

On the Watch-Tower

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The greatest obstacle on the Path

It may be important for us to realize that the ego sense, compared to all others, is the greatest obstacle on the spiritual path. The Buddhist teachers have therefore given emphasis to becoming free of this sense of 'I'-ness. False, because the I's importance is not actual, it is imaginary; the mind concocts it for its own satisfaction. In Buddhist literature they mention various fetters which bind a person down and prevent him from proceeding ahead. If we consider those fetters, and go into them carefully, we will find that they are connected with the ego-problem. Take for example, the fetter which is doubt, which is a problem on the path. What is the basis of doubt?

The path of forthgoing is greater immersion in materiality, a belief in the things of material value which will bring benefit to oneself, to one's family, etc. But, the way is utterly different, for it is the realization, very dim in the beginning, but clearer and clearer as one proceeds, that these material aims will not bring about one's welfare or anybody's welfare. If there is doubt, a person is not sure whether he really wants to shed the values of the material life and proceed towards something higher, or to see whether the

spiritual life suits him or not. He will continue to live in the material sense. Most people want to reconcile impossibly contradictory things — serve God and Mammon at the same time. But this is impossible. They are cast into situations where they are uncertain whether to do this or to do that and doubt arises about following inclinations towards material things. What will happen to me after death? A cloud arises about this. That is why many people feel afraid before they are going to die, or as they are aging. What will happen to me? Everything is dark, we do not really know. We read books about the after-death state, but we have doubts about that. How far are these authors and speakers correct? I do not really know. So doubt and confusion are in the mind.

Doubt enters the mind about the spiritual life also. People say that you will experience more real happiness, and get benefits of a different order, etc., but the mind is not sure about that. Are these just promises, or is this way really beneficial? Is it nothing but egoistic desire? I want to be safe, I want to be sure. If I am following the material path I want to be sure that after my body dies I will be all right, not be cast into hell. Fortunately, very few

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people believe in hell nowadays. People may wonder what will happen to them, so there is uncertainty which is based on 'What will happen to me?'

The fanatics and fundamentalists do not really know the truth of what they assert usually with much vengeance, what they fight for, and what they will shed blood for. They pretend to themselves that they speak the truth, because the priest or scripture says so. They too are seeking security for the 'me'. Like a person who clings to a piece of wood when he is drowning, he will cling to any belief, any set of ideas, which will give him the greatest assurance that he will be right.

So both doubt and certainty are said to be fetters on the path, but they are not explained. If we explore the question, we see that they both spring from the desire of the egoistic mind to find what is convenient. Is there a state which is neither certainty nor doubt, these being the two sides of the razor's edge? There is a way between the two, and all that is between these sorts of dilemmas are what we can regard as part of that way. In between is the safe way, which is what we have in the 'Golden Stairs' — the Open Mind.

The Open Mind

Can we keep the mind not only open intellectually, but open to intuitive knowledge? That is much more difficult. This means that we must be patient, go on observing, studying life's processes, studying not only from books, but actually looking at the movements of life and trying to understand what they are. Unless

my mind is open, I may believe that I am not egoistical when I am, or in a particular situation if my ego thrusts itself forward, I am unaware of it, because I do not practise true mindfulness. I am not objectively and impartially watching.

If I am watching then I begin to see more and more. Watching comes to a stop when you arrive at a conclusion, or when you are stuck with the idea that you must come to a conclusion. But to live without wanting to arrive at conclusions means to have a balanced position. Because the balance is very quickly lost it is like a razor's edge.

To see the ego in action we must be aware of the nature of relationships, not only one's own relationships with people, but relationship with ideas, objects or past traditions, and also become aware of the nature of relationships in general. If we try to understand when other people have a problem, we come to know that ultimately the problem is in the person's own mind. A lady, who has been a member of the Theosophical Society for many years, studied theosophical books, tried to interest other people in them, and so on, lost a near relative. What was her reaction? A highly disturbed mind, with a sense of loneliness and grief, wanting to know where the relative was, what she was doing and so on. The whole mind was in a turmoil.

You find the same thing when two people quarrel. They try to convince others that the other person was wrong. Why should you convince others that the other person was wrong? Why should you

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convince others if you are certain? When you watch life, particularly human action without judging anyone, you will often find ego concepts connected with sorrow, agitation or whatever. If action is not serene, balanced, benevolent, then we can be sure the ego is in it. But the problem is that when we find the condition in our own mind, we quickly conclude that it is not so. It is only when it happens to other people that we see the fault. But suppose we continue to watch, perhaps we will be able to recognize the egoistic impulse behind all this.

