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A Sannyasi in India



I sit here on the veranda of my cell, watching the sun set behind the trees, and recall the day, nearly fifty years ago, when I watched the same sun setting over the playing fields at school. My cell is a thatched hut surrounded by trees. I can listen to the birds singing, as I did then, and watch the trees making dark patterns against the sky as the light fades, but I have traveled a long way both in space and in time since then. There are tall palmyra palms around me, and young coconut trees growing up between them, and the bananas are spreading their broad leaves like green sails. I can hear a robin singing, but it is a black Indian robin, and the voice of the cuckoo which comes from the distant woods is that of the Indian cuckoo. I have made my home here in India, in the Tamil Nadu, by the banks of the river Cavery, but my mind has also traveled no less far than my body. For sixteen years now I have lived as an Indian among Indians, following Indian ways of life, studying Indian thought, and immersing myself in the living traditions of the Indian spirit. Let me now try to reflect on what India has done to me, on how

my mind has developed over these years, on the changes which have taken place in my way of life and in the depths of my soul.

The first thing that I have learned is a simplicity of life which before I would have not thought possible. India has a way of reducing human needs to a minimum. One full meal a day of rice and vegetables—at best with some curds and ghee (clarified butter)—is considered sufficient. Tea or coffee with some rice preparation and some pickle is enough for breakfast and supper. Nor are tables and chairs, spoons and forks and knives and plates considered necessary. One sits on the floor on a mat and eats with one's hands—or rather with the right hand, as the left hand is kept for cleansing one's self. For plate there is a banana leaf. There is thus no need of any furniture in an Indian home. The richer people who have adopted Western ways may make use of tables and chairs and beds and other conveniences, but the poor man—and that is the vast majority—is still content to sit and sleep on the floor. Nor are elaborate bathrooms and lavatories considered necessary. In the villages the majority of people will take their bath at a pump or a well or in a neighboring tank or stream, and most people still go out into the fields or by the roadside or by a stream to relieve themselves. There is a beautiful simplicity in all this, which makes one realize something of the original simplicity of human nature. Even clothes are hardly necessary. Most men today, it is true, wear a shirt and a "dhoti"—a piece of cloth wound round the waist and falling to the feet—and women wear a sari and a blouse to cover the breast, but this is comparatively recent. Even now clothes are still felt to be things which are put on for the occasion, and are easily discarded. A man will take his shirt off when he wants to relax, and a laborer will wear no more than a "langothi"—a piece of cloth wound round the middle and between the legs.

All this makes the life of a *sannyasi*—one who has “renounced” the world—immensely simple. He needs no house or furniture. He may live in a cave or take shelter beside a temple or on the veranda of a house. For clothing he needs only two pieces of cloth—which should not be stitched—one to wear round the waist and the other for a shawl to cover the shoulders or the head. There are even some *sannyasis* who renounce all clothing and are said to be “clothed with the sky.” For food he needs only one meal a day, which he gets by begging or, more often, which a householder will offer him unasked. He can thus reduce his life to an absolute simplicity. He is totally detached from the world, depending on divine providence for his bare needs of food, shelter, and clothing. Does this not bring him very near to the first disciples of Christ, who were told to take “no gold, nor silver, nor copper in your belts, no bag for your journey, nor two tunics, nor sandals, nor a staff,” and to the Son of man himself, who had nowhere to lay his head?¹ What a challenge this presents to a world which takes pleasure in continually increasing human needs and so makes itself more and more dependent on the material world.

I have not been able to reach this extreme degree of detachment. I have my little hut, which is simple enough, just one small room with a thatched roof, but it is solidly built of brick with a concrete floor. I have also a table, a chair, and a bed, which are luxuries for a *sannyasi*, but I have not been able to learn to sit and sleep always on the floor. I have also my books and my typewriter, but these are not really “mine,” any more than the hut and the furniture—they are, as we say, “allowed for my use.” A *sannyasi* is one who does not *possess* anything, not even the clothes on his back. He has renounced all “property.” This

¹ Matthew 10:9–10; 8:20.

is the real renunciation which is demanded, the renunciation of “I” and “mine.” A *sannyasi* is one who is totally detached from the world and from himself. It is detachment which is the key word. It does not matter so much what material possessions you have, so long as you are not attached to them. You must be ready to give up everything, not only material attachments but also human attachments—father, mother, wife, children—everything that you have. But the one thing which you have to abandon unconditionally is your “self.” If you can give up your self, your “ego,” you can have anything you like, wife and family, houses and lands—but who is able to give up his self?

