

Vedanta

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The Spiritual Significance of Death

Swami Ashokananda

Hinduism and its meaning for the West

Swami Budhananda



Divine Wisdom

Illustrated Tales and Parables of Sri Ramakrishna - 7



ALL FOR A SINGLE PIECE OF LOIN-CLOTH

A SADHU under the instruction of his Guru built for himself a small shed, thatched with leaves at a distance from the haunts of men. He began his devotional exercises in this hut. Now, every morning after ablution he would hang his wet cloth and the *kaupina* (loin-cloth) on a tree close to the hut, to dry them. One day on his return from the neighbouring village, which he would visit to beg for his daily food, he found that the rats had cut holes in his *kaupina*. So the next day he was obliged to go to the village for a fresh one. A few days later, the sadhu spread his loin-cloth on the roof of his hut to dry it and then went to the village to beg as usual. On his return he found that the rats had torn it into shreds. He felt much annoyed and thought to himself, "Where shall I go again to beg for a rag? Whom shall I ask for one?" All the same he saw the villagers the next day and re-presented to them the mischief done by the rats. Having heard all he had to say, the villagers said, "Who will keep you supplied with cloth every day? Just do one thing—keep a cat; it will keep away the rats." The sadhu forthwith secured a kitten in the village and carried it to his hut. From that day the rats ceased to trouble him and there was no end to his joy. The sadhu now began to tend the useful little creature with great care and feed it on the milk begged from the village. After some days, a villager said to

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Editorial

Spiritualising our Daily Life

What does it mean to lead a spiritual life? Can we hope to spiritualize our everyday life? These are pertinent questions asked by people who tend to associate spiritual life with only meditation, prayer and certain obligatory rituals which form part of the religion into which they are born. If our spiritual life is just restricted to a period of formal meditation and prayer to be performed every day, then we are not going to attain anything significant because most of our day we are engaged in doing things which we believe are secular.

Thus our formal practice of spirituality then occupies only a limited part of the day. What we eventually yearn for, whichever spiritual path we follow, is to ensure that our entire life itself becomes spiritualized. It does not mean, however, that we must conduct ourselves in such a way that we look overtly pious and have a holier-than-thou attitude in our life. There is nothing very mysterious about spiritual life. As a matter of fact, spiritual life is the most natural way of life and no one ever needs to know what it is that we are doing. We do not have to do anything different. The essential thing is to change our attitude towards what we are doing in our life and in the process try to find a spiritual meaning and significance within everything. All it does is take away the meaninglessness of life and ultimately helps us to find true joy and fulfilment. To those who always associate weakening mysticism with true spirituality, Swami Vivekananda has a word of caution. In his famous lecture, 'My Plan of Campaign, delivered at the Victoria Hall, Madras in 1897, he said, "Give up these weakening mysticisms and be strong. Go back to your Upanishads — the shining, the strengthening, the bright philosophy — and part from all these mysterious things, all these weakening

things. Take up this philosophy; the greatest truths are the simplest things in the world, as simple as your own existence. The truths of the Upanishads are before you.”¹ We shall try to discuss a few basic principles of spiritual life based on Vedanta as explained by Swami Vivekananda which will show us how to spiritualize our day to day life.

The first point is to remember that Vedanta does not teach us to compartmentalize life into spiritual and the secular. To a true spiritual aspirant everything is spiritual, and nothing is secular at all. A spiritual life has to be a continuous one and the spiritual mood we develop during our formal meditation and prayer must be sustained throughout the day. Many of us fancy that if only we could live in solitude in a forest retreat somewhere, where we could practice prayer and meditation all the time, then life would be wonderful, and our spiritual life would be easy. But we forget that the problem with going to a quiet retreat is that we take ourselves, our worldly minds with us. We go to the retreat and then find that we have brought all our usual problems, the very problems from which we are trying to escape, with us. And they continue to haunt us even there without any respite. So, what is the solution? Swami Vivekananda gives us the answer in his talk on ‘Karma and its effect on Character’ in his book, Karma Yoga. He says, “There arises a difficult question in this ideal of work. Intense activity is necessary; we must always work. We cannot live a minute without work. What then becomes of rest? Here is one side of the life-struggle-work, in which we are whirled rapidly round. And here is the other - that of calm, retiring renunciation: everything is peaceful around, there is very little of noise and show, only nature with her animals and flowers and mountains. Neither of them is a perfect picture. A man used to solitude, if brought in contact with the surging whirlpool of the world, will be crushed by it; just as the fish that lives in the deep sea water, as soon as it is brought to the surface, breaks into pieces, deprived of

the weight of water on it that had kept it together. Can a man who has been used to the turmoil and the rush of life live at ease if he comes to a quiet place? He suffers and perchance may lose his mind. The ideal man is he who, in the midst of the greatest silence and solitude, finds the intensest activity, and in the midst of the intensest activity finds the silence and solitude of the desert. He has learnt the secret of restraint; he has controlled himself. He goes through the streets of a big city with all its traffic, and his mind is as calm as if he were in a cave, where not a sound could reach him; and he is intensely working all the time. That is the ideal of Karma-Yoga, and if you have attained to that you have really learnt the secret of work.”²

The second thing Vedanta tells us is that our everyday life, our every moment, is already a spiritual life. We are potentially divine, and divinity is within and without, all pervading. It is eternal in time. We do not have to create anything new; we just have to remind ourselves of our divinity. In his famous lecture, ‘The Mission of Vedanta’ at Kumbhakonam in India in 1897, Swami Vivekananda says, “Ay, let every man and woman and child, without respect of caste or birth, weakness or strength, hear and learn that behind the strong and the weak, behind the high and the low, behind every one, there is that Infinite Soul, assuring the infinite possibility and the infinite capacity of all to become great and good. Let us proclaim to every soul: Arise, awake, and stop not till the goal is reached. Arise, awake! Awake from this hypnotism of weakness. None is really weak; the soul is infinite, omnipotent, and omniscient. Stand up, assert yourself, proclaim the God within you, do not deny Him! ... Teach yourselves, teach everyone his real nature, call upon the sleeping soul and see how it awakes. Power will come, glory will come, goodness will come, purity will come, and everything that is excellent will come when this sleeping soul is roused to self-conscious activity.”³ We just have to remember that everything is sacred and divine. And ordinary life is just as sacred and divine as anything. So, learning that here and

now, whatever I do, I can learn to do it in a spiritual way. I can spiritualize my relationship with people and the world, I can spiritualize my work, I can spiritualize my play, I can spiritualize just about everything I do in life by remembering that everything is suffused with divinity.

A third thing Vedanta teaches us is that what we do is not so important. It is the transformation that we undergo in the process of doing our actions that is important. This means whatever we do in life, and whatever we are doing every moment in our life, whether we are doing big things or even small or trivial things, it doesn't really matter. It is how we do it that is important, because it is through this excellence in work that character is built, and spirituality is developed. Swami Vivekananda says in his Karma Yoga, "Certain kinds of work we feel and they become tangible to us; they are, at the same time, the aggregate of a number of small works. If you really want to judge of the character of a man, look not at his great performances. Every fool may become a hero at one time or another. Watch a man do his most common actions; those are indeed the things which will tell you the real character of a great man. Great occasions rouse even the lowest of human beings to some kind of greatness, but he alone is the really great man whose character is great always, the same wherever he be."⁴

Every day we come across countless situations to ennoble ourselves or degrade ourselves spiritually. And by working in the proper way with the proper attitudes, using work as an opportunity to develop ourselves, we find that it is not the fruits of work that are important, but the transformative nature of work which ultimately matters in developing us spiritually. Swami Vivekananda said, "He who in the midst of the greatest activity finds the sweetest peace, and in the midst of the greatest calmness is most active, he has known the secret of life. Krishna shows the way how to do this—by being non-attached: do everything but do not get identified with anything.

