

RELIGIOUS LIFE AND SRADDHA (*)

By Swami Paratparananda

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In the Rig Veda there is a hymn devoted to *Sraddha*¹, as a goddess in which the Rishi prays to her, that he may have devotion to the sacrifices he performs and the work that he does in this world. Sayanacarya commenting on this *sukta* says, '*Sraddha* is a special affection which is imbedded in man.' Continuing he terms it as a distinctive reverence, for a particular object or principle. The author of the *Vedantasara* puts it as 'the faith in the words of the scriptures as taught by the guru or teacher.'²

We experience that without a little faith, a little trust no action, be it secular or religious, is possible. We take on trust many things. We put faith in a great many people and then alone transactions become feasible, life becomes a possibility. We believe in certain principles as conducive to our welfare and strive to work them out in life. How tenaciously and persistently do not people hold on to their particular political views! That is faith. Unless one has faith in what he does, he would not be able to turn out any work satisfactorily. Religion, therefore, does not claim any special allegiance when it says you should have *sraddha*, faith, in the words of one whom you have accepted as a teacher.

The Hindu scriptures are not dogmatic that you have to subscribe to some particular creeds for your emancipation. Nay they go a step further and say that one has to go beyond the scriptures, one has to go beyond all laws, if one has to be liberated. For, everything within law is a limitation, freedom is beyond all law, but the way lies through the scriptures. Simply knowing the truth intellectually and harping on the eminence of one's own scriptures is not enough. We have to verify the propositions, the principles, enunciated in the scriptures in our own lives. One who has true *sraddha* in the statement of the scriptures, waits not for any one to goad him onward. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: 'Suppose there is a thief in a room and he has come to know that a great treasure lies separated from him only by a thin wall, can he rest content only to know about it? Will he not try to possess it?' *Sraddha* is like that. It makes one restless to possess what one prizes most and it serves as the motive power which makes man jump into the fray and fight on courageously towards the noble end, God-realization.

Like the scriptures, the true teachers do not demand unquestioned obedience, they are ever ready to satisfy the doubts of a genuine seeker. What they demand is, that the seeker should be sincere and not simply a stoic who argues for the sake of argumentation. Swami Vivekananda in a telling manner implants the idea of faith, when he says: 'What use is

belief in God if we do not see Him? What use is the faith that we have a soul if we do not experience it?' That kind of firm belief is *Sraddha*.

With the advance of science and technology, faith of the people in religion has waned. Physical science has usurped, as it were, the place of the scriptures. Now this physical science says: man is no more than an animal. Why? because it cannot see man except as a body. The other part, the real being, of man lies hidden from its view, is beyond its ken, since it is not material. Scientists in the beginning doubted the existence of soul, as they did not come across anything like it during the process of dissection of the bodies. They called the idea of soul and religion as idle fancy of some deranged brains. The first psychologists or to quote a Western scholar 'the medical materialists' said with impunity that the soul-flights of the saints were 'nothing but' expressions of their organic disorder. But the science of the soul, religion, smiled at their vain prattle and allowed them to rattle on, never for once disbelieving in its well-verified conclusions. Religion firmly asserted that man is divine. Swami Vivekananda boldly declared, 'Man is potentially divine'. The Upanisads say, 'Thou art That'³ (the Infinite Being)' from whom the whole universe is projected, in whom it is maintained, and into whom it dissolves again.

Here a little digression is inevitable. It may be asked, 'Will not man become egotistic thinking himself to be the creator, the preserver, and the destroyer of the universe?' A little thought bestowed on the above statement will surely set at rest all such questions. Can any thoughtful person comprehend this universe to have emanated from his body? Can he ever think that the whole universe, with its varieties of manifestations outside himself, is maintained in his body? Does he dare believe that the whole universe will last only as long as his body lasts? An emphatic negative will be the reply. The Upanisads, therefore, certainly do not refer to the body when they say 'Thou art That', but to the Atman, the Indwelling Spirit, the 'self'. So there is no way, for a man who knows this truth, to be egotistic and no man can be said to have known this truth as long as he identifies himself with the body. The Atman of course should have recourse to a vehicle to manifest Itself, just as we have to take the aid of some conveyance for any journey, short or long. Now the body forms the vehicle for the Atman.

