

Random Thoughts

- Vivek Sharma -

A Glimpse into the Human Soul

The concept of “soul” as an eternal, indestructible, pure and imperishable entity residing within the human body is deeply ingrained in the philosophy of many religions. Hindus have always believed in Karma and reincarnation. Krishna in Bhagavad Gita says, *“Just as a man discards worn out clothes and puts on new clothes, the soul discards worn out bodies and wears new ones.”* (Chapter 2). Soul, or “Aatma” in Hindi, has thus given rise to the concepts of “Dev-aatma”, the divine soul or demi-god and “Param-aatma”, the supreme soul, considered to be the God almighty. Fascinatingly, Hindus also believe that since all the aatmas are manifestation of one Supreme Being, worshipping to any of the forms is the same thing. As a result, the Hindu society is inundated with various Gods and demi-gods under different names and forms. However, the underlying principle of oneness is intact – at least in principle. That is because the God, or the Param-aatma, is seen as a manifestation of three entities, Brahma (the creator), Vishnu (the preserver or the protector) and Shiva (the destructor or the esoteric). Mythological figures, Parashurama, Ram, Krishna and even Gautam Buddha are considered to be the “reincarnations” of Vishnu. So, in their belief even by worshipping to different reincarnations, they are effectively worshipping the same entity. In the same sense, worshipping any of the three manifestations, and their reincarnations, is essentially worshipping to just one Supreme Being. It is a broad and blunt philosophy but with a subtle connotation.

The Hindu concept of trinity is not far from the Christian belief of Divine Trinity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. The Catholics believe in resurrection of Christ, in the similar way as Hindu reincarnation but with a difference that in case of Christ, it was through the same body. However, most of the Christian institutions do not believe in reincarnation of ordinary human souls. Some people, however, believe that the notion and the references to reincarnation were expunged from the Bible by the Church with an objective to keep focus on one single entity – Christ – as the only divine figure capable of such miracle. However, as mentioned by Wikipedia encyclopedia (www.wikipedia.org), John (3:3) says, *“.....Except a man be born again, he cannot see the Kingdom of God”*. The different interpretation of this passage has prompted various evangelistic movements. However, the Catholic Church interprets “born again” as a mean of “conversion” or “baptism”. Islam rejects the idea of reincarnation all together but believes that all the dead will be risen to face the day of the judgement in front of God. As noted by Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org), some of

the verses from Quran are interpreted differently by some branches of Islam such as Sufism. "*From the (earth) did We Create you, and into it Shall We return you, And from it shall We Bring you out once again.*" (The Quran, 20:55), is interpreted by Sufis as a reference to reincarnation. The Jewish mystic sect of Kabbalah points to various references of reincarnation in the Hebrew Bible although the traditional Jewish belief does not directly endorse the notion of reincarnation. Similarly, there have been various examples of the use of the term reincarnation throughout the history in various traditions, invariably associating it with some sort of "entity" that reincarnates life after life, many like to call as "soul".

In the spiritual (non-religious) domain – and the word "spiritual" can also be interpreted in various ways by various individuals – the notion of soul is often associated with words such as consciousness, energy and higher self. There is, however, an underlying problem in attempting to "understand" the subtle concept of soul logically when spirituality in general is concerned with "knowing" the things through self-realisation – the wordless, sensitive, knowledge (Prajna) that dawns in the enlightened state of brain (note, not Mind). Zen masters referred to the mind as made up of thought-based perceptions, a logic-based sense of personality that tends to "define" a person, which is illusory in nature as it does not have a physical existence. Some people confuse the physical brain with mind. While some Zen literatures refer to the brain as pure Mind, they actually mean brain devoid of the perception of ego or "I".

Hui-Neng (We-lang), Zen's sixth patriarch, commented on the Self-Nature or "*hsing*" also described as Self-Knowledge, "*In the Original Nature itself there is Prajna knowledge and it is because of the Self-Knowledge. Nature reflects itself in itself, which is self-illumination not to be expressed in words.*" (Suzuki, 1972). Our modern world is today dominated by logic-based theories, concepts and ideologies that keep influencing the way people think and perceive the world. The problem arises when a "thinking mind" tries to interpret meaning of a spiritual phenomenon in a logical sense. Similarly, the perception of so-called "soul" as something divine, halo, pure and of higher self, creates a distinct division in the psyche that gives a mental impression of a separate, holistic entity not touched by the worldly indulgences. There seems to be a general tendency in people - especially in those who have gotten themselves engaged in something "spiritual" in their own way - to objectively differentiate between the "body" and the "soul" as two separate entities. They start "believing" that there is a higher self of oneself and a targeted spiritual practice can "connect" one to this higher self. That creates a lot more problems than solutions. In an attempt to clinch to the perceived higher self or soul, they inadvertently create an erroneous view of their existence in several divisions of a) body b) "I" or "me" c) soul d) consciousness and alike. Interestingly, the same people, when asked, would most likely answer that they believe in "oneness" of the nature. Oneness, it seems, sans the body because the body is supposedly perishable. Once again, the concept of an eternal soul changing the bodies in various lives appeals more to the thinking mind than the concept of thought-based ego dominating the thinking process. It is not to say that there is not a part of us that moves on to the next stage of evolution and transformation but the problem is in pre-conceiving the notion of soul as a separate entity. At best, we can eliminate the erroneous views of duality and multiplicity by

