

# THE CONVIVIAL ASCETIC

[Our readers are familiar with the sane and balanced insight into a variety of problems expressed in the essays of **Dr. Alexander F. Skutch**. He is a naturalist who has been collecting specimens and also been studying bird habits in Central and South America. His reverence for Nature is great and his views on right intelligent living are helpful.

In this article there are some thought-provoking statements. Man sows, harvests and consumes food, but does not truly recognize that these acts are indissolubly linked with Nature and also other human processes. This is the old teaching of the wisdom of Prajapati quoted in the third chapter of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. Again, *yoga* in the dual aspect of Yoke and Union is brought out. We must practise asceticism which frees us from the yoke of the lower selfish nature, but which simultaneously enables us to unite with the higher Self-Nature. Right Loneliness and Good Company both are aspects of convivial asceticism. One-sided asceticism begets the false pietist of bewildered soul; at the other extreme is the hedonist—time-waster at night and sluggard in the morning, corrupter of his own soul. The childish old age is different from Second Childhood. Our author recommends regaining of the Child State so pithily described in Shankara's *Crest-Jewel of Wisdom*: "As a child free from hunger and bodily pain, rejoices in his play, so the sage delights, happy, free from 'my' and 'I.' Things of sense neither wound him nor delight him, he is no longer either allured or revolted by them; in the supreme Self he joys and rejoices over, delighting in the essence of that unrivalled bliss." The great Buddha in a single verse, 142 of the *Dhammapada*, has voiced the philosophical formulæ of this article: "But he who is tranquil and serene and calm and lives a tamed and restrained life of holiness and has ceased to injure living things, though richly attired, he is a Brahmana, an ascetic (Samana) and a monk (Bhikkhu)."—ED.]

At first sight, the title of this short paper seems to involve mutually contradictory terms. A convivial ascetic appears to be an impossibility, like "black whiteness" or "the son of a barren woman." Everyone knows that a convivial person is given to eating and drinking in jovial fellowship; we commonly think of him as seated or reclining at the festive board. The ascetic, on the contrary, holds himself aloof from such gatherings. Although he may dwell with others

who share his austere practices, he is often a hermit, who munches in contemplative solitude his frugal meal. The festive board where wine flows freely is anathema to him. How could an ascetic be convivial?

Such is the common conception, but if we analyze the situation a little more deeply we shall see that it is wrong. At least, the usual distinction between the convivial person and the ascetic fails to do justice to the literal meaning of the word convivial—*con vivere*, to live

with others. Let us in imagination seat ourselves, as uninvited and unseen guests, at the groaning board; and while the invited guests lift the wine cup in repeated toasts, and stuff themselves with an excess of rich foods, and pass the merry quip and shake with laughter, let us reflect earnestly upon what we behold.

In most countries, and throughout the greater part of history, our thought would trace this superabundance of choice comestibles back to the toil of oppressed serfs or driven slaves, living in misery and squalor, deprived of adequate nourishment, bereft of freedom, beauty and hope, so that their masters might enjoy enervating luxury and ease. Yet many of those down-trodden toilers are by natural endowment nowise inferior to their lords; given the same advantages, they would in numerous instances surpass them in wisdom or wit. But, dull and uncouth as the inevitable result of the harsh conditions of their lives, they are naturally excluded from the brilliant company amidst which we sit. The convivial fellowship does not extend to them; it is confined to a narrow clique, callously indifferent to the well-being of the very workers upon whose toil it subsists.

But, it will be objected, the situation we have just contemplated is archaic; in the more advanced countries, where agriculture no less than industry is largely mechanized, everyone enjoys an

abundance without the forced labour of slaves or of serfs bound to the land. While there has been much improvement in this respect, it is still true that the world contains many human mouths that might benefit by the food which harms those who eat too lavishly. Yet even with the assurance that the meat and drink that burden the table at which we sit were not produced by undernourished labourers, we are not quite happy about them. Our mental vision follows the flesh on the plates before us back to the reeking slaughterhouse, where in-offensive animals in the prime of life were cruelly butchered, perhaps after a long, harassing journey in an overpacked van, after much abuse and mutilation on the farms where they were reared. Even the ice-cream, so innocent in appearance, calls up visions of calves who never enjoyed a taste of their mothers' milk, who were perhaps slaughtered at a tender age to increase the dairyman's profits.

The cigarettes, the coffee and the cocktails, which figure so prominently at luxurious entertainments of the present day, appear to escape this objection. We cannot by any stretch of the imagination detect a drop of blood on them. Yet tobacco, coffee and the fruits or grains of which fermented drinks are made are grown on fertile land, which is thereby excluded from producing food which someone, perhaps the very labourers on this land, could well

use. And although the area needed to supply these things to a single person may not be great, the aggregate consumption by teeming modern populations represents a huge drain on the earth's bounty, which even without this additional burden is strained almost beyond its limit by humanity's multitudinous demands. It is clear that the greater man's consumption of unnecessary luxuries becomes, the more he reduces the areas of the earth which remain to support the natural vegetation and the free animals of all sorts which dwell in it. These also seem to deserve a portion of this planet, to whose beauty and interest they add immeasurably. Thus, despite the emancipation of slaves and helots, the feast of which we are the unseen spectators has not achieved true conviviality in the literal meaning of the word. This sort of entertainment is not living with other creatures to the best of our ability. Our merry-makers are still members of a little closed society, indifferent to the wider fellowship of living beings.

