

On the Watch-Tower

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The World as a Ground for Pleasure

The chief concern of many is their own personal comfort. These people do not like their familiar routine to be disturbed. No matter what needs to be done or how urgent the task, they will not allow themselves to be inconvenienced. It is well known that wherever there is work to be done there are only a few who are willing to do it; the majority are taken up entirely with safeguarding their own interests and passing the time agreeably.

In *The Voice of the Silence* it is said 'Inaction in a deed of mercy is a deadly sin'. The world is crying out urgently for help; there is widespread need and tremendous suffering. We may perhaps be disturbed when these things come uncomfortably close to us, but if they are far away we are not at all concerned as long as they do not interfere with our comfort. If we can lead fairly agreeable lives ourselves we generally do not bother too much about what happens to the rest of existence. We have what is necessary for our own survival, and perhaps more than we really need, so we have not too many problems.

The condition of humanity has ever been one of struggle, of hopes and despairs, of quarrels and misunderstandings, of cruelty and callousness.

And all this is born of ignorance, of lack of understanding. But we do not really care about it; we care very little about anything until it touches us personally. Only our own narrow satisfaction is important to us and all we want is to sink into any little comfort that life happens to offer. We seek out for ourselves a position which is psychologically and physically cosy, and we settle down into it. Other people, even those near to us, may suffer hardship but as long as we are reclining on soft cushions we do not bother about them.

To the person who seeks pleasure, everything that he encounters become objects of indifference or objects which are obstacles to the fulfilment of his wants. Our desire for power converts other people into pawns which can be used or which can be dominated, controlled, organized and shaped according to our fancy. The whole world is looked at from the point of view of our personal drives and desires.

An Unreal World

These pursuits are of different kinds. Our minds are concerned with a variety of ideas, perhaps virtuous and idealistic, but too often mediocre if not downright bad. And it is these mental pursuits that

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cause problems. If you have a delicious cake before you, it is not the cake that is the problem; the problem is that you want to eat too much of it. To have pursuits, then, is to have problems.

Pursuits and attitudes create various reactions, because when there is a pursuit there are objects which promote that pursuit. There is a pursuit of pleasure and the objects which satisfy that pleasure. And when there is an object of satisfaction there is attachment. Then arise jealousy and envy, and there is anger against any obstacle to that satisfaction.

Pursuits in the mind necessarily carry with them emotional reactions. There is a longing to possess the object of desire (often irrational), so there is expectation. Or there is the dread of its 'being denied' and there is resentment. The likes and the dislikes, the hopes and the fears, the elation and despair — all create turmoil in the mind and colour the world that is perceived through them. Most things, for most of the time, take on a hue that may not properly belong to them. So the content of the mind and disorder within it, distort our perception. The Sanskrit word for desire or pursuit is *rāga*. It is significant that *rāga* also means colour; and it underlines the fact that when there is desire, everything that surrounds that desire is coloured and distorted.

The unreal world of which the individual is conscious is not basically different from the unreal world of everyone else. There is the same search for pleasure. And, as long as this 'fever' — this 'thirst' as Buddha called it — goes on inside the

mind, there is distortion. The suffering it causes is not just physical; it is the suffering of living in ignorance. The mind 'is the great slayer of the Real', for it takes the unreal for the Real. That is also part of the sadness of it.

If a person wants success above all, then all his thoughts centre round his ambition. He makes friends with those he thinks can help him; he plans how to please them; what harmless deceptions he can get away with. So connected to every desire there are many thoughts and emotions, many reactions.

To know something conceptually as an idea is not the same thing as knowing it actually. As an idea, one may accept that there are factors in the mind which create obscurity, but actually to see that this is so — that we live in a dim world of psychological reactions — is something else again. But if we observe carefully and if we begin to see that there are these currents of various kinds inside the mind, which distort perception and create disturbance, it will become clear that meditation is not a matter of acquisition.

The greater part of mankind is bent on achievement of power, the acquisition of pleasure, getting satisfaction of some kind, not necessarily for material things; perhaps for psychological satisfaction in the company of chosen people. If something prevents their being with their friends they feel angry; if they find somebody else in the same company they feel jealous. And this favoured person may not necessarily be connected with ordinary desire; sometimes it happens that people seek a

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spiritual teacher. They want to be in his presence and they do not like anybody else to be near him or nearer to him than they are themselves. So there is jealousy and competition among the so-called disciples. All the feelings and turmoil which exist around a worldly relationship can also be found around a guru. It is exactly the same desire for satisfaction and the attachment which comes from the pursuit of satisfaction.

