THHEME
“A Pilgrim’s Progress”

A. PROGRAMME

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday, July 11, 2013</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Departure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coordinators</td>
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<td>First Session</td>
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<td>Second Session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Visit to temples</td>
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# A. PROGRAMME

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Third Session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>1:30 pm to 2:00 pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fourth Session</td>
<td>2:30 pm to 4:30 pm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural Programme</td>
<td>6:30 pm to 8:00 pm</td>
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**Saturday, July 13, 2013**

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<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>1:30 pm to 2:00 pm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Departure for Chennai</td>
<td>Alleppey Express</td>
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**Sunday, July 14, 2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fifth Session</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lunch</td>
<td>1:30 pm to 2:30 pm</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday, July 15, 2013</td>
<td>Arrival at Chennai Central</td>
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## B. PARTICIPANTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Adikesavalu K. Mr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Advaiith Hebbar Mr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Agnisundaram S. Mr.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Aiyamma B. C. Mr.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Anbarasu V. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Arumugham V. Mr.</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>Arvind Mathur Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8.</td>
<td>Auftab Begum Dr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9.</td>
<td>Balasubramanian A. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>10.</td>
<td>Balasubramanian A. R. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>11.</td>
<td>Bholanath Mr. IPS (Retd).</td>
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<tr>
<td>12.</td>
<td>Chandrasekharan S. J. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>13.</td>
<td>Chandrasekharan K. K. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>15.</td>
<td>Chitra Krishnan Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16.</td>
<td>Elangovan B. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>17.</td>
<td>Girija Arumugham Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18.</td>
<td>Girish Babu Mr.</td>
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<td>19.</td>
<td>Govindarajan S. Mr.</td>
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<td>20.</td>
<td>Govindaswamy R. K. Mr.</td>
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<td>22.</td>
<td>Joseph C. R. V. Mr.</td>
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<td>23.</td>
<td>Kamalakannan A. Mr.</td>
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<td>24.</td>
<td>Kothandapani V. Mr.</td>
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<td>25.</td>
<td>Kripa nichi S. Mr.</td>
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<td>26.</td>
<td>Krishna Das C. S. Prof.</td>
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<td>27.</td>
<td>Krishnakumari V. S. Dr.</td>
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<td>28.</td>
<td>Krishnan J. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>29.</td>
<td>Krishnan R. S. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>30.</td>
<td>Mangalam Krishnamoorthy Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31.</td>
<td>Mukundan Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>32.</td>
<td>Natarajan K. R. Mr.</td>
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<td>33.</td>
<td>Natarajan M. Mr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34.</td>
<td>Pamela Joseph Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35.</td>
<td>Pattavardhini P. A. Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36.</td>
<td>Radha Alexander Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>37.</td>
<td>Radhakrishnan V. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>38.</td>
<td>Rajalakshmi R. Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39.</td>
<td>Rajeev R. Mr.</td>
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<td>40.</td>
<td>Raman V. S. Mr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41.</td>
<td>Santhanagopalan K. M. Mr.</td>
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<td>42.</td>
<td>Saraswathy V. Prof.</td>
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<tr>
<td>43.</td>
<td>Seshiah V. Dr.</td>
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<td>44.</td>
<td>Seshiah V. Dr. Mrs.</td>
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<td>45.</td>
<td>Sivakolundu T. S. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>46.</td>
<td>Srinivasan T. V. Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>47.</td>
<td>Srinivasan T. V. Mrs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>48.</td>
<td>Sriram Ayer Mr.</td>
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<tr>
<td>49.</td>
<td>Swaminathan A. M. Mr. IAS (Retd)</td>
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<tr>
<td>50.</td>
<td>Vaithyanathan A. Mr.</td>
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# B. PARTICIPANTS

<table>
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<tr>
<th>S.No.</th>
<th>Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>51.</td>
<td>Vasudevan. D. Mr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>52.</td>
<td>Velmurugendran. C. U. Dr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53.</td>
<td>Venkataraman. T. V. Mr.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>54.</td>
<td>Vidya. K. Miss</td>
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<tr>
<td>55.</td>
<td>Vijayalakshmi. A. Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56.</td>
<td>Vijayalakshmi. S. Mrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>57.</td>
<td>Viswanathan. B. Mr.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
C. FOR YOUR GUIDANCE

1. Your train from Chennai is Alleppey Express. It departs from Chennai Central Station. Please reach the Chennai Central Station at least one hour in advance in view of the rush hour traffic congestion. Please ascertain the correct time of departure.

2. We have made our own internal berth allotment. You will be given separate berth cards. Where necessary, kindly help to accommodate very senior citizens in the lower berths. You do not have to check your berth in the train chart. Please keep your identity card without fail.

3. Snacks will be served during the journey.

4. Hotel rooms will be allotted at the discretion of the management. Accommodation will be on a twin-sharing basis.

5. The menu for breakfast, lunch and dinner is fixed.

6. Timing schedules will be strictly adhered to, so as to get the maximum benefit from the Retreat.

7. Prof. C.S. Krishna Das and Mr. V. Anbarasu will be the Coordinators for the train journey, local trips and stay arrangements.

8. Mr. Balan of Hotel Elite International will coordinate the arrangements at the hotel.

9. We are grateful to Mr. K.V. Sadanand, Chairman of Hotel Elite International Group, for providing us accommodation, food and transport facilities as well as for the generous hospitality.

10. Please switch off your mobile telephones during the sessions.

11. During the sessions, kindly give your best attention. Try to make the discussions practical, useful and lively. Please do not interrupt when another participant is talking. Reserve your points to your turn. When your turn comes, make the best use of it. By listening, you enhance the quality of your contribution. And we expect every participant to contribute during every stage of the discussions.
12. A Retreat is the time and place where we should be willing to give as well as take. When we share our experiences with others, we learn and let others learn. Raising questions and sharing your experiences in a spirit of honesty and commitment ensures the fulfillment of the purpose of the Retreat.

13. When there are practical sessions such as yoga, meditation and counselling, please give full attention to them in your own interest.

14. Please cooperate.
## D. SESSION DETAILS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Subject</th>
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<td></td>
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<td>11.00 AM</td>
<td>12.00 Noon</td>
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<td>12.00 Noon</td>
<td>1.00 PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>First</td>
<td>July 12, 2013 Friday</td>
<td>2.30 PM</td>
<td>3.30 PM</td>
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<td>3.30 PM</td>
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**Retreat Closes for the Day**
Visit to Temples - 4.30 PM to 7.30 PM

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<td>10.30 AM</td>
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<td>12.30 PM</td>
<td>1.30 PM</td>
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<tr>
<td>Third</td>
<td>July 13, 2013 Saturday</td>
<td>2.30 PM</td>
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<td>3.30 PM</td>
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**Retreat Closes for the Day**
Cultural Programme - 6.30 PM to 8.00 PM
## D. SESSION DETAILS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Session</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Subject</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fifth</td>
<td>July 14, 2013 Sunday</td>
<td>9.30 AM - 10.30 AM</td>
<td>“Life is a Highway”</td>
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<td>10.30 AM - 11.30 AM</td>
<td>“When I Climb the Mountains, He is the Summit”</td>
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<td>11.30 AM - 12.30 PM</td>
<td>“Waiting for God”</td>
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<td>12.30 PM - 12.40 PM</td>
<td>“Health Tips”</td>
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<td>12.40 PM - 1.30 PM</td>
<td>“Open House and Thanksgiving”</td>
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The Retreat Closes
The Participants Leave
A Pilgrim’s Progress

FRIDAY
JULY 12, 2013

FIRST SESSION
10:00 AM TO 1:00 PM

“A PILGRIM’S
PROGRESS”
T. V. VENKATARAMAN
10:00 AM TO 11:00 AM

A. INTRODUCTION

Sometime ago, JK came home for a chat. As we talked, we began to travel to unknown destinations. Wide-ranging philosophical perspectives came into our view. We were fascinated, got overawed, because they were opening up vistas that the logical mind found difficult to comprehend. We however acknowledged that our searching insight must continue to work and seek the inspiration that could take us beyond, ‘like a sinking star beyond the utmost horizon of human thought’.

An inner voice used to tell me, “Be in search. Be a pilgrim”.

This probably echoed my mother’s more humble advice: “Go to the temple daily. Keep visiting newer and newer temples”.

At some point, JK reminded me of my remarks in “Gentle Whispers from the Distant Mountains”, notes which were discussed during Hamsa’s 2012 July Retreat. It was a strange coincidence. Our thought waves appeared to be vibrating together.

“The journey of a pilgrim is an arduous task. It is not merely going on vacation, taking a bed-roll and the latest designer suitcase. It calls for austerity, the awareness of a soul-searching mission. In their absence, we go merely as vacationers bent on a holiday. Quite often, the tourists want to escape their life’s woes, at least temporarily. They are in flight. The pilgrims are in quest. I was a peculiar person. I went to the Himalayas as a tourist with the heart of a pilgrim. The abode of snow was also the abode of gods. And I was a tourist-cum-pilgrim staying in one of the best hotels, surrounding myself with all comforts, ambience and good food, resting amidst soft pillows, and trying to fathom eternity in the interior of my mind which was busy going all over the world”.
“This is so true”, JK said, “Come to think of it, a sense of search underlies all our thinking and action. Only, we are not clear where it is that we need to go, and for what purpose”.

I was listening keenly. JK continued: “For a logical mind, it seems that what is said in the scriptures, revelations, mythologies and the like, are more like stories and doctrines. We are not able to accept all of them as factual. How do we understand their relevance in an unbiased manner? In which direction should our search lie?”

The question of Journey; Where, when and how do we begin to tackle it? It is not surprising that so many of us are beginning to ponder over the passage from birth to death. At heart of hearts we are envisioning a meaning; yet, we do not seem to know how to pierce the veil that surrounds it. To many of us, our daily life and tasks are just that. We go through them and forget about them, because they do not make an impact on our psyche. Some, however, are able to have an insight into the underlying current of meaning and they relate their experience to a longer time span of events, a time span that can even take them beyond their own lifetime.

A journey is all these. These notes may indicate the pathways, based upon experiences of many (including myself), underscoring their relevance in this so-called modern world. I am obliged to JK for inspiring me to attempt to perceive the vistas of man and seek their meaning and relevance.

Perhaps my mother contributed to my thinking and feeling about the way I looked at life more as a pilgrim than as a tourist. She was a simple woman, given to austerities and rituals, ready to pack her little trunk, with her prayer materials, to go on a pilgrimage to fulfill some vow or the other. Many of those vows pertained to my health and so, I was always a part of the entourage. I loved those tours. We used to visit temples, many of them located on hilltops or by the rivers, or amidst forest areas. The bullock cart mode of travel gave enough time to break the journey, take a dip in a nearby stream, and eat our food at leisure in the company of birds which I could not identify. My mother would perform her prescribed austerities at the temple, while I did small chores for her. In a rising crescendo of religious fervour, Mother would offer her worship, light the camphor
and appease the deity with heart-rending chantings, and everything was over. Mother would smile, and say that everything would be alright.

You make a pilgrimage with prayers that you must be the recipient of divine grace, always. This motivational psychology stuck to me, and whenever I travelled for business or pleasure, the worship mode became a dominant behavioural feature.

I grew up like everyone else and thanks to my upbringing, plunged into life with confidence and open-mindedness. I enjoyed a freedom that soon pulled me into the fast lane and I drove madly, just in search of novelties and excitement. Pleasures were there for the asking and I did not know that pain would follow. The world was brilliantly lit and my myopic eyes were chasing the curves and contours of happiness in glitter and glamour, elegance and enjoyment. The physical presence of my mother was too far away to be reckoned, but the heart yearned for her presence in times of need, to retrieve the worship mode, but I could only imagine her benign smile in the crevices of my mind.

I wanted to be a pilgrim and I ended up as a tourist spoiling the beauty, peace and sacredness of the mountains.

It is not easy being a pilgrim. You need to look at the world like a child. You should ask, why is the sky blue, what makes the rain fall, why does the ocean stay where it is. Can we leave our homes, I mean, our mental homes, go under the cloud of contemplation and simply ask those questions that seem obvious, but, often, aren’t –

“Who am I?”

“What on earth am I doing?”

“What matters?”

“What are my gifts?”

For many years, I did not know of these questions. I didn’t know how to ask them. I certainly did not know whom to ask. I was blissfully ignorant as to where I was going, where my destination lay and what road I should take. I was not aware of the many forces that were pushing me or pulling me. One thing I was sure about was that I was moving, not stagnant. But, where was I going?
When you look all around, you see a multitude of human beings, crowding on diverse pathways, making a beeline towards the express highways. They all look like robots obeying some remote control commands. When too many human beings push along a single pathway, there is a jam, they switch over to other pathways as if by instinct. But, in reality, they are all controlled by some remote control stations. We have seen the single file of hundreds of ants that move briskly, talking to each other, not treading on each other’s toes. When they find a block on their way, they skirt or circumvent it with amazing dexterity. The only difference is that ants seem to know where they are going. This is not the case with human beings. We do not seem to know the road we wish to travel along. We do not even want to be the arbiter of our destiny, when destiny beckons us to go along and choose. We are individualistic, isolated in spirit and narrow-minded. And above all, we do not have the child’s curiosity of inquiry.

Questioning is at the heart of the spiritual journey, of leaving the home, to go on a retreat, a pilgrimage. That is how we remove ourselves, for the time being, from the duties and dramas, the relationships and the roles that load us with responsibilities that may be distracting or irrelevant or even destructive to the emerging power of spirit. In making a pilgrimage, we want to associate ourselves with some Higher Power. We seek a Vision. We pray that such a Vision reveals our true self, our true name, and our true vocation in life. Questioning, we want to strip away all that we have been taught.

When such questioning becomes insistent, pressing, demands an answer, what is in the background becomes foreground. What is overlooked begins to look us up. What is waiting in the wings now flies into the brilliantly-lit hall. The decision to go on a pilgrimage is a response to an inner call, not merely born out of a desire to fulfill certain religious duties.

Once inspired, it is difficult to say how the pilgrim plans his travel. He may or may not have a goal. His spirit is the compass that points the way. His immediate concern may be religious. His distant goal is to come to terms with himself. He may choose the path of Sankara in order to imbibe the spiritual essence of an age-old civilisation. He may sit beneath the tree where the Buddha saw the light and grasp
the essence of man’s true salvation. He may pace the garden where Jesus walked and fill his heart with love that gives meaning to all life. Wherever he goes, the pilgrim walks with his body and the mind has soared to the regions of the unknown. His true seeking is for truth, beauty, love, perspective, serenity, transcendence and sacredness.

Otherwise, our pilgrimages are only vacations. Our retreats are not advances in our soul’s travels. We are merely tourists, window-shoppers and curio-seekers. May be, we are just escapees. We are in flight rather than in seeking. Whether we go to Benares or the Holy Land or Mecca or Bodhgaya, we must maintain a spirit of self-reflection. We must seek guidance for getting definitive answers to our basic questions.

Today, millions of people make a beeline to pilgrim centres all over the world. Spiritual tourism is a flourishing industry that feeds ever so many hotels, transport systems, tourist operators and the providers of travel requisites. All these have made pilgrimages enjoyable, if not fruitful. Contrast this with the pilgrims of the past who trekked long distances in summer and winter, rain and storm, using basic modes of transport, facing troubles cheerfully, inspired only by their inner sacredness and eagerness to catch a glimpse of the Cosmic Light. Austerity was their key. Today, the world has lost much of its relevance, except in the case of the determined souls who aspire to be pilgrims rather than tourists.

My mother, I know, was an example of a true pilgrim. She had travelled to numerous pilgrim centres in the country in the same devoted, sincere, humble and austere manner that was the hallmark of the ancient pilgrims. She continued to be a pilgrim at heart, even when she was no longer able to travel. I enjoy the sunshine of those memories and wonder whether I would become a pilgrim at all.

Sometime ago, I was reading “The Pilgrimage”, the famous writer Paulo Coelho’s spiritual journey to a holy shrine in search of ancient wisdom. Coelho’s world was different from mine, but I found, we had the same spirit, the same longing for a quest, except that I was somewhat unsure of myself, my faith, whereas Coelho was under inspiring guidance to trace a Wisdom that he was in pursuit of.

Paulo Coelho was on the road to Santiago. But why? Let me quote him:
“Just as the Muslim tradition requires that all members of the faith, at least once in their life, make the same pilgrimage that Muhammed made from Mecca to Medina, so, the Christians in the first millennium considered three routes to be sacred. Each of them offered a series of blessings and indulgences to those who travelled its length. The first led to the tomb of Saint Peter in Rome; its travelers, who were called the wanderers, took the Cross as their symbol. The second led to the Holy Sepulcher of Christ in Jerusalem; those who took this were called palmists, since they had, as their inner symbol, the palm branches with which Jesus was greeted when he entered that city. There was a third road which led to the mortal remains of the apostle, Santiago – Saint James in English. He was buried at a place on the Iberian Peninsula, where one night a shepherd had seen a brilliant star above the field. The legend says that not only Santiago, but also the Virgin Mary went there shortly after the death of Christ. The site came to be known as Compostela – the star field – and there a City had risen that drew travelers from every part of the Christian world. These travelers were called pilgrims and their symbol was the scallop shell”.

“Even today, mystics, devotees, researchers traverse on foot the seven hundred kilometers that separate the French city Saint-Jean-Pied-De-Port from the Cathedral of Santiago in Spain! . . . . the route followed by the pilgrims is exactly the same as the medieval path taken by Charles Smagual, Saint Francis of Assisi, Isabella of Castille, and most recently by Pope John XXIII”.

How fascinating it is to recollect the history of such pilgrims who turned a travel into a pilgrimage by their magical wand of purposeful devotion and prayerful exertions.

We can speak of the same spirit that moved the Hindu pilgrims across the vast Indian sub-continent from Rameswaram to Kashi and to the four sacred places of the Himalayas - Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri and Yamunotri, in conditions much more hostile, much less hospitable.
Families used to move in large numbers in groups after groups. They would put their children and the elderly in carts drawn by bullocks or horses or camels or even elephants. They carried their own provisions and cooked their food on the wayside. They bathed in the village tanks or with water drawn from public wells. They slept under the trees, which the Indian weather conditions permitted during most of the year. Philanthropic people came forward, put up shelters, provided drinking water and food for the genuine pilgrims. They chanted the holy name of their gods, sang devotional songs as they marched along, took care to ensure the purity of their body and mind during the whole journey. When they completed their pilgrimage, it was the triumph of their will, the success of their devotional fervour and a tribute to their mental strength.

This lifetime of mine has denied me the opportunity to be a pilgrim of this kind. In my contemplation, I often, picture myself seated in an icy cave, on the lovely heights of the Himalayas, face to face with eternity, and the visible cosmos spreads before me to ethereal distances, and in that aloneness and emptiness, some celestial music fills my inner ears and it is not I who is hearing.

“Eon after eon, birth after birth”, a voice is heard, “You are on a journey”. When you come to understand that it is a pilgrimage, everything is changed!

The Mahabharata narrates the *theerthayatra* of Arjuna, which I found somewhat amusing. Owing to certain strange circumstances, Arjuna goes on a pilgrimage for one year. He proceeds towards the banks of the River Ganga. While taking a bath, he meets Ulupi, the daughter of the King of Nagaloka. He is attracted by her ravishing beauty, and the young maiden also falls for him. They spend some happy times. After visiting the Himalayas and performing the rituals in many sacred rivers, he goes south and meets Chitrangada, the daughter of Chitrasena, falls in love with her and marries her. Then, he moves towards Prabhasa, a pilgrimage centre near Dwaraka and meets Krishna. In the gardens of Dwaraka, he eyes the lovely damsel, Subhadra, and begins to pine for her. Krishna encourages them both. Subhadra is his sister and Arjuna has been his loving companion. He arranges that Arjuna elopes with Subhadra, a *kshatriya* style of *vivaha*. 
What do I make of all these? The Epic speaks little about the austerities undertaken by Arjuna. Instead, Arjuna experiences windfalls of pleasure all the way. He is lucky with his Destiny. However, all that would not be a *theerthayatra* from the point of view of Hindu injunctions.

A friend tells me that he has gone on pilgrimages to more than a thousand temples in all corners of India.

“Did you make that many vows?” I ask him.

He laughs and says, “No”.

“Then, for what purpose?”

“I simply like travelling in the trains and buses in strange lands. I like to meet new faces, unfamiliar people, and”, he pauses and continues, “I like different kinds of food!”

So, that is the root cause of his hunger for pilgrimage.

When my wife died and I faced emptiness all around and my mind had come to a standstill and I was not in a position to decide on any course of action, I just took the train to Delhi and moved on to Mussoorie, the Himalayan hill resort, the place I had always loved, took a room in a friend’s place, shut myself, opened the windows and stared at the endless chain of icy mountains, when something told me: “You are not alone”.

I took out the sheets of paper that I had brought along and started writing the story of the last few years of her life – our life and our love. Pen and paper merged, mind and heart found their home in a delicate mood of composure, her words that she spoke when she was seriously ill came to my mind.

“Keep pouring love into the vessel of life to its brim and your happiness is complete!”

I quickened the pace of my writing, said all that I wanted to say, packed up my things and returned to my place of work.

Life is beautiful, a miracle, and a challenge. Life means looking at others through their eyes, not yours. In life, there is peace and sublimity, insult and injury, sorrow and elation. If I start my life’s
journey, asking for love from the family, from the people, from the gods, that means that I always keep wanting something, without thinking of giving anything in return. If the journey starts with an open mind, open heart and open arms, offering love, manna of more love, expecting nothing in return, Heaven will continue to fill my heart and mind with gratitude and fulfillment, which I will cherish more dearly than even the proximity of the gods.

B. DISCUSSION

* * * * *
A Pilgrim's Progress
I visited my native village on the bank of the River Cauvery. The river is very wide near my village. At a distance, stands a long railway bridge that connects both the banks and enables rail traffic to run from north to south mainly, but in fact in all directions. On the other side, stands the Srirangam temple with its majestic towers. Once in a year, Lord Ranganatha crosses Cauvery during the dry season, arrives at our village in a richly decorated palanquin and stays the whole day. Devotees from the nearby places gather in large numbers to offer worship, which pleases the Lord.

At the time of my visit, the river is full and that is a beautiful sight. The swirling waters do not deter the coracles from plying between the banks, carrying passengers throughout the day. The river feeds the main canal which is the lifeline of agriculture in our village. A few kilometers away, a railway line runs parallel to the river and our village and all the paddy fields lie in between.

This is the season for transplanting paddy seedlings and there is hectic activity, with the labourers busying themselves with a hundred tasks. I could see them bright and happy, since Mother Nature has blessed them with abundant water for irrigation.

The place I like most in my village is the coconut grove where a few hundred trees have subsisted for years, yielding coconuts from season to season. I am fond of visiting a group of semi-permanent cottages in the midst of the grove and I never miss an opportunity to spend some time there. Batches of boys are sitting in rows, facing their teachers. They are from five years to fourteen years. All of them wear dhotis with an upper cloth tied round their shoulders. They have shaven heads with tufts, oiled and tightly clasped. They look smart and their eyes glisten with a light that seems to come from within.
They are reciting the Vedas, the ancient scripture of the Hindus. As the teacher recites the Sanskrit lines in a sonorous voice, with cadence and passion, the children repeat the utterances with immaculate precision. Similar recitals had taken place thousands of years ago, from the Vedic Age, in the same manner, among small village communities. Texts of enormous lengths have been preserved till today without a single error in transmission. The Master taught the disciple, who in turn became a teacher, passing on his learning to other select disciples by word of mouth. An enormous memory of stupendous learning was built up, not in books, computers or CDs, but in the billions of neuronal cells of the human brain. There was a sense of purpose and a mission to protect the heritage of the wisdom of the sages, and it was possible to achieve a mighty vision with a life of sincerity, austerity and faith in cosmic help for the right cause.

Hundreds of years later, this transparence of transmission ceased and Vedic learning became the exclusive privilege of a minority of learned ones. They were, no doubt, fully qualified to be the custodians of Vedic wisdom, but the aura of learning diminished. Whatever it was, there was learning in the teacher-disciple relationship, a learning that was not merely mental, but arose from an infinitive understanding that flowed from an open heart and total faith in the cosmic powers that were behind such learning. The students of the scriptural studies, learned. The students of today pursue knowledge.

I ask the teacher how mere memorising and chanting would help the students to acquire the wisdom of the Vedas and other scriptures. His reply is simple and straightforward. He says:

"In the very process of memorising, the students inherit the wisdom of the sages. It seeps through their mind to their heart and fills their whole being. They have become wise. They apply this wisdom in their daily life or whenever a situation demands wisdom’s help. We do not appreciate enough the power of memorising in our times".

I ponder over what the teacher has said. The truth of his observations dawns on me like a flash. I recall that I had myself memorised many scriptural passages that I learnt in my young age.
and I know how their meaning and intent have stood me in good stead many times. I also know, after many years, that not merely the recall but the ability to put your recollection to practice is the hallmark of wisdom.

In the Upanishadic Age, a young scholar Swetaketu learns the nature of the Absolute and the Self from his father Uddalaka Aruni through very simple examples. Pervasiveness of the Absolute is demonstrated by the example of dissolved salt in a glass of water. The Absolute grows and expands and envelops all that is seen and not seen, but the Absolute itself is not visible, like the banyan seed that grows into a huge tree, but the seed itself is not seen. Flashes of intuition, and Swetaketu understands, and is fully transformed. He himself becomes an acknowledged teacher, spreading wisdom among disciples, during the Upanishadic period.

The village Vedic teacher tells me more:

“Much, again, will depend on the austerity of the teacher and the disciple. A life given to teaching is a life of penance. The teacher is one from whom the student gets the insignia of dharma imprinted on his mind and heart. The teacher must be a man of high conduct, noble character and pronounced austerity. If a teacher slips in his own dharma, he commits a grave sin. From darkness unto further darkness shall enter both the teacher and the student. By setting the right example, the teacher is passing on wisdom to the disciple and the disciple may not even be conscious of it”.

“The student should lead a vigorous life strictly according to the Dharma-sastras”, the teacher continues, “Let me give you some details”.

“The period of studying all the Vedas during studentship is forty eight years. Every day, the student should fetch firewood from a wild tract and offer it in the sacred fire. He shall speak the truth, remain modest and free from pride. He should get up before his teacher and go to sleep after him and never disobey his teacher’s instructions in any matter, except when it entails a sin. Let him speak with women only as much as is required, and refrain from dancing, singing, playing musical instruments, wearing perfumes, using shoes or umbrellas and applying oil or collyrium”.
More follows:

“The student shall not eat ritual food, spice, salt, honey or meat. He shall not sleep during the day. He shall not engage in sexual intercourse or show himself off. He shall not be given to gossiping but keep things confidential. He shall be gentle, calm, controlled, modest, resolute, energetic, not given to anger, and free from envy”.

The above instructions are from the Dharma-sastras, says the teacher. There are many more, with small differences based on lineage. There is no doubt that the students of the ancient times lived severely disciplined lives.

What’s the purpose, I ask the teacher.

It’s not merely to learn the Vedas, says the teacher, but also to enable the student to lead a life of impeccable character and become ideal teachers themselves. I think of the students of our generation. I always carry a copy of The Hindu, for relaxed reading in the cool breeze that gently blows from the river. A news item shocks me. Students of two colleges in Chennai, nurturing longstanding enmity, engage themselves in violent clashes, resulting in serious injuries to more than ten students. One of them subsequently dies in the hospital. These students are our children, our grandchildren. What has happened to them? Could someone not have taught them basic virtues, goodness of heart, friendship and understanding? What are the parents, teachers doing? For that matter, do the parents maintain an elementary code of conduct in their domestic and social relationships? Wisdom or learning does not require text books.

I feel depressed. I turn towards the earnest students noisily reciting the Vedas, repeating what the teacher says. They are all seated on wooden planks, out in the open shade of the trees, displaying a sharpness of mind in the pure ambience of Mother Nature.

“God”, I pray to myself, “protect these children at least from the baneful influences of the city. Give them the strength to maintain some purity in their character. Give them the nobility of conduct and a positive outlook to serve human beings. Let them not fall prey to the licentious culture of the money-struck humanity”. 
The Veda teacher with whom I am talking would not be more than fifty years. He is a deeply religious person, with a vast background of the Vedic studies and sastras, has a son, about ten, studying the Vedas in this school.

“Where will your son go when he completes his studies here?” I ask the teacher, “Will he become a temple priest? Or will you permit him to become a priest authorised to conduct household rituals?”

The teacher pauses for a moment, “How can he go as a priest?” he says, “My son must study further and get a Degree. He must be qualified as an Engineer or a Computer Programmer. He must go to America, work there and earn money. May be, I, too, will go to America and work as a priest in one of the temples there. They say they pay very well. Who cares for us here?”

The teacher spoke without interruption. He is, no doubt, determined and ambitious for his son, but I do notice a tinge of sadness in his voice. The futility of all that he is doing seems to hit him and his clarity about the feverish modern culture wiping away ancient learning comes from his heart and not from his mind. I, too, feel sad for the man who stands for all lost values, which, if adopted even in a small degree, could give a sense of meaning to life and opportunity for learning for a better future.

Fortunately, I was good in memorising and reciting in my school days. Today, I value that foundation. I was also good in explaining the meaning of the passage as taught by the teacher. By memorising a number of verses from the Ramayana, Kalidasa’s Kumarasambhava and so on, I could ponder over their meaning and appreciate their immense value to a sound, cultural life. I used to be amazed at the way some of my friends could recite Shakespearean plays. One of my friends was fond of reading extensively and entertained us by quoting long passages from literature, history and speeches of eminent persons. He continued his marathon performance till late in his life. I used to feel envious, but there it was, I respect such people, but wonder how it could improve their learning.

Children, at school, these days are notorious crammers. They are made to master the art of cramming in order to secure impressive results in the examinations. The teachers goad the
students to cram. It is easier to pass on knowledge that way. It is far more onerous to teach and make the students understand. One of my lecturers in my college, dealing with histories, used to dictate notes throughout the period and he expected us to cram them for excellent results in the public examinations. He did not lecture. He dictated. He seldom made us follow the exciting courses of Greek or Roman history which would have helped us to become more learned. I doubt if he knew the histories on which he dictated notes, period after period. But, the notes were useful for the examinations. One could cram as much as one wanted and pass meritoriously, if that was the objective of the lecturer. He saved his vocal chords and got good results.

However, I sympathise with the parents of today’s children who also have to cram! They cram more than their children. I know this from desperate mothers whose memorising abilities are no greater than their children’s!

During one of my visits to Mussoorie, I spent a day in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. Following the Hinayana tradition, the monks had to know all the Buddhist scriptures by heart. In addition, they had to become experts in the Tibetan tradition of the Buddhist rituals, with their elaborate texts. So, the young novices spend most of their time reading aloud the passages until they become familiar enough to be able to recite them. This does not stop here. They have to debate the content of what they have learned and thereby deepen their knowledge of the subject. I witnessed a debate session, an exciting affair. Fourteen or fifteen year olds, dressed in the flowing robes of novices, their heads clean shaven, their eyes sparkling, their chubby, reddish faces glowing in the mild sun, are arrayed against each other and are discoursing, trying to drive home their viewpoints, loudly, gesticulating wildly.

“You say everything is nothingness. Can you prove?” One young novice asks another.

“What proof is needed? Don’t you see it for yourself?” returns the other novice.

“That’s not proof. You must show me that there is nothing”.

A Pilgrim's Progress
“Just put aside your mind for a moment. You will see there’s nothing”.

“If you have put aside your mind for the moment, you must tell me what you experienced.”

“I tell you, if I put aside my mind, there is no experience. There is nothing!”

“But, you are not able to define nothingness”.

Remember, these are debating points from fourteen year old boys. I was amazed at their grasp of their texts, their mental clarity and their ability to express themselves. The old monk, sitting on a stone bench, supervising the boys, looked at me with a broad smile, a smile of satisfaction that the learning process was taking place as he had visualised.

I had earlier mentioned about Hiuen-Tsang, the great Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled to India to study Indian languages including Sanskrit, to read all the original texts, translate them and take them back to China for submission to the Chinese Emperor. After an arduous journey, the venerable monk reached India and visited the various viharas, the stupas and monuments connected with the life of the Buddha, in the Magadha country. He spent five years in the great monastery of Nalanda, inhabited at that time by ten thousand monks. It was in this sanctuary of knowledge and virtue that Hiuen-Tsang learned the Sanskrit language and all the higher knowledge that was to make him the foremost Buddhist monk in Nalanda itself.

Nalanda was originally a wood of mango trees which some rich merchants, converted by the Buddha, had offered to him. The Buddha had occupied the place for sometime and in memory of his inexhaustible compassion, the place came to be called ‘Nalanda’. Etymologically the word, in Sanskrit, means, ‘He who is never weary of giving’. Kings and rich men added edifice after edifice and all the buildings were enclosed by a single wall. There were six convents and eight courts; the monks stayed in buildings four storeys high; running streams and shady groves kept the whole place cool even in the hottest conditions. All the establishments were maintained at the expense of the kings.
Monks and novices spent their time in study, discussion and contemplation. All the known sciences at that time were studied, from the vernacular writings and the Vedas, down to medicine and mathematics. Halls were assigned for lectures, where a hundred different professors lectured to the students every day. The students had nothing to disturb them from their pious tasks and thanks to the generosity of the kings they had all their daily requirements met with kindness and abundance. The students could wholly devote themselves to the pursuit of learning and in fact Nalanda became the most famous for the zeal of its pupils and the talents of its masters.

It was in such a spiritual environment that the Chinese monk settled. He diligently followed his master, venerable Silabhadra’s instructions, making him explain several lines, the books or the passages he did not know, reexamining those he had formerly read, in order to dispel any doubts he might still have. During his stay, the followers of the Hinayana (Little Vehicle) complained to the king that he was giving undue importance to the studies of Mahayana (Bigger vehicle) in Nalanda. The king invited representatives from both groups to assemble before him for a debate for testing the superiority of either faith. The Nalanda monks chose the Chinese monk to sponsor the case of the Bigger Vehicle. The Chinese monk did it so effectively that the protagonists of the Little Vehicle had to admit defeat. At the concluding session, the monk spoke about the greatness of the Buddha and the correctness of the philosophy of the Mahayana and the king loaded him with presents of all kinds.

Why do I describe the Nalanda picture in such detail? Just to show that the practice of mutual debate, to sharpen one’s intellect and to deepen one’s mastery of the subject, has been prevalent in the philosophical circles of the Indian society for thousands of years. It has been in existence in the Upanishadic period. King Janaka, the sincere student of the Vedic studies, encouraged scholars to debate several different philosophical positions in the open court in his presence. Sage Yagnavalkya was an outstanding expert of all Vedic knowledge and could take on any opponent with ease and authority. There were female scholars too, who stood in the forefront in the debating forum. As the texts record, quite often, they were noisy and would not let their opponents leave, until they were fully satisfied.
that they had received adequate explanations to their questions. Adisankara, the foremost exponent of the Advaita philosophy, was one of the most vigorous and persuasive debaters of his time. He went up and down the country on a burning mission to demolish every other philosophy and establish the authenticity of his own. That he succeeded to a great extent was what made him one of the best known philosophers of all time. His dominant rivalry was with the followers of purva mimamsa, the philosophy of action, and a prominent follower of the karma-kanda was one by the name of Mandana Misra. His chief argument was that the mere performance of the rituals as laid down in the scriptures was sufficient to give happiness in this world and bliss in the other. Sankara rejected this argument stoutly saying that only the removal of ignorance will lift the veil of Maya that envelops the world and the human beings and that alone is true liberation, whereas happiness here or there is impermanent experience.

A debate took place between Mandana Misra and Sankara, mediated by Mandana’s wife, a scholar in her own right. The debate lasted fourteen days and Mandana Misra faced defeat, when his wife intervened and asked Sankara whether domestic bliss also was Maya. Sankara paused, took a day’s time and underwent certain experiences, returned and reiterated his arguments with the added strength of his personal experience. Mandana Misra became the staunchest disciple of Sankara and became an outstanding spokesman of Sankara’s Advaita philosophy.

To say that the learning process is a complicated matter will be to oversimplify the issue. From the Buddhist viewpoint, learning involves the body, the mind and the spirit. The Buddhist accounts tell us how the Buddha transmitted the burden of his experience through an eye glance, a smile or even a wave of the hand. Similarly, the self-realisation experiences of the Hindu masters tell us that they could be either spontaneous or call for considerable effort and sacrifice.

