

SPIRITUAL LIFE AND PERCEPTION

By I. K. Taimni

The Divine Wisdom, which is referred to as *Brahma Vidyā* in Hinduism and Theosophy in Western thought, is not essentially a system of philosophical and religious concepts or even a philosophy of life but a living Reality that can be perceived only when certain conditions of mind and heart are fulfilled. If, therefore, we want to know what this Divine Wisdom is in its innermost essence and to realize that Supreme Truth which is sought to be communicated in the highest doctrines of Occultism, we must translate our spiritual ideas into spiritual life in order to bring about these required conditions of mind and heart. The determination to know this Reality directly in the final stage and to provide gradually the necessary conditions for this purpose must always be there, and the acquisition of intellectual knowledge of Theosophy should be subordinated to the effort in this direction. Pursuit of intellectual knowledge, without a dynamic interest and earnest effort in the transmutation of this theoretical knowledge into real perception and actual experience, becomes to a great extent futile on account of the very nature and purpose of this supreme and unique knowledge, which is referred to as *Brahma Vidyā*.

The Theosophical Society or any such organization devoted to the theoretical study and dissemination of the truths of spiritual life can, at best, be considered as the outermost court of the Temple of Divine Wisdom. But without a considerable number of students and aspirants engaged seriously in the realization of the truths of the Divine Wisdom, and without an innermost core of enlightened souls who have realized the Supreme Truth and are in touch with the innermost Realities, the Society would be as meaningless as a mere outermost court of a temple without the intervening enclosures and the Holy of holies. Such a Society can, no doubt, promote a very wide dissemination of ideas concerning the realities and ideals of spiritual life and thus prepare the ground for the gradual growth of the spiritual outlook and the realization of spiritual truths. But without well-directed and widespread efforts on a large scale to carry this work forward into the deeper realms of experience and realization, the work of the Society is bound to remain to a great extent infructuous and maybe futile.

Although progress in the life of the Spirit results not only in acquiring a progressively deeper perception of spiritual truths and their expression in the life of the individual, it is necessary to remember that this expression is based to a great extent on perception and not on the deliberate regulation of one's life according to a

definite and rigid code of conduct. The life of the Spirit is a natural expression of what we perceive directly or sense intuitively and not a blind following of what others ask us to do. It has thus the quality of freshness, naturalness, and effortless-ness, which immediately attracts people and silently affects their life and outlook.

Take, for instance, the question of practicing brotherhood. An individual who knows that all life is one (or at least senses it intuitively) behaves towards others with real feelings of sympathy and tenderness and helps them under all circum-stances naturally and effortlessly. While those who *practice* brotherhood as an intellectual ideal without having any real brotherly feelings and sympathy can, at best, conform to an outer code of behavior, which lacks warmth and capacity to inspire confidence in other people.

We shall realize the importance of this if we recall that real knowledge concerning the truths of Divine Wisdom is not, as in the case of other branches of knowledge, a matter of intellectual comprehension but of spiritual perception; this means that these truths no longer remain interesting or even inspiring ideas but realities of direct experience. The truth is reflected, as it were, in its true form in the field of our consciousness and not merely as a shadow on the screen of our mind.

This spiritual perception that we are going to consider is a very extraordinary experience. Since it is of the very essence of *Brahma Vidyā* the aspirant for self-realization has to understand its nature and learn to distinguish it from mere intellectual comprehension, which is generally mistaken for it. It is of the nature of a new kind of awareness and enables everything that is present in our consciousness to be seen in a new light or from a higher dimension.

In bringing about this inner spiritual transformation of consciousness, the *sādhaka*¹ has to progressively sharpen or refine his perceptive faculty so that he can perceive increasingly deeper significance in the content of his mind without changing the nature of that content. It is this sharpening or refining process which, when carried to the extreme limit, enables him to perceive the Ultimate Reality that pervades and contains the manifested universe but remains unknown for lack of perception.

The truth pointed out in the above paragraph is expressed tersely in the well-known *mantra* from the Upanishads: “The Reality can be seen only through a penetrating perception” (*drśyate tvagryayā buddhyā*).

Since *buddhi* is the faculty or power of perception, the above *mantra* means that the Reality can be perceived only by gradually sharpening the power of perception. This penetrating power of perception is not gained instantly. It is a matter of slow

¹ A spiritual novice or apprentice.

growth, which takes place when the vehicles are made more and more sensitive and the mind purer by systematic *sādhana*.²

According to Yogic literature, there are seven stages in the development of this increasing power of perception as pointed out in aphorism II-27 of Patañjali's *Yoga-Sūtras*: "His (of the *Purusha*) Enlightenment is reached by seven stages." Upon examining the nature of these seven stages of Enlightenment, which are described in detail in Vedantic literature, we find that they are nothing but degrees of power of perception which enable the Yogi to see deeper and deeper significance in the same facts of existence by which he is surrounded.

