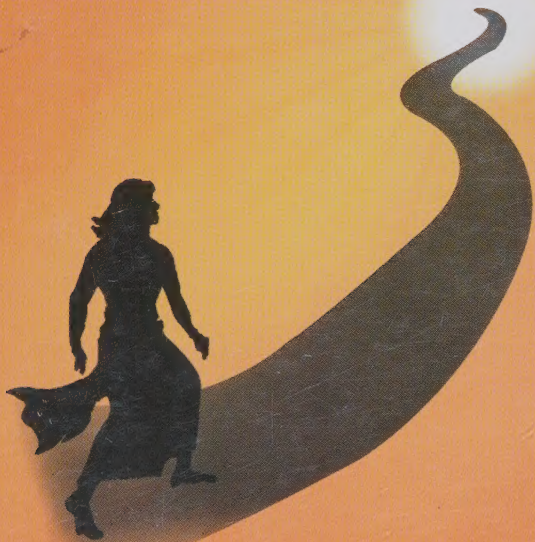


Essentials of Spiritual Life



Swami Yatiswarananda



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Sri Ramakrishna Math
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Publisher's Note

Swami Yatiswarananda (1889–1966), a former Vice-president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, was a well-known spiritual figure in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Neo-Vedanta Movement, who contributed much to it by his talks, articles, and spiritual ministrations in India and abroad. He is especially known among the spiritual aspirants for his important work, *Meditation and Spiritual Life*. However, much before this book was published, the Swami had published two compilations, one of selected scriptural passages for meditation called *The Divine Life* and the other

of prayers from the Hindu scriptures called *Universal Prayers*. He had also written illuminating introductions to both these books, which are excellent and complete guides to spiritual aspirants. Since the emphasis on these two compilations was on the Sanskrit texts, many felt that the worth of the *Introduction* was undermined.

Hence the *Introduction to The Divine Life* is now being published as an independent book (with some minor changes) so that spiritual aspirants may derive greater benefit from it.

**Sri Ramakrishna Math
Mylapore, Chennai - 4**

Essentials of Spiritual Life

Spiritual Awakening

The phenomenon of spiritual awakening is witnessed in all the great religions of the world. In the course of man's higher evolution, there arises in him a new yearning, the hunger of the soul. Because of this new urge, the aspirant is not satisfied with the finite and fleeting pleasures of life, physical and mental, but longs for the Eternal and the Infinite, which alone can bring nourishment and peace to his hungry soul. We notice this fact in some form or other in the Hindu Seer, in the Buddhist Initiate, in the Christian Mystic as well as in the Islamic Sufi. All of them lose their

desire for material pleasures and even intellectual enjoyments, and with their entire being hanker after perfection and freedom, although the paths of spiritual discipline they follow may be different in many respects.

Whether the first spiritual change, or 'conversion' as it is called, is brought about all of a sudden, or by a slow process going on in the soul of the aspirant, unknown and unnoticed, there comes to him always a new outlook, which has been very characteristically expressed in terms of theism by a great Indian devotee of ancient days:

Lord, may I think of You with that strong love which the ignorant

cherish for the things of the world,
and may that love never cease to
abide in my heart.

In studying the psychology of the spiritual seeker, we find in him not only a new attitude towards the world but also a new outlook on his own self. The worldly-minded identify themselves with the body and care only for the enjoyments of the world. The spiritual aspirant, on the other hand, comes to regard himself as a soul—a spiritual entity dwelling in the body but different from it, and he earnestly seeks the experience of the Oversoul, or the Divine Principle of the monist, or the God of the devotee. As Sri Ramakrishna realised, the ultimate

Truth is one, but is attainable through many paths of spiritual culture.

Consciousness of the Eternal Self

The belief in the indestructible and eternal nature of the Self is a most vital point in spiritual life and practice. Empirical sciences, busy with the material aspects of things, are not sufficient to explain life. The living body is, no doubt, a combination of cells as biology tells us; but the principle of life that animates it is something different from the dead matter through which it manifests itself. As Sir Oliver Lodge has expressed very clearly:

The behaviour of a ship firing shot

and shell is explicable in terms of energy; but the discrimination which it exercises between friend and foe is not so explicable. The vagaries of a fire or a cyclone could be predicted by Laplace's calculator, given the initial positions, velocities and the law of acceleration of the molecules, but no mathematician could calculate the orbit of a common house-fly. Life introduces something incalculable and purposeful amid the laws of physics; thus it distinctly supplements those laws, though it leaves them otherwise precisely as they were and obeys them all.

There are biologists who go so far as to declare that the brain secretes thought just as the liver secretes bile.

Thus, according to them, mind is a product of matter. But it should not be forgotten that the conception of matter is undergoing a revolutionary change in the thought of some of the advanced scientists of today. As the distinguished physicist and astronomer, Sir James Jeans, clearly acknowledges:

The universe begins to look more like a great thought than a great machine... Mind no longer appears as an accidental intruder in the realm of matter. We are beginning to suspect that we ought rather to hail it as the creator and governor of the realm of matter. Not, of course, our individual minds, but the Mind in which the atoms, out of which

our individual minds have grown,
exist as thoughts.

To the materialist, the body and the world of matter are realities of the first order. And whatever is taken to be real for the time being, draws out the whole soul of man, his thoughts, his feelings as well as his will. But when the new factor of spiritual consciousness begins to exert its influence upon the seeker after Truth, he comes to doubt the ultimate reality of his body and the world of matter and mind, nay, he instinctively comes to regard his Self and the Divine to be more real. Consequently, he begins to react in altogether a new way, and his entire life and thought undergo a transformation.

This is pointed out in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

The Self is never born, nor does It die. It is not that not having been, It comes into being. It is unborn, eternal, changeless, ever Itself. It is not killed when the body is killed.¹

So the man of Self-realization gets rid of the fear of death; for having attained to the knowledge of the true Self, he has become immortal. The sincere believer in the eternal nature of the Self should be free from fear. The *Bhagavad Gita* says again:

This, the Indweller in the bodies of all, is ever indestructible. Therefore, you should not mourn for any creature.²

1. 2.20

2. 2.30

The *Gita* further says that the aspirant who is steady in the ideal and in the path leading to its realisation should perform his duty, giving up attachment and remaining indifferent to success and failure.³

Taking refuge in the Lord who dwells in his heart, he should follow the divine path and approach the ideal more and more.

What is the relationship between the Self and God? To the mystical theist, God is the indwelling Spirit, the Self within his self, both of which he takes to be real. To the monist, God is his true Self, as distinct from the individualised, false self which he takes to be real before the dawn

3. Cf., 2.48

of the highest spiritual knowledge. In trying to realise his real nature, he finds that what he has been calling his own self is only a shadow of Reality, that his so-called personality is but a reflection of the eternal Principle. He gains perfection in his ideal; he becomes one with it. Speaking on this point, Sri Ramakrishna observes:

If a man knows his own self, he knows other beings and God. What is my ego? Is it my hand or foot, flesh or blood, muscle or tendon? Ponder deeply, and you will know that there is no such thing as 'I'. As you peel off the skin of an onion, you find it consists only of skin; you cannot find any kernel in it. So too on analysing the ego, you will find that there is no real entity that

you can call 'I'. Such an analysis of the ego convinces one that the ultimate substance is God alone. When egotism drops away, Divinity manifests Itself.⁴

God, Soul and the Universe

The three entities, God, soul and the universe, are the most fundamental postulates in all religions and philosophies. The intelligent spiritual aspirant wants to form a clear conception of the interrelation of these three. He wishes to find the right solution for the enigma of life. So it was but natural that in ancient India the seekers after Truth, perplexed by

4. *Sayings of Sri Ramakrishna*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, 29th print, 2013, p. 200

the mysteries of existence, asked the questions:

What is the cause of the universe?
Whence are we born? Why do we
live? Where is our final rest? Under
whose command are we subject to
happiness and misery?⁵

They pondered deeply over the riddle of the universe and tried to find explanations of it with the help of the intellect and reason. They took up for consideration the various concepts—time, chance, matter, energy and so on—that might prove to be the ultimate cause of things, but finally rejected them all as unsatisfactory. They realised that the final explanation could not be had on the

5. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 1.1

plane of the intellect. So, with the view of arriving at the true knowledge by means of intuition or direct experience, they dived deep into the inner regions of their mind, and through the process of meditation realised that everything has its origin in an eternal self-conscious Power, called God or Self in their religion and philosophy.

