

Karmayoga

WE HAVE spoken of Karmayoga as the application of Vedanta and Yoga to life. To many who take their knowledge of Hinduism secondhand this may seem a doubtful definition. It is ordinarily supposed by “practical” minds that Vedanta as a guide to life and Yoga as a method of spiritual communion are dangerous things which lead men away from action to abstraction. We leave aside those who regard all such beliefs as mysticism, self-delusion or imposture; but even those who reverence and believe in the high things of Hinduism have the impression that one must remove oneself from a full human activity in order to live the spiritual life. Yet the spiritual life finds its most potent expression in the man who lives the ordinary life of men in the strength of the Yoga and under the law of the Vedanta. It is by such a union of the inner life and the outer that mankind will eventually be lifted up and become mighty and divine. It is a delusion to suppose that Vedanta contains no inspiration to life, no rule of conduct, and is purely metaphysical and quietistic. On the contrary, the highest morality of which humanity is capable finds its one perfect basis and justification in the teachings of the Upanishads and the Gita. The characteristic doctrines of the Gita are nothing if they are not a law of life, a *dharmā*, and even the most transcendental aspirations of the Vedanta presuppose a preparation in life, for it is only through life that one can reach to immortality. The opposite opinion is due to certain tendencies which have bulked large in the history and temperament of our race. The ultimate goal of our religion is emancipation from the bondage of material Nature and freedom from individual rebirth, and certain souls, among the highest we have known, have been drawn by the attraction of the final hush and purity to dissociate themselves from life and bodily action in order more swiftly and easily to reach the goal. Standing like

mountain-peaks above the common level, they have attracted all eyes and fixed this withdrawal as the highest and most commanding Hindu ideal. It is for this reason that Sri Krishna laid so much stress on the perfect Yogin's cleaving to life and human activity even after his need of them was over, lest the people, following, as they always do, the example of their best, turn away from their *dharma* and bastard confusion reign. The ideal Yogin is no withdrawn and pent-up force, but ever engaged in doing good to all creatures, either by the flood of the divine energy that he pours on the world or by himself standing in the front of humanity, its leader in the march and the battle, but unbound by his works and superior to his personality.

Moreover the word Vedanta is usually identified with the strict Monism and the peculiar theory of Maya established by the lofty and ascetic intellect of Shankara. But it is the Upanishads themselves and not Shankara's writings, the text and not the commentary, that are the authoritative Scripture of the Vedantin. Shankara's, great and temporarily satisfying as it was, is still only one synthesis and interpretation of the Upanishads. There have been others in the past which have powerfully influenced the national mind and there is no reason why there should not be a yet more perfect synthesis in the future. It is such a synthesis, embracing all life and action in its scope, that the teachings of Sri Ramakrishna and Vivekananda have been preparing. What is dimly beginning now is a repetition on a wider stage of what happened once before in India, more rapidly but to smaller issues, when the Buddha lived and taught his philosophy and ethics to the Aryan nations. Then as now a mighty spirit, it matters not whether Avatar or Vibhuti, the full expression of God in man or a great outpouring of the divine energy, came down among men and brought into their daily life and practice the force and impulse of utter spirituality. And this time it is the full light and not a noble part, unlike Buddhism which, expressing Vedantic morality, yet ignored a fundamental reality of Vedanta and was therefore expelled from its prime seat and cradle. The material result was then what it will be now, a great political, moral and social revolution which made India

the Guru of the nations and carried the light she had to give all over the civilised world, moulding ideas and creating forms which are still extant and a living force. Already the Vedanta and the Yoga have exceeded their Asiatic limit and are beginning to influence the life and practice of America and Europe; and they have long been filtering into Western thought by a hundred indirect channels. But these are small rivers and underground streams. The world waits for the rising of India to receive the divine flood in its fullness.

Yoga is communion with God for knowledge, for love or for work. The Yogin puts himself into direct relation with that which is omniscient and omnipotent within man and without him. He is in tune with the infinite, he becomes a channel for the strength of God to pour itself out upon the world whether through calm benevolence or active beneficence. When a man rises by putting from him the slough of self and lives for others and in the joys and sorrows of others; — when he works perfectly and with love and zeal, but casts away the anxiety for results and is neither eager for victory nor afraid of defeat; — when he devotes all his works to God and lays every thought, word and deed as an offering on the divine altar; — when he gets rid of fear and hatred, repulsion and disgust and attachment, and works like the forces of Nature, unhesitating, unceasing, inevitably, perfectly; — when he rises above the thought that he is the body or the heart or the mind or the sum of these and finds his own and true self; — when he becomes aware of his immortality and the unreality of death; — when he experiences the advent of knowledge and feels himself passive and the divine force working unresisted through his mind, his speech, his senses and all his organs; — when having thus abandoned whatever he is, does or has to the Lord of all, the Lover and Helper of mankind, he dwells permanently in Him and becomes incapable of grief, disquiet or false excitement, — that is Yoga. Pranayam and Asans, concentration, worship, ceremonies, religious practice are not themselves Yoga but only a means towards Yoga. Nor is Yoga a difficult or dangerous path, it is safe and easy to all who take refuge with the Inner Guide and Teacher. All men are potentially capable of it, for there is no

man who has not strength or faith or love developed or latent in his nature, and any one of these is a sufficient staff for the Yogin. All cannot, indeed, reach in a single life the highest in this path, but all can go forward; and in proportion as a man advances he gets peace, strength and joy. And even a little of this *dharma* delivers man or nation out of great fear.

स्वल्पमप्यस्य धर्मस्य त्रायते महतो भयात् ।

It is an error, we repeat, to think that spirituality is a thing divorced from life. "Abandon all" says the Isha Upanishad "*that thou mayst enjoy all*, neither covet any man's possession. But verily *do thy deeds in this world* and wish to live thy hundred years; no other way is given thee than this to escape the bondage of thy acts." It is an error to think that the heights of religion are above the struggles of this world. The recurrent cry of Sri Krishna to Arjuna insists on the struggle; "Fight and overthrow thy opponents!" "Remember me and fight!" "Give up all thy works to me with a heart full of spirituality, and free from craving, free from selfish claims, fight! let the fever of thy soul pass from thee." It is an error to imagine that even when the religious man does not give up his ordinary activities, he yet becomes too sattwic, too saintly, too loving or too passionless for the rough work of the world. Nothing can be more extreme and uncompromising than the reply of the Gita in the opposite sense, "Whosoever has his temperament purged from egoism, whosoever suffers not his soul to receive the impress of the deed, though he slay the whole world yet he slays not and is not bound." The Charioteer of Kurukshetra driving the car of Arjuna over that field of ruin is the image and description of Karmayoga; for the body is the chariot and the senses are the horses of the driving and it is through the bloodstained and mire-sunk ways of the world that Sri Krishna pilots the soul of man to Vaicuntha.