

सत्यात् नास्ति परो धर्मः ।

“There is no Religion higher than Truth”

## THE THEOSOPHICAL MOVEMENT

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### DISCERNMENT AND CRITICISM

THE DICTIONARY meaning of the term “discern,” is to perceive clearly with the mind and the senses. Discernment means good judgement or insight. By discernment, we learn to know good from evil. By discrimination, we choose either good or evil, though these two terms are used synonymously. Through observation and experience, we learn to distinguish between good and evil. True discernment comes to one who is not identified with his personality and always strives to “act for and as the Self” of all creatures, and therefore evaluates all things from the point of view of that Self. True discernment results when *Buddhi-Manasic* light gets reflected in our everyday mind, whenever, it turns inward, to the divine parent, for guidance.

In *Notes on the Bhagavad-Gita*, Mr. Crosbie explains that true discrimination distinguishes between *good, evil* and *mixed natures*. It proceeds from a universal point of view and understanding, which arises from the knowledge that everything in the manifestation has common divine origin. Everything is an expression of the One Spirit to a greater or lesser degree. We need to understand and appreciate that all human beings are *inherently* perfectible and that imperfections exist only in the lower *acquired nature*, and that vices of men are due to ignorance and not due to *innate* wickedness. It is then that we shall begin to gradually acquire patience, fortitude, modesty, mildness and compassion and know that what makes for evil and

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destructiveness can be turned into that which makes for good and constructiveness. Hence, instead of condemnation of the wicked and the evil, we would hasten to create opportunities to reform the murderers, rapists, prostitutes or drug-addicts. Mr. Crosbie defines true discrimination as, “the ability to do the *right thing*, at the *right time*, and in the *right place*; on every plane of action.”

The act of discrimination ranges from the simple levels to the subtle and complex levels. Not only does one need the *capacity* to discriminate in subtler matters, but also must have the *right basis* for discrimination. Otherwise, discrimination can easily degenerate into partiality and prejudice. We hear of “racial discrimination” and “caste discrimination,” where certain group of people are judged or seen to be “superior” or better than the other, based on caste or religion they belong to, or based on the colour of the skin!

The discerning power which arises from *Buddhi* may be thought of as direct cognition or direct perception, the highest intellection, and the power of judgement. This discerning power is exhibited by each person in varying degrees. True or *Sattvic* discernment is that which enables a person to know when to start and when to cease, what to do and what not to do, what to fear and what not to fear, what binds the soul and what sets the soul free. True discrimination stems from the appreciation of the pairs of opposites. A person who is exposed *only* to good can never reach true discrimination. He needs to know and face evil and overcome it. It is said that *Devas* are all the time in the pure state while the enlightened beings have reached the pure state through the exercise of discrimination. A spiritually advanced person knows more about evil than a sinful person, because the sinner sinks deep into his vice or sin, whereas a spiritual person is able to remain detached while observing it.

The act of criticism involves approving or condemning either good or evil in others. When we criticise, we are contrasting another person with ourselves, and being a biased discernment, it makes us see all the faults and unwholesome traits in others, and all the good qualities in ourselves. The good in others is rarely contrasted against

the faults and weaknesses in us. Such criticism would aid the process of self-improvement. When our mind is always directed toward the imperfections and shortcomings of others, even when we may be relatively free from those faults, we miss out on devoting time and energy to cultivating good qualities. More often than not, we are not entitled to judge the person. We are sadly mistaken if we feel that we can improve the person by continually reminding him of his faults and weaknesses. No doubt, as a well-meaning friend, an elder, or an officer, we may make the other person aware of his faults, but having done that, all we can do is to be ready to help him by advice and encouragement, if he chooses to get rid of his faults. Firstly, it is human nature to refuse to accept one’s mistakes or faults, especially when pointed out by another, partly because very seldom such criticism is directed with a sincere desire to benefit the person. Ideally speaking, it is the act and not the individual that should be criticised. We should always condemn the sin and not the sinner. The moment we are able to separate the act from the individual, our judgement becomes impersonal. Often teachers and parents prefer to make an indirect reference to the wrong action or fault of their pupil or child, by discussing the article or a story that revolves around that very weakness or fault. A sensitive and receptive child or pupil gets the message, and knows that corrective measures are left entirely to his or her own discretion.

Sometimes, we take pride in being forthright, in our ability to point out the wrong bluntly, without mincing words. Often, we hear people say, “I told him point-blank,” which actually means that I told the truth without contemplating the effect my words will have on the person. One of the precepts among the specific and subtle precepts of speech given in the *Laws of Manu* says, “Let him utter no disagreeable truth.” We should be able to tell the truth without hurting other person’s feelings, and if we are not able to do so, it shows that we have failed to build the necessary rapport or relationship with the erring person. When the force of criticism rests in its passionless judgement and objective reasoning, it is likely to

result in repentance and reformation. When “criticism” is directed towards wrong views in a system, if one is sure of his ground, and puts it across impersonally, it is less likely to excite opposition. He may find his opponent convinced by the inherent truthfulness of his views, and more so because he does not care for the triumph of his own opinion but for the triumph of truth.

If it is our duty, under Karma, to point out the wrong in a person, we must do so openly and directly to his face. Says the Buddhist Precept: “Condemn no man in his absence; and when forced to reprove, do so to his face, but gently, and in words full of charity and compassion. For the human heart is like the Kusuli plant: it opens its cup to the sweet morning dew, and closes it before a heavy shower of rain.” (*H.P.B. Series No. 33*, p. 41)

Do not sit on the judgment of any person, because the *inner state* of the person is known only to the Law of Karma. There is the instance of a lady who moved into the new neighbourhood and was labelled “proud” and of “loose character.” Later, they came to know that she was shy and afraid but not proud. The man who visited her almost every day was her lawyer, since her divorce case was going on. We, sometimes, sit on judgment even when we do not have enough data on hand. It is even more difficult to know the *inner state* of the person and the motive behind his actions. When we criticise another person, even mentally, the elementals get coalesced with that thought, creating an entity. By condemning, we create a focus in ourselves such that the elementals will carry that very fault to us. After a while, we would find ourselves doing that very thing for which we had criticised another person. For instance, when a person has committed violence, we hear people say that he should be beaten, he should be whipped publicly, etc. In condemning violence, we are ourselves on the verge of becoming violent. Mr. Judge writes: “Hence, through the injustice of your merely human condemnation, which cannot know the source and causes of the action of another, you at once become a sharer of his fault or failing by your own act, and the spirit expelled returns ‘with seven devils

worse than himself.” *Light on the Path* reminds us, “Remember that the foul garment you shrink from touching may have been yours yesterday, may be yours tomorrow.” If we are not greedy or hot-tempered, *in this life*, it is no guarantee that we were not so in one of our past lives or will not be so in some future life.

“And why beholdest thou the mote that is in thy brother’s eye, but considerest not the beam that is in thine own eye?...Thou hypocrite, first cast out the beam out of thine own eye; and then shalt thou see clearly to cast out the mote out of thy brother’s eye” (*Matthew 7: 3 and 5*). Indeed, the one who is accustomed to seeing “mote” or speck of dust, in the eyes of others, misses out on seeing the “beam” in his own eyes, till someone points that out to him. It may happen that the fault of another might be as little or insignificant as a “speck of dust,” while the one who criticises him has a greater fault or even many faults. A poem for children, in a vernacular language, that brings out this point humorously, runs thus: “The camel points out that in this gathering, there are many animals with crooked limbs, like the crane has a curved neck; parrot, a bent beak; dog, a twisted tail; tiger, misshapen nails; buffalo, warped horns....Hearing this, the fox tells the camel that ‘while others have only one part that is crooked, you have eighteen.’”

