

ETHICS OF AUSTERITY

Swami Paratparananda

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To think of austerity in the present times appears to many as an anachronism, to speak of it as out-of-date and to practise it is considered definitely primitive, antediluvian, with the result that we find where we are; neither able to solve our increasing problems nor to reap the benefits that would have accrued from its practice. To act as one likes, to think as one's mind fancies and to speak as one's tongue presumes seems to be the order of the day and this is considered as freedom. Nothing can be more pathetic than such a condition. It is more so when such a state of affairs happens in a country which had nurtured from time out of mind the idea of sacrifice, self-effacement to an extent unheard of in world's history. Whether we take cognizance of our epics as facts of history or as myths, the ideal placed before us by them is very high. We hear of Rishi Dadhichi's giving up of the body so that the devas may make weapons out of his bones and kill the demons with their aid; we hear of king Shibi protecting a dove from a hawk and in the process and in conformity with justice, being ready to sacrifice his body in order to appease the hunger of the bird of prey. Whatever value we may place on these stories, the moral which is attempted to be inculcated in the people and the moral which was once practised, we must concede, is self-sacrifice. Ancient Indian society was built on that ideal. There the highest honour was not given to the most ruthless or powerful tyrants but to the possessor of greatest virtues, among which austerity, which meant a life of self-effacement, was one. It was practised by not only those who exclusively devoted themselves to the life of the spirit but was the norm of the whole society. A popular saying of the time, which puts the idea briefly, was that an individual should be given up for the sake of the clan, the group, the family; a family for the sake of the village, a village in the interest of the country and every thing for the sake of the Self (Atman).¹

Perhaps this may look as a digression from the subject but it is not so. For by austerity we do not mean here physical privation alone. Austerity according to the *Gītā* covers all the spheres of man's life: his body, speech and thought. What we in the present day consider as most trivial and hence unworthy of notice such as the way one comports in his

¹ Mahabharata, Udyoga Parva, 129.48.

everyday life, even regarding the minutest details, was prized most by our ancients. The *Gītā* says, 'Adoration of God, the twice born, the preceptor, and the wise, and purity, straightforwardness, practice of continence and non-injury are the austerity of the body'.²

Let us examine the implication of this statement, every word of which is pregnant with meaning. The very idea of adoring God postulates the acceptance of His existence, and His accessibility. No one adores a being who is unknowable and unapproachable and in whose existence there is a doubt. Secondly this adoration also means that there is a relation between Him and the worshipper; relation such as that between master and servant, as between father and child, as between friends, as between the indweller and the house, and so on. The purport is that God is not like an absentee landlord, demanding only his dues and not caring for the tenant. He is actively concerned with the affairs of all beings. Man has lost that belief in a higher power due to the scientific inroads and materialistic philosophies. Along with this he has forgotten also that he is not a mere combination of body, senses and mind but something more. This is but a natural corollary. Perhaps the latter view gained ground first and later on disbelief in God, agnosticism and scepticism sneaked their way into the human mind. Now, why was this adoration of God considered a necessity? So that man may not forget that however highly placed he may be, however powerful in the empirical world, he is but a puny creature before a higher power; a power that ruled the universe, that meted out desserts according to one's deeds. Before Him everyone of us and even all of us are nothing. This was the first teaching.

Why should we adore the twice-born is the next question? The twice born, specially the Brahmana, was not adored because he was born in that class but because he possessed qualities of head and heart which deserved admiration. Sri Krishna enumerates a few of them in the *Gītā*: 'Control of the mind, and sense organs, purity (inner and outer), forgiveness, straightforwardness, knowledge of the scriptures and realization of its contents in one's own life, and a firm faith in God —these are the natural tendencies of a Brahmana'.³ No one in his sane mind, even at the present day, can say that the possession of such virtues, in whomsoever they may be, is detrimental to society. On the other hand everyone is coming to realize the absence of these virtues as being the cause of all our trouble, and miseries. No wonder then that the possessor of these qualities was adored in a society, which put a high premium on their acquisition. Again, it may also be observed that unless one honours and respects an idea or a norm one would not be able to imbue it, not to speak of practising it. Further, however much an abstract idea or ideal may appeal to us it is very difficult to practise or believe in unless we find

² Gita, 17.14.