You are the soul, the pure, the free, all the time; you are the Witness. Our misery comes, not from work, but by our getting attached to something.”⁵ In another place he says, “By the by, I have made a discovery as to the mental method of really practicing what the Gita teaches, of working without an eye to results. I have seen much light on concentration and attention and control of concentration, which if practiced will take us out of all anxiety and worry. It is really the science of bottling up our minds whenever we like.”⁶

A fourth thing Vedanta teaches us is that what we do every day regularly forms a habit and it is those habits that really transform us. And the reason that we see the world the way we see it is nothing but because of our habits. If we could change our habits, we would see the world as God. We would not see it as a troublesome place with problems and sorrows alone but see it as a mart of joy, a heaven on earth. Our daily actions form habits and what we do every day becomes our character. Swami Vivekananda says in his book *Raja Yoga*, “It is said, ‘Habit is second nature’, it is first nature also, and the whole nature of man; everything that we are is the result of habit. That gives us consolation, because, if it is only habit, we can make and unmake it at any time. ... The only remedy for bad habits is counter habits; all the bad habits that have left their impressions are to be controlled by good habits. Go on doing good, thinking holy thoughts continuously; that is the only way to suppress base impressions. Never say any man is hopeless, because he only represents a character, a bundle of habits, which can be checked by new and better ones. Character is repeated habits, and repeated habits alone can reform character.”⁷

References:

- 1 The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda (Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 1972), 3:225. (Hereafter cited as CW)
- 2 CW, Vol. 1 p. 34
- 3 CW, Vol. 3 p. 193
- 4 CW, Vol. 1 p. 29
- 5 CW, Vol. 4 p. 96
- 6 CW, Vol. 8 p.484
- 7 CW, Vol. 1, p.207-8

The Spiritual Significance of Death - 1

Swami Ashokananda

I

I hope you do not consider death, a subject too grim for discussion. Many refuse to think of death arguing it is enough if they live their lives properly without asking what happens afterwards. I think such avoidance of the thought of death is due partly to fear and partly to misunderstanding and ignorance.

We cannot understand life without knowing what death is and what lies beyond it. How can our birth, our life, and our actions in life have real significance unless they have a survival value? How can we be sure that we are not wasting our time and energy, unless we know that the fruits of our efforts on earth will have meaning and validity also in the other world, the world beyond death?

We must admit that life as we know it—bounded by birth and death—has no obvious meaning. Simply because we do things instinctively and find such doing interesting, does not mean our mode of living is real. It may well be that we are deluded. I am inclined to think that most of us are, for is it not true that we know very little, that our instinctive knowledge is extremely faulty? For thousands of years we have perceived reality in a certain way. Now science points out that our perceptions and conclusions are wrong things and not what they seem. Our understanding of life also may well be mistaken. There is little doubt that most of us are ignorant. Because we happen to be in the majority, it does not follow that our ideas are trustworthy. We must probe deeply into life in order to understand it, and one way to deepen the understanding of life is to understand death.

At the present time there is a great interest in post-mortem phenomena. Spiritualism admits the existence of the soul and makes a great effort to find what happens to it after death. As a result, there are many stories of after-death existence. Some departed souls are said to establish direct contact with their loved ones on earth; others try, it is said, to reach them through mediums or to communicate with them by means of automatic writing. Even when such contacts and communications are genuine, the satisfaction derived from them is never permanent, and the benefit derived from them is doubtful. Besides, the chance of deception, especially of self-deception, is great.

Consider automatic writing, for instance. The claim is made that even living persons can inspire it. I remember a tragic case of three brothers who indulged in automatic writing. All were well educated: the youngest was a brilliant student of mathematics, and the other two were lawyers. These young men composed many philosophical essays which they believed were really written through their hands by a great philosopher who lived about five hundred miles from their city. After some time one of the young men thought he received initiation from the sage through the same medium, automatic writing. Finally, the brothers made a journey to the place where he lived, and upon arrival asked to see him, saying that one of them was his disciple. The sage replied that he did not know them and had not given initiation to any of them. When the brothers explained that they had been the medium through which he had written voluminously, he denied that he had done so and refused all responsibility for the writings. The brothers returned home disappointed and disillusioned.

In this talk I shall not concern myself with the kind of life departed souls live, nor even with the possibility of their

communicating, either directly or indirectly, with relatives left on earth. The significance of death can no more be learned by conversing with spirits than an understanding of life can be acquired by conversing with average persons. How few comprehend the true significance of life! How many merely float on its surface! As the living may miss the meaning of life, so the departed may miss the meaning of death.

II

Various explanations are given of death. Materialists say that matter is the only substance, mind being merely a subtle form of matter. The physiologist explains that when the heart ceases to beat, the blood no longer assimilates the oxygen which the cells composing the vital organs need for their functions. Being deprived of it, the machinery of life fails, the cells die in masses, and the organs begin to disintegrate. This is of course a purely physical interpretation of death, and I shall not discuss it further. If it represented the meaning of death, it would also represent the meaning of life, and there would be no moral obligations, sense of duty, search for knowledge, or any other value in our existence here. We should merely be passing time. But even in saying this, we are assuming a 'we' who would be passing time. If man is but an aggregate of organs made of cells, he is not a unitary being but a composite thing. In that case discussion of death, as of life, is not only meaningless but impossible.

There are those who are not materialists yet deny the existence of the soul. I am speaking of the Buddhists. They affirm the continuity of existence, not because of the immortality of the soul but because of the persistence of karma. They say that all actions leave impressions on the mind and that such impressions do not die with the death of the body but build up, time and again, other

conscious organisms with physical and mental components. This process is said to form the continuity of existence. Is it not better to assume the continuity of soul rather than the continuity of karma as the most essential element in man?

Let us forget the materialistic and the Buddhistic views and hold to the proposition that the soul exists, that the soul is immortal, and that it dwells within the body and the mind. Vedanta maintains that the soul is clothed with three bodies: the causal body, the subtle body and the physical body. It is the conclusion of our philosophers that the mind does not die with the death of the physical body, but that the soul departs intact with the two inner bodies, the subtle (the lower mind) and the causal (the higher mind). Therefore, the impressions made upon the mind during life remain with the soul, and only the physical body is left behind.

Death has two phases: it appears differently to the living and to the dying. When we think of death, we, the living, generally form an extraneous picture of it; we think of its objective phase. We observe that the dying person loses consciousness, that he is unable to see, hear or speak with normal clarity, and that he breathes with great difficulty. Sometimes he appears to suffer terrible agony at the time of passing. All bodily processes stop; the breath goes out; and we say that the soul has departed, that the man has died.

In regard to the subjective phase of death, that is, death as it is experienced by the dying rather than as observed by the living, we are told that when a spiritually undeveloped soul separates from the body, it feels all the shock and agony such separation implies, whereas when a spiritually developed soul departs, its passing is easy and smooth, and there is no attendant agony.

Even when the dying man appears outwardly unconscious, he is inwardly conscious and experiences the transition from life to after-life. At the dying moment his whole past life is said to pass before him as a quickly moving panorama, and certain tendencies and characteristics of his life begin to assume pre-dominance. Coloured and influenced by them, he departs, and the nature of the departure is determined by these predominant tendencies and characteristics. If they are good, the passing is pleasant: if not, it is unpleasant.

When a soul struggles hard and suffers great agony because it resists separation from the body and the world, on passing it appears stunned by the blow of death, and it requires some time to recover alertness. Even when full consciousness returns, it is not immediately able to determine its course. It drifts for a while, and only later is it able to find its way to a suitable plane of existence.

What do you think makes the soul resist separation from the body and the world, with the result that death means agony and struggle? Suppose I have lived in a certain place for fifteen or twenty years, that I have developed countless interests there, and that I have become fond of my neighbours. Suppose I am forced to leave that place at a moment's notice—what a stunning blow it will be to me! Finding myself torn away from all I knew and loved. I shall suffer greatly. Death is that kind of separation, and to those who have been much attached to life it is certainly painful.

As long as we enjoy life, we shall be attached to it; so some philosophers say it is kind of the Lord to visit men with illness in their last days, for without a period of suffering before death, their clinging to life will not relax. If I suffer a lengthy illness, I shall no longer enjoy the things which gave pleasure in health. You may tell me of a beautiful play that has come to town or of a new book,

but they will not interest me. During a protracted illness everything loses its flavour; we grow disappointed with earthly life, and our mind is gradually prepared to withdraw. Even when it does not become consciously ready to do so, the pain of separation is much less acute than when death comes suddenly. Accidental death is therefore considered undesirable.

Generally speaking, there are two kinds of people: one kind is prepared for death and the other is not. As we have seen, those who have become detached from the world pass away easily and painlessly when the hour of death comes, while those who are attached to the world die in an agony which persists after death.