Our IITs, Business Schools and leading Medical Institutions, swamp the students with a lot of valuable technical information which, honestly speaking, may take a to absorb. But, the institutions will not wait for a whole lifetime to let a single batch of students to absorb this information. They are interested in rapid
turnaround. How much learning do the students get from their studies? Moreover, what these institutions do not teach may, perhaps, be more important for the success of the student in life. Such high profile education, no doubt, gives the students a strong platform to take off. But, the question is: where do they go from there. They, no doubt, earn fat sums of money; then marry into affluent families, go abroad every now and then, live well and also keep sharpening their technical skills continuously, trying to stay in the race. Their talents and competence and hard work take them to the top of the ladder from where they are even able to influence the course of the related science and technology. Hats off to them! It’s even more exciting to find that much younger students in the schools, and even kids, get addicted to the computer, and let their creativity focus on new findings and these are easily recognised and successful young school students are being offered fabulous pay packets to work with multi-national companies. What will they do with the money?

I remember my father giving me fifty paisa daily for my expenses. I had to use the money for my bus travel and for some light lunch. Since the amount would not cover all the items of expenditure, I used to walk back home from the college, a distance of nine kilometers. I had walking companions, and we enjoyed our walking and talking. We could analyse Karl Marx or Bertrand Russell, page by page, and some of my co-walkers became national celebrities in their later years. They became Governors of States, Indian Administrators and one of my finest friends, a sparkling young economist, became Advisor to the Prime Minister and continues to look after national economic policies. All of them were humble men, very simple and frugal in life, austere in their approaches, high-minded and very wise. How lovely the dream is, when I see our young people assume the mantle of national leadership and utilise all their knowledge and learning for uplifting the 70% of our people who are still below the poverty line - will this happen?

When knowledge gets transformed into learning, life itself becomes a personal mission. Life’s mission represents the very essence of who you are. It is your deepest intention – your heartbeat – that provides you with an overall theme to guide your life.
Your knowledge has flowered into learning, when everything makes sense because you have learned to connect with what you are doing and everything that you do takes on a special meaning, since from now on learning is the main driver. A life’s mission is not merely a career, an avocation, a hobby, a pastime, or even a passion. Life’s mission refers to your understanding of who you are in the light of your learning and its connection to whatever action you may launch on. Everything else is non-learning, even though there may be a versatile possession of a vast amount of knowledge. Such knowledge or non-learning can, in fact, be an obstacle to real learning. As Idries Shah put it, it becomes a ‘veil’ to right understanding. From knowledge, ought to arise, perception of oneself, of the world and the interconnection among all things. Otherwise mere knowledge is like knowing about a mango by studying it, perceptive knowledge is to know it by its taste. One is mere knowing, the other is knowing about knowing.

It will be interesting to look at the place that the Western world, particularly, Europe gave to education. For about a thousand years, Christianity was the main stimulation of the creative forces that were manifested in the magnificent churches, grand statues, systems of prayer, liturgy and worship and inspired a movement for upholding certain human values. Education of those days was Christian education. This civilisation began to decline during the 17th and 18th centuries and its intellectual society practically disappeared. People had to develop faith in something outside of themselves. They tried a number of alternatives, from belief in the divinity of nature, to the supremacy of human rights. The Western world began to look to liberal education as a means to reestablish human values, not on the basis of divine commands but with the help of logic and rationality. Education came to be regarded as an effective answer to a range of society’s ills. Colleges and institutes were considered to have a higher task to fulfill; they could turn us into better, wiser and happier people. **John Stuart Mill**, the great defender of education put it: “*The object of the universities is not to make skilful lawyers, physicians or engineers. It is to make capable and cultivated human beings*”. **Mathew Arnold** would say that proper education should inspire in us a love of our neighbour, a desire for clearing human confusion, and for diminishing human
misery. He added, at its most ambitious, it should engender nothing less than “the noble aspiration to leave the world better and happier than we found it”.

However, it is generally not clear how education could turn students towards generosity and truth and away from sin and error. All the later developments in the field of education have succinctly proved the incapacity of the schools, colleges and universities to infuse even a minimal sense of humanness among the students. We know from experience that the modern university has precious little interest in teaching its students any emotional or ethical life skills, much less how to love their neighbour and make the world a better place.

When religious beliefs begin to fracture and people struggle to find meaning in their life, it is believed that culture and education can replace scripture, and help the people to understand the pathway to humanism. Literature and poetry can gently impart moral instructions and education. Drama can change our lives. Philosophy can address our basic anxieties and offer consolation. Such noble expectations held the ground for a fairly long time, until the scientific and technological revolution overturned the apple cart. Abstract thoughts held sway over men’s minds for a long time. When science and technology took centre stage, attention switched over to the concrete realities of the world – the body, the living conditions, measurement of happiness in terms of possession that gave a big boost to the ego personality. The result is that education has become the handler of mechanical details, displacing human considerations and ethical and value-based judgements. Man’s loneliness is exposed and no matter in whichever direction he looks, there is no human experience to learn from. There is only a struggle for existence, in which each person seeks to ascend the ladder of survival, over the bodies of others. What kind of goodness, friendship, love and compassion can be expected in such an ambience? Hobbes’ verdict that the life of man is ‘nasty, brutish and short’ seems amply borne out by fact.

We may read books, but, we often fail to ask questions of them, because we are afraid of admitting the true nature of our inner needs. We are ambiguous and uncertain, because, unlike the past, we are not to look for moral benefits from the books (I am not talking
Do We Learn?

here of scriptures or religious books). We have created an intellectual world, where we are not to ask, let alone answer, the serious questions that will help us to step outside of our own ego and spread the inherently good feelings of the heart to reach others. The ruthlessness with which the modern man, inspired by the scientists, shuns values in his work, except those that he himself adopts (and these have little relevance to the world) makes him vulnerable because of indecisiveness and anxiety. When he has to handle issues of value judgement in real life, in his family or in his social interactions, he fumbles, because he has missed the opportunity of learning, even as he educates himself.

The old Greek philosophers used the word ‘*akrasia*’ to refer to an irresistible tendency to know, combined with persistent reluctance to actually do it, whether through weakness of will, or absentmindedness or the usual egotist resistance. In other words, even when we desire wisdom, we lack the strength to put it to practice in our lives. We generally see education as a tool to counteract ignorance, but we fail to use it to act upon ideas which we have already fully understood at the level of knowing. Thus, there is a chasm which we deliberately create so that we may free ourselves from the burden of building a bridge of values that will connect both.

Religion, philosophy and spirituality seek to perform this task with varying degrees of success. What is important is that these three great paths must have thorough openness, enveloping human suffering with welcome arms. Dogmatic assertiveness of any kind can close the doors to true understanding, making even the faithful to become the fundamentalists, breeding on hatred and exclusiveness. Learning can give way to ignorance.

It is wonderfully true that education has proved itself to be the proper machinery whereby society tunes to inculcate in its younger generation, within a set span of years, what took the brightest and the most determined of their ancestors centuries of painful and self-sacrificing efforts to work out.

Thus, society understands that knowledge is transferable. Yet it has come to steadfastly deny that wisdom, the mother of learning, is transferable. Religion, philosophy and spirituality are playing a minimal role, because of their inherent problems. With the violent
shake up of the social fabric to its foundation, thanks to science and technology, there is no wisdom that can be imparted, no learning that can be passed around for the benefit of all.

Is this how we are going?

B. DISCUSSION

* * * * *
A. INTRODUCTION

Aswin and Rekha, my good friends (whom you know), went to a dream location somewhere in the Western Ghats for a week’s stay to rejuvenate themselves. Rekha’s mother came and took care of the children during the couple’s absence. Rekha wanted to take the kids with her but the rules of the Ashram were clear. The Retreat was not to be enjoyed as a family holiday. But, Rekha strongly felt that the presence of the two lovely children would greatly enhance the sum total of contentment. The Ashram said, “No”. It e-mailed to say, “No children, no dogs!” Sadly, my friends had to fall in line with the Ashram’s discipline which, after all, was meant to help the spiritual well-being of the participants who had paid a pocketful of money. Tired and jaded plutocrats were expected to develop a new perspective and go back with renewed vigour in body and mind and make more money.

Rekha and Aswin were young, smart and alert, full of positive views about themselves and the society and had no compelling reason to take to the spiritual Retreat. Yet the couple chose to attend the course.

“You are the prompter!” Rekha said, “You have been telling us to look beyond ourselves”.

“Did I tell you to go to this course in particular?”

“No, but you had infused in us a spirit of inquiry, and we were searching”.

“My God!” I said to myself.

That Rekha and Aswin registered for a spiritual course, any course, was not surprising to me. Millions of people all over the world, without social cohesion, family moorings or religious grounding are struggling to find some firm pedestal on which to hang
their pegs. They quit their families and have become atomised. Isolated by their high-value education, they seek to slide into name and fame. With their scientific outlook, they have distanced themselves from religion. When the mythological psyche embedded in their collective unconsciousness disturbs them with questions of the right and wrong during waking and sleeping hours, they have no answer.

Instead, they become psychic themselves and resort to smoking, drinking and drugs and sleeping pills to contain their inner agitations. Some others look for spiritual outlets as a personal search. I would put Aswin and Rekha in that category. They are happy and satisfied in the worldly sense but still able to feel the pressure of a rising restlessness within themselves which they are unable to explain. But, strangely, this restlessness does not give them pain, suffering or sorrow; instead, they feel an excitement within themselves, an expectation that gives them positive thoughts about the world they can possibly reach, if only they are properly guided.

I met Aswin and Rekha after their return.

“How did it go?” I asked.

“Fabulous!” said Rekha, flushed with enthusiasm.

Aswin was careful. “It was OK”, he said, “I learned things that I had not known before”

“Like?”

“Like deep relaxation, healthy physical and mental activities and some discipline”.

“How about life, family, relationships, values and the like? About the meaning and purpose of existence?”

“Not much, though. Physical and mental health appeared to be the main concerns”.

“Did you think that your inner doubts were cleared?”

“I had no inner doubts”, Aswin said and laughed.
I liked Aswin for his candour. Many of us speak like Aswin. We are caught up with our daily lives, our profession, our status and our family responsibilities and we have no time to have any doubt in our minds. In fact, there is no space in the mind to entertain doubts or questions. Nor is there any time even to think of formulating a doubt or a question.

The world is too much with us. ‘There is no time to stand and stare’, said Wordsworth. If that was the case during his time, more than two hundred years ago, we can well imagine how much time distortion must be taking place now, where knowledge is information, information is technology and the last one postulating ‘speed’ as its most important parameter. And speed is the vital characteristic of the mind. And man depends, like his life-breath, on the mind for creating the very things that he is eventually unable to control. The mind is the manifestation of one’s ego and, thus, you will see that the ego is the centre of everything in the whole universe. I find it difficult to conceive of someone who is totally egoless. The enlightened, the liberated, are not totally egoless. They sublimate and train their ego to serve humanity by alleviating its sufferings and by giving it correct perspectives of happiness. Founders of the religions, spiritual masters and the expounders of the faith have had the same mission; they taught their precepts with the incisive sharpness of their logic and genuine compassion to the millions through the ages. Their central message has been, more or less, the same. “Think less of yourself and more of others; Refine your thoughts and feelings and focus your attention to helping others in need. See the others in the same way as you would see yourself. When you judge a person, please know that you are also being judged by the same token!”

Such simple teachings! And yet the world has found it difficult to accept them honestly, much less to practice them. On the contrary, we will do everything to drive ourselves to death, just to be on the top. You must be a killer in looks too, as much in achievements in society. When we caution people that they are being led by the nose of their own ego towards wanton destruction, they say that they prefer such death, in the field of worldly success, to purposeless anonymity. Driving in the same direction, with venomous fury, the media rushes to spread its net, over helpless children, in the name
of talent-hunt, be it in music or dance, or brain work with the computer or memory teasers. Nobody is left alone. The parents, too, have joined the race to project their children through the TV and other media and are doing great injustice to them by rushing them to learn things beyond their mental capacity or maturity.

Every child is a gem, a diamond. Allow it to grow as a diamond. A child has derived diamond-like qualities of the brain and the physique during a million years of evolution. It has crystallised through the best of the qualities of the diamond at its birth. And, then, as it grows through pulls and pressures, pain and suffering, its quality of innate brilliance becomes hidden by a load of rubbish. When it becomes an adult, it covers the whole mess with a coat of bright, shiny varnish. The adult presents this artificial veneer to the world as his true nature and wonders why nobody thinks that the varnish is extraordinary. Over time, the adult even comes to believe that this protective shell is what he really is and he shapes the whole personal identity around it.

But, if we are lucky, life presents us with a gift, a call. Something happens, when, for the moment, we crack through the hardened surface, look past the layers and catch a glimpse of the radiant brilliance arising from within.

Then, if we are very, very lucky, we spend the rest of our life journeying homeward into its exquisite beauty and freedom. We discover that we have always been and will always be, this pristine, flawless diamond.

I am not talking religion, philosophy or spirituality. I am sorry to say that the religion of today is not the religion of the founders. If they were to land back on earth anticipating to see their golden precepts cherished in tender hearts, they would be sorely disappointed. Soon after they (all of them) ascended to the heavens, philosophers and the ritualists took over and saw to it that religion was not a way to beauty and freedom, but a path of bondage to the dogmas, and Truth became a high-sounding word and the philosopher proceeded to define it, limit it and take it beyond the ken of understanding of the ordinary man, who could do nothing but gaze at the dazzling array of words and expressions, the meaning or significance of which he would seldom know.
Among such expressions, you will notice the popular ones are spirituality. New Age Spiritualism, Spiritual Masters, and Spiritual Retreats. We are confounded, because we are not specifically told whether they are founded in religion or represent a new way of life, a new perception, where the spiritual cure, more than God, is the guiding force towards a destination not transparent, but intriguing. But, everyone, like Aswin and Rekha, is excited. The followers think that they are about to enter a new world of uninterrupted bliss, where all kinds of troubles are at an end. Spirituality is said to be both the means and the end. Once you are in it, spiritual leaders say, your life gets transformed. You do not have to know the meaning of the word, ‘spirituality’, but everything that you think, speak or do is spiritual. All relationships are spiritual, when they are open and such relationships, bridging the gap between the inner and outer, create a spiritual ambience of peace and quiet. Spirituality, the masters teach us, points always beyond, beyond the ordinary, beyond possession, beyond the narrow confines of the self, and – above all – beyond expectation. Because, the ‘spiritual’ is beyond our control, it is never exactly what we expect. At the same time, spirituality is a reality that one approaches not by ‘learning’, but by ‘following’. And then we have the spirituality of imperfection. This is rooted in and revealed by uncertainties, inadequacies, helplessness, the lack and failure of control, and it suggests a way of living in which our imperfections, chiefly in others, can be accepted and endured and a new way of building a world of peace is brought about. The masters tell us that spiritual sensibilities begin to flower, when the soil is fertilised with the understanding that ‘something is awry’. There is after all, something ‘wrong’ with us. I can go on repeating what the spiritual leaders have been proclaiming, but I shall deal with the real content of ‘spirituality’, as I take you along with me in the course of this journey.

Millions of people, all over the world, are already keen ‘spiritual enthusiasts’. They follow one master or another; they train themselves in the spiritual ‘arts’ as taught by the masters, or their authorised trainers; they are happy to display themselves in the midst of the crowds around their master, with certain pride, if not superciliousness. Elaborate arrangements are made to receive, fete and worship the master. Songs are composed and sung, eulogising the divinity of the master, in language that the gods could be
envious of. Many masters attract disciples irrespective of nationality, religion, colour or creed. Some of them join the gathering out of curiosity; some want to spend their surplus wealth; and some others want to take the opportunity to intensify their pleasurable lives in different ways; and yet some others want to get out of the bondages of religion and tell the world they could still lead meaningful lives. At the same time, such devotion and commitment among the followers require the master to lead a life of exemplary love and compassion, that he can set an example for all. Humility and sacredness should be manifest in all that he does. The true master is one with his followers, is not away from them.

Unfortunately, in real life, human nature seems to set a limit to the realisation of such expectations. Vanity, self-glorification and the instinct of aggrandisement and authoritarianism do make their appearance and the followers explain it away saying, “After all, it is human to be so!”

“You are harsh on the spiritual masters”, said Rekha, one evening when I was dining with the couple, “you, yourself, are a very spiritual person. What’s the problem?”

“Rekha, listen, I shall define my spirituality”

“I forgive the tears I was made to shed
I forgive the betrayals and the lies,
I forgive the hatred and the persecution
I forgive the blows that hurt me
I forgive the wrecked dreams
I forgive the still-born hopes
I forgive the hostility and the jealousy
I forgive the indifference and ill-will
I forgive the anger and the cruelty
I forgive the neglect and the contempt
I forgive the evils that they may turn good
I forgive myself for all my faults
May the misfortunes of the past no longer weigh on my heart.
Instead of pain and resentment, let me choose understanding and compassion. Instead of rebellion and violence, let me choose to assuage the sufferings of the forlorn with the music
of my heart, milk of my kindness. Instead of grief and despair, let me choose forgetting. Instead of vengeance, let me choose victory by love”.

Aswin and Rekha were silent. They probably wanted the thoughts to seep into their minds slowly.

I continued:
“I will be capable of love, regardless whether I am loved in return,
Of giving, even when I have nothing,
Of working happily even in the midst of difficulties,
Of holding out my hand, even when I am alone and utterly abandoned,
Of drying my tears, even when I weep,
Of believing, even when no one believes me”.

I finished. Silence for a while.

“You speak like Jesus Christ!” said Aswin. “You know how difficult it is to cultivate that kind of mind in the real world?”

“I have always felt I needed to accomplish a few things in life, like being good, compassionate and so on. But, worldly compulsions are too strong and my mind is weak”.

This was Rekha, very serious, very different from her ebullient self.

“One need not be a Jesus Christ,” I said, “Or a great spiritual personality, to be good, kind and compassionate. But, Rekha is right. Our compulsions to be different are great and we find it difficult to surmount them”.

“What are the compulsions?” asked Aswin.

“Well, you know them all too well”, I said, “From birth to old age, we are compelled to act in a way that we experience no sense of freedom. Studies, compulsions of parents and teachers, the pressure to structure your life to suit the social requirements, the need to push yourself up the economic ladder, putting all your innate talents into well-laid out paths, even if you don’t like it at all, the need to give the best of your attention to your family so that you are not
spoken against for failing in your duty, and, in short, to be ahead of everybody at great personal cost to your body and mind. There could be more!”

“These are inevitable in modern life”, said Aswin, “nobody complains about them. If you are thinking of leading your life in a leisurely way like an angler by the lake, you know such a life is the thing of the past. Why call them compulsions?”

“I agree, Aswin, that is a good statement of your position”, I said, “but please consider, today you cannot do without a mobile to transact your business, a laptop to get everything done, from writing letters to gazing at the sunrise, at the Antarctica, the latest LED TV model, to get all the news about the world, a club to socialise and clinch your business deals and a mandatory holiday to snatch your lost sleep! Tell me, where do your wife, your children, your parents, and yourself, come in all these? They are the steps by which you are ascending the ladder, and a little slip, they had it!”

“This does not happen in all cases”, Rekha, the quiet listener so far, intervened.

“I am happy you say so, Rekha”, I replied, “You must ask them! You must find out from them how much space they feel that they occupy in your minds. We are become individualistic, isolationist, pursuing only our goals. Others come in only to provide you the sustenance, isn’t it so, Rekha?”

Rekha did not respond. I continued: “Look at yourself. I do not say that you should have no wants. Each one of us has his or her own desires, fancies, attractions. Today they are fanned and fuelled by the multimedia, the advertisements, the TV, the cinema, the entertainment world; even our tastes for food are dictated by the recipes advertised by the restaurants. One look at the fashion parade and the dazzling display of dresses is enough for you to know, that the very next day, people will scurry to the shops to pick up the latest arrivals”.

“No business can be carried on without advertising”, said Aswin, “it creates and satisfies demands. The economy thrives. I get paid”.

“Fine, Aswin”, I said, “you should get paid even more for your statement!” Now, what do you eat? The vegetables in the
supermarkets, the food grains, the provisions all packed by them, the vast collection of readymade and ready-to-eat food, which is out there, ready to satisfy every taste, every whim and fancy! We don’t inquire where they come from or what they are composed of. We trust the printed information. Who is there to check?”

I could see that Aswin was getting a little restless. “What’s the point that you are making?” he asked.

“I am trying to say that spirituality cannot be taught in one week or even one-month retreats. I have great respect for the spiritual masters of our times who are trying their best to divert people’s attention from the compelling materiality of our life. I would prefer everyone to begin to ask some simple questions of themselves.”

“How much free am I?”

“By thinking or acting, am I lessening my bondage and improving the prospects of freedom?”

“Do I feel less free when I am confined within myself?”

“Do I enjoy my freedom better, when I am able to think beyond myself, when I am able to see less in materials and more in lives?”

“Spirituality begins, Aswin and Rekha, when you begin to shed your egos little by little”.

The couple was quiet. They were not unfamiliar with my thoughts. Surprisingly, I found that my thoughts were crowding in my mind rather rapidly for me to express them clearly.

“I have a question to ask”, said Rekha, “we still have to face our life’s compulsions that you spoke of. The need for self-protection and survival puts the ego in command. I am confused!”

“No need for any confusion, Rekha”, I told her. “Life is not a big obstacle. We need not think of it all the time, as a sea of troubles. Nor need we feel that the earlier we swim across, the better for us. Life teaches us many lessons as we go along. It’s a matter of learning from our experiences. A mind that is open is far more receptive to answers to life’s questions. It’s exciting once you learn to look at it this way. It’s a challenge that calls you to shed your ego-
oriented disposition. Some guidance, some experience and a lot of introspection helps to put you on a higher level”.

“The art of living?” asked Rekha.

“The art of non-living”, I said and laughed.

Rekha looked puzzled.

“What are you saying?” she said.

“It’s simple”, I replied, “We live in a complex society. It’s becoming difficult for us to cope with the hundreds of problems we face every day. We are told that we are in stress. Whether we are in stress or not, the advice and the warning themselves make us stressed. So, we go for relief. There are umpteen masters who tell us how to face our stress, or adapt ourselves to the situations thrust on us by factors beyond our control. We think we are better prepared. We go back and find conditions as intolerable as before. We are not able to step out of our bondage, because we are being trained to live in bondage and the chains bind us more tightly”.

“Rousseau”, Rekha intervened to say, “Man is born free, but everywhere he is in chains!”

“Wonderful, Rekha”, I said, “How did you know that?”

“I was a student of political science”, she said and looked at her husband adoringly.

“Rekha, you hit the nail on its head”, I said, “and we do not know that we are in chains. The illusory grandeur of the material world is so dazzling that we are overpowered by it. Blinded, we become and are drawn into the whirlpool. We are taught to move faster, rotate more quickly in the whirlpool and we cannot think of a different kind of experience”.

“Plato’s Men in the Cave”, interrupted Rekha.

“Great”, I responded, “the political scientist again! Plato has spoken of men who have been chained inside a cave, facing the wall of the cave. They cannot look behind, they have no other experience. But, once released, they can turn around and look at the entrance and see the light. They are in a different world!”
“So, your art of non-living?” Aswin asked somewhat impatiently.

“It means not living according to the style that has been thrust on you by the society and the system, which have no time or place for higher emotions or worthwhile values in its scheme of things. It means to know that you can refuse your ego and cultivate finer sensibilities. It means to extend a helping hand to a person in need, be it a neighbour or a stranger. It means to try and educate the poor children to the extent of your capacity as well as you do in the case of your own children. It means to lavish affection on your elderly parents, but for whose help and guidance, you will not be where you are. It means to treat all elders in society as members of your extended family and do your best, individually or institutionally, to keep them free from worries and troubles. It means, specifically, to know with conviction that there are no enemies, but only friends, and misunderstandings and enmity, rivalry and hatred are you own mental constructions, a display of the power of your ego which can destroy both yourself and the society!”

“So non-living, according to you, means living differently?” asked Aswin.

“Yes”, I replied, “It means to get out of the rat race, the muddy ways of thinking and living. It includes self professed scholarship which confirms your ego’s authority. It eschews chasing after intellectual pursuits in the name of spirituality. This is a convenient way of skirting the real issues and problems of society. When you contribute your best to solve your neighbour’s suffering, you grow spiritually more rapidly, than all your ‘spiritual’ seeking in terms of what intellectual scholarship can help you to do”.

These conversations with Aswin and Rekha took place over a period of time. They were keen listeners, sincere seekers who wanted to ‘accomplish’ spirituality rather than ‘learn’ it. By their interactions, they used to stimulate me to explore my own depths, find fallacies therein and to correct them.

People quite often, describe successful living as an art and hundreds of teachers all over the world are trying to teach us this art, whatever it means. Again, Art is contrasted with Nature. The artist gives expression to his inspiration in concrete terms. He glorifies, exaggerates, beautifies or simply imitates Nature and Life.
Art, Nature and Life are there to help us, to enlarge us, to give us less egotistic ideas and nobler hearts - that opens up an entrancing world, refines and uplifts us, shows us the spiritual path at the same time. Good art must awaken in us a deep feeling of reverence to our own inner strength and mental tranquility.

Tolstoy once called art, ‘a beautiful life’. This may be so, or may not be so. Art can rouse either devilish or divine feelings. It may lead man to a sense of higher beauty, which, Keats equated with Truth. Art can help man to acquire a vision of beauty, that is, a manifestation of the divine in him. With sincere contemplation, art can help man to understand the divine qualities in him and apply them to daily life.

In a way these thoughts sum up the points of the discussions I had with Aswin and Rekha. Our thoughts, speech and action will reflect our innate natural goodness, kindness, a sense of beauty and other desirable virtues, if we, as artists, keep our highest mission in view – that is, to pursue our innate nature all the time.

B. DISCUSSION

* * * *
A. INTRODUCTION

When I was in the college, during our study of Economics, a burly German and staunch catholic missionary introduced us to Karl Marx. My capacity for intellectual assimilation was limited, as I was young and unused to logical thinking and I found it very difficult to comprehend the philosophical idealism of Marx. My Professor, himself, was a student of the eminent socialist scholar of the London School of Economics. He personally was fully convinced of the need to change the society to a practical socialist way of life. Since, however, he was a missionary and could not openly canvass his ideas among his colleagues, he chose his class as the forum, to engage us in stimulating intellectual debates, in the course of which he drove home his argument that the Marxist revolution was necessary and inevitable.

Karl Marx impressed me tremendously. Marx’s famous statement, “You have no right to a cake, when your neighbour does not have a piece of bread”, seemed to sum up the whole issue. With youthful exuberance, I started shouting from the rooftops that Marx would be able to bring about a revolution that would destroy all kinds of inequalities and inequities. Though subsequent global events proved that the Marxist arguments contained inconsistencies that would never make Marxist society a reality, my admiration for Marx continued to be strong. Today, as the ‘great divide’ enlarges with lightning speed, thanks to the so-called ‘Economic Marvel’, the rich have come to hold sway over the affairs of the world and the poor are becoming poorer. I grow restless about this trend, but am helpless. I can only recollect Aldous Huxley’s famous remarks:

“The big scorpion breeds the small scorpion, the big dung beetle breeds the small dung beetle, the big company manager breeds the small company manager”.

What fascinated me, even more, was the famous dictum of Karl Marx, "Religion is the opium of the people".

It also left me stunned. All my ideas of religion went into a spin. Though I did not fully understand the implications of that pronouncement in the early years of my studies, it made me feel nervous. My contact with religion at that time was basic and primal and totally self-centred. As in the case of most people, my parents followed religion and observed the rituals mainly to extract benefits from the deities. I hardly understood that religion was a tool in the hands of the establishment to exploit the people. However, as I grew to be an introspective young man, my own limited experiences as to how the rich treated the poor could teach me a lot many lessons that gave a new significance to my perception of the Marxist dictum. It was easy to see that much of the religion, as practised in the course of our daily life, consisted of rituals, prayers, worship of a deity, celebrations, adherence to certain faiths, worship of the teacher and following his path with sincerity. All these could keep the people so engaged in their religious tasks, that eventually the believers are tired out, feel rested, happy and contented under the umbrella of faith and they feel neither interested, nor concerned about the affairs of the society or about the crunching inequality, poverty or disease. The people may even become appreciative of the rich who spend a lot of money on the temples for conduct of public festivals. We may remember the Roman times when the dictators and the emperors held massive shows in the stadium where the slaves were thrown to the lions. People were so excited about the sights and sounds that they forgot their own serfdom. The Establishment gave jobs to workers, fed them with small doles and tender mercies and the people seldom thought that they were opium-coated and never grumbled or showed any dissatisfaction. Marx argued that religion acted in the same way. By telling people to love one another, religion, according to Marx diverted them from paying attention to the reality of their own lot or doing something about it. Religion is the opium of the people. Why not think that our democracy works in a similar way? People elect the politicians to power and the Big Brothers assert themselves once they are in power and sugar-coated programmes follow, which help, not the people who have voted for them, but them who dispense the largesse.
Another interesting implication of the Marxian dictum is that once a man falls into the trap of opium, he has become a victim, is addicted to this golden drug, cannot get away from it and is happy if he gets a daily dosage doled out to him. It helps him to see heaven and hell, the sun, the moon and the stars and his happiness is complete. Though some people may not like me saying this, intellectual pursuits are equally addictive. We want to grab whatever knowledge is available, put up an ego and say how much more we know than the other person.

Religious addictions too take similar shapes. Devotional or ritualistic involvement of a person with his personal god can make him forget the world, the people around him and even himself. He surrenders to his god totally and we know that many great poets, in the intensity of their surrender have been inspired to write memorable poetry and songs. Often, this may be at the cost of personal service to the cause of the near and dear ones. However, such distancing from the performance of personal duties has not been considered a failure in their life. Rather, it has been hailed as detachment of the highest order and this is said to please the gods more than any other form of worship.

In the end, however, the Marxian effort to push religion away from the people did not succeed, one of the reasons possibly being that religious fervour is far more deeply ingrained in man’s consciousness, having reached there thousands of years ago. This fervour sitting at the back of his mind has been making a dominant impact over man’s pressing need to safeguard his economic welfare against opposing forces in an unseen society.

The moral and intellectual failure of Marxism has left modern man with the alternative to enjoy materialism with complete economic freedom. At the same time, the true tenets of religion are fading back into the memories of the scriptures and these are gathering dust in the shelves of the truly learned. Libertarian materialism worships science as the root source of man’s achievements and celebrates with skyscraper edifices, travel to the moon and Mars, connects men globally with mind-boggling electronic devices and revels in an ugly display of wealth with glamour and consumption.
Religion is not to be left behind. It seeks to demonstrate its hold on the people with glamorous displays of feasts and fasts, prayers and chantings, satsangs and pilgrimages, festivals and processions and new age interpretations of the ancient scriptures. People wanting to get a release from the bane of life’s pressures find some peace and joy in such open activities and the visible increase in their number makes one believe that religion has returned. It is not so.

In the East, religion began with Nature. In the West, religion ended with Nature. In the East, religion is, generally, the outcome of nature mysticism. Man gazed at the stupendous mountains, flowing streams, swift rivers, wooded forests, rain and storm, thunder and lightning, famine and floods. He saw that a supernatural power was behind all cosmic happenings. He prayed to the gods to protect him, his family and his cattle from the ravages of nature. He prayed to them for long life, freedom from disease and for the well-being of his cattle. The sages of his time created the rituals, which, by bringing the connection between man and gods closer, helped him to fulfill his cosmic duties. In turn, the gods became committed to acceding to the wishes of man and keeping him happy in the face of restless Nature.

At the same time, pressing questions began to assail man’s mind. He began to wonder and ponder over who the gods were and after much introspection understood that the various gods of Nature were the embodiment of a Supreme Power that transcended the universe, both visible and invisible and also remained in the inmost self of all living beings. With experience, man learnt that he, the man, the natural forces, the cosmos and the gods who controlled them should always be in equilibrium with the help of the prayers and rituals. Otherwise, the natural forces could be upset, leading to natural disasters, and instability and suffering in the case of human beings. It was, therefore, highest wisdom to come to terms with the gods, which man can do by fulfilling his duties. It was, then, the responsibility of the gods, the recipients of the benefits, to stand by man, keep the cosmos in order and provide the right ambience for man to grow in wealth and progeny and live up to the prescribed tenure of life. Thus, it was man’s respect for nature and appreciation of his position in the cosmic environment that inspired him to write down the first religious principles.
Religion - A Milestone or a Millstone?

My second statement, ‘In the West, religion ended with Nature’, needs some explanation. Kenneth Clark in his widely acclaimed book, “Civilisation” speaks about this beautifully. Let me quote:

“For almost a thousand years, the chief creative force in Western civilization was Christianity. Then, in about the year 1725, it suddenly declined, and in the intellectual society, practically disappeared. Of course, it left a vacuum, people could not get on without a belief in something outside themselves and during the next hundred years, they concocted a new belief, which, however irrational it may seem to us, has added a good deal to our civilization, a belief in the divinity of Nature. . . . . The first stage in this new direction of the human mind was very largely achieved in England and perhaps it was no accident that England was the first country in which the Christian faith had collapsed. In about 1730, the French philosopher Montesquieu noted: ‘There is no religion in England. If anyone mentions religion, people begin to laugh’.

May be this is true even now. A few years ago, I happened to spend a month at Durham in North Eastern England as a guest of our Hamsa friends, Dr. Shanti and Dr. M.S. Krishnan. One day, we were driving past the countryside when a billboard in front of a village church caught my attention. It read: “If you are interested in meeting God, please assemble for breakfast every Sunday morning. We will show Him to you”.

The Indian scene is different. Religion has not ended, and it thrives in thousands of temples where gods live and enjoy the company of the devotees, take offerings from them and keep them happy.

You need a kind of childlike sensitivity to recognise the power of nature and instinctively respond to it, to see beauty and truth in it and instantly go into meditation, when the human mind grows into cosmic dimensions. Unfortunately, with thousands of years of evolution, man has developed the left side of his brain dominantly and has depended upon logic and reason as tools for understanding nature. Wordsworth moaned about the ‘meddling intellect’.
“Sweet is the lore our Nature brings,
Our meddling intellect
Misshapes the beauteous form of things;
We murder to dissect”.

The poets of the eighteenth century England derived much of their inspiration from the landscape of the English countryside, the plainness of its people as well as the grandeur of the Alps and the hardiness of the Swiss rural folk. Not all the poets worshipped nature in the same way. Some of them were filled with sentiment and memory and enjoyed natural beauty with a gentle melancholy. Gray’s “Elegy” is one such example. Some like Rousseau loved nature as the mother of man’s innocence. For him, nature and natural man were the same. For him, the beauty and innocence of nature extended from plants and flowers to men and women and children. Coleridge looked at nature in a mystical way. In “Hymn before Sunrise”, he addressed the Swiss mountains:

“O, dread and silent Mount! I gazed upon thee,
Till thou, still present to the bodily sense,
Didst vanish from my thought; entranced in prayer
I worshipped the Invisible alone.”

Wordsworth it was, who saw ‘divinity in nature’ and his inspiration was pure and moral:

“Accuse me not of arrogance, unknown Wanderer as I am,
If having walked with Nature threescore years,
And offered, far as frailty would allow,
My heart a daily sacrifice to Truth
I now affirm of Nature and of Truth,
Whom I have served, that their Divinity
Revolts, offended at the ways of Men”.

Several other poets of Nature echoed Wordsworth in varying ways. They were all earnest and pious and their sole aim was to prove that their goddess was Truth and she it was who inspired Man to lead a moral life. They aligned Nature with Truth, much like the Vedic seers did, and proposed a new set of values, based on right instinct, rather than learning. The new religion was anti-hierarchical and informed us that simple people often showed more courage, loyalty and unselfishness and had a better moral perception than
the sophisticated people. They enjoyed a wholeness of life not given to the wealthy, who are cut away from their natural moorings.

“One impulse from a vernal wood
May teach you more of man
Of moral, evil and of good,
Than all the sages can”.

Wordsworth’s love of nature was uniquely blended with a profound spiritual insight, that made him see the eternal energy of the Supreme Being in the smallest of plants and creatures, in the most delicately shaped petals of the flowers, and the rich spectrum of colours that has been bestowed on them.

In “O Nightingale! Thou Surely Art”, he wrote:

“He sang of love, with quiet blending,
Slow to begin, and never ending,
Of serious faith and inward glee;
That was the song – the song for me”.

Emerson, the famous nature philosopher, echoed the same spirit:

“Everything in nature contains all the power of nature –
everything is made of one hidden stuff”.

This includes yourself, myself. You and I are part of nature. I desire to be in solitude, to be free, to be my natural self, to follow my intuition, to sing when I want to, flow as the river does – these are all our natural gifts, and we only too easily ignore them, or think little of them.

You are probably asking me now - Why all this fuss about worshipping Nature? Where is Nature anyway? You have my sympathies. The answer is in your own question. You ought to agree, if I say, that this is a matter of mindset – that is your question and doubt. We are no longer the simple, primitive denizens of the forests and the hills, witnessing the path of God in the rays of the sun, hearing His voice in the rolling thunder over the distant mountains. We are modern, intellectual, scientific, computer-guided gifts of the industrial world, for whom manna from the business is more important than the immortal poetry of the mystic bards beckoning God. The former confers a lavish life, the latter demands a life by way of sacrifice. The religion of gain has replaced the
religion of nature. The parameters and prerequisites of happiness have been reset.

