The Inner Meaning of the Beatitudes*

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“These things I have spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full,” Christ said as recorded in the Gospel of St. John. “This is my commandment, that ye love one another, as I have loved you.” The teachings of Christ are imbued with this feeling of joy and love for God and all humankind.

In the Gospel of Saint Matthew, the first Book of the New Testament of the Bible, the Sermon on the Mount opens with the eight Beatitudes, teachings which were given to the close disciples of Jesus. They contain the essence of spiritual life, applicable to followers of any faith. Mahatma Gandhi too has described the Sermon on the Mount as the core teaching of the Master Jesus Christ.

The Ten Commandments, given to Moses on Mount Sinai in the Old Testament Book of Exodus, relates a series of “Thou shalt nots,” evils one must avoid in daily life on earth.

In contrast, the message of Jesus was one of humility, charity, and brotherly love. He taught transformation of the inner person. Jesus presents the Beatitudes in a positive sense, virtues in life which will ultimately lead to reward.

One of the first contemplations on the Beatitudes came from St. Gregory of Nyssa, a mystic who lived in Cappadocia in Asia Minor around 380 AD. He described the Beatitudes this way:

“Beatitude is a possession of all things held to be good, from which nothing is absent that a good desire may want. Perhaps the meaning of beatitude may become clearer to us if it is compared with its opposite. Now the opposite of beatitude is misery. Misery means being afflicted unwillingly with painful sufferings.”

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A.A.
As the Bhagavad-Gita represents the essence of the Hindu scriptures, so the Sermon on the Mount represents the essence of the teachings of Christ. These two great scriptures proclaim the universal principles of spiritual life and the methods by which they may be practiced.

In the Beatitudes we find the central note of the Sermon on the Mount. To enable us better to understand their inner meaning, we should consider the verse in the Gospel according to St. Matthew just preceding them: “And seeing the multitudes, he went up into a mountain, and when he was set his disciples came unto him.”

Every spiritual teacher, whether he is a divine incarnation, or an illumined soul, or a prophet, has two sets of teachings: one for the multitude, the other for his disciples. The elephant has two sets of teeth: the tusks with which he defends himself from external difficulties and the teeth with which he eats. The spiritual teacher prepares the way for his message with his tusks, as it were. The inner truth of religion he reveals only to his intimate disciples.

A man may be a great scholar. He may have studied many scriptures and philosophies. But that does not make him spiritual. Religion is essentially a transformation of mind and character. It is an inner unfoldment of the divine consciousness latent in every individual. And the spiritual power to awaken that consciousness is transmitted by the teacher to the disciple. But the field must be fertile and the soil ready before the seed can be planted. In the *Katha Upanishad* we read, “To many it is not given to hear of the Self. Many, though they hear of it, do not understand it. Wonderful is he who speaks of it. Intelligent is he who learns of it. Blessed is he who taught by a good teacher is able to understand it.”

In the life of Sri Ramakrishna we find that when crowds used to visit him on Sundays, he would speak to them in a general way which benefited them. And when his intimate disciples gathered around him, as I was told by one of them, he would take every precaution that nobody could overhear them. He would carefully lock all doors and windows before he gave them the sacred truths of religion. It is not that the truths themselves are secret. They are recorded, and anyone can read them. But what he gave his disciples was something more than
words. In a divine mood he would uplift the consciousness of those around him. Christ taught in the same way. Therefore he did not give the Sermon on the Mount to the multitudes, but to his disciples whose hearts were prepared to receive it. The multitudes are not yet fit to understand the truth of God. They do not really want it. My master used to say: “How many are ready? Yes, many people come to us. We have the treasure to give. But they only ask for potatoes, onions, and eggplants!”

In the Crest-Jewel of Discrimination, the seer-philosopher Shankara mentions four qualifications which must be met before a man can attain the knowledge of God. They are: discrimination, renunciation of ephemeral enjoyments, the six treasures of virtue, and the longing for liberation.

First of all, we must learn to discriminate between the eternal and the non-eternal. Why do we seek knowledge of God? Because our experiences in the world teach us that everything we perceive and enjoy through the senses is transitory. And something within us refuses to be satisfied with the ephemeral. Everyone is seeking abiding happiness. Yet this search is bound to end in frustration as long as we look for lasting fulfillment in the external world, whose very nature is non-eternal. One who discriminates analyzes himself: are his thoughts and actions leading him toward God, in whom alone is found eternal peace and happiness, or away from him?

