

# STRENGTH: THE BASIS OF LIFE

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Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – May 1966; Vol. 53; page 3

If we happen to traverse through the pages of history, all the world over, we shall invariably find that prosperity and glory opened up before the strong, and the weak and the cowards went to the wall. Empires have risen with the strength of the particular people and dwindled and died with their weakness. Darwin's theory, 'survival of the fittest' which has been so well proved in the sub-human species illustrates this fact to a large extent. Probably, physical strength alone could not prove even Darwin's theory. Because, if we take into consideration the recent stipulations of science, that there existed in a remote past such gigantic animals like the dinosaur which have become extinct now, we cannot but admit that their very gigantic forms which restricted their movements made them vulnerable to attack and destruction by smaller and more agile beings. So it is not physical strength alone that gains supremacy. Indian history of the past few centuries will show how some small hordes were able to run over the whole land. What was it due to but our own disunity which was the most vulnerable spot that the conqueror chose to exploit!

The current events in the world too show that might still rules though in a different mask. A nation, therefore, has to be strong if it is to remain independent and ward off the grasping hands of the neighbours from its territories. Strength is also a necessity for even the internal development of a nation. The weak may be pitied but the strong alone will be respected. And anything that is received without a requisite repayment in some form or other will bear down heavily on the recipient. It is a debt and an obligation.

This preamble has been to show that what law holds good in the world outside, is applicable to the regions of the mind and soul too, but with the difference that in the latter case one has also to possess moral and spiritual excellences. The Upanisads declare: This Atman cannot be attained by the weak.<sup>1</sup> Strength of the muscles alone will have nothing to do with the inner world, nor intellectual power keep the mind from wandering. It is the life righteously lived, which generates a moral force

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<sup>1</sup> Mundaka Up., III.ii.4.

and which runs as a precursor to the dawn of a higher mode of life — the life of the spirit — that is spoken of in this statement of the Upanisads as strength. In it all these types of strength are included and none is excluded. Physical strength is as important to withstand the strain of spiritual disciplines one has to undergo, as intellectual acumen is incumbent to understand the subtle truths of religion. In secular and political pursuits intellectual power may be put to the meanest possible use, and yet one may succeed in one's endeavour in those fields. But the way of the spirit is quite different. An inch you swerve from the right path and a thousand feet away will you be flung from it — narrow is the way of righteousness, like the sharp edge of a razor, as the Upanisads describe it. Or as Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'Man does not know what it is that causes his downfall'. He then illustrates this by an example: 'Once, while going to the Fort,<sup>2</sup> I could not see at all that I was driving down a sloping road; but when the carriage went inside the Fort I realized how far down I had come'. That is the way one slides from the right path little by little, imperceptibly, unknowingly, so much so that when one comes to know of it, one has travelled a long way down the wrong path. The allurements of the world are many and strong and therefore one has not only to be physically fit, but mentally alert and morally toned up to resist them.

An appreciation of Naciketa by Yama, the king of death, when the former refused to be drawn and entangled by the rewards of the earth and heaven that were offered to him, will bear evidence as to the importance that is laid on the strength of the mind to deny oneself the luxuries, comforts and enjoyments that can be had here or hereafter. Yama is profuse in the praise of Naciketa. Again, and again, amidst his teaching he stops and puts in a word of encomium about Naciketa's self-denial. Here are his words: 'You have discarded, after well discerning, all that was offered to you in the shape of pleasing and pleasurable things. You have not deigned to accept this wealth, which is another name for transmigration, in which the majority of mankind choose to sink.'<sup>3</sup> 'I wish there was some one among us, my disciples, who could be an inquirer like you.'<sup>4</sup> Again, 'I deem that the portals of Liberation are open to Naciketa'.<sup>5</sup> All this points out how lofty is that power and how mighty and covetable is that strength which in the end endows us with a blissful life for ever.

Here the sophisticated may think: 'If it is such a botheration, such a hard task, if it is so impossible a thing to realize an unknown God, why not try to make the world more and more perfect?' Overwhelmed by the magnitude of the task of realization, man seeks perfection in an imperfect world; happiness in a vale of misery. For the world is an existence of

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<sup>2</sup> The reference is to the Fort in Calcutta.

<sup>3</sup> Katha Up., 2.3.

<sup>4</sup> IBID., 2.9.

