

46. The conquest of attachment

*With what ingenuity does the tongue
Manage to move about in the mouth
Without getting caught between the teeth!
Man also should behave likewise
To avoid the perils of life.
Forget not these good words, Oh man!*

SHANKARA looked upon man's existence in the world as that of an actor on the stage, who plays his part, by being born, growing and dying.

*Man's life is like a drop of water
Shimmering without rest on a lotus leaf.
It is filled with grief and sorrow.
Give up attachment to this life
And start worshipping Govindha,
Oh man! lacking in wisdom. (Thelugu Poem).*

Human life is like a house filled with many rooms in the form of desires. Desires and disappointments are the order of the day. Doubts are rampant. Man is racked by fears. Fear haunts him wherever he goes or remains. He is caught up in a maze of troubles. How is he to escape from it? Even the happiness which he seems to derive from life is coupled with fear. There is no freedom from fear. How is it to be got? Where there is no attachment, there is no fear. How is this state to be got? By proximity to the Divine.

Shankara exhorted mankind to banish fear by cultivating *vairaagya* (detachment) and journeying towards the *Aathma* (Self). It is through Self-Realisation that the true nature of fear is understood. Joy and sorrow, profit and loss, light and darkness are pairs of opposites in which the absence of one is the sign of its opposite. For both, the root cause is the *Aathma*. All things originate from the *Aathma*. Here is a flower. It has many petals. These petals appear distinct from each other. But all petals have emerged from the same single stem. The stem is the seat of the *Aathma*, from which the petals have emanated. But we view the flower as a single object. The flower is one, but the petals are many. The petals have come out of the one stem.

The ocean, waves and foam

The analogy is applicable to the endless number of waves arising on the ocean. The waves are many and distinct. But they are of the same stuff as the ocean. From the waves arises the foam, which has the same properties as the waves and the ocean though different in form and name. These three are based on the ocean. The three represent the three kinds of proofs in logic *Prathyaksha* (direct perception), *Paroksha* (indirect evidence) and *Anumaana* (inference). This is the logical basis for *Adhvaita*. It is termed *Thriputhi--the three-in-one--the Aathmik principle*. In the human, this three-in-one is found in the unity of the body, mind and *Aathma*. The body

functions on the basis of the mind. The mind is based on the *Aathma*. The *Aathma* is the basis for everything. For humanness, the *Aathma* is the basis. This is the doctrine of Non-Dualism.

Ignoring this truth and pursuing the myriad ephemeral objects of the phenomenal world, people ultimately come to a realisation of the *Aathmik* Principle.

Siddhaartha's discovery

After a long period Shuddhodhana had a son, named Siddhaartha. The King kept Siddhaartha entirely within the palace so that the boy should have no knowledge of the sufferings in the world outside. Once Shuddhodhana introduced his son to a high-souled *pandith* who had come to the palace. The *pandith* was an oracle. He told the king: "Shuddhodhana! This lad will become a renunciant. Moreover he will become a great teacher of wisdom to the people." Shuddhodhana was alarmed on hearing this.

Apprehending that the prince might develop *Vairaagya* (total detachment) if he went out, he kept the prince from going out. The king got him married when he reached his eighteenth year and crowned him Heir-Apparent. After his coronation as Yuvaraaja, Siddhaartha desired to go round the kingdom. There was no meaning in a ruler confining himself to his palace. He should know how the people lived. Hence he wanted to go round the country. Despite his apprehensions, the king agreed to the prince's request because he was now married and was unlikely to break away.

Old age, disease and death

Siddhaartha got into his chariot and set out on a tour of the capital. He saw an old woman, bent with age, trudging, on the road with a stick. He asked the charioteer: "Who is this strange creature moving on the road?" "Lord! When one grows old, the back is bent and one becomes infirm. This is an old woman." The prince asked: "Does this happen to everyone as a result of old age?" He replied: "It is inescapable. It is a law of Nature."

The chariot went further. A sick man was sitting under a tree, coughing and wailing. The prince asked what the matter was with the man under the tree. The charioteer replied: "The human body is subject to a variety of ailments. That man is suffering from a severe ailment. No one can tell when anyone may be afflicted with disease." The prince took note of this.

The chariot proceeded further. A dead body was being carried by four persons on a bier. The prince asked what it was that the four men were carrying. He replied: "It is a dead body." "What is a dead body?" asked the prince. The charioteer replied: "A dead body is without life." "What about us?" asked the prince. "We are *Shivam* (alive)." The prince asked: "Does everyone lose his life?" "Yes. Death is unavoidable, sometime or other." The prince heard this. He dropped the sword in his hand and returned to the palace.

He did not eat that night. He went to bed, but could not sleep. By his side, his wife Yashodhara and his young son were sleeping. He looked at them intensely. The thought flashed in his mind: *Sarvam dukkham* (All is sorrow). Then he declared: "*Sarvam Bhayam, Bhayam, Bhayam*" (All is filled with fear). Next, he declared: "*Sarvam anithyam, anithyam, anithyam*" (Everything is transient, transient, transient). Then, he declared: "*Sarvam shuunyam, shuunyam, shuunyam*" (All is emptiness). Making these declarations, he left the palace.

What great renunciation is this! We see any number of ailing persons, old people and dead bodies. How many get the feeling of renunciation after seeing these scenes? Only Siddhaartha

got this feeling. To acquire such a control over the senses (as to give up all attachments) God's grace is necessary.

