

# MODERN MAN IN SEARCH OF A SOUL

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by

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These sessions, which go by the name of a conference, have been organised with a special purpose which to every one of you must be obvious—namely, to find a specific occasion when we all seated here may be enabled to collect ourselves into a focus of attention in the direction of what, perhaps, we are seeking in this life. This precisely seems to be the theme of this session today—what is it that we are seeking in this life; what is it that anyone is searching for through the vicissitudes, the works and enterprises in various walks of life. The turmoil and tumult of human endeavour is dinning such a clamour into our ears from moment to moment that we hear only the noise of human activity and desire, and a moment required for considering the motive behind human enterprise does not seem to be available.

Now, these two sentences that I have uttered will perhaps form a sort of introduction to the theme we are supposed to discuss. That we cannot find time to pay due attention to the purpose for which we are living and working will be an answer to the manner in which we are living in this world. A machine works very hard and works continuously in a very systematic, precise, mathematically operated manner, but the machine does not know that it is working in

that way. So there can be a precise and scientific movement for the purpose of an output, as in a mill or a factory, without the movement being conscious as to the very nature of the output. Some sort of stuff is ejected out of the machine which is as unconscious of itself as is the operating mechanism behind it.

Today we—men and women, humanity in general—have become accustomed to believe the great ideology that a machine is an indispensable appurtenance of human life. We cannot do anything without the assistance of a machine. This shows the subsidiary character of man in comparison with the gigantic operative mechanisms that he has considered necessary for not only his satisfaction, but even his existence. He manufactures arms, not perhaps obviously for an immediate satisfaction, but for a security in regard to his own existence. Even his existence is controlled by a machine—he cannot even be sure that he will be here for a few minutes unless a machine operates around him; and a machine need not necessarily be a typewriter, or a printing machine, a motorcar or an airplane.

I am now trying to bring our minds to the very concept of mechanism, which is a way of thinking rather than an object that we visualise with our eyes. There is a philosophy which sometimes goes by the name of 'mechanism'. We know very well that a philosophy cannot be a machine which we can obtain from a market. It is not a thing, it is not a substance, and it is not anything that is tangible. It is a conceptualisation and a certain outlook of the psyche of the human being—we may say the outlook as a whole of a particular set of people. This is called a mechanistic philosophy, and it has its roots in that which goes by the name of a scientific evaluation of things. In some way, classical science is mechanistic, though I do not say that every science is so. Today we are at the fag end of the discoveries of science, which has awakened the scientist himself to a novel presentation by nature—that it is perhaps not working on mechanistic lines, though ancient scientists like Lapis, Newton, etc. thought that there is nothing but mathematics working in the universe. Maybe

mathematics is working even now, but it is working only at a certain level of human life. We need machines only under certain circumstances of life, and it is not true that we need mechanisms always, under every circumstance in our lives. That this is a truth may not occur to the minds of many of us, since we have not found time to think of conditions of living where machines may not be of any utility to us and we cannot save ourselves even with the help of machines. There is something in us which cannot be amenable to the operation of a machine. I do not wish to dilate upon this aspect, since during the few days of Sadhana Week we had occasion to discuss these aspects also.

None of us would believe that we are only machines, though from the point of view of a behaviourist psychologist, or a pure atomist, or a physiologist, we may be appearing to work like stereotyped machines, measurable by the rods of medical science and intelligible from the philosophy that is behind this approach.

Today we have been asked to speak on a very well-known but intriguing theme—man in relation to his soul. Here we are likely to commit an error at the very outset when we utter the words ‘man’ and ‘soul’. Though we may be well-educated persons, mature, and past sixty or seventy years of age, it may not be true that we have a correct understanding of what man is in relation to what we hear of as a soul. With all our age and experience and learning, we cannot escape the childish notion into which we have been born—that the soul is something that is residing in this body.

Now, does such a thing exist, or does it not exist? If we feel that there is such a thing called ‘soul’ independent of the body and yet existing within the body, illuminating, vitalising, energising this body which we sometimes mistake for what we really are—if this is our understanding of a so-called existence called a ‘soul’, and a mystery called ‘man’, then we would not be able to answer this great query that is raised by the very theme of the discussion today. What is happening to man today, and what he is today, is perhaps a

necessary background on which we have to base our further considerations in the direction of a solution to this great question or pose—is man searching for a soul, or is he searching for anything at all?

