

LEARNING AND SPIRITUALITY

The Pedant and the Mystic

Like other saints and masters, Bulleh Shah has made a sharp distinction between knowledge gained through the study of scriptures and holy books and that gained through personal spiritual experience. Since he himself was a highly learned man, he was fully aware of the limitations of bookish knowledge and erudition. This awareness became all the more sharp, when he attained the mystic experience through the guidance of his Master, who apparently was an unlettered man. When Bulleh Shah first met his *Murshid*, Inayat Shah, the Master was transplanting onion seedlings from one place to another. Little did Bulleh Shah know at that time, that the simple vegetable-grower was an adept in implanting the Word of God in the hearts of true seekers.

When he came in close contact with his *Murshid*, Bulleh Shah realized his Master's spiritual greatness as also his high moral conduct. The qualities of a realized soul began to appear in sharp contrast with the character of scholars and learned men. He saw that men of learning and scholars made use of their erudition for amassing material wealth and gaining worldly fame, whereas Inayat Shah was content with leading a simple, pure life, and was distributing gratis, the great spiritual wealth that he possessed, to true seekers. This led him to proclaim spontaneously: "O Bullah, if you seek the pleasures of the spring season, become a slave of the *Arain*"¹

1. Literally, the vegetable-grower, here it stands for Inayat Shah.

That no scholastic knowledge is required on the path to God-realization is conveyed thus by Bulleh Shah :

With 'A'¹ my heart is steeped in love for the Lord;
 I have no knowledge whatsoever of 'B'².
 The study of 'B' gives me no understanding.
 I have relished only the bliss of 'A'
 I knew no distinction between 'Ain'³ and 'Ghain'⁴
 Through 'A' I learnt their difference.
 O Bullah, their utterances of 'A' are perfect,
 Whose hearts have been cleansed of dross.

In another oft-recited *kafi*, Bulleh Shah points to the same truth :

I have acquired much verified knowledge,
 But only one letter⁵ is true in it.
 All other disputation is futile.
 In vain does it raise a tumult !
 Words that come to my tongue cannot be held back.

Spiritual and Bookish Knowledge

In sufi language spiritual or mystic knowledge has been called *Ilm-i-Sina*,⁶ whereas knowledge from books has been given the name *Ilm-i-Safina*.⁷ Bulleh Shah considers knowledge from scriptures, devoid of practical application, as a 'bundle of woes'. The erudite scholars

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1. Originally, *Alif* (ا), the first letter of the Arabic/Persian/Urdu alphabet. It stands for unity, the One, God.
 2. Originally *Be* (ب), the second letter of the alphabet. It stands for all that is other than God.
 3. & 4. The letters *Ain* (ع) and *Ghain* (غ) have the difference only of a dot. Esoterically, it signifies the reflection of God in the Master. Elsewhere, Bullah writes : "As is the form of *Ain*, so is the form of *Ghain*."
 5. *Alif*, the letter for Allah. It symbolizes the unity of God.
 6. Literally, knowledge from the heart.
 7. Knowledge from books.

are adept in hair-splitting over the holy scriptures, but they are ignorant of all inner spiritual secrets. They have neither any personal experience of the Reality within, nor do they try to mold their lives in accordance with the teachings from scriptures. The aim of scriptures is to show the path of Truth and to render help in attaining it. A knowledge which neither purifies the heart, nor tames the restive mind, of what use is it to man? Says Bulleh Shah:

Why do you read a cart-load of books?
 You carry on you a bundle of woes.
 The journey ahead is replete with perils.
 You memorize the holy *Qura'n* by heart,
 And keep your gaze fixed on the reward.

On the futility of mere recitation of scriptures, without any spiritual practice in the wake of it, Guru Nanak strongly denounces it thus:

If we were to recite scriptures year after year,
 If we were to recite them month after month;
 Nay, if we were to recite them all our life,
 And spend every breath in this pursuit,
 Only one thing will count in the end, O Nanak,
 All else is futile, sheer waste and strain.¹

The Persian mystic and philosopher, Sanai, went to the extent of saying that "knowledge which does not take you to the destination of Reality, only ends by aggravating your ingorance."

One who has intellectually grasped the theory of Reality has not necessarily tamed his mind and

1. *Adi Granth* : M. 1, p. 467.

controlled his passions. He may tender advice to others on matters spiritual, but himself may be vexed by doubts and suspicions. There is no conformity between his speech and conduct. His life is all hypocrisy and cant. To such a one Bullah says:

You read and administer homilies every day;
But you eat the food of doubt and suspicion.
You preach one thing and practice another.
You are false within and true without!

Gather no more knowledge, O Friend!
You read and read, and pile up a heap;
The *Qura'n* and other books lie all around you.
All around is light, but within you is darkness.
Without the guide there can be no knowledge.
Gather no more knowledge, O friend!

Many of Bulleh Shah's couplets harp on the same theme. He finds the hypocritical way of life of people, especially of preachers and the clergy, intolerable. Here, two of his couplets are given as examples:

1. Mullahs and torch-bearers come from the same stock;
They give light to others, and themselves are in the dark.
2. All else is mere chatter, talk only of God.
Some confusion comes from scholars, some from books.

