

HOLY COMPANY AND SPIRITUAL LIFE

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Man is a gregarious animal. He wants associates; he wants companions; he must have society. Rare is he who can live by himself. Why? Because man has been made so, created so. The Lord created man with the senses going outward therefore he perceives, seeks things outside,¹ says the *Kathopanishad*. His delights are outside of himself. Alone he is afraid of several things — of robbers, if he has money; of life, if he has enemies; of himself, if he has a bad conscience and so on. A man with a tormented conscience likes to lose himself in a crowded place — crowded with activities as well as people.

Again, man wants to share his thoughts, his sorrows, his joys with others. Aye his joy too, in a sense. For where is the man who can say that he will not share some good news, that gives him happiness, with another who is likely to appreciate his talents, or envy his success? In sorrow and in disease, man really needs somebody, who would sympathise with him, who would feel for him; for want of this succour sometimes men have been seen to lose all faith in humanity and turn unfeeling, unappreciating brutes, nay, they may even be driven to insanity or may become hardened criminals. History has a number of incidents which go to prove this.

Psychological investigations, in which America has fairly advanced, show that even babies languish and die for want of sympathy and love. They instinctively feel — though their minds may not have developed to grasp intellectually what they feel — that they are not wanted. The very atmosphere, perhaps, becomes oppressive to them. This is not merely a conjecture. It can be inferred by your own experience in life. In our everyday life we meet with such situations. You are invited to a party, because you happen to be in some way related to the people, who are giving it, but in reality they will be glad if you abstained from attending. You do not know it yet. You go to the function and immediately you regret your action, for you instinctively feel that you are an unwanted person there, though you came not uninvited. Perhaps a dead silence of a minute or two at your entry, in the otherwise gay atmosphere, tells you that; or something like it happens and you become aware of the true state of affairs. It may sometimes be suffocating for you and perhaps you wish you were not there at all. On the other hand others at some other place would, probably, wish that you went to them even uninvited and felt yourself at home with them. Such instances show that an atmosphere is not merely physical but something more. And this other atmosphere acts

on the psychic being of man as the outer climate and atmosphere acts on his body. The psychic being in man can be and is influenced by the environment he lives in, by the company he keeps. 'Tell me with whom thou art found, and I will tell thee who thou art,' said the German poet-philosopher Goethe. This has been the verdict of not only him but also of others before and after him.

So, it has been a universal experience, all through the ages, all through the climes and all throughout the world that, but for a few exceptions, all men desire company; and that association influences them as sure as milk acted upon by acid transforms itself into curd. That being so it behoves all to take good care with what type of people they associate.

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Spiritual personages have emphasized the need of keeping holy company, on all aspirants. In ancient India it was easily done; everything fitted like a glove, on account of the traditional method of education — of living with the Guru. Every Brahmana boy was required to study *Brahma Vidya* under a competent preceptor, otherwise he was called a friend of a Brahmana and not as a Brahmana. This appellation, *Brahma-bandhu*, was not a coveted title, rather it was a way of ridicule, a derogatory epithet. The parents were very conscious that their children did not become mere friends of the Brahmanas.

At an early age of eight, the boys were sent to the preceptor's house and they studied under him all he could teach and imbibed his way of life as well. But there was nothing in this relationship, of teacher and disciple of that time, which could be termed as regimentation. Where love and affection was the guiding principle, harshness was only a semblance. The teacher bestowed upon his disciples as much affection as he showered on his own children. This period of life was one of austerity, of learning, of studentship — *brahmacharya*. Those who passed through the training could rise to every occasion in their future life. They had, neither difficulty, nor vacillation in facing the most trying circumstances with equanimity, for their feet were set on firm ground. This was the basic on which life was built in ancient days. And in this set-up, holy company was a foregone conclusion.

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But, as it happens, this ideal could not strictly be followed in later periods. Yet the idea that holy company was a necessity of spiritual life was indisputably accepted by one and all. There is a common saying in the Sanskrit language, which brings out this idea. Translated it means: 'With the benefit of holy company one attains to the state of non-attachment. With non-attachment one goes beyond infatuation; and going

beyond it one grasps the steadfast Truth, the Ultimate Reality; attaining It one is freed here while living; one becomes a *Jivanmukta*.' This was not a cant but the living experience of hundreds of people. Even to this day instances occur when a touch of, or a glance from a holy man transforms a person. Swami Vivekananda used to say that spirituality is a thing that can be given like a flower or fruit, by those who have realized God. Jesus Christ took as his foremost disciples fishermen and said: 'Come and follow me and I shall make you fishers of men'. And that he really did. A servant boy of a devotee of Sri Ramakrishna by association with the Master became one of the wonders of spiritual history — we mean Swami Adbhutananda. What great heights of spiritual wisdom did he not scale! He had literally and truly no education, as it is generally considered at the present time. So he had no access to the Scriptures. Yet, as attested to by his brother disciples and people who visited him in later times, words of wisdom flowed from his lips. He had direct access to the Source of all knowledge. Such was the transmutation that was produced by the company of Sri Ramakrishna in Lātu Maharaj.

