

BASICS 8

The spiritual and the physical: A sounder balance is required

The human situation is a paradox. We are at one and the same time inhabitants of a world of reality as well as a world of appearance. A true human life must embrace both aspects, must be spiritual as well as physical, must integrate the intuitive as well as the intellectual; the body's needs, comfort, and surroundings must receive our attention. But they should not receive attention out of all proportion to their value. Are we here on earth for these things alone? Is the higher purpose of life to be entirely ignored? A sounder balance is required.

If industrial civilization has enriched our outer life it has also impoverished the inner life. It need not have done so if we had brought about a proper equilibrium between the two and if we had done so under the light of the guiding principle of what we are here on earth for. (13-2.140)

One thing that struck my mind forcibly on my return to the Western hemisphere after an absence of several years in the Orient, was the way we busied and over-busied ourselves, whether in work, pleasure, or movement. Few take life easily; most take it uneasily. Few go through its daily business serenely; most go through it nervously, hurriedly, and agitatedly. Our activities are so numerous they suffocate us. It is a life without emotional poise, bereft of intellectual perspective. We are intoxicated by action. We moderns give ourselves too much to activity and movement, too little to passivity and stillness. If we are to find a way out of the troubles which beset us, we must find a middle way between these two attitudes. >

>The need of silence after noise, peace after feverishness, thought after activity, is wide and deep today. Amid all the nostrums and panaceas offered to humanity there is little evidence of the realization of this need. >

>The conditions of modern civilized society are not helpful to mystical self-culture, although they will serve intellectual self-culture. What is first needed is a recognition of the value of retreat, of times and places where every man and woman may periodically and temporarily isolate himself or herself whilst withdrawing attention from worldly affairs and giving it wholly to spiritual ones. These words will make no appeal to the materialist mentality which still regards all spiritual experiences as the outcome of pathological conditions.

Is it possible to unite both ways, the active life in the world outside and the quiet life in the stillness within, and find no break, no essential difference, no falsification of the oft-stated idea, "God is everywhere"? The answer is Yes! and has been tested in ancient and modern experience. "What is the World?" gives the same reply as "Who am I?" Withdrawing from the physical sense-world as the mystic does or going into physical action with the senses engaged need not break the union, the awareness of Divine Presence.

If he can combine and balance a practical attitude towards the world with a transcendental detachment from the world, he will fulfil man's higher purpose.

The question of how far he would be prepared to travel in this quest has no geographical reference. It is a metaphorical one and refers only to the time he can give each day to the exercises, studies, and devotions, as well as to the moral ideals he can bring himself to pursue. He is not asked for more than he feels he can humanly give under his present circumstances and responsibilities. As for going to India or elsewhere, that is unnecessary and even inadvisable. One of the greatest Western mystics I ever knew spent every day in the city of London, where he had a business to manage. He did his job and made a success of it, stuck to his ideals and became spiritually "aware." He was indeed an adept at meditation but he had never set foot in the Orient. The seeker has indeed not very far to travel. Four hundred years ago Sebastian Franck, a German who had attained the full spiritual realization, wrote: "We do not need to cross the sea to find Him—the Word is nigh thee, is in thy heart."

To find the correct equilibrium, through knowledge and practice, which enables one to deal with the affairs at hand but never deviate from staying in the Presence—that is the art of life. That also is to become "natural" in the best sense, to possess an unself-conscious unadvertised spirituality.

A human being is not necessarily unspiritual if he lives fully in the world, engaging in its activities and appreciating its satisfactions. Only, he must remember constantly who and what he really is and never forget his ultimate purpose.

What is wrong if we claim some happiness from this world, provided we keep our balance, the heart anchored to an allegiance higher than the world, the mind always remembering for what it is really here?

There is nothing wrong, but, rather, everything right in aspiring to a certain amount of success in worldly life along with one's spiritual development. But one must make sure that the worldly attainments are not gained at the expense of neglecting his inward development, and that they do not infringe upon the ethical principles which govern discipleship.

