

The Psychological Verities in Spiritual Life

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THE study of mind and the nature of consciousness was carried on in India and satisfactory solutions had been *arrived at when civilisation had not yet dawned* on European soil. In the modern age when we find reputed scholars giving out opinions similar to, or approximating, the truths discovered by Patañjali and other psychologists of ancient India, we cannot but admire the scientific precision in which studies in such a subtle subject as psychology, were made by our forefathers.

Charles Baudouin in his book “Suggestion and Auto-suggestion” has the following words of admiration: ‘As one of the curiosities of history and further *as a lesson in humility* (the *italics* are ours) we may point out that the states just described... are described with considerable psychological acumen, though not of course in modern psychological terminology, in the precepts by which for centuries past the Yogis of Hindustan have been accustomed to attain self-mastery.” Again, in his concluding paragraph, he makes another beautiful statement, too well appreciated in India. He says: “The work of modern science is a great achievement, but is incomplete. For its completion a certain change is required both in outlook and method.” As the philosopher Spir has well put it,

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'We are masters of nature externally alone, inwardly we are nature's slaves!' Studying only too well all that surrounds us, we have forgotten our own personality, and now, or never is the moment when we must put into practice the maxim of Thales, 'Know Thyself'. The doctrine of the New Nancy School in conjunction with other doctrines of contemporary psychologists enables us to make a great advance in this knowledge."

To understand the contribution of contemporary psychologists towards the knowledge of our own selves, we have to study the history of the findings made by different scholars in these years. Of these scholars we can mainly speak of three schools of opinion. Their teachings, different though they may be in their pursuits, only supplement one another.

First of all, we have to consider the Freudian school of psychologists. Freud is a doctor by profession who unwittingly embarked on a new sphere of knowledge in diagnosing his patients. The results of his experiments have made it possible for a genetic theory of mind to be gradually built up. Freud is mainly a clinical psychologist. "In his efforts to ascertain the significance and therefore the genesis of neurotic symptoms, he made the remarkable and quite unexpected discovery that these have a remarkable psychological meaning and purpose, one, however, that is totally unknown to the patient... He found that the patient opposed a dynamic resistance to the revealing of his previously unconscious thought and Freud concluded that the force thus manifesting itself outwardly was the same one that had hitherto prevented the patient from becoming aware of these thoughts. To the force operative in the latter (inward) direction he gives the name of repression." For tracing the unconscious thought Freud used a

technique known as *psycho-analysis*. As a result, he found himself in a region of mind which was quite different in character from the conscious mind. This sphere of mind he calls the “*unconscious*”. The nature of this buried stratum of mind next engaged his attention and he was able “to detect the contribution made by the unconscious to various modes of mental activity.”

Mental life is summarised by Freud under two principles: (1) the pleasure principle, and (2) the reality principle. The former represents the primary original form of mental activity and is characteristic of the earliest stages of human development. In its primary attributes we find a tendency to avoid pain and disagreeableness and a never-ceasing demand for immediate gratification of various desires—of a distinctly primitive and lowly order. This principle is essentially anti-social. But in the *reality principle* we find the attempts made by the ego to adapt itself to the exigencies of the real world outside. In other words, the *reality-principle* checks the animal impulse in man by social and ethical considerations. These two principles are always in conflict. Man becomes ethically perfected and advances socially as a civilised being only when he is able to change the under-currents of his animal nature into very healthy humanitarian channels.

Freud asserted that man is merely a sexual being and all his actions can be explained by this nature alone. This created a wave of excitement against the author who wanted to explain the richest and noblest sentiments of man by 'the reproach of the basest naturalism'. “To present religion, morality, art and the like as sublimated sexuality would be as lacking in taste as to characterise the execution of Beethoven's violin concerto as a refined form of the vibration of catgut.”

In this connection we have to remind our readers that Freud used the word “sex” in a sense quite different from what we ordinarily mean by it. A lack of understanding regarding the true implication of the term has caused all this brunt of opposition. In India we need not be astounded at this discovery. In the Vedas it is declared that desire first arose in the mind of the Creator. He proclaimed “*Ekoham, bahusyam*,” “I am one, let Me be many”. The whole universe is projected from the mind of the Creator because of this impulse. This process of bifurcation goes on *ad infinitum* and this is called evolution. The unconditioned appears as the conditioned, the path of *Pravrttti Marga*. At the same time, this order can be reverted; if this impulse is checked and transmuted into a higher energy, that will carry us back to the centre. The energy that finds expression in diversity is the same energy that would achieve unity. The former, Freud calls the sex energy. If he had stated that the primitive passions of man would never change their colour, in spite of all adjustments made by the *reality-principle* to accommodate them for social purposes, then there would be some appropriateness in the charges levelled at him. But when he states that man can sublimate elementary emotions, primitive and anti-social in character, to high levels of mental achievements, he unconsciously admits that man is also a spiritual being. Freud being a doctor of medicine, his main concern was his neurotic patients in whom he discovered that emotions undergoing inhibition had found outlets of expression through diseases. By the technique of psycho-analysis, he found a way to open up the buried stratum of the mind in which unrealised emotions had undergone repression. Such a process alleviated the illness.