Science has gone on to discover the laws that govern the universe and assures that these laws create the ‘cosmic design’ and the universe can sustain itself through the laws, without a God. Science has shown that many concepts of religion are unrealistic, if not wrong, and in any case, unnecessary. These arguments of science are powerful and the blows to religion are hard, if not fatal.

Richard Dawkins, the world renowned professor at Oxford wrote the book, “The God Delusion”, in which he tries to prove that all religious premises are totally wrong. He does this with the ruthless logic of a thorough-going, merciless scholar and scientist. In his preface, he says that he intends to raise the reader’s consciousness to the fact that “To be an atheist is a realistic aspiration and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral and intellectually fulfilled”.

He quotes with approval Robert M. Pirsig, the author of “Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance”:

“When one suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from delusion, it is called religion”.

Richard Dawkins also quotes the author Sam Harris in his book, “The End of Faith”:

“When religious people are not generally mad, their core beliefs absolutely are”.

Dawkins further refers to the tragic loss of millions of human lives in religious wars fought over many centuries and wonders whether people will come forward to wage wars in defence of atheism.

He quotes a passage from “The End of Faith” to clinch his arguments:

“The danger of religious faith is that it allows otherwise natural human beings to reap the fruits of madness, and consider them ‘holy’. Because every new generation of children is taught that religious propositions need not be justified in a way that all others must, civilization is still besieged by the armies of the preposterous. We are even now killing ourselves over
ancient literature. Who would have thought that something tragically so absurd is possible?”

Scathing indeed! What is it that the scientists are so disturbed about? We may offer an answer. Being given to logic and reason, they cannot accept the myths, superstitions and irrationalities. They say that these take away the meaning of man’s life and make it nonsensical. Man’s faculties are to be put to use to study and understand his universe, his world, the habitat where he lives, his people and his environment and formulate the laws that govern them. Such perception contributes to better living in this world than the mystical pronouncements about something that is beyond and that can never be put to any kind of scrutiny. Such ideas like the soul, the afterlife, heaven and hell, and divine intervention in human affairs, are not their cup of tea. They cannot understand why human love and compassion, charity and generosity should be mixed up with devotion and worship and considered as God’s gifts.

**Albert Einstein** did not believe in a personal god. But, he believed in a religion of a mystical kind. To quote him:

“To know what is impenetrable exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom, and the most radiant beauty, which our dull faculties can comprehend only in their most primitive forms - the knowledge, the feeling is at the centre of true religiousness. In this sense, in this sense only, I belong to the ranks of the devoutly religious”.

Towards the end of his life, Einstein went further and said, “In their struggle for the ethical, good teachers of religion must have the stature to give up the doctrine of a personal god”.

Modern man finds very little time to practice religion in the manner stipulated by the scriptures or the saints. But, when circumstances like ill-health, business losses, litigation and the like, force him to look for help beyond himself, he surrenders to his personal god, the god of his choice, the god who can listen to his woes and retrieve him from the precipice. The scientist has other concerns. In the course of the discovery of the laws of nature, their applicability to daily needs impresses him and technology takes over, and floods us with gadgets that are supposed to increase the sum total of the happiness of man. So preoccupied does the
scientist become, in a drive to enhance material satisfaction, that religion fades away from the ken of his perception. He may even think that the religious goals and procedures are a millstone around his neck. In such a milieu, religion becomes the exclusive domain of the priest, the pastor and the preceptor. Swayed by the glamour of the instant heaven of abundance, of luxury and pleasure, we tend to treat religious obligations as an unavoidable burden.

Religions do have the answers for the questions raised against them. Religion is equally capable of mounting fierce counter attacks. A Vatican priest in Dan Brown’s “Angels and Demons” comes out passionately:

“Even the technology that promises to unite, divides us. Each of us is now electronically connected to the globe and yet we feel utterly alone. We are bombarded with violence, friction, fracture and betrayal. Skepticism has become a virtue. Cynicism and demand for proof have become enlightened thought. Is it any wonder that humans feel more depressed than they have at any point in human history? Does science hold anything sacred? Science strives for answers by probing the unborn fetuses. Science even presumes to rearrange our own DNA. It shatters God’s world into smaller and smaller pieces in quest of meaning and all it finds is more question. … You proliferate weapons of mass destruction. Someone else has to tell you to exercise restraint. Who, among the living creatures, who is there to tell you the moral implications of your action? When we, as a species, abandon our trust in the power greater than us, we abandon our sense of accountability. Faith, all faith are admonitions that we cannot even understand something to which we are accountable; with faith we are accountable to each other, to ourselves and to a higher truth. Religion is flawed, but only because man is flawed”.

Science can afford to be indifferent to these attacks. The scientist is only interested in taking the next step, his focus becoming sharper and sharper, in order to reach one more discovery, or arrive at some more proof. His vision has no place for connecting his little truth to the cosmic truth of Religion. Breadth of vision is the casualty, but he leaves it to Religion.
Having said all these, we must also be aware of what religion can do and has been doing, to make human life less miserable and more tolerable. When we do so, we must also know that we cannot judge religion in the way we can in the case of science. The parameters change. The happiness quotient can no longer be measured as in the case of science. We do know that science, wealth and economic prosperity have not abolished or lessened suffering, both mental and physical. Anxiety and stress of modern life are such common experiences that even a six-year-old schoolboy complains of it, without, probably, understanding what it means. Science claims to be neutral and objective and, therefore, will have nothing to do with human sensibilities, finer virtues, refined emotions and above all, love and compassion.

The bane of modern life is isolation. If we have any access to a spirit of community, it is by involving oneself in professional groups. Our young men throw themselves, with vigour, into professional careers, where mental energy and its application carry them to the top, where focusing on work becomes a paramount necessity, even to the exclusion of family, social life and contemplation on more human and pressing situations. There is impressive financial gain, no doubt, but continued concentration on the narrow self, gradually dehumanises and finally destroys the very personality that is seeking an opportunity to grow beyond itself.

Religion helps in establishing a sense of community through common rituals, prayers, community worship, and celebration of festivals. Religion tells us to set aside undue concerns about our limited self, to extend a helping hand to the poor and the needy, to take care of persons less happily placed than ourselves, to venerate the elderly, to keep them contented in their advancing years and to promote, consciously, those values that give lasting satisfaction. Religion notes that it is people’s nature to develop the outer values, like power, position and authority. At the same time, by gently bringing home, through scriptural studies, the impermanence of life, possession and family, religion draws upon the goodness that may be lurking in the ego-personality to go beyond itself, to shed wealth and some of the indefensible adherences. By trying to do this, religion helps to combine the ego-sense with a spirit of sacrifice and infuse a sense of community, free from a feeling of inequality.
A Pilgrim's Progress

Quite often, social alienation is the offshoot of a fear of inferiority. It results in jealousy, spite, hatred and aggression. Religion steps in to eradicate these undesirable qualities by placing a Power above man and inviting us to share in the essential goodness of all people, under the loving eyes of that Power. To be polite, to honour one another, to be faithful and sober, is not easy, and science thinks that it is not its job to promote these qualities. And these are the very essence of religious teachings. People are the losers if they have not understood the urgent necessity for cultivating such desirable qualities.

The essence of religious teachings, in fact, is our own. It is deeply embedded in the consciousness of the people. It is so much a part of our inner make-up that none outside need really show it to us. The founders of the religions only told us to recognise our essential goodness and shape our lives according to it.

We can go further and say, if you want any logical explanation, that the origins of religious ethics lay in the pragmatic needs of the earliest communities to control the tendencies of their members towards violence and to foster in them the contrary habits of kindness and forgiveness. Religious codes began as practical, cautionary precepts and were then projected into the sky and reflected back to the earth in majestic, supernatural forms. Injunctions to be generous, sympathetic and feel one with the neighbours, stemmed from an awareness that those qualities alone could draw the societies back from fragmentation. The codes became essential for our survival. We must remember that we (our forefathers, ancestors) were the ones who formulated them. But, we needed to say that morality came from the heavens, since, otherwise, logical minds would start exploring the right and wrong of them. We continue to need all the exhortations to be sympathetic, just and kind, even if we do not believe that there is a God who wants it to be so. We do not have to be brought in line by the threat of hell or a promise of a paradise. We only need to remind ourselves that the most mature and reasonable parts of ourselves want us to live in a society that is built on love, kindness and justice. So, we are the authors of our own moral commandments and religion is the manifestation of our own finer feelings, brought to focus so that all of us may live as members of a single community, pursuing one goal of peace that passes understanding.
I often feel sad about the way the noble principles and essential truths of religion are being conveyed to us with a sense of authority and power of knowledge by the priests, the pastors and the philosophers. They speak as if, they, and they alone, are in possession of maturity and moral right. I am one with them in their thoughts and I have arrived at my destination, crawling before the Altar of Truth, weighed down by humility. I may not even know the scriptures and the mythologies and the legends, but they have already made their homes in my collective unconscious. I weep even before the preacher has told the story; I smile when he fails to interpret it correctly. They all fail to realise that in the end, we are incomplete, imperfect and unfinished human beings who are tempted to make mistakes all the time. Religious lessons can be more easily absorbed, if they are delivered by teachers who know both sides of the coin of human existence.

We may never discover cast-iron rules of good conduct, which will answer every question that may arise, as to how human beings can live well and peacefully together. But that does not stop us from investigating and promoting both theoretical and practical solutions to our problems, the overriding principle being, they should all be resolved with goodwill and that a better and more conducive atmosphere for peace should prevail in the end. This is a continuing effort. While we may draw inspiration from the past traditions, religion, culture or civilisation, we should deal with the problems that arise in the present context with sympathy, nobility and utmost human considerations. This is what all the religions would expect us to do.

We derive our religious grounding in the early years from our parents. My religion is what their religion is. We accept the rituals and the mode of worship as they practice them. Implicit in this acceptance is our trust in the parent’s correctness or moral rightness. Our faith, in that young age, in God may not be sound, but our belief in the infallibility of the ritual procedures will be. As we grow, we find that the world is divided into many religions and many sectors in the same religion. We somehow get attached to our sectarian religion thanks to early parental schooling, and are not happy when criticism is levelled against our sector on theoretical or practical grounds. We respond with vehement attacks, even where
we are on unsure grounds. Much of the differences among the religions arise out of ignorance of one another’s tenets or insufficient appreciation, or refusal to appreciate, or mala-fide considerations.

When I talk to my friend about the sweetness of the mango that I had tasted, he listens, but the information conveys nothing to him unless he has tasted it himself. Our ability to understand a faith, and offer a testimony for or against it, comes only after we experience the contents of that faith in the course of our life. Such experience is subjective and our credentials grow with deeper and deeper knowledge. Only then can we have what can be called a conviction, which will be the rocky basis for all our future thought and action.

When we rely on the credentials and testimony of others, however learned, wise and respectable they may be, we will find it difficult to establish our own faith, except as a matter of courtesy or duty, and we will always have some doubt. It is impossible to cultivate faith in the presence of doubt.

**Rabindranath Tagore** said, “Faith is the bird that sings when the dawn is still dark”. Darkness will disappear in the face of light. Even so, with concerted action, faith will soon take charge. No one can compel you to have this faith. Like love, faith cannot be enforced. When you force love, you create resistance and even hate. Trying to compel faith on another will only promote doubt and disbelief. If you are not ready, no amount of compelling will help you to see the light. But, if you are ready and are determined to start as a pilgrim, it means that faith has already taken charge of you. Religious pursuits without faith will be an egotistic exercise of one’s power and position. It is tragically true that much of our religious pursuits is vanity-driven and will have no ultimate validity.

The true path of wisdom, as Petrus in “The Pilgrimage” remarks, must first involve agape, that is love, and the path must be such as can be followed by anyone, for it to have practical application.

All religions point to a Supreme Being, but comprehensive understanding, even in the first instance, is a very difficult thing indeed. That is why some of the religions have encouraged the devotees to get attached to a personal god. This helps contemplation, in developing a devotional, prayerful and worshipful
Religion - A Milestone or a Millstone?

mood. This encourages detachment from worldly affairs and acts as a signpost to continue the pilgrimage on the road ahead. A personal god notwithstanding, religion provides succour and consolation, instills some courage and optimism in the minds of the devotees. True devotion to a personal god helps the seeker to perceive beyond the narrow confines of his mind, to restrain his temper and to meet worldly situations dispassionately. Worship of a personal god is man’s private choice and, perhaps, at times, he needs it more than wealth, prestige and even family. Moreover, the way is open for the devotee to promote his inner self and to free himself from the ideological disputes of the religions.

At the same time, intense devotion to a chosen deity may also prove to be addictive. That is, it may be an obstacle to seeing God as one God, in a larger perspective, and deprive the person of an opportunity to conceive of a cosmic vision of one man, one God and one cosmos. Therefore, the devotee must also train himself to balance the intensity of his faith with considerations for other people’s attachments, their own gods or religions.

A true and sincere devotee who looks at other religions as his own, and other people as his kith and kin, can provide an ennobling influence in all his social contacts. On the other hand, blind adherence, with an insufficient appreciation of the true significance of the precepts of his religion, can be self-destruction. The person can easily damage the spirit of his religion and can endanger the structure of inter-religious peace. He can even become a cause for violence by raising religious debates. In course of time, such persons, by locking themselves in the nests of their religion, think that nothing else exists and turn ‘fundamentalist’. Such persons become vulnerable to the unscrupulous exploitation of their leaders who amass power and use it to promote hatred and violence on a global scale. Religion and politics get mixed up, and minor, local religious disputes explode into huge conflagrations. The innocent people, not in any way connected with the happenings, become victims, sacrificial offerings at the altar of religious inhumanity.

Let us admit that religious faith is still not an absolute passion. Nor is it a delusion which people cannot help getting into because they lack the brain or the education to disprove tenets and creeds.
People have the choice to believe what cannot be rationally proved one way or the other. They need some larger mythical dimension in their lives. Today, people consciously want to get rid of religion as they progress in their material life. At the same time, they cannot help telling their stories to others, so as to convince themselves that they are in search of a larger meaning of life. It goes without saying that it is difficult to find peace or contentment in atheistic or agnostic ways of life without symbols, icons and community bondages.

What kind of religion will it be that will give lasting peace? Why do we need to ask this question at all? The fact that we do so universally makes me feel that we are so attached to our particular faith that we think that other faiths have very little to convey to humanity. We need to understand that all religions have something to offer and the founders and the sages of religions chose the right time and place to communicate their wisdom, to suit the local needs of the community that they lived with. Religions were ‘localised’ that way, but it is fascinating to see that they all seek to convey the same message of simple life, high thinking, love and friendship, avoidance of pride and hatred. It is sad to think that we still project our differences rather than absorb the best from all the holy teachings.

But, if you say that it is natural human tendency we all must know that human imperfections are gross and man has a long way to go. There are, still, rays of hope. Man can assert his humanness, even when he is a strict adherent of a particular religion. And the best in man, comes out when he is faced with disaster, sorrow or suffering; kindness, generosity, sacrifice, acceptance of pain, helping others to ease their pain are all parts of man, as old as his darker self, and much more spontaneously forthcoming.

Sometime ago, at Oak Creek, Wisconsin, six Sikh worshippers in a Sikh temple were shot down by a white supremacist in a sudden outrage. The assassin was also shot down by a policeman. The tragedy was sudden, as most of the members of the Sikh community had gathered at a Sunday morning worship. The whole American nation condemned the dastardly crime. On Tuesday, when the Sikhs turned out in good number for a candle light vigil, they were surprised to see a large number of white and black Americans joining the prayer. They had come to accept their moral responsibility for the killing by a white fanatic. As they joined the
gathering, what moved them was the willingness and readiness of the Sikh community to forgive the man who committed the crime and the sincerity of the Sikhs to emphasise love and forgiveness over violence. The town’s police chief, John Rowards, who was among them spoke from his heart:

“In twenty eight years of law enforcement, I have seen a lot of hate. I have seen a lot of revenge. I have seen a lot of anger. What I saw particularly from the Sikh community this week was compassion, concern, support. What I did not see was hate, what I did not see was revenge. I did not see any of that. In law enforcement that is something unusual to not see that reaction to something like this. I want you all to understand how unique that is. It surprised everyone when they were victims of someone so full of hatred. Because of their reaction, saying that they would like to forgive and move on, I think that is quite the attitude to hear after what just happened”. (Courtesy: The Hindu).

I am sure that you will appreciate that the Sikh community rose to the noblest level by its acceptance of the tragedy, without any hatred, through forgiveness. This could, most likely, have been due to years of schooling in religion.

I have seen, heard, celebrated and meditated upon religion and I move on.

B. DISCUSSION

* * * *
A Pilgrim's Progress
A. INTRODUCTION

So everyone says life is a journey. It is true that we keep moving from minute to minute, hour to hour, day to day, year to year. We also do not realise that time has flown in the wink of an eye, before we go past our middle age, and get some leisure to look back. Many of us are so stressed that we want to keep pushing to make money, to gain some power, position or authority. When we take a breather, it is not to contemplate on what has gone by, to seek some deeper understanding of the events and get some peace thereby, but to gloat over our successes and to get ready to march over the hapless bodies of our enemies, whom we have disliked and despised, simply because we could not stand competition or opposition.

This is not to deny that there are many people who seem to know the relevance of time and have a glimpse of an idea of the meaning of life’s passage. Perhaps, it is not difficult to comprehend that life is a journey. We are aware of our own growth from childhood to adulthood and old age. We are past our prime even before we could experience it fully. The scientists keep telling us that every cell in our body dies after a fixed period of time and is promptly replaced. Some cells, specially the neuron cells, do not get replaced at all. Once dead, they are gone forever. We grey, become bald, lose our teeth, suffer from poor vision and become hard of hearing. Our body and mental faculties decline to the stage at which we need other people’s help. And then, the hits and misses of life quicken the pace of life’s journey to its predetermined destination.

However, it is somewhat more difficult to understand or accept that there is meaning to all these passages.

An affluent friend once spoke to me about himself. We were traveling in his latest model plush sedan.
“I’m happy with what I have”, he said, “I’m doing well in my business. I have a loving wife. Adorable children. I give them a holiday abroad every year. I have no problems at home. I am a good Christian. I attend the church on Sundays and mix with the crowd. I give to charity. I’m happy in every way. What more do I want?”

Today, many people, in particular, the younger generation of men and women, speak the same language. They have specialist education and technical skills, optimism and dynamism. They earn money and the markets feed them with an ever-increasing variety of goods and services that stimulate their desire to ask for more. To them, neither time nor its passage counts. They are not going to grow into old age when they will ruminate over their losses and disappointments. Human relationships are but playthings that are there for them to play with as long as their mind is in it. Perhaps more than the philosophers, they know that the scenario changes fast and it is best to make hay while the sun shines. They are mostly not god-minded or are inclined to put themselves on the moral plane, but they are religious in the sense that they are capable of pursuing their goals with single-minded devotion.

May be you say that I am exaggerating, that I am grumbling over the glittering lives and fortunes of these people, a lifestyle that I could not have dreamt of in my days. May be you are correct, but I cannot help the feeling that the worlds are rapidly falling apart. The worlds are travelling with lightning speed toward another galaxy and people will have to find their own logic and reason for their new existence. Aldous Huxley’s “Brave New World” seems old-fashioned by comparison, because it still has some moral basis.

But, we still have to consider the question of the meaning of life’s passages.

Even as the affluent are celebrating the glory of their living, problems will keep creeping into the marrow of their bones, unknown and unannounced. On the other side of the coin, hundreds of thousands of people all over the world will have different stories to tell. Their grinding poverty, ill-health, and lack of contentment, tend to manifest in hatred and spite, against the affluent in particular and the social structure in general, but their anger is stifled and suppressed by the very system against which they are emotionally in
revolt. When a family comes to me, crying in agony, stating that their land and hut have been forcibly taken by unruly elements, backed by power and party, I feel helpless and can only share their grief in silence. When the rains fail and the farms are not cultivable because the waters due to them have been dammed up in the upper reaches, and there is a total lack of human consideration, I know that despair will drive farmers to commit suicide. My head hangs in shame when I ask myself, “Why this?”

When my wife died of cancer at an early age, bearing the pain and suffering with a smile and never asking the question, ‘Why Me’, I used to weep in the depths of my heart and ask the same question.

Personal suffering of any kind is a terrible experience. It is unfair to throw the karma wheel at people as an explanation for their suffering. Likewise, it will be cruel to talk to them about the path, the goal, the pilgrimages, eternity and so on. When I read Karl Marx at college, I was mad with excitement. When Karl Marx began to rule, I thought total brotherhood would prevail, that there would be seasonal rains, no earthquakes, no tsunamis or famines. How silly of me! I started sharing the Marxist platform with other speakers and I found they knew nothing except to express vicious vituperative. I was appalled at their ignorance of the conditions of ordinary people. In fact, I knew much better than they, because I lived in slum-like conditions. Not Marx, but the people who professed him disappointed me deeply. Besides, Marx did not anticipate that capitalism was a tricky baby. It attracts, grows into you, becomes part and parcel of yourself and then, consumes you. There is no rational explanation for man’s attachment to the so-called economic freedom, in spite of the hard reality that it dumps him into the dark abyss in periodical cycles of ruin and disaster. Sadly, it is irrationality that is the governing feature of all our life - personal, social, political and religious.

When I was a college Marxist, I, once, took a small procession of residents, from a colony in proximity to where I lived, asking for restoration of drinking water connection to that colony. I found from a good friend that the connection had been cut, without authorisation, to provide extra water supply to a well-to-do man living close by. I was not sure how the Commissioner of the Corporation would respond to group pressure. Surprisingly, the benign, sweet-smiling
old man received us with kindness, inquired about our problem and on hearing the details, gave immediate instructions to restore the connection. He turned to me and said:

“You look to be a bright young man. I see you wear a Marxist badge. Don’t get involved in politics. You’ll have to go far, probably you’ll occupy this chair one day!” A fine man! In his small physical frame, he had collected so much wisdom!

Very soon, I became a bureaucrat myself and found the going extremely difficult. Nothing could be done. Nothing was possible. Many vague ideas could be floated, but none grounded to see the reality of action.

I am still on the question of the meaning of the pilgrim’s progress.

Alexander the Great was on his way to India overpowered by ambition to conquer that country. He had heard of a strange man who lived by the side of a river. He was a legendary figure, who wore no clothes, seldom spoke and behaved like a madman. Everyone acknowledged him to be the greatest mystic of the age. Alexander went to meet him to get his blessings for the mission. The name of that mystic was Diogenes.

Diogenes asked Alexander, “You are trying to conquer the whole world. What about you? When will you have the time to conquer yourself?”

“I cannot say that I am certain about the next moment”, said Alexander, “but I promise you that when I have conquered the world, I would like to rest and relax like you”.

Diogenes was stretched full length on his back on the river bank, a picture of perfect serenity. He listened and laughed loudly. The mighty Emperor was offended.

“Why do you laugh?” he asked.

“It’s very simple”, Diogenes said, “If it is rest and relaxation that you finally aspire for, you can have it straightaway without having to conquer the world! And nothing prevents you. The river is large. The riverside is spacious. So rest and relax now – or never!”

You have arrived before you made the journey.
Rest, relaxation, recreation – is this the meaning of life’s journey?

A journey not for the conquest of a country, but a journey for learning, purification of the mind, was the one undertaken by the Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang, the legendary Buddhist monk, who travelled from China to India, thousands of miles, in the most unfavourable and hostile conditions. His goal was to study under the Buddhist masters, read as many texts as possible, translate them into Chinese and to present them to the Chinese Emperor – above all, to live and mix and learn from other Buddhist monks from all over the world at the fabulous University of Nalanda. This monk had an insight about his vocation at an early age of thirteen and worked unceasingly to realise it before his death at the age of sixty eight years. During his entire life, he pursued with devotion, and single-minded concentration, the task of propagating Buddhism. From the age of thirty, he journeyed for almost sixteen years in strange lands, exposing himself to endless perils of all kinds, on icy mountains and burning deserts where his only guides were the bones of travellers who had died. He struggled through inaccessible mountains, where for many weeks he had to wade through perpetual stones, over precipices, impetuous rivers, facing the attacks of covetous robbers. Nothing could divert his attention from the object of his mission. It was truly a historic journey that contributed to the astonishing achievement of a goal that took a religion to a whole new world. It was a spiritual journey. The Chinese monk was driven by a powerful inner urge that took him beyond himself, gave him energy, transcending the will or the capacities of ordinary mortal beings.

Indian sub-continent saw a traveller who rose to such heights of spiritual insights that the world continues to respect him as one of the most intuitive philosophers of all time. That is Sankara, the teacher of the Advaitic principle of the Sanatana religion of India, said to have lived in the 8th Century AD (dates widely differ). Sankara assumed monkhood at a tender age, understood the inner meaning of the Vedic texts more sharply than others did and established a sequential understanding of the world, the soul and God or the Supreme, in such a way that an intelligent perceiver would see the meaning of it all clearly, not through learning and erudition, but by a simple clearance of all kinds of ignorance and misconceptions about the world, life and the absolute Truth. Though
his teachings were somewhat intellectual and abstract and beyond the appreciation of an ordinary devotee, Sankara’s heart of gold and dynamism in action and propagation, etched his name in the annals of all global philosophies. More than that, Sankara was a restless traveler. He walked from the land’s end to the icy heights of the Himalayas two times or more, meeting people, visiting holy shrines and the sacred rivers, propagating his convictions in simple language, composing numerous devotional poems of rare sublimity, all with the avowed aim of inculcating the habit of faith and conviction of one’s own divinity. Known as the Path of Knowledge, Sankara’s ways of looking at the world, spirit and God, derived from the well-known scriptures, did to some extent, displace the ritualistic procedures for pleasing the gods and, certainly, helped intending seekers to look beyond their narrow selves, paving the way for a better understanding about the life of purity, humility and constant self-inquiry, to eliminate one’s own faults.

An arduous mountain trek to heights of rarified purity. Something tells me I will not be upto that task!

An inner urge it was, again, that caused Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, a barrister from high-living England, to submit himself to the pains of the chains of a foreign power. He chose to experience personally the chill penury of the vast masses of the Indian people. He shed all hypocrisies, including western clothes and launched on a historic fight to free the people from the foreign yoke with a strange weapon – unknown to history – the weapon of Ahimsa. He demonstrated that non-violence was a power far superior to all other kinds of resistance and open war, in order to liberate a country from the clutches of a foreign power that gloated that the sun would never set on its empire. A frail man, Gandhiji walked over long distances, through the length and breadth of the country, so that he might personally know how much centuries of serfdom had demoralised the people. As he walked, his powerful spiritual energy enveloped the whole nation, and for the first time in history, Indian people had a vision of a goal of freedom that had as much spiritual content as it was political. Spirit it was that moved the Buddhist monk from China as well as Gandhiji and to lose that spirit that takes a man beyond himself, that makes him see other human beings just as he would like to look at himself, will be suicidal indeed.
I have not yet grappled with the problem of meaning in my life. An alarm bell rings in my mind and says that by procrastinating, I am committing a sin. When I want to have a goal, I must know what it means.

**J. Krishnamurthy**’s unconventional thoughts shook me a little. In his talks, “**What Are You Doing with Your Life?**” he says:

“Our difficulty is that since our life is empty, we want to find some purpose to life and strive for it. Such a purpose of life can only be a mere intellection, without any reality. When the purpose of life is pursued by a stupid, dull mind, by an empty heart, that purpose will also be empty. Therefore, our purpose is how to make life rich, not with money and all the rest of it, but inwardly rich”.

“When you are seeking a purpose of life, you are really escaping, notwithstanding what life really is. Life is action in relationship. When I do not understand relationship or when relationship is confused, then I seek a fuller meaning. Why are our lives so empty? Why are we so lonely, so frustrated? Because we have never looked into ourselves and understood fully and completely. We seek to run away from ourselves and that is why we seek a purpose away from relationship. If we begin to understand action, which is relationship with people, we will find that the relationship itself brings its own reward”.

Jiddu’s point about action and relationship is no doubt important, just now, in this age. There was a time when relationships were normal, natural and had some sanctity. People respected relationships for their own sake. Today’s relationships may be more spontaneous and adaptive, but the fact that they are mainly instinctive, expectant and self-oriented, makes them vulnerable, open to more emotional pressures. There is abundant joy in relationship if and when it is properly framed. Jiddu calls it action and equates it with relationship. This does not refer to action performed as duty; it refers to action that arises from an innate understanding of kinship by which we are all connected to one another, which makes us respond spontaneously to the needs of other people.

Are we now expecting an era of truthful relationships, that Jiddu envisages, to happen? I would say that this is an age of crisis in
relationships. This crisis is fuelled by an atmosphere of violence, mental and physical, engendered by pride, hatred, jealousy, parochialism, narrow-mindedness, fundamentalism and other forces. The sunshine of love, compassion, friendship, brotherhood and sacrifice, appear chimerical. What meaning do I find for life here? In my heart, the question comes up again and again; if purpose, goal and the journey have their value in the scheme of life, I must know the meaning of it all. I must comprehend the meaning of my very existence.

During the Second World War, Victor Frankl, a medical practitioner with a background in psychology, was incarcerated in the German concentration camp. He awaited his death every day through bitter winters. When he thought that his day of extermination had arrived, something miraculous happened. His camp supervisor, a hated German, fell seriously ill. Victor got the opportunity to treat him successfully. The grateful supervisor helped him to escape and Victor settled down to his professional life and became a very flourishing psychotherapist in Vienna. His profound finding was that all life had meaning and that the meaning was sacred and it was absolutely necessary to intuitively understand the meaning of one’s own life. Each life is different and so is its meaning. When the meaning dawns on one’s consciousness, the goal, would present itself before the mind’s eye, and the journey would begin spontaneously. Some of the ideas, as recorded in his famous book “Man’s Search for Meaning” are worth quoting:

“Man’s search for meaning is a primary motivation and not a secondary rationalisation. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own will to meaning”.

To put the question in general terms will be comparable to the question put by a chess champion:

“Tell me, Master, what is the best move in the world?”

“There simply is no best or even a good move apart from the particular situation in a game. Similarly, one should not search for an abstract meaning of life. Everyone has his own specific vocation or mission in life to carry out a concrete assignment
which demands fulfillment. Everyone’s task is as unique as is his specific opportunity to implement it”.

“As each situation in life represents a challenge to man and presents a problem for him to solve, the question of meaning of life may actually be reversed. Ultimately man should not ask what the meaning of life is, but rather he must recognise that it is he who is actually asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life and he can only answer by answering for his own life. To life, he can only respond, by being responsible”.

“In other words, live as if you were already living for the second time, as if you had acted the first time as wrongly as you are about to act now!”.

Nothing more one could ask for to stimulate a sense of reasonableness and responsibility.

Victor Frankl continues:

“By declaring that man is responsible and must actualize the potential meaning of his life, I wish to stress that the true meaning of life is to be discovered in the world rather than within man in his own psyche as if it was a closed system. I have termed this constitutive characteristic ‘the self-transcendence of human existence’. It denotes the fact that every human being always points and is directed to something or someone, other than himself – be it a meaning to fulfill or another human being to encounter. The more one forgets himself by giving himself a cause to serve, or another person to love, the more human he is, and the more he actualizes himself”.

We need to ponder over these passages in order to have a clearer conception of our own meaning. There is meaning which is the inherent quality of everyone’s life, which everyone must pursue for his own fulfillment. This meaning has to be understood in terms of the world and the relationships. If your care to deepen the understanding, the inherent humanness will reveal itself, which will help you to lead a fuller life.

Victor Frankl’s life in the German concentration camp and his day-to-day survival gave him his philosophy that life had reserved
something for him to live for and accomplish. Every man has a story of his life. Some stories are more inspiring than others. They help us to clear our muddy disposition and sharpen our vision and take us nearer to the feeling of Love, Beauty and Truth.

Victor Frankl spoke of meaning. I read the book at a time when I was struggling to find all about it. It was vague and far from my everyday life. For many years, the going was good and I could spend much time in the free-floating cosmos of the intellect, debating if there was God, any meaning in the cosmos and purpose in the soul. The giant wheel of intellectual grinding kept going up and down, from dizzy heights to bottomless pits. Ask me if such airy flights taught me to relate to myself and I would say that the answer is a big “No”. I wanted to be part of life, its indivisible unit, but the more I saw things around me, the farther I was inclined to go. While I was attached to the worldly outwardness, I was getting more and more isolated from it. I approached religion and philosophy for a closer understanding of myself. But, as Victor Frankl would say, that was a wrong approach. I was approaching the problem from the wrong end. That was no way of finding the meaning of my life.

Religion and philosophy, I thought, might help me find some meaning. Men of religion spoke of the duties that needed to be performed for peace in life and liberation afterwards. I shall revert to a little more of these later. Attractive enough, but they left me cold, because, deep in my heart I was feeling that the meaning of life ought to be more concrete, more specific to me. Philosophers live in a world of their own. They say that a philosophical outlook is a prime requisite for a reasoned and peaceful life, but the philosophers themselves are caught in a web of abstract thinking that is, no doubt, a tribute to their high intellectualism, but a poor consolation for the ordinary man struggling with life’s limitless conundrums. Philosophers’ search for the Truth is understandable, but their logical rigidities get them stuck at each step.

They speak of ‘Poorna’, ‘fullness’, which is total. You can cut a piece out of it, it will still remain Poorna, fullness. A scientist-friend once told me:

“Take a sphere. That is fullness. But, it also has emptiness. Emptiness is the other side of fullness!”
This is strange, but I thought so, too! The *Sanatana Dharma* of the Hindus speaks of the ‘Absolute’ as ‘Fullness’. The Buddha, who strove to question it, projected emptiness of the mind as karma-free existence! This rival presentation is not merely a point of dispute. It is an invitation to look at the potential for fullness and emptiness of the human mind at the same time. These are not mere view points. Experience is the basis of both. Both are steeped in mystery and it is the unraveling of this mystery that could be the final challenge of the mind.

Once I went to Mussoorie, my favourite Himalayan hill-resort. The Creator has spread enchanting beauty across the skies, over the mountains and valleys, snows and water, waterfalls and streams. Profound silence reigned upon the earth. I could hear my blood coursing through the veins at the extremity. Thoughts had come to a standstill. In the total peace, I could feel an emptiness, a nothingness, ‘*Sunya’*. I recollect the passages in Gao Xingjian’s “Soul Mountain”:

“There are no miracles. God is saying this to an insatiable human being – me”.

“Then what else is there to seek”, I ask.

All around is silence. Snow is falling endlessly. I am surprised by this tranquility.

“Is it peaceful like this?”

“And there is no joy. Joy is related to anxiety”.

Snow is falling.

“I don’t know where I am at this moment, I don’t know where this Realm of Heaven comes from. I look around”.

“I don’t know that I don’t understand anything and still think I know everything”.

“Things just happen behind me and there is always a mysterious eye. So it is best for me just to pretend that I understand, even if I don’t”.

“While pretending to understand, I still don’t understand. The fact of the matter is that I comprehend nothing. I understand nothing!”

“That’s how it is!”
I can say this of myself. I am the hero of “Soul Mountain”. I know nothing and understand nothing and still pretend that I know everything. I can express the deepest emotion with the least feeling in the heart. Thin strands of piecemeal information would suffice to make me look and talk like a scholar. I am a godly person with no faith in sight. You can know me to be a man of pretences. A life of pretences is an empty life. I realise this and feel abysmally low at times. I know I have to start from nothingness. Of this much I am sure, I do not want to go back there.

I have walked much distance under the burning sun and scalded my skin. I have struggled through floods in stormy nights. I want to close my umbrella, sit easy on a large chair and contemplate. A journey from the starting point of nothingness is challenging. The feeling that you are nothing, is the right place to start from. Everybody, everything finally is nothing. An hour past is gone for ever. You cannot step into the same river twice, said Heraclites. That part of the river is gone forever. The ephemeral, the impermanent, the inconstant are all words. The heart must capture their essence. Then, the meaning hits you like a bolt from the blue.

History is known for its propensity for diversity – of cultures, languages, religion, literature, mythology, human thoughts and ways of life. It is good to jump into the river, fall in line and sail along. If you are alone, you will have to chart a path of your own. Difficult, but not impossible. Just think of the meaning.

My English Professor used to tell me to look into the dictionary always to find the correct meaning of the word. I open the pages of Oxford Dictionary and search for the meaning of ‘Meaning’. Among other things, it says: ‘Significance, Importance’! How fantastic! Life is significant, important. Let us see what we have done about it!

