

CONTENTMENT AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

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THE first hurdle that man faces in spiritual life is his mind. It is a formidable hurdle but at the same time a very delicate one. It requires careful handling. The nature of the mind is fickle. Even a world-conqueror may be but a slave to his mind. The speed of the mind is said to be the fastest that can be thought of. It moves so fast, now it is here and in a moment it may be thinking of the remotest part of the globe. Again it is like a double-edged sword which cuts both ways. It can kill or save a man, spiritually speaking. So one has to be very dextrous in using it.

Further, it is not possible to measure the fickleness of the mind. If you happen to visit a menagerie you will notice the restlessness that is manifested in the caged beings, — especially the wild animals like bears, tigers and lions — moving round and round their cages. The agitated state of monkeys is proverbial to need repetition. The human mind is more restive and restless than all these. Swami Vivekananda once said that the mind is like a mad monkey, intoxicated with liquor and bitten by a scorpion. The agitation that goes on in such a monkey is inconceivable. Naturally prone to fidgetiness, madness increases its unrest enormously. What then will be its state if it becomes drunk and is bitten by scorpion? Can we have any idea of it? Its unrest cannot even be imagined. We will surely pity such a creature. Yet that is the very nature of an uncultivated, uncultured and uncontrolled mind. It flies from enjoyment to enjoyment. Even in sleep it is pestered with the impressions that it receives in the waking and is forced to project a thousand and one pictures of pleasure. One thing, however, that prevents the mind from perpetual dreaming is its being confronted by the painful side also. That is what breaks the dream and that is, again, what breaks our waking dream also.

The first thing, therefore, that we have to learn is that this fickleness will not do, that discontentment is the mire in which we get stuck up, that ambition is a trait that projects a fast receding goal, an *ignis fatuus*. Maybe ambition is all right for those who immerse themselves in materialism. But it does not bring them happiness. On the contrary it pours into them the poison of disquietude, a hankering that becomes unsatiable. Sri Ramakrishna's advice to a devotee in this connection can be noted with profit. Adhar Chandra Sen when he came to

Sri Ramakrishna was holding the post of a deputy magistrate, a post that carried prestige in those days. He became much attached to Sri Ramakrishna and the Master too loved him. Adhar sometimes used to come straight from his office to Dakshineswar, lest he should miss the Master's company if he went home. Even such a devoted man had once asked Sri Ramakrishna to pray to the Divine Mother, that he could get the post of vice-chairman of the Calcutta Municipality. Let us quote here what the Master said about it.

Master (*to Adhar*): 'Didn't you get the job?'

In order to secure the job, Adhar had interviewed many influential people in Calcutta.

Master (*to 'M' and Niranjan*): 'Hazra said to me, "Please pray to the Divine Mother for Adhar, that he may secure the job." Adhar made the same request to me. I said to the Mother: "O Mother, Adhar has been visiting You. May he get the job if it pleases You." But at the same time I said to Her, "How small-minded he is! He is praying to You for things like that and not for Knowledge and Devotion."' "

(*To Adhar*): 'Why did you dance attendance on all those small-minded people? You have seen so much; you have heard so much! After reading the entire *Ramayana*, to ask whose wife Sita is!

'Be satisfied with the job you have. People hanker after a post paying fifty or a hundred rupees, and you are earning three hundred rupees! . . . Serve him whom you are already serving. The mind becomes soiled by serving but one master. And to serve five masters!'

To call out such strong remarks from the Master two things were necessary: the Master's interest in the welfare of the devotee and his urge to point out to one and all the gaping chasm that awaits a spiritual aspirant, if he entertains worldly ambitions. There is no end to man's desire and no satisfying of all of them even if the whole world with all that is in it were his. There is no satisfaction in the enjoyment that comes from wealth and the like. Peace comes from contentment and contentment from being satisfied with whatever one has got.

II

Why do we hear from every spiritual master that we have to give up worldly thoughts if we are earnest in seeking God? Christ said to a rich man, who had asked to be initiated into the life of religion, 'Sell everything you have, give it to the poor and then follow me'. Sri Ramakrishna said 'lust and gold' are the two impediments in the path of a spiritual seeker. The Upanisads too are categorical in their declaration, 'Neither by actions, nor by progeny and wealth, but by renunciation alone some attained liberation.'¹ Why is this so? Can there not be a *via media*? Knowing Brahman alone one goes beyond death; there is not any other

¹ Kaivalyopanishad, 1.3.

path² declare the Vedas. Because, first of all, the world is such a subject that it engrosses the whole of man's mind once he gets into it. Worldly goods can so tangibly be grasped and palpably felt and perceived that it requires a very keen intellect to see in and through the kaleidoscope of this world. That the world, like a kaleidoscope, is but a glass tube with some glass pieces in it, worth nothing, yet lure people of immature minds again and again, is a fact that is discerned by a very few, a microscopic minority.