This idea is graphically expressed in another *Upanishad*, the *Mundaka*, which says:

As the spider produces the thread and absorbs it into itself again, as herbs grow on the earth, as hairs come out spontaneously from man, so does creation spring forth from the Imperishable.⁶

6. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 1.1.7

The words of both the living and the non-living have their origin in the one great Cause:

As from a blazing fire there shoot out thousands of sparks of the same appearance, so do the various beings originate from the Imperishable, and into It they go back... From the Imperishable are also born vital energy, the mind, the senses, ether, air, fire, water and the earth.⁷

It may be that some schools of Hindu thought regard the individual self as atomic in its true nature, while others conceive it as infinite; but all hold that it represents a pure, conscious and spiritual existence different from mind, senses and body, which form

7. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 2.1.1 & 3

its instruments of knowledge and action. Again, the Hindu thinkers do not consider the Self or Atman to be really a created being. According to some, it is eternally existent as an atomic consciousness; according to others, it is finite only in the state of ignorance, whereas in reality it is infinite Consciousness itself. The texts that speak of its origin, according to this latter view, are to be interpreted only as implying its expression or manifestation in the world of mind and matter. This Self dwells equally in men as well as in other beings; the only difference is that animals and other creatures are in a lower state of evolution. All will manifest their potential Divinity and attain perfection in course of time.

The Eternal Law of Karma or Causation

The laws of Karma and reincarnation are inseparably connected with the soul's state of bondage when it is associated with mind and matter. The term 'Karma' means both work and its result, manifest or unmanifest. The doctrine has nothing to do with fatalism or inactivity. Rightly understood, it means that each act done must bear its fruit, good or bad, according to its nature. Karma has its objective result and also its reaction on the mind of the doer. Believing in this cosmic law, the Hindu holds that his present state is the result of his past actions, physical and mental, and that his future is moulded by its

present strivings. As such, the law of Karma is the greatest incentive to self-effort. It does not make man subject to the fiat of a whimsical God, but urges him to be the architect of his own fate and invests him with the full responsibility for his actions. It asks him to reconcile himself to his present lot, without unnecessarily worrying himself with affairs over which he has little or no control. It inspires him at the same time to put forth fresh efforts for improving his future as much as possible.

Whatever might be the mistaken notions about it among those who, avoiding moral and spiritual struggles, take shelter in the doctrine of parasitic salvation, Karma in its true

import includes both destiny and self-effort, and of these the latter is the more important factor in life. One of the Hindu scriptures says:

Know that destiny is the result of one's own action acquired in another bodily existence. Hence the wise man calls one's effort superior. So even adverse destiny is vanquished by the heroic efforts of people exerting themselves in auspicious actions.⁸

The Doctrine of Rebirth

The doctrine of rebirth is based directly on the law of Karma. It presupposes the belief in the imperishable Self or Atman and in the potential divinity of man, nay,

8. Cf. *Matsya Purana*

of all beings, and also in the law of evolution through which the soul has to pass in its march towards perfection. The Hindu teachers do not believe in the creation of a new soul along with the body. They believe, on the other hand, not only in the soul's future life but also in its pre-existence. According to them, the habits and tendencies with which the soul is born are due to its actions in previous lives. And until the dawn of the highest knowledge, which puts an end to Ignorance (the root-cause of man's attachment to his body and false personality as well as to the world of senses and enjoyment), the soul undergoes repeated births in order to gain fresh experience and

grows wise through them. In the words of the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Even as a man casts off worn-out clothes and puts on others that are new, so does the embodied being cast off worn-out bodies and enter into others that are new.⁹

Neither the doctrine of a single birth, nor the theory of hereditary transmission can satisfactorily explain the life of the soul with its inborn temperament and idiosyncrasies.

Every embodied being has a two-fold ancestry, material and spiritual. He gets his physical body from his parents; but as a soul distinct from the body, he is in a sense his own

9. 2.22

ancestor, although from a larger point of view he derives his being from God and therefore 'cometh from afar'. He is born with ideas which are 'more ancient than this corporeal birth'.

Swami Vivekananda says:

Some are born happy, enjoy perfect health, with beautiful body, mental vigour and all wants supplied. Others are born miserable, some are without hands or feet, others again are idiots and only drag on a wretched existence... Why should a man be miserable even here in the reign of a just and merciful God?... There must have been causes, then, before his birth, to make a man miserable or happy and those were his past actions...

All our knowledge, whether we call it perception, or reason, or instinct, must come through that one channel called experience, and all that we now call instinct is the result of past experience degenerated into instinct and that instinct regenerates into reason again. So on throughout the universe, and upon this has been built one of the chief arguments for reincarnation in India. The recurring experiences of various fears, in course of time, produce this clinging to life. That is why the child is instinctively afraid, because the past experience of fear is there in it.¹⁰

10. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Advaita Ashrama, Kolkata, Mayavati memorial edition (henceforth CW.), 11th edition, 1962, Vol.1, pp.8 & 240-241

Is the soul eternally bound by the trammels of Karma and rebirth? Is there no possible escape from them at any time? There is, replies the Hindu scriptures. Regulated self-effort, including moral practice, performance of duty, worship, prayer and meditation, prepare man for the highest knowledge and devotion. These reveal to him his true nature as well as that of the divine Reality. To quote the words of the Upanishads on this point:

The knots of the heart are loosened,
all doubts are cut asunder, and
Karma and its effects cease to exist
when the Self is realised.¹¹

11. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 2.2.8

Sri Krishna puts the same idea in different language when He declares in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Reaching the highest perfection and having attained Me—the Divine—the great-souled ones are no more subject to rebirth, painful and ephemeral. All the world is subject to return, but after attaining Me, there is no rebirth.¹²

Thus, in the Hindu conception of life and salvation there is scope for both personal striving and divine grace. Although the doctrine of rebirth forms an important part of the Hindu religious teaching, one must remember that the ideal set before the aspirant is to strive for the

12. 8.15,16

attainment of the highest goal even in this very life.

Observes Swami Vivekananda:

Religion is not in books, nor in theories, nor in dogmas, nor in talking, not even in reasoning. It is being and becoming... Man must realise God, feel God, talk to God. That is religion... There is such a thing as realisation even in this life, and it is open to everyone, and religion begins with the opening of this faculty, if I may call it so.¹³

God and the World

According to Vedanta, the highest expression of spiritual knowledge

13. CW., 9th edition, 1964, Vol.3, p.253 & Vol.4, p.165

in Hindu culture, there are three points of view from which God's relationship with the world can be discussed. In dualism, God is personal and extra-cosmic, and the universe, like a machine or a pot, made out of self-existent materials called 'atoms'. In what is known as qualified non-dualism, God is personal-impersonal and is immanent in Nature. Here, the universe is looked upon as an organism. It is real and passes through gross and subtle states in a cyclic order. This is the theory of evolution and involution.

In the third point of view known as non-dualism or monism, the Divine who is really impersonal and transcendent appears as the

universe through the power of Maya or delusive and creative Ignorance. With its limitations of time, space and causation, Maya forms, as it were, the matrix of matter and mind. This appearance is taken to be real, as long as the soul is in ignorance, but it is found to be unreal with the dawn of true knowledge, which reveals the nature of Reality.

None of these theories advocates the idea of creation out of nothing. In the first two, the cause of gross matter is subtle matter, and destruction is not annihilation. It is only going back to the cause. Through ignorance men take the world to be a reality of the first order. With the dawn of higher knowledge, the world is found to be a

reality of a lesser order, dependent on the Divine. According to the monist, Brahman or Reality appears as the universe. Here, there is no question of creation out of nothing, as the substratum is always present even when it is not recognised. The Power that is the cause of this appearance, and the appearance itself, are not illusions but empirical realities to the ordinary man. They do not, however, possess absolute reality, as they disappear when the highest spiritual consciousness is brought about by supreme knowledge.

Maya, as Swami Vivekananda puts it, is not illusion but a statement of fact. Its nature is beyond human comprehension. Why and how does

it produce a world so full of contradictions—of good and evil, happiness and misery, life and death? And why and how again does it and all its manifestations melt away with true knowledge? None has been able to answer these questions and solve the mystery. But to the illumined soul there comes a time when this contradictory phenomenon of the world ceases to be, when even the question of its existence or non-existence does not arise at all. As Sankaracharya observes:

Maya is neither absolutely existent nor non-existent, nor does it partake of both characters... She is most wonderful, and her nature cannot be defined. She can be destroyed by

the realisation of pure Brahman, the One without a second, just as the false perception of a snake for a rope is removed by the recognition of the rope.¹⁴

Thus, although we cannot know the nature of this illusive Maya, we can, however, transcend it. And beyond it, says Swami Vivekananda:

There is but One—The Free
—the Knower—Self!

