

TOWARDS A PRACTICE

PART 1. 'RULES'

What are we to make of Sanatan Dharma? How do we apply it in our own lives? The Shankaracharya said:

It is not at all necessary to embrace our Sanatan Dharma. Every religion contains Sanatan Dharma. If everyone follows his own religion truthfully he would certainly be following Sanatan Dharma. It is the basis of all religions and their centre. There is no need to change anybody's present Religion. [22.10.62]

Many of us do not have a 'religion' in that sense, but there are some basic precepts about right living in the Gospels which have become embedded in our Western culture so it is worth pursuing their study.

The basis of Christian morality and of 'how to be' is found chiefly in Matthew Chapters 5-7, the so-called Sermon on the Mount'. The exposition has a remarkable ring-like structure with the Lord's Prayer at the half-way point¹. The sequence proceeds under the following headings:

- (A) the initial scene, retreat from the crowds
- (B) the kingdom of God; the Beatitudes
- (C) the law and the prophets
- (D) antitheses (you have heard it said...but I say unto you...)
- (E) Lord's Prayer
- (D) antitheses
- (C) the law and the prophets
- (B) the kingdom of God
- (A) the final scene, rejoining the crowds

But the two halves are different: the first half leads the reader towards the experience of God and the second half shows the path in the newly revealed world.

The first half of the ring is more concerned with the inner journey, and there are elements that correspond to Sanatan Dharma inner precepts: purity; meekness; poverty of spirit (= lack of ego?); hunger after 'righteousness'; search for the spiritual rather than the physical.

Then the second half deals more with the relation to the outer world: not to judge, so that you may not be judged; good behaviour - 'turning the other cheek'; mercy; loving your enemies; letting your light shine before men.

The final statement on the rule of the law and the prophets, the golden rule, is succinct:

Do to others as you would have them do to you.

But the interpretation of the Gospel text is quite hard work, and as Dr Roles remarked: "Understanding the word 'Sanatan Dharma' brings the whole meaning of the Christian Gospels into line" (FCR letter 19.1.82). Perhaps he meant by this that the many strands of teaching in the Gospels allow for many interpretations, and the principles of Sanatan

¹ Matthew 1-7, Hermeneia. Ulrich Luz. Fortress Press, 2007.

Dharma help to tease out an inner meaning. So here are the first 8 Beatitudes: what is their inner meaning?

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

Blessed are those who hunger after righteousness, for they will be filled.

Blessed are the merciful, for they receive mercy.

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

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Ouspensky was dismissive of ordinary morality, which he regarded as subjective and dependent on the particular society in which it operates, but scrupulous about right behaviour. He insisted on a high standard of conduct and there were 'Rules', conditional on joining the work, such as: not speaking about the work to anyone outside; not holding social activities for a mixture of work acquaintances and others; not acknowledging work acquaintances encountered in outside life; and so on.

As individual development became apparent, more and subtler 'rules' were added until the work came to bear upon almost every waking moment. At the same time the elementary 'rules' could be allowed to become more flexible.

It is difficult for us to understand, from the relaxed and tolerant atmosphere which we take for granted today, how intensely seriously 'the work' was regarded 50 and more years ago. Not serious in the sense of dull or humourless but as a matter almost of life or death. Today, in a very different climate and culture we may wonder how to create a similar intensity for ourselves so as to make our own knowledge practical.

Apart from these 'Rules', what else was the practice that Ouspensky's students followed (and some of us still follow)? Chief in the practice was 'self-remembering', and indeed the main function of the 'Rules' was to make self-remembering possible and to interrupt mechanical behaviour by making it observable. We need to understand what was really meant by self-remembering and this will be the subject of the next paper.

Another part of the practice was to try 'not to express negative emotion'. At a higher level emotion is not polarised into negative and positive, it becomes quite another phenomenon. By not expressing negative emotion we save the energy for this new possibility. Not expressing negative emotions means knowing in the moment of feeling them that we want something else much more. The memory of the real Self, and how we should behave if we were indeed in that presence, guides our behaviour and allows the energy of the negative feeling to be redirected into quite a different field.

Then there was 'external considering': putting oneself in someone else's place, understanding them, and acting accordingly. Perhaps this is the key to 'doing to others as you would have them do to you.'

The next few weeks present an opportunity to examine our individual practice and to make it more intensive.

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