

Expanding Our Centre of Consciousness

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ALTHOUGH almost every spiritual tradition speaks of the divine nature in human beings, humanity is involved in suffering, brutality, and selfishness. Why are we in such a sorrowful condition? Is there any way out? Eastern philosophies as well as modern Theosophy say the origin of our present state is *avidyā*, ignorance, and that only the perception of Truth will set us free. *Avidyā* is not ignorance of common knowledge; rather, it is a lack of perception of who we really are, and what our relationship with the Universe is. Therefore the ultimate remedy for our innate illness is *viveka*, or spiritual discernment. This qualification is defined in many ways, but all of them are different expressions of the same essential idea: the discrimination between the Real and the unreal. Thus it is especially related to our faculty of perception.

Viveka has different aspects, as expressed in *At the Feet of the Master*, and its development has various stages, but we will focus particularly on the development of a capacity defined by Dr Annie Besant as being the essence of spirituality, that

is, the ability to intuit the unity of all life. In like manner, HPB said that ‘spirituality is not what we understand by the words “virtue” and “goodness”. It is the power of perceiving formless, spiritual essences’,¹ without being deluded by the gross aspect of the manifested world.

Most of us deeply feel we are just our personality, that is, the ‘me’, the one that is now reading, perceiving. We do not have actual consciousness of the unity of life; we have not developed ‘the power of perceiving the formless’. In our waking consciousness we only perceive the outer shell of the world through our five physical senses, which are very limited. Besides, we perceive it in terms of the inner (me) and the outer (the other). Our perception is confined to what is happening in ‘me’ at the personal level. We usually cannot feel in ourselves what is going on inside another person or being. Therefore, naturally, selfishness arises, because we directly experience our individual necessities, our pain, pleasure, hopes, and only in an indirect way do we realize other people’s feelings. That limitation is the very cause

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Expanding Our Centre of Consciousness

of our suffering, since we become identified with something that is fragile, small, separated, transient, and incomplete. Theosophical teachings, however, postulate that our real identity is eternal, whole, unconditioned. If we could perceive this, the problems born of our identification with the limited 'I' would automatically vanish. But is it possible to perceive in an unbounded way?

Many mystics in different cultures and times had the experience that consciousness is ubiquitous. This experience was described by J. Krishnamurti (JK) in the following words:

There was a man mending the road; that man was myself; the pickaxe he held was myself; the very stone which he was breaking up was a part of me; the tender blade of grass was my very being, and the tree beside the man was myself. I also could feel and think like the roadmender and I could feel the wind passing through the tree, and the little ant on the blade of grass I could feel. The birds, the dust, and the very noise were a part of me. . . . I was in everything, or rather everything was in me, inanimate and animate, the mountain, the worm and all breathing things.²

Thus we know, through the experience of the mystics, that the working of this extraordinary spiritual perception is a possibility for human consciousness; that we can perceive in a holistic way, feeling as if we were part of every living creature and even of every so-called 'non-living thing'. Let us examine, then, how we can have access to that kind of perception.

The psychological approach

When considering this subject from a Theosophical point of view, we find two approaches: the psychological and the occult. They are complementary, and, to use HPB's words, would lead us to gain 'a clear perception of the unity of the one energy operating in the manifested Cosmos'. We will begin by exploring the psychological approach, which is especially meant to remove obstacles, before building a different kind of perception. In order to have access to that complete perception, we have to discover first why it is that our consciousness works in such a limited way. In a talk with some friends, JK refers to this:

Wait, Sir, I am all that, the past and the present and the projected future; I am born in India with all the culture of 5,000 years. That is all my point. That is what I call consciousness . . . when you say you are a Hindu and I am a Muslim; when there is focalization through identification, there is then choice.³

According to Theosophical teachings, our real consciousness, that which endures life after life, is beyond the personal mind, emotions and physical body. In every new life it builds those vehicles for its expression in the lower realms. But then that consciousness is limited by them during incarnation. In fact, the *focalization* of the unbounded original consciousness, limiting its capacity to perceive from a wider perspective, is due to the *identification* with the personality. In her article on 'Morality and Pantheism', HPB wrote:

The Theosophist

The starting point of the 'pantheistic' (we use the word for want of a better one) system of morality is a clear perception of the unity of the one energy operating in the manifested Cosmos . . . The principal obstacle to the realization of this oneness is the inborn habit of man of always placing himself at the centre of the Universe. Whatever a man might act, think or feel, the irrepressible 'I' is sure to be the central figure. This, as will appear, on the slightest consideration, is that which prevents every individual from filling his proper sphere in existence, where he only is exactly in place and no other individual is.⁴

Thus the main problem seems to be the 'inborn habit' of identifying ourselves with our limited, temporary, personal vehicles of consciousness, with the centre 'I'. This personal consciousness of ours was formed in the infant as a result of the impact of impressions from the outer world upon the brain. Since then, that limited mind became the main means of perception during our waking consciousness. We are used to perceiving through it; we do not know anything else. As JK states:

What is the problem? I have been seeing only this fragment (pointing to a portion of the carpet) . . . My whole life has been spent in observing the fragment. You come along and say this is part of the whole, this would not exist if the other did not exist. But I cannot take my eyes off this fragment. I agree that this can only exist because of the whole carpet but I have

never, never looked at the whole carpet. I have never moved away from this . . . And I do not know how to remove my eyes and look at the whole carpet.⁵

We know, in theory, that our personal consciousness is only a fragmentary expression of a greater whole, the Individuality, or Higher Ego, but we are unable to realize that. We feel that we are this person; that this is our name, our age, work, features, etc. We do not know how to perceive in a different way, and there is a force that keeps our perception limited to that narrow field during our daily life. What is it? JK dwelt on this at length:

What is it that prevents total perception of this vast, complex, existence? . . . When I enter the room, one object catches my eye. The lovely bedspread, and I casually look at other things . . . the rest recedes, becomes very vague . . . Why has perception focused on that? . . . I see this whole field of life only in terms of pursuing pleasure . . . Does that prevent total perception? . . . How can the mind see the whole of the field when there is only the search for pleasure? . . . What is the factor of pleasure? . . . Pleasure is always personal. . . So, as long as the mind is pursuing pleasure as the 'me', how can I see this whole thing? I must understand pleasure, not suppress it, not deny it. So, it is important to see the whole, not the particular.⁶

Pleasure is a sensation born in that limited centre of consciousness, the

Expanding Our Centre of Consciousness

complex body-mind. And as long as our consciousness is pursuing sensation, it will be bound to work through the personality. Damodar K. Mavalankar, one of the most prominent characters among early Theosophists, wrote:

The desires and passions are, so to say, chains (*real magnetic chains*) which bind down the mind to these earthly carnal enjoyments and appetites. And he who wishes to rise superior to the Māyā which pervades this world must do so by breaking those adamantine chains which hold him a prisoner in this transient world.⁷

Thus, we should examine ourselves and ask: How are we living? Are we mostly seeking personal pleasure in the different activities in which we take part? Is our daily attitude one of self-protection, self-justification, and so on, trying not to be disturbed? If it is so, we are constantly strengthening the fragmentation of consciousness that is the 'me', keeping our consciousness in the prison of personal sensation. It is not that we have to refuse pleasure as if it were sinful. If it comes, we experience it, in the same way as we experience unpleasant things. Both are part of life. But the fact that we are seeking for some kind of pleasure in almost every situation means that bodily sensations have a great influence on our consciousness. That is why, as we read in *Practical Occultism*, 'The first great basic delusion you have to get over is the identification of yourself with the physical body'.⁸ Unfortunately, it is not just a question of studying or talking about it. In most

cases, study has to be the first step because it points out the direction. But if there is no real willingness to live according to it, this knowledge is of little use. In this connection HPB wrote:

Knowledge or *jñāna* is divided into two classes . . . — *paroksha* and *aparoksha*. The former kind of knowledge consists in intellectual assent to a stated proposition, the latter in the actual realization of it. . . . From the study of the sacred philosophy, . . . *paroksha*, knowledge (or shall we say *belief*?) in the unity of existence is derived, but without the practice of morality that knowledge cannot be converted into the highest kind of knowledge or *aparoksha-jñāna*. . . . It availeth naught to intellectually grasp the notion of your being everything and Brahman, if it is not realized in practical acts of life You cannot be one with ALL, unless all your acts, thoughts, and feelings synchronize with the onward march of Nature.⁹

That is why real spiritual knowledge does not come merely through study, but through an integral way of life that also includes meditation, self-knowledge, and an unselfish attitude. If we are serious about it, we should train our consciousness daily to live beyond that centre of pleasure that is the 'me'.