B. DISCUSSION

* * * *
A. INTRODUCTION

I am back on the wide, long highway. I have friends now. They are walking with me on pairs of old, damaged chappals, with a canvas bag containing one set of dress for a change and some rudimentary toilet accessories. Like me, they don’t have good eyesight and we walk slowly and that is fun, because we are able to enjoy everything at close quarters.

On our left, we see palatial mansions built in gorgeous style, in the centre of huge compounds surrounded by high security walls. They are the abodes of spiritual masters, who teach their followers the tricks of living and dying happily. From one of the mansions comes the voice of a spiritual master relayed aloud through the speakers installed outside, alongside the road.

“If you see the ego, kill him on the road”.

A friend’s spirit rose up sky-high. “Where is the Ego? Who is he?” he asked menacingly.

I took his hand and together we walked towards the mansion from where the booming voice of the spiritual master came thundering through the speakers. I stopped after a few steps and I pointed to the imposing dais within the compound, as if that answered his question. He understood. A few minutes later a Benz car glided past the gates, followed by a dozen other Benz cars.

I said, “We do not have to kill anything or anybody. Let’s proceed”.

We walked a whole day until we reached a heavenly city of skyscrapers, wide avenues, parks, superb bridges upon bridges and glittering shopping arcades. My friends, as I told you, were ordinary people who really thought they had reached Indraloka. I assured
them that we were on terra firma and such sights were possible in
the world of the new, rich and affluent. We stopped in front of a
thirty storey building and asked one of the army of security guards
as to whom the building belonged. Not that we were interested in
buying up the building, or in dynamiting it because the owner had
done some wrong to us in some previous birth. It was just curiosity.
That was all. The guard, a pan-chewing, toothless, middle-aged
man came out with many secrets in return for a ten-rupee note.

The building was the residential mansion of some leading
industrialist. He lived there with all his kith and kin. Some more had
been conceived and many more yet to be conceived. The
industrialist had a temple where he worshipped daily, a swimming
pool and any number of facilities that would make his guests happy.
He had parties everyday where dozens of the elite men and women
joined and stayed till late at night. All of them were kind people and
gave the guards bunches of notes. The owner was a generous man
who paid the staff handsomely for keeping all his transactions
secret.

“He is the most powerful man in the country!” the guest said.

“How”? I asked him.

“He could buy all the officers, ministers and the whole country.
He has so much money”.

Suddenly all the security men became totally alert. A huge Rolls
Royce rolled by and stopped in front of the gate. A big man,
immaculately dressed, his eyes covered with some costly cooling
glasses, got out. He noticed gardeners in uniform watering the
plants. He went towards one of them and slapped him heavily on his
cheeks.

“Next time I see a plant wither like this, I’ll have you in my
chambers”, he said and left.

Gas chambers? No wonder, he was reputed to be paying them
well.

The gardener wiped his cheek, looked at the passing car
contemptuously and was heard to remark, ‘Fool’.

I didn’t know whose ego was bigger.
He Follows Me in the Silent Dark

My friends, as I said, were simple people. All of us were walking along life’s highway with some detachment. We owned no cars that flew above the surface and we had no business that had to be completed on an urgent basis. Sometime ago, I read John Bunyan’s “The Pilgrim’s Progress”. I liked the prose narrative. I admired the genuineness of the author who was a pastor. I could appreciate his commitment to his Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings and the biblical essence which he had tried to distill in his novel. The chief character, Christian, was determined to find heavenly bliss through the teachings of Jesus Christ; his wife Christiana was equally devoted to following her husband’s path. Christian had friends like Prudence, Charity, Faithful, Ignorance, Hopeful, Talkative, Formalist and Hypocrisy. Funny names! The names indicated the way they talked and behaved. Through them, sins and virtues were paraded before Christian. Thoughtful.

Till some years ago, we gave our children traditional names. The many names of God became the names of our children too. Today, the naming has become modern. Names are picked from the ‘Book of Names’. They should be high-sounding, unintelligible and difficult to pronounce. People name their children and their pets the same way. This shows their concern for the welfare of the animals. Recently, I read that a parrot could lisp names in seven languages. We should not be surprised if prospective parents queue before the parrot for universal names! The system of naming children based on certain numbers related to their birth is also quite popular, but the names, in many cases, make no sense.

Why all this fuss about naming? Because, I want to be I. My ego must be grown and nourished from my childhood and it must be known by a name and a form.

“Our spiritual masters carry impressive names. Will they have large-sized egos also?”, a friend was trying to drag me into controversies and I decided to stay away.

“Why bother?” I said, “Our names are with us. They go in front, we follow. Miles ahead someone notices you and identifies you by your name”.

“We agree”, my friends said, “what has that got to do with the ego?”
“You know Rabindranath Tagore?” I asked. They nodded.

“In one of his poems, he says:
‘I came out alone, on my way to my tryst
But who is this that follows me in the silent dark?
I move aside to avoid his presence, but I escape him not
He adds his loud voice to every word I utter
He is my own little self
My lord, he knows no shame
But I am ashamed to come to thy door in his company’.

“There are two people living inside of us. The first person you can call the ego. This person always wants to be right. He believes that he is distinct from everyone else and that he is competing with all others. He feels that his very existence depends on being better than everyone else. He strives for expensive things and more expensive things. He feels best when he is able to defeat someone else and he evaluates his wants as a person on the basis of how he stands up to all those he so desperately wants to conquer. If he is number one, this is his dream come true”.

My friends listen and I keep talking.

“Ego not only loves to win, he needs it desperately and he is always in a state of striving and straining. He wallows in his own achievements, counts his rewards, awards and the Padma titles, and the honorary doctorates. Ego wants the nicest cars, fanciest clothes, finest foods, very special drugs, and all manners of pleasures. When he is tired of them, he begins to make brand new demands. Ego is difficult to satisfy so long as there is someone to whom he should feel superior. Sometimes you feel that there is a lot of nonsense about what you think or how you act. You must know that your ego is that part of you that creates this nonsense. Though the ego is a level of consciousness that includes much of what we think of ourselves, including our bodies and our personalities, the ego is convinced that it is me, you, whole of me or you. He can misinterpret anything he chances to come across and is mainly responsible for our self-defeating behaviours and beliefs. He convinces us that he can make us safe and happy, but never does. He wants to be always right, wants to have the last word and always feels threatened. His mode of communication is attack and defence
but he can cleverly disguise them with elaborate reasoning and justification. He denies, lies, tricks, enforces, hurts, blames, hates and all the while he will give you the impression that he is acting in your best interest. He strives, but never arrives”.

“Spiritual masters say that we should learn to get the better of our ego in order to progress towards higher consciousness. Psychologists tell us that ego is a powerful energy and man does not understand this, and the wrong application of this energy disorients our perception, landing us in serious trouble in personal life and social relationships. The New Age Spiritualists say that the ego is not a bad thing in itself, but our wrong understanding of it drives it along shaky paths. The philosopher wants to know where the ego is and says that the ‘issues’ that motivate man are far more relevant and crucial than the ego”.

“Every religion has touched upon the subject of ego and wants us to throw cold water on the smouldering cauldron before we end up in uncontrolled conflagration. Religious leaders exhort us to kill the ego and destroy it and their very exhortation carries the power of their ego in full strength”.

“If you see the Buddha on the road, kill him’ is a well-known Zen saying. That is, if you are on the spiritual path, according to the prescriptions of the Zen, somewhere along the road, you feel you have achieved something by way of knowledge or experience, it means, your ego is active and you need to put it down, then and there, vigorously. A funny tale is told of a ninth century Zen Master Tanasia who used to warm his bare backsides at a fire that he made with the wooden image of the Buddha. In the Zen traditions, symbols of every kind are to be ruthlessly destroyed, particularly those that kindled one’s ego”.

My friends listen intently. One of them asks. “What is ego? You have not told us”.

I tell them of a conversation I had heard in a temple where a wealthy politician had come to participate in a big ceremonial bathing ritual to the main deity. It was in the morning and there were just a few devotees, though the followers of the politician had come in good strength. The politician was celebrating his success in the elections with that thanksgiving ritual. He noticed that the crowd was
sparse. He turned to one of his followers and wanted to know about the population of the locality surrounding the temple.

The man did not know. He blurted out, “Five lakhs!”

The wealthy worshipper looked at him sternly.

“Do you mean to say that you could not have got five hundred people to witness this ritual that I am performing?”

We may be nearer the definition of Ego. Still a long way to go!

I continue:

“Ego, as everyone knows, has two components – ‘I’ and ‘mine’. All religious texts describe these things in great detail. They want us to give up this ‘I’ sense and ‘mine’ sense”.

“I must, in the first place, know what it is about the ‘I’ sense that I must give up. One day, out of curiosity I decided to count the number of times I used the ‘I’ in my thoughts, in speech or in writing. After sometime, I gave up the attempt, because, I just could not keep count. Then, I tried to observe that ‘I’ in my meditation. I wanted to observe the ‘I’ sense without getting emotionally involved. The more I tried, the more it was there. ‘I’ sense came alive in each breath. Without it, there is nothing else. ‘I’ sense seemed coequal with my very existence”.

“Even the First Born, the Creator, when he came into the world, looked around and saw nothing and said, ‘I am Brahma’ (Aham Brahmasmi), probably to reassure himself (Brahadaranyaka Upanishad). In the process, he set in motion the identification of all living things through name and form”.

“Look at the way the child revels in its name. When a young child learns that a sequence of sounds produced by the parents’ vocal chords is his or her name, the child begins to equate the word, which, in the mind, becomes a thought, with what he or she is. Initially, the child only knows the name. It calls itself by the name. The name is everything. Through the touch of its mother and the sound of its name, the child has encompassed the whole universe. Everything is meant for it. Nothing is outside its realm of appreciation. Everything is the projection or extension of itself. As
the child grows into an adult, the ‘I’ sense, the ‘Ego’ sense and the name and the form reinforce each other, giving a grandiose impression to the person, which is nothing short of delusion”.

“Quite early, the child learns the magic word ‘I’ and equates it with its name. The child also learns to relate and combine all other thoughts with the ‘I’ thought. At the next step, come the thoughts of ‘me’ and ‘mine’. When ‘my’ toy is taken away by my elder brother, there is intense suffering, not because of the intrinsic value of the toy - the child will soon lose interest in it – but because of the thought of ‘mine”’.

“As a child I seem to have exhibited an unusual behaviour in this regard, as my mother recalled to me once. Whenever my father bought a toy for me, I used to give it away to some child that came to play with me. This apparent lack of interest in toys, at so young an age, worried my parents, who did not want to see a child monk in their home. What happened was that all the beneficiaries played with the toys for some time, lost interest and all I needed to do was to pick them and take them back home. That way, I built up a ‘mine of toys’, all ‘mine!’”

“As we grow, the original ‘I’ attracts other thoughts to itself. It becomes identified with the gender, body, possessions, nationality, race, religion, profession and scholarship. Other things which ‘I’ identifies with are the roles - mother, father, husband, wife accumulated knowledge of opinions, attitudes, likes and dislikes, things that happened to ‘one’ in the past, which is memory of thoughts, which further define my sense of self as ‘me’ and ‘my’ story. They are ultimately no more than thoughts, held together by the fact that they are invested with the sense of ‘I’ and ‘me’. It is, therefore, no more than a series of mental constructs. To be more precise, most of the time, it is not ‘you’ who speaks what you say or think, but some aspect of that mental accumulation. Another name for this mental construct is egoic self. To explain further in most cases, when you say ‘I’, it is the ego speaking, not you. It consists of thoughts and emotions, a bundle of memories you identify with as ‘me’. It consists of habitual roles you play without knowing it, of collective identification, such as nationality, religion, caste or political alliance or social contact group”.

He Follows Me in the Silent Dark
“I have a friend, an elderly gentleman. Whenever I asked him how he spent the day, he always said he was extremely busy the whole day. When asked what kept him busy, he would reply, ‘I have been thinking’.”

“Thinking about what?”

“Why, about so many things. You can go on thinking!”

“I do not know how a person can keep thinking the whole day in the sense of promoting logical thinking in a directional and meaningful manner. As for me, I find it difficult to do sustained thinking about an idea and view it from different perspectives. My friend’s thinking must be an incessant stream of mind, of compulsive thinking, most of which is repetitive and pointless where the ‘I’ sense is no different from the thought process”.

“In most cases, we are what our mind says. We call it egoic mind, because there is the sense or the presence of ‘I’ (ego) in every thought, memory, opinion or interpretation, viewpoint or reaction. And our mind is conditioned by the past, our upbringing, culture, family background. Suffice to say, it is these that speak through ‘I’. When you say ‘I’, it is the outward flow of the stream of all these currents, reinforced by emotions. It is this ‘I’ that feeds with a sense of possession, makes you say, ‘my’ and ‘mine’, also with distorted concepts of yourself as better than or not as good as others, as a success or a failure”.

“The content of ego varies from person to person, but in every ego the same structure operates. Egos may appear to differ on the surface but deep down they are all the same. In what way are they the same? They thrive on identification and separation. When you live with the mind-made stuff, comprising of thoughts and emotions, that is the ego, the basis for your identity is precarious, because thoughts and emotions, by their nature, are ephemeral and fleeting. So every ego is continually struggling for survival, trying to protect and enlarge itself. To uphold the ‘I’ thought, it needs the opposite thought of ‘the other’. ‘I’ cannot survive without the ‘other’. The ‘others’ are mainly those whom the ‘I’ sees as rivals, competitors, if not enemies. Even where the ‘I’ looks upon the ‘other’ as a friend, the ground is always slippery. The friendship will last only as long as the ‘I’ feels that its interests are not affected. The ego, that is the
‘I’ consciousness working through the mind, thought and emotion, constantly tries to assert itself by fault finding, complaining, judging, even though, ‘I’ have neither the basis nor the facts nor the authority for complaining or judging”.

“Jesus Christ said: ‘Why do you see the speck that is in your brother’s eye, but do not see the log that is in your eye’? Jesus asked the question more to chide. But, we know the answer. When I criticise or find fault with another, my ego swells, I feel bigger, superior”.

“Complaining is one of ego’s favourite strategies for strengthening itself. Every complaint is a little story that the mind makes up and you completely believe in it. Whether you complain aloud, or only in thought, makes no difference. Quite a few egos thrive on complaining alone. When you are in the grip of such an ego, complaining, especially about other people, is habitual and unconscious; which means that you do not even realise what you are doing. Applying negative mental labels to people, either to their face or when you speak about them to others, is part of this pattern”.

“There are many, easily overlooked forms of ego, that you may observe in other people and more importantly in yourself. For example, you are about to tell someone the news of what happened, like ‘Guess what? You don’t know yet? Let me tell you!’”

“You may be able to experience a momentary sense of superiority, just before conveying the news. It is due to the fact that for a brief moment, there is, in the eyes of ego, an imbalance in your favour as between you and the other person. For that brief moment, you know more than the other person. It is your ego that feels a great satisfaction, even as you feel a stronger sense of the self relative to the other person. Even if he is the President or the Prime Minister, you feel superior for the moment, because you know more. People are addicted to gossip, partly for this reason. In addition, gossiping offers juicy opportunity for malicious criticism or judgement of others without basis and so it strengthens the ego through imagined superiority. Ego can extend its tentacles to all spheres of life including profession, scholarship, social standing”.

“If someone has more, knows more, or can do more, then ‘I’, the ego feels threatened, because the feeling of ‘less’ diminishes its
imagined sense of superiority relative to others. It may then try to restore itself by somehow diminishing, criticising or belittling the value of the other person’s possessions, knowledge or abilities. Or, the ego may shift its strategy and instead of competing with the other person, it will try to enhance its image by associating with the other person, if he is important enough in the eyes of others”.

“If you are famous or important, people want to enhance their identity – their ego image of who they are – through association with you. They themselves may not know that they are not interested in you at all, but merely to strengthen the fictitious sense of their self. The absurd overvaluation of fame is just one of the wrong manifestations of egoic madness. Some famous people fall into this error and identify with the collective fiction, the image that the media have created of them and they delight in seeing themselves as superior to ordinary human beings”.

“Albert Einstein, perhaps the greatest physicist, who ever lived, had never identified with the image, the collective mind, created of him. He remained humble, utterly egoless. In fact, he spoke of a ‘grotesque contradiction between what people consider myself to be, my achievement and the abilities and realities of who I am and what I am capable of’.

“The ego sense rapidly descends into conditional patterns of behaviour between human beings. Your mental concepts – your perceived notions – interact with the other person’s mental concepts. There is no relationship at all. You have a conceptual image of the other person and you interact with the conceptual image which the other person has of you. There is no genuine viewing. The ego relishes this position, because it can enjoy its conceptual superiority”.

My friends are getting disinterested. They expected me to deliver a religious discourse. But, all that I have so far talked about appear to be pure psychology to them, something to do with the mind and behaviour. I try to tell them that I am leading them to religion and God. They look skeptical. No wonder the Buddha confined himself to the mind and carefully shifted God and the soul out of his philosophical perception. But, I have decided to go ahead with the picture that I have been painting.
I am going to great lengths explaining the nature of the Ego. We know, forever, that there is this Ego in every human being and yet do not know its characteristics. We need to know them if we want to learn to live with them – a kind of peaceful coexistence which will help all of us to gain some spiritual heights.

You would have noticed that ego is on guard against any kind of perceived diminishment. When some person blames or criticises me, my ego sees it as diminishing of my ‘self’ importance. My ego will proceed to repair the damage through self justifications, defence or blaming. Whether the other person is right or wrong is irrelevant to my ego. It is more interested in self-preservation than in truth. Anger is one way by which ego seeks to recover its loss of prestige since anger brings about temporary, but huge, ego-inflation. Ego thinks that every step it takes is natural and normal. But, anyone who observes the outburst of anger knows that it is dysfunctional, abnormal behaviour.

Western psychology has studied the ego in some depth. Sigmund Freud first postulated the ‘ego’ when he divided the personality into three major components; the ‘id’ representing our innate biological and instinctive drives, the ‘superego’ representing the consciousness that controls these drives and the ‘ego’ which mediates between the two. The ego is subject to both the conscious and the unconscious, the exterior and the interior.

Jung saw ego as the conscious element that acts as an operating principle, combining inner and outer experience or thoughts and emotions. Anger, self-esteem, reaction, are the kinds of situations to which the ego propels a person, with the energy derived from it.

The Eastern religious psychology has really plunged into the very depths of the mind, not only into its superficial conscious and unconscious layers, but also into its subtle and spiritual connections, linking its evolution in spirit in a succession of lives.

The Buddha went into the very core of the mind and called it as the cause of human suffering and advocated a system of living that will free the mind from the ego which controls the very existence of man, by propelling him to desire objects and relationships. He said that desire was the cause of human suffering and men needed to separate the ego from the desires, to lead a sane living.
A Pilgrim's Progress

It is worthwhile to quote Krishna Srinivasan (“Hindu Spirituality”) in some detail to get a clear idea of the Hindu viewpoint:

“The religious literature of India in effect acclaims with striking unanimity that the actor who dominates the stage of life is a ‘person’, but in the etymological sense of one wearing a mask, a false self. ‘I’ as the person is not the real ‘I’ and much less the immortal spirit which I truly am by essence or affinity, behind the veil of my nature. The ego is the mono-actor in the drama of a life of worldliness, being by definition what exists, solely for itself, even while flinging altruism, what isolates and separates from others, while also, ensconced in a web of relationship. The ‘I’ of ‘I am’ or ‘I do’ is not spirit as such, but misdirected, deflated dynamics of the spirit element in the service of deception. In this deception, ‘I’ identify with my possessions, which, by a right, I claim, belong to me, but not to others. The subject as ‘I’ always seeks and postulates a distinction from others who are the objects. The subject-object split inhibits knowledge from realizing its destined goal of immediacy of truth”.

“The ‘I’ as thus understood is severely castigated by the generality of Indian spiritual traditions, especially in view of the claim that this ‘I’ claims attention for itself as the centre, as if it were the whole universe, enduring one with the imaginary royalty of the world. The real person – the spirit – calm, disinterested and all compassionate is what stands behind the ego, letting itself to be confused . . . .”

The Hindu sages declare that to renounce the ego by tracking it to the most far-reaching sweep is true renunciation and to loosen it from its most insidious claim, is true detachment.

We seem to be reaching a milestone, where we see two things – the ego which is the false self, and a self that rings the bell of truth and stands for everything that can bring about enduring peace and happiness.

It is this that Rabindranath Tagore speaks of in his poem, “Ego”, the ‘one that follows in the silent dark’, ’my own little self’ and the true ‘I’, the pure spirit.
A disciple knocked at the doors of his master’s house.

“Who is it?” replied the voice

“It’s me”, said the disciple.

“Go away”, said the voice, “there is no room for two”.

The disciple thought and came back after sometime and knocked at the door again.

“Who is it?” asked the voice.

“You, yourself”, said the disciple.

“Come in, the place is yours” said the master.

This is a Sufi story. It points to the same lesson – the personal identity and segregation are not conducive to spiritual understanding.

So, inside each of us, there are two persons – the Ego and the Self. We saw that Ego always wants to be right. He thinks that he is separate from everybody else and that he is competing with all others. He loves to win. He wallows in his achievements. He counts his rewards. He wants to be a winner all the time.

The second person is the Self, also called Spirit. He is disinterested in any of the things that Ego wants to pursue. He cares the least about acquiring. He is not interested in being better than anybody else. He does not compare himself to anyone. While Ego wants his House to be famous, the Spirit wants peace in his House.

Our Spirit is our Ego’s direct opposite in many ways. He does not want to be feeling anger, envy, pride, worry or fear. He does not feel threatened in any way, because he is capable of abundant love, compassion and sympathy. He has no interest in who is right and who is wrong. He has no use for conflict. He values peace, love, friendship and forgiveness. He is joyful, generous, content, and always knows our true interests.

We can now try to understand our own spirituality better. To me, spiritual growth or evolution means that we, the human beings, need to grow in our awareness of the spiritual aspect of ourselves. We
need to learn to see its viewpoint and hear its guidance. Then, we will be able to extend its qualities in our lives. This way, our spirit grows, expanding, reaching the spirit of others. Everyday situations and relationships contain plenty of opportunities to open up to our spirit’s guidance. This takes time and we need to be patient. But, our egos are noisy and demanding and obscure all awareness of the essential nature of our spirituality.

So, we need peace, where the ego needs to be quiet. How to be at peace now? By making peace with the present moment. The present moment is the field on which the game of life is played. It cannot happen anywhere or at any other time.

Once you have made peace with the present moment, see what happens. You have become one with that moment. You are not fighting it, feeling separate. Being one with the moment means you are one with life. You then realise that you don’t live your life. Life lives in you. Ego resents the reality of the moment. By being one with life, it is possible for you not to accept the authority of the ego.

Sometimes, we do feel we are free of ego. People who are totally devoted to their work may feel free of ego, while performing their work. They may not know it, but their work has become a spiritual practice. Artists, musicians, doctors, teachers often perform admirably without any self seeking, fully responding to whatever the moment requires of them. They are one with what they do, one with now, one with the people or the task they serve. The influence of such people goes beyond whatever functions they perform. They help others to see their ego in the right perspective. Even people with restless egos do relax, let down their guard and stop playing their fictitious roles.

A powerful spiritual practice is to consciously allow the diminishing of the ego when it happens, without attempting to restore it. Try this experiment. When someone criticises you or blames you or calls you names, instead of immediately retaliating or defending yourself, do nothing. For a few seconds, you may feel uncomfortable. Then you will find that your inner space is enlarging. You have not been diminished at all. In fact, you have expanded. When you no longer retaliate or defend yourself, you have stepped out of your ego-field. You will not feel ‘less’, you will feel ‘more’.
If you are content with being nobody in particular, you align yourself with the powers of the universe. What looks like weakness to the ego is in fact the only true strength.

An ancient Taoist Classic says:

“Instead of trying to be the mountain, be the valley of the universe, so all things will come to you”.

When we are on an ego-trip, we want to be the mountain. We want everybody to look at us in awe and wonder. We are upset and angry when someone tells us in the face that we are not what we claim to be. When we are the valley, all thoughts, feelings and people rush towards us, moved by our humility, which is the opposite of ego.

Deep inside we know we are spiritual beings. Our ego is anxious that we ignore this precious truth. At best, it may allow you to play with your spiritual being but will not agree to its coming to the surface. Training our ego consciously, to understand that there is place for two, is a challenging job, but is not an impossible one. When, during some inspirational moments, the ego gets an opportunity to experience perfect peace or unconditional love, the ego can learn to cultivate the spirit. Therefore, there is no question of killing the ego. It is a matter of grooming it to see a higher path. That is the time when ego looks upon the spirit not as an enemy and slowly moves forward to shake hands with the spirit. It may hasten to keep its own thoughts and feelings at manageable levels. Henceforth you may not hear your ego giving advice, ignoring the higher faculties. There is a mutual consultation which enables the ego to shift gears and move towards a newer world.

This is the transformational stage of the human being when the ego learns to integrate with the spirit. Ego is healthy, not only in a psychological sense, but also in the spiritual sense. A psychologically unhealthy ego ends up in mental depression. A healthy ego is the one whose powers are at full play. But, a spiritually healthy ego is one that integrates with the innate spiritual self and learns to sacrifice itself for the greater good. This ego feels high when being a faithful servant to something bigger and higher than itself. This is the grandest ‘ego trip’ that you can envisage! The marriage of the ego and the spirit has taken place!
To survive in this world we need our personal egos. They are the masters of the material world. However, when they begin to combine with the spiritual powers, they themselves can take us on a path of progress. At this stage, our spiritual intentions, rather than ego, drive us to share in the joys and sorrows of humanity, individually and collectively.

This happened to me. Once, when I was in service, I went to a beautiful place named Cumbum, overlooking the Periyar Lake in the Western Ghats, for an inspection. I reached the place late in the night and stayed in the Government Inspection Bungalow. I was tired and fell asleep. I woke up to a glorious morning and went to the bathroom to wash my face. I stood before what I thought was the wash basin and started brushing my teeth, looking at an old mirror in front and began washing and felt all the water pour down on my legs and feet. I looked at the wash basin and saw that it was all broken. I was seething with anger. I was young and holding a position of some responsibility and had gone to the place for official work, after giving due notice to the field officers. I could not stomach the shabby manner in which a Government building, meant for the VIPs, was maintained.

I sent for the Supervisor. He was an old man, about to retire. He came from some village in the South, but had been in that place for many years. He walked in with assurance, as though nothing had happened.

"Good morning, sir", he said.

"What good morning? Please go and have a look at the wash basin!" My voice was trembling with anger.

He went to the bathroom and glanced at the wash basin. There he stood still for sometime as though lost in contemplation and came out. By that time, I had moved out to the other side of the bungalow. He followed me.

"Sir", he said, I turned around and looked at him, angrier that he had not uttered a word of apology.

"Sir", he said again, "Look at the lake. The lake is full. Rains have been good. Please see the herd of elephants on the other side. They come to the lake regularly. They are a showcase. They
like visitors. They like to be photographed. The big one, the leader is a very responsible chap! He does not tolerate indiscipline. They are all Vinayaka’s *avatar*. You are able to sight them so early in the morning. You are lucky! Elephant sighting is auspicious. You will have many promotions. I will read about them in the newspapers. I am retiring next month”.

“That’s all right. What about the wash basin?” I asked, somewhat subdued, but, not yet able to bear the slighting of a senior officer.

“I am sorry Sir. I installed a new one about a few days ago for your benefit. That one has broken. Poor material. That’s how they place orders. Cheapest rates!”

I could not help laughing. I had lost my cool with a small time official, whose sense of balance was much more than mine. He said something which made me feel that he had learned to handle ego the right way.

“Whenever I have a rift with my wife and for wrong reasons and she is invariably right, I just walk out, come to this place, look at the lake, look at the waters. The elephants are there. I feel small before the grandeur of nature, my ego melts, my anger evaporates, and my mind becomes silent!”

He had said everything about ego. I was moved by what he said.

“You are a philosopher sir”, I said. He smiled.

“When you look up at the clear sky at night, you may realise a truth, utterly simple, extraordinarily profound. You will see stars upon stars, galaxies after galaxies. You may know the names of some of them. You will get interested in the form and the name and the knowledge that goes with it and you will be proud of your competence in identifying and marking them differently. When you gaze at the vast arena of space and the countless heavenly objects, you begin to experience a sense of awe. You may feel deep reverence in the face of an incomprehensible mystery. You are no longer interested in naming. You have become still with the cosmic silence that beckons you to lose sight of all forms and names and fame, including that of yourself, and go beyond, to the root and origin of all forms and names, that is the final answer to all our ego
experiences. Deep in your heart, you hear, ‘Not I, but He’ and your ego too listens and sits quiet at your feet like your beloved pup”.

I turned to the Supervisor who was standing close to a pillar watching the serene lake, a picture of perfect composure.

“When you retire, will you go back to your native place?” I asked him.

“No, Sir”, he replied. “My wife died a few months ago. I have no need to go anywhere. I will settle here”.

“What will you do?” I asked him.

“Sir, I have enough work to do”, he said with some gusto, “all around the lake, there are hundreds of tribal people who are very poor, uneducated, working as coolies in the forests. They fall sick quite often. There is no doctor in the vicinity. I’ll work for their welfare. I will work with the Government officials and see that benefits reach them. I know many of them. Such friendly people. You won’t see the likes of them in the towns, Sir”.

That was a teacher from whom I learned some valuable lessons.

I should now go forward.

B. DISCUSSION

* * * *
A. INTRODUCTION

It was a cold winter evening, when Aswin, Rekha and I drove into Khajuraho, the historic little village and checked into a star hotel. We had gone there from Delhi to see the temples and the monuments. After a good night’s rest, we were up early and after breakfast, were ready for a day-long walk through the temples. The sun rose late and was mild, and the nip in the air made it necessary for us to wear our sweaters. It was delightful weather and the tourists were streaming in through many luxury buses. The tourist guides busied themselves offering their services. We engaged one who, surprisingly, spoke good English and had mastered his lessons very well. He said he knew French and Spanish too. We respected him for his proficiency in the history of the temples, sculptures and carvings and for his fluent exposition.

The exquisite temples at Khajuraho were built by the Chandella Kings. Beginning from the tenth century AD, the Chandella Kings slowly built up their kingdom and Khajuraho became an important centre. By about 950 AD, the most beautiful and imposing treasures such as the temples for Mahadera, Jagadamba, Chitragupta, Visvanatha and other temples had been built. Kings Devavarman and Kritivarman added to the glory of Khajuraho with sculptural embellishments that continue to fascinate the visitors.

The guide was regaling us with Chandella history as we moved from temple to temple. We saw the genius and the magic of the sculptor everywhere. The iconographic detailing of the deities was rich beyond imagination. The battle scenes, marches and the festive processions were so realistic that we felt we were really a part of them. The innumerable depictions of love and passion, pure and holy, seemed to reflect the need for a fulfilling life for a householder, before he embarked on his spiritual quests. The nymphs, celestial beauties, the loving couples, dwarfed demigods and the horned
lions were some of the examples of the finest craftsmanship that I had seen.

I was a little tired and sat on a stone bench and the guide brought me a cup of hot and tasty tea from one of the many shops that had come up opposite the protected area. Aswin was busy taking pictures of the voluptuous couples in many postures. Rekha, standing close to him, was giving him directions on the choice of the figures to be photographed. The couple were enjoying themselves. They were an attractive picture against the landscape of impressive temples that portrayed courtly love, with heavenly flavour as an important step in the path to Eternity.

The day became mildly warm, as the sun rose in the sky. I took off my sweater and moved to a bench under an ancient tree.

Aswin folded up his camera and the couple returned to where I was sitting, flushed with enthusiasm. Aswin sat by my side and started to handle the camera again, while Rekha just sprawled on the smooth, cool grass in front of us.

“A costly camera”, I said.

“It cost eighty thousand bucks!” said Rekha.

“The sculpture of man and woman is pornographic”, said Aswin.

Rekha looked at him sternly and almost shouted, “No, it’s not. It’s divine!”

“It depends on how you look at it”, I said. “It’s neither pornographic nor divine. It’s a natural way of life for man and woman to derive mental satisfaction from each other through bodily contacts. Life’s contentment has to be achieved at various levels. This is one level. Didn’t you see that sculpture portraying amorous play of the couple was almost at the ground level? Then you rise. There’s a time for everything. The sculpture, certainly, ought not to be taken as licentious display. Intimacy and love go together. We have made it a big scientific study today. Without intimacy and love, man’s sense of fulfillment cannot be complete. We used to say, ‘When the stomach is full, the heart is raised to God!’”

“What about sadhus and saints who remain single and lead monastic lives?” asked Aswin.
“It will be interesting to you to know” I replied, “that many of our sages who gave us the Vedas, the Puranas and the like were married and had progeny and that did not deter them from living austere lives which enabled them to go beyond themselves and to let us share in their experiences of the Cosmic Power through their prayers and revelations”.

“At the same time, I must admit”, I continued, “the life of a mendicant was adopted by many from very early times and they were the yogis and the siddhars who walked about the Gangetic plains and moved on to the Himalayas, for yogic communion with the Highest Powers. However, domestic happiness and simple life were the paths which those mystics themselves prescribed for the householders”.

The guide was pressing to take leave of us. It was midday and time to go for lunch. We returned to the hotel after paying a good sum of money to the guide. On the way, Rekha could not resist the temptation of asking about divine love, because, she said, she saw some celestial couples in dalliance in the intricate carvings.

“Our Puranas speak of celestial love”, I said, but celestials are said to be beings of light, and what kind of love could they experience among themselves, I don’t know”. I paused and suddenly recalled some episodes from the Mahabharata.

I said: “In the course of his pilgrimage, Arjuna meets a Naga maiden, Ulipi by name, and this maiden is powerfully attracted by the charms of the warrior and they live together. Arjuna receives her blessings which help him during some difficult circumstances”.

“I will tell you another interesting story from the same Mahabharata”, I said.

“Go ahead, T.V. Sir”, Rekha was enthusiastic.

“When the Pandavas decide to retrieve their Kingdom from the Kauravas, Arjuna goes to Indraloka to get arms from Indra. As you know, Arjuna is said to be son of Indra, born to Kunti when she chanted some mantras. Arjuna is welcomed royally. It’s true heaven. There is singing and dancing. The well-known apsaras including Urvasi are found there enjoying themselves. Urvasi sees Arjuna and falls madly in love with him. She is frustrated when
Arjuna tells the real purpose of his visit, and the austerities he was supposed to observe. Furious and disappointed, Urvasi curses that Arjuna would be a eunuch for the rest of his life. Indra intercedes and reduces the curse to one year. This helps Arjuna during the exile of the Pandavas for one year in exile”.

“Fantastic, incredulous”, said Aswin, “is this the kind of story you have in the epics and the puranas. I’m glad I did not read them”.

“Not always”, I said “and don’t rush to conclusions about what they ultimately teach us”.

Later in the evening, we all met in my room and had some hot soup and appetisers. I went for my tomato juice, while Aswin and Rekha had their favourite hot and sour soup.

“All this about celestial and divine love is childish”, said Aswin, “we need to ask what love and intimacy mean to us, human beings”.

“Good”, said Rekha, “I would add, while love means so much to us, in theory, we do very little in practice”.

“That’s a fine observation, Rekha”, I said.

Chillness increased, as the night advanced, we sat around a single table, wrapped in shawls and pull-overs, and the bearer brought us some tasty menu that Rekha had ordered and I began to talk. I liked to talk if I had interested listeners and Aswin and Rekha were among the best. They were sharp, intent listeners who heard and absorbed everything and were ready to shoot questions in order to clarify their mind. That night I had wonderful possibilities.

“You must have heard about Dr. Dean Ornish. He wrote a book on how to prevent heart disease with proper diet, exercise and peace of mind. The book became a stunning bestseller and millions of people the world over read and reread the book and adopted many of his lifestyle suggestions. It was even claimed that he was one man who contributed most to the reversal of heart disease in America”.

“Now, you will be interested to know that he came out with another book, “Love and Survival”, which, again, became a best seller. Love and intimacy, he says, are certainly the root cause of
health and well-being on the one hand and premature death and disease on the other.

“Were you close with your mother? Were you close with your father?” Harvard students were asked for answers and Dr. Ornish tells us that some thirty five years later, a continuous study showed that one hundred percent of the students who gave ‘No’ as answers to both questions had developed major diseases in midlife, compared to only forty percent who answered ‘Yes’ to both questions”.

“Not that such studies are conclusive”, I said, “but the fact remains that, if we grew up in a family where we weren’t rewarded for learning to be intimate, as we grow, we are more likely to relate to people or choose relationships with people who have the same limited capacity for intimacy as we do”.

“Ask yourself whether you have someone to lean on; someone who feels very close to you; someone to share your feelings with, someone to confide in; someone to hold and comfort you; someone who really appreciates what you do for him or her”.

