

# *PATHS TO SPIRITUAL UNDERSTANDING*

Transcription of talk by J.G. Bennett

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It is essential to be able to go into any depth of a subject. I did, I believe, choose the title for this talk so I cannot blame anyone else for the burden I have put upon myself. I say it is a burden because here am I going to talk to you for about an hour on a subject on which I have spent ten months, day in and day out, trying to convey to students who are living with us at Sherborne: and I think that ten months of daily and nightly work is barely sufficient to set one's feet on the path. And it is not good to talk 'about' things; what one should try to do is to 'say' things: there is a very great difference between the two. When one wants to say things, one has to experience them - one can 'talk about' things, without experience.

I think the real title of the talk is about the expansion of consciousness. One of the questions to start with is to ask ourselves why we should want to expand our consciousness. All questions of 'why' lead back and back until we come to some question like 'Why am I here at all?' We are taught to ask the question 'Who am I?' we do not so often ask the question 'Why am I? What am I for?' Why am I in this strange position, communicating with you through sounds to those instruments that pick up vibrations to hear and see; why are we in this situation? As we grow older we come to ask ourselves more and more the question 'But why this body?' I can remember very clearly when this question came strongly before me. It was fifty-three years ago in 1918 when I was wounded and unconscious and was effectively out of my body and felt very comfortable without a body! I asked myself this question: But why? - and I could not find an answer. I remember that I thought that, supposing my body is destroyed by the next shell that comes over, what of it? Then a few days later, I found myself in my body and all these kinds of airy-fairy ideas about not minding what happened to one's body disappeared. When one is in one's body it seems to matter a great deal; when one is out of it, it does not seem to matter so much.

Why have we been put into this situation? We are clearly not just our own bodies; everyone must have had this same awareness at some time that they are not simply their own bodies. But if we are here in these bodies, it must be for a purpose. If anything is for a purpose, this must be with all these peculiar limitations which are associated with being embodied, incarnated. We ask

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ourselves about the expansion of consciousness; when we are out of the body, the consciousness expands by itself. I think the answer must be a very clear matter: that we have been put in our bodies because there is a purpose to be served - because we are needed. And we people are particularly needed because we have been equipped with an extraordinary set of instruments - partly bodily instruments, and partly non-bodily instruments, and one does not fit up such a marvelous piece of machinery just in order to consume food and breathe air and then die and decay; and then having left it behind, to forget all about it and go on to something different. We cannot be in this life only to get out of it again.

There are certain kinds of attitudes towards life which look upon this body as a thing to be escaped from, and as a worldly thing to turn one's back on: this cannot be quite right. When I talk about expansion of awareness, I have in my own mind that I am not meaning by this something that I am aiming at and achieving, or because it is very satisfying to me, or that it is going to give me a certain kind of knowledge and insight, or that it is going to be very good for me, or that I am going to expand my consciousness so that I can leave this body in comfort and go on to higher spheres. If my consciousness is to expand and with this, new perceptions and understanding are going to come, it must be to serve some purpose other than my own purpose. We must not forget that side of it when we talk about this. I think one must look upon this quite the other way round: that we expand our consciousness in order that we may become better instruments, in order to be better able to fulfill the purpose of our existence, not to escape from it.

There are some views of the world that seem to imply the opposite to what I am saying: those which one reads in scriptures, particularly in the earliest Buddhist scriptures, where everything is in the direction of denying and rejecting the world, holding the life of the recluse, the wandering Bhikhu who has no possessions, no responsibilities, no family, no concerns, as incomparably higher than that of the Householder who is tied to this earth. The monk or Bhikhu is the one who can very soon become ready to leave this state of existence. When I was studying these scriptures about fifty years ago, my teacher was a remarkable woman, Mrs. Rhys Davies, who with her husband first made the translations of the Buddhist texts, and she was quite convinced that this presentation of the Buddhist teaching was a monkish addition (although she herself claimed to be a reincarnation of a woman disciple of the Buddha) and that in reality the Buddha was not for the rejection of the world. I hope not. Again if we look at other scriptures, at the Christian scriptures, there seems to be a rejection of the world, and that the world is soon to be ended or that we are not to take thought for it: that also seems somehow to be a misrepresentation of what was intended by Christ. And yet it is strange that we have in these great scriptures something that seems to suggest a rejection of this world, and of a rejection of duties towards the world. In the canonical scriptures it is less strong, but in the apocryphal documents, it is very emphatic in all the stories of the horrors of marriage and the holiness of the people who reject it and refuse to have children, refuse to have any contact or affair with the world. This shows that there was a strong feeling amongst the early Christians that the world was something to be altogether rejected.