As his discrimination ripens, man’s desires for objects and pleasures in the sense world diminish. This is renunciation. But renunciation of worldly desires is only possible for the man who desires something higher. Therefore he must cultivate those qualities in himself which will help him move toward his chosen ideal of God. These qualities are known as the six treasures of virtue in the Hindu scriptures. The first is tranquility. Then come self-control and mental poise, which consist in not letting the mind react to external stimuli. The fourth treasure is forbearance, the virtue of patiently enduring all kinds of afflictions without rebellion or complaint. Then comes faith. There must be a firm conviction, based upon intellectual understanding, that the scriptural teachings and those of one’s master are true. Moreover, the heart of the aspirant must be enthusiastically inclined toward its ideal. Just to say: “I believe in God,” is not faith. One whose faith is firm will be moved to action. The sixth treasure is self-surrender.

Last, and most important, is the longing for liberation from the bondage of life, that longing for God and desire for freedom from things that hinder our approach to him. In his Sermon on the Mount, Christ speaks of these same conditions that must be fulfilled before the truth of God is revealed. But before we continue with this subject and take up the Beatitudes one by one, let us consider the central note of the Sermon, which contains the ideal of man’s life: “Be ye therefore perfect even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect.” The means to attain this ideal is expressed in the Beatitude: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God,” which we shall discuss in its proper place.
Swami Turiyananda once told me that when he was a young boy he studied scriptures and philosophy, but nothing could satisfy him: he could not understand the purpose of life. One day he found the following passage in the writings of Shankara: “A man is born, not to desire life in the world of senses, but to realize the bliss of an illumined soul who has attained his liberation.” This discovery took away a burden from his heart. Later he met Sri Ramakrishna and attained the bliss of liberation while living.

“Be ye therefore perfect.” In every scripture we find the same theme: See God! Seek perfection! But what is meant by perfection? None of us living in the relative plane bound by time, space and causation can have a definite conception of what this perfection is, because perfection is absolute. All we know about it is that it means a state where there is no lack, but abiding peace and fulfillment. In a way, every one of us is seeking perfection, whether we are religious or not. If we are sick, we hope to attain perfection by gaining health. If we are poor, we think wealth will give us perfection. The artist seeks perfection in his painting, the scientist in his discoveries. So in every field of life. But when we have health or wealth or beauty or secular knowledge, we are still not satisfied. A continuing sense of lack and imperfection drives us on to seek fulfillment only to end in frustration. Is this pessimism?

It is perfectly true that our cravings can be satisfied in this world. We can have some measure of success or pleasure. But we always seem to forget that they do not last. We cannot have success without failure, pleasure without pain. They are like two sides of the same coin.

All our struggles for fulfillment can be reduced to three desires: the desire for immortal life, Sat; the desire for infinite knowledge, Chit; and the desire for infinite love and bliss, Ananda. Sat-Chit-Ananda is a Sanskrit name of God. The sinner just as the holy man, in the last analysis, has Sat-Chit-Ananda as his goal. By sense-gratification, by every kind of self-delusion, even by violence and fraud man searches for abiding fulfillment. The trouble is that he seeks it in the transient phenomena of the external world instead of in God, the eternal Reality, dwelling in his own heart. We are like the musk deer of the Indian fable, which looks all over the earth for that haunting fragrance which is really exuded from within itself.

In one of the most important of his yoga sutras, Patanjali sums up the reason for the existence of this universe. He says: “The universe exists in order that the experiencer may experience it, and thus become liberated.” The world of sense-experience is a great book. Every page of that book can teach us something, but most of us never pass on. We read the same page over and over again, repeating the same enjoyments and sufferings. If we kept turning the pages, we would regard life as a perpetual search for meaning and an exercise in the discrimination between the real and the unreal. But only after countless hardships does it dawn on us that nothing in the external world can give us lasting satisfaction and that our search for perfection and abiding happiness can only be realized in the eternal truth of God.
In Vedanta as in Christ’s teachings it is pointed out that this perfection is not alien to us, because we always carry within us the kingdom of God. Swami Vivekananda defined religion as the manifestation of the divinity already in man. It exists in a latent state; we must unfold it. The difficulty is that we are not aware of this divinity. “The light shineth in darkness, and the darkness comprehended it not.” The light is shining, but ignorance of our true nature covers that light. This ignorance must be dispelled before we can see the light of God. Eternal life, infinite wisdom, and abiding love are within us. To understand this truth and to seek it within ourselves is the beginning of religion.

