

# *On Thought*

*(Talk given to a women's association)*

**S**INCE we want to learn to think better in order to live better, since we want to know how to think in order to recover our place and status in life as feminine counterparts and to become in fact the helpful, inspiring and balancing elements that we are potentially, it seems indispensable to me that we should first of all enquire into what thought is.

Thought.... It is a very vast subject, the vastest of all, perhaps.... Therefore I do not intend to tell you exactly and completely what it is. But by a process of analysis, we shall try to form as precise an idea of it as it is possible for us to do.

It seems to me that we must first of all distinguish two very different kinds, or I might say qualities, of thought: thoughts in us which are the result, the fruit, as it were, of our sensations, and thoughts which, like living beings, come to us—from where?... most often we do not know—thoughts that we perceive mentally before they express themselves in our outer being as sensations.

If you have observed yourselves even a little, you must have noticed that the contact with what is not yourselves is established first of all through the medium of your senses: sight, hearing, touch, smell, etc. The impact felt in this way, whether slight or violent, pleasant or unpleasant, arouses a feeling in you—like or dislike, attraction or repulsion—which very quickly turns into an idea, an opinion you form about the object, whatever it may be, that has determined the contact.

An example: you go out and as you step out of your house you see that it is raining and at the same time you feel the damp cold seizing you; the sensation is unpleasant, you feel a dislike for the rain and inwardly, almost mechanically, you say to yourself,

## On Thought

“This rain is really a nuisance, especially as I have to go out! Not to mention that I am going to get dreadfully dirty; Paris is very dirty in rainy weather, especially now that all the streets have been dug up” (and so on)....

All these and many other similar thoughts about the simple fact that it is raining come to assail your mind; and if nothing else, outwardly or inwardly, comes to attract your attention, for a long while, almost without your noticing it, your brain may produce minute, trivial thoughts about this small, insignificant sensation....

This is how most human lives are spent; this is what human beings most often call *thinking* — a mental activity that is almost mechanical, unreflecting, out of our control, a reflex. All thoughts concerning material life and its many needs are of the same quality.

Here we face the first difficulty to be overcome; if we want to be able to truly think, that is, to receive, formulate and form valid and viable thoughts, we must first of all empty our brain of all this vague and unruly mental agitation. And this is certainly not the easiest part of our task. We are dominated by this irrational cerebral activity, we do not dominate it.

Only one method is worth recommending: meditation. But as I was telling you last time, there are many ways of meditating; some are very effective, others less so.

Each one should find his own by successive trial and error. However, one thing can be recommended to everyone: reflection, that is to say, concentration, self-observation in solitude and silence, a close and strict analysis of the multitude of insignificant little thoughts which constantly assail us.

During the few moments you devote each day to this preliminary exercise of meditation, avoid, if possible, the complacent contemplation of your sensations, your feelings, your states of mind.

We all have an inexhaustible fund of self-indulgence, and very often we treat all these little inner movements with the

## Words of Long Ago

greatest respect and give them an importance which they certainly do not have, even relative to our own evolution.

When one has enough self-control to be able to analyse coldly, to dissect these states of mind, to strip them of their brilliant or painful appearance, so as to perceive them as they are in all their childish insignificance, then one can profitably devote oneself to studying them. But this result can only be achieved gradually, after much reflection in a spirit of complete impartiality. I would like to make a short digression here to put you on your guard against a frequent confusion.

I have just said that we always look upon ourselves with great indulgence, and I think in fact that our defects very often appear to us to be full of charm and that we justify all our weaknesses. But to tell the truth, this is because we lack self-confidence. Does this surprise you?... Yes, I repeat, we lack confidence, not in what we are at the present moment, not in our ephemeral and ever-changing outer being — this being always finds favour in our eyes — but we lack confidence in what we can become through effort, we have no faith in the integral and profound transformation which will be the work of our true self, of the eternal, the divine who is in all beings, if we surrender like children to its supremely luminous and far-seeing guidance.

So let us not confuse complacency with confidence — and let us return to our subject.

When you are able by methodical and repeated effort to objectivise and keep at a distance all this flood of incoherent thoughts which assail us, you will notice a new phenomenon.

You will observe within yourself certain thoughts that are stronger and more tenacious than others, thoughts concerning social usages, customs, moral rules and even general laws that govern earth and man.

They are your opinions on these subjects or at least those you profess and by which you try to act.

Look at one of these ideas, the one most familiar to you, look at it very carefully, concentrate, reflect in all sincerity, if

## On Thought

possible leaving aside all bias, and ask yourself why you have this opinion on that subject rather than any other.

The answer will almost invariably be the same, or nearly:

Because it is the opinion prevalent in your environment, because it is considered good form to have it and therefore saves you from as many clashes, frictions, criticisms as possible.

Or because this was the opinion of your father or mother, the opinion which moulded your childhood.

Or else because this opinion is the normal outcome of the education, religious or otherwise, you received in your youth. This thought is not your own thought.

For, to be your own thought, it would have to form part of a logical synthesis you had elaborated in the course of your existence, either by observation, experience and deduction, or by deep, abstract meditation and contemplation.

This, then, is our second discovery.

Since we have goodwill and endeavour to be integrally sincere, that is, to make our actions conform to our thoughts, we are now convinced that we act according to mental laws we receive from outside, not after having maturely considered and analysed them, not by deliberately and consciously receiving them, but because unconsciously we are subjected to them through atavism, by our upbringing and education, and above all because we are dominated by a collective suggestion which is so powerful, so overwhelming, that very few succeed in avoiding it altogether.

How far we are from the mental individuality we want to acquire!

We are products determined by all our past history, impelled by the blind and arbitrary will of our contemporaries.