But personalities like Sri Ramakrishna come once in a while, once in an age. They are the embodiments of spirituality, they are the Incarnations, the path-finders. What and who they are exactly is beyond any man's mind to assess. They can be understood in a small measure only through the disciples, who reveal some aspects of his life through their own. Are we then to wait till another Incarnation comes? No. Though Incarnations and saints of a high order may not always be present amidst us, there are at all times sincere and earnest people treading the path of spirituality or exclusively devoted to God, in smaller or greater number. Even in the worst spiritual crisis they are present, as can be inferred from the words of the Gita, which says that the Lord incarnates for the protection of the good and chastisement of the evil. It is the company of these virtuous, holy men that one should seek. Sri Ramakrishna declares, 'One cannot know the truth about God through science. Science gives us information only about things perceived by the senses: of things material. For this reason a man cannot comprehend spiritual things with his ordinary intelligence. To understand them he must live in the company of holy persons.' Then he gives a familiar example to illustrate this idea: 'You learn to feel the pulse by living with a physician.'

Sri Ramakrishna's one favourite phrase which explains the usefulness of holy company is, 'Come here now and then'. This he advised all those who had good parts in them. who were spiritually inclined, though they themselves did not know of it. He was a diviner of souls. At the very first sight he could find out the propensities and possibilities of a person. So, whenever he would come across a person who had a taste for spiritual life, he would repeat this invitation of his; and in some cases where he was sure that a little effort would do immense good to the persons, he kept constant watch over them and had them brought to him; and if they failed to come for any long time due to any reason he would

himself seek them out.

IV

How does the company of holy persons help? How does it act? Holy persons have known the evanescence of worldly things and have also come to know that the only thing that is valuable, covetable, real and existing is God. Having known about it they are strenuously striving to realize it in their own lives by giving up all desires and by trying to keep constant remembrance of Him, in many ways. Sri Krishna voices their feelings thus: 'With their minds and senses given to Me, expounding about Me to one another, always speaking about Me, they spend their time in great joy.'² It is not a morbid elation like that of the enjoyment of sense pleasures — which as a reaction brings in great depression with the passing away of the moment — that one feels in thinking of God. It is not stimulated by drugs. It spontaneously wells up from the heart. Its source is perennial, nay eternal.

A glance at a day's routine of Sri Ramakrishna, as available to us in the written records, explains the veracity of the above statement of the Gita. It also explains the potential creativity of that bliss — a creativity far more beneficial to man than any he could think of giving effect to, viz, the unravelling of a new life, the opening of fresh vistas which were till then closed to his vision.

For Sri Ramakrishna there was neither day nor night. Every hour would bring on him a different divine mood. He had very little or no sleep at nights. With him the nights would pass away in *samādhi*. But whenever any devotees stayed with him he was careful to see that they did their spiritual practices regularly. He would wake them up even at three o'clock in the morning and ask them to sit for meditation. In the small hours of the morning he would start chanting the names of God, totally immersed in His thought and utterly unaware of the surroundings as well as of his own body. For hours this would go on. Later in the day, if any devotees stayed with him he would talk on God and give them helpful instructions.

In the afternoon he rested only for a short while after the midday meal. Devotees from Calcutta would then arrive. Sometimes there would be singing of devotional songs, but there would always be unceasing talks on God. Many times during the singing of songs and in the midst of talks he would go into ecstasy, either being moved by the sentiment of the songs, or at the mention of a particular approach to God. Thus in his company it was all a veritable mart of joy-supreme and awareness of God.

Sri Ramakrishna, the adept teacher that he was, discouraged all talks except on God among the devotees. Do not the Upanisads say, 'Know Him, the Atman, alone and give up all other vain speech. This is the way to Immortality, Blessedness, Liberation'?³ Sri Ramakrishna lived the truths of the Upanisads and helped others live up to them. To the youngsters he would say, 'You are pure and unsullied; untainted by the

touch of the world; so you must be careful. Keep away from all attractions of the world. When the plant is young, one should protect it with hedges and keep off the cattle from trampling over it or eating it up. But when it grows into a tree even an elephant can be tied to its trunk.' Who would speak such plain words except a holy man? The holy man is not at all bound by the conventions of society. He is no respecter of persons; where truths, higher values of life were concerned, he would be plain spoken. However, truth is sometimes bitter; but, like medicine though bitter should be administered to cure a patient of his disease, truth though unpalatable must be spoken to cure man of his worldly fever. And that only a holy man has the right and courage to do. We will do well to read, what Sri Ramakrishna said to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee,⁴ the great novelist of Bengal, regarding the duties of man. He never minced matters. That is the advantage of a holy man's company: he would correct you if you went wrong. He neither feared nor curried favour with any person.

A disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, Swami Ramakrishnananda, the first President of the monastery in Madras spoke to the boys who came to him, about renunciation as the only means to God realization. The parents of the boys, naturally, got frightened lest the boys should turn monks. Some of them, who were helping the upkeep of the monastery in some way, threatened the Swami that they would withdraw their support if he did not desist from preaching renunciation. The Swami seemed to have remarked, 'What! Shall I stop preaching what our Master has taught and shown us as the only goal of life? Let them that are averse to such advice withhold their help if they like. The Lord will look after my needs.' How undaunted are the holy men! For them truth is dearer than life itself; and they alone know how to be steadfast to truth.

On another occasion, a gentleman who came to visit the monastery at Madras pulled out a newspaper to read. This called forth a sharp rebuke from Swami Ramakrishnananda: 'Sir,' he said, 'you can read that elsewhere. When you have come to a holy place think of holy things.' Instances like these can be extensively cited to prove that we learn from holy persons much that can help us in our spiritual life, if we but care to cultivate their association. The *Bhāgavata* too remarks: 'That same association, which cultivated towards ephemeral objects out of improper understanding, becomes the cause of bondage, transmigration, when cherished towards holy persons makes for non-attachment'⁵ Continuing it says that these holy men are verily the breakers of bondage (*sangadosa harā hi te*). 'By constant association with them, the incidents about the glories of God become sweet like honey to the heart and ears of the audience; and with this liking will follow immediately faith, taste and devotion to the path of salvation. By devotion and thinking about the Lord's deeds man gets dispassion towards the sense pleasures. It is then that he, devoted to *yoga*, will try by the honest *yogamārga* to control the mind. Thus, such a man without serving the purpose of Nature (i.e. without running after the sense pleasures), and by knowledge fortified

with dispassion, by yoga directed towards the Lord, and by devotion to Him, besieges the Indwelling Spirit in this very life,'⁶ further adds the *Bhāgavata*.

V

To the question, how long one should have holy company, we may answer only in one way; that is as long as one lives. Even God-men and men of God desire the company of pure souls, what then to speak of ordinary aspirants! How fervently did Sri Ramakrishna pray to the Divine Mother! 'Oh Mother.' he said, 'where are Thy pure-souled devotees! Bring them here, Mother, bring them. My ears are burning by hearing the talks of the worldly people.' Such then is the desirability of holy company.

Only one class of people need no holy company viz. those who are too much engrossed in the world, whom the *Bhāgavata* poignantly describes as 'stricken by destiny'. With very much pathos the scripture says: 'These miserable people have their intelligence stricken by destiny in a way as to make their senses averse to discourses on the Divine — discourses which are potent to destroy all evils. They have their minds completely overpowered by greed and therefore craving for the niggardly little crumbs of desires, engage themselves in unwholesome acts from eternity to eternity.'⁷ For them the very atmosphere where the holy ones live becomes stifling, unbearable. How it is so, we shall illustrate from the incidents which Sri Ramakrishna observed and give it in his own words: 'Sometimes I find that the devotees of God are accompanied by worthless people. Their companions are immersed in gross worldliness and don't enjoy spiritual talk at all. Since the devotees keep on, for a long time, talking with me about God, the others become restless. Finding it impossible to sit there any longer, they whisper to their devotee friends: "When shall we be going? How long will you stay here?" The devotees say: "Wait a bit. We shall go after a little while." Then the worldly people say in a disgusted tone: "Well then, you can talk. We shall wait for you in the boat."'

However this may be, even people who desire worldly things have much to gain by serving these holy men say the Upanisads. 'Whatever worlds a man of purified *sattva* thinks of in his mind, whatsoever enjoyment he desires, all those worlds and all those desires he obtains. Therefore one who wants wealth or power should propitiate these knowers of the Ātman,'⁸ declares the *Mundaka Upanisad*. Sankaracharya commenting on the above sloka remarks that 'the worlds and enjoyments' that such a person thinks of may be for himself or for others and as a man of purified *sattva*, all his wishes will come to be fulfilled. Yet, it may be noted that as for himself a knower of Brahman will have no desire. For he has gone beyond desires and attained the Highest. Or to put it in the words of the Gita that state is one, 'Attaining which he does not think there is anything higher or superior to be obtained and established in

which he is not perturbed by the direst of calamities.'

¹ Katha Up. 4 . 1.

² Gita. 10.9.

³ Mundaka Up. 2.2.5.

⁴ Cf. Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna. Pub.: Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras. 1947 Edn. Pp. 640-641.

⁵ Bhagavata III. 23.55.

⁶ Bhagavata III. 25. 25-27.

⁷ Bhagavata III.9.7.

⁸ Mundaka Up. 3.1.10.