

Selflessness

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[Page 3] IT is a very difficult thing to impress upon the average religious mind of today that "Goodness" is not the summit of attainment. The spiritual blindness which mistakes light for darkness, and darkness for light, is never more glaringly paraded than in the self-confident attitude of the educated classes of our time, who unite with a modicum of culture the high moral tone of a generation that is more and more recognising its responsibilities. Yet it is useless to look even amongst the religiously minded of this advancing tide of civilization, for any recognition of the true heights of being — of the ultimate destiny and goal of Humanity. The bounded scope of a materialized religion which dares not accept the self-evident and eternal truth in the soul of man, unless bolstered up by historical evidence, would seem to have dwarfed the range of men's vision.

It is indisputable that that religion best supplies the needs of the times, which most appeals to the masses of men, but it is foolish to imagine that the masses of men, who must of necessity be more or less enthralled by their material needs, can ever reach a high degree of illumination.

The orthodox conception that the deepest religious truth must be apparent to the meanest understanding, certainly has a basis of reasonableness. It *is* reasonable in face of the revolting dogma of "eternal damnation" (which modern so-called Christians have thought well to tone down somewhat!) as a protest against the notion that a man could by any possibility be wrecked eternally through lack of intellect. All the religions of the world rightly teach that moral qualities, not intellectual culture, are the main factors in determining the conditions of the post-mortem state. But the first recognition of the wider sweep of the Occult wisdom demonstrates the folly of such opinions, with reference to the more extended horizon of Being. As a proof that the hidden Wisdom was — as it must always be — unattainable by the mass of men, even in the days of comparative Spiritual illumination of ancient Aryavarta, we may quote from the Katha Upanishad [These quotations are from "The Secret of Death", by Edwin Arnold, which is a translation of the first three Vallîs of the Katha Upanishad] :—

To reach to Being,
Beyond all Seeming Being; to know true life,
This is not gained by many; seeing that few
So much as hear of it, and of those few
The more part understand not, [Page 4]

Modern Humanity may therefore truly be said to have dethroned itself and cast away its crown, when it denied the need of initiation in mysteries of the kingdom of heaven, and when the political cry of "equality" was parodied in the realm of spirit where inequality of development is the prevailing fact.

"Goodness" is so vague a term that to different minds it implies very different things. Unfortunately, the word has been degraded to such an extent by the unctuous sentimentality of the so-called religious, that it is apt to raise the scorn of those whose ideas are too catholic to allow them to fall in with the fanatical cry of any sectarian shibboleth. But even apart from its degraded signification, it is at once too limited and too general a term. Much that is excellent and that is necessary in the qualification of the pupil, is included, but it fails to embrace many of the necessary qualities. When approaching the supreme science dealing with the hidden life, it will be necessary, therefore, to inquire more analytically into the requisite qualifications. The book which, of all others, deals most fully and clearly with these qualities, as, indeed, with the whole spiritual science, is the "Bhagavad-Gita", or "Sacred Song". Amongst the many English translations of it, Sir Edwin Arnold's is, doubtless, the most poetical rendering of the original poem. The opening lines of chapter xvi clearly describe the required qualities:—

Fearlessness, singleness of soul, the will
Always to strive for wisdom; opened hand
And governed appetites; and piety,
And love of lonely study; humbleness,
Uprightness, heed to injure nought which lives,
Truthfulness, slowness unto wrath, a mind
Which lightly letteth go what others prize;
And equanimity, and charity
Which spieth no man's faults; and tenderness
Towards all that suffer; a contented heart,
Fluttered by no desires; a bearing mild,
Modest, and grave, with manhood nobly mixed,
With patience, fortitude, and purity;
An unvengeful spirit, never given
To rate itself too high; — such be the signs,
O Indian Prince! of him whose feet are set
On that fair path which leads to heavenly birth !

It will be seen, then, that many other qualities than that known by the name of goodness or piety are required in the pupil who desires to learn the secrets of wisdom of the higher life.

