

VALUE OF PRACTICE IN RELIGION

Swami Paratparananda

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There was a time, and that not very distant, when religion was considered by some as the opium of the infirm, and the invalids. But that age has passed or is passing away. The materialistic science, which impinged this thought on the world, failed to propound an alternative principle which could give man eternal solace. It had to eat the humble pie and refrain from blowing its trumpets of triumph, when all it could offer in exchange came in the form of competition, strife and destruction. The two world wars have shown this and the Damocles' sword of the third war has frightened the supporters of materialism into silence. Besides, a greater awakening to the truths of Vedanta — which took up the challenge of science to religion boldly and proved that the content of true religion was sound and that it alone could lend support to life — has badly shaken the theories of scientists that they could do away with religion as of no import. The advent of the twin personalities, Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda, on to the stage of the world, and their illuminating lives have rejuvenated the faith of the doubters and imparted *sraddhā* even into the faithless. For they based their arguments not on words but on deeds. There was ocular evidence of spiritual vigour and attainments in their case and an earnest seeker who went to them obtained something tangible, something solid, in the form of spirituality. There was little speculation in their teaching. It was all here and now. Everything was definite about God, without being dogmatic. This can be, without any hesitation, said to be the turning point in the history of the world, though it may still take time before it is acknowledged or fully realized. But acknowledged or not, there is clearly written in bold letters, as it were, that the scientific methods of Vedanta had completely upset the apple-cart of the material scientists.

How was Vedanta able to do it? In India, by religion was meant something which was practical. It was not an aid to either politics or social developments nor a curio meant for decoration, as it happens to be in some other parts of the world. In India religion was for its own sake, therefore the ancients were bent upon making it most practicable, livable. There is not a principle in Vedanta which could not be put into practice. Vedanta is not only a speculation but also a practice and a realization. It is not from the erudition in the presentation of the philosophy that the eminence of a person is judged, but how far he had been able to put that philosophy into practice. Sri Ramakrishna's words in this regard are final

and bring out the importance practice bears to our soul's well-being. He says: 'I consider a pundit (scholar) without any asset of *sādhana* (practice) to his credit as mere straw. Such pundits are like vultures that soar high in the sky when all the while their eyes are fixed on the charnel pit below.' How true it is! Unless one practises spiritual disciplines the longing for the things of the world do not abate in the least. It is being proved everyday by science that one has to go beyond the gravitational pull before one can manoeuvre freely, with safety, in space. So too, unless the pull, the drag of the world is nullified it is impossible to rise beyond the worldly attractions. What an amount of power they put in the rocket that fires a ship into space! Once in there, however, the occupant is safe and can at will come down. That is exactly what the science of religion professes to teach: To rise beyond the gravitation of the worldly desires. But the power is to be built by oneself. No one can do it by proxy, though everyone would have liked to benefit if such were the case.

Practice: The Sign of Earnestness

There is a sequence of events, rather a succession of actions that settle, that signify whether a man is earnest about religion or not. He may profess vehemently but unless he practises spiritual disciplines, in India at least, he is not believed to be of any consequence as a religious person. Neither can he hoodwink people for all time, though some may be duped for sometime. Like the counterfeit coin he gets caught when observed at close quarters. So practice is a necessary limb of religion. Take even the ordinary arts like music or painting: What pains does not one take to play on a single musical instrument, be though it may, even to a moderate success; what labour does not one put in to culture one's voice in singing or to become even a third rate painter? How many years does one not spend in these pursuits! Does one consider it a waste? There is an earnestness in such people, so no effort seems too much for them. Why then should not religion which reveals the inner beauty of the soul not attract as much attention; make us as much earnest? Swamiji picturesquely brings this out: 'What an amount of attention does business require, and what a rigorous taskmaster it is! Even if the father, the mother, the wife or the child dies, business cannot stop! Even if the heart is breaking we still have to go to our place of business, when every hour of work is a pang. That is business, and we think it is just, that it is right.' Have we at least this much of application to religion? Swamiji says, 'This science calls for more application than any business can ever require.' Unless earnestness gets hold of you, you will not practise. And earnestness comes when religion is sought for its own sake, and not as a means to something else.

The purport of religion is one thing, and one thing alone, that is realization of God, liberation from this round of births and deaths, 'being and becoming' as Swami Vivekananda aptly describes it. And every true

religion emphasizes this. Christ said, 'If thou wilt be perfect, go and sell that thou hast, and give to the poor, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven: and come and follow me.'¹ He did not stop with that. He continued: 'It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God.'² The Upanisads say, 'Not by action, nor by progeny or wealth but by renunciation alone immortality was reached by some.'³ 'Establish your mind in Me alone and in Me alone merge your intellect. And then, after the fall of the body, you will, without doubt, live in Me alone,'⁴ says Sri Krishna in the Bhagavad Gitā. Thus every prophet has vouched to the fact that religion means practice of renunciation and culture of other good virtues. And practice alone testifies to earnestness. Wheresoever there is non-compliance of this fundamental principle there can be no true religion, however much it may be lauded, however much it may be of utilitarian value. In short, there cannot be a comfortable religion, if we can but properly assess the ideas contained in the quotations cited above.

