

## ACTION IN THE INSTANT PRESENT

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**I**T is a strange fact that life exists only in that elusive moment which is the present, not in the past or in the future. The future is really a thought from the standpoint of the present, and the past, even the event of the past instant, is only a memory. But in between is that intangible hardly discernible moment which we call the present. If the future and the past are depicted as two contiguous areas on a map and shaded differently, say dark and light, it is the line which divides the one from the other that constitutes the present. This line is so thin that it does not constitute any division of time at all. A line is like a point, it is dimensionless except as an extension.

If life exists only in that moment which is like a dimensionless point, a nothing in terms of time, then life must exist from moment to moment; logically it cannot be otherwise. If it continues for two instants, the first instant becomes the past in relation to the second, and life does not exist in the past. Life is an energy, obviously, but extraordinary and mysterious, and it does not come over from a past but arises in the ever-new but vanishing present. In itself it does not ever carry a past.

It is the mind, which mysteriously enough is involved in life, as part of life, that trails a past and projects a future. There are so many phenomena connected with life; it is incessantly active and produces changes; yet all its movements seem to be in that dimensionless point or along that thinnest

of thin lines which steadily advances from the past to the future. Obviously there is very much more to understand about its nature than we do, although it looks such a simple thing when it appears. We take it for granted and destroy it with an easy conscience as it appears in various forms; yet we do not know the mystery of its nature, we only know that it is an energy.

How can it arise, from moment to moment, from such an almost non-existent ground? If it is not a thing of time, it has perhaps in itself—apart from the form it wears—a timeless nature, the character of eternity. Eternity is not endless time, prolonging time to billions of years. Such a period is sometimes called an eternity, but it all depends upon the sense in which the word is used. If eternity is not infinite time but timelessness, it can be said to be at the opposite pole to time. But they cannot be regarded as opposites; for in a timeless state there can be no reaction to time, no relation to it, while opposites are always related. We have to go very deeply into the nature of life as it actually exists in that moment which is the present, not as we may conceive it, in order to fathom its mystery. We know it only superficially in its conditioned state, not as it really is or in its depths, and we make do with that superficial knowledge.

H. P. Blavatsky says that life flows from extraordinary heights, that is, from a very exalted source transcending the limitations into which it enters. In that unconditioned state it must have an altogether different character from how it appears in the world of time. Life in any individual form appears as a continuous movement; like a ripple or wave travelling from the past to the future. It is a possible view that life is really a movement; at every moment it makes an impact on the existing state of things, and that impact produces a change. There is no living form or organization in which a change does not take place at every point,

every second or fraction of a second. This is an observed scientific fact. It is as though there is a wind blowing all the time through the whole of the organization, through every cell and particle in it, and it is a wind of change.

This concept that life is a movement is discussed at considerable length by the scientist-philosopher, Henri Bergson. I do not know if anyone else in recent times has also expounded that view. H.P.B. propounds the archaic view that life is eternal, and ceaseless motion is its one absolute attribute. So perhaps the right view is that life is an ever-existing energy manifesting itself as motion in the field of matter, and where it is, there is the present instant of time. But in its own nature, at its source or base, it is really timeless. It is of a mysterious nature, but we lack the understanding, or rather, the sharpness of intelligence, the necessary penetration, to probe its depths, to feel its true character.

There is everywhere in Nature a sequence of events, and the mind in its activity covers a domain which includes a reflection of what is past in the form of memory and a future supposed or invented by itself, it has this capacity for inventiveness. Thus, it is the mind which by its own operations gets involved in the relationships of time, whereas life itself, of which the mind is an instrument, does not have that problem and is not conditioned by time. The consciousness, which is inseparable from the very nature of life, can experience its timeless state. But the mind by its nature has a freedom which enables it to depart from that present instant which reflects the true character of life, and gets involved in the complications of time, subjecting itself to various illusions. For instance, death as an event, which will take place in its own time, is a certainty for everyone and can be quietly accepted as such, but the mind conjures up all kinds of difficulties in regard to it long before the event,

and works itself into a condition of fright, which, strictly considered, is quite unnecessary.

Freedom includes freedom to go astray, to think anything, right or wrong, and it is this freedom of the mind which enables it to move away from the truth of things and invent ideas which are either pleasing to itself, or fit into a condition which it has created in itself. Thus the mind becomes a creature of illusions. It has the memory of certain experiences to which it becomes attached, and under the stress of forces involved in that attachment it projects a future, and these forces appear as desires of various sorts. There is a pull towards the experience which was agreeable, and there is a movement away from an experience that was disagreeable. The mind is moved by these forces. It is afraid that something that happened in the past and was painful might happen again, and it eagerly wishes something that was pleasant should take place again, and it tries hard to bring it about.

