

THE BEAUTY OF VIRTUE *

By N. Sri Ram

There are certain words in the English language—and in other languages too—the meaning of which is only partially known because it has to be discovered through one's own life and action. *Wisdom* is such a word. We may have a certain concept of what it means but that concept, even if it is not vague and faulty, is likely to be partial in its truth. We may not know its true quality, beauty, and action.

Virtue is another such word. Sometimes we use the singular form to cover everything of that nature; sometimes we speak of “the virtues” in the plural, distinguishing one from another. The virtues so divided have been classified in different ways.

For instance, in ancient Greek thought, *justice, temperance, courage, and prudence* were regarded as the cardinal virtues. These words, being translations from the original Greek, may not convey the sense in which they were understood at that time. But using the words to mean what they ordinarily do at present, it does not seem clear why these particular virtues were regarded as fundamental, others being presumably additional or subsidiary.

However excellent and indispensable they can be in certain of their aspects, they are virtues that belong to the realms of reason where one has to start from the right premises. Any intelligent person can see that prudence, for instance, is needed to safeguard their interests, and temperance or moderation to insure their own well-being. Along with courage and justice, these would be acceptable to the most people as conforming to their worldly wisdom. But self-interest and virtue in its superior aspects may not go together.

When the influence of Christianity spread in Europe, other virtues of a predominantly unworldly character, such as humility, charity, love, and faith assumed importance. They were looked upon as nearest to the heart of God or the Divine Nature.

In the Mahayana school of thought in Northern Buddhism, the way of virtue was not separate from either wisdom or altruistic action. It was conceived of as being marked by seven portals, each of which called for a certain type of development representing an aspect of human perfection, and having its roots in an uncorrupt and incorruptible nature present deep down in every human being. The key to the first

* This article has been edited from the original to allow for gender-neutral language and minor stylistic changes.

portal, as explained in the book, *The Voice of the Silence* by H. P. Blavatsky, is *Dana*, a Sanskrit word, translated by her as “charity and love immortal.” Literally, the word means *giving*, but it is a giving with one’s heart unreservedly, as well as with one’s hands. Unless the journey is undertaken out of a pure motive of altruism—the longing to devote oneself to the task of bringing happiness and enlightenment to every human being and the good of every living creature—it cannot be undertaken at all. One’s heart and mind have first to be attuned to the heart and mind of all living beings.

The second portal calls for *Shila*—all the portals have Sanskrit or Pali names—usually understood as clean living and rightness in all aspects of one’s life and conduct. H.P.B. translates it as “harmony in word and act,” as it is the harmony within oneself, inseparable from right living, which is manifested as harmony in word and act.

The third portal signifies *Kshanti*, which she describes as “patience sweet, that naught can ruffle.” The ordinary dictionary meaning of the word *patience* includes forbearance and forgiveness.

The next two virtues are *Vairagya*, or dispassion, and *Virya*, or energy. H.P.B. translates *Vairagya* as “indifference to pleasure and pain, illusion conquered, truth alone perceived,” and *Virya* as “dauntless energy that fights its way to supernal truth.” It is not the kind of energy that belongs to things of matter, but the energy of life or spirit that arises out of a pure unconditioned state and therefore can manifest the utmost ardor or passion and yet remain detached, not involved in the things amidst which it moves.

The last two portals designated *Dhyana*, meaning contemplation or the meditative state, and *Prajna*, perfect comprehension, are really conditions of being in which the qualities of any or all the virtues can be present.

When we use the word *virtue*, what is our concept of it? Ordinarily we think of a formula, principle, or precept to which we have to conform. In doing so, there is always a gap between that ideal and the actual, and this becomes a cause of internal conflict. The ideal may be truthfulness, not merely in words, but also in conduct and thought. If we fails to achieve it, unless we loves truth for its own sake—without a self that seeks success, a sense of achievement and a good opinion of itself—there is sure to be dissatisfaction with ourselves, and this might even be transferred to the ideal itself. Such dissatisfaction might lead to a questioning of the ideal or even a revolt against it. We may notice this kind of a reaction in the case of a person who wants to give up something to which they are addicted but finds it difficult to do so. It might even seem to such a person after a time that it is good to indulge their weakness up to a point; it relieves tension, conduces to good relations, and so forth.

