

6 January 1975

READING 1

SYSTEMATIC PRACTICE

At the start of what may well be the most difficult year of our lives, we would like to return thanks for the uncountable benefits we have received by transmitting to all those English-speaking people who have come in contact with us, a message of goodwill and encouragement to get us through the gloomy turbulence which always precedes the dawn of a new era of civilisation. For many of us the meeting with our System of knowledge and, later, with the Meditation and the personal guidance of the Shankaracharya, has felt like a resurrection from the dead – a source of unending joy which we want to share with anyone who will accept it.

There are times like the present when the benevolent guidance of the All-knowing Self (that is born in every human being), has been largely lost and with it the natural connection with the Source of Truth, happiness, and confidence in the essential goodness of the human endowment. One of my visits to the Shankaracharya (in 1971) began with this question (based on one by D.B.C. in 1970):

In the children's game of hunt the treasure that we are playing, even a little attempt to follow your advice has given such promising results that I have come for more intensive practice under your guidance. Can you say more?

S. Before answering, let us get the question right. The *eyes* are present and, moreover, are all the time performing their proper function of seeing. The reason why the child is not finding the thing he is looking for, is that he is looking for it in a place other than where it actually is.

For example: suppose that we have lost something inside our own house, and that in searching for it we labour under the false impression that we have lost it somewhere *outside* the house.

Similarly, there is this false impression in the case of the individual Self (Atman) and the Self of all creation (Param-Atman)... The Atman actually sits in the lap of Param-Atman in the innermost recesses of man's Soul, but the trouble is that it possesses an external outlook and feels constrained by the external layers of man's Nature (Prakriti).

If the Atman could turn its eyes inwards through Meditation, then it would see where it really is, namely in the very lap of Param-Atman; and then those layers of ignorance and delusion would cease to matter and there would be a state of unbroken joy all round.

Just now the cry is heard on all sides (by people who have practised the Meditation for some time) for some additional form of 'systematic practice' which would enable each of us to be in better control of the machinery of mind and body both in Meditation and in practical life. I feel that a very good starting-point in the present situation can be found by continuing the talk above quoted, which you have never heard; a subject which has been developed on subsequent visits and much correspondence to the point where the way is clear for intensive practice. But let us be reassured at the outset that this will be no additional burden – only a relief and an *unburdening of the mind* from the unnecessary load it carries. So we must first give up all the fear and gloom which are usually associated with such words as 'School discipline' and the like.

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Buddhi (Reason and intellectual knowledge) is like a guide that will take one through the town to a given address and recognise the number on the gate, but beyond that one has to enter by oneself to have communion. It would be necessary for some force to take over the leading role from Buddhi at this stage. This force is the Prakriti or 'Nature' of the individual. Prakriti is the force which drives the combined powers inherent in the individual (of motivation, feeling, reason, and the changing consciousness with its sense of individuality, which are manifested in our psychological and physical life). If this Nature or individual Essence is harmonious and pure, it will be helpful; otherwise it will only become an obstacle to communion. So this Nature of each individual must be made good and useful and right for union (Yoga) when the time comes...

Under the present circumstances one needs to transform one's Prakriti, and 'systematic practice' is the only way. Asked about the Sanskrit word for 'systematic practice' (which our interpreter keeps translating as 'discipline' in the way it is imposed by the School to which he belongs), His Holiness replied:

The word is Sadhana. Sadhana is a system; it creates a force so that the individual who has forgotten the natural and proper way of living in the pattern in which he was originally evolved, can correct his deviation from it. Sadhana empowers us, step by step, to meet both aspects of our life – the practical life of worldly affairs, and the other which we have to create for the psychological and Spiritual worlds (subtle and causal).

Q. If reason can only take us a certain distance, surely a most important part of the Prakriti which is needed to take one further is the emotional life? Is there further advice connected with the purification and melting of the heart?

