

RELIGION AND THE YOUTH

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THERE IS a beautiful verse by Sri Śankara which depicts how man escapes God. Aye, man does evade God. God is ever attentive and seeks man with all His might but finds him happy with the red bright toys of the world. He calls but man does not listen, does not respond or at the most says, "wait, I shall finish this game and then I shall attend to you". 'As child he is engaged in play, as youth in mirth, as old man in deep worries, alas in the Supreme Reality no one is engaged, none interested,¹ says Śankaracharya. The old man's worries are numerous: 'How shall I live; how will my body get over this disease or that feebleness', and similar myriad other worries peck at him. Man sees all these, perhaps, laughs at the old man's clinging to life, yet does not think that he also will one day have to pass through the same path and face a similar situation. Youth has vigour and therefore being optimistic loses himself in enjoyment and mirth. To a certain extent the parents too encourage him to lose himself in the world, for they are afraid to put anything that speaks of religion in his way, lest he should leave them all and seek God.

To many religion may mean a following of a certain code of conduct, an observance of certain rituals and creeds, a practice of particular dogmas, one or all of these; but that is not what we mean here. Religion is an experience which results in the conversion of man to the Divine. However, this does not mean we ask any one to throw overboard all rituals and creeds. They are necessary and essential but are only steps of the ladder to religion. Let us hear Swami Vivekananda about what real religion is: "Realization is real religion, all the rest is only preparation — hearing lectures, or reading books, or reasoning, is merely preparing the ground; it is not religion." All morality, all ethics, all good works, all rituals and creeds are a preparation for religion to dawn into our hearts. Others are only the chaff while the seed is realization of the Ultimate Reality.

There is a maxim going round at present, 'Catch them while young'. And this has been made effective use of in very many fields of man's activity, especially in the most hazardous tasks such as mountaineering. This enthusiasm to infuse into the youth a spirit of adventure, a spirit of responsibility is very good and is being tried in scientific fields also. But

¹ Charpatapanjarika stotram.

this idea is not anything new to India or religion. In a minor Upanishad there occurs a passage which says: "Be religious while still young; otherwise pointless, aimless will be man's life."² An aimless life is like wild grass, it grows and is uprooted but grows again, serving no one's purpose. Naciketa, in the *Kathopanishad* impresses on his father the necessity of following the righteous conduct: 'Seeing,' says he, 'how the righteous acted in the past and how also the saintly ones act in the present try to follow them in the proper way of life. Grieve not that you are sending me to the abode of *Yama*. As corn ripens and falls and then grows again man is born and dies.'³ What remains to man is what good or bad he does in this world; for that goes to shape his future life. So a man who aspires for the eternal life which never undergoes any change, that is to say, wants to realize the Absolute Existence, must stick fast unto truth. For none can hope to gain truth by error. Man travels from the lower truth to higher truth and never from error to truth. So, if we are not careful to cultivate the lower truths here and now, how can we hope to reach the higher truths later!

However much the present generation may encourage the youth to secular adventure, it thinks that serious attempt at religious life may be left out for a future date, and an indefinite future it always becomes. Once when a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna was asked by someone, why he should renounce the world at such an early age, he put the inquirer the counter question : 'What certainty is there that I will live up to a ripe old age — the age when you say I can give up?' The questioner was silenced, for it was an irrefutable statement though unpalatable. But truth does not wait to sweeten anyone's taste. Sri Krishna says, 'That which in the beginning appears like poison but in the end tastes like nectar, that joy, born of the clear understanding regarding the Atman, due to purity of the mind, is said to be of the *sattvika* type.'⁴ Verities and values of life must be weighed, understood and acted upon in this light.

Why should man be religious while still young? Not only from the standpoint of uncertainty of life but also for other reasons men, who really seek God, should be religious while they are still in the prime of life. For once an attachment is cultivated, once character is formed it is any body's guess that one could reform oneself. That is why, Sri Ramakrishna used to praise his young disciples so much. He would say, 'Their minds are untarnished with worldly desires . . . They are like kneaded clay which can be moulded into any shape . . . Their minds are like new vessels into which milk can be kept without fear of turning sour.' That is why people must be earnest in spiritual life while young, before they receive impressions of the world. Swami Vivekananda has repeatedly stated how every thought we think, every action we do goes to form a part of our character. These acts and thoughts leave an impress on the mind which

² Bhavasantaropanishad, 1.41.

³ Kathopanishad, 1.6.

⁴ Bhagavad Gita, 18.37.

sinks to the sub-conscious. So, though these impressions are not always manifest they lie on the ocean-bed of the mind to rise again at a call, as it were, when circumstances become favourable. So what would you like to have in your mind? Definitely every one will like to be good. But will this goodness come if we don't work for it? Can one be a musician or an artist if he does not assiduously practise even supposing that he has a natural bent towards it? If any one says he can, the lives of the musicians and artists all over the world give the lie to such a supposition. So, one must work at the foundations, then only can a strong and beautiful edifice of character be built. And that foundation is the young age. Lose the chance and you lose a great deal. For this birth in a human body is very rare indeed.

