

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

EXISTENCE, as we know it, is full of sorrow. To mention only one minor point: every man is a condemned criminal, only he does not know the date of his execution. This is unpleasant for every man. Consequently every man does everything possible to postpone the date, and would sacrifice anything that he has if he could reverse the sentence.

Practically all religions and all philosophies have started thus crudely, by promising their adherents some such reward as immortality.

No religion has failed hitherto by not promising enough; the present breaking up of all religions is due to the fact that people have asked to see the securities. Men have even renounced the important material advantages which a well-organized religion may confer upon a State, rather than acquiesce in fraud or falsehood, or even in any system which, if not proved guilty, is at least unable to demonstrate its innocence.

Being more or less bankrupt, the best thing that we can do is to attack the problem afresh without preconceived ideas. **Let us begin**

by doubting every statement. Let us find a way of subjecting every statement to the test of experiment. Is there any truth at all in the claims of various religions? Let us examine the question.

Our original difficulty will be due to the enormous wealth of our material. To enter into a critical examination of all systems would be an unending task; the cloud of witnesses is too great. Now each religion is equally positive; and each demands faith. This we refuse in the absence of positive proof. **But we may usefully inquire whether there is not any one thing upon which all religions have agreed:** for, if so, it seems possible that it may be worthy of really thorough consideration.

It is certainly not to be found in dogma. Even so simple an idea as that of a supreme and eternal being is denied by a third of the human race. Legends of miracle are perhaps universal, but these, in the absence of demonstrative proof, are repugnant to common sense.

But what of the origin of religions? How is it that unproved assertion has so frequently compelled the assent of all classes of mankind? Is not this a miracle?

There is, however, one form of miracle which certainly happens, the influence of the genius. There is no known analogy in Nature. One cannot even think of a "super-dog" transforming the

world of dogs, whereas in the history of mankind this happens with regularity and frequency. Now here are three “super-men,” all at loggerheads. **What is there in common between Christ, Buddha, and Mohammed?** Is there any one point upon which all three are in accord?

No point of doctrine, no point of ethics, no theory of a “hereafter” do they share, and yet in the history of their lives we find one identity amid many diversities.

Buddha was born a Prince, and died a beggar.

Mohammed was born a beggar, and died a Prince.

Christ remained obscure until many years after his death.

Elaborate lives of each have been written by devotees, and **there is one thing common to all three—an omission.** We hear nothing of Christ between the ages of twelve and thirty. Mohammed disappeared into a cave. Buddha left his palace, and went for a long while into the desert.

Each of them, perfectly silent up to the time of the disappearance, came back and immediately began to preach a new law.

This is so curious that it leaves us to inquire whether the histories of other great teachers contradict or confirm.

Moses led a quiet life until his slaying of the Egyptian. He then

flees into the land of Midian, and we hear nothing of what he did there, yet immediately on his return he turns the whole place upside down. Later on, too, he absents himself on Mount Sinai for a few days, and comes back with the Tables of the Law in his hand.

St. Paul (again), after his adventure on the road to Damascus, goes into the desert of Arabia for many years, and on his return overturns the Roman Empire. Even in the legends of savages we find the same thing universal; somebody who is nobody in particular goes away for a longer or shorter period, and comes back as the "great medicine man"; but nobody ever knows exactly what happened to him.

Making every possible deduction for fable and myth, we get this one coincidence. A nobody goes away, and comes back a somebody. This is not to be explained in any of the ordinary ways.

There is not the smallest ground for the contention that these were from the start exceptional men. Mohammed would hardly have driven a camel until he was thirty-five years old if he had possessed any talent or ambition. St. Paul had much original talent; but he is the least of the five. Nor do they seem to have possessed any of the usual materials of power, such as rank, fortune, or influence.

Moses was rather a big man in Egypt when he left; he came back as a mere stranger.

Christ had not been to China and married the Emperor's daughter.
Mohammed had not been acquiring wealth and drilling soldiers.
Buddha had not been consolidating any religious organizations.
St. Paul had not been intriguing with an ambitious general.
Each came back poor; each came back alone.

What was the nature of their power? **What happened to them in their absence?**

History will not help us to solve the problem, for history is silent.

We have only the accounts given by the men themselves.

It would be very remarkable should we find that these accounts agree.

Of the great teachers we have mentioned Christ is silent; the other four tell us something; some more, some less.

Buddha goes into details too elaborate to enter upon in this place; but the gist of it is that in one way or another he got hold of the secret force of the World and mastered it.