A machine has not a soul, we know very well, and when we say that a machine has not a soul, we know what we mean. Everyone knows what is meant when a statement is made that a motorcar has not a soul, an airplane has not a soul, a robot has not a soul, any mechanism has not a soul. When we say this, what do we mean in our minds? We are making a statement without being clear as to what we are saying. We have a vague notion of the necessity of the presence of something which will permit our acceptance that there is a soul. Naturally when we say that the machine has no soul, we do not intend that something should be moving inside the machine like a light, in the sense that we understand a soul to be operating within ourselves. We speak of a soul and use that word oftentimes, on many occasions. “The whole activity has been without a soul.” “The entire enterprise lost its soul.” “The whole project has no soul in it.” Do we not make statements like this? “The whole performance was minus a soul.” When we say that an important theme that we expected in a large gathering or conference was absent, we say, “Oh, the soul was absent.” We expected a very powerful dignitary who would give a tremendous influential power to the whole organisation by his very presence, but he was not there. It might be a great genius of a scientist, or a great philosopher, or a great politician, or it might be anything—something surpassing in some way was absent and we say the soul was missing in spite of all the din and noise and activity there.

What do we mean by saying that the soul is missing? If one person in an audience is missing, how can we say that the soul is missing? Every person has a soul. If some important person whom we regard as very valuable, more worth the while than anybody else, and who has a pervasive influence over everyone else is missing and therefore the soul is missing, we do not mean that other people have no

souls. Just imagine what ideas we are perforce entertaining in our minds when we are thinking of a soul. We are not thinking of some little thing inside the body of a person when we conceive of a soul—otherwise if one important person in an audience is missing we will not say that the soul is missing. It would mean to say that other people have no souls and only that person has a soul, which is not a fact; others also have souls. So what makes us say that the soul is missing? “The entire show was without a soul.” Why?

This is an occasion for us to dive into the mysteries of what a soul is, and then we can know whether we have missed the soul, or whether we are in search of a soul for modern man or ancient man or any man; particularly modern man—the word has been used for a specific reason. I’ll touch upon that theme shortly.

We have missed something in our lives, and if I use the word ‘soul’ it may be so enigmatic and intriguing and eluding to our understanding that I prefer not to use this word frequently, though it cannot be escaped. It has to come, one day or the other, in a new light altogether—into which I tried to introduce to our minds by bringing these illustrations of there being a soul which is not necessarily identical with the souls of all these people, though everyone has a soul.

What man misses in life seems to be something which keeps him in unison, harmony, and in a state of cohesion. A dismembered society, a dismembered political organisation, a dismembered bodily organism, a dismembered psyche of man is something like a machine without a soul. So a soul is that which prevents the dismembering of organisations, whatever be the nature of that organisation. It may be a little body—it may be the body of an ant. It may be my body, or your body, or the body of a family. There is a soul in a family. Though every member of the family has a soul, one may miss the soul of the family. If the chief organising, influencing, potent force in the family is missing, we will say that the soul of the family is gone. Yet the members of the family are there

and they also have souls. Listen to me very carefully, because these are very subtle analyses.

Likewise, when we speak of any type of living arrangement or organisation, the word 'organisation' also has to be understood in its true spirit. An organisation is a coming together of various parts, and parts cannot come together unless there is something which brings the parts together. We do not see the wheels of a vehicle automatically joining together and making a motorcar; nothing happens automatically. No part of a machine will join with another part unless there is a cohesive, pervasive and immanent force which envisages the arrangement or the pattern that is to be projected in the form of a machine, and that may be considered as something independent of the machine, though it cannot be totally isolated from the machine.

'Organisation' is a very subtle, eluding word. This body also is an organisation. It is made up of various parts which work in collaboration—it is a machine. The body is a machine in the sense that it is made up of various parts, nuts and bolts, and there is a dynamo, and a pulley, and every blessed thing; but nothing will work unless there is a system introduced into this mechanically placed multifaceted arrangement which we call an organisation. There is no organisation without something which organises these parts which are called the organisation. We have to consider what that something is.

There may be a leader of a huge organisation, and his presence, his influence, his activity brings all the people together, though they may be millions in number. We may be wonderstruck as to how one person can bring together thousands of people, because thousands are larger in number than this one single person. Now again I am coming to a sort of answer to this query raised by the theme of today. If we can find out some answer within ourselves as to the circumstances under which one person can rule millions of people and command a huge battalion, and one single man called a field marshal can command a whole array, no part of

which is inferior to him from the point of view of his body, or a mechanical structure, or even intelligence; if this is a possibility, there is also a possibility of lifting our minds to an area of consideration which is not necessarily mechanistic, physical, or purely visible to the eyes. There seems to be some invisible thing which seems to be an unavoidable and inviolable presence everywhere, without which the organisation cannot function.

