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INTERIORITY : A UNIVERSAL SEARCH FOR CONTEMPLATIVE EXPERIENCE

A universal yearning for contemplative experience is discernible in the contemporary search for divine depth or interiority in the human person. Religionists and psychologists speak about it in order to combat the growing human stress, alienation and superficiality. Though this inner depth is man's innermost reality, what Ira Progoff said is right and significant. "In Freud's victorian age, the awful secret that nobody wanted to talk about was sex. Today the awful secret is spirituality. People today will discuss anything but that inner self."¹ The lack of intimacy with one's self and consequently with others, is what created the loneliest and most alienated people in the world. Hence they do not want to talk about their inner life, but they are actually very much involved in a search for meaning, intimacy and inner peace. This search and process of growth, however, is one from within the human person, essentially an inward process. Any inward looking tendency with a goal of personal growth and inner peace has a contemplative dimension, we maintain. It is this dimension that we want to develop and promote in this article as the new contemplative trend in the religious and secular world of today.

Stories with Insight

A young aspirant wanted to learn to meditate. He went to a guru and requested him to teach the techniques of meditation. Guru was pleased with the enthusiasm of the young man and asked him to meditate on the sound produced by the clapping of his both hands. The disciple started his exercise and did well for a month. After learning his first lesson, he came back to learn the second step. The guru said:

1. Cf. Ira Progoff, *The Practice of Process Meditation: An Intensive Journal Way to Spiritual Experience*, N.Y: Dialogue House Library, 1980; and Progoff, *The Well and Cathedral*, N.Y: Dialogue House Library, 1971.

"Now go and clap with one hand and meditate on the sound that is produced. The young man expressed his surprise and asked how," "Go and do it" was the order of the guru. Coming back to his cave, he started the exercise, but in vain. Desperately he spent hours and days together to produce the sound with one hand. Disappointed he came back to the guru and expressed his inability to meditate. "I cannot produce the sound, then how can I meditate?" he asked. "You are right" said the guru, you cannot produce it. But there is a sound that is not produced either by both hands or by one hand or by anything else. You should learn to listen to that sound. That is the sweet voice residing in the depth of your heart. It is not produced by anything; it is the sound of silence, the voice arising out of the cave of your heart. Meditate on that voice of interiority."

Sankaracharya is the famous philosopher and sannyasin who expounded the advaitic doctrine of Brahman-Atman identity. Once he was walking with his disciples. Then a low-caste man came from the opposite direction. Being a Brahmin, the philosopher cried aloud, 'give me way.' Because in those days a low-caste man was supposed to move away from the path to allow the brahmin to pass through first. Coming straight to the Acharya, the low-caste man said with a surprise: "Should my God in me give way to you? I adore the God who dwells in you." Then he prostrated before the guru and touched his feet. Taken aback for a moment, Sankara said: "I also adore the God in you," and prostrated before the *chandala* in adoration. The *chandala* was aware of the presence of God in man and experienced it, whereas Sankara who taught it theoretically was unaware of the fact.

Once there was a conversation between Brahmā and Siva. "People on earth are enjoying too much; they have a lot of consolation and happiness. We shall not allow that," said Siva. He continued: "We shall bury joy and happiness under the sea, or within the heart of the earth or in the outer space that the humans may not find it again." Brahmā said: "No, they will discover the joy and happiness from all these places. I shall hide and bury it in their hearts. Only a few will find it again. Those who find it, let them enjoy." Smilingly Siva admitted that the human heart is the deepest interior area in man and only those who reach there, will enjoy peace and happiness.

