

THE BENEFICIAL EFFECTS OF SERVICE

The subject which the Master never ceased to talk about throughout my discipleship with him was service. "Service", he used to say to me, "which is performed in various ways is the realisation in practice of our teaching and forms an important stage in the evolution of disciples. By service is not meant only the donation of material goods.

The meeting of any real need of our fellow-men is service. This may be the meeting of their need to express some problem which they have, and our solidarity, without identification, in this, our psychological support of them, and so on.

In the case of psychological support, caution is needed, because service should respond to the deeper need of the human being for balance of the soul. And so we should, every time, discover the real need of the other person, to the extent that we can manage this, and not satisfy merely some apparent need. At all times, of course, there is the possibility of error. But the possibility of error should not, however, lead us to refuse service.”

In the early days, every time that he spoke of this subject, I became irritated and replied that throughout my life I had helped and served people as far as I was able. There was, therefore, no reason for us to waste our time for me to learn to do something which, in any event, I was doing already. A considerable length of time went by before I realised that he had his reasons for insisting on dwelling on the subject. What he was trying to make me understand was that the service which I was performing was not conscious, pure service. On the outside, this is what it seemed to be. But unconsciously I was not doing what I was doing only out of love, because, deep down, I was seeking recognition in order to satisfy my egoism. And whilst I believed that I loved people, that I suffered with them, I had to understand that all this was no more than the shop-window of my ego, it was a purely emotional approach, and that my mind and my heart played a very small part in these things, and so what I did seemed to me heavy and burdensome.

Another point to which the Master had drawn my attention from the beginning in connection with service was the control of our own emotions when we are trying to give psychological support to certain people, because we convey our emotions to them as well. If these are positive, our help to them is great, because not only will we pass these on to them, we shall also assimilate their own negative emotions. If, however, these are negative, instead of helping them, we shall have done them harm, because to their already sorry psychological state we shall have added our own.

The Master used to say: "Of course, the offering of positive emotions is a beginning, which usually brings about unstable results, because of their double nature. As the years go by, and if you work on it, you will learn to provide a more substantive form of service, which is that containing the features of the intellectual mind and of love, indissolubly bound up with one another. This service brings about stable results, because in this way we are also helping the other person to pass over his emotional identification and to understand for himself the solution to his problem. But until this happens, service from this position helps us not to become entrapped in the troubled emotional world of the person we are dealing with."

On the subject of the emotions, the psychologist Carl G. Jung says that these are infectious, and studies of the

interaction of the psychological state of individuals have described the emotions as viruses which are passed on from person to person. Just as there are people who are vulnerable to viruses, this is what happens here. That is, the soul too has its immune system, the difference being that man is called upon to safeguard this system on his own by working constantly to reduce his egoism and for his union with everybody and everything, because the complete immunity of the soul is achieved only by this total union.

Scientists speak of the responsibility which we have when we do nothing to change our mood and are at the mercy of anxiety, fears, and all the other negative feelings. In these cases, apart from the fact that we suffer ill effects ourselves, we transfer these feelings on to others. In this way, the dimensions taken on in society as a whole by our bad moods, our melancholy, our complaining, and the whole range of negative emotions is enormous.

I had made discoveries myself about how much our emotions influence others. I had noticed that the influence on me from my visits to sick people was different in each case. I knew, of course, that the agitation which seized me was not only a result of the sorrow which I felt, but above all of my fear of my own possible illness. However, this agitation was not always the same. As a result of my observations, I arrived at the conclusion that

I was being influenced by the psychological state of the patients. When these had accepted their problem and were coping with it calmly, they didn't aggravate my own state. But when they were possessed by fear of their illness, then things became very bad for me, because their feeling of fear was added to my own. And, of course, in the same way I was influencing them.

This influence began to diminish with time, after the work which I did so that I would stop being afraid of illness. In this I was helped by the words of the Master – that illness, like all the negative features of life, is a part of it, and that, in any event, when we have already fallen ill, we can't avoid the problem, but we can help to overcome it more quickly. Thus we shall avoid another possible illness which we can cause by our phobia.

