



A journey of self into self: KV Raghupathi's *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree*

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Abstract

Several poets have broken the previous trends and created their own style in presenting their invaluable experiences to the contemporary world, and have emerged powerfully evocative by rendering such experiences as crispy, epigrammatic and enigmatic. A few poets have tried to contemplate on the self, and have been using poetry as a strong vehicle to unleash the mysteries of life. Raghupathi is no exception in this genre. He has penned a long poem using the Peepal Tree as a symbol to represent his inner experiences and take a reader to plunge deeply in his/her self to ponder on the self itself to understand its mysteries and paradoxes. This paper explores such a journey of the self as presented by the poet in the long poem, *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree*.

Keywords: *invaluable experiences, crispy, epigrammatic, enigmatic, self, mysteries, paradoxes*

Introduction

Raghupathi has authored many poems and collections since 1987. He has so far brought out twelve collections. A quick reading of his works, *Desert Blooms, Echoes Silent, The Images of a Growing Dying City, Dispersed Symphonies, Samarpana, Voice of the Valley* and *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree*, has given me an understanding that his experiences are largely mystical in nature and consistently dealt with the experiences of 'self' in metaphysical sense. 'Self' is the distinct individuality or identity of a person or thing. The experiences of the 'Self' differ from person to person and it is individual's perception and understanding in this context matters a lot.

Some writers touch on the peripheral and temporal layers and describe their experiences. But others delve deeply into the human consciousness and bring out their emotions and thoughts in a unique way. And Raghupathi is no exception in this genre. He is different from the other poets as far as the way of projecting the deeper aspects of life is concerned. Though his works appear to be simple on the surface, on digging, the multi-layered meanings are revealed. His background involves the backdrop of transcendental elements in his writings. Though Immanuel Kant, the German Philosopher, emphasized that the cognizance of transcendental knowledge is confined to human experiences, Ralph Waldo Emerson, an American Poet influenced by the Eastern wisdom, chiefly Indian, on the contrary regarded that human experiences must go beyond the five senses and must cognize the things intuitively, if necessary and Raghupathi's poetry is imbued with this quality where he travels beyond the senses and sandwiches thought with emotion and emotion with the experience of the beyond through his concise and epigrammatic words.

The present paper examines the *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree*. This slender volume comprising forty pages begins with his reaching the mysterious Peepal Tree on the Mysore University campus in his long evening walks while he was a Thoreau Fellow at Dhvanyaloka in 2000. In his regular evening walks on the

campus, the poet sat under the tree and underwent mystic experiences. These experiences were later put in the form of the tree rendering its voice in chaste wisdom that is unparalleled in the annals of poetry, secular and universal. Thus, he listens to the Peepal's voice:

I am the Peepal

Ageless, ancient and primitive

The primordial flows in me. (21)

Peepal tree is considered as one of the five sacred trees for the Hindus, the others are banyan, mango, neem and tamarind. The tree symbolizes enlightenment as well as pure wisdom. It was under this tree, Siddharta had attained enlightenment and became Buddha. The poet has appropriately chosen the three words, 'ageless', 'ancient' and 'primitive' to represent the characteristic qualities of the tree. 'Ageless' because, the poet is not sure of its age – when it was planted and how many years it has existed there; 'Ancient' because it is very old, timeless; 'Primitive' because it has been there since time immemorial. All the three words are synchronized to represent the quality; hence it cannot be ignored. It is irresistible for the poet and it is also persisting. 'Primordial' here represents in the beginning, and in the beginning wisdom existed and flowed; it was all nothing but wisdom.

The Peepal tree continues, to still one's mind, one needs to still one's body. This is the principle of Yoga. Only by stilling the body, mind can be stilled. It is for this reason *Padmasana* (lotus position) or *Siddhasana* or *Sukhasana* (comfortable sitting with crossed legs) with straight back is recommended in Yoga for meditation. As one achieves stability (*sthiram*) in this posture, stilling the mind becomes automatic. Then the poet pleads:

Let your roots of wisdom penetrate every cell of my body

Like the river and its tributaries and streams

That cut deep into the earth.

Let your wisdom enter

My veins and arteries till I merge with Nature. (23)

The poet expects the tree to impart such pure wisdom to penetrate every cell of his body. The simile used here is striking: 'Like the river and its tributaries and streams'. The poet however does not use 'mind and soul'. Obviously, he means to give sanctity to body, a house for both mind and soul to dwell in.

