

BASICS 15

The physical world is our school for spiritual discovery

Daily life as spiritual opportunity

Spiritual laws structure experience

Experience as personal teacher

Spiritual truth in practical life

Getting the point

Daily life as spiritual opportunity

All worldly experiences may become doors to divinity if interpreted aright.

Human experience is our laboratory for higher experiment. The world is our school for spiritual discovery. The vicissitudes of personal circumstance are our field for ethical achievement. The great books written by illumined individuals from antiquity till today are our guides.

Those who complain that their opportunities for meditation, study, travel to India, and so on are nil, and that therefore they have no possibility of spiritual growth, need not despair. The common life regarded in an uncommon light, the ordinary activities engaged in from a different standpoint, become part of a spiritual path through which development is possible.

If life is a process of gaining education through experience and reflection, it is also a process of correcting errors and approaching truth, of clearing illusions and perceiving realities.

The ego naturally and understandably revolts bitterly against calamities which are put upon it by chance, by destiny, or by any other apparent cause outside itself. The quester must not accept this emotion but ought to separate himself from it. In this way he advances at a spurt on his quest.

Life presents him from time to time with occasions for improving character and strengthening its weaker places. But whether he accepts them as such, or lets his ego follow its habitual trends without opposition, is his choice.

The various experiences through which we have passed, reflectively and analytically instruct us; the immoderate desires we have checked repeatedly, strengthen us; and the wandering thoughts we have concentrated determinedly, tranquillize us. Life never runs to waste if it thus is attuned to the notes of this quest.

Life is our real school, for it provides the chance to acquire virtue and discipline evil, to nurture the mind and clarify its thoughts.

If he can bring himself to look upon events when they flow upon him as being intended to elicit his qualities and exercise his powers, and thus give him the chance to cultivate them, he will learn to acknowledge and accept the responsibility of choosing whether those qualities be positive or negative, whether those powers be good or bad.

No experience is a wasted one when it is treated philosophically, when not only its final results but every moment of it is used as material for his strivings toward the ideal and his understanding of the True.

No situation or circumstance is really counter to self-liberation. Each one may be used for enlightenment.

Here, in this physical world, the ego is put to school. Here it learns lessons, sins and suffers, yields to passion and then checks it, responds to intuition and is led upward.

All activities in the world are an opportunity both for self-study and for objective awareness of the self in each situation. An intensified longing for the way itself, rather than a too great concern with the particular steps along the way, will clarify these efforts.

The experiences of daily living in the world become, for the quester, occasions for working on himself, for co-operating with the World-Idea as it concerns himself.

When every situation which life can offer is turned to the profit of spiritual growth, no situation can really be a bad one.

The kind of environment in which he lives may hinder or hasten a man's mystical development, but every kind of environment can contribute towards his understanding of life and therefore towards his general spiritual development.

In the end each experience incites the living entity to unfold the powers qualities and characteristics already within itself but still unexpressed.

The whole of his everyday experience can be brought within the area covered by the Quest. Indeed it must be so brought if the self-division from which ordinary unquesting man suffers is to be avoided. The ills and calamities of life, as much as its joys and boons, will then contribute toward his understanding and growth.

Regarded in this way, every experience becomes an instruction, all life a spiritual adventure.

He sees in the end that all his life and business, relationships and contacts in the world really constitute a contest with his own self; that all have the forming and finding of himself as the ultimate result and ultimate fulfilment.

Life on earth for us is not to be a goal in itself, but a means to the goal. All its experiences are to be used to shape our character and increase our knowledge and, above all, to bring us nearer the discovery of, and identification with, our Overself.

Everything, every experience, good or bad, pleasant or unpleasant, may be turned into a pointer towards our true nature, a reminder of the high quest which all human beings are here on earth to follow, whether consciously or not.

Each experience of human existence offers at least one clue, generally more, to the hidden secret of being, the Overself.

Spiritual laws structure experience

If we accept the existence of a higher power behind life and the universe and if, further, we believe that infinite wisdom is an attribute of this power, then, finally, we must also accept life as we find it and as we humanly experience it.

There is no problem which does not carry within it a hidden meaning, no person associated with us who does not bear within himself a hidden message. As soon as we rise above the level of their appearance, and as long as we stay on that level, the problem shows us the way to solve it and the person plays his true note in the harmony of our lives.

