

## **Root Out Egotism**

One day, when Jesus was passing through Galilee with his twelve disciples, the latter were arguing among themselves about who was the greatest of them. On reaching their destination, Jesus ‘sat down and called them around him and said, “Anyone wanting to be the greatest must be the least – the servant of all.” ’

Man, with a boasted ego, wants to be above others. He likes to think, I am superior to others in this or that respect, and I must be recognized as such by others. In the words of Robert Browning, ‘I confess an itch for the praise of fools – that’s Vanity.’ We seek pleasure in vanity. If I am admonished for some reason even by the best well-wisher, I am hurt and perhaps I retaliate angrily. When I am praised a little by any Tom, Dick or Harry, I feel very happy. My mind undulates in a sweet breeze, as it were, when I see my name or photograph printed in a publication, or if I am called upon to speak or sing from the dais. With a feeling heart some of us start working for others. Then, as soon as a little appreciation comes, the motivation for work is likely to turn to ego-satisfaction. Remember what Swami Vivekananda said: ‘In everything we do, the serpent ego is rising up.’ Like any habit left uncontrolled, it keeps on growing.

What is the problem there? It distorts our thinking, our analysis and decision-making, our very motive behind work. And I start looking down upon others, thus alienating them. Yet I ask for their whole-hearted approval of my superiority. Vanity and alienation bring forth fears of loss, fears of rivals, envy, hate, and all meanness. Thus organized social actions so often fall through.

Our sense of identity is linked to broader groups like our family, class, community, nation, etc. These groups also develop superiority-inferiority complex of various shades in the same way. The individuals’ narrowness thrives in collective parochialism. Only the nominative, ‘I’, is replaced with ‘we’. We have witnessed the destructive power of this process in the World Wars and the Cold War of the last century. The hegemonic tendencies and megalomania of today’s superpowers still bear glaring testimony to it.

Not that we have to shun ego altogether. No conscious thought or action is possible without the sense of agency or doer or ‘I’, generally called ego. The problem starts when its importance in our thinking takes such proportions as to become excessive and destructive. That is egotism. Artificial humility that conceals egotism is no solution. The constructive use of ego is to have self-esteem. It is the opposite of self-conceit, though their outward expressions may sometimes look similar. Proper self-esteem brings in its train a sense of esteem for others as well. For the truth is: there is something good in me and in others also. I can be great, and all others too can be great. So, I must work for my own development and for others also. Such thoughts bring forth much strength, love, and the capacity for united action. We have to become flexible to accept our weaknesses and, at the same time, determined to remove them. In case of groups also, such an outlook will bring about a constructive environment of mutual respect. Families and communities will work together for a better society. Each nation will contribute her best in a great harmony of the comity of nations. Friendship and peace will prevail.

The true spirit is: All of us have great possibilities, and we are essentially one. The Upanishad says:

*Eko devah sarva-bhuteshu gudah sarva-vyāpi sarva-bhutāntarātmā  
Karmādhya ksha sarva-bhutādhivāasah sākshi chetā kevalo nirgunashcha.*

–One and the same divinity is present in all beings and everywhere as the soul of all. It presides over all work (of the instruments called the body and mind) as the only conscious witness. Yet It is also beyond all this.

We have forgotten the real glory of our being. We have missed the fact that ‘the vanities of the world are transient’. One is reminded of the lament of Isabella in a drama of Shakespeare:

‘... But man, proud man,  
Dress’d in a little brief authority,  
Most ignorant of what he’s most assur’d –  
His glassy essence – like an angry ape,  
Plays such fantastic tricks before high heaven  
As make the angels weep...’

Swami Vivekananda called it self-hypnotism. Carl Jung said, ‘Through pride we are deceiving ourselves. But deep down below the surface of the average conscience a still, small voice says to us, something is out of tune.’ Do we listen to that voice within? Then, to bring back the right tune, let us listen to Swamiji’s advice: ‘Don’t allow egoism to enter your minds, and let love never depart from your hearts. What destruction can touch you? Fear not.’