Give me Bodhisattva,
O Tree of Knowledge and Wisdom!
O Tree of Enlightenment! (23)

Later he addresses the tree as 'Bodhisattva', regarded next to Buddha in hierarchy. The poet is aware of this hierarchy in Buddhism. According to the Mahayana School, there is only one Buddha but there could be many Bodhisattvas whose task on the earth is to guide and transform the humanity spiritually. Hence, the poet addresses the tree as Bodhisattva and not Buddha.

The tree remains silent to the speaker's quest and the next evening the poet returns to the tree "with an unqualified longing to become the Bodhisattva."

The tree resumes its rendering:

The healing lies nowhere
But in your own tiny palms that hold water
Full of your own reflections. (24)

The answer he receives is to lose one's purpose, strip one's will, and be devoid of relations. Further, he has to disown everything. He should be no "other" man, be alone and live for himself and die for none. The healing lies with every one of us. There is no need to run after swamijis and yogis. Yet, people run after these so-called holy persons. It is nothing but self-deceiving.

The ending is not you but that which is 'not you' should come to an end, as the tree speaks. This is the quality which has to be annihilated in all human beings. 'Not you' is complex. It may be understood as the sum total of all becomings in one's life. Raghupathi's way of telling the complex truth in simple language is amazing.

What is to be extinct is not "you"
But the "not you" in you. (25)

All men suffer due to the expectation of the work he does. If human beings can go beyond the configuration of expectation, then they can travel beyond suffering. This idea comes close to the concept of '*Nishkama Karma*' as expounded by Lord Krishna in the *Gita*, which says that *karma* is true when it is performed with no expectations and anticipations.

Because you expect returns
From whatever you do and don't do (26)

Raghupathi understands that maintaining equanimity and tranquility helps a person achieve balance towards all the vagaries of life. He suggests strongly growing in one's consciousness and taking refuge in one's own self is the panacea for all illnesses. The tree says that by only forsaking and disobeying the opposites and contradictions, can one bring out all the power that lies within:

You are the Opposite, the poles apart are in you
A bundle of contradictions;
But strength and power lie in you
In disowning the opposites and contradictions. (28)

The tree asks a series of questions like – "Do you want to live? Do you want to love and to be loved? Do you want honor? Do you want contentment? Do you want peace? Do you want freedom? Do you want happiness?" (31) The solution for all these questions lies in rising from the dust and din of one's own creations, that is becoming. The poet thus says

It is identification that brings longing.

It is alienation that brings misery. (30)

The root cause of misery is non-acceptance of the things that life throws at you. Hence, the message is very clear that by accepting the things one faces in life, man becomes free of all the clutches of the life. If you want to try something in life, don't aim for pittance. A Bodhisattva loses all to gain everything in life:

Attain the unattainable
You will miss "nothing" in your life
Like the Bodhisattva. (31)

The poet says that when one lives with the infinity and loves all beings on this planet, he shall resurrect like Christ. He becomes holy in the truest sense for which no saint, no philosopher, and no teacher is essential to disperse the darkness of the soul. When a man becomes empty of lust and narcissism, he/she shall become immortal in this very world:

O beauty is in your own living.
Shrine is in your own heart.

The image is your own tended self. (33)

It is also known that suffering is the great purifier and it is the greatest healer too, the poet reflects. Without undergoing the pains, one cannot gain "religious consciousness" in this world nor of the other world. The message to be discontent for the small things is also dealt in:

Nothing awakens you

To religious consciousness, like suffering.

Your sorrow comes from your burning heart for the great. (33)

In the words of Swami Vivekananda, 'All the power lies within you' holds good in this long poem. The poet says that as the fragrance of the flower comes from within and the will of the banyan tree to grow is mapped inside a tree, whatever one wants to become in one's life, is already there within the self. Hence the need for harping on outer things doesn't arise:

To show yourself what you are

You must not seek the blessings of a saint.

The grace is in you,

Like the fragrance in flower in shrubbery

The will is with you.

Like the seed in a banyan tree. (34)

To have a perfect balance sheet of life, one has to stop asking and receiving, only then one can quit this world like an unknown bird. He continues that one has to set his heart free from hope and expectations:

For you have come from the original silence.

