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ROBERT BROWNING AND THE VEDANTA.

By Sister Devamata.

(Address delivered before the Boston Browning Society.)

In considering how far Browning voices in his poems the spirit of the East, we must first of all remind ourselves that Spirit knows no boundary lines. Truth is neither of the East nor of the West. And he who sees the Truth is neither of the East nor of the West. He is of God. That Vision lifts him above time and place. It leads him even to transcend himself. But although this supreme Vision is open to all men, few there are in any age who attain it in fulness. When, however, there comes a rift in the cloud and a few gleams of the Light shine through, flooding the heart and soul of some man, then we have a genius such as Robert Browning. Yet it is only a rift. The illumination is not complete. Shadows still linger; hence the strong contrasts which nearly always mark the character of geniuses, contrasts which are difficult for the ordinary mind to reconcile.

When that rift grows wider, allowing a broader beam to pass, then there rises a prophet like Isaiah or Jeremiah, a towering figure, who at one moment stands on the heights lost in the wonder of God's glory and at the next descends into the valley to lament the wickedness of men; a great soul tossed on the ocean of dualism, seeing always two, light and darkness, good and evil, and warning men to strive for the one and flee from the other. When, however, the cloud is rent and the whole Vision comes, then the world gains a

Messiah or a Seer, mighty ones like those illumined Rishis, who from the silent heights of the Himalayas gave to mankind the lofty revelations set down in what we know as the Vedas. Their light never wavers. For them there is but One, there are never two. They have looked upon That which lies behind both good and evil and their whole consciousness is filled with That. They sit calm, "Serenely amid the half-formed creatures round," as Browning declares in "Paracelsus"; or again in "Cleon":

". . . . Those divine men of old time
Have reached, thou sayest well, each at one point
The outside verge that rounds our faculty,
And where they reached, who can do more than reach."

The power and need of such Teachers is a familiar theme in Browning's poetry, for he claims that only the man who has touched God is fitted to refresh and regenerate mankind. It is through such, as he says in "Pompilia," that "God stooping shows sufficient of His light for those in the dark to rise by." The Vedic Seers dwell with especial emphasis on the necessity in the world at all times of great souls who can say as John said in "Death in the Desert," "I saw"; for they alone keep men's faith alive. What made the scribes stop and harken to Christ's words? Because He spoke with authority; He had seen. What made it possible for Buddha to go out and conquer Asia? Because He had seen. Always must there come God-men of supreme Vision to break through human crystallization and show man once more his Divine nature. Therefore is it said in that great Eastern Scripture, the Bhagavad-Gita: "Whenever religion declines and irreligion prevails, whenever there is a predominance of

vice and a decline of virtue, then I (the Lord) manifest Myself, for the protection of the good, for the destruction of evil and for the preservation of religion."

It was because the Indo-Aryan Sages recognized so clearly the power of the personal vision, the strength of an apostolic succession of living teachers, that in ancient India higher knowledge was always transmitted by word of mouth. Man reads into the written teaching his own limitations, they said, and interprets it according to his own partial understanding; but when he listens to an Illumined Soul speaking even the humblest word, the force of the teacher's spiritual insight so quickens his perception that he is able to discern a new and deeper meaning in the truths spoken. Hence the ultimate revelations of the Vedas are called *Sruti* (that which is heard), while the minor Scriptures are known as *Smriti* (that which is written down). I remember, during the first weeks of my stay in India, being awakened every morning at half past four by the deep-toned notes of a man's voice and the light soprano of a little child's answering voice, and I learned that it was the teacher who came each day at that hour to rouse his young pupil and help him learn line by line the rolling majestic verses of the Vedas, which through all his life would be fixed indelibly in his memory.

