

8 July 1963

READING 9

ATTENTION AND LEARNING TO DO

PART 1

I would advise you to recall the System description of *Attention* in relation to the sub-division of the Centres into Mechanical, Emotional and Voluntary (old terminology 'Intellectual') parts. Recent experiences have shed much light on this.

The *mechanical parts*, all intermeshed, constitute the machine by which everything gets done. This machinery has been built up since birth and into it have gone all learnt movements, all acquired skills. It is controlled by the Moving and Instinctive Centres in the lower storey with their 'centre of gravity' in the spinal cord. It is far too rapid and complicated to be controlled by any intellectual process; all the intellect can do is to watch it operating. Driving a car fast through traffic illustrates this. The intellect mustn't *interfere* with the mechanism; if it is watching it can stop the mechanism being interfered with by irrelevant tendencies – feelings, thoughts, the traffic jams, etc. Left alone, the driving skill we have acquired is perfectly competent and appropriate.

But without attention, the mechanical parts get out of hand. In the case of driving a car or playing tennis, which are both purely 'moving centre operations', the mechanical parts of the emotional and the thinking centres interfere. In the case of more important activities like artistic creation, Self-realization, these cannot be done by mechanical parts; they need the Higher parts of three or four centres working in harmony.

First the emotional parts of the appropriate centres begin to work when desire or interest is aroused. They introduce new rhythms and harmonies into the dull repetitive pattern. It is rare in ordinary life for the emotional parts to be aroused to sufficient intensity to create. But we can experience slight degrees of it. The sentence in the Shankaracharya's last letter (quoted in 63/34): 'In ordinary life the mind of man is naturally kept sympathetically stimulated towards the object of his desire' – refers to the beginnings of the working of the emotional parts of any of the centres. But without discipline this process is brought to a stop by identification. We need discipline (first the discipline of some instructor and later our own self-discipline) to learn to control our Attention precisely when the emotional parts are becoming fully roused.

Dante, who knew what inspiration is, knew also that it is of little avail unless its recipient is a master of his technique and prepared to take considerable pains with its gifts when he receives them; 'therefore let the folly of those be confuted, who free of art and knowledge and trusting in genius alone, rush forward to sing of the highest themes in the highest style' (*De Vulgari Eloquentia*). In these rapturous moments inspiration and criticism may seem an oddly assorted pair, but it is a remarkable fact that the greatest poets are usually able to combine them. Good evidence comes from Pushkin,[†] who in the very frenzy of creation, when words and ideas were galloping through his mind, was able to apply a relentless criticism and selection and to reduce everything to a serene and flawless harmony.'

(*Inspiration and Poetry*, C.M.Bowra, Macmillan & Co., 1955, p.12)

[†](See Note, page 96)

This describes the work of the Higher parts of centres, the Emotional and the Voluntary parts. Now in relation to the most important work of all – Self-realization and Self-creation – it is just as essential to learn to keep Attention when emotion is aroused; and like learning to swim, we have to acquire control in quiet waters first. This is why a School and special conditions are chiefly necessary. We are learning this vividly as we try to practise one of the techniques or disciplines devoted to Self-realization.

Thus in the *Meditation* all difficulties come from the interference of mechanical parts of centres. We learn to pay no attention to them; to keep bringing our attention back to one thing. The machinery is necessary; it has to go on like a power plant, for we wouldn't get any light if it didn't. The art of meditation is to pay attention only to what you want; and even in the highest stage of 'Turiya' or Ecstasy we have His Holiness's assurance that the adept must retain control of his Attention.

In trying to learn the dervish 'Turning' (a much more difficult and arduous art, it seems), the same is true. Everything is done to make it emotional, that is, to make the emotional parts of centres work. Thus a Higher meaning is given to every little act; we hear words like, 'Don't look at anything, look into your own heart', or 'Find the roots in yourSelf'. As much as one achieves this so the impossible becomes possible, but unless we use every ounce of Attention and Will on what we are doing, the mechanical parts of the centres stop it at once. We sincerely hope that at least a few hardy souls will win through to reach the required standard, for then the rest of us will profit greatly.

