Am I Truly Practising Religion?

-Pujya Gurudevshri Rakeshbhai

Have you ever questioned if your religious practices are bearing fruit? In spite of performing various rituals, something is missing. Pujya Gurudevshri elucidates how we often miss out on the most important part of religion – its essence.

The Enlightened Ones espouse that religion is the practice of experiencing true happiness. It is connecting oneself to the peaceful, blissful Soul. Disinterest in worldliness is its natural outcome. The life of one who does not make any effort to attain real joy but only emulates this disinterest, becomes dull. It lacks the freshness of a flower; there is no melody, no poetry, no dance and no fragrance. Without experiencing the bliss of the Soul, there cannot be true detachment towards the world. This is why the Wise speak of revering bliss. Any path devoid of this is only a way to suffering.

In the name of pursuing bliss, what is practised is the opposite. You consider religion as going after the opposite of what you earlier understood as the means to attain happiness. You decide that you will not do certain things, but this decision of ‘not doing’ feels burdensome because it does not stem from complete understanding and readiness. The things given up become more significant. Though you stay away from sensual objects, you still remain entrapped in slavery to sensual pleasures, because your belief regarding happiness has not changed. Realise that you cannot take even a step towards freedom from sorrow unless you have given up the idea of happiness in material objects.

In this way, you become a worshipper of misery; you think being religious is to suffer. Religion is the path to true happiness. Instead of that, it has been made into a method of enduring pain. It is therefore necessary to correct your understanding.

The Touch of Religion

The Enlightened Ones say that you have not truly performed any religious activities till now – neither practised worship, nor dissolved in meditation nor observed fasting. Therefore, you have not attained anything. People perform ‘daily’ religious activities. These daily practices should manifest rejuvenating bliss, supreme peace and raise one’s level of consciousness. However, people without a higher purpose have restricted the meaning of daily practices to mechanically performing some inert acts where there is no happiness, no inner experience.

If you place your hand in fire, it will certainly burn. If someone says that he put his hand in fire, still it did not burn, that only means that it was not a true fire, but a picture of fire. Religious activities when performed properly will certainly bring about a transformation; else they are not true religious activities. However, when religious acts or practices are not fruitful; instead of finding fault in yourself, you blame the practice. You do not change yourself but keep altering the acts and practices.

You will have to bring about a change in yourself. To do this, begin from scratch, right from A, B, C. Start a genuine search for the Truth like a child. Analyse each act. Carefully examine each conduct that is considered as religious – how much have you moved towards peacefulness from this? In this manner, dive deep into each of your religious acts.

Practice of Worship

You go to the temple. You behold the Divine. You worship and pray with devotion. While going to the temple, you carefully check all the external material you carry, but have you ever examined what you are carrying within yourself? As you behold the Lord, your head certainly bows, but does your heart truly bow down? Your entire body passes through a mechanical act. Your eyes open and close, hands rise up and join, head bows, lips quiver and body moves –that is it!
Inside, you remain absolutely dry.

While worshipping, check – who are you worshipping? What feelings are passing through you? Where are you – with God or in the house or marketplace? Where is your mind – with the beloved Lord seated in front of you or the people and environment around you?

Whatever you do, your existence does not completely focus on it. You offer flowers but do not check whether your being emits the fragrance of devotion or not. You light a lamp outside but do not light the lamp of knowledge within you. You wave a light in front of the Lord, and remain satisfied with merely illuminating the external surroundings. Do you never see the expanse of inner darkness of ignorance? Moreover, because you are not mentally present in any rituals, you do not enjoy them, you feel bored and then you search for other means.

You keep switching from one means to another. You feel that you have done everything in the field of religion, but you have done nothing whatsoever. You do not understand that your extrovert nature cannot be removed like this. If done correctly, even one act is enough to take you within.

The solution is right understanding and firm resolution. Know what true devotion is, and how can it be attained. If you thoughtfully connect yourself in devotion, you shall certainly attain the Divine.

**Practice of Fasting**

The purpose of fasting is staying in tune with the Soul, coming closer to the Divine. On the day of your fast, the time saved from eating, etc. must be devoted to meditation and the like; it must be utilised for getting connected with the essence of your being. However on the day of fasting, there is no such effort made. There is no attempt to come closer to the Soul using means such as chanting, devotional singing, study, meditation etc. All the efforts are focused towards staying away from food. Instead of getting connected to the Self, your body identification grows stronger. As a result, the goal is missed. Fasting takes place but not coming closer to the Soul.

Amongst those performing the austerity of fasting, often it is seen that there is an inclination to fill the stomach with heavy food the day before the fast. But how long can such a ‘tiffin box’ be useful? One’s thinking and conduct reflect concern about giving up food, rather than an eagerness to connect with the Self. So, in most austerities undertaken, connection with the supremely peaceful, blissful consciousness is not experienced.

People think that Bhagwan Mahavira attained liberation by abstaining from food, and so they imitate His outer action. Actually, Bhagwan was so absorbed within that He had no remembrance of the external. Day after day passed, abiding in the Self, and there was no food intake. He remained immersed in bliss. People noticed His fasting but did not see His inner absorption.

In a circus, trained acrobats are seen efficiently swinging high in the air. They nimbly swing from one trapeze to the other unscathed. However when the circus joker tries to imitate them, he falls to the ground. Similarly, those who attempt to blindly imitate Bhagwan’s effortless act of ‘not eating’, without understanding its true essence and inner connection, meet the fate of the joker.

**Focus on Quality**

You need to examine the aim behind your religious activities. Do you want to become pure and peaceful like Bhagwan or do you have some other goal? Commonly, it is noted that one does not practice rituals with the aim of becoming pure. There is some other underlying focus, like the desire for heavenly pleasures or the fear of hell. Religious activities could be undertaken out of the feeling of compulsion that one ‘has’ to do them or one ‘should’ do them even though he is not interested in them. In the name of religion, one has made horizontal movement in the same plane, but not vertical or upward movement. One has done much quantitative work but not qualitative work. If there is vertical movement, if one moves towards the peak, then he will transcend the transient world and attain the Divine.