

18 June 1973

READING 5

ATTENTION

PREFACE

I had prepared a synopsis of the recent neuropsychiatric research on this subject, but it merely served to show me how utterly different must be the point of view of those who study only *other people*, such as the mentally sick, without practising one-pointed attention in themselves. Anyone interested in psychiatry or child-guidance is probably familiar with this recent work already, but the simplest part is included in an appendix to this paper. Since it divides 'attention' into what they call 'involuntary' and 'voluntary' ('involuntary' being 'identification', and not 'attention' at all for us), this complicated evidence does the Self-realizer very little good! I recommend it only for private study, and suggest the following for reading at your 'quiet' meetings instead.

PART 1

One of the classics of the East (best known in old Tibet), was *The Book of the Golden Precepts* on which the early theosophists based much of their teaching (see *The Voice of the Silence*, H.P. Blavatsky, 1892–1930). The method centres on a scale of 'inner sounds' which (in that system) Buddhi learns to distinguish. It begins:

He who would hear the voice of the Silence, the soundless sound, and comprehend it, he has to learn the secret of Dharana (one-pointed attention).

Having withdrawn himself from objects of perception, the pupil must seek out the Raja of the senses, the *thought-producer*, he who invokes illusion. This illusion is the great slayer of the Real; let the disciple slay the slayer.

For when to himself his form appears unreal, as do on waking all the forms he sees in dreams; when he has ceased to hear the many, he may discern the One, the inner Sound that kills the outer. Then only shall he forsake the region of Asat, the false, to come within the realm of Sat, the True...

Before the Soul can comprehend and may remember she must unto the Silent Speaker be united, just as the form to which the clay is modelled is first united with the potter's mind.

For then the Soul will hear and will remember; and then to the inner ear will speak the Voice of the Silence.

[Pause for Meditation]

This is, of course, the core of the instruction that His Holiness has been continually giving us by discourse and letter for at least three years:

In the Antahkarana (inner organ or Soul) of each person, there lives the Universal along with the individual Self for the purpose of guidance. Therefore we get a guiding Voice from time to time when we are in difficulties, etc.

(from a letter, 19 November 1970)

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COMMENT

If the meditator practises this, and even if he knows nothing more, he would succeed. The third paragraph of the first quotation is similar to the answer sent to N.R. in New York:

S. When looking at the street, buildings and people under a changing sky or at clouds and trees – and also when there is a vague feeling of an expanding and dissolving flow – what you experience is the **WORLD**. And the world has three stages, viz: creation, maintenance and destruction.

When we wake up from a sleep, the [sensory] world stands up before us as it is; when we perceive a dream, however, it is a dream-world that we see; when we go into deep and dreamless sleep, then everything of the world merges into the Self, and only that Self is all in all. That is why we try to merge everything of our day-to-day life into the Universal Self (Param-Atman).

The advantage of this would be that the thought of the past and of the future would weaken and you would find yourself in a special state of Self-consciousness. As this practice deepens, you would see the states of waking and dreaming more and more alike. With your eyes open or shut, it would be the same world before you. A condition of sameness would possess your heart. The mind would shed its burden and become filled with joy instead. A feeling of perfection and limitlessness would supervene.

(Record, 8 August 1972)

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PART 2

The Book of the Golden Precepts continues:

Three halls, O weary pilgrim, lead to the end of toils. Three halls, conqueror of illusion, will bring you through three states into the fourth [Turiya or Enlightenment]...

The name of the first hall is Ignorance [Avidya]. It is the hall into which people are born, and in which they live and die.

The name of the second hall is the Hall of Learning. In it your soul will find the blossoms of life, but under every flower a serpent coiled.

The name of the third hall is Wisdom, beyond which stretch the shoreless waters of Akshara, the indestructible fountain of Omniscience.

If you would cross the first hall safely, let not your Mind [Buddhi] mistake the fires of selfish desire for the sunlight of life.

