

## **PLACE OF THE GURU IN SPIRITUAL LIFE (\*)**

**By Swami Paratparananda**

\* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – February 1965; Vol. 51; page 487

AN INTERESTING question posed by thinkers, who somehow have a vague knowledge that divinity is the true nature of the human beings, is: 'If we are all sparks of the same divine Spirit, what need is there for one man to help another to realize it?' It is an intelligent and sincere poser. One can feel that the inquirer is sincere. Perhaps a little of everything has disturbed such a mind — and there are so many new philosophies springing up, enough to confuse any ordinary man.

What is the answer for such an inquiry? Let us probe the inquirer. How does he know that he is a spark of divinity? Does he know from his own experience or from books or literature or other persons? Well, if he has known that from other persons or books he has defeated his own question. For if he can believe in certain things said somewhere and by some persons what prevents him to believe in the necessity of trusting in the efficacy and usefulness of a spiritual guide, a person, perhaps, more regular in his prayers and meditations, sincere to the backbone in his spiritual life, and of pure and unsullied character? This of course the inquirer cannot answer except by conceding that his assumption was wrong. Still he may feel that his query has gone unanswered. So let us turn to the practical side of the question. Let us take the example of a child busy with its play. The play has absorbed him and he forgets his studies. Is it not necessary that the mother should remind him of his studies? In the spiritual world we are all children until we have reached the summits of realization. We need the guide, the Guru to remind us, nay actually help us overcome the obstacles in our path.

Why cannot we do so by our own efforts? Maybe it is possible in very rare cases where the yearning for God is intense, where the renunciation is like a blazing fire, but for the ordinary aspirants a spiritual guide is essential. It is true that our nature is divine, that we are the children of Immortality. But are we aware of the fact? How many days in a year are we conscious of this fact and how many minutes in a day? We have to confess that it is very rarely that we are aware of it. The idea of spiritual practices is to become aware of this divinity more and more. Again, the spiritual paths are numerous, which one should a particular aspirant select? All these intricate questions are solved by the true teacher by his insight into the life of the disciple. Otherwise, the aspirants will be tempted to try whatever path presents to them as alluring, as easy. It will be like digging for water now here and now there but not sufficiently until one reaches the springs. One has to be persevering and

persisting if one has to achieve any result in spiritual life at all. Merely floating on the water will not get us the gems that lie on the bed of the ocean. One has to dive and dive deep says Sri Ramakrishna.

The *Kathopanishad* warns the would-be aspirers after the spiritual life rather sternly: 'It is not given to many even to hear about this. And even hearing about It many do not understand. Wonderful is the teacher and fortunate is the obtainer of this teaching. Still more wonderful is the one who understands It when taught by a wise one.'<sup>1</sup> Many a ship of life has foundered on the uncharted seas of this life. A wise pilot is therefore incumbent. If even after repeated instructions we are not able to understand the Highest Spirit then how can we by our own effort reach it!

Taking for granted that some day the spark in us may blaze out if conditions become conducive, how do we know that other circumstances will allow it to burn? If, for instance, a huge load of wet firewood is heaped over the dying embers would they be able to consume the firewood? Never. The fire itself may be smothered and die out soon. But supposing one who knew how to kindle that spark, would wisely handle and make it glow brighter by adding dry leaves, were to help, would not then the same fire be able to burn even a forest? Man's condition is almost identical. A host of tendencies are smothering the divine spark and making it impossible to gain a better view of that divine glow. Lust and greed are the two chief burdens which weigh down on his mind making it impossible for him to be conscious of his divinity at all.

Sri Ramakrishna's parable of the grass-eating tiger very aptly describes man's condition. The tiger which as a cub was left in the midst of sheep, even before it had drunk its mother's milk, quietly followed the ways of the sheep — eating grass and bleating while threatened with danger. One day another tiger attacked the flock and when it saw a tiger bleating and running away, it was surprised. However, it caught hold of the grass-eating tiger and asked, 'why are you running away? You are a tiger like myself'. But the grass-eating tiger would not believe it. Then the other tiger dragged the latter to a pond; showed it their reflections in the water and then pushed some meat into its mouth and roared. The grass-eating tiger thus convinced of its nature and having tasted the meat, roared in response. Here is how the true teacher helps an aspirant. We have forgotten our true nature and caught in the meshes of the world believe ourselves to be sheep. So doubts arise in our minds even when we are told that we are divinity itself. The other tiger is the Guru who makes us aware of what we are.

Now, let us take another illustration. Swami Vivekananda gave the example of sowing a seed. 'Do you grow the plant?' he asked. No. The vitality to germinate is in the seed itself. You cannot infuse that vitality into it. 'What you can do is to put it in the proper ground, water it and thus help it grow.' You only remove the impediments and obstacles in its path and allow it to grow of itself. Likewise the divine spark in man is to be felt, not simply theoretically known. The work of the Guru is to help

the disciple feel It, realize It, by finding out and removing the impediments that block his path.

We have only to look at the way in which Sri Ramakrishna trained his disciples to understand this relation between the Guru and the *sisya*. There was first his selection of the proper disciples and then his training of them. He knew the past, present and future of those whom he took in his hand to mould as his disciples. It is not Sri Ramakrishna alone that possessed such powers. Jesus too, had had it before him. Did not Jesus choose some of his disciples from fishermen? The Incarnations could at a glance know the nature of any man with whom they were brought in contact.