Of course, perfection in God is not achieved immediately. But if the aspirant struggles even for a little while, he will see certain signs which show him that he is progressing. He becomes less selfish and assertive. His mind is increasingly able to grasp subtle spiritual truths, and his heart becomes filled with sympathy and love for others. But he is still in the relative plane. The perfection, which is absolute, cannot be experienced in our normal consciousness. That is why Sri Krishna in the Gita tells his disciple Arjuna that he cannot see God with his human eyes, and he gives him divine sight. This divine sight opens in the transcendental state of consciousness; beyond our normal experiences of waking, dreaming, and dreamless sleep.

It is hard for us to believe that God can be known and realized in this very life. Yet in every age, among the followers of all religions, there are examples of those who have attained that perfection in their lifetime. Christ, Buddha, Moses, and many others not only reached that state but insisted that everyone must reach it. Christ stated that unless a man is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God. The German mystic Angelus Silesius explained these words as follows: “Christ may be born a thousand times in Bethlehem, but if he be not born anew within your own heart, you remain eternally forlorn.” What does it mean to have Christ born in our hearts? It is to come face to face with God, to be awakened to that transcendental consciousness. That is the one purpose of religion.

In our present age, Swami Vivekananda as a young boy was searching for the truth of God. He went to every teacher and asked: “You say you believe in God. Have you seen him?” Finally he came to Sri Ramakrishna and received this reply: “Yes, I have seen him; more clearly than I see you.”

“Can I also see him?”

“Yes, you can.”

And Sri Ramakrishna gave Vivekananda a touch which opened his divine sight and transformed his life.

Why do we not see many realized souls? First of all, few really long for that perfection. Of those who do, very few are willing to struggle for it. Secondly, not many believe that religion means “to be perfect even as the Father which
is in heaven is perfect.” Most people are satisfied with living a more or less ethical life on earth and being rewarded in an after-life for any good deeds they may have done. Christ’s ideal of perfection is generally either forgotten or not understood. True, many people read the Sermon on the Mount. But the teachings do not sink deep into the consciousness. Few try to live them. But although theologians may argue today whether perfection can be achieved in this life or not, as we have pointed out, Christ taught that man should be as perfect as God himself, by realizing his oneness with him. His disciples were not concerned with doctrines, creeds, theology, or philosophy. Many of them were simple fishermen. They followed Christ because they hungered for the truth of God and knew that Christ could teach them how to satisfy that hunger.

One thing I learned from my association with the disciples of Ramakrishna is that in the presence of such illumined souls one becomes convinced that God is and can be realized. They do not have to lecture to persuade you. When you sit at their feet, you feel that the perfection Christ speaks of is within your reach, that the treasure of God is just like a fruit in the palm of your hand.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of God.”

In the opening sentence of the Beatitudes, Christ speaks of the chief characteristic the disciple must have before he can understand the teaching. He must be poor in spirit, he must be humble. If a man has pride in learning, in wealth, in beauty, or in lineage, or has preconceived ideas of what spiritual life is and how he should be taught; his mind is not receptive to higher teachings. Sri Krishna says in the Gita: “Those illumined souls who have realized the Truth will instruct you in the knowledge of Brahman if you will prostrate yourself before them, question them, and serve them as a disciple.”

A man came to a teacher and asked to be made a disciple. The teacher had spiritual insight and, realizing that the man was not ready to be taught, inquired: “Do you know what you have to do in order to be a disciple?” The man shook his head and asked the teacher to tell him. “Well,” said the teacher, “you have to fetch water, gather fuel, cook, and do many hours of heavy work. You also have to study. Are you willing to do all that?” The man asked: “Now tell me please, what does the teacher do?”

“Oh, the teacher sits and gives spiritual instructions in his quiet way.”

“Ah, I see! Why not make me a teacher then?”

Everyone wants to be a teacher. But before we become teachers we must learn to be disciples. We must acquire humility.

“Blessed are they that mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

As long as we think we are rich in worldly goods or knowledge, we cannot make spiritual progress. When we feel that we are poor in spirit and that everything is in vain, then only will we be comforted. We must grieve that we have not
realized the Truth of God. No doubt we all mourn for the loss of worldly pleasures and possessions, but that is not the kind of mourning that Christ speaks of. The mourning which Christ calls “blessed” is very rare, because few people feel this loneliness, this spiritual loss which we must have before we are comforted. Most of us are quite satisfied with the surface life in this world. In the back of our minds perhaps we feel the sense of something incomplete, but still we hope that this lack can be filled by the sense-objects of this world.

