

MEDITATION ACCORDING TO SPANISH MYSTICS

SWAMI PARATPARANANDA¹

Reproduced from The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – November & December 1979; page 435

[In the galaxy of mystics Christianity has produced, the mystics of Spain are stars of the first magnitude. We meet the names of St. Theresa and St. John of the Cross in even casual references to Christian mysticism. Swami Paratparananda who heads² the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Buenos Aires, explains here, citing chapter and verse, the philosophy and methodology evolved by these scrupulous Treasurers of the Soul.]

The most outstanding figures among the Spanish mystics are St. Theresa of Jesus and St. John of the Cross. They were contemporaries and lived in the sixteenth century. Both of them belonged to the Carmelite Order and were instrumental in the toning up of and reforming the Order to which they belonged and which was then in a declining state. St. Theresa also founded sixteen convents and fourteen monasteries and in her position as directress of a large number of novitiates had to constantly write letters to guide them in their spiritual path. These letters along with an autobiography which the saint was asked to write by her confessors, have been published in book-form.

St. John of the Cross was a well-learned person who has left behind some beautiful verses depicting the spiritual ascent of the soul and its union with God. Explaining the significance of these verses he has written a long commentary which has served as a source of inspiration and guidance to the earnest seekers of the Christian community during the last two centuries.

When one goes through these works one rarely comes across the word "meditation," and when it occurs it is used in the sense of imagination, ideation or phantasy³. Yet, its usefulness and efficacy, as a preparatory stage, are not deprecated or discarded. However, the Spanish mystics speak much of mental prayer and contemplation, as means to union with God, which may be, for all practical purposes, interpreted as meditation as we understand the word nowadays. For example, to St.

¹ Swami Paratparananda was the Editor of Vedanta Kesari magazine (1962 - 1967).

² From 1973 to 1988.

³ San Juan de La Cruz, Obras Completas, Vol. II, Page 98. Pub.: Editorial Calomino, La Plata, Argentina, 1945 Edition.

Theresa prayer is not simply a mere utterance of some words but an intimate conversation with the Beloved. In a letter to the nuns she says: "Try to think and understand, my children, with whom you are talking or going to talk. Even in a thousand lives of ours we shall not be able to know in what way the Lord deserves to be treated, this Lord in whose presence even the angels tremble. Everything is subject to Him, He can do anything and His mere wish is action. It is reasonable that we take delight in His grandeurs and be aware to whom we are espoused and what grand life will be ours."⁴ Here she compares the Lord to a beloved husband and says that one who has taken up the spiritual path is already married to Him. Then she places before the nuns the duties of a truly devoted wife in the world and how their own life and thoughts should be: "In this world when a woman marries, she knows to whom, his status in life and what he is. Now, my children, we who are already married to Him before the formal ceremony and are to be taken to His abode, shall we not think of Him? Those who are married to men here do not discard these thoughts. Why then, should we not try to know who this person is, who his father, what is that land where he will take us, what are the riches that he promises to give and so on? Also, in what way shall we be able to please him and in what way we shall transform our state to conform with that of his? In the world, a woman, who desires to be devoted to her husband, is not required to know everything else than these things even if the husband be a very low person. Should we than give lesser importance to our Lord than they do to men? Further, if the husband is of a jealous nature and wishes that the wife have no contact with anyone, it will be strange indeed that she should not think how best to satisfy him in this respect, for in him are all the things that one could desire! To know and understand these truths is mental prayer."⁵

As we know it is extremely difficult to concentrate on any particular subject for a long time unless we have a keen interest in it. And interest or taste for a thing unfolds itself only when we find ourselves involved in, feel an intimate relationship with, or affinity to, the subject. In the spiritual world too this theory or rule applies; so in thinking of God or meditating on Him, one has to establish a certain relationship with Him, if one has to make rapid progress. The mental prayer, as described above by St. Theresa, for the reason just mentioned, can be termed as a type of meditation. It helps the individual to dive deep into the mystery of the divine relationship and be aware of the benefit he receives in developing such an attitude of mind. The natural bent of the human mind is to seek a return for whatever one does, even a philanthropist is moved to act by some hidden motive, for example by a desire for name and fame. So unless man gets convinced that the sacrifice he is going to do, by discarding the things of the world and giving up even the appetite for

⁴ Obras de Santa Teresa de Jesus, Page 431, pub. by Apostolado de La Prensa, S.A., Velásquez 28, Madrid, Spain. 1948 Edition.