It requires a strong faith to believe that even in the midst of the direst distress, of the gloomiest hardship, what happens is sanctioned by, and under the rule of, divinely ordained laws and that it has a rational and higher meaning which we should seek to extract and heed. Those who lack this faith bear strain-ridden faces that betray no inner calm. Yet it is only a single step to turn around and start the journey from inner wretchedness to inner radiance.

The penetrative mind of the deep thinker finds in time that life in this world is not only life in illusion but also in pain. Yet for him to stop with this discovery is to stop at an intermediate stage on the way to truth. He must travel beyond it and learn the hidden cosmic laws and thus come to understand the magnificent goal toward which all this passage through worldly existence is leading.

All the power behind the cosmos insists on meeting cause with effect, action with reaction, evil with retribution.

What controls the course of our lives? Fate is something which descends on us from outside ourselves and to which we have made no visible contribution—as in the death of a beloved one. Destiny is something which arises out of our own causation.

Throw out the idea of coincidence. Remember there is a World-Idea. There is meaning in life, in its events, happenings, karmas, meetings, and opportunities.

The troubles and inconveniences of life do not come to us without the knowledge and sanction of the higher power. Therefore they do not come to us without some reason.

Knowledge is the crying need of the hour, knowledge of the higher laws governing the life and fortune of human beings.

The central message of philosophy to the modern era is that man is not isolated but supported by a friendly power, not left in the dark but surrounded by helping hands.

There is a higher destiny behind all the experiences which the aspirant undergoes. Although purificatory work may at times have brought hardships to him and to those whom he loves, still he must recognize that it may also have afforded protection against dangerous possibilities from which he and they have been saved.

The man who is ignorant of the higher laws, such as the law of recompense, may still display sagacity in certain situations if his character is good and his intellect sharp. But if they are not, then he will display only fatuity.

The man who hesitates to accept the idea of rebirth must confess, in his frankest moments, that he cannot reconcile the sufferings around him with faith in a benevolent power.

The teaching of reincarnation, that every individual enters repeatedly a new life on earth, carries the sister teaching of compensation. The two constitute the most plausible teaching about the suffering of man which he has ever been offered. This teaching sets in place under universal law what otherwise seems mere chance.

The nearer he comes to this insight the larger is his acceptance of life. Each event is seen to be either inevitable, just, or right. No news is ever so bad that there is no good behind it. Less and less is he inclined to attempt to reform others or to meddle in their affairs. More and more he sees that there is wisdom and purpose at work in all happenings, and that the law of recompense never ceases to operate.

In the end, after so many births, all these experiences must lead to the mystical rebirth.

If you live in harmony with Life it will unfold in perfect sequence the exact experience which you need.

There is no situation in the life of a quester, no incident and no contact, which is not a parable to be penetratively read and its inner meaning adequately elucidated.

If he works faithfully on the quest, every experience which is essential to his inner growth will gravitate to him, every thing or person needful to his development will be drawn to him, subject to some synchronization with his personal karma. He, on his side, ought to welcome those situations which can be used to strengthen his inner life.

Nothing in his experience is to be condemned but everything is to be understood. It is there because its lesson is needed. Similarly, no one in his experience is to be despised but everyone is also to be understood. Each is there to test or tempt, to teach or uplift.

The friends of a man who was thrown out of work into unemployment asked, "Why should this evil happen to him? He is so upright in character and so scrupulous not to harm others. Yet he has been without work for the past three months and there is none in sight!" This is one way, the commonest way, of looking at the matter. But the habitual attitude towards events is often an inferior one. It is the ego's attitude. It is possible to regard unemployment from another and superior standpoint, a more impersonal and less egoistic one. For this question, like many others, is part of the larger and ultimate question, "Why am I here on earth?" Only when the answer to this second one is correctly found will the answer to the first one be correctly found. The unemployed man will see his situation not as an evil to be shunned but as an experience to be studied. If he does this calmly and properly, he may find that certain deficiencies in himself have to be supplied, or faults remedied, or capacities developed. With the acceptance of such a discovery, the lack of work will go and a cycle of more fruitful activity than ever before will come. For the Infinite Intelligence which placed him here also provided the necessary conditions for his existence. Where these conditions are not immediately favourable or discoverable, that circumstance does not nullify this statement, for then it is intended to educe his latent resources, to force him to make the efforts needed to develop his character and intelligence, to stimulate the growth of his energies, capacities, and qualities.

