

A SPIRITUALITY OF LIBERATION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE OF INDIA

Joaquim D'Souza, SDB

1. Are Young People Interested in Spirituality?

Carl Jung is said to have once remarked that spirituality really begins at forty. I suppose by that he meant that to take spirituality seriously one had to have a certain experience of life, and a certain maturity that only comes with age. Are young people seriously interested in spirituality? The question is a moot one. The first impression that young people give us is that they are hardly interested. All their attention and interests seem riveted on the here and the now. Whatever is dazzling, glamorous and novel catches their fancy. Whatever calls for sustained effort, discipline and hard work seems to put them off. Spirituality and young people seem to be at opposite poles. At most, some of them might be curious enough to dabble with it for a time in order to experience the kick they can get out of it. As the caption on a T-shirt of a youth says: "I'll try anything once". This sums up the spirit and the mood of most young people today.

First impressions however are not always correct. There is another side to young people than the one that is immediately apparent. If we live with young people for some time we soon discover in them an earnestness, an authenticity, a generosity and an idealism that is truly amazing. These characteristic traits of the young are the stuff of which a spirituality is made. Perhaps it is not spirituality as such that

turns young people off, but a certain kind of spirituality that alas is all too common—an other-worldly, life-denying, smug, complacent type that takes away the joy of living. Young people have no use for such a caricature of spirituality and reject it outright. And with the bathwater out goes the baby!

2. What Kind of Spirituality?

Another type of spirituality is needed if young people are to feel drawn to it and assume it as a way of life. Its essential features will have to be spelled out later, but here and now we must examine what kind of spirituality will make sense to young people of India today.

It must be a spirituality that is relevant to the life of the young in all its concreteness and earthiness. Young people are at the threshold of life and want to live it to the full. A spirituality that would appeal to them would have to be life-affirming, joyous, creative and dynamic. It must promote and enhance the life of the young person, bringing out his or her latent riches and transforming him or her from within.

Many young people in India suffer from oppressive conditions in the family and social environment. They lack even the barest necessities of life such as adequate food and clothing, housing, sanitation, education and employment prospects. Theirs is a continual struggle to survive against all odds. If spirituality has anything meaningful to offer them, it must be a spirituality of liberation from these inhuman conditions; it must be a spirituality that offers them reasons to hope, to dare, to struggle to live a more human life.

Must it be an explicitly Christian spirituality? For Christians, the answer is definitely yes. Even for them though,

a Christian spirituality should have distinctively Indian traits. But in the multi-religious context of India, to offer a spirituality that is explicitly Christian right from the start to young people of different religions would defeat the very purpose for which it is meant. Neither is it required to do so. It is sufficient that this spirituality be Christian in inspiration. What is meant by this? There are many Gospel values that are also found in other religious scriptures and traditions. There is a long way we can travel together on common ground, sharing with one another the treasures of wisdom that belong to our different religions. In this journey of faith each one draws inspiration from his or her own religious tradition, and yet meets the other on the common ground of our humanity. In this sense the spirituality we as Christian educators offer the young need not be couched in explicitly Christian terms (except for Christians, of course), and yet be Christian in inspiration.

Furthermore, it is Christian in inspiration even in the strict sense that the Gospel is the supreme norm and criterion to determine what is authentic and what is spurious in the elements that we borrow from other religious scriptures and traditions. We believe that Jesus Christ, as Son of God become man, has brought to us in his life and teachings as found in the Gospels, the most perfect revelation of who God is for human beings and who human beings are for God. Jesus Christ in his humanity shows us the true face of God and the true face of the human person. Hence, in the light of the Gospel we are called to make a discernment and separate the true and the authentic from what merely appears to be so.