One of the saddest things about this struggle towards the higher life is the content which invades the soul as soon as the strain of torture is withdrawn, and the relief with which it sinks back into worldly enjoyment. The fact that right thought is only possible when one is suffering under the divine scourge, does not at first appeal to the [Page 5] mind as truth, and indeed seems almost a revolting doctrine. Doubtless there will come a time when the concentrated energy of many lifetimes on the "Great Quest" will have made the soul so "one-pointed", that the struggles towards the higher life will no longer require anguish as a goad. But the plausible-seeming statement of the ordinary good man, that the truest thought is attainable when the whole nature is in a state of equilibrium, rest, and satisfaction, rather than when goaded by mental or bodily unrest, must surely be taken as referring to thoughts dealing with mundane objects, or, at highest, with moral questions, not to thoughts which are the lever of the soul's progress upwards; or, may it not be, that the ordinary good man — the man that is of blameless life and pious thought — has not yet reached the threshold of knowledge, has not yet developed the full responsibility for which man is destined, and which is only attained when the definite choice is made between good and evil ? For it is at the threshold of Occultism that that choice has to be made — the fruit

of the tree of knowledge is plucked and eaten by the crossing of that threshold.

And it is natural that when the fantastic religious ideas about a future life, or the pessimistic negation of any future life, which in the one case dominate, and in the other darken the man's spiritual horizon, are replaced by the conviction which takes the form of a scientific conclusion, that, as the soul is intuitively felt to have eternity before it, so it must have eternity behind, and that, consequently, the only explicable theory of life is to be found in the doctrine of re-incarnation, with its complement and corollary, the law of Karma — facts which have been more or less clearly shadowed forth for the dim multitudes by the Initiates through all the ages.

It will be seen, then, that when knowledge replaces ignorance — when the fact of man's destiny is grasped and realized, every act, every word, and every thought must be pregnant with increased meaning. To quote from a well-known treatise on Karma: "The mass of men walk waveringly, uncertain as to the goal they aim at; their standard of life is indefinite; consequently their Karma acts in a confused manner. But when once the threshold of knowledge is reached, the confusion begins to lessen, and consequently the Karmic results increase enormously (whether for good or for evil), because all are acting in the same direction on all the different planes; for the occultist cannot be half-hearted, nor can he return when he has passed the threshold. These things are as impossible as that the man should become the child again. The individuality has approached the state of responsibility by reason of growth: it cannot recede from it."

It is recognised as a truism that moral elevation of character is often unaccompanied by any power of intellect — indeed the dramatic situation is continually being represented of combined intellectual power and moral [Page 6] depravity. But those who recognize such situations as being contrary to nature, show more intuitional wisdom than the blind multitude who worship the good man, and are apt to regard his narrow-mindedness and folly as accompaniments, if not necessary attributes of goodness. Put in an axiomatic way, intellect *is* masked spirituality. It represents the Karmic inheritance of countless incarnations through the animal and the animal-human kingdoms up to true manhood, while the intuitional wisdom which is man's noblest inheritance and ultimate goal, may be described as pure intellect from which the innate Deity has torn away the mask. To prevent misunderstanding a quotation from "*The Perfect Way*, or the Finding of Christ " will render the intention of the words more apparent. "God is Spirit, God is Life, God is Mind, God is the subject and object of Mind, at once the thought, the thinker and that which is thought of."

It will be seen, then, by those who read these lines with understanding, how far the sentimental idea of goodness is from scaling the true heights of Being — indeed, the profound scorn of Shelley's lines —

Heartless things
Are done and said i' the world, and many worms
And beasts and men live on.

is echoed by many an Occultist when comparing the gush of sentiment that accompanies the passing away of anyone who has merited the plaudits of the race, by raising himself a head space above its level, with the silence in which the Great-Souls [Great Soul is the literal translation of the Sanscrit word, Mahatma] live and die, hidden from the impudent gaze of a world unfit to regard such greatness.

Even the most fervent worshipper of goodness and piety would never suggest that the goodness is not accompanied in the character by qualities which bind their possessor to earth. But while desire of any earthly thing remains, the return to incarnate life is inevitable. But there are royal saintly souls who never for a moment cease to realize that their kingdom lies far beyond the narrow limits of their present pilgrimage, who require no goad to keep the spiritual eye constantly fixed on the eternal realities, and who have ceased to regard with either desire or aversion the kaleidoscopic changes of this earthly life. Compared with such lofty calms of wisdom and dispassion, how earth-bound are the qualities of those whose watch-words are merely goodness and piety!

