

30. Karma, Upasana and Jnana

EMBODIMENTS of Divine Atma/Most people in the world do not understand the purpose of life. They do not even try to enquire why they are unable to understand the meaning of life. One in a million undertakes such an enquiry. This is the first step in the process of discovering the basic reality about life. The vast majority are content to regard eating, earning, acquiring property and rearing a family as the aims of life. This is not so. All this is merely the routine of ordinary living. Doubtless, this is necessary. But obsessed with the pursuit of external objects, men do not strive to explore the internal life of the *Atma*.

Standing on the seashore, one can see only the waves on the surface and not the pearls lying deep below. Only the brave man who can dive deep into the ocean will be able to gather the pearls and not others. Likewise knowledge of the *Atma--Atmajnana--can* be got only by those who turn away from the exploration of the phenomenal world to probe internally for the truth of the Spirit. Spiritual knowledge is not easy to get.

Divine vibrations emanate from *Mantras*

Why is it that, in spite of the fact that over the years there were many who recited the *Vedas* and carried on *Vedic* practices, no commensurate results were achieved? It is because, though many were proficient in reciting the *Vedic mantras*, few of them understood their inner meaning properly, or their sacredness and potency. It may be that the sacredness of the *Vedas* is such that even mere uttering the *mantras* without understanding their full meaning or merely listening to them will have some sanctifying effect. The potency of the Divine vibrations emanating from the *mantras* is such that they confer unique blissful experience on the listeners. Among the eight Divine potencies attributed to *Vedic mantras*, *sravanam* (listening) is considered the foremost.

Likewise, among the nine forms of devotion, *sravanam* (listening to the glories of God) has been accorded the first place. It is unfortunate that in Bharat there are many who do not choose even to listen to the Lord's glories. There are others who, even when they have opportunities to listen, run away from them. Many others listen indifferently to the chanting of *mantras* and deny themselves the benefit of their sacred power.

The human body is subject to afflictions from three sources: *Vaatha* (the wind element in the body), *Pitta* (bile) and *Sleshma* (phlegm). Hundred and two types of ailments arise from *vaatha*. Forty two kinds of diseases are caused by bile disorders. Phlegm disorders account for as many as 242 different kinds of ailments. Altogether the body is a sink for hundreds of ailments. In his attachment to the body and the fleeting pleasures derived from the senses, man is forgetting the lasting bliss that can be got from the *Atma* within him.

Just as the body is subject to ills arising from *vaatha*, *pitta* and *sleshma*, the mind also is liable to ailments from three sources: *mala*, *vikshepa* and *aavarana*. It is because of these ailments that man is unable to develop his spiritual nature and acquire knowledge of the *Atma*. On account of ignorance of his spiritual nature, he regards his mundane existence as the only reality.

The three paths laid down by the *Vedas*

Mala is also known by the term *Avidya*, meaning ignorance. Ignorance can be removed by *karmas* (prescribed actions). *Aavarana* can be removed by *Upasana* (worship). *Vikshepa* (delusion) is removed by developing the power of discrimination. Hence, to deal with the

maladies of *mala*, *aavarana* and *vikshepa*, you need *karma*, *upasana* and *jnana*. These three paths have been laid down by the *Vedas*. Through *Karma* (prescribed duties) purity of mind is achieved. Through *Upasana* (devotional worship) one-pointed concentration of mind is promoted. And through *Jnana*, *moksha* (liberation) is attained.

The primary cause of sorrow for man is birth itself. *Poorva Karma* (past actions) is the cause of birth. Desire is the impelling cause for all actions. Desire is prompted by attachment, which proceeds from lack of understanding. Ego is the cause of this ignorance. When ignorance goes, the ego subsides. Absence of egoism leads to right understanding. The desires abate. With the decline of desires, actions get sanctified. Then life becomes meaningful. Thus ignorance is called *aavarana* (that which covers or envelopes an object).

Mala is a stage anterior to *aavarana*. It is a state of the mind in which the body, made up of the five elements and the senses of perception and action, is regarded as the real self. Because of this mental condition, man has delusions regarding the body which are false and unreal. What '*mala*' means in *Vedantic* parlance can be understood from the use of the term in daily life. The passing of excreta and urine is described as '*malavisarjanam*' (getting rid of filthy things from the body). '*Mala*' means that which is impure. As a state of mind '*mala*' refers to the condition in which one regards the impermanence, the false and the unsacred as permanent, true and holy.

