

NOTHING

AN ESSAY BY FRATER ACHAD

Nothing! How many have grasped the idea, or more correctly the essence of idea, which this word conveys and boldly, unflinchingly, gazed upon it, striving to obtain a hint of the real meaning it contains? How many, having done so, have gone further yet and realized that they have a right to it, that it is all to which they have a right - and been content? Man is content with nothing; but there are two ways of looking at this statement. Some there be who, having attached themselves to the idea that they have something, nothing contents but they must have more.

Some, again, desiring "nothing" would give all that they have to obtain it. Both have in view a goal, both strive to obtain it, and fail, unless, at some point, tired with striving "absence of goal" invites the struggling wanderer, and he "Becomes"? Let us now examine a little more closely these paths which lead nowither, yet which we daily tread so earnestly and with such desperate toil.

Let us look upon those, our brothers, who are striving ever to obtain more - more money, more fame, more love, more happiness, more learning, more knowledge, more life, and more power to enjoy these.

What an endless vista is opened up.

And contentment? Peace? Where do these find their place?

Those who travel by one, or all, of these roads have given such questions but scant consideration. They dare not ask themselves those questions, and even should they find courage to do so, what would be the answer?

They will never be at peace or contented till they have ALL. Failing that, there can be no rest, no peace; and yet, such is the force of desire that they grasp, and grasp and grasp...

Now, suppose for a moment ALL could be obtained, what would be left to grasp?
NOTHING!

Who can conceive of a greater hell than this, that having grasped ALL, still to long for more, with, by then, an infinite desire, yet with absolutely no means of gratifying it? And yet that is the logical end of such a path, and many there be that walk therein.

Now let us turn our thought in another direction. Let us say that we will make that very NOTHING, or end of desire, our Goal, and then strive to cut short the journey by that means.

The moment we turn our attention to this line of thought and decide that "peace and contentment" lie along the path of giving, or getting rid, of all we have until NOTHING remains, we are up against another problem quite as difficult as the former one, although perhaps the path appears a little more direct and therefore shorter.

The moment one decides that he wants nothing he begins to realize what a lot he really has got to get rid of before he obtains it.

He begins to think in good earnest now, if never before, And when he has thought for a while he begins to take consolation in the fact that it is not necessary that he should take up much time in disposing of his worldly possessions because they no longer seem to be a part of his make-up, and the best way to get rid of them is simply to forget them - rather than try and dispose of them in any other way.

Even were he actually to dispose of his earthly possessions it would make no real difference, for he realizes, by this time, that even should he cease to desire these, and yet keep his thought upon them, they would continue to flow to him unasked.

He decides, therefore, to keep his thought away from these things as much as possible. In order that he may do this, let us suppose that he now sits down and tries to forget all these material things. What is the result? Probably he fails at first, but he will still try, for by this time he will have become a very positive and determined man.

One thing he begins to realize, after a while, and that is the fact that he remembers less and less of these things the more he really strives to eliminate them, and this gives him some hope of finally ridding himself of them.

By this time, however, he begins to realize something else rather strongly, viz: that he still has a body, and that that body is becoming decidedly uncomfortable owing to the necessity of his remaining still while he is thinking over the problems. He realizes, in fact, that this body of his is an item which requires serious consideration, whether he wishes or not.

How shall he dispose of this difficulty?
Suicide?

This immediately brings up the possibility of something continuing after physical death, something which may or may not make it easier for him to attain his goal.

Of course if the death of the physical body ends all, suicide is the very shortest possible way of getting rid of all things, and so immediately attaining his purpose. But, suppose something does remain, what then?

In any event, he thinks, it would be better to wait a bit and thrash this matter out before deciding.

Meanwhile, the body calls for consideration, it is in fact becoming damned uncomfortable and refuses to remain in one position any longer. Thus he is obliged to give up, for the time being, and take a rest by means of action for a while.

This little meditation has shown him that he has at any rate got to wait a bit and that after all the Goal is not so near or so easily obtainable as it seemed at first.

At this point, maybe, he tries to give up in despair, sooner or later to realize that that is just what he has already set out to do and that it is no use adding "despair" to the task, since it would only be a new element to be got rid of later on.

At this point some go mad and in consequence defer the real struggle to a later period, or another life. But supposing that is not the case with our hero, what then?

Gradually he gets his body under control, for he now clearly realizes that he must do the same with his body as he has done with his other earthly possessions, viz: forget about it.

This at first is not an easy task, but slowly and surely, having first placed it in a position in which it can remain for long periods without discomfort or strain on any of the organs, he masters it, until it readily answers his commands and remains steady and firm.

He forgets his body.

Has he now arrived at NOTHING? And given up ALL?

Not yet.

He has, it is true given up the desire for outside objects, but they have not parted company with him yet. As he sits quietly there every little sound from outside vibrates within him, whether he desires it or not, and with each sound comes the memory of what that sound meant to him in the outer world.

The ringing of a fire bell, for instance, starts up in his mind the images or the memories of fires he has known of or watched, or else he finds himself following in thought the engine as it races along the road and round the corner- the bell becoming fainter and fainter and dying away, but still leaving him, in imagination, climbing ladders, saving people from death, watching the crowd of upturned faces in the glow of the flames, until, with a start, he realizes that he is creating mental images and that these are colouring his mind, one after another, and that his goal of NOTHING is as far from him as ever.

He remembers, perhaps, Descartes', "I think, therefore I am," but, if he is strong enough he says: "I will STOP thinking, and I am NOT."

Steady and sure he starts on this new and more delicate process of subduing the transformations of the thinking principle. First he rids himself of the sounds from outside, then arise memories of events that occurred during the day but, conquering these, old and forgotten memories crowd into his mind. Endless seems the task. Then, strange and disconnected sentences and words invade the growing stillness, seeming to come from nowhere, but distracting the attention all the same, and before these are finally dealt with, and in the intervals, he is carried away on the wings of great emotions which gradually take on a more and more abstract form, yet which still have to be suppressed.

Need we follow this tortured soul through all the experiences that pursue him relentlessly - enough that the black abyss of NOTHINGNESS glooms ahead, and with it FEAR takes possession of his being and for the first time he realizes, really realizes, the nature of the task he has set out to perform.

The danger of madness or obsession is at this point greatly increased, and only passes when he has overcome the very Fear of Fear itself.

If he plunges towards the goal he has set up before this Fear is finally overcome, he is lost and his hell will probably represent as awful a conception as that other he described at the beginning of this essay. To live in blank, unknown, nothingness, haunted by fear or that very unknown nothingness itself. Let us not dwell on this, it is too frightful a conception to be held before the mind for a moment...

But, if he does not fail?

Having overcome his fear of NOTHINGNESS he realizes it, not as a Goal, but as ABSENCE OF GOAL.

Suddenly he realizes that he IS and that the goal never existed either outside or within the "self." Existence then is known to be the only Reality.

At last he attains to Understanding. He sees himself as one gazing into a mirror.

Then arises the right state of a peaceful mind...and the final stages must be a quotation: "The glass vanishes, and with it the reflection, the illusion of Mara or Maya. He is Reality, He is Truth, He is Atman, He is God. Then Reality vanishes, Truth vanishes, Atman vanishes. He is past, He is present, He is future. He is here, He is there, He is everything, He is nowhere, He is Nothing. He is Blessed, he has attained the Great Deliverance. He IS, he IS NOT, He is one with Nibbana. Amen."