Man, however, identifies himself with the vehicle, the body, and forgets himself in catering to its needs. It is true that man as a body is no more than an animal, so when he identifies with the body he displays all the qualities of an animal. The instincts of self-preservation, sense-enjoyment, distrust, malignity, passion and the like are most prominent at that time. But, even in the life of the vilest man some moments come when he evidences magnanimity, affection, compassion and beneficence which are his inherent divine qualities. These are the moments when the flashes of the real man come to the forefront overpowering the animal nature. The struggle in life, the goal of religion, is to convert these rare moments into a continuous experience: to subdue the animal nature once

and for all time. And here it is that *Sraddha* helps as a great asset.

Sraddha as distinctive reverence

Of the above three definitions of *Sraddha* we shall first take up *Sraddha* as distinctive reverence. He who performs sacrifices or does works or endows gifts without reverence for the sacrifice, or the cause for which he works or donates, only wastes his time and energy. He does not reap any fruits either here or after death, says the Bhagavad Gita⁴. The Upanisads are categorical in this respect. They prohibit man from giving when he has no reverence for the cause⁵. Kathopanisad illustrates this by a story: There was a person named Vajasravas. He performed a sacrifice. One of the conditions of the sacrifice was to give away every good thing that the sacrificer possessed. But this man was a miser. So after the sacrifice he gave as fee to the Brahmanas only old, jaded and dried up useless cows⁶. He had a son. Though a boy he found that what his father professed and did, did not tally. The Upanisad says, '*Sraddha* entered into this boy at this time⁷'. The boy found that his father had no *Sraddha* in the sacrifice or in giving gifts. The father hankered only after the merit. He wanted to save the father from going to a region of eternal misery by giving such useless gifts. He questioned, 'Father, whom are you going to give me!' The father kept quiet. A second and third time the boy repeated the question. The father got annoyed at the audacity of the boy and said, 'I am giving you to Yama, the King of Death'. Undaunted the boy started for Yama's abode straightway. The father was disconsolate. The boy, however, consoled his father saying that everything born, like vegetation that grows and dies and sprouts again, had to die, and so there was no use in worrying over the bygone. Now, *Sraddha* brought the boy Naciketas to the abode of Yama and from Yama he learnt self-knowledge, the way for liberation and returned an enlightened soul.

Again the Rig Veda *sukta* referred to here, in the beginning, says one should kindle the fire, for sacrifice with *sraddha*⁸. The oblations thus offered with *Sraddha* obtain for the sacrificer results in abundance. The sacrificer endowed with *Sraddha* is himself referred to by the name of *Sraddha* when he goes to heaven. For it is that reverence and faith in the sacrifice and the scriptures, that makes him go to heaven⁹. So whether one seeks enjoyment or liberation one should have reverence and faith in the duties he does.

Sraddha as affection

Sraddha as affection we come across every day of our life. The mother serves the house-hold, and the guests with *Sraddha*. Love and affection cannot generate without *Sraddha*. Indiscipline is rampant in the schools and colleges today. Why? because students have no *Sraddha* in the education they receive, nor in the teachers. Education (*vidya*) in olden

days was considered as the highest gift,—next to spirituality—one could give. It was looked upon as the boon of goddess Saraswati. That *Sraddha* has left the portals of the 'Temples of Learning' in the present age, and therefore, we suffer. Revive the affection, the *Sraddha*, for the education and the teacher, and everything will set itself right again. That *Sraddha* itself will direct our steps.

Sraddha as faith in the Guru's words

Though a distinction has been made in the definitions of the three types of *sraddha* for the sake of illustration, it is not possible to say where one begins and the other ends. All these qualities are inseparable. One supplements the other. When any one is present, the other two effortlessly follow. *Sraddha* is child-like faith.

