

## 5. Seek The Company Of Good People

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*From keeping good company, detachment follows as a consequence. From acquiring detachment, removal of all illusory relationships follows as a consequence.*

*From the removal of all relationships, steadiness of mind follows as a consequence. From the steadiness of mind, liberation of the jiva follows as a consequence.*

### **Sacred students!**

There are two things which are important for man's life. One is confidence in one's own self and the other is cleansing one's own mind. Man cannot live by himself in isolation. The entire world depends upon the social structure and on the manner in which individuals are knit together into a society. It has been the good luck of our country to have had a society which is well knit on the basis of sacred principles. The quality of forbearance of our society is not to be seen elsewhere. It is blood that flows through the arteries of Indian youth. It is not water. You have to make a determined effort to revive our sacred culture and demonstrate to the rest of the world the vitality that is contained therein. The youth of India should be prepared to sacrifice even their lives for the sake of truth. This country has been such that it had always traversed along the path of truth, had lit the lamp of truth and shed the light of truth. Today, Indians have apparently been subdued by the situations that prevail in the country, by the times in which they are living and by the environment through which they are passing. They have forgotten

the greatness of their own culture and are being ridiculed by others. The sacred tenets of our scriptures such as: respect your mother as God, respect your father as God, respect your teacher as God and respect your guest as God, no longer convey any meaningful messages to us in the social makeup of today.

Such undesirable changes have come about in our country today, and it is with a view to expose you to our original and ancient culture that these gatherings have been arranged. Experienced people have been invited to these gatherings to let you know what the greatness of our culture is, and thereby change your hearts. Our purpose is to take you all through experiences by which you will appreciate the true culture of our country.

Sankara was in the position of a teacher for the entire world and he propagated many ideals amongst the people. Amongst them, the concept of non-dualism or the philosophy of *Adwaita*, is an important one. Along with his disciples, he taught these things, travelled all over the country, stressed the importance of the aspect of *Atma* and explained to people the nature of *Paramatma* or God. He stressed the importance of having *Sathsanga* or spending your time in good company. He taught that for one's liberation, *Sathsanga* or good company is an important step and even the first step. When we make an enquiry as to what the word *Sathsanga* means, we will come to interpret it by saying

that it is friendship with good people.

We again have to ask the question what the word “good” means. Although in answering this question, Sankara gave many examples, one is reminded in this context of the very skilful elucidation given by the poet Vemana. In defining a good man, Vemana said that the individual who suffers if he is hungry, who harbours evil, who is burning with anger, and who indulges in promoting intrigue may be said to be a bad man. All others are good people. That man should spend his energy to relieve his hunger has been looked upon with ridicule by the poet Vemana. He draws attention to the fact that even animals and birds do not spend so much effort and time to get relief when they are hungry.

When that is so, how is it that man, who is superior to the animals and birds, spends so much time and effort in search of his food. Who provides the food for the birds in the forest? Who feeds the animals in the forest when they are hungry? Who gives water to the trees that thrive in the forest? God, who finds the food for the frog that is trapped between a pair of large stones, will certainly provide food for the human beings, who are so close to Him. Under such circumstances, it is not right that man should hanker after food. On the other hand, he should go after realisation of truth and develop faith in God.

When our fellow men are in difficulty, we should go to their help to the best of our ability. You should feel that there is no difference between man and man. You

should establish the oneness of humanity and realise the relationship that exists between one human being and another. You should realise that it is the spirit of *Atma* that runs through the entire range of human beings.

This alone will enable you to reach the ideal of “Brotherhood of man and Fatherhood of God.” Today we are using words like brothers and so on in a meaningless way and as mere words. We are not giving any value to either the bodily relationship or the mental relationship that signifies brotherhood. It is only when we can rise above these temporary relationships, of the body and of the mind, and get into the aspect of Divinity that we can understand the true meaning of brotherhood. It is only then that we can realise that it is the same Divine principle that exists in all of us. We should make an effort to realise such truth. It is for recognising such truth, that this kind of good company is essential. You may ask what benefit we may get out of such good company. Man’s good as well as bad features receive their final shape when he mixes with other members of the society.

In this context, we can take the example of the dust that settles on the surface of the earth. Although such dust does not have wings and cannot fly away by itself, by acquiring the good company of wind, it can get off the earth. The same dust settles down and cannot move upwards if it acquires association with water. Iron, which is hard, black and dull becomes soft, red and

shining when it makes friendship with fire. The same iron, acquires a lot of rust and loses all its strength when it makes friendship with dirt and moisture. All these modifications are coming because of association with others in the environment. It is generally not possible for anything to change or transform by itself without the help of external associations. Even a newly born baby learns to walk, talk, run, read and write only with the help of its mother and the love and affection the latter shows. Without the love and affection from the mother, the baby will grow like an animal and will not be able to talk, walk or do things which other human beings can do and are trained to do. Animals which are born in the forest, grow and move about in the forest and have certain features which are special to them. If the same animals are given appropriate training by a circus manager, we can make them do things which other animals cannot do. Even birds are able to utter good words in an understandable and clear manner if we give them good training and keep them in good company.

