

## LIBERATION - THE HINDU VIEW

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From time immemorial liberation has been the central theme of the Hindu religious philosophy. At the very outset, however, it should be borne in mind that here liberation is understood in its religious and spiritual significance, without implying any social, economic and political overtones. Such this-worldly dimensions of life have not received due attention in traditional Hinduism. In fact the spiritual and the transcendental values are so much emphasised therein that it has often been accused of being a world-denying religion. A sweeping criticism of that sort may be questionable, but the fact remains that the Hindu religious literature generally indulges in depicting in very lively fashion the frailty and futility of the world and its goods. It is insisted that a wise man should renounce the goods of this world and dedicate himself entirely to the pursuit of his final liberation.

Liberation is practically the Hindu equivalent of salvation. As in Christianity the human condition is explained through the dialectics of the Fall and Redemption, so in Hinduism it is explained through that of Bondage and Liberation. The Hindu view of life says that human existence on earth is a state of bondage and hence man's main concern must be that of obtaining the definitive liberation. As someone has put it, we are in possession of an old manuscript of the history of humanity of which the first and the last parts are missing. Each religion is trying to read the manuscript in its own terms and to spell out the missing parts accordingly. Thus Hinduism maintains that the missing parts speak respectively of the human bondage and the liberation, whereas its part on hand explains the path one has to tread in order to reach liberation.

### THE NATURE OF HUMAN BONDAGE

Man is essentially a soul « imprisoned » in a body. The soul is spiritual, eternal, simple, conscious, immortal. Though uncreated, it is ontologically dependent on God, and as such is qualified as a part

(*amśa*) of God<sup>1</sup>. The body, on the other hand, is material, limited by time and space, composed of parts (physical, psychical and vital), mortal. As the *Bhagavad-gītā* explains it: « Finite, they say, are these (our) bodies (indwelt) by an eternal, embodied (self, which is) indestructible and incommensurable. (...) It is never born, nor does it die at any time, nor having (once) come to be will it again cease to be. It is unborn, eternal, permanent and primeval. It is not slain when the body is slain »<sup>2</sup>.

How did it happen that the eternal soul came to be « imprisoned » in the temporal body? There is no fool-proof answer. In order to explain the whole issue the Hindu tradition has recourse to two fundamental presuppositions: *avidyā* and *karma*. *Avidyā* means ignorance. Here it is not understood in its epistemological or psychological sense. It is rather the « original ignorance », an ontological, but unexplainable force of evil which in some way obscures the soul's vision of reality. It is something analogous to the Christian idea of Original Sin in as much as through it Hinduism tries to account for the ills and evils of human condition.

The origin of this « ignorance » (*avidyā*) is not known; it is assumed as existing eternally as the principle of darkness. The soul in some way falls a prey to its negative influence with the result that it loses its original purity, finds itself in the space-time condition, being united with a material body. Because of the obscurity created by ignorance the soul tends to forget its own true spiritual identity and to confuse itself with the psycho-physical organism. Consequently the soul is spontaneously inclined to seek the goods and pleasures of this world rather than the supreme good. Hence ignorance (*avidyā*), states Dr. Radhakrishnan, « is not conscious dissimulation, but the unconscious tendency of the finite mind, which lives by the imperfect standards of the world. It is the negative power which shuts us from our godlike existence »<sup>3</sup>.

If *avidyā* accounts for the soul's fall from its original purity,

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<sup>1</sup> Cfr. *Gītā*, 15,7.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2,18-20; see also *Katha Up.*, 2,18-19. [*Up.* = *Upanisad*].

<sup>3</sup> *The Vedānta according to Śankara and Ramanuja*, London 1928, p. 141. Sri Aurobindo explains the impact of ignorance on man: « What is true of his spirit he attributes to his ego-personality and gives it a false application, a false form and a mass of ignorant consequences. The ignorance lies in this fundamental deficiency of his surface consciousness that he identifies himself only with the outward mechanical part of him which is a convenience of Nature and with so much only of the soul as reflects and is reflected in these workings. He misses the greater inner spirit within which gives to all his mind and life and creation and action an unfulfilled promise and a hidden significance » (*Essays on the Gita*, Pondicherry 1974, p. 534).

the principle of *karma* explains the concrete nature of that fall. Both *avidyā* and *karma* are present and operative simultaneously, and they can be separated only logically, not really. *Karma* literally means action, any kind of action. But here it is understood as the law of *karma*, that is, the law of retribution which underlines the moral aspect of the action and implies that all actions, good or bad, produce their corresponding effects which must necessarily be experienced by the subject. It is the inescapable law of cause and effect applied to the moral order. « The law of *karma* tells us that as in the physical world, in the mental and moral world also there is law. The world is an ordered cosmos. What we sow we will reap. The law of *karma* governs the growth of the human individual. Our acts determine our character which in turn determines our acts »<sup>4</sup>.

If the law of *karma* is ineluctable, then man's life is not a once-for-all event, but it had a past and it will have a future. Our past actions have determined our present mode of existence, and our future transformations will depend on the present way of living. While one is reaping the fruits of one's past actions, one is at the same time indulging in new actions and thus accumulating new merits and demerits (*karma*) whose fruits must also be reaped. From this it is deduced that human life is a process of repeated reincarnation of the soul. It is believed that the soul is subject to a process of continued birth and rebirth in accordance with the eternal law of *karma*. All the experiences of life — good and bad, pleasant and painful — are the natural and necessary results of our own deeds. Since the Hindu view of the world and of human life is not linear but circular, the question about the first beginning of the process is not considered pertinent.

