



2. Glory of Spiritual Life

जन्तूनां नरजन्म दुर्लभमतः पुंस्त्वं ततो विप्रता
तस्माद्वैदिकधर्ममार्गपरता विद्वत्वमस्मात्परम्।
आत्मानात्मविवेचनं स्वनुभवो ब्रह्मात्मना संस्थितिः
मुक्तिर्नो शतजन्मकोटिसुकृतैः पुण्यैर्विना लभ्यते ॥ २ ॥

*jantūnāṁ narajanma durlabhamataḥ purinstvam tato vipratā
tasmādvaidikadharmaṁgāparatā vidvattvamasmātparam,
ātmānātma vivecanāṁ svanubhavo brahmātmanā saṁsthitiḥ
muktirno śatajanmakoṭisukṛtaih puṇyairvinā labhyate. (2)*

2. For all living creatures, a human birth is indeed rare; much more difficult it is to attain full manhood; rarer than this is a sāttvika attitude in life. Even after gaining all these rare chances, to have steadfastness on the path of spiritual activity as explained in Vaidika literature is yet rarer; much more so, to have a correct knowledge of the deep significances of the scriptures. Discrimination between the Real and the unreal, a personal experience of spiritual glory and ultimately to get fully established in the living consciousness that the Self in me is the Self in all – these come only later on and culminate in one's Liberation. This kind of a perfect Liberation cannot be had without merits earned in hundred crores of lives, lived intelligently.

In the very beginning of the textbook, Śaṅkara is emphasising the difficulty of awakening ourselves to the real communion with the Divine in us. In fact, there are innumerable specimens of living creatures in the universe. Truth is the substratum of all and, therefore, the real nature of all creation, even the inert and the insentient.

In stone life too, Truth exhibits Itself as Existence, but unfortunately, the stone is not aware of it. A little more evolved is

plant life, which seems to be more aware of the world outside and so the plant compared to the stone is a higher evolved specimen in the world of beings. When we come to animal life, we find that different species exhibit different degrees of awareness not only of their external worlds of stimuli but also of their emotions and feelings.

Of them all, man seems to be the only living creature in the universe who is independent for his rational conquests and is the sacred being, which, through intellectual conviction, can gain a firm control over the emotions of the mind and apply this regulated and controlled energy for purposes of transcending psychological existence and thereby peep into the boundless realms of bliss and beauty, love and perfection. It is in this sense that the Hindu ḥsīs considered man as the supreme being, while in this modern day and age, man is considered great since he has developed technology and can build machines. If one were to follow this argument, the monkey world would take it as a great insult when it hears modern man declaring himself to be a descendant of the ape!

Here Śaṅkara seems to emphasise that this text is meant only for evolved human beings since it explains and expounds a theory of spiritual perfection, which can be understood, practised, pursued and perfected only by men of certain mental calibre and moral character. Such perfect ones who are ripe for a sudden and immediate spiritual self-development are always rare in the world at any given period of its history. Thus the Ācārya says that to get a human birth is rare, having got a human birth to have a masculine temperament is rarer still.

In the interpretation of this verse a lot of misunderstanding has crept in and some even glorify their misunderstanding on the score of a Vaidika sanction. Thus pāṇḍitas jump to a hasty conclusion and interpret this statement as a direct condemnation of women. According to such a thoughtless reading, women are not considered fit for contemplation or Self-realisation as per Vedānta. It is indeed strange how such fantastic ideas gained currency in