

Belief versus Knowledge

By Frater Achad

It has been written that "In all the world there are only two kinds of people those who know, and those who do not know; and this knowledge is the thing which matters." However sweeping this statement may appear it is little short of truth from the stand point of Religion in its real sense.

Knowledge has been defined as "A clear perception of a truth or fact, erudition; skill from practice." Also "to know, viz.; To perceive with certainty, to understand clearly, to have experience of."

On the other hand, Belief is an "Assent to anything proposed or declared, and its acceptance as fact by reason of the authority from whence it proceeds, apart from personal knowledge; faith; the whole body of tenets held by any faith; a creed; a conviction."

In regard to religion it will doubtless at once be evident that a great deal could be said on the subject of Belief, it being, one might almost say, the principle on which most, if not all, Exoteric Religions are based. It will also be evident, though perhaps in a lesser degree, that all these various religious beliefs, held by masses of people in all lands, must have arisen in the beginning out of the Personal Experience of a few who had somehow obtained a direct perception or knowledge of certain facts in regard to "The Absolute", "God", or at any rate some Being or Beings of a distinctly higher order than themselves, and that these revelations were then given out by them to others, coloured to a certain extent by their own personality and limited by the horizon of their own intellectual sphere. To what extent these "revelations" or "inspirations" can be relied upon and whether it is better to accept them as taught or to rely upon our own experience, are matters I shall endeavor to treat of in this brief essay.

The first thing that strikes one in attempting to deal with the subject at any rate in the writer's own experience is how little we really know and how rapidly, if unchecked, our beliefs tend to accumulate.

The beliefs accepted in our early childhood undoubtedly have a strong influence upon our minds, especially in early life, but apart from these, as soon as we begin to look around us and attempt to think for ourselves, fresh beliefs rapidly creep in upon us. These gain strength and to some extent, often to a great extent, modify our ideas and even dominate our actions.

Those who have a natural aptitude and desire for religion soon begin to read books and possibly to attend lectures on the subject. Something that one has heard or read strikes us as being original and fascinating, it seems to us this new idea must be true, and almost unconsciously we find ourselves believing it.

If the matter were allowed to rest there until we found time and inclination to go over these new ideas, carefully comparing them and trying to unite their utmost divergences so as to make them conform more or less with our own experience and outlook on life; well and good. But if, as is very liable to be the case, these new theories are lightly discussed and then forgotten for a time, there seems to be a tendency upon the subject re-arising or again being presented to us at some later period, for these ideas to be awakened more or less suddenly and for us to think "Oh I know about that." While losing sight of the fact that it is not actual knowledge, but a bare belief that has lain dormant in our subconscious minds.

I think that anyone who has taken the trouble to examine his, or her, own mind in regard to their worldly knowledge on any matter, will agree that this knowledge is entirely based on experience, but when we turn our attention to religion we immediately feel either that actual knowledge is lacking or that it is confined to certain instances of an entirely different nature from any other experience we have had so that these "illuminations" stand out as landmarks along the Path, having a marked effect upon the outlook and conduct of those who have partaken of them.

To make my meaning clearer I will quote an instance from the life of Charles Kingsley which will give a good general idea of one of the earlier Mystic states. He writes "When I walk in the fields, I am oppressed now and then with an innate feeling that everything I see has a meaning if I could but understand it. And this feeling of being surrounded with truths which I cannot grasp amounts to indescribable awe sometimes—Have you not felt that your real soul was imperceptible to your mental vision, except in a few hallowed moments?"

A much more extreme state of mystical consciousness is described by J.A. Symonds and probably more persons than we suspect could give parallels to it from their own experience. "Suddenly" he writes "at church, or in company, or when I am reading, and always, I think, when my muscles were at rest, I felt the approach of the mood.

Irresistibly it took possession of my mind and will, lasted what seemed an eternity, and disappeared in a series of rapid sensations which resembled the awakening from anaesthetic influence. One reason why I disliked this kind of trance was that I could not describe it to myself. I cannot even now find words to render it intelligible. It consisted in a gradual but swiftly progressive obliteration of space, time, sensation, and the multitudinous factors of experience which seem to qualify what we are pleased to call our Self. In proportion as these conditions of ordinary consciousness were subtracted, the sense of an underlying or essential consciousness acquired intensity. At last nothing remained but a pure, absolute, abstract Self. The universe became without form and void of content. But Self persisted, formidable in its vivid keenness, feeling the most poignant doubt about reality, ready, as it seemed, to find existence break, as breaks a bubble around it. And what then? The apprehension of a coming dissolution, the grim conviction that this state was the last state of the conscious self, the sense that I had followed the last thread of being to the verge of the abyss, and had arrived at demonstration of eternal

Maya or illusion, stirred or seemed to stir me up again. The return to ordinary conditions of sentient existence began by my first recovering the power of touch, and then by the gradual though rapid influx of familiar and diurnal interests. At last I felt myself once more a human being; and though the riddle of what is meant by life remained unsolved, I was thankful for this return from the abyss this deliverance from so awful and initiation into the mysteries of skepticism."

