

WHY WE HAVE A BODY

JG Bennett: *Sunday Talk at Coombe Springs*

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LET us start today with an unusual question: "What is the point of having a physical body?" We can easily picture to ourselves that we could exist with some other kind of body, not subject to the conditions of this existence but with the same thoughts and feelings that we have. And as we live mainly in our thoughts and feelings, we can ask ourselves: "What good does it do to us to have a body?" Having a body lets us in for a great deal of trouble: the care of the body and its needs occupy at least half of our time. We have to spend at least half of our time in sleeping and eating and washing and clothing this body, and some of the time not directly occupied with that is occupied in earning what is necessary for its needs in the way of food and shelter and so on; so having to live in a body takes away a great deal of our freedom. It is also clear that the actions which take place in and through the body constantly distract our attention from our wish to understand the deeper reality; and also from our wish to be free and able to be fully ourselves.

We really have to make some effort to put ourselves, in imagination, into the position of being free from having to live in this kind of body made of physical matter. Some of you may have had the experience of getting out of this body, as I have, and if so, you know how much freer and better off you feel and how reluctant you are to get back into it, as if it would be real bliss to go off and leave it for good.

Certainly, it is very probable that the body has to go through about an equal amount of pleasant and unpleasant experiences and it is very doubtful whether on balance it is more pleasant than unpleasant to be living in a physical body. One cannot say that it is for the sake of pleasure that one is living in a physical body, nor can one say that it is necessary to have a physical body in order to be alive, because there is certainly something in us which is alive and does not require that it should inhabit this kind of body. So when you have discarded all the reasons which at first sight seemed to make it worthwhile living in a body and begin to ask yourself why we need to live in it, you see that it is not quite such an easy question to answer.

The answer is a very important and deep one. The body is an instrument which enables transformations to take place in us which are necessary for our freedom and for establishing ourselves with the possibility of existing in a different way. One of the reasons why a body can do this is because the physical body is related in a special way to time and therefore it is a very well-devised instrument for overcoming the problem of time in ourselves. Until we can overcome this problem of time, we are always undergoing a process of destruction. From the moment it is born, this body of ours is undergoing a process of destruction which is only partly compensated by its power of renewal, and we are inclined to think that the renewal mechanism that is placed in the body is just for the purpose of keeping it alive and active for the span of time allotted to each one of us. In other words, that we have this power of organic renewal simply so that the body can maintain itself.

But this is only part of the story. The real truth of it is that through this power of renewal

of the body we can establish in ourselves a kind of renewal that no longer depends upon the body and then, when we discard the body, carry with us this means of renewal wherever we go afterwards. If we do not achieve this with the help of this body, it is not so easy. It can be compared with a workshop in which an apparatus is made. In the workshop of the body, a particular apparatus can be made by which man is able to renew his existence apart from and independently of the body. This apparatus of renewal is sometimes called the astral or *kesdjan* body, or "body of the soul" - not the soul itself, but the body of the soul. So if you look upon this body of ours as a workshop in which something is made which will be very difficult to make without this workshop to make it in, you will have a different attitude towards it. The value and meaning of a workshop is in what you can make in it, not just in keeping it tidy or going on filling it with more and more tools which you will never use.

Now what are the tools which are in this workshop? The one I want to speak about specially this morning is the tool that consists in the presence of rhythms in the body; processes that renew themselves at regular intervals such as our day-to-day existence, the rhythm of our daily life and also of course the rhythms of our heart beat and breathing and the rhythm of the digestive process. All of those are instruments for producing in ourselves this other apparatus that we require to be able to travel freely without being dependent on the process of time, as we are in this body.

These rhythms are all connected with renewal. As our heart beats, it is pumping blood around in order to renew the tissues. As we breathe, we are taking in air in order to renew the quality of the state of the blood. As we eat we are taking in the substances for the renewal both of our energies and also the tissues of our body. In our periods of sleep, a process of renewal and general regeneration of the organism takes place. Every rhythm is a renewal, like the swinging of a pendulum that renews its possibility of swinging by concentrating its energy into a potential form at the top of its swing. Every cyclic or rhythmical process is like that. It is very necessary for us to learn how to transfer this renewal of our organism into the finer parts of our being which are not automatically provided with them. For example, there is no automatic provision for renewal in our mental processes. They have another, very necessary, quality which is the property of spontaneity and freedom from the dependence on past and future, but they are always dependent upon accidental shocks to keep them going. We find this particularly in our wish to work on ourselves, to find reality, to make progress in our inner life. This wish, which may be strong at one moment, dies away and, as I said, there is no principle of renewal here that enables it to return constantly and keep us in the right direction. We depend upon some shock, some accident, some combination of circumstances to bring back this wish to us. The source of the wish does not disappear, because there is hunger and need for reality in all of us, but this does not usually translate itself into a wish that will lead us to act. To wake up, to act, we have somehow or other to find a way of bringing the principle of renewal into our wish, and this is just where our bodily organism must be used as what is sometimes called a reminding factor.

There are ways of getting reminding factors from the outside but they are precarious. The real secret of the reminding factor is in this physical body of ours; for the very reason that the physical body is equipped with a wonderful series of rhythmic renewals and we can link ourselves to any and all of these for whatever purpose we wish. We only have to learn how to do it. And once we have learned how to link ourselves with the processes of

renewal in the body, then the renewals begin to come into other things, like our thoughts and our feelings, and can then maintain a direction and stability that they could not have otherwise. This is, as I said earlier, one of the ways in which this body serves as a workshop for constructing this other apparatus that we require.

I am proposing today to make an experiment with you by arranging that the big house bell be rung every quarter of an hour from eleven o'clock until lunchtime. I want you to take this as a signal for renewal in yourself of your wish.

You have presumably come here with a certain wish; but you know, as well as I do, that you will soon forget this wish, and that everything will then go in the usual broken-up way, because your thoughts and your feelings have not a principle of renewal, and your body will just go trudging along doing what is in front of it.

It is really necessary for us to bring our bodies into the service of our aim. If we try to do this with our thoughts and our feelings only, it is almost an impossible task, but with the help of the body it is possible. Something in you will be listening for that bell and that something is your own body. If you ask of your body that it should remind you of your wish when it hears the bell, you will see that it will begin to do so. I say "ask" because there is an intelligence in the body which we can rely on. We are inclined to treat the body as if it were a donkey that cannot understand anything; but even donkeys understand a good deal of what is said to them and our own bodies can understand a good deal more. They can be spoken to and they will respond; they will help us. In fact they will help us better than our thoughts or our feelings, because they are more reliable - if only we will let them do the work for which they are intended.