Vigilance

Vigilance is the way that leads to immortality (or Nirvana). Negligence is the way that leads to death. Those who are vigilant do not die. Those who are negligent are dead already.

In these texts the word Nirvana is not used in the sense of annihilation, as you see, but in the sense of an eternal existence in opposition to life and death, as we know them in the present earthly existence, and which are contrary to each other: life contrary to death, death contrary to life. It is not that life which is spoken of, but the eternal existence which is beyond life and death — the true existence.

Vigilance means to be awake, to be on one’s guard, to be sincere — never to be taken by surprise. When you want to do sadhana, at each moment of your life, there is a choice between taking a step that leads to the goal and falling asleep or sometimes even going backwards, telling yourself, “Oh, later on, not immediately” — sitting down on the way.

To be vigilant is not merely to resist what pulls you downward, but above all to be alert in order not to lose any opportunity to progress, any opportunity to overcome a weakness, to resist a temptation, any opportunity to learn something, to correct something, to master something. If you are vigilant, you can do in a few days what would otherwise take years. If you are vigilant, you change each circumstance of your life, each action, each movement into an occasion for coming nearer the goal.

There are two kinds of vigilance, active and passive. There is a vigilance that gives you a warning if you are about to make a mistake, if you are making a wrong choice, if you are being weak or allowing yourself to be tempted, and there is the active
vigilance which seeks an opportunity to progress, seeks to utilise every circumstance to advance more quickly.

There is a difference between preventing yourself from falling and advancing more quickly.

And both are absolutely necessary.

He who is not vigilant is already dead. He has lost contact with the true purpose of existence and of life.

So the hours, circumstances, life pass in vain, bringing nothing, and you awake from your somnolence in a hole from which it is very difficult to escape.

17 January 1958

**Having fully understood what vigilance is, the sages delight in it and take their pleasure in the presence of the Great Ones.**

Throughout this teaching there is one thing to be noticed; it is this: you are never told that to live well, to think well, is the result of a struggle or of a sacrifice; on the contrary it is a delightful state which cures all suffering. At that time, the time of the Buddha, to live a spiritual life was a joy, a beatitude, the happiest state, which freed you from all the troubles of the world, all the sufferings, all the cares, making you happy, satisfied, contented.

It is the materialism of modern times that has turned spiritual effort into a hard struggle and a sacrifice, a painful renunciation of all the so-called joys of life.

This insistence on the exclusive reality of the physical world, of physical pleasures, physical joys, physical possessions, is the result of the whole materialistic tendency of human civilisation. It was unthinkable in ancient times. On the contrary, withdrawal, concentration, liberation from all material cares, consecration to the spiritual joy, that was happiness indeed.

From this point of view it is quite evident that humanity is far from having progressed; and those who were born into
the world in the centres of materialistic civilisation have in their subconscient this horrible notion that only material realities are real and that to be concerned with things that are not material represents a wonderful spirit of sacrifice, an almost sublime effort. Not to be preoccupied from dawn to dusk and from dusk to dawn with all the little physical satisfactions, physical pleasures, physical sensations, physical preoccupations, is to bear evidence of a remarkable spirit. One is not aware of it, but the whole of modern civilisation is built on this conception: “Ah, what you can touch, you are sure that is true; what you can see, you are sure that is true; what you have eaten, you are sure of having eaten it; but all the rest—pooh! We are not sure whether they are not vain dreams and whether we are not giving up the real for the unreal, the substance for the shadow. After all, what are you going to gain? A few dreams! But when you have some coins in your pocket, you are sure that they are there!”

And that is everywhere, underneath everything. Scratch the appearances just a little, it is there, within your consciousness; and from time to time you hear this thing whispering within you, “Take care, don’t be taken in.” Indeed, it is lamentable. We have been told that evolution is progressive and that it follows a spiral of ascending progression. I do not doubt that what one calls comfort in modern cities is a much higher degree of evolution than the comfort of the cave-man. But in ancient narratives, they always spoke of a power of foresight, of the prophetic spirit, the announcement of future events through visions, life’s intimacy with something more subtle that had for the simple people of that age a more concrete reality.