Pedantry, Discrimination and Action

The aim of knowledge, according to Bulleh Shah, is to awaken our faculty of discrimination. Knowledge

should enable us to distinguish between truth and falsehood, good and evil. The pedant who claims to be a man of vision, is in reality blind. He is blind to all higher values, because he does not distinguish between good and bad, and between a man of God and a man of the world. He is a loser in this world as also in the hereafter. A knowledge which inflames passions and desires instead of extinguishing them, should better be avoided. A knowledge which incites one to dishonesty and arouses in him avarice to possess others' property, does not make him dear to God, says Bullah. It is better to be illiterate and ignorant with a pure heart than to be learned and scholarly with a heart full of cunning and deceit. It is to bring out these truths that Bulleh Shah writes:

1. By such knowledge many complications arise;
 Though endowed with eyes you are totally blind.
 You capture saints and let go thieves;
 You are disgraced in both the worlds.
 Gather no more knowledge, O friend!
2. By constant reading mullahs become *Qazis*,
 But God is happy without such knowledge.
 Their greed is whetted day after day.
 Their acts are aimed at personal gain.
 Gather no more knowledge, O friend!
3. Much knowledge was acquired by Satan;
 His hearth and home were burnt to ashes.
 A necklace of curses was hung round his neck.
 And, at last, he lost the game!
 Gather no more knowledge, O friend!
4. O Bullah, in the divine temple God asked men
 for an account of their acts.

He kept pundits and learned away from Him,
and beckoned to Him the simpletons.

5. Enough of this learning, O friend!
Only *Alif* is required on the path.

The well-known Sufi saint, Khwaja Abu Ismail Abdulla Ansari (1005-1090 A.D.) writes: "One person has continued to gather knowledge for seventy years, but has not been able to experience a spark of light within him. Another man has remained unlettered and ignorant, but has succeeded in hearing the divine melody within him, and remains immersed in it. The latter is far superior to the former. On this path (of spirituality) arguments and logic serve no purpose. Seek with all sincere effort, and you may have the glimpse of Reality." Khwaja Hafiz, too, warns us against the sermons delivered by pedants. Says he: "Listen not to the harangues of one who does not practice what he says. Keep him at an arm's length, and proceed to the wine-cellar (where lives the cup-bearer, the Master, the dispenser of the wine of love)". Rumi in one of his verses, comparing worldly knowledge with divine or spiritual knowledge, says: "Knowledge which emanates from the body (matter) acts like a snake; knowledge which emanates from the heart is a friend."

The thoughts expressed above do not mean that the study of scriptures and holy books is a waste of time and energy. Saints and mystics spent many precious years of their lives to compose their works for our benefit. But, it is impressed upon us in their very books that salvation will not come by sheer recitation or reading of them. Release from the cycle of birth and death can be attained through love for God and practice of the Word.

A mere repetition of the praise of sunlight by a man sitting in a long dark tunnel will not bring him out in the sun. This objective can be gained only by actual movement to cover the distance of the tunnel from one end to the other. To have faith in the existence of God and to recite or chant hymns from holy scriptures is not enough. If union with the Lord is the goal to be achieved, spiritual practice of the Word is indispensable.

From the point of view of research, from the point of view of discovering Truth, from the point of view of removing doubts, or from the point of view of getting acquainted with the principles of spirituality, the study of scriptures and holy books is highly beneficial. But the real gain from such study lies in molding our lives in accordance with the knowledge acquired, and in attaining the final goal of God-realization.

The study of holy scriptures is our beginning, not our end. Theoretical knowledge of a science needs to be confirmed through practical experiments. That is why saints and mystics have repeatedly stressed in their writings, that knowledge conveyed in their books relates to *their* experience. For us, it is only testimony, a second-hand confirmation. It should inspire us to gain *our* experience, which was the real aim of writing these books.

RITUALISM AND SPIRITUALITY

Every orthodox religion is wedded to its own body of rituals, customs and external observances. Also, it considers its own system superior to those of others.

Consequently, it has usually been a source of conflict between one religious group and others. But saints and mystics look at all with the same eye. Junaid, an Arab mystic, says: "The *Arif* could not be an *Arif* until he is like earth upon which the pious and impious walk; and like the clouds that are spread over everything; and like the rains that descend upon all places quite without any likes and dislikes."¹ The Lord belongs to the whole world. He is not the sole possession of any particular group. Perfect saints and mystics, who have become one with the Lord, make no invidious distinctions between man and man. They are not tied down to any particular set of rituals. They are well-wishers of all mankind, because they are in love with God, and see Him reflected in everyone. Says Bulleh Shah:

True love has beguiled me, O friend!
 Reveal to me the land of my Beloved.
 At my parents' I was an innocent maid.
 With love to me He has robbed me of my heart.
 Logic, semantics and a store of knowledge—
 Such pedantry has left me devoid of Him.
 Of what use are fasts and prayers to them,
 Who have drunk deep from the font of love?
 Sitting in the company of the Spouse,
 Bullah is free from all rituals, O friend!

If, at times, saints are critical of the pursuit of a wrong path, it is with the sole purpose of saving men from going astray. Their intentions are always noble. They do not want people to waste the rare opportunity of the human birth in useless activities. In fact, they

1. *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. I, p. 57.