

THE DIFFICULTIES OF A SPIRITUAL SEEKER

by

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The spiritual way of life is perhaps the most intriguing and enigmatic of all arts and sciences. The reason behind this difficulty in understanding and living the life spiritual is that this arduous adventure on the part of an individual is connected with so many subtle factors and calls for such dextrous adjustments from moment to moment that the entire process or effort is practically beyond the reach of the common man who is used to what we may call a happy-go-lucky attitude of total abandon to instincts, prejudices, routines and movements along beaten tracks of stereotyped conduct and behaviour in his personal and social life. It is by a rare good fortune, we should say, that a person gets fired up with the spiritual ideal, sometimes by causes which are immediately visible and at other times for reasons not clearly intelligible even to one's own self. Broadly speaking, a spiritual aspiration may be stirred up in the heart of a person by frequent association with spiritual Adepts or Masters, continued study of spiritual literature for a long time, or even a sudden awakening to facts brought about by the perception of blatant contradictions, sufferings and sorrows in life, as well as an unexpected shot of an insight arisen into the transiency and ultimate vanity of everything earthly and phenomenal. These may be regarded as some of the visible causes of the rise of a spurt of spiritual aspiration in the mind of a person, though these visible features have deeper

unseen causes extending outside the ken of the powers of the conscious human level. But the fructification of intense virtuous deeds performed in the previous lives and the right efforts put forth in such earlier incarnations of the soul may act as invisible causes of the manifestation of profounder spiritual urges even in an early age in one's present life.

The pressure of a spiritual sense of values can take one by surprise and lead one to such personal and social attitudes which may startle people around and force them into a conviction that 'something is rotten in the state of Denmark'. This may lead to a kind of social tension between oneself and others, though only for a short period of time, initially, and drive one to an adoption of such a gospel of life as may set oneself in a sort of disharmony with the atmosphere prevailing outside, if not entirely put upside down the accepted etiquette and ethics of the society into which one is born and in which one has been brought up. The spur of the spirit from within can for a time face the strongest forces of the world and blow like a whirlwind uprooting trees which stood firmly on the ground so long and casting out roofs of houses and temples which have been held so dear and sacred. It may even break the walls and ramparts of affection towards those who cannot but be regarded as indispensable relations of oneself, near and dear as one's own skin. In this sense, the upsurge of the spirit from within is a sort of revolutionary violence sprung upon everything around which is normally regarded as morally good, socially necessary and traditionally inviolable. This force of the spirit rising from within may even look like a terror to the sacredness of earthly formalities, a fire of doom that has come upon all the loveable values of life. When such a spirit takes possession of the individual, there can arise a feeling that nothing in the world is worth anything and the only thing worth the while is the realisation and the experience of the Supreme Being. It is under such conditions that a person hurries forward to places of seclusion, to temples, churches, monasteries, nunneries, Ashramas or convents, with the hope that here, perhaps, are chances

available for obtaining facilities in leading a contemplative spiritual life. And we have, thus, the spiritual seeker in a holy cloister.

The Mahabharata and the Bhagavadgita are the grand epic illustrations of the problems of a spiritual seeker and of the ways of confronting them and solving them once and for all. The Adi-Parva of the Mahabharata represents the condition of the seed in which form the spiritual tendencies and powers lie latent and having sprung up from the seed, remain like tender children requiring great protection, care and nurturing. The children grow up in a nebulous atmosphere of hope and insecurity mixed up in a confused proportion and they are not quite confident of the nature of their surroundings and the precise character of their future. In the Sabha-Parva the aspect of hope seems to be in a condition of jubilant fulfilment, and everything looks secure, fine and grand. This is exactly the stage of the spiritual seeker and the condition of tremendous enthusiasm and positivity, when he enters the sylvan surroundings of holy seclusion or the rigorous atmosphere of a monastery in which he expects to live the sublime life of contemplation on God. But there is a sting attached to the end of the Sabha-Parva which turns all the glory of initial enthusiasm into an anti-climax of utter suffering, and we find the Pandava brothers getting into the clutches of a deceptive dice game and being banished into the woods to find their fate in a wretchedness which would beggar description. And here we are in the Aranya-Parva. Such is the sorry state of affairs now that even at the end of the period of exile there is a need to live incognito for a time, lest the unfriendly forces should wreak vengeance upon the audacious goodness of a noble aspiration which is so offensive to the philistine world of social hypocrisy. So goes the Virata-Parva. But truth triumphs, goodness ultimately succeeds, and the power of virtue commands the admiration and attracts the attention of even the gods. There is a turn of events suddenly, and in the midst of the worst of sufferings promises come from mighty potentialities of the divine government, that things are not so

