

Commentaries on Living

Third Series

From the Notebooks of
J. Krishnamurti

Edited by
D. RAJAGOPAL

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Chapter 32, Killing

What's the problem, sirs?

"To eat meat, or not to eat it," replied the non-meat-eater.

Is that the main issue, or is it part of a larger issue?

"To me, a man's willingness or unwillingness to kill animals for the satisfaction of his appetite indicates his attitude towards the larger issues of life."

If we can see that to concentrate exclusively on any part does not bring about the comprehension of the whole, then perhaps we shall not get confused over the parts. Unless we are able to perceive the whole, the part assumes greater importance than it has. There's a bigger issue involved in all this, isn't there? The problem is that of killing, and not merely killing animals for food. A man is not virtuous because he doesn't eat meat, nor is he any less virtuous because he does. The god of a petty mind is also petty; his pettiness is measured by that of the mind which puts flowers at his feet. The larger issue includes the many and apparently separate problems that man has created within himself and outside of himself. Killing is really a very great and complex problem. Shall we consider it, sirs?

"I think we should," replied the fourth one. "I am keenly interested in this problem, and to approach it along a wide front appeals to me."

There are many forms of killing, are there not? There is killing by a word or a gesture, killing in fear or in anger, killing for a country or an ideology, killing for a set of economic dogmas or religious beliefs.

"How does one kill by a word or a gesture?" asked the third speaker.

Don't you know? With a word or a gesture you may kill a man's reputation; through gossip, defamation, contempt, you may wipe him out. And does not comparison kill? Don't you kill a boy by comparing him with another who is cleverer or more skilful? A man who kills out of hate or anger is regarded as a criminal and put to death. Yet the man who deliberately bombs thousands of people off the face of the earth in the name of his country is honoured, decorated; he is looked upon as a hero. Killing is spreading over the earth. For the safety or expansion of one nation, another is destroyed. Animals are killed for food, for profit, or for so-called sport; they are vivisected for the 'well-being' of man. The soldier exists to kill. Extraordinary progress is being made in the technology of murdering vast numbers of people in a few seconds and at great distances. Many scientists are wholly occupied with it, and priests bless the bomber and the warship. Also, we kill a cabbage or a carrot in order to eat; we destroy a pest. Where are we to draw the line beyond which we will not kill?

"It's up to each individual," replied the second one.

Is it as simple as that? If you refuse to go to war, you are either shot or sent to prison, or perhaps to a psychiatric ward. If you refuse to take part in the nationalistic game of hate, you are despised, and you may lose your job; pressure is brought to bear in various ways to force you to conform. In the paying of taxes, even in the buying of a postage stamp, you are supporting war, the killing of ever-changing enemies.

"Then what is one to do?" asked the non-meat-eater. "I am well aware that I have legally killed, in the law courts, many times; but I am a strict vegetarian, and I never kill any living creature with my own hands."

"Not even a poisonous insect?" asked the second one.

"Not if I can help it."

"Someone else does it for you."

"Sir," went on the vegetarian lawyer, "are you suggesting that we should not pay taxes or write letters?"

Again, in being concerned first with the details of action, in speculating about whether we should do this or that, we get lost in the particular without comprehending the totality of the problem. The problem needs to be considered as a whole, does it not?

"I quite see that there must be a comprehensive view of the problem, but the details are important too. We can't neglect our immediate activity, can we?"

What do you mean by "a comprehensive view of the problem"? Is it a matter of mere intellectual agreement, verbal assent, or do you actually comprehend the total problem of killing?

"To be quite honest, sir, until now I haven't paid much attention to the wider implications of the problem. I have been concerned with one particular aspect of it."

Which is like not throwing the window wide open and looking at the sky, the trees, the people, the whole movement of life, but peering instead through a narrow crack in the casement. And the mind is like that: a small, unimportant part of it is very active, while the rest is dormant. This petty activity of the mind creates its own petty problems of good and bad, its political and moral values, and so on. If we could really see the absurdity of this process, we would naturally, without any compulsion, explore the wider fields of the mind.

So the issue we are discussing is not merely the killing or the non-

killing of animals, but the cruelty and hate that are ever increasing in the world and in each one of us. That is our real problem, isn't it?

"Yes," replied the fourth one emphatically. "Brutality is spreading in the world like a plague; a whole nation is destroyed by its bigger and more powerful neighbour. Cruelty, hate, is the issue, not whether or not one happens to like the taste of meat."

The cruelty, the anger, the hate that exists in ourselves is expressed in so many ways: in the exploitation of the weak by the powerful and the cunning; in the cruelty of forcing a whole people, under pain of being liquidated, to accept a certain ideological pattern of life; in the building up of nationalism and sovereign governments through intensive propaganda; in the cultivation of organized dogmas and beliefs, which are called religion, but which actually separate man from man. The ways of cruelty are many and subtle.

