

Understand the power of senses¹

B Mahadevan²

Among the many “wish lists” we all have, one common item is to have a peace of mind. You can ask anyone cutting across nationality, religion, caste, creed, age and sex if this is in their wish list. They will all answer in the affirmative. It merely shows that this is not a religious or a spiritual value to be practiced but a simple yearning in our heart. After all if we visit any doctor he will also tell us that this can bestow a healthy life for us. Yet to our greatest surprise, we find this to be a challenging idea to practice. We need to ask ourselves what proportion of time in 24 hours we have peace of mind. A disturbed mind cannot even have peace of mind in sleep as the dreams will continue to disturb.

Remote controlled peace of mind

One of the common limitations we all have is that our peace of mind is remote controlled by many others around us. Somebody will make a remark about us and we will lose peace of mind on account of that. Some other person will deal with us in an inappropriate manner and the aftermath of this leads us to mental suffering. Ideally the other person must go through the suffering. We shout at people in the office and public places when we feel we have been cheated or ill-treated. We have developed good skills in writing long, nasty e-mails to our colleagues and associates when we are in disagreement with the other side or not happy with their action. We carry our frustrations, tension and disappointments back home and vent it on the family members (children, spouse, parents and other elders at home) the moment we get an opportunity. In several other situations we may not vent it out on others explicitly as illustrated above. Instead, we may mull over it and plan revenge or counter-attack at a later time. We also curse at others, develop envy and jealousy etc. All these agitate one’s mind and induce enormous mental stress in oneself.

All these actions fundamentally work at cross purposes and prevent us from realizing our simple goal of being peaceful. It is not that we engage only in these activities all the time. However, from time to time we seem to slip into this undesirable state that achieving even this simple goal in life appears to be an uphill task.

Human beings are considered to be the most evolved of all the living creatures. We are endowed with the five sensory organs and the power of discrimination. This separates us from all other living beings and enables us to “think and act” accordingly. Despite such a rare endowment of special capabilities why are we not able to achieve this goal in life? It is therefore obvious that our peace of mind is remote controlled by people and events around us. All these generate enormous mental stress and eventually lead us to chronic diseases.

¹ **Mahadevan, B.** (2013). “Understand the power of senses”, *Sadguru’s Blessings*, Vol. 10 (5), January, 2013, pp 20 – 21.

² *B Mahadevan is a Professor at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore.*

Getting rid of mental stress

There are several modern day prescriptions to address the mental stress problem. Often it starts with a motherhood statement, “you need to make life style changes”. This is very ambiguous and nobody knows what it means. For some it means starting morning walk and yoga classes and for some others it amounts to cutting oil and sweet. The moot question is will this help us gain an upper hand on this apparent state of helplessness?

We may not be able solve a problem until we know the root cause of it. If we get headache, we can swallow an aspirin and temporarily get rid of it. Suppose we get head ache the next day, we can swallow one more aspirin. However, if we experience head ache every day, it is wiser to know what causes these headaches and address the root cause. While aspirins can help you get rid of headaches as and when they re-appear up to a point, it may not help us gain an upper hand on this ailment once and for all. The life style change prescriptions for addressing the mental stress play exactly the aspirin role. What we need is a much better and a stringer dose to get rid of this head ache called mental stress. Let us turn our attention towards *Bhagavad Gitā* and see if there is some help forthcoming to tackle this issue.

Root cause of the problem

Lord Krishna points to a different aspect and shows us the source for most of these problems. According to him, even a person who is wise (*vipaścitaḥ puruṣaḥ*) and has been able to constantly strive for a good mind control (*yataḥ*) will face certain challenges. The turbulent senses (*pramāthīni indriyāni*) are so powerful that at times they snatch away the mind (*manaḥ haranti*) of even such a person with force (*prasabham*).

यततो ह्यपि कौन्तेय पुरुषस्य विपश्चितः ।
इन्द्रियाणि प्रमाथीनि हरन्ति प्रसभं मनः ॥ 2.60

*yatato hyāpi kaunteya puruṣasya vipāścitaḥ
indriyāni pramāthīni haranti prasabham manaḥ*

What we infer from this is advise of Lord Krishna is that we experience mental stress when we lose mind control and act in a manner which may not appear appropriate. Further, one important reason for losing mind control is succumbing to powerful senses. Imagine riding on a set of five violent horses at the same time, whose control we do not have. Instead of reaching a desired destination we will only be tossed aside and eventually thrown out.

Value of Sense Control

If you dig deep into why we react violently in a variety of ways as mentioned earlier, we will invariably be able to trace it to active and uncontrolled senses. An uncontrolled sense starts this process and adds fuel to the fire and drags individuals to the brink of animal behavior. Once we reach that state of mind we start shouting and doing other things which are

unfitting of humans. An individual with uncontrolled senses will be full of impulsive reactions to situations around him/her. There will be no rhyme or rhythm in what he/she does. Life will be often punctuated with regrets for such unconstrained behaviours. Regretting such behaviours later does not build a great character or temperament in an individual. Therefore, sense control is the fundamental building block for individual development and character building.

How do we develop sense control? The first step in this process is to understand the power of the senses in hijacking oneself to an undesirable path. This can be achieved only by repeated contemplation of this very thought. It is a worthwhile investment by everyone as it goes a long way in paving the way to experience peace of mind. Another useful practice to avoid getting trapped into the cunning ways of the senses is to create a meaningful delay between stimulus and response. Such a delay will provide an opportunity for the *buddhi* to rationally analyse the situation on hand and provide an appropriate response after taking into consideration the pros and cons of various options.

If we live in a place infested with deadly snakes we exhibit utmost care. Since this thought engulfs us on a 24x7 basis we are always alert. We need to develop a similar approach towards handling our sense organs. Repeated contemplation of this *śloka* and the grace of Lord Krishna can help us escape the mouse trap set by the senses.