Many console themselves with the belief that however painful dying may prove, endless happiness will be theirs after death. They think they will be reunited with the loved ones who have gone before. Do not picture death so sentimentally. Let us forget the fairy stories we were taught in childhood—we adults should be able to think more realistically. Do you consider the prospect of an endless family reunion after death so desirable? Love we should have, but it becomes unbearable if we do not, at the same time, feel independent. Whenever affection becomes a bondage, it is unendurable. Even here, if our family members cling together every moment of the day, do we not find it intolerable? Family reunions are all very well on Thanksgiving and Christmas, but we could not stand them throughout eternity. Is there any reason for thinking God has so arranged things that after death we shall be compelled to suffer the eternal bondage of eternal family relationships?

Many doubtless believe that we become so perfect after death that life in the other world is ideal, and not tiresome. But what is your idea of perfection? If you are perfect, can you have all kinds

of relationships, cravings and attachments? These are possible only in imperfection. Family relationships arise of necessity from our limited being, because we are dependent upon others for the fulfilment of our desires. When we are perfect and therefore complete in ourselves, we do not need father, mother, son, daughter, friends and the like. Relationships then become meaningless. The perfect being cannot be related: only in imperfection is relationship possible.

Consider the implications of childhood beliefs concerning death, and you will understand how irrational they are. The idea that after death we continue the earthly existence in an idealized form has no validity. Death rudely snatches us away, and this sudden departure is indeed very painful unless we have prepared ourselves for death even while living.

III

You may say, "This is a strange teaching. Why should we prepare for death while living? Is it not abnormal to dwell on death?" All religions have attached great importance to death and have recommended preparation for it. Hinduism also insists on our preparing ourselves for death. It teaches that we should do this by developing proper conditions of mind, for it maintains that our state after death and our existence in the next incarnation will be determined by whatever thought we entertain at the time of passing. The thought that comes to the dying is considered not to be in any sense subject to chance, but to be the result of the entire life of which the individual is taking leave. This being so, we must take great care to make our whole life a preparation for death.

I confess I dislike the idea of being at the mercy of either life or death. We belong to neither the one nor the other. Instead of

preparing for either, we should rather prepare for eternity, which is beyond both.

Though no doubt this idea occurs in most religions, it is certainly prominent in Vedanta. The Upanishads have often declared that here on earth we must realize the Eternal; that what we are in this Life, we are in the next life also; that if we do not reach our goal in this life, we do not do so in the next. I prefer such an approach to life and death. If, however, we are still floating on the surface of life and there is no likelihood in this incarnation of our realizing the Eternal, probably the best thing for us is to prepare for death, so that we may have peace at the time of our passing and be prepared for a more spiritual life in our next birth.

If life is lived so that one is truly prepared for death, the passing will not only be easy, but will actually bring spiritual consummation. Convinced that the relations of the worldly life have no validity beyond death, one should renounce them, and thus having left the world behind, should fix the mind on the Eternal. The Bhagavad-Gita says: "He who at the time of death, meditating on Me alone, goes forth leaving the body, attains My Being. There is no doubt of this."

That indeed instructs us concerning the ideal way to die, but can we follow the instruction? I have seen some pass in this way, raising their consciousness to a high level, fixing it on God, and departing in meditation. For such a passing there must be continuous preparation, and this preparation, this training of the mind, should be undertaken by all. It should be made a vital part of the plan of living. At least one period in our life should be dedicated entirely to such spiritual culture.

According to the Hindu scriptures, life should be divided into four stages, of which the last should be given to complete

renunciation. The first stage is student life; the next is that of the householder: and the third is the life of contemplation, into which many in India retire when they reach approximately their fiftieth year. Formerly, at this stage of life people renounced their homes and went to live as hermits in the forest. Nowadays it is not always practicable to go to the forest, so they often seek holy places, where they can live in retirement, devoting themselves to spiritual practices.

One summer I visited the sacred city of Puri on the Bay of Bengal. There, in the dark of early morning while dawn is just breaking, hundreds of worshippers go to the temple of Jagannatha, the Lord of the Universe. I still remember vividly the inspiration of seeing their white-clad figures gleaming in the darkness, as they waited calmly for the temple door to open. Countless were the hours such devotees spent in the temple in meditation. Even in Calcutta, which is modern and not looked upon as a holy city, many men and women may be seen in the dark hours of early morning hurrying to the sacred Ganges to bathe and meditate. I remember the face of a woman I once saw returning from the river. She was the very personification of profound meditation—infinite calm and power dwelt in her eyes. I cannot forget that face.

Preparation for death must be started long before we die—years and years of effort should be devoted to it. When children are grown and our duties to family and community are finished, we usually hope to spend our remaining years in recreation, perhaps in travel, but this is not the right way to spend those precious years.

Why live on the surface of life forever? Having discharged his duties, a man should dive deep in contemplation. He should penetrate the depths of life and find its true meaning. He should be able to go deep into his soul, to enter into the holy of holies of

his being and through it reach the heart of the universe. When we have finished with our duties and responsibilities, it is surely time to devote ourselves to spiritual practice. By doing so we not only fulfil our highest possibilities but also become of great service to the community.

Rather than blame young people for their unrestrained life, we should censure the old who set a bad example. If the young could see around them older men and women who were the very embodiments of sincerity, love and purity, they would feel inspired by their example. Do not think yourself useless in middle age and old age because you cannot frisk about like the young. If these later years are devoted to the quieting and purifying of the mind, to the spiritualization of thought and life, the greatest aim of life can be achieved, and death will not mean destruction, but fulfilment.

However, no one seeks the truth and joy of contemplation or tries to quiet the mind unless he first assimilates the basic truth that there is nothing on the surface of life, that life and reality as we ordinarily know them are always changing and vanishing away. Such is indeed one of the great truths to be learned from death. The dying and the dead impress it on the minds of those they leave behind, who can benefit from it if they so wish.

...To be continued in the next issue

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Hinduism and its Meaning for the West

Swami Budhananda

The study of Hinduism, when attempted without equipment, guidance, patience and reverence, can be very bewildering and exasperating even to the born Hindu. Years of devoted study alone will not vouchsafe a correct understanding of the religion. It takes more than scholarship— and this is characteristic of every religion—to have a true insight into Hinduism. To one who has that 'more', Hinduism unfolds its magnificence and profundity, its symphony and sweetness. And then one can really appreciate this declaration of Max Müller, the German born philologist and Orientalist in regard to India as a statement of faith:

"If one would ask me under what sky the human mind has most fully developed its precious gifts, has scrutinized most profoundly the greatest problems of life, and has at least for some provided solutions which deserved to be admired even by those who have studied Plato and Kant, I would indicate India. And if one would ask me which literature would give us back (as Europeans who have been exclusively fed on Greek and Roman thought, and on that of a Semitic race) the necessary equilibrium in order to make our inner life more perfect, more universal, in short more human, a life not only for this life, but for a transformed and eternal life, once again I would indicate India."

When Max Müller said, "I would indicate India", it is obvious that he meant Hinduism with all its offshoots and ramifications.

Hinduism is the professed religion of the 300 millions and more of Hindus who live mainly in the Indian sub-continent. The name 'Hinduism' came to be attached to this religion in a rather peculiar way. It was not chosen by the people who are today called Hindus. It was as it were thrown upon them from outside with the glue of

history and it just stuck on. It was the Persians who first used the word 'Hindu' in order to indicate the people who lived to the east of the River Sindhu, the modern Indus which flows through the Punjab. Later on, the Europeans adopted the same word for the same purpose. The religion of the people who were called Hindus, easily came to be called 'Hinduism'. But the Indians themselves preferred to call their religion *Vaidika Dharma*, the religion rooted in the Vedas, or the Sanatana Dharma, the religion founded on the eternal spiritual principles recorded in the Vedas.

Hinduism is not a historical religion in the sense Christianity and Islam are, but it has created history for millenniums. Hinduism has no particular founder, but it is one of the most well-founded religions of the world, which continues to renew itself in the process of time while remaining absolutely firm in its roots. Hinduism has never been an aggressive religion but has withstood many an aggression of alien faiths. Hinduism is not an organized religion in the sense Catholicism is, but has been the matrix of various organizations, social and religious, which have lasted through centuries. Hinduism does not speak of one spiritual path; it asserts that there are various paths but emphasizes that there is only one spiritual goal of life, and that is liberation of the spirit through the realization of God. Hinduism by and large has not been a missionary religion, but Hindu ideas are some of the most widely travelled ideas in the world, which have influenced the spiritual culture of man in root and branch.