Our sages have declared this time and again. Sri Śankara in the opening verses of the *Vivekacudamani* makes this very explicit: 'For all beings the human birth is difficult to obtain, more so a male body; rarer than that is Brahmanahood, rarer is the inclination to lead a life according to the Vedic religion; erudition in the scriptures is still more rare; next in the higher scale of things come discrimination, to differentiate between the self and the non-self, Realization, and being established in the state of identity with Brahman. This kind of Liberation is not to be attained without the merits of a hundred crore of births.'⁵ The Upanisads too emphatically lay down that a man who passes away without realizing the Atman loses a great deal. Witness what the *Kenopanishad* exhorts: 'If a man realizes (the Atman) here, then it is a fruitful birth, if not it is a colossal catastrophe.'⁶ The catastrophe is not only due to the loss sustained of this life but is also due to involving oneself inevitably into the round of births and deaths; for no man can escape this cycle except when he realizes God.

Yājñavalkya brings home this truth to the sages, assembled in the court of Janaka, when he relates to his questioner, Gargi, that 'one who departs from this world without knowing this Immutable, is miserable.'⁷ Śri Śankara commenting on it observes that such a one is miserable like a slave bought for a price. Why should he be miserable? Because when one departs without realizing God he remains bound by the fruits of his actions and would be dragged into this world repeatedly like a slave. That is misery indeed.

Now, there is a false notion, current among many, that religious life is meant for the old and the infirm, the decrepit and the weak. It is a gross misrepresentation of facts. Swami Vivekananda asks a pertinent question, "which is the greater of the two strengths: (1) to allow the horses run headlong or (2) rein them in effectively; which one is the stronger: one who is carried along the current or one who swims against it successfully?" Religious life is swimming against the current; it is a reining in of the mad horses of the senses. As every one knows it is easy to

⁵ Vivekachudamani, 2.

⁶ Kenopanishad, 2.5.

⁷ Brihadaranyaka Upanishad, 3.8.10.

slide down an inclined plane; it is easy to let yourself be carried away along the current but to swim against it is a very hard job. Similarly it is easy to say that one can work on the path of religion in the old age. But it has never been done unless one has been steadily working towards it from a very early period. From a distance a mountain looks very smooth but try to climb it and you will find what a quantity of thistles and thorns, pot-holes, ups and downs and ditches and mounds you have to tread. The spiritual path is like that, from the outside it looks so easy but come to brass tacks with it and you will feel its hardship. It is like walking on the sharp edge of a razor, so difficult is the path.⁸ One should be ever on the alert, one cannot afford to be relaxing in the least, on this path, if one wishes to make some progress.

It is only when the senses are subdued and when the mind is brought under control that a real taste for the higher values of life develops. A strong physique alone can help a mind to be strong, to be unyielding to temptations. Is this possible for a weakling? A weakling may not be able to err on the physical side but he is also unable to stand the strain of spiritual disciplines. The Upanisads declare, 'This Atman is not to be attained by the weak, nor by false steps, nor by mere knowledge without renunciation. The Self of the wise one, who strives by these alone enters the abode of Brahman.'⁹

By *these* in the Śruti text are understood (1) strength, both physical and that born of the intellectual conviction regarding the existence of the Atman, (2) to remain aloof without being caught in the net of the world, (3) intense thinking and austerity, and (4) renunciation. In the face of these tested truths does it not look like childish insistence to say that religion is for the weak and the infirm? What is the equipment of the old man: a bundle of habits deep-rooted as to assume the propensity of not only second nature but of the first nature. Is it possible for such a one to break easily through that nature? Such a man's thoughts perforce run into the old ruts, so assiduously cultivated by him. A least deviation from the thoughts, which have become basic, will be resisted by his mind vehemently. Let each man, therefore, try for himself and see how difficult it is to get over even a simple and single habit. Let him encounter the struggles and annoyances he would have to undergo to overcome this habit, and then let him visualize, the time, the effort and heart-wrenchings one has to suffer to reform one's life. Unless one gets into the practical field one will not understand how idle is anyone's hope to gain the kingdom of heaven through indolence. Except you get into the water you will not know the difficulties of swimming. It is so in the field of religion also.

⁸ Kathopanishad, 3.14.

⁹ Mundaka Up., 3.2.4.

II

It is no doubt a matter of common experience that man has some inherent tendencies in him. They are inborn, are there from his birth. And this is one of the fundamental conceptions, not only of Hinduism but also of Buddhism and Jainism — we mean the theory of Karma and rebirth. It has already been discussed on a previous occasion and therefore need not be repeated here. It has also been found out that it is the best explanation that can be given for the wide diversity that we see in the world. Diversity not merely regarding material possessions but also regarding physical dispositions, intellectual accomplishments and the like.