Sri Ramakrishna used to say: “People shed rivers of tears because a son is not born or because they cannot get riches. But who sheds even one teardrop because he has not seen God?” It is our ignorance which gives us this false sense of values. Shankara, in explaining the nature of this ignorance, says that the true Self, the spirit, is opposed to matter as light is opposed to darkness. Yet such is the inexplicable power of ignorance that even the wisest among us habitually identify the spirit with the ego. It is very easy to understand intellectually that we are different from the body; just as we are different from the dress we wear. Yet when the body is diseased, we say: “I am sick.” Intellectually we can understand that we are different from our minds. Yet when a wave of happiness or suffering arises in the mind, we say: “I am happy. I am miserable.” Also, we identify ourselves with our families and friends: anything happening to them seems to be happening to us. We identify ourselves with our possessions. If we lose our wealth, we feel as if we had lost ourselves, there is nothing left to live for.

But when we begin to feel that spiritual lack within ourselves, when we begin to mourn as Christ wished us to mourn, when we shed even one teardrop for God; then that comfort comes, then we know that God can be realized. Sri Ramakrishna showed us how to mourn by the example of his life. During the period of his intense spiritual practices, he passed many days longing for the moment when he would realize God in the form of the Divine Mother. Every evening when the temple bells rang for vespers, he would weep: “Another day is gone, and still I have not seen you!” We must come to this stage when we feel that nothing can give us peace except the vision of God.

Sri Ramakrishna used to tell those who asked him how to realize God: “Yearn for Him with a longing heart.” Let us analyze ourselves. We will find that we yearn for all kinds of worldly objects much more than we yearn for God. But even a slight desire to know God is a beginning that can lead us to the highest realization. We must begin with self-effort. We must struggle to develop love for the Lord by practicing recollectedness of Him, by prayer, worship, and meditation. As we practice these spiritual disciplines, that slight desire to know God will be intensified and we will feel closer to him. Eventually, our whole life must be centered in Him. Then arises that mourning that Christ speaks of, and we come to a stage where God draws man’s mind to Him as the magnet draws the needle. Then we will find comfort.

“Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.”
What is the cause of our delusion? Our sense of ego. This egotism in us must be overcome. Therefore, “Blessed are the meek.” But why does Christ say that they shall inherit the earth? At first sight this seems difficult to understand. In Patanjali’s Yoga Aphorisms there is a corresponding passage: “The man who is confirmed in non-stealing becomes the master of all riches.” What is meant by “non-stealing?” It means that we must give up the egotistic delusion that we can possess things, that anything can belong exclusively to us as individuals. We may think: “But we are good people. We don’t steal anything! Whatever we have, we have worked for and earned. It belongs to us by right.” But the truth is that nothing at all belongs to us. Everything belongs to God. When we regard anything in this universe as ours, we are appropriating God’s possession. Then how shall we live? Without the sense of “me” and “mine,” free from the sense of attachment, not as slaves to what we consider our possessions. It does not mean that we must get rid of wealth, family, and friends, but we must get rid of the idea that they belong to us. We must look on ourselves as trustees. As soon as we understand this truth and give up our deluded individual claims, we find that in the truest sense everything belongs to us after all. We inherit the earth.

Conquerors who try to become masters of the world by force of arms never inherit anything except worry, trouble, and headaches. Misers who accumulate huge wealth are only chained to their gold, they never really possess it. But the man who has given up his sense of attachment experiences fulfillment without the misery of possession.

Many people dislike this saying of Christ because they think that the meek can never achieve anything. They think that no happiness is to be had from life unless one is aggressive. My master used to say; “People who live in the senses think they are enjoying life. But what do they know about enjoyment? Only those who are filled with divine bliss really enjoy life.”

What reference does this meekness have to our human relationships? As a general rule, the worldly man asserts his ego; he forces his opinions on others; he feels that he has a monopoly on knowledge. If anyone does not give him the credit he thinks is due him, he becomes angry or feels insulted. On the other hand, the illumined soul’s heart is filled with love of God. In the Upanishads the nature of such an enlightened man is defined as being “humble and not asserting himself.” If a spiritual aspirant will practice Christ’s teaching of meekness, he will find it very practical. Anger and hatred can be conquered by gentleness and love. The Chinese mystic Lao Tzu has expressed this beautiful truth as follows: “Of the soft and weak things in the world, none is weaker than water. But in overcoming that which is firm and strong, nothing can equal it. That which is soft conquers the hard. Rigidity and hardness are companions of death. Softness and tenderness are companions of life.” By giving up his ego to God, by being meek, man will gain everything; he will inherit the earth.

