

Possessiveness - An Impediment to Usual Life

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Abstract

Possessiveness is a strong desire to have something, which may be called possession. The value of possessions depends on possessiveness. Possessiveness, not possession, is harmful to human life. Possessiveness belongs to ego/I-feeling, and this ego/I-feeling again belongs to ignorance of the discrimination between eternal and non-eternal. The misconception that the object breeds joy in us creates many problems in life. Possessiveness leads to confinement and loss of freedom. Both Jainas and Yogas accept *aparigraha*, or disowning of possessions, for making life hazardless. Possessiveness can be removed by the knowledge of discrimination between eternal and non-eternal (*nityānityavastuvivekah*), by the knowledge of I-consciousness, i.e., *jivātmā* is not different from *Parātma*. This type of knowledge can be had through rapid practice, and so ancient scriptures prescribe three *āśramas*, namely *Brahma-carya*, *Gārhaṣṭhya*, and the *Vānaprastha* to reach the fourth one, i.e., *sannyāsa* or *vairāgya*, detachment from the worldly objects. Gita also talks about *niṣkāma karma* (desire less work) to avoid possessiveness, called *karma-yoga*. The cultivation of detachment follows *śravaṇa*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana*, as per prescription in Upanisads.

Keywords: *possessiveness, possession, aparigraha, sannyāsa, vairāgya, niṣkāma karma, karma-yoga.*

Two words viz. ‘possession’ and ‘possessiveness’ are selected from the English Dictionary to be highlighted in the light of Philosophy. Grammatically, these two words belong to the same parts of speech, i.e., Noun. So, grammatically, these are equivalent to each other. However, if we look into their meaning, we will find that they are quite different. ‘Possession’ refers to physical position, but ‘possessiveness’ refers to mental position. Instead, it can be said that the word ‘possession’ has only material value in an extensive sense; possession may only be material objects like T.V., table, chair, etc, or some immaterial things like knowledge, beauty, etc. Both types of ‘possession’ do not depend on themselves. Possession in itself is valueless. Its value depends on possessiveness. But possessiveness is a strong desire to have something that may be called possession. Possession cannot harm human life, but possessiveness harms human life. Money, as a possession, is needed in human life, but possessiveness to have more money is

very bad. As the possessiveness forces you to spin around the money, it hails your life. Money in itself is not bad, but the desire to have more and more money is evil.

Possessiveness is of two kinds: 1) you need a thing and want to possess it. This possessiveness to have a particular thing is of the first type. 2) You have a particular thing, and you are feeling that your life is quite incomplete without this thing. This possessiveness to restore this thing or to increase the quality or quantity of this thing is of the second type. Both types of possessiveness are bad, but the second type is worse than the first type. The first type is only a solid thirst to have a thing you do not have, but the second type is more harmful as you are trying to increase, either in quality or in quantity, the things that you already have. In this second type of possessiveness, your thoughts remain absorbed in and around the possessions you already have. Your effort to get this possession more and more makes you confined in a particular circle which makes you narrow-minded, egocentric, restless, furious and self-centric. Your world of work becomes too small, and thus, the particular possession of your possessiveness causes your social boundaries.

Possessiveness belongs to ego or I-feeling. When I-feeling arises in a human being, s/he ignores others and thinks that s/he is superior to others. Naturally, I-feeling forces humans to separate them from others and demolishes we-feeling, the basis of social life. I-feeling injects possessiveness into the minds of human beings and inspires them to have possessions more and more. Moreover, the ego is dynamic and always trying to have something different. The ordinary and common thing cannot satisfy it anymore. Thus, the ego entices us to stress, struggle and spend sleepless nights for possessing something new. But when we get our thing of desire, we find no specialty in it. We again, as before, try to acquire something new to satisfy our ego.

The root cause of the ego or I-feeling is ignorance (*ajñāna*) of the discrimination between eternal (*nitya*) and non-eternal (*anitya*). Due to ignorance, we take non-eternal as eternal and try to possess non-eternal status and compete with others for that reason. Ultimately, the destruction of non-eternal causes pain to us. All these possessions must be obsolete at a time. Wealth, knowledge, beauty,

etc., will fade in the cycle of time, but possessiveness for this temporary or non-eternal possession will cause a lot of pain to us. We always forget it and give more importance to possession; pain and despair become our ultimate destination.

