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The Divine Presence

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The goal of spiritual life is to experience God and to have the divine vision in all that we encounter. The experience must come to us some day in which we feel the presence of God in the heavens, in the



air, in the oceans, in the mountains, in the rivers, in the flowers, in all living beings, including ourselves. We must be able to feel the presence of God in our bodies, in our minds, in our egos and in all phenomena.

The Vedantic scriptures tell us that this is possible. When man lives in ignorance, there is a wall which hides God from him. This wall has to be broken, bit by bit, but we should keep our aim pure. When we have come to spiritual life, we need not calculate how far we have progressed. We

should go on practising the means by which the ultimate goal can be reached and then, if we are earnest and if we do not lose patience, surely by God's grace we shall be able to feel the Divine Presence in all situations. Then into our lives will come the truth, the peace, the knowledge and the joy that we are seeking.

To experience the Divine Presence, through and through, is a difficult task entailing many years, perhaps many lives, but we must not give up hope. If we believe in the theory of reincarnation, we know we have lived many past lives in ignorance. Therefore, what does it matter if a few more lives are required? It is said that if we are sincere we need not have long to wait. God-realisation can come by divine grace in this life. So, with hope, courage and determination we should increase our spiritual efforts.

Great seers tell us that all we see and experience is God, the immortal Reality, the light of pure Consciousness, the infinite Bliss. Most of us, however, cannot see God in this way. This material universe, this ever-changing world, full of contradictions and sufferings, is to us so different from God. But spiritual experience is a question of the growth of the mind. When the mind is freed from desires and passions, we can understand what Divine Presence is. We begin to see that all is God — God who is looking through all eyes, manipulating all egos, listening through all ears, thinking through all minds and residing in all hearts. This is the experience of the Divine Presence. It does not evolve in one day, but we must not lose faith in the possibility of this vision. We have to begin from the place where we are standing.

In the beginning God to us is ultra-cosmic. We think that He is the Creator and Ruler, abiding in some distant heaven, and by remote control He is managing everything. That position in philosophy is called dualism. Pursuing such a philosophy we do not care to inquire so much into the nature of God. We take for granted that God is eternal, all powerful, all compassionate, omniscient. In this dualistic thinking the devotee feels, 'God is different from me; I am bound, small, limited, mortal, and the world is ever changing, but God is immortal, omniscient, free. He exists and I am praying to Him to fulfil my life, to grant me His vision.' In this way, with a dualistic attitude, we can carry on our prayers and meditations. If we persist, God will gradually begin to reveal His higher nature. He will draw closer and closer and no longer seem a distant ultra-cosmic God. He will become an immanent God.



Various views of the immanent God are described in Vedantic scriptures. *The Chandogya Upanishad* says : That which is the subtle Essence-in It all that exists has its Self. That is the truth. That is the Supreme Self. (*Chandogya Upanishad* 6.8)

The Taittiriya Upanishad says : He created all this—whatever there is. Having created all this, He entered into everything. (*Taittiriya Upanishad* 2.6.1)

The immanent God is thus present in every part of creation. God is not merely in one's own body but in all human bodies, in plants, in animals and also in inanimate objects. Nature is not separate from Him. Such a position in Indian philosophy is called qualified monism. The one is qualified by the many; everything exists in God and is filled with God. This contemplation brings God nearer to us and our awareness of the Divine Presence is intensified.

Normally we look upon a mountain as a material mass of stone; this is the usual, ignorant outlook. Now we must bring a spiritual element into our contemplation : True, the outer appearance is a material mountain, but in the core of the mountain there is God. God in the language of the Upanishads is sat, Infinite Reality. When the mountain is felt to be something actually existing, that existence is God. In all that exists, the principle of existence is God. If we break the mountain into a million parts, each part will still exist; if we break the mountain into atoms, each atom will still have to exist. Not a single fragment can escape the presence of God as sat, existence. The meditator can include in this contemplation not only the mountain but any other object in nature. Any material object is 'material' on the surface, but metaphysically it is permeated through and through by God as sat. Thus, thinking of the mountain in the context of God as existence can throw the mind into deep meditation. The mind will grow calm and the inner reality of the mountain will become apparent, not only as existence (sat) but also as consciousness, or knowledge, (chit) which is involved in all existence. All that we experience comes to us as something existing and shining as knowledge.

Then a third element has to be added, which may not be clear to us in the beginning. This is Ananda, joy. In everything there is the basic joy of God. Because we are ignorant, our experience of joy is selective. We find joy and blessedness only in certain persons or things, not in everything.

