



By Rupali Chadha, MD

Over the years I have been approached by many a devotee in distress. Though I grew up in ISKCON and have been slowly cultivating my own Krishna consciousness, I am very much a neophyte. I was blessed by Krishna's will in that I became a physician. I went forward to specialize in general and forensic psychiatric medicine. It is for this reason, I am often approached by devotees when their emotional life becomes overwhelming.

Often they are told to chant better rounds or seek shelter of Krishna. Well, perhaps Krishna guides them in their heart to talk to someone like me. One of my two mentors in ISKCON, Badrinarayan Swami, has been telling me since I was eight years old, that yes, we trust in Krishna, but if we have a broken leg, we must address that with modern medicine. When I chose psychiatric medicine as my path, he told me the same is true of some mental disturbances that come from brain diseases.

Before I progress further I must address that some mental disturbances are not brain diseases requiring medication, but still are issues we must sort in conjunction with our Krishna consciousness. Just because someone is not mentally ill (as in a major mental illness which may be a brain disease), it does not mean they are mentally well. Emotional wellness or health are key components to a peaceful life! Major mental illness like

schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and even brain disease depression require diagnosis and treatment with medication by a physician. These illnesses result from a “broken part.” Usually that broken part is the genetics we inherit that then leads to changes in the brain’s structure, chemistry, and functioning. In schizophrenia a patient may hear voices or be paranoid of harm when there is none. In mood disorders like bipolar disorder or depression, we have extremes of mood that threaten our very survival by causing behaviors that are dangerous to ourselves often, sometimes to others. In order to understand if one of these illnesses are affecting us, we must seek counsel of a trained physician in psychiatric medicine, also known as a psychiatrist (different than a psychologist who is a PhD or PsyD and not a medical doctor).

But just because most of us will not have a major mental illness, does not mean we have a smooth and well functioning emotional life. Many of us suffer from non brain disease depression, what I call demoralization. Even more of us are plagued with anxiety (again not to the severity of a brain disease, but just enough to affect our choices and peace). Once it is determined that we are not suffering from an illness that requires medication and or formal therapy, we can then embark on understanding and healing our minds.

Why is it important for someone who is aspiring towards God to work simultaneously on their emotional health? Often we work so hard to cultivate our devotional practice but completely neglect taking care of our psychological needs. Of course Krishna provides all, but doesn’t Krishna wants us to work on having ready coping mechanisms for our emotions, healthy ways to deal with past trauma, and a good managing strategy for dealing with material difficulties as they arise? As an aspiring devotee and psychiatric physician, my answer is yes! Even Krishna states in the Bhagavad Gita, that “for him who has conquered the mind, the mind is the best of friends; but for him who has failed to do so, his mind will remain the greatest enemy.” (Chapter 6, Verse 6).

So just how can one make their mind a friend and an ally to support their Krishna consciousness, rather than an enemy? The first step is in taking ownership for the mind. Now there are many things we do not control, as we know we are not the Controller. We cannot control many aspects of our environment and we certainly cannot control others. This may seem like an odd thing to say, but take notice in your day; how much of it is spent actually trying to control other people? A husband and wife trying to control the other to do something, children trying to manipulate their parents and parents, rightfully and properly so, trying to control the learning and building of healthy skills in their children. We can influence others, and as aspiring Vaishnavs, we ought to live by example and be a positive guiding light to wellness. But we still cannot control them. And we should not aim to, I would argue for two reasons: one is that love is not control, and the other is, it is futile and is only a defense for anxiety which we are then neglecting in actually addressing. Even Krishna does give us some free will and does not control us, though He is the Supreme Controller, because forcing someone to love or behave a certain way is unloving at its core. Love, even to God, has to be freely given. Now, of

course, like a parent, Krishna guides us as much as we desire and is our ultimate well-wisher.

The other key reason we should not attempt to control others, and really need to grieve this loss of control that we never even had, is that we will fail in this attempt and ignore healing the true problem that underlies. And why do we want to control our environment or others? The core reason is anxiety. We wish to limit surprises that may harm us or outcomes we can foresee as disastrous. This is why a little bit of anxiety is protective to the living entity, so we do not go hug a bear or drive off a cliff. But most of us have too much anxiety, even if not at the level of a brain disease, it is still causing us dis-ease and disturbing our minds.

