

Introversion and Contemplation.

A Study in Mysticism.

~~~~~BY ARTHUR E. MASSEY.

MANY of us whose yearnings and aspirations vibrate to the contemplative life, find ourselves tossed about in a maelstrom of chaotic everyday experiences which seem to thwart our every approach to the Inmost. These checks to our aspirations must be for our ultimate good, because all experience is essential to real progress, and when we are ready for the contemplative life in its fulness it will surely become our very own. Meanwhile, ignoring the illusion of time, we may cheerfully say with poet John Burroughs:

*"I stay my haste, I make delays,  
For what avails this eager pace?  
I stand amid the eternal ways,  
And what is mine shall know  
my face."*

In the waiting period we may derive much help and stimulus from the mystics to whom the spiritual world is more real than the material world, to the seer who has fallen in love with God, to whom God is the chief end of life, in whom the Christ has been born, and who faces Calvary cheerfully and willingly knowing that through Calvary is the resurrection from the Dead. The many know God a little, but it is only the few who know Him much. It is for the experimental knowledge of God possessed only by the few that the world is perishing. The voice of the Mystic

calls us to contemplation as a means of knowing God with the understanding of Love, and here and there his call meets with a response, if only in the wistful curiosity which asks, "Tell me wherein thy strength lieth? Tell me what this unfamiliar thing—*contemplation*—really means?" The answer is simple enough. In its essence contemplation is nothing else than a humble steadfast brooding attentiveness to the things of eternity in the solitude of our own souls. It means a concentration of attention, an absorption such as that of the true artist in his subject which can only be learnt by slow degrees, but is, nevertheless the natural attitude of a spiritual being. It involves the shutting out of all alien interests, the gathering of scattered thoughts, folding-in of stray imaginings—in short, that attitude of soul which finds its appropriate symbol in the story of the disciples assembling in the upper room and "*closing the door for fear of the Jews.*" It is not a mood, or a state of feeling, but a discipline. We are rightly informed that God dwells with him that is of a contrite and humble spirit; yet neither contrition nor humility can come to their right growth without persistent self-discipline. And we have to learn that self-discipline is none the less austere because it is the discipline of love. We say that the

Mystic soul looks out upon its world, not with the cold look of observation, which is the manner of the scientist, but with the ardent look of love, which is the way of the artist. But is the discipline of love less relentless than the discipline of science? Does the devoted servant of an impersonal idea suffer half of the rigour, the sternness, the purifying flame which love imposes upon her disciples? Certainly there is no formal and stereotyped method in the school of love, and we do well to distrust any cut-and-dried system, any rigid formula or elaborately subdivided scheme which may be offered to us in the name of Mysticism. But just because it is *not* formal it is the more exacting. Many of the Oriental Mystics, for all their tendency to luxuriate in religious eroticism, knew love's long, unremitting discipline, her stern demand of spiritual poverty, chastity and obedience. Thus the Indian poet, Princess Zeb-un-Nissa sings:—

*“O Love, where dost thou lead,  
Upon what travel fares our  
                                                          caravan?  
