

Man in Search of Happiness*

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Desire for happiness is innate in all beings. Man is no exception to the rule. If we analyse well our actions we will find that moved by this desire we acquire certain objects and avoid certain others, become intimate with some persons and eschew the company of certain others; in short, we avoid things disagreeable and seek pleasant ones with the idea of attaining happiness. This search for happiness has been the motive power behind all man's efforts, as much in the field temporal as in the spiritual. All his discoveries in the realm of science are with this end in view. If, today, man is anxious to get supremacy over the natural forces and subjugate them to serve his needs, it is for this purpose alone. If, in the past or even in the present, some few give up the path trodden by the vast majority of mankind, and avoid mundane pursuits, and retire to a forest or withdraw into themselves, that also is because of their search for eternal happiness.

But the idea of happiness differs according to the taste and the inner development of each individual. The majority of mankind is satisfied with or finds happiness in the gratification of the senses. This world, with its gross objects, is all that they are interested in. In the 'Katha Upanishad', Yama describes very aptly the mentality of such people: "Living in the midst of transient objects, these ignorant people, considering themselves wise and of firm resolution, go round and round, just as the blind led by the blind. To the erring and the intoxicated with wealth the hereafter is imperceptible; thinking that this world is all that exists, they again and again come under my sway."¹ Such people surround themselves with objects that are pleasant but impermanent; yet they believe these things to be everlasting and changeless. And the very fact that they have been able to possess them, engenders in their mind a high opinion of themselves as capable and wise persons. Thus drunk with the wine of wealth and power they wander about in this world with no other higher end in view. To such people, who judge everything by their sense perceptions, the hereafter is a myth, since it cannot be grasped by the senses. So, believing that this is the only world that they are sure of, they immerse themselves in pleasures, acquire what they can and, as a result, they are dragged again and again here.

Sri Ramakrishna divides men into four types, viz., the bound, the seekers after liberation, the liberated and the ever-free. He illustrates this division by an example: "Suppose a net has been cast into a lake to catch fish. Some fish are so clever that they are never caught in the net. They are like the ever-free. But most of the fish are entangled in the net. Some of them try to free themselves from it, and they are like those who seek liberation. But not all the fish that struggle succeed. A few do jump out of the net, making a big splash in the water. Then the fisherman shout, 'Look! There goes a big one!' But most of the fish caught in the net cannot escape, nor do they make any effort to get out. On the contrary, they burrow into the mud with the net in their mouths and lie there quietly, thinking, 'We need not fear any more; we are quite safe here.' But the poor things do not know that the fisherman will drag them out with the net. These are like the men bound to the world."²

Again, speaking about happiness, Sri Ramakrishna said that there were three types—*vishayananda*, pleasure one gets in the satisfaction of the senses; *bhajananda*, happiness one derives out of the spiritual practices, and *brahmananda*, the bliss that one attains on realization of Brahman or God. The last one cannot be measured or compared to any other happiness; it cannot even be imagined. The Upanishads have tried to give an inkling of its vastness in various ways. For example, in the 'Taittiriya' we come across a passage where the happiness of the different types of beings, beginning from man to Brahma, the Creator, is described and compared. Then it goes on to state that even the bliss of the Creator is nothing compared to that which one gets on realizing Brahman. In another Upanishad we read that the whole creation is sustained by an infinitesimal fraction of this bliss, *matrena upajivanti*. Now the question arises: "If this were so, why does man, an intelligent being, a being endowed with the faculty of thinking and discriminating, run after the petty and worthless things of the world neglecting such a mine of bliss which is his birthright?" There are two answers to this question: (1) that many do not know about the existence of such a kind of bliss and as such do not seek it; and (2) that many though aware of its existence find it difficult to overcome the pull of the outward going senses.

The 'Katha Upanishad' beautifully describes this: "The Self-existing Lord harmed the senses creating them with the tendency to go outward; therefore they perceive only the objects outside and not the Atman which dwells inside. But one of steady mind and firm determination perceives the dwelling Atman by turning away the eyes with the object of attaining Immortality."³ Here the eyes represent all the other senses also. It is only when the senses are turned away from their objects that the mind can fix itself on the Self. What happens otherwise is stated in the next verse of the same Upanishad. "Men of little intelligence impelled by their desires fall in the snares of wide-spread death."⁴ That is to say, they repeatedly become subject to birth, disease, old age and death. So a discriminating person does not see any happiness in sense contacts. He perceives the momentariness of them all and the thirst they create in him for more and more enjoyment. Also, he finds that there is no real happiness in them. The taste of a delicious dish is no more felt when that morsel leaves the tongue, thus demonstrating the transitoriness of the sense pleasures. Therefore, persons of discrimination do not pray for anything here in this world of impermanent things.