⁵ Ibid. p. 431.

them, will bring him in the long run, immense benefit, he will not take to spiritual life in the real sense of the term. Hence arises the necessity for deep reflection over the lasting gain that one gets from one's constant contact with God. The purpose of the mental prayer cited above is to maintain one's mind continually on God which is also what meditation signifies. For this reason it may not be an error to call such a kind of prayer as meditation.

There is another form of prayer practised, in almost all religions, viz. vocal prayer. The Christians have a prayer which begins with the words: "Our Father who are in Heaven" and so on taught by Jesus himself. Advising the nuns as to how one should practise this prayer St. Theresa says: "The Master taught us by setting an example that this prayer be repeated in solitude, although it was not necessary for him. From this it is be understood that it is not possible to talk with God and the world at the same time, i.e., praying to God and simultaneously listening to what is being talked about or to think of things of the world, though sometimes and in some cases this latter cannot be avoided because of the infirmity of the body or illness. Others should try to be alone when they pray, so that they could be aware with whom they are and what response the Lord has to their prayers. Do you think that He is silent because we do not hear Him? Well does He respond to the heart when we ask from the bottom of our heart. And it is of much benefit that we should consider that it is to each one of us individually that the Lord teaches this prayer and that the teacher is never so far from the disciple as to necessitate the latter to call him aloud, rather he is always very near to the disciple. For this reason my advice to you is that it is good for you that you repeat this prayer of the Lord in a proper manner and with diligence.

"You will say that this type of praying amounts to reflection or meditation, and that you are not able to do it or do not want to do it, but to pray vocally; because you have little patience and are ill disposed to take any trouble, which latter are necessary in the beginning, for the withdrawal of the mind. You are right if you stipulate that the above form of praying amounts to mental prayer, but I certainly do not know how you can separate the vocal prayer from the mental, if the former is to be practised well, knowing or being conscious with whom we are talking."⁶ She adds that one should try to pray with caution and with the introspection cited above as not to end in something superficial and unhelpful. "I have proved it", she continues, "and found that the best way is to try to have the thoughts directed towards Him to whom the words are addressed."⁷

Here we find that even while practising vocal prayer, the Spanish mystics exhort that it should be done in solitude and with the mind turned towards God. Such a prayer well done, they say, dulls all the outgoing

⁶ Ibid. p. 436.

⁷ Ibid. p. 437.

tendencies or faculties of the mind such as understanding, memory and will. That is to say the intellect refrains from seeking to understand the external objects, the memory desists from bringing to the surface of the mind thoughts that would divert its attention from the main purpose or object in view, i.e. God and the will abstains from wanting to do anything that contradicts or affects adversely the spiritual life of the individual.

"The self then understands that the Divine Master is teaching it without having recourse to words, suspending the functioning of the faculties of the mind. For if these latter were to be active they will do more harm than good. Then they enjoy without understanding how; the soul is enwrapped in love, but does not know how it loves; knows that it enjoys what it loves but does not understand how it enjoys. Well does it understand that it is not that kind of enjoyment that the common or ordinary intellect conceives; and, the will merges in the soul without knowing how, but at the same time able to perceive that this good is not something that could be achieved by all the efforts that one can do in this world. It is a gift of the Lord of the world and the heaven. This, my children, is perfect contemplation."⁸