Why it is that people do introduce this kind of idea? That this body is the 'enemy'. It was very strong in Manichaeism, that this world is something to be put away. This kind of attitude will not do in our present time. The world is so obviously in need that none of us, I am sure, have this feeling that we can turn our backs on the world and concern ourselves with our own salvation,

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using powers that we may be capable of developing only for our own insights and understanding, for our own purification, liberation even. We must all of us feel that we have to serve, and that we are given these instruments in order to serve with them. When we are going to talk about the expansion of consciousness, we are really talking, in my opinion, about making more effectual the instrument with which we can serve the divine purpose in this world, and not saying that we should be finding the way to our own private salvation.

Now let us take these instruments of ours. What is the spiritual significance of the body? Our body is, after all, the principle instrument with which we have to work: we have been provided with this instrument, we must know it, we must know how to use it, we must respect its limitations, make demands of it to the utmost of its power, to serve the purpose for which we are working. I am extremely thankful that when I was a boy and a young man, my mother and my teachers all insisted on the importance of establishing a relationship with one's body as the relationship between a rider and a horse, and that one should know which is the master. That one should know in everything and at all times. One must be oneself, even though the body is stronger and able to do things we cannot, it has to learn to obey. If we do not set ourselves this, we have no foundation for spiritual development: that is why I have to say this to begin with. I will only speak about one particular exercise connected with the mastery of the body, the exercise of fasting. Fasting is not so much practiced now as it used to be. There have been some teachers who have been insistent on the value of fasting; there was one who always fasted more than any of his followers. Fasting has been used throughout Islam: it is a part of the five religious obligations, and those who follow the spiritual path in Islam do make very great use of this. There is no doubt that the practice of fasting is a very important means for preparing one's body for spiritual experiences. One has to know how to fast, and how to have the right psychological attitude towards fasting, but I can say from experience, it is very valuable, as are other forms of bodily self-discipline.

Now when it comes to preparing the body for spiritual experience, our adult bodies are already the repositories of the whole of our lifetime experiences. Everything that has happened to us is registered in our bodies. This is producing innumerable tensions, blockages, that prevent the free flow of energies in us. In order to keep one's body as a good instrument, for every purpose and particularly for our spiritual experience, the body must be freed from these tensions and habits. For this, the secret is relaxation. There are seven stages of relaxation; three of these are on the physical plane concerning this visible body of ours - the relaxation of the muscles, the relaxation of our nerves, and the relaxation of the blood vessels. When there is full relaxation, then there is a free flow of energies and it is possible to pass over the gap from the physical into what we may call the 'astral' world without difficulties. So long as there are tensions, and of course particularly in the nervous system, this makes the transition very difficult, and we remain tied to this bodily state. Whereas fasting is an optional matter, relaxation is, in my opinion, not optional: no one can hope to develop a full spiritual life who does not regularly practice relaxation. But after the first three stages of relaxation, there come stages that concern the inner state, the psyche. These are sometimes referred to as meditation; and there is a true form of meditation which consists in certain states of such psychic, or what we may call, mental relaxation. For example, in Buddhism, this is very well described as 'the ecstasies', the higher states of consciousness, from which the word Zen comes. This attainment of successive states of freedom, of very deep

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psychic relaxation, requires practice. It is possible to go by this path alone; the seventh and final stage of relaxation is the full abandonment of one's own egoism, and the attachment to any state of existence whatsoever, that is, the state of the fully liberated being. So one can say that it is only necessary to know how to relax, and you will become Buddha. No other knowledge than that is required. But in order to do that, many other things are necessary. Very few people are able to set themselves, day by day, to increase the depth of their relaxation and arrive at the free movement of the inner energies and then the stilling of that energy. For example, first there is the stilling of one's feelings so that one is in a state of complete peace and contentment, when the thoughts are still present but no longer able to disturb the state of inward peace. This is the first stage of the psychic relaxation. Then there comes the stage when the mind relaxes and there are no more thoughts - just a state of consciousness. But in that state of consciousness there is still a feeling of presence, an awareness of distinctions. Then comes a deeper state of relaxation when all distinctions disappear, when there is just a pure pool of consciousness. Then it may possibly come about that this ultimate question presents itself: Have I any hold whatever upon anything? And if this question still presents itself, then this state of consciousness usually involves - back, and one returns, step by step, into the ordinary states of consciousness. But one day the moment comes when it is possible to answer Yes, everything is abandoned; then final release has come. I speak of this because it is the simplest and most direct way, and at the same time the most difficult, almost impossible for any ordinary person. It is necessary for us to realize that this, the most direct of all ways, is not for ordinary people. Those who can go by this way and reach liberation, they are able to serve and fulfill the purpose which they themselves create, for they are free from all constraints: but such beings do not often arise on this earth.