To the Hindu, the Vedas are the highest authority so far as his religion and philosophy are concerned. The cardinal doctrine that enlivens and permeates the Vedas is "the belief in one universal spirit or Godhead who is self-luminous and manifests himself as the earth, the sky, the heavens, and dwells in every heart as its inner ruler and guide". According to one of the Upanishads, this

Reality, which is to be realized in personal experience through spiritual disciplines, is "the soul of truth, the delight of life, and the bliss of mind, the fulness of peace and immortality".

By the word Hinduism, however, are not meant only metaphysical speculations and theological doctrines. In its all-inclusive embrace it comprises various scriptures and cults, the codes of ethics and law, sociology, values, spiritual disciplines, and systems of philosophy. Human psychology has been a subject of deep study in Hinduism for three thousand years and more. Patanjali, the father of Hindu psychology, wrote his great book the Yoga Sutras somewhere between the 9th and 10th century B.C.

There is nothing concerning life which is outside the pale of Hinduism. It is both a view and a way of life, a theory of reality, and a practical code for living. It includes various ideas and beliefs, emotions and activities, but everything is integrated to the central purpose of life which is liberation of the Spirit. Even the study of such subjects as grammar and sex-psychology have been correlated with man's search for Reality. In the Hindu's way of thinking there is no religion in the world which is not his concern.

The believing Hindu has such astounding practical sense about religion that he believes in turning everything—his eating, drinking, working, and sleeping—to religious account. He likes even to bathe, breathe or procreate religiously. The Hindu seeks not only to live religiously; he also aspires to die religiously. It is not that all Hindus know why they behave as they do; it is not that there are not genuine superstitions, failings, and problems in Hindu society; it is not that there is no need for change. The fact however, remains that the Hindu's life is soaked in certain spiritual ideas, and this makes him behave as he does. This is the key to the understanding of Hindu character.

The Hindu's sense of realism, which is often doubted by the superficial student of Hinduism, is based on a conception of reality that embraces both here and hereafter, time and timeless, phenomenal and noumenal. His terms of reference are so vast, and he is so fantastic in his attempts to live his life in those terms of reference, that to the earth-bound man he looks somewhat queer. But when it is seen that the Hindu is constantly striving—it may be quite often failing—to rise from the pleasant to the good, from the temporal to the eternal, from the personal to the impersonal, he no longer appears to be so queer.

Its richness and variety make Hinduism a fascinating study as it is found in its living literature of the last four thousand years and more. The early Indo-Aryans were a highly gifted race, a sturdy people who cherished the good things of life. They hymned the deities out of a spontaneous feeling of dependence on them for guidance and welfare. Next came the stage of trying to get to heaven and live a joyous life there. Sacrificial rituals grew by leaps and bounds. It was thought that by sacrifices heavenly happiness could be ensured. Eventually, however, came the rather logical discovery that the eternal, the permanent, the immutable, could not be attained through the instrumentality of the ephemeral.

Soon questions were being asked: What is that by knowing which everything else is known? What is that on gaining which nothing else remains to be gained, and the embodied soul goes beyond want, fear, and misery?

In this great age of inwardness, through the practice of spiritual disciplines, some truths were discovered which changed the whole future of Hindu thought. It was seen and realized that the reality behind this embodied being (Atman) and the reality behind the universe (Brahman) were the same. Once and for all, it was written down in words of fire in the racial consciousness that the

realization of this truth—this great Atman-Brahman equation—was the ultimate end of life.

Now the question arose, how the whole of humanity, the masses of men and women, who were at different stages of inner evolution, who had different cravings, aspirations, aptitudes, temperaments, failings, and excellences, could be gradually led to the realization of this abiding truth. In answer to this requirement, down the centuries came developed Hindu ethics, sociology, and values. The legitimacy of the individual's state of existence was fully accepted and proper physical and spiritual care were planned for him. Emphasis was laid not on the individual's rights but on his duties: in what one did for others was the guarantee of what would be done unto one. Everyone was provided for according to his psycho-physical needs, but one was required to proceed onward by the spiral of spiritual progress.

And from this developed different systems of spiritual discipline, in support of which the Hindus always required a system of philosophy also. Until a philosophy could be reduced to a code of spiritual discipline, or a spiritual discipline could be theorized into a philosophy which conceptualized the reality and the scheme of creation, neither was considered worthy of serious attention.

Thus we find that Hindu philosophy, spiritual disciplines, ethics, sociology, and values are all integrated in a life's pursuit so as to help a man grow spiritually by stages, while going through his duties of life, pursuing his aspirations, fulfilling his desires in a legitimate way, until he is brought through a graduated process of regeneration from within to the attainment of desirelessness, which is the condition precedent to the attainment of liberation.

Many may not attain liberation in this life. But a man always picks up the thread of his own state of being in the next life from

the stage he left it here and again travels on the path of his spiritual evolution. In his transmigration of soul he may go up or down in accordance with his merits or demerits; but the ultimate destiny of the soul is liberation.

What propels a believing Hindu through all his activities in the world is this liberation-mindedness, which expresses itself in various ways in different types of men and women.

What keeps Hindu society living, even though deluges of history have passed over it again and again, even though as a true realist the Hindu does not think that men are created equal, is his faith that man's being is rooted in something uncreated, the Atman, which knows no decay, admits no segregation, and allows no stratification.

What makes the Hindu so Catholic in his genuine regard for all religions is his conviction that God, who is infinite, cannot be finitized in the conceptions of one religion alone?

What makes the Hindu's faith living is that, through living, the truths propagated in the Scriptures have been continuously realized and demonstrated by saints, sages, prophets, and incarnations of God. Therefore, the Hindu lives in the glow of a living and vibrating faith. He believes that:

God is.

God is one, though He is called by various names. He is personal and impersonal, and beyond both.

God assumes form and incarnates on earth for the good of humanity, for instance in the forms of Rama, Krishna, Buddha, Christ, and Ramakrishna.

God can be seen, talked to, realized and experienced. The ultimate end of human life is the realization of God. God can be worshipped with or without images. A man can worship Him

through service to human beings, looking upon them as manifestations of divinity.

Religion consists in the realization of God and not in the speculations of philosophy or theology.

God is our common father, His creative energy our benign mother, the whole world our home, and all the peoples of the world are our kith and kin.

All the religions of the world are valid paths to the realization of God for those who are born in those religions. Pulling or pushing people from one religion to another is therefore unnecessary. Proselytization is a violation of God's own religious economy. The Hindu is a firm believer in the harmony of religions.

In whichever activity we leave God aside, not taking Him with us or not going with Him, doing something which does not lead us to Him—we leave the light of our soul behind and we walk in darkness, to the abyss of degradation.

The greatest work before man is the task of self-regeneration, because in it is not only the secret of the liberation of the soul but also of the regeneration of the world.

This is precisely because Hinduism, in the words of Max Müller, has scrutinized most profoundly the greatest problems of life and has, at least for some, provided solutions.

Hinduism, though the oldest of the living religions of the world, stands out as the most dynamic faith of man looking the future in the face.

Has Hinduism really any message and meaning for the West? If the Western man seeks, in the words of Max Müller, "the necessary equilibrium" in order to make his "inner life more perfect, more comprehensive, more universal, in short more human", if in fact he seeks "a life not only for this life, but a transformed and

eternal life", then Hinduism has a great message and meaning for him, as it has for the Hindus themselves.

Look at the world situation. There was never a time in human history when "to be or not to be" was so much a question with man. If we analyse the entire human situation of the day and try to pin-point the pith of the problem, what do we find? Imbalance. Man's control over outer nature has far exceeded his control over his own inner nature. Hence humanity founders in darkness. This is precisely the crux of the much-talked-of world crisis.

Those who are going to be the arbiters of human destiny tomorrow or the day after will not do better than their forebears if they do not have a firmer grip on their own inner nature. It is in this respect that Hinduism can render the entire humanity the most needed service.