But what great pains and afflictions one has got to undergo to acquire even these perishable and changing things! There is a Sanskrit verse which depicts how wretched becomes the life of a person given to infatuation of wealth: "It is with great pains that one earns money, more painful still is the labour and anxiety in preserving what is earned, and still more miserable one feels when one has to spend what one has accumulated. Fie on such wealth which is the source of misery." It may be asked: "How can we live if we do not earn money?" What is depreciated here is not money itself but an inordinate attachment to it, which makes man its slave. The lure of wealth is such that one gets lost in its pursuit and the more one possesses, the more one hankers; and to acquire it one stoops to any means with the result that one loses all human feelings in its mad pursuit.

Now, do we really enjoy the pleasures? Bhartrihari in his 'Vairagyashatakam' says: "We did not enjoy the pleasures, on the contrary, we ourselves were eaten up in the process."⁵ That is to say, in the endless anxiety in seeking these pleasures our energy itself gets sapped and we are left only with the hankering for them without the strength to enjoy. Thus mocked, as it were, we suffer more than we could enjoy in seeking the pleasures of the senses. Sri Krishna says in the 'Bhagavad Gita': "Whatsoever enjoyment is produced out of contact with the outside world is only a source of misery. It has a beginning and an end, therefore a wise man, oh son of Kunti, does not revel in it."⁶ But

such is the veiling power of the Great Illusion, that people forget their difficulties and sufferings and run after the very same pleasures which they have proved a hundred times to be insubstantial, pain-giving and deceptive. Sri Ramakrishna describes their condition with great pathos: "The bound creatures, entangled in worldliness, will not come to their senses at all. They suffer so much misery and agony, they face so many dangers, and yet they will not wake up. The camel loves to eat thorny bushes. The more it eats the thorns the more the blood gushes from its mouth. Still it must eat thorny plants and will never give them up. The man of worldly nature suffers so much sorrow and affliction, but he forgets it all in a few days and begins his old life over again."⁷

We have seen how to a person of discrimination the worldly pleasures are but an empty show, uncertainty and impermanence being all their worth. The same is also true of name and fame, scholarship and ability to expound the Scriptures. These cannot give man everlasting happiness, though he may find some satisfaction in them for some time. This is made clear in the dialogue between Narada and Sanatkumara which occurs in the 'Chandogya Upanishad'. Once Narada approached Sanatkumara and requested the sage to teach him. Sanatkumara asked him to narrate what he already knew. Narada then gave a long list of subjects which he had studied, beginning from the Rig Veda to astronomy and fine arts, and added: "Revered Sir, I am only a knower of words and rituals but not a knower of Atman. I have heard from preceptors like you that a knower of Atman goes beyond this ocean of sorrow, but as I have not attained the knowledge of Atman I am in a state of grief. Be merciful and take me across this ocean."⁸

If scholarship alone were sufficient to attain everlasting happiness, then Narada with his vast knowledge should have been most happy, but he was not. He felt he lacked something which was the essence of felicity. Where then lies happiness, true and changeless? In the knowledge of the Atman, in the realization of God or Brahman. It is not merely theoretical knowledge or book knowledge that Narada refers to, when he says: *Shrutam hyeva me bhagavaddrishebhayah, tarati shokamatmavit iti*, "I have indeed heard from preceptors like you that the knower of Atman goes beyond all sorrow," but to the direct experience of Brahman or Atman. The Rishis of olden times, who sought that Infinite Bliss, attained it after strenuous efforts; and theirs was a different type of life, of strict brahmacharya, and control of the senses. However, they did not say that they were the only ones capable of reaching that state. On the contrary, they called upon one and all, nay even those who resided in the celestial regions to try and obtain their birthright, Immortality. For example, in the 'Shvetashvatara Upanishad' the Rishi declares: "Hear ye all, the sons of Immortality, and even ye that inhabit the celestial regions, I have known the Eternal Purusha, who is beyond darkness and shines like the brilliant sun. Only knowing Him one goes beyond death. There is no other way to cross this ocean of transmigration."⁹

The Upanishads are full of passages that indicate the depth and vastness of the bliss of Brahman: a bliss which is unalloyed, which can be experienced even here, in this world, provided the person who seeks it, lives his or her life according to the standard set by the Rishis, who had attained Brahman.