All the facts of the mental world cannot solely be explained as Freud has done. In the make-up of our minds, we have to consider not only the emotional aspects, but also the cognitive and the volitional. As on *the* conscious plane, emotion, cognition and volition determine the course of thought and action, so also, in all the subconscious or unconscious workings of the mind, the counterparts of these are equally visible. The work of intellect is accomplished by instinct and intuition. Instincts can be traced in the primitive tastes of man realised in dreams. Intuition is seen in the revelations that flash on the conscious mind which cannot be explained away by intelligence or instinct. The French philosopher Bergson understood the existence of the intuitional faculty in man. The Vedantic philosophy posits another sphere called the superconscious and Bergson's intuition touches but the fringe of it. Only when all the other different *purdahs* [restrictions] of the mind are removed, can we gain access to this region. The emotions have to be sublimated; the instincts purified. There must be, to use a Sanskrit phrase, *Bhava-suddhi*, to reach this terminus of knowledge.

The work of volition is equally noticeable in the subconscious regions of the mind. But the character of this volition undergoes a change when it functions in the lower strata of the mind. The word '*volition*' in French is called '*vouloir*'. Though sometimes meaning will, this word often means wish. The process of wish is on the road to volition, but has not reached it. In that transformation from wishing to willing, to volition, the imagination is lighted up and intensified by some disturbing emotion, slips as it were, gets the lead and prevents the wish becoming will. Imagination then wins. So if an idea is planted in the mind which will be worked out by

the force of imagination when the wish is strong for the fulfilment of that idea, that idea will be realised and the wish fulfilled, provided there is not the counteracting force of any opposite idea. The reality of this theory as a workable hypothesis was experimented upon by M. Coué at Nancy. He has ushered in a new epoch in the wonder-world of psychological realities, by the miraculous cures effected in patients who sought his advice, and who according to him, cured themselves, by practising the theory of auto-suggestion he has propounded. Before his time, Nancy was already the seat of another school of psychotherapy. From his predecessors, Coué learnt that even in the so-called hypnotic state, the condition was brought about really through the influence of the imagination of the patients upon themselves. Baudouin is the first great theoretical exponent of Coué's teachings. There are three novel features in the teachings of the New Nancy School:

I. In hypnotic phenomena, it is not the suggestion given out by the operator that is the essential force in working it out; but the real cause for success lies in the subject himself. The suggestion thrown out by the operator, has to be accepted by the subject and become a real auto-suggestion. As a corollary, the chief advantages of psycho-therapeutic cure can be got without outside suggestion and without even producing a hypnotic state. Thus for auto-suggestion, the subject can produce a state of passivity by himself, and freed from any state of tension of body or mind, he can present to himself the idea he wants to place before his mind. Thereby the subject can transform his whole outlook on life.

II. Coué lays great stress on his law of the reversed effort. The operation of this law is the cause of the failure of our at-

tempts. “It means that so long as the imagination is adverse, so long as a counter-suggestion is at work, the effort of the conscious will acts by contraries. We must think or imagine rightly before we can will rightly. In a word, our formula must not be 'who wills can', but 'who thinks can', or 'who imagines can'.”

III. The most significant phenomena occur in the domain of the sub-conscious. The new powers which auto-suggestion offers to mankind are based upon the acquirement of a reflective control of the operations of the sub-conscious. Therein the teachings of the New Nancy School are at one with the findings of the Freudian school of psychologists.

Coué has shown to the world the practical value of his teachings. The sensation created by the system of cures he recommended, made the common people look up to him as a worker of miracle, a title which he disclaims totally. He made people turn to themselves for help in all mental and bodily ailments. He has held out the value of faith and shown how in man lies the solution of all the mysteries that confound him. The effects of his experiments have a far-reaching value. It is creating a revolution in the minds of many. The laws of criminology, the principles of education, theories of medicine and cure, and the growth of social institutions, have to be re-interpreted in the light of these new discoveries of the modern schools of psychology. In an understanding of the workings of the sub-conscious and its education we have the key for the moulding of the future. In the sub-conscious is capitulated the cultural history of mankind. In studying the actions and motives of man we must know that the whole contents of his sub-conscious mind equally contribute in directing their course. As a man is most powerfully in-

fluenced by his external environment, so also, his internal world must be strongly reckoned with in estimating the make-up of his character.