saying “I do not know”. If there is something, such as the supposedly soul, exists, such knowledge should be coming, or dawning, through self-realisation and not pre-supposition. By assuming the existence of soul beforehand, we pre-empt ourselves with the process that could lead to Self-Knowledge. In academic terms, it will be referred to as a “soul paradigm” which will exclude oneself from any research into the existence of soul. If we have already assumed the existence of something beforehand, we have inadvertently negated the possibility of knowing it from the scratch.

That is why the spiritual masters always warned the pupils about mental baggage. My guru Rao Maharaj from Mumbai once narrated the story of a devotee who was in service of a sage known as Dadaji. He spent many years with Dadaji observing his routines and daily tasks. Sensing that Dadaji was up to something divine, he always used to ask Dadaji to “give” him something (e.g. bestow some divine knowledge) that will put him on the path to enlightenment. Dadaji always replied that he was not yet ready. That man came from a Hindu Jain background – staunch followers of non-violence and vegetarianism. The Jain monks wear a mask on their mouths because they want to minimise the inhalation of bacteria in the air. Most of the Jains do not eat anything that grows under ground because they are produce of bacterial process. After a many years the man was starting to get impatient and insisting that he was quite “ready” to receive Dadaji’s blessings. On one idle afternoon when Dadaji was resting, he suddenly pointed to a train of ants close to his kitchen and said to the man, “I am getting irritated by these ants. There are getting into my food cloths and coming into my way all the times. Can you get some ant-killer and get rid of them once and for all?” The man was astonished to hear that and coolly told Dadaji that killing the ants would amount to be a sin. Dadaji smiled and replied, “that is why I have been telling you that you are not yet ready for the spiritual journey. If your mind is caught up in your religious teachings, how can you be ready for a journey to the unknown?” The man understood that it was only a test.

Similarly, each one of us has gone through so much conditioning of the mind that it would be hard to determine what we like and dislike, or believe and not believe, are actually our own thoughts. The need is to first recognise the dual nature of the mind and the futility of thoughts. In order to achieve that, one must first develop an awareness to observe the thought process as independent, detached observer. There is an inbuilt contradiction in the process. By separating “ourselves” from the “thoughts”, we will be starting by creating a divided or fragmented view. However, the knowledge arising from “seeing” the incessant thought process will help eliminate the thought-induced sensations and reliance on mental conjunctions to interpret things and events around us. I once asked my guru a question about dreams. Instead of answering he said, “first find out who wishes to know the answer?” The real spiritual masters will refrain from giving any word-based “information” that might create an imagination about something in a pupil’s mind. The emphasis is on “knowing” by oneself – Self-realisation. As Zen master Sosan said, *“When thought objects vanish, the thinking subject vanishes, as when the mind vanishes, objects vanish. Things are objects because of the subject: The mind is such because of things.”* Soul is a very distant prospect. One must first engage in the process of self-awareness and observation without any pre-conceived ideas, objectives or goals in mind. The thinking mind always has the tendency to compare and divide the things. As long as

there is a perception of higher and lower levels, higher or lower selves, distinctions such as body and soul, the true spiritual awareness will remain elusive.

It can be best seen by observing the children. For at least eighteen months after birth, they do not use the word “I” or “mine”. There is an unexplained purity in all their actions – when they are hungry they eat, when they are sleepy they sleep, when they are hurt they cry. They are natural in every sense. When nature calls, they do it right there and there, no matter what. They know their mother instinctively, even immediately after the birth. They are very much the part of the nature that is subtle but dynamically transforming around them. They are a part of it, moving with the flow of the nature. However, once we start teaching them the words and the moment they start thinking, “I” starts entering. The moment the thought process develops, a thought-based personality start emerging and we the adults keep strengthening it by emphasising words, describing the actions and encouraging the habits. The body is in tandem with the nature. Yet the thoughts start creating a personality that begins to see itself separate from the whole process. Suddenly, mother, father, brother, sister, visitors, tress, cars all start becoming separate things. The same child grows up carrying zillions of induced thoughts and a personality that is standing on the information fed and consolidated over the years. How can someone, then, claim to “know” anything? One has to first go through the process of identifying the elements that have been cemented in the thoughts and habits and then de-condition the mind to its pure state – the way it began. If someone asks me what is meditation, I would describe this process as a meditation. When engaged in the process of self-knowledge, the process becomes spiritual.

References:

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