THE STAGES OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE YOGA VASISHTHA

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The general condition of human life, which may be said to be one of an acquiesced satisfaction with the world we see with our eyes, is a matter for deep consideration. That some sort of an investigation is called for into the nature in which we live in the world is a necessity not felt by many people. We do not feel the need to inquire into our lives because everything seems to be clear to us.

The longings of the heart and the general pressures of human desire are so very well taken for granted as the most normal things in the world that they do not require any special attention on our part. There is practically no event or occurrence in our life that we feel needs a particular investigative attention, so we have been content in living a life of utter abandon to the condition that has taken possession of us – possession to such an extent that, to any thinking mind, it may appear that we have lost our personalities. We have been sold to the conditions that have bargained to purchase us, and our subjection to these

conditions of life is such an utter abolition of our independent way of thinking and willing that often it looks doubtful that we have any independence at all.

To be subject to the pressures of internal impulses is what we call the joys of life. The movement along the current of a river is a satisfaction since we have abandoned ourselves to the flow of the current. The upward movement is not a satisfaction or a joy because there is opposition to our contemplated movements. Whenever we oppose our impulses, the joys are cut off.

Thus, a continuous asking for unending joy in the world will automatically mean a total subjection to the will of the master, and that is the world. An utter subject as slave of a superintending authority has, in a way, no fear because there is no opposition. We have no fears of any kind, or so it looks, as long as we are content to move with any demand that is made by our body or by the conditions of our mind. Whatever is demanded is given, and therefore, the mouth of these impulses is shut by a provision of what is required, demanded, asked for from moment to moment.

But this has not been an easy affair. It would not be a simple matter to supply the demands of a source which changes its attitude and types of demand from moment to moment. If a single stereotyped asking is before us, we have enough time to think that this particular thing is what is expected of us.

The world does not seem to be expecting one particular thing from us. Our neighbours, our environment, the people who are part of human society in which we are living are, in a very important sense, hard taskmasters, so that to adjust ourselves to the requirements of these

multifaceted atmospheres tells upon our system. To be compelled to adapt and adjust to conditions which change from moment to moment is a great strain on the mind and the body. The freedom that we speak of becomes a total chimera if it is impossible for us to live in the world without a moment-to-moment adjustment with the environment in which we are living. Whether it is hot or cold, we have no say in that matter. We have to adjust ourselves with it. Whether people are friendly with us or otherwise, we have no say in that matter and have to adjust ourselves with that also. There may be a hailstorm of painful conditions on our heads, and we erect an umbrella of protection against the fall of these hails.

There has been a continuous effort on the part of man to survive irrespective of this utter subjection to uncontrollable conditions and circumstances, and these joys, these satisfactions, these pleasures that are doled out to us as from a master to a servant are the immediate outcome of our willingness to subject ourselves to these conditions. As a dog is thrown a little piece of bread, the joys of life are thrown on us by these relentless powers of nature to which we willingly subject ourselves as helpless slaves. Thus is the joy of life.

But, who has time to think? A continuous subjection prevents even the movement of thinking. Time to think is not given. There is no permission given to us to think because to think would be to assert an independence of our own, and that is not allowed. We are perpetual slaves. Thus goes human satisfaction and human life, human misery.

A time comes, says the great scripture the Yoga Vasishtha, when man begins to contemplate the seeds and

the very presuppositions of the conditions of subjection in which we are living. At least before going to bed for a few hours we begin to think: "Am I really living a worthwhile life?" This primitive stage of not being able even to think is not really worth any mention, really speaking. That our need for analytic thinking has not been felt is a great credit indeed to our ignorance and the extent of our subjection, because we are happy and we need nothing else. But why are we happy? Because we have sold ourselves. We have become slaves to such a degree that our life itself is in the hands of powers which we cannot understand, and over which we have no say. Such a kind of misery is the involvement of human life. But it is all a joy for the worm that travels in filth because there is an acquiesced adjustment of the biological condition of the worm with the constitution of its environment. We are ready to live with anything; that is enough for us, provided our impulses are gratified.

Thus, there seems to be a final quintessential conclusion of human enterprises, and it is this much: that human life is no independent, indivisible and standing value. It is a moment-to-moment self-adjusting structure which charges itself regularly day to day with the capacity for such adjustment and adaptation. Our body can adjust itself to any temperature and our mind can adjust itself to any environment. If this is not done, if this adjustment is not to be expressed as a gesture on our part, there would be a sudden eruption of a condition in life which would make our life impossible.