Secondly, a mind that is given to the world is always restless and an agitated mind is not the proper medium, not the proper ground, for the reflection of God's image. Arjuna, the hero, of many a battle confesses that the mind is, even as air, very difficult to control³. It is a common phenomenon, which is within the experience of every one, that the still waters alone, can properly reflect the objects near it, for example, the landscape on its banks. It is only the crystal clear water, which remains undisturbed or which does not rush at great speed, that discovers to us its bed with its myriad-hued stones and the life it holds in its womb. The case of the mind is very much analogous to this. Unless the mind is calm we cannot find out what is there behind it. Unless it is pure the reflection of the Most High is impossible. That is why the Upanisads ask us to ward off thoughts other than about God. They affirm that way alone lies the bridge to immortality.⁴

III

The Hindus believe that man comes into this world to reap the fruits of his past actions. They lie in seed form, in the form of propensities or tendencies, in his mind and bide their time and spurt out when conditions become favourable. They are like the germs of diseases that remain dormant until the body in which they abide gets weak; then they attack with full vigour. The remedy, therefore, as in the case of the body, lies in keeping the mind strong, that is to say, wary and watchful. Man is naturally upset if he faces a too bitter or elating experience. This perturbation makes him lose his faculty of discrimination and commit some folly, which he may regret afterwards. It is for this reason that poise of the mind has been so much stressed upon in the *Gita*. 'He who does not get elated, nor hates; neither grieves nor desires, gives up both good and evil, and is full of devotion, he is dear to Me.'⁵ 'The serenity of mind, kindliness, silence, self-control and purity of thought — this is said to be mental austerity.'⁶

Austerity or Tapas is a thing which is almost forgotten in the

² Svetasvataropanishad, 3.8.

³ Bhagavad Gita, VI.34.

⁴ Mundakopanishad, 2.2.5.

⁵ Bhagavad Gita, XII.17.

⁶ IBID., XVII.16.

present age. The modern trend is to give free reins to the mind, and senses. People can brook no restraint on their actions, neither have they control over themselves. They are content to be carried away on the tide of their emotions. They never stop to think of the *pros* and *cons* of their actions; selfishness rules supreme. In short, man is becoming more and more extrovert, the very nature which goes to make mind fidgety and restless. In the wake of this restlessness man rushes after more and newer pleasures until at last he runs up a blind alley, but having failed to cultivate the power to withdraw into himself, he, by the very momentum of his propensities, impinges against the wall, as it were. For given to a way of life that he is no more able to sustain, man loses his mental balance, becomes a neurotic. Therefore, to avoid this danger it is good for every one to practise a little introspection, a little withdrawal from the mad world of the senses.

Sri Krishna in the verse quoted above speaks of serenity of the mind. How can the mind be serene when we feed it and fill it every moment of our life with disturbing and distracting material? The way does not lie in pursuing these distractions but avoiding them. The worldly-wise may indict such a person of escapism but if he desires his own good he should not heed such meaningless chatter. Saner advice is to avoid such temptations. Sri Ramakrishna said that the temptations to man are as pickles to a typhoid patient. They should be kept out of sight.

IV

Having found out the nature of the mind, we should try to seek means to counteract its harmful trends. We have known now that there are lust, anger, greed, hatred, jealousy and pride, lurking in us and that these are deadly enemies of man. These are to be overcome, to be vanquished if we want tranquillity of mind, if we desire peace and bliss. How to do it? Patanjali suggests that a wave of opposite nature should be set against each of these whenever any of them tries to raise its head.⁷ Jesus, as it were, reflects the very thoughts when he says, 'Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.'⁸ When a wave of anger rises smother it with the thought of love. When hatred gushes out arouse the virtue of kindness. Do so every time a wrong thought oppresses you. But this is possible if we constantly and assiduously cultivate the virtues such as kindliness, humility, dispassion and the like. A question may crop up here: What is the necessity of cultivating these virtues? Is it not enough if we send a wave of contrary nature when the evil thought arises? It is not so easy as that. Life is a struggle; it is a war between the lower and

⁷ Yoga Sutras, II.33.