It should be remembered that as deeper knowledge of the realities is gained in *samādhi* it does not remain confined to the state of *samādhi* but gradually filters down into the consciousness of the waking state where it appears as a more and more penetrating power of perception, or *sūkshma buddhi*. This penetrating power of perception finds its culmination in the last stage, when the Yogi is able to see through all intermediate states of manifestation and become aware of the One Reality from which they are derived. This filtering down of direct knowledge gained in *samādhi* into the waking consciousness is referred to as *sahaja samādhi*, or "easy *samādhi*," which means a natural or effortless state of *samādhi*.

What has been said above shows the tremendous importance of refining or sharpening the penetrating power of the perceptive faculty known as *buddhi*. Most aspirants—and especially those of a scholarly type—suffer from the erroneous idea that they have to acquire more and more intellectual knowledge and fill their mind with ideas in order to be able to know the truths of the inner life and, finally, the ultimate Truth of existence. So they read more and more books while piling up scraps of information in their mind without exercising any kind of discrimination in the matter. And the more time they devote to this task of indiscriminate accumulation of purely intellectual knowledge the less they feel inclined to give time for reflection, meditation and other aspects of *sādhana*. The result of this misdirected effort to grow fat intellectually as quickly as possible is similar to what happens when we try to eat excessive amounts of food with a view to getting physically stronger without sufficient exercise to digest and assimilate that food. There is intellectual indigestion as our mind becomes clogged and burdened with half-digested ideas clouding our perception.

In real *sādhana* and preparation for Yoga, the effort is directed mainly towards the development of the penetrating power of perception and not towards the accumulation of non-essential and possibly interesting information regarding occult

² A system of spiritual discipline or practice.

facts. This is what *svādhyāya*, one of the three main constituent techniques of *Kriyā Yoga*, really implies. The acquiring of essential knowledge concerning the philosophy and technique of Yoga in practicing *svādhyāya* is only the first and least important step. This knowledge is meditated upon again and again to discover its inner hidden significance and make it an integral part of one's life. This process is reinforced by other practices like *japa* (repetition of a name or mantra in meditation), etc., which also form part of *svādhyāya*. In this way is brought about not only the gradual assimilation of essential theoretical knowledge but also the progressive sharpening of the power of perception, which enables the Yogi to become aware of subtler and subtler truths and realities of existence in the very things by which he is surrounded and in which he could not see anything more than the ordinary humdrum facts of existence.

The above process of becoming aware of the deeper realities of life owing to the sharpening of the *buddhic* faculty may be considered as the opening of new dimensions of consciousness similar to the expansion of consciousness that takes place when consciousness passes from a world of a lower number of dimensions to a world of a higher number of dimensions. The expansion generally takes place first in *samādhi* and then filters down gradually into the normal waking consciousness. No change of vehicle or environment is involved in this process, for it is really a matter of the center of consciousness passing into a deeper level of itself through the *Māhābindu*.³

It is necessary to grasp fully the significance of what has been said above if we are to understand the philosophy and technique of *Jnāna Yoga*. Most students of Yoga find it very difficult to get a clear idea of the philosophy and technique of *Jnāna Yoga*. It is so elusive, indefinite, and difficult to formulate in a clearly defined system of thought. The reason for this lies in the fact that *Jnāna Yoga* is based on gradually developing the penetrating power of perception through the combined practice of *viveka* (spiritual discernment) and *vairāgya* (non-attachment). What has been said in the above paragraphs will therefore help the student to understand to some extent the rationale of this system of Yoga and its place in the larger philosophy of Yoga in general.

In the *Yoga-Sūtras* of Patañjali this power of perception is called *viveka khyāti*, which means the power or faculty of discriminating between the Real and the unreal, or in other words, of seeing the Real in the unreal or becoming aware of the Real in the unreal. For the purpose of Yoga is to become aware of that Reality from which the whole universe is derived, and thus to be able to see the whole field of manifestation as an expression of that Reality. This alone can free the Yogi from the illusions,

³ A philosophical concept; the Great Point. See Taimni's *Man, God and the Universe*.

limitations, and miseries of life. The real purpose of *samādhi*, the essential technique of Yoga, is really to develop this penetrating power of perception, step by step, until the Yogi is able to see through all the intervening states of mind and perceive the Reality which lies beyond and also within them.

