



BELIEFS, WISDOM AND WORK

By N. SRI RAM

AT the recent South Indian Theosophical Conference held at Adyar during the Easter week-end, the three words "Beliefs," "Work" and "Wisdom" figured both in the titles in the program and in the speeches. When the word "belief" is used, it is apt to assume in some minds a connotation which sets it in contradistinction to reason; because belief in matters of religion, at least in the past, has been treated as not open to question. However, in a general sense, a belief is what one accepts, apart from what he knows or thinks he knows directly for himself. We all tend to carry on on the basis of whatever ideas we have been brought up to accept and to adhere to those ideas which obtain in the particular society to which we belong. Yet there is no real wisdom unless one considers for himself the nature and validity of the ground on which his acceptance is based.

We all must accept, for whatever it may amount to, that which we actually observe, hear or touch, the impressions we physically receive. What we thus accept is a fact to us, and as such has its own proper significance. That a tree has the shape and color I perceive is an undeniable fact, and a fact of much more significance, to me, than either its botanical pattern, plus chemical properties, or the wave-lengths and

particles it constitutes. There are these different levels of perception (assuming we may use the word "perception" with regard to the waves and the particles) and what obtains at each level has its own validity and truth.

Although we may think that actual sight, or direct perception as we may call it, is the surest test, we have to allow for the possibility that we may be deceived in what we see. What we think something to be when we see it may not turn out to be what it actually is, or we may be seeing a thing only in part and mistake it for the whole. What we think we see may be partly actual sight and partly a wrong inference, due to the play of memory. For instance, when we read a crowded printed line, the eye, which does not normally exert itself more than necessary, or when moved by the impulse of wanting to read quickly, does not take in every letter in a word, if it is a word of many letters, but hits off just a few, and the memory stepping in to recall a familiar word containing those letters, presents it to the mind in the place of the actual word. This is a fact of common occurrence. Nevertheless, we have to accept whatever memory tells us, subject to the possibility of error. When we look at a certain object and the memory says it is a chair, we have to believe it and act accordingly. Otherwise life would be impossible. What we remember has normally the same validity as a basis for conduct as what we observe, which, as it is translated instant by instant into memory, is never widely separated from memory.

Knowledge consists not merely of the imprint of an actual thing or occurrence on the mind, whatever that imprint might be worth or signify, but also the inferences. Much of what modern astronomy has to say regarding the nature of the universe is inference from certain observed phenomena, notably what is called "the red shift," the fact that the red line in the spectrum of certain sources of light in space is to the left

of where it would be if those sources were stationary. The theories based on such inferences may be right or wrong, because there may be conditions not known as yet, which may alter them completely. Actually there are different scientific theories of the universe at present, such as the expanding universe, the steady state, and so on, all based on the same observed facts. In so far as an inference is strictly mathematical or logical, the correctness of it, when the premises are accepted, may be regarded as resting on firmer ground than even facts of observation. One can be certain that two and two must make four in any circumstance; it is not rational to doubt that fact. So, what we regard as facts are based upon observation and also upon inference, although the knowledge thus gathered may suffer from limitations in the process of our knowing.

Apart from what is perceived, or as we might say, known for certain, and irrefutable inferences such as are admitted as a basis for judgment in every court of law, there is hypothesis or theory, which plays a large part in our thinking, notably in that of Science, and it is accepted when it is consonant with facts and explains their connections plausibly. It thus invests those facts with a significance not apparent when we look at them disjointedly, and partly that significance consists in the feeling of harmony and order it introduces in the understanding of them. Such a hypothesis, or even a postulate, which explains, is not a lawless phantasy, though it is a construct of the imagination, but seeks to reveal a basis of law. It does not stand on the ground of direct perception, but is like a bridge, which for practical purposes is as much ground as the points it connects. One bridge may differ in its construction from another, as Einstein's theory differs from Newton's, but may serve equally up to a point.

There is the vast theory in *The Secret Doctrine*—theory to us, not necessarily or altogether, we are told, to those who

have propounded it—about the origin and development of the universe, totally different from all the modern scientific theories; not only vast, but also inclusive of all levels of existence and the whole evolutionary process, and therefore infinitely more meaningful. We may accept it because it commends itself to us. But still it has to be placed by us in the category of a theory, as there are various parts and aspects of it which we do not actually perceive, some of them far beyond our ken. Every theory has to stand on its own merits. The moment we distinguish what is constructed by our minds as an explanation from facts which we perceive to exist, it becomes a theory open to re-construction and modifications. Every theory will necessarily alter as we see more of the truth.

A significant fact with regard to recent scientific theories is the repeated change and modifications to which they have been subjected. So long as modern Science stood firm on what it regarded as hard, unalterable facts—the hard indivisible atoms of the last century and the other foundations of its then beliefs—it had an outlook based on them which was equally solid and rigid. Since then there has been a deluge of theories and suggestions, and it is for Science a strange fact that in recent times it is theory which has taken the lead in scientific advance, and the facts of discovery seem to follow in its train.

Then there is that criterion for acceptance which we constantly apply in our daily lives, whether consciously or not, namely, the knowledgeableness, as we understand it, of the source from which we accept statements on different matters. But as regards matters little known or little explored so far as we know, there can be differences in judgment as to how authoritative a particular source or a certain statement may be considered to be.

It seems to me that more important than the rightness of a particular view in such matters—assuming the rightness can

be determined—is the allowing of complete freedom for individual judgment. The denial of respect for such freedom inevitably goes with a psychology of dogma and prejudice, in which truth, not as a mere assertion but as one's own understanding or perception, cannot find its place. Far more important for us in our Society than truth as a verbal proposition advanced from an authoritative source is a pre-disposition to truth as it exists, the preparedness to receive it. If there is the openness in spirit and attitude, even if our ideas be erroneous in some matters, we will inevitably come to the truth.