PART 2

So now, without analysing these emotional parts or getting too interested in them, we have to know how to recognise and not be misled by them. They are all under the sway of the Moving Centre with its chief characteristics – imitation, repetition and habit formation. In Mr. Ouspensky's words:

It is very easy to distinguish, when we begin to observe attention. Mechanical parts do not need attention. Emotional parts need strong interest, attention without effort, for attention is caught and kept by the attraction of the object itself. And in the higher parts you have to control your attention. When you get accustomed to control attention, you will see at once what I mean. First the character of the action will show you what centre is needed, and then observation of attention will show you the part of the centre.

There is one part which is most insidious and universal, and our chief stumbling block here and now. I will give you Mr. Ouspensky's description of it:

Q. Can one encourage the intellectual centre to work?

A. Cultivate attention. You will see that then it gives different results. Think with attention. Do not let yourself think mechanically. Mechanical thinking transforms itself into imagination.

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The mechanical part of the intellectual centre has a special name. Sometimes it is spoken of as a separate centre, and in that case it is called the formatory centre or formatory apparatus. Most people use only this part; they never use the better parts of the intellectual

centre. But ideas of this system or similar ideas cannot be understood by formatory apparatus at all. Formatory apparatus has very definite limitations. One of its peculiarities is that it compares only two things, as though in any particular line only two things existed. Then formatory centre likes thinking in extremes; for instance it either knows everything or it knows nothing. Another of its peculiarities is immediately to look for the opposite. You can find many examples of formatory thinking. For instance, if I say, you must do this or you must do that, people say, 'But you said we cannot do!' If I say this needs will-power, they say, 'How, if we have no will?' If I speak of being more conscious or less conscious, people say, 'But we have no consciousness!' These are all examples of formatory thinking.

Q. Can you give an example of formatory apparatus rightly used?

A. If the intellectual centre works normally, that is, if other parts do their work, formatory centre does its work quite all right. It is a registering apparatus. We are concerned only about its wrong work. This refers not only to the formatory apparatus but to all the mechanical parts of centres. Only when they begin to work wrongly do they become dangerous. So there is no need to worry about their right work; what you must try to do is eliminate their wrong work. The mechanical part of the emotional centre wants to do the work of the higher part, and it is the same with the formatory centre – it wants to do the work of the intellectual centre, and as a result the moving part of the centre includes all the intellectual life of an ordinary person.

Q. How do you account then for people occasionally living in the higher parts of the centre? One can occasionally have an idea.

A. Certain combinations of ideas may 'happen', but we want control, not an explanation of things that happen by themselves. Anything may happen once or twice, but it has no practical value or meaning, just as once or twice one can find money in the street but one cannot live on it.

CONCLUSION

It is this interference by the formatory centre which, above all other things, impedes us at the present time. We begin to *think* about meditation instead of actually repeating the mantra – that is interference by the formatory centre. All sorts of irrelevant thoughts and theories take us away from the actual steps of the Ladder of Self-realization. And it is this which makes our meetings so often dull and flat and complicated. Recognise it by taste and then fly away from it! In time a being will be born in you who will be detached from the machine and therefore able to operate it and make it perform the work for which it was created.

The Shankaracharya gives a simple and graphic simile which shows the difference between mechanical parts of centres ('the fool') and Higher parts of centres ('the clever man'). He says:

The difference between a good man, clever in the good sense, and a fool is this: if you give something to the good man he makes more good out of it. If you give something good to the fool, he will destroy it. Here is an example: take a good piece of wood and give it to a carpenter or wood carver; he would make a useful piece of furniture and present it in a beautiful way. Whereas the good piece of wood, if given to a fool, would perhaps be burnt or thrown here and there. So your cleverness lies in using all your natural qualities to good purpose. Nothing is bad for a good man.

All Knowledge from Higher Mind is just destroyed by mechanical parts of centres; but Higher parts of centres can make something useful of it and present it in a beautiful way.

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†NOTE (continued from page 93):

He describes his own creative process as being that of the passive watcher selecting what he wants in the poem 'Autumn' of 1833:

And I forget the world in the sweet silence,
While I am lulled by fantasy, and once more
The Soul oppressed with the old lyric fever
Trembles, reverberates, and seeks to pour
Its burden freely forth, and as though dreaming
I watch the children that my visions bore,
And I am host to the invisible throng
Who fill my revelries and build my song.
And thoughts stir bravely in my head, and rhymes
Run forth to meet them on light feet, and fingers
Reach for the pen, and the good quill betimes
Asks for the foolscap. Wait: the verses follow.

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