This human condition is called *karma-samsāra*. *Samsāra* signifies going about, wandering through, streaming continually, faring on. The life is not something well defined and limited between a birth and a death, but it is a *samsāra*, a continuous stream of, an endless succession of, a repeated passing through birth, death and rebirth, governed by the inexorable law of *karma*<sup>5</sup>. And precisely in this consists the human bondage. This is the plight from which liberation is sought.

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<sup>4</sup> RADHAKRISHNAN, *The Brahma Sūtra*, London 1971, p. 194.

<sup>5</sup> On Hindu concept of reincarnation of souls, cfr. RADHAKRISHNAN, *Brahma Sūtra*, cit., pp. 183 ff.; ID., *An Idealist View of Life*, London 1967, pp. 208 ff.; SRI AUROBINDO, *The Problem of Rebirth*, Pondicherry 1969; A. BESANT, *Reincarnation*, Adyar 1972; D. ACHARUPARAMBIL, *La reincarnazione: mito o realtà?*, in « Il Fuoco », 32 (1984) 1, pp. 8-16.

## LIBERATION AND ITS MEANS

Liberation is the *parama puruṣārtha*, the supreme end of human existence, the *summum bonum*. Generally it is indicated with the term *mokṣa* or *mukti*<sup>6</sup>. Since the fundamental causes of bondage are *avidyā* and *karma*, there can be no liberation without getting rid of them. That means that *karma* should be neutralised, or in other words, one should live in such a way that one's actions do not imply consequences to be reaped in a future reincarnation. *Karma* is operative only when one lives and acts under the spell of ignorance (*avidyā*). It is cancelled when one overcomes ignorance and arrives at the light of true Wisdom and lives accordingly. For Wisdom is the great purifier. In the words of the *Bhagavad-gītā*: «As a kindled fire reduces its fuel to ashes, so does the fire of wisdom reduce all works (*karma*) to ashes. (...) and, wisdom won, he will come right soon to supreme peace»<sup>7</sup>. The supreme peace is none other than the state of liberation.

True wisdom is in effect synonymous with the highest spiritual perfection as envisaged by the school to which one belongs. Whatever be the school — Absolutistic or Theistic — it implies a thorough purification of the individual from the very sources of evil, such as egoism, desires and attachments, and the personal realization of the Divine. It is not sufficient that one performs some good deeds and accumulates some spiritual merits. Unless such deeds proceed from a heart that is undefiled by egoism and desires, they do not arrest the operation of *karma* and ensure the final liberation.

The path that leads to this ideal of perfection and the consequent liberation is indeed long and arduous. In many a case the unflinching efforts of more than one life will be necessary, it is believed. In practice the efforts required consist in the cultivation of certain attitudes and habits, certain virtues and disciplines which may be conveniently brought under three headings: 1) those which affect one's own personal life, 2) those which have a direct bearing on others, and 3) those which regard one's relation with the Divine. Needless to say, these are not mutually exclusive but complementary.

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<sup>6</sup> Derived from *mokṣ* or *muc*, meaning to liberate, to release. Various other terms are also found in the Hindu religious literature, for instance: *kaivalyam* or the state of splendid isolation of the soul; *sāyujyam*, communion or fellowship with the Divinity. It is reaching *param sthānam* or *parā-gati*, the state beyond; *padam avyayam*, the imperishable abode; *Brahma-loka*, the world of Brahman or the kingdom of God; *Brāhmī-sthiti*, the still state of Brahman; *parā-śānti*, supreme peace; *Nirvāṇa* or *Brahmanirvāṇa*, extinction or liberation in Brahman.

<sup>7</sup> *Gītā*, 4,37-39.

1) *The personal dimension of spiritual perfection*

Under this aspect we may speak mainly of three important qualities: renunciation, asceticism and equanimity.

(a) *Renunciation*

A seeker of liberation must, first of all, renounce all goods and pleasures of this world. « It is through renunciation alone that one can become immortal. *Yoga* and *bhoga* — union with God and sense-enjoyment — cannot go together. One cannot get any taste of the bliss of Brahman unless one gives up the happiness of this world ». With these words Swami Shivananda<sup>8</sup> only reiterates the constant teaching of Hindu tradition. Without true renunciation one cannot enjoy the necessary interior freedom for dedicating oneself fully to the quest of the Divine. The term commonly used to indicate renunciation is *vairāgya* meaning without desires, without attachment.

What is envisaged is not a sporadic or superficial selfdenial, but a radical one. It aims at cutting at the very root of evil. It is observed that man tends to do evil on account of his egoistic desires. In fact desire exercises far reaching influence on every aspect of human life; it manifests itself in various ways and hinders the spiritual growth at every step. The passions, attachment to pleasures, family, riches, power and the like are all founded on desire. The *Gītā* therefore qualifies it as « the wise man's eternal foe », « a fire insatiable », « the evil destroyer of wisdom and discrimination », and so on<sup>9</sup>. It is even depicted as the very gate of hell. The text says: « Desire — Anger — Greed: this is the triple gate of hell, destruction of the self: therefore avoid these three. The man who is released from these three gates of darkness, does what is good for his soul and then reaches the highest state. But he who discards the ordinance of the Scripture and acts as his desires prompt him, he does not attain either perfection or happiness or the highest goal »<sup>10</sup>.