So a desire arises sometime in our lives, at least when we are old enough to think: "Have I lived a worthwhile life

in the sense of having gained anything which is meaningful? Have I gained anything from this world? Have I lived for any purpose?" These questions cannot arise in early ages because the impulses of life are stronger in youth, impetuous and unrelenting in their behaviour. Continuously we are pressed down on our necks to the need of this subjection to whatever is expected of us by nature and the environment. But the impulses become weak when we become physically old. Neither we can eat well nor drink well. Neither can we sleep well nor can we have any interest in life with such pep and sauce that we discovered earlier in our youth. Then it is that the grey hair begins to speak in a language of investigation and begins to question itself: What have I done in these longish years of my life in the world?

This condition of an incipient need felt for self-investigation, says the Yoga Vasishtha, is called *subecha*, a desire for the good: "I must do something good. There is no use merely being a servant throughout my life because there is no saying when the life will end, and whatever has been bequeathed to me as a kind of remuneration for my subjection to life is not lasting. It may have its end any moment. What will happen to me, where will I go, who will look after me and where shall I be placed? Am I going to cease to exist after the body is shed?" It cannot be. The conscience does not permit the argument that we shall cease to be when the body is cast off. We think: "Oh, I am doing some good; I shall have my reward."

Many a time the good deeds we perform do not receive any reward. They may even receive a condemnation. But man feels: "After all, I have done some good. Maybe man

has not recognised it, but my conscience says I have done some good. Will I go unrewarded?" The conscience says, "No, I shall not go unrewarded. Where will I be rewarded, if not in this world? This world has given me nothing. It has recognised nothing worthwhile in me; it has exploited me, put me down, harnessed me, utilised me as an instrument, and given me nothing of value."

The conscience of a human being says that life shall continue after the end of this body. But what kind of life are we going to enter? This is sometimes frightening, sometimes solacing. It is solacing to those who feel a sense of inner conviction that they have really done some good, and they have not done any harm or bad. "Some good I have done knowingly or unknowingly, whether it is publicised or not publicised." To such a convinced mind there is a solace that life shall continue after the body is shed. "These good deeds, these charitable gestures, these attitudes of service which I have of my own accord demonstrated here which have not been even recognised by people shall receive attention in my next life." That is a solace for those who are really convinced of having done something worthwhile and good.

But all are not of this type. We go with a suspicion; we go with a fear: "I have done nothing practically. I have perhaps earned a fat salary, but can this be called a good deed that I have performed, that I have had enough money to put in a bank? I have commuted my pension, I have educated my children, and my family is well fixed. Well, that may be. Is this going to protect me in my future life? What shall guard me, take care of me?" It is the law of the other world. What protects us is law, not man, not a human

being, not any particular thing. It is a principle we call the law of sustenance of the world as a whole, which is obeyed implicitly, that will take care of us. "Have I obeyed the law, and what is that?" These types of questions arise some time or other in one's life, and the Yoga Vasishtha says this is *vicharana*. We go on thinking: "It is now time for me to do something worthwhile. I may perhaps enter a realm after death where a different set of laws operate. It may be a condition, it may be a country, it may be a land of people who may not have any value for the laws of this world, and what I have done to people, to things here, may not have much value there." Sometimes doubts of this kind may arise.

But there are universally accepted laws which, if obeyed, will stand by us as a large credit balance which shall be carried forward to our ledger books of the next world. These questions arise in us. Is there anything we can think of in our life today which can be really carried over to the other world? Or is whatever we have done in this world meaningful only here, and not in the other world? Is it a currency that is workable only here and it is non-current in the other world? Then this currency is of no value to us. But have we an international currency with us which we can take to the other world also? Have we anything of that? We shall be depressed, dispirited and agonised to receive answers from our own conscience that perhaps we are not yet ready to meet the contingencies of the other world.

This fear will grip us, and it is a purifying fear nevertheless. Such a fear is necessary. Often such fears purify us instantaneously. We rid ourselves of the memories of the past and decide once and for all not to

commit an error in the future because of the fright that is immanent which may descend on us the next day, in a few days, in the next moment. An inviolable, ferocious predicament that may come upon us may purify us, cleanse us of our sins due to the repentance that we feel and the decision that we take to be right from this moment onwards. Often they say all sins, mountainous though they may be, can be washed out and discharged, destroyed, burned to ashes by a moment's decision which is correctly taken: jñānāgniḥ sarvakarmāṇi bhasmasāt kurute tathā (Gita 4.37).

These investigations of the mind, *vicharana* conducted thus, compels us to set our foot on a right path. I have done many wrongs. I am very sorry indeed, and I shall rectify myself just now at this moment. I shall tune myself to that obedience to that eternal law of God, and thus I surrender myself.

