

Positive and Negative Teaching

THE PATH WAS rough and dusty, and it led down to a small town below. A few trees remained scattered on the hillside, but most of them had been cut down for firewood, and one had to climb to a good height to find rich shade. Up there the trees were no longer scrubby and mauled by man; they grew to full height, with thick branches and normal foliage. The people would cut down a branch to allow their goats to eat the leaves, and when it was bare they would reduce it to firewood. There was a scarcity of wood at the lower levels, and now they were going higher, climbing and destroying. Rains were not as plentiful as they used to be; the population was increasing, and the people had to live. There was hunger and one lived as indifferently as one died. There were no wild animals about here, and they must have gone higher up. There were a few birds scratching among the bushes, but even they looked worn out, with some feathers broken. A jay, white and black, was scolding raucously, flying from limb to limb of a solitary tree.

It was getting warm, and it would be very hot by midday. There had not been enough rain for many years. The earth was parched and cracked, the few trees were covered with brown dust, and there was not even the morning dew. The sun was relentless, day after day, month in and month out, and the doubtful rainy season was still far away. Some goats went up the hill, with a boy looking after them. He was surprised to see anyone there, but he wouldn't smile, and with a grave look he followed the goats. It was a lonely place, and there was the silence of the coming heat.

Two women came down the path carrying firewood on their heads. One was old and the other quite young, and the burdens they carried looked rather heavy. Each had balanced on her head, protected by a roll of cloth, a long bundle of dried branches tied together with a green vine, and she held it in place with one hand. Their bodies swung freely as they came down the hill with a light, running gait. They had nothing on their feet, though the path was rough. The feet seemed to find their own way, for the women never looked down; they held their heads very straight, their eyes bloodshot and distant. They were very thin, their ribs showing, and the older woman's hair was matted and unwashed. The girl's hair must have been combed and oiled at one time, for there were still some clean, sparkling strands; but she too was exhausted, and there was a weariness about her. Not long ago she must have sung and played with other children but that was all over. Now, collecting wood among these hills was her life, and would be till she died, with a respite now and then with the coming of a child.

Down the path we all went. The small country town was several miles away, and there they would sell their burden for a pittance, only to begin again tomorrow. They were chatting, with long intervals of silence. Suddenly the younger one told her mother she was hungry, and the mother replied that they were born with hunger, lived with hunger, and died with hunger; that was their lot. It was the statement of a fact; in her voice there was no reproach, no anger, no hope. We continued down that stony path. There was no observer listening, pitying, and walking behind them. He was not part of them out of love and pity; he was them; he had ceased and they were. They were not the strangers he had met up the hill, they were of him; his were the hands that held the bundles; and the sweat, the exhaustion the smell, the hunger, were not theirs, to be shared and sorrowed over. Time and space had ceased. There were no thoughts in our heads, too tired to think; and if we did think, it was to sell the wood, eat, rest, and begin again. The feet on the stony path never hurt, nor the sun overhead. There were only two of us going down that accustomed hill, past that well where we drank as usual, and on across the dry bed of a remembered stream.

"I have read and listened to some of your talks," he said, "and to me, what you say appears very negative; there is in it no directive no positive way of life. This oriental outlook is most destructive, and look where it has landed the Orient. Your negative attitude, and especially your insistence that there must be freedom from all thought, is very misleading to us westerners, who are active and industrious by temperament and necessity. What you are teaching is altogether contrary to our way of life."

If one may point out, this division of people as of the West or of the East is geographic and arbitrary, is it not? It has no fundamental significance. Whether we live east or west of a certain line, whether we are brown, black, white, or yellow, we are all human beings, suffering and hoping, fearful and believing; joy and pain exist here as they exist there. Thought is not of the West or of the East, but man divides it according to his conditioning. Love is not geographic held as sacred on one continent and denied on another. The division of human beings is for economic and exploiting purposes. This does not mean that individuals are not different in temperament, and so on; there is similarity, and yet there is difference. All this is fairly obvious and psychologically factual, is it not?

"It may be to you, but our culture, our way of life, is entirely different from that of the East. Our scientific knowledge, slowly developing since the days of ancient Greece, is now immense. East and West are developing along two different lines."

Seeing the difference, we must yet be aware of the similarity. The outward expressions may and do vary, but behind these outward forms and manifestations the urges, compulsions, longings and fears are similar. Do not let us be deceived by words. Both here and there, man wants to have peace and plenty, and to find something more than material happiness. Civilizations may vary according to climate, environment, food and so on, but culture throughout the world is fundamentally the same: to be compassionate, to shun evil, to be generous not to be envious, to forgive, and so on. Without this fundamental culture, any civilization, whether here or there, will disintegrate or be destroyed. Knowledge may be acquired by the so-called backward peoples, they can very soon learn the 'knowhow' of the West; they too can be warmongers, generals, lawyers, policemen, tyrants, with concentration camps and all the rest of it. But culture is an entirely different matter. The love of God and the freedom of man are not so easily come by and without these, material welfare doesn't mean much.