S. The process of change-over from hardness to melting of the heart is gradual and would take time according to the degree of hardness. Abundance of Rajas – which shows as a hardened heart – is the outcome of certain kinds of activity which have been practised in the past, and which have become part of the Nature or individual Prakriti; so it is now habitual and is a springboard for all his actions when he is not awake and attentive.

The company of a guide and of words from Higher Mind can make it obvious to the individual where his actions go wrong. But this knowledge of mechanical behaviour is only the beginning, for unless this knowledge is transformed and becomes part of his Nature, it is not of much use. To do this one simply needs the 'systematic practice' that will undo the previous mechanical practice. To get out of the Rajasic practice one needs Sattvic practice, which means good quality actions, and useful and creative work, meditation, and only activities which create Sattva. One needs to keep on doing the same thing again and again to produce sufficient Sattva to melt the heart.

Returning later in the same talk to the subject of 'systematic practice' the Shankaracharya said :

To create any lasting result there must always be a System, and one must go through the whole System in the chosen order to get the required result. Under Conscious authority the steps can be shortened to create the same result, but the System must be there. The Eightfold System of Yoga (as laid down centuries ago by Patanjali) ends with Samadhi, where there is only Pure Consciousness by itself without anything to be conscious of, or any thought processes or other desires – 'One without a second'.

That System starts with the body which, with the help of Reason (Buddhi), is progressively trained for control over the external senses and the outward-looking mind (Manas). Thus, a full-time ascetic has to learn to regulate all his activities and obey certain general and special rules of conduct; must learn to sit quietly and symmetrically without movement, and regulate the breathing system; put all worldly thoughts on one side, and learn to hold one idea in the mind (Pratyahara, 5th Step), and only then is he allowed to meditate.

This is a hard System, incompatible with the life of a householder today; and only the brave can take it, even under a worthy guide.

The same System, greatly shortened by the way the Meditation is now being given [as the result of intensive research by the preceding Shankaracharya and others before and during World War II]. Though the Meditation begins at the 6th Step and the intermediate Steps – 3, 4 & 5 – are spontaneously controlled by it in right-measure; yet the individual must adapt the general and special rules of conduct to his particular way of living by dedicating his actions, feelings and thoughts to the service of the Atman. Thus all the same steps will have to be accomplished in the end, though in a different order. A story may help to show the difference:

There were two artists who went to a King and offered to please him by their art. They promised to create the same thing by two different methods. The King gave them a hall with walls to be decorated and divided by a partition. One of them cleaned and washed his wall, then started his fresco by drawing outline figures and applying the colours. The other only polished his wall.

After a month they both finished their work; the partition was removed and the light turned on. The King was surprised to see on both walls the same design. The idea is that one artist had to go through all the stages of painting, while the other turned the wall into a mirror into which everything was reflected.

The Yoga System is like painting, while our Meditation is like polishing – the result is the same, but both need systematic work and attention.

Q. What is here meant by 'polishing'?

S. Polishing refers to 'giving up'. Success in Meditation as well as in living one's own life is proportionate to the honesty and persistence with which one 'gives up'. What is it that one 'gives up'? It is the domination of the ego (Ahankara) in order to achieve Union (Yoga) with the Real 'I', the Atman.

The most direct and practical way of doing this is to understand the relation of the three Gunas to one's feeling of 'I'. The Ahankara dominated by Sattva is directed towards the Atman and all that is benevolent and gentle. The Ahankara governed by Rajas creates the feeling of self-grandeur; he would feel wise, strong and rich in his own right; he would presume himself to be better than others and would try to lead and direct them on his own. Under the influence of Tamas he would feel his own point of view to be the only possible one, and all others to be beneath his notice. He would like to behave like the Absolute, never to be governed by any laws himself, but to govern everybody else by *his* laws. All must obey him, and no-one is allowed to question him.

Everybody is a mixture of all these three Gunas and, while their proportions change, each person has one predominant and his ideas and his life are governed by it.

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[You may need to give a clear description of the Gunas to anyone who has not heard about the Law of Three Forces.]

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