“The list is long. It’s difficult to comply with”, protested Rekha laughingly.

“I haven’t finished!” I said, “If you became ill, is there someone to drive you to the hospital or engage a taxi or an ambulance to go to the hospital?”

“If you are broke, is there someone who comforts you and possibly arranges some financial help?”

“If you were sick, is there someone who would help take care of your children until you felt better? . . . . . .”

“I can answer all these questions”, jumped Rekha with some excitement. She turned to her husband and was looking at him, speechlessly, lovingly for a few seconds. Aswin looked uneasy, and moved a few feet from his chair and touched Rekha’s fingers softly.

“Anything that promotes feelings of love and intimacy is by itself fulfilling and fills you with happy moments that give strength and endures for a lifetime”, I continued. “ Anything that promotes
isolation, separation, loneliness, hostility, anger, cynicism, despair, alienation and depression and related negative feelings leads to misery and suffering”.

“What is the extent of parental influence here?” asked Aswin.

I could reply that easily. I remembered my parents, particularly my mother. When I was fifteen, I fell seriously ill, was admitted into a common ward in the General Hospital with a diagnosis of kalaazar, a rare disease. It was suffering and misery about which I would not like to think about again. A friendly nurse took charge of me and looked after me. Every day, my mother used to take crowded buses, with a small tiffin box containing some curd rice. She was a frail woman, but with a great strength of mind. She used to sit by the side of my cot and hold my hand for long hours. The nurse would advise her to go home, saying that she would attend on me. My mother would melt in gratitude. My mother’s love and the friendly nurse’s affection put a lot of cheer into me and were mostly responsible for my recovery.

Parents are, easily, the most important source of love, intimacy and social support early in life. Psychotherapists tell us that people, often, develop patterns of relationships as adults that are not very different from how they learned to relate as children. If you grew up in a family where love, nurturing and intimacy were in short supply, then, you are more likely to view your current relationships with suspicion and mistrust. If your family experiences were filled with love and caring, then you are more likely to be open and trusting in your current relationships.

It is particularly difficult for us to develop intimate and loving relationships, if we grew in a family in which intimacy was at a discount because of familial, emotional or physical constraints. The heart, in that case, develops a particularly strong armour to protect and defend itself. But, the heart can also let down its defences and open up in adult life, when there is an assurance of protection from someone else, which is strong, trustworthy and loving.

“We use the expression, ‘opening your heart’, I continued. “It means your will to be open and vulnerable to other persons. Dean Ornish puts this beautifully:
“We can only be intimate to the degree that we are willing to be open and vulnerable. Research workers say that those most in need of the support provided by a good marriage may not benefit from it, because the ability to form close relationships itself may be impaired by earlier adversity. A negative bonding experience with parents, say, may result in the failure to acquire a true sense of self and resilient self-esteem attributes promoting coping in later life”.

“But, Aswin, Rekha, “I said”, it does not have to be that way all the time. Old wounds can heal and disappear. We can consciously take steps to heal the wounds. We can extend a friendly hand and draw it back whenever we meet someone who, we think, has hurt us in some way. Memory’s normal tendency is to fade away, but it is we who keep it above, kindling the embers of thoughts and emotions”.

Aswin and Rekha were listening intently.

“We cannot change what happened to us in our childhood or adolescence and we do not need to do so. You see, it is the ongoing, continuing pattern of relating to others that is most important, not a particular event that happened or a single emotion that was experienced much earlier in life. And, we can change, get rid of the past, look at our relationships with compassion”.

“What do you mean by opening your heart?” Aswin asked.

“Look!” I said, “What do we do? When we have a problem, we retreat into the head, into the cold space that thinks, instead of feels.

This cold place seems endless. It takes in everything. It goes to work instantly, makes a few references within itself and gives you solutions. There it’s like a computer. We are all computers relating to each other on a brainy platform that is as slippery as it is dazzling. We speak, we respond like computers. Worse, we store thoughts and emotions like computers and refer to the software, whenever we want to see the film of our life or hear its worn-out music”.

“But, the brain, or the mind, ultimately, is a less satisfying place than the heart. The mind can have anger, bitterness or hatred at the bottom, while the heart, at the bottom, has compassion”.
“Rekha, Aswin”, I continued, “I would like to refer you to Dean Ornish again.

“An open heart is the willingness to make oneself vulnerable. We’ve all been hurt at various times in our lives and there is, metaphorically speaking, a wall around our hearts that protects us from pain. It’s not that we should not have our emotional defences, but if we have no one with whom we feel safe enough to be vulnerable, those defences that protect us also isolate us because they are always up. The goal is to have one person in your life, preferably more, but at least one person, with whom you can make a commitment to open your heart. By that, I mean, to let down your emotional defenses and to make yourself vulnerable as a way of being more intimate with that person”.

“If you have one person with whom you can truly be yourself, where you can be so vulnerable that he knows your dark side as well as the side that you show to other people, that relationship can be fulfilling. One person in your life who really knows you and loves you can be a source of light on your onward march to find yourself. Many people don’t have one person, not even their spouse, with whom they can be completely authentic, because they fear that, if other people knew that they were not perfect and had dark sides, they would be unloved or abandoned. People often create an image of what they want other people to think they are. Naturally that will be a case of trying to expose their good sides. Unfortunately, when you do this, love or respect may still not be forthcoming and you are the loser. And when people do love or respect you, you still lose, because their love and respect are for the image you put up before them. When you can be true, when you can show all of yourself to someone else and make yourself vulnerable, the level of intimacy can be far more powerful. After all, that’s what you want, even if it be with one person”.

Aswin and Rekha were listening. It was quite late in the night. I found that they were not in a mood to ask questions. All was quiet outside. I hardly realized that the temperature had gone down to 15oC.

“Good night, Aswin”, I said, “Good night, Rekha. A long day. Have a good rest. Let’s meet for breakfast”. Bleary-eyed they rose
and hand in hand they moved to their room and I retired to mine. I opened the window-curtain and saw the winter moon hanging low over the temple tops. The pale moonlight and the temples’ shadows settled on the couples in dalliance in perfect harmony that ensured their privacy and gave them heavenly freedom. I fell asleep without a further thought.

I didn’t know if it was a dream. It was so realistic. I least expected it. All I wanted was sound sleep after a beautiful day with my friends. But, it happened, the dream. It could have been an out-of-body experience. Realistic experience of something that was unusual.

I saw the Buddha in meditation under the bodhi tree at Bodhgaya. The place where he was seated was not thickly wooded. At the periphery, however, the big forest of trees made me feel that the Buddha was even lonelier than he would have felt, if at all. I sat a little distance away and watched him, engulfed in silence. In that silence, I felt sad for the man who left his family in the kingly palace of the lush Himalayas and had walked miles to a distant country in search of peace and solution for the suffering of mankind.

I saw that his eyes were not fully closed. Was he lonely? You feel lonely when you seek the right company and you don’t have it. I feel lonely when there is nobody with whom I can share my thoughts or feelings. Lonely means you are forced to be alone. But, you can choose to be alone and that is different. Your choice makes all the difference. You can be alone and converse actively with the ‘still small voice within’. You can enjoy your sense of aloneness by pursuing your creative vision, thoughts and feelings. But not everyone can do this at first. We need to have company with people, somebody to share with, when they share, the burden is lessened. They feel comfortable.

The Buddha was different. His comfort was in his aloneness. But, his aloneness teaches him a strange lesson- not about the virtue of aloneness, but about the virtue of connectedness of the entire humanity and about the disappearance of the ‘self’ in that connectedness. The Buddha seemed to open his eyes fully. I watched him closely. His eyes looked up and probably surveyed the leaves of the branches of the bodhi tree. His stare was fixed for a few seconds and he closed his eyes again.
A Pilgrim's Progress

A whole night passed, as the Buddha sat motionless. Occasionally, his broad chest heaved up and down, as though in excitement.

The day dawned. As the last stars were about to depart, the villagers of Bodhgaya, then known as Uruvela, gathered around him along with some children, including the young cowherd and the girl Sujatha, who had brought him milk and revived him, when he became too weak due to fasting. They stared at him, stunned by the brilliance that they saw around him.

“Are you a god?” they asked.

“Are you a deva? Are you Indra?”

The Buddha laughed and told them that he was none like that, but one among them, a member of their family, a sharer of their suffering!

In that dream, I had lived through the decisive turning point in world’s religious history, the moment which promised every seeker a life free from suffering.

For me, however, his first intuition, which led to the deeper questions and answers, was important. When the Buddha opened his eyes in the first quarter of the night and contemplated upon the life of a leaf as being connected to and dependent upon all parts of the tree, he has made it possible for all of us to understand its true significance and lead a life of joyful relationship, freed from all constraints, including the clutches of the ego.

I do not, as yet, claim that I have experienced the power of this interconnectedness down to the marrow of my being. I am still struggling with my ego. I know that it gives me a lot of unhappiness. It saddles me with responsibilities of thought and feeling, which drain my energy and pushes me farther away from my peace. The Masters are fond of saying: “Nothing can bring you lasting peace, but you have it already if you just stop disturbing it”. I admire them for saying the Truth. But, I am yet to grasp the Truth. I hear many stories of people making great progress in their journey of growth and self development. These stories, even of my friends, are very interesting. I want to know how they made it, the experiences that they had, the mistakes that they made and how they corrected. I am
interested in the way their practical experience can offer solutions to my own life’s experiments, rather than listen to their Sermon on the Mount.

In the process, I have known what it is to be both lonely and alone. When I feel lonely, which is often, I am terrified of my own emptiness, of disconnection, of the unreality of a self that will give me company. There are times, when I am in my aloneness, when I can see something of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life. I experience, that, at one level, I am alone, separate from everyone and everything else. At another level, I can see that everyone is a part of everyone else and there is nothing to feel separate and that we are one in our evolution, in an emotional, mental and spiritual make-up.

**Albert Einstein** wrote:

“A human being is part of the whole that we call the universe, a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings, as something separated from the rest – a kind of optical illusion of his consciousness. This illusion is a prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affections for only the few people nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living beings and all of nature”.

Einstein’s mystical thoughts echo the highest expressions of the sense of oneness by the greatest seers of the world. That gives me a lot of hope. But, it’s like staying in somebody else’s house as a guest. I could not do that for long. In order to be fully alive, I needed to learn to be more human. When I get angry, I cannot go to forgiveness straight. I must become more human, acknowledge the degree of my imperfection and then open my heart and show by inadequacy for the other person to understand, before he accepts my forgiving. I must get out of my head and slip into my heart. When what I try to do is reciprocated, there is greater love and greater intimacy. This journey towards greater love and intimacy is the most exciting and meaningful of life’s many adventures. Here, we need to travel our own path, rather than follow someone else’s footsteps, although we can learn a lot from others. But, personal learning is the best.
In “The Teachings of Don Juan”, Carlos Castaneda says:

“Before you embark on it, you ask the question. Does this path have a heart? If the answer is No, you will know it and then you must choose another path. . . . A path without a heart is never enjoyable. On the other hand, a path with a heart is easy. It does not make you work liking it”.

Love, intimacy and compassion. They go together. Where there is love, there must be compassion. You cannot keep your heart open and shut at the same time. The essence of compassion is that we are not so different from each other in the experience of being human. We all want to be happy and avoid suffering. When we meet in a group, seeing, feeling and understanding the interconnectedness of the members, we truly get a spiritual experience. This human dimension of relatedness can make a profound and wonderful impact on all of us. Our sorrows and sufferings disappear, not because we throw them away, but mainly because, communion and fellowship with other human beings with similar sorrows and sufferings, raise our hopes, edge us closer towards acceptance of our own problems, inspired by more profound love towards the affected people. Henry Longworth wrote: “If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each man’s life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility”.

The miracle of compassion is that it allows you to see things as they are, without having them to be seen in a particular way. You can see the situation more the way it is, because you have decided not to insist upon seeing them in a particular way. Your heart opens, it actually sees, feels, is intimate with and directly knows the heart of the other person. There is keeness to do no harm, a desire to really nourish the well-being of that heart, that person, whether it is a child, parent or spouse. This heart has an abundant supply of beneficial energy. It receives as well as gives. When the heart opens, this energy simply flows in. It also flows out, envelopes other people, brings them within the sphere of your love and intimacy. An open-hearted person is always giving to someone else, and the act of giving, simultaneously, is the act of receiving. This transfer of energy dilutes the feeling of separation and isolation, which itself is good.
Bits and pieces of thoughts that emerged from the stream of gentle feelings and I was amazed how I had kept them within myself so long. I opened the window of my room to get fresh air and saw the temples rise in their grandeur and stand majestically under the morning sun, conveying the pride and glory of a civilisation that was built on a different soil, with a different mind designing the structure. I must have woken up late and not wanting to disturb me, Aswin and Rekha must have gone out to enjoy themselves. Young things! There they were! I could spot them, walking on the lush grass, hand in hand, a picture of love and happiness.

The Buddha sitting under the bodhi tree came back to my mind. The Buddha saw the leaf imprinted against the blue sky. Its tail waved hither and thither in the breeze. He looked up and saw the sun sink into the horizon. Without the sun and the warmth and the rain, the tree would not grow and the leaf would not exist. Some clouds moved across the sky. The Buddha thought that without the clouds, there would be no rain and no tree and no leaf. Everything seemed to owe its existence, life and growth to everything else. So was the case with all of us. Nothing could exist independently from the rest of the universe. When everyone and everything is related and interdependent, it’s funny to project a separate self and build a castle around ourselves.

Tired and happy, Aswin and Rekha came inside my room and sat quietly by my side. They must have noticed the sheets of paper on which I had jotted down some of my crazy ideas.

“You have been busy, T.V. Sir”, Rekha said. “We should have stayed here and listened to whatever you wanted to say, that you have noted on these sheets”.

“Relationships”, I said, my mind still busy pursuing the idea.

“Relationships?” Rekha repeated, puzzled.

“Yes, Relationships!” I said, “It’s the most important experience of our lives. Without it, we are nothing!”

“We are nothing?” asked Rekha.

“Yes. Without it we are nothing. We are not there, if there is no relationship!” I said.
“My friend Neale Walsch would say”:

“Fortunately, there is not one of us who does not have relationship. Indeed, all of us are in relationship with everything and everyone all the time. We have a relationship with ourselves, we have a relationship with our family, we have a relationship with our environment, we have a relationship with our work, we have a relationship with each other”.

“So what?” asked Aswin. He was impatient.

“In fact”, I said “everything that we experience about ourselves we understand within the context that is created by all relationships”.

“Where are you taking us?” Aswin again.

“My friend Walsch”, I said, “sums it up saying that all relationships are sacred somewhere, within the deepest reaches of our heart and soul, we know this. That’s why we yearn so much for relationships and for relationships with meaning. When people experience love in relationship, then, they have a spiritual experience. They realise their closeness, as cosmos intended it, and feel immensely spiritual. That is, they feel elevated. They are able to see beyond themselves. When that does not happen, we are disconnected and lonely. When we are not expressing ourselves rightly in situations where we need to love, need to nourish, need to cultivate, then we are disconnected. We become separated from our spirituality, we are disconnected from the source of happiness, the source of aliveness. We feel emotions and attitudes that are not our own, we are not true to ourselves. There is suffering and we seek to escape from it by getting more disconnected. When proper relationship in love is experienced, you have aligned yourself with your true self, there is no pain or suffering, only happiness”.

“Yet, in real life”, I continued, “We try not to understand this simple language and waste our lives individually and collectively by living out of harmony”.

“What’s the way out?” asked Rekha.

“I don’t know”, I said. The couple looked surprised.

“You have advised us on many things. You mean, people don’t follow?” asked Rekha.
“For thousands of years, we have been advised by the Masters. Look at the ruin of the civilisation”, I replied.

I have tarried here for a longtime. I myself am not sure, if my own relationship with people gave me peace or joy. Quite a few times, I have fumbled and fallen, stumbled and stalled, crumbled and called for God’s help, which never came. Many situations in my relationships gave me more pain, brought me more suffering than the joy which they were intended to bring. At times, I have envied the sadhus for their ability and grit to get away from it all. I had simply failed to understand human beings and landed myself in near tragedies. A lot of all the pain that happened to me was the result of my own doing, my own foolishness, and sheer adventurism.

I have said all that. By the end of the day, having got over the troubles, when I looked back with emotion recollected in tranquility, I understood the value of all that I experienced, all that I learned, the power of human relationships and the desperateness with which men want to forge connections. God bless them. Let them just look at what I have said.

Now let me go on my pilgrimage.

Others are waiting.

B. DISCUSSION

* * * *
A Pilgrim's Progress
A. INTRODUCTION

(CAUTION: I do not know anything about this subject. About fifty five years ago, I once heard Arnold Toynbee, the veteran historian of the civilisations speak on some subject relating to the issues in civilisations. I hardly understood anything. The meeting was presided over by Dr. C.P. Ramaswamy Iyer, the erudite scholar. The audience was mesmerised by the flow of language, the command over English and a distinctive style. I admired him for all that, but found little substance in what he said.

I was a student of ancient history and Indian history at college, at the entrance level, and saw no great civilised traits in what I studied.

Therefore, in writing this note, I have derived all my inspiration from two books. One small, Kenneth Clark’s “Civilization”, the other large “Civilization” by Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, a historian of passionate intelligence. I have loved reading the books so much that I have adopted their viewpoints and quoted them extensively.

We are products of our times. We cannot get away from whatever there is around - social, cultural, political - and all those things that go by the name of civilisation.

I am a pilgrim, somewhat an impatient one, wanting to get away. All the more reason I should know what I am in).

Human evolution is marked by the rise, growth and decay of civilisations. Evolution does not necessarily mean progress. It simply features changing characteristics and adaptation to shifting environments to ensure survival and growth. Evolution is a continuous process. Civilisation is not. From the genetics to the spiritual, evolution proceeds on a path of fairly well-defined determinacy. One finds it difficult to say the same of civilisation. Yet,
evolution is the stage on which civilisations rise, grow and decay. We may not be able to identify our position in evolution, but we can find ourselves in an understandable location in respect of civilisation. Unlike evolution, which is a long drawn affair in human history, civilisation has an impressive glamour value by virtue of the grandeur of the accomplishments in a quick span of historical time.

The list of civilisations that the historians roll out before us is long and awesome – Egyptian, Syrian, Jewish, Roman, Greek, Scythian, Chinese, Indus Valley, Vedic, Dravidian, Islamic, Christian, Western and many more. This number itself is an example to show that civilisations have something to do with the environment, pre-existing culture and predisposition of the people.

What is civilisation?

“I don’t know” says Kenneth Clark, “I cannot define it in abstract terms – yet. But I think I can recognize it when I see it”.

Ruskin said:

“Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words, and the book of their art. No one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others. But, of the three, the only trustworthy one is the last - The Book of Arts – temples, churches, mosques, mausoleum, sculpture, painting, monuments, great heritages of buildings.”

Kenneth Clark concedes that the history of civilisation is not only the history of arts. In the so-called non-civilised primitive societies, people produced works of art which are still cherished for their creativity, design and constructions.

“It means that at certain epochs man has felt conscious of something about himself – body, spirit, which was outside the day-to-day struggle for existence and the night-to-night struggle with fear; and he has felt the need to develop those qualities of thought and feeling, so that they might approach as nearly as possible to an ideal of perfection – reason, justice, physical beauty, all of them in equilibrium. He has
managed to satisfy his needs in various ways – through myths, through dance and song, through systems of philosophy and through the order that he has imposed upon the visible world”.

Civilisation, according to Kenneth Clark, requires a modicum of material prosperity enough to provide a little leisure. But, far more, it requires confidence – confidence in the society in which one lives, belief in its philosophy, belief in its laws, and confidence in one’s own mental powers. All great civilisations have thrived on vigour, energy, vitality. Civilisation does not consist in fine sensibilities, good social interaction and pleasant conversation. A society can have all these and yet be dead and rigid.

Civilisation says Kenneth Clark, means something more than energy, will and creative power. It calls for a sense of permanence.

“Civilised man, or so it seems to me, must feel that he belongs somewhere in space and time. And for this purpose, it is a great convenience to be able to read and write”.

I go now to Felipe Armesto’s magnum opus “Civilization”. I will be quoting him more extensively, because he is saying more, since he classifies and describes world’s civilisations on the basis of some unique parameters which he himself has designed.

“Civilization makes its own habitat. It is civilized in direct proportion to its distance, its difference from the unmodified natural environment. What provokes it? Not an instinct – but an impulse or irritant which is almost universal which no habitable environment can resist”.

History is a ‘human’ pursuit rather than a ‘scientific’ one according to Armesto, because the past is not present to our senses, we can only know from other people’s impressions and perceptions of it. Yet people are part of the awesome continuum of nature and you cannot encounter them except in the tangle of their environments and of nature.

“The effect is to suggest that civilization can happen anywhere. The prejudice that some environments are uniquely conducive is hardly more justifiable than that which claims that some people are more productive than others or some races more prone. It is true that civilization is harder to
sustain in some environments than others, but no habitable environment has wholly resisted attempts to recraft it to suit human purposes. When looked at, environment by environment, the talent to civilize appears higgledy-piggledy all over the world, and may be concentrated most conspicuously in some places traditionally undervalued by conventional histories of civilization. The history of civilization, therefore, is conditioned but not ‘determined’ by environment even though the influence of the environment is pervasive and tends to favour some outcome rather than the others”.

Armesto’s book, perhaps, is a pioneering study of the influence of the environment on civilisations. In seventeen chapters, comprising five hundred and sixty five pages, Armesto studies civilisation with a fascinating sharpness of intellect and dedicated application to details and the result is that the book is a memorable contribution to the study of a subject that matters to man more than any other.

We are yet to understand what civilisation involves. Like many terms such as ‘democracy’, ‘equality’ and ‘freedom’, the word ‘civilisation’ has been widely interpreted. Civilisation, no doubt, represents a type of society. What type? Difficulty further rises when we try to distinguish it from the word ‘culture’. We also have the problem regarding the ‘civilised’ and the ‘uncivilised’. The additional attempts at definition have looked for a magical ingredient which transmutes a mere society into a civilisation. The word civilisation has meant so many things to so many different people that it has become difficult to define it, with some degree of precision, or describe it.

Let me go back to Armesto:

“Loosely used, a civilization means an area, group or period, distinguished in the mind of the person using the term by striking continuities in ways of life and thought and feeling. So, we can speak of the Western Civilization, Chinese Civilization, the Vedic Civilization and so on”.

But such definition, prompted by usage and convenience, can still be imprecise and insubstantial. The word ‘society’ or ‘culture’ would serve the same purpose. There may be particular continuities
which distinguish civilisations such as a common religion, a common language, a common ideology or a common preference for certain art or dance systems, collective pursuit of certain levels of agronomy or technology. However, there is always room for criticism that such criteria can be arbitrary.

At another level, the word ‘civilisation’ may denote a process of collective self-differentiation from a world characterised implicitly or explicitly, as ‘barbaric’ or ‘primitive’. But these terms are nebulous and value-charged. In a fit of anger, you will accuse a man as ‘barbaric’, implying thereby that you are civilised. You can understand that such distinctions contribute to nothing.

The word ‘civilisation’ is also used to denote a phase or a stage which the histories of societies go through or which they achieve at their climax. There is an objection. There is no set pattern of development. Societies change all the time, but in different ways. They conform to no models nor do they work for a purpose. History does not repeat itself and societies do not replicate themselves.

Armesto says:

“I propose to define it as a type of relationship, a relationship to the natural environment, recreated by the civilizing impulse to meet human demands. By a ‘civilization’ I mean a society in such a relationship. . . . One lesson of this book is that civilizations commonly overexploit the environment, often to the point of self-destruction. For some purposes – including, in some environments, survival itself - civilization is a risky and even irrational strategy”.

The last sentence has a prognostic wisdom, that man can afford to ignore only at his peril, in our present situation. When societies accumulate energy, their first impulse is to impose their authority on other societies and master and control the environment in such a way as to suit their basic needs and to pamper their aesthetic propensities achieving a demonstrable proof of their superiority over everything, even if it be for a short span of time. Human communities seek to transform the world for their own ends. They even try to secede from nature, pretending that people are not any part of the cosmic eco-system, but they are themselves a system uniquely different from others. They try to ‘denature’ humanity.
Please listen to what Armesto says:

“You can see the scars of the struggles in the deep, sharp lines on which civilizations have erected their buildings, laid out their settlements, formalized their gardens and arranged their fields. A passion for regular geometry – overlaid nature’s bristles and bumps – runs through their history. At its most uncompromising, civilization wants to perfect nature in line with the prophets’ vision of the end of time, when every valley shall be exalted, the fields laid low, and the rough places plain; a world regulated with the spirit level and the measuring rod, where the shape conforms to the geometer’s mind”.

Civilisation is a total experience, where the food for the stomach is as important as the food for the heart and the mind. Ideas and inspiration come into play, and arts, as well as the intellect and science and technology, contribute to the development of society and the society feels so different from others, even from the soil on which it grew and its possessiveness contributes to its pinnacle as well as fall.

Kenneth Clark has spoken of leisure as an essential ingredient to civilisation. He identifies a civilised society as one which values and creates lasting works of art and which builds on a large scale for the future. Today, people who think of themselves as civilised might also want to belong to a society which has enough wealth to build on creative leisure and stay together for each other’s good in a civilised circle. That kind of a society may also have the technique of recording and transmitting its inherited wisdom. It may try to adapt nature to meet people’s needs without affecting the environment. These are good points to identify a civilisation. In our own society, if we call ourselves civilised, such criteria are chimerical. There are other ideals which people talk of, waiting to be shared. But, there is a value judgement involved in all these and those wise men who had walked through one civilisation or the other, from end to end, would find it difficult to tell us what it was all about.

Civilisations have been the subject of intense study and giant historians like Arnold Toynbee, Stephen Spengler, Gordon Childe, Lewis Mumford and Ellsworth Huntington have waded and traded blows.
Armesto records that Stephen Spengler was a wayward genius who tortured his readers with grisly predictions and contortions. He defined civilisation as the ‘destiny’ of a culture, ‘the organic-logical sequel, fulfillment and finale’. A culture did not become a civilisation until it was already on the decline. “It suddenly hardens”, Stephen Spengler said, “it mortifies, its blood congeals, its forces break down and it becomes a Civilisation”. Horrifying thought about all of us and yet somewhat true!

Arnold Toynbee was a tireless advocate of the comparative study of civilisations and wrote a monster of a book about it – twelve volumes. He spoke of a real difference between the ‘civilised’ societies and the so-called ‘primitive’ societies. He said that when imitative impulse was directed towards creative personalities they pioneered to achieve the common good. When this is directed towards the future ‘the cake of custom’ is broken and the society is in dynamic motion along a course of change and growth.

Toynbee has been widely criticised. Strictly speaking ‘primitives’ do not exist. All of us are the products of a long line of evolution. Using the words civilisation, change or growth, creates confusion. All societies change, they seek stability and the question whether they are ‘civilised’ is debatable. Our own society is an example! However, the notion that civilisations are bent on the future is optimistic. It creates confidence in the capacity of the societies to put themselves on a growth map that would make lasting impression upon history.

“All the world is a stage”, said Shakespeare. Civilisation is the screens and the settings, lights and colour, growth and death through which man struts, proud of his monumental achievements. You look back and as the wonder of wonders fades away from the pages of history, a dumb sense of numbness fills you about the impermanence of it all. W.B. Yeats wrote these gloomy, if not prophetic words:

“Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world
The blood-dimmed tides is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned
The best lack all convictions, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity”. 
And yet the temptation is compelling, to see what is what, to smell the perfume of the roses in Cleopatra’s garden, even when our own roses are withering.

There is neither time nor space to go into the details of the civilisations. Yet we shall see a few of them.

Egypt truly was the gift of the river Nile. Nile gave the Egyptians food, luxury, life, a highway from the highlands to the lowlands, a passage for the spread of culture, sculpture and kingship. The river created a huge delta and shaped a kingdom. Thanks to the river, Egypt resisted natural disasters and barbarian invasions for over three thousand years, around which period the country rose high, with a strong religion, high cultural watermarks and a glorious civilisation.

We equate this civilisation with the Pyramids. Armesto says nicely:

“We build to provide delight for the living and dwellings for the dead. The large number of great works of architecture devoted to shrines and tombs reflect a healthy sense of priorities. After all, we spend far longer dead than alive. No civilization has more resolutely observed this proper order of priorities than that of ancient Egypt. Mortuary practices – precisely because they are a matter of such importance – the unbroken tradition - were subject to revolutionary changes, but the image of tradition dominates our idea of Egyptian civilization as a whole. Over a period of thousand years, nearly a hundred pyramids have been built in ancient Egypt”.

Books have been written on the Pyramids. They may be referred to, if you are interested. There is a modern revival of interest in the Pyramids for their esoteric qualities which are being slowly unraveled by arduous studies. To say the least, the Pyramids are conspicuous, for they jut out of a flat surface. They are arrogant, for only the confidence of the kings, who reckoned themselves as divine, could have inspired such titanic enterprises. They are awe-inspiring as they shimmer unnervingly in the desert heat. They make a strong impression of spiritual strength or magical energy. They represent defiance of nature, they were technically inventive
and artistically original. They belong to an era of opulence, when
the kings had plenty to employ labour during their idle time to carry
out strenuous tasks.

But, Pyramids speak of deaths. While the palaces of kings have
not survived, the monument to the dead continue to, against all
odds. Pointing heavenward, the Pyramids hoisted their occupants to
the realm of the stars and the sun.

Travellers, millions of them, visit the Pyramids every year, view
them, gasp with awe and go back to their star hotels for run-
dowers. They want to be away from death. They think that’s what
civilisation is about.

We speak of the Indus Valley Civilisation as if it were a page from
some legend. And the Archaeological Survey of India once
dismissed the Harappan findings as ‘the ruins of a town only two
hundred years old’. Yet Harappa was one of the great cities of a
unique civilisation which flourished in the Indus Valley over four
thousand years ago. However, the Indus Valley world vanished,
save for the remaining traces at or below ground level under the
wind-blown dust, and yet, today, judicious modern authorities claim
that it was a ‘formative mould for many aspects of classical and even
modern Indian Civilisation’.

The Indus Valley Civilisation was basically a home-grown product.
It spanned across greater environmental diversity than Egypt. Its
striking feature was its cultural homogeneity. The well-laid out
streets, the houses, the well-burnt bricks, the meticulously planned
system for disposing waste, the warehouses, the common quarters,
extensive communal quarters, are unique to the Indus Valley and it is
mystifying how it disappeared very soon. Still, it established contacts
across the Arabian Sea in the course of its history. The city life and
the intensive agricultural practice adopted seemed to have lasted
only a few centuries. The scholars continue to debate furiously the
causes for the disappearance of the Indus Valley. It might have
been due to growing desert-like conditions, drying up of rivers,
famine, plague or an Indo-European invasion. The last, however,
according to the scholars, seems least likely. It may be that the full
decipherment of the single form of writing adopted through the
Harappan world may tell us more. We may also note here that there is no evidence of the survival of the Harappan elements in subsequent Indian Cultural history (Armesto).

What was the connection between the people of the Indus Valley and the people who wrote the Vedas? The debate goes on. But, there is good basis to think that each of these cultures has been a sequel to the rise of a society broadly called by the later-day historians as the Hindu, though the word was not extant when the Vedas were written. The Vedic people, in a sense, told their own story – their life, their family, their village, their forests, their customs, their gods and so on. The Vedas were, usually, passed down from the father to the son and the lineages have all been listed. The oral transmission of the Vedas made it necessary to lay down systems of sound, pronunciation, rules of chanting and grammar. Most poems were ritual hymns, since they were recited as part of the Vedic rituals. Proper chanting was considered as important as the physical aspect of the rituals. The Vedic world became a world of sacrifices whereby the gods were made happy and the gods in turn took on themselves the responsibility for providing for the welfare of the people. Man and god worked in unison to establish the cosmic harmony and to uphold the truth. The Vedic man did not necessarily lead an austere life, though he had to fulfill many duties to the gods, the departed, the teachers, the family and the society. These were classified as the *dharmas* by later-day seers and it is the question of fulfilling the *dharma*, raised in a variety of ways, which figures again and again in the Epics, the *Puranas* and local mythologies. All said, the Vedic man lived a pleasant life, in the company of his spouse and children and he was given to the habit of taking intoxicating drinks, gambling and speculating. The Upanishadic seers, who followed, however, laid stress on impermanence of the body and the need to identify oneself with eternity by realising that man was a soul rather than a body. Verily, fusion of the Vedic and the Upanishadic philosophy could be said to have laid the foundation for the structured form of Hinduism.

Thoughts, philosophy and in-depth analysis of the spirit were the main features of a civilisation set in motion by the Vedic seers. Its artistic expressions, in the early days at least, were very limited. And we have not yet sighted, above or below the ground, any physical
proof in the nature of surviving monuments or even structures. The splendorous palaces and mansions mentioned in the Epics are simply not there. Structures of some kind or other begin to come up only in the post-Buddha period. There are some expectations about buried cities in Indraprastha and Kurukshetra. They are yet to see the light of day. Lord Krishna’s Capital city of Dwaraka was in the news for some underwater discovery of materials and objects. Dwaraka was said to have been destroyed by the sea, may be by a ‘tsunami’ which has come into usage now. We have, however, no evidence of any kind so far. Undersea exploration and excavation is a costly affair. A nation like India may not be able to afford the cost, without international financial collaboration. Indians are not history-minded. There is no urge to pursue such projects with vigour. And, we see, a whole palace of Cleopatra was excavated, undersea, on a sunken island off the coast of Alexandria, with its magnificent pillars, columns, priceless jewels in jade boxes and so on. Egypt, the country which carried out these excavations, is poorer than India. All this needs strong willpower which democracies do not generally display, unless there is an overwhelming demand on the part of the people.

By contrast, the Dravidian Civilisation, with the language of Tamil as the inspirational force, had grown and spread beyond the seas and has stood the test of time. Centuries before the Christian Era, the people who spoke Tamil developed a rich tradition of poetry that, unlike the Vedic songs, genuinely reflected the lives of the people who lived in the south of India, in picturesque details. The language propounded a well-drawn grammar of life, ways of loving and living in close affinity with nature and the environment, modes of worship that reflected the people’s concern for societal welfare rather than private gain. The poets spoke of respect for all faiths and peoples. Womanhood was cherished for she provided love and inspiration for the children at home. Bravery and heroism were the ideals of man at the battlefield and no mother would like to see her son dead on the battlefield with an arrow piercing his back. Above all, the requirements of a code of conduct for the king, the mendicant, the householder, the business community, etc., were formulated in the magnum opus ‘Thirukkural’, which appears to be as valid today as it was two thousand years ago.
One should not think that this was also a paper civilisation. The close cohesion of people on the basis of language, led to the growth of the kingdoms that fought with each other trying to establish political supremacy over large areas, though the propagation of the Tamil culture was incidental and not the main purpose. The Chola Kingdom became the most prominent, in the rice fields of the Cauvery delta. Its potential as the mother-country arose from the fusion of power, wealth and the ambitions of the kings with those of the merchant communities.

At Nagapattinam, Poompuhar and Mamallapuram, the grandest ports, pearls, corals, betel nuts, cardamom, dyed cottons, ebony, incense, ivory horn and even elephants, were palatially warehoused, stamped with the royal tiger emblem and exchanged for gold. The kings were the great builders of the cities and temples. The Chola sea-borne imperialism established foothold in Sri Lanka, Malaya and Maldives. The temples were the allies and the support of the Kings and enjoyed great benefits from the seaboard adventures.

Over the longer period, the Chola Kings began to concentrate on the architecture of the temples. Aesthetics and sensuality animated the Chola art. When the dynasty arrived at Thanjavur, its first capital, the monuments of the city were described to be like the ‘adornment of a girl with beautiful eyes, graceful curls, a cloth covering her body and sandal paste as white as lime’. When King Rajendra built a new city to commemorate the campaign on the Ganges, the sight could overwhelm ‘all fourteen worlds encircled by the billowing ocean’ with joy. The Chola construction, generally, embodied the essence of the civilising ambitions of the kings.

My choice of civilisations is quite arbitrary. I have no particular preference for any of them. Because, for me, ultimately, what civilisations leave behind, that continue to breathe the soul of man, is vastly more important than their grandeur or glory at any particular time. How ‘civilising’ is the impact? Do successive generations, besides being awed and overwhelmed, feel sufficiently inspired and motivated with the kind of higher values of humanness and spiritual strength that past civilisations may, if at all, reveal?
Hello! You are Civilised!

