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NOTES ON 'KNOWLEDGE, BEING AND UNDERSTANDING'

PART 1

Last term we explored as far as possible all the Self-knowledge that the simile of the three-storeyed house could give us. Just now most people I have talked with express the feeling that they don't want any more knowledge but that they want to understand what each can do to 'keep afloat' and steer a course through the waves and winds of living. This feeling is absolutely right and approaches one of the cardinal Truths at the centre of every real Teaching. If we revise what we were originally taught about this, we shall find certain tangible advantages which the Meditation and the direct connection with the Inner Circle will have since brought us.

Here is (in brief) how this Truth was expressed in our System when Mr. Ouspensky first heard it fifty years ago in Moscow:

There are two lines along which man's development proceeds, the line of knowledge and the line of being. In right evolution the line of knowledge and the line of being develop simultaneously, parallel to, and helping one another. But if the line of knowledge gets too far ahead of the line of being, or if the line of being gets ahead of the line of knowledge, man's development goes wrong, and sooner or later it must come to a standstill.

People understand what 'knowledge' means. And they understand the possibility of different levels of knowledge. They understand that knowledge may be lesser or greater, that is to say, of one quality or of another quality. But they do not understand this in relation to 'being'. 'Being', for them, means simply 'existence' to which is opposed just 'non-existence'. They do not understand that being or existence may be of very different levels and categories. Take for instance the being of a mineral and of a plant. It is a different being. The being of a plant and of an animal is again a different being. The being of an animal and of a man is a different being. But the being of two people can differ from one another more than the being of a mineral and of an animal. This is exactly what people do not understand. And they do not understand that *knowledge* depends on *being*. Not only do they not understand this latter but they definitely do not wish to understand it. And especially in Western culture it is considered that a man may possess great knowledge, for example he may be an able scientist, make discoveries, advance science, and at the same time he may be, and has the right to be, a petty, egoistic, caviling, mean, envious, vain, naive, and absent-minded man. It seems to be considered here that a professor must always forget his umbrella everywhere.

...

If knowledge gets far ahead of being, it becomes theoretical, abstract and inapplicable to life, or actually harmful, because instead of serving life and helping people the better to struggle with the difficulties they meet, it begins to complicate man's life, brings new difficulties into it, new troubles and calamities which were not there before.

...

Such preponderance of knowledge over being is observed in present-day culture. The idea of the value and importance of the level of being is *deliberately* forgotten. And it is forgotten that the level of knowledge is determined by the level of being. Actually

at a given level of being the possibilities of knowledge are limited and finite. Within the limits of a given being, the *quality* of knowledge cannot be changed... A change in the nature of knowledge is possible only with a change in the nature of being.

(*In Search of the Miraculous*, pp. 64–66)

Later it came out in the talks that Systems devoted to the development of man could all too easily produce a lack of balance leading, on the one hand to:

... a *weak Yogi*... that is to say, a man who knows a great deal but can do nothing, a man who *does not understand what he knows*, or man without appreciation ('discrimination'), that is, a man for whom there is no difference between one kind of knowledge and another. And the development of the line of being without knowledge gives a *stupid saint*, that is, a man who does not know what to do... And if he does anything he acts in obedience to his subjective feelings which may lead him greatly astray and cause him to commit grave mistakes. In either case both the 'weak Yogi' and the 'stupid saint' are brought to a standstill. Neither the one nor the other can develop further.

In order to understand this and, in general, the nature of knowledge and the nature of being, as well as their interrelation, it is necessary to understand the relation of knowledge and being to 'understanding'.

Knowledge is one thing, understanding is another thing.

People often confuse these concepts and do not clearly grasp what is the difference between them.

Knowledge by itself does not give understanding. Nor is understanding increased by an increase of knowledge alone. Understanding depends upon the relation of knowledge to being. Understanding is the resultant of knowledge and being. And knowledge and being must not diverge too far, otherwise understanding will prove to be far removed from either. At the same time the relation of knowledge to being does not change with a mere growth of knowledge. It changes only when being grows simultaneously with knowledge. In other words, understanding grows only with the growth of being.

In ordinary thinking, people do not distinguish understanding from knowledge. They think that greater understanding depends on greater knowledge. Therefore they accumulate knowledge, or that which they call knowledge, but they do not know how to accumulate understanding and do not bother about it.