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they shall be filled.”
When someone once asked Sri Ramakrishna, “Where is God?” he held up a piece of cloth in front of him and said, “Look, here I am, but you can’t see me.” God is very close to us. Only the veil of ignorance hides him from our vision. This veil must be removed by a raging hunger and burning thirst for him. Swami Brahmananda used to say: “Pray to God. He is not a stranger; He is your very own. Ask him to reveal himself to you.”

Just as we can stir up our hunger for sense pleasures, so can we stir up our hunger for God. Swami Turiyananda once asked Sri Ramakrishna: “Sir, how can I overcome lust?” To his amazement his teacher answered: “Why should you overcome lust? Increase it!” What does this mean? Lust is a passion, natural to man. It is an urge for fulfillment. But experience shows that lust fulfilled in sexual union asserts itself again, and, furthermore, does not bring the real and lasting satisfaction that it promises. Also, it dissipates man’s energy. Of course, Ramakrishna did not wish his disciple to increase his physical lust. He wanted to emphasize this point - that the energy we know as lust, instead of being expressed as such and building frustration, should be conserved and through spiritual practice transmitted into love of God. It is this love of God that Ramakrishna wanted his disciple to intensify so that hunger for union with the Divine would arise in his heart. Man’s desires find eternal fulfillment only in union with God, in the state which the Gita calls “the peace beyond passion.”

Psychologically speaking, one gigantic thought-wave must be raised in the mind, in which all the other cravings which distract us from our Ideal are swallowed up. When the mind is thus one-pointed and is concentrated upon God, He becomes revealed.

Whenever we are attracted to someone we are really attracted to God dwelling in that person. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Yagnavalkya explains to his wife Maitreyi: “It is not for the sake of the husband, my beloved, that the husband is dear, but for the sake of the Self. It is not for the sake of the wife, my beloved, that the wife is dear, but for the sake of the Self. ... It is not for the sake of itself, my beloved, that anything whatever is esteemed, but for the sake of the Self.” We must learn consciously and intensely to direct all our thoughts, all our energy, toward that Self, which is God, then we shall be filled with righteousness.

A disciple asked his teacher, “Sir, how can I realize God?” “Come along,” said the teacher, “I shall show you.” He took the disciple to a river, and both plunged in. Suddenly the teacher reached over and pressed the disciple’s head under the water. A few moments later he released him and asked: “Well, how did you feel?” “Oh, I thought I should die for a breath of air!” gasped the disciple. Then the teacher said: “When you feel that intensely for God, you won’t have to wait long for his vision.”

What does Christ mean by being filled with righteousness? It is not what we ordinarily think of as moral virtues or good qualities, but the essence of righteousness itself. In Sanskrit it is called “the-goodness-itself;” in other
words, God. The word God is derived from that which is goodness itself, not relative good as opposed to evil, or relative virtue as opposed to vice. Christ himself reproached the one who called him “good master:” “Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God.” So the hunger and thirst after righteousness is a hunger and thirst after God himself.

“Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

There is an aphorism in the Patanjali yoga sutras which corresponds to this teaching: “Undisturbed calmness of the mind is attained by cultivating friendliness toward the happy, mercy and compassion for the unhappy, delight in the virtuous, and indifference towards the wicked.” So, to be merciful is one of the conditions necessary for purification of the heart. Envy, jealousy, hatred - these are some of the universal weaknesses inborn in man. They are linked with our ego-sense which stems from ignorance. How are we to overcome them? By raising the opposite wave of thought. When somebody is happy, we should not be jealous of him; we should try to realize our friendship and be happy with him. When someone is unhappy, we should not be glad; we should feel sympathy and be merciful. When a man is good, do not be envious. When he is bad, do not hate him. Be indifferent to the wicked. Any thought of hate, even so-called “righteous hatred” will upset our own minds and increase our ignorance and restlessness so that we cannot think of the Lord or love Him until this thought-wave has subsided.

Compassion is one of the greatest of virtues. Peter came to Christ and asked: “Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him? Till seven times?” Jesus saith unto him, “I say not unto thee, until seven times, but until seventy times seven.” In other words, if we want to find God, we have to become God-like in mercy.

Swami Brahmananda taught me this truth: “What is the difference between man and God? Man, if you but hurt him once, will forget all your kindnesses to him and remember the one time you failed. But you may forget God and sin against him hundreds of times, he will forgive all your faults and remember the one time that you may have sincerely prayed to him. Sin exists only in man’s eyes; God does not look to man’s sins.”

“Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.”

This Beatitude epitomizes the means by which the ideal of life, the perfection in God, is attained. We must attain purity before God reveals himself to us. But what is this purity?