Yājñavalkya, a great ascetic and sage of old, was about to begin the life of a wandering monk. Before setting out, he wanted to settle

with his two wives, his wealth. One of his wives, Maitreyi, who was always fond of divine knowledge and contemplation, doubted the wisdom of acquiring so much wealth, while her husband renounces the same with a different motive. So she asked him: "If now this whole earth filled with wealth were mine, would I thereby be immortal?" Yājñavalkya said: "There is no hope of immortality through wealth." "Then what to do with this enormous wealth which cannot earn immortality? What should I do to be immortal?" Yājñavalkya then expounded the great lesson on interiority and the Atman who resides in the interior depth, and who is the ultimate ground of one's self. Entering into a mood of meditation, Maitreyi learned the lesson of immortality and the secret knowledge of Atman within: "Then O Maitreyi, it is the Atman within, that should be seen, listened to, thought about and deeply meditated upon. It is only by seeing, hearing, thinking about and meditating upon that all is known."²

All the four stories differently refer to an inner divine depth or interiority where one meets the presence and peace of the ultimate. The sound of silence in the heart is the "*anāhata śabda*," the unproduced sound, eternal divine voice, not produced by any object but residing in the depths of one's own heart to be discovered and discerned through meditation. Normally our life is a swimming on the surface level of our existence, tossed to and fro by varying sense-experience and the turbulence of superficiality. We fail to dive deep into the centre of our being, the core of our interiority where there is no agitation and distraction but only peace and divine presence, calmness and refreshing quietude. What the uneducated low-caste man discovered through experience, remains a dream for many of us. What Maitreyi desired and Yajnavalkya explained, is the discovery of the nature of the Atman within. This Atman within, is the object of constant search and contemplation in the Indian tradition. Indian spirituality is essentially a search for the hidden God within and a contemplation of the divine presence in the interiority of our heart. Hence the insight given by all the stories, is the same: the need to discover the inner depth of man and the interiority of his heart where he can enjoy the presence and peace of God.

2. Brahadaranyaka Upanishad, II 4. 4-5.

Contemporary Trends

The complications of living are becoming more and more challenging in contemporary society. People are restless and want to transform their life answering the painful questions grouping up in their minds. They begin to realize now that the answers to these questions and the power to change themselves cannot come from outside but only from within. Hence we want to present two representatives of such thinking . . . Shirley Maclaine's "Going Within - 'A Guide for Inner Transformation,'"³ is a new venture offering keys for enlightening one's inner perceptions. She helped and directed thousands of people to find and enjoy a state of peaceful bliss within themselves. She did it by helping people to go within. "With all I have done in my life, I have come to the conclusion that the most important journey I have taken is the one into myself. Or, it is not the most important journey; it is the only journey."⁴ She advises us, "the longest journey begins with the first step. Perhaps, the longest journey is the journey within. It is never too late to begin."⁵ "One needs to go with concentration, balance, strength and flexibility. One just can't get that on the outside. Hence I became interested in the "going within" process in order to achieve better physical performance and inner results."⁶ This is a classical attempt to reach the inner layers of human existence to find solace and peace. All spiritual techniques such as meditation, concentration and physical awareness - exercises are used to arrive at the specified results. The discovery of the interiority helps people to lead a better life and to become spiritually and physically more effective.

Ira Progoff's *Practice of Process-Meditation and the Intensive Journal* are yet other methods used by modern man to get at the centre of one's being. The meditative points in *The Well and the Cathedral* lead the aspirant into the interiority of his being. "I look within myself - exploring the deep places, reaching inward, to the memories and mysteries of my life."⁸ "We feel the centre of our self, the inner centre of our self. It is neither body nor mind, but a centre

3. S. MacClines, *Going Within*, New York: Bantam Books, 1989.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

5. *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

7. Ira Progoff, *The Well and the Cathedral*.

8. *Ibid.*, 11.7.

point – the inner centre of the self – through this centre point we move inward. Inward and downward through a single straight shaft. It is as though we go deep into the earth but within our self. Through the centre point within us, we go inward, deeper, deeper inward.”⁹

All these inward movements ultimately bring us the feeling of timeless unity with everything else in the heart of hearts. Here we become still and tranquil, even in the midst of all earthly turmoil, praising God and enjoying his presence with everyone and everything else. This is the goal of the inward journey.