We cannot reside and survive without matter in the material world; we cannot spend a moment without matter or object as a possession. We should know the fundamental nature of the object. When we think that the object is the cause of happiness, our misconception about the object breeds a lot of problems. The tendency of being happy from the attachment to the object breeds possessiveness in us, inculcates an effort and agitation of either getting or restoring the things of our liking. When we imagine happiness in the objects; we are enticed to remain to be attached to the objects like an animal is attached to a post with rope. However, if the nature of objects were happiness, then the objects would have the same effect on all, the same happiness for all at all times. Thus, the object remains the same, but the effect changes from person to person, time to time, condition to condition. So, the effect cannot be born from the object, and the effect is not objective; it must be subjective and depends on our mind. The mind is ever active and cannot stay without a relation with any object for a moment. The mind is not distracted from a particular object in any way until and unless it gets another to fulfill desires around the new object. The annihilation of desires is attainable only when the superimposition of happiness on sense objects is removed. As long as you view the non-self as the source of happiness, your interest lies in acquiring and enjoying sense objects. However, when this view is discarded, your focus shifts from these objects to the self, and you are no longer inclined to indulge in them.

The urge to achieve more is unending; there is no satiation. Making more money, achieving high positions, fame, and a name are all goal-oriented pursuits that are not significant in themselves. The more you achieve, the more you crave. Contentment is something that engenders right living and helps one find joy within. When you feel satisfied, calmness is experienced, and there is no urge to acquire more, even when compromising one's health or relationships. People who live and think right are happier. They feel less stressed and less depressed because they have figured out how to balance their living environments.

Jainas believe in the *tri-ratna*, three gems which are regarded as three precious principles of life. Among these three, the first is *samyagdarśana* or right faith, which motivates to do the suitable activity. If a right activity is performed with false faith, it loses its value in consequence. Right faith is given utmost importance in the Jaina philosophy to uproot skepticism which hinders spirituality in human mind. *Samyagjñāna* or right cognition is the second which inculcates Jaina views of religion and philosophical principles in human mind. *Samyak-cāritra* or right behaviour is the third which implies proper action. The humans perform action with what they have learned and believed to be true. No one can avoid *karma* or action as it helps human to reach the destiny of life. The action should be right and proper if it is guided and characterized by *pancavrata* or five vows. *The aim of these five vows is to train humans in leading a restrained life.* Like Buddhists, Jainas admit two aspects of *pancavrata* – the training for the laymen and that for the ascetic or monk. In the case of ascetic or monk the five vows are—(1) *Ahimsā* or non-injure in thought, word and action which includes abstention from injuring any being, as well as extending help to any suffering being; (2) *Satya* or truth in thought, speech and action; (3) *Asteya* or not to steal, i.e., not to accept anything to which one is not entitled; (4) *Brahmacarya* or abstention from self-lenience by thought, word and deed; and (5) *Aparigraha* or renunciation of worldly objects. These vows are to be followed rigorously and are called *Mahāvratā* or great vows. In the case of layman, these are modified and diluted. For this reason fourth vow i.e., *Brahmacarya* is replaced by chastity and fifth i.e., *Aparigraha* by contentment, but the first three remain intact. The vows for the laity are called *anu-vratā* or lesser vows. “In the case of the layman they are same except that the last two are replaced by the vows respectively of chastity and contentment or strict limitation of one’s wants.”¹ These vows are also included in *yama*, the first of the *aṣṭaṅga yoga* or eight-fold means accepted by Yogas. The *yama* is primarily negative and consists of these five vows. Both Jainas and Yogas think that *Aparigraha*, non-acceptance or disowning of possessions makes mind free from tension and agitation for either losing or acquiring things of our choice. Though *Aparigraha* is apparently negative, it plays a positive role when humans are satiated with things necessary for leading usual life and not to crave for more. As

long as our body exists, we are living in this world, we cannot lead our lives without possession, we cannot entirely avoid possession in social purpose. So, we should not give up possession, only practice *Aparigrah* to restrain our wants. *Aparigrah* teaches us to live in the society with universal love, not to fight with one another for possessing more than what we need for usual living.

