

Chapter XXI. The Inner Inquiry

“All this will disappear and lose individuality with the emergence of the highest wisdom (*jnana*),” said the sage Vasishta to Rama. “Rama,” he advised, “You have to understand how this non-knowledge grew and by what means it can be destroyed.”

Superposition of falsehood over truth

There is one mystery hidden in this advice. Centuries of enquiry have failed to unravel this secret: from where did the cosmos originate? How did it emerge? If it had a personal cause, the enquiry could have succeeded. The cosmos (*jagath*) is not such an object. The questions “how did it emerge?” and “from where did it originate?” are exactly on a par with the question, how did the “serpent” appear on the “rope” and cause the “terror”? Only the rope exists there; the serpent was imposed thereon, at dusk, by the defective intellect of the onlooker—that is to say, on account of illusion created by reasoning. In other words, ignorance is the basis of the misapprehension.

Brahman is the rope; the cosmos is the serpent, superimposed on it by reason afflicted by illusion. We recognize *Brahman* as the cosmos; we take one thing as another as long as this affliction holds sway. Therefore, it is best to conclude that the cosmos is an object that originated in our own intellect (*buddhi*) and emerged out of the same faulty faculty. An object born of such a delusion and confirmed by only an infirm intellect can never be true. When the delusion goes, when the infirmity disappears, the cosmos so caused also disappears.

“I am ignorant (*aham ajnah*).” Everyone has to acknowledge to oneself this fact about oneself. One can’t escape making this declaration about oneself. The conclusion set forth in all sacred texts and scriptures is that all this is *Brahman*. Setting this aside, if one still claims that one is “I”, one is asserting that one is but an ignoramus.

A doubt may arise: is it at all possible to forget oneself and believe that one is something else? We have already seen that the acceptance of truth polluted with untruth (*mithya*) is the sign of ignorant people. In the dusk, falsehood is superimposed on truth; the serpent is visualized on the rope, lying on the road. The delusion affects the consciousness and warps the intellect (*buddhi*), so that they forget their genuine nature, which is ecstatic delight (*ananda*). They impose on themselves the limitations of individuality and consider themselves as individual souls (*jivas*). They welcome the belief that happiness is outside them in the objective world, and they entangle themselves in the moving, changing, restless world (*samsara*). They suffer the twin blows of fate and fortune. Such people are taught by the revealed scriptures (*sruthi*), the *Vedas* and sacred texts, to transform their lives through consistent endeavour for knowing and realizing the *Atma*.

Nondualism dispels primal ignorance

The protagonists of nondualism (*a-dwaita*) are not engaged in proving that there is something named ignorance (*a-jnana*). “I am not happy; I have no joy. I want this. I must earn this.” Such longings constitute the individual (*jivi*). This attitude is the core of the ignorance. So, if you seek to destroy the ignorance that separates and stultifies, this attitude must be transformed and the conviction that “I am the embodiment of happiness, I am the one who has realized desire” has to be cultivated. The person who has the former attitude has individualized knowledge, and one who has the latter knowledge has universalized wisdom (*jnana*).

Bearing the burden of nonexistent problems, kicking up dust in the confusion, tied helplessly to the wheel of birth and death, people curse themselves in despair. The nondualistic texts arose in order to warn people against this ignorance and arouse in them the wisdom that can save them from misery and wrong. Truly speaking, we are ignorance as long as we feel we are in bondage. In fact, we have not been created; we are not limited or abridged or bound. The faith that has taken root, namely, “There is a universe (*jagath*) that contains me along with other similar seekers of happiness; in that search, I meet joy and grief and encounter birth and death” —this is the fundamental ignorance.

Four requisites for spirituality

“We become what our thoughts are.” These thoughts on the validity of the objective world and the value of the joys derivable therefrom, though they emanate from ignorance (*a-jnana*), do shape us from within. The reason we are caught in this mould lies in the absence of four requisites: (1) attention to spiritual progress, (2) steady faith, (3) devotion, and (4) the grace of God. Even if one of these four is absent, people cannot experience the highest bliss of the Absolute.

Our inquiry should not be directed to the obvious and the superficial. This line of inquiry will only mislead us into believing what is not the cosmos. It makes us forget that it is our mind that has generated this panorama of cosmic proportions and presented it to us as truth.

It is indeed strange that this huge cosmos depends ultimately on whether “I cognize it as such or not! If you feel it is there, it is there; if you feel it is not there, it is not there!” This means that we have to go deep into this process of the mind. Is there any occasion when our assertion leads to the existence of a thing and our negation results in its disappearance? Or, is this conclusion a figment of the imagination?