All religions have undoubtedly prescribed disciplines for the control and conquest of the inner nature of man. But for the past five thousand years of recorded history, if the Hindu has done anything consistently, with single-minded devotion, a sense of urgency, and without a break, it is religious thinking. And therefore the Hindu's specialization in this regard has excellences and subtleties of its own, from which there is no reason why the West should not learn and profit, just as there is no reason why Hindus should not learn and profit from the store of knowledge provided by the empirical sciences built up by the great minds of the West.

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Ishta Devata or the Loved Form of God

Chandra Kumari Handoo, M.A.

One of the very first steps that an earnest seeker of God has to take is to select a particular form of the Divine through which he wishes to approach the Godhead. This chosen form, as conceived and loved, is called *ishta* in Sanskrit. The word is derived from the root *isha*, meaning to desire or choose; expressing the essence of Hinduism in a nutshell, this concept is far reaching in its consequences, for it provides us with a key to an understanding of all the religions of the world. Though the absolute truth is only one, in relative perception it appears as various; in other words, God is One, but He shows a different face to each of us, and so the paths leading to Him become many. The way or method to which we are naturally drawn is the chosen way for us and is determined by the peculiarities of our nature; due to this temperamental difference the way that is good for one may be positively harmful to another, for, as the Gita says, "the dharma [or path] of another is perilous and fraught with fear." Even natures that are predominantly emotional and therefore suited to the practice of devotion may disagree in their idea of God: one may imagine Him to be a monarch in heaven sitting on a royal throne and meting out justice to all; another may think of Him as a friend and constant companion ever present in fortune and in adversity. In this way conceptions of Him may be as numerous as those who seek Him, think of Him, and love Him.

From this principle of *ishta* or chosen ideal it follows that we cannot deny the same freedom to our neighbours. Various forms of spiritual discipline are thus cemented together by the understanding that one and the same urge is expressing itself in

the following of paths and religions other than our own. Peaceful co-existence with other faiths is an important prerequisite of religious life. To denounce them is a crude form of spiritual arrogance reminiscent of a barbaric age and unworthy of civilized humanity, and if found in a genuine lover of God it is totally unpardonable. Sri Ramakrishna explained the idea of *ishta* when he said, "Do you know what devotion to one's ideal is like? It is like the attitude of a daughter-in-law in a family. She serves all members of the family—her brother-in-law, father-in-law, husband and so forth—bringing them water to wash their feet, fetching their towels, arranging their seats and the like; but with her husband she has a special relationship".

It is not as if other religions have not an *ishta* of their own, but the difference is this: Hinduism with its tolerance and all-inclusiveness fostered by the Vedantic idea of unity, allows its followers to choose from the multitude of gods, goddesses and saviours known to it, and does not confine itself to one ideal only. To take an example, Christ is the *ishta* of the Christians, and those who would follow the path of Christianity must love, adore and worship Him alone to the exclusion of all other 'sons of God' even when historically known and accepted by other people, such as, for instance, the great and compassionate Buddha. But though all Christians believe in Christ, each church and sect sees Him in a different light, the result of which is that there are divisions and sub-divisions even in the same religion with the same ideal. This proves that a living religion must provide variety to suit the needs of all its followers.

Let us take another example which seems to come closer to Hindu thought. The Sufis mark three steps in their spiritual life by saying, "*Fanaa-fi-shaikh; fanaa-fi-Rasul; fanaa-fillah.*" This means surrender of self by merging the consciousness firstly in the self

of the teacher, secondly in the Prophet, and thirdly in God. Here the shaikh, the Prophet of Islam, and Allah, are the equivalent of the Hindu *guru, ishta* and the Impersonal God. From the particular to the universal seems to be the underlying idea. The shaikh or teacher, an individual like ourselves, is more real to us than an intangible and invisible prophet; the former introduces the disciple to the prophet who, though no longer alive, lived at a certain period of time as a human being with a definite personality and mission of his own. Communion with him may be established by loving prayer and meditation, and this in the fullness of time will lead to the realization of Allah or God without form. The same idea is repeated by Swami Vivekananda when he says, "In the preliminary state, the form of the guru is to be meditated upon by the disciple. Gradually it is to be merged in the *ishta*"¹. "This *eka-nishtha*, or devotion to one ideal, is absolutely necessary for the beginner in the practice of religious devotion ... Then, if the devotional aspirant is sincere, out of this little seed will come a gigantic tree, like the Indian banyan, sending out branch after branch and root after root to all sides, till it covers the entire field of religion. Thus, will the true devotee realize that He who was his own ideal in life is worshipped in all ideals by all sects, under all names, and through all forms"². Here the resemblance of thought is striking indeed, the only difference again being that Hinduism grants freedom to its votaries in the choice of the *ishta* while the Sufis look upon Mohammed or Rasul as the only mediator between God and man.

In going out of its way to meet the individual taste of the seeker the latitude Hinduism allows its followers is unique in the field of religion. Some may give their hearts to Rama—obedient son, ideal brother, loving husband, friend of the lowly and oppressed, calm in adversity, and ever ready to sacrifice his own happiness for the

sake of others. He is known as *Maryada Purushottama*, or the best amongst those who upheld honour and righteousness. Others may find solace in worshipping the Child Krishna, loved by the simple and the good-hearted community of cowherds for his innocent mischief and childish pranks; on the other hand, Krishna in his maturity, when he spoke the rarest words of wisdom which are enshrined in the Gita, while driving the chariot of Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, may appeal to still others. Some prefer the austere form of Shiva with matted hair and ash-smearred body living on the snowy peak of Kailasa lost in deep meditation. A serpent coiled round his neck shows that he owns and loves all creatures despised by the world; ignorant of worldly ways he is very kind and easily pleased with an offering of water and bel-leaves. He is a king amongst beggars and the ideal of the recluse and sannyasin. Divinity may also take the female form of Mother, tender, patient and forbearing with the erring, penitent child, but terrifying to the wicked. She is the Cosmic Power who creates, sustains and destroys the universe. Thus, the innumerable gods and goddesses of the Hindu religion are aspects of the Absolute conceived by the infinite human mind. Each of them represents some attribute of the Infinite: they are concrete expressions of the Abstract, revealed to saints in moments of mystic communion. In addition to their beauty of form they are also symbols of deep universal truths, an understanding of which makes meditation on them easier.

Usually the choice of the *ishta* depends upon family tradition and environment, but sometimes when the impressions of past lives are strong, there is a marked leaning towards a certain path and form of God. When such is the case, it is most likely that it was the accepted approach in the past. It is also an indication of the direction in which the aspirant is destined to progress in the

future. Some people are able to remember the mantra they used in a past life and they have, therefore, no difficulty in picking up the broken thread of their spiritual life in the present. Of the man who has fallen from yoga, the Gita says that in his next life he becomes united with the intelligence of his former life and strives more than before to attain perfection. "By previous practice alone he is borne on (the spiritual path) in spite of himself" (VI. 43-44). But in cases where the habit was not so strong as to force itself on the seeker, the guru should be considered the best guide.

When the *ishta* of the past and present life differ, the result is not usually as remarkable as in the case of the Christian lady who had an unexpected but surpassingly beautiful vision of Krishna, due obviously to her devotion to the latter in the unremembered past. A Hindu lady, on the other hand, may read the Bible daily and worship Christ as her *ishta*, but, so much respected is spiritual freedom in India, she does not thereby disturb the strictly Hindu beliefs of those around her. As and when religious prejudices and barriers fade away, Hinduism will have within its fold lovers of Christ, Zoroaster and Mohammed just as much as devotees of Rama or Krishna, or of the gods of the Hindu pantheon.

To cite another case, a life-long worshipper of Shiva and Parvati came in contact with the Ramakrishna Movement and, with the deepening of her insight, was led to understand that Sri Ramakrishna and the Holy Mother were none else than Shiva and Parvati. Uniting the two *ishtas* she continued her worship as before without any element of conflict. It is said of the poet-saint Tulsidas that once, while visiting a temple of Krishna at Brindaban, he addressed the Deity in the following words, "O Lord, Thou art indeed beautiful to look at, but Tulsi's head will bow in salutation only if Thou hast bow and arrow in hand." The story goes on to say that, in the twinkling of an eye, the flute disappeared from the

hands of the Lord and was miraculously replaced by a bow and arrow, and the image of Krishna changed into that of Rama! Such was the intensity of the devotion of Tulsidas!

