

SELF-EFFORT AND SELF-SURRENDER (*)

Swami Paratparananda

* Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – June 1963; Vol. 50; page 42

Self-effort and self-surrender, are two meaningful words which are often loosely employed; and are more often than not mistaken as contradictory to one another. Self-effort is usually associated and aligned with the follower of the path of jnana and self-surrender with that of the follower of bhakti. Under such circumstances it will look paradoxical to say that both these attitudes can, nay should be found in a spiritual aspirant. To say that one supplements the other, one completes the other, or one is the corollary of the other will appear as absurd. But many things that look incongruous at first sight, on a superficial valuation or a cursory examination reveal quite contrary natures on more sustained and penetrating investigation. It is so in the physical world as well as in the metaphysical.

It is necessary for us here to know how this popular error, that these two attitudes of self-effort and self-surrender are for two distinctive types of aspirants, crept into the human mind. On first examination there seem to be sufficient grounds for this view. We all know that the path of jnana yoga is a severe one. The aspirant has to begin with the negation of the phenomena. He has to fight every moment with his mind and restrain it from identifying or associating itself not only with possessions and relations but with his body, mind and ego too. This is a tremendous task. Herculean efforts are needed to counteract the propensities that the mind has gathered for ages. And as Swami Vivekananda puts it, 'It is swimming against the current,' the hardest job. Sri Krishna too concurs on this point when he says, 'The difficulties encountered by those who are attached to the path of the Unmanifest are greater.'¹ Mark the word *greater* here. It is only a relative term, a comparison with the other path, that of bhakti. Due to the enormous effort that was required to be employed in order to follow this path, self-effort naturally came to mean the path of jnana. Thus far none will contradict this contention. In the path of devotion, on the other hand, the devotee is required to surrender everything, his body, mind and soul to God. Consequently the laity took it as the path of self-surrender. Neither can it be said that it is a misnomer if the two attitudes are not considered exclusive. All the miscomprehension starts when each is precluded and segregated from the other.

We shall now consider, the how and why of the above statement. We have seen that the path of knowledge requires inordinate efforts and

it appears that there is no ghost of a chance for surrender there. But let us examine the implications of these efforts. A follower of jnana denies that he is the body or mind. That is his discipline. What then does he postulate? What does he consider himself to be? He says he is the Self, the Atman, which is of the nature of eternal purity, knowledge and freedom. But there is a thing called ego which stands as a barrier from an aspirant's realizing this nature. Though one may have overcome the idea for the time being that he is the body he usually identifies himself with this ego, the lower self. But the ego is not the real Self. This ego is to be merged in the Higher Self, the True Self, the Cosmic consciousness; in other words the self-effort which the aspirant was considering as his should enable him to surrender his small self to the universal Self, Brahman, then alone will his efforts have a meaning. Then alone he would have gained his end. If however, he denies outwardly his body but holds on to his ego, the ego may swallow him up, bind him to the world as do the body and mind in the case of the ordinary man. Let us be more explicit: The proper and true knowledge is 'Atman is not the doer; not the enjoyer, not touched by whatever happens to the body.' Now as long as any idea of doing or enjoying remains in the aspirant, he cannot be called a follower of the complete and true *jnana marga*. When nothing is his how can the efforts alone be his? If he is not the body how can the efforts of the body be his? If he is not the mind, how can the efforts of the mind be his? But this does not mean that he should give up efforts but should give up the idea that he is the doer. When it comes to this we pause to ask: What then does it amount to if not surrender, surrender to the True Self, the Universal Self? We have thus seen that actually self-effort and self-surrender go together in the case of the path of jnana.

The other path which we take as that of self-surrender requires perhaps a little less of effort but as much of perseverance and tenacity as the first. But, because the efforts are a little less it cannot be taken to mean that there is no place for self-effort at all. It will be puerile to understand it this way. Even in the physical world, we observe, every living being struggling and making effort for its very life, for its very preservation; and wherever efforts in this direction dwindled in that proportion these beings disappeared from the face of the earth. There is a saying in Sanskrit which impresses this idea vividly: 'Beasts of prey do not enter the mouth of a sleeping lion,' that is to say that even the lion which is considered as the king among the beasts has also to prowl and hunt if it has to live. Without effort nothing can live. We shall cite another saying in Sanskrit which brings out this meaning: 'To a person who is lion-like in self-exertion, Lakshmi, the Goddess of Wealth reaches. But idlers allude to it as "destiny, surely destiny". Denying destiny do manly endeavour, and if you fail then where is blame for you?' One should apply this advice in spiritual life too. People there may be who think that self-effort on the mundane plane is not only good but incumbent but in the psychological plane self-surrender is the best. It is as good as saying, 'I

shall enjoy life and God will look after my soul, if there is one.' This is the hedonist's view and not self-surrender. This is the greatest pitfall, nay this view is the graveyard of spirituality. It is hypocrisy or at the most deceiving oneself. This way none was saved. It does not settle the issue of life, nor of death. It is neither here nor there.

