

SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES AND INNER TRANSFORMATION OF MAN

Swami Paratparananda

Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – April 1965; Vol. 51; page 567

MAN'S EXISTENCE is a fight with nature. Nature tries to limit him, to imprison him in its net. Science in the outer world and religion in the inner fight for freedom from the freaks of nature. Man manifests his vitality when he fights against a morbid set of dogmas or creeds, whether scientific or religious. He expresses intelligence when he puts forth honest doubts against set beliefs. But if he stops with this mere negative approach he misses the very fundamentals of life. He becomes a mere negative man, which is not a healthy sign of a thoughtful mind. Man's mind must have some support, some positive proposition to work upon. Whether in science or religion man takes a proposition that has already preceded him and experiments with it, before discarding it. Whereas this reasonable method is faithfully adhered to in the empirical sciences, it is sadly neglected in the religious field. The reason is, however, obvious. A man of science has to work on things external whereas a man of religion is to work on himself, on his own mind. A man of science need not necessarily be pure in character but for the man of religion nobility and purity of character are the very foundations. Those are his instruments by which he will have to work. He must be above the temptations of the world. It necessarily, therefore, follows that few are really qualified to attain that plane where they could cross the barrier of the mundane to have a peep into the transcendent. But such is man's presumption, that he thinks by mere ratiocination, empirical facts and a few experiments conducted on the body of human beings, as on guinea pigs, he would know the whole of the transcendental Truth. Rather, he believes that religious experiences are no more than some nervous diseases, produced by excessive emotionalism and are of no value at all.

There has been this allegation repeated Almost parrot-like *ad nauseum*, against religion that it 'is the opiate of the people', without even trying to plumb the depths of the religious life. Again, this statement is often supported by Freud's maxim, 'I never doubted that religious phenomena are to be understood only on the model of the neurotic symptoms of the individual'. Not satisfied with the term 'neurotic

symptoms' Freud's present disciples would have it as "psychotic symptoms". It is not known whether they understand that there is something apart from the body. It is doubtful whether they believe in a mind exclusive of the body. If we follow the trend of their arguments it comes to this: where can there be any mind if there is not a body — and a gross body at that? It is a great hurdle, however, for them that they cannot deny the dream experiences, as a result of which they have to concede a sub-conscious state for the mind. Perhaps they ignore the state of deep sleep as worth no notice as nothing phenomenal is experienced in that state.

Some modern psychiatrists have begun to experiment on human beings, to find out the effect of certain drugs, in order to prove their proposition that religious experiences are no more than some chemical changes that take place in the brain, which can be induced by drugs as well. They put forward certain statements and statistics describing the findings of their experiments. They quote from some of the sayings of some aspirants of India as well as of Christianity who seemed to have had spiritual experiences under the effect of hemp, opium, wine and the like. Undoubtedly there is some effect of these on man. He may have some experiences while under their effect but to point them out as the same as religious experience is something absurd. If these statements were from genuine seekers we have to presume that they have been distorted to suit the needs of the interpreters, if not we have to take it that the aspirants themselves were misguided. While no one denies the deadening effect of morphia on the pains of the body for the time being, the return of the pain as soon as the effect of morphia passes away is also an undeniable fact. As the drunkard experiences a certain type of enjoyment forgetting all his sorrows so too an opiate or an addict to such type of drugs may have some experiences, may find some joy. But an opiate is an opiate and to equate those experiences to those of a man of God is to say that the joy that the pig experiences in wallowing in mire is the same as that of the man who is bewitched by the beauty of a panoramic view or enthralled by a fine piece of music. What we imply by this is, that spiritual-like experiences are not the criteria of religion, but spiritual experiences are. The former are spurious, are like soap bubbles without any substance in them, hollow as the experienter himself so far as spirituality is concerned.

It is significant at this stage to note that appearances are often deceptive. Take the crow for example; how it resembles, in its build and features, the sweet song bird cuckoo! But what a difference in the cries of the two birds! The cry of one is harsh and irritating while the sound of the other is sweet and soothing. Similarly the experiences induced by drugs and the like lead man down into the realms of morbidity and later to addiction to the drug itself, which will be very difficult to get over afterwards. Often also it leads to moral turpitude and hence the ruin of the body and mind; while real spiritual experience transforms man. It is

not, however, a physical transformation. To use the language of Sri Ramakrishna, 'he does not grow two horns', but his character gets ennobled.

