

Ways to Build Up A True Spiritual Life

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Fear and love

I say, you all have to rise above fear to have a deeper spiritual understanding and a deeper love. The very fact that there is so much fear indicates that there is less of love. However, until you have a deep love, it is better to have a little fear. Many of you are too sensitive to bear strong words. Many of you would have run away, had you been subjected to what we passed through. What scoldings we had! But there was always tremendous love behind them. We saw that love. How many times we were made to weep and cry. But after all that, we felt the touches of love and kindness. If there were any wounds in mind, all were healed. Swami Brahmanandaji and his other brother monks sometimes told us strong words, but, all the same, those words remained deeply etched in our minds. Even yesterday I was telling one of my brother monks that those were the real blessings. Now when one is deeply interested in someone's wellbeing, one may occasionally feel like scolding. You would not, at any rate, scold a stranger. So when you get scolding out of love from someone who is interested in your welfare—that is a blessing. One should do a little extra meditation during this time. That was one great thing we learnt from Swami Brahmanandaji. Whenever there was any great difference of opinion between one swami and another, he would not care to settle the dispute, but would bring in a

tremendous harmonious spiritual atmosphere and in that atmosphere things would settle down automatically. In 1920 or '21 when he came to Benares, there were lots of disturbances. And what did he do? He stressed more spiritual practice. He introduced the singing of *Rāmnāma* one day at Ramakrishna Advaita Ashrama and at the Sevashrama (the Home of Service) to bring all the workers together. Some of the workers connected to the Home of Service did not care much for monastic life; one of them ran away. But such was the Swami's power of love that he soon came back and was initiated into the Order. We saw this miracle happen before our very eyes!

Every morning many of us would go to his room and find him meditating. We sat at his feet and meditated with him. After that he would speak, inspiring us to intensify the spiritual life. One day someone said: 'Swami, why don't you ask them to do more work?' He said: 'I am not to tell that. They will work on their own. They have all got in them the tendency to work. So I want to give them the inspiration to work in the right spirit, and that can be done only by stressing the spiritual life.'

We, some of whom were youngsters, were full of the spirit of service. We would pick up maybe a diseased dog and would try to dress its wounds, apply some medicine, even though sometimes we did it in the wrong way. I remember there was a stray dog. I was a student of chemistry. So I went to my laboratory, opened my

drawer and got some carbolic acid, diluted the acid before applying and dressed its wounds. However, I was not quite sure if the right thing was done. So I went to a veterinary surgeon. He said, 'You did not do the right thing, because, the dog would lick the wounds.'

With the same spirit of service, we used to go to the hospitals and attend on patients whom there was none to take care of. Then the great Swamis, mostly direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna, told us: 'Well, your desire to do service to others is wonderful. But how can you serve others unless you build up your own character, unless you have the right spirit of service, unless your service becomes a form of worship?' We could imbibe that spirit only through our own spiritual practices. Service to whom? To God in man. It was a new outlook. The old outlook changed completely.

To teach and preach

None of us could at that moment even dream what would be coming to us, that we should have to go to the West and elsewhere to teach and preach. Our ideal was Self-realization. One day in 1916, Swami Brahmananda took me along with others on a pilgrimage to Cape Comorin. I was at that time rather reluctant to talk to others on spiritual things lest I might have the vanity of a teacher. Swami Brahmananda called me one day asked: 'Why don't you talk to others and discuss spiritual things?' I said: 'What should I say?' He replied: 'Say what you have learned from us, what you are trying to do in your own life. Speak only of that, that's enough.'

Then, one day, after we returned from our trip to Cape Comorin, he said to me: 'Write an article every week.' I said, 'Maharaj, what shall I write?' He said: 'My boy, learn to think and thoughts will crop up

with such a force that it will be a problem for you to control your thoughts.' And exactly that was what happened. I worked for years as the editor of our papers, I have talked and I have never felt short of words or ideas. But we must learn how to think. He said: 'Form the habit of study to such an extent that, if any day you happen not to have studied something, you would feel restless.' And then he explained: 'When the mind is on a spiritual plane, it is all right; but when you have not risen to that height, you should occupy yourself with your studies, studying deep spiritual things.'