When I get angry, when I say something which is not really kind, when I feel offended over some trifling little thing, or irritated, proud, etc., when I want to talk too much, and thrust my ideas upon other people — when the numerous situations of life are seen without condemnation of anything, we may observe the truth about it. Perhaps we see that the ego is there all the time, either lying low or ready to come into action. That is the first step to see for ourselves. That is why they say that from the beginning of the path, right up to the end, discrimination must be practised.

We practise only by watchfulness, which must be totally objective. Let us say as an example, I am a person of high status (even in a small situation somebody can think his status is higher than that of others). All this is just imagination, is it not? Is there actually a thing called 'I'? It is just a physiological feeling. We come to a certain conclusion about ourselves; it is nothing more than that. Some people have said that it is a thought form that we

create. Of course it becomes a strong thought form, very difficult to demolish. But first we must start by not adding bricks to this mental connection. When the Buddha emerged out of his illumination, it is said that he spoke some verses. Whether he spoke, we do not know, but tradition says that he knew he had come out of the prison, and he had found out who is the builder of the prison. Obviously it is a long course which has to be trodden, but we have to work persistently at it, because as long as we remain in the prison-house that we make for ourselves, which is entirely constructed by thought, we are not free to move on. It obstructs one in every way.

To repeat Annie Besant's words, a sense of spirituality is not to feel separate from anything else. Now 'I' does the opposite. If you are inside the prison and everybody else is outside, you are all the time separate. So the prison walls around oneself have to be broken down. One cannot enter Nirvāna, that state of profound, unbroken bliss by desiring it, or by doing all kinds of other things; you have to put out the fire of ambition, desire, illusion, lust, and so on. First of all, put out the fire by not adding fuel to it. If you stop feeding it then it will die down by itself. That is what we all have to do in daily life, in all our relationships. Whether the ego is in subtle form or in definite outline, recognize it as a false creation of the mind. HPB said 'the mind is not your mind or my mind'. The impure mind is working all over the world — in your mind, my mind, in everybody's mind. See

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how that impure mind, which is the egoistic mind, operates. If we see that the problem is inside us, then we can free ourselves of it. So this must be our constant endeavour, if we are to bring about a state of goodness, calmness, peace and all that is blessed in life.

Let us learn to be attentive

The centenary of the book *At the Feet of the Master* brings to our attention many things which have to do with the Path, although this may seem like an unreasonable remark I am making. But everything that we encounter helps the Path or hinders it. All great books have a beneficial value, because what they have to say can be looked at from different points of view. Anyhow, taking *At the Feet of the Master* as an example, we know that there are what we may regard as important factors, but which are not so in fact. For instance our attitude to a person because he belongs to a particular religion, a rich or poor man, educated or uneducated and so on, appear to matter at least to some extent; but they may matter much more than we give them credit for, because all the small things of life are part of a situation on the way we are proceeding forward.

If we take the first of the qualifications, discrimination, it has many applications. This book cannot list them all, of course. We have to see for ourselves where the right and wrong, the useful or the not so

useful belong and this little book gives some examples. We have to remain awake and see that we do not fall short of perceptiveness, of what makes life more spiritual. A person may say something which you think applies to yourself, but maybe he was not in a good mood, or he was not well. Each soul has its own problems. This is true of all the qualities mentioned. Those virtues which we have to absorb though they are not mentioned in the little book are many and make us aware of the right kind of action.

We can take perhaps one other example, that is under the heading of love. Love is not something that we should feel only for our family and friends, or even for all of humanity. It is a quality that should be like a flame burning brightly inside us, so we feel equally the beauty of life even in the smallest creature and in those things that we do not appreciate as living beings, including the earth, the stones and many objects to which we usually give no attention. It is said that there is a rock on the way from the Manor to the beach in Sydney and it feels joy or indifference, depending on the persons who notice it. This may be the case with all things in nature; they respond when we express our feelings of joy or whatever as we pass by. So perhaps, this little book which brings to our attention the whole of life, is the reason why it has continued to be a bestseller, influencing hearts and minds in unknown ways. ✧

Learn to distinguish the God in everyone and everything.

J. Krishnamurti