

THE IDEAL, ITS NECESSITY AND REALIZATION (*)

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Ideal is not illusory

Many are the dreams and imageries of a boyhood. Many are the ambitions and plans of the adolescent youth. But much of these remain unrealized. They remain only as illusive visions. The nightmares of this matter-of-fact world crush out most of these beautiful dreams. But man understands this not. On the other hand in spiritual life when anyone speaks of an ideal, he is immediately put down as an idealist. And this very word brings out a smile on the lips of the so-called realist, puts a jeering laugh into the mouth of a naturalist or materialist. They point him out as a dreamer on a wild goose chase.

But is idealism such an evil? That is the question. As we see, in daily life, most people set out ambitions for themselves; they may not call it an ideal; but that matters little. What goads such people to work, sometimes to the very verge of death, many times to death itself? Ambition to reach the ideal state, in which they think they will have peace of mind and unbounded pleasure. So pleasure is their ideal. But can man have unalloyed pleasure? All agree on this point, that it is not possible. Even the seeker after pleasure knows it, but he thinks that he is going to make the best of a bad bargain. This is only a face saving device; it is like having been stuck up in the quagmire pretending to be at prayer. The pretender does not know that the quagmire may soon act like quicksand and swallow him up. So, it is actually the materialist, who puts his faith in pragmatic values, that is after the will-o-the-wisp and not the spiritual idealist. It is again the so-called realist who is out to be disillusioned when he realizes what he considered real was after all only like water in the mirage, a semblance, a ghost, a shadow and not the real.

What is idealism

Idealism has been variously interpreted and defined. We shall not go into all the details here, but try to know what the Hindu philosophers point out as idealism. The term 'idea' plays a very prominent part in Hindu philosophy and to some extent we can say in other religions too. There is the Upanisadic statement: 'In the beginning this was only Sat (Existence), one without a second. . . . It thought, let Me be many.'¹ Here

it is stated that the creation came into being because of the idea in the Reality to manifest Itself. This is so in every sphere of activity in life. Without the idea, the thought, nothing creative is possible. In other words the ideal is the motive force, the dynamic power behind the working of this universe. To know the nature of this ultimate reality in the above sense is Idealism. This again is too abstract an 'idea' to be grasped by ordinary individuals, and still less practicable in their case. Yet it will not do to neglect the need of the common man. At least our Sastras did not maintain that 'highbrowed' attitude. They are solicitous like the mother for the welfare of humanity. So the Srutis prescribed various types of disciplines and graded them to suit the temperament and evolvment of the individual. Yet all of these are only ideas. These ideas can be understood only when they materialize into the concrete.

Ideal in the concrete

It seems paradoxical to say that the ideal can manifest in the concrete. But if it were not to manifest, the ideal would have remained only an idea, a poetical concept, and there would have been no motive force to move man on his onward march to know the Ultimate Reality.

Let us now try to understand what we mean by 'the ideal' here. One meaning of the word ideal, that the dictionaries also give, is the 'perfect type'. Here there is no visionary conception. We set before us a concrete example of the standard which we want to attain: perfect men, or God-men, like Krishna, Buddha, Christ or Ramakrishna are the examples. So it is not an airy something which man wants to attain, but perfection as exemplified in these persons. Perfection not after death, in some other world, but here and now. Here again the spiritual man is more definite. He does not want any uncertain external material aid. For, whatever is gained by material help cannot be eternal, because it is a thing that is caused, a degradation, a degeneration and is certain to deteriorate, to decay and to be destroyed. It is the law of nature that a compound is unstable, its tendency is to go back to its elements. That is also what the Upanishads say.²

What is meant by perfection in this context? Only one thing can be perfect and that is the Atman, Brahman or God, which is said to be of the nature of eternal purity, eternal consciousness, and eternal freedom. It is the manifesting of this perfection that is in man, that is called religion says Swami Vivekananda. For, we cannot manifest what is not already in us. Christ also says, 'The Kingdom of heaven is within you.' What is it then that covers our nature? Our desires, our being extrovert, our running after things that are unreal. But it is also certain that this nature of ours cannot be annihilated. Even in the material world we experience this. For example, the nature of fire is to burn, we have not found at any time fire losing its power to burn and still being called as fire. We cannot say, therefore, you can come across cold fire. But it is possible that the fire

may be covered with ashes, and may not be perceivable for the time being. Likewise the Atman may be covered by ignorance but its nature cannot be destroyed. So all our efforts are to uncover this Self, this Atman, to know our true being.