Knowing thus their inmost thoughts the Incarnations could correct their disciples whenever they would have gone wrong. Jesus foretold his fall just a day or two prior to his crucifixion: 'One among you shall betray me.' And they were sad that the Lord did not believe in them. But was this prophecy not fulfilled? Again, he said to Peter, 'Thou shalt deny me thrice before the cock crew,' and was it not fulfilled? Did not Peter staunchly deny that such a thing was possible for him? Yet how did it come to happen? This shows Jesus could see not only what was going to take place for himself but also what thoughts were going to rise in the minds of those near him. This proves that the Incarnations of God do have the power to know everything they want to know. Nothing lies hidden to their gaze. That is why they have the highest place as Gurus, as teachers of mankind, for all time.

Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual ministry was a wonderful phenomena. It is like a panorama of everchanging hues, ever attractive and never tiring, the spectral play of colours, however, pointing to the same goal-post viz., God. Sometimes he would make his young disciples roll on the ground with side-splitting laughter by his humour; at other times he would sing to them songs about the divine and transport them to an exalted region. Again, there would be discussions on the philosophies of the different sects at different times. And yet again he would urge them on to meditation and austere living. Once when a disciple said that he tried to meditate but that his meditation was not deep, was not undisturbed, Sri Ramakrishna wrote something on the disciple's tongue and sent him to the secluded Pancavati at Dakshineswar. The disciple even as he went towards the place was losing his outward consciousness and lost all outer consciousness as soon as he sat under that tree. He came to himself, to use a mundane expression, only when Sri Ramakrishna stroked his body from chest downwards. Numerous are the instances in the life of the Master and his disciples wherein the Master did accentuate the spiritual potential of the disciples.

The question may be asked: Why do you then say that there is divinity in every human being if it is to be attained by hard struggle and by the help of a teacher? For the simple and obvious reason that an object cannot change its nature and remain the same. We have not heard

of cold fire or hot ice, except as a way of expression. If fire were not hot, of what use is it then? An object can manifest only what is inherent in it. If man was not divine he could never become one. But our experience is quite the opposite. We see divine personages manifesting themselves and human beings turned divine. So the proposition that man is not divine but attains divinity is also not true. What happens by the efforts is that he uncovers himself, discards the encrustations surrounding him one by one. The only acceptable and rational solution, therefore, is that man is divine, call him a spark of divinity or a child of God or what you will.

Now we come to the assistance that the Guru really renders to the disciple. Spiritual life has some matters that are to be taken on trust, matters which you cannot fathom by reasoning. But it is not a fact that religious living is devoid of all reasoning. Reason is given the fullest scope in the Hindu religion and philosophy. You are free to question and inquire, but when it becomes a case of mere argumentation, there the ancient sages drew a line.

For reason would be blind when there was no comparison to make. Reasoning is possible and helpful as far as the phenomenal world is concerned. If you have to infer, you have to draw a parallel and what is there that can compare with the transcendental life? If the transcendental can be reduced to the phenomenal it would no more remain transcendental; in other words transcendental can never become the phenomenal. The laws of the phenomenal world can, therefore, never apply to the transcendental. The Atman, for instance, cannot be seen by the eye, not even the most powerful microscope can reveal it. But it is the inmost being of man. When man dies something goes out of him. It cannot be held back, for it is not visible. But that something, which was moving the body and making it live even prior to the moment of death, was in the body cannot be denied. Spiritual life deals with that being, the Atman. Therefore, as you would go to learn music from a musician and not from a professor of logic, so we have to learn about the science of the soul from a spiritual teacher alone. Because he knows or will find out what our aptitudes and what our inclinations are and guide us accordingly.

Human beings are not all alike; they have different tastes and various natures. Perhaps, we all agree with this statement. Now, what is better — to allow man grow in his own natural way which comes easy to him or force him to follow a rigid, fixed and hidebound pattern of discipline, which surely will mutilate and destroy his nature? The Hindu sages have thought it better to allow man grow in his own way towards God; they did not try to modify his inherent nature. That is why there are so many paths, to approach God, described in the Hindu scriptures. So also about the form or formlessness of God that the aspirant likes to worship. A particular form of God appeals to one man most and thereby he is able to concentrate his thoughts on God easier, whereas there may be other forms which though of the same Divine Spirit do not awaken any

response in him. It is the Guru who finds out what form of the Deity suits each disciple, selects a mantra or a sacred formula by which he may call on Him, and instructs him how to proceed on his path. All this the Guru does with no motive at all. The Guru's sole desire is that the disciple should realize God, should get away from the meshes of Maya, of the world. It is motiveless compassion, self-less love that drives the Guru to take all the trouble to awaken the disciple's spiritual potential. So we see what a high place the true Guru occupies in the realm of the spirit. He is looked upon as the father, mother, friend, philosopher and guide. Like a father the Guru chastises when we go wrong, like a loving mother he helps when we falter, like a friend he keeps us company in our difficulties and like a philosopher he advises when we are in a quandary.

From all these it is quite apparent that the Guru occupies a supreme position in the life of the spiritual aspirant. A great many hymns have been written on the Guru, of which the *Guru-Gita* is famous.

The *Mundakopanisad* gives the description of a true teacher: a *srotriya*, one well-versed in the scriptures - and *brahmanistha*, established in Brahman.<sup>2</sup> Sri Sankara in his *Vivekachudāmani* enlarging on this concept and in keeping with the Sruti passages says that one possessed of the deep spirit of inquiry and renunciation should approach a Guru, 'who is versed in the Vedas, sinless, untouched by desire and a knower of Brahman *par excellence*; who has withdrawn himself into Brahman; who is calm, like the fire that has consumed its fuel; who is an ocean of compassion that knows no reason and a friend of all good people who bow down before him'.<sup>3</sup> That is the true teacher approaching whom we are certain to find our path and abiding peace.

---

<sup>1</sup> Kathopanishad 2.7.

<sup>2</sup> 1.2.12.

<sup>3</sup> Vivekachudamani, 33. 33.