

Two Aspects of Spirituality : Ego and Love

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While defining spirituality, we have to understand that there are two aspects of spirituality – a negative aspect and a positive aspect, and the two aspects are complementary to each other. Negatively, spirituality means melting or effacing the ego, and positively it means realizing one's unity with others (or in other words, having universal love). Ego is the principle of differentiation of oneself from others; ego rests on the feeling of otherness (what in the spiritual philosophy is technically called '*dvaitabhava*' or '*bheda-bhava*'). I cut myself off from the rest of the world (taking the persons of the world to be 'other' to me and not my own), and naturally therefore I think only for myself and not for others, I want that '*my*' will be done and '*my*' interests be served and everything be for '*me*' – this '*me*'-ship (in which '*other*' are discarded) is the ego. This means that ego takes place when I do not consider the so-called others as '*me*' or '*my own*' and cut myself off from them and confine myself to my own individuality. It should also be clear that ego is the correlate of selfishness. In the ego-state I wish only the good of myself and not the good of others, I impose myself on others and even exploit others for my own end. Selfishness and ego are like the two sides of one and the same coin.

If this is the meaning and nature of ego, it is not difficult to understand that ego is the foundation and the root cause of all evil, of all immorality. What is called '*abhimana*' (pride), like for example the '*abhimana*' of riches or strength or intelligence or scholarship or beauty or ability or this or that, - this too is called ego (*ahankara*); but this is ego in the secondary sense. This too rests on the feeling of otherness, because I want to show to others my possession (of which I have the *abhimana*), and impress myself upon them. If and when the others become 'me' or 'my own', then to whom shall I show? There is no sense in being showy to my own self. The loving mother does not 'show' herself to her children whom she considers as her own self.

If spirituality negatively means effacement of the ego, and if the ego means separating oneself from the others and confining oneself to one's own individuality and taking into consideration only oneself and the others, then it becomes easy to understand the positive meaning of spirituality as what in the spiritual philosophy is technically called '*Advaita-bhava*' or '*Abheda-bhava*' which means feeling of one's unity with all. Spirituality is the state of consciousness in which the feeling of otherness is gone and the feeling of affinity and unity with the so-called others is established. The feeling of unity can be explained with the help of some examples. Although the examples are not hundred per cent perfect, they at least give the glimpse of unity. One such example is that of the loving mother. The mother feels that the children are her own or herself; the happiness and suffering of the children are the happiness and suffering of the mother. The bodies of the children are separated from the mother, and in that sense the children are 'others' to her, but in her consciousness or in her feeling they are not others, and so the mother considers the good of the children her own good, and naturally and spontaneously does good to the children. What she does for the children, she thinks she is doing for her own self, as she feels

that the children are herself or her own. This is what is called love. Thus love is the meaning of spirituality; love is 'the' spiritual value.

The saints and Self-realised persons feel "their unity with all beings" ("*sarva-bhutatmabhutatma*") and therefore they naturally "remain busy in doing good to all beings" ("*sarva-bhuta-hite-ratah*"). Their consciousness is in perfect '*Advaita-bhava*' or '*Abheda-bava*'. The '*Bodhisattva*' of the Buddhist tradition is the other exemplar of spirituality; he refuses to accept and relish his own *Nirvana* until all beings become free from suffering, and vows to work incessantly for the redemption of all. The '*Bodhisattva*' of the Buddhist tradition is called '*Jivanmukta*' in other traditions.

The philosophy of Vedanta (*Upanisad*) as also of Tantra, provides the metaphysical foundation for the spiritual consciousness or the spiritual way of life. According to Vedanta, I am really the *Atman* (the Self or the Spirit or the Consciousness), the *Atman* is also *Brahman* which means all-pervading, the world is the manifestation of the *Atman*. This means that the whole world is the manifestation of my own real Self and that I am one with all. But due to Ignorance (*Ajnana*), I am not aware of this truth and am taking them to be 'other' to me (although really they are my own). This ignorance of my unity with all is the basic cause of my suffering. Otherness or duality is false and illusory (*mithya*) and unity is the truth (*Satya*). So realizing or being aware of one's unity with all, means coming from falsity to truth. This Vedantic metaphysics is not mere faith, nor is it philosophic speculation or poetic imagination; it is actually experienced by the seers, and it can also be experienced and verified by others by following the spiritual path of self-purification. Thus this philosophy may be taken as an authentic picture of Truth, and it may become the guiding principle of a healthy and happy life.

It has already been pointed out that love is 'the' spiritual value. But love should be distinguished from such mental states and situations that are falsely taken to be love. For example, infatuation, possessiveness, selfish attachment, etc are not love. Love may be understood as the opposite of selfishness. In selfishness I consider myself as the end and use others as the means for my end. Since I consider only myself as 'my own' and the rest of the beings as 'other' to me, I do not hesitate in exploiting them for my own benefit. But in love, I consider others also as ends in themselves, for I take them to be 'my own' just as I take myself to be my own, and naturally therefore I would never be inclined to exploit them as mere means to my own end. This is because I know that *their* loss would be *my own* loss. So love means taking the so-called others not as others but as one's own self, and wishing and doing their good for their own sake. In true love the good of the beloved person becomes the lover's own good. For example, when I do good to my child, I do not consider it an act of charity, for I know that the good of my child is my own good and that what I am doing for the child, I am doing for myself. This is how a saint feels when he/she does good to the whole world. Only a saintly or Self – realized person has true love, for there is no feeling of otherness in him/her, all become his/her own, and there is also no motive of getting return from the beloved person. Everyone who loves, is saintly and self-realized to the extent of the purity of love.