Now to manifest the divine we have to get rid of the veils; veils of body, senses and mind. Are we then to court death? Not at all. For there is no certainty that the soul thus forcibly relieved from one cage will not enter into another. On the contrary our Sastras say it does take up more and more bodies, according to the desires most prominent at the moment of its release. 'I shall tell you now the eternal secret as to what happens to the Atman after it leaves the body. For the sake of embodiment it enters other wombs according to its actions in this world, and according to its knowledge, sometimes it takes the form even as immovable things like trees and plants,'³ says Yama in the *Kathopanishad*.

Practice & Renunciation

But there are other ways of overcoming this transmigration. What are they? We have here to recall that all paths, which speak of realization of Brahman, emphasize on tranquillization of the mind, on equanimity. This is the prime and foremost condition for the reflection of the Infinite in the mind. For, as when the surface of a lake is disturbed the reflection of even the most proximate object is hazy or unperceivable, so also the mind lake when in a wave form cannot catch the reflection of the Atman, which is next to it.

This serenity of the mind is what is called yoga, says Patanjali. It is to be acquired by renunciation, and practice,⁴ which are, as it were, the systole and diastole of the heart, or the hub and spokes of the wheel of spiritual life. One without the other cannot be thought of. And to posit one without the other is to make a parody of religion. Sri Krishna too says in the Gita, 'O son of Kunti! This (mind) can be controlled by practice and dispassion.'⁵ Every religious leader says that, and acts up to it.

Swami Vivekananda relates a story from the Æsop's Fables to show why perseverance is necessary: 'A fine looking stag is looking at his young one, "How powerful I am, look at my splendid head, look at my limbs, how strong and muscular they are; and how swiftly I can run." In the meantime he hears the barking of dogs in the distance, and immediately takes to his heels, and after he has run several miles, he comes back panting. The young one says, "You just told me how strong you are, how was it that when the dogs barked, you ran away?" "Yes, my son; but when the dogs bark all my confidence vanishes." Such is the case with us. We think highly of humanity, we feel ourselves strong and valiant, we make grand resolves; but when the "dogs" of trial and temptation bark, we are like the stag in the fable. Then, if such is the case what is the use of teaching all these things? There is the greatest use. The use is this, that perseverance will finally conquer. Nothing can be done in a day.'

Necessity of an ideal

This practice becomes easy when we take hold of some ideal, have before us the example of some great personality who has attained perfection. And this is one of the methods which Patanjali asks us to adopt as an assistance to our concentration: 'Meditation on the heart that has given up all attachment to sense objects.'⁶

What a torment is this life! to be dragged by two forces set diametrically opposite, we mean the temptations that come in the form of sense pleasures and the desire to be free, free of all shackles! Confronted with such a situation, the life of those who are free of all attachment to the sense-pleasures, puts some hope into our hearts. They light our paths and lighten our burden. They are as it were, ever ready to take our burden. Sri Krishna exhorts in the Gita, 'Giving up all duties, take shelter in Me alone. I shall free you from all sins, do not grieve.'⁷ Christ says, 'Come unto me all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.'⁸ Sri Ramakrishna too said, to some of his disciples specially those who were hard pressed for time, 'Visit here (meaning himself) now and then and you will achieve everything.' That kind of assurance the God-men alone can give. Even the remembrance of those personalities washes off all dross, drives away all vulgar ideas from our minds. Sri Ramakrishna relates a story to illustrate this: 'Some friends said to Ravana: "You have been assuming different forms for Sita. Why don't you go to her in the form of Rama?" Ravana replied, "When I contemplate Rama, even the position of Brahma appears insignificant to me, not to speak of the company of another man's wife! How could I take the form of Rama for such a purpose?' Such is the sanctifying power of these God-men. Such are to be our ideals.

Swami Vivekananda remarks; 'The ideal is far away, no doubt, but at the same time, we know that we must have it. We must have even the highest ideal. Unfortunately in this life, the vast majority of persons are groping through this dark life without any ideal at all. If a man with an ideal makes a thousand mistakes, I am sure that the man without an ideal makes fifty thousand. Therefore, it is better to have an ideal. And this ideal we must hear about as much as we can, till it enters into our hearts, into our brains, into our veins, until it tingles in every drop of our blood, and permeates in our body. We must meditate upon it.'