To understand better what has preceded and what is to follow it is necessary to know some of the principal concepts of the Spanish mystics. St. John of the Cross speaks of the spiritual night as the immediate means for the union of the soul with the Divine. The soul has, according to them, three potencies of faculties, viz., understanding, memory and will, whose supernatural objectives are the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity or love, respectively. These three virtues are the means by which the soul unites with God, each one creating a vacuum and darkness in its respective faculty: faith in understanding or intellect, hope in memory and charity or love in the will. The understanding is to be perfected in the darkness of faith, memory in the vacuum of hope and the will buried in the lack of all sensual love, to go towards God. When these faculties are perfected in the above-said manner, one can clearly perceive what a great necessity there is that the soul, to travel safely in this spiritual path, should pass through this dark night, leaning on these three virtues, which empty it of all the things of the world. For the soul can unite with God in this life neither through reasoning, nor by enjoyment, nor through imagination, nor through any other sense organ, but only through faith, hope and love. Faith tells us what we cannot understand by the intellect or reasoning, and even if the intellect comes to grasp the certainty of the things manifested through faith, it is not able to understand clearly, rather finds itself groping in darkness.

Hope of uniting with God, without doubt, empties and darkens all memory of things of this world and the next, because hope is always of something one does not have and does not see. Charity empties the will of its resolutions to gain or obtain all external objects; it compels us to

⁸ Ibid. p. 438.

love God above all things, which cannot be done except through severing the love to these and directing it all to God. Thus these three virtues put the soul in the darkness and emptiness of all things of the world. And this is the dark spiritual night referred to above as the immediate means for union with God—to be blind towards things of the world, to renounce them totally.

Now we have seen what are vocal prayer, mental prayer and contemplation according to the Spanish mystics and how the first two go side by side; to be practised simultaneously, to be effective. The third one, contemplation, is meant for a very few and is a gift from God.

How to practise vocal prayer is next dealt with. First of all one should examine one's conscience and do other purificatory acts. "Then, my children", advises St. Theresa to her nuns, "seek company, because you are alone. What company is better than that of the Master, who taught the prayer that you are going to recite? Imagine that the Master is beside you and you will discover with what love and kindness He is teaching you. Be not without such a friend as long as you can. If you get habituated to bring Him near to you and He perceives that you do it with love and are trying to content Him then He will never fail you; certainly He will help you in all your efforts, He will be with you everywhere ."⁹

The practice recommended here helps to put the mind in a state of concentration. Even an aspirant who is not able to discriminate or reason about theological problems is asked to cultivate this habit. For, to fix the mind on one subject for a long time is a difficult task and cannot be accomplished without years of hard practice. Admonishes St. Theresa her novitiates: "I do not ask you that you develop profound and intricate reflections about the Lord; do not ask you anything more than that you look at Him. What is it that impedes you to direct, even though it is for some moments if not more, your soul's eyes towards this Lord; Well can you look at things very ugly, and can you not look at the most beautiful thing that can be imagined? Your Lord, my children, never takes His compassionate eyes off you, even though you might have acted a thousand times vilely against Him. Is it then too much to ask that you take off your eyes from the external objects and direct them, some times at least, toward Him? Listen, He does not expect anything else from you, than this much."¹⁰

"Further, in the world they say that if a woman were to be considered as devoted to the husband, she should manifest sorrow in his sorrow, and happiness in his happiness, though in reality she may not feel so. Look, from what servileness you have been saved. But this sympathy the Lord truly shows towards us; He assumes the role of the servant and desires you to be the mistress, to serve you at your pleasure. If you are cheerful you will see Him in His glorious state of resurrection, majestic,

⁹ Ibid. p. 438-439.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 440.

handsome, victorious and cheerful, like one who, in a battle, has conquered a great kingdom which He desires to give you along with Himself. Is it then too much to expect of you that you look at Him, once in a way; Him who gives you so liberally?"¹¹ These, says the saint, should be one's thoughts while praying.