Take this example of a huge army being commanded by one man. What strength has this man got over these millions of people? Mechanistically, physically, materially, economically considered, he has no strength whatsoever. Yet he has strength. That strength is that which pervades everyone in the whole army which is constituted of individuals like him. This is something very surprising—thousands, *lakhs*, (hundreds of thousands), millions of persons like him are organised into a single focus of consideration and attention and action by the presence of one individual who is also like them. We have to think deeply here, and this type of thinking is called philosophical thinking. This is not scientific thinking, because science cannot recognise what it cannot observe and experiment upon, and if we observe an army, experiment upon an army and see the army though a microscope or even a telescope, we will see nothing except a huge mass of people. But it is not a mass of people; there is something else in it, which is the reason why we do not call it a huge heap of people, but we call it an army.

Organisation and a unified force... What makes us feel that a large organisation—it may be a parliament, it may be a political system, or an army, or any such thing—what makes us believe that they form one single organisation, not withstanding the fact that we cannot see any organisation there? We see only different heads and different legs moving about in different ways. This eluding, mysterious yet impossible-to-avoid thing is the soul. We cannot say that it is inside the body, because the body of a person who organises a large gathering is like the body of anybody else, and if we

say that his soul controls everybody, well, our consideration that the soul is inside the body rules out that argument. We cannot expect one man's soul to jump on somebody else's soul and then organise everybody. What is it that is intriguing us and stirring us and stimulating us, keeping us restless in spite of all our estimations, properties and social securities? We have missed something.

I was told that there was a doubt in the minds of some people whether there is *a* soul for which man is searching, or there is only *the* soul. This difficulty, this question also arises due to a misunderstanding of the very meaning of the soul itself. A mere academic bookworm cannot answer these questions, as one cannot find an answer to these questions in books. Though there are hints in the great scriptures as to what all this means, we do not have that intellectual caliber to go into the depths of the implications of these scriptures, much less the time to study all these.

What is man searching for? All of us seated here are well-educated, cultured persons with time enough to think deeply over this matter. We cannot say that we are searching for money and status merely, though it may be one of the things that we are searching for. We have seen learned people who are not happy. We have seen very rich people who can burn money but are unhappy in many, many ways. Potentates, politically powerful, ruling a large dominion, are terribly insecure day in and day out; they have no peace of mind. There is something that everyone is missing, whatever be the acquisition of a person—physically, materially, economically, politically. Do we know that something is missing which keeps us anxious all the while? A very rich man is always anxious about something—he is brooding, thinking and scratching his head. He's not resting quietly, "Everything is fine, milk and honey, let me sleep." No rich man will sleep like that—he is worse than a poor man as far as anxiety is concerned. Similarly, every person with any kind of acquisition is insecure for various reasons. A healthy man is insecure—he may fall sick and cannot be eternally healthy.

So, there is a lacunae, unintelligibly though, felt by each person, and one would like to search for an answer to this insecurity, this restlessness, and this elusive character of that which one is searching for in life. No one seems to have got what he wanted in this life. When the time comes for us to leave this world, it appears very few will go with the satisfaction that they have got what they wanted. There was always something receding, like the horizon, and not permitting the grasp of the human being—psychically, intellectually, mentally, much less physically. We cannot know so easily what we have lost. This is the reason why we are kept in this suspension. We may concede that there is some terrible lacunae in our life; we are a hollow, a vacuum, empty inside in some mysterious way in spite of our material possessions and social status.

Perhaps every one of us may be aware there is something lacking, but it is not easy for us to know what it is that we are lacking. We go on experimenting with various circumstances in life. “Perhaps I lack material wealth.” We struggle, experiment with it and get something, and find that it is not the thing that we wanted. We go on searching in various ways for various other things like power, authority and doership, and we find that we are not seeking for that, and it is not at all the thing that we expected. We have been experimenting with the location of something which we have lost in the various persons and things of the world, and to our consternation we have realised, and we are yet to realise, at least some of us, that these locations—call them persons, things, events, circumstances, situations—are not the spots in which we can discover that eluding something which we seem to have lost.

