

THE NATURE AND SIGNIFICANCE OF SPIRITUALITY*

These days there seem to be many misconceptions about spirituality. Sometimes it is taken to be something mystical and mysterious, sometimes it is taken to be a kind of abnormality, sometimes it is described and denounced as a source of evil and sometimes it is considered to be just a kind of morality. We want to point out in this paper that spirituality is none of these, that it is of vital necessity and importance in our life, and that in spite of various spiritual traditions there is one common goal of all which is something tangible and which is to be properly understood and appreciated.

Let us begin with the question : What is spirituality or spiritual life? Ordinarily a man is taken to be spiritual if he puts on certain marks, wears a certain kind of clothes, goes to temple, church or mosque and performs some form of worship. But obviously these are only external marks and are not necessarily indicative of the inner life of the man. There must be something which makes the above marks meaningful, and we should be able to find out that. Some people think that having different kinds of visions is the mark of a spiritual man. But psychologists today point out that abnormal persons also have visions. Medical men tell us that even drugs can make us experience visions. Others seem to believe that the power of showing miracles or making prophecies is the sign of a spiritual man. Curiously we find two conflicting tendencies these days. On the one hand visions are dismissed as psychological aberrations, and prophecies and miracles are seriously doubted. On the other hand unless a man is able to perform miracles and make prophecies, he is not taken seriously. All this only shows that we do not have a clear and correct conception of spirituality.

In order to have a clear and correct conception of spirituality we should discover the nature of that inner life which is on the one hand common to all spiritual traditions and which on the other hand gives meaning to the external forms, doctrines and dogmas

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of the various traditions. Keeping this in view we can say that spirituality is a method of trying to attain permanent peace by tackling the problem of the ego. This definition has three merits—it points out the common and essential feature of different kinds of spirituality, it brings out the vital importance of spirituality and it distinguishes the inner aspect of a spirituality from its external forms and it also recognises many forms of spirituality. We hope to make our point clear by explaining our definition.

First of all let us note that spirituality is only a method or a *mārga* as we call it in India. It is not the goal or the thing itself. When this is forgotten and the method is mistaken to be the thing itself, there is fanaticism, narrowness and dogmatism. So it is necessary to remember that spirituality is only a way of life or a method or a discipline with the necessary implication that there can be many methods and disciplines and not only one although the goal is one. The possibility of a variety of spiritual disciplines is very well recognised here in India but not in the west. But if we want to avoid bigotry and fanaticism and if we do not ignore other religions and traditions, it is necessary to accept many spiritual ways of life. There is the *bhakti mārga*, the *jñāna mārga*, the *yoga mārga*, the Buddhist way, the Jaina way and so on. The west knows only the *bhakti mārga* generally and does not seem to recognise the other *mārgas* or ways.

The next point is that spirituality is a method of attaining permanent peace. We are aware that different methods define their goals differently in terms of *salvation*, *mukti*, *nirvāṇa*, *Īśvara prāpti* etc. and so it may appear wrong to say that the goal for all of them is that of attaining peace. But our contention is that the above different conceptions of the goal refer to what happens after this life. We do not want to be involved in the controversial question as to what happens after the present life. Nor do we want to raise the question of God and soul. Our concern is with spirituality or spiritual life here on this earth and so we have defined the goal as that of permanent peace.

The peace which spirituality aims to attain is a kind of peace which is different from every other kind. There is what may be called physical peace. It is the kind of peace which we have when we get rid of physical discomforts such as hunger and thirst, disease and pain or wants of different kinds. The experience of this kind of unpeace is universal; even animals have it. The cause of

unpeace is taken to be some factor in our environment and the method employed for its removal is empirical and the relief is but temporary. Most people do not seem to go beyond desiring this physical peace and they do not hesitate to adapt even unfair means to have it. But there are others who are not able to enjoy peace even after the attainment of physical peace. They seem to have some kind of intellectual problem or tension and so they feel relieved only when the mental problem is solved. This may be called mental peace. There may be still others who have unpeace because of moral conflicts and considerations. Such persons have a sigh of relief when the moral conflict is over. This may be regarded as moral peace. All these different kinds of peace are temporary and superficial since they do not uproot the very possibility of unpeace. So the question is whether there is a root cause of all unpeace and whether it can be permanently removed.