By Hedjaz desert shall thy foot-  
                                                          steps speed,  
The longest journey since the  
                                                          world began.”*

And again, more explicitly:—

*“Treading Love's path so long,  
Under such heavy burdens did  
                                                          I bow,  
At last my chastened heart has  
                                                          grown so strong  
No task, no pain, can bend my  
                                                          spirit now.”*

That *love* is not only an inspiration but also a discipline holds nowhere more true than in the soul's communion with God; and the real reason why we know God so little is that we allow outside things—worldly distractions, to draw us away from submission to the long, searching *process of practising the presence of God*. To attend to God is a lost art. We seem to lack the necessary patience. One of the most important essentials of contemplative discipline is *Introversion* and it must not be confounded with introspection. Introspection is the attitude of the spiritual egotist who examines his soul periodically to “see how it is getting on”. It is, in the last resort, not an inward activity at all, but merely an attempt to observe one's soul from the outside—a holding up of the mirror to oneself, which simulates humility, but in reality only ministers to pride. Introversion, on the contrary, is a turning inwards from the circumference to the centre in order to hold converse, not with oneself, but with the Word, the Spirit, the indwelling Christ, Kṛṣṇa, Buddha, call it what we will, speaking in the deep places of the soul, purging it from its stains and unreality and guiding it into paths of wisdom, peace and love. Introversion must never be contrasted with that outgoing of the soul towards God of which it is but “the other side.” It is, in fact, that coming to oneself which alone makes possible the cry, “I will arise and go to my Father.” The Mystics, then, call us to *introversion*, declaring with one voice “Better the fountain in the heart

than the fountain by the way." As a matter of fact we do not readily believe that. We live in a land full of fountains. Scarcely have we left our wayside well behind when another offers its sparkling draught to our eager lips. Our hands are full to overflowing, and still there remains so much we should like to grasp. Is it not so? We tend to live more and more outside ourselves, we are everlastingly seeking company, seeking diversions and amusements, shirking solitude. Even our concern in spiritual things often resolves itself into the interest of an ordinary student or intelligent onlooker anxious to study the varieties of religious experience. So that the undiscovered country of one's own heart is almost totally ignored. Faber reminds us that a man needs to keep his heart warm by living in it, and it is for want of being lived in that our hearts seem to us arctic regions for which we are loath to exchange the genial sunshine of our busy and interesting *external* life. Occasional excursions into the fringes of the unexplored breed in us a nameless discomfort, a kind of ghastly fear; and we haste us back to a more friendly and familiar landscape. And so we go on, until one day some "Act of God" shatters our dream-world and we awake to the fact that nothing really matters except that strange, mysterious life behind the brain in which man touches God. Such an event may come to pass through the sudden explosion of a hidden mine in the heart, through the terrifying emergence of undreamed of passions. It may

come as a revelation of spiritual bankruptcy, or as a discovery of untapped sources of spiritual wealth, something that cuts the ground from under our feet, and we turn to our neglected hearts, to realize with pain that we are not at home in our own house, that we have lost the key to our true kingdom. But the Mystics remind us that we need not awake to so bleak and desolate a dawn. "Had your eyes been open", asks Maeterlinck, "might you not have beheld in a kiss that which to-day you perceive in a catastrophe?" "Your heart is your life," says William Law. "Thou art a stranger to this principle of Heaven, this riches of eternity within thee.....Heaven is once more brought to us as a treasure hidden in the centre of our souls." And, again, speaking of the Church within the soul, "Accustom thyself to the holy service of the inward temple. In the midst of it is the fountain of living water.....There the Mysteries of thy redemption are celebrated..... There the Supper of the Lamb is kept, the bread that come down from Heaven that giveth light to the world is thy true nourishment.....When once thou art grounded in inward worship, thou wilt have learnt to live unto God above time and place." And with reiterative insistence he bids us dig deep for the pearl that was never hid in any earthly field. Awake then, thou that sleepest, and Christ, who from all eternity has been espoused to thy soul, shall give thee light. Begin to search and dig in thine own field for this Pearl of Eternity that lieth hidden in it; it cannot cost thee

too much, nor canst thou buy it too dear, for it is *All*, and when thou hast found it, thou wilt know that all which thou hast sold or given away for it is a mere nothing, as a bubble upon the water."

Plainly, this getting accustomed to the worship of the inmost temple, this digging for the hidden pearl of our hearts, is a slowly acquired art and involves a steady and searching discipline; and the question which immediately arises in minds which are accustomed to easy and all but unconscious acquisition of treasure, is whether the gain is worth the effort. What shall we find in that dense and baffling jungle of passions, desires, aspirations and motives we call our heart? Two things, say the mystics: Knowledge of Self and Knowledge of God.

Self-knowledge must always be partial and limited, and like all partial knowledge, is a dangerous thing unless it is acquired by focussing on something other and higher than Self. Introversion, which must necessarily precede contemplation is *not* self-inspection, but rather the beholding of God as immanent in the soul; and we might add that vital knowledge, either of Self or of God, can come in no other way. "To mount to God", says the great mystic Alberlus Magnus, "is to enter into one's Self. For he who inwardly entereth and intimately penetrateth into himself, gets above and beyond himself and truly mounts up to God."

