

PILGRIMAGE AS A MEANS TO SPIRITUAL AWAKENING

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SPIRITUAL LIFE has a sort of mystery surrounding it. Man does not know by what act of his the inner awakening will come, by what means the doors of his vision will open, what shall illuminate his path. For it has come in several ways to different persons. Gautama's renunciation was due to the sight of misery, disease and death; and in striving to find a way out of these tribulations and sufferings he became the Buddha. In the life of Tulsidas it was the admonition of his wife that brought out the transformation. Young Tulsidas loved his wife extremely. He could not part from her even for a day. One day, however, he had to go on some work, far away from home. On returning at night he found that she had been¹ taken to her father's. Tulsidas set out immediately and reached there late in the night. The wife was vexed; and ashamed of being railed at by people mildly reproached him, 'Ah! what attachment you have for these bones and flesh. If only you had half this love for God you would have realized Him.' That was enough. A flood of light, as it were, fell upon him. That very moment he left his home and hearth. Sri Chaitanya's pilgrimage to Vrindavan brought him in contact with Īswar Puri and that set the chain of events ending in his complete renunciation of the world and the propagation of the Bhakti cult throughout India. It is said that Swami Saradananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, used to follow meticulously the religious rituals whenever he visited temples. He would even circumambulate and ring the bells that hung in the Siva temple at Banaras, as was the custom. When asked by some one why he too followed these superstitions, he seems to have replied: 'Who knows, my boy, by what action the Lord is pleased? So I follow all the customs, every one of them and I don't know, friend, how to express my love for the Lord,' Such then is the idea: anything may help to rouse our sleeping divinity.

Now, in the scriptures pilgrimage has been recognized as one of the means of devotion. Therefore with a minimum of belief in the scriptures and words of the saints, man must set out on the spiritual path. For it is not possible to scientifically and concretely demonstrate the progress or retrogression of a human being after he has done this or that deed, or had performed one or the other pilgrimage. It is possible that the man himself may not feel the change even after a long time. But on that account he should not slacken his efforts or give way to despair.

ATTITUDE TO PILGRIMAGE

Facility of travel and eating houses at every street corner, even in places inaccessible before, has made pilgrimage a sight-seeing affair with many. Many more are attracted by the sculpture and the art that has gone into the building of the temples. But little do they care to think of the Deity that dwells in the temple. Sri Ramakrishna used to say 'People are enamoured of the garden, but rarely do they seek to know the owner.' Every word of his is being verified as true today.

What a contrast this is to the ancient mode of pilgrimage, even that of a hundred and fifty or two hundred years ago! At that time only earnest persons ventured to set out on a pilgrimage. For they had to travel mostly on foot and their path lay through forests full of wild beasts. So, when they thought of undertaking a pilgrimage they made over the responsibilities of the worldly affairs to those at home, bade them adieu and made themselves over to the care of God, their Lord. They dared not carry money for fear of dacoits; naturally they had to depend upon the hospitality accorded to them by the people on the way. The thought about home never troubled them. Their minds dwelt on the sanctity of the place they were to visit. The Deity, the grace that the Deity had showered on the saints, the lives of the saints who had lived and made the place holier — all these and similar associations would be revolving in their minds. We cannot expect people at the present time to go on foot, perhaps that would be thought of as absurd either to suggest or to follow. But surely the other part for which a pilgrimage is really undertaken, i.e., the constant remembrance of the Lord, is neither impossible to try nor absurd to suggest.

We come now to a very subtle point in the conduct of a pilgrim i.e., how should he behave in a place of worship. This is most important. A man may be a millionaire, he may have a big pedigree, and may be a great scholar. But what is that before the Creator of the Universe — all of his wealth, scholarship and nobility is as nothing in the presence of One who is the Lord of everything that was, is and will be. Yet, how cramped man's thinking is! Even earnest devotees falter here. Once at the Dakshineswar temple some ornaments of the Radha-Govinda image were stolen. At this Mathuranath Biswas, the then proprietor, a son-in-law of Rani Rasmani and an ardent devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, said in his hearing, addressing the image, 'What a shame, O God! You could not save your own ornaments!' Sri Ramakrishna sharply rebuked Mathuranath: 'Does He who has Lakshmi, the goddess of fortune, for His handmaid and attendant ever lack any splendour? These jewels may be precious to you but to God they are no better than lumps of clay. Shame on you! You shouldn't have spoken so meanly. What riches can you give to God to magnify His glory?' Yet, that is how man forgets himself in the pride of his wealth. It is difficult to be humble unless we feel the presence

of a Being far far above us in every respect. This feeling is to be cultivated. With it will come the sense of our smallness, of our littleness. Spiritual life becomes a total failure if arrogance rules supreme in the mind. The idea of going on pilgrimage is not to show off but to practise the presence of God. We cannot purchase God's grace by our wealth. It is not by what one says about God but what one does and how one does it that God measures our earnestness and sincerity.