Psycho-analysis is the weapon wherewith to dig into the different layers of the mind, and suggestion and auto-suggestion are the seeds to be implanted therein, and by understanding properly the mechanism of character-formation, it is no wonder that we shall be able to convert this human life from a vale of sorrows into an eternal pleasure-garden.

Suggestion may be defined as the acceptance of an idea by the mind, especially by the so-called sub-conscious (unconscious) independently of adequate logical grounds for such acceptance. “It is an instance of idea-motor action. The idea is placed before the mind, rather aroused vividly in the mind when the mind is in a state where opposing and conflicting ideas have no chance of making themselves felt, whereupon this implanted idea tends to realise itself.” So the things necessary for working out suggestion are a passive state in the subject—muscular as well as sensory—together with concentration upon the idea. One must put oneself into “a state of contentment,” a state of concentration without effort. “It is essential,” Baudouin says, “that the attention should remain spontaneously immobilised. This is what happens when one tells the beads.” The religious aspirant does the same thing. The whole course of his *sadhana* (spiritual practices) is to de-hypnotise himself. All along he has been thinking himself to be finite matter bound by all limitations. He has to awaken permanently the consciousness that he is the Atman, ever free, ever perfect. For that, he has a regulated course of practices laid down in the Ashtanga Yoga. Baudouin is astonished at the teachings of the Hindu Yogis,

for he has the following: “The two states, whose acquirement must be the novice's first aim are known as *Pratyahara* (mental examination) and *Dharana* (concentration of mind upon a thought).” He then quotes from a treatise on Yoga. He says: “As for auto-suggestion we encounter it in Yoga but tinged with mysticism. The sacred word 'Aum' is repeated a myriad times, the three sounds A-U-M being well separated and uttered in the respective notes do-mi-sol. This, we are told, produces a mental transformation in the subject, which is preparatory to great spiritual progress.”

For suggestion and auto-suggestion to work effectively, genuine faith has to be developed. If the subject can overcome all obsessive fears and feel that the springs of success in life are in himself, then he becomes a fit candidate to practise the methods which Coué recommends. Or if he believes in God and the ever-merciful nature of a benign Providence, then any stand he may take on the basis of this belief will work miracles. Dr. Pfister, while estimating the value of religion, says: “I confess that the beauty of a healthy, ethically pure piety has only become overwhelmingly clear to me.” At present it is the therapeutic value of the discoveries of the New Nancy School that has attracted the attention of the world. These discoveries have also a far-reaching effect upon the development of spiritual life.

The difficulties of fashioning one's life on a spiritual basis are too numerous to be mentioned. Our scriptures have said that it is as difficult to attempt this task as to walk on the edge of a sharp razor. Yet the game has not been given up and history is not wanting in examples of men who have truly lived the life of holiness and spirituality. The discoveries of the modern schools of psychology only help us in understand-

ing ourselves more, to steer ourselves clear of the cataracts and currents of life that often wreck our hopes and make us despair of the Truth.

We have noted that the emotional, cognitive and volitional functions at the mind are visible in the workings of the sub-conscious mind. The blessed feeling that we must live the life spiritual often comes to many of us; but we are deterred from our path mainly because our sub-conscious self has not properly responded to the call of the spirit. So the aspirant after spiritual life has to educate and refine his sub-conscious mind. All the primitive feelings of man have not hit off their colour and this can be easily seen from the ideas that crop up when the sub-conscious is tapped. In the phrasology of Freud, the war between the pleasure principle and the reality principle is very intense. As a result, most of our emotions undergo “repression”. They lie in wait in some form or other in the ambushes of our minds and take us often unawares. These emotions have to be sublimated. In the degree a man is able to sublimate his baser passions into finer emotions lies his success in the spiritual life. If he is unsuccessful, his life will be a struggle in the darkness. All the repressions have to be cleared up. And the best way for doing it is by active work. There should not be a lop-sided development in the aspirant. He must try to educate his emotional, cognitive and volitional faculties as best as he can without starving anyone of them for want of sufficient exercise.