So the whole movement of life is towards getting either knowledge or information, affection or appreciation, material possessions or a good position or something or other. And it is also the pain of life, because when we attach ourselves to something, sooner or later it disappoints us. We attach ourselves to people and the relationship breaks up. We attach ourselves to ideas and the result more often than not is misunderstanding and quarrelling. Attachment to a narrow set of ideas breeds intolerance and strife. And the same thing happens when the desire is for enlightenment, for some special kind of experience. It creates exactly the same sort of turmoil.

The Way to Darkness

If you think about all this, you will find that our difficulties arise out of the pursuits we have been discussing. If there is the pursuit of pleasure or of power, one can very easily cause injury through actions or words. Other people can become secondary to our ambitions; they do not matter at all and they can be set aside.

Whatever lies in seed within the mind

will grow in strength. For example many people pursue power. It may not be for great power, they may not want to dominate the lives of many people, but the love of power is still there. It may be hidden for the time being or it may show itself in a number of small ways — in their efforts to manipulate others to do what they want, to impose their ideas on them. It may be the desire to hold a position — to be the first in a small group if we cannot be the leader of a larger. Or they may see themselves as superior to others in virtue (although self-conscious virtue is nothing but conceit and pride).

We can feel superior in ability. There are people who are efficient in their work, who can organize business deals, and they have little tolerance for those who are not up to the mark. The feeling of superiority which arises with feelings of virtue or with capacity or a hundred other different things is, in fact, desire for power, and it drags the mind away into darkness and illusion.

And there is not just the pursuit of power; the pursuit of pleasure is equally strong in the mind. We live in a materialistic society where decreasing working periods leave us with more idle hours to fill with amusements, where pleasure-seeking has become not only a dominant objective in life but a major industry. There is therefore the search for self-pleasing in every possible way. Then there is pursuit of pleasure through knowledge; the acquisition of knowledge becomes so important to many people that they do not care how it is obtained. Hence we gather

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more and more facts in the fields of science and medicine through the wholesale vivisection of animals. A person who is following up his interests with one-pointed dedication too often becomes indifferent to the methods he uses or to the objects of his experiments, and this holds true whether he is seeking power or pleasure.

Within the mind, then, there are all these cross-currents, dragging us this way and that towards comfort, towards power, towards pleasure and many other things. And because this is so, the world and everything in it become for us mere objects mostly unconnected with one another.

The Falsity of Personal Desire

The object of our desires may change. The mind alters its direction but not its nature. So, instead of wanting to achieve something at the material level, a person may want to excel in the so-called spiritual or religious field. He has, let us say, fleeting experiences which lift him out of himself — he may even have had an occasional expansion of consciousness — and he wants to know where he has arrived, he wants somebody to tell him he has now reached a particular stage in

his spiritual journey. He is still involved in the whole psychology of achievement and will probably feel that he is now superior to others on the same search.

We may imagine ourselves to be fairly advanced in the spiritual life; our desire after all is for enlightenment, we want to have some special experience, to reach some transcendental state, to escape the mundane, troublesome features of life. But even when we appear to desire only what is noble and good, the mind is in exactly the same condition as it was before. It is still capable of creating the same disturbance — jealousy, envy, conceit and everything that goes with it. These disturbances lie hidden in the soil of desire for achievement and, like weeds they grow fast.

Desire for the spiritual is often hidden in the midst of desire for one's own progress. How can we be free of all desire, the desire for personal as well as non-personal things? The desire for personal satisfaction is a strange thing. It hides behind other seemingly superior ideas but when it exists it is a barrier. Can we watch for it and transcend it and reach a level where there is no desire at all? ✧

OFFICIAL NOTICE

Mr M. P. Singhal was recently elected Vice-President of the Theosophical Society in place of Mrs Linda Oliveira, and took up office from 5 January 2012.

Mr T. S. Jambunathan has been appointed from 1 January 2012 as International Treasurer of the Society in place of Miss Keshwar Dastur.