The need of harmony

I was telling you that we must all do extra meditation so that the work may go on in a harmonious spirit and you have greater harmony within yourself. When a certain number of individuals are working together, they should work in a spirit of mutual cooperation. If each one is harmonious, then, all will be able to work with greater harmony. I won't say how long you should meditate—one hour or two hours. But keep this ideal in mind that each one of us should try to be as harmonious, pleasant and good to others as possible and to bring in more and more the sense of unity. We are all like different parts of the same machine, different parts of a greater whole. So if we all have the idea, or rather consciousness, of totality, then each one of us would find his place in it. Then and then only work will become harmonious. There may be differences of opinion but that should not lead to animosity or antagonism. Sometimes we had to agree to differ even with some of our very revered Swamis. It was but natural as all of us did not think exactly in the same way. We had our differences, we would compare notes, and accept some of the suggestions the others

gave. It was not a dead uniformity, for harmony means unity in diversity. Each one of us was put to the test whether, in the Swami's absence, we could work in a spirit of harmony. Well, that was one thing that held us and our work together.

The problem of ego

Whenever I find that my ego is asserting itself, the best thing to do is to do a little more spiritual practice. If all our egos are connected with the Lord in some form or the other, we feel that we are all parts of a greater whole. So naturally, in our work there would be greater harmony. We should have great patience with one another. Even we must have great patience with ourselves. It is hard but it can be done and, if one would make up one's mind, it can be done to a great extent. Whenever there is a disagreement, just meet and talk to the other person. As you talk, you begin to understand the other's point of view; the other also will understand your point of view, and thus something like harmony gets established. It is necessary for each one to feel that it is our responsibility to work in a spirit of harmony. Swami Brahmananda used to tell us: 'Your mind becomes your guru.' There is a deep meaning in that. It means, in a metaphorical sense, that our mind becomes pure to the extent that we surrender ourselves to the Divine Will. The 'Divine Will' then will manifest Itself through our purified mind. In that sense, the mind, indeed, becomes the 'guru'. Pray for the guidance in a spirit of self-surrender and when the guidance comes, follow it. Sometimes it maybe unpleasant and against your wish. But if you follow the guidance, then, next time, you will get it more easily. But if you don't listen to this voice, it will leave you. It is something more than mere feeling. Feeling

is only a reaction. The guidance does not come just from our little self, it comes from the bigger self, the higher will. But the mind should be pure enough to receive it and to translate it into action.

Self-surrender

Once I had a long discussion with Swami Turiyananda about self-surrender. I was arguing that self-surrender could be practised without any great difficulty. The Swami laughed and said—'No, that's not true. The real self-surrender comes only after we have striven our utmost and that is all we can do.' He gave Sri Ramakrishna's parable of a bird. A bird sat on the mast of a ship that was anchored at some port. When the ship sailed and was on high sea, the bird wanted to return to the land. It went to the east, to the west, to the north, to the south, but found nothing but water everywhere, no sight of land! Its wings became so tired that it could not fly anymore. Then the bird came and sat on the mast. In due course the ship anchored in some other port and the bird could go to the land.

That's the thing. First, on our side, we should strive our utmost, strive in a spirit of self-surrender and, then, with less energy we can do much.

Swami Brahmananda used to say another thing: 'The breeze of divine grace is constantly blowing, unfurl your sail.' The cosmic energy is flowing through us. Because it flows, we are alive and if it stops, everything is over with us; we fall down dead that very moment. Let us recognize that the energy that comes to us is part of the cosmic energy, and we just happen to be the channels, and the more we remove the obstructions—emotional, mental and physical, the more energy will be flowing through us in a spontaneous

way. We would then have more energy for our own spiritual practices and also for serving the Lord's cause.