One of the important aspects of renunciation is chastity which expresses concretely one's total commitment to the search of ultimate liberation. The Hindu tradition employs the term *brahmacarya*

<sup>8</sup> *For Seekers of God*, Calcutta 1972, p. 188.

<sup>9</sup> Cfr. *Gītā*, 3,37-41; 2,62-63. « Desire is never satisfied by the enjoyment of the objects of desire; it grows more and more as does the fire to which fuel is added » (Manu, 2,94).

<sup>10</sup> *Gītā*, 16,21-23. « When are liberated all the desires that lodge in one's heart, then a mortal becomes immortal! Therein he reaches Brahman. When are cut all the knots of the heart here on earth, then a mortal becomes immortal » (*Kaṭha Up.*, 6,14-15).

to signify chastity or celibacy, and it literally means to walk with God or to follow the path of God. As Gandhi explains it: « *Brahmacarya* is not mere mechanical celibacy, it means complete control over all the senses and freedom from lust in thought, word and deed. As such it is the royal road to self-realization or attainment of Brahman »<sup>11</sup>.

It is true that Hinduism does not insist on life-long celibacy. It has always held family life in high esteem. But in view of the fact that as long as one is bound up with family obligations, one is not fully free to concentrate on the spiritual destiny, it invites its followers to renounce at a certain stage all worldly ties and to dedicate themselves entirely for the Divine realization<sup>12</sup>. Thenceforward chastity should enjoy a place of honour in their spiritual scheme. And the *Praśna Up.* gives them the consoling assurance saying: « Theirs is the world of Brahman — they, who practise penance and in whom true chastity (*brahmacarya*) is firmly rooted »<sup>13</sup>.

#### (b) *Asceticism*

In order to intensify the spirit of renunciation and the yearning for liberation one should lead an austere and penitential life. It is a well known fact that throughout the history of Hinduism ascetic ideals have maintained a strong hold on the minds of the people. « The aim has been », observes Prof. John Mckenzie, « to break down all that has been understood to interfere with the freedom of the soul, and as an aid to the attainment of this end there have been practised in India forms of self-mortification and penance which have few parallels in the whole history of human conduct »<sup>14</sup>. The sacred books and the mythologies extole so much the exercise of penance that the Hindus cannot think of a holy man who is not at the same time an ascetic.

The technical sanskrit term for asceticism or austerity is *tapas*, whose original meaning was heat, conceived as the principle of life and movement. We are told in the Vedic creation myth that it was through *tapas* that the Primal Being began to create<sup>15</sup>. Later it came to be applied to mean the heat or fervour of devotion; and finally it acquired the familiar meaning of austerity or self-mortification.

<sup>11</sup> *Hindu Dharma*, New Delhi 1978, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup> See the teaching on the stages of life: D. ACHARUPARAMBIL, *Spiritualità e mistica indù*, Roma 1982, pp. 73-101.

<sup>13</sup> *Praśna Up.*, 1,16; cfr. also *Mundaka Up.*, 3,1-5; *Chāndogya Up.*, 8,4,3; 8,5,1-4.

<sup>14</sup> *Hindu Ethics*, New Delhi 1971, p. 236.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. *Rgveda*, 10,129; 10,190; *Śatapata Brāhmaṇa*, 10,4,4,2; 11,5,8,1.

The old belief was that severe asceticism (*tapas*) had such intrinsic potency that through it one could obtain whatever one wanted. The scriptures affirm that, by virtue of *tapas* the great sages (*ṛṣi*) acquired invincible powers, conquered even celestial worlds and became blessed and immortal. Mythologies speak of the preoccupation of gods seeing ascetics engaged in long severe penance, for fear that thereby they would come to possess uncontrollable powers. Such ideas have encouraged the proliferation in Indian religious circles of different methods of mortification and self-torture. As J.N. Farquhar remarks: « No man will ever be able to tell the self-inflicted horrors which the forests and mountains of India have witnessed »<sup>16</sup>. Fasting carried to the point of extreme emaciation is one of the commonest methods. Silence continued for very long periods is another. Endurance of frightful heat or excessive cold; the use of unnatural food, the maintenance of fixed and painful position for days together, and so on are other examples.

Such exaggerated ideas came to be gradually modified, but they have not disappeared altogether. Even now ascetics practising severe penances are to be found in India. They may command the admiration of the people, but a more reasonable and moderate approach is recommended. The *Bhagavad-gītā*, for instance, condemns in strong terms all excessive penance and underlines the religious and spiritual significance of a well balanced asceticism<sup>17</sup>. It is a necessary means of self-purification and of disposing oneself for divine contemplation and final liberation. In this respect the following words of our text are particularly relevant: « Verily, *yoga* is not for him who eats too much or abstains too much from eating. It is not for him who sleeps too much or keeps awake too much. To the man who is temperate in food and recreation, who is restrained in his actions, whose sleep and waking are moderate, to him accrues *yoga* which destroys all sorrow »<sup>18</sup>. The *Gītā* then specifies some other virtuous habits and attitudes as the best forms of penance, such as respect for teachers and elders, purity of mind and body, uprightness, continence, non-violence, truthful and beneficial speech, silence, self-control and regular recitation of the scriptures<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Crown of Hinduism*, Oxford 1913, p. 251.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. *Gītā*, 17,5-6, 18-19; 18,5-6; 4,10.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 6,16-17.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. *Ibid.*, 17,14-17.