There is a beautiful parable of Sri Ramakrishna which brings out this kind of hypocrisy in its true colours: 'A Brahmana, succeeded in rearing up a beautiful garden with much effort and great pains. One day a cow entered the garden and began to graze and destroy the plants. The Brahmana was infuriated. He so violently assaulted the cow that it died. He was seized with fear. He thought, "Alas, I, a Brahmana, have killed a cow—which is the greatest of sins." The Brahmana had read a little of the Vedas and remembered that human sense organs derive their power of functioning from the gods and as Indra was the presiding deity of the hand he pacified himself by thinking: "It is Indra who has moved my hand and killed the cow."

'Now the sin due to the killing of the cow came to enter the body of the Brahmana. He said, "Go away, you have no place here; Indra has killed her, go to him." So the sin went to seize Indra. Indra said to the sin, "Wait a little please, let me go, speak a word or two with the Brahmana and come back. Seize me then if you like." Saying so, Indra assumed a human form, entered into the Brahmana's garden and saw him standing close by looking after the plants and trees. Indra began to praise the beauty of the garden in the Brahmana's hearing: 'Oh, what a beautiful garden it is! With what good taste have the plants and trees been planted, each in its proper place.' He approached the Brahmana and said, "Sir, can you tell me whose garden it is? It is so beautiful." On hearing the praise of the garden, the Brahmana was besides himself with joy and said, "Sir, this is my garden; it is I who have planted all these. Come let me show you round." While he was thus taking Indra round and praising himself all the time, he came inadvertently to the place where the dead cow was lying. Startled, as it were, Indra asked, "Whew! Who has killed the cow here?" The Brahmana, who was all the while taking the credit of planting the garden, was at a loss what to say and remained utterly silent. Indra then assumed his own form and said, "Ah! you hypocrite, you have done whatever is good in the garden and it is the killing of the cow alone that devolves on me. Isn't it? Here is your sin of cow-killing. Take it." Saying so, Indra disappeared and the sin came and took possession of the Brahmana's body.' Such is the surrender that some practise. It is therefore better that as long as one tends the body, one attends to the soul also and that more solicitously than one does the body.

Again surrender is not running away from duty. Sri Krishna in the Gita chastises Arjuna for posing as a wise man and trying to escape from his duty to fight the battle. He enumerates several reasons why Arjuna should fight. First of all he says: 'You talk like a wise man but grieve over

those who should not be grieved. For, a wise person grieves not for the dead nor the living.'² Secondly, 'For a Kshatriya there is no greater good fortune than fight a righteous battle.'³ Even while one worked one should remember God, for having continuously and constantly kept Him in one's mind, the thought of Him will persist even at the last moments of one's life, which will enable one to reach God. This is the reason why Sri Krishna exhorts Arjuna, 'Remember Me and fight.'⁴ Lastly he says, 'Even the maintenance of your body will become difficult if you become inactive.'⁵ Doing duty has its own merit. Swami Vivekananda says: 'You should cultivate a noble nature by doing your duty. By doing our duty we get rid of the idea of duty; and then and then only we feel everything as done by God. We are but machines in His hand. This body is opaque, God is the lamp. Whatever is going out of the body is God's. You don't feel it. You feel "I". This is delusion. You must learn calm submission to the will of God. Duty is the best school for it. This duty is morality. Drill yourself to be thoroughly submissive.'

What then is the real meaning of self-surrender? Who can really surrender? These are the burning questions one should seek answers for, before talking of surrender. Self to a devotee means the *jiva* who resides in the body. There is the Lord, Iswara who presides over all the *jivas*. The surrender of this *jiva*, i.e. body, mind and soul, to Iswara is real self-surrender. It is the calm submission to the will of God, without fretting or fuming. It is the implicit belief in the goodness of God and one's capacity to view everything that happens to oneself, whether good or evil, as a blessing from God. Once a great saint, Pavahari Baba, was bitten by a snake. The saint fell unconscious. After he revived and regained his consciousness some one asked him how it was that he who did no harm to any creature was bitten. His reply was: 'It was a messenger from the beloved, the Lord.' That is how a devotee views even a catastrophe. There is no room for egoism in self-surrender; one has nothing to call one's own having submitted everything to the Lord.

Sri Ramakrishna gives the analogy of a kitten, depending on its mother, to illustrate self-surrender. The mother cat carries the kitten in its mouth, securely holding it, and sometimes puts it on the master's bed, sometimes on the roof behind a pile of wood. But whatever it does, it does for the good of the kitten. That type of dependence is complete surrender, complete reliance, on God. The aspirant yearns for God and God alone. He does not want anything but God. He does not calculate how much material gain he can reap by his surrender. There is no trading in his surrender. Our Epics like the Mahabharata are replete with stories which delineate such self-surrender. Prahlada and Ambarisha are some of the shining examples they have held before us.

