

THE FOUR-FOLD BONDAGE AND RELEASE THEREFROM

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THE average man's life on earth is a hopeless dependence on circumstances. He has several masters to serve: those under whom he works, those to whom he owes obligations, his own passions and lastly the ego. Among these, the passions are the worst tyrants; they exact out of him all his energy and they will not leave him at that but would continue to torment him. Man's senses are at the root of all passions; the eyes hanker after beautiful objects, the ear after sweet sounds and so on and these senses are never satisfied. They appear to be pleased for a time, but there is no appeasing them. Without any compunction they repeat their demands. Their hunger is enormous. They make man work like a bond-slave, like the bullock that is tied to the yoke of the native oil mill. Tantalized by the wisp of grass that hangs before it, the bullock, in order to reach that coveted piece of food, grinds the mill day in and day out, but never gets the promised delicacy. Likewise, man expecting happiness grinds this mill of the world as a slave. But the pity of it is, that even when he becomes aware of his condition, aware that he is only made an instrument of, aware that he is himself being crushed in the mill, is unable to get out of it. He finds himself bound hand and foot, as it were. He finds that the flame of desires that he had himself kindled is burning him through and through. Then he cries out: Is there no way out? His real search begins then.

II

Let us try to understand the reaction of man, down the ages, to this fourfold bondage viz., to nature, to the relations and the like, to the senses and the ego. Man has tried in various ways to overcome external nature. He has come out of the cave and built up towns and cities to be free of the fear of the ferocious beasts and the whims of the ever-changing nature. He has overcome heat and cold by various methods. He has made nature yield its secrets bountifully. So, in a sense we can say that man has been successful in conquering outer nature. Yet a great question remains to be answered: How many have actually been

benefited?

Perhaps a few countries may have been successful in breaking man's attachment to relatives, and the like. But whether that has improved man's nature in living peacefully with his neighbours, is a matter of dispute.

But when humanity is considered as a whole man's inner nature, i.e. the predominance of the senses and ego over man, has remained at, almost, the same level as what it was thousands of years ago. Civilization has not improved that nature to any appreciable extent. Now, consider what follows: a thousand years ago two nations would have fought out and done with any quarrel, within a few days or months. But today though hot war has gone under, it has been replaced by cold war. Nations are afraid to trust one another. Therefore each is trying to build up its defences to its utmost capacity, with the result that what revenue should normally have gone to build the economic structure of a nation goes into the war machinery. But there is no way out. No nation can, without danger to its very survival and territorial integrity, dare neglect to keep pace with others regarding armaments, especially of those of its neighbours. So this cold war goes on and on. Similar is the situation in every other field of man's contacts, family as well as society. So, where is the change? To consider, therefore, the question of change of nature in man taken on the collective plane is of little avail. We shall confine to man as an individual, for if in a society there were to arise a sufficient number of good individuals that society may ultimately be beneficial not only to itself but to the world as a whole.

III

We have seen how much handicapped man is. Each individual, who seeks to master his lower nature, therefore has to fight his own battle. But what humanity has given him as a legacy is not soft clay but hard rock. From this hard rock he has to cut his image and according as his instruments, that is, his mind and inherent tendencies, are sharp and sound, and his efforts in this direction are ceaselessly continuous, regular and unwavering to that extent the image he will carve out, will also prove attractive and divine. But how to carve that image? In other words, how to attain that perfect mastery over our lower nature? There is a great difference here between the outer and inner worlds. In the outer world we may, if we have enough of wealth, employ the best sculptor or painter to do our job for us. But in the internal sphere, in the case of the mind, ordinarily, none can help, none can get you out of the morass. You have to find your own way out of the labyrinth. It is like the silkworm which builds its cocoon round itself. None can help it to break its house. But if it intends to come out, it may, in the form of a beautiful butterfly, do so. If man eagerly yearns and earnestly makes efforts, he can break this fourfold bondage. But the path is difficult and requires immense patience.

It is like walking on the sharp edge of a razor. One should always be on the alert. That has been the experience of sages who have travelled the path.¹ For, in the case of the ordinary man, attachments insinuate themselves, in several ways and once they get hold of him they do not leave him easily. The story of Jadabharata, in the *Mahābhārata*, is aptly illustrative of this fact. Leaving his kingdom and wealth Bharata had retired to a forest to live in contemplation of God. There he came upon a young-one of a deer which was just then delivered by its mother on the bank of a stream and was being carried away on its current. Its mother had died in fright hearing the roar of some ferocious beast. Moved to pity Bharata rescued the deer and he thought it would be cruel to leave it in the forest with none to take care of. He reared it up with loving care. But when it grew the native urge in the animal took it into the forest; all the love the sage had showered on it could not hold it back. The sage was broken-hearted and roamed the forest calling the deer by its pet name, but it never returned. The thought of the deer however continued to haunt him and when he died his last uttered word was the name of the deer and his last thoughts were of it. Such is attachment. The king in spite of his right resolution could not restrain himself from being attached.

