

The Root Cause of Conflict*

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I would like to go into this whole question of peace and conflict as a dialogue with oneself. We learnt from Krishnamurti that if we really deeply want to understand an issue, we must not form opinions about it, one mustn't side with a particular viewpoint, one must start with questions and rely on observation of facts. Ask oneself deep fundamental questions and not seek answers in the writings of others but rather explore them oneself with a passive awareness which can discover the deeper truths which underlie the whole issue. Such an approach is fundamentally necessary, especially for a theosophist, because the motto of the theosophical society says that truth is the highest religion, it has to be perceived and is therefore not the known. To explore into the unknown and not just take sides with the known is important for a theosophist. When one so perceives the deeper truths related to the issue under consideration, it contributes to the wisdom in our mind, it transforms the vision with which one looks at life and so on. So I would like to explore the roots of conflict in this way. To get to the root, one has to dig deep. To just understand the branches, you can use study and intellectual analysis.

So I begin by asking myself what exactly do we mean by peace and by conflict? I find that in society we talk of peace as the interval between two conflicts, between two wars. Right now

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most people would say that we are going through a period of peace because there is no global war going on. So is peace just the interval between two wars? And what do we mean by war? When I examine that, I find that we call it a war only when guns start shooting and there is an armed conflict, when planes start bombing and the army starts moving. But does warfare or conflict begin only at that time? Is it really peace before a war begins? Is the hatred between two communities, whether they be national communities or religious communities or caste communities or linguistic communities, not a form of psychological warfare? Is it not that psychological warfare which increases in its external manifestation and eventually leads to physical warfare? So where do I draw the line and say it is a conflict now? It seems to me that there is no well defined border like that. It is a continuum. There is a border only in the outer manifestation of that hatred, of that psychological warfare between two communities. Since the one leads to the other, the roots of the conflict do not lie just in the specifics of the situation which has generated the conflict. For example, the specifics of the situation in Kashmir may lie in the history of how independence was obtained and

what happened at that time, what the British said and the legality of whether the Maharaja acceded to India willfully and so on. Those facts are not irrelevant, they are true, but they don't seem to me to be the root of the conflict.

So if one is talking about a lasting peace and not just a temporary peace between two episodes of armed conflict, then the question acquires a much deeper significance. We have to dig deep in order to understand the source from where this conflict is emanating. If we don't do that, then our existence becomes a series of conflicts to be resolved and we have developed various mechanisms for conflict resolution. For conflicts between nations we have created the United Nations. They bring about some kind of compromise between the two nations. We have seen that happen repeatedly in Kashmir, in Palestine and those compromises are constantly breaking down. If you look at human history, it has been a very long history of conflict. These conflicts are not a new thing. In exploring the roots we must be aware of the seriousness of the problem in order to understand its nature. Conflict is not a new problem for humanity. We have read about the Mahabharata, which is pre-historic, but even as far as known history goes, we have always had war and conflict in different parts of the world and we are still at it now. You solve it at one place and it erupts at another place. So one asks oneself whether we are not at war, is that really peace or the seeds of conflict are

present always? When suitable circumstances arise, they will erupt into a new conflict, whether large or small. The scale of the conflict is incidental, circumstantial. You may succeed in controlling it, but the root cause of conflict does not lie in those circumstances because circumstances are always variable.

So where is the root cause of conflict? Where do the seeds lie? Is it not important for us to examine from where these seeds come and whether those seeds can be eliminated? If we are really concerned with a lasting peace in society we must ask that question. We may not know the answer, but we must ask that question in earnest. Otherwise we are merely accepting conflict to be an inevitable part of life. You may say it is innate to human nature, that it has biological roots and it can never be got rid of and it is no use philosophizing about the roots of the conflict. You can keep dealing with the manifestation and hope to contain it. We have been doing that for five thousand years in various ways. We have tried political reform, we are trying economic reform, we have tried legislation, judiciary, police. We have also tried organised religions around the teachings of a great sage, trying to follow him, follow the message of love and compassion, calling ourselves the followers of Gandhi, the followers of Jesus, the followers of Buddha and so on but nothing has succeeded. This is an observed fact. At the end of all those attempts we are where we are today. The actual state of humanity today is

revealed daily on the television screens and the newspapers. So I realize that this is not a simple problem, it is not merely a matter of changing circumstances or creating new outer structures. Why have human beings not been able to solve this problem for thousands of years though we have progressed greatly in every branch of knowledge and skills? We think we are very intelligent and in some ways we are. But we have not been able to resolve the problems of conflict and war.

