

THE SPIRITUAL PATH

by

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THE SPIRITUAL PATH

Swami Yatiswarananda, the author of 'The Universal Prayers' and 'The Divine Life', is the representative of the Ramakrishna Order preaching the gospel of Vedanta in the continent of Europe. The Swami was formerly the Head of the Ramakrishna Math, Madras, and the Editor of the Vedanta Kesari. In this article forming the substance of some of his class-talks in Europe, the Swami gives many a practical suggestion to spiritual aspirants. — Vedanta Kesari, August 1937.

BEGIN EARLY

ONE has to begin as early as possible with one's spiritual life. Unless we have sown the seed of spirituality in our soul early in life, there is no possibility of creating the spiritual mood in later life. Those who are not spiritually minded while they live in the world, can never be spiritually minded when they retire from the world. They will find that the old impure impressions have become so deep that there is no possibility of effacing them. That they have become the slaves of their instincts and impulses, and that they can no longer act in the way they would like to, cannot take up a higher and purer life, neither mentally nor physically. Our ideal is to make a beginning of liberation in this very life and to make the best use of the time that is given to us.

THE LORD'S GRACE

The Grace of the Divine comes to a person in the form of self-effort, in the form of the will to strive for something higher and more permanent than all these phenomena.

Some speak of destiny, others speak of self-effort, while again others hold, “Yes, it is true that everything depends on the will of the Lord, but the Lord desires that I should strive my utmost. Self-effort comes to me as a manifestation of my 'destiny'; it is the will of the Lord that creates in me the desire for striving”. But without purity and real, unfeigned dispassion there can never be any spiritual life, or even any deep spiritual striving. Unless we strive our very utmost and our best, the Lord's Grace will not descend on us.

CONTROL THE MIND

What is most essential in all forms of spiritual life is to keep the greater part of the mind thinking of God, thinking of the Ideal, and never to allow it to give its thoughts entirely to the world or worldly affections and relations even when occupied with some worldly duty. We must know how to divide the mind to some extent, so that we can make one part of it cling to the Lord and to the Lord alone, whatever be our occupation.

Through constant practice, through unflagging practice, we may develop an attitude of mind that enables us to think and to feel that whatever we do is a service to the Lord, and that we have no right to the fruits of any of our actions. “O Lord, whatever works I do, I look upon it as a form of worship to Thee.” This service may be physical, intellectual or spiritual.

Watch the reactions in your mind brought about by certain people and things, and act accordingly. Avoid everything that is apt to rouse old, evil impressions and thoughts belonging to your former life. We cannot allow ourselves to run after worldly love and affections and have the higher Divine Love at the same time. God and worldly affections cannot live together.

DEFINITE IDEA OF THE PATH AND THE GOAL

We should have the ideal fixed that neither worldly nor heavenly pleasures are our goal, that our ultimate goal is Self-realisation—neither this world nor heaven, nor any other world. Heavenly enjoyment is no better than earthly enjoyment, and so long as there is hankering after heavenly enjoyment, we can never attain the goal. We must yearn for God more than for His creation either in heaven or in earth.

Before we actually begin our spiritual life in real earnest, we must decide if we are really fully prepared to pay the price. We must fix once for all our ideal, our conduct of life, and everything, and then stick to it in all circumstances. If we wish to transcend all the unrealities, there must always be a certain amount of dare-devil in us, a certain amount of fearlessness and true heroism. Unless we are prepared to sacrifice all our worldly desires and our sense of, ‘I-ness’ we can never hope to realise the higher ideal. “Give us discrimination, give us renunciation, give us devotion and knowledge”—let us pray thus to the Divine.

DISCRIMINATION

You must never associate too freely with people and must always use discrimination. If another person attracts you, just direct the mind into some higher channels, create in yourself some dislike or disgust for the person in question, so that that person loses all charm for you. Later on this disgust is to be effaced so that you can look at that person with the same indifference with which you would look at a stranger you have never known. In spiritual life, although to a great extent you cut off your personal relations with others, you come to have a wider love and sympathy for them through the medium of the Divine. When one finds something higher, the lower ideal automatically loses its attraction, and is put aside.

We should also practise a certain amount of control and discrimination regarding the food we take. And so long as we are in the body, the body must be properly taken care of and nourished to keep it a fit instrument for realisation of the Divine and for the Divine's work. There is much more body-consciousness in the person who is ill or weak than in the perfectly healthy and normal person. We have to see that our body-consciousness is reduced to a minimum if we want to make good progress in spiritual life.

Unless our mind be to some extent pure and non-attached and prepared for renunciation, we can never even think of God-realisation. Try to purify your heart, to purify your mind, as much as possible. Then the blazing fire of spiritual realisation will burn away all desires.

