

WORK IN ORDINARY LIFE

A Zen Koan says: “The Way is ordinary mind.” (Ordinary aims, wishes, thoughts, events – the Way is our everyday life).

Someone says: But we come to meetings to get away from the ordinary, to have a taste of something else. There seems to be no impact of the world we encounter in meetings on our ordinary life. This is evident even in very trivial matters: in meetings we do not interrupt each other, but we always do so in our ordinary life. I feel that we are not in the Fourth Way, a way that is part of ordinary life, but in a kind of a monastery, situated in the ordinary world, but quite detached from it. There is no contact between the way I am in meetings the sitting exercise or movements, and how I am in my everyday existence.

The Koan continues: “If you try to reach the Way, you lose it.”

Someone remarks: For the blessed ones who are on the Way, there may perhaps be no distinction between the ordinary and the sublime. They exist in a unified world, where everything is holy and profane at the same time. But for us who are not on the Way, there seems to be no method for getting there, by any kind of transformation. We live in a separate world from the blessed ones and from the Way.

Someone brings his experience: There are rare flashes of the sublime that may sometimes lit up the ordinary. An infant is born. It may seem an ordinary event, birth and death, continuation, evolution. We understand the biological mechanisms involved, the drives, sex, reproduction. And yet when it actually happens, when an infant is born, we may sometimes feel the presence of a sublime world. A blessing, a grace. For a moment we may comprehend directly that the biological life that sustains us is only a carrier of an unknown presence that may manifest itself directly in the wonder of delivery and birth. Thus the “ordinary” world becomes a manifestation of the holy.

Some further thoughts on the matter: Our children have not shared our experience at their birth. They can probably not understand our yearning for the taste of wonder they once gave us. They have outgrown their early infancy and gradually became distinct persons, more or less imperfect, like all humankind. Yet in our innermost hearts we know them for what they truly are – sparks of a higher world – a knowledge that impregnates our “ordinary”, day to day, dealings with them. Thus a bond between “the Way” and the “ordinary mind” is formed through our children.

It may seem that this bond needs no investment, no inner work of any kind. We have become parents whether we like it or not. We remain parents even if our extraordinary experience at the birth of our child has been obliterated. Still, as most parents may affirm, the “ordinary” mutual relations, with their rages, envies, and frustrations threaten to cast the

fundamental kernel of parenthood aside, unless it is revived one way or another. The memory, the yearning, may sometimes be hard to experience naturally. It may be almost forgotten. Yet that forgetfulness, once we become aware of it, may give us a shock, serving as a reminding factor

Ordinary life is not always a glimpse of grace from above. Very often we encounter moments of rage, envy and frustration. Either such that we sense from the direction of others, or that we ourselves direct against them. How are we to relate such moments to the Way? If indeed there is an inner work to be actualized in ordinary life, it must be then and there.

There is an injunction quoted in Gurdjieff's book "Beelzebub Tales to his Grandson", where it is ascribed to Buddha. He set his disciples the task of withstanding the negative manifestations of others toward them, as comprising all the inner work they need. One wonders how to understand this injunction. Don't we suffer those negative manifestations of others toward us anyway?

Some years ago I translated my Hebrew book on Gurdjieff and the inner work into English. . After some people in the U.S. read the manuscript, it was accepted for publication by a publishing house that specializes in spiritual material. A contract was signed, and I received some money in advance, but the actual publication was delayed several times. A well known journal offered to publish a chapter, once the book is published. But finally the publishers informed me that due to financial difficulties they would not be able to proceed with the publication and left the advance in my hands as compensation.

Here was a case of frustration in ordinary life. The owner and most of the staff of this publishing house were in the Gurdjieff groups. Initially I reacted with anger and wrote him a letter, saying that I did not expect such a treatment from people in the Work and that irrespective of circumstances, signed contracts should be honored in ordinary circumstances, let alone between persons in the Work.

Upon further reflection, however, I could not fail to notice that my anger was due more to frustrated ambition than to moral injustice. It would have been a joy to have the book circulated abroad, perhaps it could even bring some additional income, yet the inner lesson of a frustrated ambition could not be ignored. The Bhagavad Gita teaches us that our task is to carry out our responsibilities, not to succeed in them. Success and failure are determined by the Gods. Our task is to accept both success and failure with equanimity, something I certainly did not display in this instance.

Once this became evident, I felt an inner change. My frustration did not disappear, but it was mixed with a positive sense, somewhat difficult to define. Was it joy, serenity, or gratitude? Perhaps a little of each. I suddenly realized, with the help of my initial frustration that I could almost feel thankful for this occasion. Yes, I could see now something about myself. The frustration had served me well.