

July 1961

READING 7

PART 1

It would be interesting for you I am sure at the last meeting before the Summer holidays to consider man's organism from a different angle. So far we have been looking at its structure – the four-roomed house. But it's important also, to see it in terms of chemistry or energy – the way the alchemists tried to describe it. Man is of course an extremely complicated chemical factory – an infinity of chemical reactions on every scale. But *psychologically* one's chemistry is felt in an extremely simple way in terms of the Three Forces and the matter through which they are conveyed. You remember that in the early nineteenth century the recent discoveries of Cavendish, Priestley and Lavoisier and others led to a great part of our System being formulated in terms of what was then the new scientific language. Matter conveying Active or Positive force was called Carbon; that conveying Reactive or Negative force was called Oxygen; that conveying the Neutralizing force was called Nitrogen; matter taken apart from any force was called Hydrogen. These divisions of matter were described in the System as present throughout the Universe in increasing complexity from the finest to the densest.

Though this terminology was more precise than the alchemical names, Fire, Air, Water and Earth; yet it has a rather archaic and perhaps confusing sound today. Recently, in India, I have been hearing much of a part of the great Sankhya philosophy which corresponds to some extent, though with important differences. In their language the three kinds of matter conveying the Three Forces are called Gunas; Rajas Guna conveying Positive or Active force; Tamas conveying Negative or Reactive force and Sattva (pronounced Sattwa) conveying Neutralizing force. The chief differences are that there is no special name for Hydrogen (matter apart from force); and that in common parlance they are spoken of only in relation to man's organism when they correspond to what used to be called in the Middle Ages the 'Humours'.

We can for the moment conveniently use the idea of 'three humours', especially since chemical physiologists of today often refer to the old idea of 'humours' because of the rather new discoveries of chemical transmission from nerve to organ. Since Claude Bernard it had been realised that, beside the 'Voluntary' or 'cerebro-spinal' division of the nervous system (most of which could be brought under control of the will), there is the *Autonomic division* which cannot be brought under any will that we have, and which keeps the chemistry of the body constant in spite of a changing environment. Now this Autonomic division has two kinds of nerve cell and nerve – those which on the one hand are sensitive to *adrenaline* and similar chemicals and which prepare the body for activity (for fight or flight), and those which are sensitive to *choline* (pronounced 'coaleen') and its derivatives, which act as a damping mechanism, absolutely opposed to the arousal mechanism in every organ throughout the body. These correspond to matter conducting the Positive and Negative forces, that is to say, to Rajas and Tamas gunas; the third kind of matter being (as always) invisible and difficult to measure and to establish scientifically. Though there is a corresponding anatomical relation involving the three divisions of the body, let us put that on one side for the moment, since the predominance of any one of the three gunas is felt *all over the mind as well as all over the body* and not just in one place.

Scientifically all this is very complicated, but practically it is quite simple; for in the deep central headquarters of the mind there are two centres separated by only a few millimetres, one of which controls the arousal mechanism and the other controls its opposite – the damping mechanism. All the time we are in the throes of the interaction, the war, between Rajas and Tamas – positive and negative, active and reactive. It is easy to observe it in other people and in ourselves – hundreds of different manifestations of activity and hundreds of different manifestations of reaction. The minimum of action (Rajas) and maximum of reaction (Tamas) corresponds to the state of deep and dreamless sleep.

Sometimes we become aware that there is a third possibility; something which is neither active or reactive; something new and different. Again there are many different manifestations of this Sattva guna, so that no one word can describe it, and that is why it is better to keep the Sanskrit name which has no associations for us. Thus the Apostle Paul used many words to describe it in this single sentence (Galatians 5: 22–23):

But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, temperance [in its sense of ‘balance’ or ‘harmony’]; against such there is no law.

We all know the sudden change felt all through the organism when this different kind of energy suddenly predominates over the other two. The poets have many descriptions and every anthology contains them. For me these verses from Emily Bronte’s poem ‘The Prisoner’ often seem to describe it best:

But first, a hush of peace – a soundless calm descends;
The struggle of distress and fierce impatience ends;
Mute music soothes my breast – unuttered harmony,
That I could never dream, till Earth was lost to me.

Then dawns the Invisible; the Unseen its truth reveals;
My outward sense is gone, my inward essence feels:
Its wings are almost free – its home, its harbour found...

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