

REMEMBRANCE OF GOD

Swami Paratparananda

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ONE of the effective ways by which one can obtain release, attain liberation, from the trammels of this world is by the constant practice of the presence of God, say the saints of all religions and of all times. Ordinarily man is aware of the physical world, the world that can be grasped by the five senses: of hearing, touch, seeing, taste, and smell. His estimate of this world in the present age is that it is only a material entity. He does not see it even as God's creation. No doubt he is moved and lured by its constantly changing panorama. The beautiful sunset on a lake or the sea, the wonderful hues and sweep of the rainbow, the cool moonlight on a silent night, each of these, may put him into a rapture. The gentle murmur of a brook and sweet chirping of the birds soothe his nerves and sometimes send him into an ecstasy, as it were. Yet all these may touch only the superficial part in him, that is to say, his senses and to some extent his mind also. He may remember those moments all throughout his life as moments of un-inhibited and inexpressible joy. But they do not enable him to make a deeper dent in his personality if they cannot touch something of the spiritual being in him. Such a person's susceptibility to Nature is only fleeting. The next moment, of such a lofty experience, he may plunge himself into some dastardly act, or perverted action, without any qualms whatsoever, if he does not believe in a higher purpose of life, in a nobler destiny of man, in a Being that lives in all beings and witnesses everything. Nevertheless this influence of Nature is not discounted in spiritual life. In fact Sri Ramakrishna's first ecstasy, which happened when he was a boy of seven, may be said to have been induced by Nature, when a flock of white cranes passed flying across the sombre clouds in the vast expanse of a village sky, unimpeded by skyscrapers and the dust, and smoke of industrialized cities.

But, more often than not, man does not strive to look beyond appearances, beyond the phenomenal world. That is why his desserts too are of the world. One cannot reach the Beyond, the Eternal by having recourse to the ephemeral¹ says Yama, the Lord of Death, to Naciketa in the *Kathopanishad*. It is also the experience of all in this world: as you sow

¹ Kathopanishad, 2.10.

so you reap. What then should one do? Should he give up everything? Sri Ramakrishna says to the house-holders that they should give up mentally. He says, 'Hold on to God with both hands when you are not engaged in your duties. And do even your duties with one hand still holding on to His lotus feet'. And those aspirants who are not encumbered are asked to give up not only mentally but outwardly also. What happens to a man who clings to his possessions and relations is graphically described by Sri Ramakrishna: 'Even on his deathbed a person attached to his wealth, asks those around him to lower the wick of the lamp and not to waste the oil so much'.

People speak of giving up everything at the end of their life, as if it is so easy as casting off one's worn out clothes. Attachments to things grow gradually into one's skin, as it were, nay they go even deeper, they penetrate into the very marrow of one's bones, it involves one's whole being. And to think of giving up these attractions and possessions at the evening of one's life will be like having one's bones broken or breath stifled. Even when in full vigour of youth and life our thoughts revolve round our treasure chest. Is it then possible to give up that clinging when old and infirm? Let the youth not delude itself by thinking that they can devote the fag end of their life to God. We must heed the wise ones who exhort: 'Apply yourself diligently to what is auspicious, for truly, who knows when death will snatch us away'.

There can be no two opinions about the duration of life. Even a hundred and twenty years, which is perhaps the limit that a man can live healthily, is quite insufficient to fulfil all ambitions and desires in this world. That life is short, is conceded even by agnostics and atheists. It is left to man to make proper use of his life, to get beyond transmigration, to stand away from the wheel of *samsāra*. Again, if we believe in the scriptures, which are authorities in respect of all that is beyond the human ken, we have to accept that those whose actions are more akin to those of the beasts in this life are likely to take the birth of beasts in the next birth. 'By good deeds one goes to higher births and by wicked deeds to lower births and by a mixture of these one attains human birth',² says the *Praśna Upaniṣad*. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* asserts that 'persons with meritorious deeds to their credit are born as Brahmanas, Kshatriyas, or Vaishyas, (i.e. men of pious temperament) and those who are of wicked deeds are born as animals such as dogs, pigs and the like. But those who do not fall under either of these two categories tread the third path, of short-lived duration, such as insects and worms, again and again'.³