Again he observes, 'It is a great thing to take up a grand ideal in life and then give up one's whole life to it. For what otherwise is the value of life, this vegetating, little, low, life of man? Subordinating it to one high ideal is the only value that life has. Live for an ideal, and that one ideal alone. Let it be so great, so strong, that there may be nothing else left in the mind; no place for anything else, no time for anything else.' And when that ideal is the Highest, it revolutionizes, transmutes man's life, ennobles him. He becomes a force unto himself, not for self-seeking but for the

welfare of the world.

Different ideals

The very fact that there are so many religions, so many sects and creeds, and that they still thrive in spite of all efforts to the contrary, shows that there is a need for this variety in the creation. These sects and creeds serve the inner cravings of certain particular temperaments and are very necessary for their growth. Just as you cannot make the water animals to live on land, nor can force the land animals to live in water, so it is no use prescribing one method, one path and one ideal for all. The ideals are for the progress of man in his spiritual life, not for his regression.

Now, growth is possible when there is freedom of thought and action. Observe a plant that is growing in the lap of nature and put one in a room shaded from sun and protected from wind, the former grows healthy and strong and yields plenty, whereas the latter grows weak and lank, and yields nothing.

The different types of vegetation we see from the Equator to the Poles is another illustration of this variety in creation. Similarly even in this age when distance is no distance, owing to the speedy communication and fast travelling, a cross section of the world's population will reveal a wonderful, divergent and colourful pageant of life, customs, and manners. As in external life, so in internal life too man varies in development and aptitudes. So the variety is inevitable.

Swami Vivekananda remarks: 'Every man should take up his own ideal and endeavour to accomplish it. That is a surer way of progress than taking up other men's ideals, which he can never hope to accomplish. For instance, we take a child and at once give him the task of walking twenty miles. Either the little one dies, or one in a thousand crawls the twenty miles, to reach the end exhausted and half-dead. That is like what we generally try to do with the world. All the men and women, in any society, are not of the same mind, capacity, or of the same power to do things; they must have different ideals, and we have no right to sneer at any ideal. Let every one do the best he can for realizing his own ideal.'

Unity in variety

However, we must understand that these are only the outer embellishments and they will naturally be varied, but there is a unity in the background, just as vegetation, however varied, has the earth's soil as its ground. Sri Krishna says, 'In Me all this is woven like the pearls on a string.'⁹ Swami Vivekananda observes regarding the different ideals of the past: 'It is the duty of Vedanta to establish this connecting thread, however incongruous or disgusting may seem these ideas when judged according to the conceptions of to-day. These ideas, in the setting of past

times, were harmonious, and not more hideous than our present ideas. It is only when we try to take them out of their settings and apply to our own present circumstances that the hideousness becomes obvious.'

Devotion to the ideal

It is only when we love the ideal that we make real progress in life. It is only then that a tremendous power is generated in us. It is only then that even extreme sacrifice is possible without a wrench of pain at the heart, nay the pain itself turns to bliss. 'Devotion to one ideal is the only method for the beginner, but with devotion and sincerity it will lead to all. Nistha (devotion to one ideal) is, in a manner, placing the plant in the tub, shielding the struggling soul in its path,' observes Swamiji. He reiterates, 'You must have a great devotion to your ideal, devotion not of the moment, but calm, persevering and steady devotion, like that of a Chataka (a kind of bird) which looks into the sky in the midst of thunder and lightning and would drink no water but from the clouds. Perish in the struggle to be holy; a thousand times welcome death.'

There is always the error committed by man, the error of misconstruction, the error of judgement. He is apt to jump to conclusions, not warranted by statements or situation. We have to guard against committing this folly. So when our teachers say that we should be devoted to our ideal we should not misconstrue that they want us to hate other ideals or be intolerant of them. 'But I say unto you which hear, love your enemies, do good to them which hate you, bless them that curse you, and pray for them which despitefully use you,'¹⁰ said Christ. Why? because he knew no waters of love can flow in the terrible desert of hatred; they would dry up in no time. But to root out hatred is a herculean task, no doubt, but there is no other way to perfection. Swami Vivekananda says, 'Charity never faileth; devotion to an ideal never fails in sympathy, never becomes weary of sympathizing with others. Love to enemies is not possible for ordinary men; they drive out others in order to live themselves. Only a very few men lived in the world who practised it.'