Lastly, India is a land of profound religiosity, where the quest for the absolute has been uninterrupted for thousands of years. The search for God has been channelled in three definite and inter-related paths. We call them the three *margas*:

Jnana-marga, Bhakti-marga, Karma-marga. These three ways which actually coalesce into one, have been enshrined in the hearts of the people of India as the sure means to attain fulfillment in one's life and union with the Absolute. A Spirituality of Liberation for young people of India cannot do without these hallowed means, even when we give them an interpretation more in line with the Gospel than the one they have in the religious tradition from which they derive. We believe that in doing so, we are being faithful to the deepest aspirations of our people, who for centuries yearn for true liberation and complete freedom.

3. Elements of a Spirituality of Liberation

It is important to begin by clarifying the meaning of the key terms, spirituality and liberation.

There are several definitions of spirituality. For our purpose it suffices to state that by spirituality we understand a way of life that is chiefly dominated by the influence of the divine. A person who lives a spiritual life makes the divine (Person, Law) the supreme norm according to which he or she conducts his or her life. In every aspect of life he or she refers himself or herself to the guidance from the divine.

We understand liberation in an integral sense comprising the personal, social and cosmic aspects. The focal point of India's spiritual quest over many centuries has been the liberation of the self. We too make liberation the focal point of the spirituality that we propose to the young. But, rather than liberation *from* this life, which seems to have been the main thrust of India's spiritual quest, we strive for a

liberation *of* this life and *within* this life from all those conditions that render human life dehumanizing, degrading and demeaning on any and every plane, be it personal, social or environmental, *for* a fuller human life here on earth leading to its fulfillment in a blessed communion with God after death.

It is in this sense that we understand and make our own the magnificent prayer of the ancient seers:

“From the unreal lead me to the real,
From darkness lead me to the light,
From death lead me to immortality.”

(Brihadaranayaka Upanishad, 1:3:28)

3.1 Jnana-marga (The way of contemplative perception)

More than just “knowledge”, the word *jnana* connotes something close to what in German is meant by *Weltanschauung*, “world-vision”. It is a certain vision of the whole of reality. I have translated the word as “contemplative perception”, because it is a way of perceiving all things, a certain attitude or stance one takes with regard to the world, an in-depth appreciation of the true worth of each and every thing. It is a vision born of wisdom, or better, it is wisdom itself.

The vision that *jnana* offers is that of the basic unity of all things. Underlying every distinction and differentiation, which is only superficial and restricted to the world of appearances and therefore illusory (*maya*), there is a basic oneness and identity of all things. In certain schools of Indian thought (e.g. the *Advaita* school of *Sankara*), this unity is

expressed in terms that seem to tend towards absolute *monism* or *pantheism*, but other scriptural texts and schools (e.g. the *Bhagavad-Gita*, the *Visishtadvaita* school of *Ramanuja*) take a more nuanced position closer and more acceptable to the Christian doctrine. It is the latter interpretation that we shall adopt.

The way of Contemplative Perception (*jnana-marga*) invites us to become gradually more aware that everything comes from God as its Creator and everything returns to God as its final Goal, that everything belongs to God, shares in God's existence according to its own measure, and is in God (*panentheism*). "In Him we live and move and have our being" (*Acts* 17,28). The consummation and fulfillment of all things is to be found in God, in the return of all things to their Origin and Source, who is God. Then "God will be all in all" (*I Cor* 15,28).

This type of awareness is not at all a philosophical acquisition (though it can also become one), but a certain way of looking at and experiencing reality. It is a religious attitude which gradually becomes a religious conviction or faith, a whole way of life. It is a spirituality of finding God in all things, and seeing all things in God.

This awareness begins with an experience of one's interiority, an experience of self in its richness, its individuality and uniqueness. It calls for attentiveness to oneself, silent reflection and recollection. The ancients explicitated it in three attitudes: *Sravana* (listening), *Manana* (discursive reflection) and *Nidhidhyasana* (recollection). It is a restful state of being at home with oneself, comfortable with oneself, appreciating oneself.

This contemplative experience of self leads to the appreciation of the primacy of being over doing (works) and having (possessions). What matters most is not what one appears to be, does or has, in the sight of others, but what one is at the centre of oneself.

