

THE VALUE OF UNCERTAINTY

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We journey into the unknown through a trackless jungle. If we are truthful to ourselves, we must admit that we do not know what it is that we seek; we do not even know that there is anything to be found. If we already knew it, there would be no search: we would have only to recall it to mind.

All that we have heard about God, the Spirit, Atman, the Void, derives at its best from other people's experience; and we have not yet shared that experience. It may be their knowledge, but it is not ours; and that is why we are still seekers and not finders. The experience they claim is so foreign to what we call 'normal' waking experience that we cannot share it, even by comparison with familiar events. We cannot even be sure that we understand their words in the senses that they use them.

We hear of a path, even of many paths that lead to the same goal. Yet no one who has blazed a trail through the jungle of his mind has thereby left a trail in ours. We cannot follow in his footsteps. No one but ourselves has ever trodden or can ever tread our private jungles.

Beyond the jungle, they say, there lies a mystery. But the mists that shroud it are not dispersed for us when they melt before another seeker's gaze.

The mystery comes to the very edge of the jungle and entices us with promises of joy, knowledge, power, and fulfillment. We see its reflections in the mysteries of birth and death, the joys of love, temporal power, the satisfactions of appetites, and the mysteries of the material universe. Yet the very solidity of the mirrors makes us doubt our perception of the reflected mystery.

In the face of these inherent uncertainties, what is it that drives us to seek? It is not just the voices of those who affirm the reality of the goal, for there are as many, perhaps more, voices that deny it. Nor is it just the tendency of the human mind to evade the immediacy of real life by pursuing abstractions: religion may sometimes be an opiate, but no real search for the ground of being can be construed as an escape from reality.

There is something in us that drives us to question and to seek the answers to our questions. There is something in us that responds to the answers given by those who have found, and responds to their affirmation of an ultimate reality which can be experienced. It is as though that "something" does already know what we seek. It responds, as the string of a violin vibrates when the note to which it is tuned is sounded by another instrument.

This subtle resonance stirs us on a level as deep and as difficult to isolate as the homing instinct of our animal natures. Often, we seek to satisfy the longings it inspires with outer substitutes that seem to harmonize with its urgings. We may join a church or a religious society, take up the practice of yoga, communicate with the dead, become followers of the fashionable guru, or just remain content with reading books and trying to be good. And if, as so many people do, we become bigots in support of our chosen sect, it is because the inner resonance is so small in relation to the doubts that invade us that we dare not let go of the one bit of the harmony we have recognized.

We seem, in fact, to be caught between the rationalizations of the surface mind and the urgings of something so deep as to be almost unrecognizable as part of ourselves. And since we are normally aware of things only when they find their way into the surface mind, the terms in which we become aware of this urge depend on how our surface minds interpret it. The divergences of these interpretations run through the whole gamut of possible human attitudes.

If we are fortunate, we may be able in one lifetime to leave these outer reflections of the inner call—reflections distorted in the troubled waters of life—and pass to a clearer formulation of what it is we feel ourselves called to seek. But we are still apt to accept the ready-made formulations of religious and philosophical systems. The inner resonances now sound more clearly, and we find ourselves responding to words, phrases, and concepts. Feeling wells up within us, triggered by names and ideas that seem infused with the being and power of what they represent. And here lies a trap for the unwary, for we are apt to take the concept for the reality and subtly assume that our pleasurable feeling is experience of what we seek.

A time comes when we need to question the terms of our search, terms drawn from the religious or philosophical systems with which we are familiar, and which arouse what we feel to be the right sorts of resonances in our beings. These terms are all very well so far as they go, because they have the validity that inheres in anything that has withstood the test of time. For countless generations they have expressed man's faith in an ultimate knowledge, and they were used by men who achieved that knowledge. We may even argue that we need no other terms. Adequately or inadequately these terms express our aim and we humbly seek only to approach the mystery which others, greater than ourselves, have unveiled.

Yet a niggling doubt remains. Despite the promptings of the soul and faith in whatever teachings are received, we know that in this search there can be no substitute for personal experience. We are not looking merely for an adequate philosophy which will put the problems of life into a rational perspective and so make them more bearable. We are not looking for someone to tell us the secrets of existence—as if such secrets could be told. We seek the answer that only we can know, just as only we can eat

our own meals.

We know, or ought to know, that when the experience comes it will probably be so unlike anything we have ever imagined that we shall have to struggle to find terms to describe it. If we then use the familiar terms, it will be for the sake of being understood by others, and not because those terms are necessarily the best.

Such reflections on what is likely to be our state when we achieve our goal should make us cautious of using terms to describe it in a manner that suggests our already knowing what we are seeking. We may have feelings, such as I have called the promptings of the soul. We may have had experiences of the psychic sort which enlarge the horizons of our world and, at least, allow us to expect that there may be something more beyond. But we cannot know what it is we are looking for. We can know it only by experiencing it. And to experience it we have to seek. But seek for what?

We may justifiably say that we seek certainty, or that we seek to discover our place in the cosmic whole. Perhaps it would be more truthful to say that we seek to discover whether we have any place and whether there is any cosmic order to have a place in. The philosopher's prayer, "Oh God—if there be a God—Save my soul—if I have a soul," is perhaps not so stupid as it sounds.

