

SIGNIFICANCE OF SOLITUDE IN RELIGIOUS LIFE (*)

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The term solitude instantaneously brings to one's mind the majestic Himalayas, with its snow-capped peaks, its aromatic herbs and shady trees, its magnificent fauna and flora, its birds of beautiful plumage, flitting occasionally through the forest lisping sweet notes, its swift flowing currents and cool waters. The Himalayas has attracted and been attracting world-weary souls for ages now. It has sheltered in its bosom hermitages of Rishis; and has preserved its holy atmosphere vibrant with the notes of the Vedic hymns and Vedantic lore, in all its purity of accent as were uttered by the teachers of yore. Away from the bustle of cities it had maintained all through the ages the dignity which strikes awe in man and has compelled recognition from poets. Kalidasa, the famous Indian poet, goes into raptures while he speaks about the Himalayas. He says: 'There in the northern direction lies the godly king of mountains, called the Himalayas, entering the seas on the east and the west (with its rivers); and stands lofty and high, as if it were the earth's measuring rod'.¹ He runs on in this strain for another twelve verses, in his memorable work *Kumarasambhava*. Rarely were the sacred precincts of the Himalayas disturbed in the past by the changes in the political atmosphere or by social upheavals. It was the haven of rest and abode of peace for the restless and the enquiring. In the then national set-up when the aged ones withdrew from the responsibilities of the world, after fully meeting the demands made on them by the world, it was the Himalayas which charmed them by its quietude, vastness and solitude, its picturesqueness and calmness. What does this signify? It signifies two things: that outer calmness and solitude are the essential factors which contribute to inner calmness; and secondly that it is in the lap of nature that man learns to be natural, to shed his artificiality.

Solitude, a prime necessity

It is possible that the moderns, attuned as they are to the hectic life of the present civilization, and feel one with the ideas expressed in Cowper's poem:

'O Solitude where are the charms
That sages have seen in thy face?
Better to live in the midst of alarms

Than dwell in this horrible place.'
Alexander Selkirk, Stanza 1.

may interpret this retirement of the aged to the forest, in the past, as an admission of failure to face the problems of life, or take it as an indication of setting in of senility at a certain age. This argument seems to make a travesty of facts. For it is a matter of conjecture alone as to how many senile people can leave their homes, at the fag end of their life's journey willingly, to take to a harder and uncertain life. Moreover, it is security and not insecurity that men seek even in the bloom of youth, at the height of their vigour and strength — even if we take the present trends as the standard. What to speak then of the infirm old age? This postulation therefore falls to the ground being baseless. On the other hand it stands to reason to presume that there was a genuine desire in those who relinquished the responsibilities of the world, when at the height of their fame, to know the Reality. It was almost an impossibility for them, moulded as their lives were in the hoary tradition, to forget or lose sight of the aim of life. The goal of life kept constantly renewing and reviewing before their minds' vision so that when they had reached the point of satiation in their desires, rather attained dispassion towards them having been discriminately engaged in fulfilling them, they no more sought to be entangled into the maze. Solitude was what they longed for: to think of the Creator, Who sent them into this world, from Whom they were separated and unto Whom they yearned to be united again.

Religion apart, solitude is a felt need in all thoughtful avocations. It may be the mathematician working at his table, the scientist busy in the laboratory or the student at his studies, in every case solitude is a thing that can never be dispensed with. Observe how prudently, the diligent students shut themselves up to pore over their studies! How deliberately the scientists go into seclusion to think and work out their hypotheses! When we see that even in secular life isolation is at times necessary, we must pause to ask: how much more conscientiously should not religious aspirants seek loneliness?

Solitude of the mind

Solitude again can be classified into three types: solitude of the forest or mountain caves, solitude of the mind and solitude of the Atman (Self or Soul). Although outer calmness aids man to attain inner peace, the outer aids alone without the active cooperation of the mind are of little avail in spiritual life. The mind must first be educated to dissociate itself from its desires and then cultivated to think of the Supreme. It is said that man may obtain the grace of the preceptor, the grace of the Lord and also be blessed with holy company but if he has not the grace of his own mind all this will not help him in any way spiritually. Bhartrhari in his *Vairagyasataka* most tellingly describes how tenaciously the mind

clings to desires: 'My food is what is collected by begging that too insipid and taken only once, bed the bare earth, body the only servant, clothes the old tattered rags, yet, alas, the desires for enjoyment won't leave me.'² So strong are the desires of an uncultivated mind left to associate freely with the objects of the senses.

It is a long way to attain solitude or one-pointedness of the mind but on that account none need be dispirited, none need lose heart. As we have instances of despondency, we also have models of grit and grim determination. It is said of Vacaspati Misra, the writer of the well-known commentary *Bhamati* (on the Brahma Sutras), that at a very early age he took to the writing of this commentary. After he had begun his work he was married to a young and beautiful girl. But he was so absorbed in his work that he did not know when the day dawned or the night came. He did not know who looked after his bodily needs. When tired he would lay down his body to rest on the mat near his writing desk and when he got up he commenced his work. His wife, however, dutifully and without a murmur looked after his needs. This went on for years and years until he had finished his work. Then when he lifted his head to look at the world he saw beside him a grey-haired woman. He asked her who she was and when he came to know that she was his wife and that she it was who had served him faithfully all through, he out of gratitude made her immortal by naming his *magnum opus* after her. This is an instance of one-pointedness of the mind. From this we learn that all that is wanted is aptitude and resolution. The same concentrated mind if given to God can contact Him too. That is how the saints and sages attained realization.