“Not the unworthy actions of others, nor their sins of omission and commission, but his own acts of omission and commission should one regard,” teaches the Buddha. This verse contains a very practical advice for those who want to live a spiritual life. No sooner one starts practising a few virtues than there arises a feeling of superiority. One tends to become intolerant of vices of another and there is a general tendency to criticise others for their shortcomings. A disciple ought not to do that. Mr. Judge writes: “We are all human, and thus weak and sinful. If, in one respect, we are better than others, then, in some other way, they are better than we are...everyone should never think but the very best, no matter what the evidences are. Why, if the Masters were to judge us exactly as They must know we are, then good-bye at once! We would all be sent packing.

But Masters deal kindly with us in the face of greater knowledge of our faults and evil thoughts from which none are yet exempt.”

Someone who has realized the truism of these words is likely to have cultivated a lot of goodwill towards all human beings. Such a person does discern good and evil in others, and may have great insight into human nature, but has learnt to withhold criticism. In fact, every time he sees faults in others, he looks within to find out if the same exist in him, in their subtle, if not, in their gross form, ever ready to work on his own nature, so that he could help others most effectively in overcoming their faults and weaknesses.

The endeavour to abstain from condemning others forms the very foundation of the Universal Brotherhood. As one works for Theosophy, the value and effectiveness of one’s service are inversely related to one’s habit of personal criticism. In *Letters That Have Helped Me* (p. 123), Mr. Judge writes: “Both \_\_\_ and \_\_\_ are two weak, half-corroded spots.” To corrode is to wear away or decay gradually. Here we are told about two spots, *i.e.*, two centres of Theosophy that had deteriorated, due to various reasons. One of them was gossip. Hence, gossip not only brings about harm individually, but it also affects the entire centre, because gossip indicates a lack of unity, and in the absence of unity no help can be given by the Masters. We do not really know the motive or state of mind of the person when he acts in a certain way, and hence must not judge another. “By our not looking at their errors too closely, the Master will be able to clear it all off and make it work well,” writes Mr. Judge. Only a wise man has discernment and therefore he blames what is blameworthy. Let us be wakeful and watchful of our own faults and weaknesses, and always be ready to examine ourselves, when our attention is drawn to a fault in us by a fellow-student. We ought to be always helping each other by appreciating the smallest effort and contribution made by a co-worker in the furtherance of the Cause of Theosophy.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT THE CRUCIBLE—II

IN *Leviticus* (xx. 27) we read, “A man also or woman that hath a familiar spirit, or that is a wizard... shall surely be put to *death*, they shall stone them with stones, *their blood shall be* upon them.” H.P.B. points out that the original term is *shoel aub*, which our English translation renders, “a consulter with familiar spirits,” but which the Septuagint translates as, one that has a familiar spirit *inside* him, one possessed with the spirit of divination. Therefore, the words obsessed or possessed are synonyms of the word *witch*.

She explains that this spirit is the disembodied spirit that has fallen to the astral region nearest to earth. It refers to a depraved entity, someone who has severed all connections with his divine nature by living a series of lives of vice, crimes and animal passions. Such entities seek to enter the bodies of simple-minded, weak, passive and sensitive individuals, who then become possessed and obsessed, till such spirits are dislodged or driven away by a pure and powerful will. Jesus, Apollonius of Tyana and some of the Apostles had the power to cast out devils, by purifying the atmosphere within and without the patient. “It is because Moses knew so well what they were, and how terrible were the consequences to weak persons, who yielded to their influence, that he enacted the cruel, murderous law against such would-be ‘witches,’” though Jesus *healed* such individuals instead of *killing* them. (*Isis*, I, 353-56)

These weak people or mediums when they are possessed by spirits, which could be disembodied spirit or an elemental, then they find themselves completely under the control of that spirit. They cannot control the actions of the spirits, nor even their own. H.P.B. quotes Thomas Wright who explains the difference between magic and sorcery: “The magician differed from the witch in this, that, *while the latter was an ignorant instrument in the hands of the demons, the former had become their master by the powerful intermediation of Science*, which was only within reach of the few,

and which these beings were unable to disobey” (*Isis*, I, 366). In this sense, a witch is a medium, a person “through whom the action of another being is said to be manifested and transmitted *to an abnormal extent* by the consciously or unconsciously active will of that other being.”

“There was a law against the admission [to Mysteries of initiation] not only of such as were convicted of deliberate *witchcraft* but even of those who were known to have ‘a familiar spirit.’ The law was just and logical, because a genuine medium is more or less irresponsible,” writes H.P.B. Socrates, the Greek philosopher, was a medium, and was never initiated into the Mysteries, because he had his “familiar spirit,” or a *daimonion*, so that he would allow himself to be ruled by this “guide,” and not by the rules of the sanctuary. Any mediumistic person would be passive and he could be “*entranced* at the will and pleasure of this ‘power’ which controlled him,” and therefore such a person could not be entrusted with secrets of the final initiation. (*Isis*, II, 117-18)

H.P.B. refers to the phenomenon of re-percussion, in which, when a blow is aimed at the astral double or phantom of a living person, that blow strikes or hurts the living person himself, at the same time, and in the very place at which the double was struck. Thus, the blow is re-percussed, as if rebounding from the image or double of the living person, and reaches the living person, wherever he or she may be. (*Isis*, I, 360)

In this connection H.P.B. refers to the history of Salem witchcraft, as given out in the writings of Cotton Mather, Calef, Upham and others, which account corroborates the fact of the astral double and the phenomenon of re-percussion, as also the effect of being controlled by elementary spirits. “This tragic chapter of American history has never yet been written in accordance with the truth.” She goes on to explain how some four or five girls, mentioned in the general account of Salem witchcraft, become “developed” as mediums, by sitting with a West Indian Negro woman, a sorceress or a black magician. These girls complained that they suffered

various kinds of physical tortures, such as, pinching, having pins stuck in them, and the marks of bruises and teeth in various parts of their bodies. They were hurt by spectres or apparitions of various persons. H.P.B. quotes from the Narrative of Deodat Lawson (London, 1704): “Some of them confessed that they did afflict the sufferers (*i.e.*, these young girls), according to the time and manner they were accused thereof: and, being asked what they did to afflict them, some said that they pricked pins into poppets [dolls], made with rags, wax, and other materials. One that confessed after the signing of her death-warrant, said she used to afflict them by clutching and pinching her hands together, and *wishing* in what part and after what manner she would have them afflicted, and *it was done*.” Likewise, C. W. Upham writes about Abigail Hobbs [called Abigail Williams in Miller’s Play] having acknowledged that the Devil came to her in the shape of a man and brought to her wooden images made in the likeness of the other four girls, along with the thorns. When she pricked those thorns into the images, the girls complained of being hurt by her. (*Isis*, I, 361)

In the article, “Animated Statues,” H.P.B. puts it thus: “The astral body of a living person, of one unlearned in occult sciences, may be forced (by an expert in magic) to animate, or to be drawn to, and then fixed within any object, especially into anything made in his likeness, a portrait, a statue, a little figure of wax, etc. And as whatever hits or affects the astral reacts by repercussion on the physical body, it becomes logical and stands to reason that by stabbing the likeness in its vital parts—the heart, for instance—the original may be sympathetically killed, without any one being able to detect the cause of it.”