Now we may ask: If man is bound by the fruits of his past actions how is he responsible for his present doings? To a certain extent this may be true but man having the capacity to shape his future must not leave things to themselves. In him there is also the capacity to resist all the powers that press him down. Does he not fight against all odds to improve his material conditions? Therefore, if past actions went to form man's present birth it naturally follows that his present actions can make or mar his future. 'Never a doer of good actions, O Arjuna, comes to grief,'¹⁰ assures Sri Krishna in the *Gītā*. So instead of wailing at one's circumstances one should put in all efforts to proceed onwards from where he is placed.

III

A great many factors influence man from his childhood onwards. It is the example of the parents that influences the child in the beginning and childhood is the most impressionable age. At that time the child simply imitates its elders. So it is very necessary that the parents and elders who happen to come in contact with the child, every moment of its life, should be of commendable character. There is a story in the *Mahābhārata*, of a queen, Madālasa, who sang to her babies even from the cradle about the glory of the Atman, which was their true being. They were so much impregnated with the idea that when they grew up they renounced the kingdom and the palace and everything to realize God. It happened in the case of the first boy and the second and the third. The king was flabbergasted. He did not know how to prevent a repetition. The fourth time the child was taken away from the mother to be brought up elsewhere to become a king. 'As he was leaving home the mother gave him a piece of paper which he was to read when he grew to manhood. On the paper was written, "God alone is true, all else is false; live alone or keep the company of holy men ". When he grew to manhood he read the note and renounced the world.' That is the way children are influenced.

¹⁰ Bhagavad Gita, 6.40.

Even a queen in those days thought it her own responsibility and duty to bring up her children, to nurse them and serve them herself in every way. Under such circumstances the tendencies of the mother percolated, as it were, into the child and the influence abided for ever.

Second comes association. It begins from the days of the child's toddling. Here too the responsibility of the parents is enormous. They should see that the child mixes with children brought up in a congenial atmosphere. This is the formative period of the child's life and due care should be taken to avoid its falling into bad company. If good impressions are formed the child, as he grows up, will pick his associates carefully.

Then comes the teacher. In ancient India his influence was tremendous. The pupils lived under him for a long time and therefore it was incumbent that his life should be exemplary. Though the same system of education does not prevail now it is possible that a teacher can influence his students by his life even at the present age.

Next comes contact with holy men. This is where today's youth can begin. For they cannot undo what has already happened. But they can and must make a beginning somewhere. They must create in themselves a lively interest for religion. And that can be done in two ways, by reading books and associating with holy people. Books will give theoretical knowledge but in holy men you will find the truths illustrated. Contact with them will strengthen one's belief in the scriptures, in religion and spirituality.

IV

Some aspirants try to combine *yoga* with *bhoga*, spirituality with enjoyment. Real progress in spiritual life is an impossibility if anyone thinks that in this way he can work the religious path. Sri Sankara has unambiguously put this forth in his *Vivekachudamani* thus: "Whoever seeks to realize the Self by giving himself up to the nourishing of the body, is like the man who proceeds to cross a river catching hold of a crocodile, mistaking it for a log of wood."¹¹ For these two (*yoga* and *bhoga*) are like the two opposite poles of the same magnet, are like light and darkness, like fire and water. They can never come together without detriment to each other. Remember the advice Christ gave to the rich young man, when the latter had approached him with the question, 'Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?' 'Keep the commandments,' Jesus had said. 'That I have ', the youth had replied and asked, 'What lack I yet?' Christ's reply to this should clarify all doubt, should set at rest all vacillation. Jesus almost seems to say, "to be good and moral and loving and kind is excellent indeed! But if there it ends, you will be a good man and no more. You would have prepared the

¹¹ Vivekachudamani – 84.

ground to be religious but the seed is yet to be sown; you have to take the last step," when he said 'If thou wilt be perfect, go *and* sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven; and come and follow me.'¹² "Give up", that is the last but the most important commandment of Jesus but the least followed. What does this "following me" in the text mean? To be like him. A definition of what it is to be like him is contained in his exhortation, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind."¹³ This means, to be without attachment to anything here. An illustration of it is Christ himself, which is substantiated in his saying: "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head."¹⁴

Again, study the life of any great spiritual luminary,—a Buddha, a Śankara, a Ramakrishna, a Vivekananda. What does it teach? All these, as if, with one voice declare, "give up all that is worldly and cling to God alone". Confronted with this obvious truth the youth should abstain from committing the mistake of trying to combine *yoga* and *bhoga*.

V

To sum up: One should cultivate an intense liking for the religious life even while young. A whole-souled application to the practice, with all the vigour at one's command, is a necessity towards any achievement. It is more incumbent in the case of religion.

Swami Vivekananda had great hope in the youth of India. He wanted them to come forward not only for the material regeneration of the motherland but also for its spiritual invigoration. It was a call to serve both, viz., the mankind and oneself. Will the youth understand and respond to his call?

¹² Gospel according to St. Mathew 19.16-21.

¹³ Ibid., 22.37.

¹⁴ Gospel according to St. Luke, 9.58.