

WHAT DOES TAKE MAN AWAY FROM GOD

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Editorial of The Vedanta Kesari Magazine – December 1965; Vol. 52; page 339

INDIAN psychologists of old were aware that man's senses were not infallible, nay they were definite that the senses were easily fooled by Dame Nature. They knew that something stood between us and the thing experienced and made us perceive them in a different state. In the *Sāṅkhya Kārikā* we come across a passage where the author enumerates the several reasons due to which man cannot perceive objects. These same reasons may be given as to why we see the world not as it is but in quite another way. The passage runs thus: "Due to extreme distance, extreme proximity, deformity of the receiving senses, an unreceptive mind, subtlety, veiling, suppression and becoming one with what is similar, non-perception is possible."¹ We can in the light of scientific discoveries add some more reasons for our not being well posted with the exact situation we are in. Take the natural phenomena, for example the rising of the sun. According to science the expression itself is faulty. Science says that the earth moves round the sun as also on its own axis and therefore, the days and nights, the months and seasons result. But the common man's idea of rising and setting of the sun is naive, not in consonance with the scientific explanation, yet it is in vogue. Similarly man — aver the scientists of the soul, the Rishis, the saints — does not see himself as what he truly is. The sublime experience of these sages was that the one Brahman has become all these: our own self, these creatures and all that is seen in the universe. The *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* says: 'It (Brahman) thought, let Me be many'.² Again, 'this same deity thought that let Me entering into these devatas (viz. fire, water and earth) by means of the living self, (*jīva*) manifest as name and form'.³ There are many passages in the Śruti which assert this type of relation between the *jīva* and Brahman or God.

The question now is why do we not perceive this relation. What prevents us from experiencing it? This has been the quest of philosophers and seers through the ages and this is the real purpose of religion: to find out who we are, from whence we came and where we go. The Advaitin will tell you that it is due to *avidyā*, ignorance that you see variety in unity, and *avidyā* has been variously described. Sri Ramakrishna has given us a simpler definition of this *avidyā*. He used to say egotism in

¹ S.K., 7.

² Chandogya, VI.ii.3.

³ Ibid., VI.iii.2.

man is *avidyā*. Another time he said it was lust and lucre. It stands between us and God. Now a doubt may arise: Is then this *avidyā* more powerful than God as to come between Him and us? The answer has been given by Sri Ramakrishna himself. He says, 'It is not so. Even a tiny thing can veil a great object'. He cited the example of the sun — which we know is very much larger than the earth itself — which can be prevented from being seen by a flying piece of cloud. Can we on that account say that the cloud is more powerful than the sun? The cloud owes its very existence to the sun and not the other way about. An effect can never be greater than the cause. Sri Ramakrishna further drove home this truth by holding a piece of cloth between himself and the audience. He said, 'You cannot see me now because of this veil. Such is *avidyā*, such is the nature of egoism'. It hides the true nature of the world and even of oneself.

II

How can we overcome this egoism? If we have to proceed scientifically, first of all we must know what it constitutes. The Upanisads speak of the *jīva* as endowed with the five sheaths, the *pañcakōśas* — the *annamaya*, *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya*, *vijñānamaya* and *ānandamaya*. The very idea that these are termed sheaths shows that they are not the real thing. We know the scabbard is not the sword, it is but a receptacle for the sword. Likewise these *Kōśas* are not the self, not the Atman. But as the scabbard is a necessary accoutrement for the carrying of the sword, so these *Kōśas* are necessary for the purpose of transit of the soul through the world of experience back to its own nature.

The above *Kōśas* are sometimes regrouped and named as the *sthūla* (gross), *sūkṣma* (subtle), and *kāraṇa* (causal) bodies. The *annamaya kōśa* is the gross visible body; the *prāṇamaya*, *manomaya* and *vijñānamaya kōśas* constitute the subtle body and the *ānandamaya kōśa* forms the causal body. In this regrouping or reclassification though the word sheath has been dropped, the substitute used, viz. *śarīra*, body, has not much more respect in Indian philosophy than the word sheath. Sri Krishna in the *Gītā* likens the body to a garment. 'Just as man discards the worn-out garments and puts on other new ones, similarly the *jīva* (*dehi*) discarding the old and decrepit bodies takes on other new ones.'⁴ There is the *śarīri*, the dweller in the body, for whom the body is the house. A house is not built for its own sake, nor for mere architectural beauty, but for some one who wants a habitation. By itself it has no value. Only because someone dwells in a house it is worth all the trouble and the labour and the cost. Likewise the body is worth less than the dust of which it is made as soon as the indweller leaves it. Yet such is the infatuation, that the indweller identifies himself with the body and forgets himself. This superimposition of the insentient body on the conscious

⁴ Bhagavad Gita, II.22.

entity (the self) and vice versa, i.e. the admixture of truth and falsehood is the natural basis, says Śrī Śankara, of all the transactions in this world.⁵ Not to know about this is what constitutes ignorance, and identification of oneself with any of the three bodies above cited is what is called the ego (*ahamkāra*).