⁸ St. Mathew, 5. 43-44.

higher natures in man. The lower nature is always strong. We have heard in the Puranas how the Devas, were most of the time defeated by the Danavas and God had to come to their rescue every time. This fight goes on within us too. The demons of evil inclinations are always alert to undermine our Godward life. So our weapons are to be trim, ready and formidable to give fight to these foes. The virtues are our weapons here, and, therefore, are required to be practised continuously until they become a part and parcel of our nature. Then alone can we be sure of defeating the wicked inclinations.

Sri Ramakrishna gives us another method to overcome these evil propensities. 'Direct the passions to God. The impulse of *lust* should be turned into the desire to have intercourse with Atman. Feel *angry* at those who stand in your way to God. Feel *greedy* for Him. If you must have the feeling of *I and mine*, then associate it with God. Say, for instance, "My Rama, my Krishna." If you must have *pride*, then feel like Vibhishana, who said, "I have touched the feet of Rama with my head; I will not bow this head before anyone else."⁹ Such constant remembrance of God changes the whole fabric of that person's mind. The passions then no more trouble him. He becomes contented and tranquil. He becomes dear to the Lord. 'A Yogi who is always contented, whose passions are under control, who is of firm determination, and whose mind and intellect are given unto Me and is devoted to Me, he is dear to Me.'¹⁰ 'He, by whom the world is not troubled and who is not troubled by the world, who is free from elation, anger, fear and anxiety — he is dear to Me.'¹¹ To be noticed by the Lord and to be loved by Him, the devotee should make his heart pure, devoid of all other attachments. Jesus said, 'Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.' Purity of heart is achieved by excluding all other thoughts and making it one-pointed; then alone contentment comes. And contentment is the precursor of Knowledge, of the descent of God into man's heart.

Here we may be asked: Is God partial then? Why is every one not dear to Him? The *Gita* has given us the answer. 'The Lord does not accept anyone's demerits or merits; but knowledge (that the Lord is same to all) is covered by ignorance; because of this they get deluded. But those whose ignorance has been destroyed by the knowledge of the Self — their knowledge, like the sun, manifests that highest Being.'¹² So it is not that God is partial but that we do not need Him. Whatever we yearn for that is given to us. If we seek the things of the world we get them but along with them will come the evils of the world too. A popular story that we come across in the Puranas may well illustrate this fact. Once when the gods had lost their everything to the demons and were sorely dejected, Lord Vishnu told them to churn the Milk Ocean to produce nectar, drinking

⁹ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, p.155 (1948).

¹⁰ Bhagavad Gita, XII.14.

¹¹ Bhagavad Gita, XII.15.

¹² Ibid., V. 15 & 16.

which the mortals would become immortal. A sort of a pact was patched up between the two quarrelling parties, viz., the gods and the demons, for this purpose and making Vasuki, a huge serpent, the rope, Mandara mountain the churning rod, they churned the Milk Ocean. But the first thing to come out was not nectar but a virulent poison, the very breeze of which suffocated and made the lives of the gods and demons alike miserable. The gods then took refuge in Shiva and prayed to him to save them from that torture. The story says that the great God drank the poison and relieved the universe of its misery. Many other things came out of that great effort but nectar was the last to be produced. This story tells us that things coveted here are not unmixed with misery. Pleasure and pain go together; one who accepts pleasure must accept pain also; he cannot avoid it. Sri Krishna says in the *Gita*, 'The happiness, that is derived from the contact of the senses with their objects, which tastes like nectar in the beginning but in effect works like poison is of *rajasic* nature'.¹³ On the other hand that happiness which in the beginning savours like poison but in effect works like nectar that is called the *sattvic* joy and is born out of the tranquillity and purity of the mind.¹⁴ Knowing this we should pray and strive to attain purity of heart.

V

There is, however, one discontentment, one restlessness which is not harmful for a spiritual aspirant, viz. divine discontent: restlessness to see God, eagerness to feel His presence. This restlessness on the contrary is an antidote to the other. Here there is no straying away from our moorings. It is rather a gathering back into the fold, a going home. But this discontent comes to one in a million, after years of austerity and practice. Ordinary people have to plod on and try to still the lower type of discontent. For the former discontent leads you towards God and the latter entangles you into the world. Remembering this let us exert our bit to free ourselves from this bondage, from this *Samsara*.

¹³ Ibid., XVIII.38.

¹⁴ Ibid., XVIII.37.