If the development of the penetrating power of perception is the essential technique of *Jnāna Yoga*, then *Jnāna Yoga* is an integral and major part of the Yogic technique outlined in the *Yoga-Sūtras* of Patañjali. Many students can see easily the essential elements of other systems of Yoga in Patañjali's integrated system, but somehow fail to see what role *Jnāna Yoga* plays in his system. A careful examination of Patañjali's system in the light of what has been said above regarding *Jnāna Yoga* will show that *Jnāna Yoga* permeates the whole system of Patañjali. From a general point of view this system may be considered as an elaborated technique of *Jnāna Yoga*, for the emphasis throughout in Patañjali's system is on gaining direct knowledge, culminating in the attainment of the knowledge of the Reality which is the source of all kinds of knowledge. The fact of the matter is that it is impossible to divide different systems of Yoga into watertight compartments. They have all to be considered as different aspects and techniques of one comprehensive philosophy and method of realizing by direct experience the Reality that underlies the universe as a Whole and is also the ultimate basis of each individual human consciousness.

This power of perception is developed not only by means of *samādhi* and all the other practices that precede *samādhi* but also by the intensive practice of *vairāgya* as indicated by the well-known aphorism of the *Yoga-Sūtras* (I-12): "Their suppression [of the modifications of the mind] is brought about by persistent practice and non-attachment" (*abhyāsa-vairāgyābhyām tan-nirodhah*). That is why in *Jnāna Yoga*, *vairāgya* and the different methods of developing it play such an important part. The practices which develop *vairāgya* cannot be defined as clearly as those which lead to the attainment of *samādhi* by manipulating the mind, but all the same they are equally effective in bringing about that state of mind which leads to *samādhi*.

The fact that *Jnāna Yoga* is based on the direct unfoldment of the power of perception also becomes clear when we examine the seven stages in the development of knowledge referred to as *Sapta-Jnāna-bhumika*. The first three stages in this progressive unfoldment of consciousness will be seen to be stages of developing *viveka* as ordinarily understood by the common man, and the last four stages those of developing *viveka khyāti* as defined in the *Yoga-Sūtras*. These last four stages are attained by means of techniques like *samādhi*, etc., which are more specifically identified with the path of Yoga.

If we consider *viveka* as the power of spiritual perception, instead of the capacity to discriminate between the Real and the unreal, it will perhaps be easier for the

ordinary student to understand its nature and role on the path of Self-unfoldment. On closer analysis *viveka*, or spiritual discrimination, is seen to be nothing but the capacity to perceive the deeper and more spiritual significance of things with which we are familiar and which we miss partly or entirely owing to our lack of sensitivity. The whole of the manifested universe, including the phenomenal worlds in which we live and pass our life, is an expression of the One Reality; but we remain completely unaware of this fact because our perceptive power is not sufficient sharpened to perceive this Truth of truths. When this power or faculty begins to unfold from within, the same humdrum, monotonous, and even evil world begins to put on a more spiritual complexion until it is transformed in the last stage as the expression and embodiment of the One Reality. It is this realization that frees us from the illusions, fears, and miseries of embodied existence.

This view of *viveka* will also enable us to bridge the gulf between *viveka* and *viveka khyāti* that exists in the minds of many students. They regard *viveka* and *viveka khyāti* as two different faculties, while actually these are merely two phases, or aspects, of the same faculty of spiritual perception found at the earlier and later stages of its development. The path of Yoga is entered through the exercise of ordinary *viveka*, which enables the aspirant to perceive the illusory nature of worldly life and pursuits and makes him decide to rise beyond these illusions and limitations by finding the Reality that is hidden within the deepest layers of his own consciousness. *Viveka*, and its correlate *vairāgya*, continue to play an ever increasing and deeper role in his spiritual life until the Yogi attains *Dharma Megha Samādhi* through the intensive practice of *para-vairāgya* and *para-viveka* and becomes permanently established in the world of Reality. He has now acquired the capacity of remaining fully and permanently aware of his Divine nature.

Viveka thus passes into *viveka khyāti*, and *viveka-khyāti* flowers into the state of Enlightenment and Liberation. From one point of view, treading the path of Yoga will thus be seen to be a matter of progressively unfolding the penetrating power of spiritual perception.

This awakening of our perceptive powers is one of the most wonderful realities of spiritual life. Many of us have had some kind of qualitative experience of this awakening in our ordinary life. We may read a book of deep thought, find nothing in it, and forget all about it. Years pass as we make mental and spiritual progress. We happen to take up the same book again and now find it full of deep significance of which we had not the slightest inkling before. Why? Has the book changed? No! It is we who have changed in the meantime, or rather our perceptive power has unfolded, and it is this fact that enables us to see much more in the same book.

But such experiences, though common, are not very remarkable or of much significance because they are on the plane of our ordinary experiences. We see more meaning and greater significance in such cases because our mind and intellect have unfolded or become more developed during the interval and it is this fact which enables us to see more and more in the same things. It is only when we enter the realm of inner realities of spiritual life that we discover what a tremendous difference it makes when our perceptive powers with regard to spiritual matters begin to awaken.

