

29 April 1968

READING 1

FRESH EXPERIENCES

In preparing a second edition of *Waking Up* (enlarged, rearranged and rewritten), I have had to read quite widely among recent books and periodicals. I'm now convinced that nearly all those encouraging (but usually momentary) episodes that have come to be called 'peak experiences', or spontaneous examples of 'extra-sensory perception' (ESP), are really what the Shankaracharya means by 'the Good Impulse' – the first step on the Ladder of Self-realization. In my own case any further progress always starts from those. So I would like you to use this name in preference to others; for such experiences are not the *end*, but truly the *beginning* of something of extreme importance but easily forgotten – namely evidence of the eternal presence of the miraculous 'True Self' within everyone.

At this moment I want from you some fresh examples (to replace most of those given in the first edition), because the book that needs to be written ought to link all these current up-going tendencies together; and I would like all of you to contribute something. It does one good to try to do that. Needless to say that even the memory of such experiences only comes into consciousness as the result of a few minutes of regular peace and silence.

As so often, it is most useful to go back to the original questions which triggered off this growing trend in psychology. In this country it was Marghanita Laski who, around 1950, sent out a questionnaire to 63 people ('friends and acquaintances and other people I met in circumstances that allowed me to put my questions without intolerable embarrassment'). 'I did not know', she wrote,[†] 'how common and indeed commonplace my original speculations were... and it would be interesting to know what ecstasy felt like to other people.' This was the questionnaire she sent:

1. Do you know a sensation of transcendent ecstasy?
(If people asked, as they sometimes did, 'What do you mean by transcendent ecstasy?' I replied, 'Take it to mean whatever you think it means.' If they answered 'No' to the first question, I omitted questions 2 to 4 and went on to question 5.)
2. How would you describe it?
3. What has induced it in you?
4. How many times in your life have you felt it – in units, tens, hundreds? (Or you could say how often you are getting it nowadays – daily, weekly or monthly.)
5. What is your religion or faith?
6. Do you know a feeling of creative inspiration?
7. How would you describe it?
8. Does it seem to you to have anything in common with ecstasy?

Though the original answers fulfilled expectations, her subsequent efforts were often disappointing. For instance:

In August 1958 I took part in a BBC Television Brains Trust at which a question was asked on mysticism, and I took the opportunity to ask those watching to write and

[†]*Ecstasy*, The Cresset Press 1961; First Paperback Edition 1965)

tell me of mystical experiences they had known. I received 42 letters, most of them from women, and many of them dotty – anyone who has received letters after appearing on television will know what I mean.

Among them however were one or two she valued, e.g. (p.531):

In 1916 I was walking along the shore westward out of Culross... wheeling a pram which contained one child recumbent and one doing everything but lie down. There were three other young children running round one, getting under my feet and asking the silliest questions... The sun was not shining. I looked across the waters of the Firth of Forth... and out of the utter boredom and empty meaninglessness of that afternoon came a stab of knowledge. I knew and have known ever since that there *is* some Reason, some Plan, some Cause, some Soul, call it what you will, which can be relied on... For *a split second* there upon the shores of the Firth, I *understood*. What I understood I don't know now, but I *know* that I understood then and I have remained firm and calm and unshaken upon that rock – i.e. that once I understood...

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In the USA a far more extensive literature on this subject has been increasing, which was apparently given initial impetus in this way: A.H. Maslow (a professional psychiatrist at Brandeis University) seems to have wanted to find out how many people shared his own 'peak experiences'. He selected from among friends and college students (in 1953–4) those who seemed to be 'self-actualizing' or 'growing' people and sent them the following instructions:

I would like you to think of the most wonderful experience or experiences of your life; happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture, perhaps from being in love, or from listening to music or suddenly 'being hit' by a book or a painting, or from some great creative moment. First list these. And then try to tell me how you feel in such acute moments, how you feel *differently* from the way you feel at other times, how you are at the moment a different person in some ways.

(*Toward a Psychology of Being*, p.67)

[With other subjects the questioning asked rather about the ways in which the world looked different].

His first two books, *Motivation and Personality* (Harper & Row, 1954) (especially Ch.12) and *Toward a Psychology of Being* (Van Nostrand, 1962) were largely based on written responses from 190 college students and personal interviews with about 80 individuals. The qualities by which he recognised 'self-actualising' people resemble closely those long-term improvements which we were originally promised would come from meditation, and which we have since amply confirmed and extended. The conclusion that comes out of all this is that though some taste of such experiences (especially in childhood) is almost universal, there are three possible reactions. Most commonly people brush them off (since they don't fit with anything else) and adopt a sceptical attitude, so they cease to have them ever again. About 1% of people *value* them so much that they dwell on them and show their effects in their lives. Even fewer than that want to find some systematic way of getting more of these delights, and snatch at any opportunity that presents itself.

