

ATMAMOKSHA AND JAGAD-HITA

A New Interpretation

SWAMI HARSHANANDA

INDIA HAS A HOARY TRADITION of devotion to knowledge. Not only is knowledge considered a great purifier (*Gītā*, 4.38) it is even deified as a goddess. *Vidyā*, the word signifying knowledge, is one of the names of Durgā. Sarasvati is not only the goddess of learning but the very personification of it. Knowledge is the best of ornaments that can adorn a human being and the one without it is a veritable brute (*Nītiśataka* of Bhartṛhari, 16-17). To acquire knowledge both secular and sacred, —known as *aparāvidyā* and *parāvidyā*—is the primary duty of all. The former helps us to lead a socially useful life here, and the latter takes care of the hereafter. And *tapas* or austerity of body, speech and mind, as also *sevā* or devoted service to the *ācārya*, the preceptor, are considered the primary means of achieving it. These preceptors who were the repositories both of learning and of character loved not only further acquisition of knowledge but also transmitting it to worthy disciples.

The technique of teaching is as much a sophisticated art as learning itself, perhaps, more so. At a time when living with the preceptor and oral transmission of knowledge were the rule, powers of memory of the students were highly taxed. Hence these great teachers had developed a unique method of transmitting knowledge through *sūtras* or aphorisms which, being short, were easy to memorize and yet encompassed in themselves a mine of information. This method helped not only the preservation of vast fields of knowledge for the posterity but also—along with their explana-

tions—created an entirely new system of literature in course of time.

Apart from the fact that it is easy to remember a *sūtra*, it has several other advantages too. It gives good scope for an elaboration of the subject from various angles. Though it may lead to several schools of thought, it also affords greater freedom for us to pick and choose any area, due to the variety available.

Towards the close of his life, Swami Vivekananda gave us in a nutshell the whole philosophy behind his life and work in the form of a *sūtra*: *ātmano mokṣārtham jagaddhitāya ca*, 'For the liberation of oneself and for the good of the world.' Though given originally as a motto for the Ramakrishna Monastery, it has the tremendous potential not only of being applicable to the Ramakrishna Movement but to be adopted as a philosophy of development itself. Even more particularly, it has great relevance to contemporary India. Hence an earnest study and analysis of this *sūtra* will be highly beneficial to us.

Meaning of the Sūtra

Before attempting to interpret and expound this *sūtra* we must first have a correct understanding of the terms that comprise it. The word *ātman* cannot mean here the Atman or the true Self, but only the *jīvātman* or the empirical self, bound hand and foot due to its identification with the body-mind complex. Otherwise, the concept of *mokṣa*, emancipation, becomes incompatible since the Atman is ever

* Swami Harshananda is the head of Ramakrishna Math, Allahabad. He is the author of *Hindu Gods and Goddesses*, *Hinduism through Questions and Answers* and several other books.

free. The word *jagat* in the *jagad-hita* refers to the living beings in general and human beings in particular though nature as such need not be excluded from its purview. *Hita* is that which brings real good, conducive to peace and happiness, to the maximum number and to the maximum extent.

With this background, we can now give the meaning of the *sūtra* as: '(One should work) for the emancipation of oneself and for the good of the (other) beings of (this) world.'

Conventional Interpretation

The word *mokṣa* in the *sūtra* is generally interpreted as spiritual emancipation, the same as *mukti* or *kaivalya*, resulting in freedom from rebirth, to be brought about by any mode of *Sadhana* or spiritual practice, known as *yoga*. And, *jagad-hita* is taken to indicate all types of service activities. There is nothing wrong in this interpretation. In fact, this is the true interpretation in the ultimate analysis.

But should we really restrict the interpretation to the narrow limits of the spiritual side of life only? Can we not expand its scope to include the other aspects of life, the secular side also? Hearken to what Sister Nivedita of Ramakrishna-Vivekananda proclaims: 'If the many and the One be indeed the same Reality, then it is not all modes of worship alone, but equally all modes of work, all modes of struggle, all modes of creation, which are paths of realization. No distinction, henceforth, between sacred and secular. To labour is to pray. To conquer is to renounce. Life is itself religion. To have and to hold is as stern a trust as to quit and to avoid. This is the realization which makes Vivekananda the great preacher of Karma, not as divorced from, but as expressing Jnana and Bhakti. To him, the workshop, the study, the farmyard, and the field are as true and fit scenes for the meeting of God with man as the cell of the monk or the door of the temple. To him, there is no difference between service of man and worship of God, between manliness and faith, between true righteousness and spirituality.' (Introduc-

tion' to *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda*, Vol. I)

The answer is obvious!

A Reappraisal of the Concept of Mokṣa

Once we concede this, a reappraisal of the whole concept becomes possible leading us to some startling conclusions. The etymological meaning of the word *mokṣa*, derived from the root *muc*, is freedom. It can be freedom of any type, freedom from anything that restricts, constricts or limits. And there are many such things in our life that put severe limitations on us at the various levels of our existence.

Hunger, disease and physical weakness come first in this series of limitations from which we have to free ourselves. Since the body is the primary instrument given to us by nature and through which alone we can achieve anything worthwhile in life, it should be relieved of hunger, disease and infirmity. This is the first freedom we have to get in life. It is common knowledge that we can achieve it through nutritious food, medical treatment and exercise. The very fact that Vivekananda laid great emphasis on the cultivation of physical strength shows that this interpretation is in consonance with his philosophy, which again is in tune with the spirit of the Upanishads (*Muṇḍaka Up.* 3.2.4; *Chāndogya Up.* 7.8.1; *Kaṭha Up.* 3.1.3).