Sri Shankara in his 'Vivekachudamani' warns us: "He who makes the pampering of the body the main object of his life and yet aspires to realize the Atman, is like that ignorant fool who mistakenly taking hold of the crocodile, thinking it to be a log of wood, tries to cross the river."¹⁰ That is to say, one who wants to realize God or Atman, has to abstain from sensual indulgence. Knowledge of Brahman and the pleasures of the senses, being poles apart, cannot be experienced at one and the same time. The 'Bhagavata' says: "What acquisition or enjoyment can please a man while death is near? Certainly they are not pleasing to him. It is like offering grass to an animal that is

being dragged away for slaughter."¹¹ In another place it recommends: "Having after many births obtained this extremely rare human body, which, though frail, yet serves as a vehicle for man's supreme welfare, a person of discrimination should earnestly strive for Liberation, before the body, which is always subject to death, happens to fall off; for sense enjoyment can be experienced in any body."¹² Man alone, endowed with the faculty of discrimination, is equipped to overcome the lure of the senses. In the ordinary human being this faculty is dormant, so he is attracted by the tangible gains he can make, and the palpable and pleasant objects he can grasp and enjoy. As the 'Katha Upanishad' says: "The good and the pleasant approach man. The man of intelligence having analysed them, separates the two and selects the good in preference to the pleasant, while the man of little intelligence opts for the delightful with a view to the growth and protection (of the body etc.)."¹³ The distinction between these two types of objects is discernible only to a wise man who has the patience to consider their importance or unimportance as also the fruits they will yield; while the ordinary person misled by the immediate gains loses sight of the goal of life.

But such indeed must be the immensity of the Bliss that one obtains on reaching God, or realizing one's own Self, that very few, who experience it, come back to tell the world about it. Sri Ramakrishna illustrates this point by means of a parable: "Once four friends, in the course of a walk saw a place enclosed by a high wall. They all became eager to know what was inside. Three of them, one after the other, climbed the wall, saw the place, burst into loud laughter and dropped to the other side. These three could not give any information about what was inside. Only the fourth man came back and told people about it. He is like those who retain their bodies, even after attaining *Brahmajnana*, in order to teach others."¹⁴ Such is the charm of that state that when a person reaches it he forgets everything else and the world with all its kaleidoscopic pictures appears to him as the mere ashes of the crematorium. Any doubts that may have existed in his mind regarding the eternity of the Reality and the transitoriness of this world disappear for ever. But we have to work hard to retain it, otherwise, even if per chance we attain it, we will not be able to bear its impact.

An incident that occurred in the life of Sri Ramakrishna will explain this fact. Mathuranath Biswas, a son-in-law of Rani Rasmani, once requested the Master to make him experience *bhava samadhi*. Sri Ramakrishna tried to dissuade him but he would not listen. On the contrary, he insisted that the Master bless him with that state. At last when all arguments failed to convince Mathur, Sri Ramakrishna said: "Well, I shall tell Mother and She will do whatever She pleases." In a few days Mathur had his wish fulfilled, but he found it impossible to think of anything except God; he could not turn his mind towards his worldly duties. This frightened Mathur so much that he sent for Sri Ramakrishna and when the Master arrived narrated his experience, the difficult situation in which he found himself, and pleaded with the Master to take back that state. Thus we see that unless a person equips himself properly, by purifying his mind, controlling his senses, etc., he will not be able to contain this limitless bliss, which comes with the realization of the Divine.

We mentioned earlier that immortal bliss is our birthright and that the whole of the creation lives by a fraction of this bliss of Brahman; also, that one of the reasons why all men do not strive to attain it was because of their ignorance about its existence. Similar things sometimes happen in this world: for example, due to freaks of destiny children of rich parents may get lost and may never come to know of their parentage or heredity; or, one may bury his treasure when in great danger of losing one's life and run away from the place in great hurry and when the danger passes return to the place to recover it, but being unable to locate the exact spot, walk over the treasure once and

again. The 'Chandogya Upanishad' gives a similar analogy: "Just as people who do not know the region, walk over and over again the treasure hidden underground and never find it, even so, all these creatures here, though they go daily into the world of Brahman, do not discover It, for they are carried away by the untrue."¹⁵ Their desires for impermanent objects mislead them. The world of Brahman spoken of here is that of our real nature, into which we enter when in deep sleep; when neither the distractions of the waking state nor those of the dream world present themselves. Nevertheless, there remains the ignorance due to the inherent desires for things mundane. True happiness can be had only when these desires along with their roots are removed from the mind.