Without a name, without
a form or stain.

In Him is Maya, dreaming
all this dream.

The witness, He appears
as nature, soul.¹⁵

14. Cf. *Vivekachudamani*, 109–110

15. CW., Vol.4, p.394

The Ideal of Divine Realisation

In Hinduism, religion and philosophy have been inseparable and even almost synonymous. The common aim of both being the intuitive vision of Truth, they fulfil each other. As Prof. Max Muller has very truly observed, the two have worked together harmoniously in India alone, where religion derives its breadth of vision from philosophy and philosophy its spirituality from religion. Religion is the practical form of philosophy, and philosophy the rational form of religion. In Hinduism, Darsana (literally 'seeing' but usually translated as 'philosophy') means a system calculated to bring about direct vision or experience of

Truth. The Hindu philosophers were primarily men of spiritual realisation. And therefore their systems, based as they are on transcendental experience, lead to the same goal, if followed with sincerity and devotion. Thus the goal of both religion and philosophy is Self-realisation, and the aspirant should strive to attain it in this very life.

It is not enough that an aspirant subscribes to doctrines and dogmas with strong faith. He must also strive intensely to live a higher life and gradually attain divine experience in its various aspects. So corresponding to the dualistic, qualified non-dualistic and non-dualistic systems of thought, there

are spiritual experiences in which the devotee realizes the divine Being as his master, father, mother, friend, or beloved; or as the eternal Principle of which his personality is the eternal mode or part; as the one Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute constituting his true Self and Goal.

Spiritual life is a continual warfare between the higher and lower natures of man. Animal and divine tendencies are found often mysteriously blended in one and the same individual. It must be the constant effort of the aspirant to eliminate the evil and strengthen the good in himself. But he must first of all be able to distinguish the divine attributes that lead him towards

perfection and freedom, from the demoniac qualities that intensify the soul's ignorance and bondage. The *Bhagavad Gita* enumerates these divine attributes in detail thus:

Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in knowledge and spiritual practice, giving away in charity, control of the senses, sacrifice, reading of the scriptures, austerity and uprightness; non-injuriousness, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, tranquillity, absence of calumny, compassion to beings, non-covetousness, gentleness, modesty, absence of fickleness, boldness, forgiveness, fortitude, purity, absence of hatred and absence of pride—these belong to one born for a divine state.

Ostentation, arrogance and self-conceit, anger, as also harshness and ignorance, belong to one who is born for a demoniac state. The divine state is deemed as making for liberation, the demoniac state for bondage.¹⁶

The Gunas and How to Transcend Them

The general classification of men and things into the two groups of good and bad did not satisfy the analytic mind of the Hindu seers. In the course of their examination into the nature of things, they discovered three primordial stuffs (or forces) known as the Gunas. These three inseparable constituents of Prakriti

16. 16.1-5

or Nature transform themselves into ego, mind, senses, bodies and sense objects. The Gunas manifest themselves both as substance and attributes, even as the primal creative energy expresses itself as both matter and force.

The human personality is a combination of the Self and the non-Self constituting the ego, mind, senses, etc. All that is non-Self belongs to the domain of the Gunas. Knowing the truth that the Self is distinct from the Gunas and their activities, the man of Knowledge does not become attached to them but remains free, while the ignorant man with his understanding deluded by egotism thinks that he is the doer and so becomes entangled

in the world. This is the teaching of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Cf. 3.27,28). But it is not possible for the ordinary soul bound by the Gunas to detach itself all of a sudden. In order to transcend the Gunas, one should know their respective natures, attributes and manifestations, and above all, the means to go beyond them.

As has been said, the three Gunas are inseparable, but one or the other is always predominant in the embodied being. It is this dominance of a particular Guna that determines the nature of a man. Sattva is associated with purity, knowledge and happiness; Rajas with attachment, activity and pain; Tamas with impurity, ignorance and indolence. The

aspirant should overcome Tamas and Rajas by means of Sattva. In order to do this, he should subsist on food that increases Sattva. He should try to acquire knowledge that is conducive to the Sattva mode of life. His worship, gifts, austerities and other forms of activity should be done in such a way as to bring about the Sattva state. As his mind is gradually purified of all its dross, he finds no agent other than the Gunas behind all actions and comes to know the transcendent Principle which is higher than the Gunas. Freed from birth and death, he attains the immortal state. Sattva is thus nearer to the Truth; but it is not itself Truth. Truth can be realised

only by transcending even Sattva. But the question of transcending it will never arise until the seeker has in the first place attained it. Therefore the aspirant should try to develop the Sattva or the spiritual element in him to the best of his power, eliminating all that is impure and unspiritual.

Spiritual Life—Its Meaning

It is clear, therefore, that spiritual life is one of intense striving. The *Bhagavad Gita* exhorts:

A man should uplift himself by his own self. Let him not weaken this self. For this self is the friend of oneself, and this self is the enemy of oneself...¹⁷

The life of the seeker after Truth must be dynamic and creative. This does not mean that it is to be standardised in every respect. Freedom being the first condition of growth, he must be able to follow freely the laws of his being. According to temperament and capacity, he may pursue either the life of selfless activity, or the path of devotion, or the way of sense control and mental concentration, or the path of self-analysis and knowledge, singly or jointly. Swami Vivekananda speaks of the ideal of spiritual life thus in his inimitable way:

Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within, by controlling nature,

external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy—by one or more or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms are but secondary details.¹⁸

Moral Culture Indispensable

However different may be the approaches leading to the Divine, there can never be any true religious life without a strict moral basis. Ethics is a necessary stepping stone to spiritual culture and divine realisation. It is said that the bonds of the devotee are cut asunder through

18. CW., 11th edition, 1962, Vol.1, p.257

the mercy of the Divine. Swami Vivekananda says:

This mercy comes on the pure. So purity is the condition of His mercy. How does that mercy act? He reveals Himself to the pure heart; the pure and the stainless see God, yea, even in this life; then and then only all the crookedness of the heart is made straight. Then all doubts cease. He is no more the freak of a terrible law of causation.¹⁹

Some may prefer to hold that purity itself is through God's grace, expressing itself as striving for higher life. Whether this purity is the condition or the consequence of grace, there is no doubt that it is

19. CW, 11th edition, 1962, Vol.1, p.13

essential for success in all phases of spiritual life. Very rightly do the seers of the Upanishads declare:

Neither those who have not refrained from wickedness, nor the unrestrained, nor the unmeditative, nor the one with unpacified mind, can attain the Self even by knowledge.²⁰

The paramount necessity for moral culture is well illustrated by the following story of the Upanishads. Once upon a time, gods, men and demons went to Prajapati or the Creator for instruction. His teaching, however, was enigmatically brief, consisting as it did of only one letter. On being asked by Prajapati what

20. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.2.24

they understood, the gods replied that the practice of self-control was enjoined upon them; men said that they were instructed to do acts of charity; lastly the demons answered that they were taught to show compassion towards others. 'Therefore,' concludes the *Upanishad*, 'one should learn these three—self-control, charity and compassion.'²¹

Sankaracharya, in the course of his well-known commentary on this text, gives the following alternative explanation:

Or there are no gods or demons other than men. Those among men who are wanting in self-control, but at the same time are

21. Cf. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.2.3

otherwise endowed with many good qualities, are the gods; those who are particularly greedy are men; and those who are cruel and given to injuring others are demons. So the members of the same species, namely, men, according to their lack of self-control or liability to the other two defects, or according to their tendencies of balance, activity and inertia, are given the titles of gods etc. Hence, it is men who should learn all the three instructions, for they are meant for men alone; because men are observed to be wild, greedy and cruel.²²

The *Bhagavad Gita* too says:

Lust, anger and greed are the three

22. Cf. Sankaracharya's commentary on *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 5.2.3

gateways to hell; therefore one should renounce them.²³

Ethical Life and Spiritual Life Inseparable

Ethical practice is thus commonly enjoined upon all spiritual aspirants. As we find in the *Bhagavad Gita* and other scriptures, there are different paths in spiritual life but there is only one system of moral culture, graduated though it may be, according to the needs and states of the aspirants. But however important may be the place of ethics in the growth of the spiritual seeker, he must always bear in mind that his goal is something higher, something more than mere

23. 16.21

practice of morality; for ethical life is only the stepping stone to spiritual culture.