Where are we today? Are we members of a civilisation that is unique, by any chance? Now that our understanding of all that is happening around us is far superior, thanks to information technology that has put time and space in the palms of everybody, do we feel proud of an achievement, feel wholesomeness that comes with the fulfillment of our higher needs? Do we feel learned, wise enough to govern our lives with amity and peace all-round? Have we ceased to think of the wars and battles as a method of solution of our problems? Do we smile when our neighbours get a gift and do we feel sad for them when there is a loss and show our sadness in words of cheer and acts of homage? In short, are we in a civilisation that is making us ‘civilised’?

In a very wide sense, our civilisation has come to be known as Western Civilisation in contrast to the Eastern Civilisation. The distinction between the two, sharp and pointed at one time, is becoming increasingly thin and nebulous. The main reason is that the global interaction between the two is smoothing the edges and the main sources for distinction such as religion, culture, family life, and style of living are getting overwhelmingly mixed up. A concern for certain values that were highly cherished, is no longer a serious matter except in fundamentalist circles, be it in religion or philosophy or cultural practices. While the Western Civilisation has been equated with materialism, free trade, rise of science and technology, free economic enterprise and the like, the Eastern Civilisation is associated with continued attachment to religion, ritualistic practices, closely knit family life and respect for the values of the yesteryears in societal interaction and management and an all-pervasive spiritual flavour in thoughts and deeds.

We know that the actual situation is more complex. We note that distinctive, personal, family and cultural values, which can moderate the ego-propelled activities and sublimate them towards a greater understanding of the path of personal growth, are being edged out. The high value which nations place on the material prosperity of the huge number of citizens is genuinely a menace to the environment. Western Civilisation can be sustained only by consuming the world’s resources at an unsustainable rate.
An Easterner goes West, is impressed by the imposing buildings, roads and bridges, fast moving traffic, luxurious living and wants to settle down in one of those rich Western countries or wants to simply ape. He comes back with high-powered imagination to transform his society into a Western model in every way. He changes his style of living, mode of work, nature of the workplace, builds glittering buildings and fills them with human figures, who soon lose their human feelings.

Being in it, it is difficult to speak about it without powerful passions. I do not want to condemn the civilisation that we are in. It has given us science, technology, education, modern medicine, good health (for many), material prosperities, economic freedom (for a few) and an illusory sense of happiness. I do not want to spare it either. We are witness to wanton destruction of nature in the name of material progress. The sprawling ugliness of our cities, the desolation of the rural area, the polluting effects of the industries that sustain the cities, the ruthless and destructive efficiency with which nature is raided to feed and sustain our cities, depleting the species and spoiling the beauty, are not the curses of the civilisation per se, but the shameless acts of man priding himself to be civilised.

And look at the moral deficiencies and the human costs. We live in an era of triumphant capitalism where the greatest good of the greatest number is said to be obtained. This economic formula cannot do anything to feed the billions of starving children across the globe. It cannot eliminate poverty or provide good health, sanitation and shelter for the poor in every country. Capitalism and democracy are the two strong pillars of this civilisation. Both impose a subtle and ruinous inequality upon unknowing people who are only too busy eating out the crumbs of bread thrown at them by the politically powerful and the fat-pursed plutocracy. The masses, ever wanting some entertainment, sit like tongue-oozing pups at home, in front of the television, waiting for some announcement regarding the latest product or movie. All brands contain the same product, but the advertisements make them look so distinct and unique, that every man or woman thinks that the product has been made by God just to meet his or her need. We are said to live in a world where the consumer is king. The economy is pictured to revolve around what he wants. How does he know what he wants? He remains ignorant until the multi-media steps in. Then he begins to know what the
media advertisement desires him to know. And the consumer is the king! It reminds me of the old Roman days, when the gladiators fought with the lions and the poor slaves and Christians were given to them for their open breakfast before thousands of blood-hungry spectators in vast arenas. After the show was over and a few innocent lives were lost in front of the admiring audience, the masses went back home, happy and ready to plunge into their own licentiousness, while the dictators went on to make merry in their own way. The multi-national companies and the monopolies lay down the honeyed path, and we jolly well take it, since there is no other alternative.

Kenneth Clark, in his classic work “Civilisation” characterises the present era as ‘heroic materialism’. Why, heroic? Because, probably, it broke away from the fetters of religion, religious institutions, feudal lordship over family and society, mild romanticism that only satisfied private tastes and produced no public sympathy. But, then Kenneth Clark has also something harsh to say of the present civilisation:

“We have no idea where we are going. J.B.S.Haldane summed up the situation when he said, ‘My own suspicion is that the universe is not only queerer than we supposed, but queerer than we can suppose. . . .’

“However, in the world of action, a few things are obvious, so obvious that I hesitate to repeat them. One of them is our increasing reliance on our machines. They have ceased to be tools and have begun to give us directions. And unfortunately, machines from the Maxim gun to the computer are for the most part means by which a minority can keep free men in subjection. . . .”

“Our other specialty is our urge to destruction. With the help of machines we did our best to destroy ourselves in two wars and in doing so, we released a flood of evil, which intelligent people have tried to justify with praise. Add to this the memory of that shadowy companion who is always with us like an inverted guardian angel, silent, invisible, almost inaudible, and yet unquestionably there and ready to assert itself at the touch of the button; and one must concede that the future of civilisation does not look very bright”.
More modestly, **Armesto** would add:

“On recent or current showing, Western Civilization is doing badly by the standards of the rest of the world, despite – or, perhaps, because of enviable levels of material prosperity. Families are floundering as divorce rates increase and people opt out of marriage. The numbers of the homeless and the alienated are increasing. Individual life takes a sinister turn, when the pursuit of individual self-fulfilment makes people forsake loyalties to traditional communities, associations and civic responsibilities and fraternities of mutual support. These trends are grounds of indictment of the Western Civilization”.

Armesto now speaks a little more angrily:

“Twentieth century has produced voices despairing of all civilization’s chances of survival or actively calling for civilized traditions to be abjured. Civilization has come to seem not worth the effort, for the experience of the century was bewilderingly paradoxical. It was the best of times. It was the worst of times. It was born in hope and developed in disaster. The twentieth century produced more creativity, more effort, more technical resourcefulness, more planning, more freedom, more power for good than ever before in human history. It was also the century of the most destructive wars, the most inhuman massacres, the most repellent tyrannies, the worst extremes of wealth and poverty, the foulest environmental degradation, the most trash, the cruelest disillusionment. It promised so much and betrayed so many. The big mystery of the twentieth century is: What did civilization yield? Why, in other words, did progress fail?”

Some would say that we no longer believe in God or take religions seriously. Experts would argue that progress is, itself, an illusion. There was a definition of civilisation as a society in stability towards the end. If a civilisation is marked by progress, as we claim, there is yet no stability, because we have not reached the end. We are now uniquely placed to observe our civilisation and to intellectualise on its merits and demerits. But, progress can be subverted by its own contradictions. It may be our worst enemy, because it excites hopes which can never be fulfilled. We have had dreams of grandiose vision, but we have not given expression to
them as the high marks of human culture, manifesting our deepest emotions of the highest human behaviour. We connected them into patterns of rationalised thinking and manifested them in feelingless, but imposing structures. Dreams have no end, rational thinking has limitations, despite the use of the most advanced computers. This civilisation could be a case of dreams gone sour.

I take the Emirates flight from Dubai and fly to Newcastle in UK to be with our friends for a month. The distance is about six thousand kilometers and the most advanced Boeing aircraft covers the distance in about six and a half hours, flying at a speed of one thousand kilometers per hour at an awesome height of forty thousand feet from the ground. The aircraft is pressurised to give coolness of the altitude of six thousand feet. Pretty staff, with winsome smiles, move the trollies up and down, offering choice drinks and classy food. Our Hamsa friend travelling with me forbids me to touch the drinks and gets me the ‘softest’ of the drinks possible – tomato juice! I look around and see the passengers settle down to their usual travel practices. A Christian father is busy poring over his Bible and a Muslim gentleman is turning the pages of the bulky Quran, in order, probably, to locate the right prayer for the travel. My Hamsa friend begins to snore and I take a little walk through the long passage to lighten my stomach. The destination reached, the plane lands and all the passengers rush through the exit to clear customs formalities. They are gone for ever. Nothing will be known about them. In this big world, each one seeks his or her own niche in life. We have produced the largest, faceless societies of the world that history has ever known.

I look into the Oxford Dictionary for the meaning of the word, ‘civilisation’. It reads: ‘an advanced stage or system of human social development’.

The word preceding it is ‘civility’. This word is defined as ‘politeness and courtesy’. We give importance to ‘politeness and courtesy’ rather than to ‘civilised behaviour’. If civilised behaviour does not characterise human social development, it will be difficult to call it a civilised society.

Kenneth Clark expresses certain beautiful sentiments and I am one with them. I end this note, quoting them:
“I believe that order is better than chaos, creation better than destruction. I prefer gentleness to violence, forgiveness to vendetta. On the whole, I think knowledge is preferable to ignorance and I am sure human sympathy is more valuable than ideology. I believe that in spite of recent advances of science, men have not changed much in the last two thousand years and as a consequence we must still try to learn from history. History is ourselves. I also hold one of the two beliefs that are most difficult to put shortly. For example, I believe in courtesy, the ritual by which we avoid hurting other people's feelings by satisfying our own egos. And I think we should remember that we are a part of a great whole, which, for convenience we call nature. All living things are our brothers and sisters. Above all, I believe in the God-given genius of certain individuals and I value a society that makes their existence possible”.

I turn around and see nobody, nobody to share these sentiments. I continue my journey.

B. DISCUSSION

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INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda was spoken of by the ancient sages as the ‘science of life’. They even called it the ‘science of being’. It was ‘veda’ in the sense that it was a repository of the knowledge of the life-giving sources of nature and natural living. It was considered as the upanga (branch) of the Vedas. It arose in the dim past, when men lived in harmony with nature. Man and nature supplemented one another in maintaining harmony and balance in the cosmos, and in life. The sages carefully studied the interactions of nature with the human living and prescribed disciplined ways of living from birth to death.

Ayurveda should not merely be considered to be the science of prescription of herbal remedies for diseases. Asanas, Pranayama, Yoga, healthy eating, periodic abstinence from food, modest living, moderate exercises and sound sleep, are all considered vital ingredients of Ayurveda.

Ayurveda originated in India, in the vast ranges of the Himalayas and other mountains and villages where herbs of infinite variety grew, which had life-giving and disease-relieving properties. The local people had known their value and used them for centuries. They had no systematic formulation of herbs or diseases, but they found that the herbs worked. It was left to the sages to study the potential of the herbs, analyse them systematically and to evolve preventive and curative regimen from the herbs, no less impressive than the modern pharmaceutical procedures.

Today, Ayurveda continues to be highly popular in India and in the West. Many Western practitioners have begun to advocate ayurvedic remedies. But, much more needs to be done to study the chemical properties of the ayurvedic herbs and the pathway through which the disease is attacked. Ayurveda needs also be raised from the myths surrounding it to a well conditioned scientific discipline.
Everyone knows that Kerala, with its mountains, valleys and perennial green herbs, ranks high in the map of scientific Ayurveda management for a fair segment of the populace.

Dr. M. Prasad, MD, is an ayurvedist of the classical Kerala style. A Post Graduate in Salakyatanthra, he is the Director of Sunethri Ayurvedashram and Research Centre.

Dr. Prasad studied the basic principles of the philosophy of Ayurveda under Padma Bhushan Vaidyabhooshanam K. Raghavan, Thiruvulpad for over twenty one years. He also studied and got trained under Padma Shri Dr. K. Rajagopal in clinical Ayurveda. As trained by his guru, Dr. Prasad is practising and propagating Ayurveda in its simple, cost-effective and life-style oriented form.

Dr. Prasad is presently working as Associate Professor of Salakyatanthara at Vishnu Ayurveda College at Shoranur. He has undertaken a research-oriented programme for developing an effective protocol for the management of autism from 2002 onwards. Thanks to his pioneering efforts, a novel method called Supra (Sunethri Protocol for Autism) was developed and the details were published in the World Ayurveda Conference 2010 held at Bangalore.

He was the co-author of a Malayalam Book on Ayurveda published in 2007. He has contributed a number of articles in scientific and popular journals. He has presented nearly 100 papers in national and international seminars. He has won awards for his thesis in 2001, 2006. He also won Tharayil Narayanan Vaidyar Puraskaram as the Best Physician in 2010.

Hamsa is thankful to Dr. Prasad for taking part in the 2013 Retreat and for agreeing to give a talk on Ayurveda.

We now look forward to Dr. M. Prasad’s exposition.

B. INTERACTION

* * * *
A. INTRODUCTION

There was noise everywhere. Piercing sounds of human wailing. People were running without knowing where they were going, as though a meteor was about to strike the earth and burn it to ashes. In the distant land, a messenger of God stood up on a mountain top and announced that the end of the world was near. People had locked their houses and were glued to their TV, wondering what would happen next. Even the rulers of the land had increased their security.

I was accompanied on this part of the journey by a lawyer friend who knew a lot of law but did not know how to practice. Lawyers put on a serious demeanour during comical situations like when the judge sleeps in the court while the arguments are being advanced, wakes up and asks questions not pertaining to the case. Most of the time, of course, lawyers can give you a whale of a time, when they argue the wrong points, while the judge puts the right question. I knew this from my father who shared these aspects while advising me not to become a lawyer. He was a lawyer who practiced for a short period and left the bar because he thought that the judges did not understand what he was saying. This lawyer was a fine friend, a man of practical wisdom with bags full of gossip about the court and about everybody.

I asked him:

“What’s going on?”

“Number of things”, he said. “Prisoners fought with the guards in the prison and killed a few of them. Their women are crying. A bus jumped over the bridge of a river and about twenty persons are dead. Those struggling in the water will also die, because people on the banks are engaged in serious discussion as to what to do. At the previous stop, the bus driver entered the Government liquor
shop, took as much liquor as you and I would drink water, felt highly elated, saw the river and though it was the road. Poor youngster! He is not there to realise his mistake. In a nearby village, a sadhu stayed for ten days, sang and danced and discoursed and left suddenly one night and two of the young women were missing. Of course, there are gang rapists everywhere, not to talk of the terrorists."

My friend would have gone on with his list, had I not stopped him, for after all he was a lawyer. I told him that a leading newspaper devoted one full page for accidents, one for thefts and murders and one for gang rapes. The rape case news spilled over to a few more columns on some other pages, since everybody took extraordinary interest in the matter, discussing how to prevent such happenings, while gangsters continued with their job, unmindful of the public scanner. After all, they knew that the country was big, a billion people with five hundred thousand villages, any number of buses and trains.

When I was young, a school student, I did not hear of the gangsters. I knew gang coolies, who worked on the roadways. Their job was to spread the stones and the gravel on patches, water the spread and a big road-roller would be driven on top of them, and in a few minutes the road was repaired. For the rest of the day the workers would sit under some shade and play cards and collect the wages for the day. Their wives and children would bring them food, and the family gathering would gossip about the superiors and the contractors with no malice.

I had also seen gang workers working on the railway tracks in the area in which I lived. Their job was to fill the gaps between the rails with stones, a tough job under the burning sun. The supervisor came, seated on a trolley that rolled on the rails, inspecting and also bringing food for the workers and he happily shared it with them. The workers and the supervising force worked in harmony and strove to extract more and more concessions from the railway management which had, for sometime, Englishmen at the top. A few passenger trains, drawn by coal engines, used to pass by, chugging along and the friendly driver would stop the train at unscheduled places, to collect the tiffin carrier containing food, from someone from his house which was close by. There were many unmanned
crossings those days. Sometimes, school children would have to go to their schools on the other side of the railway line. Whenever a passing train driver happened to notice the children trying to cross the line, he would stop the train at a distance and wait for the children to cross the line. What kindness! What courtesy!

The other day, I was proceeding in my car on a busy road. My driver was proceeding fairly fast. I always sat by his side to alert him and I saw a pedestrian crossing ahead. Some students from a local college were walking on the pedestrian crossing with clear signal for them. My driver tried to maintain the speed, dispersing the students hither and thither and a few meters away he was promptly stopped by a traffic policeman who found him guilty and fined him a sum of five hundred rupees. Of course, I paid the fine!

I contrast this with the driving habit in the UK. I used to take long walks on the near-empty roads of Durham, a beautiful town in North Eastern England, where our Hamsa friends resided. Smaller streets led up to the wider four lane road. Sometimes, while trying to cross the small road, I came across cars that came to join the main road. They were also owner-driven cars. I stood at the edge of the pavement, waiting for the car to pass. The car driver would also stop, well before the entry into the main road. He waited for me to cross. I waited for him to drive away into the main road. Both of us looked at each other and smiled. After a minute or two, the driver put out his head and said,

“I’m waiting for you to go!”

“Thanks”, I said, crossed the road and looked back to wave my hand. He waited till I fully crossed the road safely, waved and left. A number of cars that had collected at the junction began to move, every driver looking at me, waving his hand.

“Not possible in India”, my legal friend said, “How I wish our drivers had their hands firmly on the steering wheel at least. One hand is busy with the mobile and the other busy with tuning the channels in the car radio and the car runs. How will it notice a pedestrian crossing?"

“The problem may be that we have too much democracy everywhere!” I said.
“Or too little?”

“Or both?”

“Democracy”, my friend said, “is Government of the people, for the people and by the people. Our people vote once in five years or so. They go to the polling booths and press some electronic circuit in an idiot box and there you are. You elect your representative to govern the country. He elects his leader and all is forgotten. The leaders rule the country. Democracy, is ruling by leadership. We have no qualification for the leaders, because we ourselves have none!”

“But nations are still governed!” I said, “They somehow manage their affairs, may be clumsy, may be corrupt. No justice done. But, don’t you see people are vibrant?”

“The vibrant ones get things done”, my lawyer friend says,”they know what ticks and what tickles!”

“What about the not-so-vibrant ones?”

“They get doles and charity, five yearly gifts, bank loans which they need not repay, houses or rooms for which they don’t pay any rent”.

“Is that also not democracy?”

“What?” my friend stared at me sternly. “It’s the country brew with which people are quite happy, while leaders . . . .”.

“Leaders?” I queried.

“They are busy piling upon their hard-earned votes”.

I thought my friend was treading on risky ground. He was a lawyer and knew how to defend himself. I was defenceless. Any lawyer, trying to defend me in a case, could twist it clearly, so that he could extend the legal proceedings ad infinitum, while I might have to dig my grave deeply and search for gold to pay him. But, I assure you that my lawyer friend does not belong to that category. He is sincere to me, loves me, is devoted to me and he is undertaking this journey with me to protect me, as well as to wash off the sins of his wrong-doings.
“Today, we have more violence, more barbarism, more terrorism and more of everything that will destroy the globe”, said my friend, “we are becoming asuras – yes, every one of us. One day, the aliens will send their crafts to strike at our nuclear installations and the earth will blow up”.

“Or sink under the ocean as Dwaraka did during Krishna’s time?” I thought I was joking.

“Oh, that’s a small matter”, the lawyer said. We have had Sodom and Gomorrah, the two cities which God destroyed with flying flames for the sins that their people committed. He had volcanoes that killed a million people in Italy, a plague that killed tens of millions of people in the whole of Europe! We had the tsunamis recently that killed tens of thousands of people! Why, the whole Tamil Country went under the ocean, destroying a civilisation! Do you think those were chance occurrences?”

“You don’t think so?”

“Every effect has a cause. We are searching for physical causes. Our science has woefully limited our search to a few atoms! May be the atoms are what give you electricity. But, forget it. It is the moral atoms that are vastly more important!”

“Moral atoms?”

“Yes, moral vibrations”, he said. “When the physical atoms bind, they can be split and you get giant energy. But, when moral atoms bind, they cannot be split. The stronger they bind, stronger is love, peace.

“What do you mean by the binding of moral atoms?” I wanted to know.

“Simple”, he said. “When two people come together with positive vibrations, look at them. How happy they are. When two people face each other with hatred sown in their hearts, look at their faces. How distorted they are. Each wants to destroy the other. They are drowned in their negative forces. When positive vibrations spread among a group of people, they are peaceful, happy and are ready to face their problems with a spirit of give and take”.
“Well said”, I responded. “I thought my friend was only a lawyer. Now I know he’s a positive thinker too!”

“I am going with you, because I find you a positive person”, my friend said, “but look at the tragedies taking place every day. There is so much violence, hatred. People are united in name by all the information technology, but they are divided in heart and mind. We are burning both inside and outside. Our pollution levels are heating up the globe and nature will turn aggressive. Our insides are heating up with shallow feelings, jealousy, rancour, caste, ethnic, racial and national feelings of parochialism that is building up inner turmoil and people explode here and there, unable to contain their feelings. The global war of insiders is on. The war of the fists is just a few feet away. A nuclear holocaust is at the fingertip of some madman”.

“You are being pessimistic”, I told him, “after all, at all times, humanity has had wise men who have pulled the earth from the brink of the precipice”.

“I agree with you”, he said, “That’s our only hope. But, remember, even Krishna could not prevent the total destruction of his race. He called it his own doing - bringing about the end of the people, whose sins mother earth could not bear. So, our leaders have to be extraordinarily careful.

“Who’ll bell the cat?” I asked.

“Our people”, the lawyer said, “Plato wanted a philosopher to be the king. He would be the most objective, disinterested and just person. If only our people begin to think that way!”

“You must know that people have hardly any respect for the scholar, the philosopher or the intellectual. They suspect such persons. People are inclined to think that the intellectuals will do no good because they have hardly any idea of what the people want”.

“It is not what they want, but what is good for them, that should be the goal of all rulers”.

“We are arguing in a circle. Who is to decide what is good?” To what extent will the people accept such decisions? Does it not sound autocratic?”
“Everything must be put on the bar of justice”, my lawyer friend said. That was his favourite subject. Justice. “Every decision must satisfy the canons of justice”.

Is not justice man made? That was my query. All along I was learning from my friend during this part of the journey. Somehow I had missed the points of people’s confrontation with justice, the social tension, about which my friend wanted to speak. It was easy to think that all was well.

My friend replied: “Philosophers, both in the West and the East have said that a sense of justice was basically inherent in man and pointed out the circumstances that underplayed it and that was always for selfish reasons. Our scriptures say that dharma, which is justice and rta which is order, governed the cosmos and the welfare of man and society depended upon how well they brought dharma and rta to regulate our lives. Man evolved and began to understand the various niceties of dharma and laid down the practices and precepts that must be observed in order to obtain the larger dharma. In the process, you could say that the dharma became relative to time, place and circumstances. Still the foundation of the Cosmic Dharma was always adhered to.

“The Western philosophers examined the concept of justice and enunciated the basic principles for human conduct and the governance of the affairs of society. They defined concepts like equality, liberty, fraternity, rights, institutional protection and the like, as the pillars of justice”.

“Was it all a smooth going?” I asked.

“No, it was not”, the lawyer, went on, “tribal, ethnic, racial differences, conflicts, religious interests and tensions in gender relationship tended to disrupt the functioning of the system based on the accepted cannons of justice. Where there ought to be patience, there was intolerance; where love, hate. Economic dominance of the minority corrupted the judicial system. Democratic governance used or abused justice to suit its own purpose. In the end, the ordinary man, the man on the street, is left to look after himself. He reacts with open hatred and violence. Moral considerations are thrown to the winds, wolves roam about. People wanting to live in peace, unprotected women and children, are in danger. Nirbhaya!”
“Yes. *Nirbhaya*, I said, “It’s heart-rending. The world is sorry about that young woman who became a prey to loathsome lust”.

“Uncontrolled passions rule the day, when people have scant respect for justice”.

“Won’t we be able to change?” I asked him, getting concerned about all the developments conceptually narrated by my friend, about which I did not have much information. I had stopped reading newspapers long time ago.

“Yes. But, it involves a change of mind and heart. The odds are against profound transformation during a short period. No doubt, New Age spiritual leaders all over the world are trying to impart instructions for the change. These are not taken, because of the powerful impact of the world fascinations. Besides, as you know, people easily find out whether the man who preaches also practises what he preaches. Even for them, there can be many slips between the cup and the lip!”

“On the whole, I think what you are saying is that, while the social impact of personal transformation is bound to be slow and tortuous, you would like to strengthen the institutional set up that is fair and just, fair to all, with malice to none, just, in particular to those who have come out the worst in the political, economic competition, gender, caste and community domination. A strong case for justice”. I waited for my friend’s reaction.

“You have put it succinctly”, said my friend and added, “In the little world in which children have their existence, says Pip in Charles Dickens’s ‘Great Expectations’, there is nothing so finely perceived and finely felt as injustice”.

“How true”, I said.

“This is quoted by Amartya Sen, the Nobel Laureate in his magnum opus ‘Idea of Justice’”, said the lawyer.

“Oh, that book!” I exclaimed. “It’s with me. My friend Sriram Ayer presented it to me. I read it through and through. At first, I did not understand much. Then the ideas from the book came crowding into my mind with their full meaning. I thought, ‘what a contribution!’”.
“Yes. A great contribution indeed”, said my friend, “I always carry the book with me. He seems to have an approach for every type of injustice. It is not abstract or theoretical. It’s practical. Justice is not defined in an absolute way. Amartya Sen seems to be allergic to such definition.

Instead, his approach is relative, circumstantial. It takes the prevailing conditions into account. It gives no prescription on the basis of the so-called absolute justice”.

“You are summing up better than I understood!” I said.

“I have the book with me. I’ll read to you some of the passages”, he said.

We walked some distance. Both of us were old, our legs were getting weary. Not the body, but the spirit was moving us to some unknown destination. I did not know how long the old lawyer would go with me. He was a busy man with too many cases in the courts which brought him a lot of money. No one knew what was ahead of us. We proceeded to the shade of a big banyan tree. Birds of many descriptions were nesting there, talking to each other in their own language. We took cool coconut water from the vendor and tasted the pulp mixed with jaggery with relish. It was not warm. It was pleasant, since we seemed to be on some elevation. The lawyer took out the book from his bag and began reading from Amartya Sen’s “Idea of Justice”:

“I expect Pip is right: as he vividly recollects after his humiliating experience with Estella, ‘the capricious and violent coercion’, he suffered as a child at the hands of his own sister. But the strong perception of manifold injustice applies to adults as well. What moves us reasonably enough is not the realization that the world falls short of being completely just - which few of us expect – but there are clearly remediable injustices around us which we want to eliminate”.

“This is evident enough in our day-to-day life with inequities or subjugations from which we may suffer and which we have good reason to resent, but it also applies to more widespread diagnoses in the wider world in which we live. It is fair to assume that the Parisians would not have stormed the Bastille, Gandhi would not have challenged the empire on which the
sun used not to set, Martin Luther King would not have fought white supremacy, 'in the land of the free and the love of the brave', without their sense of manifest injustices that could be overcome. They were not trying to achieve a perfectly just world (even if there were an agreement on what that should be like), but they did want to remove clear injustices to the extent they could”.

“The identification of redressable injustice is what animates us to think about the theory of justice - (Its) aim is to clarify how we can proceed to address questions of enhancing justice, removing injustice, rather than to offer resolutions of questions about the nature of perfect justice”.

At the global level, Amartya Sen gives examples of standing injustices. My friend reads:

“We are engaged in making comparison, in terms of the advancement of justice, whether we fight oppression (like slavery and subjugation of women), or protest against systematic neglect (through the absence of medical facilities in parts of Africa, Asia or lack of universal health coverage in most countries in the world, including the United States) or repudiate the permissibility of torture (which continues to be used with remarkable frequency in the contemporary world) or reject the quiet tolerance of chronic hunger (for example, India). We may agree that some changes contemplated will reduce injustice. But, even if all agreed changes are successfully implemented, we will not have anything that we can call perfect justice”.

He finished reading. He was a lawyer and was used to reading pages and pages of documents and legal books and decisions before the courts in order to drive home a single point in favour of his clients. The Hon'ble Judges were human beings. Sometimes, they dozed off. But, they were always sharp. They woke up just in time to catch a point and question the lawyer on some crucial aspects. The unprepared lawyers could be thrown off balance unless they were equally sharp and rose to the occasion to gently remind the Lordship that that wasn’t the point under discussion. My lawyer friend was an adept, and waited for the Lordship’s rest to
draw out a plantain from his long coat pocket, gulp it and was ready for further reading from the legal scriptures.

“Sir”, I told him, “I appreciate that you brought out some good points. Let’s face the facts. As we are talking, dozens of young women have been raped or harassed. Educated women face professional hazards most of the time. The Harijans are not allowed to take the dead bodies through streets where the so-called higher castes reside. Their houses are burnt and looted because a Harijan boy loved a high caste girl. And look at this. A respected foreign Christian missionary is murdered for preaching his religion. A group of terrorists just walk into a five star hotel and shoot and kill whomsoever they see – two hundred innocent persons dead. The other day, I saw a documentary of a village woman, who had given birth to a girl child, feeding her from a bottle of milk mixed with extractions from local herbs and the whole of it is poison. Welfare workers, on hearing that such practices are rampant in the village, visit the spot to prevent the woman from poisoning the child. It is too late. The girl child is dead”.

“Institutional democracy, running with the aid of the legislature, executive and the judiciary, seems incapable of halting such noxious practices. They are in power. Power corrupts. Rulers forget why they are in power. They turn away towards the international scenario in order to divert their minds from the local problems. When they look at them, if at all, they seek to keep the masses content by spending large sums of money from the exchequer, on questionable schemes. Money is what money does. It rotates from pocket to pocket and finds its destination in undeserving hands. The slender legs of democracy seem to be cracking”.

The spirit of the lawyer rose. His face turned reddish and his lips quivered.

“What are we here for?” thundered the lawyer, “We are here to protect civil liberties. We’ll fight injustice, through the courts and the public forums. We’ll bring to book the culprits, wherever they are. Our punishment law must be made more severe. People say ‘No capital punishment!’ They want the culprit to be languishing in jail till the end of his life. Of what earthly use is that? Do you expect him to read the Bhagavad Gita in jail and change and write a commentary?
All those crude criminals, including the wealthy ones, destroy the dharmic fabric of the society, by their wanton acts, and need to go. If they had had any inclination for scripture, they would not have been in the jail at all. We have totally corrupted our system and we do not know who is wrong and who is right. We can put down evil in the society, if only the society understands that there is evil. Films, TV and the magazines exalt evil and our children and young men have imbibed a sneaking admiration for violence. They are up in arms for no reason. A school student strangles his teacher because she took him to task for poor academic performance. Students wield the lathi and cycle-chains and sometimes pistols of their parents, against fellow students, on simple disputes that could be settled just by talking. We need the arm of law to go long, sir!”

“A long exposition”, I said, “what are your practical solutions?”

The lawyer paused, took a deep breath. He said, “Not one solution, but many. Who’ll listen to me? First and foremost, Sir, is education. Not just the learning process. Education of a moral kind, which makes people see right and wrong with better appreciation. A more active place for the well-meaning thinker in society who is not influenced by money, power or any other considerations. Making people know that the respect for law is in the social interest. Parents, teachers, children, all need a strong dose of lessons in public and private morality. The institutional arrangements of democracy are crucial for the peace of the society and everyone shall contribute to strengthening them - particularly men in public offices. An overhaul of the educational system that helps to kindle the fire of creativity and tap the original innate resources of the children and the young people - I can keep listing”.

“Don’t worry, my friend”, I said, “thanks for telling me so many things that I did not know. These are matters which the people must study, argue and come to a collective understanding. You had quoted Amartya Sen. I’m sure you must have read his other well-known book, ‘The Argumentative Indian’. There, he stresses the need for what he calls ‘public reasoning’ in all public transactions. He quotes Rabindranath Tagore, who also emphasises the role of deliberations, and reasoning as foundation of good society”.
“Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high
Where knowledge is free
Where the world has not been broken up into fragments
By narrow domestic walls
Where words come out from the depth of truth
Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection
Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way
Into the dreary desert sand of dead habit
Where the mind is led forward by thee
Into ever-widening thought and action
Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.”

I take leave of the lawyer. He has work to attend to. I have to move. I proceed.

B. DISCUSSION
A Pilgrim's Progress
A. INTRODUCTION

For over half a century, the Buddha walked the length and breadth of the vast Gangetic plains of North India, unmindful of sun and rains, preaching his wisdom to the people and gathering hundreds of thousands into his fold. He talked to them about suffering and sorrow, told them how to get rid of them and lead an enlightened peaceful life.

Today, great monuments speak of the glory of his time and the role that the Buddha played in bringing the king and the commoner to an equal platform of understanding, of love and compassion.

Dr. V. S. Krishnakumari has visited many of the places associated with the life of the Buddha. In addition, she has gone ahead, following the trails of Ashoka, to Sanchi and the Kalinga’s River of Sorrow. She made a presentation before the members of Hamsa UK, at Durham last year, which was received well.

Dr. Krishnakumari now makes the presentation at Hamsa’s Trichur Retreat, 2013.

B. PRESENTATION

* * * *
A Pilgrim's Progress
A. INTRODUCTION

“They say that Life is a highway and its Milestones are the years, And now and then there’s a toll-gate Where you buy your way with tears It’s a rough road and a steep road, and It stretches broad and far, But, it leads at last to Golden Town Where Golden Houses are”

(American poet Joyce Kilmer – 1886-1918)

The above stanza is the fifth in a poem “Roof” addressed to Amelia Josephine Burr. This American poet enlisted himself in the army during World War I and was killed in action in France in 1918 at a young age of thirty one. His last lines seem prophetic.

“It’s a rough road and a steep road and it stretches broad and far, but it leads at last to a Golden Town where Golden Houses are”.

One would not like to imagine a rougher or steeper road than the trenches of World War I, in the depth of winter. Somehow, Joyce Kilmer seems to have known about an even grander home, beyond life, beyond death. In another beautiful poem “Tree” that he wrote, the last lines read:

“Poems are made by fools like me, Only God can make a tree”.

Man’s instinct is to travel. Evolution taught him to keep moving from place to place in search of food, companions, contacts and novelty. The harder the road, the more adventure there was, the more determined he became. He was impelled by an urge to conquer and master and then make friends. In the beginning, animals, too, went from place to place, in search of prey. By nature,
they could brook no opposition and began to kill each other. Slowly they learned to define and demarcate their territory. The choice of the master was determined by strength, agility and leadership quality. Within the territory, the master was all powerful. I was amazed to learn that among the elephants, the lordship was matriarchal and the males formed a separate group. After thousands of years, man decided to settle at one place in order to care for the crop and the cattle. Home became his heaven. After a day-long physical activity, tending cattle, looking after the fields, or chasing little game for food, he walked back to his home, or whatever it was, for an evening of relaxation with his family. He might not have prayed to God for peace and security, but in his settled home and in the company of his family, he got all that he wanted.

I would like you not to think that I am writing something about the primitive form of life. What is ‘primitive’ after all? It could denote an early stage in human evolution or an early form of organisation or extremely basic level of comfort, or at worst, it may mean a behaviour, dominated by emotions, manifesting itself in instinctive and unreasonable actions. All these do not condemn ‘primitivism’ straightaway. The word ‘primitive’ does not lead us to the presumption that it is a ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’ life. The words ‘bad’ or ‘immoral’ are later-day incorporations into life, thought and action, owing to the influence of the religions. Rousseau, the great French philosopher, believed that natural man was virtuous. He said that it was modernisation that curbed man’s natural goodness. Man is born free, he said, but man is everywhere in chains. Rousseau’s “The Social Contract” gave impetus to the movement to extend sympathy to the voiceless and the oppressed, be they human or animal. As I said earlier, it proposed a new set of values, echoed by William Wordsworth’s belief that the new system of values was based on right instinct rather than learning. Wordsworth put it firmly on the ground, when he said that simple people often showed more courage and loyalty and unselfishness than sophisticated people and also a greater sense of ‘wholeness of life’.

A life of simplicity. This is what I am now coming to. Such a life may have been a natural passage towards peace and contentment in the past. It contained a few essential ingredients which members of the society accepted without question, because their concern was
for the greater good. Today, a single life has become a ‘road less travelled’. It was Robert Frost (1874-1963) who spoke of the road less travelled. This is also the title of a series of popular books on self-help and management. Robert Frost wrote:

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence;
Two roads diverged in a wood and I –
Took the one less traveled by
And that has made all the difference”.

The poem is titled “The Road not Taken” and the above stanza is the last of the poem. Robert Frost contemplates something more transcendental than merely picking up a less busy highway at a fork in the road. In the earlier stanzas, the two roads diverge in the wood and Frost contemplates ‘if I should ever come back’. He implies that he has only one chance here. I cannot take one road, and if it does not work, come back and take another. He has to decide and his instinct guides him and he takes the ‘road less travelled’. Robert Frost gives us the valuable lesson that living out your life, not following the pack, choosing your own path, can make all the difference. There is a sense of freedom and coupled with it, a sense of responsibility. It’s your life!

If you truly want to make a difference in your life, you cannot do so by doing things which everyone else does, or by living like everyone else. If you choose to live a life the way everyone does, what is it that you have to offer? The road most travelled, is one which will make you accepted. But, it will not allow you to make a difference. The enduring contributions of great thinkers happened because they took the road less travelled. They endured despite the criticism of those who chose the more common path.