Pilgrimage, therefore, undertaken with a spirit of faith and earnestness and humility should also be accompanied by self-control, restraint of senses. Almost a parallel can be cited from the *Bhagavad Gita* when it speaks of the means to Knowledge, knowledge of God, Realization. It says: 'A man endowed with *shraddhā* obtains Knowledge.' Two words, however, were again immediately subjoined to this statement to qualify the aspirant: (*tatparah*) one who is intent and attached to it and (*samyatendriyah*) of controlled senses. Sankara commenting on this verse says that it is possible to fake humility in outer acts as bowing down and the like, but not so in *shraddhā* (faith). The control of the senses is an added requisite to be possessed by one who aims to scale the peaks of spirituality. In every path this control of the senses and the mind is spoken of as unmistakably necessary equipment. With a mind frittered and senses like unbroken horses the goal would remain as far as it ever was, nay may recede further. Sri Ramakrishna compares a man who has not gathered his mind from the sense pleasures and yet tries to realize God to a drunkard who rows a boat all night without lifting the anchor. He remains where he was though he thinks that he is fast progressing. Attachment to the world is the anchor. Unless man frees himself from that, at least for the duration of his pilgrimage or of practising any other discipline, all his struggle will yield but little fruit.

There is an exquisite instance which remarkably points out how faith works. When some of the direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna were proceeding to the shrine of Kedarnath in the Himalayas they saw a blind, old lady too trudging on. They were quite non-plussed as to why this lady who had lost her eyes should undertake such a hazardous journey. One of them asked, 'Mother, can you see'. 'No, my child', said she. 'Then why have you taken the trouble of this journey', asked he again. She replied, 'My child, what if I cannot see, but the Lord will surely see me.' That was the faith of the lady and she was quite satisfied that it would be enough for her salvation if she presented herself before the Deity and the Lord saw her. They were moved by the devotion of that lady.

WHAT ARE THE PLACES OF PILGRIMAGE

To Swami Vivekananda 'if there was any land on this earth that can lay claim to be the blessed *punya bhumi*, to be the land to which all souls on this earth must come to account for *karma*, the land to which every soul wending its way Godward must come to attain its last home, the land

where humanity has attained its highest towards gentleness, towards generosity, towards purity, towards calmness, above all the land of introspection and spirituality — it was India'. He uttered these words with authority and sincerity. Why did he say so? Was it simply eulogy? It was not mere eulogy but there is a sound reason behind this remark of Swamiji. A holy place, for instance, is one which has been the place of birth, of *sādhana*, of the attainment of spiritual perfection, or ministration of a saint or saints. India has been such a place. Hundreds of saints have been born and have trodden this soil. It was here again that the highest philosophy had its birth and this was Swamiji's reason for considering India as a whole as a holy land. It was his inmost feeling too.

It is said of Swami Ramakrishnananda, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna and the first President of the Ramakrishna Math at Madras, that he looked upon every place where Swami Vivekananda was reported to have stayed during his sojourn in South India as holy and used to bow down to it with great devotion. Narada in his *Bhakti Sutras* says, 'These holy ones impart sanctity to places of pilgrimage.'² The *Bhagavata* declares, 'It is not the waters nor the clay or stone idols, that have been there for a long time, that make a place holy but the saints who purify them by mere sight (by virtue of God residing in their hearts).'³ India has produced many saints and sages and that is why there are numerous places of pilgrimage throughout the country. Similarly other religions too have their own places of pilgrimage.

HOW DO THE HOLY PLACES PURIFY MAN?

As we said earlier, a person going on pilgrimage has to know about the history of the place he is going to visit. With that comes to his mind the lives of the saints who sanctified it, of the pure devotion of those saints and through them of God Himself by the law of association of ideas. Deep and constant thinking on holy men makes man pure. Patanjali in his *Yoga Sutras* states that meditation on a pure heart that has given up all attachment leads to calmness of the mind.⁴ It is a matter of common experience that mesmerists and psychologists by suggestion influence persons, may be for a short time but that they are able to do so cannot be denied. Their powers, however, are limited and are used for mundane purposes. The psychologists work by digging into the past of the patient by various means and find a remedial suggestion. Sages, on the other hand, when they are in body create an atmosphere round them surcharged with spirituality and this continues to exist, in the place they have lived, for a long time. It acts like a loadstone in attracting people, even slightly inclined to a good life, to God.

Sri Ramakrishna's own words on this matter are the strongest testimony. He says, 'One undoubtedly finds inspiration in a holy place. I accompanied Mathur Babu to Vrindavan. Hriday and the ladies of Mathur's family were in our party. No sooner did I see the Kaliyadaman Ghat than

a divine emotion surged up within me. I was completely overwhelmed. Hriday used to bathe me there as if I were a small child.'

'In the dusk I would walk on the bank of the Jamuna when the cattle returned along the sandy banks from their pastures. At the very sight of those cows the thought of Krishna would flash in my mind. I would run along like a mad man, crying: "Oh, where is Krishna? Where is my Krishna?"

