

# UNLOCKING THE SOUL



## Spirituality is the life-breath of any individual, organisation, society and system.

**W**ith the evolution of spiritual consciousness, the interaction with the world and our relationships with others become like a sport.

Swami Vivekananda offered us one of the most insightful yet practical interpretations of God or spirituality. Speaking in the West, he said: “Ancient religion says that a man who does not believe in God is an atheist. Modern religion proclaims that a man who does not believe in his own self is an atheist.”

### Glory of the Self

The foundation of wisdom of this volcanic monk can be traced to the messages of the *Upanishads*, which had always sung the glory of the Self. The presiding deity in the *Bhagavad Gita*, that crystallised wisdom of the entire *Upanishads*, is not the Lord but the Self in its resplendent glory. The Lord acted

only as the inspirational force and power that would help Arjuna to rise beyond the pettiness as well as the shackles of the lower self and discover the Higher Self in its full glory.

The locus of this pristine super-ordinate identity, the Higher Self, is lodged right at the centre of our hearts: “*Isvara sarvabhutanam hriddese Arjuna stishthathi*”. This also resonates with the inspirational dictum from the Bible: “The Kingdom of Heaven is within.”

### Essence of Spirituality

What then is the essence of spirituality or spiritual pursuit? The Latin word *spiritus* connotes breath. Breath is the most fundamental and universal rhythm in our system that keeps us alive. We cease to live when we cease to breathe. Thus, spirituality is the life-breath of any individual, organisation, society, system and the planet at

large. It keeps any system vibrant, dynamic and ever flowing and enables us to have the flavour of every moment of our existence.

When the flow of breath is harmonious, we feel the dynamic balance in our life and enjoy the drama of existence in its fullness and depth. When the harmony goes out of balance and the consciousness of breath is lost, our life, individual as well as collective, sinks into the abyss of dullness, monotony and oblivion.

A sense of lack of purpose and direction then keeps haunting us until we find our anchorage in the Kingdom of Heaven within us. Spirituality is not merely an end point or a destination. It is the entire journey. Tagore put it very succinctly in verse:

“My pilgrimage is not at the end of my road

My temples are there on both sides of my pathway.”

## **Beginning of Pilgrimage**

Where does this pilgrimage or journey begin? It begins with the individual self. Each one of us has a certain notion of our own self. It is created by our perception of the body, the sense organs, the mind and the intellect.

Usually, our experience of the self is limited within the body-mind frame and we are often unaware of the fire in our heart and the flame of the spirit. The spirit is always soaring and pining for expression through expansion.

This is the expansion of our consciousness that begins from our body but slowly reaches out to everything around us and finally unites with the world and universe at large. The spiritual journey begins to take off when we cross the limits of the body and start reaching out to others by way of expansion of our consciousness.

The process of evolution of consciousness can be likened to the expanding of a sphere along concentric spheres with increasing diameters. It progressively covers and includes the family, the organisation, the society, the nation and finally the planet and the whole cosmos.

When it is limited to the domain of the body and the objects of proximate concern, the human being is called selfish, that is, concerned merely with his physical or material self and the immediate surroundings.

The more it accommodates others in its fold, the more its own petty concerns pale into insignificance. Finally when the whole universe is engulfed in this process of evolution of consciousness, others find in him a completely unselfish person.

Upon reaching such a stage, Swami Vivekananda had exhorted: "Never forget the glory of human nature. We are the greatest gods that ever were or ever will be. Christs and Buddhas are just waves in this boundless ocean which I AM!"

## Implication of Spiritual Journey

What is the implication of this spiritual journey for society?

Firstly, it makes society a vibrant and throbbing entity that is always on the path of evolution. Like breath, it brings fresh air and new light to society, so that it can come out of the stagnant dragging force of dead habits and fossilised ideas and thoughts of the past while retaining its effulgent glory.

It opens up new avenues of experimenting with our innate creative energy and finds novel and pragmatic ways of resolving

our pressing problems that apparently had created an impasse in our personal and social spaces of development.

To use a current phrase, it shows us multiple ways of how to "think out of the box". Spirituality is not to be confused with religious sectarianism, bigotry and fundamentalism that fiercely champions the cause of "the only one way".

Spirituality in essence embraces different pathways of liberating the self so that we may reach the zone of enlightenment. Enlightenment is not a sudden flash of light from above.

An old poem will make it clear. "Before enlightenment, mountains are mountains and rivers are rivers, During enlightenment, mountains are no more mountains and rivers are no more rivers; After enlightenment, mountains are once again mountains and rivers are once again rivers."

Then what has changed? It is the way we look at the world and ourselves too.

## Deeper Questions

Another important aspect of our spiritual culture is

encouraging the art of questioning and dialogue. One may recall the words of Socrates: “An unexamined life is not worth living.” Such examination begins with asking the deeper questions that may often be uneasy.

It may be mentioned here that all the *Upanishads* have been composed in a mode of conversation between Teacher-Student or Master-Disciple. Profound subjects on philosophy and life in general have been raised here through questions from the Student Seeker and the answers are offered by the Master.

The text of the *Bhagavad Gita* is a conversation between the disciple Arjuna and his Master. All these conversations are logically structured and systematically evolving, taking the seeker gradually up along the progressively unfolding layers of consciousness to the final rendezvous.

When the societal consciousness also evolves in a similar fashion, with increasing clarity and depth, the deadwood is cleared and it moves ahead towards becoming an enlightened society.

## Concern for Others

Thirdly, with human consciousness growing beyond the small self and then flowing into others, the constricted notions of consumption, self-aggrandisement, mindless competition gradually give way to concern for others, welfare of the many and an individual as well as collective quest for something higher and deeper in life and world beyond our narrow limitations of a life closed and tight.

Fourthly, at a macro level, with our growing connectivity with the planet and the cosmos in heart and spirit, there is a natural flowering of ecological sensitivity within us. This is qualitatively different from the number crunching exercises that experts often engage in for generating environmental awareness. This is more a matter of feeling from the heart as one is in communion with Nature.

And finally, with the evolution of spiritual consciousness, the interaction with the world and our relationships with others becomes like a sport that we begin to play as we are increasingly becoming aware that the other is essentially

identical to us at the core but there is difference, or rather diversity in outer forms like body, mind, intellect, senses and so on.

This reduces the chances of violence and strife and can create a climate of peace and amity through mutual understanding and cooperation. Above all, like a game, we all begin to enjoy the drama of life while playing all the while with “myself only” in essence but apparently with “the others” like a child!

I end with Sri Aurobindo's beautiful and vivid depiction of God: “What is God after all? An eternal child playing an eternal game in an eternal garden!” 🕯️

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