Let us discuss this point further. In Patanjali's book on yoga, the group of virtues consisting of non-injury, truthfulness, non-stealing, chastity and non-covetousness is mentioned as the first of the eight steps to yoga. Purity, contentment, austerity, study of the scriptures, and the surrender of all acts to the Divine—these form the second step. After the seeker has fulfilled these conditions to a satisfactory extent, he is asked to practise a steady posture, control of breath and withdrawal of the senses from their objects. It is only when he has successfully practised these that his

mind becomes fit for the practice of concentration and meditation, which gives him the immediate experience of Reality in the highest superconscious state.

The teachers of the Upanishads very strongly stress this point when they say:

The senses of one who is always of unrestrained mind and devoid of right understanding become uncontrollable like the wicked horses of a charioteer. But of one who is always of restrained mind and has right understanding, the senses are controlled like the good horses of a charioteer. He who is devoid of higher understanding, thoughtless and always impure,

never attains the goal; he gets into the round of births and deaths. But he who is intelligent, ever pure, and controlled in mind, reaches that goal whence none is born again. The man who has intelligence for his charioteer and the mind for the well-controlled rein attains the end of the journey—the supreme state of the all-pervading Self.²⁴

At the beginning of his spiritual life the aspirant may be able to draw a distinction between moral culture and spiritual practice, but as he advances, the dividing line between the two disappears. The two become indissolubly connected with each other.

24. *Katha Upanishad*, 1.3.5–9

The Yogas in Brief

Such a synthesis is also noticed with reference to the various types of spiritual discipline—the paths of selfless activity, of devotion, of concentration and of discrimination. Here also there seem to be borderlines at first, but as the aspirant proceeds in his journey, they gradually vanish, and he fails to perceive where one path ends and the other begins.

At the start one may be described as following a particular path according to the dominance of any one of the disciplines mentioned above. But with spiritual growth all the paths become more or less harmonised in the totality of spiritual life, a synthesis that cannot be compartmented.

This is the great lesson we learn from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is a veritable compendium of all Hindu scriptures. The term 'yoga' means dissociation of the self from things physical and mental, and union with, or realisation of, the Divine, the supreme Being, the Self, the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute. It may also denote the paths which lead to this spiritual realisation.

Supreme peace, born of the highest spiritual experiences, is the same for all aspirants following the apparently different paths.

Sri Krishna points this out distinctly in the *Gita*:

The well-poised, forsaking the

fruits of action, attain peace born of steadfastness.²⁵

Take refuge in the Divine with all your heart. By His grace shalt you attain supreme peace and the eternal abode.²⁶

Having attained knowledge, one gains supreme peace at once.²⁷

Always keeping the mind steadfast in yoga, the yogi of subdued mind attains to peace which abides in Me, the Divine—the peace which culminates in final emancipation.²⁸

The *Bhagavad Gita* places different

25. 5.12

26. 18.62

27. 4.39

28. 6.15

yogas or methods of spiritual culture before aspirants of different temperaments and tendencies. As has been mentioned before, these paths may be roughly classed as those of selfless activity, devotion, knowledge and meditation. They may be discussed here in brief.

The tendency to perform action is innate in all beings, and none can remain inactive. Of those who are particularly of an active temperament, what is required is not cessation from action but the proper controlling and directing of their activities. Work with attachment binds the soul, but selfless work performed in a spirit of worship becomes a means of attaining freedom.

Says Sri Krishna in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

To one who does actions, forsaking attachment and resigning them to the Divine, evil does not cling just as water does not cling to lotus leaf.²⁹

Though ever engaged in actions, he having taken refuge in Me, the Lord, attains to the eternal and immutable state by My grace.³⁰

The devotee yearns for union with his beloved Lord with all his heart. Worldly love is not able to satisfy this deep passion of the soul. His entire mind flows, as it were, in a continuous stream towards his Lord who is of the nature of 'love

29. 5.10

30. 18.56

unspeakable'. His God is not a Being dwelling somewhere in a far off heaven, but is seated in his own heart. In order to see Him and to feel His divine presence he has only to look within.

Sri Krishna says:

The Lord dwells in the hearts of all beings. Take refuge in Him with all the heart. By His grace shall you attain supreme peace and the eternal abode.³¹

The Jnani, or the seeker with a philosophic turn of mind, is not satisfied with the little pleasures of this life. He is anxious to know his true nature and the reality at the back of the phenomenal world. He does

31. 18.61 & 62

not feel any great attraction for the personal aspects of the Divinity. He yearns to attain to the Infinite—his true Self. Speaking of those who follow the path of knowledge, Sri Krishna observes in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Those who have their intellect absorbed in That, whose self is That, whose steadfastness is That, they attain to the highest salvation, their impurities being cleansed by knowledge. Relative existence has been conquered by them, even here in this world, whose mind rests in evenness. Since the infinite Self is even and without imperfection, therefore they indeed rest in Him.³²

32. 5.17 & 19

The man of a contemplative bent of mind, endowed with tremendous will-power, wants to control the whole of Nature, external and internal. But spasmodic attempts at concentration will lead only to failure and mental depression. The restless mind is to be brought under control slowly and steadily 'through practice and renunciation'.

Speaking of the yoga of contemplation, Sri Krishna says:

With the understanding steadfast, with the mind fixed on the Self, let the yogi attain quietude by degrees. By whatever cause the restless, unsteady mind wanders away, let him, curbing it from wandering, bring it back under the control of

the Self alone... Verily, supreme bliss comes to the yogi who has become perfectly tranquil in mind, whose passions are quieted, who is free from impurities, and who has become one with the all-pervading Being.³³

Harmony of the Yogas

All the various spiritual paths can more or less be classed under the four yogas mentioned above. When we study religious psychology in general and the *Bhagavad Gita* in particular, we find that these paths are not, as we have already said, like watertight compartments. They are all so interdependent that many

33. *Gita*, 6.25–27

of the texts speaking of one are applicable to the others as well. It is therefore impossible, as we have seen, to have a clear-cut division between one path and another. The aspirants following one path, no doubt, possess some predominating features that are distinctive of that path, but they have also many traits that they share in common with the followers of other paths.

The person who follows the path of selfless activity has to possess devotion, discrimination and concentration along with non-attachment. Aspirants of the other paths too, besides being endowed with common ethical qualifications, should have—it may be in varying degrees—all

these indispensable elements of spiritual life. Thus, it is practically impossible to draw a dividing line between different types of aspirants and the paths they pursue. For example, evenness of mind which Sri Krishna speaks of as yoga in the *Bhagavad Gita* is a virtue which all yogis alike should possess. We may further quote the following verses of the *Gita* to illustrate the common features of the yogas:

Content with what comes to him without effort, unaffected by the pairs of opposites, free from envy, and even-minded in success and failure, the wise man is not bound even though he be acting.³⁴

34. 4.22

Resigning mentally all deeds to Me, the divine Being, having Me as the highest goal, and resorting to the devotion of right knowledge, ever fix your mind on Me.³⁵

The yogi who, being established in unity, worships Me dwelling in all beings—he abides in Me, whatever his mode of life may be.³⁶

All these words of Sri Krishna are more or less applicable to every type of yogi. There is a conscious or unconscious combination of all noble attributes in the perfect ones as also in all real aspirants.

35. 18.57

36. 6.31

The Synthesis of Yoga

The reason of this combination is not far to seek. The human mind is a synthetic whole possessing the faculties of will, feeling and knowledge. The path of selfless activity and that of concentration and meditation both depend more on the faculty of will than on the other inseparable faculties, although the former path is mainly objective while the latter is mainly subjective. In the path of devotion, feeling is the dominant factor, whereas in the path of knowledge, with its discipline of analysis and discrimination, the aspirant relies mainly on intellect or reason. But all the faculties are

inseparable, and so are the yogas; they all fulfil one another.