"This trance recurred with diminishing frequency until I reached the age of twenty-eight. It served to impress upon my growing nature the phantasmal unreality of all the circumstances which contribute to a merely phenomenal consciousness. Often have I asked myself with anguish, on waking from that formless state of denuded, keenly sentient being. Which is the unreality? the trance of fiery, vacant, apprehensive, skeptical Self from which I issue, or these surrounding phenomena and habits which veil that Inner Self and build a self of flesh-and blood conventionality? Again, are men the factors of some dream, the dreamlike insubstantiality of which they comprehend at such eventful moments? What would happen if the final stage of the trance were reached?"

These instances, taken from Professor William James *Varieties of Religious Experience* which, by the way, is an excellent book to study if you are interested along these lines explain, much better than I could, the difference between personal experience of a Religious nature and the ordinary run of religious beliefs. They are, however, of the sporadic type, and are, after all, rather elementary. Much more valuable are the experiences to be gained by a definite scientific training towards that end.

In India, as you all know, training in this mystical insight has been known from the earliest times under the name of Yoga. Yoga means the experimental union of the individual with the divine. It is based on persevering exercise; and the diet, posture, breathing, intellectual concentration, and moral discipline vary slightly in the different systems which teach it. The Yogi, or disciple, who has by these means overcome the obstruction of the lower nature sufficiently, enters into the condition called Samadhi, and "comes face to face with facts which no instinct or reason can ever know."

"He learns" writes Swami Vivekananda, "that the mind itself has a higher state of existence, beyond reason, a superconscious state, and that when the minds gets to that higher state, then this knowledge beyond reasoning comes.

All the different steps in yoga are intended to bring us scientifically to the superconscious state or samadhi—Just as unconscious work is beneath consciousness, so there is another work which is above consciousness, and which, also is not accompanied with the feeling of egoism—There is no feeling of I, and yet the mind works, desireless, free from restlessness, objectless, bodiless. Then the Truth shines in its full effulgence, and we know ourselves < for Samadhi lies potential in us all < for what we truly are, free, immortal, omnipotent, loosed from the finite, and its contrasts of good and evil altogether, and identical with the Atman or Universal Soul."

The Vedantists say that one may stumble into superconsciousness sporadically, without previous discipline, but it is then impure. Their test of its purity is empirical, its fruits must be good for life.

The Yogi, however, is not the only being who has practiced along these lines and obtained these results. Let me quote one instance from the Christian Mystic, St John of the Cross, who thus describes the condition called "union of Love" which he says is reached by "dark contemplation."

"In this the Deity compenetrates the soul, but in such a hidden way that the soul finds no terms, no means, no comparison whereby to render the sublimity of the wisdom and the delicacy of the spiritual feeling with which she is filled we receive this mystical knowledge of God clothed in none of the sensible representations, which our mind makes use of in other circumstances. Accordingly in this knowledge, since the senses and the imagination are not employed, we get neither form nor impression, nor can we give any account or furnish any likeness, although the mysterious and sweet-tasting wisdom comes home so clearly to the inmost parts of our soul.

Fancy a man seeing a certain kind of thing for the first time in his life. He can understand it, use it, enjoy it, but he cannot apply a name to it, nor communicate any idea of it even though all the while it be a mere thing of sense. How much greater will be his powerlessness when it goes beyond the senses? This is the peculiarity of the divine language. The more infused, intimate, spiritual and supersensible it is, the more does it exceed the senses, both inner and outer, and impose silence upon them. The soul then feels as if placed in a vast and profound solitude, to which no created thing has access, in an immense and boundless desert the more delicious the more solitary it is. There, in this abyss of wisdom, the soul grows by what it drinks in from the well-springs of the comprehension of love, and recognises, however sublime and learned may be the terms we employ, how utterly vile, insignificant, and improper they are, when we seek to discourse of divine things by their means."

The incommunicableness of this transport is the keynote of all mysticism and this accounts to a great extent for the absolute silence so often kept on the subject, but another reason for silence is that the being's whole outlook on life has become changed by these experiences.

The point I particularly wish to emphasise is that we need not, and should not, be content with mere intellectual beliefs when the way lies open for us to obtain actual knowledge of these states if we will only take the necessary trouble; also that the first step towards that end is to obtain knowledge of ourselves.

"Man know thyself and thou shalt know thy God" "Seek ye first the Kingdom of Heaven (which is within you) and all these things shall be added unto you," are sayings, so familiar that they have perhaps lost some of their deeper significance by constant repetition. I will therefore quote one or two less known quotations from the Upanishads, bearing upon the Knowledge of the Higher Self.

Speaking of the Absolute the Atmabodha says "That should be known as Brahman, which, beyond the gaining thereof there remains nothing to gain, beyond the bliss thereof there remains no possibility of bliss; beyond the sight thereof there remains nothing to see; beyond becoming which there remains nothing to become; beyond knowing which, there remains nothing to know."

