

## TRUTH - THE PATH AND THE GOAL (\*)

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Nothing is so much sought after in this world and at the same time nothing is so eluding man's grasp as peace. Hundreds of conferences have been held for its accomplishment on a permanent basis since the last war. Every country that possesses nuclear weapons professes that the tests it conducts, the stocks it piles up and the increasing lethality of the weapons it produces are all for securing peace. But peace seems to be far far away. This is the world situation today.

In individual life too man amasses wealth, works incessantly and has progeny all with the fond hope that he may rest and enjoy peace in the evening of his life. But rarely is man successful. Maybe the man loses the power of his limbs or his sons turn ungrateful and prodigal or some such denouement overtakes him, and like the *ignis fatuus* peace recedes for ever from his grasp.

Naciketa in the Kathopanishad says to Yama: 'Man can never be satisfied by wealth. By seeing you we will have it in plenty. We shall live as long as you so command, but for me the boon I desire is that alone (the knowledge of the Self). For what fool is there who coming in contact with persons like you who are immune to old age and death will still ruminate on the short-lived colourful panorama and desire to live a life of sensual enjoyments for a long time.'<sup>1</sup>

In the life of the staunchest hedonist and excitement-mad person too a time comes when his nerves refuse to respond to the titillations offered. Depression then mocks him in the face. The day to day experience of a common man points out to us the insufficiency and incompetency of the body to enjoy and to cope with the increasing number of allurements the world holds out, without peril to body itself. King Bhartrihari in a pathetic strain cries out 'we did not enjoy the pleasures but were consumed ourselves by the desires.'<sup>2</sup>

After a hard day's labour when the time of rest draws nigh then the eye-lids care not our injunctions; the most beloved at that time appears as a shadow or is no more than a dream. Willy-nilly we slip into the arms of sleep, that panacea for all worries, but in the eyes of the matter-bound the impediment of all joys. Unfortunately the peace that man enjoys in sleep is short-lived. Either dreams encroach into its realm or the sordid reality of the work-a-day world perforce drags him back to wakefulness where all the horrible situations and painful remembrances which haunted him before await and welcome him with their hideous faces. What a piteous predicament?

Placed in such a situation is it too much to expect man pining for peace? What can bestow peace? Our scriptures declare that a pure life

and a perfect character alone can guarantee peace. How to acquire such a character? Character is not formed in a day. It is a life-long process. It is the sum total of the impressions of our actions done in the past or present lives. A pure life therefore depends on certain fundamental principles of which truth is one.

Truth plays a significant role in the formation of an individual's character and consequently the culture and advancement of society. For society is but an aggregate of individuals. The value of truth cannot be over-emphasized whether it be in the family life, or in social contacts; in national organization or in international communications. Its potentialities are immense. Like the mythical nectar it has the power to rejuvenate a worn down organism. It tears down all cowardliness and infuses great strength. It is the source of tremendous power, being the axis round which all virtues revolve and being the backbone of pure character.

What then is this truth that has so vast a hold, that has so complete a grip — to the point of obsession — on man? The common man's idea of truth is the verbal expression of an incident as it occurred or of a fact as it exists. There is another sense in which this word truth is used: that of adhering to the given word; to act as we say and to think as we speak. Everyone understands this. But how difficult do we not find to keep to truth? Suppose a man commits an offence, be it ever so trivial, his first reaction is to hide the offence, or to run away from the punishment and in case he is unable to do both, to shift the blame on to someone else. Naively does he think that a falsehood uttered to save himself from an embarrassing situation, innocuous to others -is harmless to himself. But there he commits the greatest error. In this way he beguiles himself. How is the man sure that he will be able to hold fast to truth when a greater calamity confronts him, even when he is not able to face a small embarrassing situation?

Falsehood is like the forbidden fruit. Once tasted it makes a slave of man by creating a longing to have recourse to it more and more. For does it not provide opportunities to live an easy and comfortable life without much exertion? Man, therefore, stoops not to conquer but to be vanquished. He bows not in humility, but in cupidity, and bends not in age but under the weighty burden of falsehood. There is an adage in the Indian languages: 'a man of deceit dies many a death before he takes his final leave of this world.'

How innocently do we not mix untruth freely in our speech, colour reports just to make them attractive. No doubt no mischief is contemplated in the beginning but what happens is that the habit persists and probably another time when it really injures another we cannot control ourselves from weaving webs of untruth into our narratives. That is the bane of walking into the trap of falsehood. Oftentimes we find that we have to spin yards of lies in order to support the original one. Further when man consistently lies his con-science becomes blunted. He no more feels for another; woe to the man who crosses his path or intercepts his

interests. In his material pursuits he sinks lower and lower into the mire of hatred, for it requires tremendous moral courage to be magnanimous enough to own one's fault and accept the consequences with composure, whereas the other way seems so wide and strewn with flowers and bouquets.