Virtue can be regarded in another light, not as conformity to a rule or principle placed before us, which we accept for one reason or another, but as a spontaneous and free expression of a pure basic nature or being that exists in every human being, a nature that is uncorrupt and in fact incorruptible. When that nature comes into action, the way in which it acts is in itself the way of virtue. It is this truth that Lao Tsu, the great Chinese philosopher, sets forth in his famous classic, but it requires a clear insight to see this as a fact. The question, therefore, is: Do we see the existence of such a nature in ourselves as a possibility? If this possibility exists—whether we refer to virtue in general or to specific virtues—then, they are all ways or forms of action assumed by the energy that springs from that pure nature which is ever unconditioned, unmodified by any extraneous influence.

In the Noble Eight-fold Path taught by the Buddha, the very first step is “right insight,” not belief, as the Pali word is so often wrongly translated. It is insight into oneself—the way a person is affected by external things, including their actions and reactions—which sets a person on the path of wisdom. Then there can be right thought, right speech, right action, and so forth, which are the other steps. One has to be able to see what is right and what is not right in every form of their own action, including thought and speech.

When virtue is thus understood, as a wholly free and spontaneous expression of a nature that exists in everyone, at least potentially, there is no self-will involved in it. Self-will comes in only when one’s action has to be directed according to a certain concept or image; and this will arises from one’s own conditioning and inclinations. It is not free will in the real sense, as it can become a form of egoistic self-assertion and willfulness. It is not the will innate in life’s free movements. The energy that springs out of any form of conditioning is mechanical in its action, a resultant of induced forces. It is not the energy of the spiritual nature, which is ever original and unconditioned and acts totally and not partially, freely or spontaneously and, because it does not act according to a set pattern, also intelligently.

Virtue in action—without action there is no virtue—errs neither by excess nor by defect. That is why its path has been spoken of as the golden mean. That nature which is uncorrupt knows by instinct what is right in action and thought, and therefore acts accordingly, as a master-artist knows how to form a curve of beauty and forms it with a sure instinct. He knows exactly where the line must be placed, through what points that line must pass. There is in the pure unconditioned nature such an instinct, which shows itself in the manner of its action as well as the quality of results achieved. The manner is as important and can be even more important than the concrete perceptible result. For manner conveys feeling; it radiates a quality; it is like the inflection of the voice in producing music, which has to be faultless all the way through.

The energy of the unconditioned nature acts freely and, in doing so, creates a pattern or form, which is always a kind of harmony. There can be innumerable such forms. It does not act according to a set pattern—there will be no freedom in such action—but its free action assumes such a form, because the form expresses the quality of harmony that is innate in that nature, which ever acts as a whole, never losing its unity. All such forms arising from the same base, that is, from that unified nature, must also be in harmony with one another, just as all laws of nature agree with one another. In other words, there can be a synthesis of all virtues which is virtue in a general or comprehensive sense, representing the total harmony of that nature as a whole.

The form that comes into existence changes from moment to moment because the action, which creates the form, arises from a basis of sensitivity and life. There can be such spontaneous action because, when the ground is clear, when there is a quality of purity or innocence in that soil, the Divine seed that is present everywhere in nature—it is really a concentration of energies—flowers of its own accord. What is divine is beautiful, and its energies always act in concert and create a form of beauty. A well-known ancient Indian hymn speaks of “the One Seed” which flowers into many different forms. It is so virile, so full of potentiality that the energies burst into action of their own accord when the way is open for them to do so. All virtues arising from the same pure soil of an uncorrupt nature constitute in their totality a form of perfection. It is this truth which is conveyed in the legend of the Christ being born out of Virgin Mary, the Christ being the personification of divine grace and beauty as well as wisdom, and Mary typifying that immaculate nature out of which that perfection arises spontaneously.

When there is an instinct of beauty, all that one does following that instinct will be beautiful. In the same way there can be an instinct of virtue or rightness, and when it comes into action all that one does, thinks, and feels will be right and beautiful.