Should not lower the ideal

Another risk we run here is of lowering the ideal, seeing that its empyrean heights are not easily accessible. But with that degradation sets in. With that we begin to tread the downward slippery path and once we slip there is no knowing where we will be. That is why Swamiji warns us, 'There are two tendencies in human nature, one to harmonize the ideal with the life, and the other to elevate the life to the ideal. It is a great thing to understand this, for the former tendency is the temptation of our lives. I think that I can only do a certain class of work. Most of it, perhaps, is bad; most of it, perhaps, has a motive power of passion behind it, anger or greed or selfishness. When a man brings an ideal

which can be reconciled with my selfishness, I am glad at once, and jump at it.' We must be alert and avoid creating such a situation. In another context Swamiji exhorts, 'Let a few stand out and live for God alone and save religion for the world. Do not pretend to be like Janaka when you are only the "progenitor" of delusions. Be honest and say, "I see the ideal but I cannot yet approach it"; but do not pretend to give up when you do not. If you give up stand fast. You must struggle towards the ideal, and if a man comes who wants to bring that ideal down to your level, and teach a religion that does not carry that highest ideal, do not listen to him. Beware when anyone is trying to apologise for sense vanities and sense weaknesses. If anyone wants to preach that way to us, poor, sense-bound clods of earth as we have made ourselves, by following that teaching we shall never progress. . . . Take care that you do not swerve an inch from the ideal. . . . The ideal should never be lowered.' We need not dilate on this point for the teaching is clear.

Realization of the ideal

The ideal is to be realized and not merely thought of, or intellectually grasped. The Upanisad says, 'Atman is to be seen; to be heard, to be pondered over and meditated upon.'¹¹ The first injunction is the goal, the rest is the process to reach it. There is no hesitation here. Srutis do not mince matters. They definitely say it is to be seen. They do not encourage indolence or idleness. That is suicidal to the spiritual life of the aspirant.

We have all heard of the four paths that lead to God. Till now one or the other of these were exclusively practised, but Sri Ramakrishna has proved that they need not necessarily be exclusive. He showed that they can be practised in combination too. Man is endowed with the faculties of feeling, thinking and willing. And we can add to these his capacity for action. Sri Ramakrishna's plan of action did not exclude any one of these traits of man. He desired man to grow into a harmonious whole and not one-sided. He is the example of his own precept. He attained the dizzy heights of the philosophic speculation, viz., the Nirvikalpa Samadhi, yet he retained the attitude of a devotee. He was a past master in Yoga and rendered service to humanity which it can never forget.

Even in the process of development he wanted us to utilize our faculties and this he illustrated by the example of the goldsmith at his work: of melting gold in the crucible. The goldsmith uses the blowpipe with his mouth, the bellows with his hand to kindle the fire, to produce the intense heat and stops not till the gold is melted and put into the cast. Sri Ramakrishna's advice to his devotees was to be up and doing, to use one or all methods and realize the ideal, God. And realization of the ideal depends mostly on one's own efforts. Patanjali says, 'The success of Yogis differs according as the means they adopt are mild, medium or intense.'¹²

In this age the ideal path to God-realization would be as laid down

by Sri Ramakrishna; for as he himself has said, it is not possible to get rid of the body idea, by denying the needs of the body, as is required of a jnani; at the same time, mere stress on bhakti may lead to sentimentalism. So he said keep the knowledge of Vedanta in your pocket and work; at another time he advised us to follow the path of bhakti tempered with jnana. Let us, therefore, not forget that the ideal of life is God, and to realize Him is the highest end.

¹ Chandogya Up., VI. Ii. 1 &3.

² Katha Up., 2.10.

³ Kathopanishad, V, 6.7.

⁴ Yoga Sutra, 1.12.

⁵ Gita, VI.35.

⁶ Yoga Sutra, 1.37.

⁷ Gita, 18.66.

⁸ Gospel of St. Mathew, 11.28.

⁹ Gita, 7.7.

¹⁰ St. Luke, 6.27&28.

¹¹ Br.Up., 2.4.5.

¹² Yoga Sutras of patanjali, 1-22.