(c) *Equanimity*

The exercise of renunciation, control of passions, self-discipline, austerity and the like engender in the aspirant of liberation the spirit of equanimity which, according to the Hindu view, is the sure sign of spiritual maturity and perfection. This state is indicated by terms like *sthita-prajñā* or stable mindedness, *samatā* or equality, and implies that no person, no object, no event nor experience should disturb one's internal calm and serenity.

The ideal proposed is that of remaining unaffected by the pairs of opposites like friend and foe, pleasure and pain, and so on. As Lord Kṛṣṇa declares in the *Gītā*: « I love the man who neither exults nor hates, who neither grieves nor desires, who puts away both pleasant and unpleasant things, (...) who is the same to foe and friend, the same whether he be respected or despised, the same in heat and cold, in pleasure and pain, who has put away attachment and remains unmoved by praise or blame, who is silent, and contented with whatever comes his way »<sup>20</sup>.

Undoubtedly equanimity is a firm guarantee to a deeply rooted spiritual maturity. However unpleasant the circumstances, however painful the experience, however objectionable the behaviour of others, one should be able to face them with tranquillity, without impatience. It is easy to hold one's peace when things go well, when people are friendly. But that is not the test of equanimity: it is to be demonstrated in adversity.

This equanimity or equality, explains Sri Aurobindo, is not mere quiescence and indifference, not a withdrawal from experience, but a superiority to the instinctive reactions of the mind and life. It is the spiritual way of replying to life, or rather of embracing it and compelling it to become a perfect form of action of the spirit. It is the first secret of the soul's mastery of existence. And above all, it is the manifestation of the clear recognition and the adoring acknowledgement of the fact that every person, event and experience express the Divine presence, a divine plan and a divine finality.

Aurobindo writes: « The Lord is there equally in all beings, we have to make no essential distinction between ourselves and others, the wise and the ignorant, friend and enemy, man and animal, the saint and the sinner. We must hate none, despise none, be repelled by none; for in all we have to see the One disguised or manifested at his pleasure. He is a little revealed in one or more revealed in

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<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 12,17-19.



another or concealed and wholly distorted in others according to his will and his knowledge of what is best for that which he intends to become in form in them and to do in works in their nature »<sup>21</sup>.

If every being manifests the Divine presence, every event represents the divine will and has a divine purpose. Each experience, suffering and privation no less than joy and satisfaction are a necessary link of a divine plan which we have to understand and second. To revolt, to condemn is our natural instinct, and implies spiritual immaturity. « The ripened soul does not condemn but seeks to understand and master, does not cry out but accepts or toils to improve and perfect, does not revolt inwardly but labours to obey and fulfil and transfigure. Therefore we shall receive all things with an equal soul from the hands of the Master »<sup>22</sup>.

The man who possesses true equanimity will enjoy, according to Aurobindo's analysis, four inestimable fruits: « first, equality in the most concrete practical sense of the word, *samatā*, freedom from mental, vital, physical preferences, an even acceptance of all God's workings within and around him; secondly, a firm peace and absence of all disturbance and trouble, *śānti*; thirdly, a positive inner spiritual happiness and spiritual ease of the natural being which nothing can lessen, *sukham*; fourthly, a clear joy and laughter of the soul embracing life and existence »<sup>23</sup>.

## 2) *The horizontal dimension*

A seeker after liberation must be imbued with the sense of the sacredness of the world around him; and all his contacts with others must spring from the spirit of *ahimsa* or universal love.

### (a) *The sense of the sacred*

For a committed Hindu a profane world is only an artificial invention of an insensible mind. He does not see the relevance of a polarity between the sacred and the profane. He is profoundly convinced of the fact that everything that exists is sacred. One thing may be more sacred than another, but nothing is fully profane. This outlook has been consistently inculcated by the Hindu tradition right from the very beginning of its history. All the scriptures bring out the significance of this view of the world from different perspectives.

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<sup>21</sup> *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Pondicherry 1973, p. 211.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 694.

In the beginning, as represented by the Vedic hymns, the powers of nature were looked upon as so many divinities to be praised and propitiated so that people may live in peace and prosperity. The Vedic men beheld gods in the bright sun, in the high mountain, in the wide earth, in the expanse of the sky, in the immensity of the ocean, in the irresistibility of the wind and storm, in the darkness of the night. In their poetic outpourings the Vedic thinkers gave expression to their feelings of wonderment and helplessness, surrender and supplication before these godly powers. Thus they lived with the consciousness of being surrounded by numerous divinities; they lived and moved and had their being in the midst of gods and goddesses.

In its later development Hinduism did not abandon its primitive background, but only enriched it by new intuitions and interpretations. In no stage did Hinduism disavow its view of the sacredness of the natural phenomena, but according to its more developed teaching they are sacred not because they are as many deities, but because they are permeated by the presence and power of the Supreme Spirit. The many gods merged into the One Supreme Being who, remaining the Inner Soul (*Antarātman*), the Inner Controller (*Antaryāmin*), the Lord that dwells in the very heart of all beings, rendered everything radiant with a deep spiritual significance. This outlook is one of the principal messages of the *Upaniṣad*.

For instance, the *Iśa Up.* opens with a solemn declaration: « By the Lord enveloped must this all be — whatever moving thing there is in the moving world ». The *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.* presents the universe with the myriads of beings it contains as the « body » of the Supreme Spirit — *Ātman* — who, without in any way compromising His absolute transcendence, is abiding in each and every one of them and is ruling and guiding them from within. The text says: « He who, dwelling in all things, yet is other than all things, whom all things do not know, whose body all things are, who controls all things from within — He is the *Ātman*, the Inner Controller, the Immortal »<sup>24</sup>.