Actually, these decisions of the spirit of the human being which can be even instantaneous, coming flash-like, can be so effective and purifying in their nature that saints, devotees tell us actions piled up in our minds as memories of several lives led earlier will be set at naught by the piercing flame of this repentance and surrender of oneself to God.

The mind, which is usually fat with its egoism of attention to the body continuously throughout its life, the ego which is rendered fat by pampering with the satisfactions of the world of senses, gets thinned out. The Yoga Vasishtha says the ego becomes stout; it puts on weight. It says how the ego becomes fat day by day. The more we are tied to affection to person and things, the

stronger becomes our ego and assertive instinct. By acquiring wealth in the world, by becoming more and more rich materially, economically, by holding property, dissatisfaction fattens the ego. By the gaining of the objects of the lower impulses, the ego gets fattened. By these tantalising phenomenal presentations of the joys of life, mistaking the cool shadow under the hood of a serpent for a comfortable place for rest, with such mistaken views the ego becomes fat. The Yoga Vasishtha compares the coolness of Earthly satisfaction to the coolness under the hood of a cobra. Who will take rest under there? Even if we are parched in the hot sun, will we take rest under the hood of a cobra because there is cool shade there? This is the world, and so is the joy of life which will sting us one day or the other, to our own torment and discomfiture, and it is better to guard oneself before such a stage of utter helplessness takes possession of us.

Here the mind is rejuvenated into a new orientation of thinking. Nothing of the world can satisfy us. There was a king called Yayati. The story comes in the Puranas and in the Mahabharata. He was very fond of sensual gratification. He was getting old, but the desire was not waning. He was in a state of grief. "I am old. My sense organs are not strong enough to receive the joys of life." He went to his children. "Lend me your youth, my dear children. After my satisfactions, I will hand it back." Nobody was prepared to give his youth. So he cursed them; he uttered some imprecations. One of them, they say, was agreeable to this request. In a mysterious way by tapas, austerity, by a vicarious suffering, as it were, vicarious transference, we may say, the youth of the poor boy was transferred to this

old man. He became youthful again, and enjoyed all the pleasures of the senses. But again old age came. When he returned the youth, he was old again. It is said he went to the heavens due to the effect of his sacrifices, and he was not repentant. He was asked: "What have you seen?" "What have I seen? Nothing can satisfy me. There is no end. The pleasures of life have not satisfied me. All the rice and the wheat, all the gold that is on Earth may not be sufficient for the satisfaction of one man." This is what he said. All the gold and the silver and the wheat and the rice and the sugar and what not, all the things of the world will not be sufficient to satisfy the cravings of even one person in the world. And what about many of us?

Thus one decides in the end, and girds up one's loins to lead a life that is really recognisable in the higher realms of being into which we have to enter one day or the other. Sadhana is the stage into which we enter after this condition of *vicharana*. *Subeccha*, desire for the good, is the first stage. *Vicharana*, investigation, self-inquiry is the second stage, and the thinning out of the mind, the threadlike condition of the ego which was earlier very fat with these joys as if it is going to break, that *tanumanasi* condition is one of heightened spiritual practice or sadhana.

What is sadhana? What is spiritual practice? What is it that can save us from these turmoils of the life of sorrow by an inward communion that we establish with the law of God or, we may say, *rita* or *satya*, the law of the universe, which is another way of saying that we sacrifice ourselves at the altar of God's creation. A *yajna* is performed by our Atman, a *yajna* which is *jnanyajna*, a knowledge sacrifice

which is a knowledge of the fact that our very existence is inseparable from the creation of the Absolute impels us to surrender ourselves to this all-being. Towards this sense, sadhanas are practiced by *japa*, by *kirtan*, by *swadhaya*, by *puruscharana*, by *dhyana*, by *tirth yatra*, by study of scriptures, by charitable acts, gifts and the like, by holy baths and what not.

When the mind is thinned out, and the ego is famished almost, the light of the Atman reveals itself. The sun, though he is so fiercely brilliant, is clouded completely by thick layers of water particles as if an eclipse has covered the sun. In dark monsoon, even midday looks like night. Such a condition has befallen us. The light that is within us is beclouded by the layers of clouds of unfulfilled longings, desires which have been carried over into our present life from our earlier ones by non-fulfilment, lodged now in our *koshas – anandamaya kosha*, subtle body, the *linga sarira*. They are thick, but they have to scud. The clouds have to move by a fierce concentration directed towards this *yajna purusha*, the omnipresent reality which is the ultimate reason why we have even these apparent joys of life on Earth.

