

KIERKEGAARD AND IQBAL ON THE SELF

Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855)/ Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938)

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The Self is an integral part of a person. It is in one's inner nature, which psychology does not grasp but it definitely exists and is real beyond any doubt. We can intuit Self; in fact only it is in intuition that the true nature of the Self is revealed. To Kierkegaard the Self is nucleus of our existence. He says that a person first learn to know himself before learning anything else. This single sentence of a great philosopher takes us into certain depth of the subject. He is not telling us to know the Self but wants us to learn how to know the Self before learning anything else. This particular knowledge i.e. how to know the Self is prerequisite towards knowing one own self. It is only after we acquire the required knowledge that we can move further on. After knowing the Self the man is able to proceed towards its development.

The development of the Self is a movement from temporal to eternal. But one must be careful enough to put the first step on this path, which is extremely difficult, full of riddles and risks. It demands personal sacrifices. Therefore Kierkegaard had to forego all the pleasures of his life before trotting on this difficult path. Iqbal says: *Jigar kboon ho to chashm-i-dil men hoti hai nazār paida*, (The inner gets vision only when the heart bleeds).

According to Kierkegaard the Self has its origin in God. It is a vital entity in the individual, which has deep insight and tremendous observing power. It has the power to see what remains hidden from human eye; it sees not only the object as it looks but can see the whole of it. Kierkegaard's concept of approach to the Self is a movement from temporal to eternal (*i.e. from Fana to Baqa*). His movement from the beginning to the end is ethico-religious, in which faith and Love are the most essential and central tools. The faith guides the wisdom to adopt correct path and Love is the force, which provides strength to the person to destroy all the hurdles, all the risks and all the dangers on the way. It removes all the fears and doubts from the mind of the traveller. Love is the most sacred feeling in a person as it relates to one of the attributes of God. This is why Søren Kierkegaard gives utmost

importance to the cleanliness of the heart for the growth of Love. To him purifying the heart from rubbish is the first and foremost step towards self-awareness. He says that trying to know the Self with impure heart is self-deceit. Indeed such an effort is bound to end at tragedy. Kierkegaard says that 'a person can damage his soul without anyone suspecting it, for this is not an external damage, it lies within the person's innermost being. It is like the rot at the heart of fruit, while the outside can look very delectable; it is like the inner hollowness of which the shell gives no hint.'¹⁸¹

The inner rot is the rubbish of the heart and for its treatment Kierkegaard prescribes his formula of 'up building (edifying) belief', and he says that 'again it is Love that builds up belief.' To him Love is the ground and foundation of the life of the spirit, which are to bear the building. He says 'Love is the origin of every thing, and spiritually understood love is the deepest ground of the life of the spirit. Spiritually understood, the foundation is laid down in every person in whom there is Love. And the edifice which, spiritually understood, is to be constructed, is again love.'¹⁸² Indeed Love is Truth and is the very ground and foundation for constructing the building of the Self. It demands that the path that goes towards it must be first cleaned up and the rubbish and hurdles on its way must be removed. Kierkegaard says that a person must strengthen his/her inner being. He says that 'only thoughtless soul can let everything around it change, gives itself up as a willing prey to life's fickle, capricious changes without being alarmed by such a world, without being concerned for itself.' It is faith that strengthens the inner being of a person. 'Strengthening of the Inner Being' as termed by him, is to make a person to occupy his place in this world. One must not abandon his soul to 'worldly appetites' as human being is destined to rule the world and not to be ruled by evil forces. Man being the servant of God and the master on earth when strengthened in the inner being comes to know his place and becomes aware of his duty that he has to perform. The Self that seemed before as an illusion now turned up to him as a reality.

A Sufi would say that the place of God is human heart. It is evident that an impure heart where 'other' than God also lives cannot be a place of God. For the sake of cleansing the heart from rubbish different methods have been

¹⁸¹ *Either/Or* II, p. 222

¹⁸² *Kierkegaard The descent into God*, p. 34-35.

adopted by different people at different times including meditation, Yoga practice, prayers, fleeing away from society and being a hermit etc. But to Kierkegaard love is the foundation material of everything and therefore love supported by faith is the best remedy. When love purifies the heart it becomes transparent. The transparency of heart resembles to the transparency of the sea, as maintained by Kierkegaard. This is why he stresses on the process of constant deepening of transparency of the heart. He says that ‘the depth of the sea determines its purity and its purity determines its transparency.’ According to him elevation of heaven can be seen in pure depth of the sea. Similarly when the heart is deeply transparent and calm it ‘mirrors the divine elevation’ of Reality in its pure depths.

