

BASICS 3

Sift all teachings. All must be tested by experience!

"We may call that ideal worth following which brings people closer to knowing the Truth about life, which offers them what is real, not illusory, which improves and refines character, and which can be tested by practicable action". With these words Paul Brunton emphasizes the importance of sifting through all the teachings we come across, of carefully examining whether they lead us to the Truth about life, of whether they impel us to ennoble and elevate our character, and of whether they are ultimately worthy of following after being tested by personal experience. Several PB notes tell us about this essential subject... verify their truth through your own experience!

A GENERAL REFERENCE...

It is not enough to receive a teaching from someone else. The truth of the teaching must be tested by personal experience, the worth of it should be measured by personal knowledge.

"Study both sympathetically and critically the other contemporary mystical movements but do not join them". Such is my general answer to the seeker who questions me about them. He should certainly examine and study other teachings, not necessarily for his acceptance, but for his broadening. Be a good student, but a bad joiner! For he will find it difficult to recognize the lineaments of full perfection either in the teaching or the practice of any existing institution or movement. However, the danger here is that he may overconcentrate on their study or practice, elevate side-routes into the main one, and finally get so absorbed in them as temporarily to abandon the original quest altogether. So there are certain reservations in my advice, a certain watchfulness is needed during such studies. He should take care to be only an enquirer into these cults and not a follower of them. He should be first, a sympathetic enquirer and then only exercise the philosophical right of severely critical examination. In the end, every aspirant must find his "own". "The path of another is dangerous", says the Bhagavad Gita. Unless a spiritual teaching has enough inspiration behind it to help him successfully tackle his gravest personal problems, it is not the right one—however much it may be so to others.

The time comes when the seeker must sift out all the doctrines he has received and let those go which lack reasonableness, the sound of truth, the lofty tone of impersonality. And even after he has sieved away the ideas born of narrowness, pettiness, bigotry, prejudice, and false sentimentality, he has still to choose those which he can usefully work with.

What tradition, family, society, and surroundings have bequeathed to him, consisting of beliefs, ideas, customs, culture, and manners, may need revision, examination, sifting, and sometimes even scrapping.

Past traditions may contain knowledge based on experience: they should be scrutinized, sifted, and tested, not ridiculed and rejected merely because of age.

Even if a belief were held throughout the world, it is not thereby proven true. It may still be a world-wide self-deception or, more likely, traditionally received suggestion.

If men will not use their intelligence to examine and sift their traditional inheritances, social and individual, they must expect to suffer the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children.

Youth would be better advised to sift out and preserve whatever spiritual values may be found in the past and combine them with the best material values of our own day.

No doctrine is so sacred that it is not to be questioned. Man cannot escape from his duty to doubt. Each generation must reflect in its own way on the conundrums of existence and be vigorously alive to its own problems, which are not wholly the problems of other epochs, and must face them in a fresh living manner.

All communications of a psychical or intuitive, visioned or heard character must be tested warily and judged critically by their results in experience. Otherwise the false, the fraudulent, the unfactual, the misleading may be accepted as the true and real. This of course is a rule mainly for beginners.

He must not be content to accept the communication entirely as presented but should sift it and seek the origins of its various parts. But he must sift it critically and seek these origins open-mindedly.

What he meets with outwardly as well as inwardly on this quest should be tested against these affirmations and scrutinized in the light of these truths.

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.

We may accept the judgement of authority but only after we have examined the history and tested the worth of such authority, be it book or person, tradition or institution.

He is wise who sifts, screens, and absorbs the bygone years, taking only their lessons, counsels, warnings, and encouragements. In this way, he frees himself from much of it.

The intuition which fails when checked, tested, and verified by every other possible source must be treated with caution.

It trains the mind to move guardedly along the path from reasoned thinking to conclusive judgement, to proceed cautiously and not precipitately when opinions are formed, and to form them not at random but only after sifting factual evidence from idle hearsay.

AND IN SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO...

... mystical doctrines

All mystical doctrines need to be studied with care and sifted with discrimination: this is especially so with Oriental doctrines and reports.

