

## **THOUGHTS FOR THE SEASON**

### **Swami Bodhananda**

#### **The Modern Debate**

A raging debate is going on in the spiritual and religious circles regarding the relationship between morality and spirituality. Could there be true spiritual progress and experience without moral discipline? Some people aver that spirituality, like science, is value neutral, that one can gain spiritual *siddhis* without being a moral person. But this argument goes against the teachings of all great masters.

The two pillars of morality are honesty and self-control. Experience without self-discipline is delusion leading to madness; and self-discipline without experience is mind-body torture leading to perversions. Spiritual experience consists in abiding in one's true nature as happiness and radiating such happiness in all one's interactions. This experience makes one fearless, loving, and a master of both one's desires and work. A spiritually-awakened person lives in the infinite Spirit, mindful of an endless parade of body-mind events. The spiritual experience is variously called *Samadhi, Sayujyam, Kaivalyam, Moksham* and *Nirvanam*.

#### **New-Ageism**

A few new-age spiritualists argue that moral rectitude has nothing to do with spiritual practices and experience. Findings from recent research also claim that there is no connection between emotional intelligence and spiritual attainment. (One has to question the researcher's concept of spirituality). A few fundamentalists again suggest that just as the discoveries of science are not dependent upon or evaluated on the basis of the scientist's moral life, so too an individual's spiritual attainment doesn't depend upon his/her moral life. Accordingly they assert that spirituality is beyond the relative categories of "good" and "bad." These amoralists argue that "Spirit is all-inclusive and abhors nothing." Spirit includes life and death, morality and immorality, light and darkness, bondage and liberation and hell and heaven. In misapprehended justification, they quote Krishna's statement in the *Gita*: "The spirit neither kills nor is killed."

The new-age enthusiast's creed claims that "by combining good and bad, the moral and immoral, the spirit finds its full realization. They assert that the unconscious must unravel and empty its contents, letting it all hang out, without fear of, and without regard to, the

consequences. Thus, the spirit blossoms in full splendor when the mind has completely evaporated.” “Drop the mind and reach God,” is their *mantra*. “One can reach God through either the path of morality or the path of immorality,” proclaim the new-age tenets. Left-handed *tantra* uses all proscribed methods – liquor, meat-eating, and free sex – along with *mantra* and *mudra* (hand gestures) to awaken libidinal energy and to “unite with Shiva.” They advocate dropping out of the “hypocritical” cultural confines along with all its suffocating superimpositions. Their Shiva is an “Erotic Ascetic.”

With this heady mix of Freudian libido and tantric free sex, new-age spiritual formulations are convinced of the superiority of their philosophy. They are ready to flout all canons of law and civil behavior. They are not even adverse to using drugs in their so-called spiritual practices! Does freedom from social fetters imply such sexual anarchy and lawless behavior in the name of category-breaking spiritual experimentation?

For unconditional freedom, the late Rajneesh, a charismatic new age *guru*, advocated uninhibited gratification in its variety of forms (e.g., free sex, drugs, abusive language etc.). In the process he acquired a huge following and a larger number of Rolls Royce’s, diamonds, silk garments and gold crowns. At least Rajneesh was brutally honest and did not use the façade of religion and social service to cover up his sizzling teachings. But for the later variety of fake spiritual leaders and teachers religious organizations and social services meant billions of dollars in bank balance. Religious fundamentalism and cultural arrogance that spurn reason and commonsense give added force and justification for all kinds of social and sexual perversions, among them the mistreatment of women in the name of religious freedom and cultural uniqueness. Is the heady mix of free sex, money, a crazed following, and publicity worth giving up of one’s sanity, moral sensitivity and social responsibilities?

A market for this form of new-age spirituality will always exist. If a market exists, there will definitely be abundant supply. The market doesn’t care whether one is a saint or a scoundrel – so long as there is wealth to be gained and enjoyed.

### Genuine Seekers’ Doubts

Genuine seekers are bewildered. What is the truth? Is spiritual experience merely a flowering of uninhibited libidinal energy? Are society, rules of conduct, moral behavior, rationality, relationships and social responsibilities, unnecessary and an unacceptable imposition on the

spirit? If so, are all forms of discipline and authority based on suppressed libido and sexuality? And can one by free sexual expression remove those superimpositions and live eternally in the spirit? Is self-discipline and moral discrimination actually a hindrance to spiritual flowering?

## What the Scriptures Have to Say

All our scriptures prescribe two paths for spiritual realization: 1) the path of celibacy and contemplation (*nivritti marga*); 2) and the path of activity and moderate sex in the confines of marriage and family (*pravritti marga*).

