

# Spiritualizing Daily Life

SWAMI TYAGANANDA

## The *Time*-magazine approach

**E**arlier I spoke on puja, i.e., ritualistic worship, but that is not the only kind of worship that there is. Today I want to talk about another kind of worship, a worship that can be done anywhere and at any time.

The term worship, as we generally understand it, is limited to ritualistic worship and often it creates a division in our lives. Even when we use the word ‘worship’ in a more generic sense in connection with our spiritual or religious life, we find that, for most of us, our life gets divided. There are things related to spiritual life which, as a result, become a once-in-a-week event. Sometimes this approach is called a ‘*Time*-magazine approach’ to things. You know, in the magazine you have a section on religion, a section on sports, a section on politics and so on. Our life can sometimes become like that. We have one day reserved for spiritual things and other days for other things. So we can say, in general our lives can get divided between work and worship. And by ‘work’ I mean everything that you do other than spiritual practice. Often we speak about the separation of the State and the Church. In itself that is a wonderful thing, something that is very necessary in social context. But what about our personal context? Should there be this dividing line separating my spiritual ideal from what I see as my secular ideal?

Sometimes in Vedantic understanding they say that the way to integrate these two

compartments—work and worship—goes through stages. When we learn to do all our work as worship and when we succeed in doing it, eventually we realize that work *is* worship. Then the imaginary division goes away.

The goal of life is to eliminate all compartmentalization. Sometimes compartmentalization helps no doubt, but that gives us a short-term benefit. Moreover, the walls are not so rigid; they are sufficiently porous. We might think that, things related to my family will remain within the family and things related to the workplace will remain confined to the workplace. Ideally, it can be helpful. But, we know that it does not always remain that way. If there is some major upheaval going on in my family, then even when I am in my workplace, those thoughts follow me there. I cannot shut them out completely. In the same way, if there is some major thing happening in my workplace I cannot shut it off when I go back home. So we know that these walls are not really that powerful.

## Integration of disparate parts

The ultimate goal is to break down all walls. In order to do this, we need to find a way to integrate all the disparate parts of our lives. Our life cannot remain simply a collection of parts. Here I just made two divisions—‘work’ and ‘worship’. But these two can be sub-divided and life can become very fragmented, with too many parts and distinct social groups. My workplace could



be one part, my family, another. Then, I have a circle of friends who are not related to my workplace. So that could be a third part. If I am interested in sports, then my sports buddies form the fourth part, and then a fifth, sixth, and so on.

Look at our own lives. When we go to a place of worship we dress in a particular way. When we go to a ball game we are dressed differently. Yet, one visiting these two places is the same person. Of course, we want to do things in an appropriate way on each occasion. But we cannot afford to have ten different masks! When we go out with one friend we have one mask, when we go out with another, we have another mask, when we go to a place of worship we have yet another mask. It cannot be like this, because *spiritual life means removing all masks and not changing masks*. Spiritualizing daily life means minimizing these masks, and ultimately removing them all because we need to know ourselves. When we look at the mirror we really want to look at who we really are. Life then cannot be just a collection of these different parts of our personality.

We all watch movies. Movies are not just collection of scenes. All the scenes make a story. If the scenes are not well-connected, then they cannot make a narrative. Now if we look at our own lives, what kind of life do we want it to be? Just an unconnected collection of scenes? If that be so, then at the end of our life, we shall look at it and say, 'How disorganized my life has been!' What we need to ask is, are all the parts of my life integrated well? An integrated life is an authentic life. Those of us who consider themselves spiritual seekers must ask themselves: Is my life authentic?

You may ask, what does an authentic life of a spiritual seeker mean? It primarily means that, if I am a spiritual seeker, I am a

spiritual seeker everywhere. Not just once a week, not just when I am in a place of worship but also in other places. It is possible to go and enjoy a good ball game with a friend and still be a completely free and authentic spiritual person. It is possible to go and enjoy your shopping by being a spiritual person. It is possible to do everything, no matter what you are doing and in which place, whether it is at home or in office, and maintain your identity as a spiritual seeker or a spiritual person. If I do that, then my life will become authentic.

Sometimes some worldly people too can be very authentic. By worldly people I mean people who are very materialistic. When materialistic people go to a temple or a church, their prayers can be very materialistic. So they are authentically materialistic everywhere. In the same way, if we want to be spiritual we have to be spiritual everywhere. There is no such thing as part-time spirituality.