Now, it may be asked: How then to live in the world? Sri Ramakrishna has given us the prescription. He said to the householders: 'Live like a maid-servant in a rich man's house. She takes care of her master's children and calls them my Ram, my Shyam and treats them as her own but all the time she knows that her own children are there in her native village.' But this idea gets root only by long practice of discrimination and detachment. When one is able to detach oneself from the most dear thing without the least wrench at one's heart one can live like a master. The outer circumstances will then fail to produce any lasting impression on one's mind.

This discrimination is the sheet anchor of spiritual life. It is the faculty which makes man choose the right path and discard the vicious. The senses present one with a panorama of objects and sensations, which causes desires to arise. It is discrimination which says whether you can fulfil those desires without any detriment to your spiritual health. If you wisely submit to the dictation of discrimination you are safe, otherwise you involve yourself into insurmountable difficulties.

All sages have unequivocally declared that desire is at the root of all evil. The Buddha said that *tanha* (*trishna*) for things of the world was responsible for man's miseries. Sri Krishna says, 'This *kāma* (desire), this anger, is produced from the Rajoguna. It is a great appetite (*mahāshana*) and the most sinful (*mahāpāpmā*). Know it here (in this world) to be your enemy.'² Here desire and anger are bracketed together as one. For anger is desire obstructed. All other passions may be said to be the offsprings of this desire. As the *Gītā* observes, 'Man who thinks always about sense objects grows attached to them. From attachment desires arise, and when desires are obstructed anger springs up; anger clouds the mind. A

darkened (infatuated) mind loses hold of memory (of what is good and what is evil). With loss of memory one fails to command the discriminating power and consequently loses one's hold on spiritual life.'³ Herein we get a clue as to how man becomes increasingly a slave to his passions, and indirectly we get a hint as to what is to be avoided by a spiritual aspirant.

Another great drag on the mind of the present generation is its obsession about reason and logic and the related philosophy. Philosophy, as mere intellectual propositions, without their practice may be all right for a pedant, for a pedagogue and one who wants to earn name, fame and wealth. But as far as the religious life is concerned its use for man is very limited. A mere pundit cannot have peace for himself, not to speak of his being able to bestow it on others. His peace if at all he must find in what the common run of men also experience i.e. in sense pleasures. But that is exactly what a spiritual aspirant has to avoid and tries to break through. Idle is a man's hope, if he thinks that he can reach the summit of spiritual life by mere theorising about Reality without living a pure and unsullied life and doing assiduous and arduous practices. If any one wants to believe in a person who advocates living any sort of life but doing some intellectual gymnastics, about philosophy, he may well be sure that spiritually his ruin is certain and sealed. For even in the ordinary world, mankind does not trust a man devoid of integrity to be at the helm of affairs of a Government or even an establishment, what then to speak of spiritual life! Let us beware of such wolves in sheep's clothing who come to advise in this manner.

Having pointed out the pitfalls we shall see what is the way towards breaking these bonds and becoming master of ourselves. Man from his first appearance on earth has fought for freedom. Swami Vivekananda says that not only man's but the exertion of every being is to get back its freedom. Because in essence every being is that Brahman which is unfettered and eternal. All beings have somehow fallen from that state of freedom and so are struggling to get back to it. Two types of people tried in two different ways to obtain this freedom. The West concentrated their efforts in the external world whereas in the East, in India, our sages having explored the regions of outer life found that freedom was not to be sought there. They found another world inside themselves, unexplored, untouched, and vast. Commanding it, they realized, man could live like a master and eventually be free from this 'ring of return'.

But this word 'master' has a peculiar ring for an average man. It at once brings before his mind's eye the picture of man with many servants and vast wealth. But this is not the proper form of a master. For control over others may give us momentary satisfaction but cannot give us peace. Even dictators have a fall and while they rule they live in deadly fear of their lives. But to control one's body, one's senses and mind and turn it towards God is to become the real master, to be free from any

fear. Man then cares not for anything. Nothing disturbs his peace. That was what our sages found out. And that mastery they said is to be achieved if anyone wants lasting peace and bliss.

