

EQUANIMITY

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I

THINGS in nature are in a state of flux, every moment they change. The seed that is sown sprouts in a few days and becomes a plant, puts forth buds, and the buds blossom overnight. A few hours and they too wither away yielding place to fruits, sometimes. The moon revolves round the earth and the earth round the sun, every moment. The whole universe is in the vortex of activity. It cannot rest for fear of its annihilation. But eternal activity is an impossible conception. There must be periods of rest following activity. In everything created we find it. Maybe the period of activity and rest in some cases can be counted in terms of hours, while in some others (as in the case of the earth) in millions of years. All the same, if nature is built on any definite plan, if from the construction of the microcosm any conclusion as to the cosmic process can be drawn it should be admitted that there must be periods of activity alternating with periods of rest, in the universe as a whole. Hindu scriptures support this view. They speak of the cyclic theory of manifestation, when they say: 'The Lord projected the sun and the moon (and the other beings) as on the previous occasions.'¹ The Hindus do not say that this life of the earth or of the universe is all that has been in the womb of time. Creation, in their opinion, had no beginning. It is only alternately rest and projection.

However, if it is asked: Why then do the Upanisads speak of a 'beginning' when they say: 'The Existence alone, without a second, there was in the beginning'?² Sri Sankara replies, that the 'beginning' here refers only to the present cycle of creation. And what was there at that time (in the 'beginning') is described in one of the most beautiful concepts in the Rig Veda which in Swami Vivekananda's words is given here: 'Then there was neither aught nor naught, nor air, nor sky, nor anything. What covered all? Where rested all? Then death was not, nor deathlessness, nor change of night and day. That existed, that breath, covering, as it were, that God's existence, motionless.'³ Further, the Vedas wonderfully picture that indescribable first state as 'Gloom existed in gloom.'⁴ Persons living in villages, far away from cities, might have some faint idea as to this.

¹ Rig Veda, 8.8.48.

² Chandogya Up., 6.2.1.

³ Rig Veda, 8.7.17.1&2.

⁴ Ibid., 8.7.17.3.

They would have noticed that calm of the gloomy night of the New Moon, which instils awe and almost fear into the traveller. Imagine now how much more calm there would have been in that 'gloom in gloom'.

But coming to the calm, there is the calm before the storm, there is also the calm of the sultry night, when the wind tired of blowing has gone, as it were, to take rest in some distant cave. But what a vast difference between the two types of calmnesses — the one that was before the projection of the universe and the others enumerated above. In one there is all the assurance of placidity, in the other all the fear of the impending calamity. In the one there is the soul-soothing coolness, in the other there is the presence of unbearable discomfort. In the one there is peace, in the other there is anxiety.

A remote resemblance to this soul-soothing tranquillity can be met with in the calm of the mountains, of the Himalayas. The mountain-retreat holds a direct contrast to the hectic and mad whirlpool of activity of the world, caught in which poor man loses all his bearings and moorings. Far away from the madding crowd, secure in the contemplation of his own self, man, in the retreat, not only retires from the world outside, but also withdraws from the worlds he is creating within. Perhaps a very near parallel to that indepictable calmness can be experienced in the dreamless sleep. Here, in dreamless sleep, we get an idea, though yet a little vague, of what equanimity is.

II

All creation is rushing back to gain this equanimity — this disturbed balance, though unconsciously. Human beings too do it, some unconsciously and some consciously. Aye, that is the difference between man and the other creatures — he can strive consciously to possess that equanimity. For man is a peculiar phenomenon, perhaps, the most wonderful creation of nature. It is only he that manifestly goes against nature. He fights with it tooth and nail. Though created with a frail constitution he has survived all the onslaughts of mightier animals and of subtle pestilences as well. He has harnessed the forces of nature to serve his needs. He has delved into the depths of nature's secrets, and is trying to gain mastery over them. But fighting external nature forms only a fraction of the total struggle. With all his conquest of the outer forces man is still not in a happy position. His inventions of all sorts give him pleasure, for sometime, no doubt — we shall say, give him excitement — but that only increases the tension on the nerves, increases the horrid torrent of unrest. Tranquillity does not come with these pleasures; instead a deep void soon develops, a wide chasm soon opens, as a reaction.

However, this running after the pleasures too is done with the view to attain that Infinite Bliss, to forget everything else, but only mistakenly, as one thirsty in a desert takes the mirage as an oasis and runs after it. A large majority of mankind mistakenly takes these pleasures as the be-all

and end-all of life. Why so? How does the error arise? It is said in the Upanisads that the joy which the beings live by is an infinitesimal fraction of that divine Bliss.⁵ The error has arisen because mankind has taken that little insignificant fraction of bliss to be the Infinite. That is how they are misled. For that divine Bliss cannot be found in the finite things; in the Infinite alone is the complete Bliss.⁶ It is a fact, that has been assured by the Hindu scriptures, that ultimately everyone will reach that Infinite Bliss, because all this has come out of It, live in It and in the end will return unto It.⁷ But that may take aeons and also transmigration through millions of lives. Inert things and unthinking beings may bide their time, but a human being should consciously make efforts to regain that 'kingdom of heaven', and then it will come.