Expansiveness

Now, ultimately it comes to this, that through our spiritual practices we are more and more in tune with the Supreme Will. Sometimes we find we have become awfully tense and tend to get upset very easily. Here is an illustration Sri Ramakrishna gives. If an elephant gets into a small pool of water, the water overflows; but if the elephant or a number of elephants get into the Ganges or into a big lake, nothing happens. Similarly, if one is egocentric, limited and selfish, one easily gets emotionally upset. But if we learn the secret of expanding ourselves, maybe emotions will arise, but we shall remain more or less undisturbed by such emotions. So whenever you feel you have got tensed up, try to sit quietly, do a little prayer and meditation and have a little expansiveness. When you have this expansiveness, you feel a greater harmony. Conversely, when your consciousness shrinks and you become like a whirlpool, conflicts arise. So all of us should watch our minds carefully. A friend, a householder, told me the other day, 'Swami, if any day I don't take enough rest after meditation, I run into conflict with everybody. It makes my own life miserable as well as those of others.' Hence, we should learn the secret of relaxing, and avoid anything that contracts our minds and our consciousness instead of expanding them.

Now, there may be some false expansiveness. Suppose, by telling some falsehood, I get something from somebody, and, as a result feel a little elated. That elation won't last long. For, I have done something wrong and therefore my consciousness has shrunk. But if I do the right thing even at the risk of undergoing

some unpleasantness, it will ultimately result in an expansiveness. And that is the test. We should examine carefully whether meditation, services and all that are bringing us this feeling of expansiveness or *citta-prasāda*. Do I become more tense after meditation or do I feel relaxed? Of course sometimes we do become tense. That is all right. But, if you get this tenseness as you sit for meditation, or even after meditating for a while, then you may move about a little and then come back. Sometimes you may feel sleepy—you may then pace to and fro for a while, wash your eyes or sprinkle water on your face and go back to meditation.

Meditation

The mind is very restless. The effort to bring it back itself makes one tense. What to do then? In that case one thing that you can do is to make your ideal more and more *living*. As you love the ideal more and more, much more than all that makes your mind wander, this love will help you to get rid of that restlessness. Certain postures, a little rhythmic breathing exercise and things like that are of great help in controlling the restlessness of the mind. But more than everything else, your aspiration is very important. If we are accustomed to eating at a particular hour, our whole system is just inclined to eat at that time. Similarly, if you have some fixed hour for meditation and you have the inclination to practise meditation, then at that particular hour, you will find yourself thrown into the right mood. Let us avail ourselves of that, and with that mood, have the joy of better meditation. *Prānāyāma* is to be done only under the special guidance of a teacher. The psychological and mental condition as well as the environment must be proper for this practice. Otherwise you strain your machine

too much without avail. The technique is, basically, to intensify our love for the object of meditation.

Love for the ideal

How does this love come? God is there in every heart. The very fact that you feel spiritually inclined shows that God in you wants to awaken, wants to assert Himself. But our misfortune is that we do not know it. The more we think of it and the more we meditate on it, this thought of the Divine Reality becomes stronger and stronger. The object of love—call Him God, or give Him any other name—is not something fanciful. It is real. It is there. Only we must know it, we must be conscious of it, we must experience it.

Now meditating on God is not like meditating on a castle in the air or a hare with horns. There is no such thing as a hare with horns. You may paint wonderful pictures but you can never find a hare with horns. This is a figment of imagination. Someone may say: ‘Well, when you think of God, you are you only imagining.’ Yes, I am imagining. But I am imagining something that is real, while in the other case I am imagining something that has no objective counterpart. When I think of God as Light or the Spirit or whatever it is or when I think of a Godman or a Divine Incarnation, I think of something that exists, that is real, something that can be realized some day. As we think more and more of God and repeat the divine name, a taste is created, because, as a result of your *japam*, a harmonious state is brought about, a little awakening of consciousness happens and what you have been meditating on becomes a little more living. That shows that what I have been meditating on is real. So after one gets a little glimpse of this Reality, one’s faith is strengthened. Until one gets this glimpse,

one feels the need of what is called ‘faith’ or *shraddhā* in Sanskrit, faith in the words of the teacher and the words of the scriptures which are records of the experience of those who came before us. But all these will be fruitful if there is a little hunger, a spiritual yearning in us. Don’t you know the Master’s parable of a child and its mother? The child was going to bed and said: ‘Mummy, if I feel hungry please wake me up.’ The mummy said: ‘Don’t worry, your hunger will wake you up.’ It is a kind of hunger that nothing in the world can satisfy.