In recent times Sri Durga Charan Nag and Girish Chandra Ghosh, the two householder disciples of Sri Ramakrishna stand out, prominently as illustrations of this attitude of surrender. Nag Mahashaya was superb. There was no peer to him in humility, and his love of God was unique. But

the miracle of the Master was Girish Chandra Ghosh. Girish at the time he met Sri Ramakrishna was leading the life of a Bohemian. But by his simple and unbounded faith and absolute surrender he was turned from a sinner into a Saint. How was this alchemy performed? When after meeting Sri Ramakrishna Girish evinced interest in spiritual life and asked the Master how he should conduct thenceforward, Sri Ramakrishna, a teacher *par excellence* as he was, far from making any violent attempt at reform asked him to live as he was living but take the Lord's name morning and evening. But even this simple discipline Girish could not promise to carry out. Sri Ramakrishna then asked him to take the name of the Lord at least while taking his food. This too Girish could not bring himself to assure because he did not himself know in what state he would be at that time. At last the Master asked Girish to give him the 'power of attorney' and said he would do whatever was necessary for his salvation. Girish jumped at the suggestion and gladly accepted it, thinking that he wouldn't have to do anything. But one day when he was talking in the presence of the Master he said 'I would do it'. The Master immediately corrected him. He said 'How can you say that? Have you not surrendered yourself to the Lord? Then say that if the Lord wills I shall do it.' From that day onwards Girish had to remember Sri Ramakrishna before he could do anything or say anything. Girish later on said 'How could I know that giving the "power of attorney" was such a difficult task? Much remains to be understood even now. I find that at some time there is an end to the spiritual practices like japa, austerities and devotional exercises but there is no end to the work of a person who has given the "power of attorney"; for, he has to watch his every step and every breath to know whether he does so depending on Him and His power or on this wicked "I".' So difficult is absolute self-surrender.

Swami Vivekananda remarks, 'If every body can truly live always in this mood, then he is a free Soul. But what really happens is that for the 'good' I have the credit, but for the 'bad' Thou, God, are responsible. Without the attainment of the fullness of Knowledge or Divine Love, such a state of absolute reliance on the Lord does not come.' It is therefore, better to be realistic, measure our shortcomings and exert truthfully and perseveringly to eliminate them; better to be honest than to be simulating reliance on God. Sri Krishna, though in a slightly different context, points out: 'He only has no work whose enjoyment is in the Atman alone whose satisfaction is in the Atman, whose bliss is in the Atman alone.'⁶ Only such a person soaked in the thought of God, permeated through and through by His presence, 'who sees God inside and outside need not do any tapas.' Until one attains that stage one should earnestly endeavour, has to put in all efforts.

It is obvious from the above that absolute self-surrender is possible for the highest type of devotee, of which there are very few at any one time. We have to know then as to what is the path for the generality of aspirants. Sri Krishna in the chapter on bhakti yoga in the Gita gives a list

of paths one could follow according to one's capacity. He asks Arjuna, 'Fix your mind on Me, rest your intellect in Me, when you will, without doubt, be able to live in Me. If however, you find it difficult try the Yoga of practice; if that is impossible, work for Me. Even by doing work for Me you will attain the goal. If you are unable to do that also, taking refuge in Me and being self-controlled, renounce the fruits of all actions.'⁷ It is necessary to awaken love of God within our hearts by any one or all of these methods. And once divine love dawns there is no danger for the aspirant. Till then it is a hard uphill task and we have to face it. There is no easy way in religion. It is idle fancy to imagine that God's mercy will suddenly descend upon us. If it comes, well and good, but let us purify ourselves to receive it, and do our part of the work. We are well aware of the saying 'God helps those who help themselves,' and we do remember it in our earthly pursuits. Let us apply it in our spiritual pursuit as well. There should be no stint or hesitation on our part to exert, at the same time there should be no eagerness for result. For, God, the all-merciful Lord, under Whom we seek shelter is the Dispenser of all fruits. He will do what is good for us, and when we love God, exertion will not be exertion, it won't be tiresome. If we do all work as a dedication to God, there would be joy in it.

Lastly we come to the question, what exertion or effort is a devotee required to put in. The *Bhagavata*, the bhakti sutras and saints have dealt with this subject at great length and may be separately discussed. Yet it will not be out of place, if we mention here one significant verse of the poet-saint, Kulasekhara Alwar, which exquisitely portrays how every limb of our body can be utilized for, and every function of the body be sublimated by worship and adoration of the Lord. Though much of the charm and beauty of the verse will be lost in translation we give it for the sake of those who cannot follow Sanskrit. Addressing the different limbs the saint says: 'Sing, O tongue Keshava's glory; think O mind of Muraripu; O hands worship Sridhara; hear O ears the stories of Achyuta; O you eyes see Krishna; bend your steps O feet towards Hari's abode; smell, O nose the tulasi-leaf offered at the feet of Mukunda; bow down O head to Adhokshaja.'⁸ Every name of the Lord used here is pregnant with meaning, thinking about which man becomes imbued with devotion. Hence, resting our will in the Lord and remembering Him always we should do *sādhana*.

¹ Bhagavad Gita, 12.5.

² Bhagavad Gita, 2.11.

³ Ibid., 2.31.

⁴ Ibid., 8.7.

⁵ Ibid., 3.8.

⁶ Ibid., 3.17.

⁷ Bhagavad Gita, 12, 8-11.

⁸ Mukundamala, 10.