Such being the case, is it not desirable to put equal stress on all the four paths of yoga, and attempt at a simultaneous development of all the mental faculties alike? Indeed, if this can be done, it would mean an all-round spiritual growth. In the sphere of religion, one-sided development is fraught with dangers. Work sometimes becomes aimless and leads to mere restlessness. Yoga or the path of concentration at times degenerates into physical mortification and pursuit of psychic powers. Devotion often deteriorates into meaningless sentimentalism. And knowledge may also lapse

into dry intellectualism and morbid inactivity. Hence, there is a great necessity for combining the different paths in order to safeguard against the dangers of following one path to the exclusion of others. Let work be combined with meditation, and knowledge tempered with devotion. Let us try to be equally established in all the yogas and bring about a harmonious development of all our latent spiritual powers. This all-sided development of personality is the healthiest ideal for any religion or spiritual aspirant to pursue. Speaking of this synthetic yoga, Swami Vivekananda says:

Would to God that all men were so constituted that in their minds

all these elements of philosophy, mysticism, emotion, and of work were equally present in full! That is the ideal, my ideal of a perfect man. Every one who has only one or two of these elements of character, I consider 'one-sided'... men, with knowledge of that one road only in which they move; and anything else is dangerous and horrible to them. To become harmoniously balanced in all these four directions is *my* ideal of religion.³⁷

Thus an embodiment of this synthetic yoga is the man who is fully illuminated with the light of the highest knowledge, who is ever active in helping others without any thought of his own self, who,

37. CW., 10th edition, 1963, Vol.2, p.388

intoxicated with divine love, thinks lightly even of salvation, who is perfectly established in the glory of the Self realised through the complete control of the senses and the mind, who has attained to the fullest growth of all his best faculties, and is therefore 'a free man of the whole estate.'

Belief in God and Spiritual Life

The intelligent devotee who takes up the path of devotion, no doubt begins his spiritual life with faith in God. In the true devotee, however, even this initial faith is a living force, not a mere conventional allegiance to doctrines such as is found in the commonalty who pass as the faithful

in the different religions. But belief in the existence of the God of popular theism may not be possible, or even necessary, for aspirants of other types. These 'sceptical' or 'agnostic' seekers, to the extent they attain selflessness, sense-control, concentration and mental purity, are certainly moving towards perfection, and in course of time would surely gain the realisation of the ultimate Truth. How this takes place is beyond the understanding of the superficial believer in God, who is living more or less the life of a religious parasite without striving intelligently and consciously for divine communion.

As we have made clear already, we plead for the life of synthetic yoga in

which the several faculties of man are harmoniously co-ordinated and developed. When the intellect, the will and the feelings are cultured and developed to their fullest possibilities, the seeker transcends these powers of the mind and comes to possess the innate but forgotten faculty of intuition that brings him directly in touch with the ultimate Reality, which the different types of aspirants conceive as God, the supreme Spirit or the Absolute. The divine Being or the supreme Self is to be made the centre and the goal of all these different forms of spiritual culture.

Work and worship, self-analysis and meditation should form in-

separable aspects of this synthetic spiritual life. Hence it is necessary that the aspirant should possess a clear conception of the Divinity; for, as the *Bhagavad Gita* says, he should fill his mind with Him, be devoted to Him, sacrifice unto Him, bow down to Him, make his heart steadfast in Him, and take Him to be the supreme goal.³⁸

Place of Meditation in Spiritual Culture

Meditation (or Dhyana) in some form or other is essential for aspirants of each path as well as for those who want to follow the synthesis of yoga. It is therefore necessary

38. Cf. 9.34

to understand what is meant by meditation. It may be defined as the maintenance of an unbroken current of thought on a definite object or theme to the exclusion of all foreign or contrary thoughts.

This can be done only by following a systematic course of practice for a long time. One has to check the wandering mind and turn it away from desires and the sense-objects pertaining to them. In doing this, the first step is to disconnect the senses from their objects. Then, the senses are to be controlled, and the mind is to be brought back to itself. When this has been achieved, the mind can easily be made one-pointed or concentrated. Next comes the

question of meditation or dwelling on the divine thought without any break.

As a continuous stream of thought cannot be maintained immediately without training, at first the aspirant can only dwell with interruption on holy thoughts. To the untrained mind, even this is impossible without the help of words and symbols. The aspirant will therefore find it very useful to repeat mystic syllables like 'Om', or concentrate on holy texts like those given in the chapters on meditation in *The Divine Life*³⁹ and in its companion volume, *Universal*

39. Book by Swami Yatiswarananda, published by Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai.

*Prayers*⁴⁰. One will find this helpful in calling up divine thought. In speaking of the practice of meditation, the *Bhagavad Gita* says:

Abandoning without reserve all fancy-born desires and completely restraining, by the mind alone, the group of senses from their objects in all directions, with the understanding steadfast and with the mind fixed on the Self, let him attain quietude by degrees; let him not think of anything.⁴¹

In higher forms of spiritual meditation, the theist attempts to fix his inner sight on a holy form with or

40. *ibid.*

41. 6.24 & 25

without the setting of the Formless, or on the formless Divinity itself endowed with the noblest of attributes such as omnipresence, omniscience, absolute purity, in-finite mercy, etc. The monist tries to entertain a constant stream of thought of the same kind as that of the Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, the One without a second, to the exclusion of such foreign ideas as those of the body, mind, etc. In both cases, meditation means a living touch or communion between the aspirant and the object of his realisation. And as it is prolonged, it ripens into the superconscious state called Samadhi, lasting for a comparatively longer time than meditation.

In the theistic, as in the lower monistic Samadhi, the distinction of knower, knowledge and the object of knowledge is not lost. But in the highest monistic experience which is attained through the practice of non-dualistic meditations, all distinctions are lost. Instead, there is the superconscious experience of the One without a second, the Absolute. This can only be realised by becoming one with It but cannot be described in words. The familiar example of 'the dumb man's tasting of a delicious sweet' is often cited as an illustration to indicate the ineffable nature of that experience.

But this superconscious state can be achieved and retained only by

carefully following the spiritual path, proceeding step by step in a systematic way. About the method to be adopted for the realization of the Self, Sankaracharya observes as follows in his commentary:

It should first be heard of from the teacher and the scriptures, then reflected on with the help of reasoning, and then steadfastly meditated upon. Thus only is It realised—when these disciplinary means, viz. hearing, reflection and meditation, have been gone through. When these three are combined, then only true realisation of the unity of Brahman is accomplished, not otherwise—by hearing alone.⁴²

42. Cf. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 2.4.5

Before the highest Truth is realized, meditations on the Divine are mostly imaginations, but they are not baseless. For there are imaginations and imaginations. By seriously thinking of the castle in the air, one is not able to live in it. By taking the mirage to be real, one can never quench one's thirst. By taking the mother-of-pearl to be silver, one is not able to buy food for appeasing one's hunger. These are false; they take us away from Truth and make us live in a world of illusion. As distinguished from these, there are imaginations that are based on Reality and help us in the supreme quest. The self-conscious bubble of the human soul, by meditating on

the ocean, realises its true relation with the ocean and becomes one with it. By dwelling on the true nature of the infinite Light, the living ray of light reflected on a particle of sand becomes identified with It. The tiger, accustomed to thinking that it is a sheep, knows itself to be a tiger again by constantly thinking that it is really a tiger and not a sheep. Before knowledge illuminates the soul, it is with thoughts founded on Reality that the forces of ignorance have to be counteracted. These thoughts may be imaginations in one sense, but they are imaginations that take us to the Real.

It is thus that the bound soul realises its union or unity with God,

the infinite Principle. The process is, as Sri Ramakrishna puts it, like the removal of a thorn in the flesh by means of another thorn from the tree. When the first thorn has been taken out, both may be thrown away.

The Law of Spiritual Growth

What should be the initial concept of God and spiritual life that a devotee should entertain at the beginning of spiritual life? The answer is: let him start from where he stands; let him worship, pray and meditate according to his own conceptions. The child should begin his spiritual life with his childlike ideas, and the grown up person with his advanced ones. Great harm is done to spiritual

growth by trying to standardise the thoughts of people. Each aspirant must be free to follow the law of his own being. The child need not be ashamed because he is not a youth; the youth should not feel sorry that he is not an elderly man. If the child tries to think like a grown-up man, and the latter like the former, no progress is possible. Each should strive to evolve more and more in his own way, and thereby outgrow his previous conception of the spiritual ideal and take up higher and higher ones as a matter of course.

As Swami Vivekananda puts it in a humorous way, 'It is very good to be born in a church, but it is very

bad to die there.’⁴³ Institutional religions may try their best to keep their followers in a state of perpetual childhood, but a true aspirant, making the best use of the protection and support given to him during the early years of his life, should outgrow them and stand on his own strength, drawing his inspiration more from the Divine than from men and institutions. This is the secret of growth in the world of true religion. Whoever follows this law evolves, and whoever breaks it remains stunted in growth and may even run the risk of going down in the scale of spiritual evolution and progress.

43. CW., Vol.4, p.42

Different Conceptions of the Divine

The various conceptions that seekers hold about the Divine vary with their growth and knowledge. As a Sanskrit text points out:

The higher castes worship God in the fire, the advanced seekers meditate on Him in their own hearts, the ignorant think of Him in the image, and those who have attained to the Infinite realise His presence everywhere.

