The Process of Self-Transformation

A Spiritual Guide for Effective Living

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Taken from Chapter One: The Life We Face

We face two problems in life: the personal and the social.

THE PERSONAL PROBLEM

On the personal level, we are all confronted with the problems of unhappiness, of fear, of worry, of the pressure of society, of physical and emotional pain, sickness, death and a thousand other matters that threaten the serenity, meaningfulness and happiness in life. No one is exempted from these threats. From the moment we are born to the day we die, life is a constant balancing act between satisfying personal needs and dealing with external constraints. We are born into a life of conflict. The majority of humanity are born to parents who do not know how to handle life's conflicts. Children learn their parents' faulty ways of coping with these conflicts, thus growing up insecure, defensive and lost in the jungle of life.

Are there time-tested ways of effectively dealing with these problems?

There are. From time immemorial, there have been sages who have discovered and transmitted to later generations enduring solutions to the dilemmas of living. These wise beings come from diverse cultures, races and historical periods. Their findings are not secret. They have not kept their discoveries to themselves. Yet, unfortunately, these insights are not as well known to the world as they ought to be. Our educational institutions barely give attention to them, which is regrettable, considering how many school years are devoted to the learning of polynomials, grammatical rules, historical information, social codes, scientific knowledge, etc., much of which we don't even use when we grow to adulthood.

For example, how many schools teach their children how to handle fear? I don't know of a single one that systematically does so. On the contrary, almost all schools use fear as a tool to compel students to follow rules. Instead of freeing children from fear, they contribute to the accumulation of fears in the child. As a result, children grow up carrying psychological baggage that adds to their unhappiness and unwholesome life patterns.

How many schools teach their students how to deal with worry? Again, I don't know of any. Yet, worry is the scourge of humanity. Fear and worry are two of the most unwholesome coping mechanisms of humanity that contribute to human misery. They breed insecurity, which in turn breeds aggressiveness, which eventually begets violence.

Yet, enough is known about how to handle fear and worry to be able to help billions of human beings live with lesser burdens and misery. That the educational establishments in all countries have not incorporated such basic insights into their curriculum is a sad commentary on our collective wisdom. Humanity today is more concerned about earning a living than with learning how to live. People are more occupied with how to compete than how to excel. They are too busy building up protective defenses to guard their insecurities, and have very little time to explore their higher potentials as human beings.

For many years, I have been involved in conducting study groups in the Theosophical Society on such subjects as spirituality, transpersonal consciousness, meditation, karma and destiny. Initially, I could not help but note that although these ideas were eagerly accepted, it was obvious from some of our attitudes and behaviors that this knowledge was not becoming integrated into our daily lives. For example, speakers and participants would talk about qualifications for the spiritual life, which include the cessation of anger and selfishness, yet there were no sessions devoted to how to actually handle anger and selfishness.

A gap clearly existed between the ideal and the actual. Discussions about the ideal can often lull us into thinking that we are going in that direction, when in fact we are not. We feel satisfied that we are studying it, that we know about it, but strangely we are not worried that we do not live it.

The Self-Transformation Seminar arose out of this need to bridge the gap between the ideal and the actual. If we talk about love, what exactly do we mean in terms of our relationship with our spouses and

children, friends and co-workers, etc.? Is it a verbal declaration of love? Is it a behavioral expression of care? Or is it a state of consciousness within? Or all of these? How do we actualize each one of these? What are the obstacles in the way of their realization?

The proof of the pudding is in the eating, we have heard it said. Hence, we must ask questions about the end results of our studies and the declaration of our ideals. Is there really inner peace in our daily life? Are we free of fear and chronic worry? Are we easily hurt when someone unthoughtfully says something unkind to us? Do we get depressed? Do people around us sense or feel our care for them?

The Self-Transformation Seminar teaches that it is possible for a person to grow toward states of serenity and meaningfulness, with the capacity to effectively deal with the unavoidable conflicts in living. One can be free from the shackles of fear, anger and resentment and awaken to the possibility of genuine love and caring. It affirms that it is possible to explore the higher potentials of human life — such as spirituality, intuition and transcendence — without having to abandon the circumstantial duties that we are born into or grow into.

THE SOCIAL PROBLEM

The social problem must inevitably be faced by the individual. One cannot escape from it. Even if one goes to the mountains to withdraw from people, such a withdrawal is in itself an attempt to deal with the problems of human relationship, whether they are interpersonal, societal or global.

Interpersonal. If we ponder on it, we will find that virtually all of our unhappiness is due to problems in relationship. As one friend put it, "I know what hell is. Hell is people." When we read of businesspeople who commit suicide due to business failures or bankruptcy, they do so not because of money but because of the fear of humiliation. Psychologists have observed that the number one fear of humanity is fear of rejection (which includes fear of failure and fear of public speaking). We fear rejection more than death and pain.

If we look into the conflict, anger, fear and resentment in interpersonal relationships, we find that they are rooted in our individual conditionings, attitudes and character. Fear, for example, is the result of the conditionings of our elders, schools or the media. Thus, to deal with fear, it is not the object of fear that

we must look into but the conditionings that we have acquired.

We need, then, to transform ourselves, not other people.

Societal. The social environment is another chronic source of human problems. This includes crimes, tyranny, loss of freedom, injustice, corruption, competition, and many other forms of social disorder. Many thinkers have inquired into the nature of the ideal society, ranging from Plato in his *Republic* to Thomas More in his *Utopia.* Two and a half thousand years of such inquiry have not made the world a more ideal place. In many ways, it has become worse.

In the meantime, the legal structure of society has become more and more complex. Every year, thousands of new laws are enacted, from national congresses to the smallest village councils. They complicate life, and we find that we are still very far from the utopia that we seek.