According to the *Bhagavad-gītā*, the universe is a unified whole because God, as a golden string, runs through everything that exists:

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<sup>24</sup> *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Up.*, 3,7,15; see also 3,7,3-23; 2,5,1-14. Here it is useful to bear in mind the definition of *body* given by Ramanuja: « Any substance which a sentient soul is capable of completely controlling and supporting for its own purposes, and which stands to the soul in an entirely subordinate position, is the body of that soul (...) In this sense, then, all sentient and non-sentient beings together constitute the body of the Supreme Person, for they are completely controlled and supported by Him for His own ends, and are absolutely subordinate to Him » (*Śrībhāṣya*, 2,1,9).

all that is here is strung on the Lord as rows of gems on a string<sup>25</sup>. And more: « In the region of the heart of all contingent beings dwells the Lord »<sup>26</sup>.

Many of the great mystics, too, looked upon the world around them as a reminder of God's nearness, as a means of constant communion with Him, which is the very substance of liberation. Dadu (XVI c.), for example, sings:

« Rama is all-pervading, yet men behold Him not.  
Whoso beholds Him is made pure.  
Without, within, near and far, the Master is present everywhere.  
Wheresoever I look, there is no other:  
Rama dwells in every soul.  
Whithersoever I go, He is with me:  
the Lord of the three worlds filleth all.  
Says Dadu: When men behold Hari they find peace.  
O grant that day and night my gaze may be fixed on Thee »<sup>27</sup>.

Another mystic, Tayumanavar (XVII c.), says:

« I cannot in Thy temple worship  
Or there before Thy symbols bow  
Or pluck Thee dew-kissed flowers of offering,  
For in the flower's heart art Thou.  
How can I press my palms together  
My body bend to worship Thee?  
Since it is all imperfect service  
For Thou indweldest, Lord, in me »<sup>28</sup>.

The message of it all is this: a man who aims at his final liberation must live in the world with an attitude of religious respect for all creatures, because everything is permeated by God's presence. Man should not arrogate to himself the lordship over the creatures, he is only one among them and as such his duty is to live in harmony with the rest of creation and thus find lasting peace and joy in the Lord of all creation.

#### (b) *Universal love or Ahimsa*

The virtue of universal love or *ahimsa* is only the natural complement of the sense of the sacredness of all creation. In the Indian

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. *Gītā*, 7,7.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 18,61.

<sup>27</sup> W.G. ORR, *A Sixteenth Century Indian Mystic*, London 1947, Song no: 404, p. 122.

<sup>28</sup> T.I. TAMBYAH, *Psalms of a Śaiva Saint*, London 1925, no: 45, p. 27.

tradition as a whole *ahimsa* has been considered as the most important virtue and the duty par excellence (*paramo dharma*) of a human being. The term *ahimsa* is the opposite of *himsa* meaning to injure, to slay. Etymologically therefore *ahimsa* means to refrain from causing pain or injury to or killing any living being. Generally the word is translated as non-violence. Though negative in form, the positive meaning conveyed is that of universal love. As Prof. John Mckenzie observes: « From the time of Mahāvīra and Gautama [VI c. B.C.] this idea [*ahimsa*] has had a place in Indian ethical thought and practice that is almost unique. The content of the idea varies somewhat in different quarters and at different times, but throughout the history of Hinduism the general principle of refraining from injuring living creatures has been adhered to »<sup>29</sup>.

Basically *ahimsa* is the practical aspect of the recognition of the sacredness of all creatures. If everything is sacred because of God's presence in it, living creatures are even more sacred because life is the vibration of that presence, a tangible proof of His immanence in creation. Hence not only humans but all living beings are to be treated with love and respect. Explains Gandhi: « The chief value of Hinduism lies in holding the actual belief that all life (not only human beings, but all sentient beings) is one, i.e. all life coming from One universal source, call it Allah, God or Parameshwara. (...) This unity of all life is a peculiarity of Hinduism which confines salvation not to human beings alone, but says that it is possible for all God's creatures. It may be that it is not possible, save through human form, but that does not make man the lord of creation. It makes him the servant of God's creation. Now, when we talk of brotherhood of man, we stop there, and feel that, all other life is there for man to exploit for his own purposes. But Hinduism excludes all exploitation. There is no limit whatsoever to the measure of sacrifice that one may make in order to realize this oneness with all life »<sup>30</sup>.

While all are obliged to observe *ahimsa*, a spiritual seeker must abide by it with greater rigour and fervour. In Hindu view a monk (*sannyāsin*) is a living symbol of one who is wholeheartedly engaged in the pursuit of liberation. On the point of *ahimsa*, the Code of Manu prescribes for him this rule of conduct: « In order to preserve living creatures, let him always by day and by night, even with pain to his body, walk, carefully scanning the ground »<sup>31</sup>. But forseeing

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<sup>29</sup> *Hindu Ethics*, cit., p. 60.

<sup>30</sup> *Harijan*, 26-12-1936.

<sup>31</sup> *Manu*, 6,68.

that, despite all possible attention, one might unintentionally cause injury to some creatures, the law-giver prescribes that one should expiate it through some daily penance.

### 3) *The vertical dimension*

Liberation essentially is the personal realization of the Divine, and the other aspects are only preparatory; they concur to create the dispositions conducive to that ultimate experience. But the nature of the Divine realization itself has been variously viewed by the Absolutistic and the Theistic Schools.

