

THE HUMAN MIND - ITS NATURE AND GOOD USE

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THE most perplexing organism, to a thinking man, is his own mind. We have deliberately used the word 'thinking' here to indicate a definite class of people, who are not satisfied with the natural trend of events and of life. People, generally, are not interested in taking note of the working of their own minds. That is: how the mind works? How it reacts to situations? Is the reaction conducive or not to future tranquillity? And so on. They concern themselves with the fulfilling of their immediate needs, in attending to their daily necessities anyhow, without caring to see whether it hurts others or not. To live a happy life, as they consider it, is all they desire and do. Normally people act within the bounds of the letter of the laws of the land though they may not respect the spirit behind them. Sometimes they cross the limit, and by clever stratagems escape the hand of justice. But cleverness is not wisdom. Wisdom is something different. Man may give the go-by to human laws sometimes but not his inherent ones. By clever manipulation he may evade the laws and amass money or enjoy other objects of the world but that will not give him peace of mind, because there will be lurking in his mind all the impressions (aroused or dormant) of the actions he has done.

The human mind is such a mechanism that it records everything that one takes interest in. For instance we may see many sights or meet a number of persons but the mind will record indelibly some scenes, some faces in which we get interested. Others are no more than vague, hazy, shadowy figures. Not only does the mind receive impressions but it stores them away. To borrow an expression of Swami Vivekananda, each impression is pigeon-holed and is revived or taken out for reference, as it were, when the experience is repeated, or when we meet again the person whom we had seen on a former occasion. And then we remember the experience or recall the person to our mind. This particular ability to recall an instance back to the mind is called memory. And memory forms one of the *vr̥ttis* of the *citta* (mindstuff)¹ according to the Indian psychologist Patanjali. It forms a part of the subconscious mind, if we are

¹ Yoga Sutras, 5 & 6.

to speak in the language of the Western psychologists. We all know what a wonderful gift this memory is. Everyone has this faculty in smaller or greater measure. Without memory man would be a strange, pitiable being. As an illustration of this we can cite people who either due to great mental shocks or concussion of the brain in accidents suffer from amnesia permanently or for a time.

This subconscious mind plays a very great part in human life. Perhaps this statement may not be readily accepted by one and all. A little discussion may help to remove doubts regarding its veracity. We think we are acting consciously in the waking state. Very few do that. The majority of people are moved by their impulses, their habits and tendencies which are imbedded in the subconscious. We can observe our own minds to verify the phenomenon. In spite of our best efforts to the contrary we are forced to do certain actions which we know are harmful to our well-being — actions of which we in our saner moments are likely to regret, nay be ashamed of. And this will happen not once but repeatedly. And every time, perhaps, we may resolve that we would not be doing it again. But when the impulse comes, when the desire arises all our control slips away like water from a sieve.

Sri Krishna, with great pathos, says in the *Gita*, 'As per one's nature even a man of knowledge acts. Creatures follow their own nature. What will mere prohibition do?'² Wise counsel has no effect at that time. Men do evil actions or think evil thoughts when they are wide awake, conscious of what they are doing, yet they do not do them with all their heart, a slight heartache persists, the pricking of the conscience remains. Remorse, regret and shame set in afterwards. Does this not show that people are mostly moved by their subconscious mind?

Further, how much of our life do we live in the present? Much of it is spent in ruminating over our past or planning for the future while the present slips by every moment. Well did Pascal, the French mathematician and philosopher, say: 'Let any man examine his thoughts, and he will find them ever occupied with the past or the future. We scarcely think at all of the present; or if we do, it is only to borrow the light which it gives for regulating the future. The present is never our object; the past and the present we use as means; the future only is our end. Thus, we never live, we only hope to live'.

Whatever may be the other implications of this saying of Pascal, it also conclusively brings forth the fact that the subconscious has no mean contribution to make in the shaping of man's life and character, and hence cannot be overlooked, neglected. In fact the psychoanalysts have more to do with the subconscious mind of their patients than the conscious. They have somehow to ferret out the causes of the nervous tensions of the patients in order to know what suggestions they can make for their removal.

² Bhagavad Gita, III.33.

