

WHERE TO SEEK COMFORT

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I

THAT this world is a conglomeration of good and evil, of happiness and misery, of concord and discord, of endearment and estrangement, of union and separation, of origination and destruction is a known fact. All human effort is to go beyond these pairs of opposites, to attain unalloyed bliss. Men try to reach that state in various ways; some by wealth, some by progeny, some by doing good, some by intellectual attainments, some by obtaining power, yet in the end none of these attain it. Instead of the peace that they seek, through these means, they attain only unrest, either provoked by a thirst for more and more of the things sought, or lost in the care and tending of the things obtained.

The world that we thus create absorbs all our mind and the more we get attached to things and begin to identify ourselves with them, the more acute becomes the anguish at separation or estrangement from them. Man knows this, yet he cannot get away from them, nay he does not even attempt to get away. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, 'the camel eats the thorny bushes and in doing so bleeds profusely, yet it will not stop eating the thorny plants'. Even so is man's life here. He knows that he has to undergo untold miseries in this world, once he gets entangled into it, yet he cannot help involving himself in it. What is it that compels him to do it? His desires and passions; his seeking happiness and comfort outside of himself.

Indian psychologists tell us that the creation is an imbalance of the three constituents, *gunas* of Prakrti or Nature. These *gunas* are to be found in every created being. '*Sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas* are the three *gunas*, which have originated from Prakrti and bind the immutable Self dwelling in the body. *Sattva* because it is pure (like a crystal) reflects light, and is quiescent and binds through conjunction with happiness and knowledge. Know *rajas* to be of a pleasing nature, the source of all thirst and attachment. It binds the Self through association with activity. Know *tamas* which deludes all beings to be born of nescience. By error, laziness

and sleep it binds the Self,¹ says Sri Krishna in the *Gītā*. As already pointed out, all these *gunas* are existent in every being; only in some people some one of them is predominant and in others some other, and so on, and according to the dominating factor man becomes quiescent, active or idle. It is *rajas* or the active principle in man that makes him restless and run after pleasures. Goaded by desires man commits good and bad deeds, the fruits of which he alone has to reap. The fruits of good deeds taste sweet but of bad ones taste bitter. It is then that we feel miserable. We, however, try to foist the blame for our suffering on to someone else, forgetting that it is the fruits of our own action that we are reaping. It is at this time that man seeks solace and comfort. Where shall he seek it?

An agnostic or a sceptic has no belief in a higher being. He relies on matter, material comforts, to soothe him. Does he attain it? No. It is then that he takes to intoxicants and tranquillizers in order to forget his unhappiness. But the mind is such a mechanism that it remembers only those things which we want to forget and thus chases man, unceasingly from pillar to post, as it were. Man can escape even from the most vigilant hand of law but not from his own mind. Like a shadow it accompanies him everywhere.

Perhaps misery is placed in this world as a corrective to an erring humanity. 'Well,' you may ask, 'do not the believers suffer? We see that they suffer more than the unbelievers.' Pleasure and pain alternate in this world. As Swami Vivekananda says, 'Life is and must be accompanied by evil. A little evil is the source of life'. What does he mean by the latter statement? It is because there is a little evil in us that we are born. The *Praśna Upanisad* remarks: 'By meritorious deeds one attains the meritorious worlds and by sinful acts the sinful worlds and when there is a balance of good and evil the creature is born in the form of a human being'.²

II

Now, dexterity is in getting beyond good and evil, for in that alone lies peace. How to do it? By reposing confidence in God and submitting to His will. How can we know what His will is? Whatever happens, happens by His will. In that case why shouldn't we think that what we attempt to do is also His will? True, there is no argument against that. But are you sure that it is His will that is working through you? If so you will not feel elated when success comes and depressed when your attempts result in failure. If on the other hand, there is the slightest elation or ego, that you have achieved something or you are the doer, then you do not believe in what you say. It is hypocrisy that makes you say that God's will is

¹ Gita, XIV. 5 to 8.

² Prasna Upanisad, 3.7.

working through you. Should we then submit meekly to all calamities? No one advocates that. As long as you are aware that you are the agent of actions, you must resist all that you feel as wrong. The dictum 'Resist not evil' is meant for very highly evolved souls. It does not mean only physical non-resistance but mental also. No modifications should arise in the mind of one devoted to non-resistance against the evil doer. When such a state is reached you can speak of this dictum. For ordinary people the path is to resist evil by all means at their command.