Light flashes when sadhana is intensified, the mind is purified, the intellect is stabilised. What happens? The clouds of desire disperse. Longings for contact with objects of sense break, and affections for things cease. In the light of the fact that our mind, our ego is only a network of longings for external objects, we may very well understand how they break when the desire ceases. As a cloth is made up of threads, the mind is made up of desires. It has no

independent existence apart from the threads. So is the mind, so is the ego.

This beclouding mental awareness in terms of objects of satisfaction is not a real hard substantial something. It is a complex interrelated structure, like a fabric; it can be reduced to nothing when the threads of desire are pulled out one by one, and then the clouds disperse and the sun shines. Yoga Vasishtha considers this condition as *sattvapatti*. *Sattvapatti* means attainment of a flash of lightning of spiritual awakening. As we see lightning flashes in the sky, we will begin to see the flashes of the spirit before the vision of the mind. And they come and go. That is why they are called flashes. It is not a perpetual radiation like the midday sun, which of course we shall await. But it has not yet come. There are only indications we are moving in the right direction. When we move in the direction of the vast ocean, a cool breeze blows over our face. We are told we are nearing the ocean. When we near the Ganga we feel: "Yes, I am near the Ganga; I feel the coolness of the water." So symbols will be presented before us in the form of musical intonations, fragrant smells, soft touches and brilliant flashes. This is what yoga scriptures tell us. These are indications that we are advancing in our sadhana. Superphysical satisfactions will present themselves before us, satisfactions which do not necessarily arise by contact of senses with objects, satisfactions which do not require any object at all. An automatic arising of the joy from the Self itself will come in the form of a flash of radiance, *sattvapatti*.

Then what happens? There is no necessity for the mind at any time whatsoever to long for contact with anything.

The thing called the contact ceases because of the inner permeation of the spirit with the very substance of all things. The awakening that has come now educates us into the understanding that our joys are not the products of the contact of mind with objects. They arise from a spontaneous eternal bottom in our own being, and therefore, all longing for contacts ceases at one stroke. *Asamsakti* is this condition – no contact with anything. It is a condition of non-contact because the spirit has no contact. It is a non-contactual permeating principle, ethereal like the vast space or sky, and it is present in the hearts of all things; and that being the source of joy really, it needs no contact with anything outside for awakening this joy from inside us. Actually, contact of the senses with the objects will then be realised as a malady that has come upon us, a sickness, a sorrow. It is an illness.

What happens afterwards? Glorious descriptions are given to us in the Yoga Vasishtha which will transport us into ecstasy, which will make us dance in joy that such a thing is possible after all. These things which are told to us by these scriptures are unthinkable to our minds – unthinkable, unimaginable, and beyond the comprehension even by the farthest imagination. We shall not be able to live in this world due to the possibility of having such attainments. "What happens then?" says the Yoga Vasishtha. *Padartha-bhavana* is there. A pithy word is used. Matter vanishes; spirit reveals itself. Matter, the so-called hard world of rock, bricks and iron and steel, this world of such hard substances melts into the liquid of the omnipresent light. Matter becomes radiance. We have heard modern science saying that matter is convertible into

energy and light. They are inter-convertible. They are inter-convertible because they are made up of the same substance.

The lodgement of the spirit in sleeping matter is awakened to its own self-independence, and it frees itself from these shackles into which it appeared to subject itself, and matter which appeared as a shroud for consciousness becomes an appendage and a glory, a *shakti* of the *purusha*, a light of the sun which is no more a shroud for the sun. So the whole world lifts the veil that it was putting on its face to delude us, to make us feel that it is something different from what really is. That veil which the world was putting on to deceive us, distract us and subdue us, that veil the world lifts, and the glory of eternity in this temporal world is revealed before the all-seeing eye of the spirit immanent. The world vanishes into the Supreme Being. *Padartha-bhavana* – no world, no object is there anymore, or rather, in another sense, it is the recognition of the true *padartha*, *padartha-bhavana*. The real substance is discovered by a direct entry and insight into its reality.

The culmination of this process is the melting down of our very existence in this vast sea of eternity. This is the state of moksha, *turiya*. Towards this great goal we are moving with our little foibles here, with our little deeds, with our ups and downs, with our little sadhanas and prayers. With our little humble efforts in life we are gradually trekking towards this Might of all mights, the Almighty, the glorious radiance of immortal nectar which is awake in us. The very thought of that glorious attainment is possible for us. After all, it is possible for us. If not today, then tomorrow it is possible. "I shall have it and it has to be

had!" With this conviction that it must be had and it is possible and practicable, we shall attain it.