

On the Doubt in Our Heart

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ON A SPRING DAY like this the fields turn into a broad expanse of green, dotted with small wild flowers in full bloom. And in the afternoon the boastful skylark, with fluttering wings, chirps in the clear blue sky. Then in the evening, the hazy moon hanging serenely over the mountain peaks is a scene which is just indescribable. And we, inhabiting this beautiful world, gather with our good friends or share the comforts of a happy home and family. Repeating over and over our daily routine—waking, working, eating, sleeping—our sixty or seventy years of life are spent, teeth fall out, vision dims and, finally, cremated, we depart as a puff of smoke. Our ancestors also spent their lives in this manner, and so will our descendants. The world has always been like this, and it seems the direction in which our lives proceed has already been determined. Looking at it in this way, life seems simple and pleasant, and there shouldn't be any doubt or dissatisfaction with it. And yet, there is something in the depths of our heart which, because of its self-reflective nature, won't allow us to be content with this kind of life and then die.

At present, with the study of matter becoming more precise each day, we can calculate right down to the split second when a star will become visible in the sky, and determine the wavelength of light or electricity. The advances in knowledge are so amazing that every single phenomenon in the universe seems clear, as though there weren't one mystery left.

* The essay translated here, "Jinshin no Giwaku" 人心の疑惑, in *Nishida Kitarō Zenshū*, Vol. 13, Iwanami Shoten, Tokyo, 1979, pp. 85–89, was written and first published in 1903 in the *Hokushinkai* journal. It was one of the last essays before Nishida's epoch-making *Zen no Kenkyū* (A Study of Good); for further biographical background, see V. H. Viglielmo, "Nishida Kitarō: The Early Years," in *Tradition and Modernization in Japanese Culture*, edited by Donald H. Shively (Princeton University Press, 1971), pp. 507–562. Footnotes have been provided by the translators. We would like to thank Tokiwa Gishin for his help during the preparation of this manuscript.

But, when we concentrate and ponder the matter deeply, we find there is not one thing that *isn't* a mystery. For example, even though we say lightning is electricity, and electricity is the oscillation of ether, the question remains, what is ether?¹ After all, we're explaining one unknown only by means of another. There are always some assumptions inherent in our understanding, and only from them can results be formed. The weight of authority these fundamental assumptions have for the human mind lies in the fact that that we simply can't think without using assumptions and everyone else uses them. Isn't it just a matter of convenience for us to do so? And is the knowledge based on such assumptions really capable of satisfying and consoling our hearts?

Likewise with our social lives, there are customs, laws and morals, and it has been clearly established what should and should not be done. If we go along with them we are able to pass our lives without difficulty. But again, when we reflect deeply in our heart, why must a person live like this? And why is a good thing considered good and a bad thing bad? Is there even one person in a million who has thought clearly about these fundamental questions? Normally everything seems clear and simple enough. However, when we are really made to suffer from some unexpected misfortune, such questions concealed at the bottom of our hearts rise up like a swarm of bees and we fall right into a deep pit of doubt. The Epicureans say that the ultimate purpose of life is pleasure, but what possible pleasures could we indulge in that would give our hearts solace and satisfaction? On the contrary, repeating the same meaningless pleasures only increases our weariness and doubt. Unable to become God or to be satisfied being demonic, what a pathetic creature man is after all, wandering in a thick fog, utterly bewildered.

Long ago, on a dark winter day, an Anglo-Saxon king was speaking with his high priest about the meaning of human existence when suddenly a small bird flew in one window and out another. Seeing this, the high priest remarked that this also is the way of human life. Alive, where do we come from; in death, where do we go? Why does a person live, why does he work, and why does he die? These are man's greatest and

¹ What Nishida says here does not, of course, rest on this outdated model of ether; on the contrary, it seems to anticipate modern developments in theoretical physics. The article itself appeared two years prior to the publication of Einstein's restricted theory of relativity.

deepest doubts. From ancient times, in Greece and India, until today, three thousand years later, they have continued to arise in us.