But even here a common snag arises. Among a bundle of reprints of recent articles and talks by Professor Maslow, just received from Brandeis University, is one called *Additional Notes* (undated) which begins:

After talking recently with various students and professors who 'wanted to work with me' on self-actualisation, I discovered that I was very suspicious of most of them and rather discouraging, tending to expect little from them. This is a consequence of long experience with multitudes of starry-eyed dilettantes – big talkers, great planners, tremendously enthusiastic – who come to nothing as soon as a little hard work is required. So I have been speaking to these individuals in a pretty blunt and tough and non-encouraging way.

And:

Another point that has been coming up is the talk about personal salvation. For instance, at the Santa Rosa existential meetings there was much of this kind of talk, and I remember exploding in a kind of irritation and indicating my disrespect for such salvation seekers. This was on the grounds that they were selfish and did nothing for others and for the world. Besides, they were psychologically stupid and psychologically incorrect because seeking for personal salvation is *anyway* the wrong road to personal salvation. The only real path... was salvation via hard work.

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Naturally we can learn some lessons from these accounts. Chiefly we learn how, almost inevitably, empty talk becomes a substitute for further first-hand experience. All this literature arises as a result of the 'Good Impulse' happening *by chance*. I have found nothing in it about the systematic practice of any method which is designed to take one up the Ladder of Self-realization by using the good impulses for further endeavour. I want to find out how well we are succeeding and what improvements can be made.

What I want from you is to get some fresh, short examples under the following heads:

1. **Sporadic 'Good Impulses'** ('peak-experiences'), coming by chance, occurring in people we know at first-hand, before they begin to practise any systematic method. I want you to compare them (in respect of frequency, intensity and duration) with what you get now as the result of coming to groups, meditation, turning, movements to music, work parties, etc. I want to be sure you are getting more and more, not less and less!
2. **New 'Good Impulses'** (more complete and more lasting) which you have been enjoying recently and which you ascribe to *systematic practice* of some particular method or to just being part of our organisation centred on Colet.
3. **Short accounts of the long-term beneficial effects** by which our lives are made different in some way because of what you have practised since joining us. We could surely add something to the list (mentioned above) that Maslow gives as characteristic of 'growing' people.

Would you get this enquiry going at your groups. You could picture yourselves as receiving either of the two communications quoted above, and send in replies to them. If people take the trouble to do this for me, we might find that as well as being useful for the book, it would be valuable in other ways. It would, anyhow, put us in line with current thought in different parts of the world, and might also be used (if we evolved our own sort of questionnaire) as part of an invitation to friends to come to a pre-Meditation meeting or a Mukabeleh. It would also be a check for each one of us on whether we are at present getting all the results we could get, or whether we need to change our weekly programme in some way.

If you are selecting experiences to relate, you would find it most profitable to choose the one

which has an effect on your attitude or your knowledge, more permanent than just a transient feeling that 'sinks without trace'.

Group takers would help us by assembling those from people in their own group and perhaps picking the most telling to send on to us.

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May 1968

Dear

We are approaching you in connection with a forthcoming book for which we want to collect examples of personal first-hand experiences which can be described as 'Peak Experiences'. I will try to explain what is meant by this. The following quotation from a questionnaire written by Professor A.H. Maslow of Brandeis University (USA) will give some indication. He writes:

I would like you to think of the most wonderful experience or experiences of your life; happiest moments, ecstatic moments, moments of rapture, perhaps from being in love, or from listening to music, or suddenly 'being hit' by a book or a painting, or from some great creative moment. First list these. And then try to tell me how you feel in such acute moments, how you feel *differently* from the way you feel at other times, how you are at the moment a different person in some ways.

Marghanita Laski published a book, *Ecstasy*, in which she gave examples of 'Peak Experiences' which she had collected from other people. The following is an example.

In 1916 I was walking along the shore westwards out of Culross wheeling a pram which contained one child recumbent and one doing everything but lie down. There were three other young children running round one, getting under my feet and asking the silliest questions... The sun was not shining. I looked across the waters of the Firth of Forth... and out of the utter boredom and empty meaninglessness of that afternoon came a stab of knowledge. I knew and have known ever since that there *is* some Reason, some Plan, some Cause, some Soul, call it what you will, which can be relied on... For a split second there upon the shores of the Firth, I *understood*.

We want to collect examples under the following headings:

1. Experiences which occurred at any time in the past prior to taking up the Meditation. (These often occur in early childhood).
2. Any experiences which you have had since taking up the Meditation.
3. Any long-term beneficial effects by which you may feel your life has been made different in some way since meditating.

It may be found necessary to sit quietly for some time when trying to recall these things. The movement and hurly-burly of life will often tend to cloud the memory of special moments. It is evident from research that more and more people throughout the world are enjoying more and more of these experiences, but it is important to collect factual evidence; so will you please help in this matter as far as you can?

If you can write anything at all, will you kindly send it to me. It will be treated confidentially; your name wouldn't be published – only initials (and age, if under 20). It would clearly be advisable to discuss these things only with friends of a sympathetic nature.

Yours sincerely,