9 April 1951

Mother reads a passage about art and yoga (Questions and Answers 1929, 28 July), then asks:

What is the relation between art and yoga? Can the artist and the yogi have the same source of inspiration? (Mother turns to a disciple:) Amrita, will you tell us what relation there is between art and yoga?

*A beautiful relation.... Art can be a yoga and yoga is an art.*

That’s very fine! I knew someone, an American lady, who said that spirituality was supreme good taste, the best possible good taste. This is quite similar.

*What do snakes signify in books and in dreams?*

That depends on the books! That depends on the dreams! If you give me an example from a dream I shall tell you what the nature of your serpent was, but just like that, “snakes” is too vague.

*Why is modern art so ugly?*

I believe the chief reason is that people have become more and more lazy and do not want to work. They want to produce something before having worked, they want to know before having studied and they want to make a name before having done anything good. So, this is the open door for all sorts of things, as we see.... Naturally, there are exceptions.

I have known artists who were great artists, who had worked hard and produced remarkable things, classical, that...
is, not ultra-modern. But they were not in fashion because, precisely, one had not to be classical. When a brush was put in the hands of an individual who had never touched a brush, and when a brush was put on a palette of colours and the man had never touched a palette before, then if this individual had in front of him a bit of canvas on an easel and he had never done a picture before, naturally he daubed anything at all; he took the colours and threw them in a haphazard way; then everybody cried out “Admirable”, “Marvellous”, “It is the expression of your soul”, “How well this reveals the truth of things”, etc.! This was the fashion and people who knew nothing were very successful. The poor men who had worked, who knew their art well, were not asked for their pictures any longer; people said, “Oh! This is old-fashioned, you will never find customers for such things.” But, after all, they were hungry, you see, they had to pay their rent and buy their colours and all the rest, and that is costly. Then what could they do? When they had received rebuffs from the picture dealers who all told them the same thing, “But try to be modern, my friend; look here, you are behind the times”, as they were very hungry, what could they do?... I knew a painter, a disciple of Gustave Moreau; he was truly a very fine artist, he knew his work quite well, and then... he was starving, he did not know how to make both ends meet and he used to lament. One day, a friend intending to help him, sent a picture dealer to see him. When the merchant entered his studio, this poor man told himself, “At last! Here’s my chance”, and he showed him all the best work he had done. The art dealer made a face, looked around, turned over things and began rummaging in all the corners; and suddenly he found... Ah! I must explain this to you, you are not familiar with these things: a painter, after his day’s work has at times some mixed colours left on his palette; he cannot keep them, they dry up in a day; so he always has with him some pieces of canvas which are not well prepared and which he daubs with what are called “the scrapings of palettes” (with supple
knives he scrapes all the colours from the palette and applies them on the canvases) and as there are many mixed colours, this makes unexpected designs. There was in a corner a canvas like that on which he used to put his palette-scrapings. The merchant suddenly falls upon that and exclaims, “Here you are! My friend, you are a genius, this is a miracle, it is this you should show! Look at this richness of tones, this variety of forms, and what an imagination!” And this poor man who was starving said shyly, “But sir, these are my palette-scrapings!” And the art-dealer caught hold of him: “Silly fool, this is not to be told!” Then he said, “Give me this, I undertake to sell it. Give me as many of these as you like; ten, twenty, thirty a month, I shall sell them all for you and I shall make you famous.” Then, as I told you, his stomach was protesting; he was not happy, but he said, “All right, take it, I shall see.” Then the landlord comes to demand his rent, the paint merchant comes demanding payment of the old bill; the purse is quite empty, and what is to be done? So though he did not make pictures with palette-scrapings, he did something which gave the imagination free play, where the forms were not too precise, the colours were all mixed and brilliant, and one could not know overmuch what one was seeing; and as people did not know very much what they saw, those who understood nothing about it exclaimed, “How beautiful it is!” And he supplied this to his art-dealer. He never made a name for himself with his real painting, which was truly very fine (it was really very fine, he was a very good painter), but he won a world reputation with these horrors! And this was just at the beginning of modern painting, this goes back to the Universal Exhibition of 1900; if I were to tell you his name, you would all recognise it.... Now, of course, they have gone far beyond, they have done much better. However, he had the sense of harmony and beauty and his colours were beautiful. But at present, as soon as there is the least beauty, it won’t do at all, it has to be outrageously ugly, then that, that is modern!

