

From The Small To The Big

After the *Mahabharata* War, Vidura was trying to give solace to the grieving father of Kauravas, Dhritarashtra, by discussing some inevitable facts of life. In course of that discussion he said:

*Sarve kshayāntā nichayāh patanātā samuchchhrayāh /
Samyogā viprayogāntā maranāntam cha jeevitam.*

All accumulated wealth gets attenuated in course of time, all great waves necessarily fall, all unions end in separation, and death is the destiny of life.

We shall readily agree – at least those of us who have gained a bit of experience. Yet we do not realize it. We cling to the small and transient things of life. We forget the facts we are uncomfortable with. We want to live for ever. We hope all joy and only joy will be ours – ours for ever. But time and tide wait for none, as the old adage goes.

Day by day our desires go on increasing in strength and count. The more we satisfy a desire, the more it gets fortified and runs riot for more and more satisfaction. There is hardly a better example of this than the legend of Yayāti. After a whole life of enjoyment, as he grew old and unable to enjoy the world any more, he developed extreme desires for more enjoyment. So, one of his sons gave him his youth, so the story goes, and Yayāti again jumped into the world of enjoyments. Finally he realized that it was impossible to satisfy desires. They go on increasing with each bit of enjoyment, like the hungry fire that glows all the more, as more oblation is offered to it. He said:

*Na jātu kāmāh kāmānāmupabhogena shāmyati /
Havishā krishnavartmeva bhuya evābhivardhate.*

What is the result of such pursuits? It leaves us jaded and worn out. Poet king Bhartrihari described the scenario with his characteristic clarity:

*Kālo na yāto vayameva yātāh /
Trishnā na jeernā vayameva jeernāh.*

– Time does not go away, but we do. Desires are not weakened, but we are. What a shocking state of things! Are we not able to change it? The body comes and goes, but the life in between can become a glory, and to make it possible we have to be serious about moving to the bigger concepts and feelings of life.

Here desire means selfish desire. It is the willpower directed towards the little self that one refers to as ‘I’. Selfish desires are the prime movers of almost all of our actions, so long as we are self-centred. We cannot but love the self most, but our concept of the self makes all the difference in our life. The more this little ‘I’ vanishes into wider concepts of the self and the more we feel that *the same self resides in all*, the more our willpower naturally gets diverted to the wellbeing of all. Conversely, the more we concern ourselves with the good of others, the more we are away from this little ego. This expansion is the true sign of life. Swami Vivekananda put it into an equation, as it were, ‘What is life but growth, i.e. expansion, i.e. love?’

He defined the real man thus: 'Man is an infinite circle whose circumference is nowhere, but the centre is located in one spot.' So the 'circle' of his existence encompasses all, yet he retains his separate identity 'in one spot'. God, he said, 'is an infinite circle whose circumference is nowhere, but whose centre is everywhere.' When he can identify himself with every 'spot', with every being, he is God.

So, at one end of the spectrum, there is the brute-man who identifies himself with the small body-mind complex, spends his life in pursuit of selfish desires, and thus gets worn out, and life looks like a horrible nightmare. At the other end is the God-man, who identifies himself with all, who is completely selfless. In between the two is the 'man' of various grades of unselfishness. 'Religion is the idea which is raising the brute unto man and man unto God', said he. To begin with, we may aim at approaching proper manhood.

Too much of selfish desires take us away from manhood. They make us forget our real stature. They make the mind impure. One of the ways suggested by Patanjali, and later expounded by Vivekananda, to make the mind pure is the four practices: *maitri* (friendship to all), *karunā* (compassion for the distressed), *muditā* (happiness with strength-giving things), and *upekshā* (indifference to weakening things). The Buddha said in what came to be known as *Mettā Sutta* in Pali:

Even as a mother protects with her life
Her child, her only child,
So with a boundless heart
Should one cherish all beings:
Radiating kindness over the entire world
Spreading upwards to the skies,
And downwards to the depths;
Onwards and unbounded...

He went on to say that 'the pure-hearted one having clarity of vision' will be 'freed from all sense desires'. Let us at least try to take the first steps. Remember the words of Vivekananda, who was likened to the Buddha by many of his contemporaries, 'This life is short, the vanities of the world are transient, but they alone live who live for others, the rest are more dead than alive.'