The experience of self opens up to the experience of its relation to the Ground and Source of its being. Again, this is not first a notional realization, but an experience of being sustained, supported, held up by a transcendent Mystery deep in the heart of all things. It is an experience of a radical dependence in every way and at every moment on this ineffable Mystery and a profound thirst for a share in its fullness of life. It is an experience of creatureliness open to transcendent Fullness, Joy, Life.

Simultaneously, it is an experience of the unity of all things in their Source, and the individuality and uniqueness of each thing, however fragile and fleeting it may be. All things are one in their Source and each thing is separate, apart from others, unique and therefore valuable in itself. This gives rise to the sentiment of sympathy and solidarity with all things, an attitude of respect and non-violence (*ahimsa*) with regard to each thing.

From this there follows the realization that there is a divinely established order in the universe, which must be maintained and promoted, and that one's individual happiness and fulfillment is linked to the well-being of all persons and things (*lokasamgraha*). It calls for a commitment of service for the advancement of others (*karma-marga*), that we shall see in the next section.

Thus *jnana-marga*, the way of Contemplative Perception, is the indispensable first step in the Spirituality of Liberation. It is a conversion of mind and heart, of the whole self and its orientation to the transcendent Origin, Goal and Ground of one's being, the ineffable Mystery of Life, of Fullness, of Joy that we call God. It is a liberation from ignorance (*ajnana*), self-centeredness and illusion, and a profound experience of self in its unity-in-distinction with all things and with God. It is the awareness of a divine order underlying all things, the advancement of which, especially as it touches the lives of other people, calls for a commitment of service and brings about one's happiness.

3.2 *Karma-marga (The way to committed service)*

According to ancient Indian tradition *karma* (works, action) is both necessary and binding. It is necessary to sustain and promote the well-being of the whole universe (*lokasamgraha*), for without it the whole universe would collapse. At the same time, by an iron law of cause and effect, it is itself the product of a good or bad action performed in an earlier existence, and it in its turn will produce its own fate, from which there is no escape, except through liberation. It is the positive aspect of *karma* as committed service to the well-being of others that we wish to highlight and develop from our Christian standpoint.

In the preceding section we have seen that *jnana* as contemplative perception of the unity-in-distinction of all things in God already adumbrates the need for *karma* as committed service for the well-being of all, and leads to it. From right perception of reality flows right action on behalf

of others, not however by a blind law of cause and effect, but through an appeal to liberty. The contribution of *karma* to the advancement of the world-order lies in its being a free action, a gratuitous gift of oneself in works that issue from the depths of one's liberty. Herein lies its uniqueness and its dignity.

Not any type of action furthers the good order of the world. For an action or work to be good it must be the fulfillment of one's *dharma* which we understand not as caste duty, but as the fulfillment of the duties and obligations of one's state in life. We do not believe in caste as a fixed social class into which one is born as a result of one's *karmas* in a previous existence, as Hindu tradition maintains it. In fact, for the members of the lowest caste (*sudras*) and the outcasts (*harijans*) the caste-system is a curse and a gross injustice, from which they must be liberated. Enlightened Hindus of the past (e.g. Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Gandhi, Tilak) have fought against this unjust social division, and the *dalits* today are rising in revolt against it.

Work and the fulfillment of the duties of one's state of life is noble and it ennobles the one who does it. We believe in and uphold the dignity of work, all work. There is no such thing as menial and demeaning work. Every honest work is a sharing in the creative power of God transforming the forces of nature. One can take legitimate pride in the work of one's hands and in a job well done.

However, one must avoid undue and excessive attachment to the fruit of one's labors. Undue attachment comes from inordinate desire (*karma*) for more gains, and leads to unhealthy competition with one's rivals, slavery to materials goods and anxiety over their loss. Such a way of

life is no longer human, but that of a slave. It entails loss of freedom and of one's identity. The whole Hindu tradition teaches that undue attachment to the fruit of *karma* is at the root of man's suffering and misery. It must be uprooted by a sober detachment (*samatvam*) and renunciation (*sannyasa*).

