

ON THE OBSTACLES IN THE SPIRITUAL PATH

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SRI KRISHNA says in the *Bhagavad Gita* that the Lord residing in the heart of all creatures moves them by His Maya as dolls mounted on a machine.¹ Christ declared, 'The kingdom of God is within you.'² The Upanishads predicate, 'Projecting it (this universe) It (Brahman) entered into it.'³ Again they claim, 'Smaller than an atom and larger than the largest this Being of Atman is hidden in the cave of the hearts of all creatures.'⁴ Proclamations like these propounding the nearness of God or Atman or Brahman, by what-ever name He is called, are extant in all the scriptures and in all languages. Can this be merely a form of speech to encourage the aspirant to move forward? Or is it a fact that is verifiable? It is a little bit confusing. Does it not sound like a paradox — to say that it is nearer than the nearest and, at the same time, to be unable to experience its presence? Exactly so, the situation is almost comical. But there is nothing laughable about it. It is a statement of fact. What is nearer than our own face to our eyes. On that account can we see it without the aid of anything else, a mirror or a reflecting surface for instance. No, we cannot. Yet that is not considered strange. It is accepted as a thing well-known. Rather, to put such a question is considered as something stupid, revealing the depth of ignorance of the questioner. In a similar manner, the Lord though dwelling in our hearts remains unrevealed to most of us.

Why is it so? There are several reasons. Now, let us see what is that which reflects all things, that is, takes cognizance of objects presented before us. It is the mind-stuff (*citta*). This mind can be compared to a mirror. Now, the mirror, as we know, has two sides, one the reflecting surface and the other the opaque one, protected by wood. Now this mirror of the mind is facing outwards in the majority of people and the wooden side is turned inwards. The mind, therefore, takes in reflections of the outside world and not of the Lord within, that is, we are awake towards the world and asleep towards the Lord, all-conscious of the world, and all-unconscious of God. What then is the use of complaining that we cannot see the Indwelling Spirit? We have to turn this mirror

¹ Gita, 18, 61.

² Gospel of St, Luke, 17.21.

³ Taittiriya Upanishad, 2.6.

⁴ Kathopanishad, 2.20.

inwards to see the Lord. That is what the Upanishad also affirms when it says, 'Some intelligent one desiring liberation sees the Indwelling Atman, by controlling his senses.'⁵

How to do this? What are the impediments that are in its way? The attachment that has been generated towards the panoramic beauty of the external objects, in myriads of births, is difficult to get rid of. This has formed, as it were, encrustations around the hinges of the mirror of the mind making it difficult to move even to the slightest extent. Along with this attachment there have developed other foibles like anger, greed, lust, pride, malice, vanity and so on. The list is endless and staggering. Yet it can be resolved into two main impediments, as Sri Ramakrishna puts it, 'lust and greed'; or as Sri Krishna says, into desire or lust — lust for gold, lust for sensual enjoyments, lust for power and so on; or as the Upanishads say, into three *esanas* — *putresana*, *vittesana*, *lokesana* — seeking progeny, wealth and enjoyable worlds like the heavens.

Let us analyse this question. What for is this lust and greed? What is the motive? Is it not for happiness? We have to admit that it is so. But is happiness there in the things of the world — that is the question. Where is happiness? Is it in the objects? If it is presumed that it is in the object, it must always be so. Because happiness will then become the inherent quality of the object, just as heat and light are the inherent qualities of fire. But, this, as we see, is not the case. The same object is seen to give happiness at one time and produce misery at another. The heat of the fire on a chill winter night in a cold climate is welcome, whereas the same on a sultry night in summer is unbearable. How then can the happiness be in the object? Now, it will be said that it depends on place, time, and object. Well, given all these suppose the mind is disturbed on account of some calamity that has happened or is impending. Will man then be happy by any number of outward attractions? No. So, it naturally follows that happiness is not in the object but is a condition of the mind. The objects are only instrumental in stimulating happiness or misery. The main part, therefore, is played by the mind.

Again, the mind, under pressure of circumstances, changes its likes and dislikes. This shows that it is pliant and not rigid. If so, why not make it take an interest in one's own being. That is possible. It has been done heretofore and it can be done again. Only the mind should be freed from its entanglements. The mind has mixed itself hopelessly with the world. We have allowed the world too much to get into the mind. To take an illustration from Sri Ramakrishna, the milk of the mind has been too much mixed with the water of the world, for every seer of milk there is five seers of water in it. Such is the condition of our minds. The water is to be dried up if you have to get the taste of pure milk and then only can it curdle. First, we have to free the mind of all desires. It may be asked: Why not satisfy the desires and finish with them? No, that cannot be done

⁵ Ibid., 4.1.

even if we were given millions of lives. For desires are endless. As soon as one of them is satisfied, a hundred spring in its place. A mind with desires is like a desert ever thirsting for water. It is an unquenchable thirst. Buddha found out that this *tanha* (*tr̥sna*) was at the root of all misery. This running after the things of the world — what a host of things it brings in its train! Anger, jealousy, hatred all are its camp followers and makes the mind a seething cauldron of discontent.