The ordinary religious idea that goodness and piety are the qualities to achieve the bliss of heaven is perfectly true so far as it goes — true that the rewards of the Subjective State — the Devachanic period that lies between each objective existence on earth — are earned by such lives of goodness and piety, but it must be apparent to the simplest student in Occultism that this has nothing to do with the "Great Quest" — indeed that those who lead such lives may live and die, and pass life after life in utter ignorance of the wider horizon of Being — that the qualities by which [Page 7] men may attain liberation from the earth-bound state — in other words attain Divinity — must be very different from those which conduct to a merely temporary reward, and still leave the nature essentially human in its attributes. Of such it is written in the Katha Upanishad [These quotations are from "The Secret of Death", by Edwin Arnold, which is a translation of the first three Vallis of the Katha Upanishad] —

that man is ignorant, and dies
To live again, until he learn to die
The death which frees from living.

and this we may be sure refers to no mere physical separation of soul and body, but to the death of all desire for earthly existence.

If life has any definite purpose, and man any definite goal beyond the mere earthly perfectionment of his manhood (which may be called the Agnostic ideal), disillusion must surely be the process by which nature begins her work. It may at first take the form of painful earthly experience, as when the bright day dreams of love or glory imagined in youth, fade away before the stern reality of later life; but they gild the distant memory with a pathetic halo, and the fervent souls whose dreams have been brightest and desires intensest, will find that they naturally form the goad which drives the mind inward, and that the religious feeling of the valuelessness of this life compared with the eternity beyond, was but the germ of the more matured philosophic conception of the illusiveness of all life, which to the mass of men appears as real, and the reality of the ideal which lies behind it; or perhaps it may be more correctly stated as the realization that no object of sense or thought has any real existence apart from Soul, which — containing as it does within itself the counterpart of all things — alone makes perception or cognition possible, and that the one reality is the Soul-Substance — the Atma or Spirit, which is synonymous with Deity, and of which the whole objective Universe is but a transitory expression.

Joy is felt by many to have such an intoxicating effect, that it is far more difficult to hold the soul in equilibrium while drinking the foaming cup of pleasure, than the bitter draught of pain. At least it would seem that this first assertion of the spirit's rightful supremacy must be made while pain dominates the nature. When the control has once been successfully established, it will then be for the man's truest self to make it permanent, and to still the violence of the emotions caused both by pleasure and pain. What

an amount of suffering is endured, too, before the spirit's rightful authority is recognized ! What a burden of earthly cares we continue to carry before the piling up of the burden to breaking point impels us to seek for relief, to cast the whole burden away ! Whether that relief comes in the form of an imaginary divine person external to us, who relieves us of our burden, or in the more direct opening of the eyes to the recognition of the God-nature within, it is in either case the first rift in the [Page 8] cloud that lets through a gleam of the light eternal. It is the first attempt to realize the peace of the "Higher Carelessness".

The last stages in the progress from manhood to Deity must necessarily be hidden from our view. Doubtless, the initiations into the lesser and greater mysteries, references to which abound in the writings of antiquity, have to do with these stages of progress; but even apart from the authority of revealed Scripture, it must be apparent to the mind that before man can reach to the life which lies beyond manhood, the qualities which constitute that manhood must have been put aside. These may be summed up in the one word — Desire.

The foolish criticism of the beginner in occult research — that the killing out of all earthly desires must necessarily mean annihilation of the human nature, is answered by the terms used below. Though the animal-human may be killed out, the growth of the divine-human will by that very process be vitalised. Perhaps, however, it is a pardonable mistake to make, for the mass of men have but the germ of the divine-human within them, which they have not yet begun to develop. What wonder, then, that they should imagine their whole nature to be bounded by the animal-human they know so well!

When desire and fear and anger are entirely rooted out of the nature, the stupendous achievement of selflessness will be realized. For one still dominated by the passions of earth, the contemplation, even, of this divine state is an impossibility; but some light may be thrown on what this ultimate development means, by contemplating a stage in the progress. In a comment on one of the opening aphorisms of "*Light on the Path*" (" Before the voice can speak in the presence of the masters, it must have lost the power to wound "), the author has pictured for us a ceremony of initiation which takes place yearly, and which is open to all neophytes who are prepared for it. "All weapons of defence and offence are given up; all weapons of mind and heart and brain and spirit. From that ceremony he returns into the world as helpless, as unprotected as a new-born child". He has renounced all individual rights, and never again can defend himself even by a scornful word. He has devoted himself to the service of Humanity. He has begun to identify himself with the All. "He may be led as a lamb to the slaughter, yet he openeth not his mouth". And what shall we say of his brother-workers who have partaken of the same sacrament ? Is not this the veritable "Brotherhood of Love " ?