### **Jigsaw puzzle**

One way of looking at life is to view it as a jigsaw puzzle. As far as our lives are concerned, they are made out of the pieces of the puzzle, but we do not know what the final picture is going to be. It is a matter of trial and error. We have to see which piece fits in where. Sometimes we get it right and sometimes we get it wrong. Sometimes we are able to fit in seventy per cent pieces of our life with thirty per cent still hanging loose. This is what happens with most of us. Sometimes some kind of a picture does emerge but, unfortunately, it is not a stable picture. By that I mean, when some major changes and upheavals occur in our lives, either in our personal lives, or in the life of a friend or someone in a family directly related to us, then the picture comes apart again. When we lose someone, someone dear to us



passes away, some pieces in the puzzle go missing. Though physically that person is gone, memories die hard. Sometimes new pieces get added. The earlier equilibrium gets disturbed and a new equilibrium takes place. So life becomes a continual effort to put together different pieces.

Who, we often ask, is an enlightened being? An enlightened being is one who has succeeded in putting all the pieces of life together in a perfect way and the end picture is perfect and beautiful. The pieces are so perfectly welded together that they are not going to come apart again. In the enlightened being complete stability and equilibrium have been attained. Right now we are trying to attain that equilibrium.

### **Inner discipline**

How do we learn to put the different pieces of life together and make our life an integrated whole? The answer is that it becomes easier when there is some inner discipline in our lives. One major challenge for the spiritual seekers is to remain aware of this particular identity of theirs throughout the day. If I see myself as a devotee of God or as a believer in God or someone who has faith in God, how can I maintain that awareness? There are times when we remember that identity, for instance, when we pray and meditate. It is easy to remember your identity as a spiritual seeker then. But do you remember this identity when you are caught up in the traffic snarls, or some other tense situations? With inner discipline, however, this too is possible.

This can be done in three steps twice a day. As spiritual seekers we are often told that when you pray and meditate, close your eyes, try to shut the world out and look within. At the same time we are also told that God is everywhere. We cannot remain

with eyes closed all the time, with all the doors and windows shut all through the day, which is neither advisable, nor possible or practical. Therefore I have to find a way of making myself strong enough or developing myself enough spiritually to feel the presence of the Divine within my heart, even with my eyes open, even when I go about dealing with hundred other things during the course of the day. We begin with meditation—looking within. Then we take the next move of stepping out a little bit and doing an inner worship. Sometimes the inner worship is called *yajna* or inner sacrifice. When we are able to do the inner sacrifice, inner worship, we are able to do the outer sacrifice and outer worship. Meditation, inner worship and outer worship—this is one set that we practise in the morning. In the evening we move in the reverse order.

One thing a person should do is to make a good beginning. The saying goes—‘well begun is half done’. Those of us that have tried to lead a life of spiritual discipline know that if we can begin the day, even when we have not got out of bed yet, by remembering our prayer, our *mantra*, then we have already begun well and that makes a huge difference. This is much better than beginning one’s day by saying—‘Oh, my God! I am late already. I’ve got to go.’ So, surrender your body, mind and spirit to your ideal and seek God’s guidance and support throughout the day. Those of you who have received spiritual instruction and *mantra* from the teacher (*guru*) should go on practising your *japa*, meditation, and the inner *yajna* or inner worship.

### **Take charge of your life**

We may look at the heart as the seat of consciousness and make an offering. Just as we make an offering of flowers, sweets, etc., and sometimes make the fire-offering



or *homa*, similarly we can make an inner offering. Offering is a set of affirmations and rules that we can make for ourselves by waking up early, doing meditation, work and study, offering some service to others, observing mindfulness and so on. This is a tentative guideline, and you can make some alterations to it as per your aptitude—mental and spiritual—and progress towards a life spiritual. We do not like and appreciate rules that are imposed on us from outside. Therefore Vedanta says, look into your heart, recognize that you are the creator of your own destiny, that your future is in your own hands. If something goes great in your life, there is no need to thank anybody, you have worked hard for it. But if something does not go well, then you need not blame anybody either. Whether it is something good or bad, each of us has contributed something to it. This Vedantic lesson is extremely empowering. It just shows that even though forces outside try to influence the course of my life, I am not a helpless victim in the hands of those forces. If I want I can summon up all the strength or all the courage which is already in my heart and then take charge of my own life. This practice is an affirmation of my own willpower so that I may take charge of my own life. I do not want others to tell me what to do. And the best way of not giving others the opportunity to tell me what to do is by telling myself what to do. So make some self-rules that are in harmony with your ideal and what you want to achieve in your life.