If you would cross the second safely, do not stop to inhale the fragrance of its stupefying blossoms. Seek not for your Guru in those hypnotic regions. Wise men linger not in the pleasure-ground of the senses; nor do they heed the sweet-tongued voices of illusion.

Seek for Him who is to give you birth in the hall of Wisdom, wherein all shadows are unknown and where the light of Truth shines with unfading glory.

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CONCLUSION

It is the myth of the Garden of Eden over again. We know now both neurologically and psychologically – in ourselves – precisely what all this means. But we also know enough not to waste time killing out all those ‘snakes’, but to take the above advice and go straight through to the Hall of Wisdom by acquiring the habit of remembering the Param-Atman all the time.

APPENDIX

ATTENTION – CURRENT WORK

Though psychiatrists are probably divided on this subject, the following is a synopsis of what seems to be the clearest recent account:

The main task of the recent approach of neuropsychiatry to *attention* is to bridge the gap which had always existed in psychology between elementary, involuntary, forms of attention, on the one hand, and the higher, voluntary forms of attention on the other.

It is well-known to psychologists that those features of the most elementary, involuntary attention of the type which is attracted by the most powerful or *biologically significant* stimuli, can be observed very early on, during the first few months of the child's development. They consist of turning the eyes and then the head, slowing towards this stimulus, and the cessation of all other, irrelevant forms of activity; together with a clearly defined group of visceral reflexes (breathing, pulse-rate and circulation, and skin changes) which Bekhterev (1905) called the 'concentration reaction' and Pavlov the 'orienting reflex'.

Definite signs of this reaction... giving behaviour its organised character, can be observed in a child of only a few weeks, at first in the form of an arousal reaction, and later, when the child was awake, initially as fixation of the external stimulus, and later as an active search for it...

Fragments of these features, even in the *newborn* infant, can be observed, e.g., the cessation of the rhythmic sucking movements on shining a light or making a noise... Later, as the electrical activity of the cortex matures, the physical changes in breathing and circulation are joined by other phenomena well-known in electrophysiology, e.g., inhibition of the alpha-rhythm (or 'desynchronisation') etc. ... The whole complex of autonomic (involuntary) features of the orienting reaction had been studied in great detail by the end of 1963 (Sokolov and others)... An essential feature of the orienting reaction distinguishing it from the general 'arousal' reaction is that it may be highly directive and selective in character... thus creating the basis for directive and selective, organised behaviour.

...

It would be a mistake to imagine that the attention of the infant can be attracted only by powerful and novel stimuli, or by stimuli connected with immediate demand. From the beginning the child lives in an environment of adults. When his mother names an object in the environment and points to it with her finger the child's attention is attracted to that object, so that it starts to stand out from the rest regardless of whether it gives rise to a strong, novel, or vitally important stimulus. This direction of the child's attention through social communication, words or gestures, marks a fundamentally important stage in the development of this new form, the *social organisation* of attention. Later, it gives rise to the type of organisation of attention with the most complex structure, voluntary attention.

Vygotsky, who was the first psychologist to identify these social roots of the higher forms of attention, expressed his views in the principle which I have already cited.

In the early stages of development the complex psychological function *was shared between two persons*: the adult *triggered* the the psychological process by naming the object or by pointing to it; the child *responded* to this signal and picked out the named object either by fixing it with his eye or by holding it with

his hand. In the subsequent stages of development this socially organised process becomes reorganised. The child himself learns to speak. He can now name the object *himself*, and by naming the object himself he distinguishes it from the rest of the environment, and thus directs his attention to it. The function which hitherto was shared between two people now becomes a method of *internal organisation of the psychological process*. From an external, socially organised attention develops the *child's voluntary attention*, which in this stage is an internal, self-regulating process.

The identification of the social roots of the higher forms of voluntary attention, which Vygotsky first recognised, is of decisive importance; it bridged the gap between the elementary forms of involuntary attention and the higher forms of voluntary attention, thus preserving their unity.

(*The Working Brain*, A.R. Luria, Penguin Press 1972, pp. 258 & 262)

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