#### (a) *The absolutistic interpretation*

This school is represented principally by the *Advaita Vedānta* of Śaṅkara<sup>32</sup> who is the close follower of the *advaitic* or non-dualistic message of the *Upaniṣads*. Its main purport is the realization of the soul's (*ātman*) identity with Brahman, the Absolute, the One without a second, Unqualified, Impersonal. It is said that, on account of the magic spell of the original ignorance (*avidyā*), the root cause of all human limitations, man thinks of himself, and wrongly, as being a separate individual, seeks satisfaction in the transitory goods of this world, and lives alienated from his real Self, Brahman. The one effective, immediate means of liberation, then, is to overcome this ignorance and to reach the true wisdom (*jñāna*), by which he discovers in the intimacy of his being that he is the same as Brahman. With this he discovers simultaneously that his presumed individuality and the reality of the phenomenal world were all essentially illusory, more or less in the same way as it happens with that serpent which one mistakenly perceived in the place of a piece of rope, when one discovers that it was, after all, a piece of rope.

The aspirant, duly prepared interiorly, applies himself intensely to the acquisition of true wisdom (*jñāna*) through the appropriate discipline which is articulated in three phases of gradual development, namely, hearing (*śravaṇa*), reflection (*manana*), and self-realization.

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<sup>32</sup> Cfr. THIBAUT (Eng. tr.), *The Vedānta Sūtra with Śaṅkarācārya's Commentary*, 2 vols., Sacred Books of the East XXXIV & XXXVIII, Delhi 1962; P. DEUSSEN, *The System of the Vedānta*, Delhi 1972; O. LACOMBE, *L'Absolu selon le Vedānta*, Paris 1937; S. RADHAKRISHNAN, *The Vedānta according to Śaṅkara and Rāmānuja*, cit.; A.G. K. WARRIER, *The Concept of Mukti in Advaita Vedānta*, Madras 1961; D. ACHARUPARAMBIL, *Induismo: vita e pensiero*, Roma 1976, pp. 105-118.

zation (*nididhyāsana*)<sup>33</sup>. Since the wisdom sought here doesn't consist in the mere accumulation of intellectual knowledge, but in internal illumination, it is not enough that he seeks it on his own accord, but must be guided by a competent *guru*. The Vedantic tradition insists that spiritual illumination is normally obtained only within the intimacy of the *guru-śiṣya* (disciple) relationship<sup>34</sup>. One must receive, hear, with faith and submission, the Truth from the mouth of the *guru*. After explaining the Vedantic teaching, the *guru* communicates to him a *mantra*, a sacred formula, which is the condensed form, the verbal symbol, of the entire teaching. The commonly used *mantra*, drawn from the *Upaniṣads*, are: « *Aham Brahmāsmi* (I am Brahman) », and « *Tat-tvam-asi* (That thou art) ».

The truth thus received must be fully assimilated, which is obtained through an assiduous, prolonged reflection and meditation. And finally the spiritual illumination bursts in upon him in which the « I am Brahman » or « That thou art » becomes a living experience. « When the mind, purified by constant meditation, is merged in Brahman, the truth of Brahman is clearly and definitely realized by the superconscious absorption (*nirvikalpa samādhi*). This leads directly to the realization of the bliss of Brahman, the One without a second »<sup>35</sup>.

The dawn of this experience already marks the beginning of the state of liberation called living liberation (*jīvan-mukti*). And in due course when the physical forces dissolve one obtains the final liberation or *videha-mukti*, in which the soul becomes what it always has been, Brahman. Here there is no question of an interpersonal relationship between the soul and Brahman, rather there is no room to speak of relationship at all, because the soul is the selfsame Brahman. As the *Mundaka Up.* puts it: « Just as the rivers flow and disappear in the sea, giving up their name and form, so also the wise man, released from name and form, enters into the Divine highest Spirit. Truly, he who knows that highest Brahman becomes the Brahman. (...) He goes beyond sorrow, goes beyond the evil, and freed from the knots of the heart, he becomes immortal »<sup>36</sup>.

The final liberation, therefore, is the experience of the absolute fulness of Brahman, the One only without a second. The *Brahmānubhava Up.* tries to articulate that state: « I am the Brahman who is Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (*Sat-cit-ānanda*). I am the Supreme Brahman without form (*nirākāra*), non-dual (*advaita*), indivisible

<sup>33</sup> Cfr. *Brhadāranyaka Up.*, 2,4,5; 4,5,6.

<sup>34</sup> Cfr. *Mundaka Up.*, 1,2,12-13.

<sup>35</sup> *Swarūpa-bodha Up.*, 7.

<sup>36</sup> *Mundaka Up.*, 3,2,8-9.

(*akhanda*), complete (*paripūrṇa*). I am the Brahman who is eternal (*nitya*), pure (*śuddha*), perfect (*siddha*), wise (*buddha*), free (*mukta*). I am the very fulness of Existence-Consciousness-Bliss (*Saccidānanda-svarūpa*), the fulness of the unconditioned Happiness (*bhūmānanda-svarūpa*), the fulness of Light (*jyoti-svarūpa*), the fulness of Peace (*śānti-svarūpa*) »<sup>37</sup>.

(b) *The theistic view*

While the Absolutistic interpretation represents an elite circle, the Theistic one represents the most popular current of Hindu religious thought. Here the state of liberation is envisaged as the soul's interpersonal, loving and blissful communion with the Divinity, who is essentially personal and the fulness of goodness and love. The greater part of the Scriptures and the majority of the saintly mystics uphold this view. The *Bhagavad-gītā* may be taken as the most representative text of this trend. The immediate means of liberation is *bhakti* or the *loving devotion to God*.