Sage Patanjali in his yoga aphorisms stresses repetition of the divine name or *japam*. When you do it constantly, or for a time every day, a great harmony is produced within you and part of your tenseness goes. Patanjali also says that as a result of this practice, disease, lack of energy, and yearning for sense enjoyments gradually disappear. We have seen that in our lives, in the lives of others. As one continues to repeat the divine name, one comes to have, Patanjali says, a new awakening that reveals the inner truth of that name. So, on one side, physical and mental obstacles are minimized, and, on the other side, a new consciousness arises. You feel the presence of something within. That cannot happen all of a sudden.

Our biggest trouble is our desires, various kinds of desires. Nag Mahashaya, a great devotee of Sri Ramakrishna, used to say, ‘An anchored boat does not move.’ There is a story behind. Some drunkards wanted to have a boat ride. They were drunk, got into a boat, kept rowing. In the morning, when the effects of alcohol were gone, they found their boat did not move an inch! What happened? They forgot to weigh the anchor. Similarly one can make no progress in spiritual life unless desires are minimized. Various desires ties us down to

the things of the world. Therefore, while we are doing *japam*, it may have some effect, but in order to get the full effect, Patanjali says, we should have self-restraint (*yama-niyama*), adherence to *ahimsā* (non-injury), *satya* (truthfulness), non-covetousness, chastity and so on. To the extent we succeed in having these qualities, we succeed in having better meditation.

Swami Brahmananda used to tell us this ancient saying—‘*Guru, Krishna, Vaishnav tiner dayā holo, eker dayā bine jive chhāre-khāre gelo.*’ It means one has got the grace of the teacher, one has got the grace of Krishna, the Lord; one has also got the grace of the devotees of the Lord, but ‘*eker dayā bine*’—without the grace of one’s own mind, the soul comes to utter ruin. The grace of one’s own mind means that our mind must be open to the Truth. There should be deep spiritual yearning and the divine grace comes through spiritual practice.

‘Struggle, struggle, struggle’

Shankara says in *Vivekachudāmani*:

*Durlabham trayamevaitaddevānu-
grahahetukam /
Manushyatvam mumukshutvam
mahāpurushasamshrayah // (Verse 3)*

—‘There are three things which are rare indeed and are due to the grace of God—namely, a human birth, the longing for liberation, and the protecting care of a perfected sage.’ From this point of view, our spiritual striving itself is the grace of God, and this grace comes in various indirect ways. What is necessary on our side, however, is striving. In 1911, when Swami Brahmananda decided to send me to South India for my training, I asked him: ‘Revered Maharaj, what should I do?’ He repeated three words: ‘Struggle, struggle, struggle.’

Indeed, through struggle one grows spiritually. The light of Truth always shines in our heart though sometimes we may feel the grace is withdrawn. The sun can never withdraw its light. Dispel the cloud through spiritual practices, get rid of desires and the sun will shine forth. Of course, we cannot do that all of a sudden, we can do that little by little. Someday the cloud is lifted a little and it may come again. But once you get a glimpse of light, it is of great help. As a matter of fact, spiritual life begins only after having some good glimpse. There was a brahmacharin in our monastery, whose eyes were awfully bad and some doctor gave him thick glasses. He was given the nickname—‘searchlight’. One day he went to Calcutta and his glasses were changed. Then he made a very touching remark. He said: ‘I quite forgot that there was so much light in the world!’ That is the fact. There is no dearth of light in the world, but we must have correct glasses.

In a way, all our spiritual disciplines form part of a great cleansing process, which Patanjali, the great Indian sage, would call *shuddhi*—the process of purification. These various steps of yoga or meditation are parts of a process of purification. Once Sri Ramakrishna in a deep spiritual mood said: ‘Why should I meditate? Why should you meditate? Think of God.’ He said this as he was feeling the presence of God. But so long as we do not feel the Divine Presence, we must think of it, brood over it, and try to visualize it. As I said before, this imagination is based on something that is real, and some day it will take us to the Reality. While some of our imaginings may take us further away from the Truth, some may bring us nearer to it. When you meditate on the Supreme Spirit or on the inner light, once in a while you may get a
(Continued to page 18)