Thus, *Aparigrah* puts a way in front of us to solve many modern problems arising from envy and rapacity. The root of peaceful life lies in the attitude of limiting our desires. Human beings have to set limits on all activities. We should practice restraint to consumption, limits to possession. Such type of practice brings balance to modern consumerist society. Consumption beyond the limit and the usual requirement consumes humanity, creates greed, and veils our good qualities. “But this act of getting is partial. It is limited to man’s necessities. We can have a thing only to the extent of our requirements, just as a vessel can contain water only to the extent its emptiness. Our relation to food is only in feeding, our relation to a house is only in habitation. We call it a benefit when a thing is fitted only to some particular want of ours. Thus to get is always to get partially, and it never can be otherwise. So this craving for acquisition belongs to our finite self.”²

In the social context effect of possessiveness can be felt if the lesser vows or *anubrata* is explained from bottom to top order. If human beings limit their wants and restrict their possessiveness, then they will be satiated with what they get for their essential living, not with what they want. They will neither have broken hearts nor be overwhelmed, as their possessiveness to have anything more is unimportant. They only want whatever is needed for their simple living. At the dispelling of possessiveness, chastity or purity of mind and body will automatically come, and this is the *brahmacharya* or celibate life in a social context. If human beings do not want anything more than their basic requirement and they are satisfied with what they have, they need not steal anything. They, too, need not utter falsehood because human beings use falsehood to survive their possessiveness. As they have already removed their possessiveness, they need not say false for their own sake. At last, the removal of possessiveness keeps the social beings away from the competition of having worldly things more than others, so *himsā* or injury to another fellow will

not automatically prevail in mind. Thus, eradicating possessiveness takes an important place in social life to lead a peaceful and hazard-free life.

When we know discrimination between eternal (*nitya*) and non-eternal (*anitya*), possessiveness of non-eternal possession must be removed. Śankaracārya defines knowledge as *nityānityavastuvivekah*- knowledge of the discrimination between eternal and non-eternal.³ Only Brahman is eternal; all other things different from Brahman are non-eternal. Eternal or *nitya* is not limited by time or *kāla*; its opposite, i.e., limited by time, is called non-eternal or *anitya*. “Gaining a thing, as we have said, is by its nature partial, it is limited only to a particular want; but *being* is complete, it belongs to our wholeness, it springs not from any necessity but from affinity with the infinite, which is the principle of perfection that we have in our soul.”⁴ Nothing is eternal in this world. Everything is in flux, and under the rule of creation and destruction. So one, who knows the transient nature of this material world, would be less interested in it and always try to search for the eternal within non-eternal. S/he will try to dive into the ocean of eternity for having the identity of own eternity with the divinity. “Man’s abiding happiness is not in getting anything but in giving himself up to what is greater than himself, to ideas which are larger than his individual life, the idea of his country, of humanity, of God.”⁵ Through this knowledge, human beings can give up lust, greed, and attachment around these possessions and ultimately possessiveness for non-eternal possessions.

When mind is unaware of reality of *ātmā* within, when it thinks egoistically that it is the ‘doer’, it wallows in error. The mind must turn within and acknowledge the supremacy of the *ātmā*. We are obsessed with the physical and material. Attachment and vanity result from excessive body consciousness. We should not identify ourselves with the body, and we should move away from the allures of the materialistic world. The more we identify with the body, the more we want, the more we crave, the more we possess, the more we get entangled in *māyā*, illusion. Identification with the body leads to the illusion that power, pleasure, and possessions of this world can make us happy. However, this is not true; these material possessions only keep us in bondage- the bondage of *avidyā* or ignorance.

According to Upaniṣad, I am that (*tat tvamasi*). This is called I-consciousness. *Jivātmā* is not different from *Parātmā*. Due to ignorance (*ajñāna*) we cannot realize this pure eternal nature, and ego or I-feeling arises in us. Knowledge of eternal nature of the self, knowledge of the ultimate reality i.e., Brahman, and knowledge of the identity of everything with that reality are the different names of the awareness of the distinction between the real and the unreal. When we realize our true nature as inseparable from *Brahma* or the supreme soul, we do not give any importance to non-eternal possessions but give importance to the eternal soul. So through knowledge of I-consciousness, we can give up the possessiveness of possessions and guide our mind into the trustworthy source of joy, the Supreme power. Rabindranath Tagore says in this context, “Things in which we do not take joy are burden upon our minds to be got rid of at any cost; or they are useful, and therefore in temporary and partial relation to us, becoming burdensome when their utility is lost; or they are like wandering vagabonds, loitering for a moment on the outskirts of our recognition, and then passing on. A thing is only completely our own when it is a thing of joy to us.”⁶ This type of adoring attitude towards the Supreme Being helps devotee to purify mind for having His grace. The purified mind keeps itself away from the ephemeral mundane things and gets into own divine nature as the abode of infinite joy. Thus, with help of pure mind the devotee becomes fulfilled and reaches the ultimate goal. “.....the Absolute is that ocean while you and I, and Sun and stars, and everything else are various waves of that ocean. And what makes the waves different? Only the form, and that form is time, space causation all entirely dependent on the wave.”⁷