Those great Wise Men of the East knew well, as Abt Vogler says, how "to build, broad on the roots of things." That is their salient characteristic. In the Rig-Veda it is recorded that the disciple came to the Master and questioned: "What is that by knowing which all else becomes

known?" He did not ask for facts or information. He asked to be taught the basic principle of life and knowledge. And all the Vedas following this earliest Scripture were composed as answers to that fundamental question, to know That which lies behind all knowledge. But such knowledge is not the ordinary knowledge which we gain from books. It is not the knowledge of the university campus or the library. Browning himself has described it in "An Epistle":

"So here—we call the treasure knowledge, say,
Increased beyond the fleshly faculty—
Heaven opened to a soul while yet on earth,
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven."

But for this revelation higher perceptive powers are necessary, the Vedanta declares. Man has within him three states of consciousness,—the sub-conscious, the conscious and the super-conscious; or as Browning expresses it in his "Death in the Desert":

"Three souls which make up one soul: first, to wit,
A soul of each and all the bodily parts,
Seated therein, which works, and is what Does,
And has the use of earth, and ends the man
Downward: but, tending upward for advice,
Grows into, and again is grown into
By the next soul, which, seated in the brain,
Useth the first with its collected use,
And feeleth, thinketh, willeth,—is what Knows:
Which, duly tending upward in its turn,
Grows into, and again is grown into
By the last soul, that uses both the first,
Subsisting whether they assist or no,
And, constituting man's self, is what Is—
And leans upon the former, makes it play,
As that played off the first; and, tending upward,
Holds, is upheld by, God, and ends the man
Upward in that dread point of intercourse,
Nor needs a place, for it returns to Him
What Does, what Knows, what Is; three souls, one man."

According to the Vedic teaching, the sub-conscious mind is the mind of the body, the mind that does. It is the mind which makes the heart beat and the lungs breathe, which draws us back automatically from pain and pushes us toward pleasure. Above this is the intellect, the mind that knows, by which man perceives, classifies and associates ideas, thus gaining what we ordinarily call knowledge. Still beyond is the super-conscious or the spiritual mind, by which man apprehends being directly. In this state of consciousness he no longer reasons or infers. He sees face to face what is. The hidden laws of God become apparent to him and he learns to identify himself with the Universal. As Browning describes it in "Sordello": "Divest mind of e'en thought and lo God's unexpressed Will dawns upon us."

To attain this state of spiritual illumination is the goal held out by the Vedic Sages to every living being; for through it alone will a light be kindled in the heart by which man will perceive his true nature and the true nature of all things. Every man is "a god though in the germ," we read in "Rabbi Ben Ezra"; and in "Sordello," man "must fit to the finite his infinity." The soul, in Browning's conception of life, cannot stop short of the Infinite, the *Sat-Chit-Anandam* or "Existence Absolute, Knowledge Absolute and Bliss Absolute" of the Vedas. Therefore, he tells us in "Sordello" again, "Let essence, whatsoe'er it be, extend, never contract." With him, as with the ancient Indo-Aryan Seers, all salvation or ultimate attainment can be reached only through the full revelation of the soul to itself. When that supreme moment arrives and the veil drops from Spirit,

then, the Svetasvatara-Upanishad declares: "As a mirror clouded by dust shines bright again after it has been polished, so is the embodied one satisfied and free from grief after he has beheld the real nature of his Self. And when by means of the real nature of his Self, he sees, as by a lamp, the real nature of the Supreme, then having known the Eternal God, who is beyond manifested nature, he is freed from all fetters."

With the realization of the soul comes necessarily a realization of the mutability of all finite things, and throughout Browning's poetry this is perhaps one of the strongest notes sounded. In "Fifine at the Fair" he writes:

"Truth inside, and outside, truth also: and between
 Each, falsehood that is change, as truth is permanence.
 The individual soul works through the shows of sense,
 (Which, ever proving false, still promise to be true)
 Up to an outer soul as individual too,
 And, through the fleeting, lives to die into the fixed. . . .
 Truth sets aside speech, act, time, place, indeed, but brings
 Nakedly forward now the principle of things
 Highest and least."

Wherewith change ends."

And again:

"Each has a false outside, whereby a truth is forced
 To issue from within. . . . Life means, learning to abhor
 The false, and love the true, truth treasured snatch by snatch."