The Indian Inwardness¹⁰

From time immemorial, the Indian Sages have experienced the immanent God in the serenity of their inner being. This abode of the Absolute in the perishable human body is named differently as the cave of the heart, inner sanctuary, divine depth, interiority etc. Indian spirituality is a search into this inner sanctuary to discern and experience the Divine there. The story of Yajnavalkya is a powerful beginning to this search. The Upanishads identify the Absolute in the cave of the heart as Atman. It was Sankaracharya who theologically established the identity of the inner self with the eternal Atman. The awakening of the inner self – *ātmabōdha* – is the way to self-realisation and experience of God according to Sankara. To this day, *Bhakti*, *Jnana* and *Yoga* remain as the powerful means of awakening the inner self. Searching and finding God in the heart of human being is, therefore, something unique to Indian thinking right from the beginning. Hence, Indian spirituality is primarily an inward journey in search of one’s own interiority. Ultimately, it is a search for the true nature of the Atman. “Who is the Atman” is a matter of continued research. The Atman must be known. According to Yajnavalkya:

He who dwells in the earth, yet is other than the earth,
whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth,

9. *Ibid.*, III, 4 and 8.

10. See The Internal Way and Encounter with texts and commentary to see the nature of the search and final encounter with the Atman, in Raimundo Panikkar, *The Vedic Experience*, Darton, Longman and Todd, London, 1977, pp. 696-778; also cf. V.F. Vineeth, “World Religions and the Way to Divine Depth,” in *Kristu Jyoti*, VIII, 3 (1990), pp. 70-81.

who controls the earth from within, he is the atman within you, the inner controller, the immortal . . . ¹¹

He who dwells in all beings, yet is other than all beings, whom all beings do not know, whose body is in all beings, who controls all beings from within, he is the atman within you . . . ¹²

He is the unseen seer, the unheard hearer, the unthought thinker, the unknown knower. There is no other seer than he, no other hearer than he, no other thinker than he, no other knower than he . . . He is your atman, the inner controller, the immortal . . . ¹³

The Upanishad sums up the doctrine: He dwells in that space within the heart; the ordainer of all, Lord of all, Ruler of all." According to different schools of thought, this atman is identified with the ultimate self, Brahman, the ultimate foundation and source of all life and happiness. The task of spirituality is to awaken the awareness of the atman within. This *atmabodha* process in silence and concentration and the resultant peace and harmony is in fact contemplation and mystical experience. All the neo-Hindu meditation movements are the off-shoots of this original Hindu *sadhana* and *anubhava*-method of experience. In the name of modernity and newness, it is afraid, the new movements drift away from the original Hindu spirit, namely: "The eternal which resides in the atman should be known. Beyond this, there is nothing that needs to be known."¹⁴

Christian Interiority

The concept of interiority is basic to Christianity. Developed through the Old Testament, it reached its maturation at the incarnation of Christ, where God became Emmanuel, God with us, to be with man in the heart of humanity. The uniqueness of Christian experience consists in the fact of experiencing God as divine and human in the heart of man. Deeply rooted in the Christian vision of man presented by the Bible, this concept and experience run

11. *B. Up.* III, 7. 3.

12. *B. Up.* III, 7. 15.

13. *B. Up.* III, 7. 23.

14. *Sveth.* Up. I. 61. 12.

through the history of Christianity from the beginning to this day. The Bible presents man as the image of God. Man is God's image. He is not God, but His image. He has the power to name and rule over, direct and use the creation. He has been endowed with intellect and will, soul and spirit. Hence he resembles God. God is very much present to him. He is in the presence of God. Hence the core of man's being is divine. He is a member of the divine family. In baptism, a Christian becomes the abode of the spirit, the dwelling place of the Holy Trinity. From then on, the divine presence becomes a concrete reality for a Christian. For him interiority is therefore a state of being, or level of existence wherein he recognises, accepts and realises himself as a living temple of God. Being created in the divine image and endowed with the divine consciousness, a Christian possesses in the cave of his heart a sanctuary where the Trinity dwells and where he can always enter and experience the presence of the divine Trinity.¹⁵