When people get used to not understanding things, they consider it as only normal. Then, though they don't understand them, they come to accept that that's just the way they are. But, when we think with a very clear and calm mind, there's nothing so incomprehensible as this world of ours. Although there are times when things go as would like, when we are once unexpectedly confronted with this doubt, our heart is suddenly enveloped in clouds of grief, and our suffering is unbearable. This doubt is the real sickness in the depths of our heart. Like a worm eating away at the heart of a beautiful flower, the innocent human heart is robbed of its peace and happiness. Setting aside the time we are completely taken up with trifling, momentary matters—thinking merely to hoist our sail and follow the prevailing winds—if even for a moment we stop and seriously ponder this world we live in, or seriously try to live our life, we must inevitably arrive at such a doubt.

Faced with this problem Sakyamuni renounced his noble rank, severed himself from his family and sat in meditation dead to the world for six years in the Himalayas. Faced with this same problem Luther shut himself up in a monastery and offered prayers like a madman. And not only religious people but scholars and poets, and even the great and heroic—*anyone* who thinks seriously or lives in earnest must without fail struggle with this problem. Recently the world has applauded the works of Nietzsche and Gorki. Though the narrow-minded and negative tone of their works does not recommend itself to impressionable young people, one cannot help deeply empathizing with the doubt and anger over the human condition expressed in their writings.

Holding on to the doubt mentioned above might seem too negative and destructive; but we do not doubt simply for doubting's sake, nor do we destroy simply to destroy. We doubt deeply in order to seek out a profound solution; we destroy thoroughly so as to have a solid foundation. Doubting without seeking to dispel that doubt is due to lack of courage; destroying without wanting to rebuild comes from lack of sincerity. We should not have that kind of doubt. Our doubt must be sincere and earnest, like a thirsting man in search of water or a lost child yearning for her parents.

From the commonsense point of view the problem might seem too abstruse and narrowly conceived, something for people of leisure like

philosophers and religionists to investigate, and not for the average person, who, even if he felt the need to consider it, wouldn't have the time. However, the doubt of the human heart which I'm talking about is not a mere philosophical problem based on an intellectual demand. It arises from the actual demands of our will and emotions, the basis of our relation with the world. This doubt is rooted in the facts of our sorrow and happiness, wants and desires, and is *the* problem of life which must be answered with blood, sweat, and tears.

How many millions of people run around all day just to earn their livelihood, spending their whole lives struggling to maintain their physical existence? With no time to think *why* they are living, these pathetic people pass their lives only in order to exist. It might seem rather bold to comment on the value of human life like this, but is this physical existence as important as it is generally assumed to be? After a lifetime of mental suffering to provide physical sustenance, our body ends up as a foul-smelling corpse which gets cremated and returned to the earth again, leaving the same kind of life for our descendants. But what could be more absurd than for our descendants to merely repeat the same meaningless life? What a relief it would be to put an end to such an existence and let it fade into oblivion. People scoff at beasts of burden for the existence they lead, but we are no less at the beck and call of our own carnal desires, all our life pressed into their service, led about by a ring through our noses—are we really so different from horses and cattle?

Or again, there are people who say they have no time to think about this abstract and remote problem of human existence. They have pressing business to attend to, duties here and now. This too sounds plausible enough, but is there anything we do which is separate from life? It is vanity to assume that what we do is unrelated to the problem of life, and it is hypocrisy to think that what is good does not need to be practiced in our life. The sun and the truth are the last things that people want to face; and so, with various excuses, our unsettled hearts try to avoid facing the serious problem of human life. But inquiry into the problem of life is far from being anything unrelated to our ordinary life. Daily we eat, sleep, wake up, feel love and anger; but when, with this same everyday heart, we directly seek in our dealings with the world for the heart of God or the realm of salvation, for the first time such an inquiry really makes sense to us. Only a pure and sincere heart can inquire directly into this. No special knowledge or ability is needed. Peter,

who spread the teachings of Christ, was a fisherman from Galilee; Hui-neng, who expounded the Dharma teaching of Bodhidharma, was an illiterate woodcutter.

The moment we confront this doubt concerning our life, we begin to suffer in heart and mind; we ask ourselves whether we can resolve it, and how we can resolve it. There must be many who attempt to confront it, but remain lost. It is then that we must turn to great spiritual figures such as Sakyamuni and Christ. Like the pull of the earth's magnetic poles, their religious experience gives hope and courage to our lost and sick hearts. Inspired by these great figures we embrace their teachings, and try to resolve the deep doubt in our hearts. They are truly a constant source of light in our dark night. Were it not for them, how meaningless our lives would be.

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