Scriptures tell us that sexual discipline is central to spiritual progress. Sexual profligacy, by whatever name it is practiced and justified, will lead to physical, mental and spiritual dissipation and loss of discrimination, leading to wrong judgment and perilous action.

In the path of celibacy, the seeker lives in association with a *guru*, as both engage in daily study, discussion and contemplation, leading a life of austerity, service and transparency. As an accomplished or enlightened person, he/she may spend time guiding other seekers. Celibacy is sometimes like walking on the razor's edge. The tension of sexual control is at times acute and distressing. Perverse thoughts may lash the mind. To direct the mind toward positive pursuits and to sublimate sexual energy, the celibate engages in selfless, constructive work for uplift of humanity.

Ashtavakra, the four Kumaras, Narada, Hanuman and Suka (all mythical characters) were believed to have lived life of celibacy. Hindu *swamis*, Jain *munis*, Buddhist *bikkus* and catholic priests are supposedly living a life of celibacy, austerity, and service. Dietary discipline, *yoga* practices, *pranayama*, and *mantra* chanting all help to uplift sexual energy. The celibate ought to live a dynamic life of self-giving service. He /she swims against the current of hormonal rush and the biology of evolution. The journey is one of spirit over mind and matter – an apparently impossible ideal. Many are the seekers who have fallen on the uphill path to celibacy. But there also are a few, like Adi Shankaracharya and Swami Vivekananda, who attained the highest state of spiritual bliss and fulfillment through the strict practice of celibacy.

The path of activity and disciplined sex in the framework of marriage is easier but, again, full of perils. The distractions of family life, the nagging spouse and quarrelsome children, jealous relatives and nosy neighbors, and financial woes together with career blues, all bedevil

the householder's life. Totally lost in his/her daily struggles, the family person loses sight of the supreme goal of spiritual realization. The maddening pursuit of power, money, fame and gratification sucks the spirit out of his/her life. Living in constant fear, the householder seeks refuge in superstitious beliefs and quack practitioners. The light of reason vanishes from his/her life.

To such a bewildered and confused householder Shankara directs his *dharma* teaching: "chant the name of God; give up the mad pursuit of wealth and fame; give up pride; life is brief and uncertain, so make best use of it; study the *Vedas* daily; let work be worship; seek the company of good people; meditate on the spiritual identity statements (*mahavakyas*) of *Upanishads*; abide in the blissful Self; be self sufficient, loving to all, and always remain detached."

Manu prescribes the five sacrifices for the family person for the purpose of self-purification and spiritual progress. These five sacrifices are: 1) daily study of the *Vedas*; 2) propitiating ancestors; 3) honoring guests; 4) planting trees (vegetation) and feeding animals; and, 5) daily performance of the fire ritual. The householder's life is full of duties and responsibilities, and he/she is asked to perform them without personal expectations and as an offering to God. The practitioner's final reward is peace, prosperity and Self-realization.

The scriptures proscribe sex, drugs, deception, and violence perpetrated in any form in the name of spirituality and/or spiritual practices. The Tantrics tried sex; the Hippies tried drugs; and, the *kapalikas* tried violence in the name of spirituality. All of them were proven to be erroneous methods to attain the supreme spiritual goal.

Sex, drug and violence offer the practitioner an instant high, an altered state of consciousness, and an elevated non-dual experience. But those contrived experiences were found to be momentary and dissipative. People who became attracted to such practices were (or became, as a result) depressive and/or perverted. Since a large number of such people exist in any community, oftentimes among the rich and powerful, we find that, like the attraction for pornography, the attraction for base and perverted spirituality will continue.

Patanjali prescribes ten moral disciplines as a preparation for spiritual practices. These disciplines include truthfulness, celibacy and non-possessiveness. Similarly, the *Bhagavad Gita* prescribes 20 values, such as humility, self-control, honesty, and indifference to pleasure, as

preconditions for spiritual practices. The *Upanishads* talk of “discriminating detachment” and “celibacy” as the ground for spiritual flowering.

## **Spiritual Knowledge and Self-Discipline**

Hence, sincere seekers have to be doubly vigilant against charlatan teachers promoting false teachings that minimize the importance of self-discipline and character in spiritual advancement. *Knowledge without discipline is lame, and discipline without knowledge is blind.* Knowledge without discipline can also lead to empty sound-bytes, specious arguments, secretiveness, and anti-social behavior.

While it is a great blessing to associate with a competent and honest spiritual teacher, well-read in the Scriptures, well-established in practice, and honest in his/her dealings, the greater blessing is to be an honest, sincere, vigilant, and incorruptible seeker.

Love,  
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