MEDITATION ON THE HOLY PERSONALITIES

Few people can begin their spiritual practice with the meditation on the Formless and Attributeless Aspect of the Divine. Even the conception of God without form but with attributes is beyond the grasp of the many. So long as it is impossible for us to form even an idea of the Divine in both his transcendent and immanent aspects, we should first of all try to think of the Divine Glory as manifest through the Holy Personalities-the great Incarnations and Prophets of mankind. It is very easy for us to speak of worshipping God in truth and in spirit. But since, as a matter of fact, we cannot do so, it becomes a meaningless phrase and nothing more.

We think in terms of our small, limited, impure, individual consciousness, but the great ones think in terms of the Infinite Consciousness.

We are like small, tiny, self-forgetful bubbles, while they are like mountain-high waves that are always conscious of their ocean-origin. The ocean never comes to be limited by

the wave-form.

The Incarnation is a glorious manifestation, but never the whole, of God who is the reality at the back of ordinary beings also.

Tiny bubbles that we are, we find it difficult to understand even a full wave-consciousness. By worshipping and meditating on the great ones, we are able to come in touch with their super-consciousness. This breaks the bonds of our limited existence and brings in a new light, a deeper awareness that lies hidden in the depths of our being. The waves bring us in contact with the ocean.

By lifting ourselves consciously to the plane of their knowledge, we get rid of all our false notions, of our being identified with the body, of being men and women. Dropping the limiting adjuncts, we get a new and purer sense of existence – a universal consciousness that gives the true meaning to our individual existence and life.

INDIVIDUAL AND UNIVERSAL

In trying to separate itself from the ocean, the bubble runs the risk of bursting its bubble-form, as it can never exist without the contact of the ocean. But the trouble is that we are not conscious of this great fact. We consider ourselves to be separate entities, separate from the ocean and separate from one another. When this initial mistake is made through ignorance, all other mistakes follow as a matter of course and make our life one of endless misery.

Although we may take our limited existence to be absolutely real at first, we find, on deeper consideration and experience, that it is not so. The false conception of reality is wholly due to ignorance. It is through this that we come to cherish many a petty and ignoble idea, and we suffer because of that. However, by getting rid of the false concep-

tions, we rise above all illusory, limiting adjuncts, and regain our true nature, the true dignity and glory of the Divine in us, who is not only our *self* but is the *self* of all.

HINTS FOR MEDITATION

In the beginning of our spiritual life we have to create our own images, but these must be images of which the pattern is right, i.e., imaginations of something that is real, not of something wholly imaginary. Some stress the sense of the Presence more than the form, although they, too, may call up the form. The same Being permeates both the form called up and the devotee, as it is the devotee's own eternal Being – his true *self*.

Just think that your whole heart or head is permeated with the Divine Effulgence, and that this Light is part of the Infinite Light that pervades everything. Melt away your whole personality, your I-ness, into That. Melt away your body, your mind, your senses, your emotions, into That. Just imagine this very vividly. And then this infinite ocean of Light takes shape as part of this Light becomes solidified in the form of your *Ishtam* (Chosen Deity), but never lose sight of the infinite background of which your *Ishtam* and you yourself as well as all others are parts, and which permeates all these. The ocean, the One Eternal Principle, lying at the back of both yourself and the whole universe, must never be lost sight of, because it is That which is to be fully realised by you one day.

But one who does not lead a pure life and is not disciplined ought not to follow this instruction, because meditation becomes dangerous in the case of a person who is not properly prepared and has not gone through the proper preliminary training.

SELF-SURRENDER

Only one who has really passed through strenuous self-effort can give himself up and surrender himself wholly and unconditionally at the feet of the Divine. All forms of striving make the mind pure and fit for the Divine touch. And self-surrender can only be accomplished after having gone through one's spiritual practice with great perseverance and doggedness. Self-surrender can only come when our wings are dead-tired like those of the bird sitting on the ship's mast after having tried in vain to reach land when the ship was on high sea.

Too much activity is very dangerous, because it usually becomes like the aimless activity of the monkey. This kind of activity is just restlessness, and we see it in people who are terribly afraid to be left to themselves. But on the other side you find a form of so-called self-surrender that is nothing more than inertness, indolence, lethargy. And this is just as bad as aimless activity. The true aspirant should always try to combine both—activity of the right kind and self-surrender.

STUDY AND PRACTICE

Religion is something different from, and something more than, book-knowledge. Through mere scholarship, through mere intellectual study, you can never learn the Truth. When we think too much and too highly of intellectual life, we can never realise the essential truths of religion.

“Let one study as well as he can, master the subjects, but after having become a great scholar, let him renounce desires and try to live upon the strength which comes from knowledge.”

One must be free from all guile, from all falsehood, all lack of uprightness, from all the perversities of the mind, and then become a man of meditation, if one wants to make real

spiritual progress.