It appears that sometimes mediums were called “witches” because strange things occurred in their presence, and which were often owing to their peculiar constitution. In the article, “Nature’s Human Magnets,” H.P.B. narrates a case of a farm servant in Russia, who attracted all objects to herself. For instance, when she opened the cellar door to get some potatoes, she seemed to be pelted with

potatoes and soon found that her basket was filled with potatoes. When she approached the well, to draw water or passed near a bucket of water, the water began to rise and then overflow. When she stretched out her hand to get some piece of crockery from the shelf, other earthenware plates and cups would begin to jump and tremble, and then fall with a crash at her feet. All such phenomena took place in the daytime, and were always preceded by an extraordinary noise, as if of a howling wind or raps in the window frames and glass. “The news about the young witch and her struggle with the invisible imps ran round the whole district,” writes H.P.B. A priest was called, but no good results followed. But there was nothing *supernatural* about this case. We all give out magnetic fluid or magnetic exhalations. In some individuals, this vital magnetic or *Odylic* force is intensely strong. “Persons magnetically surcharged, like the Russian girl...are now and then encountered, and among the class of mediums there have been a few famous ones,” writes H.P.B.

The Council of Aenham in 1110 A.D. condemned “sorcerers, witches, diviners, such as occasioned death by magical operations, and who practiced fortune-telling by the holy-book lots,” that is because more and more people, other than the priests and holy saints were able to perform miraculous phenomena, including mesmerists and somnambulists in America and France, through occult knowledge or by other means, but without claiming that these miraculous happenings were produced by the angels and God’s direct intervention. This upset the claims of both the Catholic and Protestant Churches that such phenomena could be performed exclusively by their chosen ministers and holy saints, by “Divine Intervention.” Hence, such powers, outside of the church, were considered to be obtained through the help of the Devil. (*Isis*, II, 21-22)

In societies where belief in magic is prevalent, witch-hunts occur. In modern times, witch-hunts are reported by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), as a violation of human rights. The causes of witch-hunts include poverty, epidemics,

superstition, social crisis and lack of education.

Often, a witch-doctor, who carries out an exorcism, for a fee, gains economic benefit. A witch-doctor used to be a kind of healer who treated ailments believed to be caused by witchcraft. Just as a medical doctor treats physical illness, a witch-doctor uncovers the hidden causes. Typically, a witch-doctor makes use of incantation, divination, or herbs with medicinal properties and amulets, which give protection against “evil eye” or evil spirits. He has the power of curing cases of possession and obsession. However, both in modern and ancient times there are instances of witch doctors themselves practising sorcery. According to the fundamental propositions of the Oriental philosophy, “Arcane knowledge misapplied, is sorcery; beneficently used, true magic or wisdom....Races of men differ in spiritual gifts as in colour, stature, or any other external quality....Some are addicted to sorcery, and transmit its secret rules of practice from generation to generation, with a range of psychical phenomena, more or less wide, as the result.” (*Isis*, II, 588)

H.P.B. defines black magic as abuse or misuse of psychic powers, or of any *secret of nature*, *i.e.*, using them for selfish or evil purposes. A hypnotizer who hypnotizes his subject, interfering with his free will, and uses the power of “suggestion,” to make that person steal or commit a crime or murder, could be termed a *black magician*. When a person tries to bring undue personal psychological influence upon another, it becomes *unconscious black magic*. “It is easy to fall into Black magic. When a man uses the powers of nature indiscriminately with partiality and no regard to justice, it is Black Magic. Justice is the opposite of partiality.” One who aspires to become a White Magician or an Occultist must be ready to give up “every prejudice, every earthly liking, every feeling of preference for one thing over another. A deed of kindness done with partiality may become evil, *e.g.*, by stirring up animosity in the mind of others.” (*Letters That Have Helped Me*, p. 161)

(Concluded)

## EXTRACTS FROM UNPUBLISHED LETTERS

### CONTROL OF LOWER NATURE—II

WE HAVE to learn to see the good and the lovely side of beings and things. Nothing can be perfect in this world and we have to build our own complete perfection out of a variety of perfections mixed up with gross imperfections. Of course, we must look not only in those we love but everywhere for the good and the beautiful. The *Raja-Yoga* chapter of *The Bhagavad-Gita* (the 9th) opens with “Unto thee who findeth no fault...” This is imperative for the esoteric life. Who bothers about your traits which you call undesirable?—and you yourself should not. Just forget about your weaknesses! And who is there who does not feel a hypocrite at times? Our ideals are high, our realizations poor, comparatively speaking. We have to keep on striving and our ideals also ascend higher each time. That is the order of progress. You, like all others, have two natures, but you certainly are not Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Let us be thankful for dismay and some despondency. They are signs that the True is near which we are aspiring to reach. We may throw down our bow and arrows—the Philosophy and its many applications; but we will not, we must not, abandon them. We may, often do, bend like reeds, but we must never break.

Weaknesses leave no void in their departure, nor do we feel frustrated when they depart! Here is a line of thought that needs to be pursued.

Why do we slip into wrong doing? Well, is not the story explained in the closing portion of the third chapter of *The Bhagavad-Gita*? The foundation of our personal nature (not always evil) is the *Rajas* which colours the very will to live. Inclinations of the personal soul are a motion in separativeness. *Sattva* unites, and for that force or motion we are labouring. Rhythm is also motion, but jerks are gone, waywardness is gone, discords are synthesized into chords. We are able to work long and late thus and at long last fatigue must disappear. Is not that the way the Masters work? The crash of kingdoms occurs, but the real Kings go on surviving with a smile, abuilding, abuilding.

What you say about the lower nature is true: animalism becomes an animal. Blood circulates in the living body, congeals in the corpse. Correspondentially, in the animal man conscience is not awake and errors and blunders circulate; but when the discipline of self-examination in the light of the philosophy of the True is practised, our foibles and frailties congeal and solidify and we, so to speak, are able to objectivize them. This is related to the phenomenon of the Dweller on the Threshold. Mental errors and mind sins are a terror, and they are the neophyte’s real enemy. H.P.B.’s statement in the *Transactions* is terrifying if we take this point of view (Please see. p. 142). Both the metaphysical and the psychological aspects are important. Now apply this to your own discovery about your own battlefield of mind and you have taken a new step in the Inward Life.

Of course, the lower nature is insidious; machination is its second name. Mortification of the mental nature is the starting point. Mind is the base of the personal nature. Mental asceticism needs knowledge and study for “the gentle breezes of soul wisdom” to brush away the dust and the dirt. Physical exercises involving food, breathing, etc., are a snare and a delusion as causes; as natural effects they have their value.

Numerous are the exercises given for separating, even for a few moments, our mind from *Kama-Tanha* and turning it to higher *Manas-Tanha*—the will to live higher ideas. We have to *think* and translate our thought into silent speech. A Being of triple Light is the Self—the Inner Guru, the Real Father, the Elder Brother. It creates, sustains and renovates. It is the True, the Good, the Beautiful. Ever a Triad: metaphysically, Atma-Buddhi-Manas—three in One and One in three. He or It is the comforter, the asylum and the friend. Along these lines you can make a start. One more fact: *The Secret Doctrine* teaches that the spirit is one and impartite; that Matter-Prakriti is divisible. The One Purusha in the first vehicle of Prakriti is the One Eternal Monad, the Logos, the Ineffable Word, Ishvara. From Ishvara, the Eternal Monad, by the process of emanation (see *The Theosophical Glossary*) all Monads come forth. Strenuous

concentration on that Inner Ruler is not possible at present. We must begin with gentle brooding in a relaxed posture.

It is the mission of Theosophy to arouse the Ego and make him note the defects of his personality. Have you considered the role of Narada, the “Mischief-Maker”? Also, please note, the Kingdom of Heaven is to be taken by violence. One should never even speculate about abandoning the fight. “Hold grimly on,” says Judge; and also, “Press forward.” The peace of the desert is a fiction. Excessive heat, sand-storms, etc., are there and *tamas* is prolific. We in cities are *rajasic*, but are now and again attacked by *tamas*. *Sattva*’s peace and repose we yearn for and are getting—more indirectly in *Sushupti* and a little less indirectly in our effort at meditation and the unfoldment of calm and tranquillity. Love for humanity does not suffice; it forces us to pose the question—Why is humanity suffering? Those who are not troubled by that question are not true lovers of their fellow men. Memory-Meditation is necessary for finding the safe spot for the Soul. Without that, real service cannot be rendered. Masters are Servants because They are compassionate and wise.