Thus, the kind of sacred life which you wish to lead and the aspirations which you have in your mind about the type of life which you want to live can be achieved if you are in the company of good people. You have to make friendship with good people and follow their example in your daily routine. This is the appropriate age for you to lead such a life and put yourself in the company of elders. During this age, you

will be able to develop good ideas and good conduct and you should make a firm determination to do so. At this important stage of your life, you should dedicate yourself to the service of your country and to the service of your parents.

On the contrary, if you spend your time in bad company and wander about the streets like stray dogs, whistling like foxes, you will only be wasting your life. Time wasted is life wasted. If you can understand the strength and the power of good company and use it in the best manner possible, there is every chance of your doing great things. All good people are such that their thoughts are very attractive. Their actions are soft and their ideas are good. The good people can be recognised by their gentle thought, word and deed.

Here is a small example. If a piece of black charcoal is kept in the proximity of a bright red fire the area along which this black charcoal is in contact with the bright fire will also begin to glow. In this analogy, the black charcoal is your ignorance. The bright red fire is the good company. By the two coming together, only the portion of your ignorance that is exposed to the effects of good company will be dispelled. But, if you employ *sadhana* or practice as a fan to increase the area of contact, then the entire region of ignorance will become bright.

It is, thus, not enough if you are merely in the

company of good people. You should also develop the *sadhana* of *prema* or love, and become dear to the good people. It is necessary to be near and dear to the good people.

The nature of the bad people is such that they enjoy and take pleasure in seeing the difficulties and troubles which come across the path of the good people. Looking at good people who are doing good things and getting some fame for the good actions which they are doing, bad people become jealous and spread bad stories about the good people and try to pull them down. These people will be making an effort to see only the bad qualities in others with a thousand eyes. The company of such bad people draws us also into bad ways; and therefore, Sankara taught that one should try and keep at a distance from the company of such people. It may be argued that if we keep ourselves at great distance from such bad people and exercise no influence on them, it is possible that these bad people will cause harm to the society and to the country. It may be suggested that under such circumstance, we should go near such people, give them good advice and change their ways.

We should assess and find out how far away we should keep from bad people and under what circumstances. If there is strong faith in our own capacities and in our own good, and provided we have the strength to maintain the good that is in us, then there is a point in our going near bad people and trying to change

them into our ways. On the contrary, if there is no strength in our own good qualities, there is no point in trying to change the bad people because you may lose even the feeble strength that you happen to have. It is only when we are able to increase the good in us in a qualitative as well as a quantitative sense, that we will be able to change, to some extent, bad persons with bad qualities.

There is a small example for this. If you take a cup of water and try to sell it for half a rupee, no one will purchase it. If in ten cups of milk, you mix this one cup of water, then they will readily give you the price for eleven cups of milk. This single cup of water has acquired that value only because it is in the company of milk which is good both in a qualitative and in a quantitative sense. On the contrary, if one cup of milk is mixed with one cup of water, there will be no value for the water, because there is no quantity in such a company. In this case, even the cup of milk which has joined the cup of water loses its value. Thus, when you have one cup of milk and one cup of water which is a mixture in equal proportions, the milk has lost its value. You can understand what will happen if ten cups of water are mixed with one cup of milk. Everything good that the milk had will be completely lost.

In the same manner, if inside our heart and outside our body, we create an environment which is good in ideas and good in actions, the strength and faith in our heart will never diminish, waver or change in any

manner. For illustrating this, Ramakrishna Paramahansa gave a striking example. An incense stick, when lighted has fire in it. If some one lights a cigarette, there is fire in it. If a forest is burning, there is fire in it. If a cooking stove is working, there is fire in it. These are all fires of different strengths. If you take a bundle of dry sticks and put it near the incense stick or the cigarette, the dry sticks may not catch fire. Not only will they not catch fire, they will even put out the fire in the incense stick or the cigarette. On the other hand, even if you take a bundle of raw and green plantain trees to the forest fire, they will not succeed in putting out the forest fire but will themselves become part of the fire.

The reason for this is that the forest fire is rich in quality and in quantity. It is therefore able to burn everything that comes into contact with it. The fire on the incense stick and on the cigarette has neither the quality nor the quantity and therefore it itself is extinguished. So it is, that if the good qualities in yourself are feeble, they will be extinguished under the pressure of bad company. If they are strong, they will extinguish everything bad that comes into contact with them.