This is precisely the spiritual problem. The empiricist believes that the cause of unpeace is in the external circumstance, the moralist believes that the cause of unpeace is vice or sin. But the spiritual man has a different diagnosis. He inwardises his attention and discovers that the cause of all unpeace is something internal, our ego or pride. The ego is the basis of our whole life if we come to think of it. It is the ego that isolates and separates us; it is the ego that develops selfishness and self-interest because it is the ego that passes for our self. The ego is the organ of experiencing the *dvandvas* — success and failure, victory and defeat, pleasure and pain, inflation and depression. Our life is nothing but the life of the ego all the time seeking self-gratification, seeking progeny, power and pelf. It can be easily seen that suffering is due to passions and passions are due to the ego. Where the ego is not involved, we do not have any feelings or passions, and where it is even the least involved, we cannot but have feelings. The greater the involvement of the ego, the greater our passions; the less the involvement of the ego, the less our feelings. This correlation shows that the ego is at the root of our suffering. The truth of our statement can be tested every moment by observing our own life and that of others.

The ego has its ramifications; it does not centre round our body alone; it spreads to everything with which our body is related and seeks self-gratification through everything — its family and community, its village and district, its country and its party. Every-

thing, even one's religious sect, is made an instrument of gratification by the ego. Whatever is regarded by me as mine affects me, and the sphere of the mine varies from individual to individual. The ego has not only an extensive sphere but also a subtle way of operating. Humility is anti-ego but the ego can exploit even humility for its own gratification by making a show of it or by advertising it. The ego thus produces lot of self-deception in every sphere, specially in the sphere of spirituality. One can guard against self-deception only if one is constantly vigilant and aware of the subtle ways of the ego. The ego hides itself even in most unsuspected corners of life. That is why the spiritual man's attention is always directed inwards. He does not blame external circumstances and other persons; he blames himself. The attention of the worldly man goes outward to others and to the external environment. That is why the worldly man is not able to see that our suffering has a root-cause and that root-cause is in us. The worldly man is not able to see that persons and circumstances cease to be a source of suffering the moment our relation to them is cut off, not the physical relation but the relation of *mine*. The moment the life is divorced or the house is sold, they affect us no more, as they cease to be mine. If there were no root-cause, suffering could not be removed as a whole or completely. Nor could suffering be completely removed if it were due to external factors, because external factors can never be completely controlled by any one. At the moral stage suffering is said to be due to our sins. But when it is discovered that sin itself is due to our desires for self-gratification then there is the awareness that suffering is due to our ego, that is, there is a root cause of suffering. This is the spiritual stage. Although the desire to get rid of suffering is universal, the awareness that it is due to our ego is not universal. Only those who have this awareness take to spiritual means of tackling the ego. Such persons are no doubt few but they are there always. Otherwise the stream of spiritual life would have dried up long ago.

If it is admitted that the ego is the root-cause of unpeace or suffering then the question arises: how to tackle the ego? It seems to us, as already pointed, that there is not one way but many ways of tackling the ego. But there seem to be two primary ways of dealing with the ego and all the different ways can be put under one or the other. The essential thing to note is that in all the

different ways ultimately the aim is to tackle the ego directly or indirectly. This is what we will endeavour to show.

Of the two primary methods of handling the ego, the one is direct and the other is indirect, the one is a frontal attack and the other is a flank attack. The indirect method is the method of *bhakti* or devotion and the direct method is that of knowledge or *jñāna*. In the *bhakti* path it is believed that the ego cannot be completely removed, at least not with the help of the ego. The ego cannot commit suicide. But the ego can be transformed in such a manner and to such an extent that it shed off its evil urge for self-gratification. *Bhakti* means yoking the ego in the service of God. The ego because of its self-gratifying nature develops love for finite and transitory objects and consequently suffers. So the solution lies in turning our back to the finite and transitory objects and direct our love to what is infinite and eternal, that is, God. When we turn to God and develop love for Him, our ego ceases to be what it was; it ceases to have the fret and the fever of life as it feels the presence of the infinite and the eternal. With the realisation that God alone knows what is good for us and He alone can do good, our urge for self-gratification and self-effort is abated and gradually disappears and there is complete surrender to God. Surrender is thus the essential spirit of *bhakti* and egoity the spirit of worldliness. In this spirit of surrender our individuality or ego is not negated but only transformed. All the *bhakti* schools whether in Indian or in the west share this view. They are all realistic and pluralistic and regard individuality as ultimate and not as false.