The unaided seeker may experience great difficulty in selecting his sadhana (spiritual disciplines) from what seem to him a confused mass of paths, scriptures, gods, demi-gods, saints and teachers; but once the *ishta* has been selected either by himself or the guru, the path of sadhana becomes clear to him. Amongst the innumerable scriptural texts at his disposal he will read those which contain the life and teachings of the *ishta*. By repetition of the name of his Chosen Deity, at first, maybe, just mechanically a certain number of times, and later constantly and habitually, it will become part and parcel of his being. He will sing hymns in praise of the *ishta* and may perhaps also worship Him in a picture or through symbols, with flowers, incense, light and offerings of fruits and sweets. When paying homage to other Divine forms, he will know in his heart that they are no other than his own beloved *ishta*. In this way, filled with loving thoughts for the Lord, he will learn to see Him within and without. Should he be unable to progress so far, yet if he can but imbibe, even in a small degree, the special features of the Lord's teachings and character, his search will not have been in vain.

Sadhana is nothing but a psychological process of changing the inner being of man and therefore right thoughts are the most powerful method. The same thing is called sublimation in modern terminology. The scattered energy of the mind is gently collected and made to flow in one channel. The *ishta* is a kind of peg on which we hang our thoughts or a point towards which we converge them. Our spiritual energy, diffused and vague, acquires direction and is not lost in the wilderness of lukewarm desires which pursue many shadowy ideals but do not persevere in any

of them. In its variety of sadhana, Hinduism offers clear-cut roads which appeal to and can be followed by widely differing types of people, and by which they may travel God-wards. When thought, feeling and action are all harnessed to the same ideal, the conscious and subconscious are both affected by it and harmony restored where there were previously conflicting emotions and warring impulses. The personality of such an aspirant becomes integrated to a great extent and peace flows from him like the pure water from a mountainside.

If the *ishta* is to become the special object of our veneration, shall we not find its limitations irksome and irrational in view of our desire to be liberal? Again, it may be asked, if Hinduism is true to its claim of comprehensiveness and universality, why should its votaries be narrowed down to one creed or path only? The answer is obvious. No achievement is possible unless one concentrates one's attention by faithfully treading the so-called narrow path. How many pleasures and enjoyments, moral obligations and duties does one give up in order to acquire money, fame, scholarship or eminence in any walk of life? In this age of specialization we fully understand that a devoted student of history, for instance, cannot, in the ordinary course, also be a mathematician of any standing. How much more so does this apply to the knowledge of God! The finding of God, it is said, is the fruit of the labour of many lives; so what will a man gain by experimenting on more paths than one at the same time? And what will it avail him to sail haphazardly along the current of life to a vague destination?

If spiritual realization has the disadvantage of being more difficult than secular knowledge, it has also a corresponding advantage: with the reaching of the Supreme Goal comes the simultaneous intuition that all forms belong to the same Reality.

Sri Ramakrishna, a devotee of Kali, loved Her to the very end, but having seen Her, talked to Her and known Her, he tried other paths of Hinduism not excluding monistic Vedanta, as well as those of Christianity and Islam: he found that they all led to the Indivisible Unity of the self-same God. This was not an intellectual conviction but a positive awareness, an inalienable content of consciousness which in his case had the sanction of the Hindu scriptures; and on the strength of this the Ramakrishna Mission practices and preaches the principle of the harmony of religions.

Whereas there are bound to be different sects, creeds and religions worshipping a variety of Divine forms and sometimes affirming a Formless God as well, the recognition of an overall spiritual unity would be a valuable unifying factor amongst the people of the world. Perhaps this is to be India's contribution towards the growth of a new world order, the advent of which we are all awaiting so anxiously. How devotion to the *ishta*, though seemingly narrow in itself, can liberalize the mind of man may be studied in the lives of the great ones. We have already made a passing reference to the life of Sri Ramakrishna in this connection. The famous Sufi saying quoted above is also an illustration of the same principle.

One more objection remains. It would be pertinent to ask, "Since it is the Formless that gives rise to Form, why not go to the source and choose the former as our *ishta*? Then all differences would be resolved automatically, and religious strife would cease for ever". We shall try to give a brief reply to this criticism. First of all, for the sake of an artificial and outward conformity nobody's spiritual growth should be retarded by forcing him to accept a way of life that goes against his natural inclination. Secondly, all religions have the idea of a Personal God, the few exceptions to it being those which, in the course of time, substituted the Impersonal; but

even these used various symbols such as books, prophets and holy places to represent it. From this it can be inferred that to grasp the abstract, symbols are a fundamental necessity of the human mind. India with its Advaita Vedanta has threaded these forms and symbols like pearls on a string. Since the dawn of civilization, she has understood and taught that behind the Form is the Formless, behind the external God is the internal One who resides in the heart of all creatures. The sanction and authority of the Personal God is the Impersonal, but philosophically and mystically they are identical like the waves and the ocean. The distinction is intellectual and man-made and melts away as religious consciousness matures. So, while we are still on the way, let us remember that all lovers of God ultimately belong to the same family and all forms to the same Divinity.

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Who is Fit to Survive?

Swami Sunirmalananda

‘Survival of the fittest’ has become a popular phrase. Herbert Spencer wrote it in 1864 and Charles Darwin used it to mean Natural Selection. The idea that the fittest alone will survive on this planet has gained sufficient ground now, thanks to Darwin.

Nobody lives forever, but the idea is that those who are the ‘fittest’ will ‘survive’ while others succumb to pressure. Even Swami Vivekananda has said that Nature appears to favour the fittest: “According to the law of nature, wherever there is an awakening of a new and stronger life, there it tries to conquer and take the place of the old and the decaying. Nature favours the dying out of the unfit and the survival of the fittest”.¹ Vivekananda is only speaking here about the tendency of the new to replace the old—newer forms trying to substitute older ones.

Who are the fittest ones? Or, what does fitness mean? Remember, there is this superlative—the fittest ones. Is it physical fitness? At least in the physical world it appears to be so. In our everyday world, the fittest alone appear to survive while those that are unfit have succumbed to difficulties. This is what appears to have happened throughout history to plants and trees, animals and birds, individuals and groups, institutions and nations—the physically weak have made place for the strong. History is the story of how the weak have been smothered out. Further, medicine also seems to announce that if you are strong, you can avoid ailments and infections. It needs no Socrates to say that the world we live in is one of challenge, competition and constant struggle. If we are not fit enough to face the world and its challenges, we

are gone. So, the simple truth is, to survive in this world, be the fittest, physically.

So far so good. But does this happen as a rule?

There is a remarkable statement from Swami Vivekananda: "They talk a great deal of the new theories about the survival of the fittest, and they think that it is the strength of the muscles which is the fittest to survive. If that were true, any one of the aggressively known old world nations would have lived in glory today, and we, the weak Hindus, who never conquered even one other race or nation, ought to have died out; yet we live here three hundred million strong!"²

Just as there are countless cases of Herculeses' overpowering Nemean lions and Mares of Diomedes, and Supermen doing impossible things, there are also cases of the physically weak surviving all attacks. So physical fitness, though necessary, is not everything for the simple reason that we are not just our bodies. The body, with all its perfected muscles, is not automatic, and needs something more to keep it going. This body is not the real 'we', though many of us live so—taking recourse to even corrupt and unethical means to satisfy its demands. We are not like other animals, struggling only for the upkeep of the body. Can we prove that physical strength is not everything? The strongest paying medical bills and suffering from ailments, problems, and difficulties is a case in point.

What is fitness then? Financial fitness, perhaps? Some seem to decide that the fittest are the rich, with a good bank balance. If you have money, you can have anything is the popular idea. The present-day consumerist society appears to fully endorse with the idea that money means fitness to survive. However, not all rich are 'surviving', despite their fitness. While the poor appear to survive somehow, the rich seem to always need more to live by.

With regard to nations, the financially fit nations do not appear to be happier than the so-called unfit ones, the poor ones. Though millions may bring down the highest ideals to satisfy their lowest desires, though even the most sublime thoughts and ideals be misused only for physical and monetary benefits by the millions, the fact remains that neither just the body nor money can bring true fitness to us human beings. Therefore, has India since time immemorial and knowing peoples of the world nowadays glorify having less, which is renunciation. To survive, therefore, does not mean to breathe and to eat and to make oneself strong financially by any means. This philosophy holds good at the animal level. But at the human level, it means to live in peace and with dignity.