³ Ibid., 18.42.

before us people living that idea, and where such ideas are lived our heads, of their own accord, bow down, either in appreciation or in respect. So that was the second injunction: to respect goodness.

In former times the preceptor, specially the one who guides man in his spiritual path, was revered more than the parents. The parents give us the body but the preceptor, the guru, discovers to us our inner-being, the Self. He puts us on the path to perfection, salvation. He gives to us, as it were, a second birth; honour was therefore due to him too.

The wise that are referred to in the above quotation of the *Gītā* do not mean those who are merely conversant with the scriptures but those who have realized God, known their self by experience. Naturally one who loved the life of the spirit adored these men. For only they, if at all any, were worthy of worship —having overcome worldly desires they help others to cross this transmigratory existence.

Next comes purity. Purity of the body was insisted upon, as dirt on one's person and surroundings did not signify a good taste. Besides association with dirt engendered unclean thoughts as well. And one who is pure will be straightforward also. Guilelessness, as Sri Ramakrishna used to term this simplicity or straightforwardness, was a virtue, to be had only after infinite efforts in the past lives, and was the high water mark of the evolution of one's mind. To possessors of this quality, Sri Ramakrishna would remark, God realization would come with a little effort.

Continence or *brahmacharya* is the next requirement not only of the fourth *āshrama*, but of every stage of life. The first stage, that of studentship or *brahmacharya*, as it was formerly called by the Indian seers, was a rigorous way of life, where all luxuries were shunned and where flippancy in conduct was meticulously eradicated. The student's mind was never allowed to stray away into sensate regions and was always directed to the acquisition of knowledge and learning about the values of life. Even in the household, the second stage, it was enjoined on man to cultivate abstinence. Sri Ramakrishna too said to the householders that husband and wife should live as brother and sister when one or two children were born to them. And to those who wanted to devote their lives exclusively to God, the life of continence was indispensable. Sri Śankara categorically brings this to the fore in the *Vivekacūdāmani*, 'One who is after the care of the body and yet thinks of realizing the Self is like the man who desires to cross a river through the help of a crocodile mistaking it for a log of wood'.⁴ Our sages never minced matters, as such they sometimes appear to be severely critical of the ways of the world. But then we must remember that, like the surgeon who seems to be

⁴ Vivekachudamani, 86.

ruthless in cutting out a gangrenous growth, the seers had no option but to point out in the strongest language at their command the dangers that beset a spiritual aspirant in his path. In spite of such warnings people fall into the trap set by Mahamaya, the great illusion, as if willingly. What would have happened, if these eye-openers were not there, can best be imagined than expressed!

We now come to non-injury. Sometimes man makes a travesty of this teaching. He follows only the letter and deliberately forgets the spirit behind the instruction. He thinks that only one who injures physically is an evil doer. But injury need not be only physical. Man can without actually doing bodily hurt play enough mischief to goad others into situations where there will be no way left for the individuals but to do away with themselves. Yet, outwardly the person who is responsible for such catastrophes may appear as the mildest being living on earth, one who would not harm even an insect or worm. Therefore, the proper way in which we can evaluate the meaning of this instruction is to view it in the light of the circumstances under which it was given. Coming from the lips of Sri Krishna who had persuaded Arjuna to fight a battle, which was almost like a blood bath, this interpretation seems to be meaningless. It should, therefore, be treated in a different way. It should be conceded that injury can be done in other ways also. This, however, should not be interpreted that physical violence is encouraged or connived at by us or was done so even by Sri Krishna. In no way is physical violence advocated here. What we want to stress is that there are other ways of doing harm which ordinarily escape human attention or though known, society finds itself helpless to root out. For our purpose anything that is done to acquire wealth, fame and other worldly possessions unrighteously is *himsa*, injury. Take for instance the food adulteration that is going on at present. Does it not harm people; is it not an injury? But most of us forget that it is. Therefore, even on the pragmatic level non-injury is a must that is to be practised by all members of the human society. Can we then say that this austerity is useless? We shall not find anyone, not even those who indulge in these malpractices, who would say so openly.