Having known the essentials of spiritual life, having formed a clear idea of the Divine, you should try to practise the disciplines. Do not read too many empty words. That creates only disturbance and trouble. Now, this does not mean that you should not go in for studies, but you should make it a point to study with a view to realise the Truth, and along with your studies there must be some real spiritual practice every day. You must always train your intellect and have your fixed studies, think deeply on the problems, and form a habit of clear thinking and deep study, so that you would feel uncomfortable the day that you have not studied anything deeply pondering over it and over the truths it contains. This daily study is to be made an important item of your spiritual practice.

LUST AND GREED

Sri Ramakrishna's message is: "Be spiritual and realise the Truth yourself." By living the spiritual life, we can make the Divine living in our own life. The Master shows us how we may overcome sex and greed—these, our greatest obstacles on the path of all spiritual progress. He wishes us to have a new outlook towards ourselves and others. Men as well as women must have the Divine outlook, and not think of themselves in terms of sex and body. To see the Divine in oneself and in all others, men and women, is the only solution for the world-problem of sex and the relation between the sexes. This is a most vital point to note for the spiritual aspirant. You can never rise above the sex-idea by just hating woman or man, as many mystics of the Middle Ages tried to do. Something more is needed. The Divine is in me, in all, in everything. "I am not a man, I am not a woman, I am the Self."

BUDDHA'S PRACTICAL INSTRUCTIONS

It was the mission of Buddha's life to ask people not to think too much of philosophies and metaphysics, of rites and ceremonies, but to make religion—the Spiritual Law—a living force in their own lives by leading a life of purity, meditation, spiritual discipline and mental control. What did Buddha say of God? He was silent on the point. It is not essential to speak of God so much, but far more essential to follow God's path, to live the spiritual life. What is the use of saying: "O Lord, how beautiful Thou art! How beautiful are Thy skies, Thy stars, Thy whole creation!" The Creator is always greater than His creation, and does not feel proud of it. Seen from our human standpoint, we find it great, but to God it is insignificant. So it is more important to follow God's path than to praise God eternally, without ever doing anything. This lip-service is of no use to the aspirant.

Once Buddha was asked, "Sir, is there a God?". He replied, "Did I say there is a God?" "Then is there no God, sir?" asked the questioner. "Did I say there is no God?" came the reply, Buddha wanted to stop all empty and hair-splitting discussions and speculations, and make people do something. So he said, "When a house is on fire, do you first go and trace the origin of the fire, or do you try to extinguish it?" But we in our foolishness very often try to trace the origin first, but before we have succeeded in the attempt, the whole house is burnt down and nothing remains of it but a heap of ashes.

We always want everything to be done for us by somebody else. There can be no vicarious salvation without any self-effort on the part of the aspirant. Most of the so-called religious people are mere parasites in the world of religion and spiritual life. It would be better for them to take up something else.

AVOID TEMPTATIONS

During the period of our spiritual training we must try as much as possible to avoid all temptations, both in its gross and subtle forms. We should salute anything that may become an object of temptation to us, from a safe distance. Let us not go near it. We must not rely too much on our own strength for a long time to come. We have such a dirty mind full of filthy impressions that once it is really stirred up, it may create no end of troubles. Lust, hatred, greed, vulgarity, all these are lying hidden in us and waiting to make us their prey. And so we must be on our guard.

Always the trouble arises through our being too little aware of the danger in the form of a tiny and apparently insignificant ripple in the mind. The outer stimulus, even if it be a very subtle and scarcely perceptible one, gradually affects the mind. Sometimes even the memory of some old impure impression is enough to upset us, because the germ or the seed is always inside, never outside. Unless the seed be inside, it can never sprout.

Attachment in any form may be enough to muddle the brain and bring about the spiritual ruin of the aspirant, but when attachment and anger combine, the whole mind becomes chaotic, and all progress is stopped. All struggle for the Higher Life comes to an end when passion has its sway over a person. That is why we should carefully avoid any harmful stimulus, even if it be a very subtle one, and keep our mind engaged with the higher thoughts. We should not give an opportunity to the lower propensities and impulses, and avoid as much as possible the company of persons of the other sex as well as that of those of our own sex who do not lead a strictly moral life, at least during the period of our spiritual training.

“Fill the mind with Vedantic thoughts until you fall asleep or until this body of yours drops off”.

We should not give an opportunity to the passions to sway us. It is the nature of the mind to think, and if we do not give good and pure thoughts to the mind, avoiding all old impure associations, it is bound to think of bad and impure ones. So be up and doing. Always be on your guard and follow the path intelligently and assiduously.

PRAYERS

O Lord, with the passing of every day the duration of life is seen to shorten, and youth to decay.

The days that are gone do never come back ; time verily is the devourer of the world.

Fortune is fickle and short-lived as ripples on the surface of water, while life is momentary like a flash of lightning.

Therefore, O Thou Refuge of all, do Thou even now protect me who seek refuge in Thee.

May the wicked become virtuous.

May the virtuous attain tranquillity.

May the tranquil be free from bonds.

May the freed make others free.



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