Inquiry on these lines would undoubtedly reveal the truth. When the rope is seen in darkness, by mistake, by ignorance, the serpent arises and appears in its place, displacing the truth of the rope. For some reason, when the truth is known and the onlooker feels, “This is no serpent; it is a rope”, the serpent disappears, for it was mere “falsehood”. So, feeling or thinking is able to create the serpent and also to destroy it. Assertion creates; negation destroys. Both are mental processes, which can be classified as “thoughts”.

Though there are diverse levels and grades, all these are but thoughts. From where do these thoughts emerge? Are they free to emerge spontaneously? The answer is: “Our intellect follows the lead of our activities (*buddhi karma anusaarini*).” Thoughts arise in conformity with the attachment one develops and the results one anticipates from one’s actions. The very first motive for action is, “I must attain happiness and harmony.” This motive arises from the ignorant assumption that the world is real.

Transform knowledge into practice

Education without wisdom, mere wisdom bereft of discrimination, action without discretion, erudition lacking sagacity, power not justified by credentials, statements not based on truth, music wanting in melody, adoration not sustained by devotion, a person devoid of common sense and character, a student not endowed with humility, and a discourse that fails to inspire —these serve no useful purpose.

In addition to knowledge derived from the sacred texts, one should gain wisdom through experience. Knowl-

edge without personal experience is futile. Wisdom lodged within us will be of no avail if it is static. It will only assume the form of mere scholarship. If such learning is brought within the ambit of practice, it is creditable. Acquiring and hoarding wealth will be of no avail if it is not consecrated and spent for the welfare of the world. Similarly, mere acquisition of knowledge from books is a futile exercise. Knowledge becomes blessed only when it is translated into actions that promote the good of humanity. This translation of knowledge into experience is possible only when you pass through the three stages of knowing (*jnatum*), visualizing (*drashtum*), and entering (*praveshtum*).

First, you must learn about the precious truths contained in the sacred texts from veterans in the field. When you learn about them, you naturally take an interest in them. Then you develop an urge to visualize those truths at any cost. This is the first stage of knowing.

In the second stage, you carefully peruse, examine, and collect such sacred texts wherever they are available. You read and directly visualize them. With great perseverance you enquire, comprehend, and enjoy them. Thus, you derive some satisfaction that you have discerned certain profound truths. This is the second stage of visualizing.

It is not enough to make progress only in the first two stages. One must experience what is known and seen. By entering the arena of experience, one should feel complete identification with the ideal. Lying down after consuming food causes indigestion. However, if one consumes daily the requisite quantity of food and undertakes some physical work, the food will be digested and, converted into blood, will offer nourishment. In the same manner, we should translate into experience and action what we have known and seen, by assimilating it and utilizing it for the progress of our country and welfare of humanity.

It is easy to memorize passages from books and deliver lectures. Knowledge acquired merely through the reading of books is bookish knowledge. This is quite an ordinary type of knowledge. What has been heard, seen, and understood should be put into practice at least to some extent. This is the stage of entering.

The ancient sacred lore contain several precious truths. Invaluable gems lie hidden in them. Many scientific theories relating to the atom are also to be found there. Students should seek to unravel these hidden truths and harness them to the effort for human welfare. There must be the urge as well as the determination to explore undiscovered truths. One should not rest content with delivering discourses and appearing on forums of discussion.

Only those possessing a genuine spirit of enquiry can disseminate real knowledge in the world. Mere superficial knowledge will be of no avail. No knowledge can surpass the knowledge derived from direct experience. It must be acquired through self-effort, initiative, determination, and perseverance. It should be utilized for technological development and the increase of production, which make for the country's progress.

Discriminatory knowledge

It is necessary to derive wisdom from experience, but it is equally essential to develop the faculty of discrimination, which enables us to employ the wisdom for the well-being of the country. Education without discrimination and wisdom without discernment are of no use. Education is one thing; discrimination, quite another. Discrimination is the faculty that enables us to distinguish good from bad and confers upon us the ability to decide how much importance to give to various aspects in a given situation. Discrimination is a component of wisdom. Without discrimination, one cannot pursue the right path. It is a mark of sagacity to display discrimination in all

actions.

Through researches in atomic energy, one may invent destructive weapons that can reduce the entire world to ashes in a second. The same atomic energy might help us to generate millions of kilowatts of electric power, which could be utilized for industries and agriculture, transforming the country into a smiling garden. An educated person should display discrimination in such matters and take the right course of action. Discoveries and inventions should not be for evil purposes that lead to disaster and destruction. Discrimination guides us in properly employing them for augmenting production and promoting human welfare.