God's sacred presence is meant to be discovered within the inner depths of one's being, in others and in the material universe. Man thus discovers and experiences not only the existence of his inner self but the inter-relationship of the triune God who dwells in the cave of his heart, in the heart of creation and in the heart of humanity.¹⁶ The interior man thus becomes open to himself, to the being of others, of the world and of God. Whereas a man of exteriority is closed in himself, tends to be superficial giving importance to externals and being distracted and dissipated he has only little depths in his thinking. A man of exteriority is governed by external forces, whereas a man of interiority will be a spirit-filled self-director from within. His intimate personal communion with the Trinity is the touch-stone of his interiority. Through this intimate communion with the indwelling God, he unites himself with the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit dwelling in his heart. Thus a Christian with the gift of interiority is constantly in contemplation.

Jesus was a man of interiority, a man of being. In His Sermon on the Mount, he emphasised the need for inner righteousness.¹⁷ The

15. James Aerthayil, ed., *Becoming Disciple – A Training Programme in Gospel Values*, Vol. I, Bangalore: Dharmaram Publications, 1990, pp. 40–70.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 41.

17. Mt. 5.8, 14, 20; 6.3–4, 16–18.

Kingdom of God is within man.¹⁸ Hence he instructed his disciples to enter in to the inner sanctuary of their heart, the chamber where God dwells and pray their in solitude alone to the God who is present there. He also promised his followers that He will make the human heart His dwelling place.¹⁹ Jesus withdrew into the solitude of the desert to pray in preparation for his ministry.²⁰ Through word and example, Jesus thus showed us the value of interiority. And Jesus' interiority was a communion with His Father, with His fellowmen and a deep commitment to his ministry. This is the Christian model of interiority and it is a perfect form of constant contemplation.

Interiority and Contemplation

According to St. Theresa of Avila, the starting point of the spiritual journey is the strong conviction that God dwells in one's soul and the point at the arrival is the perfect union with God in the depth of one's soul. Interiority is our conviction of God's presence within the heart and this conviction naturally leads us to union with him in contemplation. All religions bear testimony to this fact. The Chinese say: "Your treasure house is within. It contains all you will ever need. Use it fully instead of seeking vainly outside yourself."²¹ Seeking the treasure within is a spiritual endeavour which will lead us to the treasure, God himself. Searching and reaching God is certainly a contemplative experience. According to the Granth, "God is in thy heart, yet thou searchest for him in the wilderness." Making God too transcendent and searching him in faraway places has been a tragedy in spiritual life in all religions. Fundamentally, religion is an openness and acceptance of a God who approaches man and reveals Himself to him. Christianity is a classical example. The history of Bible is the history of a God who comes closer to man through a historical process. Its climax is the Incarnation of Christ and the consequent abiding of God in the hearts of the believers. This reality of God's presence in man and man's awareness and response to it is Christian interiority. It is essentially contemplative. Contemplation here is a diving deep into the inner depth, into the presence of God. It is to be with the Emmanuel within. It is simply getting in touch with the cave of one's heart.

18. Lk. 17. 21

19. Jn. 14. 23.

20. Mt. 4. 1-2.

21. As quoted in J. Aerthayil, *Becoming Disciple*, op. cit., p. 53.

Contemplation is to be united to the indwelling Trinity in the core of one's being.

If this is the Christian vision of interiority and contemplation, Hinduism also has contemplative trends in yoga. Pathanjali Yoga is a process of interiorization through physical, mental and spiritual means to arrive at the centre of one's being. The *samadhi* that is achieved at the end is contemplative and mystical in nature, an experience of an identity with the self in the depth of one's being. All these show that interiority-experience is universally contemplative and therefore both the religious and secular man become more and more aware of it today. What St. Augustine said seventeen centuries ago is to be rediscovered by contemporary man in order to become still and relaxed in God. He said:

God is in the midst of the soul.

God has for His throne the conscience of the just.

The throne of God is in the heart of man.