How does solace come if we believe that it is God's will that is working? The misery that comes is not softened, the blow that falls is not padded because of that belief. No, we do not say that. Such a belief does not mean that we will not suffer calamities, will always be free from worry, but that the strength to bear the pain comes along with the tribulations. We will not be frantic when calamities occur, knowing that it is His will that is sending them.

Does an ordinary man who believes in God has this faith, this strength? Each one gets his desserts according as his faith is strong or weak. It is said that faith can move mountains but that faith itself must be like a mountain, unshakable. Sri Ramakrishna used to tell a story of a Guru and a disciple. The disciple was a milk-maid, who used to supply the Guru with milk. She lived across a river and had to wait for the ferry boat to cross the stream. One day when she was late the Guru asked her what made her come late. She explained that as she had to wait for the ferry boat she was delayed. The Guru said, 'What! Can you not take the name of the Lord — whose name ferries across people even from this vast ocean of transmigration — and cross this river?' The woman was a simple village lady having implicit faith in the words of her Guru. After some days the Guru observed that the woman was very regular, not even a day was she late. He then asked her 'My child, how is it that you are regular these days?' 'Why, revered Sir, did you not tell me that I could cross the river by taking the name of the Lord? I do it, and therefore I have not to wait for the ferry boat and am regular in my service to you,' replied the woman. The Guru could not believe that this was possible. He commanded her to demonstrate the phenomenon. The woman walked over the water taking the name of the Lord as if she was walking on solid ground whereas the Guru himself walked into the water, and was seen tucking his cloth lest it should get wet. The woman had faith whereas the Guru had not and each was rewarded according to his faith.

How does this faith develop? By being simple, by being guileless. When one is guileless he trusts in the person whom God has chosen to send to him as his teacher. He implicitly follows him, once he comes to know about the genuineness of the teacher.

III

How about those who are not so straightforward or simple? They

have to struggle hard to overcome their crookedness. They have to pray with sincerity to the Lord that He may straighten all their angularities and crookednesses. What if the prayers are not answered? That doubt itself shows that we have not taken to the path seriously, with all earnestness. Swami Vivekananda says, 'How much of tempests and waves one has to weather, before one reaches the haven of Peace! The greater a man has become, the fiercer the ordeal he has had to pass through'. So we should not give up, if our prayers are not answered all at once. The struggle must continue whatever happens. For there is no comfort elsewhere. Where will you go? In what will you trust? In wealth, progeny, relations, friends? How far can they help and how can they dispel your miseries which are beyond all human help? Knowing that no one is our own except God we have to take shelter in Him. Seek comfort in Him. Swami Vivekananda says with authority, 'Give up all "me and mine"'. To him who has nothing in the universe the Lord comes'. If you read his letters you will find that these words came out of the fullness of the heart, out of his own experience; that is why even now his words thrill and infuse confidence in the readers. The words of those who have touched and felt the Infinity have a vigour of their own. These words, like fire, consume all doubts and vacillations of those who hear or read them.

Why then do believers too grumble and groan under the axe of misery? Because they have not accepted the Lord *in toto*. And it is not possible also to accept Him in such a way as long as there is the slightest desire for enjoyment, as long as there is the slightest imperfection. Sri Krishna assures Arjuna, 'I take the responsibility of supplying the needs and of protection of those who think of Me alone and serve and adore Me always and are ever devoted to Me'.³

The worldly-wise may then question whether the Lord is partial. If so, He is no better than a human being. To this Sri Krishna himself replies: 'I am equally manifest in all beings. No one is hateful or dear to Me. Yet those who worship Me with devotion I am in them and they are in Me'.⁴ The Lord is present in every creature as the inner-controller, as the inmost Being. How then can He hate any one? The meaning is the devotee loses the differentiation and distance that an ordinary man feels from the Lord. To the devotee the Lord becomes his own and the things mundane are only of secondary importance, or of no importance at all. His life becomes God-centred. There is a song which describes this attitude of the *bhakta*.

*Thou art my All in All, O Lord! — The
Life of my life, the Essence of essence; In the three worlds I have
none else but
Thee to call my own.*

³ Gita, IX, 22.

⁴ Ibid., IX.29.