Again, the mansion of man's body is constructed of a highly inflammable and explosive material. That is what he forgets. Śrī Śankara observing man's pitiable plight says in his *Vivekacūdamani*: 'The deer, the elephant, the moth, the fish and the black-bee, everyone of these have died by their attachment to one or the other of the five senses, viz., sound etc. respectively. What then is in store for man who is attached to all the five senses!' ⁴ It is said that the deer is enamoured of music. Even though it is beset with danger the moment it hears the sweet sound of the flute it stops rooted to the spot and then is slowly, without its knowledge, drawn towards the sound. This is how, it is believed the hunters used to catch the deer. Similarly the other animals are drawn by their respective dominant senses. But man is a slave to all the five. How much then should not he be careful not to be entangled or ensnared by them! There is no way of controlling the senses than not to indulge in them. Not to give them any rope, short or long. One should not give any scope for them to occupy one's mind. One should always be engaged either in good works, good thoughts or thought of God.

Sri Ramakrishna recommended taking the name of the Lord as the most efficient remedy for the malady of these passions. He further said, 'As you go to the east, the west is left behind. As man progresses towards God, his passions fall off from him.' Now to remember God, an Unknown Entity to a large section of mankind, is really a great problem. Most of the people have not seen Him, how then can they remember Him? Again, people can remember only things which they have seen and to which they are attached. How can they love God whom they have not seen? True, it is not possible all at once but on the other hand this physical attraction does not last; love in the world wanes and crumbles after a time. Things of the world are transient; today they are, tomorrow they are not. Nothing is permanent. Affliction and joy alternate. Love and hatred follow one another. Śrī Śankara has an exquisite couplet describing the nature of human behaviour: 'As long as man is able to earn money, so long does the family respect him and regard him but when the body becomes feeble and decrepit, no one in the family asks about his welfare.' ⁵ And that is literally true in most of the cases. So, man must prepare himself for disillusionment if he is not to lose heart in the end. If he remembers these facts his outlook on life will change. He will then turn to a higher source of solace which neither fails him in his need nor makes any exacting demand. This constant remembrance of the Most High will enthuse man with new vigour to fight his lower nature; then the temptations will begin to have less and less effect on him.

There are, however, ups and downs in spiritual life also. It is not at all a smooth sailing. To tide over the rough weather man must have recourse to holy company. The company of the holy gives a fresh lease of

life to his drooping spirits. From these holy men he comes to know that those phases of depression have to be gone through by every aspirant and are not insurmountable barriers, as they first appear to be. The practicant has to persevere until he reaches the goal. This is what the *Gita* calls, continuous practice. The *Gita* gives a high place for practice in religious life. It says that *abhyāsa* and *vairagya* (renunciation) are the two ways of controlling the mind.⁶ Further, the *Gita* declares: 'The wayward mind is to be repeatedly brought under control though it may stray away from the Self from time to time.'⁷ There is no other way to subdue the mind than this. When the mind becomes tranquil, free from all impurities and is not disturbed by anything, then man becomes one with divinity. Then only he can be the master, not otherwise.

Purity of the mind, the *sine qua non* of spiritual life, can be achieved by several ways : (1) by living with a realized soul or holy men and serving them with sincerity, and devotion, (2) by good deeds, (3) by prayer, (4) by taking the name of the Lord, (5) by meditation, and (6) by yoga. Unless one's mind is pure the reflection of the Divine will not be perfect in man; it will appear distorted. That is why man sees evil everywhere. When man becomes one with the Divine or sees the Lord, to use the devotee's phraseology, he gets rid of all bondages. This has been repeatedly stressed in the Upanisads. And when the bondages are broken man becomes master of himself.

And that is the most covetable state. We may move unconsciously towards it and make false steps in the attempt and retard our progress. But to move consciously and intentionally and deliberately, man must have a clear vision of his goal and the means that he is going to adopt to reach it and then without let or hindrance stick to his path firmly. If he is successful in his attempt, even while he is progressing on the path he will be peaceful and blissful, in spite of the heavy strain he will be subject to, even then he will feel that he is master, unfettered and free. In short, to live like a master one needs, not hoards of wealth, or progeny, or servants, but mastery over one's own mind and complete identification with God.

¹ Katha Up. 3.14.

² Bhagavad Gita, III.37.

³ Ibid, II. 62&63.

⁴ Vivekacūdamani, 76.

⁵ Mohamudgara, 5.

⁶ Bhagavad Gita, VI.35.

⁷ Ibid., VI.23.