***Satkarmas* purify the mind**

The *Vedas* have shown the different means by which this mental state can be changed. They declare: "Perform *Satkarmas*" (good and righteous deeds). What are these righteous actions? They include *Yagas* and *Yajnas* and charitable undertakings. All actions done as an offering to God can be regarded as *Satkarmas*. Through such actions, the mind is purified. This means the elimination of the accumulated impurities in the mind resulting from impure thoughts and actions in the past. The purpose of the *Karmakanda* of the *Vedas* is to indicate the kind of actions and rituals that will serve to purify the mind.

Aavarna: *Aavarana* means enveloping or covering something. The six vices-- lust, anger, greed, pride, delusion and envy--have enveloped man. Attachment and aversion have gripped him. Because of this man has forgotten his real nature and filled himself with pride of all sorts. Losing his *Vichakshana-jnana* (power of discrimination) he indulges in all kinds of misbehaviour towards his betters. The *Vedas* prescribed *Upasana* (devotional worship) as a means of getting rid of these bad qualities. As a lighted joss stick removes by its fragrance the bad odour in a place, devotional repetition of the name of God drives away the impurities of the mind.

Essential qualities to develop devotion

Devotion means friendship with God. It means establishing close relations with God through love. Service to God is the essence of devotion. Hence sage Narada declared '*Hrishikesa Sevanam Bhakthiruchyathe*' (Service to Hrishikesa is called devotion). When devotion is developed in this manner, *Karuna* (compassion) arises spontaneously. When compassion grows, man experiences Divine bliss, free from ill-will or attachment towards anyone.

The company of the good is essential for developing devotion. It serves to nourish the seed of love in the heart. *Bhakti* reaches its consummation in one-pointed concentration on the Divine. *Satkarma* (right action) results in purity of mind and devotion promotes concentration.

The third stage is *jnana* (knowledge). There are different kinds of knowledge. One is worldly knowledge. Another is general knowledge. What is implied by the *Vedic term Jnana* is knowledge of *Atma*. It is not concerned with the physical, sensory or worldly knowledge. *Atmajnana* (knowledge of the *Atma*) can be got only by enquiring into the nature of the *Atma* and not by any other means. It cannot be taught by preceptors or learnt by studying texts. It cannot be received from any one or offered to any one. It has to emerge from the inner consciousness. Preceptors and texts can only help to some extent. But the aspirant who *seeks Atma-Jnana* has to embark on self-enquiry to experience this Self-awareness. He should explore and investigate the whole gamut of spiritual experience and arrive at the ultimate Reality. Just as a child learns to speak by watching the mother's words, the spiritual aspirant has to make the effort himself while listening to the preceptor or studying scriptural texts.

Who can be called a *Jnani*?

Jnana in Vedantic parlance has been defined as "*Advaita Darsanam*" (recognising the One without a second). That is to see the One in the many Unity in diversity. Here in this assembly are present many thousands of persons. Their names and forms are multifarious. But you have to recognise that the *Atma* Principle in all of them is one and the same. It is not enough to say this in words. You must make it a living experience. Only then can one experience enduring *Ananda* (bliss). Such a person alone can be called a *Jnani* (a Knower of the Supreme).

To reach the stage of a *Jnani* the first steps are *Karma and Upasana* (righteous action and worship). Without following the paths of *Karma* and *Upasana* and succeeding in them one can never become a *Jnani*, just as a student cannot acquire a degree without passing the School Final and Intermediate examinations. To reach manhood one has to pass through childhood and boyhood. There can be no fruit unless there has been a bud and a green fruit. It is idle for any one to claim that he is a *Jnani* unless he has gone through the prior disciplines. The mark of a *Jnani* is perennial joy. It is for this reason that the *Veda* has placed the *Karma Kanda*, the *Upasana Kanda* and *Jnana Kanda* in that order of succession. To realise the oneness of divinity these three paths of action, worship and knowledge have been laid down.