And yet a person accustomed to self-observation knows for certain that at different periods of his life he has understood one and the same idea, one and the same thought, in totally different ways. It often seems strange to him that he could have understood so wrongly that which, in his opinion, he now understands rightly. And he realises, at the same time, that his knowledge has not changed, and that he knew as much about the given subject before as he knows now. What, then, has changed? His being has changed. And once being has changed understanding must change also.

The difference between knowledge and understanding becomes clear when we realise that knowledge may be the function of one storey. Understanding, however, is the function of three storeys. Thus the thinking apparatus may know something. But understanding appears only when a man feels and senses what is connected with it.

We have spoken earlier about mechanicalness. A man cannot say that he understands the idea of mechanicalness if he only knows about it with his mind. He must feel it with his whole mass, with his whole being; then he will understand it.

In the sphere of practical activity people know very well the difference between mere knowledge and understanding. They realise that to know and to know how to do are two different things,[†] and that *knowing how to do is not created by knowledge alone*. But outside the sphere of practical activity people do not clearly understand what ‘understanding’ means.

As a rule, when people realise that they do not understand a thing they try to find a name for what they do not ‘understand’, and when they find a name they say they ‘understand’. But to ‘find a name’ does not mean to ‘understand’. Unfortunately, people are usually satisfied with names. A man who knows a great many names, that is, a great many words, is deemed to understand a great deal – again excepting, of course, any sphere of practical activity wherein his ignorance very soon becomes evident.

(*ibid*, pp. 67–68)

PART 2

Let us agree then, first of all, that, whatever our type, our chief interests or our kind of life, we all have this in common, that we belong to the Fourth Way, the Way of Understanding. We need to keep the balance between our Knowledge and our Being.

Within that single Way we see that people have different needs at different times. According to the three fundamental aspects of the human being there have always been three paths. One is the path of Knowledge, the second is the path of Love, service or devotion; and the third is the path of Action for those who are very fully engaged in earning a living, and supporting a family (the ‘householder’). These three paths can go on simultaneously but they represent a different emphasis which must be taken into account. The single Way which is a combination of all these three is called the ‘Way of Wisdom or Understanding’. Within that Way, each of us has to decide which path to follow at a given time, but those in charge must resist the temptation to force people into a single mould which conflicts with the present need.

Life is difficult to live just now; our common need, then, is to live productively and economically and at the same time to use the Work for which we have come together here to increase our *Understanding*. The Fourth Way goes on in the midst of ordinary life; those primitive Ways (the Way of the Fakir, of the Monk and of the Yogi) which demanded first of all a total retreat from life, are now only of interest to us historically.

But we have much recent instruction about the three paths which were outlined in the *Bhagavad Gita* as compatible with ordinary life. The first six chapters speak about the path of *Action*, how to live an active life, to use one’s efficiency and influence in society both for outward success and for inward preparation for another world. The next six chapters describe the path of *Love*, to establish unity and emotional connection with the lover (the Absolute) through compassion for other people. And the last six chapters describe the path of *Knowledge* which deals with more abstract ideas of the Creator, and His Creation, the two Cosmic Laws and man’s structure and his possible evolution. The Fourth Way is for people who have some capacity for all three, and flashes of understanding when they come together, but there is usually, as we have said, a bias towards one or another.

It is worth recalling, too, the following summary which speaks of a practical kind of knowledge that comes from experience and not from books:

[†]Knowing good coffee, and knowing how to make good coffee.

But on the Fourth Way knowledge is still more exact and perfect. A man who follows the Fourth Way knows quite definitely what substances he needs for his aims, and he knows that these substances can be introduced into the organism from without (if he learns a certain method). And so, instead of spending a whole day in exercises like the Yogi, a week in prayer like the Monk, or a month in self-torture like the Fakir, he simply prepares and swallows a little pill which contains all the substances he wants and, in this way, without loss of time, he obtains the required results.

[In a group we could try experiments in planning a week by adopting the suggestions of people with one of the three kinds of emphasis in their need at present.]

In the next paper you will learn how, though all the above is perfectly true on a broad theoretical level, yet with the meditation and our guide, the idea of Being can be seen to have an altogether different meaning on a higher and very practical level.

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