We all know of people whom we would describe as pure in an ethical sense, but they have not seen God. What is the reason? Ethical life is needed as a preparation for spiritual life and therefore is taught in every religion. But it does not enable us to see God. It is like the foundation of a house; it is not the superstructure.
What is the test of purity? Just try to think of God. What happens? The thought of his presence flashes through your mind for a moment. Then all kinds of distractions begin. You are thinking of everything else but God. These distractions show that the mind is still impure, and such a mind cannot see God as Christ intended. These impurities are the many kinds of impressions gathered by the mind from birth to birth. In turn, these impressions, which are the sum-total of all our thoughts and actions, whether good or bad, form our character. They have to be removed completely so that the mind may be purified. St. Paul said: “Be ye transformed by the renewal of your mind.”

One definition of yoga, or union with God, is the complete control of the mind-waves. The mind may be compared to a lake in which the water is muddy and lashed into waves. In such a lake the sun is only dimly reflected. The waves must subside before the sun is perfectly reflected in the water. It is the same with the mind. We must calm the thought-waves in order that the mind may clearly reflect the divinity or perfection within us.

To remove the mind-waves, we have to know their cause. Yoga psychology defines five root causes of all our impressions. First is ignorance, in a universal sense, of our divine nature. God dwells in and around us, but we are not conscious of this truth. Instead of God we see the universe of many names and forms which we believe to be real. Secondly, there is the sense of ego, projected by this ignorance, which separates us from one another and from God. It makes us think of ourselves as individual beings, and say: I am Mr. so-and-so. From the sense of ego we develop attachment and aversion. We are attracted to one thing and hate another. Both desire and hatred are obstacles in the path to God. The final cause of mental impurity is clinging to life: our fear of death, which is natural to all, good and bad alike. Buddha calls it thirst for life. Christ refers to it when he says: “For whosoever will save his life shall lose it.” Only the illumined soul has no sense of ego, no attachment, no hatred, and no fear of death; they have all vanished.

Even if God were to stand before us this moment and to offer us spiritual enlightenment, we would refuse it. Even if we have been seeking God, at the time we are about to have his vision we would draw back in fear. We instinctively cling to our surface life and consciousness. We are afraid to give them up, even though doing so means that we pass into that infinite consciousness, in comparison with which our normal perceptions are, as the Gita says, “like a thick night and a sleep.”

A great saint like St. Augustine used to pray: “Lord, free me from lust.” Then from his heart would arise the wish: “But not yet!”

Swami Vivekananda, although he was a pure soul longing for God, experienced that same fear. When he first came to Sri Ramakrishna, the Master gave him a touch, and his spiritual vision began to open. Then Vivekananda cried out: “What are you doing to me? I have my parents at home!” And Sri Ramakrishna said: “Oh, you too!” He saw that even this great soul was subject to the
universal clinging to the surface life before letting himself pass into that infinite consciousness.

There are many ways to purify our hearts. Christ teaches them in the course of the Sermon on the Mount. The main principle in all the methods is to be devoted to God. The more we learn to think of God, the purer our hearts will become. One way to grow in purity is to try to feel that we are already pure and divine. This is not delusion; purity and divinity are basically our nature since God is dwelling within us. If we cry all our lives that we are sinners, we only weaken ourselves. Sri Ramakrishna used to say: “By repeating a hundred times, ‘I am a sinner’ one really becomes a sinner. One should have such faith as to be able to say, ‘I have taken the name of God; how can I be a sinner?’ God is our Father and Mother. Tell him, O Lord, I have committed sins, but I won’t repeat them.’ Chant his name and purify your body, mind, and tongue. ... The more you move toward the light, the farther you will be from darkness.”

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”

It is only when we have attained the vision of God that we really are his children and peacemakers. Of course, it is true that we are always children of God, even in ignorance. But until we have known Him, we cannot bring peace. In our state of ignorance, our sense of ego makes us feel separate from God. For the illumined soul in the state of union with God, the ego disappears. When he returns to a lower plane of consciousness after this experience he again has a sense of ego, but it is a ripe ego that does not create any bondage. In illustration of this ripe ego the Hindu scriptures speak of a burnt rope; it has the appearance of a rope, but it cannot tie anything. Without such an ego it would not be possible for a Christ to live in a human form and teach. Swami Brahmananda once said to me: “There are times when it becomes impossible for me to teach. No matter where I look I see only God, wearing so many masks, playing in so many forms. Who is the teacher then? Who is to be taught? But when my mind comes down from that plane, then I see your faults and weaknesses and try to remove them.”