The story began with... the man who used to do still-life and
whose plates were never round.... Cézanne! It was he who began it; he said that if plates were painted round that would not be living; that when one looks at things spontaneously, never does one see plates round: one sees them like this (gesture). I don’t know why, but he said that it is only the mind that makes us see plates as round, because one knows they are round, otherwise one does not see them round. It is he who began.... He painted a still-life which was truly a very beautiful thing, note that; a very beautiful thing, with an impression of colour and form truly surprising (I could show you reproductions one day, I must be having them, but they are not colour reproductions unfortunately; the beauty is really in the colour). But, of course, his plate was not round. He had friends who told him just this, “But after all, why don’t you make your plate round?” He replied, “My dear fellow, you are altogether mental, you are not an artist; it is because you think that you make your plates round: if you only see, you will do it like this” (gesture). It is in accordance with the impression that the plate ought to be painted; it gives you an impact, you translate the impact, and it is this which is truly artistic. It is like this that modern art began. And note that he was right. His plates were not round, but he was right in principle.

What has made art what it is (do you want me to tell you this, psychologically?) is photography. Photographers did not know their job and gave you hideous things, frightfully ugly; it was mechanical, it had no soul, it had no art, it was horrible. All the first attempts of photography until... not very long ago, were like that. It is about fifty years ago that it became tolerable, and now with gradual improvement it has become something good; but it must be said that the process is absolutely different. In those days, when your portrait was taken, you sat in a comfortable chair, you had to sit leaning nicely and facing an enormous thing with a black cloth, which opened like this towards you. And the man ordered, “Don’t move! Steady!” That, of course, was the end of the old painting. When the
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painter made something lifelike, a lifelike portrait, his friends said, “Why now, this is photography!”

It must be said that the art of the end of the last century, the art of the Second Empire, was bad. It was an age of businessmen, above all an age of bankers, financiers, and taste, upon my word, had gone very low. I don’t believe that businessmen are people necessarily very competent in art, but when they wanted their portrait, they wanted a likeness! One could not leave out the least detail, it was quite comic: “But you know I have a little wrinkle there, don’t forget to put it in!” and the lady who said, “You know, you must make my shoulders quite round”, and so on. So the artists made portraits which indeed turned into photography. They were flat, cold, without soul and without vision. I can name a number of artists of that period, it was truly a shame for art. This lasted till about the end of the last century, till about 1875. Afterwards, there started the reaction. Then there was an entire very beautiful period (I don’t say this because I myself was painting) but all the artists I then knew were truly artists, they were serious and did admirable things which have remained admirable. It was the period of the impressionists; it was the period of Manet, it was a beautiful period, they did beautiful things. But people tire of beautiful things as they tire of bad ones. So there were those who wanted to found the “Salon d’Automne”. They wanted to surpass the others, go more towards the new, towards the truly anti-photographic. And my goodness, they went a little beyond the limit (according to my taste). They began to depreciate Rembrandt — Rembrandt was a dauber, Titian was a dauber, all the great painters of the Italian Renaissance were daubers. You were not to pronounce the name of Raphael, it was a shame. And all the great period of the Italian Renaissance was “not worth very much”; even the works of Leonardo da Vinci; “You know, you must take them with a pinch of salt.” Then they went a little further; they wanted something entirely new, they became extravagant. And then, from there, there was
only one more step to take for the palette-scrapings and then it was finished.

This is the history of art as I knew it.

Now, to tell you the truth, we are climbing up the curve again. Truly, I think we had gone down to the depths of incoherence, absurdity, nastiness — of the taste for the sordid and ugly, the dirty, the outrageous. We had gone, I believe, to the very bottom.

Are we really going up again?

