

30 April 1979

READING 1

CONSCIOUSNESS & MEMORY

PART 1

It seems that the most profitable and indeed urgent subject for study by our Society this term would be the relation between consciousness and memory. It is a subject requiring careful observation and discernment, for there are many wrong ideas about it in current thinking and built into our education system. Since 'consciousness' is so difficult to catch and to define, it is most easily approached by observing our memory.

In the first of a series of Psychological Lectures given by P. D. Ouspensky in London in the 1930's which some of us attended and to which we were encouraged to bring our friends, he spoke as follows:

In most cases in ordinary language, the word 'consciousness' is wrongly used as an equivalent or an alternative to the word 'intelligence' in the sense of mental activity. In reality consciousness is a particular kind of 'awareness' in man, awareness of himself, awareness of who he is or where he is *at the moment...* What memory means in a technical sense I will explain later. Now I simply want you to turn your attention to your observations of your own memory. You will notice that you remember things differently: some things you remember quite vividly, some very vaguely, and some you do not remember at all. You only know that they must have happened...

You will be astonished when you realise how little you actually remember. And it happens in this way, because you *remember only the moments when you were more conscious*. [A moment of consciousness brings with it a very vivid kind of memory which connects this moment with all previous moments of the same sort.]

The question arises: Is it possible to acquire command over these fleeting moments of consciousness, to evoke them more often, to keep them longer, or even make them permanent?

Let this be our chief question today, because there have been many scientific and other discoveries about human nature in these 40 years which can bring us close to the answer.

First, our system of Meditation is designed to do exactly this, and for the Shankaracharya's non-dualistic tradition of Meditation, the relation of memory to consciousness is just as central as it was to Ouspensky's system, though it is not concerned with 'recall of the past' but remembering the Source of our consciousness at any moment Now.

Secondly, the accumulation of evidence from first-hand accounts recorded by people who have been resuscitated from clinical death also point to the same thing; for the most frequently described experience is that of a Being of Light who gives the dying man 'a living panorama of the events of his life in complete clarity and detail' (John Davy, *Observer Magazine*, 8th April 1979, p.33). Therefore all that memory must have persisted in the individual although he thinks he has forgotten it. All agree that the 'Being of Light' is entirely benevolent and that such experiences if remembered are always beneficial.

And thirdly, the scientific interest in the alerting mechanism and in the bilateral symmetry of the brain, has brought the knowledge that the two halves of the brain have quite different memory mechanisms. While we know a lot about the ‘dominant hemisphere memory,’ practically nothing is yet known about the potential memory of the silent inward-looking hemisphere or of the memory of the two when working in harmony together. This should be a most valuable direction for our Society’s researches.

So much for the importance of the subject: let us proceed cautiously by self-observation avoiding speculation or theorising at this stage.

PART 2

The best way to simulate our own observations would, I think, be to quote part of a very honest and most amusing account given recently on radio (*Listener*, 12th April 1979) by the much-respected John Sparrow, sometime Warden of All Souls, Oxford. He begins:

I want to talk about memory – memory and the loss of memory – about remembering and forgetting... When people say to me ‘I suppose you’re going to give us your memoirs? What a lot of interesting people you must have met!’ I tell them that I have at least one excellent reason for *not* writing my memoirs, and that is that I am losing my memory – which wasn’t a very good one at the best of times – and if you can’t remember anything, that is rather a disqualification for writing recollections or, at any rate, truthful ones.

He goes on to give examples of what people call ‘a good memory,’ pointing out that many of them are just a specialised development of different facets of ordinary memory and that all such claims should be tested very carefully. Later he continues:

What do I forget? I won’t say everything; of course, that would be going too far. I am not in the championship class, like Lord William Cecil, the bishop of Exeter, who used to travel about his diocese by train, and was on one occasion unable to produce his ticket to the inspectors. ‘Never mind, my Lord,’ said the man, ‘We all know you on this line.’ ‘That’s all right for you,’ replied the bishop, ‘but what about me? Without my ticket, how can I tell where I’m going?’ He was on such occasions reduced to telephoning home from the station and appealing to his wife or his secretary to supply the necessary information – like G. K. Chesterton, who in a similar plight, sent his wife the classic telegram: ‘Am in Market Harborough, where ought I to be?’

As I say, I am not in that class, but I have got a pretty good all-round lack of memory – words, facts, dates, names and faces, I can forget them all. And I quite often have the trying experience of forgetting what it is that I have forgotten. ‘There was something this morning that I was trying to remember – something important. What on earth was it?’ Whatever it was it is buried under a double layer of oblivion.

COMMENT

The admirable Dr. Sparrow can take comfort, because, unless he had been blessed with the power to forget the mass of irrelevant information that the mind picks up on its journey through life, he *would* have been in the ‘championship class,’ or even had a nervous breakdown! For the human mind when fresh and recharged will naturally provide the memory we want. The fading memory of the tired mind is due to *trying to remember too much*; which is the reason why it

forgets the really vital things like: ‘Who am I and where am I *now*?’ and ‘what is that most important thing I keep forgetting?’

Indeed John Sparrow concludes his talk with the wise words:

There is matter here for at least another half-hour of philosophical enquiry. But I am forgetting (if that is the right word) how time flies. I must remember (if one can remember the present) *now* that it is time for me to stop.

Let us follow his example, keep away from philosophical speculation and sum up our present stand-point in these words of the Shankaracharya:

The Jiva (oneself) is part of the Self of the Universe (Param-Atman), and it has come into the world for the sake of the Happiness which is independent of conditions, but instead of that, it has fallen into the trap of ignorance (Avarana). Ignorance is forgetting the Reality, and is the root cause of all the troubles associated with the sensory world. So the biggest of all troubles is to forget the Reality; by which we mean that only Param-Atman is real and that our usual views of the world are unreal.

(Record, 7 May 1971)

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A perpetual game of hunt-the-treasure seems to be going on; we are all seeking something. But although the direction of the search appears to be different it is actually Param-Atman that all are seeking. During the search people have forgotten what exactly it is they are seeking; as in his story of the countryman who couldn't remember the name of the place when asking the booking-clerk for his ticket.

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