Animals and other creatures may survive physically by being strong, but the human being needs a different type of fitness to 'survive'. Surprisingly, this fitness is exactly the opposite of what is commonly understood as fitness. As we said, the popular notions of fitness are physical and economic health. That is, generally, to survive, we think it should be 'me' first. But to survive in the true sense of the term, one needs the ideal of 'me' last. *Vairâya mevâhayam*, renunciation alone brings true peace. We should be able to say 'you' first. So Vivekananda wrote to a prince, who knew fully well what physical and financial fitness meant: "My noble Prince, this life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive".³ St Francis of Assisi sang the same tune when he said: 'It is in giving that we receive, and in dying that we're born to eternal life.' So the fittest, the noblest and the bravest are those who sacrifice for others, and they alone survive.

Is this possible? Isn't it contrary to fact? While history appears to show how the physically strong and the powerful seem to have 'survived' in the ordinary sense of the term, it also shows clearly,

time and again, that it is the selfless alone that have truly survived in this battle of life. Not the rich or the Supermen, but the apparently ragged and weak ones have been the most successful. While those who lived for themselves might have conquered continents and sat on prickly thrones placed inside pools of blood, worrying constantly about the enemy, those who have conquered their desires and ambitions have lived in peace and stability. At least for two reasons physical fitness and financial fitness are not everything: a little microbe or a bacterium may destroy a strongly built body and a stock-market crash can turn a mountain of cash into pieces of paper. Moreover, in fitness of these forms there is never any satisfaction.

Those who lived for others alone have attained the goal of true survival, which is attaining inner peace. How could survival mean attaining peace, you may wonder. When someone is in a blazing fire but comes out unscathed, he or she has survived the fire. So those fit ones, who have lived for others, have lived in peace, acquired immense merits owing to their selflessness, and have attained supreme good. They have not survived like vegetables, living until they are killed, but have lived the fullest lives. They have not survived like animals, living only for satisfying the basic desires of the body. What is more, even plants and animals are seen to live for others, while we humans cheat, lie and hate to please ourselves. But this can change.

The selfless ones are different: they live like the gods. Their names are sung longer than time can imagine. To survive in this sense not only brings inner fulfillment but also keeps the body in shape, the mind in order and peace, and the heart full of happiness. The anxiety that is involved in trying to survive the ordinary way is worse than death and so people take to corruption and other means. As Swamiji says, "Anxiety is worse than the disease."

When all is said and done, living for others is fine but we should also survive in this world. In this present age, we shall also have to take care of ourselves and our families. How to combine selflessness with our own welfare? Or should we ignore our family and go about doing good to others?

This is where the genius of Vivekananda comes in. He knew what struggle meant having suffered the tortures of the world immensely. He therefore presented the ideal of karma yoga, the way of working to live every moment of our lives fully, to live a life of contentment.

We have spoken about renunciation, *tyaga*. In fact, India's ideal hasn't been just *tyaga* but also service, *seva*. Thousands of people all over the world are now practising these ideals and are leading excellent lives.

Who are the truly fittest then? On 18 February 1902, Ramakrishna's birthday, Vivekananda wrote to Brahmananda: "If in this hell of a world one can bring a little joy and peace even for a day into the heart of a single person, that much alone is true; this I have learnt after suffering all my life; all else is mere moonshine."⁴ He also said: "I can secure my own good only by doing you good. There is no other way, none whatsoever."⁵

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2. CW 3:156
3. CW 4:363
4. CW 5: Epistles-First Series
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New Concept of Tapasya to suit the Modern Times according to Swami Vivekananda

Swami Muktidananda

Tapasya in the Indian traditional sense, such as Japa, dhyana in solitude, silence and practice of physical austerities is known to all. Stressing the need for tapasya in spiritual life, Vyasa says in his Bhashya on Yoga Sutra, *na atapasvino yogah siddhyate* – “Those who do not follow the path of austerity do not get the Yoga siddhi”.

However, Swami Vivekananda has given to us a new concept of tapasya to suit the needs of the modern times, linking *jagad hita* to *atmano moksharta* that is, self-transformation through service. What is more, in this new dispensation, or so-called Neo-Vedanta, envisioned by the Swami, he has also re-interpreted tapasya to suit monastics life in modern-day society.

According to the Swami, tapasya in modern conditions can also be a sincere service to society, following the principle of Karma Yoga, Sister Nivedita, who understood this new spiritual call of service by the Swami, writes in her introduction to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* “No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life itself is religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid.”

Shankaracharya in his *Vivekachudamani* says *karmastu chitta shuddhaye, na tu vastu upalabdhaye*—“Karma will bring about transformation of mind and *samskara* and results in *chitta shuddhi*, but will not give experience of the Divine Self, by itself.” However, Sri Thakur says *shuddha man aur atma ek*, “the pure mind and Atma are one.” Just as pure water reflects the light clearly, the

intervening pure mind reflects the light of Atman, that is the Atman is revealed in a state of *chitta shuddhi*.

We can therefore, deduce that work done as Karma Yoga or Seva Yoga (as interpreted by Swami Gambhiranandaji Maharaj) also constitutes 'tapasya' in today's society. Furthermore, if such service is performed in a selfless way, with the spiritual aspirant seeking only to please the Lord with *bhakti bhava* and surrender, then it will silently bring about the required transformation.

Therefore, in our daily lives, although most of our time is spent in the company of different types of people and in the performance of various work and service activities, and though Prakriti has ordained life on earth—*karmabhoomi*—in such a way that work is an inseparable part of life, it can still be converted into a mode of tapasya if we sincerely try to seek God in this way. And Swami Vivekananda understood the challenge of such spiritual seeking and wanted us to learn how to transform this inevitable work itself into tapasya so that it can lead us towards spiritual transformation. Swami Turiyanandaji Maharaj, who was a traditional tapasvi, also accepted this view of Swamiji during the last days of his life.

The vast majority of householders are able to practice daily either Karma Yoga or Seva Yoga, but only by learning to do work in the spirit of *tapasya* can one become a role model to be emulated by householders and thus demonstrate as to how this type of work can also be performed as a type of Karma Yoga, that is, a kind of tapasya that is used as an effective two-pronged tool for self-transformation of the individual and the society as a whole. And this was Swami Vivekananda's main thrust in the philosophy of Practical Vedanta.

The Bhagavad Gita also upholds this type of Karma Yoga as a means of transformation. (*Yajnarthat karmano anyatra lokoyam*

karma bandhanah and yogastha kur karmani sangham tyaktva Dhananjaya).

By this type of tapas, even *madhyama adhikaris* (middle order seekers) and *samanya adhikaris* (ordinary spiritual seekers) who have been given the opportunity to become monks can attain salvation through Karma Yoga as this kind of service, ensures *jagad hita* at the same time. And the service provided by our monks and brahmacharis in schools, hostels, hospitals and in other such ways is also a form of *tapasya* if it is done with spiritual awareness and detachment. In this context it is worth recalling the words of Swami Adbhutanandaji Maharaj a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna - *kajer maje ake dhorbi hardam tar sevay lagbi* – “One has to hold on to God even amidst work.”

Conclusion:

All forms of work for *jagad hita* can be transformed into *tapasya* and can therefore lead us to *atmano moksha*

How to control our minds?

Swami Vivekananda

Until you know what the mind is doing you cannot control it...(1.174)

We have very little command of our minds. Therefore, to bring that command about, to get that control over body and mind, we must take certain physical helps. When the body is sufficiently controlled, we can attempt the manipulation of the mind. By manipulating the mind, we shall be able to bring it under our control, make it work as we like, and compel it to concentrate its powers as we desire. (1.132)

All these senses, external and internal, must be under... control. By hard practice (one) has to arrive at the stage where he can assert his mind against the senses, against the commands of nature. He should be able to say to his mind, "You are mine; I order you, do not see or hear anything", and the mind will not see or hear anything - no form or sound will react on the mind. In that state the mind has become free of the domination of the senses, has become separated from them. Next, the mind must be made to quiet down. It is rushing about. Just as I sit down to meditate, all the vilest subjects in the world come up. The whole thing is nauseating. Why should the mind think thoughts I do not want it to think? I am as it were a slave to the mind. No...knowledge is possible so long as the mind is restless and out of control...(One) has to learn to control the mind. Yes, it is the function of the mind to think. But it must not think if (one) does not want it to; it must stop thinking when he commands it to...Also, (one) must have great power of endurance. Life seems comfortable; and you find the mind behaves well when everything is going well with you.