bad as they have appeared up to this time. Great energies get gathered up, and sympathy and support come from all sides. Not only such celestials as Indra but invincible heroes like Sri Krishna offer to join the forces of virtue and aspiration in their battle against the opposing elements of egoism, greed, lust and wrath, the powers earthly and the instincts undivine. The Udyoga-Parva describes the assembly of powerful and undaunted friends of the Pandavas deliberating over the courses of future action. This is the most complex among the eighteen Sections of the Mahabharata, wherein we have a portrayal of colourful dramatic scenes that are enacted prior to the commencement of the sanguinary war with the forces of Nature which, in the vehemence of their asserting the beauty and joy of a real diversity of values and the meaningfulness seen in sensory contact and the physical possession of earthly goods, attempt to destroy the diviner powers that are struggling to tend towards an ultimate unity of life. It is here that there is the picture of a beautiful blend of human effort and divine grace, and the rising of a confidence that success is perhaps a possibility. God himself takes the responsibility of seeing that the needful is done in the matter of the protection of the forces of divine aspiration and virtue, and we have in the Udyoga-Parva a description of the majestic event of such a superhuman character as Sri Krishna himself undertaking the task of going on a peace mission to the assembly of the Kauravas. Not only that; the dread power of God is visibly demonstrated as being there behind the powers of goodness, virtue and aspiration, when the occasion arose for Sri Krishna to exhibit his cosmic form. The actual battle, however, commences in the Bhishma-Parva, where, at the very beginning of the battle that was to ensue, there is a surprising description of an astonishing attitude which Arjuna reveals, quite contrary to the heroic preparations made earlier for the fierce battle that was regarded as unavoidable.

This condition is precisely the initial stage of actual spiritual practice,-a sudden dampening of fervour, a mixing up of emotions and a totally unexpected persistence of the

seeker in misconstruing all values and putting the cart before the horse, thus attempting to turn upside down all the logic and ethics of that earlier occasion when it was thought with great wisdom that there was an inescapable significance and meaning in embarking upon the adventure of a war. What follows is the gospel of the Bhagavadgita pronounced in eighteen Chapters representing the stages of the ascent of the soul in its spiral movement towards the Absolute. In the war of the spirit it is not merely the forces of obvious evil, such as Duryodhana and his henchmen that are to be faced and overcome, but also traditional law and ethics embodied in Bhishma, though the oldest and the most venerable for everyone equally; efficiency and learning going hand in hand with unscrupulousness adumbrated in the personality of Drona, though extremely powerful and helpful; and misdirected friendship and fraternal feeling as pictured in the figure of Karna, though immensely cooperative and a dependable source of awful strength. All these good things, dear things, valuable things and sacred things have to be sacrificed at the flaming altar of soul's allegiance with and surrender to the cause of the ultimate Goal of life. And in this awe-inspiring, heart-rending and terrific war of the Spirit waged for the establishment of Truth and Righteousness, the silent helping hand of God is seen to be vigorously active right till the end, when the war is finally won, all which are some of the beautiful scenes painted through the Chapters of the Mahabharata.