II

It is important to note here, at this stage, that every thought, word or act of man goes to form his tendencies, impressions, *samskara*, in the subconscious. Man comes into this world with a load of *samskaras*. As Swami Vivekananda categorically points out, a child does not come into this world with what some of the earlier Western philosophers called the *tabula rasa*, a blank slate. 'Such a child,' he continues, 'would never attain to any degree of intellectual power, because he would have nothing to which to refer his new experiences. We see that the power of acquiring knowledge varies in each individual, and this shows that each one of us has come with his own fund of knowledge.' Another reason that Swamiji adduces to the existence of these impressions is that 'knowledge can only be got in one way, the way of experience; there is no other way to know. If we have not experienced it in this life, we must have experienced it in other lives'. He then proceeds to cite the example of the fear of death which is everywhere: 'A little chicken is just out of an egg and an eagle comes, and the chicken flies in fear to its mother'. It had had that experience in the past. So also with other feelings. A young one of a duck though hatched by a hen runs into water as soon as it gets near a pond. Each one of us has many such imprints in our mind and it is the sum total of these impressions that forms man's nature, *prakrti*.

We have now a fair idea why it is so important to control our thoughts, speech and actions. For they are going to shape our future. As a poet sings:

Our acts our angels are, or good or ill,
Our fatal shadows that walk by us still.

Like shadow the impressions of past acts will stalk us all our life and there is no escape from them. That being so we have to be cautious in our acts. We now know how formidable is the task set for us to fit ourselves to a religious life. But there is a silver lining to the dark clouds. If the tendencies with which a person is born are good and the environment provided for his growth is conducive to spiritual well-being, the momentum of these tendencies will carry him a long way and a little exertion will meet with great success. But this fortune, good luck is given to a few. Others have to earn everything by the sweat of their brow. We are speaking here in the language of the worldly man. For in fact, as Swami Vivekananda remarks, 'No one can get any thing unless he earns it. We are responsible for what we are'. If, therefore, we see disparity in the world we should remember that it is not due to any whimsical fiat of Providence but due to the earned merit or demerit of the beings that the differences are there.

What then about the rest of us? We have somehow gone wrong in

our previous births. Is there no redemption? Is there no way out? These are the questions that will naturally come to one who is desirous of liberation. The Hindu scriptures never speak of eternal damnation. They say every one can reach the Highest provided he patiently and ceaselessly applies himself to the task. And it is here again that the subconscious comes into the picture. As we have already observed, man's character is the aggregate of the impressions he carries within him. There is no chemical or physical process by which we could wipe out all imprints of our past actions however much we may wish for it. They have gone and formed into brick or mortar in the edifice of our character. But we can build again, as Swamiji asserts, 'And what we wish ourselves to be, we have the power to make ourselves'.

How can we remake ourselves? We have noticed what happens when we pay heed to the promptings of the pleasurable sensations. We are drawn back and again into their unsatiable vortex, and then our discriminative mind is, as it were, put on the rack. It is torn between the intention to restrain and the lure of the siren senses. But the more you let loose the reins of the senses the more will they draw you down into the mire. Yet those who have had enough of all these pleasures will turn to something that is non-transient, something that is real and eternal. And to them Sri Ramakrishna suggests prayer to God as a remedy to overcome their baser nature.

Let us find how prayer helps. We get attached to things when we constantly come in touch with them either physically or mentally. Sometimes in the physical world the faults and defects of the things we love are visible and are likely to destroy the image that we had projected about them. On the other hand, the mind can construe images, of what we like, more perfect, ideal, and blemishless, inducing man to involve himself deeper and deeper with the attractions. Now, when we pray to God, sincerely, not for the things of the world but to reveal Himself, our mind is taken off the object on which we dote. And as long as we pray the mind is flooded with the vibrations of the Divine. When this process is repeated constantly the mind naturally rests in God. By repeated practice one is able to inundate the mind with the consciousness of God. What happens is nothing extraordinary, nothing unusual. The mind which was being disturbed by various types of waves is now subjected to a vibration of a particular kind and then faithful to its duty it goes on recording the ripples until other imprints become stale and wane.

How to turn the naturally sense-bound mind towards God? Let us ask ourselves whether even a trial of practice is so difficult. Do we not lose our most loved relations and friends by estrangement or death, yet recover from the shocks? Do we not become cheerful after a time? We do. We make new friends, attach ourselves to something else and go on living. Likewise let us estrange ourselves from the senses which pose as friends and yet betray us; let us turn our mind towards God, who is our own. He is the innermost essence of our being. 'No one who believed in

God has come to grief;’ sings a poet-saint of South India, ‘it is those who did not have faith in Him that were ruined.’ Sri Ramakrishna says that God is like the wish-fulfilling tree. Whatever you ask for will be given to you. Why then should it be impossible to turn our mind towards Him, a little at least? In this instance alone do we have to consciously struggle. We are to undermine the baser inclinations, which have taken root in our subconscious. The mind should be trained to forget its old friends and cultivate new ones. The furrows that have been dug should be smothered by the newly ploughed ones.

