



Ramana Maharshi and the Socratic Method

Kushal Shah



Ramana Maharshi was an enlightened Master who hardly did any preaching, but attracted a large number of devotees simply by the power of his presence. His primary means of providing spiritual guidance was through conversations with the seeker and most interestingly, many of these conversations took place in silence. Devotees would come to have his darshan with lots of questions, but after being in his presence for a while would often have all their questions answered, without the Maharshi uttering a single word. And when the Maharshi did answer questions in the spoken form, the answers were not merely lines picked up from the scriptures meant to be memorized by the devotees, but something that would make them dive deeper into themselves. Ramana Maharshi was not an ordinary Guru with a desire to gather a large following. He was truly liberated with no desires. Neither did he have a desire to impress, nor to express, but only to silently

inspire his devotees to seek a simple and pure inner experience of the highest kind. His primary method was that of self-enquiry, which means asking ever deeper questions about yourself, till you reach the source.

A spiritual practice leads to enormous spiritual growth, only if the rest of our daily lives is in tune with our practice. This is why Vedanta puts special emphasis on integrating our spiritual goal into every single aspect of our lives. If these mundane aspects of our life are not in accordance with our spiritual goals, progress is stymied, which can either lead to frustration or loss of interest in practice of spirituality itself. This is one of the reasons why idol worship was introduced in Hindu society. Being aware of the formless reality is indeed very difficult for most people. But having a form or picture or idol can be a great help to remember the spiritual ideal and shape their daily lives around it. Similarly, the path of self-enquiry may appear quite exciting on

the surface since it gives lot of freedom to the seeker to ask questions, but it can also be quite challenging because it becomes very difficult if we have not cleared up our minds.

Our education system and family and work lives largely revolve around obedience to various authorities (teachers, parents, seniors, etc.). Children in general are not expected to ask too many questions in classrooms or in their homes. Our regular lives are designed to follow what we are asked to do.

To illustrate, the entrance examinations to our leading universities are largely based on repeated practice of a large number of problem sets, which leads to a dulling down of the mind. Add on to that the never-ending flow of information from social media and it becomes almost impossible to take up any practice which requires immense dedication, concentrated effort and fortitude. In such a scenario, it is not practical to expect many people to be able to undertake the path of self-enquiry. This indeed is an unsatisfactory condition that we find ourselves entangled in. Hence, it is important to work towards bringing about a radical change in ourselves and our education system, if we wish our future generations to be spiritually aspirational.

One of the ways, we can initiate a change for the better is by encouraging

adoption of the Socratic method in our schools, colleges, families and other organizations. The Socratic method is a very powerful method to arrive at solutions to various problems and also to teach various concepts in a classroom. It essentially proceeds through an open-ended discussion on a particular topic, consisting of question and answers posed by all the members involved. This method also fosters a deep sense of connectivity between various theoretical concepts we are familiar with and our own perception of reality. It helps in clearing much of our biases which prevent the free flow of our thought process. In other words, the Socratic method can be a perfect precursor to the spiritual path of self-enquiry and the two can be made to beautifully merge into each other. This can be of high importance, since our current societal setup and education system are quite in contrast to the ancient spiritually grounded one.

The Socratic method of teaching and Ramana Maharshi's path of self-enquiry can together provide a fascinating opportunity to encourage our young generation to introspect about the world around as well as the inner world of their own experiences, and in the process realize that these two are essentially one and the same.■

[e-mail: atmabodha@gmail.com]