If the mother says pointing to a man, 'He is your elder brother' the child believes that the man is his brother: Similarly in every action the child implicitly believes the mother. Many are the stories which Sri Ramakrishna told the devotees to impress upon them the necessity of *Sraddha*, faith, in the words of the guru. He once said: 'There was a boy named Jatila. He used to walk to school through the woods, and the journey frightened him. One day he told his mother, of his fear. But what could the mother do? She was too poor to provide a servant. Yet she was a devotee of the Lord. She inwardly prayed to the Lord to protect her child. She replied: "Why should you be afraid? Call Madhusudana." "Mother," asked the boy, "Who is Madhusudana?" The mother said, "He is your Elder Brother and lives in the woods." One day after this, when the boy again felt afraid in the woods he cried out, "O Madhusudana." But there was no response. He began to weep aloud. "Where are you Brother Madhusudana? Come to me. I am afraid." Then God could no longer stay away. He appeared before the boy and said: "Here I am. Why are you frightened?" And so saying he took the boy out of the woods and showed him the way to school. When He took leave of the boy, God said: "I will come whenever you call Me. Do not be afraid.'" One must have such child-like faith in the words of the teacher, and such yearning to realize the goal.

Efficacy of Sraddha

Efficacy of faith can never be over-estimated. The foregoing stories bear ample testimony to this fact. But lest it should be thought that these are mere fables and fairy tales for enticing the child-minds, let us narrate some recent events. Sri Girish Chandra Ghosh, the father of the Bengali stage, was leading a Bohemian life before he met Sri Ramakrishna. But his meeting with the Master proved to be the turning point in his life. He was more and more attracted towards Sri Ramakrishna. His estimation of the Master increased with every visit. Gradually the conviction grew upon

him that the Master was none other than God Himself come down to redeem mankind. That faith had a great effect on his character. His vices left him one by one until at last to remember the Master became the one ruling passion of his life. A sinner was transformed into a saint. That is the miracle of *Sraddha*.

Again, Swami Adbhutananda, Lata Maharaj, a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna, though he began his life as a servant boy in one of the Master's devotee's house, soon ascended the pinnacle of realizations by simple faith. A childlike faith he had in Sri Ramakrishna. The Guru's words were like mandates from on High. He unquestioningly followed them. He had no doubts. The Master, was his pole-star. Like the proverbial oyster that sinks down to the bottom of the sea after receiving a drop of rain to turn out a beautiful pearl, he shut himself within himself and following the teachings of the Master became a saint in his own right. Literally illiterate though he was, no philosophy was a closed book to him. This was, as it were, confirming the famous passage of the Gita: 'A person of firm faith attains knowledge being devoted to it by restraining the senses; and obtaining the knowledge he attains peace that passes all understanding.'¹⁰

Again it is common knowledge that the doubting Narendranath converted himself into the world-shaking Swami Vivekananda by his wonderful *Sraddha* in the Master's words.

Different types of Sraddha

Sraddha, again, is of three types. Every-one has faith according to the propensities with which he is born and as is his faith so does he become¹¹. Man, according to the Sankhyas is made of three constituents, *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*. In every person all these qualities are present in a more or lesser degree. The difference between man and man is because of the predominance of some one constituent. If *sattva* happens to preponderate such a man's faith will tend towards respect to elders, towards worship of God, and the like. If *rajas* were to be prepotent the person will lean towards the worship of other gods; will be having great avidity for name and fame. If *tamas* were to be inordinately prevalent his inclination will be towards the worship of ghosts and spirits. Man's all activities can be attributed to the working of these constituents. The proportion in which they exist in man goes to form his nature, which Sri Krishna calls as prakriti, and is commonly known as character.

Perfection of character the goal of all religion

Now this character or nature has to be cleansed of its dross, is to be perfected so that it may give place for the play of higher and nobler faith. All the scriptures aim at this. A man cannot be truly religious if he

happens to be imperfect in character. True *sraddha* dawns only in a perfected nature. So in the initial stages *sraddha* is to be cultivated and for that all concomitant forces or qualities are to be developed. When the perfection in character is attained then does one realize God. Only on realization of God, adamant faith, complete *sraddha* in God takes firm root. Till then all belief in God is subject to vacillation. Our aim in life should be to have that adamant faith. *Sraddha* is thus the guiding factor of religious life from the beginning to the end. Without *sraddha* religious life amounts to nothing. With *sraddha* it is everything.

¹ Rig Veda, 10 Mand. 151 Sukta.

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³ Chandogya, VI.viii. 7.

⁴ Gita, 17.28.

⁵ Taittiriya Up. 1.11.3.

⁶ Katha Up. 1.3.

⁷ Ibid. 1. 2.

⁸ 10.151.1.

⁹ Chand. Up. 5.4.2.

¹⁰ Gita, 4.39.

¹¹ Gita, 17.3.