

APPROACH TO GOD

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THERE is a conception that unless there is awe and fear and the concomitant feelings of submission and servitude, God cannot be approached or worshipped. While it is a fact that this attitude may be one of the approaches to God, it does not necessarily follow that it is the only approach. An everyday and every man's experience in the world should throw some light upon this statement. Whom do we remember most? Those whom we fear or love? Who does command our submission, non-acquisitioned and spontaneous, earliest; one who tyrannizes or one who loves? The only answer can be those whom we love. In fear the burden of submission is irksome, always, and is a compulsion that is sought to be overthrown the moment the subject feels himself strong enough to do so, or to flout it. But in affection, in love, man does not feel it though it may weigh down upon him. There is no groaning under its weight; there is not even the grumbling. Rather, there is a spontaneous joy in such submission. In worship or approach to God also this same rule is applicable. In fact man's feelings, being what they are, cannot be multiplied in number; no fresh type of faculties can be created but they can be extended, expanded, sublimated. And that is what happens in our approach to God. You are not asked to be bereft of your feelings or create new ones but only to turn them Godwards.

Now, what infuses awe or fear into us? Is it not the immensity of the powers or glory of God? And also a feeling of alienation from Him when we do not consider Him as our own? 'It is those who love glory themselves that think much about the glory of God,' says Sri Ramakrishna. Why should we be overwhelmed with His glory? Perhaps, there is a desire for worldly things and glory lurking in ourselves that makes us do so. Perhaps, we want to bargain with Him for some of His glory. This does not, however, mean that one should not appreciate a beautiful scenery or a serene and soul-elevating place or circumstance. But to think of His glory and forget Him is not an aspirant's way. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'What will you gain by counting the trees and branches and leaves in a mango grove? You have come to eat mangoes. Eat them and be happy'. What will it avail us if we come to know what all

are the powers of God? And is it possible to know all? On the other hand, if we realize God, see Him, talk with Him that will liberate us, make us free. And this freedom is not something like that what we see in the world, momentary and conditioned. It is eternal and unconditioned. It makes us soar beyond the plane of mundane consciousness. It enwraps us in a divine and eternal light, makes us free from fear, free from inhibitions, free of likes and dislikes, free from attachment and hatred. Is not such a state covetable? Worship of God helps us reach this state. Nothing else can.

There is a Sanskrit verse by the poet Bhartrhari which runs thus: 'In enjoyment there is the fear of disease; in social position, the fear of falling off; in wealth, the fear of kings; in honour, the fear of humiliation; in power, the fear of the foes; in beauty, the fear of old age; in scriptural erudition, the fear of antagonists; in virtue, the fear of calumniators; in body, the fear of death. All things of this world pertaining to man are attended with fear; renunciation alone stands for fearlessness.'¹ We may add that when this renunciation leads to God-realization it opens the flood-gates of bliss eternal leaving no room for the baser motives and fear to assert themselves. That is why one who has touched the source of Truth, of Light wavers not in his path; fears nothing. He stands like the adamantine rocks which though battered by the waves remain unmoved, undented. Tribulations and trials, miseries and afflictions leave him unperturbed. When we realize God we know Him to be our own, the Soul of our souls, our inmost Being. Can we then call it servitude or submission in the sense we understand worldly servitude? To whom do we submit? Is it not to our own inner Being? Could there be any harm in that? What is more welcome than that we conquer our baser impulses, the turbulent passions, and the still stronger ego and submitting to the Indwelling spirit be at peace with ourself and the whole world? And if worship of God does it, as assured by God-men and men of God, why should we stand away?

All the objections to worship of God seem to arise from the conception that He is an extra-cosmic Being, sitting somewhere in the Heaven, high above the clouds, demanding implicit submission under threats of dire consequences, holding out bouquets and enjoyments to those who follow His commands and punishment of hell fire to those who transgress. But the Hindu view of God — that He is the Indwelling Spirit of every being and at the same time transcends them all — is a very encouraging one. Here the distance between the soul and the Oversoul shrinks, as it were, to an appreciable extent. The strangeness, man at first feels towards God, drops off yielding place to a feeling of appurtenance, belonging. The sages and saints experienced this; the Upanisads declare it: The *Chāndogya*, for instance, points out 'that Purusa which is seen in the eye that is the Ātman'.²

Bādarāyana in his Śārīrika Sūtras removes the apparent ambiguity

¹ Vairagyasatakam, 31.

