29 March 1951

“The articles and dogmas of a religion are mind-made things and, if you cling to them and shut yourself up in a code of life made out for you, you do not know and cannot know the truth of the spirit that lies beyond all codes and dogmas, wide and large and free....

“In every religion there are some who have evolved a high spiritual life. But it is not the religion that gave them their spirituality; it is they who have put their spirituality into the religion. Put anywhere else, born into any other cult, they would have found there and lived there the same spiritual life. It is their own capacity, it is some power of their inner being and not the religion they profess that has made them what they are.”

Questions and Answers 1929 (9 June)

Are all religions mental constructions?

All religions were perhaps not that in their beginning, but they have certainly become that with time.

What is the “Little Vehicle” and the “Great Vehicle”?

These are Buddhist terms. This is the translation of a Pali word, I believe. It is said that the religion of the North is the “Great Vehicle” and the religion of the South the “Little Vehicle”. The Little Vehicle abides by quite a strict teaching according to what has been preserved or is believed to have been preserved of the words of the Buddha.

You know the Buddha used to say that there was no God, there was no persistence of the ego, there were no beings of higher worlds who could incarnate here, there were no...
denied almost every possible thing. The religion of the South is like that, it is extremely nihilistic, it says no, no, no to everything; while in the religion of the North, which has been practised in Tibet, and spread from Tibet into China and from China to Japan, one finds the Bodhisattvas (who stand for saints as in all other religions), all the previous Buddhas who are also like some sort of demigods or gods. I don’t know if you have ever had a chance to visit a Buddhist temple of the North (I saw them in China and Japan), for you enter halls where there are innumerable statuettes—all the Bodhisattvas, all the disciples of those Bodhisattvas, all the forces of nature deified, indeed you are overwhelmed by the number of gods! On the other hand, if you go to the South, there is nothing, not a single image. I believe they speak of the “Great Vehicle” because there are lots of things inside, and the “Little Vehicle” because there are few! I don’t know exactly the origin of the two terms.

“Things have an inner value and become real to you only when you have acquired them by the exercise of your free choice, not when they have been imposed upon you. If you want to be sure of your religion, you must choose it; if you want to be sure of your country, you must choose it; if you want to be sure of your family, even that you must choose.”

Questions and Answers 1929 (9 June)

What does “choose one’s family” mean?

You have come into the world in a certain milieu, among certain people. When you are quite young, but for a few rare exceptions, what surrounds you seems altogether natural to you, because you are born in its midst and are quite used to it. But when, a little later, a spiritual aspiration wakes up in you, you may quite possibly feel yourself completely ill at ease in the environment where you have lived, if, for instance, the people who have
brought you up don’t have the same aspiration or if their ideas are the very opposite of what is developing in you. Instead of saying, “You see, I belong to this family, what shall I do? I have a mother, a father, brothers, sisters...”, you can set out in search (I don’t mean necessarily travel), set out in search of spirits who have an affinity with yours, people who have a similar aspiration and, if you have the sincere aspiration to find those who like you are in quest of something, you will always have the occasion to meet them in one way or another, through quite unexpected circumstances; and when you have found one or more people who are in exactly the same state of mind and have the same aspiration, quite naturally there will be created bonds of closeness, intimacy, friendship and, among you, you will form a kind of brotherhood, that is to say, a true family. You are together because you are close to one another, you are together because you have the same aspiration, you are together because you want to create the same goal in life; you understand one another when you speak, you have no need to discuss anything which is said and you live in a kind of inner harmony. This is the true family, this is the family of aspiration, the family of spiritual inclinations.

Now, about the country, this may depend upon all sorts of things, this may depend upon a sort of inner affinity. For instance, if you come to a country and there you find a kind of response, an inner response to your aspiration, you find the surroundings more in conformity with your tastes, your tendencies, you may very well choose to live in this country, which is not necessarily that of your birth; and since you choose that country to live there, you may say, “This is my country.” There are people, many people who go and settle elsewhere for very materialistic and uninteresting reasons most of the time, but there are also others who are in search of an environment which suits their inner taste, their aspiration, or who seek lands, ways of living more in keeping with their deeper nature; then they settle down somewhere and don’t move again, and when they
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stay there for a number of years, they can really feel that this
country is theirs, much more than the house or village or city
where they were born.