Ancient scriptures show that possessiveness can be avoided through random practice. The main aim of Upaniṣads is to remove *ahamkāra* or ego, and *Vairāgya* or detachment is the most helpful attitude towards the world for successful eradication of ego. The hard and worshipful training and austerity help to eradicate ego. To reach *Vairāgya* or detachment, three *āśramas* or disciplinary stages, namely *brahmacharya* or religious trainee, *gārhasthya* or householder and *vānaprastha* or anchorite are essential. “As the very word ‘*āśrama*’ means ‘toil’, the three *āśramas* are the stages of strife when selfishness is slowly but steadily rooted out.”⁸ Human beings must leave the sensual life far behind if they want to

live the life of eternal peace, that of the spirit, not the life of happiness. The training consisting of the three *āśramas* leads to *sannyāsa* or *Vairāgya* or detachment which transcends the triple mode of *āśrama* life. *Sannyāsa* is considered as a result of *Brahma*-knowledge or knowledge of the unity of *jīva* with the *Brahma* rather than a means of attaining it. If one is to acquire *vairāgya*, s/he has to undergo these three training in society successfully. The perception of the character of social human beings can only be had through the three stages of training, and in that sense, these three can be entitled as social training. Detachment cannot be acquired without these three preliminary trainings, and the perfect accomplishment of these trainings will carry renunciation at the end of these trainings. This training attaches the greatest value to society and stresses the need for sympathy and kindness for fellow men. In this way the social training makes human beings social in true sense; at the same time it makes them transcending social stature to spiritual through the complete renunciation of self-interest. “We see everywhere in the history of man that the spirit of renunciation is the deepest reality of the human soul. When the soul says of anything, “I do not want it, for I am above it,” she gives utterance to the highest truth that is in her. When a girl’s life outgrows her doll, when she realises that in every respect she is more than her doll is, then she throws it away. By the very act of possession we know that we are greater than the things we possess. It is a perfect misery to be kept bound up with things lesser than ourselves.”

9 When humans begin to realize their real immortal nature, eternal soul within, they begin to move towards it and automatically cross over the limit of so-called mortal and transient mundane possessions through continuous renunciation. Though the *āśramas* or disciplinary stages, like the Upanisadic era, are not appropriately followed in modern times, the practice of *vairāgya* or detachment is possible in a modern social system in many ways through the reformation of the educational system as well as reconstruction of the moral character of the superiors and teachers whom the first learners can follow.

Gita contributes the idea of *niṣkāma karma* (desire less work) in a similar way. Srikrīṣṇa motivated Arjuna to participate in the War of *kurukṣetra*, known as the War of Religion, without thinking about the outcome of the War. In this connection, He says that every man should do his work without desiring any

particular result. Karma or work itself is not bad, but when a particular desire is added to it, the karma is evaluated. If karma gives a desirable result, it is good; otherwise, it is not. So work is not bad, but desire is terrible. Every man should be indifferent to the result (*phala*). If we are indifferent to the result, it can produce neither joy nor pain, as we desire nothing. Gita advises-