<sup>5</sup> IBID., 2.16.

contraries. It is an imbalance in the *gunas* (substantive forces), *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, of Prakrti that has caused the projection of the universe. When that balance will be regained there will not be this manifested universe. It will be resolved into its cause, the Prakrti. But still man thinks that he can progressively improve the world phenomena. Swami Vivekananda, speaking of progress remarks, 'To live in the world where it is all good and no evil, is what Sanskrit logicians call a "dream in the air".' Continuing he says, 'Another theory, in modern times, has been presented by many schools, that man's destiny is to go on always improving, always struggling onwards but never reaching the goal.' Commenting on this theory he concludes, 'This statement, though apparently very nice, is also absurd, because there is no such thing as a motion in a straight line. Every motion is in a circle. A straight line infinitely projected must end in a circle. Therefore, this idea that the destiny of man is progressing ever forward and forward and never stopping is absurd'. So to seek perfection in the created world is a wild goose chase. Is then all work to improve the world-condition to be given up? The answer is no; the efforts to help the world in every possible way are to be continued. At the same time it should be remembered that we do not actually help the world but help ourselves to become more liberal in our outlook on life. Again, we cannot cease from work, cannot even live without work. When it is so, is it not better for man to do something good instead of becoming more and more selfish and self-seeking?

## II

Having seen that there is no happiness in the created world, the sages sought it in the Uncreated, by cultivating dispassion towards the things of the creation. 'Having examined the worlds attainable by actions a Brahmana (a man of wisdom) should inculcate dispassion. For the Uncreated cannot be had by sacrifices, by acts,'<sup>6</sup> says the *Mundakopanisad*. Now, as it is a long journey from the created to the Uncreated, the equipment required also should be commensurate with the hazards and situations one may meet on the way. For in the world also we note that the equipment of a mountain expeditioner is not the same as a North Pole explorer nor like that of a space walker. The expedition into the Unknown, has its own peculiar requirements. We have already said that all types of strength were essential for spiritual growth. We can understand what is meant by physical strength and intellectual acumen. But what is moral strength? What is spiritual force?

We need not discuss here the term 'moral' from the point of view of society. For there can be no one standard for all countries and all societies and for all time. We are here concerned with that which leads to

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<sup>6</sup> Mundaka Up., I.ii.12.

a religious life. There are some fundamentals on which even a society is dependent, or to be more explicit, on which its growth, its usefulness to the world as a whole and its glory rest. And these are common to the spiritual life also. For when we say society we are going into an abstract construction, but what is society but a collection of individuals? So, it is the individuals, who constitute society, that are expected to maintain certain norms. And one among these norms is truth. Here again, there may be an endless controversy as how far one should be truthful and so on. Giving a go-by to this controversy we shall pin-point our attention to the necessity of observing truth. Allowing every margin to the prevalence of falsehood, in the life of man, we find that there is an element of truth behind the universe, and it is this truth which upholds it. Sri Sankara in his Brahma Sutra Bhasya aptly observes: 'All transactions in the world are through the combination of *satya* (truth) and *anrta* (untruth)'.<sup>7</sup> Sankara might have stated this truth from a higher plane of consciousness, but even from the lower standpoint it is found to be true.

Swami Vivekananda, speaking about the potency of truth, remarks: 'Truth is like a corrosive substance. It can penetrate everything, soft things quickly and even hard granite rocks slowly but surely. No one can resist it'. We all know that ultimately 'truth alone triumphs and not untruth'.<sup>8</sup> But such is the lure of wealth and the like that though repeatedly reminded of this fact we forget it at the moment. Perhaps the readers will be wondering what connection has this truth to do with our subject matter. However, if we remember that truth forms the moral base on which the structure of society is built it will not be difficult to relate the two. In the religious field too moral goodness must precede the spiritual hankering. Besides, truth is an element of the spiritual life. It makes one courageous, whereas falsehood transforms us into cowards. With truth one can face tribulations bravely and that is what made the martyrs live and die for their cause cheerfully.

The second equipment that is necessary for our journey is dispassion towards the transient things. There should not even be lingering back-glances on what has been once discarded. Nevertheless, it does not mean that the passions leave man immediately he resolves to lead a spiritual life. The meaning is that the passions should not be entertained, even when they arise; courting them would be dangerous.

The third requirement is chastity. There is a beautiful story in the Upanisads to illustrate the value of Brahmacharya as well as the necessity to cultivate other virtues. Once the gods, men and demons, all his progeny, went to Prajāpati and lived with him the life of continence. After their term of *brahmacharya* the gods asked him, 'Tell us how we can

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<sup>7</sup> Adhyasa Bhasya.

<sup>8</sup> Mundaka Up., III.i.6.

conduct ourselves in life'. Prajāpati uttered the letter '*da*' and asked them whether they had understood the meaning of his teaching. They replied that they had, that he meant that they should control themselves. He said, 'Yes, it is so; you have understood well'. The gods are denizens of the heaven and given to great deal of enjoyment. After living the life of *brahmacharya* with the teacher their eyes of knowledge had opened, they had come to know of their own defects and hence had no difficulty in comprehending what Prajāpati expected of them.

Then the men said to him, 'Please instruct us'. To them too he repeated the syllable '*da*' and asked them whether they understood the meaning of what he had said. They said they had understood him; that he meant that they should *give*. 'Yes, it is so; you have understood, said he. Men usually are of the hoarding nature. Man puts by things thinking it is only for a rainy day, but it is not always so. More often than not his avarice makes him self-centred and callous towards others' sufferings. After having lived the life of continence with the Lord of creatures the men came to know wherein was their fault and could understand the cryptic message so easily.

