

VOWS FOR THE NEW YEAR

by

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What is our duty in the New Year? This is the subject of our contemplation on this eve of the advent of a new light.

Our duty is to be true to God and true to one's own self – a stocktaking of our previous year's follies and forfeits, a striking of a balance sheet of what we have done in the last year from January to this day, the last day of December. We have lived for twelve months, and we should take stock of what we have done – strike a balance sheet, as accountants do: what good has been done and also what wrong has been done, how much progress has been made in our soul's longing and aspiration for its destination, and whether we have been moving in the proper direction or whether we have been sidetracked. Throughout the year we may have been moving in a wrong direction – though we must have been moving, no doubt. Instead of moving in the eastern direction, quite likely we may have been moving in the opposite direction because the east can be reflected through the west if a mirror is kept midway between the two directions, and wrongly we may move towards the rear part of what is visible before us.

The greatest of vows and dedications we can make on this holy occasion, this blessed moment of the New Year, is that we shall be true to our own selves. This is the most

difficult part of all observances and vows because while we know what is good for us oftentimes, we deliberately commit a wrong and an error on account of affiliation with our body. We are affiliated to this physical body too much, and therefore we many times play second fiddle to the voice of the senses and the weaknesses of flesh. The spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak; and the weakness of the flesh can create such a devastating effect if it is given a long rope. Vigilance should be our watchword in the New Year because with all our wisdom and power of will and understanding, we must also remember what caution Bhagavan Sri Krishna has given us in the Bhagavadgita: *indriyani pramathini haranti prasabham manah* (Gita 2.60). The senses are too powerful for us. They are very active day and night; impetuous, vehement and turbulent are the senses.

So we pray to the Almighty to give us, to bless us, with sufficient knowledge and strength to withstand the onslaught of the senses. We cannot control the senses because they are in the body and they draw sustenance from the body. The bodily needs become bodily passions. In the beginning, our weaknesses manifest themselves as preferences. "I prefer coffee to tea." We don't say, "I have a passion for a thing." We say, "I have a preference." Then afterwards it becomes a liking, a little more intense. "I would like to have it." It is not merely a preference or a wish; it becomes more intense. "I must have it." And it is impossible to live without it. When a weakness becomes an uncontrollable, vehement pressure upon ourselves, we call it a passion. The senses can slowly lead us into this condition from a harmless state of preference and wish to a serious condition where we would have no succour. Awful is life when the soul succumbs to the voice of the senses and the flesh.

Sadhakas, seekers of truth, therefore have to take a disciplined vow that they shall live a life of minimum comfort and maximum vigilance and understanding. The first vow that we take is that we have minimum comforts. We should not ask for luxuries, because luxuries are not necessary for the body. The needs of the body are different from the

cravings and the passions, greed and luxury. So the first and foremost thing to tabulate on our diary today, on this New Year, is what are our needs. We will find that our needs are very few. They are not many. Most of the things that we have are not needs, they are only luxuries; and while we have a right to ask for our needs and creature comforts, we have no right to ask for luxuries because that which exceeds the limit of our needs does not belong to us.

Thus, the first vow that we take is we shall have minimum comfort possible. If we can get on with two blankets, it is sufficient, and we should not ask for ten blankets or five quilts, because they become luxuries. They are all right, but they are not needs. If we can get on with one good meal and a light supper, that is sufficient. We need not have a heavy breakfast, a heavy lunch, a heavy supper, and also a heavy tea with some titbits in between. These are not the needs of the body.

The needs of the senses, the needs of the body and the needs of the mind have to be curtailed to the minimum so that we may gain a double advantage. One thing is, we will not be thieves. A person who enjoys more than what he needs is a thief, and he is culpable. He will be punished by the law of nature. Also, this voluntary self-sacrifice that we do by taking only what is the minimum necessity for our lives will be serving society, and to that extent we will be ameliorating poverty in the country. Why should we have greed to earn millions of dollars every month while it is not essential for our life? Why do we corner wealth in a particular part of the land when others may be dying of hunger and poverty? Therefore, the first vow we take is that our comforts should be to the minimum, to the barest necessity of the physical body, merely for its existence and its normal activity.

The second vow we take is: We do not take more than what we have given. This is a very important vow. We are reborn into this world of transmigration, *samsara* chakra, as we call it, because we have taken more than what we have given. To take more than what we give is to borrow without

giving back. Exploitation of every kind comes under this category. We should not exploit even a servant by taking more than what we give him. If we give a few rupees of salary to a servant in the house, it does not mean we should harass him with work for twenty hours of the day just because of his poverty.