The causes, or rather the one cause, which led to the development of the inferiority complex in you of which you write are not difficult to understand. Our Eastern psychology teaches the great doctrine of self-reliance and spiritual interdependence and the rejection of all that makes the animal self depend upon its peculiar friends and companions, also animal in nature, which tend to lower our own estimate of ourselves. Theosophy teaches that it is better to know ourselves in our inner nature as we really are and not regard ourselves as a bundle of complexes, which is the mode for the understanding of the human personality which Eastern psychology gives us. It is imperative that you get a clear-cut philosophical concept of what man is in his entire make-up and in his dual nature of the higher and the lower, or, to use technical terms, as a spiritual individuality and a lower personality made up of his animal nature. The psychology offered by Theosophy for the understanding of man’s make-up has two sides, metaphysical and moral. You will have to get at this if you want to help yourself in the right way. I would suggest that you read carefully the fourth chapter of *The Ocean of*

*Theosophy* and the section of *The Key to Theosophy* which deals with the human principles, draw your own conclusions as to man’s make-up and then apply that knowledge to your own make-up. Unless you have cleared the ground of this inferiority complex and its causes, you will find that, under the law of cyclic return of impressions, from time to time you will have this inferiority complex creeping on you and disabling you from prosecuting your life-study and life-work.

(To be concluded)

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THE MASTER’S love is bountiful; its light shines upon thy face and shall make all the crooked ways straight for thee.

Let Karma judge thee and also plead thy cause against the unrighteous.

Their abuse is but of the visible personality; they cannot touch thee, invisible, unconquerable.

If you shall stand unmoved while reviled for truth’s sake, your strength will increase.

Karmic consequences seem sometimes slow, but they are sure.

By patience and virtue add hourly and daily to the strength of your character, which is all that you will carry into your next life.

Do not argue with a boaster or try to convince the positive.

Allay irritation with compassion, and anxiety with patience.

Harmony among diverse elements is due to equilibrium and not to removal of diversity.

Right equilibrium does not arise from a dead level of equality: there is always someone who is greatest.

—Aphorisms from *The Path*

## THOUGHTS ON CURSES AND BLESSINGS

### II

THE SCRIPTURES of the world are replete with stories of blessings and curses, and almost all of them should be interpreted allegorically and symbolically, in order to be able to extract the inner significance. One such story mentioned in the *Bhagavat Purana* (Canto 3, chapters 14-16) is that of Jaya and Vijaya, described as gatekeepers or *Dwarapalaka* of the abode of Lord Vishnu, known as *Vaikuntha*, meaning the place of eternal bliss. When four Kumaras, chaste youths, also described as mind-born sons of Brahma, reached this place by dint of their spiritual potency, they experienced transcendental ecstasy. They had realised the truth of the self, but in appearance they were like five-year-old boys. After passing through six gates, when they approached the seventh gate, they were stopped by two demi-gods, the gatekeepers. The story goes that so far, these four Kumaras were able to open doors, of their own will, as they had no *bhed-buddhi*, or the idea of “ours” and “theirs.” They were quite furious with these two demi-gods and wondered who they were, having such discordant mentality, despite of being in proximity to Lord Vishnu. They were in a place where complete harmony prevailed, and yet they had in them seeds of doubt and fear, which could arise only out of the sense of separateness. The Kumaras decided that since these two demi-gods found *duality* even in such harmonious existence of *Vaikuntha* life, they needed to be placed in a material world, *i.e.*, they should take birth on earth, where beings have to face three kinds of enemies, namely, desire, anger and lust. As sloka 27 of the Seventh Chapter of the *Gita* says, the “pairs of opposites,” attachment and aversion or likes and dislikes, cause agitation of mind, and that in turn produces *maya* or illusion which prevents us from seeing the Reality. Just then, Vishnu appears, and realising that the two gatekeepers have been cursed to be born on earth, he requests that they should somehow return to *Vaikuntha* as quickly as possible. The Kumaras tell Vishnu that whatever

punishment he wishes to award to the gatekeepers was acceptable to them. Vishnu said that these two will take birth in a demoniac family. Since their concentration of mind will be intensified by anger, they will be firmly united to Him in thought, and very quickly return to His presence.

When the gatekeepers request Vishnu to lift the curse of the Kumaras, Vishnu says that this curse cannot be reversed. Instead, he gives them two options. The first option is to take seven births on Earth as a devotee of Vishnu, while the second is to take three births as his enemy, after which they can return to *Vaikuntha* as demi-gods and gatekeepers. Jaya and Vijaya could not bear the thought of remaining away from the Lord for seven lives, so they chose to be born three times as His enemies, whereby the Lord would have to incarnate on earth to defeat them. In their first life, they were born in *Satya Yuga* (Golden Age) as two Asuras, Hiranyakashipu and Hiranyaksha, born to Diti (daughter of Daksha Prajapati and sage Kasyapa). They were killed by *Varaha* (or boar) *avatar*, and *Narsimha* (or man-lion) *avatar* of Vishnu, respectively. The story goes that once Diti insisted upon uniting with her husband, at evening time, as she desired to have a child, though the sage explained to her that the hour was most inauspicious for such union. Hence, the progeny was demoniacal in nature. It was as if the womb was ready for the fulfilment of the curse given to Jaya and Vijaya. These two were born in *Treta Yuga* (Silver Age) as two *Rakshasas*, Ravana and Kumbhakarna, and were killed by Rama, an avatar of Vishnu. In the third life, during *Dvapara Yuga* (Bronze Age) they were born as two humans, Dantavakra and Shishupala, and were killed by Krishna. It has been observed by many that the strength of Jaya and Vijaya declined with each subsequent birth.

Such stories are symbolic, besides conveying actual historical facts, and stages in human evolution on our earth. Each symbol can be interpreted by applying anthropological, psychological, metaphysical, spiritual, etc. keys. At a simple level, it may be applied to an individual’s spiritual progress. The threshold has to be crossed

before entering a room or a house. It is as if someone sitting at the threshold of the house or a room prevents you from going inside the house or a room. Likewise, in moving from the familiar, personal and often base nature, to the unfamiliar and spiritual nature we have to face and conquer, at the threshold, the evil in our own nature, in the family, race, etc. In the story, the four Kumaras have passed through six gates, and are outside the seventh gate, which when crossed, allows one to unite with the deity, and is guarded by the gatekeepers. In a human being, that deity is the *Atman*, the divine spirit, the Higher Self. “Gates” often symbolize a transition from one state to another. Man passes through them when he casts off his limitation.

Every temple has a *Garbha-griha* or Holy of Holies or the *sanctum sanctorum*, in which the deity resides. The *sanctum sanctorum* of the Hindu temples is surrounded by seven *praharas* or corridors. Commenting on the second *Brahmana* of the first chapter of the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, Swami Krishnananda writes: The temples, especially in Southern India, are constructed in the shape of *Virat*, the divine and cosmic form of God. The *Holy of Holies* is the head of the *Virat*, which is represented by a luminous glow of a sacred light in a dark room, comparable to the *Anandamaya Kosha* (causal sheath) which is dark but illumined by the *Atman* within, and encompassed by seven *praharas* or corridors. Sometimes these are five, comparable to the five *Koshas* or vestures of the body—*Annamaya kosha* [physical body], *Pranamaya kosha* [vital sheath or astral body], *Manomaya kosha* [intellectual sheath or lower mind] and *Vijnanmaya kosha* [Higher Mind]. And there is *Balipitha*, the sacrificial altar, at the entrance, which is represented by a huge post. Before you enter the body of the *Virat*, you have to offer yourself first; otherwise, no entry is possible. You have to pay a fee to the *Virat* before you gain access to it, and the fee is your own self. You have to cease to be, first, as you are now, in order that you may become what you want to become, explains Swami Krishnananda.

