

WHY DO WE NOT MAKE PROGRESS IN RELIGIOUS LIFE?

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THIS is a question that persistently crops up or should do so in the mind of a genuine spiritual aspirant. For it is the way by which one can evaluate one's progress — not for elation —, find out the impediments that obstruct one's path and search out the requisite means to overcome these hurdles; in short, it is a pointer to self-analysis. And self-analysis for a religious is as essential as breathing to a living being. Devoid of self-analysis one is apt to sink into self-complacency from where the way is not far off to ego-centrism.

Let us examine where man is plausible to flounder in the present set-up. First of all it is important to note that we have to begin with whatever equipment we possess viz., with our wandering, wavering, unruly mind. In the ancient context, we perceive, the situation was quite different, people had a different lay out, plan of life, as far as religious life was concerned. There was the system of living with the preceptor, who was a man of advanced spiritual attainments. The teacher was there to test the disciples and regulate their life so that it did not stagnate; that it flowed towards its goal smoothly. Moreover, under the ancient system the knowledge of the scriptures was imparted very early in life. The whole atmosphere was rendered conducive to the healthy growth of the body, mind and spirit. We do not have today many of these fundamental advantages, instead we are overwhelmed by an antagonistic, atheistic environment. Our education has become academically oriented and money-motivated. Religion has become a taboo for many. Hampered and oppressed as we are by this heavy weather, most uncongenial to the growth of religion, we still have to make headway.

What do we mean by progress in spiritual life? How can we know about it? We cannot know about another man's spiritual growth, for it is not like his physical growth noticeable from outside. Nor is it something which the present scientific and technological appliances can reveal. It is not concerned with the body or its inner organs superficially. It is the mind that grows and changes, that expands and is illuminated, that sheds its weeds of selfishness and puts forth blossoms of a myriad hues of

selflessness. And who can judge it except oneself? How are we sure that we do not make a mistake in such judgments? Well, there are several codes by which we can safeguard ourselves from overestimating our progress and being a prey to conceit. One of these is absence of conceit itself. The pride of holiness is perhaps the worst type of vanity which attaches itself to man and leaves with great reluctance. 'Holier than thou' attitude is not a good ground for the germination of other helpful tendencies on the spiritual path. Was such an attitude to spring up in our minds we may be certain that our progress is barred. For who can know what instrument the Lord will like to use to manifest holiness and knowledge? Are there not instances when pupils who prided themselves of their learning were humbled by the teacher, by making one among them whom they despised take the role of the teacher? There is the story of Totaka, a disciple of Sri Śankara who appeared like a dunce in his studies but who excelled in the personal service to his Guru. The story goes that Śankara's other disciples looked almost with condescension on him. One day when all of them, except Totaka, had assembled for their daily lesson, the disciples asked Śankara, why the lesson was not being begun. Sri Śankara saw contempt for the absent disciple, as it were, seeping out of those words. Without a word the teacher waited for the absent disciple to come. And when he came Sri Śankara asked him to take the seat of the preceptor and hold the class for the day. There was no protest from Totaka and no objection from the others. Sri Śankara had along with his command infused into the disciple the knowledge that was necessary to explain the abstruse truths of philosophy. Thus we see how little we know about the will of God. So, there should be no room for any type of vanity in a holy man, and those who want to follow in his footsteps have also to eschew all of it.

We may remember here that prefatorial prayer, sung prior to the chanting of the *Gītā*: 'He whose grace makes the dumb speak volubly, and the lame cross the mountains, to Him, Mādhava, who is supreme Bliss, I bow down.' If a Swami Vivekananda could say, 'thousands of Vivekanandas may spring forth through one gracious glance of Sri Ramakrishna's eye', is it not preposterous on our part to presume the attitude of superiority? Whenever that attitude creeps into our mind let us ask this question: What have I achieved that I want to dictate to others, as if from a pedestal of judgment, of what they shall do or not do? Have I realized that Highest that I preen myself and strut about? We know that parents who are really solicitous for the welfare of their children never praise them in their presence, though they feel elated at the progress they make in their studies or in life. For there is the likelihood of the children getting conceited, and if we can remember that 'pride goeth before a fall' we would be cautious. Here for instance is the story of Śvetaketu. Śvetaketu was sent by his father to learn under a preceptor and on his return after the completion of the required period of stay with