Pray to God a hundred and a thousand times mentally, and forcibly make the mind accept it and then the subconscious will take it up. Once that part of the mind absorbs a theme it goes on recording the idea all the unconscious hours of our time. Thus we create a new habit. This is remaking of man. Only those people who can remake themselves, live a man's life, others are much like the dumb-driven cattle, slaves to their nature.

It should not however be taken to mean that the mind will immediately yield as soon as we begin to pray. It would definitely put up a stubborn fight. But we should not despair. Sri Krishna advises Arjuna, ‘As and when the fickle and unsteady mind wanders away should it be brought back repeatedly and placed under the control of the Atman’.³ Pascal, perhaps, had this struggle and assertion of the inner man in view when he made the statement about living, quoted earlier. How long should this struggle go on? ‘Till one falls asleep and till one's last breath, should one pass one's days in the contemplation of Vedanta’, says a sage. What has been said about Vedanta can be said of the other practices also. The practices may be trying but there is no shorter road to immortality and if we have manliness we must stick on. The assertion of the higher nature over the baser one, according to Sri Ramakrishna, is real manliness. Jesus said, ‘For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul?’⁴ Truly there is nothing which can be compared with the soul.

III

As in the case of prayer so also in the case of good actions the subconscious remoulds itself. Engaged in good acts the mind is forced to be occupied with good thoughts and as such keeps away, as far as possible, the lurking robbers (evil characteristics). But the way of motiveless action, the Karma Yoga is a difficult path. We may like to do unselfish action, make a good start too, but desire for results, in the last instance the desire for name and fame, somehow puts forth its stealthy shoot and in no time grows into a mighty banyan tree. That is the reason why it is expedient to have recourse to prayer and surrender to God along

³ Ibid., VI.26.

⁴ Gospel according to St. Mathew, 16.25.

with the performance of unmotivated actions. Sri Shankara, with his far insight into the nature of things, had probably observed the drawbacks in the performance of mere rituals, when he declared, 'Karmas are for the purification of the mind and not for the attainment of the goal. Even millions of rituals without meditation on the Atman can give us no peep into the Highest'.⁵ We are apt to miss the point made out by Sri Shankara if we lay stress only on the second part of his statement. He has recognized the value and place of *karma*, in the purification of the mind, of sublimating the thoughts. Purity of mind is a great boon and if it is attained it is a great achievement. For a person of pure mind the goal is not far off.

When is the mind said to be pure? When there are no desires, no hankerings, no attachments whatsoever lurking in it and when it naturally rests in God. If we analyze the impurities of the mind — they are many we shall be able to trace back their origin to one single feeling, desire. Arjuna asks this pertinent question of Sri Krishna: 'Impelled by what does man, though unwillingly, engage himself in wicked actions as if compelled by force?'.⁶ Sri Krishna's reply brings us to the same conclusion: 'This desire, this anger which is the product of *rajoguna*, is a voracious eater, and a great sinner. Know that to be the greatest enemy here (in this world)'.⁷ It is a significant statement. Sri Sankara commenting on this sloka of the *Gita* says: 'This desire, because of which there result every kind of misery, is the enemy of all. This desire of the creatures when obstructed results in anger and therefore anger also is only desire in another form'.⁸ Every one of our passions, in the ultimate analysis we will find, has originated with this desire. Therefore, becoming desireless, not for a time or for a day, but for ever, is to be pure in mind. For a person of pure mind the light of the Atman is ever present; as such, action when done without motive, though not directly, leads us towards the Highest.

IV

The method of psychic control also indicates how the mind has much to do with our religious life. 'The mind alone, for man, is the cause for bondage and emancipation — the mind which is engrossed in sense objects makes for bondage whereas when it is not entangled in them takes us to *moksha*',⁹ says one of the minor Upanishads.

From the foregoing we might have had some idea of the value of the mind. It is a great treasure. It now depends upon each person to what use he puts it. He may squander it away in false pursuits or utilize it in noble endeavours. Only he should keep in mind that his reward too will be

⁵ Vivekachudamani, 11.

⁶ Gita, III. 36.

⁷ IBID., III.37.

⁸ Shankara's commentary.

⁹ Amrita Bindu Upanishad.

according to his desert, that he will have to lie on the bed he has made.

No one can force anyone into any path, especially so into the right one. The utmost that can be done is to show the dangers underlying the journey on the wrong road and the peace that is awaiting on the right one and leave the choice to the pilgrim. That is what Sri Krishna said to Arjuna after teaching him the whole of the *Gita*. 'I have taught you all this knowledge, which is subtler than the subtlest. Pondering deep over their meaning do as you wish.'¹⁰ Let us too think whether we will give the mind free reins to move along the roads of the senses or turn it on the Atman, on God. If we choose the latter course it will be the best use we will be making of it.

¹⁰ Gita, XVIII.63.