Besides these obvious and open avenues of knowledge, there may be another of an entirely different nature. One may know the truth from within himself, as certainly, for instance, as the fact that I am in the room where I am. This may be called intuitive knowledge, if it is really knowledge which belongs to that little-known faculty we vaguely call intuition. This inner knowledge may be derived from the most unquestionable sources in oneself, the bedrock of one's being; but by its various nature it carries no authority for another; its certainty must be confined to oneself.

A person may say, "I believe," for shortness' sake, having reason to believe. One need not quarrel over the word. If we regard the question of belief or acceptance, on whatever grounds, as an entirely individual matter, then there can be no quarrel over it. He may be right or wrong, or partially both, which is more often the case than we think. It is when we make a platform out of certain beliefs that conflicts arise. When a number of people take their stand on it, there may be an individual among them, who for his own reasons feels obliged to stand with them, but does so with reluctance or objections within himself not openly expressed; and when differences become pronounced, there is a call for reconstructing the platform.

In any case, a platform is like the ground on which we stand; it is taken for granted. Somebody once asked Einstein how he came to those remarkable discoveries, the very original views, which he propounded, including, I may remark incidentally, the view that there is really no such thing in the universe as force. His answer was very simple: "By questioning every assumption". We assume many things in the course of our thinking, but it is only when we become aware of our assumptions that we can discover the falseness or the truth in them. The ground on which we base our ideas with regard to any matter whatsoever must change with knowledge in a real sense, and it is only when there is no artificial barrier to such change that life flows in its own proper channels and in ways that bring out its ever-changing meaning.

In the Theosophical Society there is a body of thought which is broadly common to very many members. This is all the more remarkable, considering the extraordinary diversity of their cultures, their religions, their upbringing, their racial and national temperaments, and so many other influences which have entered into their lives. Yet this body of thought represents a free response on the part of all of them to the truth or teachings we call Theosophy, based on no inducement offered, no compulsion. They were not asked to subscribe to them; nor do we say they will thereby gain any advantages here or in after-life, or win Divine grace or the favor of the Masters, or even make good karma. Those who join the Society do so through no pressure, no baits or fear. Just as beauty calls for a response that has no ulterior motive, no idea of possessing or utilizing it, so in the same way one knows the truth only when he appreciates it for its own sake, its beauty, its intrinsic value, and, I may add, the fact, if we can only realize it, that our own being is inseparable from that truth.

Brother Jinarājādāsa has written a booklet entitled, *What Theosophists Believe*. I remember Dr. Arundale remarking about it: "They believe what they like to believe." This is what all the world does. Why does a man believe something? Generally because it suits him in his condition to believe it. Similarly, people reject the ideas which do not suit their particular conditioning. The arguments for believing or disbelieving are easily enough invented by the mind. Liking or disliking involves one in a more intimate manner than a belief. Ruskin said, "Tell me what you like and I will tell you what you are." The nature of a man, as revealed by his likes and dislikes, and tastes in all matters whether important or trivial, goes deeper than his beliefs, which he can easily change. But perhaps these tastes, which we take for granted, are also not unchangeable. They do change as our own perceptions become more refined and sensitive.

When we use the word "wisdom," we come into a different sphere. Wisdom is not an accumulation of ideas. It is an expression of one's being; we cannot separate it from the way we think or feel, our behavior, tastes or actions. That is why it is said that wisdom ordereth all things—great and small. Obviously, there is a certain order in Nature. It exists as the foundation for all that is taking place. The physicist, in so far as this order falls within his purview, attempts to express it in his own terms by his formulæ or equations. But the wisdom that can order or re-order all things has to spring in part from ourselves, and it is only by its means, as it arises from within, that ourselves and the world can be changed to fall into their proper order. Such wisdom on our part means a clearer perception of the truth with regard to all things, as related to the nature of ourselves.

Our work, therefore, has to be understood not in terms of any superficial activity following an established pattern, but as an endeavor to awaken people to certain fundamental truths

which have roots in their own being. To awaken others, we must of course be ourselves awake.

There is always a new understanding needed—of our work, as much as everything else; new not in the sense of some new fancy or sensation, like the sensations a child enjoys when he has a new toy, but manifesting a new quality in our lives which will make a fundamental change in our lives and the life of humanity. The Theosophical Society has the duty of giving a lead in the direction of the change that is needed, especially now because of the crucial nature of the times. That lead, if it is to mean the upsurge of new life, without which it will be a mere regimentation of minds and the stopping of its flow, must come through every one of us. The world at large still believes in regimentation. One man is the leader, he gives the word and everybody carries out what he says, and seeks to share his glory. The feeling that underlies such leadership arises from a psychology of inflation that enjoys the power to move people at its command. But such leadership is diametrically opposed to the nature of the work in which we are engaged. When we use such words as “awakening,” “realization,” “truth,” they all refer to the individual who has to come to it out of his own freedom.

The first leaf in spring can give an indication of the glory that is to come, but it is not only one leaf but the whole tree which becomes new in springtime. The fountainhead of the renovating life is in its roots, not in the branches. That fountainhead for us are those fundamental truths pertaining to our being, and inseparable from that being. The springtime for the whole of mankind cannot come by the mere lapse of time, the continuation of its present heedlessness and blindness with whatever developments may spring therefrom; it has to come through individual insight and realization, the flowing of fresh life from the sources of his uncorrupt being.