A question may arise here: If in true love there is no motive of getting return from the beloved person, what is the benefit of love for the lover? The answer is simple. The feeling of love itself gives immense satisfaction and bliss to the lover. *Only* a lover knows and experiences the happiness of love. There is nothing in the world so satisfying and also so elevating as love. It

gives happiness to both the lover and the beloved person. To use a Shakespearian phrase, "it bleaseth him that gives and him that takes". Even if the lover does not get reward or return, he/she remains happy and satisfied, for the very flow of love gives deep satisfaction to the heart in which it flows. The return or reward may or may not come, but the fruit of love (that is, 'ananda' or bliss) is already there simultaneously along with love itself. In the natural course the reward also comes, but love is independent of any reward or return. Love not only *rewards* itself but is a *reward in itself*. The point is that love does not require anything else to satisfy the lover, but love itself is the satisfying factor, and the satisfaction is intense and deep. We say in ordinary language that love 'gives' *ananda*, but the truth is that love itself 'is' *ananda*.

It can become clear from the above treatment that in love which is the spiritual value, there is natural synthesis of what is called 'Sreya' (the good) and 'Preya' (the pleasant). Love is actually the two in one – the good and the pleasant both at once. We have already seen that in love the good of oneself and the good of others become one, as the 'others' too become one's own. Morality becomes natural in love, as one would not exploit the beloved person and, on the contrary, would do good to him/her. Selfishness which is the opposite of love, is the ground and the cause of all immorality. Since in love selfishness is absent, there remains no cause for being immoral. Thus the spiritual value (love) satisfies the demands of Dharma (morality) and Sukha (pleasure or happiness) both at once. It gives immense pleasure and satisfaction to oneself on the one hand, and on the other hand one becomes spontaneously inclined to do good to the so called others. It should also be added that the pleasure of love is deeper, higher and much more satisfying than any other pleasure of the world, and the good that is done to others in love, is more satisfying to the recipients.

We have pointed out that (i) egolessness and (ii) love or the feeling of unity-are the two negative and positive meanings of spirituality. Now, we can understand that the two meanings are complementary to each other, or it would be more true to say that the two denote one and same state of consciousness. One cannot be loving without being egoless, because the very meaning of ego is the separation of oneself from others. 'I am in love' means I do not feel separate from the beloved person, which means my ego is gone (at least in the moment of love); love melts the ego. In the state of ego, I think only for myself; but when I am thinking for others, I have already come out of my ego-shell which had captivated me. (That is why love is also the state of freedom). There is inverse relationship between love and ego. The more the ego is tight, the less loving we are; and the more loving we are, the lesser is the ego. The two cannot go together. That is why Kabir, the great mystic poet, has said; "If you want to drink the nectar of love and also want to keep up your ego, this is impossible like putting two swords in one and same sheath"

All the qualities related to egolessness and love are spiritual

As a logical corollary of the meaning of spirituality as egolessness and love, all the qualities related to these mutually incorporating characteristics, would be called spiritual. For example, compassion (*Karuna*) means the deep feeling for the suffering person and the resultant inclination to help remove the suffering. Since compassion involves feeling for others and doing good to them; it is a form of love, and so it is a spiritual value. *Bhakti* (Devotion) means surrendering to God and following the will of God. This means surrender of the ego and hence

this too is spiritual. Moreover, in *Bhakti* the *Bhakta* (devotee) loves all the creatures, for he/she knows and feels that they are all the children of God and they are therefore to be loved and served. That is why it is said that service to man is service to God.

The *Jnani* or *Jnanayogin* loves and serves the creatures because he/she has realized his /her unity with all, he/she takes them as 'own' or part of oneself; whereas the *Bhakta* or *Bhaktiyogin* loves and serves all beings because he takes them to be the children of his own Lord, the God. Both the *Jnanayogin* and the *Bhaktiyogin* practically do the same thing for different reasons. Moreover, the *Bhakta* takes himself/herself as the instrument of God and does all work as the duty of God; this is what is called *Karmayoga*. Those who do not believe in God, can do the same by putting 'Truth' in place of 'God'. God is truth and truth is God. For the atheistic spiritual practitioner, surrender would mean surrender to Truth, and *Karmayoga* would mean doing work not with selfish interest but with the sense of pure duty. There can be atheist devotee too. The *Sramana* tradition (Jainism and Buddhism) presents the way of atheistic devotion and atheistic spirituality.

Thus, *Karuna* (compassion), *Bhakti* or *Bhaktiyoga* (surrender to God or surrender to Truth), *Jnana* or *Jnanayoga* (*Advaita-bhava* or realization of one's unity with all beings), *Karmayoga* (doing all work with the sense of being the instrument of God or with the sense of selfless duty) – all these are co-relates or corollaries of the central spiritual value which negatively means egolessness and positively means love or unity of oneself with all. To be spiritual means to be also all above things.