The occultist approach

We have seen that, according to HPB, 'The principal obstacle to the realization of this oneness is the inborn habit of man of always placing himself at the

The Theosophist

centre of the Universe.’ Let us ponder over these words from an occultist’s perspective. The problem here is that we are conditioned by the sense of being that centre ‘where we only are exactly in place’. As stated before, consciousness is not necessarily limited by space or form, but it is able to become aware of what is taking place in other expressions of the One Life. Since it is not habituated to perceive beyond the personal centre, our practice should involve an attempt to decentralize our consciousness, thus getting used to expanding it for a wider perception. How do we do that?

The practice of HPB’s Diagram of Meditation is very useful in this endeavour.¹⁰ The whole Diagram is designed to help us break the identification with our lower consciousness. The subject of this Diagram is too vast to be thoroughly discussed here and we will explore it in a future article, but we can refer to one portion of it. HPB suggests that we should gradually habituate our consciousness to perceive in a non-centred way, trying to live with a ‘Perpetual Presence in imagination in all Space and Time’. ‘From this’, she adds, ‘originates a substratum of memory of universality.’ This means that we should try to limit the focalization of consciousness to the spot where we are in space and time. It is not an easy thing to do, but the very effort in that direction develops the capacity to habituate our consciousness to perceive in a different way. We can use whatever strategy we find useful. When walking, for example, we could try to feel that we are everything

that moves around, ‘our’ body being just one of those objects. Or we could sit on a bench in a park and try to feel we are everywhere, or that our existence has neither beginning nor form. Then we should gradually incorporate that abstract feeling into our daily routine.

There is another interesting exercise suggested by C. W. Leadbeater:

During meditation one may try to think of the Supreme Self in everything and everything in it. Try to understand how the self is endeavouring to express itself through the form. One method of practice for this is to try to identify your consciousness with that of various creatures, such as a fly, an ant, or a tree. Try to see and feel things as they see and feel them, until as you pass inwards all consciousness of the tree or the insect falls away, and the life of the LOGOS appears.¹¹

Here Leadbeater points out two important things. The first is: ‘During meditation try to think of the Supreme Self in everything and everything in it’, which is another aspect of HPB’s meditation just mentioned. And second, he advises us to identify ourselves with the lower forms of life. Again, it is not an easy exercise because it involves entering into a new realm, but we can find some interesting hints in the words of JK, who has also suggested a similar experiment:

It seems to me that one of our greatest difficulties is to see for ourselves, really, clearly, not only outward things but inward life. . . . Have you ever experi-

Expanding Our Centre of Consciousness

mented with looking at an objective thing like a tree without any of the associations, any of the knowledge you have acquired about it, without any words forming a screen between you and the tree and preventing you from seeing it as it actually is? Try it and see what actually takes place when you observe the tree with all your being, with the totality of your energy. In that intensity you will find that there is no observer at all; there is only attention.¹²

To succeed in this kind of exercise, we have to be able to silence our personal

consciousness. All of these exercises may be tested by oneself in a spirit of investigation. They will gradually develop the power of perception that is latent in every one of us. Undoubtedly, when this kind of spiritual discernment awakens, an important transformation will take place. As Leadbeater said after describing his exercise:

When we know quite certainly that we are part of a whole, we do not so much mind where this particular fragment of it may be, or through what experiences it may be passing.¹³ ✧

References

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3. J. Krishnamurti, *Tradition and Revolution*, Dialogue 27: 'Intelligence and the Instrument', Bombay, 15 February 1971.
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6. *idem*.
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8. HPB, *Practical Occultism*, 'Some Suggestions for Daily Life'.
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10. HPB, *The Theosophist*, May 2003, 'Diagram of Meditation', pp. 308-9.
11. *The Inner Life*, 'Meditation'.
12. JK, *Freedom from the Known*, ch. 11.
13. *loc. cit.*

When the Self is found, when a man realizes, however imperfectly, his unity with the Supreme, when he begins really to break the bonds of the heart, then it is that, seeking liberation, he becomes intent upon the welfare of the world.

Annie Besant