This kind of experience is not necessarily very pleasant or agreeable in the early stages because the dawning of *viveka* not only enables us to see deeper into the realities of spiritual life that, hitherto, were matters of mere intellectual knowledge devoid of any spiritual significance; in the beginning, it is also more likely to tear down the veils of illusion, which surround ordinary worldly objects and pursuits and invest them with glamour. When these veils fall from our eyes, all the pleasure that we found in them and the zest that we felt in their pursuit disappears; our life may appear to have become quite empty and purposeless.

But this negative phase of spiritual awakening—if we may use such a phrase—generally passes after a time, unless we become alarmed, unbalanced, and plunge back again into our old life and pursuits with greater zest in order to drown our budding *viveka* deliberately. If we can resist this tendency, we begin to gradually see and feel the positive aspect of the spiritual realities, which are hidden in their fullest splendor beneath the common things of life. It is when we begin to perceive these, at least to some extent, that real spiritual life begins. Till then it is all a play of ideas, illuminated partially perhaps by the light of intuition.

As this perception deepens and becomes more penetrating, the awareness of different spiritual realities (or different aspects of these realities) takes on a better-defined and dynamic character. And as our progress continues and we draw nearer to our goal, we begin to see a glimmer of that all-pervading Reality which is the source as well as the substance of the manifested universe. We see the ultimate truth of our existence first darkly, as it were, then more and more clearly, until gradually the whole world of objects gets transformed into that Reality in which they essentially exist and of which they are different expressions. As a matter of fact, the objects do not disappear, but being seen as Real in the light of that Reality, they lose their significance as separate objects and merge in that all-embracing and overpowering experience which is beyond our present comprehension and imagination.

As this concept of the ultimate state of Self-realization is extremely subtle, let us dwell on it for a while to clarify our ideas. To understand this concept we have to recall that consciousness is not only the subtlest principle in existence, but it also has

a unique character with which we cannot find any parallel in our ordinary experiences. It is this subtlety and uniqueness of character that enables consciousness not only to pervade everything but also at the same time to contain everything in the manifest and the Unmanifest within itself. The idea of pervasion, which is generally associated with the underlying Reality of the universe, does not fully represent the relation of this Reality with the manifest and the Unmanifest. For a thing that pervades another is different, and apart from, the thing which is pervaded. But this Reality not only pervades but also contains everything in itself. Whatever exists, exists in this Reality and is derived from It. It, no doubt, pervades everything, but it is also what is pervaded.

From this relation of the One Reality to the manifest and the Unmanifest, and keeping in mind the order in which the different fundamental principles of existence are derived from this Reality, we can see, at least intellectually, what happens when spiritual perception awakens and its penetrating power increases progressively. In the first stage, the outer world of sensuous perception dissolves in mind. This does not mean necessarily that it disappears. It means that it is seen clearly as an expression of mind. The mind then dissolves in consciousness. This again does not mean that the mind disappears. It means that it is seen as an expression of consciousness. The consciousness then dissolves in the Reality in which everything is contained. This is the supreme phase of the awakening perception when everything is seen as contained in the One Reality and as an expression of that Reality. And yet in all these tremendous changes that take place, no change in the content of consciousness need take place. For everything is inherently and always contained in consciousness and is an expression of consciousness. It is only a question of deeper perception or seeing the same things from a deeper level of consciousness.

What has been pointed out above should make the aspirant realize the importance of making definite efforts to develop the penetrating power of perception and not remain content with merely adding to the stock of ideas in his mind. The first requires bringing about drastic changes in our mind, heart, and attitudes by means of rigorous self-discipline, while all that is necessary in enlarging our stock of ideas is to read books and hear lectures. The first course leads ultimately to Enlightenment and freedom from the illusions and miseries of life while the second course enables us to have merely the satisfaction of enlarging our mental horizon and being considered as a very learned person, possibly involved in greater and more insidious illusions of life as pointed out in verse 9 of the *Iśa Upanishad*: "Into a blind darkness they enter who are devoted to ignorance (rituals); but into a greater darkness they enter who engage in knowledge alone."

Spiritual Life and Perception

Many students who are not accustomed to deep thought and do not feel inclined to undertake this more strenuous task frequently ask, "What is the use of going into these deeper aspects of religion, philosophy, and science?" The answer to this question is quite clear and definite. This is the first step in our effort to leave skimming the surface of life and dive into the deeper realities of existence. We must first learn to go at least into the deeper aspects of intellectual knowledge before we can succeed in diving into the much deeper realities of spiritual life.



This article was edited by the Department of Education