Exploitation is of various types. Taking advantage of the ignorance or the weakness of another person is what is called exploitation. If he is a poor man, ignorant, and knows not the tricks of the world and the worldly wisdom that certain people have, people exploit him. Putting to one's own personal use the ignorance and poverty and the helpless condition of other people is exploitation, which is a sin. So we shall not take more than what we have given.

We shall not eat what we have not earned. We cannot ask for bread unless we have earned it. At least some contribution must have been made in some way, whether physical, psychological, educational, spiritual, or whatever it is. What contribution have we made to deserve the bread of our day? If we have not made any contribution, we will be reborn for having taken what we have not given.

So, minimum comfort is the first vow. We should not ask for more than what we actually need. The second vow is we should not take more than what we have given. The third vow is, hurt not the feelings of others – either in your thought, word or deed. Do not speak barbed words, words which sting and pierce. If possible, give satisfaction and joy to others. If we cannot do it, we should keep quiet. It is not necessary that we should utter words, do deeds or think thoughts which are derogatory to the happiness of other people. This comes under ahimsa, the greatest of vows. We should never speak a bitter word to any person, even to a subordinate or underling. If possible, we should speak educational words. Even if a person is wrong, that wrong can be set right by educational psychology and educative methods of approach. That is our duty.

Among the three forms of tapas mentioned in the Bhagavadgita, one form of tapas is speaking sweet words. If we cannot speak sweet words, we need not speak at all. We can keep quiet. Hurting others' feelings is an objectionable trait. It is due to the rise of selfishness in us that sometimes we speak words which are not conducive to the progress of the happiness of others. Ahimsa is popularly defined in this manner as not hurting the feelings of others.

The other vow is that we shall not deliberately speak a lie. Unconsciously we may utter a falsehood without knowing things properly, that is different; but wantonly we should not speak a lie. We speak lies for the satisfaction of the ego. That should not be done. This should be one of the vows for the New Year.

And the most significant vow of *sadhakas* and novitiates is *brahmacharya*. The control of the senses and the restraint of the mind for craving for objects of sense are vows which have to be fulfilled. *Sattva* increases when *ahara*, or the intake of the senses, becomes pure. *Ahara* means intake of the senses, and not necessarily just the diet which we munch through the mouth. All the objects which are fed to the senses are the diet of the senses. While we should take pure diet, *sattvic* diet, it also means we should see *sattvic* things through the eyes, hear *sattvic* words through the ears, speak *sattvic* words through the mouth, and touch and smell only *sattvic* things. All the five senses should be connected only with *sattvic* objects. That is *ahara shuddhi*. When *ahara shuddhi* is there, there is an increase of transparency of character, luminosity of nature. When *sattva* increases within us, our memory power, power of concentration and meditation also get intensified. When the power of concentration is there, the knots of the heart of bondage are broken. We become liberated.

These are the disciplinary vows which we may undertake as a necessary step in our progress on the path of *sadhana* and God-realisation. But other than these disciplinary methods, there is the higher aim that we have to keep before

us always: the ideal of life. What is the goal of our life, what is the objective behind us, what is the purpose of our activities – what is it that we want finally in our life. This also should be decided, and we had better think it now because we do not know what length of time, what span of life has been allotted to us in this world. “Remember death,” Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj used to instruct us. “Remember death, and you shall remember everything good for you.” This is because death is the greatest teacher of mankind. The greatest disciplinarian is time, says Bhagavan Sri Krishna in the Bhagavadgita. “Among disciplinarians, I am time.” The Time Spirit is the hardest taskmaster in the world. He will not spare even a second. The second that is gone is gone forever; it will not come back. We cannot beg the Time Spirit, “O my Lord, please bring back the time that has gone. I am sorry.” He will not accept ‘sorry’ or anything of the kind; what has gone has gone. *Kalah kalayatam aham* (Gita 10.30): “Among measurers, among disciplinarians, among restrainers, I am the Time Spirit,” says God.

We must remember the current situation in which we are – that is, any time we may receive the call to quit. There is no saying when this call will come; and when this call comes, we have to go – finished. Come means come, that’s all. We cannot say, “After sometime. My child is in the cradle.” “Let it be there.” “I have not received my salary.” “Okay, you quit, salary or no salary.” “What about my children; what about my wife?” “I don’t know. You quit.” This is what he will say. “You hang yourself – your children and your wife and your property and your salary, nobody cares. You quit just now.” Such orders will come to us, and nobody will hear our cry. Our cry is in the wilderness. “O Lord, what is the mistake I have made? So many years I have lived in the world. What have I done, O God?” At that time, we will weep. So let us not weep in the end. Let us be cautious and prepared now itself. “If the call comes, I am ready – yes.” We must be able to say that. “If it is now, it is now. Okay, all right.” But we are not ready for it because we have commitments. Snapping all these commitments from now onwards is the act of wisdom.

