

LIFE – A PROCESS AND ACTIVITY

by

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The philosophy of the Vedanta makes a distinction between existence as such and the experience of any type of existence. We may say, if we would like, that a fact or an existence is absolute so far as it goes, and a subjective experience of it is relative. Human life is a psychological process, and not an immutable existence. A knowledge of the functions of the mind is essential to understand life in its fullness. In the observation of the mind we can have no instrument, such as the ones we use in observing, measuring, examining or cleaning outward things. The mind is the student as well as the object of study, when life as a whole is the theme that we wish to investigate and comprehend. In a famous image given in the Kathopanishad, the inner self of man is compared to a lord seated in a chariot, the body to the chariot, the intellect to the charioteer, the mind to the reins, the senses to the horses pulling the chariot, and the objects of the senses to the roads along which the chariot is driven. The Upanishad gives a caution that the supreme state can be reached only by him who has as his charioteer a powerfully discriminative intellect which directs the restive horses of the senses with the aid of the reins of the mind, and not by anyone else who may have a bad charioteer. The meaning of this analogy is that the human individuality and personality are outer forms and instruments to be properly used by the

inner directive intelligence towards the great destination of life, and not to be taken as ends in themselves or mistaken for reality as such.

Not only the body and the senses but even the self conceived as a limited individual centre of consciousness is a process of intense activity, moving, changing and evolving incessantly. The individual self is the basis of knowledge as well as action. Due to confinement to a spatial existence, the individual self is dominated over and harassed by certain urges felt within itself, pointing to certain external objects and states. The desire for food, clothing and shelter, for name, fame, power, sleep and sex, often appears in the human individual as a violent force which cannot be easily subdued or even intelligently controlled. These deep-rooted urges are an immediate consequence of the self's restriction to a dualistic perception of the world and an arrogation of ultimate selfhood to itself, while the truth is otherwise. The individual has a morbid habit of unconsciously asserting itself as the centre of experience and considering the other contents of the universe as adjectives or subsidiary elements meant to bring satisfaction to it in some way or the other. In this respect, we should say that all forms of human knowledge are different types of activity to achieve certain ends other than themselves. Man never is—he is always to be. This predicament is, as it would be clear, a corollary of the feeling that we are localised entities forming a mechanical whole, which we call the universe, of which it seems that we can never have a simultaneous knowledge. Our perceptions are always in a series; we know things one after another, and not at one stroke. We never see one and the same picture at two given moments in a cinematographic projection, but yet we seem to see a continuity of the existence of forms on account of a very quick succession and motion of the pictures. Strictly speaking, we never see one and the same thing in a particular act of perception, but the rapidity of the psychoses is so tremendous that there is an illusion of the perception of a static existence. And above all, there is that absolute Self behind all mental functions, from

which these draw sustenance and borrow existence as well as light.

Every action, viewed in this light, becomes a symptom of the restlessness of the relative consciousness in any of the human sheaths in which it is enclosed. There is an unceasing attempt on its part to break boundaries, to overcome all limitations and to transcend itself at every step. The environment called life in which it finds itself is only an opportunity provided to it to seek and find what it wishes to have in order to exceed itself in experience in the different stages of evolution. The universe is a vast field of psychological experience of multitudinous centres of individuality for working out their deserts by way of objective experience. The universe is another name for experience by a cosmic mind, of which the relative minds are refractive aspects and parts. The desirable and the undesirable in life are nothing but certain consequences which logically follow the whimsical and unmethodical desires of the ignorant individuals who know not their own ultimate destination. What is desirable today need not be so tomorrow, and today's painful experience may be a blessing for the future. It does not mean that all that we want is always the good. We often grope in darkness and find a cup of poison which we avidly drink, while we are really in search of some soothing food to appease our hunger. There is no error in the world or the objects; it is in the painful fact that we have no knowledge of what is really good for us. It is not enough if a physician knows merely that a particular drug has the power to suppress a particular ailment, he has also to know what other reactions the drug will produce in the living organism. In our life, the mind has to act as its own physician, and in this work it has to exercise great vigilance born of right perception. No thought, feeling or willing can be said to be healthy when it is not in consonance with the health and peace of the universe as a whole. That we are members of a single undivided family demands that we have to be mutually cooperative, and think and act in terms of mutual welfare, which, in the end, is the welfare of the whole.