Now we can leave this, the way of abandonment of every hindrance, every stoppage, and ask ourselves how can we make the transition into the state of freer consciousness. We must understand, as I said before, about the body being a depository of all our past life. As a result, there comes, for all of us, every kind of reaction; so we are not free people. We wish to behave in a certain way, but because of what has been deposited in us, what happens is not the same, and not what we intended. If we were to set ourselves to purify ourselves, step by step, of each of these taints that are in us, in our existence as we are today, the rest of our lives would not be sufficient. And we do not know how to do it. The doing of it is such a hard thing that this way, by means of self-discipline, of struggling with all one's defects one by one, is not practical. It is so for the very simple reason that one cannot do this work piecemeal. If you attempt to struggle with a defect in one part, one does not know what consequential changes there will be in another part. One gets rid of one fault, and one does not see that perhaps two other faults have arisen in its place. One has overcome some petty bad habit, and in place has come pride, a sense of superiority over others, worse a hundred times than the fault which one has eradicated! So that way of direct self-discipline is not only too hard, but not even a right way. It has been superseded by other ways. That is where the `technical' questions come. The obvious thing is that if you have faults, correct them and get rid of them: and if you have virtues, set yourself to exercise them. Make yourself a better man or woman by incessant struggle. That way is not technical; it is not intelligent. We need to be more intelligent than our own weaknesses.

We do have certain gifts that have been provided to enable us to do this work in a much more effective way. One of these gifts comes from the special character of the vibrations of sound. For a long time, it has been known that vibrations of sound have a certain effect on the human psyche and in all religions; the vibrations of sounds have played a part. They are capable of

being a very powerful spiritualizing force for man; it is from these that the Mantrams and the repetitive exercises, the prayers of all the different religions, originated. Sometimes these are so powerful that they are not made available to people who might misuse them, and this is why, very largely connected with the use of the vibrations of sounds, there are special precautions taken for people's access to them. But some are very well known and most people have heard of mantrams and of zikrs and of prayers. But let us take one that probably most of you know: it is the Prayer of the Heart. This was taught me by a starets of the Russian Orthodox Church. Some of you will have read the book 'The Way of the Pilgrim', or the Philokalia, and know how the fathers of the desert made use of these continuous prayers, all nominally based on St Paul's 'Pray without ceasing'. If you ask a Russian what is the prayer of the heart, he will probably translate it as 'Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me'. Many people try to use this, and they try to associate it with their heart. In reality, the true prayer of the heart is much simpler: it is simply, 'Gospodi Pomiloi' which comes into the old Slavonic liturgy. This has a certain vibration which enables it quite clearly and strongly to be pronounced in the heart, and anyone can soon discover that it can and does itself proceed in the heart. These vibrations in the heart, which belong to many of these practices, have a general effect on the whole of the body, of liberating from tensions and even from what could be called 'the consequences of the sins' of the body. When it is combined with fasting, with other practices which change the relationship between the consciousnesses of the body, it does produce a very wonderful spiritual progress in people, an awakening of the deeper consciousness penetrating in a way which is much more possible for people than the direct way I spoke about before. The sacred syllable of AUM also has this. In Islam, the usual thing which everyone knows is the word Allah which lends itself to being repeated in the heart. The dervishes also use sound in their secret movement. There is one very special one that does directly produce release from one's own past; it is very strange and extraordinary. It apparently originated in Central Asia and has found its way in different forms into many parts of the world, but is too sacred to repeat here and now. These mantrams, zikrs and prayers, with and without sound or with and without words, all have the effect for man of making the transition from the sensible world, of sensation, of thought, sight, sound and the rest of it, to another world which is also within this world, and which is connected with this world by vibrations. It is not quite right to call it the 'world of vibrations', because they are only the physical counterpart of what that world is. If you called it a world of energies it would be unfortunate, as we have associations with all kinds of the ordinary energies, but there is this world into which we have to go if we are to open up our spiritual life. This is why these things are made available. It is very seldom that what one gets out of books about this, or one hears talked about, are those that are really used, so you have to go with care and find someone who really knows. It was only through a remarkable Russian monk that I was able to learn that what I had always thought was the prayer of the heart was not that at all. Although vibrations are of very great importance, one must know that they are not so readily accessible; they can be misused to produce states of ecstasy for one's own enjoyment, or people may believe that they are making spiritual progress when they are using, for their own indulgence, the blissful states that are produced when one practices these spiritual exercises, the purpose of which is to get beyond, to become capable of being the instrument of a higher purpose. States of bliss are very good: there is an indication that something is right and one must not be afraid of them, but one must always know these states are only a gift way through which one has to pass and not one in which one must sit - on the contrary, one has to know that one has to be prepared to put this aside and go through the gate of suffering.