There are devotees who think of God as always associated with divine forms and attributes. Others consider Him to be formless but endowed with not only omniscience and omnipotence but also omnipresence.

Some again combine these ideas and look upon the holy forms as manifestations of the Formless. To them the personal aspect of the Divine is a manifestation of the Impersonal, and both are real. There are others again who try to realise the transcendent Being who, as they hold, is in His real nature beyond all forms and attributes but appears to be associated with them. Speaking of the different aspects of God, Sri Ramakrishna remarks:

God with form and without form are not two different beings. He who is with form is also without form. To the devotee God manifests Himself in various forms. Just think of a shoreless ocean—an infinite

expanse of water—no land visible in any direction. Only here and there are visible blocks of ice formed by intense cold. Similarly, under the cooling influence, so to say, of the deep devotion of His worshipper, the Infinite reduces Himself to the finite and appears before him as a being with form. Again, as on the appearance of the sun, ice melts away, so on the appearance of knowledge, God with form melts away in the Formless.⁴⁴

He says further:

God is formless, and God is with form too. And He is that

44. Cf. *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, Sri Ramakrishna Math, Chennai, p. 802

which transcends both form and formlessness.⁴⁵

Meditation on the Divine

At the very dawn of human civilisation the Vedic seers inquired, 'Who is the Being to whom we should offer our worship and prayer?' As they pondered over the subject deeply, they received the answer from within:

He who is the giver of spiritual knowledge and of strength, whom the whole world worships, whose command all learned men obey, whose shelter is immortality, whose shadow is death, He it is to whom

45. *ibid.*, p. 192

we shall offer our prayers and worship.⁴⁶

During the initial stages of spiritual life, the devotee cannot help thinking of God as outside of himself and as the embodiment of power. He attributes to Him human sentiments, even if he can rise above the conception of human forms. And he wants to come into living touch with Him, to enter into an intimate and personal relationship with Him, and to receive His protection and guidance. A sage of the *Rig Veda* prayed:

Be of easy approach to us, even
as a father to his son. Do Thou, O
self-effulgent Lord, abide with us

46. *Rig Veda*, 10.121, 1 & 2

and bring blessings to us.⁴⁷

The advanced devotee clearly sees the Divine also immanent in Nature and worships Him saying, 'Salutations to the God who is in the fire, who is in the water, who has pervaded the whole universe, who is in the plants and who is in the trees.'⁴⁸

Next, as a result of mental purification and introspection brought about by sincere devotion, the aspirant feels within himself the presence of the Divine which he has been worshipping outside. The sages of the Upanishads realised the self-conscious Principle immanent in

47. *Rig Veda*, 1.1 & 2

48. *Svetasvatara Upanishad*, 2.17

themselves as well as in all beings and declared:

It is the ear of the ear, the mind of the mind, the speech of the speech, the breath of the breath, the eye of the eye.⁴⁹

And finally there comes the grand realisation of the infinite divine Existence that is immanent and transcendent at the same time as declared in the Upanishadic passages:

He who dwells in the earth, and is within the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body the earth is, and who controls the earth from within—He is the Self, the

49. *Kena Upanishad*, 1.2

controller within, the immortal.⁵⁰

He who dwells in the sky, and is within the sky, whom the sky does not know, whose body the sky is, and who controls the sky from within—He is the Self, the controller within, the immortal.⁵¹

He who dwells in all beings, and is within all beings, whom all beings do not know, whose body all beings are, and who controls all beings from within—He is the Self, the controller within, the immortal.⁵²

He who dwells in the breath, and is within the breath, whom the breath does not know, whose body the breath is, and who controls the

50. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.7.3

51. *ibid.*, 3.7.6

52. *ibid.*, 3.7.15

breath from within—He is the Self, the controller within, the immortal.⁵³

He who dwells in the mind, and is within the mind, whom the mind does not know, whose body the mind is, and who controls the mind from within—He is the Self, the controller within, the immortal.⁵⁴

There is yet the realisation of the Absolute which is really beyond all question of immanence and transcendence, which is beyond all speech and thought, which the Upanishads try to describe mostly in negative terms:

It is neither consciousness nor unconsciousness. It is invisible,

53. *ibid.*, 3.7.16

54. *ibid.*, 3.7.20

unrelated, unperceivable, devoid of all connotations, unthinkable, undefinable, essentially of the nature of absolute self-consciousness, negation of all relative existence, infinite peace, supreme bliss and unity.⁵⁵

The Relation between God and Soul

In the passages on meditation on the Divine, we come across different conceptions of the Deity—personal, impersonal and also transcendental. Whatever may be the meditation that different devotees choose for themselves, they should try to establish an intimate connection between themselves and the Divine

55. Cf. *Mandukya Upanishad*, 7

with whom their existence is inseparably connected. Even if God is thought to be outside of oneself, the devotee should try to feel that his finite will is always in touch with His infinite will that controls and directs it. If He is looked upon as the infinite Whole, the aspirant must ever feel that his individual self is ever in contact with that Whole of which it is only a part. It is just as the ocean is inseparable from a particle of water belonging to it, whether the particle is in its usual state or in the form of a bubble; or it is as the infinite ocean of light which, though filling all space, is indivisible from the single ray of light that may or may not be reflected on a particle of sand.

Swami Vivekananda says:

Religion is... the eternal relation between the eternal soul and the eternal God.⁵⁶

The Upanishads speak of this inseparable relation in language that is both beautiful poetry and profound philosophy:

Two birds of beautiful plumage, closely united in friendship, reside on the self-same tree of the body. One of them eats the sweet fruits thereof, while the other looks on without eating. Seated on the same tree, the individualised being is deluded and grieves over its helplessness. But when it beholds the other—the worshipful Lord—

56. CW., 9th edition, 1964, Vol.3, p.4

and also His glory, it becomes free from all grief. When the seer realises that effulgent Supreme Being—the Author, the Lord, the Creator of even the creator—then that wise seer, having cast off all sin and merit, attains to the supreme stainless unity.⁵⁷

In order to follow the spiritual path with success, the aspirant should have a clear idea of the soul and the Divine, and also cultivate a definite relationship between himself and the object of his adoration. He should first of all ascertain in what stage of evolution he is and with what attitude he should approach the Divine. Then alone can he make any progress in

57. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.1.1–3

spiritual life. As with the world view, so also with the soul and the Divine there are three standpoints which are like the three rungs of the ladder of spiritual life.

The dualistic systems of thought hold that the souls are many in number, and that they are separate from one another and from God who is usually held to be extra-cosmic. But the souls are all dependent on the Divine as a servant is on his master, or a child is on his parents; they are all controlled by His will and power. According to the qualified non-dualistic ideas, the souls are many in number and yet they all form part of an infinite Whole, which is not a mere sum total of all souls, but is immanent

and transcendent at the same time. Just as the souls dwell in bodies, so does God dwell in individual souls as the indwelling Spirit or the Soul of all souls. In monism or rather non-dualism, the One without a second, the undivided and indivisible Existence-Knowledge-Bliss Absolute, is considered the only reality. For, from the ultimate standpoint the multiplicity of souls is regarded only as an appearance that has empirical reality so long as the highest Truth is not experienced. But with that revelation the limiting adjuncts of the soul such as the ego, mind, senses, etc., that have caused the multiplicity, are realised to be non-Self and therefore unreal.

The Threefold Spiritual Realisation

To the ordinary mind the three standpoints appear to be contradictory but to the seer they represent the three stages in the process of spiritual evolution through which man passes in his search after Reality.

Swami Vivekananda puts this clearly:

The religions of the unthinking masses all over the world must be, and have always been, of a God who is outside of the universe, who lives in heaven, who governs from that place, who is a punisher of the bad and a rewarder of the good, and so on. As man advanced spiritually, he began to feel that

God was omnipresent, that... He was not a distant God, but clearly the Soul of all souls... And a few individuals who had developed enough and were pure enough, went still further... And they found at last that they and the Father were one.⁵⁸

Man's conception of God evolves with the evolution of his own consciousness. As he comes to possess higher and higher conceptions of himself, his idea of the Divine Principle also grows grander and grander, and the relationship between the two, the worshipper and the worshipped, becomes more and more intimate, until perfect union, nay, even unity is established. '

58. CW., Vol.4, 147-148

O Lord,' declared the fully illumined Hindu devotee endowed with the all-inclusive vision, 'when I identify myself with the body, I look upon You as my Master and myself as Your servant. When I think of myself as the individualised soul, I regard You as the infinite Whole and myself as Your part. When I look upon myself as the Spirit transcending all limitations, my individuality is lost in You and I realise that I am verily Yourself.' A similar idea is expressed by St. John of the Cross, the great Christian mystic, when he says that in the last rung of the mystical ladder, divine love 'makes the soul to be entirely assimilated to God'. This is an experience which

only a few can gain, and of those who gain it, none can really describe this state of 'absolute assimilation with the divine Essence'.