"Even if we spent the rest of our lives looking, we couldn't uncover all the subtle ways in which cruelty expresses itself, could we?" inquired the third one. "Then how are we to proceed?"

"It seems to me," said the first speaker, "that we are missing the central issue. Each one of us is protecting himself; we are defending our self-interests, our economic or intellectual assets, or perhaps a tradition which affords us some profit, not necessarily monetary. This self-interest in everything we touch, from politics to God, is the root of the matter."

Again, if one may ask, is that a mere verbal assertion, a logical conclusion which can be torn to shreds or cunningly defended? Or does it reflect the perception of an actual fact that has significance in our daily life of thought and action?

"You are trying to bring us to distinguish between the word and the actual fact," said the third speaker, "and I am beginning to see how important it is that we should make this distinction. Otherwise we shall be lost in words, without any action—as in fact we are."

To act there must be feeling. A feeling for the whole issue makes for total action.

"When one feels deeply about anything," said the fourth man, "one acts, and such action is not impulsive or so-called intuitive; neither is it a premeditated, calculated act. It is born out of the depth of one's being. If that act causes mischief, pain, one cheerfully pays for it; but such an act is rarely mischievous. The question is, how is one to sustain this deep feeling?"

"Before we go any further," put in the third man earnestly, "let's be clear about what you are explaining, sir. One is aware of the fact that to have complete action, there must be deep feeling, in which there is a full psychological comprehension of the problem; otherwise there are merely bits of action, which never stick together. That much is clear. Then, as we were saying, the word is not the feeling; the word may evoke the feeling, but this verbal evocation does not sustain the feeling. Now, can one not enter the world of feeling directly, without the description of it, without the symbol or the word? Isn't that the next question?"

Yes, sir. We are distracted by words, by symbols; we rarely feel except through the stimulation of the term, the description. The word 'God' is not God, but that word leads us to react according to our conditioning. We can find out the truth or the falseness of God only when the word 'God' no longer creates in us certain habitual physiological or psychological responses. As we were saying earlier, a total feeling makes for total action—or rather, a total feeling is total action. A sensation passes away, leaving you where you were before. But this total feeling we are talking about is not a sensation, it does not depend on stimulation; it sustains itself, no artifice is needed.

"But how is this total feeling to be aroused?" insisted the first speaker.

If one may say so, you are not seeing the point. Feeling that can be aroused is a matter of stimulation; it's a sensation, to be nourished through various means, by this or that method. Then the means or the method becomes all-important, not the feeling. The symbol as a means to the feeling is enshrined in a temple, in a church, and then the feeling exists only through the symbol or the word. But is total feeling to be 'aroused'? Consider, sir, don't answer.

"I see what you mean," said the third one. "Total feeling is not to be aroused at all; it's there, or it's not. This leaves us in a rather hopeless state, doesn't it?"

Does it? There's a sense of hopelessness because you want to arrive somewhere, you want to get that total feeling; and since you can't, you feel rather lost. It is this desire to arrive, to achieve, to become, that creates the method, the symbol, the stimulant, through which the mind comforts and distracts itself. So let us again consider the problem of killing, cruelty, hate.

To be concerned with 'humanitarian' killing is quite absurd; to

abstain from eating meat while destroying your son by comparing him with another is to be cruel; to take part in the respectable killing for your country or for an ideology is to cultivate hate; to be kind to animals and cruel to your fellow man by act, word, or gesture, is to breed enmity and brutality.

"Sir, I think I understand what you have just said; but how is total feeling to come about? I ask this only as a query in the movement of search. I am not asking for a method: I see the absurdity of that. I see, too, that the desire to achieve builds its own hindrances, and that to feel hopeless, or helpless, is silly. All this is now clear."

If it is clear, not just verbally or intellectually, but with the actuality of the pain that a thorn causes in your foot, then there's compassion, love. Then you have already opened the door to this total feeling of compassion. The compassionate man knows right action. Without love, you are trying to find out what is the right thing to do, and your action only leads to greater harm and misery; it is the action of politicians and reformers. Without love, you cannot comprehend cruelty; a peace of sorts may be established through the reign of terror; but war, killing, will continue at another level of our existence.

"We haven't got compassion, sir, and that's the real source of our misery," said the first man feelingly. "We are hard inside, an ugly thing in ourselves, but we bury it under kindly words and superficial acts of generosity. We are cancerous at heart, in spite of our religious beliefs and social reforms. It's in one's own heart that an operation must take place, and then a new seed can be planted. That very operation is the life of the new seed. The operation has begun, and may the seed bear fruit."