Sri Ramakrishna is very emphatic about having recourse to solitude for the purpose of practising spiritual disciplines. He says that we should practise disciplines in the forest, in a secluded corner of the house or in the mind. Again he remarks 'If you ask me how long you should live in solitude away from your family, I should say that it would be good for you if you could spend even one day in such a manner. Three days at a time are still better. One may live in solitude for twelve days, a month, three months, or a year, according to one's convenience and ability.' This advice he gives to householders who cannot devote all their time to God. What then to speak of aspirants who have forsaken their all for the sake of God? And what type of solitude does he prescribe. He exhorts: 'When you practise discipline in solitude, keep yourself entirely away from your family. You must not allow your wife, son, daughter, mother, father; sister, brother, friends, or relatives near you. While thus practising discipline in solitude, you should think "I have no one else in the world. God is my all".' Continuing Sri Ramakrishna remarks, 'The mind is like milk. If you keep the mind in the world, which is like water, then the milk and water will get mixed. That is why people keep milk in a quiet place and let it set into curd, and then churn butter from it. Likewise, through spiritual discipline practised in solitude, churn the butter of knowledge and devotion from the milk of the mind. Then that butter can easily be

kept in the water of the world. It will not get mixed with the world. The mind will float detached on the water of the world.'

To control and train the turbulent mind we have not only to withdraw it from the senses and sense-objects but also direct it towards God. For, the mind requires some support to cling on to. You cannot make a vacuum of the mind all at once. The moment you try to do it all types of thoughts will enter it. The one thing the mind foolishly believes is, that it will be able to hold on to the gross objects. It envelops that object with its veil of attachment. But soon it gets disillusioned, the attachment snaps due to the loss of or estrangement from the object of attachment. Then it is that frustration sets in. Again and again the mind tries to settle itself on gross sense-objects and sensations, and repeatedly it is disillusioned. With each blow thus received man withdraws into himself little by little until at last he leaves off hankering after worldly things and completely turns inward for solace. With some this process takes a long time, with some others a few disillusionments are sufficient to awaken them to reality.

Taste for solitude

A taste for solitude is generated when the clamourings of the senses are silenced and the senses themselves are rudely shocked out of their gear by the internal blows the mind receives or the external sufferings the body endures. When this taste develops and is directed to God a great part of the battle of life is won. But mind being what it is requires constant watching. Discrimination is the only watchdog man has to prevent his sheep of thoughts from straying on to forbidden ground. With discrimination alert and taste for solitude active we can brace ourselves for the life's fray. If ever anyone by the grace of the Lord is able to quieten his mind and develop taste for solitude it will be the height of folly on his part if he does not utilize the occasion to naturalize this taste, make it his own. This solitude is man's highest treasure. It will not be preposterous if we say that it is in a way the bestower of health as well. For does not man everyday of his life long for rest and sleep? What is deep sleep? What keeps him company there? Alone, alone he is in that state. Yet he is not afraid to go into it. This sleep is the redeeming factor. It soothes many a shock, embalms many a wound and helps the body to recover its strength. It is the solitude of the deep sleep that restores much of the energy that man wastes while in his waking and dream states.

The question is how to cultivate the taste for solitude. No hard and fast rule can be laid down about it. Broadly speaking it can be obtained by practice and dispassion. Dispassion can be arrived at by discrimination. What is this discrimination? Between what are we to discriminate? 'Two types of objects, the good and the pleasant, come to man. The wise one weighing the pros and cons of both, chooses the good alone as it

outweighs the pleasant, but the shortsighted one thinks only about the life on this earth and accepts the pleasant,³ says the *Kathopanishad*. The discrimination is to be between the good, which leads one to liberation and pleasant, which makes for bondage. How to know the one from the other? There are two ways: one is to listen to the words of the scriptures and the wise, other to learn by experience. How to distinguish between the two experiences is told us by the Bhagavad Gita: 'The joy which in the beginning appears like poison but in the end tastes like nectar is *sattvika*, for it is the outcome of the pure mind's intense contemplation on the Atman. The joy one experiences due to the contact of the senses with the sense-objects which appears as nectar in the beginning but turns out to be like poison in the end is termed *rajasika*. There is again a third type of pleasure called *tamasika* which in the beginning as well as in the end deludes man by inducing sleep, lethargy, and negligence.'⁴ Herein we get clear indications as what to expect when we follow a certain path. Whatever joy one gets from the contact with the outside world, is of a transient nature and produces an unfavourable reaction. It saps our energy. In other words whatever ennobles one's character, expands one's heart, augments one's forbearance, increases one's love to fellow beings, that is the path of dispassion and the opposite is the way to bondage.

