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THE PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION OF A PARABLE

In his Psychological Lectures given in the 1930's, Mr. Ouspensky said that those who have been brought up in the Christian tradition, can take the Gospels as a 'Treatise on Psychology' if they can get rid of built-in 'religious' and historical attitudes. In 1967 I put the idea to the Shankaracharya that we might see connections between the Christian Gospels and his teachings from the Vedanta, which may well have been their original source. As he agreed, I put to him the Parable of the Prodigal Son in this simplified and translatable form, and he immediately commented on it as if it were already familiar to him:

R. A man had two sons. The younger asked for his portion of the inheritance and went to a far country where he 'wasted his substance in riotous living'. Now there came a great famine in the land and, being reduced to the job of a swineherd, he even wanted to eat the pigs' food; but when he came to himself he said, 'How many hired servants of my Father have food enough and to spare, and yet I perish with hunger! I will arise and go to my Father'; and while he was yet far away, his Father met him, embraced him and made his servants put the best robe on him and prepare a feast.

But the elder son, when he came home from working in the fields, complained that although he had always been faithful, his Father never made a feast for *him*! But the Father said, 'Son, you are always with me and all that I have is yours; but this, your brother, was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.'

My question is: If the Father is the Self or Atman, who are the two sons, and who receives the 'good impulse' to remember himSelf?

S. The Father is the Atman or Absolute; the sons are men, one with true Knowledge and one with ignorance. The ignorant identifies himself with the body and its claims, so he asks the Father to give him his portion to spend. In doing so, he only established a boundary within creation which he wants to call his own property.

He then goes out into the material world to search for happiness in realms far removed from the source of happiness. This 'far country' is the level of the universe where only the physical laws prevail; and when the physical and subtle bodies have spent their substance, there ensues a 'famine' due to lack of Spiritual energy and bliss. Being in utter confusion and misery and unable to see any future, he looks back or looks within. It is the misery which forces him to look within. He remembers the wealth and abundance of his Father's house where everyone is happy, and contrasts his present situation with that one.

While still far away, he is met by his Father and given a robe. The giving of the robe is the dawn of discrimination which distinguishes the true Knowledge from the false. Then all become happy and make a feast. He starts a new life because a transformation has taken place following on the Memory and the Knowledge.

When the other son asks why *he* was never given a feast he is told that feasts are given to those returning after separation. Those who remain united with the Father are always celebrating; there is not a moment without happiness in the company of the Father, or one who is without blemish has himself become the Absolute.

R. May I ask in relation to myself, is the older son the lower mind (Manas) long ago evolved in the lower forms of creation; while the younger (more newly evolved) human Mind is the Buddhi which contains the power of choice?

And does the change in the younger son represent the two states of Mind – one united with worldly ambition, and the other remembering to ‘arise and go to the Father’?

S. Yes, two states of Buddhi, one with discrimination and true Knowledge, and the other without. When a person is subjected to misery, then at the climax of great misery the Buddhi looks back. Human society is such that it follows sensual pursuits, without realising the cause of its misery, until it reaches the end of the road and discrimination starts.

R. With me, this seems to happen many times each day, and even several times during a half-hour’s meditation. One feels the influence of the Gunas in one’s psychology – rushing off and wasting energy in Rajas, then reduced to Tamas; and, when Sattva collects, it turns to the Father.

S. This is right.

COMMENT

It is valuable for work on Being, at moments when one sees emotionally one of the Parables, to enquire how it applies to one’s own psychology. And this might be a good occupation for spare moments around the feast of Christmas.

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