

PSYCHIATRY AND VEDĀNTA

SWAMI SATPRAKASHANANDA

The treatment of mental illness is the primary role of psychiatry, of Vedānta it is a subsidiary function. While psychiatry, a special branch of medical science, is concerned particularly with ailing persons, the religion and philosophy of Vedānta—like other systems of thought and culture in general—deals specially with normal human beings. Its primary function is to develop man intellectually, morally, and spiritually and to prevent his deterioration. Normal individuals, too, have mental troubles, such as disquiet and distractions and emotional disturbances. When occasion arises the Vedāntic teachers undertake therapeutic work. The knowledge of the human mind that Vedānta provides is adequate for the purpose, as far as I can see.

The scope of Vedāntic therapy is however limited in a sense. Mental ailments due solely or primarily to physical causes, such as the diseases of the nervous system and the bodily organs, Vedāntic teachers leave to the care of the psychiatrists and the medical doctors. They usually restrict themselves to psychogenic cases, the treatment of which must be, in their view, at the psychological level. According to certain statistical accounts eighty percent of medical cases in America are psychogenic. Actual cause of the trouble being in the

mind it cannot be reached by purely physical treatment, such as insulin therapy, lobectomy. The cause has to be determined by psychological analysis, which need not be the same as psychoanalysis, that is, probing into the lowest depths of the mind. The Vedāntic psychotherapy aims to cure mental and functional disorders due to fear, anxiety, grief, frustration, internal conflict, sense of guilt, suppressed desire, and so forth, by rectifying the patient's inner attitude towards the objects concerned—things, beings, or events, as the case may be—and thereby transforming his reactions to them. He is taught how to adapt himself to the varying conditions of life, since the stress due to social maladjustment contributes to neurosis and psychosis as well. But to effect the permanent cure Vedānta recommends the change of outlook on life, because the root cause of mental ailments is man's wrong view of life. All the while the patient is to be treated with due consideration of his capacities. He who feels for him heals his heart.

As long as a person looks upon pleasures and possessions as the primary objectives of life he cannot be free from emotional involvement. Whoever is attached to his riches must have the fear of losing them and the consequent cares and worries. He

will be envious of those who have more than what he has, contemptuous of those who have not enough, and proud of what he has. Greed invariably takes hold of him. Sense desires are insatiable, while the means of their fulfilment are inadequate. The objects of desire, transitory as they are, cannot be easily acquired. The body and the organs, the instruments of sense enjoyment, give way before the mind is satisfied. The baneful effects of modern living—constant tension, discontent, competition, clash and conflict, are inevitable, inasmuch as one and all clamour for maximum power and prosperity as the very goal of life. Vedānta does not condemn the search for pleasures and possessions but urges the seekers not to look upon them as ends in themselves. It draws man's attention from the lower to the higher ideals until he finds the highest. When the mind turns to the higher values it invariably becomes detached from the lower. This is the way to outgrow sense-desires. This is what Vedānta recommends and condemns their suppression and repression no less than over-indulgence. Detachment does not however mean indifference. Human desires and emotions are not wrong in themselves. Otherwise they could not be sublimated. They have to be given higher and higher directions until they turn to God, the Highest. Self-control implies self-upliftment.

Vedānta agrees with psychiatry on the point that man should be viewed as an integrated whole. But the difference is this. Psychiatry conceives man as a psychophysical organism, of which the physical system is the prime factor, and ignores his spiritual self. Vedānta recognizes, as religions generally do, three distinct factors in human personality—body, mind, and spirit, among which the spiritual self is the basic unifying principle. So the real man is not the unity of the three factors

but the central principle of consciousness that integrates the body and the mind and functions as the knower and as the doer in association with them. The mind has the capacity to transmit consciousness that belongs to the knowing self. Though distinct the body and the mind are closely associated and influence each other. A man's problems cannot be solved effectively unless he has a correct view of himself. The truer the view the better is the life. Not only should he be acquainted with his present status or the stage of development but also with his fundamental nature. Is man basically a physical, or a psychophysical, or a spiritual being? On his answer to these questions depend his ideal and plan of living—the key to the integration of personality. Until he knows the true meaning of life no inner stability is possible. None can be at peace with himself unless he can find a satisfactory answer to the question 'what do I live for?'

It is the recognition of the spiritual self, ever shining, birthless, growthless, decayless, deathless, that gives man a sense of security amidst all the uncertainties of life, removes his fears, awakens his self-faith, the key to his development, and makes him the master of himself—his mind, the body and the organs. At the same time he recognizes the spiritual self of others and treats them with love and respect. The root cause of man's troubles is the ignorance of the true nature of the self.

One of the Upaniṣads gives a graphic picture of man's journey to the ultimate Goal with self-mastery :

'Know the (spiritual) self to be the master of the chariot and the body, the chariot. Know the right understanding to be the charioteer and the mind (volitional) the reins. The senses are said to be the horses and the objects, the

roads. The wise call the self associated with the body, the senses, and the mind the experiencer.... A man who has right understanding for his charioteer and holds the reins of the mind firmly, reaches the end of the road; and that is the supreme position of the omni-present, all transcendent Being.' (*Kātha* I. iii. 3)

Man's self-fulfilment is not in his physical, intellectual, aesthetic, or moral well-being, but in his spiritual enlightenment. Being conducive to the highest good, spiritual life is of supreme importance in the Vedāntic thought and culture. Next to this is man's moral life. To neither of these has psychiatry paid much attention, as far as I can see. Moral goodness is a prerequisite for spiritual awakening. Not only that; it sustains man's intellectual, aesthetic, physical, and social well-being. Who can expect to maintain good health unless he lives with moderation and self-restraint? Virtue brightens intellect and develops the power of discrimination between the pleasant and the beneficial, the apparent and the real, the ephemeral and the eternal. It counteracts emotional imbalance. Humility overcomes pride, charity unkindness, loving sympathy anger and hate. Unsupported by moral judgement aesthetic sensuousness turns into sensuality. Without fair dealings with our fellow-beings no sound interpersonal relationship is possible; tension and hostility in collective life, potent causes of nervous breakdown and mental disorder, are inevitable.