The six gates may well represent, in one sense, the acquirement of

six degrees of knowledge, having passed through six degrees of initiation (*diksha*). One reaches the seventh gate only after conquering various vices and weaknesses in their gross and subtle forms, by developing corresponding virtues. The most difficult foe to overcome is *Ahankara* or egotism. So long as there remains a subtle sense of separateness union with the divine is impossible. “There dwelleth in the heart of every creature, O Arjuna, the Master—*Ishwara*” (*Gita*, XVIII). In the Heart resides the spiritual consciousness. *Chhandogya*, *Katha* and *Mundaka Upanishads* also speak of the “knot of the heart,” which must be untied. “This knot is the astringent power of self—of egotism—idea of separateness,” says Mr. Judge. We are ignorant of our true nature. For most of us, our sense of self does not go any deeper than the personality.

Egotism is pride, and it works at various subtle levels. It has many strongholds. If we conquer it at one level then it surfaces at another, subtler level. Its presence is easy to detect when it is of a gross nature. Love for the enjoyment of senses, desires for material and worldly things, desire for amassing wealth and desire for fame are easy to detect and may be overcome through will and fierce fight, but it is only a small victory. An aspirant may be unaware of other, not so obvious desires such as a desire for power, desire to love and be loved as a great benefactor of mankind. Each of these is the stronghold of the devil in man. He may engage himself in the work of humanity, or undertake religious observances, disciplining of his senses, and consider himself superior to others. Behind fervent work for humanity there lurks pride, sense of superiority—a holier than thou attitude. He may refrain from being at the forefront, but may like to mastermind the work from behind the scene. In such a case, he has fallen prey to his ambition for power. The enemy forces take on new and subtler forms where their presence is difficult to detect. The most difficult to overcome is the desire to love, and to be loved. This innocent and seemingly natural desire is rooted in egotism. To love unconditionally, whether or not your love is required or returned, is not easy. Thus, one has to fight the enemy from the outermost gates to the inner, until the final Great War is fought in the centre of the fort, and won.

There are many stories of sages and spiritually advanced beings who, even after making great progress, display pride or egotism. It may surface as “holier than thou” attitude or as pride for one’s intellectual, psychic or spiritual achievements. A spiritual aspirant may think that he is working to benefit humanity but if there is a thought that in helping humanity, he will gain merit, it shows that he was indirectly seeking his own benefit. A subtler form of selfishness is exhibited by one who chooses *Moksha*, or the Path of Liberation, *i.e.*, enters the peace and bliss of Nirvana with no concern for suffering humanity, instead of choosing the Path of Renunciation.

Egotism is the most formidable enemy of spiritual progress. When power and knowledge are combined with egotism, that person tends to lose *viveka* or spiritual discrimination, and ends up misusing both powers and knowledge. The demi-gods preferring to take three incarnations as enemies of the Lord is symbolic of the fact that there is a greater chance for a sinner to turn the corner than for a person following mechanical goodness and morality. “Expiation is the kernel of sin. ‘Evil’ containing its own punishment continually defeats itself, and sows the seed of ‘good’ in its own regeneration” (*Vernal Blooms*, p. 18). Expiation or atonement is the kernel of sin. An evil act is a shell, the outer covering, by which we normally judge a person. But there is potential good hidden within evil, because the heart or centre of evil is expiation. True repentance can bring about an inner transformation in the sinner. A person may be a thief but may respond to the virtue of kindness, generosity or courage, which could act as a footstool and help him take a higher step.

Jaya and Vijay represent two different kinds of victory. Vijaya is the victory over material things, adversities, adversaries, while Jaya represents victory over one’s personal or animal self. Jaya is superior to Vijaya, as it results in taming of animal nature, in wiping away the false ego and manifestation of the divine, leading to unconditional peace and happiness.

*(To be continued)*

## MANY FACETS OF TRUTH

IF scriptures, and the language in which they are written, are themselves sources of truth, how is it that different people derive from them different and sometimes directly opposite meanings? Who decides what is the *actual* meaning of the author, and how to verify it? Even among religious authorities, there are perennial controversies on theories of interpretation.

More often than not, scriptures are made the justification for acts, which are otherwise reprehensible based on their interpretation by overzealous followers. A “scripture” need not be a religious one, but any text which reaches reverential status among its followers tends to become a venerable hermeneutic lens to construct relationships and interpret life. The catastrophic consequences of unquestioned obedience are seen in every decade of history. Alexander Solzhenitsyn cautions us, thus: “Macbeth’s self-justifications were feeble—and his conscience devoured him. Yes, even Iago was a little lamb, too. The imagination and spiritual strength of Shakespeare’s evildoers stopped short at a dozen corpses. Because they had no ideology. Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others’ eyes.”

Yet, the pages of history glow with the lives of those who deeply love and peacefully co-exist with other communities. They are generally the men on the street, going about their life uninterested in scholarly dissensions, innately perceiving unity in diversity. They intuitively transcend artificially constructed barriers and embrace humanity. Such wisdom arises from the promptings of his Heart rather than the machinations of his Head. In this lies the hope for human progress.

Deeply conceited as we are, one may ask why be tolerant of others’ beliefs at all. “If I know something to be right, why tolerate

a contrary idea? Is this not insincerity?” This is a serious question, though not so clearly articulated usually. It lingers in the background of our mind, influencing our view of others. A little self-reflection shows that the belief we claim as “ours” is often instilled in us through our parents and cultural milieu. They are unquestioned assumptions—not necessarily wrong every time—but certainly unexamined, and prone to errors. We identify ourselves with our beliefs, and close our minds to other ideas. When Lord Buddha observed that we do not belong to ourselves, we can safely assume he referred not merely to our body.

Further analyzing the mental bundle of ideas, called “our mind,” is it not true that many ideas we held a decade ago are incompatible with those of today? Yet, it has not stopped us from claiming our *present* ideas to be absolutely valid, and even demanding its universal acceptance. It is good mental hygiene to periodically remind ourselves that our present ideas may have to be discarded in the near future.

Being unaware of incessant self-deceit, we place ourselves at the center of the cosmos and expect the world to revolve around us. Thus, in her article, “What is Truth?” H.P.B. says that man is, “a sorry bundle of anomalies and paradoxes, an empty wind bag inflated with his own importance, with contradictory and easily influenced opinions...at once an arrogant and a weak creature, which, though in constant dread of some authority, terrestrial or celestial, will yet –

“... like an angry ape,

Play such fantastic tricks before high Heaven

As make the angels weep.” (Shakespeare)

But does tolerance, then, require an absolute surrender of one’s conscience and power of discernment? Certainly, this would be contrary to any serious pursuit of truth. Tolerance does “not mean indiscriminate acceptance of everything and everyone. The attitude of ‘namby-pambyism’ is but a pseudo-tolerance. Carried to its legitimate conclusion, this false idea of ‘brotherhood’ would signify that sin, sorrow, suffering, error, all religions and all philosophies

are all right; that everybody is doing the best he can, and the best he knows how to do, and cannot do any different.” Such a spineless, passive pseudo-tolerance helps no one and eventually leads to self-assertion as a reaction.