the Guru, the father noticed that the son moved about with pride and aloofness. The father was disturbed, but he was himself a teacher par excellence and he knew how to wean away his son from his possible fall. One day he addressed him, 'My son, how is it that you move about like a man of high attainments? Have you by any chance known that *One by hearing which all things unheard become heard, by knowing which everything else becomes known?*' The son was startled out of his smugness. He was puzzled. He stammered and stuttered. 'How could that be, father, I have not heard of it. Perhaps, my preceptor did not know about it. Please deign to instruct me yourself.'¹ From the question that was asked by the father it seems that a man of knowledge, a man of realization, alone has the right to become proud and stand off from the world. No doubt only such a man has the right to do so, if any one had. But it is those very persons who have realized the oneness of everything, of God in all and all in God, who are the most humble. There is no pretence of humility in them; neither is it a cultivated one. Theirs happens to be the spontaneous humility. Therefore what the teacher means is that vanity in others is unforgivable when there is no vanity in the knowers of God. And if on any account they are seen to be indifferent to the world it is because in that state they are neglectful of even their own bodies. It is a state where they see nothing and hear nothing except God. The creation to them, their own bodies too, look like pillow cases without substance. The Substance, the Consciousness they perceive is without destruction. Elsewhere than this you will find God-men most sympathetic and most human to the problems of life, otherwise why should people flock to them for succour? When the mother who had lost her only child ran with the dead body to the Buddha and prayed for its restoration to life, was not Buddha most sympathetic? Did he not feel for the bereaved woman? But he was wise, he had come to teach the world the transience of all creation and could not fool them any more than they already were. Yet he did not give then a discourse on philosophy to the mother. Instead he told her to bring some mustard seeds from a house that had known no bereavement so that he could revive the child. Was not the truth told and yet without wounding the sensibility of the bereaved mother? To Sri Ramakrishna also many a bereaved soul came and were solaced. To one of them he said, 'Is it not natural that one should feel depressed and forlorn if a son who is as one's own part passes off?' Then he cited his own case. 'When Akshaya (Sri Ramakrishna's nephew) passed away I was near him and I saw the soul passing out of the body, as if the sword was being taken out of its scabbard and I laughed. But later on, for three days I felt as if my heart was being wrung like a wet towel. If that happens to me how much more should you not feel? But death pursues man every where, so be prepared'. He then sang a song in his soul-stirring voice and with great pathos which soothed the heart of the

¹ Chandogya, VI.i.3&7.

bereaved man as with a balm. So if any one carries an impression that God-men are unfeeling, he is most unfortunately mistaken. Their sympathy on the other hand is genuine and not in any way formal, lip sympathy.

Now, we find that all great teachers were of the opinion that humility is the ground where other virtues could sprout and prosper. Sri Ramakrishna said, 'Rain water does not collect on a mound. It runs down and collects in lowly places'. Likewise, we could surmise that all virtues accumulate in the humble alone.

II

We do some austerities, practise *sādhana* of some kind, get some dreams and visions of gods and goddesses and think that we have attained a great deal and that there is nothing further to be achieved. While all these are very good and not to be decried in any way, the conclusion drawn, that one has become holier than another, who has not had the good fortune to experience any of those things, is an attitude quite out of tune with religious life. Sri Krishna gives us an inkling into the way devotees behave when they happen to meet: 'Those who have given their minds to Me, whose sense organs are dedicated to Me, they, explaining and talking about Me to one another, are always pleased and happy'.² This is the meeting ground of devotees where it augurs well for everyone. Speaking about the Lord makes us forget our narrow personalities. We are lifted to a higher sphere from whence, for the time being at least, all mundane things appear as paltry, frivolous and flimsy, not worth any attention. Under such circumstances, how can one having some *sādhana* to his credit look down upon any one? How can arrogance dominate his mind? None of these should be able to capture or influence the minds of devotees if their struggle had been sincere, if their practices were properly directed. The very fact that we are unable to overcome these drawbacks in us must make us aware that our efforts are insufficient, or our inner urges are stronger and contrary. If in these circumstances one does a little more austerity and the like, how can he claim any preferential or exceptional treatment from others? On the other hand, if one does any religious act with a view to gain name and fame or recognition, one defeats the very purpose for which they are done. Religion is for realization, for emancipation and not for getting bound in this *samsara*. As it is, we have enough impediments to tie us down here without adding any more to their legion. Sri Krishna tells us about some of these qualities which make us return to this round of births and deaths again and again. 'Ostentation, arrogance, self-conceit, anger, harshness and ignorance,'³ are some of the qualities that are termed demoniacal

² Gita, X.9.

³ IBID., XVI.4.

and which require to be exterminated from our minds. Actually it is these, along with those of a like nature, that weigh us down, not allow us to rise higher. They are like the ballast to the balloon. But unlike the ballast, which we are free to cast away at our will or pleasure, these qualities stick on to us tenaciously once they are given room to dwell in. Even to turn out any one of them is a lifetime's work. Should we then allow them to get hold of us? Knowingly we should not, and caution must be taken to see that they do not sneak in unawares. Last but not the least aggressive of these passions are lust and greed. We find the whole world is moved by these two passions. Analyse the motives of all actions the world over, either of individuals or nations, and you will come to know about the truth of this statement. That is why Sri Ramakrishna once said that 'lust and greed' alone constituted *Māyā*. They cover man's intelligence and lead him away from his goal. It is not necessary for us to go into the working of every wicked tendency. We have traced the workings of one of them and the depredations and havoc it is able to do; others are equally if not more depredatory.