The fact that an event has happened or that an experience has arrived must have some significance in a man's life. It could not be there unless he had earned it or unless he needed it. If he is not willing to meet it from this approach and deal with its effect impersonally, he will miss most of its lesson.

The experiences which come to him and the circumstances in which he finds himself are not meaningless. They usually have a personal karmic lesson for him and should be studied much more than books. He must try to understand impersonally the inner significance behind these events. Their meaning can be ascertained by trying to see them impartially, by evaluating the forces which are involved in them, by profound reflection, and by prayer. Each man gets his special set of experiences, which no one else gets. Each life is individual and gets from the law of recompense those which it really needs, not those which someone else needs. The way in which he reacts to the varied pleasant and unpleasant situations which develop in everyday life will be a better index to the understanding he has gained than any mystical visions painted by the imagination.

Every important event occurring to him who follows this path has an inner as well as an outer significance, for it traces back to a karmic origin which is specially selected to promote his self-knowledge and self-purification.

If he will look upon each situation when it comes as a new lesson to learn, or an old one to learn better, he will gain precisely what he needs just at the time he needs it. Books can only seldom speak with exactness to his personal condition, for they are written to suit too many individuals and they are too general to be quite pertinent to his own personal requirements.

If his growth requires a drastic change in his surroundings or his circumstances, be sure it will happen.

Experience as personal teacher

The whole world carries a message—nay, innumerable messages—to the man with ears to hear.

Every event, happening, and action-consequence carries its message to those concerned. Too often that message is the need of abandoning negativity or animality, of becoming positive or disciplined.

Some events happen to a man or some people come into his life to stand as symbols representing a truth of human existence generally, or a fact of inner life, or a principle of ethical, moral, or karmic law. The situation offers a lesson, or a warning, or an instruction or challenge.

Experience is apparently of value only insofar as it leads to thoughts about the experience, but actually it has another and hidden value—in the subconscious mind.

The education of self which is provided by experience is an almost subconscious process.

The lessons remain long after the problems themselves have died.

There is no school of philosophy where instruction is so regularly given as the school of life itself.

There is no substitute for personal experience, no more effectual way to learn the lessons of human existence than to see with one's own eyes and feel with one's own body. This said, philosophy neither justifies nor approves this way, but only explains why it is the commonest one.

Every generation must learn these lessons afresh, must find by its own experience that evil traits will invite the purgation of suffering. Technical advance can be kept for and maintained by the next generation, but spiritual advance is a highly personal and individual matter. It drops out again when the man himself drops out of circulation. This is why real historians who happen also to be deep thinkers tell us that mankind's moral nature changes only slightly during the centuries. The group has to learn its moral lessons all over again but some units in that group need not.

In life we learn that truth, principle, knowledge, or information best which we teach ourselves.

Reflection and imagination, analysis and anticipation, rightly used and harmoniously combined, can supersede experience. Indeed, they are forms of experience. But, being under our individual control and direction, they can be used as instruments to save us long-drawn and emotionally painful results.

Why should we individually undergo every possible experience? Can we not, by creative imagination, intuitive feeling, and correct thinking, save ourselves the need of passing through some experiences? This is so, but it is so only for those who have developed such faculties to a sufficient degree.

Ironically enough, pain and suffering are not always necessary. But only the few understand this. They may learn quietly from philosophy within a few years what humanity at large must learn brutally through suffering, and relearn again in every epoch.

He who will not heed the counsels of reason or accept the promptings of intuitive feeling will receive the less pleasant instruction of experience.

All people are inescapably guided by experience. But the prudent man looks to other people's—especially the best—as well as his own, whereas the fool is limited entirely to his own.

Experience is an expensive way of gaining wisdom.

If a man feels that despite the dictates of reason he should embark on a particular unethical adventure simply to gain some sort of experience, and if he believes that this experience is a necessary part of the whole of his development, then let him go ahead, taste the bittersweet fruits of his actions, and learn at first hand why it should have been left alone.