But we must enlarge our vision. We have to know that joy or blessedness, like existence and knowledge, is inherent in everything and in every experience. The mountain is a real object but the source of that reality is God. The mountain is a piece of knowledge and that knowledge is coming from

God. The mountain also is a mass of joy and that joy is coming from God. In this perspective we must look at nature. We will have to alter our mode of thinking. Normally the mind does not see God; it sees only the material form of the universe.

But in meditation the spiritual seeker has to touch the core of reality. This is not a poetical fancy. These are the actual experiences of sages who have beheld God and who have felt the Divine Presence everywhere. Following their experience, as we contemplate the mountain, the ocean, the forest, the river, the sun, the moon, all that we see around us, we must try to see that God is existing there and radiating bliss, for He has entered into all these objects.

In the *Upanishads* one finds many exercises for meditation on external things: 'meditate on the sun as *Brahmar*'. Without the sun, all life would have stopped. What power, what potentialities exist in the sun! The spiritual aspirant contemplates the fact that all the brilliance, the heat, all the life-giving powers in the sun are emanating from *Brahman*. In the core of the sun is that spiritual reality which is God. Using the sun as a symbol, the aspirant meditates on God. Similarly, he can meditate on the moon: everyone sees the moon's sweetness, its beauty, its calmness, its gentleness, but the spiritual seeker must also associate the moon with God. The devotee should try to feel that all objects in nature are emanations of Brahman; their very existence comes from God. In this way the mind prepares itself for higher and higher contemplations, and it becomes more and more ready to feel the Divine Presence.

Another meditation is on Usha (the morning). No matter how tired a person may be in the evening, when he awakes refreshed, he often thinks, 'Oh, what a wonderful morning !' All of us think in this fashion, but a spiritual seeker must realise that it is God who is manifested in the morning and meditate on this. He can also meditate on *Sandhya* (the evening): evening is the scene of quietness; all the turmoil of the day is gone. At that time the mind is naturally in a calm mood. The meditator should think that the evening's power of tranquillity is coming from God. In the Rig-Veda there are superb hymns dedicated to the goddess of morning and to the goddess of evening but all gods and goddesses are nothing more than manifestations of the one universal God, *Sat-cit-ananda*.

In another meditation the meditator looks inside himself. He sees within him a miniature universe; there also are mountains, rivers, deserts, for all nature has its counterpart in the human body. In these preparatory meditations the devotee may concentrate on the presence of God in his eyes or ears or heart or any other organ. Next he tries to feel the presence of God in the various modifications of his mind. The *Chandogya Upanishad* (7.4.1) directs us to meditate on *samkalpa as Brahman*.

Samkalpa is that function of the mind which is continuously creating resolutions some of which are effective, some futile. With the help of this contemplation, the mind will gain a quality of serenity and will not be disturbed by trivial resolutions. Another exercise is prescribed: meditate on the mind as a whole as *Brahman*. *Brahman* has entered into the mind and that is why all the functions of the mind are possible.

If the devotee can meditate on the mind (*manas*) as *Brahman*, after a time he will see that this brings a remarkable transformation in his mind. The mind will realize that it is being watched, and will comprehend that it is connected with God. As The Divine Presence it is watched, the mind will be ashamed to play tricks; all thoughts and emotions that come will be controlled, calm and rational.

In a similar way the meditator can try to associate *Brahman*, the Divine Presence, with other elements of his personality. Take the case of ego. Normally we take our egos for granted but our egos can deceive us. At one moment the ego becomes angry; the next moment it becomes sad; in another moment it is kind, and then violent. Soon it becomes a saint and a minute later is a devil. That is because we have not objectively observed our egos.

We think the ego is an independent power, but this is not so. The 'I am' consciousness is really grounded in that universal Reality, God. In the Old Testament of the Bible we read that Moses asked God, 'Who are you?' He did not actually see God, but he heard God's voice. Then the voice of God answered, 'The 'I am that I am', which means, 'I am the Fundamental Reality; no one can describe Me.' God's 'I am' does not change, but our 'I am' is false. If someone asks, 'Who are you?' today, one of us may say, 'I am a scholar,' but tomorrow he may say, 'I am a fool.' In the morning he may say, 'I am happy,' but by evening he may declare, 'I am miserable.' Actually we are nonentities. God alone can truly say, 'I am,' because He remains eternally the same. If a spiritual seeker remembers that his own small ego is based in the infinite reality of God, his ego will be less changeable; it will be steady and serene. He will be able to feel the Divine Presence in his own ego.

We must try to feel God's presence in as many ways as possible. This does not come to us in one day but through practice of contemplation these ideas will become increasingly real. More and more we will be able to feel the presence of God inside and outside. Even when we are working, our minds should be tinged with the Divine Presence. The spiritual seeker should know that God is the real Doer. Our bodies and minds are His instruments. The *Bhagavad Gita* says :

'From whom originate all the activities of beings, by whom all this is pervaded, worshipping Him with his own duty, a man attains perfection'.