To look into one's heart with honest, humble eyes is to place

oneself under the discipline and instruction of One who is greater than our heart. As we turn in upon ourselves, veil after veil of unreality is stripped from our quivering eyes and life gradually becomes a profounder, greater thing, we know ourselves and walk with a deeper humility, a truer understanding, among our fellows. The spirit of condemnation and fault-finding is slain, and in its stead there comes a love that longs to cover the multitude of sins. This, the mystics teach, is the *beginning* of the contemplative life. Without it, contemplation is an intellectual pastime, an emotional dissipation.

A sense of our short-comings is only the *beginning* of true self-knowledge. Much of our Western present-day teaching, especially of the Evangelical type ends there. Self-knowledge is still bound up with the knowledge of sinfulness and frailty of the Self. But with the great mystics, Self-knowledge has as its crown the recognition of all the glorious powers, the transcendent possibilities which slumber in the soul that is destined to be a new creation. Not in a far-off heaven, but *here and now* these powers and splendours can be assumed. Heaven and Hell are with us from the beginning. To know oneself a sinner is good; but to know that one can "do all things through Christ" is far better. Christ the warrior within is the great Inspirer, the unfailing Guardian of the smoking flux, the absolute Gurantor of every holy aspiration. It is union with this Divinity within which is our rightful

goal. And Introversion is the first step in that mystical discipline which is at once a purgation and an illumination, a bringing into captivity and a liberation. It is not an easy thing, it involves a habit of recollection, concentration, and attention against which flesh and spirit alike rebel, as is known to all who have tried to attain to it. Christian mystics have always sought to acquire it by way of meditation on some aspect of God's being or of man's redemption, some article of faith, some verse or incident of scripture. Meditation, however, while it may be described as the preliminary step in the contemplative life, is not the exclusive property of the mystical type. It is essential to *all* spiritual life, impatience and lack of self-control has made meditation a lost art. A great book yields its true spirit, its interior sweetness only to long and patient brooding; and no amount of ordinary modern Bible Study, however intelligent and up to date, can take the place of that slow deep pondering which at one time was the joy of every pious farm-labourer who could by any means spell out the scriptures.

A single sentence or passage from the Bible, the *Bhagavadgītā*, Koran, or any sacred book, properly and deeply pondered upon, will yield treasures untold, and will compose the soul to a condition of receptivity. "Be still and *know*," is the great rule of the mystic life. But there is also a negative element in Mystic Quiet. The soul that would hold the Divine Word as the shell holds the ocean must be empty, not only of stray thoughts and superficial interests, but of its own burning inclination towards whatever seems to it divine. It must no longer

go out to seek; it must wait. Both seeking and waiting have their place in the spiritual life. Passivity is an essential element, not only in genuine religion, but also in all great art and all true science. For just as the genuine scientist empties his mind of all theories and speculations and surrenders himself humbly to Nature, so the true mystic composes himself to perfect stillness that God may speak. If we really believe that the still small voice never ceases to whisper in all the myriad ways of life, that the spiritual world knocks every moment upon the gates of sense, then our only wisdom is to be still and listen. We read such mystical rhymes as:—

*"Once in a silent night a child was  
born,  
Who brought again what once  
was lost and torn.  
Could but thy soul, O man, become  
a silent night  
Christ would be born in thee and  
set all things aright."*

Or:—

*"Would you look in Paradise,  
It must be with closed eyes.  
Would you here the singing spheres,  
Lie and list with closed ears"—*

And we dismiss them as quaint mediaeval conceits.

But a deeper consciousness tells us that they are the naked truth that we have missed, that Holy Thing which waited to be born in us, because we have preferred the pride of distractions, of noise and clamour, to the humility of fruitful silence; because we could never honestly say "Speak Lord, for Thy servant heareth." It is just here that the message of mystic quiet, and the need for contemplation of the "unseen and real" makes its appeal to a garrulous pleasure-loving and easy-going generation.

