

A TEACHING FOR THE 21ST CENTURY

Intensity

Whatever the path, it is the intensity of the pursuit that impresses in the Bhagavad Gita, and indeed in Shankara and in Ramanuja. Even in the school of Ramana Maharshi, which adopts the simplest version of Advaita, the pursuit of the Self is full-time, 'full-on'.

The path we follow recognises that imperfections come between us and the Param-Atman. Meditation is our chief weapon; it is supposed to be so powerful, to generate so much Sattva, that the imperfections are burned off. If we are not being successful in this, it is perhaps because we do not take a systematic approach.

Something of the intensity of application that is called for is apparent in one of Dick Guyatt's audiences with HH:

RG. May we start with some questions from people in London, which are mostly about Meditation? As I said yesterday many people feel that the practice must be taken further, they feel 'stuck' and some feel the need for a new start.

HH. In relation to the feeling of being stuck with the activity of meditation and the subsequent desire to begin afresh, one should understand the reasons for such feelings and desires. All activities have physical involvement but command and impetus is given only by the mind. If one gets stuck in any activity the cause is that the mind has got stuck and therefore the importance is minimised. One need not feel frustrated and wish to begin afresh, for meditation does not work like that. One should begin from the same point where one feels stuck.

To rekindle these particles of reverence and vigour one needs prayer. The prayer should praise the glory of the Atman and Param-Atman while putting worldly attractions on the level they really deserve. One must surrender oneself; remind oneself of the early blissful moments, pay less importance to worldly achievements and request the Atman to help. The particles responsible for sloth or complacency will be purged of their effects and one will find the original enthusiasm and vigour will return once again to help unstick the situation. Accept the situation as it is and apply sincere prayers without looking for quick results. The path will be unlocked and progress will be definite. Importance given to the qualities associated with the spiritual world or the divine world initiates a rational process of correction in the mental set up and this will release what seems to be stuck.

The decision to get unstuck has to be made by one's own Buddhi, with prayers, to pick up meditation with enthusiasm and vigour, the loss of which has almost stifled the act of meditation. The impediments and Viksepas of the mind will be dissolved if one has a prayer from the heart to do so. A new start is no answer to this problem. [*Record* 18.4.88]

More generally, whether the path is devotional or through knowledge of the Self, it seems to narrow down at some point where the Atman, the Absolute, has to be faced. One may shrink from approaching the Atman, but it is more a question of acknowledgement than conversion.

*

What about the teaching that is needed to support an intense practice? The teaching must be different for newcomers and for those further along the path, and indeed it seems obvious that it should divide into three streams: for newcomers, for those who have been studying the ideas for some years, and for those who are further along the path. ‘Teaching’ is used here partly in the narrow sense of something that can be structured: for example, the order in which ideas are taught. But there is also the question of interpretation (students of theology will be familiar with ‘exegesis’ and ‘hermeneutics’).

As for the teaching for those who know the ideas as well as anyone, one attitude is that they mostly need a *satsang* in which the teaching component is a refresher, an accompaniment to a devotional ceremony. But one suspects that what they most need is help on the final stretch of the path from a teacher who knows the way.

Teaching for the middle stream of people could be very exciting; this is the place to try out new approaches – for example, combining or contrasting the System and Advaita; new interpretation – for example through studies of the Vedas and science; in-depth investigation. We must return to this later and give some thought to what new directions could and should be pursued, but for now suggestions are welcome.

In thinking about how to teach new people it is difficult to be objective. What we have suits us, but that is not to say that it suits a new generation. It is like the anthropic principle. We live in a universe which is such that we are here. We have a teaching which is such that we are still here. There are other universes, other ways of teaching, other people to be taught.

Times change. There are now more ideas more generally available and consequently less valued. On the one hand it is a dumbed-down society, individualistic, ego-ridden. On the other hand it is open, interested, concerned. On the basis of a very limited experience in teaching new groups, there seems to be less enthusiasm for new ideas (perhaps because they do not seem to be so new), more of a craving for experience. Sharing experiences, doing exercises, approaching the Self, shared silence, all produce astonishing responses. But there is little solid connection with our teachings about psychology and the universe, and that necessitates a very serious re-appraisal of what and how we teach. Perhaps we should take a lead from the teaching on ‘three caskets of knowledge’, which may also relate to the three streams of teaching referred to earlier.

But some things do not change; as Herman Hupfeld wrote and Dooley Wilson memorably sang:

And when two lovers woo
They still say, “I love you.”
On that you can rely
No matter what the future brings
As time goes by.

The same perennial feelings are found in everyone who is starting to search: something has been lost, something needs to be understood, something has been experienced. Maybe that is the starting point.

* * *