

DISEASES OF THE HEART

Some people are good at taking love but not so good at returning it, giving it back. Why do people act the way they do, what does it take to recognize how we behave? We seem to have only a limited ability to recognize our own emotions, possibly because emotions limit consciousness, they overwhelm consciousness in the same way that alcohol and drugs do. Strong emotions overwhelm our consciousness and keep us from thinking clearly, we think through the emotion, the qualities this emotion brings with it.

We have everything inside us, including a lower and higher self. Many of our emotions are attached to qualities of the lower self. When these emotions take control of us the lower qualities are in control, we learn to think this is who we are. Now we are confused, we fail to see these qualities as a strange, invasive force making us behave in unacceptable ways, we see these qualities as ourselves, who we are, and this is just like consuming alcohol, it makes us behave differently. There is nothing we can do about it until the alcohol passes through us, until it no longer affects our capacity.

There are two considerations here, first, what these qualities do to us, and second, what we can do to understand ourselves better when these qualities rise up in us or in others. Many of the difficulties we have come because of what might be called diseases of the heart, in other words a heart without purity, a failure of purity which causes inappropriate actions. If we understood appropriate actions completely we would recognize when we are being overwhelmed by something inappropriate; if we understood inappropriate actions completely and governed them, we would be able to stop them.

Let us think about this—psychology tells us to let our emotions out, to feel what we are feeling, express ourselves during the feeling. But if this is not really who we are, if it is merely a passing state, we can cause harm, especially if this is a thing of the moment, something which stays for an hour and leaves. Anyone who has ever had a fight with his wife and said things he regretted later understands what I mean, anyone who has ever had a fight with his child or a friend and said things he regretted later knows what I mean. We have all done that, said things we regret.

If we have control over our tongue and our words we know when we are overwhelmed, we know when it is time to take ourselves from that situation, go to a private place, close the door until the emotion passes. It takes restraint and appropriate conduct, good qualities, respect for different situations. When we practice that appropriate conduct with our language, our words, we bite our tongue before we speak. This means we stop ourselves from saying things we should not say, this is discipline, self-restraint, the ability to move away from a situation.

Why do we find ourselves in situations where we have to bite our tongue, why do we stumble into situations which make us angry with other people, what motivates this? There are so many reasons it is impossible to list them, we all have a different list, a different pattern most of which we acquire in childhood. There are so many examples. Think of someone with a cruel parent, so cruel that whenever the parent walks into the room the child is fearful, profoundly uncomfortable with a fear which becomes the ruling emotion of that life. As adults we might self-medicate with alcohol, but as children this is not possible. What can they do instead? They create another emotion to mask the unbearable fear, what alcohol does, something to deaden the emotion. But what emotion

takes away fear? Anger, anger replaces fear of the parent, they are angry with the parent because it is easier to live with anger than with fear.

When we think about this, remembering a situation when we were fearful, we realize anger gives us more control than fear. Both are holes in the heart but they are different. As we are growing up whatever we do repeatedly becomes a pattern. Science recognizes that any action we repeat again and again creates a pathway in our brain stronger than pathways for things we have not repeated so often. Spaced repetition is a way to learn, the reason why multiplication tables are taught every day, again and again. By repeating something this way it becomes a pattern, we develop a pathway in the brain so that we do not have to think when someone says three times four, twelve jumps from our mouth, we do not have to work it out. Children who use calculators cannot do this, not because they are unintelligent, but because they have not had spaced repetition to build their response, they get answers a different way.

Thirty, forty or even fifty years later, if we have developed patterned responses to uncomfortable situations we go automatically to the most accessible groove in our brain when we are troubled. If anger is the most accessible pathway, when we are uncomfortable we become angry. What we learn as a child is written on stone, what we learn as an adult is like writing on water. Science talks about grooves in the brain, those grooves on stone are the same. Early childhood experience and the way we interact with our parents both have much to do with the way we grow up, with emotional responses when we are grown up.