This is the point at which we must come to terms with our own uncertainties. Instead of quelling them with affirmations of faith, we must learn to live with them. Indeed, instead of uncertainty being a hindrance, it is now seen as the spur which drives us to effort, for we cannot any longer tolerate substitutes for personal experience.

It is perhaps here that the seeker appreciates that all the talk about there being many paths to the one goal expresses only a half truth, for all paths end where the individual turns away from teaching, discussion, and obedient performance of set practices to face the trackless unknown of his inner being. To say that he follows in the footsteps of his predecessors is but metaphor; all he has is their assurance that they found their way through. Occasionally he may find recognizable similarities between his experience and that of another man, and the effect can be as encouraging as finding a tree blazed by another pioneer in unmapped forest. But the next sign he marks may have been left by a different pioneer on an apparently different route. None of these marks necessarily indicates that he is nearing his goal; they are indicative only in that others have been there. Like all pioneers, they may have had an aim, but they followed no path; and the route they followed may not have been the shortest, for each seeker takes the route dictated by his individual nature.

I am assuming that the seeker has already spent many questing years thinking, reading, discussing, and meeting teachers—possibly even meeting men whom he believes to have attained to the goal. And he may have submitted himself to one or

more spiritual disciplines. All these have had their effect on him. He may feel himself a changed man, sure where he was previously uncertain, awake where he was previously asleep, more mature, controlled, and at peace with himself and the world.

He has, in effect, gained sufficient experience to be sure that the results of the prescribed disciplines vindicate his having followed the urgings that motivated his search. But the disciplines do not by themselves bring him to the fulfillment of his search. They may refine his nature, free his emotional potential, and clarify his ideas, but, without the fire of aspiration, the burning desire to plunge into the unknown territory of the spirit, nothing "spiritual" will happen. He may become a remarkably disciplined man or a remarkably integrated and free man. He may, indeed, be higher in the scale of human evolution than most. But, if he is honest with himself, he will admit that there is still a core of uncertainty in his being which waits to be filled with something, something he may have tasted, whose presence he yearns for, an indefinable something whose promise of ultimate fulfillment has supported him throughout his years of seeking.

It is this "something" which he has habitually termed God, Spirit, the Void, the Goal of Life, etc., words that are but suggestive symbols which, by common agreement, represent what cannot be represented. If he is aware of this, then he knows that he is truly not seeking anything, and that to define his search in terms which, even if they are not descriptive, carry the associated value-attitudes of the systems that coined them, may result in vitiating his efforts.

These word associations also tend to attach themselves to the practices prescribed by the same schools that use the words. Thus the usefulness of mantra repetition may seem vitiated because the words of the formula are associated with Hindu, Muslim, Christian, or Buddhist theological or philosophical formulations. Meditation may be understood to mean only those particular mental exercises prescribed by a particular school and associated with particular mental and emotional attitudes. Such problems can be overcome when it is seen that, when many different schools prescribe variants of the same exercise, it is an indication that the exercise itself has recognized value, irrespective of the coloring attached to it in different localities.

The seeker thus finds that there are a number of exercises which common experience has found useful in the primary objective of withdrawing attention from outward sensing. They are well-trying tools, as common to the seeker as hammer and saw are to the carpenter. He may use them or not, as he pleases. And he may construct new tools, or variants of old ones, which are adapted to the peculiarities of his own nature.

He should also know that tools serve different purposes according to who is using them. No tool, no discipline, no practice is in itself sufficient to take a man to the term of the inner search, whether the seeker uses it himself or whether he surrenders himself to

be worked on by his teacher. In one way or another, this is expressed in many traditions by the saying that the final attainment is given by divine grace. The operation of that "grace" is in some way related to the seeker's ability to refuse substitute or partial experience for the whole.

Many genuine seekers harbor a belief that the numinous experience of the unity of being constitutes the spiritual attainment. In itself, it does not. Such an experience may be given by a man of actual attainment, and may occasionally be obtained through meditative practices and even by drugs. To taste a strange fruit is not to possess it. It may ensure that he who tastes will be able both to recognize it again and to appreciate something of what its possessors speak of. But he may not like it, may or may not be prepared to give his whole being to the task of possessing it or, more properly, of being possessed by it.

Full attainment implies not merely that a man has at some time known what it is to be submerged in the universal awareness, nor that he can so submerge himself when he pleases, but that he has wholly integrated his perception of the universal within his individual nature. As one of the Sufis said, "Anyone can understand how the drop can blend with the ocean. But how the ocean can be contained within the drop is a very great mystery."

Perhaps that very word "mystery," the word which is at the root of the meaning of mysticism, is the crux of the matter. The seeker must know that what he seeks is a mystery. No matter how profound or glowing the words in which it is described, the thoughts and feelings they arouse in their hearer are pale nothings before the splendor of the revealed mystery. To give a name to that splendor is to pretend that we know it—almost that we need not seek it. Puzzlement, doubt, uncertainty, despair are the lot of the man who seeks to discover it, for he must hold steadily to the knowledge that he does not know and cannot know what that mystery is until it is revealed.

Against this uncertainty he pits the instinctive yearning of his being which, like a homing horse, finds its way when the rider thinks himself lost. Hope sustains him where reason fails. Love guides him when all else is dismayed.