And again in the Kenopanishad we read "That which is not spoken in speech but that whereby all speech is spoken. That which does not think in the mind, but that whereby the mind proceeds to think. That which does not perceive with the eye, but that whereby the eye receives its sight. That which does not hear with the ear, but that whereby the ear hears. That which does not breathe the breath of life, but that whereby life itself is kept up. Know thou that that is the Absolute, not this that people worship."

Again "If thou objectest, how should I grasp this? Pray do not grasp it; for the residuum after all grasping is at an end, is none other than thy Real Self." (Panchadasi).
"Where is the man who doubts the fact of his own existence? If such a one be found, he should be told that he himself, who thus doubts, is the Self he denies." (Svatmanirupana).
"Setting aside everything which becomes the object of knowledge in this world, there yet remains a residuum, the real essence of knowledge. The knowledge that this is the Real Self, is true knowledge of the Self."

Speaking of the Way, the Yogavasishtha says "He continually sees the Real Self, who studies to unify philosophy, and the teacher's explanation, with the facts of his own consciousness."

"Forms of religion but forge so many bonds round the individual; Spiritual Consciousness alone disperse them." (Mahabharata).

I think the above quotations will suffice to bring before your minds the fact that a little real knowledge is better than a great deal of belief.

Some might perhaps reply that belief is necessary in order to assimilate the very instances I have quoted in favour of knowledge, but this I am not ready to admit.

I say that everyone has the opportunity to prove these things, and that the ability to do so lies already within you, not in the fact that you believe or disbelieve a single instance herein set forth. If you had never heard of a similar instance but had voluntarily purified your minds and looked within yourselves in search of Knowledge, the result would have been very much the same. But this I will also say; the search requires hard work, and those who are afraid of hard work had better perhaps remain content with their beliefs.

But to those who are unafraid, who are burning with the desire to help others and who desire the definite knowledge which is essential before that help can be intelligently given (or withheld), I say that Knowledge is already a part of yourselves, therefore let your effort be not so much to obtain as to become Knowledge.

But how is this to be accomplished? This is a very natural question for you to ask. It is useless to tell you to "become Knowledge" if you don't know how to accomplish this for yourselves.

This at once brings us to the "Way" or "Path" which lies within rather than without. The time has come when man, having vainly sought among the externals of life and failed to realize the ideal, turns again and retraces his steps towards the Source from whence he came. Only when he does this consciously does he find the true entrance to the Path.

Then will begin for him that great struggle, which brings with it an every increasing joy. Having once realized that the Goal lies within and not without, his whole attitude must become changed. It is no longer a question of adding to his store but rather of getting rid of or subduing all that is not essential to his one purpose.

He must become purified bodily and spiritually if he would attain the priceless "Union" which will crown his labours. This cannot be accomplished at once, but without a very definite effort it cannot be done at all. The first thing then is a definite effort in the right direction.

But what is the right direction? To this I would reply that every man and every woman should strive to formulate and to unite their consciousness more and more with their own highest Ideal. Whether this Ideal be called the Christ, the Buddha, the Higher self, the True Will, or whether we give it no name, matters little except to the individual. But such an Ideal lies within each one of us, covered, it may be, with sheath after sheath of non-essential ideas. The important point is that we should formulate this Ideal, however vaguely at first, and then work, work so that every action we perform, however humble, may shadow forth the Ideal to which we desire to become united.

More and more we must learn to control our lower personalities and conform to our Higher ideas. More and more shall we cease to care for the fruit of our actions as long as the "Work" itself is rightly done. Gradually we shall feel in closer touch with the Life of all around us, and with the Ideal within.

Another very important thing is that we should spend a few minutes every day in meditation upon our Ideal. At such times we should endeavor to free our minds from all that is not according to that Ideal. We should try to think as our Ideal would think, while letting our little worries slip away from us for the time being.

Then, as we become more advanced, we may during these meditations, begin to control the thinking principle itself, for the essence of the Eastern Teaching lies in the perfect control, even the entire suppression, of the Thinking Principle. Nothing that can be thought is true. That alone is true which is above all thought as we understand it.

Gradually, step by step, we shall accomplish this difficult task, until the waves of thought in our minds are stilled, and the mind itself becomes clear and transparent, a fit reflector of the Highest, just as the Sun may be seen reflected in a clear lake. Then, and then alone will true Knowledge arise.

Then will the Voice of the Silence tell us that having reaped we must sow. Then shall we also learn to sow rightly, but not till then, as it is written in "Light on the Path." It is impossible to help others till you have obtained some certainty of your own.

This must be the certainty of Knowledge and not of Belief, and even if the attainment of Knowledge is not the final goal (for it still implies duality, viz. a Knower and a thing known), and someday, perhaps, this too must be transcended, still until then let us Work, let us will to Know, let us forget ourselves in our striving to become that Greater Self which is All Knowledge, so that for each of us the Day may Dawn when, wrapped in adoration, we shall Love and Worship, "Knowing as we are Known."