“*karmanyebādhikaraste mā phalesu kadāchana|*

Mā karmaphalaheturbhurmā te sangohastvakamarni||” 10

Our only right is to do the work, not to expect anything from the result of the work. We should give up the consequence of work, not the work itself. This is known as *karma-yoga*. *Karma-yoga* is explained as doing the work ascribed to social human beings without any desire. The word ‘Yoga’ literally means ‘Union’, and so, the basic aim of yoga is to realize unity, the unity of *jivātmā* with *parātmā*. The practice of *yogā* never presupposes renunciation, never avoids family and social responsibilities. *Yogā* helps humans to maintain mental equilibrium in adverse situations and become free from unsanitary habits. The *niṣkāma karma* is called *yoga* to reach the destination which is also called *yoga*, the unity of the individual soul with Supreme Being because *niṣkāma karma* helps to realize one’s true nature and feel oneness with the Supreme Being, with everything of the world. Being impressed by the Gita’s conception of *niṣkāma karma* (desire less work) Swami Vivekananda is of the opinion that humans should do work without any selfish motives, any attachment to the desires which make humans slave because selfish motives belonging to desires bind humans within the narrow possessiveness. If one wants to be master of his/her work, s/he should do the work without selfish motives. “He works best who works without any motive, neither for money, nor for fame, nor for anything else; and when a man can do that, he will be Buddha, and out of him will come the power to work in such a manner as will transform the world. This man represents the highest ideal of *Karma-yoga*.”¹¹ Sri Aurobindo’s concept of Yoga is also based on the traditional view of Yoga but he differs from it both in the goal and process of yoga. Generally the goal of yoga is individual liberation, but Sri Aurobindo accepts the liberation of mankind and the emergence of Divine life in collective humanity along with the traditional individual liberation, spiritual

self-manifestation along with the traditionally accepted goal of self-realisation. In consistence with his view on the goal of *yoga*, he differs from the traditional view on the process of *yoga*. According to him, *yoga* is a total transformation of all aspects of human beings - the mental, vital and the physical, the transcendental, cosmic and individual, while traditional *yoga* lays emphasis only on any one or two or three of these three aspects separately. For this reason Sri Aurobindo's *yoga* is called *Pūrṇa yoga* or Integral *yoga* where these three aspects are conceived as three steps integrated in one. "Thus *yoga* implies not only the realization of God, but an entire consecration and change of the inner and outer life till it is fit to manifest a divine consciousness and become part of a divine work."¹² A *yogi* acquires the spirit of love through the practice of *yoga* to make a profound spiritual connection with others. Thus, *yogi*, by the practice of *yogā*, when s/he feels a spiritual connection with others, s/he remains inactive to have more possessions, deceiving others in society.

Actually, *yoga* aims to cultivate detachment, which is a pre-condition of proper knowledge. The practice of detachment involves *śravana*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana*, as explained in the Upaniṣads. *Śravana* means the study of the Upanisads under a competent teacher, *manana* stands for continued reflection upon what has thus been learned to get an intellectual conviction regarding it, and *nididhyāsana* for meditation which helps directly realizing the unity in and through the diversity of the universe and this unity lies within oneself. We cannot realize the self by merely reading or listening to it. Without the practice of self-knowledge, direct experience of the self is not possible. Consistent practice is essential for achieving self-realization. By maintaining a continuous focus on the self and regularly practicing the sensation of being the pure soul, ignorance of the self diminishes over time. The true self becomes realized when all thoughts are set aside during practice. Thus, with the practice of contemplation on the self, one abides in the state of *Samādhi*. Thus, the rapid practice of the *śravana*, *manana*, and *nididhyāsana* helps human beings realize their unity with Brahman and consider worldly objects as unused.

The Upaniṣad teaches us to live in this mundane world as caretakers, not proprietors, because the Supreme Lord has proprietorship over everything within this universe.

Īśā vāsyamidam sarvaṁ yatkiñca jagatyām jagat|

Tena tyaktena bhūñjīthā mā ḡrdhaḥ kasyasviddhanam|| 13

The act of renunciation is not just a concept but a powerful tool for detachment that empowers us in our spiritual journey. The Lord controls and owns everything of the universe. This understanding brings us a sense of security and guidance, knowing that we are under divine control. Therefore, we should have the right only for things which are essential for us, and not adopt anything that belongs to others. The Lord, being *pūrṇam*, all-perfect, is beyond the laws of material nature, which He controls with absolute authority. The living entities and inanimate objects are under His control, which should fill us with awe and reverence. “When you know that whatever there is is filled by him and whatever you have is his gift, then you realise the infinite in the finite, and the giver in the gifts. Then you know that all the facts of the reality have their only meaning in the manifestation of the one truth, and all your possessions have their only significance for you, not in themselves but in the relation they establish with the infinite.”¹⁴

Thus, possessiveness hinders us from knowing our spirit or reality and consequently impedes everyday life. But when we are enriched with the knowledge of self or *Ātmanjñāna*, which dispels ignorance and unnecessary confinement to the mundane world and bodily aspects, possessiveness is eliminated automatically. As a result, we regain our innate immortal nature, keeping possessiveness aside.

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