There is a passage in the Bhagavatam which reads: “He in whose heart God has become manifested brings peace, cheer, and delight everywhere he goes.” He is the peacemaker Christ speaks of in the Beatitudes. I have seen such a life; the life of my master, Swami Brahmananda. Whoever came into his presence would feel a joyous upliftment. And wherever he went he brought with him an atmosphere of festivity.

In one of our monasteries there were a number of young monks, not yet trained, fresh from school. When they had been together a short time, their old tendencies began to assert themselves, and the boys formed cliques and quarreled. A senior swami of the Order went to investigate the affair. He wrote to Swami Brahmananda that the ringleaders were unfitted for monastic life and should be expelled. My master answered: “Don’t do anything about it. I am
coming myself.” When he arrived at the monastery, he did not question anyone. He made no distinction between individuals, good or bad. He just started living there. He only insisted on one thing: that all the boys should meditate in his presence regularly every day. The boys soon forgot their quarrels. The whole atmosphere of the place became uplifted. By the time Swami Brahmananda left two or three months later, perfect harmony had been established in the monastery. No one had to be expelled. Their minds and hearts were transformed.

When I first came to Belur Math, two young boys quarreled and came to blows. Swami Premananda, the abbot of this monastery, saw this and reported the incident to his brother-disciple Swami Brahmananda, by whom I was seated. He asked that my master send these boys away. My master calmly answered: “Brother, they did not come here as perfect souls. They have come to you to attain that perfection. Do something for them!” Swami Premananda said: “You are right!” He called all the monks as well as us boys together and brought us to Swami Brahmananda. With folded hands he asked his brother-disciple to bless us all. Swami Brahmananda raised his hand over our heads and one by one we prostrated before him. In everyone there came an inner exaltation which could be felt but not described. This is how a real peacemaker affects us. He uplifts men’s hearts by his presence and engages their minds in the love of God.

“Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye when men shall revile you and persecute you and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad, for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you.”

Before we can understand this passage, we must consider the difference between spiritual aspirants and people of the world. As a general rule, men of the world try to hide their faults and weaknesses instead of trying to overcome them. They enjoy criticizing others and gossiping. It is like chutney to them. At the expense of others, their own egos become puffed up. Also, they pretend sympathy when they do not feel it. People with daggers in their hearts smile at each other as if they were the best of friends. These attitudes are natural to man. But a spiritual aspirant must completely change his tendencies. If he is hypocritical, he cannot grow spiritually.

Once I asked Swami Turiyananda for a definition of religion. He answered: “Religion is to make the heart and the lips the same.” Frankness and sincerity are the very foundation of spiritual life. Of course, this does not give us the right to hurt others in the name of frankness. A truly spiritual soul speaks the truth, but always a beneficial truth. Frankness and sympathy must go together. Moreover, a holy man does not try to hide his faults and does not make compromises in order to impress others. Whether people mock or revile him, or try to do him an injury, his mind is fixed in God, he feels the unity, he sees the ignorance, he is merciful. He pleases only his Lord.
There is a story of a young monk who was traveling. When he got tired, he lay down in the shade of a tree. Having no pillow, he got a few bricks and rested his head on them. Some women were going along the road to fetch water from the river. When they saw this monk lying there, they said to each other: “Look; this young monk can’t renounce the luxury of a pillow!” When they had passed, the monk thought to himself: “These women were quite right to criticize me.” And he threw the bricks away. When the women returned, they saw the monk lying with his head on the ground. They remarked contemptuously: “What kind of a monk is this! He feels insulted just because we made fun of his pillow!” Then the young monk thought: “If I have a pillow, people criticize me; if I don’t have a pillow, they criticize me. Let me try to please my God!”

We find throughout the history of religion that prophets and illumined souls, and even a divine incarnation like Christ, are reviled and persecuted. Worldly people, with their preconceived ideas of holiness, cannot accept or understand true spirituality. Normally, when someone speaks ill of us or hurts us, we instinctively want to retaliate. But if we do, in addition to hurting someone else we hurt ourselves, because when we are angry or resentful, we cut ourselves off from the thought of God. Sri Ramakrishna, like Christ, taught, not to react, but to pray for those who revile and persecute us. Of course, this teaching of non-resistance is the highest ideal. Before a man is ready to turn the other cheek he must be spiritually evolved. Purity of heart must be attained before non-resistance can really be practiced, otherwise not resisting evil is merely hypocrisy or cowardice. Non-resistance means to see God in all beings, and because of this realization, to maintain tranquility, patience, and forbearance in the midst of the conflicts and contradictions of life.