The range of this ego is very vast. As if not satisfied with the embellishments of these bodies it takes on new ones. There are the *upādhis*, the limiting adjuncts which further cramp our soul when it gets attached to them. There is scholarship, and there is wealth. There is name and fame, property and progeny. If these *upādhis* are not properly used they are sure to use man improperly. Instead of the dog wagging the tail, the tail will wag the dog as the saying goes. Each one of this is enough to swell the ego to infinite proportions and when such a thing happens there remains but very small space for the Ātman to occupy, for God to manifest. For by whatever name we call that Conscious Principle, according to our leaning towards Advaita or Dvaita, it has to be accepted on the grounds of authority of Śruti and Smṛiti that this Principle lives in man. The *Brhadāranyaka Upanisad* says, 'He who lives in all beings but is within them, whom no beings know, whose body is all beings and who controls all beings from within, is the Internal Ruler, that is your own immortal self'.⁶ 'The Lord, O Arjuna, dwells in the heart of all beings and makes them move by His power, Māyā, as if mounted on a machine,'⁷ says Sri Krishna. Even such a Being we are neglecting and accumulating tinsel and burying ourselves into the heap of scrap to such an extent that for all practical purposes the Ātman in us sinks almost into insignificance. As someone referring to the Upanisadic passages, humorously said, 'because of man's preoccupation with the other things of the world the Ātman has entered into a very secret place and hidden Himself⁸ in the smallest space in the heart.⁹ It is afraid to be seen by unholy eyes'. What happens by this process of increasing our accretions is that the thickness of the veil that we project between ourselves and God increases, until it becomes too opaque for us to have any glimpse of Him. It takes the shape of a wall, a barrier too thick to penetrate.

An impressive example as to how the ego of wealth acts was given by Sri Ramakrishna. He said, 'If a thief steals ten rupees from a rich man's house and is caught, the owner exclaims, "what to steal from my house!" First he takes away the stolen money, gives the thief a good beating and not satisfied with that hands him over to the police'. Why does this happen? Because the rich man had identified himself with his wealth. That is the ego of wealth. Sri Krishna describes this as *āsuri sampat*, demoniacal traits in man, thus: 'This I have acquired now; this

⁵ Br. Sutra Bhashya, Introduction.

⁶ Br. Up. III.vii.15.

⁷ Bhagavad Gita, XVIII.61.

⁸ Kathopanishad, II.12. and III.12.

⁹ Chandogya Up., VIII.i.1.

desire I shall soon have; this wealth is mine, the other also will soon become mine. That enemy of mine I have already killed and shall slay others as well. I am the Lord; I am the enjoyer; I have attained everything that can be coveted, am powerful and happy. I am richly endowed with wealth; I am of noble birth; who else is equal to me? I will perform sacrifice; I shall give gifts; I shall sport'.¹⁰

III

How to overcome this ego that prevents us from seeing God? The Upanisads prescribe the method of discrimination. What is it that sees and perceives things in this world? It is the Conscious Principle, the Ātman that perceives, whereas in the world it is believed that the aggregate of the mind, senses and body is the seer, is the experiencer. 'That which is the ear of the ear, mind of the mind, speech of the speech, it is the vital force of *prāṇa*, and eye of the eye. The wise man distinguishes It from these faculties and rising above sense-life becomes immortal,'¹¹ says the *Kenopanishad*. From this it is clear that it is not the eye that sees, but that which keeps the eye alive; it is not the mind that thinks but that which keeps the mind alert. And that resides in all beings and makes them live, move and have their being and that is God. The *Kathopanishad* affirms this stand tirelessly and denies experience to every other faculty or entity. 'Realizing the One, which sees the things that are in the dream and things that are in the waking, as the Great Omnipresent Being, a wise man does not grieve.'¹² 'The meaning is obvious. That which is in us and takes note of things in the waking state as well as in the dream, that is the Omnipresent Being, God. And realizing it as such one does not have any sorrow. As another Upanisad remarks, 'Where is infatuation, where is sorrow for him who sees oneness everywhere and knows that his Atman alone has become all beings?'¹³ It is very near to us, yet very far.¹⁴ It is very far for those who get engrossed in the world. They have to travel a long distance before they can reach or see Him. But it is very near to those who have discrimination, who know that it is God alone that exists in so many forms. For them it is there inside every being as well as outside of them.¹⁵ When these ideas are repeatedly forced upon the mind and when it learns to assimilate this fact and make it its own, be one with that idea, then man has made some progress towards his ideal, towards God.