Again, to quote Sri Ramakrishna, 'The disease of worldliness is like typhoid. And there are a huge jug of water and a jar of savoury pickles in the typhoid patient's room. If you want to cure him of his illness, you must remove him from that room. The worldly man is like the typhoid patient. The various objects of enjoyment are the huge jug of water, and the craving for their enjoyment is his thirst. The very thought of pickles makes the mouth water; you don't have to bring them near. And he is surrounded with them.'

So the wise said, 'withdraw the mind from the objects of enjoyment'. How can this be done? By restraining the senses that feed the mind continually with the sensations of their objects. The eye looks at beautiful things and tempts the mind; the ear conveys sweet sounds and entices it; likewise the other organs of touch, taste and smell ensnare it. It is by avoiding the sense objects and by directing the mind Godward that the mind can be gradually brought under control, and not by giving free reins to desire. The *Kathopanishad* has resorted to a beautiful allegory to elucidate this point. There the body is compared to a chariot, soul to its owner, intelligence to the charioteer, mind to the reins, sense organs to the horses, and sense objects to the roads. 'The body when conjoined with the senses and the mind is called the enjoyer (*bhokta*) by the wise',⁶ continues the Upanishad. What it says in the next verse is a thing that is to be remembered always by aspirants to the higher life. 'One who is ignorant, and perpetually of uncontrolled mind has his sense organs rebellious like the wicked horses of the charioteer.'⁷ Sri Sankara commenting on it explains in detail: 'If the intelligence, which is the charioteer, is ignorant, not smart, indiscriminate, as to what to engage in and what to abstain from, and allows the mind, which is in the position of the reins, loose, to wander, then the sense-organs, being like the unbridled and wicked horses, will be impossible of control.' And the result will be that the chariot, along with the owner will soon come to grief.

But the task of retrieving the mind, is difficult, tedious and long. There is no easy way. Let us be clear about it. Never was any treasure unearthed by the mere knowledge of its situation. Never was success achieved in any field without exertion. And how foolish it is of man to think that he will be able to attain the Highest without shedding the sweat of his brow, without spending sleepless nights and restless days in its pursuit! It is only idle fancy of man to think so. It is as Sankara in his

⁶ Ibid., 3.4.

⁷ Ibid., 3.5.

Vivekachudamani very pointedly brings out, 'To announce oneself an emperor, without destroying the enemies, without acquiring sovereignty over the kingdom.'⁸ Goethe, the German poet remarks, 'Happy the man who early learns the wide chasm that lies between his wishes and his powers.' All this shows that nothing can be obtained merely by wishing.

Now, there are two methods by which one can arrive at this taste for higher life: One is by allowing the mind to experience the sweet and bitter fruits, that it is so fond of, until a very bitter one makes it pause and think as to whether this is all what is meant by enjoyment. The second is by discrimination. The first method is for those who will not listen to sane advice, nor would believe in the existence of a hereafter. The second is for those who had already experienced the meaning of enjoyment either in this life or past ones.

In the first case no amount of outside pressure is of any avail. In their case we have to leave it to nature to work its course. So we pass on to the other. Here definite rules have been enunciated. The mind having been in the world cannot be withdrawn from it all of a sudden. The mind, which has been practised to one way of thinking, cannot immediately change to quite a contrary way. The ephemeral nature of the things of the world, must first dawn on it, then will come the reassessment of values. With it will come dispassion. This dispassion to take firm root should be strengthened by discrimination. Discrimination between the Real and the unreal — that God alone is real and all else is unreal. This idea is to be repeatedly and constantly impressed upon the mind. The idea should also be followed up in practice incessantly and for a long time, until it becomes natural. The mind will resist doggedly; it will try to run in the old ruts, because there is no resistance there. Such a lapse or tendency is to be prevented. It is a life-long vigil. A spiritual aspirant can never afford to be slack or sloth in his watch over himself without the fear of losing his moorings. Sri Ramakrishna says, 'Through the discipline of constant practice one is able to give up attachment to "lust and greed". By practice one acquires uncommon power of mind. Then one doesn't find it difficult to subdue the sense-organs and to bring anger, lust and the like under control.' The *Gita* also says the same thing: 'By practice and renunciation can this wavering, fickle mind be controlled.'⁹ But Sri Ramakrishna also warns even those who had attained a high state of spirituality to beware of allurements of lust. How then can persons on the lower plane of the spiritual path presume to be neglectful!