Of St. Paul's experiences, we have nothing but a casual illusion to his having been "caught up into Heaven, and seen and heard things of which it was not lawful to speak."

Mohammed speaks crudely of his having been "visited by the Angel Gabriel," who communicated things from "God."

Moses says that he "beheld God."

Diverse as these statements are at first sight, all agree in announcing an experience of the class which fifty years ago would have been called supernatural, to-day may be called spiritual, and fifty years hence will have a proper name based on an understanding of the phenomenon which occurred.

Theorists have not been at a loss to explain; but they differ.

The Mohammedan insists that God is, and did really send Gabriel with messages for Mohammed: but all others contradict him. And from the nature of the case proof is impossible.

The lack of proof has been so severely felt by Christianity (and in a much less degree by Islam) that fresh miracles have been manufactured almost daily to support the tottering structure. Modern thought, rejecting these miracles, has adopted theories involving epilepsy and madness. As if organization could spring from disorganization! Even if epilepsy were the cause of these great movements which have caused civilization after civilization to arise from barbarism, it would merely form an argument for cultivating epilepsy.

Of course great men will never conform with the standards of little men, and he whose mission it is to overturn the world can hardly escape the title of revolutionary. The fads of a period always furnish terms of abuse. The fad of Caiaphas was Judaism, and the Pharisees told him that Christ "blasphemed." Pilate was a loyal Roman; to him

they accused Christ of "sedition." When the Pope had all power it was necessary to prove an enemy a "heretic." Advancing to-day towards a medical oligarchy, we try to prove that our opponents are "insane," and (in a Puritan country) to attack their "morals." **We should then avoid all rhetoric, and try to investigate with perfect freedom from bias the phenomena which occurred to these great leaders of mankind.**

There is no difficulty in our assuming that these men themselves did not understand clearly what happened to them. The only one who explains his system thoroughly is Buddha, and Buddha is the only one that is not dogmatic. We may also suppose that the others thought it inadvisable to explain too clearly to their followers; St. Paul evidently took this line.

Our best document will therefore be the system of Buddha;¹ but it is so complex that no immediate summary will serve; and in the case of the others, if we have not the accounts of the Masters, we have those of their immediate followers.

¹ We have the documents of Hinduism, and of two Chinese systems. But Hinduism has no single founder. Lao Tze is one of our best examples of a man who went away and had a mysterious experience; perhaps the best of all examples, as his system is the best of all systems. We have full details of his method of training in the *K'ang K'ing*, and elsewhere. But it is so little known that we shall omit consideration of it in this popular account.

The methods advised by all these people have a startling resemblance to one another. They recommend "virtue" (of various kinds), solitude, absence of excitement, moderation in diet, and finally a practice which some call prayer and some call meditation. (The former four may turn out on examination to be merely conditions favourable to the last.)

On investigating what is meant by these two things, we find that they are only one. For what is the state of either prayer or meditation? It is **the restraining of the mind to a single act, state, or thought.** If we sit down quietly and investigate the contents of our minds, we shall find that even at the best of times the principal characteristics are wandering and distraction. Any one who has had anything to do with children and untrained minds generally knows that fixity of attention is never present, even when there is a large amount of intelligence and good will.

If then we, with our well-trained minds, determine to control this wandering thought, we shall find that we are fairly well able to keep the thoughts running in a narrow channel, each thought linked to the last in a perfectly rational manner; but if we attempt to stop this current we shall find that, so far from succeeding, we shall merely break down the banks of the channel. The mind will overflow, and instead of a chain of thought we shall have a chaos of confused images.

This mental activity is so great, and seems so natural, that it is hard to understand how any one first got the idea that it was a weakness and a nuisance. Perhaps it was because in the more natural practice of "devotion," people found that their thoughts interfered. In any case calm and self-control are to be preferred to restlessness. Darwin in his study presents a marked contrast with a monkey in a cage.

Generally speaking, the larger and stronger and more highly developed any animal is, the less does it move about, and such movements as it does make are slow and purposeful. Compare the ceaseless activity of bacteria with the reasoned steadiness of the beaver; and except in the few animal communities which are organized, such as bees, the greatest intelligence is shown by those of solitary habits. This is so true of man that psychologists have been obliged to treat of the mental state of crowds as if it were totally different in quality from any state possible to an individual.

It is by freeing the mind from external influences, whether casual or emotional, that it obtains power to see somewhat of the truth of things.

Let us, however, continue our practice. **Let us determine to be masters of our minds.** We shall then soon find what conditions are favourable.