Now that we have taken responsibility for our minds, or at least decided this is the path we wish to embark upon, we can focus on what we can control. Our minds! The mind is an unruly place and years, and lifetimes, worth of programming has many of us thinking in a way that is self defeating. We have a leg up, so to speak, in our faith in that we know we are not the mind. That it is a separate entity we can build to be stronger, more resilient, and more in service of our wellness, and then by product, our Krishna consciousness. The mind can roughly be thought of as our thoughts and feelings. It is so easy and conditioned to identify as our thoughts and feelings, but we are not either. We should tackle thought and feelings separately, though they are clearly married in many ways.

Every devotee has the experience of chanting the Holy Name during our daily japa, only to think think think. Rarely do we have a breakthrough moment where we just hear the Holy Name and be. So even if we want improved rounds and that is the only (and perhaps best) goal, we must figure out what to do with all these thoughts! Awareness that we are not these thoughts and to just observe and release them is a great first step. A goal is to not take them so seriously and know many of them are not there because we are electively choosing to think through a problem and use them as tools, but because they are automatic and from our ego. So observing them and taking them a little less seriously is a great beginning action. A great Jewish friend once told me, "what is enlightenment if not to lighten up!"

Next we must address, if necessary, the content of these automatic, constant, and chattering thoughts. For people suffering from anxiety, which on some level is most of us, they are worries and often quite mean. Thoughts saying we will fail, we are bad, fat, ugly, a bad devotee, a fraud, and the list goes on. Many of these thoughts are partially or mostly wrong, and even if they are true, they do not help build wellness. I recommend this exercise to my patients, hug yourself and hear the thoughts but then say to your mind, "I hear you, I love you, I will never leave you, but I am not going to go in the direction (down the bunny hole of anxiety) that you want, I am in charge." The "I" here is a deeper part of you, or the real you, the soul. The thinking part of our brain can be used magnificently to plan festivals, chart out our day of service, read and share our Shastra,

and create a new prasadam recipe. But this chattering, negative part need to be noticed and stopped lovingly in its tracks. This is a process. But this is powerful.

The second component of our minds, which is more the feminine part of us (especially if we think of thinking energy as the masculine “doing” part of us) is our emotions. I only bring up the masculine and the feminine here as many times in Western culture, in particular, there is dismissal of feelings/emotions as being heavily the concern of one gender. Whatever body we find ourselves in, we have both of these components and both of these components deserve the same care and attention.

Emotions, or our feelings, can seem impossible to ignore or control. I advocate we take a more flowing approach with them. Ignoring emotions may mean missing real threats or information, but most of us are simply overstimulated by our feelings. And so we either indulge them or ignore them. Neither approach will help us appreciate them and then be able to manage them. Try this exercise instead: when a feeling pops up, pause, breathe, feel it all. Then use your mind as a tool to see if this feeling has validity, rational associated thoughts, or automatic false ones and either release the feeling consciously or decide an action may be necessary. This seems easy but is so difficult in the beginning and we may find we are using a lot of brain power to handle this moment to moment! But it will become as automatic as being overwhelmed by an avalanche of anxiety or another negative feeling and will of course, produce a peaceful mind.

We can see a peaceful mind still thinks and feels! It's just not running amok. Chanting rounds, as best as we can, will help hone the mind and employing this awareness and tactics will help our rounds. It's an exponentially mutually beneficial journey.

What if there are real threats and stressors in our life? Well, now we know how to use the mind as a tool to approach them. Imagine how much easier it is to tackle the same stressor when you are aware of your mind's mayhem potential, versus when you are, as described in the Gita, the bewildered passenger being ferried all around by wild senses! This article is by no means suggesting a panacea for our suffering, as only cultivating our Krishna consciousness can do that, but it is offering a way to mitigate our journey so that we have a better shot at going home to Krishna.

Of course this all being said, many problems, as mentioned above, require formal therapy and training. Some folks will have inherited illness turned on by their environmental exposures (like stress, drugs, medical illness etc) and need medicine. I am simply offering a new outlook or awareness we can start to employ to take the first steps on this journey. Prabhupada wanted us to take the best from the East and the West. He wanted us to be scripturally based but use technology, science, healing arts when not in direct conflict with the tenant of our faith, to help ourselves and each other go home.

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