'I went to Syāmakunda and Rādhākunda in a palanquin and got out to visit the holy Mount Govardhan. At the very sight of the mount I was overpowered with divine emotion and ran to the top. I lost all consciousness of the world around me. The residents of the place helped me to come down. On my way to the sacred pools of Syāmakunda and Rādhākunda, when I saw the meadows, the trees, the shrubs, the birds, and the deer, I was overcome with ecstasy. My clothes became wet with tears. I said: "O Krishna! Everything here is as it was in the olden days. You alone are absent.'" No doubt that Sri Ramakrishna was fully penetrated with God, soaked in God, and every *sādhaka* may not expect to reach such heights of inspiration, yet according to their progress each one will reap some benefit, each one will get a push, a lift higher.

Sri Ramakrishna also used to encourage his disciples to do their practices at the various places of his own *sādhana*. The conversation that took place between him and 'M', the writer of the *Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, regarding Panchavati — the place at Dakshineswar temple garden where Sri Ramakrishna performed intense spiritual practices — unequivocally brings to our notice, the value of staying in a holy place. One day he said to 'M', who was staying overnight at Dakshineswar: 'Where will you sleep? In the hut in the Panchavati?' 'M': 'Won't they let me have the room on the upper floor of the *nahabat*?' 'M' selected the *nahabat* because he had a poetic temperament. From there he could see the sky, the Ganges, the moon-light, and the flowers in the garden.

Master: 'Oh, they'll let you have it. But I suggested the Panchavati because so much contemplation and meditation have been practised there and the name of God had been chanted there so often.' Does this not suggest that the Master recommended the atmosphere of the place to help the devotee in his *sādhana*, in his attempt to proceed Godward?

IS PILGRIMAGE NECESSARY FOR ALL?

Now, the question arises: Is pilgrimage necessary for all? Two types of people do not require it. The saint who has realized God and the man who has not risen above the level of animal enjoyments. The latter will not gain any benefit from visiting such places. The attitude and aptitude being absent none of the other ideas help men to become pure, or to realize God even if they live in the sacred places. They are like fish and other aquatic animals that live in the sacred Ganga, or like the trees that grow in the precincts of temples, untouched by their sanctity.⁵ 'As the

strength without work to do or work to do without strength are unable to accomplish the deed separately but when combined make the deed a certainty, likewise when endowed with bodily and mental purity and helped by the sanctity of the holy place one attains his goal easily,'⁶ says the *Mahābhārata*.

For the saint, again, there is no necessity of any pilgrimage, for he, having attained his goal, has nothing more to achieve. 'If he visits a place of pilgrimage it is only for the purpose of new inspiration,' says Sri Ramakrishna. For people who are in between these two stages of evolvment it is essential to visit places of pilgrimage, with all faith and devotion at their command, as a sort of spiritual discipline. All through the march of time we see even saints and sages having travelled from one end of India to the other enduring all hardships and tribulations; and thus have they sanctified and sometimes discovered anew the exact places of birth and sport of Divine Incarnations. It is said that it was Sri Chaitanya who found out the exact place of sport of Sri Krishna in Vrindavana. They are like spiritual diviners. They feel the spiritual atmosphere in an intense way and are able to leave to posterity a rich heritage, the heritage of a holy place from where successive generations could benefit spiritually. Therefore, pilgrimage should not be thought of as mere waste of time and energy or as an idle *wander-lust*. Further, it is possible to meet in these places some *sādhakas* or perfected souls whose company will help us on our onward march and transform us altogether. Most important thing, however, is to keep the spirit of sacredness burning and to acquire love of God. Then everything will become easy, everything will be helpful.

HOW TO CONDUCT ONESELF AFTER A PILGRIMAGE?

As it is necessary to prepare oneself to visit a holy place, as said already, so also it is necessary to ruminate over the pure thoughts and emotions that are generated in one's mind on the occasion of one's visit to a holy place. Sri Ramakrishna's advice to his disciples on this subject are of deep significance and will be of immense benefit when followed. We shall state it here with the circumstances that gave rise to the remarks.

'On one occasion,' writes Swami Saradananda in *Sri Ramakrishna, the Great Master*, 'some of us (devotees) accompanied the Master to Kalighat, to pay our obeisance to the Divine Mother. The special divine manifestation of the Pithasthāna (hallowed place) and Her living manifestation in the mind and body of the Master produced an extraordinary joy in the hearts of the devotees. On our way back, one of us had to go to his father-in-law's place in response to a special request and to spend that night there. On the morrow, when he came to the Master, he asked him where he had passed the previous night. And hearing that he had had to pass the night in the house of his father-in-law, he said, "Ah, what is that? You saw Mother and came back; what a great

difference between 'chewing the cud' of the vision and thoughts of Her, which you ought to have done, and passing the night like worldly people in your father-in-law's house instead! One should 'chew the cud', in other words, continue to cherish the thoughts that arise in one's mind in temples and holy places of pilgrimages. How can those divine thoughts stay in the mind otherwise?"

Such is the way to perform a pilgrimage so as to reap the maximum advantage out of it.

¹ "Hearing about God, singing His glories, His remembrance, going on pilgrimage or service to Him, worship, obeisance, friendship, and self-surrender are some of the means."

² N.B. Sutras, 69.

³ Bhagavata, X.48.31.

⁴ 1-37.

⁵ Satvatasamhita.

⁶ Anusasana Parva, 108.20.