

The Significance of Austerity

prabhāta-raśmiḥ

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Harih Om Tat Sat. Jai Guru.

I asked Ma today what I shall talk about or on. She said, “Austerity”.

This “austerity” is a word which everyone will do well to reflect upon and understand. Any seeker of truth must live an austere life. He must embody austerity as much as possible. Without austerity there will be no quality in the seeker. In the same manner, when one attains *siddhi*, the *siddha* also will not be sufficiently shining, unless he has the merit and the character of austerity. But “what is austerity” becomes a very important enquiry.

In our shastras and in the spirituo-religious and philosophical life that we Indians have, right from the Vedic life, there are 3 important items – yajna, daana and tapas. In these three, we can summarize everything about our religion, religious practices, spirituality, spiritual discipline, and refinement and philosophy, the quest and search for Truth and finally its discovery.

We do not consider that a philosophical life is merely an intellectual life, where constantly there is an enquiry after the supreme reality or ultimate truth. No! Then it would have remained only in the university or teaching and learning campus. For us, philosophy means something far different, very personal, supreme and finally fulfilling. That is why, in the name of religion on the one hand, spirituality on the other, philosophy and yoga; you renounce everything and take up sannyasa.

Why are we taking up sannyasa? It is something that you have to think about. It is only to deepen, strengthen, refine, to go to the maximum measure whatever we propose to do. What will a sannyasin do? A sannyasin is supposed to be always doing austerity or tapas. But out of the so many ascetic sannyasins you will find, those people who are able to pursue, embody, actualize, realize, and then disseminate spiritual wisdom - are supposed to be the best and the highest.

I belong to the Paramahansa order of sannyasins. Naturally, all of you are of that lineage. What is meant by this Paramahansa order? We have many orders of sannyasa. Our sastras and traditions are wonderful! We have a number of spiritual traditions. Some people are called *kuṭīcara*. Others are called *vahūdaka*. There are some people who are called *madhukari bhikṣāvālas*. There is a category called *udāsīna*. Another category called *avadhūta*. Still another category called *atyāśramī*. There are also the *paramahānsas* and the *parivrajakas*.

What is meant by paramahansa? Paramahansa sannyasins are those people who are, right from the beginning, given to the pursuit of spiritual wisdom! Their way of life is wisdom pursuit; their goal of life is wisdom. What is that wisdom? That wisdom which enables them and leads them to realize Brahman, the supreme reality. Brahman is not to be reached, nor is it to be gained, nor is it to be attained. The only word and idea relevant to Brahman is "Know it! Know it!" This knowledge, again, is not an intellectual one. It is an experiential one. So we call it "Realize Brahman." So the paramahansa only has got one ideal – Brahma Jnana!

And what is this Jnana for? *jñānāt eva kaivalya prāptih*

From jnana alone can liberation be attained! And what is liberation? Complete freedom!

We are doing everything in this world because we have a desire. The desire proceeds from the feeling that I am not full, I am not complete, I need something more different. So the desire sprouts from a kind of ignorance, a kind of incompleteness, and to remove this incompleteness and make us complete and full, we proceed after one thing or the other. As against this, brahma-jnana implies knowledge of the supreme reality, which when had, will take away all the feeling of insufficiency and incompleteness from you.

As long as the mind is bogged down by un-fullness, incompleteness, there is a bondage. This has to be let loose! This is called freedom. So the freedom will be possible only by a process of knowledge, and this knowledge has to be pursued. We call it vidya abhyasa. Abhyasa means repeated pursuit. It is not the question of reading and understanding. It is the question of following the understanding, pursuing the understanding, applying it. Where? In your own body personality; mind, intelligence and ego; until at last, all the disturbing and binding elements, psycho-intellectual; are completely overcome and you feel relaxed, full, inwardly abundant and even opulent.

All these can be had only by tapasya. Tapasya is a co-ordinate of our mind, of our intelligence. But in the initial stages, tapasya can also be relevant to our senses and body. You take up any practice whatsoever, which you are not normally doing, and then hold on to that practice. Make it a point to go to the temple - any temple or a

chosen temple. Initially if you cannot go every day, make it a point to go there at least one day in a week and spend about half an hour and come back. Now this is not a habit necessary otherwise for your life. You incorporate this new practice of going to a temple and doing circumambulation, pradakshina there, standing in front, maybe chant some stutis or slokas, prostrate, take a little prasada, put it on your forehead, and then come back.

The time and effort you make for going to the temple and doing the temple exercises, that is called austerity. Incorporating something additional is austerity, or eliminating something otherwise habitual with us. Whatever you are already doing now, you stop. Say, "I will observe evening fast every week - one day. On ekadasi day, I will not take my normal food but something else." If you cling on to and preserve this, a change from that daily routine, that can also be an austerity.

The true austerity should be of the mind, intelligence and heart. In the level of the mind, austerity means, more and more of purity, less and less of impurity. In intelligence level, it should be more and more of the pursuit of spiritual wisdom. Knowledge we pursue, but all that knowledge is object knowledge. Austerity comes when you pursue subject knowledge. There are some qualities which can promote and strengthen austerity. When a man takes to be a seeker, or even a brahmachari, lifelong brahmachari or a sannyasin, he is supposed to have a few vows, so to say. He takes the vow of being austere, austerity, being truthful, rely upon God under all circumstances. You can also add a vow of poverty. These are the four important items of austerity.

They may appear to be a simple sentence or a formula. But you have to hold on to it in a comprehensive manner in all facets of your life. So the austerity is either one of denial or one of incorporation. It can relate to the body and senses first; mouth next; mind still next; intelligence still further, and finally it can refer to the 'I' or the ego.

Now in Bhagavad Geeta, you will find, by a process of instruction and elucidation, Sri Krishna was providing not merely knowledge, but the austerity called knowledge.

na hi jñānena sadṛśam pavitramiha vidyate - he says. (*Bhagavad Geeta 4.38*)

Even this Arjuna listening to Krishna was really a great austerity. And finally he ends it up saying that all austerity means sacrifice - tyaga, sannyasa, renunciation.

I was reading one chapter, he is speaking about vishvaroop, there he says,

dharmāṇāmasmi sannyāsaḥ

Of all the dharmas, he says, I am sanyaasa.

So, just imagine, what is this renunciation! What is this renunciation, just think about it!

So, austerity, various forms – economic austerity, societal austerity, behavioral austerity, characteral austerity, many austerities will be there. But all of them relate to the body and the senses, then the mouth, then the mind, intelligence and ego. It can be progressive or even otherwise!

Harih Om Tat Sat. Jai Guru.

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