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VEDĀNTA PHILOSOPHY

LECTURE BY

SWĀMI ABHEDĀNANDA

ON

DIVINE COMMUNION

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"He whose heart is unattached to the objects of senses, and whose soul is fixed in Divine Communion with Brahman, attaineth to bliss everlasting."—*Bhagavad Gītā, Ch. V, 21.*

DIVINE COMMUNION.

DIVINE communion, according to the Christian belief, is most intimately related to that ritual which is known by various names, the Lord's Supper, the Eucharist, Sacrament or Mass. The general belief is that during the celebration of this ritual the souls of those who partake in this holy service commune with each other as well as with Jesus Christ, the Son of God. In Matthew we read: "And as they were eating, Jesus took bread and blessed it and brake it and gave it to the disciples and said, Take, eat; this is my body. And he took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them saying, Drink ye all of it; for this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins." Chap. xxvi, 26-28.

These words have given foundation to that memorial service called "Holy Communion," which was instituted by Jesus the Christ, and which has been practised by all the Christian nations for nearly 1900 years; but if we read the religious history of other nations we find that the eating of bread, or the body of God, and

the drinking of wine, or the blood of God, existed among pagan peoples many centuries before Christ was born, and was practised by the Greeks, Egyptians, Persians and the Hindus of the Vedic period.

Readers of the comparative history of religions know that the Eucharist is one of the oldest rites of antiquity. The Greeks called it the Eleusinian mystery. Rev. Robert Taylor said: "The Eleusinian mysteries were the most august of all the pagan ceremonies celebrated, more especially by the Athenians, every fifth year in honor of Ceres, the goddess of corn, who, in allegorical language, had given us her flesh to eat just as Bacchus, the god of wine, in like sense, had given us his blood to drink."

"Prodicus, a Greek sophist of the fifth century B.C., says that the ancients worshipped bread as Demeter (Ceres) and wine as Dionysus (Bacchus);" therefore when they ate the bread and drank the wine, after it had been consecrated, they were eating the flesh and drinking the blood of their deity. "The Eleusinian mysteries were accompanied by many religious rites and ceremonies expressive of the purity and self-denial of the worshipper, and were therefore considered to be an expiation of past sins." Throughout the whole ceremony the name of the Lord was repeated many times.

The ancient Egyptians annually celebrated the resurrection of Osiris, their Saviour and Lord, and commemorated his death by eating the bread and wine consecrated by the priest through many rites and ceremonies. The worshippers who partook of this holy

sacrament believed that the bread and wine became the veritable flesh and blood of their god Osiris.

In Persia, many centuries before the birth of Christ, the worshippers of Mithra, who, according to the Parsees, was the Mediator, Redeemer and Saviour of the world, took the sacrament of bread and wine with the same belief that the Christians do to-day. Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Renan and other scholars believe that the Christian Eucharist was an imitation of the Persian ceremony which was practised by the worshippers of Mithra from most ancient times. In India, among the ancient Vedic sacrifices, we find one of special importance for remission of sins. It was a sacrifice of cake and wine. Cake was called Purodâsha and wine was called Soma; this cake was made especially for this purpose, was round in shape, its top resembling the back of a tortoise. It was considered to be the symbol of the body of Prajâpati, the first-born Lord of all creatures, who sacrificed himself before creation for the good of all, and out of whose body the whole universe arose. The wine of the Soma plant is described in the Vedas as the liquor of immortality, the giver of life and strength, the water of life; it was called the nectar which purified the body and soul of all those who drank, and which conferred immortality upon them. The sacrificer in ancient times consecrated this cake, then cut it into pieces, and, chanting the name of the Lord, threw each of those pieces into the sacrificial fire; at the same time he poured consecrated wine into the fire. The remaining portions of the cake and wine were reverently

eaten by the assembled family. The sins of the past fortnight were confessed, repentance was expressed, forgiveness was asked, and when they drank the divine beverage they thought that they were in communion with the Heavenly King in spirit—that they were one with the Heavenly King and Father of the Universe. Every householder used to make this sacrifice at the end of each fortnight; husband and wife performed it together and ate the cake and drank the wine with the rest of the family. The rich and powerful employed the ordained priests to perform the sacrifice for them.