Such mental representations of the past, as well as the future, are necessary for the movements of the mind. All thought is based upon memory and the possibility of conjuring up a future. What happens when we think? There are various impressions or images, all already present, and they are available to be shifted about, built up, manipulated, in the process of thinking. They all represent the past, they belong to that area of time which the movement of life has left behind it. These images and impressions are counters, that are brought into different relations, as in the shifting of the terms of an equation by means of which the mathematician gains the result he wants. He brackets certain terms together, separates or moves them, he also temporarily invents symbols such as  $x$  or  $y$ , the values of which are determined later. These symbols correspond to the suppositions we constantly make in our thinking regarding the future.

Thus the mathematician arrives at a conclusion or figure of practical value to him. Apart from the building up of images, is not thought exactly of this nature? It has to have all the counters to deal with; they have to be on some invisible table before it.

Thinking requires a terrain which is landscaped or modulated in different ways, such as the past, the present, the past perfect, the future, the conditional, and so on, all the tenses of grammar. It is with the use of the different tenses, and not only the present, that thinking takes place. A person who uses a language may not be seized of the distinctions between some of these tenses, in which case his expressions become vague and ill-defined. If one wants to think absolutely clearly and logically, he must use language correctly and be grammatical, or if he departs from an approved idiom he must be aware of that fact and know why he departs from it. He may find that a particular grammatical form in vogue is not logical and may want to amend it. After all, every language changes in course of time, but we should use language with an understanding of the rationale of its constructions. It is possible to do so without loss of freedom, without taking too much time to select the words. All young people, whatever the language may be, should be trained and instructed in correct expression, the exact significance of each preposition, tense, declension and word, so that the language becomes a sharp and flexible instrument to be used with the greatest facility. It is a necessary discipline of thought that creates order in the way the brain functions, and not a mere question of words.

The activity of thought takes place in the present, but it ranges over an area which is divided in various ways and includes the whole sequence and relationships of time. This ranging is in a sphere created by the mind while it is active in the present. If there is to be in the field of

consciousness action which does not bring in the past and does not project the future, if one is not to consider possibilities, indulge in any speculation, not use the imagination or the faculty of supposition and invention, then all that is left of possible action is what can take place on that thin line which is the present. What kind of movement is possible on it?

We *live* in that moment which is the here and now, and are conscious in it. All that life and consciousness contain as potentiality are expressed in it and come into play through it. The past is dead and gone, the future is unborn, but the action that takes place in the present has a significance which is missed because we are unable to hold ourselves at that point without deviation.

What does being conscious imply? First of all it implies perception as distinguished from thought. You perceive an object, say a tree or another person, at this moment, the present. The more strictly you exclude the past and the future from this activity of the present, the better you perceive. Such perception is without time, for you perceive directly and immediately; it is not a movement occupying an area of time. When we perceive anything—a beautiful flower, a sunset, a tree, an animal, a human face—the perception of the whole of it is instantaneous if the consciousness is fully awake, alert and not asleep, if it has not already become changed in various ways so that it cannot act with the fullness of itself, but with only a part. A dull mind may say, “Yes, I perceive,” but its perception is superficial, inadequate, feeble, because of what it has become. The mind which is subjected to different forces of attraction and repulsion becomes broken in various ways, and though the pieces are adjusted and put together, it can only function with a fraction of the energy which would be springing up if it had not undergone that process. That is the case with a mind which has become insensitive, like a person who has

been drugged. The pleasure which we experience in many forms does become a kind of drug when we cling to it or seek more and more of it.

If the nature of the human consciousness has not been modified, if it has retained its purity, its sensitivity and freshness, it can perceive in an instant the whole of what is to be perceived and can also respond to the nature of that whole. If you look at an object of beauty, you cannot perceive its beauty unless you see the whole of it at once. If we do not see the whole of a beautiful face, but only a little part of the nose, a portion of the cheek, an aspect of the forehead and so on, that is, if it is not seen fully but in fragments, we will not know its beauty, although even a fragment can be beautiful by itself. Beauty depends upon the perception of a whole, and it is present when that whole embodies a certain order which is not mechanical—a mechanical order merely adjusts what is comprised in the whole—but an order which has the attribute of harmony. All this is possible in that moment which is the present.

Even though the intelligence which acts at that moment does not seem to have that latitude which its sister the thinking mind enjoys, moving from particular to particular, it has this capacity to perceive what *is*, instantaneously, to see its beauty and respond to that beauty with the nature that we associate with the word "heart". There can be endless forms of beauty, and the word "love" can cover various unutterable movements of the heart which are like music. The word "beautiful" should not be understood to refer only to physical beauty, but also and much more to beauty in thought, in imagination, in attitude, action, relationship, beauty of soul, the whole spectrum of beauty. Beauty in anything whatsoever is perceived as an instantaneous act.

