

Paper Title:

A JOURNEY FROM KNOWN TO UNKNOWN

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TRUE SPIRITUAL GROWTH OUTGROWS RELIGION

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A Journey from Known to Unknown

On a cold winter night, a wandering ascetic asked for a shelter in a temple. The poor man was shivering in the falling snow seeing which the temple priest, reluctantly permitted the stranger to stay, saying, “very well, you can stay but only for the night.

In the middle of the night, the priest heard a strange crackling sound. He rushed to the temple and saw an incredible sight. There was the stranger warming himself at a fire he had lit in the temple. A wooden Buddha was missing. The priest asked, “Where is the statue?”

The wanderer pointed to the fire, and said, “I thought this cold would kill me.”

The priest shouted, “Are you out of your mind? Do you know what have you done? That was a Buddha statue. You have burnt the Buddha!”

The fire was slowly dying out. The ascetic gazed into the ebbing fire and started poking it with his stick. “What are you doing now?” the priest yelled.

“I am searching for the bones of the Buddha whom, you say, I had burnt.”

Later, the priest reported the incident to a Zen Master who observed: “You must be a bad priest, because you valued a dead Buddha, over a live man”.

Aren't we valuing lifeless idols more than living souls when we kill each other in the name of religion? Isn't it an irony that a country, wherein people from different parts of the world, come in search of Truth, witnesses maximum communal violence? Why? Is it because we have more religious people than spiritual? Lack of spiritual understanding and a blind faith, have contributed to this sad state of affairs. People are taken for a ride by religious Gurus to spread and hold their power and influence. Children are conditioned at a tender age and turned to fanatics, with the result that they are ready to lay their lives for the sake of religion. As if this not enough, rigorous rituals (coupled with social sanctions for non-compliance thereof) are prescribed so that an average man remains entangled and not allowed to seek Truth or question the Guru's authority.

Creating a concept of heaven and a hell, fear was instilled in the minds of people. Not only that, some of the religious Gurus have started acting as messengers of God, with an authority to pardon sins of the common man, who is drifting away from the path of spirituality. I was no exception to this. Let me share with you how I encountered spiritual understanding:-

Encounter with Spirituality

From childhood I considered myself very religious. To go to temple and do idol worship was part my daily routine. If, for some reason, I miss out my visit to temple I use to develop a guilty feeling, for, spirituality to me was all about visiting temple and performing *pooja*. But later when I attended a spiritual retreat at the Simultala, I understood the true meaning of Spirituality and realized that the religious rituals conditioned me so much, that I became God fearing and not God loving. How could I ever love Him with fear in my heart? In Simultala I learnt that religion binds, whereas spirituality liberates. I understood that one could seek God in poor and suffering mankind rather than in temples. I realized that one could be spiritual, through actualizing his potentials for the common good, rather than renouncing the world and going to forest. In other words, it is not necessary for one to renounce the world to attain spirituality. This helped me to understand religion in a scientific manner and made me God-loving, with the consequence that I could appreciate and understand other religions in a better manner.

Permit me to pen down my understanding about how true spiritual growth can outgrow religion: -

Religion

Religion is just a path to attain spirituality. Certain disciplines (rituals) are prescribed to control your mind so that you gradually overcome your sensual desires so as to proceed on the spirituality path.

Spirituality

Spirituality, on the other hand, is realization of the one-ness or unity with the Universe, call it Nature or whatever, Divine Power or Supreme Being. Realisation is a gradual process. - a higher state of mind towards which we have to evolve.

Religion and Spirituality

Religion is a means to spirituality and not an end in itself. It is a path to reach the Supreme. Spirituality transcends religion, as the former begins where the latter ends. Religious rituals binds us if, we are conditioned by it, whereas the same can act as a stepping-stone to spiritualism if looked upon as a preparatory activity for the journey to spiritualism. For example, if you want to go from Mumbai to Kolkatta you, may board a train. Kolkatta is your destination - the goal, whereas the train is a medium to reach there. Here figuratively, the train is religion and Kolkatta is the destination - Supreme Being. You may reach Kolkatta by road, train, air or sea, all of which would lead you to the same destination.

Likewise, whatever religion you follow, you will be led to the same Supreme Being. However, for you to reach to your destination the mode of transport should be dynamic for, no static object will be of any use. Similarly, religion, which is not open to new ideas or adapts to change, is static and can not reach you anywhere. As an intelligent human being, it is the duty of a religious head, to fine tune the mode of transport, that is, the religion that he heads and to see that it remains a dynamic tool not only for his own salvation but also for his followers who cannot appreciate the subtle difference between religion and spirituality.