These are the factual observations with which I begin my enquiry. If I may raise this question through an analogy: it is like having a headache everyday and taking aspirin each time to get rid of that headache. Would we say that is an intelligent way to live? Or would we say, no you must find out what the deeper cause is and whether that cause can be eliminated so that one can come back to lasting health? One is not saying, don't deal with the symptom. If you have a terrible headache, you may need to take an aspirin otherwise you can't even think clearly. So, aspirin may have a place; but if you just become dependent on aspirin, you will never get rid of the underlying disease. So coming back to the issue which we are considering, what is the disease? Despite the fact that we think we are very intelligent, and that intelligence has shown itself in the field of knowledge, science and technology and so on, why is it that it has not been able to solve this problem? We have evolved various forms of aspirin for dealing with the

headache, but we have not really been able to eradicate the disease so that we can have lasting peace and a society in which there is real happiness. Would that always remain an utopia, never become a reality? What can we try which we haven't tried in the last 5000 years? Is it merely a question of trying the same thing in a better way? Should we have a better form of politics, a better form of religion, better forms of diplomacy, better police control? If these are only controlling the symptoms, they will never resolve the underlying disease.

As theosophists, I think it behoves us to ask these more fundamental and deeper questions which are concerned with educating oneself and perhaps thereby educating also the humanity to live more wisely. One finds it being said all over the world that human beings are the pinnacle of evolution, that we are far superior to all other forms of life which have gone before us. I think we need to question that assumption. Of course we are cleverer, we can understand more than the animals but have we used our capacities of thinking, of imagination, of planning and so on for the betterment of humanity, for the betterment of the earth, or have we been more destructive? About the damage to the earth we are reading every day now: global warming, ecological catastrophes and so on, but apart from the earth what have we done to our own species? No animals or plants have destroyed either other kinds of species or their own kind to the extent to

which we have. And yet we feel we are superior, we are more intelligent! Are we defining intelligence in terms of power? We are perhaps more powerful than the animals because we can kill them, and exploit them. If we call that intelligence, then it was not intelligent to send the British away from India. They were more powerful, they were more intelligent in this sense. Why did we send them away and why did we think that was justified? So our definition of superiority, our definition of intelligence changes according to the situation. There is a biological definition given by Darwin which says intelligence is what leads to survival. The intelligent are the fittest and therefore survive. Even by that limited biological definition, can we claim that we are more intelligent? Are we going towards survival or have we brought the entire earth and the environment to the brim of a holocaust which no other animal or other species did? They have existed for millions of years longer than we have. So it seems to me that we may disappear from the face of the earth and perhaps also take with us a large number of other species which are not responsible for the state of affairs. It will happen for the very reason that Darwin gave, namely that a species disappears when it is not able to adapt itself to its environment and cannot live in harmony with it. So I ask myself, whether we have become too 'intelligent' for survival because survival doesn't require this kind of intelligence which we are cultivating. The ants and the cockroach have survived longer than us. They have not brought the world to the level of extinction. So I am just questioning this whole feeling which we take for granted that we are very intelligent

beings. We take for granted our definition of what intelligence is. So are we really intelligent or have we just defined intelligence unintelligently? I leave you with that question, a very fundamental question indeed. Krishnamurti said there is no intelligence without compassion, but we do not think so.

The other day it was pointed out that university education conditions our mind to think along certain narrow grooves. It alienates us from the ground realities of the world we are living in by compartmentalizing our knowledge. We think that the university graduates and professors are very intelligent people precisely because we haven't examined what really intelligence means. This kind of intelligence may not be the intelligence that leads to survival and therefore may not be the true intelligence. I am not asking you to believe that. We have to investigate, find out if that is true. So there are a lot of questions we must ask if we really want to get to the root of this whole problem of conflict which is a long lasting problem and has very deep roots in our psyche. You can keep on solving it at the superficial level but it becomes necessary to do so precisely because we have not solved it at the root and therefore it never really ends. What has happened over the years is that the manifestation of the problem has grown. War is now much more dangerous than it was before, but the underlying disease is the same: the hatred between human communities from where conflict is generated. It is said that war begins in the minds of men and that is true. That is where the roots lie; that is where we need to tackle it. The rest of it follows as logical causation. Just as there is causation in nature which science studies, there is

also causation in our psyche. Unless we go to the root cause and eliminate it the rest follows as a logical corollary, an inevitable sequence. Therefore it is not mere philosophy to do this enquiry; it is an urgent necessity. If we say it is inevitable, this is the only way society has always existed, then you have resigned yourself to the situation. I am reminded of Kahlil Gibran's beautiful statement "When the cup is empty, I resign myself to its emptiness; but when it is half full, I resent its half fullness"! So is the cup empty? Again that is a fundamental question I would like to leave you with, so that we can explore deeply and stay with these questions.