The word “tolerance” itself has a troublesome connotation. It has its origin in Latin *tolerare*, meaning “the action of bearing hardship, or the ability to bear pain and hardship.” We thus tolerate painful but unavoidable things. When applied to “tolerating” others’ religious or political beliefs, or “tolerating” one’s spouse’s opinion, it is not likely to lead to peaceful co-existence!

Hence, rather than tolerating, we could *harmonize* the contrary view-points, and find a synthetical unity of the binaries. The apex of an equilateral triangle does not “tolerate” the two other vertices, but connected to both, it transcends them at the same time. The two lower vertices must first recognize that they are at the same level, and then transcend themselves and their “opponent” to find a higher unity in the apex. Each of us, then, have to recognize our “opponent” as equal, and then seek that higher synthesis which transcends both our opinions. This method delineates one’s intellectual duty, even when not reciprocated by one’s “opponent.” Facing contrary opinions in every walk of life, one may learn good lessons from this humble polygon.

Extremism, a peculiar entity, must be addressed when discussing this topic. Extremism takes self-assertion to its logical and final conclusion. How do we deal with one who does not budge from his position and refuses to yield an inch, even when we are ready to? Such a stance is found in international relations, social spaces, within an organization and in domestic relations, too. There is neither an easy answer, nor is there a singular formula for resolution.

Nevertheless, irrespective of the “solution” we are offered, it is important to examine our assumptions behind the presumed solution. The method we use to examine events is usually inadequate and tinted. As Albert Camus puts it, “Methods imply metaphysics; unconsciously they disclose conclusions that they often claim not

to know yet.” Most of us conclude first, and then choose our path of reason, and select the premises, to reach the predetermined, cherished conclusion. What then, could be the matrix to evaluate and address historical injustices?

To begin with, whether religious fundamentalism or a stubborn self-asserting spouse, the *same lens* we use to evaluate “the other” must be used to evaluate oneself. This is important since we are all deeply flawed, and easily cheat ourselves to presume we are “neutral.” *Garuda Purana* warns us of the bias: “The vile are ever prone to detect the faults of others, though they be as small as mustard seeds, and persistently shut their eyes against their own, though they be as large as Bilva [Bael] fruit.”

Not only that, our special karmic ties with our family, community and nation dictate us to be *more critical* of our own beliefs. This karmic obligation demands that we morally elevate and ennoble our co-pilgrims. It involves the rectification of defects and the development of virtues. Our birth in a family and community is not accidental, but is determined by ties of duty, mutual sympathy and antipathy. We thus have special duties towards them, to ethically advance the collective mind.

It is therefore our obligation to seek out defects and help the community rectify them, beginning with exemplification but not ending there. One who critically examines the defects and removes them from his own being, and works for its reduction in the larger collective, is a benefactor of the nation. One who selfishly protects his own ilk, even at the cost of Truth and righteousness, will only add to the negative balance of the community, which can bear but evil fruit.

There is also the issue of redressing historical wrongs committed by one community or a nation against another. This generates rancour and revengefulness. We ignore the fact that accessible historical accounts are not only limited, but even distorted by the human hand. Even when accurate historical facts are available, the lens with which an instigator views the past events are deeply tinted and dangerous.

He views history as accidental occurrences, and merely as the play of hegemonic forces which injured the oppressed. This is the classic case of missing the forest for the trees.

There are no accidents in history and not a blade of grass flutters without a cause. One who can gaze into the depths of Reality alone can trace minutely the many intertwining threads of historical events, and see the justice of every event on earth. He sees the need for—not just forgiveness—but actively working for mutual upliftment. Being blind to karmic complexities between communities and nations, one is bound to mistake the effect for the cause, and create more troubles through revenge and resentment for coming lives.

When Swami Vivekananda entered a certain temple in India, to offer his worship, he was distressed at the desecration of the temple by some invaders, and thought that had he been there, he would have protected the temple even at the cost of his life. But the deity, in a formless voice, seemed to convey that the deity was capable of building innumerable such temples and “even raise a seven-storied golden temple on that very spot.” But even gods and goddesses are agents of Karmic and Cosmic laws. The complex workings of the law of Karma, the immutable order underlying the Cosmos, may here be intuited by the discerning reader. Missing this, we create feelings of animosity which binds us in a spiral of mutual destruction, all in the name of religion!

We presume we are seeking truth, being unaware that we are deeply *biased*. A good mood makes us enjoy the weather, while a bad day makes us blind to the best of life’s gifts. Our relationship with our spouse influences the way we perceive his or her actions. Our perceptions are coloured or distorted by our deep-rooted likes and dislikes. We do not perceive things as they are—the Noumena—but only the shadows of our desires and delusions. Shri Krishna warns us in the Third chapter of the *Gita*: “In every purpose of the senses are fixed affection and dislike. A wise man should not fall in the power of these two passions, for they are the enemies of man.” It appears that we are ceaselessly self-deceived.

We unconsciously tread along “mental grooves” which are our past-life tendencies and unquestioned assumptions, deepened over

time through family, culture and education. These grooves determine our priorities in life, our evaluation of others, and dictates our personal good and evil. What is good for one person appears as evil to another. We can fill our mental grooves, *i.e.*, biases and prejudices, and expand our mental horizon, with a three-step process: Firstly, never approach a conversation with the presumption of omniscience, *i.e.*, “I already know everything about the subject or person,” but approach it with humility, that the other person may know something that I may not know. Secondly, set aside for the time being your cherished beliefs about the subject. Mentally adopt, in full, the views of the other person, and seek the foundational principles of his beliefs. Scrutinize those principles, and examine their logical conclusions and ethical consequences, contrasting them with those of yours. Finally, take what is true, good and beautiful, and adopt it in life, rejecting the other parts. By repeatedly engaging in such mental *tapas*, one gains in a single life the experiences and lessons which otherwise would require multiple births!

Knowing well that there are always three sides to the story—my side, his side, and then the *true side*—one can hope to co-exist with others peacefully. Intellectual humility and thorough open-mindedness arise from such an ontological commitment to plurality. This principle is illustrated in the non-violent principle of *Anekantavada*, the recognition of truth being multi-faceted. We can, with this principle, at least aim to reach relative truth. However, when even a tiny criticism of our petty self is not taken in the right spirit but met with strong protests and reactions, can we hope to obtain even relative truth? Self-centeredness is the first disqualification from approaching the fane of truth. As to obtaining Absolute Truth, it needs not only a thorough conquest of the personal self but also requires the development of higher faculties, protracted over a series of lives. We begin by learning to welcome relative truth, and one day hope to reach the Absolute Truth or Wisdom which calls for purity of motive, and also, sacrifice and devotion of one’s whole life.

## STUDY AND ASSIMILATION

IT IS SAID that for man the whole of life is one long period of learning. If we take the trouble to review our own lives—the opportunities that came our way and that we seized or lost—we shall be convinced that life continuously presents lessons for our advancement. Widening our scope of inquiry to the lives that surround us, we shall also find that the lessons presented are suited and tailored to individual requirements. In our survey we shall also find that all men do not take seriously to schooling. There are truants in life as there are truants in schools; and when the lessons are not learnt either through inattention or absenteeism (in life, this would be running away from a situation), the student becomes a drag on the efforts of others. This is so because study is usually a joint and co-operative effort.

More often than not, the teachers of our modern institutions fail to show to the pupil the why of education and the wherefore of the particular subject studied. Why the youngster should learn his geography, algebra or geometry is not convincingly disclosed to him. Why the older man who wants to study nature’s finer forces should first study cosmogenesis and anthropogenesis is also left in ambiguity. So, the young and the old take learning as an irksome imposition that evokes no great interest and arouses no enthusiasm. If the individual fails to grasp the purpose and deep import of his study, he will merely encumber his brain with undigestible material which will part company with him at the threshold of death.