Thus we can see that this holy communion service was performed by the ancient nations for the expiation of their sins even centuries before Christ instituted it among his disciples; that ritual which is observed to-day by millions of Christians all over the world was performed long before the time of Christ by many nations who had never heard of Him. But the Hindus did not continue this practice; they gave it up when the Vedic seers began to grasp more abstract truths. Their truth-seeking minds could not rest contented with the sacrifices and ceremonials which were described in the Vedas; they gradually came to see that those sacrifices stood for something greater, and they tried to understand the spiritual significance; they searched for deeper knowledge of the mysteries of the universe; they struggled for the realization of the true nature of the soul and its relation to God, who was the objective Lord and Father of the universe. At that time they began to question whether or not God was objective and extra-cosmic; whether or not the soul

was created by God. Those seekers after Truth were gradually led beyond that old conception of an objective, personal God, who dwelt in heaven outside of nature. As they progressed higher and higher in spiritual researches and arrived at the Vedantic conception of God and the world, their meaning of the Divine communion became higher and more spiritual.

Here we should remember that as long as God is extra-cosmic, outside of nature, as long as He is far from us, so long there remains a vast gulf of separation between God and man. The more distant God is from us, the less chance there is for us to approach Him and come into direct communion with Him. Such being the conditions, the problem of Divine communion does not arise in the minds of the followers of a religion which makes God unapproachable, as we find to be the case in two of the great religions of the world, Judaism and Mahammedanism. These two religions believe in an extra-cosmic, objective, personal God, who is the all-powerful Creator of the world and of human souls.

In Judaism the conception of Jehovah is so transcendent, so objective, so strongly marked and so majestic, that there arose a vast sea of separation between Jehovah and the individual souls. The communion or approach of any individual to Him was considered to be almost an insult to the Deity. This difficulty which such a conception produced was understood and felt for the first time by the Alexandrian Jews, like Philo and his followers, who were influenced by the Greek philosophy; they tried to bridge over that sea of sep-

aration between God and man by accepting the Logos theory of the Greek philosophers.

The Logos is described in the writings of Philo as the only begotten son of God, the Father; it was considered to be the Mediator or bridge between God and the world, between the Creator and His creatures; the same Logos was afterwards identified with Jesus the Christ; and since that time the followers of Christ have believed that no one could come into close communion with God except through that especial Logos, or Word, or Mediator, or through Jesus the Christ. The orthodox Christians think that it is impossible for a human being to commune with the Divinity except through the only begotten Son, the Christ. They say that it is blasphemous even to think of the possibility of an individual soul approaching God without coming through Jesus; they have forgotten, however, that the expression of "*only begotten Son*" was first used for the Logos, which was universal, and not for any particular personality.

Do you know why the Christians say that it is impossible for any individual to approach God without coming through Christ? Because their conception of God is the same objective, majestic, transcendent and extra-cosmic being as Jehovah of the Jews, under the name of Father in Heaven. As long as this conception of the Father in Heaven remains extra-cosmic, so long such an idea will continue to prevail.

In Mahammedanism the conception of God is the same as that in Judaism. The Allah is the all-powerful, transcendent and personal God who dwells in

heaven, outside of the universe. Like Jehovah, Allah is to be feared rather than to be united with or approached or communed with. According to Mahammed, true religion lies in the complete submission to Allah's will, and nothing more. There is no possibility of a beatific communion with Allah in the religion of Mahammed. The modern Babists, who are but reformed Mahammedans, still maintain a similar conception of God; they believe in the same Allah, who is extra-cosmic, majestic and outside of the universe. The God of Mahammed lived in a heaven, and from that celestial abode commanded the universe; but the more philosophical class among Mahammedans went beyond this conception; they were known as the Sufis, and were almost like the Christian mystics of the middle ages. They were the mystics among the Mahammedans. They believed in a communion with God, and that that communion could be established through love in the state of ecstasy.

Although these Sufis believed that a human being could approach God, yet they did not accept the idea that a human soul could be one with Him. They were dualists; they believed that the individual soul could be god-like and a temporary union between the soul and God could be accomplished only through love. They did not believe in any other mediator; they even rejected Mahammed as the only prophet of God. The writings of the Sufis are full of Oriental metaphors which seem horrible to many of the practical, matter-of-fact Western minds. Even the mind of a great philosopher like Emerson could not understand the

metaphorical language of the God-intoxicated Sufi poet and philosopher, Hafiz. Those who have read the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam will understand how difficult it is to grasp the true meaning which underlies the metaphorical expressions of the Persian Sufis.