We should turn from this bondage of what we call commitment in life, the cause of transmigration. We shall search for the goal of life, which is our supreme father and mother. All blessed things it is. When we go there, we shall get everything. We will find father there, we will find mother there, we will find children, we will find salary, we will find honey and milk; we will find everything when we go there. But we do not want to leave this place. That is our ignorance.

Therefore, the goal of life should be set. And, the span of life is counted. Every hair of our body is counted, every breath is counted, and every minute of our life is counted and checked. It cannot be increased. So, together with a life of discipline we should also keep our goals clear before us, and never be misled or sidetracked, and be ready to quit, whatever be the time of that order.

Together with this we should also try, as much as possible within our capacity, to the extent permitted by our knowledge, to lead a life divine. To lead a life divine is to live a life of remembrance of God. We get into trouble the moment we forget God. Among Sufi teachers there is a famous dictum: *Samsara* does not consist in persons and things; *samsara* consists in the forgetfulness of God. Just because we are in the midst of many persons and things, it does not mean that we are in *samsara*. *Samsara* is not things and persons, and it is not property. That is not called *samsara*. *Samsara* means oblivion to God's existence, ignorance of the existence of God. Forgetfulness of God is called *samsara*, and not the existence of things and persons.

We are caught not because there are things in the world, but because we have forgotten God. Hence, our freedom consists in planting the love of God in our hearts and enshrining Him in our hearts so that we may enter into Him later on and be thrice blessed. Difficult is this path. Sharp, cutting, subtle, invisible is this path to the spirit. We do not know where that path lies to reach God. Where do we have to move – to the east or to the west? In which direction do we have to move to reach God? Nobody knows, because God has

no direction. If there was some direction in which we could have moved towards Him, we would have moved, but there is no direction, unfortunately for us, and therefore we are flabbergasted, we are in consternation, we are confused, and the end of it all is that we do nothing because we know nothing. When there is no knowledge, there is no action, no right activity.

Most difficult is to comprehend this path of God, because it is not to be comprehended with the faculties with which we are endowed – not through the senses, nor through the mind, nor through the intellect. It is the soul that visualises God, nothing else. It is the Atman beholding the Atman, God seeing God, as it were, because the soul has no senses, it has no body, it has no intellect, it has no passions. It is pure luminosity of spirit; and it is this soul within us that comprehends God as Universality.

Thus, in this New Year may we pray to the Almighty that we may be blessed, because without His grace we cannot lift even a finger. May this light of the New Year come to us as the light of God, as the light of freedom, as the light of purity, as the light of discipline and as the light of knowledge, the light of strength and power. This should be our prayer.

And when we take decisions in this manner, when we take vows, when we determine and decide to take steps in this fashion, we must also be able to sit for the results. Patanjali says in a sutra that we cannot gain constantly in this practice unless it is continued daily. We should not miss it even for a day. And the practice should be continued not only every day, but with a great intensity of ardour, fervour and intense longing for it. When this practice continues in this manner for a protracted period with intense love for it, we get established. Once we get established in it, nothing can shake us.

But a hard job it is. It requires a long-drawn training of the mind in a conducive atmosphere, in the atmosphere of a teacher, with the grace of God. Dattatreya says that the love of God arises in the soul only due to the grace of God. We

cannot say a buffalo loves God; a buffalo has no consciousness of God.

[At this point the clock strikes midnight]

Krishna Bhagavan ki jai! Wish you all a happy New Year of love of God, aspiration for God, and God-realisation in this birth! This is the spirit of the New Year which we have to keep up with: tenacity, and great power of will born of understanding, study of scriptures and regular brushing up of our memory through various sadhanas which have been prescribed.

God's grace is upon us all! We have to remember again the untiring message of Swami Sivanandaji Maharaj: God first, world next, yourself last. Always take God first. In every event, in every action and in every enterprise keep God as the first element and the principle; the world should be taken into consideration only afterwards; and we have to be taken into consideration as the last element because God was first, the world came afterwards, and we were the last after the world was created, so we cannot take ourselves first. Gurudev's teaching is God is first in everything – in every action, in every enterprise. In every new beginning God is first, and we should think of the world only afterwards, and we should not think of ourselves at all. We will be taken care of by that which is above us. If we forget ourselves in the world, the world will take care of us, and if we forget the world in God, God will take care of both the world and ourselves. This great dictum should be remembered, and we should try to practice it: God first, world next, yourself last.

God is the Supreme Reality and is the only goal of life, towards which every atom, every blessed thing big and small, every soul is gravitating. As rivers rush in to the ocean, all souls move towards God – rush towards God, as it were - because the goal of all life, all creation, whatever be its form, is the realisation of God, the Supreme Being, the Absolute.