So where does this division between communities begin because from this division comes hatred, from the hatred comes violence and then you have a larger and larger manifestation of violence till we call it war. When I look at that question, I see that it begins with saying, "We are different from them". Each community feels 'we are different from them'. How does the mind define and draw that line? That is another fundamental question. Who are the 'we' and who are 'they'? On what basis does the mind draw that line? Were the people in Pakistan our people before 1947 and we loved them as our brothers and today, because there is a line drawn across the nation by the British, they are no longer our brothers? So is it just a matter of drawing a line on the earth or is the line here inside my head? When I examine that I see that the dog crosses the border without need for any visa, the breeze

blows across those borders, the forests cross the line, the mountain ranges go through. There is no such border on the earth! I realize that it is a creation of our own thinking and also of course of our history in the sense some emperor at some time came and conquered and made the borders of what is called India and now I say I am Indian because I was born in that region. And over the years the borders of 'India' have been expanding and shrinking. It all seems so unreal. Anyway that is where it begins. Let us proceed further. Even if I see that the other person is different from me, why does that create division? That is another question we need to examine closely. When does a difference turn into a division and why? Difference is natural. We are all different from each other : in our age, in our wealth, in our knowledge, in our skin colour, in our size and shape. Everything in nature is different from everything else. So, difference is natural. Differentiation is also natural. If I can't distinguish a tree from a building, there is something wrong with me. But when does that turn into a division? Is that an inevitable process or is that a psychological process created by my own mind? So is it something existent in nature, or is it an illusion built up by my mind? Let me define what I mean by illusion. Illusion is something which doesn't have an existence in Nature but is merely a creation of my own mind, my imagination, or something to which I am giving tremendous importance when it is really not important. So is the conflict coming from illusion or is the conflict coming from facts? The fact is we are all different from each

other. Is the division also a fact, or is it a creation of my own mind, my limited form of thinking?

Let us examine that question. Is the Hindu really very different from the Muslim? That is a very major source of conflict today in our country. I am taking that as an example. Are these two human beings really different in fact or they feel they are very different just because they think so? Thinking can be changed. If they find that their thinking is false it will end. Illusion can end through the perception of the truth. If you discover that the false is false and the truth is true, then the false ends. Therefore illusion can end. Therefore if the cause is rooted in illusion the cause can be eliminated but when the cause is not rooted in illusion you can't eliminate it. So it is important to investigate that. Is the causation of conflict based on illusion or on fact. If it is based on facts you can only deal with it outwardly. To give an analogy again, if I fall down and break my bones, it causes pain. That is not a psychological pain, it is not the creation of my own mind. The sage suffers that pain as much as I do. But I also feel a lot of self-pity out of that pain which the sage does not feel. So psychological suffering has to be separated from pain which is biological. Psychological suffering may arise from illusion, from a mental construct which has no reality whereas the other is factual. So I need to find out whether the seeds of conflict are rooted in illusion or in fact? So, I ask: Is the Hindu really different from the Muslim (or

the Palestinian from the Jew) or they only think so? Let us examine it scientifically. Are their bodies very different? The medical scientist will tell you, "I can't tell from looking at the body or the contents of the body whether it is that of a Muslim or a Hindu". When he was born he was born in the same way. All this difference is imposed afterwards. Is their consciousness very different? When you examine that, you find there is desire, there is attachment, there is fear, there are all the instincts which are the same in all human beings. So what is different? Just the knowledge, the superficial layer of conditioning acquired as you grow up in this life. It is different because I was born in a different family, different culture, a different country and he was born in another. That superficial layer is called the conditioning of the mind, the knowledge acquired in this life. That alone is different. So the Hindu has been told something about God, he believes that and he propagates that as truth. He really doesn't know what God is. The Muslim has been told something else about God. He also does not know what God is, but he believes that and he propagates that as true. So it is these illusions that divide us. If we have the humility to say to ourselves I really don't know what God is, which is the truth, we would be friends inquiring together what is really meant by God! So I see that the roots of the conflict, lie in illusion. We don't know that we don't know. It is not important to say I know, it is more important to know that you don't know and to live with an exploring mind that posits the truth as the unknown. Hitler was very sure that the Nazis are superior. It is out of that certainty that all the

violence, all the cruelty, everything else came. Therefore it is important to recognize the value of doubt, to doubt one's own opinions, one's own conclusions. Otherwise we will never have a learning mind, we will never come upon wisdom.