Affirming these rules is making a resolution to oneself that throughout the day this is what I wish to do and this is what I seek God's guidance and help for. After seeking God's guidance, you carry out all the duties, discharge all the responsibilities for that day. When you return home you go

over the same ground mentally in the reverse order. You review all the activities you performed that day, and see where you went wrong and where you were right. Doing things rightly is inwardly satisfying. What you think, do and say should be a perfect expression of what you stand for. Opposite of this would not be an authentic life. Sri Ramakrishna tells us to make the mind and the speech one. By bringing harmony in words, thoughts and actions, one brings in harmony in one's own life.

Self-review leads to self-improvement. We all make mistakes. Success is built upon hundreds of failures. So keep reviewing your own selves on a regular basis to reach your ideals or goals. However, self-review does not mean being unjustly cruel to your own self and lowering your self-esteem by some unfounded foolish, sentimental notions that come from physical and mental weaknesses. Do not brood over the mistakes but take positive steps towards improving and broadening the horizon of your ideas and thoughts.

Fulfil your life through inner *yajna*. Begin your day with God-filled thoughts, go about your job, review yourself at the end of the day, and end your day again with God-filled thoughts. If you can guide yourself into sleep with thoughts of God, by and by you will be surprised to find that your mind is always fixed on God without break. Thus the whole process completes a full circle. Even in sleep, the remembrance of your chosen idol or your spiritual ideal does not stop. It continues at some finer levels of consciousness. You will soon find that a prayer, or a *mantra* has become your constant companion. At some levels of your mind there is uninterrupted repetition of your *mantra*, or prayer, even as you go about doing all your daily jobs. This remembrance becomes so natural to your being that no longer you feel the urgency to





make a conscious effort. Then you feel immense joy within. But this joy comes only after long, constant practice.

### **Karmayoga**

Many of us have issues regarding work. Our work exhausts us, it increases our stress. How, then, can we do our work so that, instead of taking away all the joys of our life, it may become a factor of bringing joy in our life? Work is exhausting, because it is not fun and we look forward to weekends. That means the other five days of the week are not so much of fun for us. Can I change my attitude toward my work? Can I change the mindset so that the other five days become as enjoyable as the weekends?

Practice of *Karmayoga* comes to our aid here. *Karmayoga* shows that work is not just a means to something but a source of joy in itself. The *Gītā* says that we cannot live a moment without activity. We all need to work and we all are engaged in doing something or the other all the time. Even the thought processes are part of a mental activity. It is true that when a work is done well, it brings joy, and if you are successful, that is the bonus. But if you did a job well and did not succeed, then also you should not feel bad because you enjoyed doing the job. That is the point. How can I enjoy the work that I do? A day might come when you would start enjoying your work so much that instead of looking forward to a Saturday or Sunday, you might be looking forward to a Monday! In his book on *Karmayoga* Swami Vivekananda points to several ways of how to make work enjoyable. He says that a person *with* an ideal may make a hundred mistakes but a person *without* an ideal will

make a thousand mistakes. The practice of self-discipline and review of one's activities will definitely lessen the number of times a person errs. Sri Ramakrishna used to say, as long as I live, so long do I learn. This learning does not have to come from books. In fact, very little learning comes from books. Real learning is from life itself, not just learning from other people's lives. Why should we not learn from our own lives? The more we are able to look at our own lives, the more we get enriched. No doubt we can learn from the lives of people who, say, lived five hundred years ago. We might think that the society was much different then. But the truth is that human drama is, essentially, not very different today from what it was even a thousand years ago. Things have changed externally, but internally, love, friendship, hatred, jealousy, thirst for power, exploitation and everything that exists now have existed all through history.

Nachiketa asks Yama in the *Kathopanishad* : Tell me the truth of the Self which is beyond *dharma* and *adharma*. That is the goal. But right now we have to begin by taking care of our present lives. Is there any way I can improve the quality of my life and become a better human being? Is there any way I can transcend my own limitations? One who is doing that is progressing in spiritual life, however slowly. Vedanta tells us, each of us has the power within to transcend our limitations. We just have to manifest that power. And the first step towards doing it is to have some kind of inner discipline. All of us have the power to get enlightenment and what we all have to do is to manifest that power. If we can do that, we shall find that not only our daily life but our entire existence is spiritualized. ■

---

\* This article is based on a lecture Swami Tyagananda, Minister-in-charge of Ramakrishna Vedanta Society, Boston, Massachusetts, delivered at the Society on 16 March, 2014.

