



READ, THINK AND ENJOY



THE SECRET OF WORK

Swami Vivekanand

SWAMI VIVEKANAND (1863 – 1902) is one of the makers of modern India. His first name was Narendranath Dutt, but he became Vivekanand after he joined the Ashram of Ramkrishna Paramhans as his disciple. In his short span of life, he toured extensively in India and abroad and delivered scores of lectures in order to propagate the ideals of his teacher. He was perhaps the first Indian to raise his country and its culture in the eyes of the West. His lectures and writings possess a clarity and force which comes not only from the mastery of the language but also from his total commitment to the cause he was working for.



In the "Secret of Work", an extract from his Karma-yoga, Swami Vivekanand gives a remarkable exposition of the idea of non-attachment to action.

THE SECRET OF WORK

- 1 The miseries of the world cannot be cured by physical help only. Until man's natures change, his physical needs will always arise, and miseries will always be felt, and no amount of physical help will remove them completely. The only solution of the problem is to make the mankind pure. Ignorance is the mother of evil, and of all the misery we see. Let man have light, let them be pure and spiritually strong and educated; then alone will misery cease in the world. We may change every house of the country in a charitable asylum; we may fill the land with hospitals, but human misery will continue until man's character changes.
- 2 We read in *Bhagavad-Gita* again and again that we must all work incessantly. We cannot do any work which will not do some good somewhere; there cannot also be any work which cause some harm somewhere. Every work must necessarily be a mixture of good and evil; yet we are commanded to work incessantly. Good and evil will both have their consequences. Good action will entail upon us a good effect; bad

action bad. But good and bad both forge fetters for the soul. The solution reached in the *Geeta* in regard to this cramping influence of work is that if we do not attach ourselves to it, it will not hold our soul in bondage.

3 This is the one central idea in the *Geeta*; work incessantly, but be not attached to it. To use the simile of a lake for the mind, no ripple or wave that rises in it dies out entirely, but it leaves a mark and there is a possibility of that wave coming out again. This mark, with the possibility of the wave reappearing, is what is called *Samskara*. Every work that we do, every movement of the body, every thought that we think, leaves such an impression on mind, and even when the impressions are not obvious on the surface, they work in the subconscious region of the brain. What we are is determined every moment by the sum total of impressions on the mind. What I am just at this moment is the effect of the sum total of all the impressions of my past life. This is really what is meant by character; each man's character is determined by the sum total of these impressions. If good impressions prevail, the character becomes good; if bad, it becomes bad. If a man continuously hears bad words, thinks bad thoughts, does bad acts, his mind will be full of bad impressions; and they will influence his thought and work without his being conscious of the fact. These bad impressions will always be working, and their resultant must be evil, and the man will be a bad man: he cannot help it. The sum total of these impressions in him will create a strong motive power for doing bad acts. He will be like a machine in the hands of his impressions, and they will force him to do evil. Similarly, if a man thinks good thoughts and does good work, the sum total of their impressions will be good; and this, in a similar manner, will force him to do even in spite of himself. When a man has done so much good works and thought so many good thoughts that there is an irresistible tendency in him to do well in spite of himself and even if he wishes to do evil, his mind, as the sum total of his tendencies, will not allow him to do so; these will hold him back. When such is the case, the man's good character is said to be established.

4 As the tortoise tucks its feet and head inside the shell and will not come out even though you may break the shell into pieces, even so the character of the man who has control over his motives and organs is unchallengeably established. He controls his own inner forces, and nothing can draw them out against his will. By this continuous reflex of good impressions moving over the surface of the mind, the tendency to do good becomes strong, and in consequence we are able to control the *Indriyas* (sense - organs, the nerve - centres). Thus alone is the character formed, and only a man of character can get at truth. Such a man is safe for ever; he cannot do any evil. You may place him in any company, but there will be no danger for him. There is a still higher state than having this good tendency, and that is the desire for liberation. Liberation

means full freedom – freedom from the bondage of evil. A golden chain is as much a chain as an iron one. There is a thorn in my finger, and I use another to take the first one out, and when I have taken it out, I throw both of them aside. I have no necessity for keeping the second thorn, because it is a thorn after all. So bad tendencies are to be counteracted by good ones, and bad impressions on the mind should be removed by the fresh waves of good ones, until all that is evil almost disappears, or is subdued and held in control in a corner of the mind; but after that the good tendencies also have to be removed. Thus the 'attached' becomes the 'unattached'. Work, but let not the action or the thought produce a deep impression on your mind. Let the ripples come and go, let great actions proceed from the muscles and the brain, but let them not make any deep impression on the soul.

