PIERCING THE FEELING – COATED EGO

Some profound realizations (incorporating a new reality into consciousness) are like deep sea fishing (Not that I have ever been deep sea fishing but I can vividly imagine what it could – would be like!)

There is this wisp of a thought, like a strange shadow slipping through deep water. One strains all one’s senses, including the sixth sense. (Manas, or consciousness) to clarify exactly what the perception is.

The thought is elusive, it evades this trap, the hook, the bait, and shimmers merrily into other inaccessible spaces. Yet, sitting in your boat of consciousness, within its well defined contours, you just know, you can feel it in your bones, that “something big is down there”. You relax a while, to distract yourself, you make a cup of tea, enjoy the sunlight on the waves, contemplate the clouds (which are also wisps) in that endless blue sky which has laid itself as a perfect mate to the endless blue waters on which you sail. There you are – in between the unconscious and the super conscious, rowing your boat! (I suppose deep sea fishing requires a yacht, but then, there was Ernest Hemmingway’s Old Man and the Sea)

This situation can go on for days, for weeks, for months, perhaps even years! (Maybe lifetimes too but we have no way of knowing that!) You know something important, something big, lurks below that calm, clear water. You can sense it. But it refuses to show itself.

A great deal of the art of fishing (I would imagine) is simply waiting and watching: masterful inactivity, so to speak. There has to be an immense quietude. A stillness, a lack of expectation, for you really don’t know what you are looking for, what you are waiting for! You just know there is something… and that something is worth waiting for!

You do many other things. All the things needed to live a decent human life. You brush your teeth, wash your clothes, your hair, you prepare food, you tend your garden, you engage in playful banter with others, you stand on your head, you breathe in right nostril and out the left, you feed the dog. You chop wood and carry water. But all the while you are watching, watching out of the corner of your eye.

Then one day, it suddenly takes the bait – you see an immense, glistening form, you feel its strength, its power, its beauty, you know nothing will ever be the same again! You have caught it! It is yours! It is your trophy, it is your prize, it is the pearl without price you have sought your whole life! Your life hereafter will take its shape from this defining moment. You see! You see! You have regained your sanity. All is so clear! All is so obvious!

From the depth of the primordial cosmic consciousness this mighty realization has come to you, to your hands, to be yours forever. The sky bends down and the ocean waters lift up and there, in between, you stand, and there is no in between any more.
There is only the realization! The understanding! The clarity! The vision! And it belongs to you! It is yours forever!

This elaborate metaphor came to me when I tried to “define verbally” and hence clarify and codify some important realizations I have experienced this summer. Even as I sit to write this, the lines from one of my favourite Japanese poems comes to mind.

_I pluck chrysanthemums over the eastern hedge_
_Two by two the wild swans fly to the north_
_In these things there lies deep meaning_
_Yet, when I would express it, words suddenly fail me!_

This summer I have glimpsed a very deep human tendency – Vasana - which is rooted in the primitive, old, mammalian reptilian brain. The Vasana – tendency - is so deep and old it is difficult to experience it consciously, though it practically rules all our actions. We think we choose our words, our thoughts, our actions, but in actual fact, we don’t. We are simply replaying in a more sophisticated form, the instinctive drives of our animal past conditioning, Let me try, with great difficulty, to express this.

The concept of “feeling” has been glorified beyond all measure in modern times. “Do not hurt his / her feelings” In the name of this idea, we do not scold our children or correct employees or even our students, “Feelings” are elevated above “Dharma – duty – correct action – appropriate response”. In this failure, sentimentality and errant behaviour is left undisciplined, not only in others, but also in our selves. The lower nature of selfish survival is nourished and the higher nature of noble spiritual ideals is left to starve and wither. Spoiled brats roam the world like rats, as a result. They “won’t cut their throats for anyone”. This is the tragedy of this great social mistake. This we see everywhere. A race of rats, nibbling at and spoiling everything they touch as they run their “rat race”.