The alert reader will have noticed that I have used the terms “undue”, “excessive” and “inordinate” when speaking of attachment and desire. These qualifying adjectives are not found associated with attachment and desire in the ancient Hindu tradition, for which all attachment and desire is harmful and to be got rid of completely. However, in a Christian anthropology, which is the perspective from which we evaluate this tradition, to excise all attachment and desire from our life is inhuman and counterproductive. In trying to be superhuman we run the grave risk of becoming beasts. Neither are we called to be unfeeling automatons. Feelings, passions, desires, attachments are not demons to be exorcised, but powerful forces which are to be moderated and channelled towards a good cause. When so harnessed, they are our mighty energizers in doing good work. There is need for moderating, channelling, harnessing these powerful forces within us lest they become unruly and drag us down to a disordered life. This is to be done by detachment, renunciation and a healthy asceticism, the goal of which is not to stamp out all desire and attachment, but to harness them to form a well-balanced and harmonious person: one who, being in possession of himself, is the more capable of giving himself freely in the service of others.

When actions are performed disinterestedly (which does not mean lacking in interest altogether, but lacking in undue self-interest, that is, selflessly), they do not detract from

contemplation. One can then be engaged in a flurry of activities, busily working from morn to night, and yet one's heart and mind can be fixed on *jnana* or contemplative perception of all things in God, provided that one works for *lokasamgraha* (well-being of all) without undue concern for self. One has then become a contemplative in action, an integrated person (*yukt'atman*).

In the context of the situation of India today, where millions of young people live in intolerable conditions of misery and oppression, *karma-marga* must mean something more than the mere fulfillment of the duties of one's state of life, even when it includes the welfare of others. It must signify a more active involvement in the liberation of the downtrodden and the oppressed. Mahatma Gandhi provides a splendid example of this new type of *karma-marga* in his struggle for the social and political liberation of India through the method of *satyagraha* (the force of truth), based on the enduring values of *satya* (truth), *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *tapasya* (self-suffering).

How is it possible to arrive at this state of interior balance and poise, in which, possessing oneself and devoid of self-interest, one can put oneself at the service of others even to the point of self-suffering for their upliftment? The next section on *bhakti-marga* will provide the answer.

3.3 Bhakti-marga (The way of loving devotion)

The liberated man according to the *Upanishads* is one who is perfectly integrated within himself, having renounced all attachment to the fruit of his works, seeing the Self in all things, and all things in the Self. He has become *Brahman*

(*brahma-bhuta*). This is the ideal of liberation in the Upanishadic texts. However, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, written about 200 A.D. and forming a tiny part of the great Epic, the *Mahabharata*, brought a new revelation of what true liberation is. It immediately captured the heart of India's millions, and even today is the best loved of the Hindu Scriptures.

The central message of the *Bhagavad-Gita* is that perfect integration, attained by a long and arduous spiritual exercise (*yoga*), is not the whole of liberation, but only its beginning. True liberation is only possible through a complete surrender of oneself in loving devotion (*bhakti*) to a personal God as a response to His prior and gratuitous personal love for him. Total liberation or salvation is a gift, an unmerited grace (*prasada*). One cannot acquire it by one's own efforts, though one's efforts are necessary to dispose oneself to receive the gift. One can only humbly and joyfully receive it as a free offer of love on the part of God.

Bhakti-marga, or the way of Loving Devotion, fulfills and transcends both *jnana-marga* and *karma-marga*. The love of God, experienced in the depths of one's being, enables one to discover God in all things and all things in God, which is the substance of *jnana-marga*. It adds to contemplative perception of reality a new dimension of joy and wondrous delight, like the feeling experienced by a lover who sees everything new and beautiful through the eyes of his beloved. God's love, flooding the heart, also enables one to fulfill his *dharma* as a committed service (*karma-marga*) for the welfare of all with a spontaneity and alacrity that is a mark of true selflessness. As St. Augustine long ago expressed it so beautifully: "Where there is love, there is no labor and even if there is labor, the labor itself is loved."