*Bhakti* has been defined as « the supreme love (*paramaprema*) of God », which consists in « the consecration of all activities, by complete self-surrender to Him, and in extreme anguish if he were to be forgotten »<sup>38</sup>. This love is qualified by a profound respect and adoration, an attitude that flows from the deep conviction and a certain internal experience of the sovereign greatness and goodness of God. The devotee (*bhakta*) tries to keep alive His remembrance all the time, consecrates himself and all his activities to Him, and endeavours sincerely to avoid everything that will mar the loving relationship with Him. Thus *bhakti* is the radical option of God vis-a-vis the goods of this world.

We may gather the true spirit of *bhakti* from the following words of the famous mystic-poet of the X century, Māṇikkavācakar:

« Our Lord supreme, both earth and heaven indwelling,  
See how I have no other help but Thee.  
Thou king of Śiva's world, bright beyond telling,  
Dweller in Perundurai, look on me.  
Who will hear my cry, who list to my complaining,  
If Thou Thy grace deny, who savedest me?  
I find in sea-girt earth no joy remaining.  
Now let Thy grace speak, bid me come to Thee »<sup>39</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> *Brahmāṇubhava Up.*, 1-2.

<sup>38</sup> *Nārada-bhakti-sūtra*, 2; 19.

<sup>39</sup> F. KINGSBURY & G.E. PHILLIPS (Eng. tr.), *Hymns of the Tamil Saivite Saints*, Calcutta 1921, no: 122, p. 117.

« I ask not kin, nor name, nor place,  
 Nor learned men's society.  
 Men's lore for me no value has;  
 Kuttālam's Lord, I come to Thee.  
 Wilt Thou one boon on me bestow,  
 A heart to melt in longing sweet  
 As yearns over new-born calf the cow,  
 In yearning for Thy sacred feet? »<sup>40</sup>.

*Bhakti* is to be nourished and perfected through proper disciplines so that one may be qualified for the final liberation. In the *Bhagavad-gītā* the Lord Kṛṣṇa himself explains how a devotee should live and act in order to intensify his *bhakti* and to abide with Him eternally: « Whatever thou doest, whatever thou eatest, whatever thou offerest, whatever thou givest away, whatever austerities thou dost practise — do that as an offering to Me. Thus shalt thou be freed from the good, and evil results which are the bonds of action. With thy mind firmly set on the way of renunciation, thou shalt become free and attain to Me. I am the same in all beings; None is hateful nor dear to Me. But those who worship Me with *bhakti* they are in Me and I also in them. (...) On Me fix thy mind; to Me be devoted; worship Me; revere Me; thus having disciplined thyself, with Me as thy goal, to Me shalt thou come »<sup>41</sup>.

The growth in *bhakti* and its culmination in divine union are not simply a human conquest. The devotee's strivings are to be assisted by the grace (*prasāda*) of God. The grace of the Divinity is in fact the necessary complement of the *bhakti* of the devotee. It is a divine gift, God's response to man's effort to love and serve Him, and it works within man rousing in him the attitudes conducive to divine intimacy and warding off all that hinders or retards his spiritual progress and finally bestowing on him the perfect *bhakti* which guarantees his eternal liberation. As the Lord Kṛṣṇa declares: « Through *bhakti* he comes to know Me, what My measure is and who I am in truth; then, having known Me in truth, he forthwith enters into Me. Doing continually all actions whatsoever, taking refuge in Me, he reaches by My grace the eternal, undying abode »<sup>42</sup>.

The liberated soul is not « dissolved » in the Divine Reality (as the Absolutistic School maintains), but enjoys for ever the most blissful vision of and communion with God. As Rāmānuja, one of the most eloquent champions of the Theistic School, teaches: « We know from

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, no: 135, p. 125.

<sup>41</sup> *Gītā*, 9,27-34.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 18,55-56.



Scripture that there is a Supreme Person whose nature is absolute bliss and goodness. (...) And with equal certainty we know from Scripture that this Supreme Lord, when pleased by the faithful worship of His devotees (...) frees them from the influence of Nescience (...); allows them to attain to that supreme bliss which consists in the direct intuition of His own true nature; and after that does not turn them back into the miseries of *samsāra*. (...) As, more over, the released soul has freed itself from the bondage of *karma*, has its powers and knowledge fully developed, and has all its being in the supremely blissful intuition of the highest Brahman, it evidently cannot desire anything else »<sup>43</sup>.

#### THE MODERN TREND

What we have delineated above represents the traditional, classical Hindu view. In it the liberation and the striving for it are almost exclusively a personal affair. Besides, the concern for the other-worldly dimension of liberation is so all-absorbing that the this-worldly aspects of human life, in their individual and social expressions, are little cared for. It is true that the sense of the sacredness of the universe and the principle of *ahimsa* or universal love are entrenched ideals of traditional Hinduism, but in practice they meant only to foster a passive, peaceful attitude towards others; they were not seen as an invitation to an active, altruistic, self-sacrificing service of others. This explains why the Hindu society, in spite of its numerous holy men, always remained a society divided into different castes and classes, with many privileges and preferences for the high castes and untold humiliations and miseries for the low castes and the so-called untouchables whom Gandhi later named *Harijan* or the People of God.

