

### 33. Freedom and Discipline

Freedom! a word to conjure with! a word most widely used—rather misused! What is freedom? A bird imprisoned in a cage is let loose, we say it has become a free bird; it has attained freedom from the cage that held it captive. But has it attained real freedom? Who can say! Freedom can only be relative in this manifested world; absolute freedom is only a metaphysical abstraction. When we speak of freedom, three ideas are involved in it. Working backward, first we attain freedom; then, from what: from something which obstructed that freedom, something which cribbed us, limited our function and held us in bondage. Then thirdly, at an earlier stage we were free, unlimited, unconditioned, we enjoyed full freedom. These three ideas—attainment of freedom, the fetters from which we freed ourselves and the initial freedom which we enjoyed before we lost it—are all implied here. A fetter or bondage will have no significance unless there is in the first place a freedom which is so fettered.

We are told that in the Divine Bosom we are free, unfettered, unconditioned in the enjoyment of absolute Bliss. We have always been free in that condition. But we, as human monads, units of Divine Consciousness, chose to descend from that free blissful state and get entangled in matter down here. We need not now discuss the question "Why should we have come down at all?" Nor is it fruitful to discuss the allied question "Why should God create this Universe and send us down here?" Anyway we are here, limited and conditioned all around. Something in us urges us to seek freedom. The faint memory of our Divine nature of Bliss and Freedom spurs us, sometimes faintly and at other times insistently, to reach our true state in the Bosom of the Lord; but with this difference; originally we enjoyed Divine Freedom and Bliss only in

the Bosom of the Lord and were helpless when entangled in matter down here, but as a result of this entanglement and constant struggle to get freed from the entanglement we slowly attained mastery over matter and realised our Divinity, not only in the Divine World which is our true home but also in the world of matter. There is a significant word used in Visishtadvaita literature in this connection. In the Divine world *Paramatma* and *Jivatma* are one, but there is this difference; the Lord has "Lakshmi-patyam" which the human soul as such has not. *Lakshmi-patyam* means literally "Lordship of Lakshmi", that is mastery over prakriti, mastery over matter. This mastery is the prize we win as a result of the long evolutionary struggle.

So man ever seeks to be free, to be his true self. But he finds he is fettered all around. By "struggle" and experience gained as a result of that struggle he works towards and finally achieves his freedom.

Freedom from what? Freedom from fear? Freedom from want? Freedom from pain and sorrow? Yes, all this **and more. On ultimate analysis all these fetters which bind us and from which we seek to get freed will be found to get reduced to one fundamental fetter, the fetter that prevents us from being what we really are, that stands in the way of our manifesting the Divine essence in us. To this fetter we may give two names according to the viewpoint we take. We are essentially Gods but have forgotten our Divinity; we are angels, but fallen angels, having forgotten our angelic nature. It is the lack of knowledge of our own Divinity—*Avidya*—that is the one fundamental basic fetter; and all other fetters like fear, pain, want are only various expressions of the basic fetter *avidya*, ignorance. Lord Buddha laid great emphasis on this *avidya* as the root of all human misery.**

Viewed from another angle this fetter will appear as the fetter of separateness. When one realises his Divinity

he realises the essential Unity of all Life; and so to him there can be no sense of separateness. He is one with God and so with all life. Ignorance and separateness are only two facets of the same veil which hides Reality from us. True freedom is freedom from the sense of separateness. To put it in a positive way real freedom consists in realising the essential Unity of everything that is. Sri Sankaracharya summed it up in one sentence:

“The state of non-separateness is alone Moksha.”

In our daily life absolute freedom is an impossibility. We have absolute inner freedom undoubtedly, but this freedom expresses itself outwardly as discipline. Freedom and discipline are apparently contradictory, but this contradiction is only superficial; they can go together; in fact they co-exist in the case of advanced human beings.

Nowadays, people have fantastic ideas about freedom. Now that India has attained “freedom” people think that they are free to do what they like, that none can curb their liberty. In other words they mistake freedom for license. If everyone feels free to do what he likes there will be utter chaos and confusion, every one will jostle against every other; it will be worse than the law of the jungle. This is so obvious and yet we see this misguided idea of freedom in evidence everywhere. People are losing respect for law and order because they think that law restricts their freedom and so can be disregarded. Even traffic rules are ignored because people think that the public road is all for them forgetting that the other person who uses that road has as much liberty to think that the road belongs entirely to him. Cross road cycle conferences have become a common feature in our cities. A number of cyclists gather at a road junction and go on talking, they would not give way to a car which has to pass that way; they expect the driver to stop till their conversation

is over or to somehow manoeuvre the car across the junction. This is their understanding of freedom! Is it not obvious that my freedom is conditioned by my neighbour's freedom? In fact my freedom is conditioned by the freedoms of all the people around me. To recognise this and live a life of amity, understanding and good will is elementary commonsense.

What distinguishes the man from the beast is that he recognises this universal interdependence and orders his life accordingly. He establishes conventions, mutual understanding, laws of conduct for the welfare of the society, thereby imposing restrictions on himself for the benefit of the whole. This is real *Dharma*. The more a person or a society advances in civilisation and culture the greater these mutual restrictions. The individual willingly accepts self-imposed restrictions for the sake of the progress of the society; he makes laws and statutes to which he subjects himself. We are sure a cultured person will not do this, that and the other thing, if these go against the mutual understanding he has established with others. In other words he lives a life of discipline. This does not interfere with his inner freedom; in fact he uses his freedom to impose these restrictions on his own freedom. The highest freedom is the freedom to surrender our own personal freedom. If we are not free to surrender our freedom can we be said to be really free?

A little thought will show that the restriction of our freedom implied in any discipline is only apparent. It is really just the other way. Some thing attracts me, I am tempted to obtain and enjoy it. I am free to enjoy it and so I strive to get it for my enjoyment. I know that it is not helpful to my progress and still I seek the enjoyment of it. Another person, seeing that the object bars his progress, resists the temptation, in other words, imposes a restriction on himself not to yield to that temptation—

this is really discipline. Which of these has really exercised his freedom? **In one case I have become a slave to the desire, in the other case he has resisted the temptation of the object to enslave him.** It is obvious that the disciplined man has exercised his freedom while the undisciplined person has surrendered his freedom. Disciplined freedom alone is real freedom. When people talk about discipline as an inhibition curtailing one's freedom they miss an important psychological fact. Ordered outer discipline develops an inner strength which alone can ensure our being able to resist the allurements which all the time try to ensnare us, and thus makes for real freedom.