Now, in those beautiful cities that are so comfortable, when one wants to condemn anything, what does one say? — “It’s a dream, it is imagination.”

And precisely, if a person lives in an inner perception, people look at him slightly askance and wonder whether he is altogether mentally sound. One who does not pass his time in striving for wealth or in trying to increase his comforts and well-being, to
secure a good position and become an important person, a man who is not like that is mistrusted, people wonder whether he is in his right mind.

And all that is so much the stuff of the atmosphere, the content of the air you breathe, the orientation of the thoughts received from others that it seems absolutely natural. You do not feel that it is a grotesque monstrosity.

To become a little more conscious of oneself, to enter into relation with the life behind the appearances, does not seem to you to be the greatest good. When you sit in a comfortable chair, in front of a lavish meal, when you fill your stomach with delicious dishes, that certainly appears to you much more concrete and much more interesting. And if you look at the day that has passed, if you take stock of your day, if you have had some material advantage, some pleasure, a physical satisfaction, you mark it as a good day; but if you have received a good lesson from life, if it has given you a knock on your nose to tell you that you are a stupid fellow, you do not give thanks to the Grace, you say, “Oh, life is not always fun!”

When I read these ancient texts, I really have the impression that from the inner point of view, from the point of view of the true life, we have fallen back terribly and that for the acquisition of a few ingenious mechanisms, a few encouragements to physical laziness, the acquisition of instruments and gadgets that lessen the effort of living, we have renounced the reality of the inner life. It is that sense which has been lost and it needs an effort for you to think of learning the meaning of life, the purpose of existence, the goal towards which we must advance, towards which all life advances, whether you want it or not. One step towards the goal, oh! it needs so much effort to do that. And generally one thinks of it only when the outer circumstances are not pleasant.

How far we are from the times when the shepherd, who did not go to school and kept watch over his flock at night under the stars, could read in the stars what was going to happen,
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commune with something which expressed itself through Na-
ture, and had the sense of the profound beauty and that peace
which a simple life gives!

It is very unfortunate that one has to give up one thing in
order to gain another. When I speak of the inner life, I am far
from opposing any modern inventions, far from it, but how
much these inventions have made us artificial and stupid! How
much we have lost the sense of true beauty, how much we burden
ourselves with useless needs!

Perhaps the time has come to continue the ascent in the
curve of the spiral and now with all that this knowledge of
matter has brought us, we shall be able to give to our spiritual
progress a more solid basis. Strong with what we have learnt of
the secrets of material Nature, we shall be able to join the two
extremes and rediscover the supreme Reality in the very heart
of the atom.

24 January 1958

Those who are intelligent, meditative, persevering, who
ceaselessly struggle with themselves, attain to Nirvana,
which is the supreme felicity.

Whosoever can sustain his zeal, remain pure in his ac-
tions, act wisely, restrain his passions, live according
to the Law (or to morality), he shall see his renown
increase.

This promise of a good name does not seem to me quite worthy
of the Buddhist teaching. It probably meant something else. And
to live according to morality, one must know which morality is
intended, for if it is the usually recognised social morality, that
also does not seem to me a very alluring promise. Those who
have decided to abandon all worldly weaknesses certainly do
not care about satisfying social morality... nor about acquiring
a good name!
To sustain one’s zeal is an excellent thing, to remain pure in one’s actions is also indispensable, to act wisely is also perfect, one cannot do it too often; to restrain one’s passions, that goes without saying, is the beginning... but that conclusion!!

However I see “Dhamma” has been translated here as “Law”, and “Yasa” as “renown”, whereas Dhamma should mean rather the inner truth and Yasa the spiritual glory. So we can interpret the text in this way: “Whosoever can sustain his zeal, remain pure in his actions, act wisely, restrain his passions, live according to the inner truth, he shall see his spiritual glory ever growing.”