When the harmony that is innate and latent in the unconditioned or spiritual nature is manifested in a form of beauty, we may call it the beauty of the soul, and it is more beautiful than any exoteric beauty. It has been said that all arts aspire toward music. They are an approximation to the form assumed by perfect music. All works of painting, sculpture, and architecture have to be creations in a medium less plastic than sound, and music excels because in it there is change and movement from one moment to the next. The nature that we are discussing also changes from moment to moment and it is subtler than anything that can be conceived by our minds. It is such a nature of sensitivity and harmony—free from every element that can impede or distort its action, lending itself to the subtlest modifications and inflections—that constitutes the true individuality or soul of man. All the beauty that we see around us, in things

external to us, are but fragments reflecting the beauty that is within. That inner beauty, as it comes into manifestation, translates itself into life and action, ever-changing but always presenting an aspect of that harmony which is its basis.

A fundamental distinction in virtues would be between those which may be called basic or spiritual, expressing the essential nature of the soul, the quality present in it—such virtues as humility, innocence, purity, and love—and others which follow as corollaries or secondary effects and commend themselves to reason as necessary and practical. Examples of the latter would be freedom from laziness, perseverance, discretion, and so forth. By themselves these are insufficient. Perseverance is good and necessary, but one may persevere in being wrong-headed. One may not be lazy but energetic, but he or she may be doing more harm than good by their energy. There has to be a realization of what laziness implies and does to oneself and others. When there is that realization one will cease to be lazy, entrenched, static, and dull.

When an artist creates a beautiful form, it always expresses a certain quality which seems to pervade that form; it evokes in the beholder a feeling which has that same quality. Every beautiful form of behavior expresses a quality found in the nature of the soul. But a form copied from a model cannot have the beauty or grace possessed by a form that comes into existence out of an inner realization or feeling, as an immediate creation. The nature of the soul has a timeless beauty, which is not of this earth. All virtues are manifestations of that beauty. In their totality they constitute the form, we might say, the flower of the soul.

That beauty manifests itself when one is truly selfless. It is not easy to extirpate the self. For even when it is not present as an active entity thrusting its presence, it can pervade one's nature subconsciously and operate in an indirect manner. But when all that the word "self" connotes—ambition, aggrandizement, lust, deception, and so forth—disappears, then like a clear sky the nature of the soul comes into the picture with its beautiful qualities. If even one of these qualities is realized in perfection, all the others will follow. For they all arise from one and the same state of being, which is ever undivided, and each involves the others. It is possible to say that humility is the mother of all virtues, or that love, in its most beautiful sense, is the fundamental virtue, or that there has to be a quality of innocence or purity in oneself as a primary basis. But it is not necessary to cultivate these—in fact they cannot be cultivated at all—one after the other; one can realize that state of being in which all these and other virtues are simultaneously present.

Because it is a question of realizing for oneself, virtue is something which in its true quality cannot be taught. One can learn by observation or from the words of another the ways or forms in which a particular virtue manifests itself. But mere form, though it may be suggestive to an intuitive person, cannot create the spirit or feeling of

which it is an expression. Virtue is not like knowledge of the ordinary sort, which can be conveyed by words. It is in the same class as taste, as a feeling for beauty, and other innate graces that cannot be taught. They have to be learned by other means. When there is love in the real sense, creating a sympathetic accord or a state of communion between oneself and another, say between a mother and her child, what is in the mother's heart *can* be conveyed to the child.

We do not know what love really means. We know only the love that is based on attachment and possession. When a person falls in love, especially if it is love at first sight, the object of love seems divinely beautiful. This condition unfortunately passes, because it gets mixed up with other feelings. But it indicates the real nature of love; it is the light from within that reveals the beauty that is hidden in things.

All action of the spiritual nature has the charm and freshness of spontaneity. Virtue has this charm. It is like an ever-fresh flower. Not only is the action of the spiritual nature wholly voluntary; it is also unreserved. It gives itself completely. The beauty of virtue is in such giving.

There is a nature deep within us which comes into the picture only when the ground is cleared for it. That nature remains the same and it is timeless. But it is capable of infinite variety in action. Every mode and form of its action is a form of beauty; as it appears in one's conduct, it is also a form of virtue.