Someone who has been loved as a child, with decent parents who have taken care of the child appropriately, is still not safe. There are the children on the street, situations

outside the home we have to deal with. We have a variety of environments, those which are difficult can lead to the self-medicating responses of childhood, usually emotional in nature. When we are adults we have similar things to deal with, still not easy if we do not know how to act. We have so many automatic responses to pain, to something we interpret as external attack, the pain we believe gives us license to react anyway we want. We rationalize our action, that person caused me pain, we slap back automatically as if we were swatting a fly.

A sarcastic tongue can be automatic, emotional outrage can be automatic. How do we cure this in ourself, how do we handle this and so many other responses from ourself and others? There is a range of subtle things that might happen since anger is not the only response, it could be slander, it could be envy, resentment or scheming. Some people are obsessive about setting things right when they think they have been wronged. Any of this can occur if we look at situations inappropriately. Once we understand that people react because of their pain, once we understand that we react because of our pain, that these responses are merely to mask the pain, we know we have to find a remedy for all this pain.

What solves the problem, what corrects the inadequacy of the heart instead of masking it, making it worse? The answer is love, true love, real love. If we have been a stranger to love all our life we might be incapable of loving without the intervention of a loving being. One of the attractions of the truly great teachers is extraordinary love; one of the attractions of a successful group is making us feel safe, allowing love to develop and grow.

Love does two things, it lets us understand the difficulties other people have, and it lets us understand what we encounter. Love teaches us to act in a way which is different from the responses of our usual pathways, our grooves. If a baby soils its diaper a rational adult who loves the child will simply clean it up, that is the end of it. Parents who scream at their children do not understand how to deal with them; when these children become adults they might not be able to handle anything without shouting.

The ability to absorb the pain which others direct at us is something we have to learn how to do. If we cannot absorb pain to a certain extent, always reacting as if it could be stopped by some external force, we are lost in our own emotional frailty. Pain does not come from the outside, although it can, I am not talking about the Cambodian holocaust or Rwanda, I am not talking about that, I mean the interactions in a theoretically peaceful society where we cause each other such pain. We need to learn how to associate with those who act inappropriately without letting their actions affect us.

There are different ways to do this. First is avoidance altogether, and severance of a relationship is sometimes the only cure. We need to be the doctor in such a situation. To reach the level where we can be the doctor in personal situations is difficult because we must first be our own doctor, heal ourself. Once we are cured we can be the cure, we understand the pain and how to stop it.

How do we make love recognizable? In the civil rights movement Martin Luther King Jr. did some amazing things within the movement itself, he made it nonviolent, pacifist. He did other things too. Look at some of the film footage showing African Americans wearing signs that say I am also a man. He embarrassed people into understanding things without being aggressive, his people wore signs saying I am also a

man. If there was any humanity in those who saw that, it moved them, and if it did not move them it moved other people with the power to write laws and make changes.

We have to reach the humanity within each being, something which does not happen overnight. We touch it by getting each person to understand we are not invulnerable either, we recognize there is a problem, we understand they have a pain we can help them with, and this is what we can do with love. At a bookstore in Toronto someone recently asked me how he could help his alcoholic friend who was not listening to the advice he gave. When people are in a state like alcoholism, in any state of masking pain like anger, resentment, jealousy, obsession, any difficult emotional state, they cannot hear what we say. They are so engaged by their own situation they refuse to believe anyone can possibly understand.

What can we do with people in that state? Either we make a commitment to them or we do not. For some we cannot because it would be self-destructive, for others we might be nothing other than an enabler, but we can love them in an unconditional way without accepting what they do. If they trust us, if they know the love is real, the love is truly caring, they might begin to listen, then we can get them additional help. These things are not cured in a day.

In the way that people are physically addicted to alcohol, they are physically addicted to their emotions. These things have been ground into our brain so deeply that we have to recondition ourself. Transformation is the hardest thing, and this path is all about transformation. Most people do not want to change, they do not want to change because they perceive themselves incorrectly, they see nothing wrong. The person who lashes out at us for some perception of inappropriate behavior thinks of himself as a little

baby protecting himself with anger, he thinks of himself as the kindest, most lovable creature without recognizing he is now a monster protecting the baby. He is not that baby any longer, he walks around as a monster. We run into monsters, different degrees of monster we need to handle, both the outer monsters and the inner monsters.

May God help us all with that understanding, that patience, that transforming love for ourself and those around us.