Very often the aspirant, once beaming with hope and strength, turns out into an abject, neurasthenic, crazy, passionate and eccentric person, because he has disregarded some of the psychological verities of spiritual life. The aspirant is unable to meet the oppositions from his lower self. The

most powerful demand on him is made by the sex impulse and on the success of the aspirant in transmuting this impulse into a higher energy depends his success in the spiritual life. Extraordinary vigilance and intense activity are demanded from the aspirant, for the enemy comes to him in different forms. He must be able to find out the real feeling behind all the confusing emotions he is at times a prey to. Once a disciple of Sri Ramakrishna went to him and in his youthful enthusiasm to lead the spiritual life, requested the Master to bless him that he may be successful in killing his passions. But Sri Ramakrishna affectionately told him, “My boy, increase them a thousand-fold, but only change their direction God-wards.” The same energy that works as the sex impulse is transformed into divine impulse. We have to realise this secret. The demands made on us by the sex impulse are often exacting and the aspirant must be sufficiently fortified not to succumb to them, nor allow them to undergo inhibition in the lower layers of the mind. Hence it is that a life of activity is required. A monk’s life in the cloister, a life of inaction, before one is fit for it, accounts for the miserable failure of many aspirants. The great Swami Vivekananda has laid out a plan of action for his disciples in which he recommends a harmonious application of all our mental faculties for the development of our spiritual life. So in the beginning, the aspirant must work consciously to find out ways of sublimating his emotions. If one applies oneself to a life of intense work, of service to one’s fellow men, one gets ample opportunities to sublimate one’s emotions. These tendencies in one’s mind are the seeds of one’s Karma. These can well be worked out by *service*. It is a fact that they must find a way out. In serving our fellow men and country with the idea that they are but expressions of the Great Virat, we not only find

outlets for our emotions, but also raise ourselves in the spiritual plane. But on the other hand, if we do not allow these emotions to be sublimated, the force of “repression” will so barricade our spiritual life that ere long we shall have to vegetate all our lives with our ideals unrealised. These repressed emotions will give rise to all kinds of mental, moral and physical illness, that will baffle the attempts of all doctors. It will then be our Karma to suffer perpetual illness and disease, the expressions on the physical plane, according to Freud, of these repressed emotions. The Lord we have to serve is a jealous God and if we do not serve Him in His creatures, we shall have to pay the penalty in the form of illness and disease.

One of the primary requisites for the aspirant in **spiritual** life is to get the blessing of a Teacher, a Guru, one who has realised God. The Guru tests the earnestness of the student by noting the tendencies of his nature. He then prescribes to him a course of action. The student has only to follow this to enable him to achieve the results. By personal service to the master and by constantly living with him a mental '*rapport*' is established between the Guru and his chela. When the mind of the chela is sufficiently fertilised by faith in the Reality, the teacher plants the seed of spirituality in his mind. This instruction is generally done in India in an imposing and sublime manner. With prayers, fasts and vigils the disciple awaits the appointed hour when the man of realisation will impart the highest truth to his disciple. The student was being tested by the master for many days or even months and years, for he must be 'a proper candidate. His attention must be keenly riveted *spontaneously* on the Ideal; for, then only will his sub-conscious self accept his choice of the life-ideal.

And when the Guru gives the *Upadesh*, they become sacred words to the student, the precious possession of his life. This ceremony ever coveted by all spiritual aspirants is known as the “*Deeksha*”, the imparting of the spiritual power. If the master is a gigantic personality, no word or sign is required for the transmission of this power. He shall be able to do it by a mere wish, a touch.

After this ceremony is over, the student is to meditate on the teachings till he becomes one with them. Some of the difficulties he has to meet with we have mentioned already. If the progress is slow, or if there are periods of darkness, called by mystics “the Dark Night of the soul”, the aspirant should subject his mind to severe analysis, *Vichara*. Thereby he shall be able to find out the obstacles, the various 'complexes' of his mind that block his path, Very often the *sadhana* is done with the help of the various *Bhavas* (devotional attitudes), mainly the five classical ones: Santa, Dasya, Sakhya, Vatsalya and Madhura. These *Bhavas* help the great ideal to blossom and flower by the force of an 'enveloping emotion'. The ideal has to be made vivid always before the mind's eye. If the mind thinks more of the obstacles, they become an obsession and by the working of the law of the reversed effort, our attempts will be frustrated. If we march on to the east, the west must fall off naturally from us. The positive ideal should be our beacon light and we have to progress on with that pole star to guide us.

Above all we have to avoid, in the words of Sri Ramakrishna, all thefts in the chamber of our own hearts. Very often we assume we are meditating on the ideal, but in reality we are only being duped by our own day-dreams that have no bearing at all on that ideal. In the sub-conscious mind a regu-

lar current of thought, in tune with our ideal, should be established permanently. When this is accomplished, the ideal of our life will come within the range of practical achievement and the very purpose of human existence will be achieved in that true resurrection of the spirit of man from all the tabernacles of thought and form that constitute this material world.

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