All actions are actually proceeding from God. In breathing, sleeping, eating and in everything, the power for each action comes from God. If the devotee remembers this as he works in the house, the office or the shop, his ego becomes quiet and he feels the presence of God.

Emotions also emanate from God. If an emotion of love for someone comes, the aspirant should feel that it is from God. The universal love of God is manifested in all our little loves for persons and things. Normally our love is tinged with selfishness, but if we can feel the Divine Presence even in our human love, it will be a means for our liberation. A mother loves her child, but if she remembers that the sweetness, the beauty and the charm of the child are coming from God, feeding and caressing the child become spiritual practices. We have many opportunities to feel the presence of God in this world, but sometimes we forget that. Often we think, 'This is my child, my child,' but if the child suddenly dies, we cry, 'Where is my child? O God, why did You take away my child?' With the practice of Divine Presence we shall not suffer. Even if the child dies, we will say, It is God's will. God brought me this child and made me love the child. It is all the play of God in order that I may find God.

If we are really earnest, we must find time to realize that it is God who is operating the universe that wherever there is power, wherever there is beauty, wherever there is bliss, it is God. 'It is He. It is He.' We must touch this reality in our contemplations, and the memory of this will prevail in all the activities of our lives. Spiritual life is a total life - a life that exists not only during the meditation but at all times. In whatever we do, God-consciousness must be there. Trying to feel the presence of God

throughout the universe, knowing that God has penetrated every atom of this cosmos, brings us great strength, courage and peace.

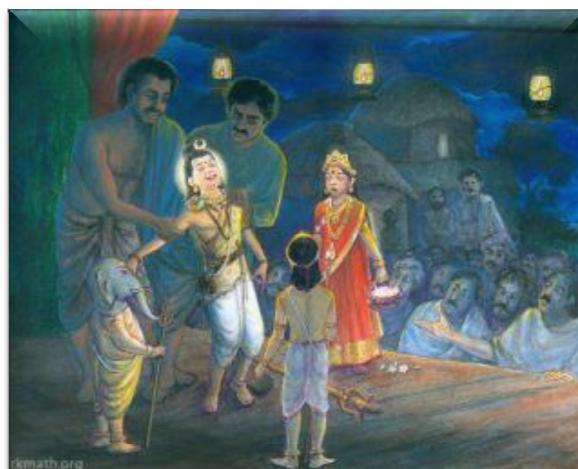
In Vedanta the final philosophic position for experiencing the Divine Presence is monism, the practice of unity. At this stage we have to know that there is nothing else but God as Supreme Consciousness. In the dream state, even though there seems to be a solid or tangible universe, yet on waking we know that the seemingly real universe was mental entirely created by the mind. Similarly, the waking world is a projection of consciousness. In the monistic vision the material world is nothing but consciousness. Space, time, matter, energy, life, mind, and all that we encounter and experience are forms of consciousness. It is all one consciousness.

At this stage the meditator will try to concentrate on the ultimate Reality as consciousness and he does not need to wander here and there to discover that consciousness. He discovers it within himself. He sees the light of his own consciousness and knows that this light of consciousness is one with the Universal Consciousness (God). They are the same. Then the meditator tries to concentrate on the Universal Consciousness as his own true Self.

Every experience that comes to him he at once merges into the Universal Consciousness. If a thought of the body comes, he at once merges it into the source of all thoughts—his higher Self. From the outside the body appears to be made up of many components—bones, flesh, nerves and so on—but it is all projections of his true Self. Slowly he realises that the entire universe, including time and space, is within himself. In this way the experience of the Divine Presence comes to its culmination—in which man's true Self includes all things: the universe, the past, the present, the future, animate and inanimate objects, life, death. All these are one indefinable, indescribable unity—the unity of the universal Self.

Thus, the Divine Presence has varying degrees or levels of comprehension. We must start from where we stand and practise the Presence as much as possible, knowing, in the language of the *Chandogya Upanishad*: 'All this is certainly God.' All this is the true Self of man.

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[To one who is repentant] God dwells in every being, and he knows the innermost thoughts of all. Pray to him with your whole heart, weep before him. He is the one who can direct your mind toward the path of good, he is the one to give you the strength to follow the path. If you vow to yourself that you will follow the path of righteousness, you will be able to do so by the grace of the Lord.

But pray to him day and night, weep before him; you will gain strength and you will attain devotion. He is the ocean of mercy, he is full of compassion and he is the embodiment of forgiveness.

(Swami Premananda)