This is a clear presentation of the Vedic doctrine of *Maya*, so often misinterpreted as delusion, but which actually means change. Nothing can be real or permanent except the Changeless Cause, because It alone is Self-existent. All other existence is relative, hence ever-shifting. "All things suffer change save God the Truth" are John's words in "Death in the Desert." Our sense-perceptions are

based wholly on contrast. We know cold only in relation to heat and what may feel hot at one moment seems cool in relation to something hotter. Light becomes darkness and darkness light, blue may seem purple and purple red according to what is placed beside it. Absolute color or sound or feeling is nowhere to be found in this kaleidoscope of phenomenal manifestation. We are unable even to define them save by relating each to something else. There can be nothing fixed in matter, because for material things fixity means death. Life on this plane depends on change and motion, on continuous circulation, perpetual ebb and flow. Yet behind this ceaseless play of *Maya* is a light that never flickers, an Absolute which holds the relative, a Real which lends to the changing form through which It shines that alluring show of reality which so easily deceives the unseeing eye. Thus speaks Browning in "Rabbi Ben Ezra":

"Fool, all that is, at all,
 Lasts ever past recall;
 Earth changes, but thy soul and God stand sure:
 What enters into thee,
 That was, is, and shall be:
 Time's wheel runs back or stops: Potter and clay endure.
 He fixed thee 'mid this dance
 Of plastic circumstance,
 This present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:
 Machinery just meant
 To give thy soul its bent,
 Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed."

With the force of a still mightier vision the Vedic Sages of old proclaimed again and yet again that Ultimate, Unchanging Reality, "from whence all beings are born; by which, when born, they live; unto which they go"; and this ancient Sanskrit prayer was ever on their lips: "O

Thou Supreme Light of the Universe, Lead us from the unreal to the Real, from darkness to light, from death to immortality." "The unreal hath no existence and the Real doth never cease to exist," Sri Krishna declares. "The Seers of Truth know the nature and final ends of both."

A recognition of the eternity of the soul and the mutability of all material things, however, does not call for a morbid under-valuation of the things of this world, nor does it demand a foolish torturing of the flesh. Browning felt that. The joy he took in living was a wholesome sign of his real vision. He exclaims:

"Every day my sense of joy
Grows more acute, my soul (intensified
By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen."

And David sings to Saul:

"How good is man's life, the mere living! how fit to employ
All the heart and the senses forever in joy."

Although he was not deceived by the fleeting nature of the created universe, he saw none the less its value in that it served to teach men to seek for the enduring and everlasting. We only know a fixed point by that which moves, and it is by studying day by day these things which crumble in our hands that we come to know that which is permanent. One of the signs of a lofty soul is to see greatness in little things, to see purity even in the impure, to perceive beauty behind that which appears ugly. There can be no doubt that Browning possessed that deeper sight. He saw the beautiful in all things, "the spiritual life around the earthly life." There was no fact of existence that did not hold a message of

inspiration for him. Why? Because he had learned to relate each thing that he beheld to the One behind. Every great poet or artist refers all to the Ultimate Beauty, as every Seer refers all to the Ultimate Truth. And no man can be a monist without being an optimist. He who sees the One in the many, unity in diversity, who beholds God everywhere, must find all things beautiful and may seem at times to revel in what to the ordinary mind appears base and unlovely. May that not explain why some of Browning's lines fall with a shock on uncomprehending ears?

None but a great soul could respond to the Higher Vision as Browning's soul responded; and no other could maintain so remarkable a balance between the Divine and the human, between flesh and spirit, between earth and heaven. Everywhere one finds a natural intermingling of the two; sometimes the scale may seem to tip a little to the fleshly side, then suddenly something swings it back to the spiritual. This is one of the greatest proofs of his genius, for higher vision never leads to the elimination or destruction of any element of life; it enables us to rate each at its proper value and maintain a balance among all. This is also the basis of the Vedic science of Yoga or spiritual development. The very word, from the same root as the English "Yoke," makes this plain; for man invented a yoke that he might balance his burdens and thus carry them more easily. Yoga, we are told in the Gita, only brings illumination to that man who observes moderation or balance in all his activities. This does not mean that at every moment he must stand at a neutral central point; but that when he swings to this

side or that, he will have such control over all his forces that in an instant he will be able to correct his deflection and regain the middle point, that point where all things are perceived at their true value.