The more commonly placed you are, better are your opportunities to choose a different road. You may become a pioneer in pointing out new adventures of the mind, new experiences. You are also more independent, since none is likely to oppose your choice at that stage. But, once you opt for the well-beaten track, because you want security, you want to be acceptable, then, as you progress, it is going to be impossible for you to retrace your step, even though you may have a strong urge to do so because the society will not let you go off so easily.
Each life is a separate highway. It cannot and should not be another person’s highway. Highways may cross and criss-cross, but each life moves to its known and unknown destination, in its own way. Call it *karma* or destiny or God’s will or one’s own follies and mistakes or give it whatever name you want. The fact is that there is a mystery, like the wintry morning fog, and you don’t see clearly, and therefore you created your own limited vision as to how to take the next step and where to place it on this broad and wide highway. You saturate yourself with thoughts and feelings and you think you are doing the right thing. God Bless you! Let it be so. You are stumped, when you reach a tollgate, because the keeper asks for his pound of flesh, and you have none. But, you cannot go back. There is no turning back in life. At best, you may look back, see what you have done. Either you are inspired because of your worthwhile past, or depressed because you made too many mistakes. Inspiration makes you find the money, somehow, to pay the gatekeeper, but with depression you begin to shed tears, and the gatekeeper takes pity on you and allows you to go on the condition that, when your successors – your wife and children – happen to traverse the same path, they should pay the penalty on your account. Life does not let us go easily when we make a mistake or do a bad thing. Life knows that such things are not good for your final rest and treats you with a sharp whip here and there. You experience the painful sting and release a helpless cry, but that is good for you, because you are freed, like the man in Huxley’s “Brave New World” who utters a hoarse cry of happiness as he lashes his whip on his own body, since that body had suffered from too much pleasure.

They tell us that there is only one life for each one of us. There is no life after life. Life is a linear highway that begins at Point A and ends at Point B. We may not be able to foresee the tollgates, the stones, the bridges, the curves or other events. The only event we can predict with certainty is the one we least like to think about – death. People do not want to end with death. They cannot accept it gracefully. They want to go beyond. So, they create a future for life – an uncertain future, though. They want to fantasise about the glories of an after-life, where you can have a wondrous time, provided you have been a good, virtuous and well-behaved person in your life. They also want to believe that death is a prelude to rebirth, the womb of life, the most natural thing that can happen,
Life is a Highway

since one life is not enough to achieve the best of body, mind and spirit.

Those, who tell us that there is only one life, have their own philosophy of living. Since we do not know what is there when we cease to exist, why bother about the goals and purposes of life? Life is a fountain of pleasure, they say, and let’s drink life to the lees. We have no regrets at the end. We have experienced what we wanted to, we need nothing more. This was the philosophy that held its ground strongly for a thousand years, at least, in India and it came to be known as Lokayata. A life without a cause. Paulo Coelho somewhere says: “I only know that a life without a cause is a life without effect. And I cannot allow that to happen for me”.

There are others who would say that life’s highway is not a blind alley at all. You are trying to measure it by time and distance. These are not the parameters to be talked of with reference to life. How intensely we are able to foresee our growth, our possibilities, that sets the goal for you and then life’s highway can be full of many goals. No man is an island unto himself. We are not alone on this earth. Our goals and our possibilities can only be with reference to all others. Within one lifetime, there are things that you can do on the human scale, which does not require another life, and another life. Life is full of challenges, if only we can wake up to them. We also need friends. We need the help of everything around us, in order to extend a helping hand to everyone in need. There is a satisfaction when we have done some good turn and that can make us humble.

The goal that I have talked about is not the one that is rationally conceived, meticulously worked out and achieved with great skill and intellectual brilliance. The runner keeps running faster in order to reach the post in the shortest possible time. Parents set goals for children to achieve the best results in the examinations. They set a target for themselves to drive their children to grow to a level in profession, administration and the like, which had been their own personal dreams to realise, and may be, they could not. Nations fix goals for economic growth based on certain calculations, and these can prove wrong, because unusual circumstances can defy the logic and the computer. The goal, if at all, that I would like to set for myself, is transcendent. It will echo Robert Browning’s sentiment:
“Ah, but a man’s reach shall exceed his grasp, 
Or what’s heaven for?”

This goal should take me beyond myself, towards others. It should help me to see humanity in the palm of my hand. It should make me cry when others cry and laugh when others laugh. If I don’t do either, I know my ego is on top of me, crushing me with its weight. If I have a soul and God is seated in my soul, I should be able to see God seated in all other souls too. I should not see any difference. Whether it is a white face, like Hamlet or a black one, like Othello, we are all one in our emotions, said Dr. Radhakrishnan. He speaks only of emotions. We must learn to go beyond our emotions, our intelligence, our spirit, into the realm where Love rules and binds people together, with or without their knowing.

Such a goal is not intellectual. It is inspirational. It springs from the heart, transcending logic and reason. When Mahatma Gandhi decided that the British rulers should quit India, it was not an intellectual decision. It was a spiritual inspiration that made him set the goal, because he knew that freedom was the birthright of man and one sixth of humanity could not suffer servitude under an alien rule. Fear of death gripped Sri Ramana Maharishi when he was a schoolboy. After the fear eased, he did not go to a park, sit on a bench and try to rationalise his fear. He threw up everything, without thinking for a moment, went to a temple city and lost himself in profound contemplation, in search of an answer to the ultimate question of death. Mother Teresa saw the poor and the crumbling people affected with leprosy and other dreadful diseases and plunged into a mission for the relief of the sick and suffering humanity. She just put her trust in God, asking Him to give her strength that she could develop a vision that was as divine as it was human.

In a remote Japanese village, an old man died and the family gathered around the body and were weeping loudly. An old Buddhist monk, who was passing by, stopped, joined the gathering and began to cry also. The family members were surprised and asked him why he was weeping when he had had no connection with the dead man. The monk replied:
“It’s as much a loss to me as it is to you. In sorrow we are not different”.

The goal to be with the people, to feel one with them, to share their feelings may not look like a goal at all. It seems so simple and silly. It does not seem to do anything to enhance your personality or meet you ego’s demand that you should be different, distinct and not feel like others. Events like births, weddings, deaths are social happenings, and your participation is intended to signify your august presence. You see, the goal may look simple, but it is challenging indeed. It means transfer of attention from our own little selves, our position, status, wealth and authority, to others, however lowly placed they may be.

“Where is the pleasure in looking for God outside the people?”

Paulo Coelho in his beautiful novel “Aleph” describes a mystical journey across the whole of Russia by train:

“I know many people”, he says, “who have done just that (looking for God outside people). I once had a serious and at the same time comical talk with a Buddhist nun who had spent twenty years alone in a cave in Nepal. I asked her what she had achieved. ‘Spiritual orgasm’, she replied, to which I replied that there were far easier ways to achieve orgasm”.

“I could never follow that path. It is simply not on my horizon. I cannot and could not spend the rest of my life in search of spiritual orgasms or contemplating the oak tree in my garden, waiting for wisdom to descend. I make this journey so that I would understand that my path is reflected in the eyes of others and that, if I want to find myself, I need that map”.

The goal of the kind that I am speaking of is always inspired by a dream. Life says that when you rest and get away from the dull realities of your everyday life, you must learn to dream. Life is an adventure that way. You are nourishing something that is very crucial to the formation of a goal and for your further progress – your dreams.

I love my dreams. I used to dream twice or thrice every night. The dreams taught me a lot. They showed me where I was going. They revealed to me the deep-layered problems that I suffered from
and told me how to overcome them. Man's mind suffers from a hundred suppressions, from family commitments, social necessities, professional hazards, insecurity about the future, worries about the children and so on. The conscious mind, having to handle them all the time, places a high premium on rational solutions and just misses the intuitive upwelling. The dreams help to unbury the hidden wisdom and gives scope for creativity, from out of which can emerge a new goal, a new vision.

In the course of my physical ailments, I used to suffer from sleeplessness. The doctors prescribed Valium, the wonder drug that gives sleep and peace to millions all over the world. It is fashionable to call oneself a Valium addict. Valium gave me sleep, but deprived me of my dreams. I could not dream at all, and my restlessness increased. With great difficulty, I managed to extricate myself from that drug and I started dreaming again, with the natural restoration of sleep.

You are talking of the dream that comes while sleeping, I hear you say. What about the dream of the goal which you really have in mind? The answer - you must never stop dreaming, that is, you must learn to feel, repeatedly, that a vision for the future must embrace the whole of humanity. A dream may suddenly turn up and it may not look rational. It may defy logic. But something in you has already told you that - that is the vision to cultivate and concretise. You may call it day-dreaming. But it has shaken you from your narrow self. It has set the goal for you. It will mean showing or clarifying a path to the people that they ought to take in order to make their own lives happier. That's why we must never stop dreaming. Dreams provide nourishment for the soul, says Paulo, just as food provides nourishment for the body. It may be that on occasions, our dreams get shattered. But we have to continue dreaming. If we don't, our soul languishes and dies and our desire for reaching out to people may not be fulfilled.

Sometimes, we shatter our own dreams. We do this, may be, by complaining of lack of time. We have seen the busiest people who also have enough time to do everything. Mahatma Gandhi or Mother Teresa was the kind of person who achieved so much and they never complained about time. Only those who do nothing and pay no attention to the little amount of work they are required to do,
who complain constantly that the day is too short. They are afraid to
dream or achieve the goal shown to them in their dreams, if they
dream at all.

We kill our dreams by what in our opinion is certain and does not
require any further reflection. We do not want to see life as a grand
adventure and we begin to think of ourselves as wise, fair and
correct. Full-stop to all creativity. We do not want to look beyond
the walls of our everyday existence - we may see battles, righteous
and unrighteous, being waged in front of our eyes, we may smell the
dust and the sweat, but we will not put in a wee bit to promote the
right cause, because our studiously cultivated complacency will be
shattered. We will see things as in a movie house, sitting, shorn of
all emotions and say that, of course, we know the end.

We praise peace in the world, because it is rare and difficult to
achieve. Strangely, our very peacefulness can blot the pathway to
our dreams. Life becomes a weekend holiday. We do not want to
ask for anything spectacular, our demand is to allow us to be in
peace. That helps us to look mature in the eyes of others, and we
can afford to put aside the fantasies of youth. That gives us the
freedom during the week to enter the blind alley of personal and
professional achievements. We feign a surprise when others of our
age want this and that. With such symptoms, it is good to know,
deep in our hearts, that what has happened is that we have
renounced the battle for our dreams. We want dreamless sleep
because it is believed that it would take us closer to eternity.

Life is a different kind of highway, where progress depends on
our dreams. That means you are getting constantly inspired. At the
inspirational level, you are going beyond what is mundane and
encounter a balanced feeling that comes from being in spirit. You
are recreating with spirit. That means that many of the things we
thought were outside our power to manifest, awaken within us, like
the flower buds at the fresh smell of the first rains. With an
awakened new energy, you will be a source of immense help to
others and that is what we are here for. A translation of some sutras
of Patanjali, one of the greatest spiritual masters of all times, quoted
by Wayne. W. Dyer in his “Wisdom of the Ages”, reads as follows:
“When you are inspired by some great Purpose, some extraordinary project
All your thoughts create their bonds;
Your mind transcends limitations,
Your consciousness expands in every direction,
And you find yourself in a new great
And wonderful world
Dormant forces, faculties and talents
Become alive, and you discover yourself
To be a greater person by far
Than you ever dreamed
Yourself to be”.

If a dream can take you this far, why not dream?

One major tollgate on life’s highway is our own perception of life not as a highway, but as an ocean. It is difficult enough to conceive of life’s highway as a straight line where time starts and ends. To imagine life as an ocean, a circular ocean, stretches our imagination. But, the inspired minds of our seers visualised such a picture. They called it ‘samsara’. Life is a samsaric ocean. The Sanskrit word ‘samsara’ means ‘to go deeply into anything’. The meaning is interesting. All of us get so involved with our lives, go so deeply, that we are unable to extricate ourselves from it, we face waves of experience, good and bad, and countering them and getting out of them tires us the whole time. Storms batter us mid ocean, and we might drown and be dead, but for some raft that we notice, by chance. No one knows when and how the raft will reach us. Every moment we are in danger of death, as giant fish fly up from the ocean and assault us, and the sharks race towards us for our flesh.

All this is because of what you did in your previous samsara, we are told. If only you had cared to listen to us, and done your duties properly, the ocean would have been like a smooth flowing river, and the calm waters would have borne you aloft to the other shore. Now, repent deeply, and pray to the Only One who can help you. We are totally exhausted, unable even to breathe, as we just manage to cling to the raft, and we lose consciousness. Where are we? Is it the other shore? No one knows. Isn’t Death the biggest healer of all woes?
Life’s highway journey is not complete without suffering. There is no life without suffering. Life hurts in many ways. There ought to be suffering where there is growth. Suffering serves the purpose of telling us that ‘something is wrong’, something does not fit in. Suffering tells us to move on in a pilgrimage to seek out ways of fitting into our ‘higher being’ and into the community of other imperfect suffering beings.

Life hurts, brings suffering in many ways, but in the hurt there is potential for growing. Growing comes with gratitude, forgiveness and love. When suffering is overcome, these emotions are not transitory experiences, but a profound understanding – leading to understand other people’s sufferings and also do something to heal them. When there is action that way, there is gratitude on both sides, ‘which is the natural expression of being in peace’.

Suffering helps us to see reality better. The essence of suffering is ‘to be done to’. In a true sense, suffering makes us real, for it defines our boundaries. Boundaries are not negative, as is commonly understood. They are important for their positive functions. They define us. By setting limits in a way that gives identity, they tell us who we are and who we are not. By this they make us ‘fit in’, ‘belong’, so that we are not alone and other people are there to share our suffering, even as we are there to share theirs.

A friend’s wife, diagnosed with cancer said: “Thank God, it’s not heart attack. I would have died. It’s not a stroke. I could have been immobilised. It’s cancer. May be I have a few years to live. I know what suffering is. I will know the suffering of other people with cancer. I’ll do my best to help them”. She looked after the children in the cancer ward for a year. When she died, the children went to her house and paid her a floral tribute and shed silent tears.

Dean Ornish likes to say that we suffer not because we are in pain. The real suffering is that we feel we are in pain alone. Modern culture has succeeded in isolating us from each other so that people think they are alone. A friend came to me terribly depressed. “No one cares for me”, he said, “No one knows anything about my wants. I am pained because my family did not understand me”. He was luckily saved from committing suicide. I introduced him to a well-
known psychiatrist, a good friend of mine. After a few sessions of therapy, he came back to me and said, “They made me more lonely. I stopped going. I feel relaxed in your presence”. We got closer, I learned a little about his problems and talked to his wife who was very attached to her rich parents. That young man had suffered from tremendous inferiority complex. The wife, an educated woman, understood the situation, began sharing her life and time with her husband with greater concern and involvement and my young friend got so much better.

Suffering and how we react to it may shape and strengthen our purpose. If I am able to grow through my suffering, my experience redeems my suffering and I no longer feel it. Albert Schweitzer, the great humanist, whom Mahatma Gandhi admired, spoke of ‘the fellowship of those who bear the mark of pain’. Schweitzer had his health restored through a series of difficult operations. After he went through those painful experiences, he knew suffering first hand and out of that he responded magnificently to an inner urge to alleviate the suffering of others.

Where is the suffering? Who suffers, asks Paramahamsa Yogananda, one of the most influential Yogi’s of our time, who taught the Western world, through his own experience, about how the Ineffable and Indescribable can be felt within. The Yogi says:

“Man has falsely identified himself with the pseudo-soul or ego. When he transfers his sense of identity to his true being, the immortal Soul, he discovers that all pain is unreal. We no longer can even imagine the state of suffering”.

In the essence of your true being, according to Sri Yogananda, pain is unreal. But, we live in a world that is real, where problems are real and suffering is real. But, what if you are a spectator of your own suffering? Don’t laugh. You can be your own observer, says another well-known Yogi and mystic, Nisargadatta Maharaj:

“You do not suffer. Only the person you imagine yourself to be suffers. You cannot suffer”.

This is an awesome challenge – not to be your known self that suffers but to be your true self that does not suffer. Dr. Deepak Chopra, the eminent American physician-spiritualist recalls a Buddhist monk telling him:
“Just remember this and you will never suffer again. Nothing should be clung to as me or mine”.

If you keep this in mind, it will help you to eliminate your false identity with your ego. This ego is all about self-importance.

For some reason or other, you keep pitying yourself. You feel low in your self-esteem. Others have done better than you. Your pride is hurt. In the modern world, you can take revenge only subtly, indirectly, and there are many methods and specialists to advise you on the same. You go to the beach and sit in a lonely corner, since you are in depression. You watch the sky, almost involuntarily, as the dusk settles and tiny stars begin to twinkle in the dark sky. Suddenly you are lifted from your depression. You begin to observe your own self-made sufferings. You want to laugh, but your ego stops you and wants you to pursue your mission of hatred and carry on with the suffering. The Native American tribes are known to sing: “Now and then I go about pitying myself and all the while my soul is being blown by great winds across the sky”.

Who wins, yourself or your ego?

Life is not long, the highway is long.

Let me proceed further.

B. DISCUSSION

* * *
A Pilgrim's Progress
A. INTRODUCTION

I, too, am amidst towering mountains. I am climbing up to the summit. There are actually rows and rows of tall peaks, that I do not know which the summit really is. I have climbed with great strain, for my age. I want to see the sun rise from the top. I want to enjoy the early morning sun rise from behind the peaks and spread its crimson radiance across the pale blue sky. My friends are no longer with me. They thought it was crazy to ascend the tough mountain path just to see the morning sun. They chose different paths on the arid, stony plains. They would not agree with me that life’s highway, in fact, ran through the mountains. The road, no doubt, narrowed, but its very narrowness was ideal for walking alone. Sages chose to walk alone. They had revelations about humanity when humanity was not there.

Years ago, I had gone to Darjeeling with an American friend. She was young, pleasant and was keen to study the Indian religions. She had plenty of money at home, and her stockbroker husband, a rich man, lavished his wealth on her. So she was free. One very early morning, we took a taxi from the hotel where we were staying and went to the Tiger Hill, a sharp edge of land close to a dark deep valley, from which rose the towering Himalayas, a huge, impenetrable wall of ice. We had gone there to witness the sunrise, which would clear the veil of mist from the snow and reveal Kanchenjunga, the world’s third highest mountain peak. Even before we reached the place, a small crowd had gathered and had occupied vantage positions while the chaiwala did a roaring business.

The expected thing happened. It was a cloudless morning, the yellow rays of the sun began to play about the tall cliffs and there it was, the giant peak, displaying all its sides to the sun’s rays, whose multi-colours began their eternal dance around the peaks and the sky lit up with the passing colours of the rainbow, breaking through
the mist, dull and sombre at first, growing deeper and darker in colours as the sun slowly climbed. It was breathtaking.

“The mountains are spiritual!” said Jane, my friend. She was sitting cross-legged on a mat which she always carried with her. She was immersed in the celestial display of colours, as everyone around was.

“So are the valleys”, I said, “So are the rivers, the trees, the flowers!”

“I like it, T.V. Sir”, Jane said, “but tell me how”.

“Look at the roses”, I said pointing to the bunch of roses that were blossoming in the morning sun. From one side of the mind you will be inclined to say that the blossom is pale pink, the stem is green, the petals are opening. If you see the flower as a flower-lover, you say nothing at all at first. Your mind is quiet. Your body and mind, likewise, take on the finer texture of appreciation. Then the flower speaks! It tells you that it has not had enough nutrition, that it is very chill, that it is mothering a bud and would like to have a little more sunshine. Whatever it is, it tells you, if you will listen! You don’t feel different from the flower. Both of you merge. The moment you listen to the flower, it has entered your consciousness. The flower records its voice silently at first and then with an increasing degree of closeness, until both of you have become one. Silently, you become the flower. The result is that you, as life, take on colour and fragrance. Your level of consciousness is heightened, and is in the process of experiencing spiritual wisdom, that enables you to forget yourself and love every other soul as your own”.

“You sound mystical!” said Jane.

“To experience a wonder, such as what you have seen is, in fact, mysticism”, I replied.

The daylight became crisp and clear but the chill breeze blowing from far away made me nearly frozen in spite of my heavy woollens. We moved back to the coziness of our hotel.

I do not want to stay too long on that mountain path praying for the dawn of some inner light, the light that will bind you forever to the summit. I want to walk the entire distance of Life and Time and see
When I Climb the Mountains, He is the Summit

what the final teaching of my heart is going to be. Still, I cannot resist the mystics. I had started studying mysticism many years ago, when I was struggling to look for some meaning in my own life. I was confronted with the problem of life and death, for which I could find no solution in economic progress or social interaction. It was a phase in my life when everything was exploding and a ‘mental catharsis’ – to use Arthur Koestler’s phrase, was overtaking me. Conventional faiths and beliefs did not impress me. An urge to confront Reality through experience, if possible, was growing. However, there were many limitations to my pursuit in the context of the circumstances in which I was placed. So, I spent much time studying the mystics in order to understand mysticism. I knew full well that this was no substitute for experience. It was an ineffective and half-hearted way to delve into the deeper recesses of consciousness. A full scale revelation at one stroke was what I could have waited for, if only I had sincerely practiced the methods taught to me by a Zen Master, who was a Christian. But, I had no patience. I was not favoured with much luck. Perhaps, that was my destiny, because later in life, I began to feel that life itself was more important than the revelation of Reality or whatever it was.

We were back in the hotel, comfortably seated in the lounge, tasting hot tomato soup. I was forgetting the world and the environment and Jane. But, Jane would not forget me. She gently touched my arm, as if she was waking me from a deep slumber, and asked.

“How does one have a mystical experience?”

This question frequently dominates the thought of the intellectual theorist. In some way, all of us, billions of us, have had mystical experiences. We have, at some time or the other, received imprint of an ineffable nature upon our consciousness. It lasts for a lifetime. It defies confinement in words. It has a holistic influence. It enables you to see all the parts in an integrated structure that gives a higher meaning than the parts viewed in separation. No more proof is necessary than the effect of the experience itself. The experience itself may be transient, but it produces a powerful internal impact which reveals itself gradually in the expansion of the consciousness, better understanding of the self and a desire for future growth. It’s like a butterfly’s touch upon the mind’s flowering, a deep stirring of
the heart upon the kiss of the beloved, a gentle feel of the smooth
fingers of a child upon your cheeks. And yet, such experience can
produce enriching influence of a lifetime.

**Rupert Brooke,** during an ordinary tea party, felt, in the midst of
a casual conversation, a flash that is truly mystical:

> “One instant, I, an instant, knew
> As God knows all. And it and you
> I, above Time, Oh, blind! Could see
> In witless immortality”.

The longing is to hold on to that moment, and we cannot, and we
reach out to recapture the moment. Everywhere and in everything,
there is a rhythm; a cyclical movement of life itself. There may be a
reversal in the flow of a consciousness, our attitudes and faith and
the flash of illustration may take us to the dark nights, when we feel
sad over the experience of a loss, and decide to ascend a new
ladder of understanding. There is a peace that makes us know
things better, a quietness that fills us with the spirit, and a yearning
starts for a new knowing. All mystical experience is valid to the
extent to which it fills us with a transforming power, a power that may
shake us out of our foundation, and gently lead us by its hands to a
newer Reality. Our clarity improves a thousand-fold, for a light
shines from a source we know not of, and the world is transformed,
because we are transformed. We have within us a new name. We
have become carriers of a new ‘consciousness’.

> “Did you have any such experience?” Jane asks. She is
becoming curiouser. She is keen to know more about me.

> “I don’t know if you would call this such an experience. But, it
definitely gave me a new perspective”, I said.

> “What’s it?” she wanted to know.

> “It was the death of my wife”, I said.

> “Her last hours. I was with her all through, sitting by her side on
the cot. She kept embracing me tightly. I was afraid her hands
would pain. But, she would not let go. The doctor kept monitoring
her condition. Slowly her arm slipped. One look. There was
indescribable peace in her eyes. And her eyes closed. Her breath
slowed and the last one – it was clear to me, that something was
leaving her body. In the gentleness of her limbs, I could see true life. The flight of the last breath. To me, that was an ethereal experience. It just flew off, like the bird that flies from darkness, through the brilliantly lit chamber, into darkness again. That very moment, I felt total, whole, there was one Spirit, nothing else. You and I and she are part. You learn from that experience, that very instance. You learn of the power of Love. You know that Life is a supernatural gift. There is no need to think, to analyse, to figure out things through a rational mind, Love is All”.

“Beautiful!” said Jane, “You have said all that a mystic could say”.

I did not say anything but deep in my heart tears of love were filling fast.

“It’s the love of God that the mystics speak of”, Jane continued, “not so much about human love. How do they connect?”

“Interesting that they do”, I replied, “when the mystical consciousness creates a wholeness of spirit, and a feeling of Oneness, the mystic sees love and life in everything and gratitude moves him, which, in turn, inspires Love for that Oneness which is manifested in all multiplicity. Just like this, you pour out your love to the smallest creature and it responds to your love and grows and blossoms more beautifully, because you have given it friendship, compassion. Even so, the mystic feels it natural to pour out his love to his God, because he has experienced that Oneness and his gratitude turns into love”.

Such love embraces not only a Supreme Power but all living things in the world. The love of God is the dominant force and that pushes the mystic towards an everlasting union with Him. The path of Love, then, becomes the way, by which the soul makes an inward journey, fully aware of its true identity with the Absolute. The mystic has become an ardent lover, who wants to purify himself more and more, cleanse himself so as to receive his Beloved. The mystic subdues all his outward energies and becomes ready to dissolve himself into the everlasting love of the Greatest Being. The mystic renounces all regard for himself, divests himself of all fascination with the manifest phenomena, both inner and outer, and is eventually filled with overwhelming love, that he is dissolved, he is no longer his being. There is no more any illusory duality between him.
and God and the awareness of a Supreme Reality dawns with such clarity that he is filled with overpowering Love. Love imitates experience, is the centre of experience and the final end of all experience. The mystic sees all living beings with that experience. He sees no distinction between them and God”.

For many of us, such love may be difficult to appreciate. Rumi says:

“Whatever I say in exposition and explanation of love, When I am to love, I am ashamed of that explanation, The speech of the tongue may elucidate. But, speechless love is yet more clear The pen hastily writes, but where it comes to love It shatters into two When the intellect tries to explain love, it becomes heedlessly Stuck like ass in the mud, It’s love alone that can give proper expression to love These loves which are for appearances only are not love – They are a disgrace! Such shows of love must be abandoned; In its place, real love must grow. All that is Other than true ‘I’ must be slain!”

“That’s a great description of love!” said Jane. But, tell me, was Love of God, the only thing which the mystic pursued?”

“Let me put it this way. The mystics are involved in the transmission of a certain kind of knowledge, possessing which nothing more is to be known”.

Man’s need is to know. Knowledge tempts him and he seeks to know more and more. Quite often, we are content to know what other people know. But, there is an area of knowledge, which is integrating and tantalising which, our spirit tells us, we ought to know at all costs. Not all of us are interested in knowing, in depth, mere scientific facts or philosophical positions. There is a knowing that must be individual. When events, circumstances or conditions confront us, we become aware of the urgency to pursue that knowledge – roots of our being - and we are no longer satisfied with another person’s knowledge. It is our own insight that must illumine
our heart; our own wisdom, the authority of which is final and convincing.

What is it that man needs to know? Essentially, the search is for meaning. The capacity to see the meaningfulness of everything is the distinctive feature of man’s quest for knowledge. We ask how the mechanism of the universe operates. The advancing awareness is not content with the knowledge of the outside of things. We ask to know the internal order of nature, the inwardness of things. Ultimately our consciousness is not satisfied with anything less than the complete perception of the Reality, which is a window to the comprehension of the sum total of things that explains everything.

The experience of the wholeness of life is the domain of the mystic. To see the sunrise everyday is an experience. It happens, not in the books, but in the world we live in. And the experience is not based on any scientific theory, but is an event to which we have ascribed meaning and also value. It gives us a wholesome feeling which words may find difficult to describe.

**Aldous Huxley** said:

“*Mysticism is the channel through which a little knowledge of the Reality seeps. It is an encounter with the totality of experience. This experience is a fact, a certainty and therefore, has to be given the status of knowledge*”.

“How do religion and mysticism get along? Were the founders of religions mystic too?”

It was Jane asking. I could see she was listening intently. When I met her for the first time, it was in a temple. She was an excited tourist taking countless pictures. It seemed that it was no accident that we met in front of the sanctum sanctorum of the Chief Goddess. I had gone there for my worship and meditation as usual.

“Howdy!” she said.

“Howdy!”

“I’m from New York. It’s all fascinating. It’s a wonderful temple. Wonderful people! The way you offer your worship, how true, how moving!”
“Come, Let’s go and sit somewhere”, I said.

“If you don’t mind, you can come to the hotel. We can have coffee in the Coffee Shop. I would love to know more about your religion!”

Thus began a friendship that lasted two decades. Jane stayed in India during most of this period. She visited numerous temples, stayed in a few ashrams and took to a serious study of Hinduism from some of my friends, who were competent scholars. I, too, had gone with her during some of her trips. She loved travelling by the Indian railway trains. I, too, liked it. Great question and answer sessions filled much of our time. Needless to say, I learned as much from her questions as she did, I suppose, from my answers.

“Religion”, I said, “is a structure of ideas, doctrines and philosophy, all underlining man’s need to accept God and surrender to Him. History has shown, repeatedly, that doctrines demand implicit obedience and unquestioning commitment. Religion may lead to the building of rich and powerful institutions, as materialistic in aims and objectives as the ordinary man’s craving for pleasures in daily life. The power and philosophy of these institutions may be contrary to the spirit and the intent of the founders. Priesthood, ceremonies and rituals may come to dominate in the place of innocent belief. The individual is all the time worried about the problem of the understanding of the externals of religion, when he ought to be soaring in the contemplation of a Divine Presence. Institutional discipline fails to kindle the Divine Spark and may even kill the very devotedness of the well-meaning soul. It is said, when the devil wants to create confusion, he starts an institution. God and the Way give way to ceremonies and rituals. The important truth that religion is a means, not the end, pales into insignificance”.

Swami Vivekananda said:

“It is good to be born in religion, but not to die in it”.

The essence of religion is to experience God. And there can be many paths. The heart of the mystery need not be reached by one road only.

Didn’t Jesus Christ say, “In the Kingdom of God, there are many mansions”?
While some may be content to live on tradition and authority, it is necessary that there should, at least, be a few in society who resolve to see for themselves.

Saint Manickavachakar, the ardent devotee of Lord Siva, said:

“See! I have seen with mine own eyes!”

The mystic’s faith is strong. His confidence in obtaining some revelation, all by himself, is equally strong. It is a faith of insight and knowledge. It is a faith, not of hearsay or dependence. It is a faith that envisions the unseen.

In the beautiful words of St. Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian mystic philosopher:

“It is necessary for the perfection of human society that there should be men who devote themselves to contemplation”.

Society, all the time seeks to condition the individual. Mystics, by their experience, teach us the methods to decondition. By their mental silence, they release the world from the constraints imposed upon it by sense-experience, words, mind and memory.

The mystics say that God is and can be experienced. Their path transcends reason and leads to a peace that passes understanding. They experience a unifying vision in which One is perceived in all objects. There is a sense of Reality that is true and objective. There is a feeling of Truth and Bliss, Joy and Satisfaction.

Wordsworth put it:

“And I have felt
A presence that disturbs me with joy
Of elevated thoughts”.

And William Blake:

“To see a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower
Hold infinity in the palm of your hand
And eternity in an hour!”

Life, soul and mind are all mysteries. Our passive acceptance of these, enjoined upon us by society, tradition and authority, kills one’s initiative to explore them and scan the heavens for the perception of the Undying Light.
Sri Aurobindo said:

“The mystics open the gate for us to escape out of the situations. They give us integrated knowledge.”

“People with strong religious feelings develop close relationship to God. The mystics adore their gods not through symbols, but as a living presence, close enough, that they can feel it, touch it, converse with it and derive immense pleasure out of such contact. And when they look around themselves, they see the Living Presence, everywhere. They see it in every living creature. It propels them to work for the total happiness of the entire humanity. In the expansiveness of their hearts, the mystics have a place for everybody. They speak to God on their behalf with an intensity that you seldom come across in daily life”.

Jane said, “You have very well summed up all that I have been hearing from you frequently. You are able to say all these with some depth, I think, because you have the mystical streak in you!”

I smiled.

“Is religious experience related to spiritual experience?” Jane was ready with one more question.

“A good question”, I replied, “People try to relate religious experience with the mystical experience. It is true that, throughout history, many mystics were the devoted followers of one religion or the other. Yet if you look at the nature of the mystical experience, it would seem to exclude any dogma. If you understand and interpret religion as a binding set of metaphysical beliefs that are final and complete in themselves, and also absolute truths, then religions can hardly be conducive to a mystical state or feeling or experience. Particular beliefs or creeds are not the main issue here. We speak of an involvement in the pursuit of God, that is exceptionally intense, that contributes to the mystical experience”.

“We must appreciate that the mystic is playing with two separate areas of his consciousness – the transcendental self and the ego, the personality. Every experience is made possible by its relation to the ego, the personality. The personality cannot participate in such an experience without the Light of the Transcendent. Because of
this interdependence, personality does move in to give colour and perfume to the experience that may have been conferred upon the mystic by a Larger Self. Thus, if a mystic has spent his life in Hinduism, it is quite natural that his experience will be interpreted from the Hindu religious point of view. The experience, however, unique, gets coloured by the overtones of the psyche”.

“At the same time, Jane, the authentic mystical experience is non-doctrinal by nature. To be effective and of value, it must be accepted by the personality in a spirit which transcends parochialism. We may, therefore, say that a mystical experience may not have much to do with religion as such. Being a truly religious person does not guarantee that one will become mystical. The mystic may found a religion but rarely belongs to one.

“Jane, I would phrase your question a little differently. What about God-experience through religion?”

“To a great many people, God is an idea, a principle. They seldom think that it is possible to conceive of God as an experience. Their relation to God is an abstraction, whether as a devotee, a servant, a lover or a slave. They may be well-versed in the idea of God and quite capable of intellectually analysing and dissecting different philosophies about God with the power of their reasoning faculties. They do this, mainly, to confirm or uphold their arguments that their idea of God is logically sustainable. Quite a few remain unconvinced about their own position and seek all manners of external philosophical support; philosophical positions become more important than the contemplation or experience of God. I am not saying that this is true of everybody. Common people, not too concerned with dogmas or doctrines, do surrender themselves before their chosen deity and pour out their woes, seek help and protection, and derive a lot of strength from their devotional approach.

“But, they too, soon, become intellectually inclined and mistake their intellectual curiosity for devotional intention. In the end, God, in effect, is shunted to the background. The background becomes cluttered with hairsplitting arguments and the devotees do not want to go beyond the periphery”.
“May be God likes it too and the background is a good place to watch from, like the traffic policeman at the junction of busy streets. He watches humanity rushing to acts of folly, madness and desperation in the name of progress. You have a lot of self gratification, but no self-surrender. God knows that it is going to be a collective suicide, and does not raise a finger. At least, the traffic policeman does take some trouble to raise his hand! Or is it His Design and we, in our ignorance, fail to notice what the Design means?

“It is not amazing that great souls did not look upon God as the inspirer of all philosophy or the fountain of all wisdom. They simply experienced what they found in their depth was the Light, which, they knew instinctively, would guide them to be merged with It. They said, ‘I have seen. That’s all!’ Some did not even say that. They preferred to remain silent. The impact of the experience was so profound that they chose not to express whatever they saw, because they knew, full well, that words were a clumsy and insufficient vehicle of communication. The highest experience could be distorted by the words misinterpreted by untrained minds and there could be attempts to use the words to produce dogmas that had no relation either to the experience or the words. Some did write good prose and poetry arising out of their experience, conveying to humanity the lessons, rather than the contents of the experience. Lessons tend to be didactic. The first teachers spoke out their convictions with such intensity that their message could easily make the listeners see new perceptions, new vistas and their conversion was a smooth transition from whatever beliefs that they had earlier held”.

“Many mystics have tried to describe this state. But, the structure of language proves to be inadequate. Zen says satori cannot be explained in words. Jesus Christ spoke in parables. So did Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa. The Upanishadic seers gave examples of everyday riddles to prove a transcendent Reality. Zen used the riddles, the koans. The Sufis spoke in the language of love, burning in intensity”.

“In course of time, however, the words of the masters became the subject matter of philosophy, going under the scanner of logic and reason. Today, when people speak of their adherence to a particular creed or religion, they mean that they go by the correctness of the
logical approach or the method of reasoning, but not the reality of the experiences, with which they do not have much to do”.