Besides the conscious and the subconscious state on which man usually dwells, Vedānta recognizes the superconscious state, which none but the specially qualified can reach. In the conscious, that is, the waking state, a person experiences the external objects and the internal facts as well. But he cannot see the entire mind.

The part of the mind that is open to the waking ego is the conscious level, below this is the subconscious and beyond this is the superconscious. In dream and deep sleep the experiencer dwells on the subconscious level. Normally, every individual experiences three different states—waking, dream, and deep sleep—every day. They do not bring about radical change in his vision of life and the world. It is the superconscious experience that reveals unto him the truth regarding the self and the universe and its Ruler, removes his bondages forever and reinstates him in his native purity, freedom, and blissfulness. The basic urge in man is the urge for perfection. This he attains by Self-realization which is the same as the realization of God, the Soul of all souls.

Vedānta highly values the conscious or the waking state. It is then and then only that man's reason and volition function. It is by the exercise of the will backed by reason that man has to regulate his emotions and actions and achieve anything worthwhile. There is no progress in the subconscious level. No moral judgement is possible there. In dream and so in drunkenness and drowsiness all mental operations are involuntary, only emotions and instincts prevail. What can man achieve then? Any intoxicant or drug that robs man of his self-awareness must overwhelm his self-determination and benumb his will-power. What positive good can man expect to come out of it? It is his volitional action that demarcates the human level from the subhuman and enables him to rise above the sense-plane. His intellectual, aesthetic, moral and spiritual unfoldments await cultural operation. He can even rectify the subconscious region by conscious efforts. To counteract the evil propensities lying there he has to cultivate the contrary tendencies with a will.

The performance of volitional action is

the special privilege of human life. In lower levels instinct prevails. Any volitional operation, physical or mental, is *karma*, the Sanskrit term with which you are familiar. Right or wrong, high or low, this leaves a corresponding impression on the mind. By our deliberate actions and experiences we are constantly storing in the mind various impressions (*samskāras*). Our ideas and emotions, tendencies and desires, capabilities and memories, are derived from them. Being manifest as such on the conscious mind they control behaviour. The impressions also dwell within as retributive moral forces that fructify in due course here or hereafter and create favourable or unfavourable situation for man. Among the unmanifest impressions some become attenuated, some overpowered. Being close to the surface these influence the conscious mind and behaviour more or less. They account for what some psychologists like to call 'the unconscious mental processes' in preference to 'the unconscious.' But most of the unmanifest impressions lie dormant in the bottom of the mind. They affect neither the conscious mind nor behaviour as long as they remain as such. They may become manifest in the conscious level in due course. Some stimulating cause may awaken any of them. Thus in the Vedāntic view the subsoil of the mind is the repository of both good and evil elements; it is not dreadful or abominable as the unconscious of Freud. It cannot be said that only repressed and suppressed urges dwell there. Whatever thoughts, emotions, and propensities prevail in the conscious mind naturally gravitate to the subconscious level. Necessarily the endogenous cause of mental ailments has to be traced there.

When the departing spirit leaves the physical body he retains the mind with all its contents in seed form. In due course

he is reborn with them, unless he attains liberation. It is the unredeemed souls that become reincarnate. The mind and the body being distinct, the characteristics of the one cannot inhere in the other. Psychiatry acknowledges hereditary transmission to account for the endogenous cause of mental illness. But in the Vedāntic view this is not possible unless we acknowledge that some parts of the parents' mind enter into the gene at the conception. In that case it is to be admitted that each time a child is born the parents must lose portions of their minds. But actually it is not so. It is also a fact that children do not necessarily inherit the parent's intellectual, aesthetic, moral, or spiritual nature. Wicked children are born of saintly parents, morons of normal parents, sane children of the insane parents. A congenital defect mental or physical is not necessarily hereditary.

The direct knowledge of the human mind is possible only by introspection. The study of behaviour is an indirect approach. Vedānta does not depend on the latter as much as on the former. Generally speaking, human behaviour is not instinctive as the animal behaviour. Man's judgement intervenes between his thoughts and emotions and their expressions. A person may be aware of a fact, still he may deny it and pretend ignorance. He may not eat the food offered to him even though he may like it. With no happiness within one may appear to be happy. With no love within one can make a show of love. Experimental psychology, on which psychiatry mainly depends, being based primarily on the observation of animal behaviour, cannot be expected to provide adequate knowledge of the human mind.

The main difference between psychiatry and Vedānta is in their conceptions of human personality. I have tried to indicate that in the treatment of mental illness

both physical therapy and mental therapy personality and the values of life. Man have their respective places. But both lives on different levels of life. He is meant have to be supplemented with a compre- for the highest. Until he finds a way to hensive and consistent view of human it he cannot have peace of mind.