One of the principal causes for neglecting the active side of universal love and resting satisfied with an individualistic approach to liberation may be found in the principle of *karma* which is the foundation of reincarnation. *Karma*, as we have seen, is the inexorable law of retribution. It implies that each individual is the exclusive architect of his own destiny; nobody else need interfere with the destinies of others.

In order to become aware of the real drawback of this outlook, Hinduism needed to be « provoked » by the humanistic ideas of the West and the open criticisms and the practical examples of the

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<sup>43</sup> *Śrībhāṣya*, 4,4,22.

Christian missionaries. In fact, from the last century onwards, when Hinduism came into vital contact with the Western culture and Christianity, all its important religious leaders and holy men have untirengly endeavoured to inculcate a new sense of human values and social consciousness in the people. They have demonstrated by word and deed how to reconcile the sincere search for spiritual liberation with an active, whole-hearted dedication for the welfare of others, especially of the poor and downtrodden. The story of the reform movements like *Brahma Samāj*, *Ārya Samāj*, *Ramakrishna Mission*, etc. is an eloquent proof of this change of attitude and emphasis <sup>44</sup>.

Besides the chief protagonists of the *Samājs* and *Missions*, various other personalities of modern Hinduism like Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, and so on, too, spared no effort to infuse in the society a more open and comprehensive vision of life. Tagore strongly condemns the tendency to flee from all active service in order to seek God and liberation. He asks: « He who thinks to reach God by running away from the world, when and where does he expect to meet Him? How far can he fly — can he fly and fly, till he flies into nothingness itself? No, the coward who would fly can nowhere find Him » <sup>45</sup>. According to Tagore, service to fellowmen is a means of communion with God; in it we cooperate with God to relieve human want and to exercise divine goodness. « Where can I meet Thee unless in this my home made Thine? Where can I join Thee unless in this my work transformed into Thy work? If I leave my home I shall not reach Thy home; if I cease my work I can never join Thee in Thy work » <sup>46</sup>.

The idea that through service to the poor and needy we share in divine working and obtain union with Him is emphasized in a remarkable way in a well-known passage in the *Gitanjali*: « Leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! (...) Open thy eyes and see thy God is not before thee! He is there where the tiller is tilling the hard ground and where the pathmaker is breaking stones. He is with them in sun and in shower, and his garment is covered

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<sup>44</sup> Cfr. J.N. FARQUHAR, *Modern Religious Movements in India*, New Delhi 1967; D.S. SARMA, *Hinduism through the Ages*, Bombay 1973; A.L. BASHAM (Ed.), *The Cultural History of India*, Oxford 1975; C.H. HELMSATH, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, Princeton 1964; S. NATARAJAN, *A Century of Social Reform*, Bombay 1959; P. ASHBY, *Modern Trends in Hinduism*, New York 1974; W.T. DE BARY (Ed.), *Sources of Indian Tradition*, Delhi 1972; V.S. NARAVANE, *Modern Indian Thought*, Bombay 1967; T.M.P. MAHADEVAN & G.V. SAROJA, *Contemporary Indian Philosophy*, New Delhi 1981.

<sup>45</sup> *Sādhana*, Macmillan India, 1979, p. 110.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 140-141.

with dust. Put off thy holy mantle and even like Him come down on the dusty soil! Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our Master Himself has joyfully taken upon Him the bonds of creation; He is bound with us all for ever. (...) Meet Him and stand by Him in toil and in sweat of thy brow »<sup>47</sup>.

Gandhi's example is too well known to need recounting. His life was an uncompromising search for God-realization accompanied by a relentless dedication for the service of fellowmen. For him, these two are inseparable. Gandhi writes: « Man's ultimate aim is the realization of God, and all his activities — social, political, religious — have to be guided by the ultimate aim of the vision of God. The immediate service of all human beings becomes a necessary part of the endeavour, simply because the only way to find God is to seek Him in His creation and be one with it. (...) If I could persuade myself that I should find Him in a Himalayan cave, I would proceed there immediately. But I know that I cannot find Him apart from humanity »<sup>48</sup>.

Other notable figures of modern Hinduism, like Sri Aurobindo, Dr. Radhakrishnan<sup>49</sup>, etc., too, insist, under various perspectives, that there can be no complete individual liberation apart from striving for the liberation of all. Individual existence is not a thing absolutely apart; it is part of the Divine self-manifestation in the universe. The enlightened soul is one with the Divine in himself as well as the Divine in all. The soul that has entered into oneness with the Divine Being must, even as the Divine does, continue to be one with all beings. The liberated souls are full men representing consistent and comprehensive affirmation of the Divine in life. « After their enlightenment they get back to the world, love and serve their fellowmen in the light of their blessing »<sup>50</sup>. Though they want nothing for themselves they cannot see others immersed in ignorance and suffering. They cooperate with the divine purpose for this world and strive for *sarva-mukti*, the liberation of all.

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<sup>47</sup> *Gitanjali*, Macmillan India, 1977, no: XI, pp. 6-7.

<sup>48</sup> *Harijan*, 29-8-1936.

<sup>49</sup> Cfr. RADHAKRISHNAN, *The Brahma Sutra*, cit., pp. 207 ff.; Id., *An Idealist View of Life*, cit., pp. 241 ff.; D. ACHARUPARAMBIL, *The Destiny of Man in the Evolutionary Thought of Sri Aurobindo*, in « *Ephemerides Carmeliticæ* », 29 (1978) 1, pp. 43-99.

<sup>50</sup> RADHAKRISHNAN, *The Brahma Sutra*, cit., p. 213.