II

How then to distinguish between the spurious and the genuine, between a charlatan and a saint? As already stated above the real spiritual person develops in character. He sheds all enmity; discards all desires; is content with whatever comes in his way unasked. He does not manifest any pomp or glamour; does not hanker for name and fame. He is always ready to help people in their troubles. He is ever immersed in the thought of the Most High. He loves all and hates none. Even the bite of a deadly snake is a message from the Lord for him. In short he has no unripe ego in him; whatever he does goes to add to the benefit of society, nay for the benefit of mankind as a whole.

It is this unripe ego that divides man from man, society from society and nation from nation. It asserts itself in several ways. Love of power is one of them. Almost everyone wants to rule over somebody. Even in a family, a society, or a nation that is what happens — the tendency to control and to rule. But who does actually rule the hearts - of people? Swami Vivekananda once said it is the child that rules supreme in the home. And is it not a fact? So, unless we be like children, simple and straightforward, pure and unsophisticated it is impossible to gain the hearts of people. And this is possible when man has gone beyond the idea of I and mine, — a condition which is possible only when one has realized the Supreme, realized God.

On the other hand, what do we come across in the history of the nations all over the world — not only in the present times but from the beginning of history? It is strife and stress, war and bloodshed. Strife between sections of society, between the haves and the have-nots; war among nations for supremacy, for possession of land not rightfully belonging to them and the like. That is what earthly power begets --- tyranny. It is the ego — the I and mine, we and ours — that perpetrates these crimes. The ego is present in every human being in one form or other — the ego of possessions, the ego of caste, the ego of heredity, the ego of learning, the ego of race, the ego of beauty of one's person and so on. Now the purpose of religion is to turn this self-centred ego into a God-centred one, turn the unripe ego into the ripe one. That is what religious experience does. Can the experiences induced by drugs do this?

Let those who assert that religious experiences are only some chemical reactions taking place in the brain, which can also be induced by drugs, give us an example of a person who has attained to selflessness, pure and simple, who has gone beyond all desires by these drugs and then put forward his claim. If they say that they have just begun to

experiment and it will take time to develop, to arrive at a perfected man through these means, is it not better to ask them not to confuse the minds of the simple folk by their unfounded arguments in the name of science, till such time that they are in a position to prove it by results? We think it will be good to do so. Also it would be good for mankind not to heed this prattle until such time but to follow the well-founded path, on which myriads of saints and sages have already travelled and who in their turn are there as beacon lights to illumine the way for humanity. Let us remember the proverb, 'Rome was not built in a day'. The Rome of character which forms the very basis of religious life cannot be formed by a few drugs. If it could be, why is there so much tension in the life of the affluent West — we mean here those who entirely depend upon matter and science for their support? Do they like to live under tension? Do they like being neurotics? Why have the tranquillizers failed to effect a lasting cure on the nervously overwrought? Until these questions are satisfactorily solved let us not be carried away by these empirical tests which prove nothing conclusively.

If the experiments are just to decry religious experience, as their purpose seems to be, such people will have to meet the challenge put forward above if they have any claim as scientists. Again there are experiences and experiences. We cannot put them all in one category. Let us remember that this thought of drugs being able to produce peculiar experiences was not unknown in India. Witness for example what Patanjali says in the Yoga Sutras: 'Occult powers are attained by birth, drugs, *mantras*, austerities and *samadhi*.'¹ Perhaps this takes these "psycho-scientists" by surprise: that drugs can induce certain powers also, not to speak of mere vague experiences. The yogis, however, never encouraged running after these occult powers. Rather, they were cited as impediments to one's spiritual progress, as pitfalls to be avoided from one's path.

