Is Virtue It’s Own Punishment?

Spiritual Quest and Pursuit of Virtues

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Shaken Out...

‘Virtue is its own punishment!’ The young teenager muttered ferociously.

I was startled to hear these words spoken almost violently by my otherwise meek and mild student.

‘What did you say?’ I asked, hoping I had simply heard her incorrectly.

She repeated her statement, with a tone of defiance, unusual for her. ‘I read the daily headlines. Everyone is getting away with murder from top to bottom. In fact all are getting rewarded for their evil deeds!’

When I probed her further, she revealed the cause of her present frustration. After studying diligently for years for her final board exams, she had hardly scored 85%, far short of the marks needed to obtain the medical seat she had worked so hard for. Her classmate, who hardly studied at all, with a rich, politically powerful father, had pulled strings, collected old exam sheets, used father’s influence and had managed a 95% mark by hook and crook of various kinds.

‘That’s how I have learned,’ she said, ‘that virtue is its own punishment. I have never cheated. My father never used any of his influence to cut corners. I worked hard to win fair and square. Look what has happened? My life is ruined!’

Did she exaggerate? I think not! Those with eyes to see will know full well that in this present degenerate age of Kali Yuga, virtue is no longer its own reward at least, not in the worldly sense.

The Problem Today

The problem now with virtue is that it no longer has social support. Virtuous people are not honoured; virtue is no longer a value. Honesty, purity, innocence, generosity, discipline, simple living and truthfulness are not important to the modern me-first, me-only youngsters of today’s generation. In fact those who strive to live a noble, virtuous life are scoffed at as fools. Rama himself is mocked as a male chauvinist and Sita is considered foolish, a woman who did not demand her rights. Wild animal behaviour is regarded as freedom, as is sexual promiscuity. In a dog eat dog world, people must live like dogs, or die, or so it is thought. The end justifies the means. Rama, Sita, Hanuman are cartoon characters shown on television and placed subconsciously in the same category as Micky Mouse and Donald Duck.

The days of the Ramayana are long gone, when a son suffered exile and hardship to uphold his father’s words as Satyam. Those days when a woman saw her husband as a
God and her chastity as a power, are also vanished into the glitter and glamour of ‘flaunt your body’ media images. Restraint in word, deed and thought are no longer womanly virtues. Modesty is diagnosed as a personality disorder. In such a social clime, truly, virtue is its own punishment and not its own reward. One cannot argue this point if one takes the worldly life as the ultimate end-all and be-all of existence.

Now! Here in all this surrounding gloom, here lies the ray of hope. This statement ‘virtue is its own punishment’ is true only in the material, sensual, worldly sense. If one’s goal is only worldly success—money, power, prestige, possessions, sensual and emotional pleasures—then definitely and without question: ‘Virtue is its own punishment’.

Beyond the Immediate and the Apparent

However, if one can step out of that Samskāric circle into a higher realm of consciousness, beyond body, emotions and senses, the whole paradigm changes. When the soul (jīva) awakens to conscious living, stepping out of the conditioned stimulus-response, pleasure-pain limited prison of existence, then, a whole new vista opens. Suddenly the entire value system changes. When one wakes up and realizes that the only aim of human incarnation is to forge a soul, when one understands that the reason of life is to evolve consciously into higher states of being, when the desire for Moksha, liberation, spiritual fulfillment, cosmic consciousness is born, then human existence takes on a totally different meaning. Then one realizes not only the value, but also the necessity of moral and ethical living. Then, virtue does become its own reward and the old maxim holds true.

This is the eternal message of Yoga and how well it is espoused by the great sage Maharishi Patanjali in his Yoga Sutras in 196 concise verses. This Rishi, who codified the essence of Yoga at least 2500 years ago, made it very clear. No spiritual advancement is possible until one has mastered Yama and Niyama, the Cosmic Law of Virtue.

Yama-Niyama is an elegant system of practical morality and ethics, the first two steps of Ashtanga Yoga, the Eight Limbed Path to Liberation. It is a No-Option Yoga because without virtue, without morality and ethics, there can be no expansion of consciousness, no further advancement.