We have in our Hindu literature two of the brightest examples of steadiness and steadfastness in truth: Sri Ramachandra and Harishchandra. Both were kings of great integrity. They never went back on their word even if it meant the greatest sacrifice. No price was too heavy for them when it concerned truth. Rama gave up his title to the throne on the day of his installation as heir to the kingdom and trod the forest path bereft of all retinue and stripped of all royal grandeur just to honour the promise extorted from his father by his step-mother. This was not all, true to the spirit of the promise, he never entered the gates of a town or enjoyed the comforts of a royal guest for the fourteen years he was under exile even when they were repeatedly and honourably offered to him.

Harishchandra gave up his kingdom to the sage, Viswamitra, as a gift and when he found that he had no money, — the royal treasury having already devolved to the sage under the gift — to pay as fees for the conveyance of the gift, he sold his wife and himself too to raise the requisite wealth. It is a tale full of pathos. A king turned overnight a beggar, a slave, with no right even on his own body. His son dies and the wife brings the body to the cremation ground. But as the guard of the ground, Harishchandra, demands the death duties before cremation. The poor mother wails in distress, for where could she procure money slave as she was? He recognises her but does not relent. Would he be untruthful to his master? Never. It is a melodrama. The emotions raised draw even from the hardest heart sighs of compassion and tears of sympathy from the driest orbs. The sage at that instant appears, restores to the king his kingdom and all. He is pleased to find the tenacity and persistence of the king to bear all catastrophies without a regret or murmur in the cause of truth. That is the ideal set before us even in the so-called secular life.

What then is the place of truth in religious life? In the real sense of the terms the life of a Hindu is not segmented as secular and religious. It is a one great offering to the Most High. The so-called secular is also lived in pursuance of the Ideal. Starting from his tutelage as a boy under the parents and later under his preceptor to the day he renounces the world the Hindu's life is a preparation, an equipping for the higher life, for dedication to God. Truth enjoys a paramount position throughout this preparatory stage. A boy of eight enters the teacher's abode. He is first taught to be steadfast in truth. His morning begins with incantations to Truth. He, with his teacher believes that truth alone protects them. Whatever value the sceptic moderns may assign to such repetitions and chantings, they had no doubt a salubrious effect on the boys of those days. For those were the days when education was imparted not for the

sake of wealth, nor name, nor fame, nor even at the command of the sceptre nor in fear of the sword of haughty kings but with the sole object of benefiting society, through worthy students. No consideration other than the genuineness of the taught, and their worthiness to receive weighed with the teachers. The bond between them was that of mutual trust and love. The law that governed their relations was that of truth.

There is a striking instance of such a teacher, who humbled the pride of the mighty conqueror Alexander. Drawn to a scanty clad but serene looking man on the banks of a river, Alexander accosts him and pleads with him to accompany him to his land, definitely with the idea of learning the Wisdom of the East. The sage content with himself refuses all the great and grand things that Alexander offers. Annoyed and angered the conqueror threatens the sage with death. The sage smiles, but the words he spoke spat fire. 'You never uttered a more foolish thing' said he 'you may tear this frame but Me your sword cannot pierce. Me the fire cannot burn nor wind dry, for I am the Eternal Spirit.' The touch of Truth, of Reality, had transmuted the man from the idea that he is a mere cage of bones and flesh to the realization that he is the immutable Spirit.

In religious vocabulary, therefore, truth gets an added meaning. It means the final Reality, Ultimate Existence, the Absolute Truth. The Upanishads describe this indescribable thus: 'Brahman is Truth, Knowledge and Infinity'<sup>3</sup>. That is the only Reality, by whichever name it may be called, others are only appearances.

The Upanishads declare that as the clay alone is the true substance of the different types of vessels and things prepared out of it, so also this Reality is alone the true entity of this world. If we know the Reality we know all. Again they say its secret name is '*satyasya satyam*, Truth of truth' i.e. if we take these worldly things as true it is because that Reality which is true is behind them. 'The vital force is truth, and It is the truth of that,' says the *Brhadaranyaka Upanishad*. Further they impress upon us the eternality of this Truth compared to the relative world by their statement '*Nityo-nityanam*, The Eternal of the eternal' or as some interpreters like to put it as 'the Eternal of the evanescent'.

From the all-illuminating Supreme, by His resolve, the right and the true were generated.<sup>4</sup> Because of Truth the wind blows. Because of Truth the sun shines in the firmament. Truth is the foundation of speech. Everything rests in Truth,<sup>5</sup> says the Upanishad.

Truth seems to be the first casualty in this so-called age of culture. But even those engaged in worldly activities such as office work or business should hold to truth, says Sri Ramakrishna repeatedly. One should not swerve from truth.<sup>6</sup> 'A person of truthfulness alone succeeds and not a man of falsehood, this is the common experience in the world but even the path of the devas widens before truth.'<sup>7</sup> The meaning is that even those that are desirous of going to heaven must adhere to truth. Now about the final liberation, realization of the Ultimate Reality, the *Mundakopanishad* says: 'This Atman is to be reached by truth, austerity,

true knowledge and continuous practice of chastity.’<sup>8</sup> As in the outer life so too in the inner life, the life of the soul, truth plays a vital role.