Let us now turn to the ascetic and see how the situation stands with him. He sits alone, eating his frugal meal of rice or bread, garden vegetables and fruits, washed down with pure water. Not for him the rich, surfeiting viands, the wine that loosens tongues and weakens self-control. How unsocial, how brutish, his solitary repast in contemplative silence! But this is to see only with

the corporeal eye, while that of the spirit remains tightly shut. The ascetic is not alone; he shares his repast with unseen companions. Because of his abstemiousness, many a creature of the most varied kinds, which if he followed the thoughtless, luxury-seeking existence of the multitude would have been either directly or indirectly destroyed, is now enjoying life. Other men, too, have more because he takes less. Whether near or far, these beneficiaries of his frugality are his commensals, the sharers of his meal. He lives with them rather than at their expense. He, not the feaster at the overlaid table, is the true convivialist, in the literal meaning of the word.

Doubtless to many this seems a perverse use of intelligence, so to permit our wandering thoughts to destroy our spontaneous enjoyment of a situation which the natural man regards as a source of great pleasure, while it exalts a mode of life that to him is anything but attractive. But this reversal of naïve appraisals is the inevitable result, or expression, of spirituality, as I understand the term. Placed at the festive board that we earlier considered, the intellectual man, the analytic thinker, may see clearly enough the relationship between the superabundance he enjoys and the deprivations and sufferings of other beings, human and non-human. But, if he is merely intellectual, these thoughts will not in the least

diminish his enjoyment of present sensations. The spiritual man, however, can no longer find pleasure in sensations or experiences which he perceives to be purchased at the price of others' pain. In so far as the creatures who suffer to provide gratifications for him are not immediately present, he must possess an analytic intelligence to trace the connection between his actual sensations and the unseen sufferings of others. Thus spirituality, in any high degree, appears to consist of intelligence plus something else. It might be defined as the capacity to have our enjoyments, or our sufferings, heightened or diminished by insight into the wider relationships and more remote consequences of our activities. Hence the spiritual man differs from the sensual man by the possession of both greater intelligence and more responsive affections, and from the merely intellectual man by his greater emotional sensitivity. He adds zest to his meagre repast by picturing to himself the creatures which benefit by his frugality; he abhors the wanton banquet because he cannot close his spirit's eye to the suffering and destruction for which it is responsible.

It appears, then, that asceticism, not in its harsher aspects but at least to the extent of studied frugality, is the inevitable reaction of the spiritual man who contemplates his position as an animal with rather large and complex needs placed in a world crowded with sentient life.

His frugality is the most perfect expression of his awareness of and solicitude for the multiform life around him. The ascetic does not scorn happiness; like everybody else, he is compelled by the structure of his own mind to seek the greatest happiness, the highest ultimate good, as he sees it. All the great ascetic systems, such as Stoicism, Jainism and monastic Buddhism, have been carefully planned procedures to ensure perfect and unshatterable happiness to those who consistently practised them. But the founders of these disciplines saw that free indulgence in sensual pleasures was not the road to happiness; for such gratifications are all too commonly procured at the price of much suffering by other creatures and even a balance of pain by the one who pursues them.

Asceticism, of the sort which strives towards true conviviality, need not and should not extend to things of the spirit. Born of spirituality, it becomes untrue to its source when it strives to cramp or depress the spirit's life. All the happiness which can be derived from the contemplation or pursuit of truth, beauty and goodness, from the cultivation of friendship, seems wholly compatible with asceticism in the things of the flesh. Indeed, frugality in food and drink, the avoidance of excessive luxury, is the regimen which best fits the spirit for a satisfying life in its own sphere.

Our crassly materialistic modern

civilization commonly underestimates the mind's capacity to create its own felicity with few or no material supports. Even in early childhood it demonstrates this capacity to a remarkable degree. When children straddle a stick and imagine they are riding a spirited horse, when they set three chairs in a row and fancy they are taking a long journey on a railroad train, must we not concede that the material component of their enjoyment bears about the same proportion to the mental component as the mass and complexity of a stick to those of a horse, or those of three chairs to a railroad train? Apparently this spontaneous tendency of the spirit to lead its own life more or less independently of the physical *milieu* has, in an evolutionary way, been repressed by the necessity to take a more realistic view of things in order to survive; and society for its own ends leads the child out of the realm of fancy into the harsh kingdom of economics. Yet the

sight of children at imaginative play should serve to remind us in what region true felicity is to be found.

Doubtless there are also social gaieties which are compatible with the sort of asceticism that we have been discussing, because they are innocent in the sense that they do not rest upon the exploitation and suffering of other beings. But it is difficult to find such innocent social diversions except within the context of an innocent society. Or if perfect innocence is incompatible with survival in a world constituted like ours, we should at least demand a society imbued with compassion, which makes innocence the ideal which it strenuously strives to realize. In a civilization whose very festivities reek of exploitation and the slaughterhouse, innocent social diversions are difficult to find. In such an ambient, the ascetic who would be truly convivial must, paradoxically, pass much of his life in solitude.

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