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Knowing Yourself

An ancient Greek philosopher said, “Know yourself,” and I believe this is important in any age for personal growth in everyday life. I have been serving in mental health work for many years, and have treated many different people with neuroses and abnormal personalities who have recovered and returned to society. From long years of experience with such people I deeply believe that their personalities and their attitudes toward life would not have been distorted if they had truly known and accepted themselves as they actually were—if they had followed the way of *arugamama*, accepting reality as it is.

Self-Awareness and the Development of Character

What does it mean to know oneself? What is the proper way of *arugamama*? Personal development depends upon the depth of one’s self-awareness. Everyone has good and bad qualities, and anyone who looks at himself deeply and honestly knows that he is not perfect. Although it may be unpleasant, we cannot deny that we sometimes have

unattractive feelings. Let us take jealousy as an example. This antisocial feeling, which may lead us to hurt others, is a manifestation of a desire for superiority and complete possession. People without jealousy are probably quite rare. Even a great, talented man like Goethe confessed his jealousy when Schiller won literary fame. There is jealousy not only in relationships between men and women, but also among friends and colleagues. It exists throughout society.

Some people are not deeply aware of their own jealousy. These people speak ill of others, delight in their failures and misfortunes and actively criticize them. Of course, I am not talking about constructive criticism. I am talking about those who try to raise their own worth by diminishing the worth of others. They do not realize that such actions come from their *own* jealousy. If they were more fully aware of the jealousy inside themselves, they would be ashamed to express it openly by speaking ill of others. They would naturally control their ugly gossip, and we could then call their personalities well-developed.

Soseki Natsume (author, 1867–1916) wrote in one of his novels that human beings are frightening because they can become evil instantly, even if they are usually good. When times are uneventful, the social side of human character emerges, but under certain conditions an antisocial side appears suddenly. For example, a politician, ordinarily a good man, may try to buy votes in an election campaign. If one is always aware of the fact that he, too, has an antisocial side, then he may be alert enough to protect himself from evil in a crisis.

Correct Self-Evaluation

People who cannot admit and accept their weaknesses, who believe they are always right, are insufferable. (Of course, some people suffer from delusions of grandeur, but we shall not consider such serious mental illnesses here.) People who have strong feelings of superiority overvalue themselves. When they have little ability, they become chronic

complainers who blame others when things go wrong. We can see this tendency among self-righteous people who claim that morality and justice are on their side.

On the other hand, there are some people, including many neurotics, who suffer from inferiority complexes. They are not antisocial, and it is a pity that they cannot apply their full capabilities. Their feelings of inferiority focus on various shortcomings of appearance, physique, health, family environment, wealth, ability, or personality. Although such matters are of little importance objectively, such people have lost confidence because of their strong desires for perfection. Everyone who has a desire for improvement has some feeling of inferiority that can stimulate him to work harder, so we can say that such feelings are even useful. When one becomes boastful, his progress stops.

Hideyo Noguchi (microbiologist, 1876–1927) was born into an extremely poor family, and a serious burn crippled his hand at an early age. His handicap stimulated his fighting spirit, and he went on to become a great scientist. Demosthenes in ancient Greece (384–322 BC) was a stutterer, but it is said that he became an eloquent speaker by training himself. Thus, feelings of inferiority can lead to constructive change. Some people, however, become negative and believe that their inferiority makes them *incapable* of doing anything, and so they become unable to exercise their abilities fully. These people are not really inferior, but they are enslaved by inferiority complexes because of their unrealistically negative self-images. I consider these people a great loss to society.

Inferiority Complexes and Neurosis

Neurotics most accurately epitomize people who cannot accept themselves as they really are. These people feel sorry for themselves and anxiously monitor themselves and their abilities. For example, when I test those who complain of poor memory or concentration, I cannot find them

objectively inferior in any way. Some complain that they tend to get tired easily, but experiments prove otherwise. Brain wave tests demonstrate that people who complain of insomnia often get much more sleep than they realize or admit. That is why I consider their symptoms less than what they claim. They tend to judge themselves with anxious feelings of inferiority, and, therefore, they do not really know themselves.

However, these people, even with their inferiority complexes, can be freed from their suffering by developing more accurate self-images and more self-confidence through the experience of success. The experiential treatment of neurosis works in this way. Accurate self-awareness means knowing one's true self and knowing that one's experiences are not necessarily unique, that is, the knowledge that something that makes one happy can make others happy, and something difficult for one can be difficult for others as well. Such a view of human equality produces empathy and bonds of solidarity with other people.

Obsessive desires for perfection come from a lack of self knowledge and, thus, inadequate knowledge of human nature. By ignoring the known facts of human nature, these people are always disappointed by their unrealistic desires. For example, a person who is obsessed with the desire for perfect feelings tries to feel refreshed at all times. In fact, however, our daily feelings naturally flow and change according to internal and external conditions, like the weather. A person who insists upon feeling refreshed is like one who hopes to have clear sky all the time; as soon as he sees a bit of a cloud, he assumes the weather will be terrible all day. When he feels just a little out of sorts, he tells himself that he is no good, and he makes himself feel worse.

