

Rudra Shivananda

Olympics and Self-Realization

Every four years, a large part of the world takes time out of their busy lives to cheer on the athletes that have made it into the Olympic Games. A week ago, I watched the spectacle of the opening ceremony in Beijing, China and it was indeed awe-inspiring. The beauty and scale of the pageant made much ado about harmony and the welcome of friendship – such laudable emotions are indeed inspiring and something to aspire towards.

However, just a few hours later, the representatives who mingled easily together the previous night, were literally and figuratively at each others' throats. They all had the same goal – to win a gold medal at all costs. Most of them have trained hard all their lives and dedicated every waking moment to their dreams of the elusive golden icon. It makes for gripping entertainment and we all cheer on our favorites, applauding the ones who succeed and shaking our heads at the failed and fallen heroes. This is the way of competition – one winner and many losers.

Please realize that unlike an Olympic event in which there is only one gold medal winner, Self-Realization has unlimited number of gold medals!

It is unfortunate that many spiritual seekers and otherwise sincere yogic practitioners behave as if the realization of the true Self and achievement of our highest potential is a competitive race. Students within the same group vie for the attention of their spiritual guide and compete to show off their achievements rather than serve in the spirit of selflessness that is necessary for spiritual attainment. The intensification of the ego is counterproductive to the practice of Yoga.

There is no attainment for those who compete on how well they can hold a physical posture or how long they can hold

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their breath or how long they can hold their meditation without moving, only pain and suffering. Practice has to be performed for practice sake without attachment or desire in order to reach higher consciousness and any competitiveness with others or even with oneself serves to strengthen the ego.

There are some spiritual guides who encourage competitiveness by their students as a way to spur them on the path. However, this is two-edged sword and eventually the ego of short-term achievements will be a barrier to Self-Realization and we can only hope that the teacher is there to knock down the inflated ego eventually.

Jealousy of fellow spiritual students is another barrier to higher awareness. It is often observed that when one student seems to make tremendous progress, others seek to tear down the one who has apparently moved ahead. This is a symptom of our cultural upbringing which has an underlying presumption that someone making progress in any field does so at the cost of others, that life is a zero-sum game – if someone wins, someone else must lose. This is not the case on the spiritual path – there can be as many winners as there are spiritual aspirants. We must re-program our basic assumptions and remove the subconscious blocks that have been built up without our understanding so that we can rejoice and applaud the progress of our fellow seekers.

If one person achieves Self-Realization, everyone on earth benefits from that one's efforts. Objectively, the realized person can help others on the path. Subjectively, we all share the same divine essence – we are One in the Divine and so share in some part the achievement, but for the intercession of the individuating ego.

Just as in the Olympics, teams compete against each other and sometimes resort to name calling and badgering to win some minute advantage on the field of battle, so also do so-called

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spiritual organizations denounce each other or claim some superior legitimacy.

The rhetoric endorsed by some organizations confine themselves to coming up with buzzwords that confuse the sincere seekers, with the intention to ensnare them into their fold with promises of quick and effortless redemption, liberation or bliss-full experiences. There is a game of one-upmanship in the marketing and advertising campaigns, just as there is between rival companies or countries or teams. The distinctive character of a spiritual goal is put aside for the sake of expediency and growth – the metric for material success is transferred to the spiritual world.

The truth is that spiritual groups and organizations can only help the sincere practitioner on the path – they are not substitutes for one's daily meditation. Devotion to any organization cannot lead to salvation, only devotion to the Divine.

Seek out those groups and organizations that offer sincere help without requiring mindless obedience to their rules or strictures against belonging to another group. The spectacular failures of religious organizations should be a warning to spiritual groups to eschew such retrogressions. Yoga is not a religion.

There is no competition within the Divine Consciousness, only within our limited minds. Let us free ourselves from such limitations and embrace our true nature of one-ness. Let us free ourselves from competitiveness and jealousies and open ourselves to the infinities, to the unlimited number of gold medals available beyond the Olympia of minor gods and athletes of physical excellence. Let us extend our hands of friendship to all the fellow travelers on the path.