We said earlier that austerity (*tapas*), in the sense that it was understood of yore, covered speech and thought too. Sri Krishna says, 'Speech that does not hurt or wound any, truth that is kindly and for the good of those to whom it is spoken, the practise of the study of scriptures—these are said to be the austerity of speech'.⁵ This world is a peculiar place and contains both types of extremes: the evil as well as the good. There are people, who take delight in wounding others' feelings. It is a morbid taste and not less heinous than those acts of murder which a pervert commits, merely for observing the death agony the victims

⁵ Gita, 17.15.

undergo. Sometimes we spread gossip without taking into consideration the sensibility of the person concerned. It rankles in one's heart to hear unmerited condemnation or wicked rumour. We may better understand these things if we put ourselves in the victim's position. How would any one like it? None would, criticism, even when healthy is not palatable, what then to speak of wicked tales. The pity is we never discriminate in this way and therefore give reins to the tongue. A little introspection will surely bring to light the evil effects of desecratory speech and make us more cautious. There is a saying that one who has controlled the tongue has controlled all. It is the tongue that makes man a glutton and it is the tongue again by unbridled speech that sows the seeds of dissension, feuds, and wars.

Truth as we had pointed out on an earlier occasion is a great healer. It heals the fever of fear. Swami Vivekananda states: 'And here is the test of truth — anything that makes you weak physically, intellectually and spiritually, reject as poison; there cannot be any life in it, it cannot be true. Truth is strengthening. Truth is purity, truth is all-knowledge; truth must be strengthening, must be enlightening, must be invigorating'. Speaking about truth Sri Ramakrishna observes: 'Truthfulness in speech is the *tapasya* of the Kali Yuga. By adhering to truth one attains God'. But how difficult man finds today to practise truthfulness. He finds the way of untruth easier, far more remunerative than the path of truth. But this is a false assumption. Truth alone ultimately triumphs and not falsehood, is an adage of our ancients. It is like the corrosive substance which penetrates even granite rocks.

Our sages did not leave us high and dry as to how to conduct ourselves in this work-a-day-world. The adjectives, *priyam* (kindly) and *hitam* (beneficent) of the word *satyam* (truth) used by Sri Krishna in this context shows us the way. Elsewhere it is said, 'Speak truth that is affable, but not truth which is disagreeable'. As an instance we can cite the Holy Mother's instructions. She would say that one should not even ask a cripple how he was lamed. That is a sore point of his life and would stir up memories which, perhaps, he is trying to forget. Restraining oneself from such remarks is also an austerity of speech.

About the austerity of thought what does the Gita suggest: 'Tranquillity, gentleness, quietude of the speech, control of the inner organ, purity of thought — these constitute the austerity of the mind'.⁶ It need not be pointed out that everyone yearns for tranquillity. But how can it be cultivated if the mind is always thrown into mountain high waves of modifications, due to the perceptible alluring world? In the pursuit of tranquillity people run after pleasures, thinking that is the way to attain it.

⁶ Gita, 17.16.

But has anyone gained placidity by involving oneself into sense pleasure? No. So, as Sri Ramakrishna used to say one must even while satisfying their little desires think about their momentariness in order to overcome all greater desires. Peace is not so easy to attain if once one gets entangled in the world. So one who seeks eternal peace should withdraw into himself; should renounce all worldly desires.

Man becomes gentle if his mind has reached the stage of quietude. All other mildness or gentleness is forced by circumstances. It is only outward, not born of the mind. The mind may be a seething cauldron of jealousy, yet the man may, for all appearances, look like an image of gentleness. This quietude of the mind cannot be practised if quietude of speech is not practised and this in turn is impossible unless the lower nature in us is controlled. All this is feasible when one's thought current is purified. Constant thinking about God only can purify our heart. There is no other way for the cleanliness of the mind. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'As you go to the east the west is left behind'. So as you go towards God the thoughts about other things become less and less.

We have now seen that even in the present age austerity has a place. It is not antiquarian as it may appear at first sight. Whether it is the secular or religious sphere, control of the body, senses, speech and mind is a necessity even now. The more a society inculcates this virtue the higher it rises in the estimate of the world, and the more easily it is enabled to solve its problems. Such a society will have the least number of problems and even the gravest of them will melt like icebergs that float down to warmer climates. The power of austerity is limitless. It is the fountain of all virtues. For a man of austerity, as described above, everything becomes easy. Will we have the courage to practise it? Then we need not fear anything in the world.