

## **SELF-ABNEGATION (\*)**

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### ***Life as Architecture***

‘Man is the architect of his own fate’, said Swami Vivekananda. Life is really an architecture. It substantially answers to Ruskin’s description: ‘Architecture is the art which so disposes and adorns the edifices raised by man that the sight of them may contribute to his mental health, power and pleasure.’<sup>1</sup> But here the edifice is the character of man. It not only gives pleasure to the builder but even those who occasionally come in contact with him. His power is not for enslavement or destruction but for ensouling and enriching. It is not sensual pleasure that one derives by coming in contact with a pure life. It is, we can almost say, other-worldly, ethereal. It is uplifting and ennobling. Again as Ruskin says about building and architecture, there is a vast difference between an ordinary life and a life built up with a purpose: though all people live, they alone live fruitfully who live with a perspective, a vision.

### ***Mind as a tool***

Architecture does not come out of nothing. It requires material and tools to produce it. What are the tools and material that go to form this architecture of man’s life? As we said, the edifice of man’s life is his character. It is a structure that is not perceived by the physical eyes but by the mind. To quote Sri Ramakrishna, ‘Man does not grow two horns’ when he becomes great. Neither the aura around him dazzle or pierce the eyes of ordinary mortals like the sun’s rays. More practised eyes, that of a yogi, are necessary to discern such a phenomenon. In short no observable physical transformation takes place in man when he builds up his character; but the inner alchemy will be marvellous. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, ‘the touch of the philosopher’s stone transforms the iron sword into gold. The shape does not change but it can no more cut’. Similarly the resulting peace that flows in the wake of a pure life is its only indicator, its only criterion.

Now, the structure of character being subtle it naturally follows that the tools also must be of a finer grain. Mind is such an instrument. In Indian philosophy it is aptly named the *antahkarana*, the inner instrument. It is the one instrument which to a great extent controls the other instruments, the senses. Instruments also and not merely material,

enter into the formation of a product. The excellence of the product and the speed with which it is turned out depend to a large extent on the precision instruments made available to the worker. Without the wheel and the rod a potter may manufacture some pots but they will not attain the finish one expects. With a blunt chisel we may break a stone but cannot carve an image. Likewise with a dull mind or a mind that rests satisfied with worldly things, nothing of value shall materialize. Such minds require chastening: sharpening, subduing and sometimes treating with heat, beating into shape and tempering. The architect does all this with his tools either by himself or sends them to a smith. But the mind being subtle cannot be physically subjected to rigorous tests as you do with these tools.

### ***Sacrifice as whetstone for the mind***

What is the way? Our ancients found out the methods. The scriptures almost said: 'If you want to enjoy, why be satisfied with these mortal things and for a brief period? Go to heaven and enjoy divine imperishable things for a long time. But there are some stipulations. You have to restrict your enjoyments here. You have to acquire divine qualities. You have to acquire merit to go to heaven, to be one among the gods,' and for this they prescribed certain duties, and sacrifices. Ordinarily man thinks of himself and is very self-centred. He hugs to his bosom his wealth and is loathe to part with it. He hoards it and the more he hoards, the more he longs for it. He does not think beyond his own family circle. And when acquisition becomes the one aim of his life he throws propriety to the winds and stoops to any means. Such a tendency is dangerous, nay volcanic. This was to be counteracted. So man was taught to live a life of merit: 'to put by treasures in heaven'. On him was enjoined certain duties: Duty to the parents, to the Rishis, to the devas, to the neighbours and even to the animals, each of which went to liberalize him, to open the windows of his closed mansion of the mind, and brought in new visions. It drew him out of his shell; made him share his things with others and become humane. It helped him rise above the animal level. Thus sacrifice played the part of the fire, the hammer and the whetstone to mould, temper and sharpen the mind.

### ***Meaning of sacrifice***

In this idea of sacrifice is found the seed of self-abnegation, self-denial. For, whatever was considered most covetable on earth by man was enjoined to be offered to the Lord. Man was thus taught to renounce his claims on things desirable, not only ungrudgingly, but voluntarily. May be, there is a desire lurking in the heart of the sacrificer at the outset for gain in the next world, but by degrees when he comes to know that even heavens too are impermanent, that even what he enjoys in those regions

is nothing better than here, these desires for enjoyment here and hereafter are annihilated. Having once learnt to give up, no sacrifice becomes too great for him then. He puts the need of the other man before his own. 'Thus by doing works alone should one desire to live a hundred years here. This way alone is open for you who desire not to be entangled by the effects of action here,'<sup>2</sup> says the Isavasya Upanisad. Sri Krishna forcefully puts this idea in the Gita thus: 'In this world work done other than for sacrifice leads to bondage.'<sup>3</sup>