People endowed with wisdom and discrimination will be honoured and adored, even though they may not have wealth or position. People devoid of wisdom and discrimination can never blossom spiritually, even though they may be an eminent educationist, a prominent scientist, or a multimillionaire. One without wisdom and discrimination cannot even distinguish between *dharma* and lack of *dharma*. Therefore, every student must acquire wisdom and discrimination without resting on their oars after gaining theoretical knowledge. The student should develop farsighted vision along with wisdom and use it for the uplift of society.

Worldly wisdom

In addition to wisdom, discrimination, and experience, one should also possess inspiring common sense. This cannot be acquired through books. In order to gain it, one must travel extensively. It is for this purpose that our ancestors went on pilgrimages to see, speak to, and touch the feet of holy people in sacred places. They also saw many sights and objects in this diverse universe of God and derived many valuable lessons therefrom. Several objects in nature teach valuable lessons that impart wisdom. The development of common sense consists in comprehending the origin and nature of such objects.

One should grasp the significance of history, culture, and civilization and propagate it. One who intends to undertake such propagation must first of all comprehend the nature of the soul. In this world there are several branches of learning, like physics, music, literature, art, and mathematics. Of all these forms of knowledge, self-knowledge is the sovereign. Without its attainment, one cannot enjoy any peace. Though one may gain renown and recognition in the world, one will not experience happiness without self-knowledge. “Knowledge of the soul”, “knowledge of God”, “spiritual knowledge” —all these expressions connote the wisdom that promotes full awareness of soul and God. Self-knowledge is that knowledge by which everything else is known. A person with self-knowledge can indeed be acclaimed as all-knowing.

Secular learning cannot confer on us abiding and absolute peace. Only self-knowledge can help us cross the sea of sorrow. So, all should strive to attain this self-knowledge, which can be acquired through purity of mind. Purity of mind can be attained through pious deeds, sacred acts, charity, compassion, and devotion. Disinterested action consecrated to God purifies the heart. The sun of wisdom dawns in a pure heart. The dawn of such wisdom exalts one to the status of God.

Human effort and divine help

Human effort constitutes the prime step in one’s endeavour to attain this highest state of Godhood. God’s grace is the second essential factor. Anyone can strive for and attain self-knowledge. Men and women, rich and poor, all are eligible to kindle in themselves the flame of spiritual wisdom. Distinctions of race, religion, caste, and

creed do not come in the way. It does not matter if one has no secular education, has no grounding in the physical sciences, or is not well-versed in worldly lore. In the modern world it is not that easy to gain this self knowledge. All the same, one need not give up the effort in a mood of frustration and despair.

Some people relentlessly seek spiritual knowledge at the expense of secular learning; this is not desirable. Some miss both and wander aimlessly between the two; such a predicament is also undesirable. Secular learning should not be neglected. It is beneficial to acquire spiritual vision while seeking mastery over secular lore. So, youth should necessarily spend some time everyday in meditation upon God.

Young people have to spring into the sphere of action and strive to the best of their ability to build up a re-surgent India and a happy peaceful world. They must shed the desire for power. The desire to uproot corruption and immorality and the urge to work hard should be firmly implanted in the heart of every student. Mother India's future depends on them, and she is waiting for them. Even as it is the duty of children to serve and please their mother, it is the bounden duty of every child of mother India to make her happy. To serve the motherland selflessly should be the sacred ideal of one's life. Thus, it is the duty of all Indians to engage themselves in the dedicated service of Mother India.

Such an obligation on one's part may even be described as forming part of the nobility of character of the individual vis-a-vis their motherland. Therefore, every student must inculcate in themselves a wider perspective of national unity and integrity. A person without character can neither uplift himself nor be of any use to the country.

Sacrifice versus charity

Sacrifice is also an aspect of character. It is one of the qualities that young people should imbibe. It is often thought that charitable and philanthropic acts make for sacrifice, but there is a vast difference between charity and sacrifice. Charitable people give only a fraction of their bounty to others. Gifts of land, distribution of food, contribution of physical labour, and spreading of education and knowledge belong to this category. Through acts of charity, no person ever gives up all that they have. One is not cursed to be born penurious if one does not perform acts of charity.

Going a step higher, some retain for themselves what is just and essential and give away the rest to society. Such people win the highest acclaim in the world. Our sacred texts prescribed that a portion of one's possessions must be offered to the poor and helpless. Neglecting this injunction, one should not accumulate millions of rupees in a selfish, callous, unfair, and unjust manner, like an avaricious curmudgeon. Sooner or later, such a miser will become a victim of disaster and degradation. It is inevitable.

