

Man a Bird -- Swami Shraddhananda

Om. A-sa-to ma sad ga-ma-ya. Ta-ma-so-ma jyo-tir ga-ma-ya. Mri-tyor ma-a-mri-tam ga-ma-ya. Avir avir ma e-dhi. Rudra yat te dak-shi-nam mu-kham. Tena mam pahi nityam. Tena mam pahi nityam. Tena mam pahi nityam.

Lead us from the unreal to the Real. Lead us from darkness unto Light. Lead us from death to Immortality. Reveal to us Thy Resplendent Truth and ever more protect us O Lord by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face, by Thy Sweet and Compassionate Face.

The subject of my talk this morning is Man a Bird.

Saints and seers have drawn many precious pieces of inspiration and spiritual knowledge from objects of nature: animate and inanimate. Many poets also we find have used natural objects to illustrate many moral and spiritual experiences: the mountain, the ocean, the river, the flowers, the meadows, the birds, the tiger, the lion, the snake. All these different objects have been used as illustrations for moral and spiritual experience.

In poetry, in spiritual literature, in the scriptures, great spiritual teachers have used these illustrations and they're very impressive because when you have a tangible illustration you understand a subtle truth very clearly. Think of a lion. The lion has stood for courage or strength.

Swami Vivekananda once, in the company of some devotees was camping in a place near our Math, present (Olimar?) retreat and in the evening he asked everybody to meditate. And then he said, "You can meditate in any way you like, but I am going to meditate on the heart of a lion, and namely strength." The heart of a lion, the heart of a lion does not mean that man has to become a lion. But man has to develop that strength and courage because spiritual realization, self knowledge is not a joke, is not for the meek. A man has to challenge this vast nature. A man has to challenge this maya, this ignorance. It's a great strength this knowledge. Great strength is required. So symbolically Swami Vivekananda presented to these, "I am going to meditate on the heart of a lion." This is one illustration.

Throughout literature we find an effort to illustrate common experiences of life. These examples, from living things, from non-living objects are used and they are very impressive. Think of a water brook -- a river. That illustration has been used on many fields of life, including spiritual life. Man is compared to a river. Just as a river emerges from some source, some hidden spring and in the beginning of its emergence it is unseen, it is very narrow. But slowly it widens and widens and widens and flows through forests, valleys, and eventually it becomes wider and wider and reaches the ocean.

So man's life, particularly spiritual life, if you consider man as a spiritual pilgrim he can well be compared to a river. He emerges from some source from

some past but his goal is the ocean. Ocean here stands for God, the Infinite. Infinite Reality. And when the river, just as the river when the river merges into the ocean, it loses its individuality no doubt. But it gains the Infinite. What was the limited river, with thousands of problems -- when the river is flowing it is beautiful no doubt, but it has many problems. The problem of flood. The problem of drought. The problem of mills standing being built on the bank. So many problems the river has to face. So individuality is precious. We appreciate individuality. But individuality also has limitations, its bondage. But when the river becomes the ocean, no more any problems. It has become the Infinite, one with the ocean. So spiritual man, spiritual life is like that.

Through a certain stage we need our individuality. We want to enjoy. We want to possess. We want to learn. We want peace and that. That is called individuality. Man functions as a limited being, with a name, with a body, with desires, with past, with present. But this is, this need not be the total story of man. Man, great spiritual teachers tell us, man has another level of existence. His true level of existence is not his limited individuality but his infinite being, his infinite truth like the ocean. And in common language we call it God.

So man through all his experiences, not in one life, through many lives is flowing and flowing and flowing. The ultimate end, the ultimate goal is the ocean. When he will reach God, he will be mukta. He'll be free. That illustration of the river and ocean is given.

So in religious literature each of these illustrations are then inspired. What you could not present by philosophical and logical language through volumes of books just one illustration is enough to make the point very clear to your mind. In the Upanishads many of these illustrations have been used, including the illustration of a bird. The bird in many aspects has great relevance to human life: man's moral life, man's spiritual life. The illustration of the bird is very apt, very proper. Think of Lord Jesus Christ. He uses the illustration of the bird. When his closest disciples who are to lead the life of monks and they are nervous, "Where shall we go. What shall we eat?" This is something new. They are accustomed to family life surrounded by family, house and Jesus Christ wants them to be wandering monks preaching the truth of God, healing people, like this: a complete new mission of life. And so he instructs them, "Don't you, don't you see, the birds, the birds in the air they don't care for sowing or reaping or hoarding. Behold the fowls of the air for they sow not, neither do they reap nor gather into barns, yet your Heavenly Father feedeth them."