Whatever may have been the meaning with which the word yajna (sacrifice) was used in the beginning, it has come to have a wider import with the passage of time. The sense is no more restricted to the performance of some rituals in the fire. Sri Krishna extends and amplifies the meaning of sacrifice when he accepts, 'Others there are who sacrifice through gifts, others again who sacrifice through penance, still others who sacrifice through yoga and some others of austere vows are there who sacrifice through study and knowledge of Scriptures.'<sup>4</sup> His list does not end here but what he implies is, that whatever helps man to extend his mental horizon and expand his heart is a sacrifice. All ethics, all morality, all religions teach this one thing: self-sacrifice. Swami Vivekananda says: 'This Nivritti is the fundamental basis of all morality and all religion, and the very perfection of it is entire self-abnegation, readiness to sacrifice mind and body and everything for another being.' Again he repeats: 'First kill your self and then take the whole world as your self; as the old Christians used to say, 'The old man must die'. This old man is the selfish idea that the whole world is made for our enjoyment.' When we say 'Thy will be done' we must have sacrificed our self to the will of the Lord. That is self-abnegation, self-sacrifice, the supreme sacrifice that man can make. Without this sacrifice none can be truly religious. It is becoming completely unselfish. Buddha taught nothing but self-sacrifice. He was ready to offer himself for the sake of even an animal. There was no limit to his self-abnegation.

### ***True self-abnegation***

Swamiji tells us a beautiful story to impress what really constitutes a sacrifice, a summary of which we give here: 'Once the Pandava brothers performed a great sacrifice. Rich gifts were given and much wealth was spent. People were amazed and declared that the world had not seen the like of it before. But there came a little mongoose half of whose body was golden and the other half brown. And, it began to roll on the floor of the sacrificial hall. Suddenly it cried out, "This is no sacrifice." People were astonished, they demanded from it the reason of such an uncharitable remark. In reply it said. "There was once a little village, and in it there dwelt a poor Brahmin, with his wife, son and the son's wife. They were very poor and lived on small gifts made to them for preaching and teaching. There came in that land a three years' famine, and the poor

Brahmin suffered more than ever. At last when the family had starved for days, the father brought home one morning a little barley flour, which he had been fortunate enough to obtain, and he divided it into four parts, one for each member of the family. They prepared their meal with it and just as they were about to eat, there was a knock at the door. The father opened the door and there stood a guest. The poor Brahmin invited the guest and set his own food before him. The guest ate the food but his hunger was not appeased. Then one by one the other members of the family placed their food before the man and when the last morsel was exhausted the guest departed, blessing them. That night those four people died of starvation. A few grains of that flour had fallen on the floor and when I rolled on them half of my body became golden, as you see. Since then I have been travelling all over the world, hoping to find another sacrifice like that, but nowhere have I found one; nowhere else has the other half of my body been turned into gold. That is why I say this is no sacrifice." We are apt to miss the moral of the story if we read it casually as a fable. Every word of it is significant. The setting of the story is in a little village, the persons depicted are poor and the scene is a time of extreme trial. There was no fanfare of a sacrifice; no crowd to applaud, not even the remotest chance of any one knowing it. It was a sacrifice silently done and with no motive. That is self-abnegation; that is true sacrifice. We shall be able to follow better the trend of Swamiji's thought if we juxtapose with it another marvellous utterance of his: 'Even idiots may stand up to hear themselves praised, and cowards assume the attitude of the brave, when everything is sure to turn out well, but the true hero works in silence.'

### ***Utility of self-abnegation***

Now we come to the question of utility of this virtue of self-abnegation. The present generation is very calculative. It wants to know what it will obtain in return for any effort that it may put in. And necessarily it wants the return to be in a tangible form. For, it has lost faith in the existence of the other world; the heavens have no more lure for it. The people of the age want everything here and now. Under the circumstances self-abnegation apparently seems to be of no earthly utility. If one had to sacrifice everything for another, what joy, what pleasure does one derive in this world? But our scriptures declare quite to the contrary. 'By giving up all this may you enjoy. Do not covet any One's wealth.'<sup>5</sup> exhorts the Sruti. What is meant by this? Does it not sound peculiar? Has any one enjoyed by giving up? By way of answering these questions we have to counter question ourselves. Whoever has enjoyed fully? Whoever has said 'I had my fill; I want no more; I am at peace by enjoying the things of the world'? Where is that man who can say he has been all blissful throughout? Let us take that instance in Buddha's life when a young mother felt very sore at the death of her only

child and came to Buddha and prayed to him to revive her darling. 'Mother,' he had said, 'get me some white mustard seeds from a house that has known no bereavement and I shall revive thy child.' Thus he let her find out for herself that sorrow and joy alternated in this universe, and that there was more misery in it than joy. She would not have listened to Buddha if he had given her a sermon when her sorrow was acute; when the wound was fresh. But when she knew for herself, by her search, that not a home existed where there had not been some catastrophe at one time or other, the few words that fell from the lips of the Blessed One were enough to cure her of her sorrow and to impress upon her the evanescence of these worldly objects. Earthly treasures cannot give one joy. Even if the wealth of the whole earth were made over to a man, he would desire still more. There is no end to his desire. Therefore it is only poetic to say that man enjoys by satisfying his desires. Pure bliss is not of this world. And about the bliss of the other world and the state of bodilessness (*jivanmukti*) we can know only from the scriptures and realized persons.