He is not asked to abandon his social aspirations, for instance, in favour of his spiritual aspirations, but to balance them sanely. He is asked not to seek the one at the cost of the other, not to desert worthy ideals at important moments. The major decisions of his life must be grounded on a reconciliation of being in the world with not being of the world.

He is not asked to abandon all thought of his particular self (as if he could) or to lose consciousness of it, but that he is asked to perceive its imperfection, its unsatisfactoriness, its faultiness, its baseness and its sinfulness and, in consequence of this perception, to give it up in favour of his higher self, with its perfection, blessedness, goodness, nobility, and wisdom. For in the lower ego he will never know peace whereas in the diviner one he will always know it.

The worldly side of things must be included with the spiritual side, related to it, balanced by it, purified through it. This is the sane view of philosophy.

... everything in its place

If he puts everything in its place—the lower and lesser things where they belong, the higher and greater ones above them—what has he to fear from the world? He can still remain active in it; flight will be unnecessary. If he does not forget the final purpose of all this worldly activity, that through the body's life and the mind's existence he may seek and find his true self, the Overself, the inner failure and superficiality of so many lives will be avoided.

... a spiritual background

By beginning each day with meditation on the Divine, a man begins well. This act helps to give a spiritual background to the work, duties, and meetings of the day. It comes every twenty-four hours as a reminder that his life has a higher purpose to which his worldly purpose must be subordinate. It refreshes his dedication and renews his self-discipline.

Above all, it attracts grace, and this may give him moral restraint or support or even a feeling of inner peace at relaxed moments later in the day.

There is nothing wrong in the daily contact with the world, attending to duties, being practical, effective, even successful in profession, business, or other work, and rearing a family, provided all this is done within the remembrance of the Higher Power.

... a false opposition

The philosophic student will not make the mistake of using the quest as an excuse for inefficiency when attending to duties. There is nothing spiritual in being a muddler. The performance of worldly duties in a dreamy, casual, uninterested, and slovenly manner is often self-excused by the mystically minded because they feel superior to such duties. This arises out of the false opposition which they set up between Matter and Spirit. Such an attitude is not the philosophical one. The mystic is supposed to be apathetic in worldly matters, if he is to be a good mystic. The philosophical student, on the contrary, keeps what is most worthwhile in mysticism and yet manages to keep alert in worldly matters too. If he has understood the teaching and trained himself aright, his practical work will be better done and not worse because he has taken to this quest. He knows it is perfectly possible to balance mystical tendencies with a robust efficiency. He will put as much thought and heart into his work as it demands.

... the obfuscation of the mind (ego)

If worldly business and external pleasures occupy modern man's mind to such an extent that they have virtually crowded out all thoughts of the higher meaning and spiritual duties of life, then that business and these pleasures will lead him not to a happier earthly existence, as they could, but to bitter disappointment and painful catastrophe.

The common attitude everywhere is to look no farther than, and be content with, work and pleasure, family, friends, and possessions. It feels no urge to seek the spiritual and, as it erroneously thinks, the intangible side of life. It makes

no effort to organize its day so as to find the time and energy for serious thought, study, prayer, and meditation. It feels no need of searching for truth or getting an instructor.

They find a completely worldly life sufficient for their needs. They do not want, do not miss, and are quite indifferent towards spiritual things.

While they are caught in a tangle of work or overwork, with the worries that often accompany it, they are unable to give their concentrated thought to abstract questions and spiritual issues.

To shift the centre of interest from worldly to spiritual affairs but to magnify the ego as a consequence of doing so, is something that happens just as readily to dwellers in ashrams as to those outside them.

Too often spiritual aspiration is simply worldly ambition transplanted to a higher but subtler level. The aspirant is not necessarily deceiving himself, for a mixture of motives is quite common.

It may be easy to get the worldly, the practical message of particular experiences, but it is not so easy to get the higher, the spiritual message they contain. This is because we habitually look at them from the ego's standpoint, especially when personal feelings are strongly involved. Truth calls for a transfer of the inner centre of gravity.