It is also reasonable to assume that whatever one constantly thinks

2 Pr. Up. 3.7.

3 Chandogya Up., V.x.7-8.

of, that one becomes. If there are some desires in man which cannot be satisfied in man's body, it is but natural that a suitable body will have to be projected, after the dissolution of the human body, to enjoy those desires. Sri Krishna categorically declares, 'By dwelling on whatever thought one leaves the body to that form alone one goes, because of his constant contemplation on that form'.⁴ This is the reason why Sri Sankara in the beginning of the *Vivekachudamani* extols human birth so highly: 'Rare is this human birth; rarer it is to be born as a man; much more rare it is to be born with good tendencies; still more rare is the inclination towards the right conduct enunciated by the Vedas and higher than this is the erudition in the scriptures; higher than these are the faculty to discriminate between the Self and the non-Self, the experience of Brahman and continuing to be established in It. (And that is liberation.) This Liberation is not to be obtained except through the well-earned merits of a hundred crore of births.'⁵

Having been born into this imperfect world, we have to somehow get rid of the limitations placed on us on every side and in every way. And overcoming these limitations once and for all time is termed *mukti*, liberation.

From the foregoing discussion we have come to know how it is that we become bound. But in it is also the way out. If we become entangled and enmeshed by thinking of ephemeral things it naturally follows that by contemplating on the Divine, on the Supreme, on the eternally pure, on the eternally conscious, on the eternally free Being we also imbibe all these qualities in some measure until at last the lure of the phenomena fades away into the background and we begin to see that all-pervading Being everywhere.

No doubt, it is difficult to reach the goal, but on that account one should not totally neglect the path. Sri Krishna says that even a little act of righteousness saves one from a great catastrophe.⁶ Everyone in this world is not endowed with equal gifts of health, strength and intellect. So each one can start in his humble way to tread the path and the easiest of all ways is the remembrance of God.

How to do it? We, every moment of our life, are doing something, imagining something or planning something. Not a moment is it possible for us to live without activity, either mental or physical. Even the laziest man will be actively dreaming of some great fortune. Inactivity is an impossibility in this world, except for a very few, whose number can be counted on the fingers' ends. 'Your very existence will be in jeopardy if you do not work',⁷ says Sri Krishna to Arjuna. Work, therefore, cannot be

4 Gita, 8.6.

5 Vivekachudamani, 2.

6 Gita, 2.40.

7 Ibid., 3.8.

an excuse not to think of God. 'Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever sacrifice you make, whatever gift you give, whatever austerities you perform, O son of Kunti, offer all that unto Me'⁸ stresses Sri Krishna. When you begin a work you invoke His blessings and when it ends you offer it to Him. You hanker for no results. The results are also dedicated to Him. Thus you become free from the fruits of your action. Work and its result has no more power to bind you. You have nothing to gain and nothing to lose. You are only His instrument. This attitude is most beneficial. It subdues, and if this submission is constantly practised, it even annihilates the ego.

It is not possible to remember God always if we contemplate on Him just for the sake of seeking some benefits and forget him totally afterwards. In every act and thought He must be remembered. Even what we eat is to be offered to Him. That is the time when people are apt to forget God either attracted by the savour of the food or due to other circumstances. A poet sang, 'Consider what you eat as an oblation unto the Divine Mother'. That is the attitude we have to try to cultivate. The Lord says in the Gita, 'As Vaisvanara (the stomach-fire) I live in the bodies of beings'.⁹ Here is a suggestion for our contemplation: that what we eat can be considered as an oblation unto Him.

'When you are lying down think that you are prostrating before the Lord.' When you are giving gifts think that you are offering them to God. Does He not live in all beings? This world is His creation and everything in it should remind us of Him; instead we are enamoured and caught in its glamour and forget its Creator. It is there that we miss the grip over our mind. The mind tries to take us away from our real being, away from God. Why does it do that? Because, says the Upanisad, it was created with a tendency to go outward, along with the senses.¹⁰ The senses present the mind with so many charming things and if it is not well controlled by the discriminative faculty it falls a prey to those rosy pictures and inevitably forgets God.