What is the prayer that helps the soul to draw within itself? Jesus prayed: "Our Father that art in Heaven" and so on. Commenting on this St. Theresa asks: "Do you think that it is little importance to know what is Heaven and where to seek your heavenly Father? I tell you that for dispersed minds it is most important to understand this, not only to believe in but try to know it through experience; because it is one of the things that influences the understanding and helps to withdraw the soul into itself. You know that God is everywhere, omnipresent. It is evident, they say, that wherever the king is there his court is; similarly, where God is, is Heaven. No doubt you can believe that where God is, there all grandeur is. St. Augustin says that he searched for God in many places and finally found Him within himself. Do you think it is of no consequence for one with a dispersed mind to know this truth and perceive that it is not necessary to go to Heaven to speak with the Eternal Father, or to be sumptuously feasted by Him; that it is not even necessary to speak aloud? In however low a voice one may speak He will certainly hear us, for He is very near; one does not require wings to go in search of Him. What one has to do is to retire into solitude and see Him within oneself; treat such a good Guest as one's own and not as a foreigner, and with great humility speak to Him as one's own father, relate to Him one's difficulties, and seek solutions for these, knowing well that one is not fit to be a child of His."¹²

This prayer, accompanied by such thoughts as above, though practised vocally helps to control the mind within a short time and does much good. It is called gathering of thoughts because the soul withdraws all its faculties and enters into itself with the Beloved, God. "The Divine Master comes to it within a much shorter time than by any other method, and blesses it with silent prayer. There the mind absorbed in itself can think of Christ's Passion, imagine there His presence and not tire itself trying to seek Him on Mt. Calvary and so on. Those who could in this way shut themselves up in this small heaven of their soul, where dwells He who made it as also this earth, and accustom not to look at nor be where the senses would be distracted, should be sure that they are treading an excellent path and will not fail to drink the water of the fountain of life."¹³ They are like those who go by boat, which with a little favourable wind reaches its destination in a few days.

Those who begin to practise thus have, so to say, already put to sea; who, though they have not left the land for ever, do what they can

¹¹ Ibid. p. 440 - 441.

¹² Ibid. p. 447.

¹³ Ibid. p. 449 - 450.

to free themselves from it by gathering their senses into the mind, at least during those moments. If the gathering of the senses is real and genuine, one feels it clearly because of the transformation that occurs in oneself: the self seems to rise beyond this play of the world, to become aware of better times and feels like a person who enters a fort to defend himself from the adversaries. Further, by such a withdrawal they shut their eyes to the things of the world, i.e., these latter have no power of attraction for such a man. On the other hand his inner eyes open to the wonders of the self. Thus whoever treads this path, if his prayer is constant, will overcome the lure of the worldly objects, defeat the baser instincts of the body and strengthen his mind. And though in the beginning one cannot feel this change, it being so slow as to be imperceptible, yet if one persists in ones effort, say the Spanish mystics, one would clearly feel, how the mind gains control over the senses. They may go out again but would not be able to do any harm as before, because they go out as prisoners on parole or obedient subjects, who return immediately they are called back. With the repeated gathering of the senses by this method of prayer, God pleases to dispose that the soul be in perfect contemplation or total absorption.

Let us conclude with an idea that the Spanish mystic placed before the novitiates to help them withdraw their minds into themselves, "Suppose within you there is a palace with immense riches, edifices of gold, inlaid with precious stones, in short, fit for such a Lord, and that you are responsible for its structure (indeed, there is no structure of such beauty as a pure soul, full of virtues, which shine like gems) and that in it dwells the great King, who has condescended to be your Father and seated on the precious throne of your heart. This may appear to be childish, but is necessary for us so that we may grasp firmly the fact that there is something in us more precious than all the precious things that we see in the world outside. Let us not presume that we are empty within. I consider it impossible that we could give ourselves up to the ephemeral things, if once we become conscious of the presence of such a Guest within, because we shall then see how paltry these things of the world are."