Lastly the demons said 'Please instruct us'. To them he said '*da*', and asked whether they had understood him. They replied, 'We have; you ask us to be compassionate'. 'Yes, so it is; you have understood well', said he. The demons are cruel and always indulging in killing, so to them the message of Prajāpati was to be compassionate towards beings. The Upanisad says that this divine message is even now being transmitted to us by means of the thunder, in its roar '*da*', '*da*', '*da*', 'Control yourselves', 'Give' and 'Have compassion'.<sup>9</sup> In Sanskrit all the three words representing the above three meanings begin with the letter '*da*' viz., *dāmyata*, *datta*, and *dayadhwam* respectively.

What is obviously evident from the story is that *brahmacharya*, a life of continence and restraint, is essential for the religious. Men cannot find out their own drawbacks until they have lived a life of continence. And once they know their defects it is easy for them to get over them when they are commanded to do so by the teacher. The second conclusion is that we have to inculcate all the three virtues mentioned herein in order to be morally uplifted. For it is these virtues that form into a moral force in man — a force that opens further and new vistas of a higher life. What a mere intellectual man, a mere scholar, can comprehend but not experience, that Self-knowledge becomes easily accessible to a man of virtues by a little practice. For morality is the ground of all spiritual evolution. 'He who has not desisted from wicked actions, has not controlled himself, nor has a collected mind, nor whose

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<sup>9</sup> Brihadaranyaka Up. V. ii.

mind is restless can ever attain Brahman by knowledge,'<sup>10</sup> says the *Katha Upanisad*. Sri Ramakrishna as it were echoes these very statements of the Vedas when he says: 'The first sign of knowledge is a peaceful nature and second is the absence of egotism'. About mere scholars, without discrimination and dispassion, he had a very poor opinion. He used to say, 'Kites and vultures soar very high but they keep their gaze fixed on the charnel pit. What I mean is that these pundits — who merely talk words of wisdom and do not live up to them — are attached to the world, to lust and greed. If I hear that pundits are practising discrimination and dispassion, then I fear them. Otherwise I look upon them as mere straw'. Intellectualism and erudition to explain the scriptures without yearning for God does not make for liberation, though they may bring one all the worldly goods, name and fame.

### III

Now, one should not stop with being morally good. It is only a foundation. And a foundation however strong is not able to give us shelter from sun, wind and rain, if there is no superstructure on it, just as a ship though large and built with all modern devices to weather gales and storms cannot be a good means to cross the ocean, if its engines fail or it puts in an harbour which is not its destination. The superstructure is spiritual life and when it is built on a strong moral base there is no danger of its collapse.

A life of devotion to God with firm faith and all the attendant virtues is the life of the spirit for a devotee; to a follower of the *jnana marga* it is to look upon every being as the manifestation of the One Divine Principle, Brahman and the continuous attempt on his part to be in communion with that One. The strength born out of leading such a life is not only beneficial to the person who practises but also to those who come in contact with him as well. Swami Vivekananda, speaking of such a strength, says, 'Strength is the idea which is raising the brute unto man, and man unto God'. In the *Kena Upanisad* is a story introduced to illustrate this fact. Once Brahman obtained victory for the gods over the demons and the former thought that they themselves had won the victory and that it was their own glory. But in order to remove this wrong notion of the *devas*, Brahman appeared before them in the form of a Yaksha, an effulgent being. The *devas*, afraid and at the same time anxious to know who that being was, deputed Agni and Vāyu successively to ascertain about It. In its presence they were struck dumb and when the Yaksha asked who they were and what was their special prowess, Agni said that he could burn whatever there was in the world and Vāyu said that he could blow away everything. The Yaksha placed a straw before them and asked Agni to burn

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<sup>10</sup> Katha Up., 2.24.

it, which with all his might he could not do. He asked Vāyu to blow away the straw but Vāyu could not move it. They returned thus discomfited to the gods and Indra then approached It, but Brahman did not even deign to give an interview to him but vanished from his sight. Indra, however, did not go away from the place but stayed on and meditated as to who that being could be. Finding him eager to know about the Yaksha, the Brahma-Vidyā itself in the form of a beautiful woman appeared there. Indra asked of her who that Yaksha was who had appeared and then vanished. She teaches him that it was Brahman, because of whom they had won the victory and had falsely been elated considering the victory as their own.<sup>11</sup> Thus it is seen that all source of strength is Brahman. Because of His presence in the universe, in all that is living and moving and in all that is immovable also, the world phenomena goes on. He is therefore, the foundation, the basis of life.

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<sup>11</sup> Refer Kenopanishad, III. 1-12 & IV-1.