But this discrimination is to be preceded by the discrimination of what is real and what is unreal. First we have to discover, we have to ask ourselves whether riches, the outward possessions — name and fame —

¹⁰ Bhagavad Gita, XVI.13 to 15.

¹¹ Kenopanishad, I.2.

¹² Kathopanishad, IV.4.

¹³ Isavasya Up., 7.

¹⁴ Ibid., 5.

¹⁵ Ibid.

are they real? Then comes what we most prize, the body. Is that eternal? No it is not. Now when we say that one thing is ephemeral, something of an opposite nature is accepted as existing always. So there is something eternal compared to this existence. Man clings to things here because they are tangible to him and he thinks he can hold on to them. But when he comes to know the true value of things he longs to reach a more permanent abode. He hears about the enjoyments in heaven and seeks for them as they are more lasting than those on the earth. But that is not the goal. The heaven is only this world of senses multiplied, a thousand or million fold if you like, but when the enjoyments in heaven which were earned through merits of actions done here, come to an end, as the merits are exhausted, there comes the fall. Therefore the seers advise that even heaven is not the goal. So one who hankers after peace and true immortality, should see God, seek the knowledge of Brahman. Such a person should have intense dispassion for enjoyment here, and hereafter. When for a long time, without let or hindrance, ceaseless efforts are made in this direction then the knowledge of the Atman dawns, then the ego dies its natural death. It has no more power to bring one back into this world. For the fruits of action, which bring man into being, are then completely burnt out.¹⁶ They become impotent to fructify, to bring about a further birth for that person just as the fried seed is unable to germinate.

IV

Now this path can be followed by very few chosen persons. Their number is a microscopic minority. What is the way for the common man? Sri Ramakrishna says, 'This ego is like the peepal tree, very difficult to get rid of. Cut it down today, tomorrow again it puts forth its shoot. So let this intractable ego remain like the servant. Then it cannot do you any harm. "I am the servant of God". This ego is not harmful'. But then one has to serve the devotees of God and learn from them the way to reach Him. Such a man's riches are put to the service of the Lord and His devotees. He may give in charity but that does not inflate his ego. On the other hand he is happy that he has been the instrument in the hand of God to serve His creatures. It is the Lord that commands him and he is there only as His servant. When one can truly cultivate this attitude one gets rid of one's unripe ego, as Sri Ramakrishna calls it. The ripe ego either knows that everything is Brahman, everything is from God, and lives in Him, or that it is only His servant and as a servant cannot pride himself on the achievements attained through him by his Master, the Lord, this ripe ego too has nothing to show off and therefore remains meek and subservient to God's will. These are the two ways of overcoming the ego. In this case of surrender, of remaining as a servant, what we call, *Karma yoga* also

¹⁶ Bhagavad Gita, IV.37.

plays a great part. Men have to work, completely effacing their egos, and without the least idea of any return. It is only for the pleasure of the Lord that they have to work and not to claim any rewards therefrom. Such a man's mind should always be plunged in God to know His will and act up to it. Bhakti or devotion does not free man from his obligations in the world. Rather they make him fulfil these obligations more conscientiously and meticulously than before. Thus doing every thing for God, establishing one's mind in Him, bowing down to Him and fully dedicating oneself to Him, one is able to tear down the veil of this ego and stand before His resplendent presence.¹⁷ This is the way for going back to Him from whom for a short while we have the feeling that we are separate. This experience is like the divided appearance the ocean presents when a stick is floating on it, while all the time it is one and undivided. Such is the nature of the ego. Penetrating and knowing it as such we go beyond it and reach Him.

¹⁷ Ibid., IX.34.