Man has deluded himself by his attachment to the body considering it to be his true nature. However, if he analyses clearly he will find that he is neither the body nor the senses, nor even the mind, but something else. Let us see how this conclusion can be arrived at. If man were only the body then in sleep, when he is not conscious of it, he should cease to exist. But this does not happen; it is the same man who went to sleep that comes out of it. If he were to be the mind only, then in deep sleep he should cease to be, for even the mind does not function then, but that too does not happen. So we are forced to conclude that man is not only a psycho-physical being but something more. The consciousness that this psycho-physical being reflects, which gives it its identity, is not its own but of the Indwelling Spirit, which is called Atman in Sanskrit. The Hindu Scriptures say that It is of the nature of Sat, Chit and Ananda, i.e., Existence, Knowledge, Bliss Absolute. When this Self is realized in Its purest form it is identical with Brahman, from whom the whole creation has emanated, in whom it exists and unto whom it will return. The Upanishads are emphatic and unambiguous in their proclamation: "That which is Infinite is only bliss; there is no happiness in the limited; in the Infinite alone is Bliss, so one should inquire about the Infinite alone."¹⁶ In this word "limited" used by the Upanishad is included everything that is not Brahman, even the highest heavens. These heavens are places of enjoyments and subject to destruction as is everything else that is created; besides, the pleasures one enjoys in these regions engender fresh desires. And desire means misery, and never has misery been seen to generate bliss in this world.

So the 'Kathopanishad' declares: "The eternal bliss belongs to those wise ones who see that One Lord,— who pervades everything, is independent, and who manifests Himself in diverse forms,—residing in their hearts, and to none else. To those wise ones alone belong the eternal peace who perceive that Lord—who is the Eternal amongst the ephemeral, who is the Consciousness of all that is conscious, who is the One Dispenser of the fruits of actions of the many—as residing within their own hearts, and to none else."¹⁷

When can we realize this Atman, or in what state do we become completely blissful? This Atman is realized in that state when one does not see a second being, does not hear a second, does not know a second thing, that is to say, when everything in this world which exist as name and form, gets merged into that One. In other words when one realizes his or her identity with Brahman; when one disidentifies oneself from the body, the senses and the mind, or, as Swami Vivekananda used to say, when we dehypnotize ourselves.

How can the Atman be realized? The Scriptures say: "It should be heard, cogitated upon, and then meditated upon."¹⁸ It should be heard from a competent person, the *acharya*, because he only can expound the meaning of the Scriptural texts authentically; he can only show us the right 'path. The Shruti itself states: "When the Self is spoken of by an inferior person It cannot be adequately known, for It is thought of variously. But when taught by one who has become identified with It, there remains no doubt with regard to It."¹⁹ After hearing from a competent person one must try to

ruminate over what one has heard and then meditate upon the Atman as taught by the teacher.

What does one achieve when one realizes the Atman, the Eternal Being? Once this realization is ours, the scriptures say that we shall see that Eternal Being, our own Atman, manifest everywhere and all delusion and all misery will vanish. The 'Bhagavad Gita says: "Attaining which one does not consider there is anything higher to be attained and established in which one is not moved even by the greatest of sorrows."²⁰

However, it must be made clear that this bliss is not attained only by those who tread the path of Knowledge but can also be experienced by those who follow the path of *bhakti*. They too experience that unlimited bliss in the proximity of their Chosen Ideal. A devotee of the Divine Mother, like Ramprasad, ever immersed in bliss, sang and danced in Her name and remained ever free. In the fullness of his heart he sang: "A person who has for his Mother, the Blissful One does he live in sorrow! The Divine Mother keeps him happy in this world and the next." Saints all over India who worshipped God with forms attained such a blissful state. It is not the exclusive property of any sect or class of society. Everyone, wherever he be placed can strive for it. In this respect the assurance given by Sri Krishna is very heartening: "If even the most wicked person worships Me with one-pointed devotion, he should be regarded as pious, because he has rightly resolved. Soon he does become righteous and attains eternal peace; know it for certain, oh son of Kunti, that My devotee is never destroyed."²¹

References

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- 3.'Katha Upanishad' II.i.1
- 4.*Ibid* II.1.2
- 5.'Vairagyashatakam' 7
- 6.'Bhagavad Gita', V.22
- 7.'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna', p.165
- 8.'Chandogya Upanishad', VII.i. 1-3
- 9.'Shevetashvatara Upanishad' II.5 & III.8
- 10.'Vivekachudamani' 86
- 11.'Bhagavata'XI.v.20
- 12.*Ibid*.XLiv: 29
- 13.'Katha Up'. I.ii.2
- 14.'Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna', p.268
- 15.'Ch. Up'. VIII.iii.2
- 16.*Ibid*.VII,xxivi.1
- 17.'Katha Up'. II.ii.12&13
- 18.'Br. Up'. II.iv.5.
- 19.'Katha Up'. I.ii.8
- 20.'Bhagavad Gita'. VI.22
- 21.*Ibid* IX.30,31