Religion is not in frothy words

Having defined what religion is, we like to point out what it is not. For more often than not the wrong is taken to be the right and vice versa. It has been a practice with some to condemn, vilify and downgrade other sects and other religions, so much so that it has become their second nature. 'They cannot glorify their religion without condemning others. But is this necessary? We think not. If one's religion is good and great it must be able to convert one into the image of God whom one worships. If not, it is simply lip service they are offering to religion. They are interested in argumentation and fights and not in bringing religion into themselves. Swami Vivekananda rightly points out: 'The very fact of these disputations and fightings among sects shows that they do not know anything about religion. Religion to them is a mere mass of frothy words, to be written in books...They fight and talk about religion, and do not want it.' When we leave off all these vain talks and seek God alone then we are on the path. For 'This Atman cannot be attained by the study of the Vedas, nor by intellect, nor even by much learning. By him alone it is attained whom It chooses — to him Atman reveals Itself in Its real form,'⁵ says the Upanisad.

Purpose of Practice

As we have said, religion proposes to make man realize his own nature, which is divinity, perfection. It makes us kindle the flame of infinite knowledge; a light that dispels all darkness once and for all time. But it cannot be done in a day. There are so many things that have covered the lamp of our Atman, so many obstacles and encrustations in the form of attachments. These are to be removed and then only can we

reach the lamp. We know that the mind is the seat of all attachment and aversions, in fact of all that man is. It is the store-house of all previous impressions and repository of all knowledge too. Every thought man thinks, every action he does leaves an impress on the mind and the sum total of these go to form his character. Impelled by the previous *samskāras* an ordinary man acts. It is the purpose of practice to overcome the vicious tendencies that have gathered in the mind, to purify it. This can be done by creating new and good possibilities. 'The evil tendencies are to be counteracted by good ones,' says Patanjali in his *Yoga Sūtras*. To think good thoughts and do good actions and check the mind from swerving away from the righteous path is practice. But it is a difficult task. Sri Krishna exhorts in the *Gīta*, 'Undoubtedly, O mighty-armed one, the mind is of a fickle nature and cannot be easily controlled, but O son of Kunti, by practice and renunciation it can be subdued.'⁶

Practice is a struggle no doubt but through struggle alone everything grows. For our very existence we have to struggle. Much as we would like it, there is no alchemy by which man turns overnight into a saint. Sri Ramakrishna used to say that mere knowledge that there is fire in the firewood cannot cook the rice; one must light the fire and put the pot of rice on it, then only will it cook. Again he said: 'Merely uttering "hemp!" "hemp!" does not make one intoxicated. One must bring it, grind it and drink it and then only will one feel the intoxication.' Likewise, merely uttering 'religion', 'religion' does not make a man religious. Swamiji remarks: 'We want to strike the light in a second, but we forget that the making of the candle is the chief thing.' Without the candle where will you light the flame. And in making the candle is all the struggle; when once it is made the lighting takes but little time. Sri Ramakrishna compared this struggle to a boatman's rowing in the winding alleys of the river. The boatman has to struggle hard, no wind can help him there. But once he has gained the main current of the river, he hoists his sail finding a favourable wind, leans back and enjoys a smoke. It is smooth sailing from then on. He has only to hold the rudder slightly steady and the boat reaches the destination safely. This is the purpose of practice: not to get stuck up in the brambles and bushes, to steer clear of the sand dunes and avoid being swept into shallow waters and running aground. It is not a shot in the dark, not an unexpected chance that man is asked to take, by practising religious disciplines; the Yoga practices have scientifically demonstrated how man can rise in the ladder of spirituality with full awareness of his progress. You do certain practices and then attain certain perceivable results.

What to practise?

It now remains to be said what one must practise. Though there are many paths and various disciplines there are certain fundamentals which are common to all the paths. Taking the name of the Lord, prayer,

meditation are some of them. But there are some preliminaries which help an aspirant in the practice of these. One of them, the most important one, is the desire for liberation, *mumuksutvam*. It is also the primary condition of religious life. When this condition is fulfilled others follow as a matter of course. If there is no real yearning for liberation, religious life becomes dull and drab. On the other hand, the desire for liberation being present even the harshest of disciplines become enjoyable and their sharpness fails to cut into the mind. The malady with the world is that it sees the unreal as the real. Let us be clear here about this reality: By reality we mean that which exists at all times, nay in which even time exists. If this definition is firmly grasped there should be no scope for miscomprehension. No one, not even the Advaitist says that this world is an illusion as we comprehend an illusion to be. What he says has been twisted and tortured to make him look ridiculous. What he says is that the world is not real as God is. And this is the basis of all religious life: To discriminate between the real and the unreal. Even a bhakta has to concede that God alone is real, otherwise how could he abstain from being attached to the things of the world?

Real spiritual life begins when man discriminates between the real and the apparent and rejecting the apparent clings to the real. The next disciplines are control of the senses and the mind, forbearance and repose of the mind. With long practise of these disciplines man's mind becomes purified and in the purified mind God is reflected, says Sri Ramakrishna. Seeing God face to face and knowing Him intimately alone is religion said Sri Ramakrishna time and again. So practice too must lead us to this and if it does not, it is time that we reassessed the motive that is hidden in our mind. Yet it must be conceded that some attain success more easily than others. The reason may be that the intensity of the longing for God in one case is more than that of the others, for does not Swami Vivekananda say, 'What want is there without its object outside? 'When the want is intense it will be fulfilled. And this wanting will be expressed in the practice. That is the value of practice in religion. Finally, let us recall what Swamiji says about religion and practice: 'Religion is ever a practical science, and there never was nor will be any theological religion. It is practice first, and knowledge afterwards.'

¹ Gospel of St. Mathew, 19.21.

² Ibid., 19.24.

³ Kaivalyopanishad, 1.3.

⁴ Gita, 12.8.

⁵ Kathopanishad, 2.23.

⁶ Gita, 6.35.