² Chandogya Upanisad, VIII.vii.4.

about the meaning of this passage — whether it refers to the Jīva or the Paramātmā — by two aphorisms: ‘The one within (is the paramatman); on account of His qualities being declared’.³ A second passage which refers to the “within” occurs in the same Upanisad (I. vi. 6) wherein the description of that Being, in the orb of the sun, is given.⁴ An objection was raised that this description cannot pertain to the Paramātmā — He being without form — and therefore must only be of the jīva, or the deity representing the sun. This contention is, however, refuted. The highest Lord though without form assumes forms to bestow grace on the sādḥaka by His own power, Māyā.⁵ Why does this become necessary? It is well-known that all individuals have not the same capacity of comprehension. Our sages too knew it. So, for such of those who cannot or do not like to think in terms of the formless aspect of God, the forms and qualities are declared.

Any further doubt lingering in one’s mind is removed by the next aphorism: ‘And there is another one (i.e. the Paramātmā, who is different from the individual souls animating the sun etc.); on account of the distinction being declared.’⁶ Where is this distinction proclaimed? The *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* gives the answer. It is not the deity representing the sun that is meant while referring to the One inside its orb, but the ‘One who dwells in the sun, but is within it, whom the sun does not know, whose body is the sun, and who controls the sun from within, that One is the Internal Ruler, your own immortal Self’.⁷

Śruti is never tired of repeating its statements to drive home the truths. It repeats this formula in the case of all elements, all beings, all limbs of man, and his mind and his knowledge. Here we see how close we are to God and yet we know Him not, comprehend Him not. Sri Ramakrishna used to give the simile of the musk-deer. The deer would smell the fragrance of the musk but not knowing that the source of the fragrance was in its own navel, would run to all quarters of the forest and at last when tired would lie down and then come to know that what it has been seeking outside in vain was all the time within itself.

Now a question would arise: ‘If we are controlled by a higher power residing in us, in what way are we responsible for our actions?’ Such a question was put to Sri Ramakrishna also. And that question will be repeated for ages to come, by people who would want to shift the responsibility of their wicked deeds on to someone else. Actually, they do not believe it when they repeat that it is the Indwelling Spirit who is working through them. It is only a veil to hoodwink others. In the heart of their hearts they know that they are far far away from believing it themselves. They assert their ego most of the time. ‘Well’, you may say,

³ Brahma Sutras, I.i.20.

⁴ Chandogya, I.vi.6.

⁵ Quoted by Sri Samkara in his commentary on Br. Sutra Bhashya, I.i.20.

⁶ Br. Sutras, I.i.21.

⁷ Br. Up. 3.7.9.

'yours is a strange logic indeed! You breathe hot and cold at the same time. Once you say that every thing is controlled by the Inner Ruler and again you say that the ego asserts. Then, what type of a ruler is that who cannot resist the force of the ego?' To this we reply, 'True, it seems very incompatible. But haven't you seen a mother, with her benevolence and beneficence, though guiding the steps and conduct of her child, giving way to its unreasonable importunities? Aye, she even sometimes allows the child to burn its fingers in fire though she could, if she would, prevent it in the interest of the child. But then she would take care of it again as soon as it has done with its play, learnt its lessons. For all that, can you insist that the mother was not strong enough to restrain the child? No. Likewise the Inner Ruler (*antaryāmin*) is not a despot. You are given a little free play to use your faculties, to pick your own way, learn your lessons yourselves in the world, when you would not listen to the sane advice that is pouring forth from your own Inner Being. He even allows you the freedom to deny Him. But there it ends, your ego comes into clash with those of others if you will assert it too much. Then you fall back for support on God, on your Inner Being. Where then is the inconsistency in what we have said?' This much about those who would say that they have their free will.

A little digression here is inevitable as the subject of free will has been introduced. Is our will free? The answer is yes and no. We can approach this reply from two standpoints. First of all, as related already, a certain amount of freedom is given to us, just as a cow tethered to a post is allowed to roam about, in a meadow, to the extent the length of the rope round its neck allows it, but no more. We can feel this even in society. Society gives us freedom to develop in our own individual way, of course, subject to certain restrictions. And when we go beyond the set bounds, down comes its mighty arm. The long arm of the law seizes one who transgresses its limits, or enters into others' domains. However much we may like to break these bonds they would not yield, but only chafe us the more. We are not in any way in a dissimilar position as far as 'will to act' is concerned. So many factors press us down: our inherent tendencies, circumstances, environments and the like.