Poverty—the poverty of spirit of the Sermon on the Mount—is a total detachment from the material world. It is to recognize that everything comes from God—our bodies, our breath, our very existence. We cannot properly possess anything—not even our own bodies, as St. Benedict says.² We can only receive everything from God at every moment—our life, our food, our clothing, our shelter, our books, our friends. Everything comes from God, created anew at every moment. If there were not this constantly renewed creation, everything would sink into nothingness. People speak of Buddhism and Hinduism as world-renouncing religions, and then they are surprised to find that these world-renouncers built temples of fantastic beauty and covered the walls of the caves, which they hollowed out, with paintings of infinite refinement. But this is precisely because they were detached from the world. When you are detached from the world, you see everything coming from the hands of God, always fresh and beautiful. Everything is a symbol of God. The modern age has banished God from the world, and therefore it has also banished beauty. Everything

² *Rule of St Benedict*, chap. 33.

has become “profane,” exiled from the sphere of the “holy,” and therefore everything has lost its meaning. For the holy is the source of truth no less than of beauty. It relates the world to the one, transcendent Reality from which the world derives its existence, its meaning, and its loveliness.

This kind of detachment from the world is in no way opposed to service of the world or “commitment” to the world. It is freedom from all *selfish* attachment. It is only when you are free from self—that is, free from self-love and self-will—that you can really serve the world. You can then see things as they are and use them as they should be used. The poet or artist has to be detached from the world if he is to reflect it truly in his art. The scientist must be detached from things if he is to deal with them scientifically. But the saint needs a more radical detachment than either. He must be detached from his very self. He does not belong to himself but to God. This includes not only the conscious self but also the unconscious. He must break all those bonds of attachment which are rooted in the unconscious, which have grown up from childhood and become a second nature. This is the work of a lifetime, and for most people it will not end in this life. Purgatory is the breaking of the bonds of attachment which remain in us at death.

What, then, is chastity? It is detachment from the flesh, just as poverty is detachment from the world. Of course, this does not mean that the flesh is evil, any more than the world is evil. The world and the flesh were created by God and are destined for the resurrection. They become the source of evil when we are attached to them—that is, when we put them in the place of God. We have to sacrifice the world and the flesh, that is, to make them holy (*sacrum facere*) by offering them to God. “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and

acceptable to God.”³ “The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord.”⁴ This is the essential condition of chastity. It doesn’t matter whether you are married or unmarried; in either case the body has to be offered to the Lord—that is, we have to be radically detached from our passions and desires and surrender them to God. Then they become holy. The married man is joined to the Lord through his wife, the wife through her husband. The unmarried man or woman is joined to the Lord without intermediary: the marriage takes place within. Every man and woman is both male and female, and the male and the female have to be married within. In heaven, when “the male shall be as the female, and that which is without as that which is within,” as one of the “Sayings of Jesus” says, there will be neither marrying nor giving in marriage. Then our human nature will be complete, the male and the female having achieved their essential unity in the body of Christ.

How, then, to understand obedience? Poverty is detachment from the world, chastity is detachment from the flesh, obedience is detachment from the self. This is the most radical detachment of all. But what is the self? The self is the principle of reason and responsibility in us, it is the root of freedom, it is what makes us men. But this self is not autonomous; it is subject to a law—to what in India is called *dharmā*, which St. Thomas Aquinas called the universal Reason, the Law of the universe. The great illusion is to consider that the self has an absolute freedom, that it is a law to itself. This is the original sin. In fact, the self can never act independently. It must either act in dependence on *dharmā*, that is the law of reason, or it will become subject to another law, the law of nature, of passion and desire, that is, the powers of the unconscious.

³ Romans 12:1.

⁴ 1 Corinthians 6:13.

This is the drama of paradise. Man was placed in the garden of this world and given to eat of all the trees, of the senses, the feelings, the appetites, the desires—all were open to him. But the tree of knowledge of good and evil—the conscience by which we know what is right and wrong—was not left within his power. For that he is dependent on a higher power, and the moment he eats of it and seeks to make himself the master of his destiny, he loses his autonomy and becomes the slave of the powers of nature—the other gods, who take the place of the one God. The self must either be dependent on God, the universal Law, and acquire true freedom, or else it loses its freedom in subjection to nature, to the unconscious. This is the essential nature of the self; it is not a static entity, complete in itself. It is a power of self-transcendence. It is the power to give one's self totally to another, to transcend one's self by surrendering to the higher Self, the Atman, the Spirit within. When this is done, we live from the principle of Life within, from the universal Law of Reason, we are "established in Brahman."⁵ This is wisdom and joy and immortality. This is what man was created for—this is true obedience.

⁵ See Bhagavad Gita, 11.72.