Not Perfectionism, but Psychological Reality

Perfectionists are obsessed with the way they think they should be, ignoring themselves as they really are. They

demand conditions in accord with their unrealistic ideals for themselves, which results in lost confidence since reality always works against them.

A student was suffering from the inability to read because of distracting thoughts when he tried to study. His suffering was caused by his belief that a reader should concentrate only on his book, that unrelated thoughts should not occur. Like this student, if one tries to eliminate digressive thoughts because they are in the way, then the opposite effect is achieved: one becomes more aware of them. Again he tries to get rid of them, getting into a vicious cycle, and then he cannot read at all. This student was attempting the impossible ideal of not having any distracting thoughts, fighting against each thought that entered his mind.

When one is reading, there is a natural rhythm of tension and relaxation, and when one is relaxed various thoughts occur naturally. One should accept this inevitable fact flexibly and continue to read on and off in rhythm. Thus, when distracting thoughts come to mind, one is not particularly conscious of them, so they do not interfere. It is important for people to recognize such psychological realities and to avoid struggling against them.

Under the Present Conditions

Our mental and physical states continually change. A person who knows himself recognizes this, and regardless of whether his condition is good or bad, he tries to do whatever he can. A normal person's attitude is to do seventy or eighty percent of something as well as possible when he cannot do one hundred percent of it perfectly. Perfectionists, however, ignore their real selves and cling to the best they have ever accomplished, expecting to be in top condition all the time. Their best performances are rare, so they are always dissatisfied with the present, and they exaggerate the importance of their minor shortcomings, which worsens their condition. In some serious cases their attitudes toward

themselves prevent them from doing anything at all unless they are in peak condition. These people are true neurotics.

We all have various mental and physical shortcomings. We can never be satisfied if we look at ourselves only by the demanding standards of our ideals. Some people try to escape from reality by making excuses for their weaknesses, and some people do great work even with serious handicaps. The best example would be Helen Keller, who had three serious physical handicaps.

It is important to recognize that we tend to make all kinds of excuses in order to avoid suffering. For example, one may escape from attending a meeting by saying he has a slight cold. He feels guilty just skipping it for no reason, so he uses a minor illness as his excuse. This is an escape into illness. On the other hand, when he goes fishing, his attitude is reversed: he thinks his cold will disappear when he gets to the sea. If one gets into the habit of using illness as an excuse, then he becomes a neurotic.

Knowing Your Feelings

An important part of understanding one's self is knowing the nature of human emotions. First, we must admit that when the waves of our emotions rise in response to stimulation, it is impossible to restore tranquility by reason. Even if one wishes to be released quickly from negative feelings caused by an unpleasant incident, he cannot control them by willpower. Everyone experiences this kind of thing. Thus, there is a side over which we have no control, and there is a side where we have relatively wide room to use our free will as human beings.

Emotional matters are very often beyond our control. The adjustment of a train fare can be done on the spot, but emotional matters are hard to adjust immediately. For example, when someone with an average income loses one thousand yen, it is not such a serious matter for him. He feels bad, but that feeling does not stay too long. If it is ten thousand yen, the bad feeling stays a little longer. If it

is one hundred thousand yen, it stays even longer. If he loses one million yen, then he will feel depressed for quite a long time. Even if he tells himself that he can do nothing about his loss, which is true, his feelings cannot be adjusted right away.

Although matters of reason and logic can be modified very easily, emotional matters are very often hard to adjust. However, some people are too eager to eliminate these unpleasant feelings right away. They do not understand the nature of emotions. Trying to do the impossible complicates matters by disturbing a natural process and, as a result, negative emotions stay longer. Moreover, such people suffer from being too slow in giving up their negative emotions.

The most important characteristic of emotions is that strong feelings subside with the passage of time if they are *left to run their course*. Our lives would be destroyed by suffering were it not for this phenomenon. For example, if the pain of a hard blow, such as the death of one's child, remained as strong as in the beginning, then no one could survive the endless pain. In fact, however, the waves of emotion rise and fall, gradually tapering off, whether we like it or not. When emotions begin to take over in labor-management disputes, negotiators sometimes take advantage of this principle by declaring cooling-off periods.

The fact that emotions fade is a great blessing, but sometimes it has a negative effect, recognized in such Japanese expressions as "a nine day wonder." For example, when people decide to quit smoking or drinking after being deeply moved by some experience, some cannot persist because their powerful emotions fade away as time passes.

Some people either ignore or do not know this principle of emotions, and they become desperate when they encounter trouble, as if it would last forever. They cannot trust the passage of time. An expert in living knows that, however terrible his experience may be, his unpleasant feelings will fade with time, and so he can live with optimism.

Outer Self and Inner Self

How do people change? How can one change himself into a better person? In ancient Buddhist terms, "When the outer facet is tidied up, the inner facet will naturally follow." The outer facet is one's external behavior, and the inner facet is one's mental and emotional side. When one lowers his head in front of a statue of Buddha with his hands pressed together, then spontaneously he begins to feel reverent. If he throws his head back haughtily, reverent feelings do not emerge. We can conclude that, regardless of the mind, if one first tries to straighten himself externally, then his spirit changes to fit the outside reality.