What is demonstrated by observing contemporary life is that so few men are willing to take their lessons from the past experience of other men throughout history, that so many obstinately prefer to learn under pressure the hard way. The same foolish errors, the old pain-bringing sins are repeated monotonously and regularly. The cost of ignoring such experience is heavy.

People are not teachable and their defects not corrigible by the gentle way. They will not absorb guidance from the interior sources of reflection or intuition or the exterior sources of preaching or observation.

It is true that wisdom comes with experience but that experience need not be gained at the cost of one's own suffering. It can just as well be gained by the observation of it in others.

Most people learn and can only learn by the method of trial and error—that is, by the method of experience.

Men are not left to depend for guidance only on what they learn by experience. What they believe by faith also guides them.

The art of living includes the arts of survival and social adaptation. In life, with its pleasures and miseries, its problems and mysteries, these arts must be learned from theory and practice, from surrender and compromise, from teachers and elders.

The truth starkly lights up certain situations, but it is equally valid to say that certain situations light up the truth.

They would not need to get any experience of the world without, if they would get sufficient experience of the world within.

All the experiences through which he passes, and many of those through which he observes others pass, should find their way after reflection and distillation into his wisdom.

The lessons of past experience are not enough in themselves to provide all the guidance needed for present living. We need also the ideals held up by intuition, the principles and ideas presented from within by the higher part of our nature, and from without by the spiritual teachers and religious prophets of mankind.

It is one thing to grope through life blindly and another to fulfil the law of our being consciously.

Where experience is extremely narrow, its deficiency may be supplied by reading, reflection, or intuition.

Only after he has fully tasted and long enjoyed the fruits of striving ambition and straining desire will he be in a position to assess their worth correctly. Only then will he be perceptive enough to consider the vacuity of his ephemeral life.

It is possible for man to learn whether a proposed course is wise or foolish, prudent or reckless, without having to wait for the testimony of events. In that case he must look for the counsel of spiritual teachers.

What he can teach himself from the pages of a book is one thing, and a very necessary thing, but what he can only teach himself from life's experiences is another.

He may learn this truth by reading someone else's ideas or reflecting on his own, by the arguments of logical thinking or the announcements of intuitive feeling.

Life and grief will teach a man through harsh tragedy what reason and intuition would teach him through tender pleading.

If they will not come to the truth by directly accepting it from the truth-seers, then they must come to it by a more roundabout and painful way.

Life is the real tutor; experience is the principal education. The voice of truth is within.

It is one thing to learn from experience, another to remember and not to forget these lessons.

Spiritual truth in practical life

A man's acts constitute the daily declaration of his faith. If he possesses spirituality let him demonstrate it by actual achievement. Action is to be considered the first criterion of philosophic achievement.

His fidelity to the Quest will be tested, both by specially critical periods and by everyday happenings. On the one side, temptations will call him; on the other, difficulties will deter him. Will he bend the knee before the world's idols? Will he stand strong amid the world's turmoil? Only when the hour of testing comes can he know.

The tests through which life itself outwardly puts him may seem appropriate or not but they contribute to the discoveries within himself, to the knowledge of his character, its strengths and limits, its belated ambitions and ludicrous self-deceptions.

I have tried to teach from the very beginning of my writing career—well before I went off to the Orient—and have repeated tirelessly, the close connection between spiritual truth and practical life, as opposed to spiritual imagination. I have insisted that the ordinary activities of everyday existence must bear the impress of this truth, that the inward light must shine in outward conduct. In other words, I tried to say that this is not a matter only for dreamers, useless to men and women who carry on the world's work, but a matter for all, whether they want to live in the busy world or in the cloistered monastery. Philosophy is for use. It is not a thing which is queer, outlandish, and entirely superfluous, as some think.

The beginner should look more to his outer situation and environment, for he is more affected by it; the proficient should look more to his inner reactions to situation or environment, for they then become his test. The role they play in his development depends on the stage he is at.

If, instead of bitterly resenting it, we receive the test in the right attitude or pass through the trial with the proper thoughts about it, we shall find when it is over that the experience has been of great value to us. We shall find that it has lifted us to a new

and higher level of character, a new and truer conception of life. Our lower nature is weakened, our better nature strengthened.
Our eyes are clearer. Our feet advance another step forward on the Quest.