There are certain teachings which are basic to life and therefore to knowledge. They are analogous to the firm foundations which are essential to any lasting edifice. The principles and laws that govern behaviours, the intelligent assuming of discipline and restraint and the good governance of emotions, desires and fancies are some of the important constituents of the foundational structure. They ensure a stable base on which anyone’s life can be made to rest. But these ingredients are useless if they stand alone. They have to be

knit together into one compact mass. They therefore require the introduction of the additional material that will cement them into one solid and homogeneous whole. That cementing agent has to be drawn out by the teacher from the inner recesses of the pupil. Enthusiasm evokes it as does the vision of a definite plan for the future and an awareness of his responsibility for the achieving of the goal for that one particular incarnation.

The teacher all too often finds that pupils are a heterogeneous lot with widely differing reactions. Each has by atavism or karmic heredity acquired moods, longings, capabilities, deficiencies and defects. These exist and cannot be ignored by either the teacher or the pupil. The mode of reaching the inner capability of the pupil varies with the nature and environment of each. The rose plant requires one type of attention, the oak sapling another. There are natures so sensitive and delicately balanced that they may be upset by the slightest criticism. A harsh word or an uncharitable remark may prove disastrous though the unwitting cause of the failure may remain blissfully unaware of his contribution to the downfall. The entering upon a study of the Scriptures is a very serious matter indeed and even small lapses may injure souls and hinder and sometimes halt their progress. Study alone does not always produce that cementing agent which can bind students irrevocably one to another through the high purpose which they have chosen and of which they have had their moment of vision. Where assimilation is lacking, there cohesion is weak and the person erects his edifice on unstable foundations.

Even though a teaching may be learnt by heart, it does not become useful unless it is readily and spontaneously available in all its strength and efficiency at the exact moment at which it is needed. If it can be weak enough to allow anger or any other passion to arise and put it in eclipse; if it cannot give the man enough stamina to stand up to intense anguish or as intense a pleasure, then is the study partial and the knowledge only an outward tinsel ornament that was purchased at high price but which has—to use a commercial expression—no resale value.

Whatever be the type of knowledge, its objective is the generation of a capability that can transmute it (an idea, a formula, an abstract idiom) into the concrete. Though anyone can with effort acquire knowledge, not many have the aptitude to work that knowledge into tangible, effective action. Thus, we have brilliant thinking with poor performance and high aspirations producing insipid results. For the student of Theosophy, this wide gap between knowledge and its application constitutes a real danger because the knowledge that finds no outlet in action becomes stagnant and dies sooner or later of inertia. On the other hand, the knowledge that is not properly applied may produce only evil. This evil becomes the great corroder of knowledge. To counter this, the student has to learn how not to misuse his knowledge, which means that he has to control and keep in abeyance his lower nature with its wiles and casuistic tendencies. At first, the walk of this lower self does not appear to be either alarming or abnormal. It is both.

The first lessons in living the life are preliminary and just because of that they are basic. They have not only to be learnt but also assimilated. These lessons comprise chiefly the acquisition of a firm belief bordering on faith that the inner and the spiritual is superior to both the inner and psychic and the outer and physical. Any lingering doubt about this may wipe out all progress if after years of effort the student gets glamourised by the psychic or lulls himself into a fatal complacency produced by the delight that comes through acquisition of material things. A failure along these lines is indicative of the fact that the assimilation was lacking and the malaise and indigestion consequent on heavy intakes of food was not attended to in time. Obesity and heartburn of the physical organism have their inner counterparts. At all times the student has to square his actions with the ideals he professes. If, for instance, he acknowledges that the Paramitas of *The Voice of the Silence* are really transcendental virtues, then he will devise ways and means by which he can give the virtues life, filling them with the warmth of his endeavour and the radiance of his devotion.

The importance of putting ethical precepts into action is easily recognized by the average intellect. Not so readily recognized is the fact that this really constitutes the second stage. The first stage is that of dedicating the life to such service as would benefit mankind. The exercise of finding out what one can do for such unselfish service of humanity, develops the inner sight and demonstrates the futility of working for oneself or for groups and cabals of men.

When a student passes several years in such endeavours, he acquires a greater certainty about the correctness of his teachings and the eminence of his teachers. Yet has he, at each stage, to beware of the glamour which emanates from the psychic and physical aspects of both men and nature. Once lured by them, his consciousness gets trapped in the lower part of himself and his life and actions can thereafter mirror forth only that lower (not necessarily the ugly), thus shutting the door against the higher. The stream of his life can no longer help mankind.

The choosing of good and wholesome food, the proper cooking and preparation of it as also the act of introducing it into the system is only part of the process of feeding the body. The nourishing becomes effective only when the food taken can advance and sustain growth. The digestive and assimilative processes if put in disarray will lead to a rejection and throwing out of the nutritive elements. The mechanism that turns food into blood, bones and muscle is different from that used for the ingestion of food. So, too, with the food of ethical experience. If not assimilated, the experience makes no lasting impression. To make it a part of one's being by extracting its essence it is necessary that it be subjected to special mind processes that will break it up into image scenarios and reduce these to corollaries of established theorems. These are then stored away into appropriate memory cells for future use. Such a process (undertaken during a review of the day just closing) tones up the moral fibre of the man and provides an index of idea-associations that on the instant leap to the attention of the man as soon as analogous situations develop. The strength that flows from such assimilation helps build up other sources of energy as yet latent in the disciple.

## IN THE LIGHT OF THEOSOPHY

We need to cultivate the art of listening by identifying the barriers to listening. Communication, or sharing feelings and emotions, is an integral part of human bonding. Besides talking, listening is an essential link for successful communication. According to Stephen Covey, the only true form of listening is “empathic listening,” when one listens to another person with the intention of understanding what that person is trying to communicate. Instead of putting forward our opinions, if we can devote time and effort to listening to another person, it could help build relationships, solve problems, improve understanding and resolve conflicts. What we receive from the outside is coloured by our prejudices, biases, likes and dislikes. In certain close relationships, such as, that of parent-child, husband-wife, close friends, often one tends to presume that he or she knows what the other is likely to say, and therefore listens only half-heartedly. This makes the other person feel inadequate and unvalued, and eventually results in drawing people apart. We must always remember that each one of us is changing, over years, months or even days. Some of us, though not all, are lucky to find a person who truly listens and we can share our innermost feelings and experiences without being judged. “The act of listening is about creating a safe space where your loved ones can let their emotions out, where they could feel free to express themselves, without the fear of judgement and interruptions,” writes Annesha Banerjee.

Our Ego is a great barrier to attentive listening. We find ourselves perfectly receptive so long as what the other says is in line with our emotions and views. But when the speaker challenges our deep-rooted ideas, convictions and complexes, we find ourselves mentally engaged in formulating a question that might embarrass the speaker or finding arguments that might support our feelings, etc. Instead of listening to their point of view, we are busy trying to convert them to our views. In a conflicting situation, it is much better to pay attention to the underlying emotions rather than hold on to words

spoken by another, because then we are more likely to react than respond. If we practice self-awareness then we would be able to observe our thoughts without reaction, and be able to do the same while listening to others. When we listen to others, by lending our time and attention, we are rendering a form of service (*seva*). We get an opportunity to expand our horizon, when we expose ourselves to other thoughts, ideas, opinions, values, experiences and perspectives by being true listeners, writes Banerjee. (*Life Positive*, March 2021)

The first step in listening consists in accurately getting the words of another, and understanding what those words convey. In perfect listening, we need to submit both our mind and heart to the speaker or the writer, as the case may be. Listening with the heart is very important because often hidden behind the irritable or angry speech of another, are pain and helplessness. By being sympathetic but impersonal listeners, we become ready to consider and grasp another person's point of view.