When this knowledge is not given to the mind, it acts blindly and errs with the idea that what appears to bring a temporary sensation of pleasure to it is the true and the good. When it does not learn the lesson of life by enlightened reason, it has to learn it by pain.

The mind, in the Vedanta philosophy, is conceived not as any independent entity opposed to matter, as is the case in several systems of Western philosophy, but is understood to be an aspect of the material principle itself appearing in a more rarefied form. The psychology of the Vedanta is a highly scientific methodology evolved out of the fundamental concept that the supreme reality is Absolute Consciousness and anything that may seem to be opposed to it can only be a phase of itself. The fivefold base of objective perception, viz., sound, touch, form, taste and smell, is found to be inseparable from the reciprocally related to the senses of knowledge working under the direction of the mind. The theory of the Vedanta is that the mind, constituting mainly the functions of understanding, thinking, feeling, remembering and willing, is the resultant of the collective totality of the purified forms of the essences of the five substrata of sensations enumerated above. The sympathy that is observed between sensations and their objects is thus explained by the fact that the causes of the appearances of the two are essentially the same. Not only this. There is the presupposition of the greater truth that at the background of the mind, the senses and their objects, there is the Absolute itself as their very reality. The Vedanta psychology is a direct consequence of its basic metaphysics which lays down that existence is non dual. It is on this foundation of the ultimate inseparability of the knower and the known that we have to envisage the law governing the universe and regulating individual and social life.

The highest law is accordingly conceived as Dharma based on Rita and Satya. Rita and Satya are two terms that occur originally in the Vedas, signifying the eternal cosmic order and the same as manifest in the diversified world. Dharma is nothing but one's duty as an individual stationed

in the cosmos, as its integral part. This at once explains by implication one's duty towards family, society, the nation and the world at large. The fulfilment of this Dharma is expected to be achieved not in a slipshod way or by leaps and bounds, but in a gradual manner following closely the evolutionary process of the cosmos. Material welfare, the enjoyment of desires and relations to society are given due consideration and are equally regulated by Dharma which, at the same time, works with Moksha or the ultimate realisation of the infinite as its aim. Dharma is the ethical value, Artha the material and the economic value, Kama the vital value and Moksha the infinite value of life. As the infinite includes all the finites, the aspiration for Moksha naturally implies the fulfilment of the ends of all other desires and the execution of all other duties in life. This sublime aspiration arises in the mind when it has an inherent feeling of 'enough' with the things of the world. This is the 'divine discontent' which acts as a forerunner of the struggle of the spirit to grasp and know itself in the Absolute. It is here that true knowledge dawns.

Ordinary psychological experience is usually marked off from a life of spiritual insight. The path of the pleasant is differentiated from the way of the good. What the senses report to us need not necessarily be the true or the good. Often they give us false intimations and involve us in tantalizing mirages which recede from us as we try to approach them. It is because of this unfortunate predicament that we go on experimenting with one object after another, seeking final satisfaction, but do not find it anywhere. This fruitless pursuit continues until thinking of benefit in terms of separateness discovers its own futility and gives way to a search for peace in terms of more and more integrated realms of being. The individual expands to the family, the family to the community, the community to a wider society or the nation, the nation to the whole world, and the world to the cosmos, wherein the process of expansion finds its limit and begins to turn inward into the centre of experience which, in the end, is recognized to be identical with the

Supreme Being. Bearing this in mind, the sage of the Upanishad warns us with the great rule that everything shall desert us if we consider it to be different from our own essential self. As we have already noticed, nothing in this world can be considered to be merely a means to the satisfaction of another, for in this mutually determined whole there are only ends, not means. The Bhagavadgita states that all pleasures that are born of the contact of the mind and the senses with the external are a womb of pain, for outward contact is not the way of contacting reality. The dissatisfying consequence of sense gratifications, the fear that usually attend upon them, the chances of getting addicted to the habits and impressions produced by such pleasures, and the inevitability of the rise of further desires and greater distractions, in addition to the wearing out of the senses, should rouse in the man of discrimination a consciousness of the higher life.