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But before we come to that, I want to speak about another extraordinary instrument given to us, and that is the instrument of breath. Breath has always been understood to be a spiritual reality. The word Atman, Ruh, Roh, Spiritus, Anima - all these words in all the languages and religions, which come from breath, are taken to be spiritual words. These words, stage by stage, lose their holiness so that now where once the word pneumatikos meant spiritual, today it means a kind of tyre. Where one used the word spiritus, the divine spirit which flows into everything, now we regard it as something to be drunk! We let these words go down and down. But in their origin, they were understood as we do not understand today, as the sacredness of breath. People knew that in breathing, man has access to spiritual forces, that are far beyond his ordinary experience, far beyond anything that we can do with our minds. Within the air that we breathe are spiritual energies of great subtlety - there are also energies that directly affect our psychic states. To know how to use breath is of course one of the great technical learnings connected with any spiritual path. As with vibrations, so also with breathing, there are many dangerous things; much misuse is possible, so that the teaching of breath control is always carefully regulated according to people's ability to use it, and their reliability in using it. But in spite of all these precautions, one must understand that the use of breath for spiritual development is an enormous facilitation. People who do not understand breathing exercises and do not practice them put a great handicap on themselves because they can so greatly shorten the transformation of certain parts of us, that what would take a lifetime can be done in a few years.

Only there is the other side, and everyone knows that this is emphasized in everything to do with breathing; it is very strong. Breathing is used for these purposes and can produce very different results and again produce states of ecstasy; and unfortunately, in teaching people to use breathing exercises, it can give exactly the same results as the taking of drugs. There is no difference between the two things because with drugs the same kind of state is produced without having the possibility of passing through to the finer levels. All artificially produced states have that great drawback; although one can come to authentic states of consciousness by taking drugs, always they come to a stop. If one is satisfied to have the state, then there is no more to be said: if the aim is to get beyond it, then one must know what one is about.

The combination of breathing and repetition exercises form the first stage techniques of most of the spiritual paths of the East. When I say first stage, I do not mean that they cease to have value at a later stage, but that they are taught when the pupil is ready for it, when there is reasonable confidence that he will not misuse what he learns, but that it will enable him to respond to what is offered in the further stages of the path. I think that one test of all this is stillness: if I have to make a decision as to whether I am going to show some particular spiritual exercise to someone, I might use the test as to whether this person is able to be quiet; are they able to be really still? If they can do this, then that indicates that they are ready for something. If they can remain still in the midst of manifestations, this is an even more important sign.

Now how does one proceed from this, from the right preparation of the physical body, and its organs of sight, hearing and the rest, and the functions of feeling, sex and thought? If that is all put in order, in man's inner or psychic states, his finer energies begin to be organized and harmonized, so that there is a real beginning of an inner life, independent of the life of his body, it is possible to proceed towards the further stages when other things are required. I have to say that it is not possible to go through the further stages without suffering. Suffering has been given

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to us as an instrument that is as valuable to us as breathing and the vibrations of sound - but it is a finer instrument. Those who have had to suffer physically, who have known how to profit from physical suffering, the weakness or the inability or even the direct pain of the body, they know that this has given them something that they could not have got otherwise. Perhaps they are able to recognise and accept that suffering is indeed a wonderful instrument that is given to us. It must be clearly understood that suffering is not an unhappy or miserable state - it is our imagination that turns suffering into this sort of thing. When people learn how to suffer and the value of suffering, they will know that it has no loss for them, and they are not less joyful. Many must have seen how people who have to suffer very much can be so extraordinarily joyful that one is in wonderment. But suppose that this kind of suffering is not given to us - and it is not given to everyone and some are unable to profit by it when it comes to them - does that mean that this instrument is denied us? The real suffering for man is the suffering of seeing himself as unable to fulfill the purpose of his existence. It is purgatory - to see that one wishes to serve God and one is unable to, because one is defective in oneself. The realisation that this prevents one from doing what one wants with the whole of one's being - this is the real suffering that purifies and transforms man. And with this there is an opening of consciousness to new worlds that are not accessible in other ways. I know from my many years of experience, how nearly all the things that I really value at this moment came through suffering.

The great thing is to realize that suffering and joy are not antithetical to or exclusive of one another. Joy is also necessary for man; it is the test for him that his life is right. There is a wonderful passage in 'The Shepherd of Hermas', one of the best early books that the Christians have, where the shepherd tells Hermas to put away grief for this destroys the spirit, that the spirit will not remain in the man who grieves. I remember many years ago I came across this and thought that this man really knows and understands. There is no point in willing this suffering - suffering for its own sake - or in mortifying oneself. That kind of false egoistic suffering has no profit, because one does not get what one wants, because one has lost something or fears to lose something. No liberation comes from that. The man, who understands suffering, understands also that this is inseparable from joy, therefore all grief disappears.