Solitude a great cure for artificiality

Many opinions have been expressed for and against solitude. We need not discuss here their merits or demerits. Sufficient it is to say that, according to one's experience whether sweet or bitter one expresses one's opinion. Again there is good and bad in every thing. A man may read the *Bhagavata* by the light of a lamp and another may forge a document by the same light. Can we then blame the light for the latter's abominable act? Similarly if some few tend to become beastly in their behaviour after retiring into solitude, the blame need not be placed at solitude's door. There is, however, one good thing in solitude which all must concede, viz. one cannot deceive anyone else except oneself in solitude, but in society you cannot be so sure. Observe the world and we can see how artificial it has become. Convinced though we be of a wrong being done, or a wicked act being perpetrated, we either wink at it or try to justify it. Again society frames some norms, some rules, and every one pretends to follow them. Let them get the least chance of evading these rules and it is doubtful whether ten to one could withstand the temptations of utilizing the opportunity to aggrandize, to enrich, or to earn name for themselves at others' cost. Man's character gets exposed at that time. In the solitude of his mind, he may harbour much ill-will towards a person but in society he shows much affection towards him. The better a person can hide his ill-feelings and odious thoughts and look polished and good, the more he is thought of in this world. It is therefore said 'judge a man not by the great works he does but by his little acts.

The former he does for praise, the latter unwittingly reveal his character'. Let a person go into solitude for a few moments daily and analyse his own acts and we believe that it is possible that he may turn a new leaf in his life. The main point is, the feverish activity which engages man of the modern times all his day and all his life leaves him no respite for introspection. He is more a machine, more like an automaton than a thinking individual. In this age of specialization man's thinking also is done by some one else for him. He only follows the dotted line. And when this happens it is easy to be led astray than when one thinks for himself. Many of man's artificialities would disappear if only he is a little introspective.

Solitude of the Atman

Now we come to the solitude of the Atman, which is the natural culmination of the other two. For no calmness, no peace that depends on created things, can be eternal in duration. Man seeks spirituality for attaining permanent release from the three sorts of miseries, viz. *adhyatmika* (misery due to bodily and mental ailments), *adhibhautika* (caused by elements or created beings), *adhidaivika* (caused by supernatural agencies). Each of these miseries, however, can be mitigated or got rid of for the time being by other agencies also; for instance, misery due to bodily ailments can be cured temporarily by medicine; mental worries due to any wants may be overcome by fulfilling that want. Likewise other miseries too can be overcome for a time by other helps. All these, however, keep on repeating and hence there is that great desire to be entirely free from them. We have to take recourse to the spirit, the Atman the uncreated Being to go beyond misery. When we realize the solitude of the Atman, and find bliss in the Atman alone we are free. When no other object remains to attract us, 'when we find that the Atman alone has become all this, where is infatuation and where is misery for him who sees oneness everywhere,'⁵ says the *Isavasyopanisad*.

In spite of all this when man is alone he gets frightened. What is the cause of fear? The reason is not far to seek. Man's congenital tendencies are too strong. He has long been accustomed to live in groups, in constant turmoil. He is addicted to the charms of society so much that he finds it difficult to live alone. Swami Vivekananda says: 'Can a man who has been used to the turmoil and the rush of life live at ease if he comes to a quiet place? He suffers and perchance he may lose his mind.' So mere intellectual grasp of the Upanisadic truths is of no avail. A constant rumination over them besides the actual practice of solitude is essential to become fearless. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* gives a description of how Prajapati also, at the beginning of creation was deluded and afraid. It says: 'In the beginning this (universe) was only the self (Viraj), of human form. He reflected and found nothing else but himself. . . . At this he was afraid. Therefore even now a solitary one is

afraid. He then reflected, "as there is none else than myself what am I afraid of." On reflecting thus fear left him, for what was there to fear? It is from a second entity alone that fear comes.'⁶ Sankara in his commentary on these verses says: 'Because this Purusa was endowed with a body and limbs, he was afraid of his extinction, owing to a false notion. And as in our case the way he adopted to get rid of this false notion, which was the cause of fear, was by acquiring the right knowledge of the Atman.' Sankara here stated that we too are deluded by the false notion of our extinction with the death of the body and the only way to get over this fear is to know our Atman in its true perspective. How to have the right knowledge? By reflection in solitude on the teachings of the Srutis. The *Brhadaranyaka Upanisad* says elsewhere, 'Wherever duality is seen there only one sees another, one hears another. But when this duality vanishes then who will see whom, who will hear whom.'⁷ All our troubles and miseries start with seeing duality and all disappear with the realization of Oneness, which is in the Atman.

¹ Kumarasambhavam.

² Vairagya Sataka, 15.

³ Katha,2.2.

⁴ Bhagavad Gita, Chap. 18, 37 to 39.

⁵ Isavasyopanisad. 7.

⁶ Br.Up., I,iv,1&2.

⁷ Br. Up. ,II.iv.14.