Sufism, which arose about 820 after Christ, was the result of the influence of the Vedanta Philosophy of India upon the dry Mahammedan conception of the objective, personal God or Allah. The peculiarity of Vedanta, on the contrary, lies in a conception of God which is not only objective; but both subjective and objective. He is not merely transcendent but immanent. God, according to the Vedanta is not only outside of nature but dwells in every particle and atom in nature; He is not only the soul of the universe, He is the soul of our souls. Although Vedanta does not object to the worship of an extra-cosmic, personal God, still it does not stop there as other religious systems have done. On the contrary, it says that a man may fear and worship God as the extra-cosmic being for some time, but when his spiritual eye is opened, and when he understands the true nature of the soul and its true relation to God, he begins to realize that God is both objective and subjective.

The soul, according to Vedanta, is not created by God out of any material which is outside of Himself, but it emanates from the spiritual essence of Divinity; consequently it is of the same substance and the same nature as God Himself. It is immaterial, immortal and unchangeable. God is not separate from the universe; there is no gulf of separation between God who

is infinite and all-pervading, and the human soul or the world; but He is like the Eternal background of the variegated colors and scenes of the panorama of the phenomenal world. He is like the spiritual canvas upon which are painted the pictures of human souls by the invisible hands of the Almighty Artist. He is the infinite source of all powers and forces which are manifested in the material and physical planes of the universe; He dwells within our souls.

Every individual soul is a part of the spiritual body of the God of Vedanta; He is nearer to our souls than are our bodies, nearer than our senses, our minds, our intellects; He is the essence of our existence and life. In Him we live and through Him we exist, consequently there is no need of any bridge, any mediator, between Him and us. The relation of the individual soul to God being naturally so close and so intimate, the Divine communion in Vedanta has a more spiritual meaning and a deeper significance than that of merely eating the flesh and drinking the blood of God. God has neither flesh nor blood. True communion with Divinity, according to Vedanta, does not come through any external relation to place, time or personality, but it comes to the soul when the innermost door of the soul is open to receive that blissful current of the Divine Spirit which rushes in with tremendous force. It comes when the depths of our hearts are flooded with the one sheet of the water of immortality, and when all the weeds of selfishness, hatred, jealousy, sectarianism and bigotry are washed away by the tremendous outrush of the current of that all-

loving omniscient Spirit; then rises on the horizon of the soul that self-effulgent sun of wisdom; the soft and benign rays of that eternal sun dispel the darkness of ignorance that had reigned there for ages, and illumine the heart with Divine light.

Divine communion comes at first like the reunion of two kindred spirits united by the everlasting bond of love, but who are apparently separated by the delusive power of forgetfulness. As a child who loves its mother, and knows nothing but that beloved mother, may forget her for the time being when its whole soul is fascinated with the toys of Christmas time; or as a young woman, charmed by jewels and beautiful garments, may forget her lover whom she adores, and considers the embodiment of all happiness; even so, the individual soul, bewitched by the objects of sense, may forget the true source of happiness, which is more intimately related to it than the mother is to the child or the lover to the beloved one. But, as the joy of the child when it is reunited to the beloved mother—as the joy which comes to the soul of that woman when she again remembers her lover—cannot be described by words, so that happiness which comes through the reunion of the soul with God is beyond the power of utterance. That happiness is not temporary; it is unbounded and everlasting. This reunion leads to a still higher realization of the spiritual oneness with God. At that time the soul regains its true nature, breaks through all barriers and walls of limitation and attains to perfect freedom and omniscience; from that time divine qualities begin to flow

through the soul. In that state all questions are solved, all doubts cease, all results of past actions are annulled and all the knots of desire that arise in the self-loving and self-seeking ignorant heart are torn asunder. After this realization there is no more struggle for the expiation of sins, no more crying for forgiveness, no more fear of punishment. The human soul is transfigured with Divine Spirit. This transfiguration, or perfect atonement, or at-one-ment with God, is the aim of divine communion.

Divine communion brings the attainment of God-consciousness; all other phases of consciousness which are manifested on the lower planes in daily life, merge into this supreme consciousness of the divine nature of the soul; it is called in Sanskrit, Samhâdhi; it is the state of God-consciousness; if any man or woman can reach this state for an instant even, then he or she destroys all effects of the sins which he or she may have committed during perhaps hundreds of previous incarnations.