Further, along with these two, discrimination and dispassion, a yearning to see God or realize one's true nature should be cultivated. For mind cannot remain in a state of vacuum. It wants some support, something to think about. Therefore, along with dispassion a zeal to realize God will keep it occupied, engaged and prevent it from being 'a devil's work-shop', from back-sliding. And this yearning for God will help

⁸ *Vivekachudamani*, 64.

⁹ *Gita*, VI, 35.

to strengthen dispassion. 'As one proceeds towards the east, the west is left behind', says Sri Ramakrishna. So too, as one proceeds toward God the pull of the world becomes less. Or to use another simile, the needle when it comes into the magnetic field is immediately attracted by the magnet. If, however, the needle is rusted or covered with mud and the like it fails to feel the magnetic pull. Constant practice of meditation, along with discrimination and dispassion is like cleansing the needle. But to be caught in the charm of the higher life early, is a grand thing. Such people are then like fresh flowers as yet untouched by the blight of worldliness; a little exertion sets them free. They are like dry matchsticks that catch fire with the slightest friction. They have to struggle only a little.

II

Man comes into this world with a load of propensities, ill or well. These, as it were, force him into a particular mould of character. They are all-powerful in a normal man, and make him their slave. But these propensities were created by man himself, by his actions in the previous births as man, say our scriptures. For man alone has been endowed with intelligence to distinguish good from evil whereas other animals have not that capacity. Therefore, according to the manner in which an individual had used his intelligence and according to his actions, the propensities were formed in his mind. And this mind does not die with the body. It, along with the subtle body, transmigrates from one gross body to another or from one sphere to another according to the fruits of its actions. With too much of evil deeds or animal-like actions the soul transmigrates into an animal or insect body or becomes even as herbs or plants. Only when the karma is in a balanced state the soul appears in the human body.

Swami Vivekananda says that as man has created these propensities, he can, if he is earnest, as well create fresh and better ones to counteract the old ones. By doing good deeds and thinking good thoughts fresh *samskaras* are created. Thoughts are as much harmful or beneficial as actions themselves. For is it not constant dwelling on an idea that goads man to action? Besides, thought leaves an impress on the mind for the future, as a seed to further germinate when circumstances become favourable. This has been poignantly described by Sri Krishna in the Gita, 'When man constantly thinks of the objects of the world, attachment grows toward them. From attachment is born desire and lust. And when these desires are obstructed then anger is generated. With anger delusion overtakes the mind. This results in the beclouding of memory, and thence takes place the bankruptcy of intelligence, which in its turn leads to the spiritual death of man.'¹⁰ How to counteract these forces has been dealt with in detail on previous occasions. Here we shall

¹⁰ Ibid., II, 62&63.

simply enumerate them. Restraint of the senses, holy company, practice of discrimination and dispassion, as mentioned above, solitude, taking God's name, performance of good deeds, meditation, a loving disposition towards all creatures, developing an altruistic outlook and above all intense yearning for God are some of the means to employ to overcome worldliness.

One more means which Swami Vivekananda has given to us is to do *karma* in the *Gita* fashion. To put it in his own words: 'Work for work's sake,' without caring for name or fame or going to heaven. 'To work just because good will come of it.' Further he adds, 'There are others who do good to the poor and help mankind from still higher motives, because they believe in doing good and love good.' 'Love, truth and unselfishness,' Swamiji continues, 'are not merely moral figures of speech, but they form our highest ideal, because in them lies such a manifestation of power. In the first place, a man who can work for five days, or even for five minutes without any selfish motive whatever, without thinking of future, of heaven, of punishment or anything of the kind, has in him the capacity to become a powerful moral giant.' This is the means which people living anywhere and in any station of life can try to follow, to become morally pure, nay even to attain the Highest.

How to do unselfish work is also taught to us by Swami Vivekananda in the following words: 'We have to begin from the beginning, to take up the works as they come to us and slowly make ourselves more unselfish every day. We must do the work and find out the motive power that prompts us, and, almost without exception, in the first years, we shall find that our motives are always selfish; but gradually this selfishness will melt by persistence, till at last will come the time when we shall be able to do really unselfish work.'

A wholesome advice of Sri Ramakrishna as to how to wean away the turbulent mind from its worldly occupation will be immensely helpful to all *sadhakas*. He says, 'Nothing can be achieved without discrimination and renunciation,' and adds, 'it is not possible to acquire renunciation all at once. The time factor must be taken into account. But it is also true that a man should hear about it. When the right time comes, he will say himself, "Oh yes, I heard about this." You must also remember another thing. By constantly hearing about renunciation one's desire for worldly objects gradually wears away. One should take rice-water in small doses to get rid of the intoxication of liquor. Then one gradually becomes normal.' Worldliness is like intoxication, and hearing about renunciation is like taking rice-water to get rid of this intoxication.