The worshipper then rises above all limitations, drops all that is non-self and realises his oneness with the Divine. The great German mystic, Meister Eckhart, thus describes the process by which this divine union is accomplished and unity is realised:

Where the two grow into one, one loses its nature. Ergo, for God and soul to be one, the soul has to lose her own life and nature. They are one as regards what is left. But for them to be one, one must lose its identity and the other must keep its identity. Then they are the same.

In this non-dualistic stage man realises that the God he has been worshipping first outside himself, and then as the immanent Being, is in reality the transcendent Principle beyond all thought—which can be spoken of only as Unity. The man of the highest Illumination can at most hint at it, as does Swami Vivekananda, when he says, 'All that is real in me is He; all that is real in Him is I.'⁵⁹

To express it in mystical language, the devotee, in trying to find the centre of his soul, realises his unity with the Divine whose centre is everywhere; in attempting to know the circumference of his being, he

59. CW, 11th edition, 1962, Vol.1, p.323

discovers that he is the same as the Oversoul whose circumference is nowhere. The dividing line between the external and the internal, between I and Thou, between the subject and the object, disappears completely, and he realises the infinite transcendental Reality. The seers of the Upanishads tried to express this in mystical language as follows:

This Immutable is never seen, but is the Witness; It is never heard, but is the Hearer; It is never thought about, but is the Thinker; It is never known, but is the Knower. There is no other witness but This, no other hearer but This, no other thinker but This, no other knower but This. By this Immutable is the

(unmanifested) ether pervaded.⁶⁰

The Buddha, the enlightened one, refers in negative terms to this transcendental experience when he says:

He in whom passion for all lusts is gone, who rests on nothingness and has put aside all else, who is released in the highest of releases of perception, shall abide there without departing from it... There is a condition wherein there is neither earth, nor water, nor fire, nor air, nor the sphere of infinite space, nor the sphere of infinite consciousness, nor the sphere of void, nor the sphere of perception, where there is neither this world, nor the world beyond.

60. *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, 3.8.11

The Sufi mystics speak thus of their divine realisation in terms of love and unity:

Whoever enters in Love's city, finds room only for One and only in Oneness union... In God there is no duality. In that presence 'I' and 'me' do not exist. 'I' and 'me' and 'you' become one. Since in unity there is no distinction, the quest, the way and the seeker become one.

The Direct Monistic Approach—Its Conditions

There are ordinarily two types of spiritual aspirants. The majority worship God as the supreme Being endowed with form. They want to enter into a personal relationship with Him as Master, Father, Mother,

Friend or Beloved, or to establish a personal-impersonal connection with Him as the infinite Whole and the Soul of souls. Aspirants of the second type, want to realise the Divine Principle as their very Self or as the One without a second. Unable to adopt the discipline directly leading to this realisation, even most of the seekers of this group have to follow the graduated course of dualism, qualified monism and monism. Distinct from these there are some rare and highly qualified aspirants in whom moral perfection, freedom from desires and the spirit of detachment have reached a high standard of development. They resolutely follow the direct path to

the Absolute, transcending subject-object relationships of all kinds.

The devotees who worship God endowed with form pursue the objective method. God is the external object of their worship and adoration, with whom they want to unite their souls. The out and out monistic aspirant, on the other hand, follows from the very beginning the subjective form of spiritual practice in which the object 'of meditation is no other than his own true Self which is infinite and absolute by nature'. He usually meditates on the monistic maxim 'I am Brahman' or 'Thou art That'. By means of this he tries to expand his limited consciousness to infinite and absolute Consciousness

or Super-consciousness, rising above all limitations, physical and mental. At first he takes the help of the dualism of subject and object inseparable from relative existence, though in this he stresses the subject or Self more than the object. And finally, he attains that which transcends all duality and relativity, all conceptions of the knower, known and knowledge. In the words of Sri Ramakrishna, he is like a salt doll dissolved in the ocean.

The mental purification attained through strenuous ethical culture and intense meditation enables the aspirant to awaken his intuitive power. He is, as it were, brought face to face with Reality, and he gains

identification with It. This faculty of intuition is not something created or produced. It is an innate capacity for direct experience lying dormant in the soul, and is manifest the moment the obstructions that stand in its way are removed. Spiritual practices including meditation and the like only remove obstacles in the shape of false knowledge, as a consequence of which true knowledge of the Absolute manifests itself, just as the sun hidden by the clouds shines in all its glory when the clouds are dispersed by the wind.

The theistic worshipper may proceed from lower conceptions of the Divine to higher ones and get some resting place on the way. This

is true, to some extent, of the aspirant who wants to attain his monistic goal by stages. Making his own soul the centre of his being, he experiences in it the touch of the Divine as infinite Consciousness or Presence from which his existence is inseparable—a fact not recognised before owing to ignorance. Subsequently, with the unfolding of his spiritual powers, the seeker comes to be identified with the Infinite and to think in terms of the Infinite. He regards his personality and also all other personalities as manifestations or modes of the all-pervading Principle. First, realising the One as connecting the many, and then, the many as manifestations of the One, he finally attains to the

transcendental experience of the one without a second, in which the question of the One and the many does not arise at all. He thus follows the graduated path leading to the Absolute.

But the task of the aspirant who does not want to stop at any of the half-way houses on the way, is much harder than that of others. So he must be better equipped than others, and must possess special qualifications that would help him to march directly to the goal. Discrimination between the real and the unreal; dispassion for all enjoyments both here and hereafter; virtues like control of the mind and the senses,

withdrawal of the self from objects, forbearance, concentration, and faith in the ideal and the path; and a yearning for perfect freedom—these are the qualifications required of such resolute aspirants. When these conditions are fulfilled, the aspirant is able to take up the highest form of meditation on the One without a second, and attain to the superconscious state of the Absolute in due course.

Monistic Meditations

The conviction of the monist is effectively expressed in the statements:

The Absolute alone is real; the phenomenon is unreal. The indi-

vidualised soul is not other than the Absolute.⁶¹

He tries to realise this ideal by bringing home to himself through analysis, meditation, etc., the unreality of phenomenal existence including his own individuality, and by convincing himself of the reality of the Self and of the Absolute which appears, through the medium of time, space and causation, as relative existence consisting of the world of thought and matter. He denies the multiplicity of phenomena and asserts the unity of existence. This denial is, however, the result of a deeper assertion—the assertion of the supreme Principle wherein

61. *Brahmajnanaavalimala*, verse 20

there is no differentiation of the knower, known and knowledge, and which is infinite, transcendental and the essence of knowledge. In the following emphatic words Sankaracharya expresses this positive ground of the denials of the monist:

I am neither mind nor intellect, neither memory nor ego; I am not the senses of hearing or taste, of smell or sight. I am neither ether nor earth, neither fire nor air. I am the absolute knowledge and bliss. I am the Self all-pervading, I am the Self all-pervading.

I am the Self, changeless, formless, and omnipresent. I am beyond the touch of sense attachment. I am beyond all bondage of

relative knowledge. I am the Self all-pervading, I am the Self all-pervading.⁶²

So long as the monist goes on with his denial and assertion, he has not yet risen to the experience of the Absolute. He is still trying to remove the dream of multiplicity and to achieve awareness of Unity or the Absolute. After having attained to it, when he comes down to what may be termed the threshold that separates the superconscious experience of the Absolute from the relative consciousness of the world, and tries to describe his previous experience, he does so more in terms of negation than assertion.

62. *Nirvana Satakam*, 1 & 6

As the monistic goal is often misunderstood and misinterpreted, it is necessary to have a clear conception of it. Sankaracharya, the best authority on the system, sheds much light on its essential principle when he says:

It is the wave that merges itself in the ocean, not the ocean in the wave. So, verily, O Lord, when all distinctions are removed, it is I that become absorbed in You, not You in me.⁶³

The wave as such can never become the ocean. Only by dissociating itself from the wave-form and participating in the nature of its true

63. *Shatpadi*, 3

substance, namely, water, can the wave be merged in the ocean and be one with it. The finite can never become the Infinite. What appears to be finite, is really the Infinite. Self-realisation is only the discovery of this eternal truth. The finite, by shedding its false sense of finitude, realises its own essential nature as the Infinite. The Upanishads describe this process by means of very happy similes. 'As pure water poured into pure water becomes the same,' says the *Katha Upanishad*, 'so does the Self of the sage who has known the all-pervading Being become That.'⁶⁴

64. Cf. 2.1.15

Strengthening the Moral Nature

Are the monistic meditations of any use to those who intellectually appreciate them but cannot follow the monistic path of Self-realisation? Yes, they may read these and dwell on their meaning when they are not engaged in their own forms of spiritual practice and meditation. To the extent they are able to realise the glory of the Self, they will be strengthening their moral nature.