But what is this “feeling” that is considered so very, very important? It is so closely akin to ego, it is like the “skin” of the ego – it is so deeply attached that to remove it provokes a _sharp horrible pain_ a feeling akin to being skinned alive. This “layer of feeling” which manifests as hurt, sadness, depression, hyper – sensitivity, willfulness, vicious defense, withdrawal, denial, biting beak, scorpion sting, sharp claw is the ego – the sense of the self’s natural defense. “If you criticize or correct me in anyway, or try to limit me, or point out a fault, you hurt my “feelings” and you threaten my survival. You become a monster in my eyes and the eyes of others. I therefore will “bite or sting you” to protect myself”. Perhaps this is the monologue one would hear if one could hear the “ego sing”. In fact it is the “song of the ego”. “I feel, therefore I am what I am. Leave me alone! My highest goal is to be comfortable! Allow me to find a safe place and sit in comfort. Do not disturb! My own ease, fulfillment of desires, power, importance, satisfaction is my highest priority. I will do what pleases me only. Nothing more, nothing less. Don’t challenge me!
These are the thought structures which are protected by this “layer of feeling”. When one accomplishes something and is pleased, a *surge of feeling* encompasses the sense of self. When one satiates desires, or wallows in self – importance or wields power or accumulates material things, this same “surge” floods the being. The “feeling” is good! At such moments, if asked by another, “How are you?” one will respond “I *feel good!*” “I am pleased”!

These feelings are a superficial shell which coat the ego – sense and stimulate the ego to continue in self – aggrandizement. They are the result of chemically – stimulated feel good hormones. They are the rewards of nature for self – survival. “I have won! I have survived!” What an elation one “feels” in those circumstances! I feel so good! I am so high I think I could fly! I have got the best girl, the best man, the best job, the best car, the best Asana, the best….. I am the greatest”.

“Don’t hurt my feelings” is the war cry of the ego!

To break out of that cage, one needs help. That “help” is called “The Guru”.

The Guru is not a person. It is a force which is destined to shatter the ego, destined to break through the shell which keeps the nascent spirit from emerging into light. That “shell” is heavily protected by a thick coating of “feelings” which quiver in pain or shimmer in delight. Pain comes when the feelings are challenged. Pleasure comes when they are stroked or petted!

“I *don’t* “feel” like doing that” is the ego’s main defense against transcendence. The feelings seek pleasure, avoid pain. It is painful to submit to discipline. It is painful to face facts, to hear criticism of behaviour, it is painful to have *mistakes* pointed out. That “pain” is a protective “feeling” which prevents change from occurring. (I don’t feel like making that extra effort to do the Asana well. I don’t feel like doing my daily work. I don’t feel like washing my clothes or going to clean the toilet, I don’t feel like doing my practice. I don’t feel like….)

That “feeling” is the biggest obstacle to Sadhana, to a disciplined search for truth – reality. One must face that feeling. One must see it clearly for what it is, one must experience it fully and then, with consciousness make that vital decision which is the turning point in spiritual evolution.

*I will do – say – think this, not because I feel like doing, thinking – saying but because and solely because it is the Right Thing (Dharmic choice) to “Do – Think – Say”*. In this conscious effort and choice one frees oneself from the motivating ego – power of feeling and cultivates the power of consciousness by Dharmic choice. Such a vital step in spiritual development! How difficult to put it in words!

Perhaps the most preise, concise phrasing of this spiritual realisation is the advice Yama, God of Death, gives to the young Brahmin Nachiketas in the Kathopanishad.

“My child, do not mistake the pleasant for the good. The good is not always pleasant. The pleasant is not always good”.

Decisions made on the basis of “feelings” will always be the choice of “what is pleasant!” Such decisions will nourish and fatten the ego. Decisions based on
consciousness and commitment to Dharma will always be “good”! Such decisions will nourish and expand the spirit.