As the emphasis in the *bhakti* path is not on renouncing the ego but on subduing and transforming it, this path is easier. Changing the direction of the ego from the finite or self-love to the infinite or love of God is not so difficult, as it follows the natural tendency of the ego to love what is more attractive; that is why *bhakti* is called *pravṛtti mārga*. *Bhakti* is difficult only so long as our desire for self-gratification is too strong. But then renouncing the ego is much more difficult as it means jumping out of one's skin. In the *bhakti* path only the centre of our life is changed; God comes to occupy the centre but the natural tendency of the ego is to love what it considers to be good remains in tact and is utilised for developing love of God. We begin to derive happiness from the love of God and not from finite objects. So love is not

negated but only redirected in *bhakti* and our individuality continues to be there.

However, there are found in India other ways of tackling the ego. Apart from self-gratification, the ego has another feature and that is separativeness and particularity. The other path emphasises this aspect and tries to discover the universal behind the particularity of the ego or egos. It asks us to shake off our particularity or exclusiveness and dive deeper to find that there is a universal self which is our real self. In other words, it is a way of broadening or expanding oneself. At present, we consider ourselves to be finite and limited to the body and things associated with the body. But really we are infinite and if we realise our universality and infinity, there will be no duality, no fear, no tension and no unease. So our ego or self has to be expanded by the discovery or knowledge that we are really infinite. Once ignorance is destroyed there is no fall again. In the *bhakti* path also, there is no fear of fall although there is duality, as one is in the gravitational zone of God and the pull of the infinite is so great that there can be no fall.

There is yet another way of shedding off individuality or particularity. This is found in Buddhism. Here we do not proceed from particularity to universality; there is no expansion here. All that we are required to do is to drop particularity. Our egoity rests on the belief that we are something durable if not also permanent, while the fact is that we are nothing more than a momentary conglomeration of momentary *dharmas*. Once we come to realise this, the citadel of our ego is exploded and vanishes into thin air; there remains nothing which we can call I or mine. So instead of expansion, there is explosion here. What we regard as the centre of our life is exploded; all fetters are shattered and there remains nothing which can cause worry. In the *Ātmavāda* tradition, our true self is found to be infinite and eternal and there ceases to be any worry regarding the finite and the temporal. But in the *Anātmavāda* tradition only the negative aspect of negating the ego is emphasised as that alone is enough to end suffering. So the Buddhist way also is *jñānamārga*. In knowledge there are two aspects, the positive aspect of knowing something and the negative aspect of destroying ignorance. The Buddhist emphasises only the negative aspect as that is considered to be both necessary and sufficient; nothing behind the flux is posited.

As regards Jainism, the metaphysical theory of *Anekāntavāda* based on the logic of *Syādvāda* seems to have a remarkable spiritual effect. Its effect, if not also its aim, is, it seems to us, concerned with the rigidity of the ego which is nothing but the rigidity of its beliefs on which it stands. This rigidity of beliefs gives rise to dogmatism, fanaticism and intolerance. "I am right and others are wrong." This is an egoistic attitude. *Anekāntavāda* teaches us humility and tolerance and makes our ego flexible as it were. It seems to say in effect "you may be right but others also may be so." By accepting and synthesising all views, Jainism breaks the back-bone of the ego i. e. its beliefs or its dogmatism. The same effect is achieved by the Mādhyamika method of rejecting all views. (*dr̥stis*) When no view is accepted, the ego has no legs to stand upon. We may understand similarly other methods of spirituality as a way of tackling the ego.

Our point is that though the different ways or *mārgas* may be associated with different doctrines and dogmas about God and soul, so far as spiritual life is concerned they all aim at tackling the ego. Instead of being baffled by differences in doctrines, we should pin down the essential and common feature and take to any method of conquering the ego which is the main target in all the spiritual disciplines. Nor should we be dogmatic about theoretical doctrines; we may take them as alternative ways of helping us in our endeavour to overcome the ego. The important thing is the overcoming of the ego and not anything else such as the metaphysical doctrines or the forms of worship or a particular holy text.

