

PRACTICE

Introduction.

It is proposed that we focus our attention this term on putting the teachings into practice. Given the weighty nature of the subject I decided to take, for this first paper of the term, a single aspect – the role of personal effort in spiritual discipline (sadhana) – and explore that.

The application of personal effort is regarded as rather a controversial subject particularly by those who deny the existence of free-will but is taken for granted by traditional Vedantists as well as Buddhists.

A beautiful prayer from the Taittiriya Upanishad, often sung by the Colet Chanting Group contains the phrase; 'saha viryam karavavahai' which, translated, means; 'O God, give me confidence in myself and in the knowledge that effort by me is required'. Many adherents of neo advaita assert; 'since God already knows very well what I want where is the need to ask Him, or indeed to strive, for anything?'. Traditionalists counter this on the grounds that 'if I have not already worked out what I want and am ready to put forth a sincere effort to realize it, then, even if God is prepared to give something, I am bound to reject it'.

Rather than get bogged down in an age-old debate about free-will versus destiny, as we have sometimes done in the past, I suggest we follow tradition in this respect, admit the place of personal effort in our spiritual work and focus instead on the changing quality of the effort required according to the level of stillness reached at any one time.

Effort in practice.

Most spiritual disciplines have as their central aim the taming of the mind. The Buddha's discourses contain many references to this:

'Monks, I do not know of any single thing that is as difficult to control as the untamed mind.

Monks, I do not know of any single thing that brings such woe as the mind that is untamed, uncontrolled, unguarded and unrestrained.

Monks, I do not know of any other single thing that brings such bliss as the mind that is tamed, controlled, guarded and restrained.'

We are all of us well enough on the way to know that progress towards that 'tamed mind' is going to be very gradual and will be achieved only as the result of a step by step approach.

His Holiness, Shantananda Saraswati, describes the same process in terms of a journey towards light.

'Imagine a traveller who has to go on a journey of 7 hours (or stages) and who starts in the dark at 3am with a small lamp in his hand. The light is bad and he feels his way with trepidation. By the time he reaches the 4th stage, dawn has broken and the sun's rays make the way increasingly clear, so that by now he does not need his own little lamp. He can now, with certainty, tread his way up to the high noon of the 7th or final stage so that when he meets the Atman he becomes One with Him'.

In making our own hesitant way through that pre-dawn phase we will have many opportunities to encounter the hindrances (listed by the Buddhists) thrown up by our own minds to deter our best efforts; sloth and torpor, greed and ill-will, restlessness and worry, and sceptical doubt. When these are not claiming all our attention we will probably be trying to gage the precise nature of the effort required in our chosen discipline be it meditation, turning, movements, yoga etc. We will encounter the problems involved in making either too little or too much effort. Effort itself is unavoidable and continues in an

increasingly subtle and refined form until late in the process. Effort has no place in the final stage because effort implies a duality, a striving to achieve and finally, to meet in unity.

Intention plays a crucial role. How pure is one's aim? Instructions are mostly very simple but our minds make them complicated. For example how simple is the requirement for mantra meditation: in a spirit of devotion or surrender, just repeat to yourself a single word or syllable. The mind (or ego) is always eager to extend its goals. So, without being very conscious of the fact one may, in addition to the instructions, be harbouring a secret wish to get to that place where one imagines Atman to be hiding. Any effort of this kind, alas, will be in vain since Atman is neither available to be 'met' or 'experienced' simply because Atman is not an object. Atman is your own Self, subject, and as such omnipresent.

On an early visit to India one of the party from Colet asked; 'Is the first thing then to find through meditation one's own individual Atman'. The reply was simple and practical, but perhaps for that very reason is easily misunderstood: 'There is no search for knowledge in meditation. Purity and stillness is the first thing in meditation. When that is achieved it is possible to see the Truth about Atman.'

So conditioned is the mind to objectify Atman one can hear this many times but still fall into the same trap of looking for that ultimate result. As far as effort is concerned, when too much ego is present one is inclined to try to force one's way. Meditation then becomes a strained activity and consequently one blocks one's own progress; 'I want' becomes 'I block'.

This was the dilemma for Sonu, a young follower of the Buddha. The soles of Sonu's feet were so soft, we are told, that hairs even grew on them. In spite of this his attitude to discipline was hard. Striving for progress Sonu walked up and down so much his delicate feet blistered and the walk was soon covered in blood. No one took much notice however except the Buddha who felt compassion and asked;

'Were you a good lute player Sonu when you were a layman'?

'Yes Lord', Sonu replied.

'When the strings of your lute were too taut did your lute sound well'?

'No Lord' was the reply.

'When the strings of your lute were too slack did your lute sound well'?

Again the answer was no.

'When the strings of your lute were neither too taut nor too slack, but evenly tuned, did your lute respond well then'?

'Yes Lord.'

'Similarly Sonu, making too much effort leads to agitation, and too little effort to slackness. Therefore work for well balanced energy'.

'Yes Lord,' Sonu replied.

Questions.

Do your efforts tend more towards tautness or slackness?

Do you alternate between the two?

Are you aware of the changing nature of effort during the course of an activity, or across the board? If so describe it.

M.R.