This mysterious, eluding something which cannot be confined to the body of an individual is what very, very glibly we define as the soul. Since it is an abused word whose meaning has never been understood clearly, even to this day, it is very difficult to project this word again and again as if it is very clear to the minds of people, because in all this explanation and analysis we will not forget that our soul is

inside the body. "My soul, my conscience, my Atma speaks," we go on touching the chest. This Atma, this little thing we are indicating within the location of this physical body, is not what we are seeking—though it is present there also—because it is an influence, it is a force, it is to some people something like an abstraction; and yet we will find that all life finally is an abstraction. Our life is an abstraction; it is not a concrete thing. We are not living a concrete life. For instance, when we touch money, we are not touching a substance but are touching a value, a conceptual evaluation which is in the head and not in the hands.

When we are friendly, when we are inimical, we are not encountering a person or a thing; we are encountering a circumstance which cannot be identified with the physical location of a person or a body. We are face to face with some situation which cannot be identified with a solid object. When we are happy or unhappy, we cannot attribute it to the presence or absence of some physical object. It is, again, a condition that has arisen, a condition that cannot be seen with the eyes, and we use this word again and again without knowing what it means. "I am in a very bad condition." "I am in a prosperous state." These are glib statements whose meaning cannot be clear so easily. This is the reason why we cannot easily be happy in this world; if it had been so easy we would have purchased it in one minute with all the dollars and pounds that we have. That cannot be done because the physical appurtenances and configurations in the form of people and things are not the thing that we have lost. When a person has lost his power—he has resigned or retired from a very powerful position—he has lost something. What has he lost? He is the same man that he was. The retired man is the same man that he was while in position. This thing that he has lost is that which he cannot see with his eyes, but it can make him utterly restless and put him out of gear. One can even go crazy if he is demoted and thrown down from a high pedestal. This pedestal is not a physical seat; it is a concept.

So are we living in a physical world, really speaking? Consider this for a while. Or are we living in a world of

concepts, ideas, notions, evaluations and aspirations? Do we believe that this is a physical world? I am not going to the philosophical aspect of the doctrines propounded by Sankaracharya and others that the world is Maya(illusion). We will slowly open our eyes and find there is some truth in what he has said. We are seeing a table, we are seeing trees, *pandal* (tent), this building and this beach, and the world is there so hard and solid—how do we call it Maya or an unreal thing? We will realise one day that we are really living in an unreal world.

The people that are around us are not our people. The things that we seem to possess, we have really not possessed, and we have not been searching for them. We have only been experimenting with them as tools for the discovery of that which we have lost. These friends of ours, these associations, these family members, this money, this status, this power, this authority, this land, this building—these are not the things we are asking for, though in a terrible state of ignorance we imagine that this is the soul that we wanted to grasp in life, and we will realise one day, “This is not what I wanted.” Otherwise, there could be no sorrow and bereavement. These are the tools that we have selfishly employed. We have been exploiting people and things in a very subtle manner to see whether they are the locations of that which we have lost in our lives.

We have not lost anything physical. The physical world is still there; we cannot lose it. We are sitting on it—how can we say that we have lost it? The whole earth is under us; we have not lost it. Do not say, “I’ve lost the physical earth.” What have we lost? What are we searching for? What is it that is keeping us restless and unhappy?

In the light of what I said a few minutes ago concerning the word ‘soul’, I will use the word ‘soul’ only in that light, of course, and that evaluation is to be before our mind’s eye when we utter the word ‘soul’. Man is in search of *a* soul or *the* soul—I will tell you why it is *a* and *the* both. We cannot think of *the* soul; we are not made in this way, because we do

not see it. Who can believe there is one soul everywhere in this audience? We are all independent souls. When we search for a soul in our lives, we are searching for a meaning in our existence. We are not searching for a substance; we are not asking for a thing. When we have lost the meaning in our existence, we can say, "I have lost my soul." People who are bereaved and who have lost their property and all their belongings sometimes feel that they have lost a soul. "I have lost all significance and meaning—everything." They have not lost meaning, because they have never discovered the meaning in their lives even earlier when they were physically in possession of all the appurtenances of life.

As I mentioned, the appurtenances, the physical associations, social connections, etc. which were bringing us some sort of a satisfaction and making us feel that we discovered the meaning in life, they were not the meaning in life. They were very, very unfortunate instruments that we had been utilising for experimenting upon the thing which we have lost and which we consider as the meaning, and their disassociation appears to us as a disassociation from the meaning of life. The meaning of life is a pervasive influence, a power or authority, and everything in the world is only an ideological arrangement. A deep philosophical mind alone can probe into these mysteries. Therefore, it is true that we are searching for a meaning in life. We know very well how unfortunate it is to lose the meaning in life; we will go crazy in one second if the meaning is lost. And what is that meaning? That is the soul of life.