Poverty and all that springs from it come next. Bhartṛhari satirically remarks that in this world all 'virtues' accrue to him who has wealth (*Nītiśataka*, 32, 33) thereby supporting the doctrine that poverty is a curse. It often deprives a man of all spirit and virtue. Vivekananda, the champion of the poor masses of India, vigorously advocated their economic upliftment and advised the upper classes to consider themselves as only trustees of the society's wealth. Economic progress through science and technology, vocationalization of education to help in this and a socialistic pattern of distribution of the fruits of labour were the means he often suggested. Once this

is done, we achieve the second type of freedom, economic freedom.

Social disabilities form the third type of bondage from which freedom is to be attained. The caste system, once based on nature and nurture, prepared the people for certain professions and eliminated unhealthy competitions. Being accepted as a natural division of labour and the dignity of man being valued highly, the system worked in India wonderfully well for several centuries. But when birth became the criterion for caste and selfish people started creating vested interests in certain key professions through which they could control and exploit others, chinks appeared in our social fabric. This gradually developed into serious disabilities for certain groups listed as inferior in the hierarchy of castes. They are continuing even now in spite of the political freedom we have gained.

So also the disabilities based on sex. Though India has given the highest place to womanhood, in practice, at least over the last thousand years or more, the 'weaker sex' has been literally treated as weak and exploited in every way.

Apart from caste and sex, poverty, lack of education and culture, nature of certain professions—all these have also contributed to social cleavages.

What is Vivekananda's solution to free oneself from these bondages? Education. Right education that gives right views on life, is the panacea for all these evils. An education that makes a man enlightened and restores his sense of dignity to him is the best, nay, the only solution.

This topic of education naturally takes us to another field, the field of intellectual bondage. Ignorance, superstition and even intellectual regimentation comprise this bondage from which we must free ourselves. If ignorance and superstition have done great harm to people—mostly to themselves—intellectual regimentation and brainwashing have done incalculable harm to entire societies. The only solution to this

horrendous problem is, again, education that gives not only knowledge but also wisdom and culture. This education teaches the mind to think not only freely but also rightly. The standard of rightness, of course, is the greatest good of the greatest number. Swamiji has laid great emphasis on this type of education.

In spite of all these types of freedom, a society can still be a slave to immoral life and unethical practices. There may be both internal and external constraints on moral judgement and its implementation. If this state of affairs is allowed to continue, it will gradually work to the detriment of the society, bringing back all the other evils in its train. The one and only way of attaining freedom from this is to incorporate value-based ideas into the system of education. It is precisely this that Swamiji advocates when he pleads for 'man-making' or 'character-building' education. Once the atmosphere is made favourable for the growth of a strong moral sense, people will be able to think clearly and act fearlessly on moral issues and firmly take right decisions at the right time.

All this is unexceptionable. However, all these ultimately touch only the fringe of the real problem of our life: the bondage of *samsāra* or transmigratory existence. All other bondages are rooted in this and will be eliminated when this is rooted out. This again can be accomplished only through spiritual enlightenment brought about by Sadhana or spiritual practice. Vivekananda with his deep insight into the psychology of modern man has advocated the path of synthesis of the four *yogas* as the most efficacious one, to get this spiritual freedom. Says he in his famous book *Raja Yoga*: 'Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work, or worship, or psychic control, or philosophy—by one, or more, or all of these—and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines or dogmas, or rituals or books or temples, or forms are but secondary details.'

Jagad-hita

The psychologists call man a 'gregarious animal'. He is wont to live in a group, in a society. This has naturally led, over the centuries, to social awareness which includes a sense of his duties and obligations towards the group. The *Gītā* advises human beings and gods to work for mutual benefit (3.11). This principle applies to human beings also. Hence anyone who gains freedom at any level or in any aspect of life should use that freedom for the good of the society around him, especially to help those who are similarly handicapped. For instance, one who regains health and strength should use it in the service of the sick, assisting them to regain their own health and strength. One who becomes economically well off, should extend financial assistance to the needy ones. One who obtains a good education should help in the eradication of ignorance and superstition among others and also try for their social uplift.

However, the greatest responsibility rests on those who have obtained moral and spiritual enlightenment. They, being the 'salt of the earth', should lead others, nay, inspire others to become MEN in the truest sense of the term. And, if they live in the society, they just cannot help doing it, because universal compassion is their characteristic trait.

Conclusion

So we see that the great *sūtra* given to us by Swamiji is capable of being interpreted in a much broader way and applied to all aspects of life. Contemporary India badly needs this message of his. Other countries of the world—whether under-developed, developing or developed—also can benefit enormously by it.

But the responsibility rests squarely on the Indians, especially the younger generation. Will they rise to his expectations?

I believe that Vivekananda will always be remembered in the world's history because he virtually initiated what the late Dr. C.E.M. Joad once called 'the counter-attack from the East'. Since the days of the Indian missionaries who travelled in South-East Asia and China preaching Buddhism and Hinduism more than a thousand years earlier, he was the first Indian religious teacher to make an impression outside India.

A.L. BASHAM

Vivekananda stands out as the most renowned philosopher and social figure of India in modern China. His philosophical and social thought and epic patriotism not only inspired the growth of nationalist movement in India, but also made a great impact abroad.

HUANG XIN CHUAN