At this stage we may be asked: What then about those who do not believe in a God but in being mere moralists? Even in their case, we have no hesitation to repeat, what we have already stated, that self-abnegation forms the very basis, very foundation of all morality. As long as man says 'I' first and all others next there cannot be any morality. If everyone was to clamour for his own exclusive right and priority there would be no morality but brutality, the strong would overpower the weak, would try to crush them. Swamiji's categorical remarks in this context are worth noting: 'The watchword of all well-being, of all moral good, is not "I" but "thou". . . . Forget yourselves; this is the first lesson to be learnt, whether you are a theist or an atheist, whether you are an agnostic or a Vedantist, a Christian or a Mohammedan. The one lesson obvious to all is the destruction of the little self and the building up of the Real Self.'

Again it is not a fact that men are not aware of this idea of self-abnegation or that it is totally absent in the generality of mankind. The world would have gone to pieces if such were the case. In each individual we can find these two forces, acquisition and abnegation existing side by side. Even in the animals we can observe these traits. The tiger that plunges its fangs in the human blood is ready to give its life for its young ones. The man who commits murder is ready to sacrifice his life to serve his wife and children. Therefore what is wanted is the extended application of this idea of self-abnegation. Do not limit it to the circle of the family, whom you consider your own; or if you have to, make the whole world your family, your own; or 'enwrap everything in this universe by the Lord,'<sup>6</sup> as the Upanisad states. For, as Swamiji observes, 'This renunciation is the only positive power in the universe. The other (acquisition) is only the misguided employment of the power of love.'

And it is a tremendous power — this self-abnegation. All heads bow down before a man of self-sacrifice. It was the ideal of the Brahmana in

the days gone by. He never amassed money, never took to earning money. His profession was to read the scriptures and teach them free — not for any consideration — to those who came to him. The slender gifts that he received went to maintain himself and his students. Thus Brahmanahood symbolised supreme self-sacrifice. His was a life of austerity and penance, and that was why the Brahmana was given so high a place in society.

### ***Self-abnegation versus selfishness***

Our valuation of self-abnegation will not be complete or impressive if it is not contrasted with its opposite acquisition. Before proceeding to say how harmful this acquisition is in spiritual life, let us see how it has helped or ruined the world. History tells us what this demon of acquisition has done when it once entered into the veins of nations. Countries were overrun, blood flowed in rivers, cities were pillaged, people were enslaved and butchered. Man, the living image of God, reduced himself to a being much worse than a despised beast. The seeds of the world wars can be traced to this acquisition, to this selfishness. In the case of religion too it has been the same, only this selfishness went by the name of fanaticism in its case. This is the stark, ghoulish picture of selfishness. Which then will be humanity's choice, acquisition or self-abnegation? On this choice will rest the future of mankind.

In the life of the individual too it is possession that makes man selfish. Selfishness makes for attachment, makes us slaves, and this in turn engenders misery. Our goal is freedom from misery, liberation. Therefore, certainly acquisition is not the way to it. Sri Ramakrishna, with his characteristic simplicity and directness, narrates a parable to show into what turmoil these desires force us: 'It is narrated in the Bhagavata that the Avadhuta had twenty-four gurus, one of whom was a kite. In a certain place the fishermen were catching fish. A kite swooped down and snatched a fish. At the sight of the fish about a thousand crows chased the kite and made a great noise with their cawing. Whichever way the kite flew with the fish, the crows followed it. . . . As the kite began to fly about in confusion, lo, the fish dropped from its mouth. The crows at once let the kite alone and flew after the fish. Thus relieved of its worries, the kite sat on the branch of a tree and thought: "That wretched fish was at the root of all my troubles. I have now got rid of it and therefore I am at peace." ' Likewise man's miseries do not come to an end as long as he does not give up his desires which spring from the idea of possession, of selfishness, of 'I' and 'mine'.

### ***Conclusion***

In conclusion, we shall recollect what Swami Vivekananda says about self-abnegation. He unequivocally declares: 'Without this renun-

ciation no yoga is possible.' By giving up this little self alone can we come to know of the Higher Self. Attaining that, man becomes blessed, liberated, and enjoys 'peace that passeth all understanding' even here on earth. What better utility can there be than this? Further, the possessor of complete self-abnegation becomes a power that sheds light on the pathways to God. Such is the virility of the virtue of self-abnegation.

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<sup>1</sup> Seven Lamps of Architecture. Pub.: George Allen, London, Seventh Edition (1898), p.13.

<sup>2</sup> Isa Up. 2.

<sup>3</sup> Bhagavad Gita, 3.9.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 4.28.

<sup>5</sup> Isavasya Up. 1.

<sup>6</sup> Isa Up. !.