There is one fundamental reason why we cannot create that ideal society. That reason is ourselves, we human beings. Because of our very own present natures, no ideal society is possible.

More than twenty years ago, I visited Auroville, the visionary community in South India established in honor of Sri Aurobindo, the famous yogi. A guide brought us around. The residents numbered several thousands, coming from different countries around the world. Before they were finally accepted as residents, they had to go through probation, which I learned took almost a year. Aside from residential houses, Auroville had a school, small factories and stores. But one place mentioned by the guide struck me: it was the *free store.* It was like any other store, except that if you saw anything in the store that you wanted, you could have it — for free. The only request made of you was that if you had anything that you didn't need in your house, you might want to donate it to the store.

I asked the guide how long the store had been in existence.

"Two and a half years," he said.

"What is the difference between the store now compared to the beginning?"

"Well, today, there are more items in the store than at the beginning."

Thinking about Manila, the city where I had come from, I saw that it was not possible at all to put up such a store there. When I ask audiences in various places what would happen if they put up such a store in their cities, they invariably laugh. "It will last only one day, and everything will be gone." Some would

even say "one hour."

But what is the difference between our cities and Auroville? Why can't we do what is possible in Auroville?

The answer is the people. Those who join Auroville, I presume, are individuals who have gone beyond the acquisitive and greedy attitudes of the average citizen of the world. They see that cooperation and mutual concern are the keys to social stability and harmony. It drove home to my mind that indeed if we want our societies to change, we must start with the individuals that compose such societies. Where there is no individual transformation, society will remain essentially stagnant, despite dazzling technological advances.

More than fifteen years after my visit, I went back to Auroville to see if the free store was still in existence. What do you think I saw?

There were now two free stores.

Sometime after my first visit to Auroville, the world witnessed the crumbling of the communist states in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In a very short time, almost all of them discarded communism and went back to the free enterprise system. Naturally, there was a widespread observation that after seventy years of experimentation, communism had failed. Marx had been proven wrong.

But amidst all these commentaries about the failure of communism, one thing seems unnoticed: we forget that communism is thriving successfully all over the world. It has been and continues to be implemented by numerous communities that have lasted for hundreds of years, without coercion or threat. The members of such communities are apparently happy staying within such communistic societies, for they are free to leave anytime they want to — without reprisal or condemnation. In fact, they seem to be a happier lot than the rest of us. Who are these groups?

These are the monastic and religious orders in the various religions of the world: the Buddhist monks, the Trappist monks, the Jesuit order, the Carmelites, etc. These communities implemented the famous dictum of Marx centuries before Marx was born: to each according to their needs, and from each according to their abilities. The able and healthy members of such communities work earnestly without additional monetary incentives, and the weak and feeble ones receive care even if they hardly contribute

to the work of their community. There is little complaint about such inequality, and we don't hear of court cases filed against unfair compensation.

Why couldn't the former Soviet Union, with its vast military and police powers, carry out the communistic principles of Marx but these religious communities could, without the benefit of even a security guard to impose discipline among themselves?

Again, we are compelled to conclude that the difference is the people. It is not the rules, not the laws, that make the essential difference. It is the people. The citizens of the socialist countries, as much as those of the capitalist countries, are generally self-centered, acquisitive and covetous individuals who may be willing to violate laws in order to meet their wants and desires. The people in the spiritual communities, on the other hand, have to a certain extent transcended the selfish, acquisitive tendencies of the layperson.

In the business world, competitors are ready to wipe out each other. Why? Why can't they agree to live and let live? Again, it is due to mutual insecurity and distrust, two attitudes that are at the root of a host of social problems. While these negative attitudes remain within us, true social harmony will remain an elusive dream.

Global. In about five thousand years of recorded history, war has been the scourge of humanity. Everybody — with very few exceptions — does not like war. No mother would like to send her children to the battlefields. We associate war with barbarism, when human beings were governed by their amygdalas (the mammalian brain) rather than by their human brains. As we become more "civilized," however, we have become more sophisticated and less barbaric, and yet we have become more capable of evil than before. Wars have become more harrowing. Instead of bows and arrows, we use land mines, biological weapons, poison gases, nuclear bombs, all of which kill not only the so-called "enemies" but also innocent civilians, women and children, who have nothing to do with the political or military agenda of the leaders.

Albert Einstein was once asked what kind of weapon will be used in World War III. He said, "I don't know. But I know what they will use in World War IV. They will use stones."

Do pacts and treaties solve the problems of war? The lessons in the twentieth century are proof that at best they are the lull between storms. The First World War was widely considered as the last war. But

barely twenty years later, a worse world war broke out, unleashing the most frightful weapons humanity has known, the V2 bombers and the atomic bomb.

During the Second World War, a total of 56.4 million people died. We assumed that since its end in 1945, the world is now enjoying more than half a century of peace. Right? Wrong. In the past half century, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, more than 20 million people have been killed due to wars and conflicts in various parts of the world.

The solution to global conflicts cannot be found in arms buildups that are meant to serve as deterrents. Neither can it be found in treaties and agreements, though they are very helpful in creating interim peace. The solution can only be found in our collective maturity, when a significant percentage of the world's population has transcended the personal and social conditionings at the root of international insecurity, fear and distrust, and when they have awakened a higher level of consciousness that sees humanity as an indivisible family, regardless of color, religion, nationality or race.

THE SELF-TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

The self-transformation process is an approach to the inner change necessary for resolving both the personal and the social problems of life. The process is not new. It is found in the age-old wisdom traditions all over the world, both ancient and modern. Research continues to affirm the validity of the principles of this approach.