According to all the great schools of Vedanta, the soul of man is pure by nature, and religion does not signify the super-addition of anything to it by an outside agency. It is, as Swami Vivekananda puts it, 'the

manifestation of the Divinity already in man.’⁶⁵ As dirt cannot wash off dirt, so the constant thought of sin cannot remove sin. The realisation of man's true nature and its relation to the Divine is the surest way of freeing oneself from sin and its root-cause, ignorance. This is why the Vedanta stresses the potential Divinity of man, and ever enjoins on the aspirant to remember and realise it.

The constant thought of one's true Self and of Its innate purity and divinity serves as a great incentive to moral and spiritual life. It helps one to overcome immorality and weakness, to manifest holiness and strength, and to live a nobler life.

65. CW., Vol.4, p.358

Swami Vivekananda says:

Let every man and woman and child, without respect of caste or birth, weakness or strength, hear and learn that behind the strong and the weak, behind the high and the low, behind every one, there is that Infinite Soul, assuring the infinite possibility and the infinite capacity of all to become great and good... Teach yourselves, teach every one his real nature. Call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.⁶⁶

66. CW., 9th edition, 1964, Vol.3, p.193

Strengthening the Sense of Unity

The monistic meditations may serve another purpose. They will bring to the sincere seeker a stronger sense of unity and human solidarity. According to Vedanta, unity, even as purity, is not merely the law of the prophets but the law of our being as well. It is the law of the God within, the Self of all. And these laws are to be realised by subordinating our lower nature to the higher nature, our lower self to the higher Self. As the Vedantic teachers hold, the foundation of morals lies in the metaphysical fact of the unity of all beings in the Universal Self. Ethics thus has not only a utilitarian value

but a philosophical support and metaphysical justification.

We all know from experience that neither divine commandment nor scriptural injunction can make the average man moral. In order to be convinced, he wants a more rational justification of morality, especially when he has outgrown the stage of blind belief in dogmas. Speaking on this point, Dr. Deussen, the great Vedantic scholar of Germany, rightly observes:

The Gospels fix quite correctly as the highest law of morality: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. But why should I do so, since by the order of Nature I feel pain and pleasure only in myself, not in my

neighbour? The answer is not in the Bible (this venerable book being not yet quite free of Semitic realism), but it is in the Veda, is in the great formula. 'Tat Tvam Asi' (Thou art That), which gives in three words metaphysics and morals all together. You shall love your neighbour as yourselves, because you are your neighbour and mere illusion makes you believe that your neighbour is somebody different from you.

With a deep insight does a Western writer observe on this point:

Here we have deeply laid the metaphysical foundation of the duty of loving our neighbour and acting towards him as though he was our Self. 'That thou art'—that is to say, there is a deeper inclusive

Self in which you and he are one;
and loving service is the note or sign
of this practical identity.

The same idea is expressed in the
Bhgavad Gita with reference to the
man of God-vision:

Seeing the Lord existent everywhere,
he injures not the Self by the Self.⁶⁷

And not only that, he becomes
'engaged in the good of all beings'.
We thus see that the common source
of all moral forces of goodness and
unity lies within us, in the God
within, in the one Self, in the Uni-
versal Principle of existence and
light manifesting itself in all and
through all. In the recognition of this

67. Cf. 13.28

Divine Principle lies the hope of true fellowship and world-unity that we need so urgently in our disturbed and distracted world.

Thus, rightly understood, the doctrine of the One—the boldest synthesis in the whole history of human thought—is not a lifeless abstraction, but a practical system which fulfils life.

To quote the memorable words of Prof. Max Muller:

After lifting the Self above body and soul, after uniting heaven and earth, God and man, Brahman and Atman, these Vedanta philosophers have destroyed nothing in the life of the phenomenal beings who

have to act and to fulfil their duties in this phenomenal world. On the contrary, they have shown that there can be nothing phenomenal without something that is real, and that goodness, virtue, faith, and works are necessary as a preparation, nay, as the *sine qua non* for the attainment of the highest knowledge which brings the soul back to its source and home, and restores it to its true nature, to its Selfhood in Brahman.

The Perfect Man and the Ultimate Goal

‘Verily,’ declare the Upanishads, ‘he becomes Brahman who realises Brahman. He overcomes evil and transcends grief. Being free from

all knots of the heart, he attains immortality.’⁶⁸

Having attained transcendental consciousness, he rises above the phenomenal. In the highest state of superconsciousness, the phenomenon altogether disappears for him. Even when he becomes partially conscious of it and gains an awareness of his body, mind and surroundings, still he retains his superconscious bent. His whole outlook on life is revolutionised by his transcendental experience. He no longer feels any sense of identification with the objects of the external world but ever remains the witness of them all.

68. *Mundaka Upanishad*, 3.2.9

An enlightened sage of this type, who is established in supreme knowledge, is described as one of steady wisdom. Of him the *Bhagavad Gita* says:

When a man has cast away all the desires of his heart and feels satisfied in the Self alone, then he is said to be one of steady wisdom.⁶⁹

Having realised in the transcendental state, the Self dwelling equally in all, he hates no creatures, and is friendly and compassionate towards all. He is free from the feelings of 'I and mine'. Even-minded in pain and pleasure, forbearing, ever content, steady in meditation, self-controlled, possessed of firm convictions, he

69. *Gita*, 2.55

has his mind and intellect fixed on the Divine.⁷⁰

For the enlightened soul it is no longer necessary to deny the reality of the phenomenon and assert the reality of the Self even when he is not in the highest state of super-consciousness. Further, being established in the glory of the Self, he has transcended all moral conflicts that are bound to exist as long as one is in relative existence. All evils having been eliminated through strenuous moral and spiritual practice, there remain for him, during the state in which he is somewhat conscious of the world, only the good desires which existed before the dawn of

70. *Gita*, 14.24-25

supreme knowledge. Speaking of the perfect man, a teacher of Vedanta says:

After realisation, humility and other attributes which are steps to the attainment of knowledge, as also such virtues as non-injury, etc., persist like so many ornaments.⁷¹

In the words of Sri Ramakrishna, the man of Self-realisation, like the expert dancer, can never take a false step, although he does not care, like the beginner, to follow every rule by a special effort of the will. In whatever he does, his conduct is in full agreement with the highest ethics, and he is rightly said to be above

71. Cf. *Vedantasara*, Sadananda, 224

the distinctions of relative good and relative evil. As Prof. Max Muller correctly observes:

This is never intended as freedom in the sense of license, but as freedom that can neither lapse into sinful acts, nor claim any merit for good acts, being at rest and blessed in itself and Brahman.

Having fully attained the goal of life the enlightened ones no longer live for any objects of their own. Their body and mind being in tune with the Cosmic Power and Will, they live only for fulfilling some cosmic purpose. They may engage in active work for the good of others, or be still in communion with the

Universal Self. But whether they work or not, they set an ideal of the highest perfection and knowledge to impure and ignorant humanity. Besides, they surcharge the psychical world with their intensive spiritual thoughts and thus fertilise it to the benefit of others. Their very presence is a blessing to mankind. They promote the good of the world even through silence.

Thus, realising the Eternal and the Immortal as their own Self, they remain free in life as in death. They do not belong to any particular religion or country; for having attained to the Divine, they have become the Divine and as such one with the souls of all. May their noble lives and examples

be a source of abiding inspiration to the seekers after Truth all the world over!

Salutations to the great seers of Truth!

Salutations to the great seers of Truth!

About this Book

Swami Yatiswarananda (1889–1966), a former Vice-president of the Ramakrishna Math and Ramakrishna Mission, is a well-known spiritual figure in the Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Neo-Vedanta Movement who contributed much to it by his talks, articles, and spiritual ministration in India and abroad.

He had written an illuminating introduction to the book *The Divine Life* which in itself is an excellent and complete guide to spiritual aspirants.

The Introduction is now published as this book with some minor changes so that spiritual aspirants may derive greater benefit from it.



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