There is another example for this. We fill a mud pot with water up to its brim. We keep this mud pot very carefully in a place to which even an ant cannot have access. The next day, we find that the surface level of water has been reduced by an inch or two. The reason is that the external environment around this pot is heating

it to some extent and a small quantity of water oozes out. If the same pot is filled to the brim and kept in a place where it is surrounded by water, we will find that the surface level of water is not reduced at all.

As in this analogy, while you are staying for one month in this summer course, you will be filling your heart to the brim with the essence of spiritual learning. When you go back to your places, because the external environment is not the same as what exists here, there is a possibility of the level of spiritual learning in the vessel of your heart becoming lower and lower by oozing out slowly. So you must make an attempt to join *sathsanga* when you go back, and you must see that the external environment is as good as the internal feeling. Then, the good in your heart does not ooze out.

Sometimes it may so happen that you will find yourself in a different company and some among them may be bad. They may even abuse you and treat you in a bad manner. In such cases, you should make an attempt to communicate the good spiritual essence in your heart to them as well. When a sharp axe is used to cut a sandalwood tree, the sandalwood tree does not feel hurt by the axe nor does it get angry with it. On the contrary, the sandalwood tree hands its fragrance to the axe. The sandalwood is such that even when it is cut to pieces, it gives fragrance. Even when it is rubbed against another stone, it gives fragrance. This is the quality of good people.

Here is a story of a goldsmith who during the practice of his profession was once melting gold. In this process, he was addressing the gold thus, “Oh gold! you are a very valuable thing and people respect you but now you are in my clutches. I will have the great opportunity of heating you, melting you, beating you and doing all kinds of things that will hurt you. This is now my privilege and pleasure”. In response, the gold tells him that the result of all his effort to cause hurt to the gold is only to further purify the gold, increase its value by removing impurities and make it shine better and more attractively. But in the process, the heat, the smoke, the pain of having to beat hard are all irksome only to the goldsmith. In this way all the trouble goes to the goldsmith and all the improvement goes to the gold.

If you take good people, saints, men of great character and men who have steady minds, it does not matter whether you abuse them or hurt them or praise them. The hurt, the abuse and even the praise never reaches them. They are returned to the persons from whom they emanate. You young people are now at the appropriate age when you should make contact with men of great character and good men and choose the path along which you wish to move. I do hope that all of you assembled here will seek such good company and will choose such a path. You should acquire the qualities of truth, prema and forbearance, as also the quality of sacrifice. This period of your life is like the morning

time of the day. If you, as you commence your life, turn your mind towards good and towards God, you will be starting your life in a manner where bad qualities do not haunt you, ego does not haunt you, jealousy and other undesirable qualities do not haunt you.

There is a small example for this. In the morning time, the sun rises. If at that time you face the sun and look at it, you will notice that you have a long shadow but it is behind you. If, on the other hand, you do not direct your sight towards the sun but turn towards your shadow, you will notice that your own shadow, a long one at that, is leading you and it will appear as if this long shadow is showing you the path. In this example, you are the *Jiva Thathwa* and your shadow is the *maya* (illusion). If it is your desire to overcome *maya* and leave it behind you, however fast you may walk, you will never get rid of *maya* if it is in front of you. On the other hand, you turn your sight towards the sun, you can overcome *maya* even as the shadow is behind you. In the same manner, your mind, thoughts, organs and the body constitute the *maya* or the shadow. If you want to get away from them, you will have to turn your vision inwards and towards your *Atma*. When you do this, you will be able to shake off the *maya*. Therefore, you should make an attempt to join the *sathsanga* and derive all the benefits that accrue from joining good company. Good company leads you to detachment and by detachment you will achieve self-realisation.

Sankara has given many verses and each verse is to be regarded as a shining lamp of knowledge. You should put the contents thereof into practice and rectify your life. Today, you have learnt the verse of Sankara relating to *sathsanga* and the benefits which *sathsanga* confers on us. We have seen the inner and significant meaning of this verse. In addition to this, we must also put it into practice. It is then that you will be able to realise the *Atma Thathwa* and develop faith in your own ability and yourself. I hope that you will stick to *sathsanga* in future and keep away from all bad company.

Kabir looked at good company as well as bad company and said that both of them should be respected. At this, the disciples questioned him how it is that both good company and bad company deserve to be respected. To this, Kabir replied that there is some trouble to the world from the bad people and there is trouble to the world also from the good people. In order that there is no trouble from either quarter, he is paying respects to both of them. The disciples then asked how any harm can result from good people. Kabir smiled and said that association with bad people causes great discomfort. On the contrary, separation from good people also causes great discomfort, and therefore, he was praying to both. There should not be separation from good people and there should not be association with bad people. You must always be praying that both these things may come your way. This is my blessing to you. I hope you will be able to get good company always.