On one occasion recounting his experiences Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘After my vision of the Divine Mother I prayed to her, taking a flower in my hands: “Mother here is Thy knowledge and here is Thy ignorance. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy holiness and here is Thy unholiness. Take them both, and give me only pure love. Here is Thy good and here is Thy evil. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love. Here is Thy righteousness and here is Thy unrighteousness. Take them both, Mother, and give me pure love.” I mentioned all these, but I could not say: “Mother, here is Thy Truth and here is Thy falsehood. Take them both.” I gave up everything at her feet but could not bring myself to give up truth.’ If this is the state of a God-man how much more should not the aspirant who is still to go a long way be guarded against untruth? Again Sri Ramakrishna said: ‘It is said that truthfulness alone constitutes the spiritual discipline of the Kali Yuga. If a man clings tenaciously to truth he ultimately realizes God. Without this regard for truth, one gradually loses everything.’ That is the invulnerable position truth occupies in life.

This Reality, this Truth, God, is to be realized. First we must have the intellectual conviction that all these things that we perceive, being evanescent, are of little value. They are appearances projected on the Reality by our own ignorance. What is this ignorance? Ignorance is identifying ourselves with everything that is not our true Self, such as the body, senses and mind. In simple language, this I and mine is at the root of all ignorance. The ego stands as a barrier to knowing our true self. The two methods of doing away with this ignorance is either to expand the ego to be all-inclusive, all-pervasive or to annihilate it altogether. Considering every creature that lives and moves as one’s own and extending sympathy to them all without distinction whatsoever, with the attitude that everyone is mine since they are my Lord’s creatures is the first method.

The other method is: all this is material, had a beginning and has an end but the Reality that I am, is immutable, indestructible so I shall place no value on these. Even the body is a limitation so I must transcend the body.

One is the path of bhakti, the other of knowledge, the position of each of the paths is quite tenable and equally helpful, for both are founded on truth. As long as we have the consciousness that we are the body we cannot deny the world. If we hold one as true, the truth of the other also must be conceded. So instead of confining ourselves to our little bodies, to our small circle of relations and to our limited possessions if we widen out our horizon and embrace all the world in our arms of love we reach the same goal as one who denies the world attains. This is the easier path. We have not to tear ourselves forcibly from anything. We have only to sublimate our love. Give our love to God and love every

creature in and through God.

Others take the Ultimate Reality and deny everything else. They say this world is a mere superimposition like a serpent superimposed on a piece of rope. The rope alone is real and not the snake but due to darkness we are perceiving it as snake. In our everyday experience too we often mistake one thing for another. The Sankhyas posit the reasons for this thus: 'Non-perception may be due to the extreme distance, immediate proximity, injury to the organs, unsteadiness of the mind, subtlety, obstruction, suppression and blending with what is similar'<sup>9</sup>. What is said here in the case of non-perception holds good in respect of mis-conception also: A bird flying at a distance is not visible. The collyrium on the eye-lids is not perceptible. A blind man cannot see. A wavering mind cannot grasp things properly. An obstruction like a wall intercepts our vision. We cannot distinguish one particular bean among a heap of beans. Likewise in our perceptions we mistake one object for another or do not see them at all.

One day when Sri Ramakrishna was speaking with the devotees he alluded to the topic of God's nearness and said though God is very near to us, we cannot see him because of the veiling power of Maya. And to illustrate what he said, he suddenly held up a piece of cloth between himself and the audience. 'You cannot see me now though I am so near. So maya too covers God.' On another occasion he gave the instance of a tank covered with scum. Let us quote his own words: 'Once, when I was explaining God's actions to some-one, God suddenly showed me the lake at Kamarpukur. I saw a man removing the green scum and drinking the water. The water was clear as crystal. God revealed to me that Satchidananda is covered by the scum of maya. He who puts the green scum aside can drink the water.' So though Reality is nearest to us we do not perceive it because of the many veils with which we cover it, the veils of relations, name, form and the like. And to it we also add the veil of untruth and make vision of God an impossibility. Our endeavour, therefore, should be to cut through these veils by the sword of truth. To give up what is unreal and hold fast to the real.

In conclusion: we have seen how truth plays a great part not only in the exclusively spiritual life but also in the worldly activities. It is both the path and the Goal. The highest goal of mankind. This Ultimate Reality being the highest truth the sooner we comprehend it the better can we account for our life here and in the lives to come.

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<sup>1</sup> Katha Up. 1.1.27-28.

<sup>2</sup> Vairagyasatakam, 7.

<sup>3</sup> Taitti. Up. 2-1-1.

<sup>4</sup> Mahanaraya.Up. 1-63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. 79-2.

<sup>6</sup> Taitt.Up. 1-11-1.

<sup>7</sup> Mund. Up. 1-1-6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 3-1-5.

<sup>9</sup> Sankhya Karika 7.