Human language fails to picture, as human thought fails to conceive, the sublime heights of the divine Selflessness. The worshipping contemplation of Deity can only appeal in moments of exaltation to the most faithful and aspiring souls, and any knowledge of such exalted states can be but dimly apprehended by those who have not crossed the threshold. But the mystic words handed down through the ages would seem to point to a [Page 9] possibility of unending progress in the sublime states of being; and the great Nirvanic goal which to us is little more than a word at which to bow the head and worship, may be but a gateway to further heights and abysses of Deity where thought loses itself in the illimitable beyond.

Though the word Nirvana, which to us stands for the ultimate ideal the most exalted of the race can but dimly feel towards, is a word of purely Buddhist origin, the Catholicity of the Occult Wisdom which has been handed down by the initiates of all times and all nations, and which has been the animating spirit in every great religion which men have formulated, must always remain its fundamental attribute.

In recognition, then, of the tie that unites Hierophant of ancient Egypt, Mage of Persia, Brahmin Yogi, Buddhist Saint, Jewish Kabbalist, and Greek Philosopher, with the Neo-Platonists of Alexandria, the Muslim Sufis, and the Christian Mystics of more recent times, let us in conclusion render a tribute to the memory of Plotinus, by quoting the answer given to the question put by Porphyry's friend Amelius, "Where is now Plotinus' soul ? " precluding this last great utterance of the Delphic oracle with the translator's introductory words. [From the essay on "Greek Oracles"] " Whatever be the source of this poem, it stands out to us as one of the most earnest utterances of antiquity, though it has little of classical perfection of form. Nowhere, indeed, is the contest more apparent between the intensity of the emotions which are struggling for utterance and the narrow limits of human speech, which was composed to deal with the things that are known and visible, and not with those that are inconceivable and unseen.

"Little, in truth, it is which the author of this oracle could express, less which the translator can render; but there is enough to show once more the potency of an elect soul, what a train of light she may leave behind her as she departs on her unknown way; when for those who have lived in her presence, but can scarcely mourn her translation, the rapture of love fades into the rapture of worship. Plotinus was 'the Eagle soaring above the tomb of Plato'; no wonder that the eyes which followed his flight must soon be blinded with the Sun".

Pure spirit — once a man — pure spirits now
Greet thee rejoicing, and of these art thou;
Not vainly was thy whole soul always bent
With one same battle, and one the same intent,
Through eddying cloud, and earth's bewildering roar,
To win her bright way to that stainless shore
Ay, 'mid the salt spume of this troublous sea.
This death in life, this sick perplexity.
Oft on thy struggle through the obscure unrest,
A revelation opened from the blest —
Showed close at hand the goal thy hope would win.
Heaven's kingdom round thee, and thy God within.
So sure a help the eternal Guardians gave,
From life's confusion so were strong to save,
Upheld thy wandering steps that sought the day,
And set them steadfast on the heavenly way.
Nor quite even here on thy broad brows was shed
The sleep that shrouds the living who are dead;
Once by God's grace was from thine eyes unfurled
This veil that screens the immense and whirling world,
Once while the spheres around thee in music ran
Was very Beauty manifest to man; —
Ah, once to have seen her, once to have known her there.

For speech too sweet, for earth too heavenly fair!
But now the tomb where long thy soul had lain
Bursts, and thy tabernacle is rent in twain;
Now from about thee, in thy new home above,
Has perished all but life, and all but love, —
And on all lives and on all loves outpoured
Free grace and full, a spirit from the Lord,
High in that heaven whose windless vaults enfold
Just men made perfect, and an age all gold.
Thine own Pythagoras is with thee there,
And sacred Plato in that sacred air,
And whoso followed, and all high hearts that knew
In death's despite what deathless Love can do.
To God's right hand they have scaled the starry way —
Pure spirits these, thy spirit pure as they.
Ah Saint! how many and many an anguish past,
To how fair haven art thou come at last!
On thy meek head what Powers their blessing pour,
Filled full with life, and rich for evermore! "