The seeker's entering a monastery or a place of holy seclusion is really the beginning of his troubles. The austerities personally volunteered and the disciplines externally imposed by the surroundings or the atmosphere of this life try to dig up the gold and the treasure that is hidden in the mine of the seeker's inner substance. But the digging also raises a lot of dust which can even blind one's eyes and hard stones and pricking thorns may not infrequently be found side by side with the treasure that is buried in the deeps. The spiritual urge can suddenly wane, being beclouded by the dust and dirt which may be kicked up

by the forces insisting on an attachment to diversity, which may for a time eclipse even the brilliance of the sun of the Supreme Spirit planted in the heart of man as his very Self and beckoning him from outside as the illimitable Infinite. A lethargic condition, one of torpidity, callousness, hunger and sleep may be the stage immediately following the upsurge of religious enthusiasm and longing for spiritual liberation, with which the seeker may enter a monastery or find a place in the vicinity of a Master. A falling back upon the principle of least resistance and least action can be the outcome of this state of mind. The spiritual urge gets pressed down at once by the cumulative effect of a dark and cloudy reaction set up by the powers of desire, otherwise normal to a human individual, which have been relegated to the limbo all the while when the spiritual urge was predominant, though for a short period. The sense and the ego are like the devil and the deep sea, between which the seeking individual is likely to get caught, and whichever of the two ways one moves, one's fate is sure to be destruction.

After a lull of inertia and sleep for a few years, there can arise an irresistible desire for sense-enjoyment, the very thing which looked undesirable years ago when a fit of renunciation drove the seeker to the hermitage or the monastery. The usual form of desire is actively sensory and herein it is that one may become prone to yield to the pressure of the subhuman side of passions that insist on having their fill. These are the impetuous instincts of the animal world, the savage nature, which have no regard for the good of the individual concerned, because their objective is only physical satisfaction. This is the immoral nature, so much condemned in the science of ethics, since it has no concern with the welfare of others. The seeker may become neurotic and eccentric when the outlets for his feelings and urges are blocked by the regulated atmosphere outside. The greatest enemies of the spiritual aspirant are wealth, sex, fame and anger. A craving for silly satisfaction through even the pettiest objects of sense, of play and diversion, may rise to the surface and press for fulfilment. There is always an

interplay of inertia (Tamas) and craving (Rajas) in the mind of the seeker who is still on the path of struggle and is groping in darkness. The achievement, if at all there has been any, up to this stage, is a suppression of desire simultaneously consequent upon the burning of the fire of renunciation and love for God, which showed its head in an earlier stage. It is something like an ocean sweeping over dustbins and locations of drainage and sewage, flooding them with its overwhelming rush and force and submerging them for a while, but not actually transmuting them into purer substances. The initial spiritual urge of the jubilant enthusiast, our youthful hero on the path, is of this nature. The dust and dirt and rubbish are all there when the oceanic waves recede and when the daylight of sense activity falls upon them, reverting them to their original form of rot and stink. Spiritual seekers, beware! It is not all rose-bed or milk and honey that is the path you are treading. A razor's edge, verily, it is!

Any healthy advice not conducive to the fulfilment of desire may be looked upon with resentment. And any over-exerted pressure of the cloister may force the seeker back to the condition of sleep, an unsocial behaviour (rarely it can even be anti-social), a sense of hopelessness, a melancholy mood and an air of dispiritedness. Then there can come rising up the hissing snake of ire against all spiritual effort, even against the very faith in the existence of God, and a longing to listen to the call of a return to worldly life, the very condition from where the soul once struggled to soar above in a flaming aspiration. How mysterious is the way spiritual! Many students of Yoga who once demanded nothing short of the realisation of God in this very life were forced later on to go back to the old routines of the work-a-day world of sense and ego. There is a very strange reaction produced by the desires suppressed for long, and that is the vehemence and ferocity with which they can strike back on centres of indulgence with redoubled force, making the moral condition of a person much worse than what it would have been even under an accepted normal state of worldly life. Prolonged

