

Bridging the Gap

For a 'house-holder' taking up the 4th Way the chief dilemma is how to bridge the gap between spiritual endeavour and worldliness. The stream of life seems so pressurized, so full of thoughts, confusion and desires. These all drive the attention outwards instead of inwards. So one wonders how to integrate spirituality with ordinary life and avoid it becoming just an adjunct to living; a weekly interlude, like adding sugar to a cup of tea but omitting to stir it in. We have to find a way to stir the inner world of spirit convincingly into our day to day life.

If one starts to analyze the character of a person and study all the blockages and difficulties one can easily just find one-self getting further and further into complexity and end up losing sight of the goal. So we have to find another angle which does not preclude psychology but preserves a balance. One way is to accept the character of a person as it is and choose one aspect of his activity or thought and use it as a ladder.

Everyone has a specific characteristic – a special quality – which is unique to them. It may be a so called 'positive' attribute or virtue, or equally it may be something which is ordinarily (but mistakenly) regarded as unfortunate; a fault or blockage over which we constantly stumble. This 'stumbling block' – in 'Work' terminology sometimes referred to as a 'chief feature' - is the seed, or rather the potentiality for giving birth, from which our spiritual tree can grow. We need to get to know this aspect of our nature and make a new relationship with it, so that it can help rather than hinder our spiritual endeavour. Everyone is different in this respect. It may be an inherent depression, or a great violence, or deep laziness or more painfully, an habitual tendency to fall into shame. Some even find that life leads them into crime, but more than one juvenile delinquent has gone on to discover a more fruitful talent for journalism. The life of Valmiki is instructive in this respect. Early on he was foremost among thieves but later became famous in Indian literature as the author of the Ramayana whose hero, Rama, exemplifies the virtues of 'right' living.

What we are beginning to discover from listening to each others' story – our personal narrative – is that life requires all of us to experience a measure of conflict and pain but out of which, something grows which we need on the journey to realizing ourselves. In the Lankavatara sutra of Mahayana Buddhism it is said that unskilled farmers throw away their own waste and buy manure from other farmers. But some collect together all their own waste, despite the bad smell, and when it has undergone sufficient transformation to be used they spread it on their fields and out of this they cultivate their crops.

Perhaps the most important thing we can learn from all this is to try not to divide the world into good and bad and so become divided against ourselves. This hostile attitude demands that we have to pretend to be perfect which requires us to suppress much of our energy. It is better not to let our ourselves behave in this way but to respect and acknowledge the good and the bad and collect it all together. It makes a wonderful manure which can provide all the energy we need for further growth.

* * *