I think so. Recently I saw some pictures which truly showed something other than ugliness and filth. It is not yet art, it is very far from being beautiful, but there are signs that we are going up again. You will see, fifty years hence we shall perhaps have beautiful things to see. I felt this some days ago, that truly we had come to the end of the descending curve — we are still very low down, but are beginning to climb up. There is a kind of anguish and there is still a complete lack of understanding of what beauty can and should be, but one finds an aspiration towards something which will not be sordidly material. For a time art had wanted to wallow in the mire, to be what they called “realistic”. They had chosen as “real” what was most repulsive in the world, most ugly: all deformities, all filth, all ugliness, all the horrors, all the incoherences of colour and form; well, I believe this is behind us now. I had this feeling very strongly these last few days (not through seeing pictures, for we do not have a chance to see much here, but by “sensing the atmosphere”). And even in the reproductions we are shown, there is some aspiration towards something which would be a little higher. It will need about fifty years; then... Unless there is another war, another catastrophe; because certainly, to a large extent, what is responsible for this taste for the sordid are the wars and the horrors of war. People were compelled to put aside all refined sensibility, the love of harmony, the need for beauty, to be able
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to undergo all that; otherwise, I believe, they would really have died of horror. It was so unspeakably foul that it could not be tolerated, so it perverted men’s taste everywhere and when the war was over (admitting that it ever ended), they wanted only one thing, to forget, forget, forget. To seek distraction, not to think of all the horror they had suffered. Then, one goes very low. The whole vital atmosphere is completely vitiated and the physical atmosphere is terribly obscure.

Hence, if we can escape another world war... Because war is there, it has never stopped. It has been there from almost the beginning of this century; it began with China, Turkey, Tripolitania, Morocco — you are following? — the Balkans, it has never stopped, it has become worse, but each time it has become a world war, it has assumed altogether sordid proportions. All you my children, you have been born after the war (I am speaking of the First [World] War), so you do not know much about this, and then you have been born here, in a country which has been truly privileged. But the children born in Europe, latterly, these little ones, who were children of the war, carry something in them which will be very difficult to eradicate, a kind of horror, a fright. One could not have been mixed up with that without knowing what horror is. The first war was perhaps worse than the second. The second was so atrocious that all was lost.... But the first, oh! I don’t know.... The last months I spent in Paris were truly fantastic. And it can’t be told. The life in the trenches, for example, is something that cannot be told. The new generations do not know.... But, you see, the children born now will not even know if this was true, all these horrors which are related to them. What happened in the conquered countries, in Czechoslovakia, in Poland, in France — the frightful things, unbelievable, unthinkable, which took place — unless one has been very close by, has seen, one cannot believe it. It was... I was saying the other day that the vital world is a world of horrors; well, all the horrors of the vital world had descended upon earth, and upon earth they are still more horrible than in the vital world, because
in the vital world, if you have an inner power, if you have the knowledge, if you have strength, you act upon them — you act, you can subdue them, you can show yourself stronger. But all your knowledge, all your power, all your strength is nothing in this material world when you are subjected to the horrors of a war. And this acts in the terrestrial atmosphere in such a way that it is very, very difficult to eradicate it.

Naturally, men are always very anxious to forget. There are already those who have begun to say, “Are you quite sure it was like that?” But those who have gone through that, do not want it to be forgotten; so the places of torture, massacre — hideous places which go beyond all the worst the human imagination can conceive — some of these places have been preserved. You can go and visit the torture-chambers the Germans built in Paris, and they will never be destroyed, I hope, so that those who come and say, “Oh! You know, these things have been exaggerated” (for one does not like to know that such frightful things have happened), could be taken by the hand and told, “Come and see, if you are not afraid.”

This forms character. If it is taken in the right way (and I think there are people who have taken it in the right way), this may lead you straight to yoga, straight. That is, one feels such a deep detachment for all things in the world, such a great need to find something else, an imperious need to find something which is truly beautiful, truly fresh, truly good... then, quite naturally, this brings you to a spiritual aspiration. And these horrors have, as it were, divided men: there was a minority which was ready and rose very high, there was a majority which was not ready and went down very low. These wallow in the mud at present, and hence, for the moment, one does not get out of it; and if this continues, we shall go towards another war and this time it will truly be the end of this civilisation — I don’t say the end of the world, because nothing can be the end of the world, but the end of this civilisation, that is to say, another will have to be built. You will perhaps tell me that this would be very well, for
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d this civilisation is in its decline, it is on the way to perish; but after all, there are very beautiful things in it, worthy of being preserved, and it would be a great pity if all this disappeared. But if there is another war, I can tell you that all this will disappear. For men are very intelligent creatures and they have found the means of destroying everything, and they will make use of this, for what's the good of spending billions to find certain bombs, if one might not use them? What is the use of discovering that one can destroy a city in a few minutes, if it is not for destroying it! One wants to see the fruit of one's efforts. If there is war, this is what will happen.

There we are, I am telling you things which are not very cheerful, but it is sometimes good to knock some sense into you to make one think.