Iqbal on this process comments, in one of his verse, that the journey to selfhood begins with love and ends at Beauty (i.e. the Real or God). We have seen that Kierkegaard also arrived on the same conclusion as stated above. He also believes that ‘the greater conception of God, the more Self.’ According to Iqbal the ego of man is deeply related to the Ultimate Ego, to which he also calls as All-embracing Ego. This All-embracing Ego is the fount of awareness of the higher consciousness of his relation with God. The ego of man when fully developed becomes deeply related with Ultimate Ego. This means that the man becomes in direct contact with God. At the same time he being a part of the Organic Whole does not lose his identity. While translating Iqbal’s *Asrar-I-Khudi*, his learned teacher Professor R.A. Nicholson asked him a question on the Self. The full text of the letter in reply received by him from Iqbal has been included in his ‘Introduction’ of *The Secrets of the Self*, the translation of *Asrar-I-Khudi*. I quote hereunder extracts from the same letter of Iqbal, which shows wonderful similarity of his thought with Kierkegaard: He writes: “PHYSICALLY AS WELL AS SPIRITUALLY MAN IS A SELF-CONTAINED CENTRE, BUT HE IS NOT YET A COMPLETE INDIVIDUAL. THE GREATER HIS DISTANCE FROM GOD, THE LESS HIS INDIVIDUALITY. HE WHO COMES NEARER TO GOD IS THE COMPLETEST PERSON. NOR THAT HE IS FINALLY ABSORBED IN GOD; ON THE CONTRARY, HE ABSORBS GOD INTO HIMSELF. THE TRUE PERSON NOT ONLY ABSORBS THE WORLD OF MATTER; BY MASTERING IT HE ABSORBS GOD HIMSELF INTO HIS EGO.”

To Kierkegaard the Self attains its highest goal by becoming deeply related to God and becomes a union of the temporal and the eternal. When one becomes aware of it, his knowledge leads him to know that 'he has actual relation to this world'. He then knows that the world has been created for him and he is for the world. That follows the man marching onward and his Self-knowledge is transformed into action with full involvement into world's affairs as vicegerent of God. This is actually the place of man, which he achieves after his real understanding of the life's way. Kierkegaard says: 'Therefore, just as soon as a person collects himself in a more understanding consideration of life, he seeks to assure himself of a coherence in everything and as the ruler of creation he approaches,...'¹⁸³.

Dr. Annemarie Schimmel a well known German scholar and an authority on Iqbal's philosophy maintains that the more developed the ego is, the better it can stand the heaviest shocks without being destroyed, and can even survive the shocks of corporeal death. Sufferings in spiritual struggle for development of the Self are inevitable and the farther away the goal, the more difficult the path. Love, however, makes the voyage beautiful and easy for the traveller. She writes: "To the problem of Love a large part of Iqbal's poetical work is dedicated. Love is, in his terminology, the force, which brings man nigh to God and consolidates the ego, and which sometimes even corresponds to intuition. It is the fiery element, which enables the growth of the personality, and without which real life cannot exist."¹⁸⁴ I quote below Iqbal's five Persian couplets and their English translation by his teacher Professor Nicholson:

(The luminous point whose name is the Self,

Is the life-spark beneath our dust.)

(By Love it is made more lasting,

More living, more burning, more glowing.)

(From Love proceeds the radiance of its being,

¹⁸³ *Three Upbuilding Discourses* (1843) p 84 (Translation by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong).

¹⁸⁴ *Gabriel's Wing* by Annemarie Schimmel p.128

And the development of its unknown possibilities.)

(Its nature gathers fire from Love,

Love instructs it to illumine the world.)

(The hardest rocks are shivered by Love's glance;

Love of God at last becomes wholly God.

Each and every above verse is coinciding beautifully with the ideas of Kierkegaard on the Self, the Love and the relationship between the two. In these verses we may also see the truth of the words of Professor Nicholson about Iqbal's brilliancy of poetic expression that 'it wins the heart before taking possession of the mind.'