III

Why do we say that the gaining of this equanimity, serenity, is a step towards that Bliss, nay that Bliss itself? Because bliss can reign only in a place undisturbed. On the placid surface of the lake alone can objects be reflected. Again, in that Infinite Bliss there is no movement, as at the beginning of creation. That is why all Teachers call upon us to cultivate this virtue of equanimity, poise. For instance, Sri Krishna speaks of a *sthitaprajña*, one of steady wisdom. Mark the words 'steady wisdom'. It is not a wisdom that is every moment changing. Neither does it mean knowledge in the ordinary sense of the term. We can have a faint conception of what it is, if we go through the description of *sthitaprajña* given in the Gita. Sri Krishna describes the state of such a person of 'steady wisdom' thus: 'When one annihilates all desires, arising in the mind, and is satisfied in one's own self by the self, then alone that one is called a man of steady wisdom'⁸ Every word here is significant. It is to be noted that desires are to be annihilated and not merely subdued. For the subdued ones may arise again and work havoc by taking toll of the subject for all the subjugation it has suffered. Again the word 'all' is very important. There is no via media in that, no concession, no compromise, 'all desires' have to be burnt. We may not show out our hankerings, but they may all be there in the mind. That too is dangerous. They should all be wiped out even from the mind. The definition does not end here, it continues 'satisfied in one's own self by the self'. What is the meaning of that? It means that for such a man's satisfaction, contentment, no outer agency is required, not even the dreams or imaginations of pleasure. His mind knows nothing at that time except the presence of the Ātman, the self, effulgent and infinitely blissful. When man attains to such a state,

⁵ Taittiriya Upanisad, 2.8.

⁶ Chandogya Up., 7.23.1.

⁷ Taittiriya Up., 3.6.

⁸ B.Gita, II.55.

then alone can he be said to be of 'steady wisdom'. *Samādhi*, the acme of all spiritual life, is not far from such a person. As Sri Ramakrishna says it is like the appearance of the dawn in the east showing that the sun will rise before long.

Continuing Sri Krishna says: 'Unperturbed in calamity and unattached to happiness, devoid of attachment, fear and anger such a one given to contemplation is called a man of steady wisdom'.⁹ This is another sketch of such a person, which explains, as it were, the previous description. The world teachers do not leave us in suspense as to what they say, as to what is good for us. They want to be as explicit as possible, as unambiguous in their idea as the vehicle of language can convey it. They come down to our level of understanding to do that. Sri Krishna probably felt that posterity may misconstrue what he has said and go wrong. He did not like that it should be so. That is why he elaborates the idea. We may put on a brave front when we are in distress but all the same there may be trepidation in our hearts. But courage born of strength is a different thing altogether. Swami Vivekananda cites the example of a sage who was unperturbed by the threats, of Alexander the Great, to kill him if he refused to accompany him to Greece. Swami Vivekananda describes the episode thus: 'And the man bursts into a laugh, and says, "You never told such a falsehood in your life, as you tell just now. Who can kill me? Me you kill, Emperor of the material world! Never! For I am Spirit unborn and undecaying, never was I born and never do I die, I am the Infinite, the Omnipresent, the Omniscient; and you kill me, child that you are!"' That is the serenity of the sage which Krishna refers to. It is born of the realization of Truth.

Again, Swamiji speaking about fearlessness gives an example of a sannyasin, 'who used to repeat "Shivoham" — "I am Bliss Eternal", and a tiger jumped on him one day and dragged him away and killed him; but so long as he was living, the sound came, "Shivoham, Shivoham"'. That is equanimity, that is being steadfast in wisdom, to be fearless even in the jaws of death, to be one with the Ātman, to be 'satisfied in the self by the self' and also 'to be devoid of attachment'. For what else is so precious to one as one's own body? Is not all the struggle of the ordinary run of mankind to keep this body intact? It is so. Yet here was one who did not think even of the body as anything better than the rags he wore.

To such alone can realization come and not to cowards. 'This Atman cannot be attained by the weak, neither is it attainable by errors, nor without having recourse to renunciation',¹⁰ says the *Mundakopanishad*. Sri Sankara commenting on this verse says that the word *pramāda* (error) that is used here means possession of or hankering after son, wealth, fame and the like. It is this error that involves man more and more into bondage. So beware says the scripture. The Upanishad continuing says, 'That wise person, who strives by these methods, enters the realm of

⁹ Ibid., II.56.

¹⁰ Mundakopanishad, 3.2.4.

Brahman,¹¹ the realm which is of the nature of perfect tranquillity, of immortality.