“Mystical experience cannot be induced with the help of drugs. Aldous Huxley tried and went into a state of dazzling nothingness. That helped him to clarify many issues that he was confronted with, but that was all. The idea of ‘zooming off’ does sound interesting. But, it is artificial. True mystical experience is natural. It will come in its time”.

“Some evolution of one’s own consciousness helps. Right extent of emotional maturity provides the ambience for the readiness to expand. Otherwise, there can be faulty reaction to one’s own experience, however grand or soul-filling it may be. But, Nature is thoughtful and provides safeguards so that, in general, the lower nature will have sufficiently matured before the transcendental state of Oneness can be perceived”.

“Strangely enough, it would seem that the only path to mysticism is the very path we have developed and walked on; that we become ready for a mystical experience by ‘living intently’. Before one can experience what is beyond joy and sorrow, one must be capable of experiencing the deepest joy and the most profound sorrow that life is ready to offer, always. Before one becomes ready for transcending the mental life, one must be capable of becoming involved passionately in the very bloodstream of life. It is the integration of joy and sorrow and their transmutation that culminates in a mystical experience”.

“What is the use of all such experience?” Jane put this question after listening to my lengthy monologue, which seemed more like an expression of myself, while walking up to the table to bring some hot tea for both of us.

I replied: “To us, the experience by itself may mean nothing. For, nothing has been created and nothing has been given. But when you begin to assimilate the experience more and more, you see that you are going through a metamorphosis of your whole life. It profoundly influences your daily habits and relationships. The ego receives the permanent imprint of a cosmic energy that shifts its attention from the limited self, to all humanity. Spirit, rather than ego,
becomes the active principle of your life. Motivation for action by the ego is transferred forever. From now on, it will include the essence of the principle underlying all creations. If the dynamics of brotherhood is the motive force, your ego will be fully involved in the task of helping all life. The ego begins to experience "instinctive' goodness, in contrast to the moral or social goodness”.

“What about science?” Is it a mystical way?” Jane asked.

“I don’t know much about science, Jane”, I said “F.L. Kunz, a leading thinker and philosopher of science, said something worth quoting:

“From a right understanding of the atom, it is possible to draw tranquility and a heightening of perceptions. The nucleus is compacted light and primal power with an associated musical microcosm of electronic standing waves. The music is unheard and part of the forces of harmony are spent in resonance bonds, to make molecules and thus to create substances, things and creatures. The whole of lovely, silent, self-formed nature may be thought of as a visible, physical quiet, an end product of harmonious dynamism; a stillness which comes in one’s heart, as in a small way comes peace, when Schubert's unfinished symphony or Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony reaches its end. The ancients perceived this underlying Order, the Vedic Indian calling it as Akasa, the Greeks and others by their own appropriate terms. The fact that this matrix is now styled the quantized radiation field makes it no less of a mystical perception for the contemplative, sensitive mind”.

“Beautiful”, said Jane, “How scientific! How mystical! A final request. Tell me about God the way the mystics see it!”

“I shall, before that, present how Einstein sums up the whole position. He tells us, and that must be his experience”.

“The most beautiful and the most profound emotion that we can experience is the sensation of the mystical. It is the sower of all true science. He to whom this emotion is a stranger, who can no longer wonder and stand rapt in awe, is as good as dead. To know that what is impenetrable to us really exists, manifesting itself as the highest wisdom and the most radiant
beauty which our dull faculties can comprehend only in the
most primitive forms – this knowledge, this feeling is at the
centre of true religiousness”.

“My god! What a statement!” Jane reacted.

“As regards God”, I continued, “listen to what Sri Ramakrishna
says:

“Some say that God has form and is not formless, others say
that ‘Nothing exists except God’. Then they start quarrelling. .
. . One can speak rightly of God only after one has seen Him.
He who has seen God knows really and truly that God has
form and that He is formless as well. He has many aspects
that cannot be described”.

“Rumi, the great Sufi, can speak of his God more directly. Jane,
you have heard of the Order of the Whirling Dervishes. They are
famous throughout the world for their ecstatic manifestation of love
of God. They claim their lineage to Rumi and the name of Rumi
brings tears of love to the eyes of all lovers of God, particularly the
Sufis. Hear what Rumi says:

“When I climb the mountain, He is the Summit,
When I enter the rose-garden, He is the Beauty,
When I dive into the Ocean, He is the Pearl,
When I burn in sorrow, He is the Flame,
When I wander into the desert, He is the Flower
When I write to my beloved, growing there,
He is the ink, the inkwell and the paper
When I awaken, He is my awakenness,
When I sleep, He is my dream,
If you seek a ‘greater’, He is greater than the greater,
Leave off language and books, let Him be your Book
Be silent, for on every side is His Light”.

Jane rose up, went near the window and gazed at the snow
mountains blankly. What did she think? I called her back.

“Jane, it’s all over. I am too much in mysticism. But, I want to stop
now and go. But, before that, I have to clarify a thought of mine”.

“What’s that?” she asked, walking forward expectantly.
“Jane, you would have noticed that I used the word ‘experience’ frequently. People say that experience is not what you go through, but what you learn. I too, thought that one gets experience, sits and introspects and pulls out a lesson or two and then throws it into the dustbin because the mind says, ‘don’t take it. It’s not for you, you will find it difficult to follow’”.

“Then, it struck me that things are not that way. True lessons of experience ought not to be elicited by a discriminating mind after reasoning. The moment the mind enters the picture, the compelling reality of the experience is obliterated”.

“As I experience something, that very moment, its intense reality fills me and I just live that moment with no concern for the past or the future. In that moment, truth dawns on me and with it the lesson or whatever you call it; moments later, the intensity decreases, the mind makes its entry and with it the past and the future, reason and logic. If we can just see the lesson at the centre of the experience, the relevance becomes part and parcel of our lives. You have become the Truth! Thereafter, you will not be able to offload it even if you try.”

“The mystics saw the lesson at the centre of their experience, and their authority becomes unquestioned. When you read their sayings as their experiences, you develop a perception that transcends the activity of the mind”.

In this big world, there are many seekers. Perhaps each one is. Some know their path; some are searching for it. Jane is a seeker. She has tough bondages to break, but she makes sincere efforts. It does not matter where she lives. Our earth is smaller than an atom, when compared with the universe. But, we are the notes of the same symphony, a line in the alapana of the same raga. We need to know that we must understand each other and be kind to each other. That is one lesson I could learn from the mystics.

I retrace my steps. One last look at the mountains. Back to Life’s Highway. I don’t know whether there is anything more to see or hear or learn.

B. DISCUSSION

* * * *
A. INTRODUCTION

I have come a long way. I am old and my vision is dull. Legs become weary even after a short walk. I need to sit from time to time before proceeding. Every step is a new step but heavy. It’s like ascending a steep mountain even though the road I have covered and the distance yet to cover are in the plains and even-surfaced, as though they were made for elders like me. My physical deficiencies stare at me, even as I become aware of my moral imperfections and spiritual inadequacies. I wonder what miracle it is that has brought me to such places, far away from where I was in the beginning. There are very few co-travellers and they are strangers and their walking is stiff and their faces grim, as though they are expecting to fall off a precipice from which they cannot return. They are all perfect people. They know their past and the future, if not the present.

I know only the ‘present’, my myopic mind cannot see beyond the immediacy of my bodily sensations. Myopics are aware of their limitations. They carry a walking stick and wave it ahead of their movement. The long-distance visionaries, the perfect beings, are like the express trains. They know their destination and seek to reach it quicker than anybody. But, the tortoise too, reaches. For it, every step is a goal.

This area is mainly barren. There are not many trees and the ones that are there are short and bereft of leaves. The grass has grown wildly and as you put your feet on them, the icy chillness will spread instantly to the marrow of your bones. The view is spectacular. I think I will rest a while before continuing. Honestly, I have no goal, and at this stage, don’t know where I am going. I have never had fixed goals in my life. They are scary. They force you to strain your nerves. They make you tense and irritable. Some of my
friends, goal lovers, deny this and say that goal-setting is exciting, that it gives purpose to your life, that it makes you think of satisfaction coming from a sense of achievement. They are drivers, A-type personalities, who keep pursuing one goal after another, throughout their life. I look small before them and what does it matter?

I stretched myself on a patch of grass. Though, at first, I felt very chill on my back, my body warmth soon overcame it and I found it comfortable enough to catch a nap. It was neither bright nor dark and that suited me.

Honestly, I don’t know where I am. People, just a few of them, on this part of the journey, are taking vigorous steps to perceive God. I don’t know if I have taken any step. I think of the affluent friends who spoke from the Olympian pedestal of wealth, power and authority. May be, I am at the bottom step, with a crazy desire to plumb the inmost depths of the secret cave of the heart and unearth the hidden treasure of the ‘holy’. I see none who can take my hand and say: “Come along! I’ll go with you!”

I recall the words of Tao:

“A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step”.

The Tao also says:

“A tree that fills a man’s embrace grows from a seedling”.

“A tower nine storeys high starts with one brick”.

The advice is: Don’t delay. Be brisk and take the first step. Avoid procrastination and begin from where you are, right here, right now. The marathon runner starts his effort by taking the first stride.

The German poet Goethe said:

“Only engage and then the mind grows heated. Begin it and the work will be completed”.

You may think that your problems are enormous. When you change the perspective, you don’t see the problems at all.

We face situations that don’t tell you, in advance, that they are coming. You may experience a lot of sufferings; illness, tragedy, financial loss or family strains, may confront you and you are at your
wit’s end. You will either wallow in your sufferings, or welcome them as gifts that life keeps pouring into your lap, to give you experiences from which you may learn and see that there are other perspectives, more mature, more productive, of peace in the end.

You begin to live in the present more authentically, rather than wander into the past or the future. You face the situation with enhanced capability. You will then enjoy every step that you take towards your destination, if you have got any.

Is this all a dream or real – the spoken words?

Take a habit you would like to do away with. You consider it as a weakness. Just for today, with no promise about tomorrow, take a single step to transcend the habit. Let tomorrow come and do that again for that day. You are living in the present, you have handled the habit for the day, and it is gone eventually.

The subconscious is awake. It queries what drives man to take the first step? A man may lead a horse to water, but he cannot make it drink. The drive must be powerful and must come from the internal dynamism. It must be generated from within. You may be stimulated externally by sights and sounds and the travel bug may begin to bite. You may visit fifty countries in your lifetime, you may just move, dream-like, in fifteen cities of Europe in seven days, a random and aimless excursion and at the end of it, your body is weary and your soul is empty. You struggle to get back the richness of imagination that initially motivated you to make the trip and you are only left with your memory, which is a poor substitute.

“I wish I had not gone at all!”

I suppose, in life, you can get the go-ahead signal from almost anything. The death of a loved one. The trauma of an accident, an injury, a sense of loneliness in distant places, the separation from a spouse, anything can shatter the dream of bliss and trouble-free life. You may begin to hear a stirring call within your head that says:

“Let’s go; let’s try; let’s breathe fresh air”.

Here, I am not seeking some respite from daily pressures and stresses. I am not planning for some peace. At this point of time, what I want to do is to pause, to think on a different mode, to look at
myself, my history and try to strip off the non-essentials that sound great in worldly life, while I suffer negligence and poverty of spirit. Something inside me tells me:

“Don’t go on grazing the old pastures. There is no longer any grass. Move away into fresh pastures!”

If you are the cow that is tethered to a pole and you have only a limited area of grazing, you will starve and eventually die. If you are the young calf who has spotted fresh greenery a little distance away, you will ask your mother to break the rope, jump the fence and join you. If the cow listens, it will do as suggested by the young calf.

“You cannot discover the new oceans until you have the courage to lose sight of the shore”.

People, sincere ones, interested in my final destiny, tell me that I need a master to guide me on the rough and tortuous path of life. Master will help me to take the first step, a leap from the precipice. You do it and land into the soft and protective arms of the Master! I don’t see a Master yet! And, look, it is interesting and true. Young chicks of the eagle learn to fly when the mother pushes them out of their nests built on precipices. The mother eagle goes about pulling out the soft material in the nests and the young ones, getting bruised by the sticks and other material, come out, as the mother eagle coaxes them off the edge of the precipice. Not knowing what to do, the young ones flap their wings, and there you are, ‘they are flying’!

I would never like to be born the chick of an eagle. I am afraid of flying. I have flown many times in my life and every time I would be huddled with all the gods in the universe for safety. May be I didn’t seek a Master, because I was not looking for any mind-blowing experience.

An American friend was totally taken in by the information that a tantric sadhu promised self-realisation within fifteen days, with the help of special breathing techniques which he had designed. The man took the next flight and together we went to some modest place in the Western Ghats. The sadhu lived in a spacious building. We reached his ashram by a boat, crossing a river amidst picturesque scenery. We stayed in comfortable rooms and my American friend
paid considerable money in dollars. He then took to the sadhana. I didn’t know what went on and happily relaxed by the riverside.

One night I heard a big noise. Some loud crying in my friend’s room. I opened the room and the distraught young man rushed to my room and started wailing loudly. He was thoroughly shaken.

“What’s the matter?” I asked him, stroking him all over his body, “Bad dream?”

“No, it’s all because of Margeret!” he said

“Margaret?”

“My girlfriend. I left her in New York. She didn’t want me to go, but the call was strong”.

“What’s it now?”

“I was practicing what my guru taught, around midnight. The Divine Energy was rising to my heart. It was exhilarating. Suddenly, Margaret came, as if in a dream. I was at fault. I began to remember her. I missed her badly. Then the flow of the Divine Energy got stuck at the heart region. I was choking to death. I didn’t know what to do. Strange land, strange people. I was afraid of death. Fortunately you opened the doors. I want to go back. I must meet Margaret. Come, let us go! This doesn’t suit me!”

I understood him. We want to try short-cut methods! God! Pray for all of us, forgive us our madness! People try to do things not knowing what they are capable of!

Take the first step, when you know where you are going. Don’t try to be a spaceman when you don’t even know how to drive a car. Your right appreciation of your strengths and weaknesses should be your guide for determining where and how far you should go. Then your travel becomes a pilgrimage, it gets a purpose and you walk on and you begin to feel the light of the cosmos showing you the way, whether you are awake or asleep. In the beginning, you are overwhelmed by your excitement, upon discovering that a path to knowledge exists and that you yourself are going to step on it. And soon, you think that you are beginning to know something and you are getting driven by a compelling urge to proceed faster, to come
within the something which is said to be beyond the grasp of all knowledge. The thought itself is interesting and challenging. Keepers of tradition, learned minds, book shops, pursue you, offering all kinds of knowledge. Curiosity is abundant and never-ending and you try to quench your thirst for knowledge with a study of the spiritual literature and participation in holy gatherings where the exponents regale you with the wisdom of their learning. You begin to think that you know and soon your ego assumes control and you try to make others feel that you know more than anybody else. What is its worth?

At this stage, you pause and ponder. You do not think much of the goal with which you started. You think that what you know is the goal. You are not alone in this matter. The people who went ahead paved the road, polished the stones and lit lights with dung sticks. They too forgot their real purpose and started plunging into the knowledge that was already there. They established the tradition that the Supreme Knowledge was for a gifted few only and what has been brought to notice by those souls was sufficient for humanity. There was no need for striving towards a goal which you could not comprehend, much less reach, without enormous trials and tribulations. From them came the attractive philosophy that the goal is in the path itself. Many seekers did not understand the implications, but nevertheless, they adopted that philosophy in their life and made no further progress.

Some are different. They are proud of their priceless possession – Mind. They have found it to be an instrument of paramount power. It may be the storehouse of thoughts and emotions. To make meaning out of them, it has given us a wonderful tool – the reasoning capacity. To use it properly, the mind has designed a system, the system of logic. The simplest mechanism and the most sophisticated computer - all depend on the so-called logical reasoning. Logic has given life to the machines and man is trying to improve upon the machines, so that they can functionally do better logical reasoning than his own brain. Man seeks to transcend himself with his machines, using his own mind. Not content with putting life into the machines, man has gone on applying logic and reason to philosophy, education, metaphysics, ethics and morality, and even religion. The more the mind does, the stronger it
becomes, the more it seeks to grab and the more it tries to
demonstrate to the world that it is the Supreme Power. Man, seated
triumphantly on the wheels of logic and reason, moves on, gazing
wondrously at the untravelled world whose margin fades like a
sinking star beyond the utmost bounds of human thought. It’s great!
But, forgive me if I say that man has not started at all.

You ask what about you? Once, I wanted to take the first step, I
was about to bend my knee and lift my leg. A wise voice crackled
through my mind:

“You must learn to discover that the ultimate goal you seek is not
some reality, ‘out there’, but is the experiencing of truth that lies
‘within’.

I thought that this was worth hanging on to. The voice continued:

“Our destination is never a place, but rather a new way of looking
at things. A change in perception. It needs a lot of courage. It
means the shedding of all leaves, making way for the new ones to
come up. That calls for unlearning what you have learned and
starting with a clean slate”.

A most difficult job. It means knocking down the craggy rock of
the self with tsunami-like force. The surging waves will swallow me
and dump me into the dark interiors of the ocean. It could be
darkness forever or it may be the Dark Night of the Soul, when
something awakens in me and helps me to see the pinpoint of a
light, an unknowing will, which transcends the knowing.

“What is Tao?” asked a monk of Master Ummon. He said:

“Walk on! Walk on, sharply awake. Arise and awake is the
wisdom”.

I remembered T.S. Eliot (“Little Gidding”):

“We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive at where we started
And know the place for the first time”.

Whenever I am told that I should shut the ‘exterior’ and seek to
go to the ‘interior’, I become suspicious, even restless. What is
going ‘interior?’ I ask my friends who are adept in this pursuit, so
that I can understand. They laugh and say, “interior is interior! You must experience!”

I began to go to a famous temple near my house. The temple attracted a large number of devotees and was always crowded. You could get a fleeting glimpse of the prominent deity, before the onrushing heads hid the view. A lightening elevation into the unknown zone and you were dropped back into harsh reality. So I made it a habit to go to the outer corridor which was open to the sky. I went there in the evenings, sat in a corner, all by myself facing the imposing towers. I used to gaze at the doll-like representations of the deities made in clay and stone, painted with eye-filling colours. The episodes concerning the deities were adopted from mythology and local tradition. I used to spend a long time admiring the imagination and the skill of the craftsmen who had fixed those colourful clay and stone statues on the towers with great deftness. Quite often, I used to forget myself and people who passed by, probably thought I was an ascetic, prostrated or touched my feet and left. Darkness sets in, the rising moon suffuses the towers with a cool, yellow light, silence prevails over the towers and suddenly, the heavenly figures on the towers seem to come alive, and they bathe in the moonlight and radiate an energy that combines with the moon’s stream of cosmic glow and the whole temple and all the deities within are absorbed in the cosmic flow. It is a sensation that gives me profound joy and I come back to life – to face the noise and the movement and the pollution and the babble of voices of people everywhere. This was an experience and it was neither ‘exterior’ nor ‘interior’.

But, an experience like that does take me to the ‘interior’, when I am confronted with death which can be as fascinating as it is frightening. I had been afraid of death from my boyhood, probably because of imagination. I used to fall ill often and whenever the doctor visited me and I was taken to the hospital, I thought I was going to die. I would cease to exist, what happened then? They told me that the body would be cremated, burnt to ashes. I earnestly wanted something to survive that was ‘me’ - that ought to live after the body was gone. When I was about seven or eight, my grandfather died and the relatives asked anxiously, “really?” The word continued to buzz in my mind for a long time. He was really
dead. He would be dead forever. No return! If death had happened to him, it could happen to me. I would really be dead. Gone for ever.

It took me a long time to shake off this fear. That was not by reading scriptures or listening to pundits on ‘immortality’ of the soul. It was simply by witnessing more and more deaths, among friends and relatives. It was even more of a telling experience, when you sat with the dying, held their hands, told them stories and assured them that they would be normal soon and how exhilarating it was to see the glow in their eyes and the pink in their cheeks!

Death is related to time. Children, as yet, do not develop an acute sense of time, and they are generally not bothered about death. When children’s sense of time develops, they lose their innocence and begin to face an understanding of death. Just the right advice and right guidance at the right time can ensure that the child, when he grows into manhood, faces the death of the near and the dear confidently and takes it all in the stride. His confidence will do. He does not have to believe in rebirth. Who knows what rebirth is all about. We only read about it and learn about it from the masters.

As a thought, death can go very deep into the ‘interior’ indeed, because it gives us a golden opportunity to break off the shackles of one’s ego. It makes one look at oneself on the threshold of the unknown, with a sense of humility and moving kindness, which can be the very core of our being because that is where love and compassion reside. When you take care of a dying person or help his family around him to contain their emotions, you are not only doing a service; you yourself are learning all about the basic sacredness and purity of death. That can take you far deep into the interior. This applies to human beings as well as to your animals and pets.

Now, you will have a different ego, an ego transformed by love. Your ego will no longer wag its old tail. Remember, where ego is, death is. When you have stepped out of your ego, you have come out of the chains of time, and death no longer looms in the horizon. Ego and death no longer exist in your configuration of emotions.
You will learn to experience a sacredness that comes out of Love, Universal Love.

A person dear to me said this on her deathbed:

“You keep pouring love into your body without stopping, it will overflow, embrace you and me, embrace everybody, it will be so lovely!”

Two years before his death, Leo Tolstoy, in a letter, said something that is worth quoting:

“Now, our whole life, from birth to death, with all its dreams, is it not in its turn, also a dream? Which we take as the real life, the reality of which we do not doubt, only because we do not know the other, more real life? . . . . The dreams of a present life are the environment in which we work out our impressions, thoughts, feelings of a forever life . . . . and then return after death. Our life is one of the dreams of a non-real life, and so it is, endlessly, until the very best one, the very real life – the life of God. I wish you would understand me! I am not playing, nor inventing it! I believe in it, I see it without doubt”.

A very beautiful statement. Continuity is not a presumption; or a mere consolation. It is Tolstoy’s conviction. But, death or not, we are still far away from both life and death. We are dying physically every moment, with labours for which we have no inclination. We are dying mentally, drained in fear, fear of ourselves, our reputation, our omissions and commissions and fear of the very world in which we exist. It’s better to dream!

I turned over. The dream of my life! How long did it go on? Till I went to sleep? How long did I sleep? I opened my eyes to see where I was. I could not guess. It was densely foggy, but it was not cold. I closed my eyes again to try to go back to my dream journey. Dreaming was more pleasant than living. I felt a soft hand touch mine and I saw a beautiful face, a young woman, seated by my side, feeling the palm of my hand. Through the fog I could see her smile, a lovely smile.

“You slept long. You are awake now”, she said. “Rip Van Winkle?” she smiled again.
“Are you from a different world? Or am I in a different world?” I asked. The surroundings were strange and unfamiliar. I suddenly thought she was the astronomer-daughter in Carl Sagan’s “Contact” who made an interstellar journey to meet her father, and saw a hazy figure in no-man’s land. She looked every inch that daughter, but, I didn’t have a daughter who was trained to make an extra-terrestrial journey.

“I’m from your world. We are of the same world. We are the race blessed with the power to see beyond ourselves. My name is Angel” she said.

“Angel”. “You must be God’s messenger!” I said

“All of us are messengers of God”, she said, “If we understand our roles”.

“How are you here, in this vast desert, on this never-ending highway? Nobody is here, except one or two pilgrims?”

“I’m here. I’m everywhere”, she said, “I go with people, show them what’s what and come back and take others”.

“Is that your work? Who gave you the work?”

“Nobody gave any work to me”, she said. “I’m doing this on my own. I see to it that people sleep soundly and dream and do a bit of learning and then, wake them up. That’s my more important job - to awaken people. Or else, they’re asleep for a long time, end up dreamlessly, which is bad. A dreamful sleep is better than the dreamless one”.

“Now you had a long dream. Good. You surveyed your past, your life, achievements, attitudes, likes and dislikes, philosophy and so on. That was a useful exercise, which not many do. That is, not many people dream. When they arrive here, they don’t know why they are here. You have had your dream. You surveyed, you introspected about your external life. That’s over for you now. Whatever satisfaction you had, that was the end of the matter. Rip Van Winkle has woken up. He is ready to go, to reach the end of the world, whichever world it is”.

“I thought this road would take me to see God?”
“And sit on his lap and enjoy all heavenly pleasures?” she said, and laughed.

“No. No”, I said, “I am not Christian of John Bunyan’s “Pilgrim’s Progress” or his wife Christiana! God Bless them. I want to know if there is a God and if I can see him”.

She smiled, paused and asked a little seriously.

“What God are we talking about? Hindu God, Christian Father, Prophet’s Allah?

“I don’t know. Are they different?”

“Even I wouldn’t know. When I feel God, I experience a sensation, which I am authorised to share with you. Beyond that it’s difficult to say anything”.

“Is God, then, just a matter of sensation?” I was troubled and wanted to know.

“Are not highest thoughts, powerful sensations that occur in your heart and mind?” Angel asked.

“Then what about the worship of the scriptures, the words of the Teachers and the images in the temples? Are they irrelevant?”

“I never said so”, Angel replied, “They are relevant. The mind needs them and takes them all. They are like the poles on which to hang your mind, so that it does not stray. But, highest sensations I spoke to you about – they’re different”.

“Are they the same as God?” I was confused.

“They are what make you godly”.

“It’s very confusing. Saints say they have seen God, met Him, discoursed with Him”.

“Their seeing is different from your seeing. When they say, ‘I have seen!’ they too have experienced the sensation”.

“I’m disappointed. I thought I would see a Cosmic Person like what Arjuna saw in Kurukshetra”.

A Pilgrim’s Progress
“No need to get disappointed. The power to become a Cosmic Power is within you. You have taken a long time in your transformational journey. You have seen people commit themselves to God through various austerities, killing the ego, trying to arouse the divine force rise in them through various exercises. You have tried all of them yourself. You have not succeeded. In your dream of life, you saw the failure of your attempts. But, you were sincere. You had one quality that absorbs this highest sensation effortlessly. You came away from the clutches of your ego, because of one factor. I wouldn’t know how you imbibed it. The mystery of getting absorbed in selflessness is hard to understand. You may speak about it, but know little. The more you know the less you will speak”.

It was still very dark and very misty. When would I see the light? I suddenly felt lonely and afraid. I gripped Angel’s arm, as I perspired heavily. Angel stroked my hand.

“Are you afraid?” she asked. “You have qualities that can drive away other people’s fears. So, not to worry”.

“Angel! What’s this sensation?”

Angel kept quiet. I thought she was lost in thought. It became gently bright now. I saw someone moving towards me, I rose and sat on the grass, watching the movement. It was a child, of three or four, walking towards me, with clumsy steps. The smile enraptured me, and I thought it was divine and it came closer, pulled out my lap and sat on it and kept smiling, the way they painted baby gods. I was filled with love and wonder, and looked at Angel gratefully.

“See this child. Where is it from? Angel! You’ve given me a lovely child. The way he keeps cuddling up to me. My God, there can be no greater joy!”

I thought Angel was not there. But, the child disappeared. Angel walked from a distance with an old man. She was making him walk slowly. He was obviously in pain. His clothes were torn at places and I saw tears in his eyes, as he walked with Angel, towards me. I stood up, rushed and literally lifted him and placed him on my lap. He was breathing heavily, as though he had run the race of his life. Yes, he had. He was haunted by terminal illness in the latter part of his life, so I was told by Angel. What could I do to help him in that
foggy desert? He lay down, his breathing eased and his eyes closed with exhaustion and he whispered, “Thank you. Someone to take care of me”. I couldn’t see the old man again.

What magic was this? “Are you a magician?” I asked Angel. “What have you come to teach me about?”

“Nothing”, she said, “You know it already”.

“What?”

She spoke softly: “Love”

“When a person has love, he has seen God. God is within him, as the highest vibration. He needs nothing more. Through his love, he spreads the highest vibration all-round. Every member of humanity and animal kingdom will experience the joy of the highest sensation of love emanating from him”.

“Is it all so simple?”

“Simple, yet different”, said Angel “When you set aside your mind, and cultivate the feelings of your heart, spontaneous love flows out of it. You may direct it to the god you love, or you may embrace all the people with it. The more intense your practice of love, the greater is your ability to share the joys and sorrows of all living beings. Your heart opens and expands and whatever divine experience that you want to have, will manifest itself, then and there. Your heart opens to the pain and suffering of people. We are all the children of the highest sensation that resides in your heart and love keeps coming to you from your heart like a never-ending stream”.

I listened. A million sensations passed through me in an instant and it seemed I was overwhelmed by the best of human qualities – love, compassion, charity, gratitude, – for a second. I have no more questions. I called Angel to thank her. She was not to be seen. The old man had disappeared.

“Angel, Angel, where are you?” I stated.

All was silence.

I stood up and looked all around me, directionless. From that moment, when I set my soft little feet on the journey of life, I was
bound to travel southwards, so everyone said. I had tried to reverse the direction. Now I know not where I stood.

“Angel, talk to me. I don’t know where I am”.

A sweet voice sounded close to my ears.

“Not to worry”, it said. “Just look up in the sky”. It seemed like the northern direction. I saw the pole star alright, small, but bright.

“Now look towards the west” said the voice.

I turned. I saw though the dense haze, the huge red sun show its head above the horizon.

“The sun rises in the west?” I could not believe. It was spectacular and frightening.

“That’s the road for you”. The voice said. “You have work to do. You will be back with your people, showering love and affection. That’s where God is. No one knows when you will restart your journey”.

The voice faded gently into the distant land of Angel. I have been given my task. My journey has ended. From the stillness of the vastness, I will be back where I belong – the world of love!

B. DISCUSSION

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A Pilgrim's Progress
The Profile of a Spiritual Retreat

Hamsa is the name of our group. Hamsa is a bird in the Indian mythology (probably belonging to the swan family) that has the ability to separate the milk from a mixture of milk and water and drink the milk only. The name Hamsa stands for an enlightened person who has learnt to distinguish truth from untruth, reality from illusion, matter from spirit and transmits his learning to all those who seek his guidance. This learning is the product of the totality of his spiritual life and experience.

We are a small group. There are no leaders or followers. All are seekers. We are just about 100 in number. We have professors, scholars, business people, professionals and the like, in our midst. They represent every shade of rational, philosophical, scientific and spiritual outlook. Their age ranges from 23 to 92. We have no membership, no subscription. We just meet at a friend's place by rotation and engage ourselves in contemplation, and discussion, mainly on spiritual topics.

Hamsa is twenty seven years old.

Our thematic Spiritual Retreats are popular events much sought after by our members and others who have come to know about them.

A retreat is recognised in all major spiritual traditions as the time and place for man to work for his spiritual renewal by focussing his attention upon his inner self through meditation, introspection and mutual sharing with like-minded participants.

Over the years, for Hamsa, the Retreats have become special occasions for a deeper understanding of the more profound aspects of the meaning of life. We have found that they make an impact, far beyond the duration of the Retreat itself.

We wish to highlight some aspects of our Retreats as follows:

1. We try to hold a Spiritual Retreat once in three months.

2. Our Annual Retreat is held at Trichur, in the State of Kerala, in June-July, when the monsoon rains are heavy and the weather is cool, and the temple town of Trichur, sandwiched
between the Western Ghats and the Arabian Sea, turns all its charms on the visitor.

3. The Retreat is held for three days, from the morning of Friday till the evening of Sunday.

4. The Retreat is always held outside of metropolitan cities. We choose fairly remote hill resorts, away from the noise and bustle of city life, in pollution free atmosphere, with clean air and good water and picturesque landscape.

5. We depend on the generosity of friends to provide us accommodation and food, and we do not collect any money from the participants for this purpose, unless strictly necessary.

6. We assemble in the metropolitan city of Chennai and travel by train (all participants together) in the lowest sleeper class; some generous members serving us food in the train, if the timings require it.

7. At the alighting point, friends organise free transport to take us to our destination. At the destination, accommodation for stay for three days is provided free, by friends who appreciate our efforts.

8. For a Retreat, we take both men and women as participants.

9. Accommodation is on a twin-sharing basis, subject to availability.

10. The Theme papers (together with some instructions) are given to the participants, a few days ahead of the Retreat.

11. We begin the Retreat on Friday morning and end on Sunday evening, in time to catch a train at the nearest station. The sessions last from 9:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. and from 2:30 p.m. to 4:30 p.m., with lunch break from 1:30 p.m. to 2:30 p.m. Coffee is served during the morning and afternoon sessions. In the evenings, participants visit nearby places of tourist interest and some famous temples. We provide the transport. We meet again at dinner, which is an informal,
warm and friendly affair, giving opportunity for the participants to get to know one another.

12. Our Annual Retreat at Trichur in the ‘God's own State’ of Kerala is held at Hotel Elite International, with the generosity of the owner, who provides accommodation, food and transport free to all the participants. The beauty of nature and the bounty of goodwill of the owner, make the Trichur Retreat a memorable event, always.

13. The programme begins with a universal prayer. Meditation Music for about 10 minutes follows. Participants would stay quiet absorbing the music, allowing their mind to calm down.

14. The session then begins with introductions of the participants and a formal welcome and an introduction outlining the objective of the Retreat.

15. Each participant is advised to give his or her best attention to the discussions during the Retreat and to make it profound as well as lively. They are told that active participation enhances the quality of experience and learning that everyone can get. Raising questions and sharing experiences, in a true spirit of honesty and commitment, ensures the fulfilment of the purpose of the Retreat.

16. In our Retreat, there is no teacher, no student. Everyone is going through a learning experience, which will help to clarify inner perceptions and learning about a spiritual change. So every person participates, comes out with his or her own feelings, thoughts, experiences and their simple truthfulness and sincerity make them elevating spiritual experiences to share.

17. In our Retreats, some basic meditation practices and breathing techniques are always taught, the idea being to help the participants to calm their mind, improve their concentration and focus on the inner-self. Some yogic relaxation techniques are also taught.

18. The ultimate goal of our Retreats is spiritual, to help the participants to understand and appreciate that their true self is spiritual and our perception of it is lost in our material
pursuits and our efforts must be directed towards awareness and abiding in our spiritual self, which is the true self and the rest is falsehood and fiction. Harmony, balance, equanimity, self-possession, self-confidence, contentment, joyfulness are all wonderful spiritual assets, and as we grow in life, the need to understand their importance as the true source of happiness and peace, becomes compelling. In the evening of our lives, loneliness, aimlessness, lack of clarity, absence of philosophical attitude, and an ambivalent attitude towards God, brings us much misery, and if one looks closely at what ails man at this stage, our lack of interest in cultivating certain basic and friendly virtues, in understanding their true scope and meaning towards building up a strong spiritual foundation, will strive us as being the root cause of much of our unhappiness. Our Retreats help the participants to become aware of these spiritual assets and to resolve to follow the spiritual path for the removal of misery caused by our over attachment to the material situations and for the realisation that the flowering of the inner qualities of the heart pave the way for enduring happiness.

19. Our thematic Retreats work with such spiritual goals in view. Some of our theme titles were:

a. “Gentle Whispers from the Distant Mountains” (July 2012)

b. “When the Strings are not Touched, the Music is Heard Within” (July 2011)

c. “Spiritual Gym”, a Spiritual Workshop for young executives (March 2011)

d. “Bhakthi” (January 2011)

e. “Pursuit of Happiness” (July 2010)

f. “Where the Seas Meet” (March 2010)

g. “A Butterfly in the Valley of Flowers” (July 2009)

h. “Hills and Dales – A Journey to Remember” (July 2008)
Our Retreats help the participant to see that when the doors to inner perception are opened, inner spirituality begins to blossom and there is a correct understanding about one's own self and this in turn urges the true self to see the ground, the source of every self. The Retreats help the participant to know his God, and to begin to love him and from there, to love all living things. In our Retreats, spirituality and God are not considered as two separate things.

At the same time, in our Retreats, we are non-denominational. We do not support one Religion over the others. We consider that true values of the world's leading religions, the messages of the great spiritual masters are the foundations for spirituality. Therefore, in our Retreat papers, we quote extensively from the various scriptures.

In our Retreats, we do not talk much about theories or philosophical positions. We rely on the personal experiences of the participants, to elicit their appreciation of the meaning of spiritual values.
23. In every Retreat, we ensure that a good number of participants are past sixty. We have found by experience that they demonstrate a certain degree of urgency in knowing all about spirituality, and in practising some of the precepts, to have peace and contentment in a stressful age. At the same time, younger people, successful in life, full of aspirations about achievements in the world, find our Retreats useful, since they help them to develop a productive inner life in which they find peace, understanding and creativity. The number of young people joining our Retreats is increasing.

24. HAMSA is now registered as a Trust, so as to give it a farther reach and wider sphere of activity.

25. Our friends in U.K. have joined together and started a HAMSA group at Durham (UK). They meet regularly and discuss matters of spiritual importance.