There will be no need to persuade ourselves at great length that all

external influences are likely to be unfavourable. New faces, new scenes will disturb us; even the new habits of life which we undertake for this very purpose of controlling the mind will at first tend to upset it. Still, we must give up our habit of eating too much, and follow the natural rule of only eating when we are hungry, listening to the interior voice which tells us that we have had enough.

The same rule applies to sleep. We have determined to control our minds, and so our time for meditation must take precedence of other hours.

We must fix times for practice, and make our feasts movable. **In order to test our progress**, for we shall find that (as in all physiological matters) meditation cannot be gauged by the feelings, **we shall have a note-book and pencil**, and we shall also have a watch. We shall then endeavour to count how often, during the first quarter of an hour, the mind breaks away from the idea upon which it is determined to concentrate. We shall practice this twice daily; and, as we go, experience will teach us which conditions are favourable and which not. Before we have been doing this for very long we are almost certain to get impatient, and we shall find that we have to practice many other things in order to assist us in our work. New problems will constantly arise which must be faced, and solved.

For instance, we shall most assuredly find that we fidget. We shall

discover that no position is comfortable, though we never noticed it before in all our lives!

This difficulty has been solved by a practice called *Asana*, which will be described later on.

Memories of the events of the day will bother us; we must arrange our day so that it is absolutely uneventful. Our minds will recall to us our hopes and fears, our loves and hates, our ambitions, our envies, and many other emotions. All these must be cut off. We must have absolutely no interest in life but that of quieting our minds.

This is the object of the usual monastic vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. If you have no property, you have no care, nothing to be anxious about; with chastity no other person to be anxious about, and to distract your attention; while if you are vowed to obedience the question of what you are to do no longer frets: you simply obey.

There are a great many other obstacles which you will discover as you go on, and it is proposed to deal with these in turn. But let us pass by for the moment to the point where you are nearing success.

In your early struggles you may have found it difficult to conquer sleep; and you may have wandered so far from the object of your meditations without noticing it, that the meditation has really been broken; but much later on, when you feel that you are "getting quite good," you will be shocked to find a complete oblivion of yourself and

your surroundings. You will say: "Good heavens! I must have been to sleep!" or else "What on earth was I meditating upon?" or even "What was I doing?" "Where am I?" "Who am I?" or a mere wordless bewilderment may daze you. This may alarm you, and your alarm will not be lessened when you come to full consciousness, and reflect that you have actually forgotten who you are and what you are doing!

This is only one of many adventures that may come to you; but it is one of the most typical. By this time your hours of meditation will fill most of the day, and you will probably be constantly having presentiments that something is about to happen. You may also be terrified with the idea that your brain may be giving way; but you will have learnt the real symptoms of mental fatigue, and you will be careful to avoid them. They must be very carefully distinguished from idleness!

At certain times you will feel as if there were a contest between the will and the mind; at other times you may feel as if they were in harmony; but there is a third state, to be distinguished from the latter feeling. It is the certain sign of near success, the view-halloo. This is when the mind runs naturally towards the object chosen, not as if in obedience to the will of the owner of the mind, but as if directed by nothing at all, or by something impersonal; as if it were falling by its own weight, and not being pushed down.

Almost always, the moment that one becomes conscious of this, it stops; and the dreary old struggle between the cowboy will and the buckjumper mind begins again.

Like every other physiological process, consciousness of it implies disorder or disease.

In analysing the nature of this work of controlling the mind, the student will appreciate without trouble the fact that two things are involved—the person seeing and the thing seen—the person knowing and the thing known; and he will come to regard this as the necessary condition of all consciousness. We are too accustomed to assume to be facts things about which we have no real right even to guess. We assume, for example, that the unconscious is the torpid; and yet nothing is more certain than that bodily organs which are functioning well do so in silence. The best sleep is dreamless. Even in the case of games of skill our very best strokes are followed by the thought, “I don’t know how I did it;” and we cannot repeat those strokes at will. The moment we begin to think consciously about a stroke we get “nervous,” and are lost.

In fact, there are three main classes of stroke; the bad stroke, which we associate, and rightly, with wandering attention; the good stroke which we associate, and rightly, with fixed attention; and the perfect stroke, which we do not understand, but which is really caused by the

habit of fixity of attention having become independent of the will, and thus enabled to act freely of its own accord.

This is the same phenomenon referred to above as being a good sign.