Love is also in the present; it is not attachment which involves the past. One is attached to what one has known

or experienced. There is the possibility of giving one's heart to something beautiful without wanting to hold on to it or possess it. The nature of love is essentially to give, not appropriate, not hold. Think of something you cannot possess, say, a beautiful sunset or the movement of a bird. There is no hope, no possibility, of possessing it, yet you may feel the wonder of it, it can have an extraordinary impact upon you. The beauty of music or of a face can fill the soul. What goes out from the heart without any return to self may be called love, which is a force like desire but is not desire. There is a natural relationship between the intelligence that perceives and the object of beauty. This relationship is of the nature of an attraction, but the attraction is not mechanical like attractions in the realm of matter. It can have no momentum if it is on the instant, if it arises freshly. The relationship consists not only in perception, but is also a response which is from the whole being of the person. It is a natural response of one's nature, if that nature is unspoiled, uncorrupt, not hardened, and therefore susceptible. When it is distorted or conditioned, it can imagine the ugly to be beautiful, it may like the ugly or the vulgar for certain reasons. Liking is different from love, one likes something for the pleasure it gives him, and that pleasure, when it becomes a craving, corrupts the mind. There can also be action from one's heart or total being that is not a response to something external but initiated from within.

What is really beautiful is not necessarily what is *thought* to be beautiful; one must be aware of this distinction. All of us should feel free to have our own feeling or understanding with regard to the beauty or lack of beauty in something we see. There are many people who, when others say something is beautiful, feel obliged to agree with them or think the same. They are so swayed by the judgments of others



or what those others may think of themselves; or they may feel there must be something lacking in themselves. So they force themselves to think that something is beautiful when they do not really think so. The mind is a delicate instrument and any forcing of it injures or distorts it. It does not really matter if other people say that one is a Philistine. Even if very many people think a piece of art is beautiful, but one thinks it makes more nonsense than sense, one must feel free to abide with his own view, for what it is worth, until he sees better or sees some ground for changing it.

In any relationship between beauty, in whatever form, and the heart which perceives and responds to it, the response arises naturally and freely. Perception, which depends at the physical level upon the reception of impressions or vibrations, requires a negative condition, but response is a form of action, which is positive. Love is also action and of a nature that is always beautiful. All the beauty that is to be seen anywhere can also exist in one's heart or being. The expression of this beauty, not necessarily by any outer action or token, is also in the immediate present.

Consciousness as an expression of the life-energy includes the action of will, and this action can be instantaneous, like an electric shock. But there is the kind of will which does not arise from the instant, but is the action of forces having their origin in the past and directed to a future. What is called will may be just the blind thrust of such forces buried in oneself; they may be of such a nature that one cannot act at once but has slowly to come to "the sticking pitch". If the will is either obstinate or half-hearted, it is not will that arises on the instant. But in the condition in which all that takes place arises from the immediate present, to will is to act, and there is in that action no ingredient of delay, postponement or laziness.

Feeling as an aspect of consciousness also arises in the immediate moment. Often we use the word "feeling" to denote the action of certain forces already in our nature, reactions generated in the past and continuing in the present. If I have a grudge against someone who I think did me an injury, this feeling does not belong to the pure energy of life as it springs in the present but is the action of memory intruding from the past. When we remember the past, we do so of course in the present. All action, including remembrance, is in the present. But it can be either action with a nature that arises freshly out of the present, or action from the domain of the mind covering various recollections from the past and the old responses to them. Any portion of one's nature that represents the past is hardened ground; for the past is settled, one cannot alter it. Life itself, as it arises freshly in the present, is ever new, but the mind with its memories can become hardened, it can even become for all practical purposes an agent of the past. The word feeling can be used to denote a pure mode of cognition; it can mean feeling the nature of whatever thing is presented to it.

We can see, therefore, that whatever is the action that takes place in the living present must have a quality of freshness and immediacy. This action includes perception, the whole range of responses to beauty, and love. We do not know the nature of all that can take place in that present, but whatever it is, it can never be stale. What is stale is what continues from the past. In life as it arises there is always freshness, a wonderful keenness and a quality that is timeless. But for life to manifest its true nature, its inherent beauty, one's nature has to be pure, child-like and unhardened. The consciousness that belongs to the unconditioned nature of life, although arising from a dimensionless point, can swell into an expanse embracing many things

or into a sphere of harmony. Life even in a physical form manifests itself as a variety of movements in harmony with one another. The consciousness of man, at its level, can give rise to innumerable forms of harmony, all implicit in the very nature of life.

We may misconceive what is to be understood as action in the immediate present. I may do something which is a mere whim, act on the impulse of the moment, yield readily to what is called temptation, and I may think that I am acting in the immediate present. There are people who call themselves existentialists, who live in the present in that manner. But that is existence with a nature that has become conditioned in various ways; the immediate present in that case does not represent the riches of life, but only mechanical reactions which result in a superficial butterfly existence. Really to act in the immediate present one has to have a nature which is capable of such action; one must bring about that change in oneself by which all that is carried over from the past, with its rigidities, the mud at the bottom, the accumulation, impurities and so on, are completely liquidated. One's nature then becomes like pure, clear water which flows and sparkles, and at every moment it is then capable of action with the whole of itself, completely unhindered. In such action there is perception, there is love, and there is beauty.