Thus understood, this text is quite excellent. One cannot do better than to conform to it.

31 January 1958 and 7 February 1958

By his effort, his vigilance, his discipline and self-mastery, the intelligent man should create for himself an island which no flood can submerge.

The fools, devoid of intelligence, give themselves up to negligence. The true sage guards vigilance as his most precious treasure.

Do not let yourself fall into carelessness, nor into the pleasures of the senses. He who is vigilant and given to meditation acquires a great happiness.

The intelligent man who by his vigilance has dispelled negligence, mounts to the heights of wisdom, whence he looks upon the many afflicted as one on a mountain looks down upon the people of the plain.

Vigilant among those who are negligent, perfectly awake among those who sleep, the intelligent man advances like a rapid steed leaving behind a weary horse.
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Vigilance is admired. Negligence is reproved. By vigilance, Indra became the highest among the gods.

The Bhikkhu¹ who delights in vigilance and who shuns negligence advances like a fire consuming all bonds, both small and great.

The Bhikkhu who takes pleasure in vigilance and who shuns negligence can no longer fall. He draws near to Nirvana.

I have read out to you the whole chapter because it seemed to me that it is the totality of the verses that creates an atmosphere and that they are meant to be taken all together and not each one separately. But I strongly recommend to you not to take the words used here in their usual literal sense.

Thus, for example, I am quite convinced that the original thought did not mean that you are to be vigilant in order that you may be admired and that you must not be negligent in order not to be reproved. Besides, the example given proves it, for certainly it was not for the sake of gaining admiration that Indra, the chief of the overmental gods in the Hindu tradition, practised vigilance. It is a very childish way of saying things. Yet, if you take these verses all together, they have by their repetition and insistence, a power that evokes the thing which seeks expression; it puts you in relation with a psychological attitude which is very useful and has a very considerable effect, if you follow this discipline.

The last two verses particularly are very evocative. The Bhikkhu moves forward like a burning flame of aspiration and he shuns negligence.

Negligence truly means the relaxation of the will which makes one forget his goal and pass his time in doing all kinds

¹ Member of the Sangha (Buddhist community), mendicant monk who owns nothing.
On the Dhammapada

of things which, far from contributing towards the goal to be attained, stop you on the path and often turn you away from it. Therefore the flame of aspiration makes the Bhikkhu shun negligence. Every moment he remembers that time is relatively short, that one must not waste it on the way, one must go quickly, as quickly as possible, without losing a moment. And one who is vigilant, who does not waste his time, sees his bonds falling, every one, great and small; all his difficulties vanish, because of his vigilance; and if he persists in his attitude, finding in it entire satisfaction, it happens after a time that the happiness he feels in being vigilant becomes so strong that he would soon feel very unhappy if he were to lose this vigilance.

It is a fact that when one has made an effort not to lose time on the way, any time lost becomes a suffering and one can find no pleasure of any kind in it. And once you are in that state, once this effort for progress and transformation becomes the most important thing in your life, the thing to which you give constant thought, then indeed you are on the way towards the eternal existence, the truth of your being.

Certainly there is a moment in the course of the inner growth when far from having to make an effort to concentrate, to become absorbed in the contemplation and the seeking of the truth and its best expression — what the Buddhists call meditation — you feel, on the contrary, a kind of relief, ease, rest, joy, and to have to come out of that in order to deal with things that are not essential, everything that may seem like a waste of time, becomes terribly painful. External activities get reduced to what is absolutely necessary, to those that are done as service to the Divine. All that is futile, useless, precisely those things which seem like a waste of time and effort, all that, far from giving the least satisfaction, creates a kind of discomfort and fatigue; you feel happy only when you are concentrated on your goal.

Then you are really on the way.

14 February 1958