There was more to this “big fish” of a realization. The natural response, of course, was a sharpening of the ability to “pinpoint” this feeling at the moment it surfaces, face it, push through it, make that extra effort to do “the right thing in the right way at the right time” making effort to “do Dharma” (Conscious choice) rather than be “done by Adharma” allowing the unconscious ego – drives to rule the life. It is a crucial choice: whether to “get out of bed to do Sadhana” or to indulge in sleep for another half hour; whether to make that extra effort to do the Asana properly or to lazily, sloppily perform it habitually; whether to walk five blocks to put the plastic waste in the garbage bin, or just to throw it on the side of the street; whether to write that letter, make that phone call, pay that debt, visit that sick friend, all the “small – vital” choices one makes on a day to day basis. To be aware of that ego – feeling rising like a big tidal wave, to face it, surf it, and conquer it! Each “success” makes the next challenge easier.

Along side of this, though of a slightly different dimensions, was another obscure but vital realisation. How to say it! When one is just sitting quietly, with nothing to do and nowhere to go, how does one feel? The degree of joy, quietude, gladness without cause, lightness, quiet peacefulness, goodwill….. which one experiences when doing absolutely nothing at all, thinking nothing at all, speaking nothing at all, not moving at all… the degree of these positive experiences is the measure of the weight of our Karma. If we experience very little of these higher qualities at that time and instead experience despair, grief, agitation, sorrow, heaviness, ill will etc. then we are carrying a heavy Karmic Load indeed and had better get busy “cleansing and purifying ourselves” Karma is “spiritual dirt”, an accumulation of “mud” which is the residue of mistakes (Adharma) in thought word and deed. A heavy Load of Karma prevents meditation (Dhyana – Dharana) from occurring. If we have cleansed our Karma, Dharana and Dhyana will spontaneously occur. This is why Patanjali says perfection in Kriya Yoga (Tapasya, Swadhyyaya and Iswara Pranidhana) will produce Samadhi – the ultimate in Quietude and Beatitude.

Load –Karma –Feeling: There is another “feeling” which is also quite as insidious as the feeling – coating of the ego. This one we can call the Karma – Load Feeling. All carry a “Load” of Karma, like a Knapsack (or as it were) a bookbag on one’s back or to go further, a mill – stone round one’s neck. This Karmic – Load Feeling can be a sense of heaviness (if one is constantly accumulating Karma without periodically cleaning it) or it can be a mild sense of discomfort and disease, a sense of “mal de fois” or “not feeling well”. Karma Load follows you wherever you go – it is permanently attached to us. However we can “escape” that “feeling” through action, distraction, entertainment and escapism of all kinds. The “relief” lasts only as long as one is engaged in the escapism! This escapism could be regular routine work; reading newspapers, magazines, books, watching movies or television, playing video games, surfing internet, excessive use of e-mails, adrenalin sports, drugs, alcohol, sex, chatting mindlessly….. the list is quite long.
But when we return to our “empty room” with “nothing to do”, the Karma Load – Feeling returns. It is unpleasant. It is the sensation of “being bored”, being restless not wanting to be where one is.

The more we have fulfilled our Dharma and worked out our Karma the lighter the feeling will be. The easier to bear…

The more we have shirked our Dharma and accumulated new Karma, the heavier, denser, more restless and agitated the feeling.

The true test of Karma – Dharma is to ask how long we can be by ourselves in an empty room with nothing at all to do. If we have purified ourselves, we will experience lightness, a joy, a rejoicing of self in self an exaltation without a cause. If we are still “dirty” with unresolved issues, we will be unable to bear such a situation. (Is not the ultimate punishment in any penal institution “solitary confinement”?)

The sheer discomfort and unpleasantness of the Karma – Load Feeling will force us to run away, anywhere, just to avoid experiencing it. This is a pattern which sabotages all spiritual growth. The desire – need for distraction rises out of this feeling. But distraction is not the answer. It is a palliative which postpones the confrontation and cleansing which must eventually occur – either on a day to day basis or through a violent sudden, purifying event, like a terrible accident, or horrendous loss, or cancer or divorce or natural disaster or………..