Rishis like Veda Vyasa, Vashishta and Patanjali are the spiritual ancestors of all who walk the noble path. They were all in-laws, not out-laws. They lived within the Law of Virtue also called the Dharma Rai, and did not try to break The Law. Their wisdom comes down to man through the ages: You cannot break The Law. You can only break yourself over The Law. They knew what medical science is only now discovering. Most diseases have a specific personality profile. Transgression of the moral law results in illnesses of various kinds, physical, mental, emotional.

Virtue Makes a Sense!

But Patanjali is even more emphatic in pointing out that on the psychic level, virtue has its own reward. Perfection in each of the Yamas and each of the Niyamas results in the development of a particular Siddhi. For example: Perfection in Ahimsa or non-harmfulness ensures that one is never harmed by another. One becomes safe, even in a wild jungle. Perfection in Satyam, truthfulness, ensures that everything one says will come true. This is why the blessings or curses of ancient sages were so potent. Perfection in Asteya produces a state of being when all material wealth comes to one unasked.

Perfection in Aparigraha or non-greed, allows one to know one’s past lives. Like that, for every virtue perfected there comes a corresponding Siddhi, or psychic power.

Suddenly, Virtue makes sense! Unless one cultivates good character, engages in good deeds, speaks good words and thinks good thoughts, one can never develop or expand one’s consciousness to the exalted firmaments of Moksha, the abode of Sat, Chit, Ananda!

Ahimsa, non-harmfulness, the very first step on the spiritual path, lifts the being right out of the animal Lokh, whose very survival depends on harming other beings. After that, the spiritual aspirant may cultivate Satya—knowing and speaking the truth. Asteya, non-Stealing—taking only what one has earned. Brahmacharya—sublimating the sexual drive from the animal need to procreate into artistic, spiritual endeavours. Aparigraha, non-greed—simplifying one’s needs, eliminating craving. These are the first steps, restraining animal instincts.

The second step of Ashtanga Yoga, the Niyama, are observances, practices, spiritual disciplines. Shaucha is purity at all levels. Santosha means one is content. One strives to cultivate the attitude that ‘one has enough’. Tapasya is austerities and disciplines. Svadhyaya is cultivating an every moment awareness of all thoughts, words and deeds and their deepest motivations—knowing oneself, watching oneself to discover flaws, failings and mistakes of character. Finally, the highest, most supreme virtue of all the Niyamas, Iswara Pranidhana, surrender to the will of the Lord, accepting all of life’s events, trials and tribulations, joys and sorrows, as Prasadam, a gift of God to help one grow in spirit.

Virtues are Their Own Rewards

Thus the Yama and Niyama form a rational, scientific template for noble spiritual living. Without cultivating these virtues encapsulated in the Yama and Niyamas, one cannot expand one’s spirit! Values once again become valuable!

Not because one has been taught so, not because society demands them, not because one will gain a heavenly reward. Purely and simply, one cultivates virtue because without it one cannot evolve one’s consciousness.

Virtue then becomes its ‘own reward!’ Vice is its own punishment for it causes the being to remain in dark animal levels. As John Milton, the blind English poet wrote five hundred years ago, ‘The mind is its own place, it can make a hell of heaven and a heaven of hell!’ Or as Milton’s fellow English poet William Blake wrote so beautifully, ‘Love virtue, she alone is true!’

When we love virtue for its own sake, the doors of celestial realms open to us and we no longer yearn for the childish things of the world. We move then, day by day, step by step, with every virtuous thought, word and deed closer to the true aim of all human life—Moksha!

Virtue bestows upon us Her own reward—and it is a pearl of great value! 

Throughout creation these two forces are working side by side; where you find the one, you find the other too. The one is selfishness, the other is unselfishness. The one is acquisition, the other is renunciation. The one takes, the other gives. From the lowest to the highest, the whole universe is the playground of these two forces.

—Swami Vivekananda

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