It is a pitiful sight.... But let us not be disheartened; the greater the ailment and the more pressing the remedy, the more energetically we must fight back.

The method will always be the same: to reflect and reflect and reflect.

## Words of Long Ago

We must take these ideas one after another and analyse them by appealing to all our common sense, all our reason, our highest sense of equity; we must weigh them in the balance of our acquired knowledge and accumulated experience, and then endeavour to reconcile them with one another, to establish harmony among them. It will often prove very difficult, for we have a regrettable tendency to let the most contradictory ideas dwell side by side in our minds.

We must put all of them in place, bring order into our inner chamber, and we must do this each day just as we tidy the rooms of our house. For I suppose that our mentality deserves at least as much care as our house.

But, once again, for this work to be truly effective, we must strive to maintain in ourselves our highest, quietest, most sincere state of mind so as to make it our own.

Let us be transparent so that the light within us may fully illumine the thoughts we want to observe, analyse, classify. Let us be impartial and courageous so as to rise above our own little preferences and petty personal conveniences. Let us look at the thoughts in themselves, for themselves, without bias.

And little by little, if we persevere in our work of classification, we shall see order and light take up their abode in our minds. But we should never forget that this order is but confusion compared with the order that we must realise in the future, that this light is but darkness compared with the light that we shall be able to receive after some time.

Life is in perpetual evolution; if we want to have a living mentality, we must progress unceasingly.

Moreover, this is only a preliminary work. We are still very far from true thought, which brings us into relation with the infinite source of knowledge.

These are only exercises for training ourselves gradually to an individualising control of our thoughts. For control of the mental activity is indispensable to one who wants to meditate.

I cannot speak to you in detail today about meditation;

I shall only say that in order to be genuine, to serve its full purpose, meditation must be disinterested, impersonal in the integral sense of the word.

Here is a description, taken from an old Hindu text, of a typal meditation:

“The great and magnificent King ascended to the chamber of the Great Collection and, stopping at the threshold, exclaimed with intense emotion:

“ ‘Away! Advance no further, thoughts of lust! Away! Advance no further, thoughts of bad will! Away! Advance no further, thoughts of hate!’

“And entering the chamber, he sat upon a seat of gold. Then, having rejected all passion, all feeling contrary to righteousness, he attained the first *dhāma*, a state of well-being and joy arising from solitude, a state of reflection and seeking.

“Setting aside reflection and seeking, he attained the second *dhāma*, a state of well-being and joy arising from serenity, a state void of reflection and seeking, a state of quietude and elevation of mind.

“Ceasing to delight in joy, he remained indifferent, conscious, self-controlled, and attained the third *dhāma*, experiencing the inmost contentment proclaimed by the sages, saying, ‘One who, self-controlled, dwells in indifference, experiences an inner well-being.’

“Setting aside this well-being, rejecting pain, dead to both joy and suffering, he attained the state of most pure and perfect self-mastery and serenity which constitute the fourth *dhāma*.

“Then the great and magnificent King left the chamber of the Great Collection and, entering the golden chamber, sat upon a seat of silver. He beheld the world in a thought of love and his love went forth to the four regions in turn; and then with his heart full of love, with a love growing without end or limit, he enfolded the vast world, in its entirety, to its very ends.

“He beheld the world in a thought of pity and his pity went forth to the four regions in turn; and then with his heart full of

## Words of Long Ago

pity, with a pity growing without end or limit, he enfolded the vast world, in its entirety, to its very ends.

“He beheld the world in a thought of sympathy and his sympathy went forth to the four regions in turn; and then with his heart full of sympathy, with a sympathy growing without end or limit, he enfolded the vast world, in its entirety, to its very ends.

“He beheld the world in a thought of serenity and his serenity went forth to the four regions in turn; and then with his heart full of serenity, with a serenity growing without end or limit, he enfolded the vast world, in its entirety, to its very ends.”<sup>1</sup>

One who strives in sincere quest for truth, who is ready, if necessary, to sacrifice all he had thought until then to be true, in order to draw ever nearer to the integral truth that can be no other than the progressive knowledge of the whole universe in its infinite progression, enters gradually into relation with great masses of deeper, completer and more luminous thoughts.

After much meditation and contemplation, he comes into direct contact with the great universal current of pure intellectual force, and thenceforth no knowledge can be veiled from him.

From that moment serenity—mental peace—is his portion. In all beliefs, in all human knowledge, in all religious teachings, which sometimes appear so contradictory, he perceives the deep truth which nothing can now conceal from his eyes.

Even errors and ignorance no longer disturb him, for, as an unknown master says:

“He who walks in the Truth is not troubled by any error, for he knows that error is the first effort of life towards truth.”

But to attain this state of perfect serenity is to attain to the summit of thought.

Without hoping to reach that point at once, we can strive to acquire an individual thought that is both original and as

<sup>1</sup> See Appendix page 29.

## On Thought

equitable as possible. Thus we shall have become minds of some consequence, with the right to bring to society the precious contribution of their highest intuitions.

I have several times spoken to you this evening of thought as a living and active being. This calls for an explanation. At our next meeting, I shall give you what I might call the chemical or inner structure of thought, its composition, how it is formed, how it lives, acts and transforms.

And now allow me, before concluding, to express a wish.

I would like us to make the resolution to raise ourselves each day, in all sincerity and goodwill, in an ardent aspiration towards the Sun of Truth, towards the Supreme Light, the source and intellectual life of the universe, so that it may pervade us entirely and illumine with its great brilliance our minds and hearts, all our thoughts and our actions.

Then we shall acquire the right and the privilege of following the counsel of the great initiate of the past, who tells us:

“With your hearts overflowing with compassion, go forth into this world torn by pain, be instructors, and wherever the darkness of ignorance rules, there light a torch.”

*15 December 1911*