Is the vital distorted from the very birth?

If your birth was not an accident, you could very well think there
was no distortion, but what you are at your birth is most of the
time almost absolutely what your mother and father have made
you, and also, through them, what your grandparents have made
you. There are certain vital traditions in families and, besides,
there is the state of consciousness in which you were formed,
conceived — the moment at which you were conceived — and
that, not once in a million times does that state conform to true
aspiration; and it is only a true aspiration which could make your
vital pure of all mixture, make the vital element attracted for the
formation of the being a pure element, free from all contagion; I
mean that if a psychic being enters there, it can gather elements
favourable to its growth. In the world as it is, things are so
mixed up, have been so mixed up in every way, that it is almost
impossible to have elements of the vital sufficiently pure not to
suffer the contagion of all other contaminated beings.

I think I have already spoken about that, I have said what
kind of aspiration ought to be there in the parents before the
birth; but as I said, this does not happen even once in a hundred
thousand instances. The willed conception of a child is extremely
rare; mostly it is an accident. Among innumerable parents it is
quite a small minority that even simply bothers about what a
child could be; they do not even know that what the child will be
depends on what they are. It is a very small élite which knows
this. Most of the time things go as they can; anything at all
happens and people don’t even realise what is happening. So, in
these conditions how do you expect to be born with a vital being
sufficiently pure to be of help to you? One is born with a slough
to clean before one begins to live. And once you have made
a good start on the way to the inner transformation and you go down to the subconscious root of the being — that exactly which comes from parents, from atavism — well, you do see what it is! And all, almost all difficulties are there, there are very few things added to existence after the first years of life. This happens at any odd moment; if you keep bad company or read bad books, the poison may enter you; but there are all the imprints deep-rooted in the subconscious, the dirty habits you have and against which you struggle. For instance, there are people who can't open their mouth without telling a lie, and they don't always do this deliberately (that is the worst of it), or people who can't come in touch with others without quarrelling, all sorts of stupidities — they are there in the subconscious, deeply rooted. Now, when you have a goodwill, externally you do your best to avoid all that, to correct it if possible; you work, you fight; then become aware that this thing always keeps coming up, it comes up from some part which escapes your control. But if you enter this subconscious, if you let your consciousness infiltrate it, and look carefully, gradually you will discover all the sources, all the origins of all your difficulties; then you will begin to understand what your fathers and mothers, grandfathers and grandmothers were, and if at a certain moment you are unable to control yourself, you will understand, “I am like that because they were like that.”

If you have within you a psychic being sufficiently awake to watch over you, to prepare your path, it can draw towards you things which help you, draw people, books, circumstances, all sorts of little coincidences which come to you as though brought by some benevolent will and give you an indication, a help, a support to take decisions and turn you in the right direction. But once you have taken this decision, once you have decided to find the truth of your being, once you start sincerely on the road, then everything seems to conspire to help you to advance, and if you observe carefully you see gradually the source of your difficulties: “Ah! Wait a minute, this defect was in my father; oh!
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this habit was my mother's; oh! my grandmother was like this, my grandfather was like that.” Or it could well be the nurse who took care of you when you were small, or brothers and sisters who played with you, the little friends you met, and you will find that all this was there, in this person or that or the other. But if you continue to be sincere, you find you can cross all this quite calmly, and after a time you cut all the moorings with which you were born, break the chains and go freely on the path.

If you really want to transform your character, it is that you must do. It has always been said that it is impossible to change one's nature; in all books of philosophy, even of yoga, you are told the same story: “You cannot change your character, you are born like that, you are like that.” This is absolutely false, I guarantee it is false; but there is something very difficult to do to change your character, because it is not your character which must be changed, it is the character of your antecedents. In them you will not change it (because they have no such intention), but it is in you that it must be changed. It is what they have given you, all the little gifts made to you at your birth — nice gifts — it is this which must be changed. But if you succeed in getting hold of the thread of these things, the true thread, since you have worked upon this with perseverance and sincerity, one fine morning you will be free; all this will fall off from you and you will be able to get a start in life without any burden. Then you will be a new man, living a new life, almost with a new nature. And if you look back you will say, “It is not possible, I was never like that!”