Wealth piled up through unfair means is the result of exploitation of the blood of the poor. Young people should not become slaves of such unfair existence and should not adopt exploitation as a means of living. Even God will not forgive such selfish exploitative lives. He who piles up wealth without enjoying or giving to others will be damned after death, and the progeny of such people will also be damned.

Four inheritors of wealth

There are four inheritors of hoarded wealth. The first is charity; the second, the king; the third, fire; the fourth, the robber. The first claimant is charity, and the major share goes to it. Students should recognize the profound significance of this truth and utilize the wealth they acquire for the welfare of mankind.

Sacrifice is the highest step. One who has the true spirit of sacrifice gives even their dearest and highest possession to others without any hesitation or reservation, smilingly and gladly. Surrendering the fruit of action to the Lord is real sacrifice. A renunciant (*thyagi*) does not shrink even to give up their 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 that have become ingrained in people over many life times should be discarded. There is no happiness greater than that obtained from sacrifice. Only those who sacrifice are the children of immortality, because they live for ever.

Spirit of sacrifice

When we study our epics and legends, we come across numerous figures who embody such spirit of sacrifice. Emperors like Sibi and Bali and heroes like Dadhichi and Karna belong to that illustrious line. Today, we need such people animated by the spirit of sacrifice among the political leaders and students. They should forget selfishness, crush egotism, dispel desire for power, put an end to pettiness of mind, pledge themselves to justice, and promote the welfare of society.

Unfortunately, words are losing their significance. Sacrifice, justice, righteousness, and service have lost their meaning and have degenerated into business. Selfishness looms large and dances like a destructive demon among students, politicians and educationists. Clamour for power and the desire for position are uppermost in the mind. Our country, which was once celebrated as a land of sacrifice, dedicated endeavour, and penance, has degenerated into a veritable playground for ephemeral joys. This is the reason for the country's many afflictions and ailments.

This state of things must come to an end, with a change for the better; then, our history will be repeated and our former glory revived. Thousands of sacrificing spirits should emerge from your midst. Every young Indian should be enriched once more by the spirit of sacrifice.

Sacrifice is sweeter than enjoyment. Sacrifice should become the aim of life. Only through sacrifice can one attain peace. Sorrows do not flee from us as long as the mind is not at peace with itself. Agonies dwell forever within us. Without the tranquility of the soul, no amount of wealth can be of any use. Surrendering the fruits of action with a dispassionate mind is eligible to be termed sacrifice. Only purity of mind can confer upon it tranquility. The *Upanishads* have proclaimed in a full-throated voice that sacrifice alone leads to immortality. Sacrifice is the chief trait of the pure. Therefore, every student must imbibe and display the spirit of sacrifice in their life. One should not become a victim of the disease of enjoyment.

End of education: wisdom and service

Unfortunately, a widespread opinion is circulating freely that education is for jobs and not for the expansion of illumination. This is deplorable. Wisdom is illumination, and the aim of education is to radiate that light of wisdom. Such wisdom bestows real power upon a person. Wisdom enables us to recognize the mutual relationship of objects and individuals and to know the precedents and antecedents of each object.

How can this illumination enter one's being? By listening to and going through great books like the *Vedas*, the *Vedanta*, the *Upanishads*, the *Koran*, and the *Granth Saheb*, the biographies of noble souls, and books dealing with physical and technological sciences and psychology, one gains this light. Along with wisdom, the discrimi-

natory approach and logical thinking can be gained by reading them. One should not depend entirely on knowledge derived from sacred texts but also upon wisdom arising from experience.

The shape and the content of education must change. Professor Gunnar Myrdal of Stockholm University, visiting Delhi in 1972, said, “The educational system of India is not progressive. It fosters the mentality that we shall not soil our hands.” All Indians, especially students, should think about these words. This remark pinpoints the tendency of our students to lead comfortable lives under electric fans, resting in airconditioned chambers and avoiding manual labour, its stress and strain, sweat and dirt, without even one fold of their ironed clothes getting crumpled.

This attitude is a far cry from the ideals of obedience and humility instilled by education. Students should impart to the people around them in society the sacred ideas they have imbibed. They must spring like tiger cubs into the arena of the villages and cleanse them of all sorts of pollution. They must teach and train the illiterate residents of the villages to live decently and with dignity. Students must strive along with the villagers and lead them forward. Students of today should pose lofty ideals of life to the world through their exemplary lives.