We make pilgrimages, make sacrifices with an ulterior motive: to obtain progeny, to enjoy the pleasures of heaven or obtain name and fame here on this earth. Well, what does all these come to? None of them, work or progeny or wealth, can set you on the path of liberation. Only by renouncing all these can man attain it.¹¹

Man, given as he is to live in the world, cannot all of a sudden obtain perfection in any method of approach to God. He must strive and struggle. There should be no letting up of efforts. It is like swimming against the current, the moment you cease your efforts you are carried down a mile or more before you are able to understand it or recover your

8 Ibid., 9.27.

9 Ibid. 15.14.

10 Kathopanishad, 4.1.

11 Kaivalyopanishad, 1.3.

breath. Sri Ramakrishna gives the example of a boatman to illustrate how one must struggle to see God. As long as the boat is in the winding alleys of the stream and the wind is against him, he rows and is alert, and he steers clear of the sandbanks and hidden rocks, but once he gains the main current he can leave the rowing, unfurl his sail to the favourable wind and enjoy a smoke. The main current means to be fully imbued with the thought of God, the favourable wind is God's grace. When these two things are combined nothing can disturb the devotee. He can be sure of reaching the goal.

Sri Ramakrishna in this connection cites another example: of a goldsmith at his task of melting gold. The goldsmith uses the bellows, the pipe and the fan to generate the proper heat to make the gold melt, but once he accomplishes his task, he sits back and enjoys rest as long as he needs it.

Patanjali says that one's progress in spiritual life is proportionate to the struggle that one makes. Sri Ramakrishna says that nothing can be achieved by those who say that everything will happen in time and do no practice at all.

A doubt may arise here: Men have practised long and arduously before having a glimpse of God. Is it then possible to see God by merely practising His presence or remembering Him constantly? Well, there have been saints who attained that state merely through the remembrance of God. But their remembrance was genuine. To use an expression of Sri Ramakrishna, there was 'no theft in the chamber of their heart'. They gave themselves up wholly, without any reservation, to Him.

Remembrance of God may appear as an insignificant practice, worth not the trouble. But if we think a little deeper we will come to know that it is not so easy as it appears to be. Engaged in the duties of the world man forgets God completely. And even if he takes His name, the lips only might move, but the heart would not be touched. Its adoration will be somewhere else. Sri Ramakrishna used to tell a story to illustrate this point: Once Narada, who was proud of being a great devotee of the Lord, went to Vaikuntha (the abode of Narayana). The Lord coming to know of Narada's thought said, 'Narada, go to such and such a place. A great devotee of mine lives there. Cultivate his acquaintance; for he is truly devoted to Me'. Narada went there and found a farmer who rose early in the morning, pronounced the name of Hari (God) only once, and taking his plough, went out and tilled the ground all day long. At night he went to bed after pronouncing the name of Hari once more. Narada said to himself: 'How can this rustic be a lover of God? I see him busily engaged in worldly duties, and he has no signs of a pious man about him'. He went back to the Lord and spoke what he thought of his new acquaintance. Thereupon the Lord said: 'Narada, take this cup of oil and go round this city and come back with it. But take care that you do not spill even a single drop of it'. Narada did as he was told, and on his return the Lord asked him, 'Well, how many times did you remember Me in the course of

your walk round the city?' 'Not once, my Lord', said Narada 'and how could I, when I had to watch this cup brimming over with oil?' The Lord then said: 'This one cup of oil did so divert your attention that even you did forget Me altogether. But look at that rustic, who, though carrying the heavy burden of a family, still remembers Me twice every day'. Our devotion is not judged by what we profess but by the way we live. The Lord looks into the heart of the devotee and does not judge merely by what he outwardly does. If there is no consonance between the inside and out, the practices one does cannot yield the desired results. Out of the fullness of the heart the mouth should speak and out of the fullness of the heart also the hands should act. True remembrance makes a god of man. His very proximity makes those near him feel the presence of the Most High. Such remembrance, however, comes after a long period of *sadhana* and is born out of the true love of God. Nevertheless this method is open to all, the high and the low, the poor and the rich. Let us practise it and be blessed.