Knowing that his reaction to whatever happens is even more important than the happening itself, he watches for hidden tests of his character and capacity. Whether he is coping with the problems of his work or moving in the circle of his family, he uses each episode or situation to prove himself worthy or to discover a weakness. In the latter event he will not become discouraged but will probe, analyse, plan, and resolve until he turns it into a new strength.

It is the unexpected situation, when there is no time to calculate a response or prepare a reply, that reveals what measure of strength we can rise to. It is in the sudden crisis—which is only a situation pushed to a complete extreme—when there is no chance to escape altogether or to evade partially, that what wisdom we have, or lack, shows itself.

Life with its variety of experiences is always testing him anyway, but it is when he is under stress that he is tested most.

Theoretical knowledge of the truth is not valueless. Its very presence, even if we fail to apply it, tends to irritate and impel us towards such application.

These eternal truths must be brought down into his simple daily experience. Every act is to be done in their light, every thought held in their atmosphere.

If the practice of meditation is to be limited to recluses and the study of metaphysical truth confined to monasteries, then both mysticism and metaphysics will be in danger of becoming merely theoretical subjects. For active life in the world, with its problems to be grappled with and its realities to be faced and its temptations to be overcome, provides both a necessary testing-ground and a valuable expressional medium for mystical experience and metaphysical reflection.

When we understand it aright, each test is then seen not to be an ordeal to be shrinkingly dreaded, but a gate to be eagerly welcomed; and this is because it offers us the chance of a higher development, of an entry into a higher state of being and capacity.

An impracticable teaching is a defective teaching. What is unworkable in practice is untrue in theory.

The minor details which, in their numerous throng, make up most of our daily life offer a chance to express philosophy's wisdom and apply philosophic discipline just as much as the great ones.

It is largely through such spiritual trial and error that so many find their way through imitations, frauds, sterilities, and black perils to the authentic philosophy and the real quest.

Every new experience or new set of circumstances becomes his teacher. Every personal reaction to it becomes an indication of his spiritual status.

Sooner or later situations will form themselves which will remind him that only by enforcing the teachings in his own conduct can he get their benefits, only by applying them in deeds and linking them to daily living can he verify their truth.

Hardships offer tests but so do easier circumstances, although this is less plainly seen because the tests are so different.

The spiritual gains made in spite of the world's opposition and in its very midst will be solid durable and substantial. But the gains made in an ashram may be imaginary superficial and transient.

The result of his actions will tell him something about the ideas which led to them, about the truth or falsity, the rightness or wrongness, of those ideas. It will tell him whether his faith is well-placed or ill-placed.

The last test must still be how far he brings the truth into his life.

The troubles of a follower do not prove that the teachings have failed. They prove only that he did not actually follow them in reality, whatever else he may have done in appearance, that they were not active in his mind and heart and will, however much they may have seemed so in the sight of others.

When the truth alters his whole conception of life, penetrates his heart and stirs his will, it has become his own.

What he accepts as idea and principle must be applied to experience and sustained in action. Then, and then only, will it manifest itself in fortune and destiny.

Getting the point

Life does not tell us why we are here: we have to enquire of it, seek to understand it, and wait while seeking for the answers.

It is not the mere succession of events that make up the essence of a man's life: it is what he extracts from those events.

Every event in his life should be made to reveal its karmic meaning for him. He may not at first perceive this; time, patience, and tranquil invitation to his deeper being—best done after meditation, before sleep, or before rising—can help.

Every new circumstance or happening in his life has some message for him from the Infinite Mind or some lesson to convey to him or some test to strengthen him. It is for him to seek out this inner significance and to re-adjust his thinking and actions in accordance with it.

At every important turn on his path the aspirant will find a choice awaiting him. He will find himself facing a set of circumstances which test his motive, strength, and attainment. These periodical tests can be neither evaded nor avoided, and often they are not recognized for what they are. Temptation may camouflage them under attractive colours. Nevertheless the student's conduct in regard to them will decide whether he passes onward and upward, or falls back into pain and purification.

In some way this life is a charade, a play which is being acted out but whose meanings have to be inferred from given clues.

What is the Overself telling me through this experience? What does it want me to learn, know, do, or avoid? Your environment is really a testing-place and a disciplinary school.

Many people read the lessons of their experience but alas! what they read is different from what is really indicated. Too often it is an egoistic distortion or even a gross falsification of the real lesson.