When we look around us, we find that these days, everyone seems to have the need to be heard. There are bottled-up feelings, anxieties, anger, frustrations, but no one "close enough" to share it with. The first step in service, these days, consists in learning to be a patient and sympathetic listener—at home or office, in the train or bus journey. *The Voice of the Silence* asks us to attune our mind and heart to humanity's great pain.

He who desires to learn must listen. This patient and attentive hearing precedes practice. In the Pythagorean School, *Akoustikoi* or Hearers (*Shravakas*) were allowed after a period to become *Asketai* (*Shramanas*), Practitioners. A perfect listener catches the underlying spirit behind the spoken and written words, and is not a slave to words, the dead-letter form of scriptures. To cultivate true listening we need to develop spiritual discrimination (*viveka*) and detachment (*vairagya*), along with six mental disciplines, namely, control over the mind and the senses, withdrawal of the mind from the external world, forbearance, faith and concentration.

We should strive to emulate, the patient, humble and resolute Listener, Arjuna, in his attitude to catch the Wisdom of Krishna amidst the din of the battlefield, without being distracted. "What Arjuna *saw* when his chariot stood between the two armies made him despondent; what he *heard* energized and inspired him to victory in the greatest of all wars," writes Shri B. P. Wadia.

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In the article, "The Drawbacks of Making Threats," that appeared in the May-June 2021 issue of *Scientific American* magazine, William B. Swan reviews the book *Threats: Intimidation and Its Discontents*, written by evolutionary biologist, David P. Barash. In this book the author exposes the futility of "nuclear deterrence" as a policy, by pointing out the flaws inherent in this idea, dealt with in the final section of the book. The first section of the book shows how some of the animals assume appearances and postures to drive away predators or competitors. Here, the genes that allow animals to successfully deceive others, as also, those that allow for the detection of deception will be advantaged. These opposing forces would most likely balance each other, "so that the use of threats among these animals remains adaptive."

The second section of the book, "Individuals and Society," deals with threats among human beings and how they could misfire. He discusses the use and effectiveness of capital punishment, torture, etc. to ensure socially acceptable behaviour, and concludes that none of the approaches is particularly effective. Thus, for instance, evidence shows that capital punishment, instead of being a deterrent, actually *increases* violent crime, probably based on the principle that violence begets violence. Likewise, he concludes that comparatively benign systems of threats, for ethical behaviour, such as found in religious teachings, are also ineffective. William Swan remarks that the first two sections seem to convey that "as threats become more sophisticated and complex, their effectiveness decreases while the risk of serious miscommunication increases."

These conclusions are applied to international relations. He points out that a country may spend a lot of money on elaborate defence systems, including nuclear systems, to counter perceived threats, but there is no historical evidence to show that possession of nuclear weapons proves a deterrent to conflict between two nations. He contends that his analysis calls for the abolition of nuclear weapons and he also lists out steps to be taken. One can only hope that this book will succeed in making others appreciate the futility of nuclear deterrence as a policy, writes William Swan.

A threat is a declaration of an intention to punish or hurt. Threats instil fear, and serve a limited purpose. Threats of bodily or mental harm may lead to hardening of heart. The Buddha, the greatest psychologist of all time, advises against using the “rod of punishment” on another. When we speak harsh words, show anger, criticize, reprimand, and chastise another person, these are most likely to evoke a similar reaction from those thus treated. Such is human nature. Punishment for violation of the law is supposed to act as a deterrent for the law-breaker. However, our law ought to be restrictive rather than punitive. It must give a chance to the offender to reform. Even if our motive is good and our intention is to change the person for his own good, unless we have established that kind of relationship and know how to communicate without offending, the reaction is bound to be retaliatory. It takes a modest and humble man to accept reproof in a proper manner, teaches Buddha. In all fields of life, emphasis must be on achieving inner change. Others cannot be forced into adopting either the scriptures or a “higher life” by threats of punishment or promises of reward. There must be an internal recognition of the value. When a person recognizes a principle or a mode of behaviour to be true, by his own self-discrimination, based on reason and intuition, he will keep his face turned in that direction, not requiring any external authority, discipline or punishment.

The outer wars are but the elongated shadows of the war within. Peace becomes disturbed when actions become motivated by negative

values, attitudes and emotions, such as anger, greed, pride, jealousy, prejudice and selfishness. Thus, “With right knowledge, or at any rate with a confident conviction that our neighbours will no more work to hurt us than we would think of harming them, the two-thirds of the World’s evil would vanish into thin air. Were no man to hurt his brother, Karma-Nemesis would have neither cause to work for, nor weapons to act through. It is the constant presence in our midst of every element of strife and opposition, and the division of races, nations, tribes, societies and individuals into Cains and Abels, wolves and lambs, that is the chief cause of the ‘ways of Providence.’” (S.D., I, 643)

The tendency to enjoy watching someone experience a misfortune is described as gloating. It is expressed by the German term “Schadenfreude,” which consists of two words, “Schaden” means joy, and “Freude” means pain. Robert Smith explores the gloating tendency in the human psyche, in his book, “The Joy of Pain.” We compare ourselves with our equals, in various areas, such as status, possessions, knowledge, skills, etc. The gloating tendency may be the result of overemphasis on material success in our society, leading us to pressurize our children to achieve. Sociologists find that “The more familiar a person in terms of comparable standing, the more intense is likely to be one’s gloating at the misfortune of the other.” Envy may help to improve one’s performance, but it tends to increase one’s tendency to gloat. Dopamine is a chemical responsible for pleasure. According to *Psychology Today*, gloating behaviour results in activating that part of the brain, which is responsible for the flow of dopamine. Anything that triggers dopamine gets addictive. As we live the life of sense-gratification, it is extremely important to be aware of the surfacing of gloating tendency, and curbing the same if we wish to acquire detachment in our spiritual journey, writes S. Ramesh Kumar. (*The Speaking Tree*, May 12, 2021)

The Buddhist speak of cultivating positive emotions, and acknowledging and eradicating negative emotions. The four wholesome emotions we need to cultivate are: love or friendliness, compassion, *Mudita* or sympathetic joy and equanimity. Sympathetic joy is a feeling of joy in the happiness and well-being of others. It is possible to share in happiness of another when we are ourselves in a happy and positive state of mind. But generally, we experience a tinge of jealousy or even unhappiness at another's success or achievement. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that at times, our first feeling is a subtle sense of satisfaction at the misfortune of another person, which sometimes includes our friends also. After that comes the conventional reaction of sympathy which smothers our first *real* reaction. Envy or resentment is the direct opposite of sympathetic joy.

We may cultivate *Mudita* by becoming aware of our mental states, and by first making a conscious effort to *appreciate* others. In a Buddhist practice called "rejoicing in merits," one appreciates the good qualities of other people. Mr. Judge tells us that there are times when we may wish to do something good, but are unable to do it because of lack of money, or strength or simply because we are far away from the place or the person who needs help. However, if we earnestly and intensely desired to help then "your strong desire will strike like Vulcan upon other hearts in the world, and suddenly you will find that done which you had longed to be the doer of." Then instead of regretting that we could not do that good work *ourselves*, we should rejoice that someone else was fortunate enough to make such meritorious Karma.

*Mudita* tacitly implies looking for the good in others and learning to recognise and admire what good there is. The extent to which we have cultivated genuine detachment, to that extent we are able to feel the joy of another. We are interconnected on the inner plane. One person's happiness can enrich not only his own inner being and of those around him, but also the collective psyche of which he is an inseparable part. When we truly feel happy for others our own happiness and peace increases.