

## **Dharma: Basis of Human Life (\*)**

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(\*\*) Swami Paratparananda was the Editor of Vedanta Kesari magazine (1962-1967)

*(Sooner or later man discovers that the pleasures the senses bring him are extremely transient and even counter-productive. It is Dharma that puts him in touch with the supersensual world of Reality, and raises him from the existence of the brute, to the life Divine. Swami Paratparananda, Head of the Ramakrishna Ashrama, Argentina (\*\*), and a former Editor of the ‘Vedanta Kesari’, explains how Sri Ramakrishna stresses that the main ingredient of Dharma or religious discipline is renunciation—external, if possible, but internal, categorically.)*

*(\*\*) From 1973 to 1988.*

Various are the meanings of this Sanskrit term, Dharma. For instance, righteousness, the innate nature of a thing, duties by birth and station in life, are some of them. We shall deal here with the first-mentioned, viz., righteousness, rectitude, or religion as it is sometimes defined. Of course, in India, religion includes duties according to *varna* and *asrama* (birth and station in life), though such a concept is nowadays not so strictly practised or adhered to. Religion or Dharma is something more than mere conformity with social obligations, restrictions or rules; more than mere dogmas and creeds. Social rules and moral codes may, nay, do change according to time and place. For example, what is regarded as immoral in some countries may be accepted as totally normal or natural in others, and so on. But mere morality is not the be-all and end-all of man. It is only the means to reach something higher, something eternal, and this something is the subject of religion or Dharma. One may call this subject as God, or Spirit, or by any other name.

The question that arises in the mind of the modern man is: what role can religion play in the present age of science and technology? Can it survive the attacks of these forces? We must remember that science and technology deal with matter, things perishable and not eternal. Matter, however long it may last, one day gets destroyed; it cannot last for ever, cannot be permanent. Having been composed of elements, it must return, sooner or later, to its elements; and that which is not permanent cannot give lasting happiness. Man never gets lasting happiness. Man never gets

satisfied with wealth; the more he has, the more he hankers after. So also is the case with sense pleasures. The body may grow weak, but the craving for them does not leave man. Aptly has Bhartrihari said in his Vairagya Sataka: *bhogâ na bhuktâ vayam eva bhuktâh*, "The worldly pleasures were not enjoyed by us; on the contrary, we ourselves have been devoured."<sup>1</sup> And he adds: *trsnâ na jirnâ vayam eva jirnâh*, "Desire is not enfeebled, though we ourselves have debilitated."<sup>2</sup> He continues: *valibhir mukham âkrântam pâlitena ankitam sirah, gâtrâni sithilâyante trsnaikâ tarunâyate*, "The face is covered with wrinkles, the head painted white (because of the grey hairs), the limbs have grown weak, though desire alone is rejuvenating."<sup>3</sup> This is the condition of man given to sense satisfaction. Science and technology have not yet found out methods to stop or prevent this decline or deterioration of the physical and mental forces of man, nor bring to him contentment that can last even under adverse circumstances like infirmity and senility, etc.

However, we do not say that there are no people who ignore the realities of life and try to enjoy the pleasures, as the ostrich, which when hunted clown, it is said, runs as much as it can and then sinks its head into the sand and believes that there is no further danger nor enemy. For such people this world is all that exists. In the Kathopanishad, Yama says: "The hereafter never appears before the foolish people, befooled by the delusion of wealth. Those who think that: 'this is the only world and there is no other' come under my sway, again and again."<sup>4</sup> Swami Vivekananda says, "Only the fools rush after sense-enjoyments. It is easy to live in the senses. It is easier to run in the old groove, eating and drinking; but what these modern philosophers want to tell you is to take these comfortable ideas and put the stamp of religion on them. Such a doctrine is dangerous. Death lies in the senses. Life on the plane of the Spirit is the only life, life on any other plane is mere death."<sup>5</sup> Here we find the answer also to those who want to make religion comfortable, adapted to the sense plane.

Man seeks happiness and thinks that he can get it in the sense objects; but, sadly, he finds that what happiness these objects can give is of very short duration, and that he has to earn it at a very great cost. He begins with tremendous optimism, but as he grows old, he gradually becomes a pessimist. Swami Vivekananda declares: "Real happiness is not in the senses but above the senses; and it is in every man. The sort of optimism we see in the world is what will lead to ruin through the senses."<sup>6</sup>

Again, however much man try to ignore the fact that suffering, physical and mental, is inevitable on the sense plane, and plunge headlong in it, a day will come when he must ask himself: "Is this all? Is this the goal of human life to live like plants and animals for a few years and die?" It is a must, for as long as man retains the thinking faculty, he cannot but put these questions to himself when faced with dire and insuperable circumstances. And this thinking should load him to self-

analysis and gradually to religion; for having suffered on the sense plane he has no alternative but to attempt to get consolation from something higher and imperishable.