That experience which steadies man's wisdom, dispels all doubts about the existence of God, breaks all ties that bind man to this world, that alone is genuine religious experience. What is steadiness in wisdom? Sri Krishna describes it at great length in the second chapter of the *Gita*. A few characteristics of such a person can be cited here to illustrate the heights to which a spiritually advanced person rises. Sri Krishna says, 'He who is unperturbed in difficulties, and unattached to happy circumstances, from whom attachment, fear and anger have taken leave is called a man of steady wisdom.'² Probably each one of us might have experienced this type of wisdom for a little time; a time when we did not desire anything, did not feel any attraction for anything, did not fear anything, and felt an all-pervading love towards every being. But the next moment one or all of these emotions may have been set in motion. The *Gita* does not allude here to such passing phases but to a continuity of

¹ Yoga Sutra, 4.1.

² Bhagavad Gita, Ch. II.56.

such a state when once attained. How do we know that it is a continuous state that is referred to? First of all, it is common knowledge that scriptures speak of things that are not discernible by the senses, The scriptures are to expound and explain what is beyond the ken of the ordinary human mind, beyond the experience of the generality of mankind. So it would not be to any one's purpose to repeat a well-known every day experience. Secondly, scriptures direct the way to get rid of misery and attain bliss eternal, for which man, howsoever ignorantly, strives in his own way. Thirdly, in this context Sri Krishna makes this point clear at the end of the discourse. He says: 'Attaining this state of Brahman, O Arjuna, one does not get deluded.'³ Sri Ramakrishna compares such a person to a bee that will not light on anything but a flower; that will not drink anything but honey.

III

The infatuation with which the world is besieged produces misery and it is to get out of this misery that man strives hard by various means. From the efforts of the cave man to that of the civilized person of today with the devices and appliances of science, are all to attenuate misery. Our Indian sages were aware that however much one strives in the outer world one could not reach the stage of satiety by enjoyment. The sense of misery would return redoubled once the enjoyment came to an end. In this way by sledge hammer blows, as it were, the truth, that there is no happiness in the outer world, is brought home repeatedly. 'That where one does not see another, hear another, know another is the Great. And this in which there is seeing another, hearing another and knowing another is little, is insignificant. This Great is immortal, and the little is perishable.'⁴ There is no happiness in this little; the Great alone is bliss. That alone is to be known,'⁵ says the *Chāndogyopanisad*. So, the ancient sages explored the realm of the spirit and were unusually and amply rewarded. They reached a state from whence they could look with an eye of equanimity on pain and pleasure, from where everything on earth and heavens seemed to pulsate with the breath of the One Conscious Principle; nay they saw it as one solid mass of Consciousness, undivided and impenetrable. They saw that they too were not separate from it. They became calm, and fearless, for they perceived not a second thing. It is from a second thing alone that fear creeps into a being,'⁶ explains the Upanisad. That is the transformation that man undergoes. Outwardly he will resemble any ordinary human being. But in him the knowledge of the Supreme will be like a blazing fire.

³ Ibid., II.72.

⁴ Chandogyopanisad, 7.24.1.

⁵ Ibid., 7.23.1.

⁶ Brihadaranyaka Up. 1.4.2.

Let us now conclude with what Sri Ramakrishna, the most modern and most liberal of the Spiritual Doctors, says about religious experiences: "Sivanath once said that one loses one's head' by thinking too much of God. 'What?' said I. 'Can anyone ever become unconscious by thinking of Consciousness? God is of the nature of Eternity, Purity, and Consciousness. Through His Consciousness one becomes conscious of everything; through His Intelligence the whole world appears intelligent.' Shivanath said that some Europeans had gone insane, that they had 'lost their heads' by thinking too much about God. In their case it may be true; for they think of worldly things. There is a line in a song: 'Divine fervour fills my body and robs me of consciousness.' The consciousness referred to here is the consciousness of the outer world." Now, just as you call in a physician for consultation when you are ill and not a carpenter, or a blacksmith, or a renowned dramatist, or a scholar, so too to cure us from the disease of worldliness the advice of the spiritual doctors, i.e. the saints and sages, is alone to be resorted to and not that of any and everyone. The assurance of Sri Ramakrishna, quoted above, should set at rest all doubts as regards the validity and veracity of religious experiences and the immense good that could come out of them.