It is only if experience is correctly interpreted that it brings discretion, and only if thought is correctly reasoned that it brings discernment.

He should learn to profit spiritually and practically by all his experiences, the pleasurable as well as the painful, the gay as well as the grave. But he can do this only if he reads from them not what he wishes to read, not what will soothe or flatter his ego, but what is really their message and teaching. The unguided seeker finds it harder to succeed in this endeavour than his luckier fellow, but it is worth trying.

The undisciplined mind is easily misled.

An experience may be wrongly interpreted so that little or nothing is learned from it, or, which is worse, the mind's error or heart's evil may be increased.

Reason alone may give him the truth about a situation, but personal feeling may give him a half-lie about it. Yet he will prefer that to the truth simply because the ego is being supported.

He sees in the situation only what his bias permits him to. That is, he consciously or unwittingly excludes from sight those factors which he does not wish brought to his attention.

An experience involving suffering may not bear its lesson on its face—unless it has repeated itself so many times that the lesson is plain and clear. Although having a teachable and receptive mind will elucidate it more quickly, more often it is dark and obscure. There is needed something or someone to draw the line of connection between cause and effect. That something can be only the intuition, but how seldom is that achieved? That someone must be a teacher or a book.

Those who have committed themselves to a particular belief, opinion, or theory may get back its mere reflection when they try to understand their experiences.

The profounder a truth the more it will be misunderstood and misapplied.

It is in the nature of human self-centeredness to appraise things, persons, and events only by the measure of satisfaction or suffering they yield. But such egotism hides their true nature and real value, and obstructs their power to bring about progress.

It was because the Greeks knew that meditative reflection upon the meaning of tragic experience is less effective in the midst of it, while emotion is highly involved, that they avoided actual representation of the tragedy itself. The audience then received it only as an idea, not as a spectacle.

It is better, more prudent, more satisfying in the end to see things just as they are and not foolishly to imagine them in exaggerated, idealized, or wished-for forms.

We look only at the mere appearance of a situation or experience and expect to judge it rightly by that. The divine message it contains is nearly always a hidden one.

The ordinary person judges from the surface of things and at times is deceived in consequence. The seeker of truth must penetrate to the depth of things.

He should cultivate the habit of looking beneath the surface of many incidents in his daily life, both the important and the trivial, to determine the character of the forces they represent. Some show forth the good or evil within himself, or within others; all have some useful lesson to teach. Some, standing for the power of evil, ignorance, or illusion, necessitate constant watchfulness against temptations outside; others symbolize weaknesses inside that must be ceaselessly fought.

If he succeeds in keeping out of the emotional surface of his being the temptation to take his situation rebelliously, and penetrates instead deep down inside where he can take it resignedly, he will gain strength and feel peace.

The art of extracting a spiritual message even from the most ordinary circumstances is worth practising. But it can be done only if one lives in a certain independence of them, if while experiencing them one stands apart from them.

The aspirant lives a kind of double life. He sees all his experiences as personal events just like other men do. But he also sees them again as material for study: what is and what ought to be his reaction to them?

This is the double role he has to play: a looker-on at what is happening around him and an active participator in these events.

Where destiny compels us to follow an undesired path, to consort with undesired company, to work at undesired tasks, a special attitude must be created and kept until that particular cycle is ended. The experience must be studied philosophically—that is, impersonally—in the larger perspective of life's general meaning and our own character's personal needs.

If he is to learn the full lesson of his situation, he must not only examine and analyse it, but he must do so as if it were somebody else's.

It is not only a way of looking at life but also a way of participating in it.

Every circumstance or situation may be looked at from a higher plane than the merely animal or narrowly selfish one so that a higher benefit may be got from it. But this attitude calls for a willingness and detachment and courage which most people lack.

From the first moment that he sets foot on this inner path until the last one when he has finished it, he will at intervals be assailed by tests which will try the stuff he is made of. Such trials are sent to the student to examine his mettle, to show how much he is really worth, and to reveal the strength and weakness that are really his, not what he believes are his. The hardships he encounters try the quality of his attainment and demonstrate whether his inner strength can survive them or will break down; the sufferings he experiences may engrave lessons on his heart, and the ordeals he undergoes may purify it. Life is the teacher as well as the judge.