So bird is an illustration of a free life of self-surrender. The bird, you see the bird somehow gets its food. It flies from place to place, place to place but it gets its food. So Jesus says, "God has planned everything." Not that every man -- it is relevant to every man. That is not. But for monks, those who lead the life of absolute self-surrender and faith and dependence on God. They have to take this illustration of the bird. "Just as the bird does not sow, nor reap, nor gather grains into barns. So you also be free, absolute surrender in God's will. I depend you."

So Jesus Christ gives them courage, the great lesson of self-surrender in spiritual life. That lesson Jesus Christ draws from the bird.

In Sri Ramakrishna's life we have a very wonderful symbolic illustration -- again the bird. In this case, a white bird, a white heron. When he was a boy, a six year old boy, Sri Ramakrishna. Of course even as a boy he had great spiritual sanskaras, tendencies. When he was a boy he was one day walking through the fields carrying with him a small basket of Rice Krispies -- not American Rice Krispies but puffed rice. It is a very age old item of food in India, as old as the sacred Vedas. They prepared that at home. The rice is made into this puffed rice at home and in villages that is one item of food, breakfast food. So this boy, little boy was a village boy. He was carrying a small basket of this puffed rice and just, even from his boyhood he was a great singer. He was humming some songs and notes and what. And, suddenly clouds came. The sky was overcast with a thick... It was a rainy season, see. Suddenly the weather changes. Suddenly there was a patch of black cloud above. And against that black cloud, a flock of white birds, snow white birds -- herons were flying up in the air. When this boy, Sri Ramakrishna the boy, his name was Gadadhar, when he saw this he looked at this, slowly he became motionless and he became unconscious. Later on he said, "That was my first ecstasy."

Now what is this ecstasy? It was not merely... Of course aesthetically it is a wonderful contrast. The black clouds and the white birds. It is an aesthetic experience no doubt but for this boy it was much more than that. It was a spiritual experience and in spiritual experience the bird and the clouds become symbolical things. For aesthetic experience the bird *as* bird is enough. The cloud *as* black cloud is enough. It can bring, it can give you a sensuous experience which is aesthetic. In aesthetic experience, there is... your mind becomes free from your ego. See. The ego is minimum and that is why the experience, the aesthetic experience also is in line with spiritual experience. But for Sri Ramakrishna this experience was not merely an aesthetic experience, but it was a spiritual experience. The birds, the white birds. The black clouds stand for the ignorance of life. The basic ignorance of life or what you call, Maya which is binding man through and through. No escape. Life of ignorance: black clouds. And the white birds stand for the free soul. Man can become... Man normally is not white. Whiteness, as you know in poetry and in literature, white is the symbol for purity. Snow white... Just as you read in the Old Testament, one saying of Isaiah, the prophet says sin, corruption is symbolically represented by the red color and whiteness is purity. So Isaiah says that even though the devotees, those who have come to God, about them he says, "Even though your sins are as scarlet, they will be as white as snow." By the grace of God the scarlet can be turned into white.

So the black, the black clouds in this case, stands for when.. In black clouds stands for the veil of ignorance, Maya, ignorance. And the white birds stand for free souls, purified souls. So that phenomenon the white birds flying against the black clouds it stands, it is a symbology for the spiritual fulfillment of man. Man,

slowly he becomes whiter and whiter, like a white bird. He's a free soul. He has become totally white and he is fearlessly, fearlessly flying against this ignorance. That ignorance is there but that ignorance cannot touch him, cannot touch that bird who is floating against that patch of that thick black cloud.

Now this experience is much more than an aesthetic experience we can feel. It is a spiritual experience because man when he comes to spiritual life, he dreams of freedom. And here a bird becomes a very, very impressive symbol. The bird flying in this vast space up see can really stand for as a symbol for the free spirit. Those of who you have read that book recently published about [Jonathan Livingston] Seagull, very symbolically written. The Seagull's flight up, up. It is a flight of the spiritual man. It is the flight of the soul.

Man's spiritual journey has often been described by mystics and devotees as the flight of a bird. Remember that saying of the mystic, Plotinus, "The flight of the alone to the Alone." The man and the soul is trying to reach God. It is like a flight of a bird, just as the bird is flying maybe hundreds of miles. Like that a man is flying in space in free space. When the bird is on the ground the bird has to be troubled by the cat, by the hunter and all. There are troubles all around. In the tree, in its nest, the bird is not safe. Snakes can come. But when the bird is in the air is up in the space the bird is free, flying easily molting [fluttering?] the wings. That sight itself is a very rich symbolical illustration of man's spiritual journey.