cannot control the situation, I can control my actions by keeping myself safe - by washing hands regularly, by taking all precautions and by staying at home.

I can keep myself healthy by practicing mindfulness, exercising every day, eating nutritious food and sleeping well. I will also do everything that makes me happy while I am at home.

C – Convert challenges to opportunities

In today's times, you can find people who are on the edge due to fear and anxiety, and will spend time blaming situations, countries, governments, health systems, health workers, etc. On the other hand, you can also find so many heroes emerging in these weeks who have found ways to spread happiness to others and surely making them happy as well in the process. Challenges in life can either make us better or bitter. Always remember that you are not a victim unless you decide to be. It all depends on how we use them. We need to look into ways by which we can make the best use of these challenges to grow in wisdom and peace. For this we need to focus ourselves on a higher goal. Then, no challenges will keep us in lockdown state.

A beautiful example of this is one of the residents in Amritapuri called Andrea from Germany. Amma has given her the name Purnima. She has been on the wheel chair for so many years. But, her focus on Amma and her will to serve is so amazing. She never allows her handicap to come in way of doing what she loves to do, which is to serve. Purnima travels to all the places that Amma goes, in India and abroad. During the programme, you can find her distributing tokens from her wheel chair. In Amritapuri, you can sometimes find her in the hospital distributing the patient cards. You can sometimes find her wheelchair tugging along a load of laundry of the visitors from the washing area to the drying area. See, externally it seems like a permanent lockdown state for her. But, her love for Amma and the goal to serve has made her such a happy and free person.

So, during these months of isolation, whenever your mind pulls you down, tell yourselves that nothing is going to make me down. I will transform this time into a real fertile soil for my growth. Keep a higher goal in front. It could be to be more focused in practices. Or it could be spreading happiness around in your own way. If you are a musician, play online and make people happy. If you are a farmer, teach some youngsters online the basics of farming. If you are a chef, take cooking lessons online...there is so much you can do to spread joy. You will never be caught up in anxiety nor will you be bored anytime.

Practical take-away: I would like to mention the practical take away from this teaching with an incident that happened with me a few years back. I was in Istanbul for giving lectures. On the way back, I reached the airport few hours before my flight. After check-in, I saw a line that was going all around the airport area. I thought, "This is strange. Are they selling tickets for the World Cup football in the airport?" I found out that it was the line for the Security. The Security check area was not even visible. The line was basically stretching to the door of the airport. Standing there, at first, I was a bit impatient and anxious, and started blaming the airport authorities for not expanding the airport enough (now they have an amazing new airport), etc. But luckily, I became aware of it. I thought to myself, "This is something that I have to face. There is no way to cut the line, and most of the people standing in front also have flights to catch, some even earlier than me. Let me make the best use of the opportunity. I gave myself the challenge that I will chant the 1000 names and complete it by the time I reach the security check area." I did not feel the wait as grueling. I did not even realize that the line was moving. As I kept nearing the counter, I had not yet finished chanting. I even wanted the person in front to take a little more time so that I would reach the target I set for myself. It was such a sense of happiness as I finished chanting exactly when my turn came.

I know a friend of mine who has taken the task of writing 21,000 mantras (1000 mantras a day), in this 21-day lockdown period in India. He wants to bring the books and offer them to Amma when he meets Her the next

time. We all can try to keep ourselves focused by setting interesting goals to be achieved in this period of self-isolation, that will keep us inspired.

So, dear sisters and brothers, let us face these times with acceptance, flexibility and converting these challenges into opportunities. Let us go deeper within and make the foundations of our life solid. Though the stock markets are fluctuating quite a lot, it is a great time for spiritual investment.

As we are going through these challenging times, let us pray to Amma for the peace of the departed souls, and for their near and dear ones to have the mental strength to cope up with this huge personal tragedy. Let us pray for the hundreds of thousands who are affected by the virus and are in hospitals or self-isolation. Let us pray for the physical safety and mental strength of all the doctors, nurses, medical staff, pharmacists, social workers, police and all those who have been working selflessly 24/7, to keep us safe.

Let me end with a quote from Amma: "Let us light the lamp of love and faith in our heart and take each step. You may wonder, 'How will this dense darkness lift with the little lamp lit inside me?'. If each person lights the lamp within, then the strength of the light multiplies and all darkness can be overcome."

Om Lokah Samastah Sukhino Bhavantu....