... a time for the spiritual

Escape from worldly life and big cities for suitable periods and on the proper occasions can be used to promote spiritual advancement and to perfect spiritual capacity.

After the work done to gain livelihood or fulfil ambition, there is usually a surplus of time and strength, a part of which could and should be devoted to satisfying higher needs. There is hardly a man whose life is so intense that it does not leave him a little time for spiritual recall from this worldly existence.

He is soon distracted by the routines, the duties, the cares, and the activities of life, however petty they are, so that the great eternal truths recede from his vision. This is why such periods of temporary withdrawal are absolutely necessary every day.

The spiritual life of man at this juncture is a battle against the outward-running tendency of the mind. To perceive this in oneself is to perceive how weak one really is, how feeble a victim of worldly activities, how lacking in the ability to concentrate perfectly even for five minutes, and how unable to hold the attention for the same length of time in the impersonal embrace of a philosophic theme.

... combine wisely

The world is told of the inner detachment which philosophy bestows, the deeper calm which it puts into a man's existence. Too often this is misread to mean a chilling remoteness from life's inescapable concerns, a feeble response to the personal demands which duty lays upon him.

If he can develop the facility to sustain his meditation and keep off distracting thoughts, he can gain a cooler vision in worldly matters and a clearer one in spiritual matters.

That keen rationality could and indeed should accompany sensitive spirituality is both practical wisdom and evolutionary necessity. A tendency to act the fool in worldly and intellectual matters is not a sign of mystical strength, as some aver, but a sign of mystical weakness.

On this plane, the body is indeed the only medium of our existence and is not to be disconnected from our higher aspirations. A complete and competent spiritual instruction ought not to be so foolish as to neglect or overlook the physical frame of the disciple being instructed but should see it with its several organs and higher senses as it truly is; that is, as an expression of Infinite Intelligence through which one can gather the experience needed to become fully aware of his relation to that Intelligence.

The physical body is neither an enemy to be harshly treated nor an encumbrance to be sadly denounced. When through the Quest's disciplines man establishes proper control of it, he will no longer regard it as an enemy of his spiritual aspirations, the paralysing weight on his spiritual being.

It is clear that the crisis will not be overcome unless we acknowledge the worth of moral values above those which have hitherto reigned in actual practice rather than in hypocritical theory. That such an acknowledgment has begun

to shine in the hearts of some powerful leaders is good, but it will have to shine in the hearts of several more if a successful result is to be attained. A section of people has vaguely felt this already, but it will become creative in their minds and lives only when it is clearly formulated. This century will not have much use for any gospel which keeps the worldly life and the spiritual life mutually exclusive.

In order to remember that we are godlike in essence we do not need to forget that we are human in existence.

The philosopher cannot set the spirit apart from the body, nor the spiritual life from the worldly life—for him, they penetrate one another. He lives every moment in the awareness of his Higher Self. Yet this does not oppose nor interfere with, the awareness of his lower one.

He will maintain a proper equilibrium between being aware of what is happening in the world, remaining in touch with it, and being imperturbable towards it, inwardly unaffected and inwardly detached from it.

There is no fundamental conflict

Those activities which belong to a human existence in the world may still go on, and need not be renounced, although they may be modified or altered in certain ways as intuition directs. His business, professional, family, and social interests need not be given up. His appreciations or creations of art need not be abandoned. His intellectual and cultural life can remain. It is only demanded of him that none of these should be a self-sufficient thing, existing in total disregard of the Whole, of the ultimate and higher purpose which is behind reincarnation.

It is one and the same Reality which *appears* in different ways to beings on different planes of perception. If it is true that they are dealing only with “Appearance” because they are perceiving only its forms, it is equally true that, as soon as they discover what it is that projects these forms, they will discover that life is a harmonious whole and that there is no fundamental conflict between the so-called worldly life and the so-called spiritual life.