Religion is a vehicle and its passengers are seekers. Unfortunately, some of the Gurus, instead of driving the vehicle and reaching his followers to the destination, they project themselves as the destination calling themselves Brahman the Supreme Being, with the result that religion loses its dynamism and therefore, reaches nowhere. Such a religion is reduced to meaningless rituals, which lead to conditioning and invariably leads to fanaticism with the result followers are driven away from true spirituality, the purpose for which they walked on the path of religion!

If this is so, then how does one achieve spiritual growth and outgrow religion? Is it necessary to go through the path of religion to attain spirituality?

Journey from Known to Unknown

Spirituality, to my mind is a journey from the known to the unknown. You go to any planned city of the world and you will find the big map at the disembarkation point to locate places. When you look at it, you only need to find out your locale and the map will show you the different ways to reach your different destinations there from. The map guides you from what you know to what you do not know and how to reach there. Religion does exactly the same.

When you wake up in the morning and see that the roads are wet you will infer logically that it must have rained at night. Then you put your inference to test, finding out if really rained. Here, from the effect we assumed the cause, which we tested and concluded. Similarly, looking at the orderly working of the Nature (Prakriti), manifested, we infer about the unmanifested omnipotent.

If that were the case, why don't we perceive or experience Him?

The answer is "ignorance". In Simultala, during the spiritual retreat, we used to go out for jogging in the morning, when the fog used to be so thick that we were unable to see objects, even a few feet away. The huge tree around which we used to jog was also not visible, but the tree was very much there, which we could not see because of our limited vision. Likewise, the veil of ignorance makes us blind, which we have to pierce through to perceive Him.

Ignorance is at a lower plane and we need to raise ourselves to the higher plane with the aid of knowledge. One of the surest ways to achieve it is through love as love purifies our hearts. But there is one more roadblock in reaching Him. We know that the unmanifested is infinite, whereas we are finite. How can we reach the infinite with the finite instruments? It is here our energy of love comes to our rescue with which we can implore that infinite to descend and take a finite form, say Krishna or Christ.

To illustrate, however mighty a person may be but when he goes home and if his little son wants to ride on him; he kneels down at the love command of his child. So also when our love for God is pure, total and unconditional, He descends at our request for us to see Him in whatever form we want. Thus, we ascend from known to unknown, from the manifested to the unmanifested. Mirabai, Sri Ramkrshina Parma Hamsa, Sri Ramana Maharshi did that. At the higher plane, one transcends all the limitations of finite mind and merges with the infinite. Sri Ramkrshina experienced the unknown from the known, manifested Goddess Kali, with immense love always for the unmanifested, Which at his love command manifested for him in that form.

Life – A Zero Sum Game

In order for us to outgrow religion, we need to attain a higher-level of mental understanding which is nothing but spirituality in essence. Once we attain spiritual wisdom, we realize the futility of the religious dogma, material world and possessions. As far as our material possessions are concerned, we ought not forget that we are playing a zero sum game, as we came with empty hands, so we shall depart from this material world.

Buddha put it beautifully:-

You never really possess things,
You merely hold them for a while,
And if you are unable to give them away,
You are **held by** them

Upon attaining this understanding, we come out of the delusion of material attachments. We can own and hold property etc. but as trustee, on the basis of trusteeship as advocated by Gandhiji, meaning these possessions actually belong to Him, Who had given it to us for sometime for use and enjoyment. He may give these possessions to others tomorrow, as noted in Bhagwad Gita, “whatever you are possessing today, belonged to someone yesterday, and it will again pass to someone else tomorrow.”

When this realization dawns on us, we would meaningfully attempt to reach our destination, for which purpose we do not need religion or its rituals. But how soon this realization could happen to us? Nobody can answer this question, as every one of us is at a different stage of evolution and also it depends upon how badly we want that to happen to us. For example, a person approached Sri Ramakrishna and insisted on seeing God. The Master asked him to take a bath in the river and as they both entered the water, Master pushed his head inside the water and held it tightly. The person was gasping for breath and when he was about to collapse, the Master released him. He got wild at the Master and reproached the Master crying that I almost got drowned. The Master with a serene smile replied, “how desperate you were to come out of water? If, with same desperation, you seek God, you shall verily find Him”.

Finale

Realisation of truth of the zero sum game is easily understood than achieved for the reason that the yawning gap between knowledge and experience/realisation is to be bridged. Unless one puts his best foot forward, one can never reach the set goal, therefore, after realizing the fundamental difference between religion and spirituality let us begin our journey in right earnest.