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My Turn

Going from Good to Better

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Hinduism is not a founded religion. It has no creed and no dogma. In this sense, Hinduism is unlike many religions. Is there, then, any distinguishing feature of Hinduism? Yes: its universality, its acceptance of everyone, of whatever path, of whatever faith, agnostic and atheist included. "Truth is one, sages call it by different names" is an old Hindu saying. Another, on which many Hindus meditate every morning is, "As the different rivers having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the ocean, so, O God, the different paths which people take through different tendencies, various though they appear, crooked or straight, all lead to Thee." Thus a Hindu respects all religions in their pure form.

If a man thinks his religion is the best for all, he is to that extent short of the true religious spirit. But if he thinks that his path is the best for him, he is both right and wise. Human temperaments are different. We all started at different points of the circumference of a vast circle and, on the pilgrimage that life is, we are moving towards the center of the circle. Our paths have got to be different--of necessity. And yet, they are all the same--all leading towards the center.

The tenet behind the Hindu view, that every path is good enough, is that all progress is from good to better, not from bad to good. Nobody is in a hopelessly bad position as such. There is no sinner. There never was any. The popular notion of "sin" is something that someone manufactured for the market of ignorance. Everyone may be subject to passing thoughts of evil, but no one is a "sinner" as such. As all evils derive from pride, there is no evil beyond pride, and even this prime evil cannot be called "sin." This concurs with the Hindu placement of evil in the flux of human affairs, namely that all appearances of evil are instant convulsions or retarded consequences of pride (ego-sense). True knowledge begins where ego ends, says sage Ramana. To "end" ego does not mean to destroy it; it is to transform ego from ruling to serving. All effort to achieve this, however long or hard a struggle it might be, must ever be in the sustained spirit of truth-seeking, never yielding to any frustration or worry.

Great spiritual masters like Vivekananda have particularly warned us against ever slipping into the tragic notion that we are sinners. What we have to conquer is pride, nothing more. Free yourself from the dark layers of ignorance, then you can see the light. Cleanse the waters of the pool of your mind of the dust of ego-sense, calm the surface of the pool from the waves of ego-wandering, then you will see through the calm, clear pool into the bottom, into yourself. How to conquer ignorance? By orienting life and living Godward (truthward) through meditation. Perhaps the greatest contribution of the Hindu sages and saints to humanity is the discovery and disclosure of the power of meditation. Christopher Isherwood wrote in 1951: "Vedanta starts you off with a single proposition which is no more than a working hypothesis: 'The Atman can be known. We don't ask you to believe that. All we ask is that you make a serious effort to get some spiritual experience for yourself, using the techniques of meditation which we shall

teach you."

Truth is beyond language and logic. It cannot be expressed. It cannot even be understood; it can only be realized. A philosopher in ancient India, who was reputed to solve any metaphysical problem posed to him, suddenly started saying that he could no more understand anything. Then he entered into decades of silence. It was held that he had "lost his wits." After thirty years, one fine morning he shouted with joy of great discovery, "I have understood, I have understood!" People flocked around, asking him if he would let them share the truth he had understood. "Surely," he said. "I have understood that It cannot be understood." Time and again, great philosophers, from Socrates to Wittgenstein, have reaffirmed that the most sought after answers can be found only in silence, by contemplation, by realization. And so, any apparent contradictions in religious literature should necessarily be there, and they should not bother us. Their resolution will dawn from within, in due course, on the journey of the spirit.

Muni Lakshmanan is a retired Mathematics professor residing in Pennsylvania USA. He served UNESCO as an Adviser in Mathematics and was raised under the Mission. The neighbors gathered together

The neighbors gathered together wailing loud and long, denied him now a name, called him corpse, and bore him to the burning ghat and the body burnt, then did a ceremonial dip--and memory of him fades away. --Tirumantiram 145.