

20 SELF-DEVELOPMENT

THE TRADITIONAL SPIRITUAL TEACHINGS I received in India did not bother about psychological problems and difficulties. The tradition is just to put everything into spiritual practice. Circumstances and inclination made it possible for me to do a lot of practice. But I found that the practice by itself would have to be so rigorous to eradicate all the psychological problems that I felt the combination of the two was necessary. That combination is what I have introduced at the Ashram. We look at our psychological problems and imperfections, and then in combination with spiritual practice we try to overcome our difficulties. I call this cooperating with our own spiritual evolution.

My experience is that this combination is necessary in dealing with illness too. I became acquainted once with a psychiatrist who wanted to bring people out of the mental hospital and back into the world. He had worked for a long time with a couple of ministers and priests, but prayers alone did not seem to do it because people will even try to make God responsible for their shortcomings and bad deeds. They will say, "That's the way you created me, so you take the responsibility for the way I am." You cannot say that. You have to take your own responsibility.

For most people, both spiritual practices and psychological self-investigation are necessary. Prayer alone is not enough.

I read about Milarepa's life¹ and the dreams he had very carefully. His advice to members of his family was very down-to-earth: "Look first at your attachment. You see, you are doing this and that and the other. And that is where all your energy and your attention are going. But if you can leave this behind, and move

1 W.Y. Evans-Wentz, ed., *Tibet's Great Yogi: Milarepa* (London: Oxford University Press, 2nd ed., 1951), and Garma C.C. Chang, *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1962), vols. 1 and 2.

up here...” However, unless you know first where you *are*, you can't move. You don't even know you should move, because you have little awareness of the capacity of the mind to create illusions.

You cannot trust the mind. You have to question it always, and ask constantly, “How do I know?” Many things affect the mind. We are formed not only by our family and teachers or by our friends and neighbours, nature itself also has an impact. If people live where the temperature is a hundred and ten degrees day in and day out, and they become wet with sweat just from walking across the room, they will be very different from people who live in mountains in great cold and lack of comfort, where they cannot even take a bath all year. Even in our part of the world, if there is very low pressure for just one day, there is a physical effect which can change your mood all of a sudden. Then, when it passes, you may almost feel as if a heavy weight has been lifted from you.

These factors are often overlooked or not given sufficient attention, but they contribute to how we feel. Unless we know about them, we may make ourselves feel unnecessarily guilty because we are not cheerful and energetic. Accept whatever is there. Just don't get stuck in it. Be reminded that nothing lasts. Everything changes. Sometimes things change rather fast, faster than we can adjust to. It is important to see that too, and accept it.

The personality aspects have their reflection in the mind, so they need to be dismantled. I find it is helpful to look at my list of personality aspects and take the one that causes the most trouble and say, “I am going to choke this until it is dead.” How can you do this? By trying to infuse that aspect with the spiritual, because wherever the Light goes in, darkness has to go out. Then ego and all the negative things are bound to change because you incite everything to make that change possible. That is important. Then you can tackle another personality aspect, and another, and however many there are. This is much less difficult than to say, “All of my mind has to change,” because you live through the mind, you function through the mind. The identification with the mind is much more difficult to change. That has been my observation in all the years I have been helping people with these things. But you can conquer one personality aspect, and this gives you the courage to conquer another one, and another one, and another, and then finally you have the feeling: “I am coming to that essence that I am.”

Childhood experience also affects the mind. How much does our childhood experience really scar us? We are all very busy looking at that. We say, “Well, in my childhood such-and-such happened and that is why I have these problems.” This is true, and yet there is evidence that although some children in a family are scarred by the family’s experiences, others who go through the same experiences are not. Why is that? There must be a different type of essence in the different individuals, in the different children.

By that, I mean we are the total of our karmic situation. If there has been a lot of accumulation of good karma, then perhaps it’s much harder to scar such an individual. This means that in our present life we have the opportunity to collect good karma by just doing a lot of good things and overcoming our selfishness and our need for comfort, and by going beyond comfort and beyond personal needs, and not clamouring constantly to have them filled. It’s selfless service that gives us the best karma – it’s consideration for other individuals. I have often said, “You can’t love everybody, but you can be considerate to everybody.” There is no question about that.

You can’t always do what you feel like doing. Most of the time your feelings will put you to shame, so if you think you have to express all of them, you will feel ashamed often. It’s better to acknowledge these feelings quickly, but not to indulge in them. Turn again to spiritual practice and prayer, and change your focus to the Divine. The greater the effort needed to shift the focus, the more necessary it is to make that shift.

I found recently some writing I did years ago when I began to wonder about my childhood and the dramatic circumstances of it. I remember quite a bit of what affected me. Of course, the tendency is for all of us to say, “Oh, great. Here’s the explanation for why I’m not any better yet.”