celibacy of a repressed character may urge one to an impulse towards leading the life of a householder or even of seeking physical satisfactions at lower levels by a psychological regression into earlier instinctive stages of what modern psychoanalysts call the 'libido'. Disturbing dreams and erratic thoughts of self-fulfilment in a variety of ways may become a common feature. There can even be a return to such gross levels as business and shop-keeping as the result of a kick received from those desires which were not allowed a free hand by the action of an overwhelming influence exerted by that spiritual enthusiasm which once had risen up to the surface long ago. An itching for frequent outings, trips and journeys can become one of the innocuous avenues for the escape of energy which was kept bottled up but not harnessed by sublimation. A thoroughgoing repulsion to circumstances requiring one to live alone and a panicky love for company of others at any cost, even if it be in a street or market place, can become an easy solution the horrors pictured before the senses and the ego by the relentless hands of the call spiritual. Grammar and literature, art and music may assume the role of not only harmless accessories to living the ideal of one's life but even forms of spiritual practice by themselves. And so our hero does go his way, undaunted by what the world may say from outside or what the conscience may speak from within.

The almost incurable trait of finding fault with others, whether by way of philosophical doctrine, technique of practice or personal attainment, may become a source of negative satisfaction when one does not possess anything that is positive. To cavil at great men and noble souls is perhaps the easiest way of becoming great oneself. Sisupala suddenly became important due to his cheek in casting aspersions on the Lord Sri Krishna. To many this is the chief source of acquiring social status and gaining certificates and encomiums from the unwary public, to exploit whole ignorance through these deceptive means of vainglorious complacency is a covetable ideal to get on comfortably in life. But Nature's wrath and the nemesis of divine law is

something which cannot be foreseen by the eyes of this astounding stupidity discoverable in human behaviour. The finding of fault with others runs, of course, hand in hand with the habit of self-justification and self-assertion which loudly proclaims that its viewpoints and the ways of its working are infallible.

There are Gurus or Masters whom it would not always be easy for a spiritual aspirant to befriend or serve. We have a classic instance of the story of the spiritual quest of Tibet's Yogi Milarepa who underwent an intolerably severe training under his Preceptor Marpa. The hardship of living with a Guru is a thing our modern curiosity-ridden students cannot understand, far less appreciate or be able to endure. But spiritual attainment exacts such a price from anyone who is really sincere in this glorious pursuit; nay, all the priceless goods of this earth cannot be regarded as equal to the value of the fruits which such a strict personal discipline and such knowledge would yield in the end. Doubts and fears unmistakably hover round even the sincere seeker like vampires ready to suck one's blood. One may doubt the worth of one's own Guru. Can this be the last stroke that Satan attempts to deal at the root of all spiritual aspiration? Perhaps not. Because, there can be something worse, and that is a disbelief in the very existence of God and a conviction about the nonsensical character of spiritual salvation which the seeker on the path is supposed to be striving for. But a type like that of Milarepa or the noble example of Nachiketas recounted to us by the Katha Upanishad is made of a different stuff, persistence in one's pursuit and tenacity in one's practice are the hallmarks of such heroes who are not only the salt of the earth but a dazzling credit to the immortal glory of mankind's essential function which tops the list of all its duties.

Physical disease, extreme talkativeness, loss of memory, gluttony, dullness of aspiration, doubts of different kinds, remission in the continuity of practice, laziness, a subtle desire to have sense-enjoyment, mistaking illusive perceptions for reality, inability to find the point of

concentration, and instability in the practice of meditation are some of the major obstacles on the path of the seeker. A desire to mix too much with society, to raise large institutions and expand the circle of one's disciples can act as a fatal weapon to deal a death-blow at the hunger of the soul for God. History is here our best teacher. The life of Rishyasringa as we have it recorded in the Mahabharata, the life of Visvamitra given to us by Valmiki in the Ramayana, the life of Buddha told in the poem by Edwin Arnold, the 'Paradise Regained' of Milton, the life of Yogi Milarepa recorded by Evans-Wentz, the lives of the Alvars and Nayanars of Southern India, the life of St. Augustine, the writings of Thomas a Kempis, and such great examples as Rishabhadeva, Jadabharata, or Dattatreya of ancient times, the life of Sri Krishna-Chaitanya-Deva, and the like would provide a stimulating and most helpful study to every student on the path of Yoga.