*Thou art my peace, my joy, my hope;
 Thou my support, my wealth, my glory;
 Thou my wisdom and my strength.
 Thou art my home, my place of rest; my dearest friend, my next of kin;
 My present and my future, Thou; my heaven and my salvation.
 Thou art my scriptures, my commandments; Thou art my ever gracious
 Guru;
 Thou the Spring of my boundless bliss. Thou art the Way, and Thou the
 Goal;
 Thou the Adorable One, O Lord! Thou art the Mother tender-hearted;
 Thou the chastising Father;
 Thou the Creator and Protector; Thou the Helmsman who dolt steer
 My craft across the sea of life.⁵*

IV

What about the wicked who have indulged in evil deeds? Have they no way out? To them also Sri Krishna promises deliverance. 'Even though a man is most wicked if he worships Me with one-pointed devotion, he should be considered as a noble soul, for he is rightly engaged'.⁶ The purport is that a man once wicked is not always wicked. There are chances for him to reform. If he takes shelter in the Lord all his evil tendencies will drop off by themselves as the leaves from a tree in winter. The sinner may be turned into a saint if he constantly remembers and worships Him. 'Anon, he (the wicked one) becomes a saint and attains ever-lasting peace. O son of Kunti, know firmly that My devotee never comes to grief'.⁷ This is the unequivocal assurance of the Lord to Arjuna. Sri Ramakrishna speaks of the dependence of the kitten on its mother. 'The kitten knows only how to call its mother, crying, "Mew, mew!" It remains satisfied wherever its mother puts it. And the mother cat puts the kitten sometimes in the kitchen, sometimes on the floor, and sometimes on the bed. When it suffers it cries only, "Mew, mew!" That's all it knows. But as soon as the mother hears this cry, wherever she may be, she comes to the kitten.' The mother cat carries the kitten in its mouth and therefore there is no fear of fall for it. A man's trust in God and yearning for him should be so intense, then and then alone will he feel the response.

Here again, the doubt, already answered, may be raised in another form: Why does not the Lord give faith in Him to all? Why to some and not to others? And to those some again why in various degrees? 'Neither agency nor works does the Lord create for the creatures, nor does he create for them any association with fruits of deeds. Their nature alone

⁵ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, PP. 776-7, second edition, 1947. Pub.: Sri Ramakrishna Math, Madras-4.

⁶ Gita, IX, 30.

⁷ Ibid., IX.31.

engages them in work,' ⁸ declares Sri Krishna. Here nature is identified with *avidyā*, nescience. 'The Lord does not receive the sins of some nor does He accept their merits. Knowledge is covered by ignorance and therefore creatures become deluded.' ⁹ All the conceit in respect of agency, works and enjoyment of the non-discriminative is due to nescience, *avidyā*. 'To them who have their ignorance destroyed by the knowledge of the Self the Supreme Reality is evident like the sun.' ¹⁰ It is attributing of agency of actions to oneself, due to ignorance, that brings in all this difference. Otherwise how can the Self which is pure and associationless can be said to be miserable. There will not be any sorrow when this identification of our Self with the body, senses and mind is transcended. Misery, fear, jealousy and the like arise because of seeing duality. 'When one sees that all that exists is only the manifestation of the Ātman, the Self, then where is grief, and where is delusion, for him who sees everything as one,' ¹¹ says the *īśāvāsyopaniṣad*. Another Upaniṣad says 'from (seeing) duality alone fear arises'. ¹² Therefore, as the layers of ignorance are peeled off from our vision more and more light of knowledge shines within us and the wrong concepts that we had regarding the world, drop away yielding place to the true ones. When true knowledge dawns the vale of misery turns into a mart of mirth. All things remain as before; their contents do not change, but the attitude, of one who witnesses, changes. It is the Lord's world that the devotee sees and he can have no fear from it. The Advaitin sees not duality but the nondual Brahman pervading everything and therefore is at peace with himself and the world.

V

Now, what about those who are entangled in the world already? To them, Sri Ramakrishna says: "Do all your duties, but keep your mind on God. Live with all — with wife and children, father and mother — and serve them. Treat them as if they were very dear to you, but know in your heart of hearts that they do not belong to you.

"A maidservant in the house of a rich man performs all the household duties, but her thoughts are fixed on her own home in her native village. She brings up her master's children as if they were her own. She even speaks of them as 'my Rama', or 'my Hari'. But in her own mind she knows very well that they do not belong to her at all."

One should live in the world like the maidservant of this example.

Thus we see that in God, Brahman or the Supreme Being alone is our comfort and not anywhere else.

⁸ Ibid., V.14.

⁹ Ibid., V.15.

¹⁰ Ibid., V.16.

¹¹ Isa Up., 7.

¹² Br. Up., I.iv.2.