Then I had a dream. In the dream somebody said, “I think you should go over there and look at this little girl. Her mother didn’t want her.” This was followed by a number of the details of my own childhood experience. In the dream, the aspect that is Radha went over to look at the little girl, the aspect that is Sylvia, and said, “But she has no scars.” It was the spiritual practice that had removed the scars. If you feel that you have been hurt very much and that you carry deep scars, nothing will smooth those scars except your gazing at the Divine.

By practice, I don't necessarily mean saying a thousand prayers or a thousand mantras. I mean practise getting out of the way you indulge yourself and cater to your comforts. Turn this completely around. That is only possible if you say, "Yes, it is this bad. Where else can I turn? Where else will there be help? There isn't anybody. There certainly isn't another human being who can do anything to help." The help then comes from a very different source. Turn to that source and become aware of the radiating power of knowledge, and become eligible for the manifestation of that grace.

When I came back from India, I was swamped by psychologists who asked me, "What was your childhood like? What did you do? Where were your parents?" I told them a little bit about my background, and their conclusion was: "How come you haven't any criminal tendencies? That's usually what happens in a case like yours. You should hate society. You should be wanting to take revenge, trying to make up for all the bad things that were done to you."

I can only think perhaps I did some good or decent things in some past life which gave me the insight to go beyond my childhood experience. I had what I call some spiritual capital. You can put a lot of capital into your spiritual bank account, and when you need it, you can draw on the interest that has accumulated. But accumulating the interest is your responsibility. It won't be done for you.

When we think about cooperating with our own evolution, we have to think about how much we all want power. We all want to control. Well, begin with controlling your destiny. That's the step to begin with. How much can you control yourself? You may control a whole army, but that doesn't mean anything if you can't control yourself. You can see that in politics. Presidents of countries have a lot of power and they try to exercise enormous control. But if there is no control of self, all the power that can be exercised somewhere else doesn't mean a thing. It leads to your own undoing. You either fall from your high position, or you get sick, or you have some other destiny that brings you down.

In Germany, first the aristocracy had the power. Then, in their love for power, they were so blind that they couldn't see their own undoing and it was all taken away from them. Then the Nazis came, and they were blinded by power and lost everything. And then came new governments – one in the east and another in the west. All this is just the shifting of power. Nobody benefits from it, and it is often very destructive.

The real power is in the Divine within. To attain this power, one has to surrender self-will, because self-will, like self-love, is very destructive.

Taking revenge for whatever we think was done to us won't help either. After World War II ended, during the Nuremburg trials, thousands of Nazis of all ranks were tried and convicted of crimes against civilians and prisoners of war. The names of Nazis who had been arrested were given every night over the radio, and people who had grievances against this or that particular Nazi were asked to come forward. I could have come forward, but I didn't. It wasn't out of the goodness of my heart. It was just that my common sense told me, "If we don't stop taking revenge, where will it end?"

People often think, "For so many years of my life, people have taken advantage of me." They feel they should have revenge. In the Old Testament, God says, "Vengeance is mine."² What others do is their problem, as long as you do the right thing and free yourself. Let go of your grievance. You won't miss it.

But you should also consider that perhaps you are being taken advantage of because for many years, in this life or a past one, you took a great deal of advantage of others. Being taken advantage of will end when your karmic bookkeeping is balanced.

The negative lasts, and is very powerful, but the positive – blessings and inspirations – will also last if we just put our confidence in that. I once spent some time in the garden of Teresa of Avila. It's a small garden with very formal, stylized flower beds, but it still holds the calm and the peace made by all the years of prayer that had been done there. Divine inspiration can last a long, long time. Teresa of Avila lived in the sixteenth century, yet that inspiration is still available.

The choice of whether you will take to spiritual life only, or whether you will also look into self-development is an individual choice. But from what I saw of those long sessions of prayer for healing with the psychiatrist and priest at the mental hospital, and all the reading I have done on Lourdes where thousands of people have gone, yet very few have had lasting cures, my observation is that we can have a shortcut on our spiritual path by using both spiritual practice and self-development.

If you bring gratitude to this work, it will be a great help. Gurudev used to say, "Let it be known that gratitude is one of the strongest powers and the finest

2 Deuteronomy 32:35.

emotion that a human being is capable of.” How you cultivate gratitude is again very individual. You can begin by being grateful for what you have, right now, right where you are. For example, you are not living in medieval times where houses were cold and clammy when it rained, or there was not enough wood and everybody had to be in the same room to keep warm. We have tremendous advantages. Let’s not waste this life and become lazy and take things for granted. Rather, let us cultivate that finest feeling, gratitude.