From the second point of view, as long as our will remains distinct from the Cosmic Will it is not free, but when the former runs in concurrence with the latter it has no more bonds. Whatever it wills comes true, for it can have no desire apart from that of the Cosmic Will. Of course, this latter state is possible only when man has attained complete perfection, when not a speck of worldly taint is left in him.

To return to the subject of submission: what about those who simulate submission accepting the existence of a Higher Entity ruling over us? It is a dangerous game they try to play. They are deceiving themselves. Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the Brahmin — who killed a cow and who while taking credit for the lay out of his garden and every good and beautiful thing he possessed, imputed the sin of cow-killing to Indra, the

presiding deity of the hand — should serve as a very poignant eye-opener. Another example Sri Ramakrishna used to cite was that of Duryodhana. Duryodhana said to Sri Krishna: 'I know what is righteousness but I have no inclination to practise it, and I know what is unrighteousness but I have no disposition to avoid it. O Krishna, I act as you, dwelling in my heart, make me act.' Sri Ramakrishna says that such lip service won't do us any good: 'You know in your heart of hearts that those are mere words. No sooner do you commit an evil deed than you feel a palpitation in your heart.' Again he said, be one in your thought, word and deed. For sincerity is the *sine qua non* of spiritual life. A man with a sincere trust in God does not come to grief. 'If you place your trust in a great man he won't let you down. What then to speak of the Lord!' remarks Sri Ramakrishna.

Having said that awe and fear, submission and servitude need not be the only approach to God it devolves on us to point out what other approaches are feasible. We shall leave out the Vedantic idea of 'Atman is Brahman', as it is not a practicable proposition in the case of all and sundry. Worship implies three things, the worshipper, the worshipped and the act of worship. Let us recall what we said earlier, viz. that God assumes forms for bestowing grace on the aspirant. Everything will be easier to comprehend if we remember this. Now, to God with form, the other forms of approach would be respect, reverence and love. The last one is an intimate relation. We are not devoid of these feelings. We respect and revere those who are good and great, who possess virtues in abundance, and who are pure. Man loves his father, mother, wife, and children. The approach of the Vaisnavas is somewhat on this line, and can be followed with profit. There are no conventionalities to be observed, no restrictions to be feared in man's approach to these relations. Man feels one with them. That is the reason why man turns to his home after a hard day's labour or a nerve-racking experience, for rest and sympathy. He is sure of the soothing touch of the beloved ones there. It restores him to cheerfulness, gives him courage to face life again, however terrible a form it may assume.

But very rarely do people come across disinterested love in the world. It is all give and take, a shop-keeping, that is why there is so much of unrest in families. Perhaps, man's love towards God begins that way. He will worship God to get some of his desires fulfilled. In other words, his devotion is *sakāma*. If, however, the aspirant uses his discrimination he will soon understand the emptiness of the enjoyments. Love of God rightly directed is able to generate in us dispassion for these enjoyments. That is the test of the dawn of real love of God. Nothing tempts a man, who has that love, to fall from the ideal. It is love of God for His own sake, not for the sake of 'loaves and fishes'.

Man is obsessed with the idea that every thing should be judged by his own standard. He wants to weigh God also in his own moral balance. This shows how anthropomorphic an ordinary man's idea of God is. Nay,

even great theologians and scholars commit this mistake. They superimpose their own imperfections, disabilities and drawbacks, on the Lord, and posit that such a being does not deserve any worship. But a little thought would satisfy that it is puerile to speak of good and evil in the transcendent. We will bring down the transcendent Lord to the level of man, if we try to impose on Him our standards, of morals and the like. Morals and laws are necessary in a world of multiplicity where there is a conflict between interests. But God is one who has no axe of His own to grind, who has no pleasures to seek and is on a plane where there is no multiplicity, no interests to clash. He is ever pure, ever perfect, ever knowing, and ever free. He desires nothing, wills nothing. If such a Being does not deserve worship who else will? Man, wherever he finds greater powers, greater talents and greater virtues instinctively bows down his head in salutation. Then why should he be arrogant towards the highest Being, who is the fulfillment of all virtues and power and glory?