The highest, the most mysterious word of God in the *Bhagavad-Gita* is that God loves each person with an infinite, compassionate love, and calls each one to surrender himself in a loving communion that, beginning in this life, reaches its fulfillment in the quiet of eternity.

“And now again give ear to this my highest
Word,
Of all the most mysterious:
‘I love you well.’
Therefore will I tell you your salvation.
Bear Me in mind, love Me and worship Me,
Sacrifice, prostrate yourself to Me:
So will you come to Me, I promise you truly,
For you are dear to me.
Give up all things of law,
Turn to Me, your only refuge,
For I will deliver you from all evils;
Have no care.”

(Bhagavad-Gita, 16:64-66)

4. An Indian Spirituality of Liberation for Young People

Is the spirituality outlined above suited to the young people of India today? Or is it so esoteric as to put them off completely? It is true that most young people in India—and for that matter, most of us—do not know their own roots and tradition. They are blissfully unaware of the treasures of spirituality and wisdom that make up their heritage. Proposing an Indian spirituality to them, which, in its classical dress, is too complex to grasp and too difficult to practice, might hardly seem the most sensible thing to do.

Yet, I believe, there is in every young Indian heart a sensibility that vibrates in resonance to anything genuinely and distinctively Indian. Now, what is more genuinely and distinctively Indian than India's millennial quest for liberation and the Absolute? Furthermore, we believe with Vatican II that in every people, culture and tradition the Spirit has imparted "seeds of the Word" (*Ad Gentes, 11*), which form the particular religious ethos of that people, their distinctive path to God. These riches should not be lost or set aside, "but purified, elevated and perfected for the glory of God" (*Lumen Gentium, 17*).

Indian spirituality, simplified to its essentials, purified, elevated and perfected in the light of the Gospel, can become very appealing to the young, and can form the basis of an authentic Indian Christian spirituality for Christians, as well as a genuine Indian approach to God for adherents of other faiths. *Jnana-marga* as seeing oneself and in all persons and things; *karma-marga* as committing oneself generously to the service of others to the point of self-suffering; and *bhakti-marga* as committing oneself to the infinite personal love of God who liberates us for Himself,—this is the essence of Indian spirituality in its simplicity, directness and beauty, which can be offered to all young people of India.

Spirituality is offered to the young not only through sacred texts and discourses, however sublime; not only through hymns and songs, however exquisite, but also and especially through a living person in whose friendly face, warm hands and loving gestures spirituality comes alive and becomes vibrant. If the *Bhagavad-Gita* teaches us anything besides its astonishingly new revelation of divine love, it is

that Arjun learnt the secret of this highest mystery not through some arcane method, but through the companionship of a bosom friend, Krishna. India's modern-day Arjuns will discover the delicious ways of divine love and experience the joy of liberation when they encounter the gentle Christ in the face, the hands and the gestures of those who witness to His name. And then the Song of the Blessed (*Bhagavad-Gita*) will be heard anew in our land.

References

The general inspiration for this paper has been drawn from my reading of the following works:

Gardet, L. and Lacombe, O. *L'Experience du soi. Etude de mystique comparée*. Paris: Desclee de Brouwer, 1981.

Lacombe, O. *L'Elan spirituel de l'hindouisme*. Paris: O.E.I.L., 1986.

Pereira, K. *The Philosophy of Man in the Bhagavad-Gita*. Pune: Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeeth, 1984. Unpublished dissertation for the Master's Degree in Philosophy.

Zaehner, R.C. (ed.). *The Bhagavad-Gita*, London: Oxford University Press, 1973.

———. *Hinduism*. London: Oxford University Press, 1972.

———, (ed.). *Hindu Scriptures*. London: J.M. Dent, 1972.

Staffner, H. *Jesus Christ and the Hindu Community*. Anand: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1988.