"You are right in that, sir, but I wish you would consider what I said about your teachings being negative. I really would like to understand them, and don't think me rude if I appear somewhat direct in my statements."

What is negative and what is positive? Most of us are used to being told what to do. The giving and following of directions is considered to be positive teaching. To be led appears to be positive, constructive, and to those who are conditioned to follow, the truth that following is evil seems negative, destructive. Truth is the negation of the false, not the opposite of the false. Truth is entirely different from the positive and the negative, and a mind which thinks in terms of the opposites can never be aware of it.

"I am afraid I do not fully understand all this. Would you please explain a little more?"

You see, sir, we are used to authority and guidance. The urge to be guided springs from the desire to be secure, to be protected, and also from the desire to be successful. This is one of our deeper urges, is it not?

"I think it is, but without protection and security, man would..."

Please let us go into the matter and not jump to conclusions. In our urge to be secure, not only as individuals, but as groups, nations and races, have we not built a world in which war, within and outside of a particular society, has become the major concern?

"I know; my son was killed in a war across the seas."

Peace is a state of mind; it is the freedom from all desire to be secure. The mind-heart that seeks security must always be in the shadow of fear. Our desire is not only for material security, but much more for inner, psychological security, and it is this desire to be inwardly secure through virtue, through belief, through a nation, that creates limiting and so conflicting groups and ideas. This desire to be secure, to reach a coveted end, breeds the acceptance of direction, the following of example, the worship of success the authority of leaders saviours, Masters, gurus, all of which is called positive teaching; but it is really thoughtlessness and imitation.

"I see that; but is it not possible to direct or be directed without making oneself or another into an authority, a saviour?"

We are trying to understand the urge to be directed, are we not?

What is this urge? Is it not the outcome of fear? Being insecure, seeing impermanency about one, there is the urge to find something secure, permanent; but this urge is the impulse of fear. Instead of understanding what fear is, we run away from it, and the very running away is fear. One takes flight into the known, the known being beliefs, rituals, patriotism, the comforting formulas of religious teachers the reassurances of priests, and so on. These in turn bring conflict between man and man, so the problem is kept going from one generation to another. If one would solve the problem, one must explore and understand the root of it. This so-called positive teaching, the what-to-think of religions, including Communism, gives continuity to fear; so positive teaching is destructive.

"I think I am beginning to see what your approach is, and I hope my perception is correct."

It is not a personal, opinionated approach; there is no personal approach to truth, any more than there is to the discovery of scientific facts. The idea that there are separate paths to truth, that truth has different aspects, is unreal; it is the speculative thought of the intolerant trying to be tolerant.

"One has to be very careful, I see, in the use of words. But I would like, if I may, to go back to a point which I raised earlier. Since most of us have been educated to think - or have been taught what to think, as you put it - , will it not bring us only more confusion when you keep on saying in different ways that all thought is conditioned and that one must go beyond all thought?"

To most of us, thinking is extraordinarily important; but is it? It has a certain importance, but thought cannot find that which is not the product of thought. Thought is the result of the known, therefore it cannot fathom the unknown, the unknowable. Is not thought desire, desire for material necessities, or for the highest spiritual goal? We are talking, not about the thought of a scientist at work in the laboratory, or the thought of an absorbed mathematician, and so on, but about thought as it operates in our daily life, in our everyday contacts and responses. To survive, we are forced to think. Thinking is a process of survival, whether of the individual or of a nation. Thinking, which is desire in both its lowest and its highest form, must ever be self-enclosing, conditioning. Whether we think of the universe, of our neighbour, of ourselves, or of God, all our thinking is limited, conditioned, is it not?

"In the sense you are using that word `thinking', I suppose it is. But does not knowledge help to break down this conditioning."

Does it? We have accumulated knowledge about so many aspects of life - medicine, war, law, science - and there is at least some knowledge of ourselves, of our own consciousness. With all this vast store of information, are we free from sorrow, war, hate? Will more knowledge free us? One may know that war is inevitable as long as the individual, the group, or the nation is ambitious, seeking power, yet one continues in the ways that lead to war. Can the centre which breeds antagonism, hate, be radically transformed through knowledge? Love is not the opposite of hate; if through knowledge hate is changed to love, then it is not love. This change brought about by thought, by will, is not love, but merely another self-protective convenience.

"I don't follow this at all, if I may say so."

Thought is the response of what has been, the response of memory, is it not? Memory is tradition, experience, and its reaction to any new experience is the outcome of the past; so experience is always strengthening the past. The mind is the result of the past, of time; thought is the product of many yesterdays. When thought seeks to change itself, trying to be or not to be this or that, it merely perpetuates itself under a different name. Being the product of the known, thought can never experience the unknown; being the result of time, it can never understand the timeless, the eternal. Thought must cease for the real to be. You see, sir, we are so afraid to lose what we think we have, that we never go into these things very deeply. We look at the surface of ourselves and repeat words and phrases that have very little significance; so we remain petty, and breed antagonism as thoughtlessly as we breed children.

"As you said, we are thoughtless in our seeming thoughtfulness. I shall come again if I may."