Your desire is rooted in the hopelessness to realize this.

And your total despair is the beginning of this awakening,

Because you lose everything in the world. (35)

Later, the thought develops slowly but consistently that one who is in fear of others is in fear of himself and one who remains untrustworthy to others, will be untrustworthy to himself. The speaker in the poem reiterates this:

You can never reach the depths of your heart

By your many works, accomplishments and distinctions

But by diving deep and shaking the bedrock

Of your hard-heartedness,

Abandoning all your claims, faults and accomplishments

You can convert the explosive

Into a smooth-running stream.

You can transform the crude coal into pure diamond. (37)

The poet also says that man should not possess more than that is essential to him. He should know the difference between a need and a want. He says that man should take what he needs and part with what he doesn't require. The poet has beautifully explained what real socialism is. Only by voluntarily sharing the surplus the egalitarian society can be established. By coercion nothing can be achieved:

Give your possessions to the dispossessed.

The excess is an unwanted disease.

You cannot live with it

As it eats your anatomy, like the pest. (37)

Take what is required;

Give what is not yours;

Part with the unused.

Alone in the desert, like a camel move on

When death comes, die valiantly.

When others rot in their own possessions

You can be intact, not claiming that is not yours. (38)

The state of being non-covetousness is explained succinctly.

Only human beings amass wealth and other things in excess of wants. No other animal does on the earth:

Take that which is essential for your living

And leave the rest unclaimed for humanity. (38)

The writer says that man's maturity doesn't lie in abandoning from the things of the world, but living with them and overcoming them. He portrays this paradox of one's living. The starting point for denying the 'self' is 'self' alone. In understanding this paradox of life lies the secret of happiness and peace:

Your alienation lies, not in your severance from all

But in the pursuit of all, in the world.

That is the paradox of your living.

Proceed from your "self" first

That is the point of beginning (38)

The great joy of living lies in enjoying from moment-to-moment.

Being dead to the old psychological memory and moving with perennial awareness of the present moment is the solution for a great joy:

True living is scrapping the dead

And forgetting the unborn.

Take your hands back

And open the gates of your heart.

Welcome into the inner part the Great Joy

That manifests in everything. (40)

Diving deep in to one's self bestows great abundance in all aspects:

And dive deep into your nonentity

And feel the great joy manifested in abundance. (42)

The poet says that freedom gets nearer to one who accepts solidarity with others without choice. When a person is not hostile with himself, life is devoid of eternal conflicts. All power originates from within by being self-conscious. When a person becomes powerless

inwardly, all follows like a natural spring. The solution that he offers is simple,

Would you know what the way is?

It is freeing the mind from "mind"

And acting on the spur of the moment (42)

The poet says that he who is acquainted with his origin, shall lose his identity. He advises to ruminate over the subtle experiences of life.

Nourish and cherish that immense silence in you,

Like your memorable and valuable experience (45)

At last, the poet says that the Peepal Tree is like any other tree found everywhere but whoever comes to it, gives primordial wisdom to him/her. The wisdom of the Peepal tree is found in the last lines. It says that

Life is not a series of arguments

But an adventure to be sought

Full of risks and pains

In oneself, fearing neither

The darkness nor the dazzling light. (46)

The Peepal tree being a mysterious one gave these profound revelations to the poet. After experiencing the elixir of life, the poet loses the longing in his heart. He says it was dropped rather it vanished. His life is filled with deep contentment like the bee after sucking the honey.

Conclusion

Man's eternal quest to return to the source is inherent in the long poem written by Raghupathi. He says that man need to contemplate deeply and go beyond the self. He has to understand the life and its intricacies and use the ordinary things to surpass his being. Life is a mixture of happiness and suffering. Through this poem, it is found that man's eternal quest could be satisfied by living and not escaping from life and when a man once tastes the eternal cosmos remains contented to come what may in life. Raghupathi's poetry is not everybody's cup of tea. It cannot be read as a passing-time pleasure. *Wisdom of the Peepal Tree* is a deeply meditative long poem. His other collections carry similar thoughts. Perhaps, he is the only poet in the contemporary world who has beautifully and succinctly fused pure wisdom in poetry. His poetry is endowed with dense philosophy. Since this dense philosophy is born out of his experience, it carries so much conviction, power and drive.

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