

FAITH IN THE MODERN WORLD

- a talk by TKV Desikachar in Nantes, France April 1995

In today's world, the authority of tradition, religious institutions or elders is questioned and not accepted unless proven to the satisfaction of the individual.

However, when a person turns to someone or something with an attitude of respect and with the conviction that through this some- thing good will happen, extraordinary results are achieved. This is especially so in moments of crisis.

TKV Desikachar, here presents an understanding of faith that the modern mind can accept and more important, that the modern mind needs.

This talk was given at Nantes, France in April 1995 when he visited Europe for a series of lectures and workshops there.

I am very pleased that the subject of faith in the modern world has attracted so much interest. I would like to develop this idea in the following way. In the Indian tradition, even today, near the beginning of the 21st century, faith is very alive and is even taken for granted. In India, anywhere in India, people still believe in temples and teachers.

Further, in our families there is enormous respect for the parents. Even though we are exposed, more than ever, to the West, this faith continues. It is an amazing situation because on the one hand, we have learnt to question many things, and on the other, we continue to live as in the past.

Our traditions are alive, our masters respected and revered and our temples, churches and mosques full. It is almost like our country has not changed at all. But this is in India and India is only a small part of this great world.

So the question before us, the place of faith in the modern world, is a very significant question. I myself have had to address this question in my own life. As a student of science and applied science, my approach was to question everything.

If something could not be established by reason, it would not have any meaning for me. I would accept only those things that could be explained scientifically. Everything else, I would consider senseless.

Today I would consider this approach nonsense. But it was with this attitude that I began my own search with my teacher. I told him that I was not going to believe what he said even if it was about God, unless he could explain it to my satisfaction. I was also influenced in this approach by some great thinkers who I was lucky to be associated with.

Though the basis for the thinking of the majority of the philosophers in India is faith in God, we do have teachers who question this. They question God, blind faith and the teacher. This is not new. Such thinkers existed even in ancient times.

One of our most ancient philosophies is the philosophy of Carvaka, whose fundamental idea is not to believe what one cannot see. It says that there is no life after death and that there has been nothing before. What one sees and experiences is the only truth.

One great teacher I was lucky to be associated with, when still young, was J Krishnamurti. He was a teacher to many all over the world, though he himself would say that there is no teacher or God. He said that the only truth is that which one discovers within oneself.

So with my rational bent of mind and influenced by J Krishnamurti, I began my studies with my father in Indian traditions and teachings. I slowly began to discover that there existed many things which could not be explained by reason or logic. There were many things that I actually saw my father achieve that defied reason.

I recall how when treating some patients he would give some special medicine. And what was this medicine? It was the ash of the burnt charcoal and firewood that had been used in the kitchen. I would see him collect this ash, package it and give it to his patients. And these people who received this medicine, the ash which to my mind was worth nothing, would come back and thank my father saying that they were healthier now, finally pregnant or cured of their chronic problem. Ash has no medical properties and if I were to give the same ash perhaps nothing would happen.

Through instances like these, I began to accept that there are things that exist and happen that cannot be adequately explained by reason. This unknown factor, called faith, responsible for these happenings is not unique to India and its people. Even in France, Germany and USA similar things happen which are beyond our capacities of reason.

I had spoken earlier of Krishnamurti who taught that there is nothing like a teacher or God. Now, some people believed that he had a power, a healing power. He never claimed this. In all the years that I knew him, I never ever heard him refer to any such ability. One day, when I went to meet Krishnamurti, as I was entering his home I noticed a person in a wheelchair coming behind me up to the door. He was being pushed in a wheelchair and I noticed this casually while walking to the house. Krishnamurti was, as usual, waiting outside to receive me. We went in and I forgot about this person. Three days later, the same person in the wheelchair came to me and said "Thank you very much". He raised his hand and said "Three days ago I could not raise my hand and today I am able to do so". I said, "But I did nothing." He said, "It is not you, but because of you I could see Krishnamurti when he was waiting to receive you. Our eyes met, something happened in my system and today I can move my hand". I narrated this to Krishnamurti and he insisted that what happened was not because of him. But the person in the wheelchair believed in this power of Krishnamurti and was almost miraculously helped.

Bernard had brought a group of teachers to Madras a couple of months ago and one of them narrated another interesting incident. Her grandson had set out to cross the English Channel on a raft. It was a bad day, very foggy and the sea was rough. With no communication from him, the family got worried. In that fog the boy would not be able to see what was ahead and the sea was very rough. Sitting in France they felt helpless and wanted to do something. The whole family assembled together and decided to pray. They prayed together and after this they felt better. They felt that their boy would be saved. Days later when the boy came out they asked him how he had managed. In the midst of that fog he had the faith that something would save him. He became aware of his breath and was convinced that as long as he had his breath and was aware of it, he was safe.

How did he suddenly recognise this and how did the family in France turn to prayer? It looks like when there is a crisis and we have tried all the known solutions without any of them working, we turn to something else which is actually within. This helps give courage, strength and tap a hidden resource through which the crisis is solved.

This is being accepted by medical science which examines very rigorously before accepting anything. This has come about through the work of Dr. Herbert Benson who calls it the faith factor. Very simply, the idea is that when a thing is done with the conviction that it will work, it will work better. This is true for all activity whether jogging, swimming, taking medicine or doing some breathing exercise. Whatever benefit is to be got from the activity will be got much more effectively. Dr. Benson developed this idea after visiting the Dalai Lama's camp in India. There, there are still people who practice the ancient Buddhist techniques. These techniques produce certain phenomena which are unusual for a medical person. For example through certain practices they are able to increase the temperature of the body, to be precise in specific parts of the body. Thereby they can withstand extreme cold. These monks have no knowledge of modern physiology. These and other phenomena occur through the use of techniques that have been handed down through the centuries and which are faithfully applied.

It seems that, to whatever the technique being used, if we add something of ourselves from within, things change. So whatever may be the changes in the traditions of the world, what is within us remains the same. Nothing can change this and nothing can take it away from us. It is there for use in any activity we choose to pursue, thereby enhancing the quality of the action.

There is one more thing. As long as we believe, there is hope. In moments of crisis, when all seems lost, if we choose to believe, hope appears again. And hope is a very positive energy. In an interview with the Dalai Lama, he told us that faith must always be backed by reason. Otherwise it is blind faith. However, he said that there are difficult situations where, though not logical, faith is necessary because faith gives hope and hope gives energy and through this the person tries again. And who knows, when he tries again, he may make it. To illustrate this he gave the example of a man dying of hunger and far away from any village. He has given up hope and his life is slipping away. It is the duty of anyone with him to convince him that food is on its way and to just wait a little longer. This may not be true but it can give hope and therefore energy and then who knows, he may take a few steps towards a stream to quench his thirst.

In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that I have not stated that one should have faith in any one particular thing. Rather, faith is something within us which we draw on when doing any activity thereby enhancing the quality of our action and its benefits. It is particularly important to draw on this in difficulties as it will provide the energy to renew our efforts. If we do not think of the positive in the most difficult situations, we panic. And once we panic we are lost.

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