If soul persists and material things perish, there rises the question: "What is death?" Browning gives answer, "New life comes in the old life's stead"; and "My foot is on the threshold of boundless life." Again in "At the Mermaid":

"Must in death your daylight finish?
My sun sets to rise again."

Did he believe in reincarnation? He does not voice it with the same definiteness as Tennyson or Wordsworth, but lines such as these seem to indicate it; and Paracelsus at the moment of his passing exclaims:

"If I stoop
Into a dark tremendous sea of cloud,
It is but for a time; I press God's lamp
Close to my breast; its splendor, soon or late,
Will pierce the gloom. I shall emerge one day."

More distinctly does the idea come in "Evelyn Hope":

"Delayed it may be for more lives yet.
Through worlds I shall traverse, not a few,
Much is to learn, much to forget
Ere the time be come for taking you."

No thoughtful mind can look deep into this ever-moving panorama of manifested life and explain its variations and inequalities on any other logical ground than that of Karma and Reincarnation. Each germ of life is working out its own salvation according to the natural law of cause and effect. It was not enough that nature should evolve the best machine. Man must go on evolving something higher within that machine; and if eons were allowed to evolve the

body, how cruel would it be to grant him a paltry seventy years to save his soul.

"I search but cannot see
 What purpose serves the soul that strives, or world it tries
 Conclusions with, unless the fruit of victories
 Stay, one and all, stored up and guaranteed its own
 Forever, by some mode whereby shall be made known
 The gain of every life."

Browning writes in "Fifine at the Fair."

Vedanta teaches that each human being is the arbiter of his own destiny. He can choose his own course to attain ultimate perfection. There is no mother whose indulgence is so untiring as the great Divine Mother of the Universe. She gives to every child as much time as he wishes to go to school. She never suspends or expels him. She lets him work or play, loiter or hasten on his way; but he must inevitably suffer if he breaks the law, just as a child cannot escape the smart and sting if he burns his fingers. She knows full well that, as Browning puts it, "Life's inadequate to joy as the soul sees joy"; and because "the soul craves all," every living creature must push on and on, climbing by his mistakes until he attains the farthest height; for "incentives come from the soul's self, the rest avail not."

But what is the purpose of it all? Browning answers in "Paracelsus": It is to teach us

"What God is, what we are,
 What life is—how God tastes an infinite joy
 In infinite way—one everlasting bliss,
 From whom all emanates, all power
 Proceeds, in whom is life for evermore;
 Yet whom existence in its lowest form
 Includes;"

while in "Death in the Desert" he says:

"God's gift was just that man conceive of Truth
And yearn to gain it."

For "The Absolute Truth is bliss itself; on attaining It the soul feels happy," the Taittiriya-Upanishad declares. And where is the Truth to be found? Once more the answer comes in "Paracelsus":

"Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.
There is an inmost centre in us all,
Where truth abides in fulness; and around,
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,
This perfect, clear conception which is truth.
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh
Binds it, and makes all error; and to know
Rather consists in opening out a way
Whence the imprisoned splendor may escape,
Than in effecting entry for a light
Supposed to be without. . . .
Therefore set free the soul alike in all,
Discovering the true laws by which the flesh
Accloys the spirit!"

The only reason for geniuses to come, for prophets and Saviours to come, is to remind man that he has the same power within himself; that he too can go to the origin of things; that within his own heart lies dormant the song of the poet, the vision of the prophet, the glory of the Saviour. To awaken each living thing to this mighty fact sounds the cry out of the Vedic past: "Arise! Awake! Seek out the Illumined Ones and gain understanding. Having known That (the Divine Spirit) man escapes from the mouth of death." And taking up the note, the inspired voice of the poet Browning calls to the world of today:

"Hold on, hope hard in the subtle thing
That's spirit."

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