This whole national division comes about through identification. I identify myself with India and I feel Indian culture is superior to other cultures. Also, I feel only for these people and want to work only for them. Why? Why should I not read Shakespeare just because he was born in England or not read Lao Tsu because he was in China? What has it to do with where a human being is born? Is only the inheritance of what the people in India said or wrote my inheritance or the entire culture of the world is my inheritance? That depends on whether I regard myself as a world citizen and feel I am part of whole of humanity or I regard myself as part of just India? Peace requires a global mind which feels for the whole of the earth and the whole of humanity. That is the reality and all these divisions have come about for historical reasons and out of our own ignorance. That brings me to what the Buddha pointed out long ago. He said ignorance is the cause of sorrow; ignorance not as lack of knowledge but as illusion. I see that these illusions run very deep, that even my feeling that I am very different from the Pakistani or the American or the Chinese is rooted in illusion, that even this nationalism is rooted in illusion and from there comes a lot of our division

and a lot of our conflict. The root of conflict lies in illusion, therefore conflict can be ended because illusion can be ended and that is the motto of the Theosophical Society: Truth is the highest religion. When you discover what is true and what is false, the illusion ends. When the illusion ends, the narrowness in the mind ends, you are no longer a nationalist, you are no longer a narrow minded Hindu, you just know that you come from a Hindu family and you are not different from another human being who has come from another family, you see that difference only as a difference of skin colour, a difference in height, difference in the kind of food you eat and it is not important. When you give tremendous importance to that, it creates division.

When the British came here they looked down on the Indians because they eat with their hands and not with knife and fork. When the Indian goes there, he asks, why do these chaps have to eat with knife and fork when you have fingers? Both are just opinions arising from the fact that one man was taught that and the other man was taught something else. That is all. There is nothing superior or inferior about it. So does division arise when we attribute superiority or inferiority to a difference, which is a kind of value judgment? From where does the mind make that value judgment? All differences do not create division. We have not had a war between tall people and short people, at least not till now! We are not yet that stupid!!

We haven't had a war between dark haired people and white haired people. We do sometimes see a difference only as a difference. But when you see a man doing Namaz and you see another man praying in the temple you see more than just a difference and develop like and dislike. Why doesn't the mind perceive that also as just a difference? When does the difference turn into a division and why? It is a psychological process. Difference is natural; it is not psychological. If I did not notice that the man from Africa is black and the man from Europe is white something would be wrong with my senses. But the day I say whites are superior to the blacks, I have turned a racist and I have done away with the universal brotherhood of man! So why does the mind say so? If you examine that you will see that it comes because we approach things with some kind of desire in our mind. If I asked you if the peepul tree is superior to a eucalyptus tree, how would you answer that question? You would say a peepul tree is a peepul tree and a eucalyptus tree is a eucalyptus tree. What do you mean by superior? If you want shade, the peepul tree is superior. If you want eucalyptus oil, then eucalyptus tree is superior. But if you don't want anything, what is superior? So I see that this feeling of superiority is connected with my wanting things to be favourable to me, which is the essence of the ego process. When we approach life in that way, egotiscally, then our nationality, our religion is used to build our ego, to find an identity, I use my Hinduism, I use my belief structure, I use my nationality to build my ego. I don't see it just as a fact. So can we cut out the psychological and remain with only facts? It is necessary to be aware of

the danger of this psychological process, which means to be aware of facts and not to be trapped in illusion. Isn't that intelligence? Because if you don't have that intelligence, you get trapped in illusion, you get drawn into division, you start hating and destroy love, destroy friendship. Even brothers who have grown together very closely, or intimate friends, fall apart fighting with each other because one does not have that wisdom. This ego process comes out of our own approach to life because we give tremendous importance to what we receive from the trees, from this country, from our friend.

The root of all conflict, both in our personal life and out there in society lies in this ego-process within human consciousness. The ego is essentially a beggar, always asking for something for itself in every relationship. From there arises like and dislike, division and therefore conflict. We must find out if it is possible to approach everyone and everything like a true friend, not seeking anything from that relationship. Only then is there a relationship of true love in which there is no division and therefore no conflict.