The first step to become a *Jnani*

The world today abounds in *Vedantins* who go about claiming that they are *jnanis*. Among myriad such claimants not one can be regarded as a real *Jnani* (a fully Self-realised person). To become a *Jnani*, the first step is to start with the *Karma Marga* (path of Action). The sacred duties laid down in this discipline have to be practised. All actions have to be performed as dedicatory offerings to God. Without doing the prescribed rites, merely declaring the actions one performs as offerings to God is futile. Set aside your likes and dislikes. Perform right actions with discrimination after due enquiry. If you are unable to ascertain what actions the *Vedas* prescribe, act according to the dictates of your conscience. Thereby your actions get sanctified. It is not necessary to study the scriptural texts. Any action done with a pure heart becomes holy.

Mantra means that which is established in the *manas* (mind) by a process of *trana* (rumination). This applies only to what is godly. Man is the embodiment of *Mantra, Tantra and Yantra*. Man's form is the basis for these three. The body is a *yantra* (a machine or instrument). The process of *So-ham* (breathing in and out) is the *mantra*. The heart, which is the power house from which the body and the breathing process receive their energies, is the *tantra*. You may see from this what sacredness is embodied in man.

Attachments are fetters which bind man

Unfortunately on account of *mala*, *aavarana* and *vikshepa* man is forgetting his inherent divinity. Supporting these three undesirable traits, there are three *vasanas* (predisposing tendencies). One is the *Loka Vasana* (tendencies associated with the world). The second one is *Deha Vasana* (tendencies associated with the body). Third is *Sastra Vasana* (tendencies arising out of scriptural scholarship).

Loka Vasana (attachment to the world) prompts one to achieve name and fame, seek power over others and aspire for honours and distinctions. As a result, one develops a narrow egoistic outlook and fails to realise the impermanence and transient nature of all worldly pleasures and possessions.

Deha Vasana (attachment to the body) impels one to seek physical strength and health and an attractive physique. All the efforts to make up one's face will not serve to alter the natural features of persons. Only that which has been given by the Lord will be enduring. You must be content with that. While taking as much care of the body as is essential, you should not have excessive attachment to that which is inherently perishable and temporary. The body must be taken care of only for realising the Divinity within. The time spent on costumes and make-up is a sheer waste. It is no doubt necessary to maintain good health as long as one lives, but obsessive concern for the body is misconceived.

Sastra Vasana (attachment to book-lore and scriptural scholarship) can be a source of sorrow even to a great scholar. He feels miserable when he forgets something or when he encounters someone with greater scholarship. The real meaning of "*Sastra*" is acting according to what has been laid down. Hence without acting according to the injunctions of the texts, verbal knowledge of the books has no value.

By the combination of *mala*, *aavarana* and *vikshepa* with the three *vasanas* man has degraded himself further. What is the use of attachment to worldly goods when man knows that he came with nothing into the world and will leave it empty-handed? What is the destination of man? Attachments are fetters which bind man. He must get rid of them to discover the Divine.

The message of Vedas and Vedantas

The *Vedas* have taught the means to make life in the world pure and meaningful. They have declared: "*Na karmanaana prajayaa dhanena, thyaagenaike amrutatwamaanasush*" (not through rituals, progeny or wealth, but only through sacrifice can immortality be achieved). Apart from emphasising the importance of *Thyaga* (sacrifice), the *Vedas* have not gone further. They have indicated the means for experiencing many temporary pleasures. For instance, to appease hunger you are enjoined to take food. The satisfaction derived from consuming food lasts for barely two hours. The *Veda* lays down what kind of food should be taken and in what manner.

The Vedanta has shown how by a process of *elimination---Neti* (Not this) you arrive at what remains, namely, the *Atma*. When you find out that what you call the "I" is different from what you describe as your body, your mind etc., what remains is the "I" which is the Self. You have to strive to recognise the *Atma* Principle in you. This is the message of *Vedanta*.

To begin with, engage yourselves in as many *Satkarmas* (good deeds) as possible. Render as much service as you can to others. Involve yourselves in social service. And have God's name on your lips. Whatever you do, do it with love and not as a mechanical routine. Don't render service

with a sense of compulsion from others. Service should be done with spontaneous feeling from the heart. Not force but the Source (the Divine) should inspire you.

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A Thyagi does not hesitate even to give up his body, regarding it as worthless straw. Sacrifice means something more than giving up of wealth, gold and material objects. Evil qualities like hatred, jealousy, wrath and malice which have become ingrained in man over many life-times should be discarded.

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