Each person has his own concept of the meaning of life—that is what we call a philosophy of life. Everyone has his own or her own philosophy. We have an outlook of life, we have an interpretation of things and we have evaluation of all things in the world—that is our philosophy, and that is the meaning that we want to discover in things. Anything that keeps us in a state of tension and isolatedness in any level of our being is the tendency to lose the soul. Even ill-health is a tendency to the loss of what we can call a meaning in a healthy body. A soul is a force; it is not a thing. It is a force

which keeps in cohesion the parts of the being we call a person, an organisation, a world, a humanity, an everything. So the soul can be a force that is keeping in cohesion the limbs of our body, and in that sense we may call it *a* soul, because there are other people also having such a sense of need for feeling a meaning in their own lives. There is, similarly, a necessity to keep in cohesion the organisation we call a family circle or a community, or even a larger one like the whole nation or the entire humanity—otherwise there will be no humanity. ‘Humanity’ is a word that we use without understanding what it means. It is not a heap of people sitting together; it is a conceptual unity that we introduce into the presence of these isolated particulars called ‘people’. Humanity is one, though people are many. We can imagine that there can be one meaning in the midst of many people. That one meaning can be said to be the soul of humanity.

So it is large, and it is small. When it is large enough to comprehend the meaning discoverable in the whole of creation, we call it *the* soul—yes, it is true. But the process by which we discover the location of the soul or the meaning in life is by degrees. The soul may be one, that is a different matter, but it does not always reveal itself as one in our lives. There are degrees of the manifestation or descent of this concept of the soul. I do not say there are degrees of the descent of the soul itself, but the concept of the soul has a descending character and an ascending character. This is the reason why we feel that there are many souls, and each one is searching for one’s own soul, which perhaps is the reason why one is sometimes impelled to become selfish in spite of the fact that there are similar souls in other people. Yet we are occasionally altruistic, we think in terms of larger circles and the welfare of many other people, and we are serviceful, which tendency in us cannot be explained if the soul is only inside our body. So there is a larger soul than our own soul, yet we are searching for our own meaning.

In our individual lives we have our own predilections and we stick to our guns, oftentimes. “What I say must be done,

let anything else go to the dogs.” When we speak like this and when we think like this, we are imagining that our meaning in life is conditioned by our own body, and our soul is only inside the body, whatever it be. But we are not always like that; we have a cultured attitude oftentimes to discover a similar meaning in other people’s existence also, which requires us to recognise the national soul—“I work for my nation.” When we work for the nation, for whose sake are we working? It is not the number of people considered as the citizens of a country that are called a nation. It is, again, an invisible thing. I am driving the point that the world is unreal, finally. It is only an idea in our heads—it does not exist physically, if we go deep into the matter. But this larger ideology of the national spirit, though invisible, is that which can shake the hearts of people; and people work day and night for the welfare of their nation, which is not merely a heap of people.

Likewise we can extend this dominion—this dimension of this concept of the meaning of life, the spirit of existence—into wider circles until it reaches the furthest limits of infinitude itself. That meaning that we discover, the one meaning that we discover in the whole creation, may be said to be *the* soul, because there can be many universes and many infinitudes.

There are gradations in an army arrangement, for instance. The lieutenant colonel is a soul of the group which he commands; the colonel is a soul of a wider group that he commands. Now, are there two souls—the lieutenant colonel is one soul, the colonel is one soul? And there is the brigadier, the lieutenant general, major general, and so on. Each one is a soul. I have already said that the soul is not a person, because one person cannot control so many other people. It is a pervasive influence, a larger immanence of an invisible something—call it meaning, call it authority, call it soul, call it intelligence, consciousness, whatever we like. That thing exists, pervading all. Perhaps the general’s soul pervades the souls of all the lower categories. There is the immanence of the soul of the general in the souls of the lieutenant generals,

and the soul of the lieutenant general is present in the souls of all the major generals; the soul of the major general is present in all the souls of the brigadiers, etc. So are there many souls, or is there only one soul? We can answer this in any way because there are gradations of the concept of organisation, the concept of authority and the concept of pervasive influence, which is the soul that we are speaking of. So there is *a* soul, and there is also *the* soul—both are correct. When we reach a larger dimension, it appears as if it comprehends the lower levels, so it absorbs the existence of the lower categories of soul in the higher one; yet the lower ones exist in their own capacity, notwithstanding the fact they are subsumed by the operation of a higher soul.