The history of religious and mystical ideas should be investigated and studied from an impartial independent standpoint, without bias for, or prejudice against, with enough critical ability to sift facts from opinion yet with enough sympathetic interest in the subject to collect materials widely from time and place. This is not work for a dried-up pedantic scholar without inner experience of his own, nor for a gullible excitable enthusiast, nor for a self-limited committed scientist, nor for a tradition-bound, excessively past-worshipping, anti-modern, religio-scholar-mystic. With this work should be conjoined a comparative study of those ideas, which requires not only historical talent and learning but deeper inner knowledge, advanced and personal experience, and skill in communicating the higher yields of intellect, feeling, mystical intuition—in short, some philosophical equipment. There would be no place in such teaching for rigid dogma, no division into "official" monopolized truth and unenlightened unblessed invention, certainly no denunciation of heresy.

The difficulty of collecting and studying, sifting and describing the varieties of mystical experience which may be found today is a barrier to the expansion of scientific psychology. For those persons who are most eager to talk about their own experiences are the most dubious and unreliable source. Those who are the least eager, feeling the matter to be too private, personal, intimate, and sacred, are able to offer valuable evidence.

Even when whatever is good and true from amongst current notions in different schools of thought is selected and sifted, and a compact doctrine is formed from the results, the tremendous vitalizing power of a master is often needed to make such truths tangible.

Out of this wide orbit we have at last come to a point where the process of sifting the wheat from the chaff has sufficiently advanced to permit us to stand aside from all asserted teachers, to be indifferent to the utterances of all authoritative texts, and to devote no further time to researches in Oriental lands. Nevertheless, in the present book, owing to the personal progress which has been made since the completion of the previous volume (which is not nullified by the fact that the long path we have yet to tread reveals by contrast how little advanced we really are), we have been guided more than anything else by an inner guide in such cases where limited attainment made verification not possible. It taught us what to set down where we could not see, and it told us what to give forth to others concerning regions where we could not walk.

... different cultures, environments, and circumstances

Learn some of the basic truths each system contains without identifying with the system itself. Keep the mind open and free to acquire worthwhile ideas and practices from other cultures and avoid the closed-in sectarian attitude.

There is a danger that the atmosphere of goodness evoked and cultivated in monastic institutions may become artificial and studied. Goodness becomes more natural when it is lived out and tested in the busy haunts of men.

Thus what we develop mentally in solitude we must work out physically in society. What we achieve quietly in the heart's stillness must be expressed and tested in external activities. What we learn in peaceful rural retreat must be appraised for its soundness by bustling city work and pleasure. This integral approach must be the twentieth-century way (Editor's Note: and centuries to come...), not the permanent indulgence in escape which was the way of antique and medieval monasticism.

Those who have much faith in the benevolent intentions of the "Mind behind the Universe", sooner or later find that faith severely tested. For the calamities of human life come to all of us...

To re-create himself by himself alone is hard. He will be better advised to accept the tested counsel offered by cultures of the past and by discriminated wisdom of the present.

... the Truth tested by experiment

If a man asks why he can find no trace of God's presence in himself, I answer that he is full of evidence, not merely traces. God is present in him as consciousness, the state of being aware; as thought, the capacity to think; as activity, the power to move; and as stillness, the condition of ego, emotion, intellect, and body which finally and clearly reveals what these other things simply point to. "Be still and know that I am God" is a statement of being whose truth can be tested by experiment and whose value can be demonstrated by experience.

... the assurance of philosophy

In one and the same day I was asked to comment upon two utterly opposed doctrines by two truth-seekers unknown to each other. Yet both doctrines were put forward as tested truths by mystical teachers with considerable public followings.

One asserted that the closer a disciple came to spiritual self-realization the more was he provided by the Spirit with material satisfactions. The other claimed that the advancing disciple was provided with so many sufferings as to be utterly crucified. The earnest student whose reading brings him up against them is bewildered by such contradictions. He may end his bewilderment if he will accept the assurance of philosophy that neither assertion is accurate.