But if something goes wrong, your mind loses its balance. That is not good. Bear all evil and misery without one murmur of hurt, without one thought of unhappiness, resistance, remedy, or retaliation. That is true endurance; and that you must acquire. (8.109-110)

We hear "Be good," and "Be good," and "Be good," taught all over the world. There is hardly a child, born in any country in the world, who has not been told, "Do not steal," "Do not tell a lie," but nobody tells the child how he can help doing them. Talking will not help him... We do not teach him how not to steal; we simply tell him, "Do not steal." Only when we teach him to control his mind do we really help him. All actions, internal and external, occur when the mind joins itself to certain centres, called the organs. Willingly or unwillingly it is drawn to join itself to the centres, and that is why people do foolish deeds and feel miserable, which, if the mind were under control, they would not do. What would be the result of controlling the mind? It then would not join itself to the centres of perception, and, naturally, feeling and willing would be under control. (1.171)

All knowledge depends upon calmness of mind. (7.72)

Nothing is done in a day... It requires hard and constant practice. The mind can be conquered only by slow and steady practice. (1.407)

The first step is not to disturb the mind, not to associate with persons whose ideas are disturbing. All of you know that certain persons, certain places, certain foods, repel you. Avoid them; and those who want to go to the highest, must avoid all company, good or bad. (1.177-178)

[All references are from The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda and the references are indicated in brackets as (Volume.Page no)]

Leaves of an Ashrama: 69

Solitude and Companionship

Swami Vidyatmananda

In a civilization such as ours, where there are more and more elderly people, the problem of solitude becomes preoccupying. Those left aside by the rush of time--what shall they do for companionship? Or the less old, suffering from the modern malady of loneliness--how can they be befriended? Some, such as the journalist Alistair Cook, praise television as a blessed consolation to the aged and the solitary. The TV--the comrade of one's youth and the solace of one's old age--what a destiny! Well yes, if he craves the company of the noxious concerns of everyday life, then television is indeed the best friend of the friendless.

But the Vedantist will not be so foolish. He will recite with Wordsworth:

When from our better selves we have too long
Been parted by the hurrying world, and droop,
Sick of its business, of its pleasures tired,
How gracious, how benign, is Solitude.

A devotee will not fear solitude, for his very aloneness will open up opportunities for new forms of companionship previously undiscovered. Solitude will allow him to make the acquisition of two companions probably neglected before, both delightful--one's Friend and oneself.

One's Friend. If one gives Him place in one's thoughts, in one's time, and in the quarters where one lives, He will become an intimate. He will respond to one's love for Him by manifesting Himself as a real presence, well-disposed and companionate. It is recounted that one-day Narada went to Vrindaban¹ to seek out Sri Krishna.² Someone told him that he would find Krishna at the home of one of

the gopis.³ In the very first house to which Narada went, there he found Krishna. "How does it happen that you are here?" asked Narada. "I am everywhere where I am loved," responded Krishna. Narada was sceptical. So to test Krishna's words Narada went to the house of a gopi living across the street. He found Krishna there also. And equally in the home of another gopi next door. Narada was wonderstruck. Then Krishna explained once more: "Wherever I am loved, there am I."

And oneself as companion to oneself? Sri Ramakrishna has explained it like this: Before visiting a retainer's house to receive his hospitality a king will send in advance necessary articles from his own stores, so that the subject may be enabled to receive his master properly. In the same manner the Divine invests the heart of His devotee with spiritual virtues in advance of His coming.

This is what giving place to the Friend does for one. That chronic double-mindedness dissolved, that regretted crookedness of heart set aright, those knots of the mind untied, that unclear conscience cleansed. One can be a comrade with oneself at last. Finally, one can be one's own good companion. At last one finds oneself to be someone fit to live with!

My guru once said: "In India we don't have any problem with old people. They sit in a corner and do japam and are a blessing to themselves and others." Once I heard him tell a woman who was grieving over the death of the last of her family: "But no. Think of yourself as fortunate, for the Lord has now liberated you to devote your time entirely to Him."

Thus, those so minded may be thankful to solitude for giving them the best imaginable company, to silence for offering them the most satisfying relationships, and to loneliness for providing the friendliest companions.

References:

- 1 Vrindaban – City where Sri Krishna lived.
- 2 Krishna – Incarnation of God
- 3 Gopis – Milkmaids who sought the company of Krishna

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Programme for November - December 2019

Sunday discourses begin after a brief period of meditation.

At the

Ramakrishna Vedanta Centre, Bourne End at 4:30 pm

Nov 3	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 45	Swami Sarvasthananda
Nov 10	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 46	Swami Sarvasthananda
Nov 17	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 47	Swami Sarvasthananda
Nov 24	Swami Bhuteshananda's Class Talks: "God in Everything"	Swami Tripurananda
Dec 1	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 48	Swami Sarvasthananda
Dec 8	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 49	Swami Sarvasthananda
Dec 15	The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna 50	Swami Sarvasthananda
Dec 22	Holy Mother's Puja	
Dec 24	Christmas Eve	
Dec 29	Day Retreat	

Holy Mother's Puja

Sunday 22nd December
at Bourne End at 3:30 pm

Christmas Eve Celebration

Tuesday 24th December
at Bourne End at 5:00 pm

Day Retreat

With Swami Sarvasthananda and Swami Tripurananda
at the Vedanta Centre, Bourne End, on December 29th
from 10:00 am until 7:00 pm

Fortnightly Saturday Class - Message of the Upanishads - Ancient Solutions for Modern Problems - by Swami Sarvasthananda

Nov 9 and 30(Saturday)

Dec 14 and 28 (Saturday)

Time 4:00 p.m to 5:30 p.m

Venue: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan,
4A Castletown Road, London W14 9HE

him: "Sadhuji, you require milk every day; you can supply your want for a few days at most by begging; who will supply you with milk all the year round? Just do one thing—keep a cow. You can satisfy your own creature comforts by drinking its milk and you can also give some to your cat." In a few days the sadhu procured a milch cow and had no occasion to beg for milk any more. By and by, the sadhu found it necessary to beg for straw for his cow. He had to visit the neighbouring villages for the purpose, but the villagers said, "There are lots of uncultivated lands close to your hut; just cultivate the land and you shall not have to beg for straw for your cow." Guided by their advice, the sadhu took to tilling the land. Gradually he had to engage some labourers and later on found it necessary to build barns in which to store the crop. Thus he became, in course of time, a sort of landlord. And, at last he had to take a wife to look after his big household. He now passed his days just like a busy householder.

After some time, his Guru came to see him. Finding himself surrounded by goods and chattles, the Guru felt puzzled and enquired of a servant, "An ascetic used to live here in a hut; can you tell me where he has removed himself?" The servant did not know what to say in reply. So the Guru ventured to enter into the house, where he met his disciple. The Guru said to him, "My son, what is all this?" The disciple, in great shame fell at the feet of his Guru and said, "My Lord, all for a single piece of loin-cloth!"

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Practical psychology directs first of all its energies in controlling the unconscious, and we know that we can do it. Why? Because we know the cause of the unconscious is the conscious; the unconscious thoughts are the submerged millions of our old conscious thoughts, old conscious actions become petrified — we do not look at them, do not know them, have forgotten them. But mind you, if the power of evil is in the unconscious, so also is the power of good. We have many things stored in us as in a pocket. We have forgotten them, do not even think of them, and there are many of them, rotting, becoming positively dangerous; they come forth, the unconscious causes which kill humanity. True psychology would, therefore, try to bring them under the control of the conscious. The great task is to revive the whole man, as it were, in order to make him the complete master of himself. Even what we call the automatic action of the organs within our bodies, such as the liver etc., can be made to obey our commands. This is the first part of the study, the control of the unconscious. The next is to go beyond the conscious. Just as unconscious work is beneath consciousness, so there is another work which is above consciousness. When this superconscious state is reached, man becomes free and divine; death becomes immortality, weakness becomes infinite power, and iron bondage becomes liberty. That is the goal, the infinite realm of the superconscious. - **Swami Vivekananda**