Finally something happens whose nature may form the subject of a further discussion later on. For the moment let it suffice to say that this consciousness of the Ego and the non-Ego, the seer and the thing seen, the knower and the thing known, is blotted out.

There is usually an intense light, an intense sound, and a feeling of such overwhelming bliss that the resources of language have been exhausted again and again in the attempt to describe it.

It is an absolute knock-out blow to the mind. It is so vivid and tremendous that those who experience it are in the gravest danger of losing all sense of proportion.

By its light all other events of life are as darkness. Owing to this, people have utterly failed to analyse it or to estimate it. They are accurate enough in saying that, compared with this, all human life is absolutely dross; but they go further, and go wrong. They argue that "since this is that which transcends the terrestrial, it must be celestial." One of the tendencies in their minds has been the hope of a heaven such as their parents and teachers have described, or such as

they have themselves pictured; and, without the slightest grounds for saying so, they make the assumption "This is That."

In the Bhagavadgita a vision of this class is naturally attributed to the apparition of Vishnu, who was the local god of the period.

Anna Kingsford, who had dabbled in Hebrew mysticism, and was a feminist, got an almost identical vision; but called the "divine" figure which she saw alternately "Adonai" and "Maria."

Now this woman, though handicapped by a brain that was a mass of putrid pulp, and a complete lack of social status, education, and moral character, did more in the religious world than any other person had done for generations. She, and she alone, made Theosophy possible, and without Theosophy the world-wide interest in similar matters could never have been aroused. This interest is to the Law of Thelema what the preaching of John the Baptist was to Christianity.

We are now in a position to say what happened to Mohammed. Somehow or another this phenomenon happened in his mind. More ignorant than Anna Kingsford, though, fortunately, more moral, he connected it with the story of the "Annunciation," which he had undoubtedly heard in his boyhood, and said "Gabriel appeared to me." But in spite of his ignorance, his total misconception of the truth, the power of the vision was such that he was

enabled to persist through the usual persecution, and founded a religion to which even to-day one man in every eight belongs.

The history of Christianity shows precisely the same remarkable fact. Jesus Christ was brought up on the fables of the "Old Testament," and so was compelled to ascribe his experiences to "Jehovah," although his gentle spirit could have had nothing in common with the monster who was always commanding the rape of virgins and the murder of little children, and whose rites were then, and still are, celebrated by human sacrifice.¹

Similarly the visions of Joan of Arc were entirely Christian; but she, like all the others we have mentioned, found somewhere the force to do great things. Of course, it may be said that there is a fallacy in the argument; it may be true that all these great people "saw God," but it does not follow that every one who "sees God" will do great things.

This is true enough. In fact, the majority of people who claim to have "seen God," and who no doubt did "see God" just as much as those whom we have quoted, did nothing else.

But perhaps their silence is not a sign of their weakness, but of their strength. Perhaps these "great" men are the failures of humanity;

¹ The massacres of Jews in Eastern Europe which surprise the ignorant, are almost invariably excited by the disappearance of "Christian" children, stolen, as the parents suppose, for purposes of "ritual murder."

perhaps it would be better to say nothing; perhaps only an unbalanced mind would wish to alter anything or believe in the possibility of altering anything; but there are those who think existence even in heaven intolerable so long as there is one single being who does not share that joy. There are some who may wish to travel back from the very threshold of the bridal chamber to assist belated guests.

Such at least was the attitude which Gotama Buddha adopted. Nor shall he be alone.

Again it may be pointed out that the contemplative life is generally opposed to the active life, and it must require an extremely careful balance to prevent the one absorbing the other.

As it will be seen later, the "vision of God," or "Union with God," or "Samadhi," or whatever we may agree to call it, has many kinds and many degrees, although there is an impassable abyss between the least of them and the greatest of all the phenomena of normal consciousness. *To sum up*, we assert a secret source of energy which explains the phenomenon of Genius.¹ We do not believe in any supernatural explanations, but insist that this source may be reached by the following out of definite rules, the

¹ We have dealt in this preliminary sketch only with examples of religious genius. Other kinds are subject to the same remarks, but the limits of our space forbid discussion of these.

degree of success depending upon the capacity of the seeker, and not upon the favour of any Divine Being. We assert that the critical phenomenon which determines success is an occurrence in the brain characterized essentially by the uniting of subject and object. We propose to discuss this phenomenon, analyse its nature, determine accurately the physical, mental and moral conditions which are favourable to it, to ascertain its cause, and thus to produce it in ourselves, so that we may adequately study its effects.

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