No individual soul, whether virtuous or sinful, rich or poor, can ever become truly sinless and happy without coming into that state of God-consciousness. You may cry for help and pray for forgiveness day after day and night after night, may ask redemption from sins, but rest assured that he who will forgive sins is your own Self. Your own Divine nature alone can make you free from sins. You may call that Divine nature, God or Buddha or Christ, it is all the same; no one other than the Divine Self possesses the power of forgiving the sins of the individual ego. Remember that

all help that you have received has not come to you from the outside, but it has come from the very bottom of your own soul; you might have thought, through ignorance, that the forgiveness and help came from outside, but the time is sure to come when you will have to realize that all the help you have received in your life, or will receive in the future, is from within; that it is your own Divine Self that will help and forgive you, who, through ignorance and self-delusion, have committed many mistakes, and have played the part of a sinner.

The highest ideal of divine communion—that is, the attainment of God-consciousness—does not come through ceremony or ritual, nor by muttering passages from the Scriptures, nor by counting beads, nor by confessing sins to a priest, nor by worshipping the departed spirit of any holy man; these may be helpful to those whose souls have not awakened to spiritual truths, but God-consciousness comes through the realization of our true nature, which is eternally one with the pure, blissful and all-knowing Spirit Divine.

There are many paths that lead to such realization; each of these paths is described in Vedanta as Yoga, or the method of attaining this consciousness. Those who practise Yoga sincerely, keeping the attainment of divine communion and God-consciousness as the highest ideal, should not stop until it is acquired. Life is not worth living if we cannot become conscious of our Divine nature in this life. What good can be gained by living like slaves to passions and desires; what shall we gain for our souls by attiring our bodies

in rich raiment, or by living in beautiful mansions, or by filling high positions in the state or country? These may be of great value to those whose aim is not higher than the attainment of earthly comforts and pleasures of the body. How long will this body stay? Not more than five or six scores of years; but remember that the soul life is not confined to the life of the body; it is from eternity to eternity. What are you going to do for your souls?

Have you gained anything for the soul? The treasures of the earth do not enrich the soul and comforts of the body cannot long satisfy that soul which is overburdened with cares, anxieties, suffering and worries, and which is obeying the commands of hundreds of masters internal and external. The pleasures of the senses do not satisfy the soul which has realized the transitoriness and the ephemeral character of worldly objects. No family ties, no earthly relations, can ever quench the thirst of that soul which longs to drink the water that comes through divine communion alone; no earthly thing can stand in the way of that soul which eagerly seeks the path to return home and rest there peacefully after the tiresome journey along the by-ways in the maze of the phenomenal world. Vain are the hopes of those who try to be happy by acquiring wealth, or the pleasures of the senses and comforts of the body. Since the beginning of the history of humanity no human soul has ever become truly happy, or peaceful, or blissful in this life by pursuing the pleasures of the senses and comforts of the body. Therefore Vedanta says: "If a man be-

comes master of the whole world, still he is not happy; he wants something else." And Jesus says: "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" Neither happiness nor immortality can be bought by the almighty dollar. One may be the father of many children, but he must be a fool who expects to be happy on account of many children. True happiness comes to a soul when it renounces the foolish idea of becoming happy through sense pleasures and earthly enjoyments, and seeks God-consciousness by entering into the gate of divine communion. He who has entered that gate by the sincere and earnest practice of Yoga, and has succeeded in regaining his true nature, sees Divinity everywhere. To his eyes the beauty of a human face, or of a landscape, appears infinitely more beautiful because behind that beauty he sees the Infinite Source of all beauty; he knows that this external beauty is but a partial expression of that Divine beauty. He feels Divine presence in music, as well as in every sound that enters into his ears. Such a soul perceives Divinity in every object of the senses.

Then the mysteries of life and death are solved. The whole life, which seems to us meaningless, unfolds higher purpose, nobler and more spiritual meaning to one who has reached God-consciousness through Divine communion. He whose soul communes with the Divine Spirit within does not care for any celestial felicity; he does not want anything of this world; he is serene, peaceful, restful, happy and always contented, free from worry, anxieties, misery, sorrow,

suffering and fear of death. He knows that he is divine. If the whole world persecutes him, tortures him and cuts his body into pieces, even then he resists not, but blesses his persecutors and gently utters: "I am Spirit Divine; swords cannot pierce me, fire cannot burn me, the pains of the body cannot affect me; I am immortal. I am in the sun, in the moon, in the stars; nay, I am the soul of the persecutor's soul. I am He, I am He. If the whole world go, I do not lose anything by it. He says: "I bow down to my Divine Spirit, which does not possess anything, yet which is the Master of all that exists in the universe, or will exist in the future."

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