

25 September 1978

AUTUMN 1978

READING 1

REALIZATION OF TRUTH

INTRODUCTION

For various reasons which, we hope, will soon become apparent, we have decided to devote our work this term to a much neglected subject – a most unpopular subject in public life today. One reason for raising the subject right now is that on October 4th Yale University are opening an exhibition of all the ‘writings of Ouspensky and his circle’ that can be found; for they are determined that he shall assume his rightful place ‘as one of the leaders of Western thought in this century’. Though we have contributed all we could to this worthwhile aim, he instructed us to forget the past and find how best to apply his teaching in today’s world. So our job is to concentrate on finding and expressing in current language what he would most wish to be remembered by.

PART 1

Anyone who knew him well would agree that the real meaning of his life was his courageous search for Truth – Truth at any price; and he showed this chiefly by his example; because, as he said, there is little one can *say* about ‘Truth’ without being misunderstood. However at Warwick Gardens in 1937 (when we were beginning to negotiate for the lease of what is now ‘Colet House’) he held a meeting on this subject which began as follows:

What is morality? Understanding of laws of conduct? It is not sufficient. If we can say, like a savage, or like our friends the Bolsheviks, ‘If you steal from me it is bad, but if I steal from you it is good’ that is not morality, it is merely savage conduct. Morality begins when one has a feeling of good and bad in relation to one’s own actions, and is capable of sacrificing what is bad... All that is known about conventional morality is not the truth for it is full of contradictions...

The aim of the System is to bring man to conscience: Conscience is a certain quality that is innate in every normal person. It is really a different expression of the same quality as consciousness. Only consciousness works more on the rational side, and conscience more on the moral side; it helps to realise what is good and what is bad in one’s own conduct. How does conscience work? By uniting emotions. We can experience on the same day a great many contradictory feelings, pleasant or unpleasant, on the same subject, either one after another, or even simultaneously...

He went on to explain that the realisation of this fact is so disturbing that we automatically construct protective devices – ‘shock absorbers’ – in order to forget it. Thus a man he knew in Moscow ‘had the conviction that he was never late, and so could be late whenever he wanted’. In ordinary life we would go mad without these protective devices; in fact many cases of ‘nervous breakdown’ come from their destruction in sensitive people by force of circumstances.

So a system which sets out to awaken conscience by getting rid of these shock absorbers must first put something very positive in their place; and must avoid any violent measures so that the change comes about gradually and naturally.

This is what, in effect, the Shankaracharya's system sets out to do, by a very different approach and without any equivalent word for our word 'conscience'. In fact our Indian interpreter after sixteen years of close association, confessed only last week that he had no idea what we mean when we talk about 'conscience'. Yet the cultivation of our innate knowledge of true or false, good or bad is at the very centre of the Shankaracharya's teaching and example. It corresponds in fact to the first step on his Ladder of Self-realization that he calls 'the good impulse' which comes (like everything good) from the Divine Self, the Atman.

In the world today the most urgent and important need is to regain the innate individual sense of right and wrong, and Meditation is the best and most universal way to begin. Moreover ordinary people are much more capable of uniting the awakening of conscience with their own experience than they are of understanding difficult concepts like 'Consciousness' or 'Param-Atman' without a lot of preparation.

So we must not pretend we don't know what the word means; the pocket OED is quite sufficient to start with: 'Conscience; faculty distinguishing between right and wrong and influencing conduct ('has no conscience' = as willing to do wrong as right)'. Take it like that, and don't waste time discussing its meaning *which is always the same*, though its application differs, being always specific: 'what ought I to say or do now on this particular occasion'.

For today we know that the awakening of conscience belongs to the realm of the private individual world and the inner quiet hemisphere which can't communicate in words; the dominant left hemisphere knows little about it, doesn't like it, and always describes it in terms of *general* morality (which means trying to force others to see things our way – in the so-called religions or politics or economics). So in the matter of conscience we should keep our talkative personality from spoiling this wonderful weapon which is meant to be used for the growth and improvement of Essence and the direct route to Self-realization.

PART 2 (Perhaps after Meditation)

But to return to Mr. Ouspensky. During World War II, over 800 people came to his meetings in New York; but suddenly he stopped teaching the version of the System he inherited in Russia. During the last 3 years of his life he said very little and when one stayed with him one would sit for hours in silence in his study at the farm in New Jersey or the studio in New York City. When one had to take meetings for him one would have to know (by what some people call 'Extrasensory perception' and he called 'Conscience') what to say and what not to say.

One meeting I was at, which he himself took, was in March 1945 on the subject of the 'Realization of Truth' and started like this:

P.D.O. You know it was said before, that we don't have positive emotions (love, faith, happiness). To know the way to make positive emotion you need two conscious efforts – first is connected with Self-remembering; second is connected with Conscience. It is emotional understanding of Truth. If one knows what it is one must keep it; one must not lose. Wrong action and talk make it easy to lose.

Q. If one loses this Conscience is it possible to get it back again?

A. Very dangerous to lose it; much easier to live without. One is relieved to lose it.

(He had previously said in London at the declaration of war that the destruction of Conscience in people like Hitler and Stalin gave them great power, because they had none of the normal inhibitions.)

Q. How can one tell what is Truth?

A. Conscience knows.

Q. Don't all people have Conscience?

A. Yes, but asleep. You have to shake, shake. But if it wakes, *people must understand things in the same way.*

Q. Can we have Conscience without consciousness?

A. Conscience comes before.

Q. Does it depend on one's standard of morality?

A. No, one thing is moral in this country and immoral in another. Mechanical part of mind is not reliable.

Q. Does one feel the emotion of Conscience as fear or remorse?

A. Truth – why use other words?

Q. Is that what they call the still, small voice?

A. No! No! When you listen to it, it is not a small voice at all.

Q. How does one awaken Conscience?

A. Not lying to oneself.

Q. Can we know by ourselves that we are lying to ourselves?

A. You always know; but that doesn't stop it!

Q. Does the content of Conscience change continually?

A. Application, not content. One day you find one application, another day, another. Conscience bites you.

Q. What is the nature of the Truth our Conscience recognizes?

A. Conscience realises simple Truths (fair play; do as you would be done by) – in relation to oneself and people one knows, not in relation to planets! Another thing, in relation to Law of Three which is difficult until one can realise the differences in man's activities.

Q. Does Conscience see the difference between activities?

A. Not always *see* – it can help.

Q. What stops us from seeing?

A. Blindness.

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Sixteen years later (in June 1961) when I first heard the Shankaracharya speak in public by the Ganges in Rishikesh one of the reasons why I felt his System was intrinsically the same was his answer to this question:

Asked 'what would be a proper code of life for someone who has not yet achieved full realization?' He replied:

A good general code would be to do nothing to anybody else that you would not like being done to you. If, for instance, you would like to expose somebody's sins in public, stop for a moment and think how you would like your own sins to be exposed in public.

But in comparing the two Systems one has always to 'look between the lines'. Both, for example, extolled memory and consistency; for O it was 'Memory of what you promised yourSelf' and for the Shankaracharya it is 'Say what you feel and do what you say' – in other words, 'Try to speak the Truth and keep your promises'. That is something we can begin to practise right now in everything connected with Colet and all the people we meet there.

Starting from the recognition that individual realisation of Truth is equally misunderstood in the East as in the West, we will surely regard it as a worthy object of research by our Society, which happens to be in a unique position for it.

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