I used to call to mind these words every day. But this was no more than a practical exercise which remained on the surface of things, and, naturally, the improvement in combating my phobias was similar. The real help came with time through the teaching, and through the work which I did on service and union with my partner. It seems that the most difficult thing, but also the most essential, of all, however little we understand this, is to achieve this acceptance and union with the other half of our self, with the other half of our nature. When this happens, acceptance of everything is easier, not to say assured.

A year after the beginning of my discipleship, my phobia about illness had been greatly reduced, without my being able to say that it had been eliminated altogether, which was, anyway, true of all my phobias. But this didn't worry me, because I now knew that, quite simply, I had not accepted my partner totally and that when this happened, absolute calm within myself would come, and – why not? – happiness also.

Before concluding this chapter, I shall give a few examples of service, in order to show by means of these how service, union, the reduction of the ego operate in dealing with our own problems, and in the finding of our own balance of the soul.

One example is the following: it was at the beginning of my discipleship, and one morning I got out of bed not all that optimistic, perhaps because the night before I had felt more unwell than usual. In spite of this, I dressed, and went to see an elderly lady. The day before, her daughter, who lived opposite us, had told me that her mother was in a very poor psychological state: she was afraid she was going to die, and cried continuously.

I hadn't seen this lady since the year before, because she only came to Athens for two months in the winter. The rest of the time she lived in her village. As soon as she saw me, she began to cry and to tell me that she wasn't well and was going to die. To start with, I felt diz-

zy and was bathed in cold sweat. My heart was beating so hard that I thought it would burst. For a moment I thought that I wouldn't be able to control the situation, but I immediately managed to see it as something which was a given fact. I set my mind to work and to reflect that at that moment a human being needed my help, and this help was nothing other than listening to that person and saying one or two words of comfort.

The first thing I did was to take her for a walk in the very beautiful garden of their house. The sun was shining and this made both of us feel better. I think that when I went away, after an hour, I left her, if not very much, at least a little better. I reminded her that I too had the same problem, that now I was trying by love and with the help of God to overcome it, and that she should do the same.

When I returned home, I was calm; I had forgotten my own issues and was glad because I had managed by my company and the conversation to make this lady feel, if only a little, better, and to ask me, whenever I had time, to go for a chat. This was the first time I realised that service helps you to overcome your own problems. Within us there is an inestimable treasure – love. When we give this treasure to others, we receive our reward at once.

The following is a second example: one morning I visited a friend of mine who was getting ready to have an operation. We talked a little about her problem, we touched

on a thousand and one other topics, and I managed to stay with her for more than an hour. When I got home, I realised that all the time the visit had lasted, I hadn't thought of myself, but only of her, and how I could support her by the conversation in her own problem. For the first time, I embraced a health problem with love, without thinking about any possible illness of mine. For the first time I consciously let my soul stretch out and embrace the other person, and for that reason I too felt well.

However, in the early days, I rarely performed this kind of service – through the heart and with knowledge and not with the emotions. And though one moment, by a simple, conscious act of service I felt myself liberated, the next I became again a slave of my egoism. And so, the next afternoon, when I was waiting for this same friend for us to have a chat, I noticed that I had begun to be overcome with unease, which, when she arrived, developed into agitation, dizziness, and the familiar constriction of the heart. I tried to relax, to set my mind to work, to accept all this that was happening to me, but sometimes I succeeded in this, and sometimes not. My fear of illness had surfaced again.

During her visit, we talked about various things – other than our health problems. She told me only that she was going into hospital the day after the next. The positive thing was I managed not to tell her that I didn't feel well. And this was positive because in order to con-

trol myself, I did some thinking along the lines of: “How am I going to talk to my friend about the anxiety I feel when she is facing this problem of hers with real calm and composure, just as she did before with more serious health problems? For all this to pass off, I must concentrate, as I did the last time, with real love on her problem, without thinking of myself.” These thoughts showed that I had begun to think of others, and not only of myself.

As my discipleship and my efforts to put it into practice progressed, both my decision on conscious service and, together with it, my health had begun to stabilise.