We are familiar with the episode of Yājñavalkya and Maitreyi. Perhaps part of it may bear repetition here: When Yājñavalkya imparted his wish to retire to the forest, to his two wives, and with that end in view wanted to divide his assets between them, the intelligent Maitreyi asks him, 'My lord, can I become immortal if this whole earth full of wealth comes into my possession?'¹² 'No, no,' replies Yājñavalkya, 'there is no hope of immortality through wealth.'¹³ 'If so,' replies Maitreyi, 'what shall I do with that which brings me no immortality. On the other hand tell me about that which can bring that state.'¹⁴ That is the type of non-attachment born of discrimination. This non-attachment, being free from desires, that is spoken of in the Gita, is not a passing phase. It is of a permanent nature. Serenity sometimes comes to any man, after the fulfilment of his ambition or some of his desires. But it is very short lived. A gust of wind in the form of some other ambition, blows this serenity away. A starving man will have no wild desires, but in him the hankering after them is not burnt away. It is dormant, in the seed form. When his body returns to normalcy all these wild desires get hold of him again. But the restraint of the man of steady wisdom, when he has realized the Highest, is of quite a different type. It is natural and results in enormous good. It is then that the state of equanimity becomes an accomplished fact. There is no fall from there. 'Attaining this divine state one is not deluded again; one who rests in it even at the time of death, attains Nirvana in Brahman,'¹⁵ says the Gita.

A question may crop up here: When everything is changing and changeable how can this state alone be of a static, permanent nature? To this we ask: Does a fried seed sprout? No; it does not. Likewise with God-realization, attainment of *samadhi*, one is not attracted to the lower life. The seeds of desires are, as it were, burnt, their vitality to germinate is lost. Sri Ramakrishna puts across this idea very exquisitely: 'Suppose there are two magnets, one big and the other small. Which one will attract the iron? The big one, of course. God is the big magnet. Compared to Him woman is a small one.' By 'woman' Sri Ramakrishna means lust, and we can include the other desires also. This analogy, however, should not be stretched too far, by asking why should not all be attracted by God, if He is such a big magnet. The question is superfluous, for this pull can be experienced only by those who have felt God, realized Him. Others who are far away from Him cannot feel the attraction, as iron placed beyond the field of a magnet does not respond to its attraction, though the strength of the magnet has not diminished in any way.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Br. Up., 4.5.3.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 4.5.4.

¹⁵ B. Gita, II.72.

We referred, above, to the state of things when the creation was yet not projected. How did the Rishis come to know of it? Through their realization. They came to know that what was before the creation ought also be what it will be when it dissolves. And in *samādhī* everything dissolves. What there is cannot be described. It is like the dreamless sleep infinitely projected, but producing wonderful results. A word picture of this state — similar to that given in the Vedas. cited above — is drawn by Sri Ramakrishna:

‘When the mind reaches the seventh plane, then the ego vanishes completely and the man goes into *samādhī*. What happens when the mind reaches the seventh plane cannot be described. Once a boat enters the “black waters” of the ocean, it does not return. Nobody knows what happens to the boat after that. Therefore the boat cannot give us any information about the ocean.’ The mind is in the condition of the boat that entered the “black waters”, uncharted ocean of Brahman. In such a man the mind which could have taken pictures of the things, gets merged in the Ātman or Brahman, in that state. That is why we draw a blank there. But this state is not one that is to be dreaded. For it is a state getting into which all bonds are cut asunder, all doubts are shattered, resolved, and fruits of one’s actions are worn away.¹⁶ Is not then such a state, of perfect equanimity, covetable?

IV

Now we come to the method of attaining that state. Practice is absolutely necessary to attain any end. Swami Vivekananda remarks, ‘You may sit down and listen to me by the hour every day, but if you do not practise, you will not get one step further.’ That is a fact of experience with all. Further, we have to impress upon our mind that the means adopted to achieve an end should be as unsullied as the perfection, the goal, which we covet. ‘You cannot attain what is infinite by finite things,’¹⁷ says the *Kathopanishad*. Similarly, you cannot attain a noble end by diabolical means. The state of equanimity, is a very high one. So, whatever qualities the man who has achieved that end possesses — enumerated in the scriptures — are to be the means by which one can hope to reach that state. One has also to go beyond the sway of the three *gunas* in order to do that. For the *gunas* bind man down to this earth. Sri Ramakrishna has compared these *gunas* to robbers. The first one (*tamas*) kills, the second one (*rajas*) leaves you bound, the third one (*sattva*) releases you, but cannot take you to your goal. For that you have to go beyond them and be without them. That is what Sri Krishna also advises Arjuna, ‘The Vedas deal with subjects that are in the domain of the three *gunas*. O Arjuna, go beyond the three *gunas*.’¹⁸ Here by ‘Vedas’ is meant mainly the actions

¹⁶ Mundakopanishad, 2.2.8.

¹⁷ Kathopanishad, 2.10.

¹⁸ B.Gita, II.45.

enjoined by them for attaining heaven and the like. Thus from all points of view, we see that, one has to be rid of all material yearnings to attain this state of everlasting equanimity.