III

We must know that the mind cannot be made a vacuum. It has need of something to contain in itself. So, a good method of driving out the evil tendencies is to infuse, inject good tendencies into it. Sri Krishna lists them in the *Gītā* as follows: 'Fearlessness, purity of heart, steadfastness in the yoga of knowledge, charity, self-control, sacrifice, study of the scriptures, austerity, straightforwardness, non-injury, truthfulness, absence of anger, renunciation, peace, freedom from slander, kindness to beings, non-covetousness, gentleness, modesty, and non-fickleness, courage, forgiveness, fortitude, purity of body, absence of hatred and pride — these, O Arjuna are the possessions of those born with divine endowments'.⁴ Therefore along with our spiritual practices we should absorb some of these divine attributes little by little. It may not be possible for us to command them all at once. But if we try and pray to God sincerely we shall be able to fill ourselves with most of these good tendencies which in their turn will render us immense service. Even the possession of one of these qualities is an asset in spiritual life.

The common trait that is difficult to get rid of is jealousy. Sri Ramakrishna's remedy for all passions is to turn them Godward. 'Be jealous of God that He favours others with divine visions and blessedness and not you.' What is the meaning of the above statement? At first it seems there is little more than what meets the eye; but if you ponder deeply over it you will realize that it is not jealousy that is stressed there but turning it towards God — a process which makes you naturally think

⁴ Ibid., XVI.1-3.

of God, pray to Him earnestly to reveal Himself to you. In the process you forget jealousy and remember God alone. If we go through the hymns and songs composed by poet-saints, we shall be moved to see how constantly and closely they fought to communicate with God. Sings a poet:

*What a delirious fever is this that I suffer from!
O Mother, Thy grace is my only cure.
False pride is the fever that racks my wasted form;
"I" and "mine" are my cry. O, what a wicked delusion!
My quenchless thirst for wealth and friends is never ceasing;
How, then, shall I sustain my life?
Talk about things unreal, this is my wretched delirium,
And I indulge in it always, O Giver of all good fortune!
My eyes in seeming sleep are closed, my stomach is filled
With the vile-worms of cruelty.
Alas! I wander about absorbed in unmeaning deeds;
Even for Thy holy name I have no taste, O Mother!
I doubt that I shall ever be cured of this malady.⁵*

Only an aspirant who spends his time in singing to God is aware of his littleness and even while he prays can sing 'Even for Thy holy name I have no taste'. That will be our attitude when we shall be progressing in the spiritual path. Whatever we do we will feel it as insufficient an effort, compared with the bliss that is awaiting us in the end. Why then care for some empty name, fame and recognition here? Let us ask ourselves whenever this thought of name assails us: Of what use are this name and fame while living? Who remembers you after you have passed away? And what is the benefit that you derive by remembrance, if any? To all these questions you will get some hazy unsatisfying answers; all is vanity, that will be your conclusion. But think what an amount of good you will be doing to yourself and others around you if you live a life of unostentatiousness, purity and bereft of hatred and jealousy! Moreover, who can say that you may not one day attain the coveted goal if you but persist in your *sādhana* unmoved by any other motive than the love of God?

We think that we are pestered and persecuted by others. But it is not so. Listen to a song:

*O Mother, I have no one else to blame:
Alas! I sink in the well these very hands have dug.
With the six passions for my spade,
I dug a pit in the sacred land of earth;*

⁵ The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna, 1947 Edn. P.138.

*And now the dark water of death gushes forth!
How can I save myself, O my Redeemer?
Surely I have been my own enemy;
How can I now ward off this dark water of death?
Behold, the waters rise to my chest!
How can I save myself? O Mother, save me!
Thou art my only Refuge; with Thy protecting glance
Take me across to the other shore of the world.*⁶

'I have been my own enemy' that is the perfect idea. Sri Krishna too asserts it in the *Gītā*: 'Raise yourself by the Self; do not let the self sink. For the self alone is one's friend and the self alone is one's enemy. The self is the friend of one who has conquered the (lower) self by the Self and for the uncontrolled the (lower) self acts as its enemy'.⁷ No one can harm us spiritually unless we allow ourselves to be harmed. When this is so why hate others; and create some more complexities to bar our progress? Search out your own mind every time when you want to be angry with any one for the supposed wrong that has been done to you, and you will find that there was some desire, some want in you which was frustrated, Desires do no good to one who wants to escape from them; knowing this how can one feel inimical to those who prevent the desires from being fulfilled? All this indicate that it is not any one else that is responsible for our being caught up and stranded but our own minds. If this fact is firmly grasped then many of the unhelpful tendencies on our path can be got over, much of the energy frittered away in fretting and fuming can be saved. Have we that courage to take upon ourselves the blame? If so we have indeed gained a great deal and known what is preventing our progress.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Gita, VI.5&6.