Now let us see what religion really signifies and what it can do for us. Religion is a system of disciplines that brings insight into the spiritual world, by the control of the senses and subduing of the mind. With this insight, we come to know the real purpose of human life, as also about the vacuity of the sensual world. Swami Vivekananda points out: "This universe of ours, the universe of the senses, the rational, the intellectual, is bounded on the both sides by the illimitable, the unknowable, the ever unknown. Herein is the search, herein are the enquiries, here are the facts; from this comes the light which is known to the world as religion. Religion belongs to the supersensuous and not to the sense plane. It is beyond all reasoning and is not on the plane of the intellect. It is a vision, an inspiration, a plunge into the unknown and unknowable, making the unknowable more than known, for it can never be *known*."<sup>7</sup> This appears to be a paradox at first reading, but if we pause and reflect, we may be able to grasp the truth behind this statement. The human mind in its impure form can know only things presented to it by the five senses and nothing more. That is why the Spirit is called unknowable; but when this same mind gets rid of its impurity, its attachment and desires, it is capable of perceiving the unknowable, make it more than known. Asks Yajnavalkya: "With what will you know the Knower"—*vijñâtâran are kena vijâniyât*. This unknown can be perceived only through a pure mind, asserts the Kathopanishad: *Manasaivedam âptavyam*, "By mind alone this is to be realised."<sup>8</sup>

The best testimony regarding the inner life is of those who have dived deep in it, and they are the men fit to speak on the matter. Let us see what Swami Vivekananda says about the necessity of this search into the beyond: "Life will be a desert, human life will be vain, if we cannot know the beyond. It is very well to say: be contented with the things of the present. The cows and the dogs are, and so are all animals; and that is what makes them animals. So if man rests content with the present and gives up all search into the beyond, mankind will have to go back to the animal plane again. It is religion, the inquiry into the beyond, that makes the difference between man and an animal."<sup>9</sup> Replying to the question what religion can do for us, he affirms: "Salvation does not consist in the amount of money in your pocket, or the dress you wear, or the house you live in, but in the wealth of spiritual thought in your brain. That is what makes for human progress, that is the source of all material and intellectual progress, the motive power behind the enthusiasm that pushes mankind forward."<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, Religion can bestow on us eternal life, bring us Light that never fails, and grant us constant peace and tranquillity. However, religion should not be judged from the standpoint of material things or possessions. Swami Vivekananda remarks: "Again and again you hear this

objection advanced: 'What good can religion do? Can it take away the poverty of the poor?' Supposing it cannot, would that prove the untruth of religion? Suppose a baby stands up among you, when you are trying to demonstrate an astronomical theorem, and says, 'Does it bring gingerbread?' 'No, it does not,' you answer. 'Then', says the baby, 'it is useless.' Babies judge the whole universe from their own standpoint, that of producing gingerbread; and so do the babies of the world. We must not judge of higher things from a low standpoint...Religion permeates the whole of man's life, not only the present, but the past, present and future....Is it logical to measure its value by its action upon five minutes of human life?"<sup>11</sup> " He continues: "Religion has made man what he is, and will make of this human animal a God. That is what religion can do. Take religion from human society and what will remain? Nothing but a forest of brutes."<sup>12</sup>

From the foregoing we see how religion is intricately interwoven in the fabric of human existence, nay, the very existence of man depends on it. And that is why the Lord incarnates whenever there is decline of Dharma and rise of Adharma, as He Himself says in the Bhagavad Gita. Now, we shall see what are the disciplines that religion recommends for attaining the highest state of Bliss Eternal that it promises. The first and foremost of these disciplines is renunciation; without it man cannot advance towards the goal. It may be asked: are all people able to renounce the world? Surely not. Then, is the salvation that religion promises only for a handful? If so, why, should the majority of mankind take interest in it? Sri Ramakrishna replies: "It is not possible to acquire renunciation all at once. The time factor must be taken into account. But it is also true that a man should hear about it. When the right time comes, he will say to himself, 'Oh, yes, I heard about this.' You must also remember another thing. By constantly hearing about renunciation, one's desire for worldly objects gradually wears away."<sup>13</sup> Sri Ramakrishna advises householders to cultivate inner renunciation and love for God, to be unattached to things of the world, and seek the company of the holy people. But he categorically says that without renunciation, at least inner, one cannot reach the Goal.

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<sup>1</sup> Vairagya Sataka, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>4</sup> Kathopanishad, II.6.

<sup>5</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 5:267

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 3:1

<sup>8</sup> Kathopanishad, IV.11.

<sup>9</sup> Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda, 3:3

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3-4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4

<sup>13</sup> Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna (New York: Ramakrishna Vivekananda Center), p.502.