So there can be many ways of downing or destroying the ego, the source of all unpeace. The point that we want to make is that this is the common feature of all methods of spiritual life or methods of gaining peace. If we recognise this we will be able to appreciate that in spite of differences of doctrines and dogmas, the goal of all the different methods is one. Those who see only differences seem to feel baffled as to what spirituality is; they feel even sceptical as to whether there is anything as spirituality. But by noticing the above common feature we can safely assert that spirituality is a way of tackling the ego and that there can be many such ways. The advantage of this definition is two-fold. Firstly it comprehends all the different forms of spirituality *bhakti*, *jñāna*,

yoga etc. Secondly we can see the effect of practising spirituality here and now. We can easily see in our own life that the less there is the insistence and the intensity of the ego, the less there is the experience of fear and anxiety, of jealousy and hatred, of all the passions that create problems for us and for others.

Negatively, we can also say that spirituality does not mean mere morality, because morality is based on our ego. No doubt, morality controls and purifies the ego, but it cannot eradicate the ego. For that we have to take to some spiritual method which does not in any way strengthen and gratify the ego. When the problem of the ego is forgotten, the practice of spirituality itself begins to strengthen the ego in subtle ways. For example when a man begins to make a show of his morality, spirituality or begins to boast of his spirituality, he is obviously exploiting spirituality and morality or is a victim of his ego. Similarly when we begin to claim a superiority of our spirituality over others and even fight for it, it is obvious that we fight not for spirituality but for our ego. Again, when we deny that spirituality is something more than morality, it is clear that we do not see the importance of the problem of the ego. Spirituality transcends morality.

What is essential is that one should conquer the ego; one should be free from the desire for name and fame, power and progeny, money and wealth, because all these are the ramifications of the ego. Such a man who is egoless does not advertise himself, he does not try to attract people, he does not overtly or covertly try to feed and nourish his ego. He does not fight whether in the name of truth or in the name of justice or in the name of religion, because wherever there is fight, it is the ego that fights. If we remember this many of our problems disappear or dissolve.

If we are able to see the ideal of spirituality as the conquering of the ego, we can also see the great social significance of spirituality. We have two kinds of social problems — one objective and the other subjective. The objective problems relate to objective needs and requirements such as food, clothing, housing, medicine etc. The subjective problems relate to our passion of jealousy, hatred, avarice ambition etc. Of these problems, if we come to think of it, we can see that the subjective problems, that is, the problems emanating from the ego are more serious than the

problems of want or the objective problems. We say this because we find that our passions do not allow us to enjoy even what we have, and that not only those who have not but also affluent persons and societies are afflicted by passions. For the same reason it is also wrong to hold that the subjective problems are due to the objective problems. Rather the objective problems are due to the subjective ones which are due to the ego. Hence the ego cannot be dealt with by providing any objective condition. It has to be dealt with by spiritual methods.

The man who has conquered his ego is a great social asset as he is at peace with himself and with others in society. Passions arouse passions and so when we associate with one who is free from passions, we experience a kind of peace. The spiritual man not only produces an atmosphere of peace around himself but also turns the attention of others in a direction in which peace can be attained. He shows that peace can be attained not by cut-throat competition for worldly objects but by developing the spirit of self-abnegation and of the renunciation. Those who are blinded by the glamour of worldly achievements are not able to see this point as they do not reflect and so do not see the inherent unpeace in the life of worldly pursuits. But those who are reflective are able to see this. They are able to see that spirituality is not something to be despised or condemned but something which the society needs very badly.

Philosophers may or may not accept the existence of God and soul; they may differ regarding everything. But nobody can deny that we all seek peace and that all unpeace whether of the individual or of the society is due to the ego. They would therefore be discharging their duties properly and repaying their debt to society adequately if they did their best to open the eyes of the people to the great social and individual value of spirituality as understood above. This view avoids metaphysical controversies by which philosophers are dogged at every step; it emphasises only the problem of the ego and the methods of tackling it. This is the minimum requirement of spiritual life which leads to the experience of peace which everyone hankers after. Philosophers will be able to establish their importance in society if they succeed in drawing our attention to the nature and importance of spiritual life as a way of tackling the ego. Let us all pull down the banner

of the ego and attain peace. Let us accept the variety of spiritual methods and not quarrel about them as all quarrel is due to the ego. Let not the ego dominate us; let us dominate the ego by following the one or the other spiritual path. Egolessness is spirituality; egolessness is peace. Spirituality cannot be denied or denounced so long as there is in man the aspiration and the urge for permanent peace.

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