The Jithendhriya kingdom

Likewise, a prince went to a forest for hunting. Feeling tired and thirsty, he went to an *aashram* for rest and water to drink. The sage of the hermitage asked the prince who he was and what brought him to the *aashram*. He said: "My name is Jithendhriya. I have come from the kingdom of Jithendhriya. I need some water." The sage offered water and asked him to sit. The sage wanted to find out whether the stranger was one who lived upto his name. (Jithendhriya means one who has conquered his senses). There are many persons who have names like Dharmaraju, but who belie their names.

The sage asked the prince to hand over his royal clothes to him and wear an ascetic's robes himself. He took the prince's clothes, sprinkled some red powder on them and set out for the kingdom of Jithendhriya. At the palace gate, the sentry greeted the sage with reverence and asked him the object of his visit. The sage told them that the prince had been killed by a wild animal in the forest and that he had brought the prince's clothes. He asked them to convey this message to the king. The gatekeeper smiled and asked: "Who is free from death? Everyone that is born is bound to die. Birth and death go together." There is a practice in the railways to stamp on every railway wagon the date on which it has to be returned to the workshop for repair and repainting. Likewise everybody has a return date, though it is not visible.

Indifference to death

After hearing the sentry's words, the sage went in to meet the king himself. He told the king that his son had died and started crying. While the *Sanyaasi* was wailing, the king was having a laugh. The king said to him: "You are wearing the ochre robe. But your words are unbecoming of a renunciant. Why do you cry? This is no matter for grief or worry. At dusk hundreds of birds return to a tree for rest. The next morning they fly away. What is the relationship between the different birds? Likewise on the tree of my family, birds like wife and children rest for a while and depart. No one can tell when and where any of them will leave. There is no cause for grief over their departure. It is a law of nature." The sage felt that the king was a heartless man. He then went to the queen, thinking that as a mother she would grieve over the death of her son. He told her: "Mother! Your son is dead. Here are his clothes." She too laughed. "Oh Saadhu! You are one who has renounced everything in the world. How can you entertain any concern for the ephemeral? Life is like a choultry where wayfarers stay for a while and then pass on. Each has his own time of departure. There is no need to grieve when any one leaves the world."

Then the sage went to the prince's wife to find out whether she at least reacted differently. He broke the news about the death of her husband. She remarked: "When it rains, leaves fall away from a tree. When there is a flood, two pieces of wood come together for a while and separate again. In this ocean of life I am one such piece. The prince was another. We came together and we have gone apart. Why be surprised or lament over this? For all these, the cause is either attachment or possessiveness. The events themselves are not to be blamed. They are bound to happen. Why worry about them?"

True detachment

The sage realised that what the prince had said about the kingdom was all true. Yet, he wanted to test the prince himself. He returned to the hermitage and exclaimed before the prince: "Oh

prince! Your kingdom has been overrun by invaders and your father and mother are kept as prisoners. You must leave immediately to recover the kingdom and release your parents. Get ready for war."

The prince replied: "All that has happened is according to the Will of God. I did not bring that kingdom with me when I was born. Can I take it with me when I die? Why should I wage war to recover it?"

It is not my kingdom. My kingdom is the kingdom of the *Aathma* (Spirit). I am striving to realise it. That is the Kingdom of Heaven: That is what I seek to secure. It cannot be got by waging by war. It has to be won through love alone. I have no interest in other kingdoms."

Be true to your role

Then, the *sanyaasi* prostrated before the prince and confessed: "We don the robes of renunciants, but we have none of the qualities of true renunciants. How many householders are leading lives free from worldly attachments."

I would relate another story, to show that whatever role one has to play in life, he should, be true to it. Once an actor appeared before the court of a king in the guise of Shankaraachaarya, declaring in strident terms the unreality of all human relationships and the impermanence of worldly possessions. The actor gave such a powerful exposition of *Adhvaitha* that the king directed his minister to present the actor with a plate of gold coins. But the Shankaraachaarya firmly refused to accept the present, saying that it would be unworthy of him to receive it in his role as Shankaraachaarya. The next day the same actor appeared in the role of a beautiful dancer: and performed an excellent dance before the king. The king was so much impressed with the dance that he directed the minister to present a plate of gold coins to the dancer. This time, the dancer declined to accept what was offered as too small a reward for his performance. The minister who realised that the dancer was the same person who had come as Shankara the previous day, then asked the actor what was the reason for his refusal to accept the plate of gold coins the previous day and to ask for more that day. The actor explained that he declined the previous offer in keeping with his role as renunciant. But, in the role of a dancer he was free to ask for more as it was natural for dancers to make as much money as they could.

Shankara's call to humanity

Shankaraachaarya called upon mankind to realise that as human beings they should cherish human values and practise them. Otherwise they would be betraying their true role in life. Shankara went round the country exhorting people to lead spiritual lives, shedding their animal qualities. His disciples imbibed the essence of Shankara's doctrines and became proficient in expounding *Adhvaitha*. For a time the *Adhvaithic* doctrine held sway all over Bhaarath. In course of time, however, the doctrine lost its hold.

Students! I do not want you all to become *sanyaasins* and to give up everything. All that I want you to do is to carry on your duties, place your faith in God and realise that there is one fundamental Reality underlying all things. When you get this realisation, detachment will develop in you of its own accord. Detachment is not acquired by compulsion. As love of God grows, indifference to worldly things develops naturally.

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