

KIERKEGAARD AND IQBAL

The Self

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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 is truly existent and is very real. We can intuit Self. Only in intuition is the true nature of the Self revealed. But to describe this in words involves great difficulty and risks. This is an analysis in simple words of the teachings of the two great thinkers of the Self: Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855) and Dr. Muhammad Iqbal (1877-1938).

To Kierkegaard the Self is the nucleus of our existence. He states that a person first learns to know himself before learning anything else. This single sentence of our philosopher takes us into a certain depth of the subject. He is not telling us to know the Self, but wants us to learn and acquire knowledge of what we call the Self before taking any further steps. To act or to move towards a goal is only possible when we possess full knowledge of it. This particular knowledge, i.e. how to know the Self, is prerequisite towards knowing our own Self. Only when we acquire that knowledge can we then move further towards developing the Self. This is a movement from temporal to eternal. But one must be careful in taking the first step on this path, as it is extremely difficult, full of riddles and risks. It demands personal sacrifice. Therefore Kierkegaard had to forego all pleasures of his life before trotting on this difficult path. Iqbal says: *Jigar khoon ho to chashm-i-dil men hoti hai nazar 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 the 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. Faith guides wisdom to adopt the correct path, and Love is the force which provides strength to the person to destroy all the hurdles, risks and 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 an impure heart is self-deceit. Indeed such an effort is bound to end in 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.'¹

The inner rot is the rubbish of the heart and for its treatment, Kierkegaard prescribes his formula of 'upbuilding (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. Love bears the building. He says 'Love is the origin of everything, 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.'² Love is Truth and is the very ground and foundation for constructing the building of the Self. It demands that the path that towards Love 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 a thoughtless soul can let everything around it change, give itself up as a willing prey to

¹ Either/Or II, p. 222

² Kierkegaard, The descent into God, p.34-35

life's fickle, capricious changes without being alarmed by such a world, without being concerned for itself.' Faith strengthens the inner being of a person. 'Strengthening of the Inner Being' as termed by him, makes a person occupy his place in this world. One must not abandon his soul to 'worldly appetites' as human beings are 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 seems to him as a reality.

A Sufi would say that the place of God is inside the 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 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 the heart resembles the transparency of the sea, as maintained by Kierkegaard. This is why he stresses 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 purest depths.

Iqbal, on this process, comments in one of his verses that the journey to selfhood begins with love and ends at Beauty (i.e. the Real or God). As stated above, Kierkegaard also arrived at the same conclusion. 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, which he also calls "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 the Ultimate Ego. This means that man comes into direct contact with God. At the same time, his being a part of the Organic Whole, he 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 that of 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 most complete 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 he becomes a union of the temporal and the eternal. When he 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 man's march onward and his Self-knowledge is transformed into action with full involvement into world's affairs as vicegerent of God. This is 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,...'³.

³ Three Upbuilding Discourses (1843), p. 84 (Translation by Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong).

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."⁴ I quote below Iqbal's five Persian (Farsi) couplets and their English translation by his teacher Professor Nicholson:

Nuqta-i noor-i key nam-i oo khudeest, zer-i khak-i ma sharar-i zindageest
The luminous point whose name is the self, is the life-spark beneath our dust.

Az muhabbat mee shawad paaindatar, zindatar sozindatar tabindatar
By love it is made more lasting, more living, more burning, more glowing.

Az muhabbat ishta-aal-i joharash, irtaqa-i mumkinaat-i muzmirash
From love proceed the radiance of its being, and the development of its unknown possibilities.

Fitrat-i oo aatish andozad zi ishq. Alam afrozi beyamozad zi ishq
Its nature gathers fire from love. Love instructs it to illumine the world.

Az nigahi ishq khara shaq shawad. Ishq-i haq akhir sarapa haq shawad⁵
The hardest rocks are shivered by love's glance; Love of God at last becomes wholly God.

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

⁴ Gabriel's Wing by Annemarie Schimmel, p.128

⁵ Asrar-I-Khudi (A poem showing that the Self is strengthened by Love).