In the Bhagavatam the attitude of such a realized soul, who perceives the one Reality everywhere, is described in philosophical terms: “Even if thou dost think another person is causing thee unhappiness or misery, thou art really neither happy nor wretched, for thou art the Atman, the changeless spirit; thy sense of happiness and misery is due to a false identification of thy Self with the body, which alone is subject to changes. Thy Self is the real Self in all. With whom shouldst thou be angry for causing pain if accidentally thou dost bite thy tongue with thy teeth?”

Christ exemplified the ideal of non-resistance when he prayed on the Cross: “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.”

In Sri Ramakrishna’s life we find another example of non-resistance. In this case this holy man actually held himself responsible for the injury that was done him. A priest in the temple where Sri Ramakrishna was living became jealous because Mathur Babu, the head of the temple estate, was fond of Ramakrishna and would go to any trouble to see to his comfort. This priest thought that Sri Ramakrishna had cast a magic spell on Mathur Babu to bring him under his control. Again and again he begged Sri Ramakrishna to reveal to him the secret formula of his success. The Master told him repeatedly that he had used no occult powers, but the priest did not believe him. One day, while
Sri Ramakrishna was alone in his room absorbed in the consciousness of God, the priest entered unobserved and kicked and beat him until he was bleeding. Sri Ramakrishna did not mention the incident to anyone until much later, after the priest had been asked to leave the temple for another reason. When he told Mathur Babu about it, the latter exclaimed: “Father, why didn’t you let me know! I would have gotten rid of this fellow immediately!” Sri Ramakrishna replied: “It was not his fault. He sincerely believed that I controlled you by a magic spell. I am to blame because I could not make him understand.”

“Rejoice and be exceedingly glad, for great is your reward in heaven.” The reward for those who are persecuted for God’s sake is heaven. And so the reward of the illumined soul, who does not react to any injury done him, is immediate, because heaven is always within him. How is he rewarded? Although men may think that he is suffering, he is immersed in divine bliss, because his love of God raises his mind beyond the physical consciousness. Absorbed in God, he overcomes the world, even in this life. The Gītā describes such a man of enlightenment:

He who regards  
With an eye that is equal  
Friends and comrades,  
The foe and the kinsman,  
The vile, the wicked,  
The men who judge him,  
And those who belong  
To neither faction:  
He is the greatest....  
His mind is dead to the touch of the external: It is alive  
To the bliss of the Atman.  
Because his heart knows Brahman  
His happiness is for ever.

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* Vedanta Centre UK, Vedanta Magazine Articles November / December 2008, Vedanta Magazine Articles January / February 2009

http://www.vedantauk.com/magazine_articles_Dec08.htm#The Inner Meaning of the Beatitudes

http://www.vedantauk.com/magazine_articles_jan09.htm#The Inner Meaning of the Beatitudes (continued)
Swami Prabhavananda, Founder of the Vedanta Society of Southern California, was one of the pioneer swamis sent to America by the direct disciples of Ramakrishna to build on the work started by Swami Vivekananda at the turn of the century.

The swami was born in India on December 26, 1893. In 1914, after graduating from Calcutta University, he joined the Ramakrishna Order of India and was initiated by Swami Brahmananda, a direct disciple of Sri Ramakrishna.

In 1923, Swami Prabhavananda came to the United States. After two years as assistant minister of the Vedanta Society of San Francisco, he established the Vedanta Society of Portland. In December 1929, he came to Los Angeles where he founded the Vedanta Society of Southern California the following year.

Under the able care of the swami, the Society grew into one of the largest Vedanta Societies in the West, with monasteries in Hollywood and Trabuco Canyon and convents in Hollywood and Santa Barbara.

Swami Prabhavananda was a man of letters as well as a man of God. He wrote and translated a number of books with the object of making the spiritual classics of India available and understandable to Western readers. He was assisted on several of the projects by Christopher Isherwood or Frederick Manchester. His comprehensive knowledge of philosophy and religion attracted such disciples as Aldous Huxley and Gerald Heard. His publications, which include the Bhagavad-Gita, The Upanishads, Breath of the Eternal, How to Know God: The Yoga Aphorisms of Pantanjali, The Eternal Companion, and The Sermon on the Mount According to Vedanta, continue to this day to capture interest and draw people to the Vedanta philosophy.

Swami Prabhavananda passed away on the bicentennial of America’s independence, July 4th, 1976, fitting for one who gave so much of his life to America.