- 5 How can this be done? We see that the impression of every action to which we get attached remains. I may meet hundreds of persons during the day, and among them meet also one whom I love; but when I retire at night and try to think of all the faces I saw, only one face comes before the mind's eye – the face which I saw perhaps only for one minute and which I loved, all the others have vanished. Owing to my attachment to a particular person, his face caused a deeper impression on my mind than those of the others. But physically, the impressions have all been the same.
- 6 Therefore be 'unattached', yet the brain – centres work; work incessantly, but let not the mind be affected. Work as if you were a stranger in this land, a sojourner; work incessantly, but do not blind yourselves; bondage is terrible. This world is not our habitation; it is only one of the many stages through which we are passing.
- 7 The gist of this teaching is that you should work like a master and not like a slave; work incessantly, but do not do slave's work. Do you not see how everybody works? Nobody can be altogether at rest; ninety nine per cent of men work like slaves, and the result is misery; it is all selfish work. But work with freedom, inspired by love! There is no true love possible in the slave. If you buy a slave and tie him down in chains and make him work for you, he will work like a drudge, but there will be no love in him. So when we ourselves work for the things of the world as slaves, there can be no love in us, and work is not true work. This is true of work done for relatives and friends, and is true of work done for ourselves. Selfish work is slave's work; and here is a test. Every act of loving brings happiness; there is no act of love which does not bring peace and happiness; there is no act of love which does not bring peace and blessedness in its train. Real existence, real knowledge, and real love are eternally connected with one another, the three in one; where one of them is, the others also must be; they are the three aspects of the One without a second – the Existence – Knowledge – Bliss.

- 8 Krishna says: 'Look at me, Arjuna! If I stop from work for one moment, the whole universe will decay. I have nothing to gain from work: I am the one Lord, but why do I work? Because I love the world.' God is unattached because He loves; real love makes us unattached.
- 9 To attain this unattachment is almost a life's work, but as soon as we have reached this point, we have attained the goal of love and become free; the bondage of nature falls from us, and we see nature as she is.
- 10 Do you ask anything of your children in return for what you have given them? It is your duty to work for them, and there the matter ends. In whatever you do for a particular person, a city, or a state, assume the same attitude towards it as you have towards your children – expect nothing in return. If you can invariably take the position of a giver, in which everything given by you is a free offering to the world, without any thought of return, your work will bring you no attachment. Attachment comes only where we expect return.
- 11 If working like slaves results in selfish attachment, working as masters of our own mind gives rise to the bliss of non – attachment. We often talk of right and justice, but we find that in this world right and justice are mere baby's talks. There are two things which guide the conduct of men: might and mercy. The exercise of might is invariably an act of selfishness. All men and women try to make the most of whatever power or advantage they have. Mercy is heavenly, to be good, we have all to be merciful. Even justice and right should stand on mercy. All thought of obtaining return for the work we do hinders our spiritual progress; nay, in the end it brings misery. There is another way in which this idea of mercy and selfless charity can be put into practice; that is, by looking upon work as 'worship'. Here we give up all the fruits of our work unto the Lord, and, worshipping Him thus, we have no right to expect anything from mankind for what we do. The Lord Himself works incessantly and is ever without attachment. Just as water cannot wet the lotus leaf, so work cannot bind the unselfish man by giving rise to attachment to results. The selfless and unattached man may live in the very heart of a crowded and sinful city, yet he will not be touched by sin.
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