When I treat neurotics, I advise them to improve their form. That makes it much easier to practice. We know that our athletic spirit awakens when we put on sportswear and sports shoes. This does not happen when one stands with his hands in the pockets of his trousers. When we frown, with our jaws clamped together and our fists tight, it is impossible to relax. When we smile, our tempers subside, and when we frown, we become bad-tempered. External form changes internal moods.

External form includes behavior. It is hard to change feelings only by thoughts or intentions; they change as a result of actions. For example, if I am in a sluggish mood, it is just about impossible to make myself feel invigorated as I am. But if I take off my jacket, climb up into a tree in the garden, and start cutting withered branches, then my feelings are energized by my activity. On a cold morning it is hard to get out of bed, so if you are going to get up only after your desire to get up matures, you will sleep all day. However, once you jump out of bed, your mood follows your action and changes completely. That is why no one goes back to bed again once he gets up.

If one is going to study only after his desire matures, then he will find it difficult to begin. He should first just sit at his desk, open an appropriate book, and start reading. The rhythm of studying is carried by the activity. First, make the form without waiting for the mood. Leave your

feelings as they are and proceed with action first, and then it is easy and practical to change your state of mind. You need to recognize and practice such psychological realities in order to change yourself more constructively.

Anxiety and Pain

I have used the term *arugamama* already, but I would like to explain more about it. First, we have to recognize the fact that we humans are born with anxiety and pain and that these are necessary for our survival. Although it would seem better not to feel pain simply because we do not like it, the sense of pain alerts us to illness or injury where it hurts, and so it provides a natural mechanism to protect ourselves from external injuries.

Anxiety, another distasteful feeling, is the same. People are not the center of nature. Disasters happen every year, and we are surrounded by hostile microbes that continually multiply. Also, although human society was created by humans, it is not made for individuals; so if one does not make some effort, he will drop out since competition is very keen. There are numerous threats, such as illnesses, accidents, poor human relations, and economic problems. We have to admit that anxiety about such dangers is part of human life. We make constructive efforts only when we are motivated by such basic anxiety.

Life stagnates and deteriorates without anxiety and pain. In sports, the anxiety that one may be defeated by the opponent builds tension that makes us practice hard. Illness frightens us, so we observe the rules of health. If we did not have fear, we would not be able to avoid sudden dangers, such as an oncoming car. However, since a person who is obsessed by a desire for perfection does not *admit the necessity and the inevitability of these basic fears*, he wishes to avoid any kind of anxiety and pain. His wish that such anxiety and pain should not exist does not match reality. This kind of selfish desire is deceptive: as one becomes more acutely conscious of anxiety and pain, he may be obsessed

by it. This is also a mistake which comes from not knowing one's *arugamama* self: the real self in the real world.

A key element of *arugamama* is to accept our inevitable physical or psychological reactions as they are, not to deny or resist the reaction, nor to stumble through by self-deception. For example, people get frightened when they climb to high places. They get nervous in front of large audiences. Their thoughts wander when they study. They cannot sleep when they have something to worry about. We all feel sluggish or weary or inferior sometimes.

Arugamama means knowing that such mind-body phenomena are inevitable and accepting them as they are. It is important to recognize this *arugamama* self with humility.

If, on the contrary, one tries to rid himself of such a weakness because it inconveniences him, then instead he becomes more acutely aware of it, and he will end up more troubled than before. For example, a neurotic who suffers from insomnia cannot sleep because of the ticking of a clock, and so he gets up and stops the clock. His attention stays with the sound because he treats it as a nuisance and tries to get rid of it. Ordinary people do not resist the sound as it is. Left to its nature, human attention does not remain focused on one thing. It moves away without notice, so ordinarily one does not continue to hear the sound of a clock even if it is still there.

Arugamama: Fulfilling the Desire to Improve

Arugamama concerns the question of how to accept sensory data from events or objects, even when we fear such stimuli. The first time anyone tries to jump into a pool from a high diving board, anxiety attacks him. This is natural. So, if one rejects his fear and decides to dive only after conquering it, he will never be able to take the first leap. Trying to overcome such inevitable fear through mental activity is impossible, and the more one tries, the more strongly one becomes conscious of it. This is not *arugamama*; it is an

unnatural willfulness. Do not confuse *arugamama* with *akirame* [surrender, giving up].

Akirame means to avoid jumping in because of fear. *Arugamama* means to jump in anyway, fear and all. To jump in only after conquering fear is willful and unnatural.

Moreover, *arugamama* includes the fact that everyone is born with a strong desire to improve and develop. To get on with is the attitude of *arugamama*, which distinguishes it from *akirame*. When one tries to dive into a pool, the natural fear is as it is: *arugamama*. Accepting that fear as a fact and yet diving in, heeding the will to grow, is true *arugamama*, unlike the negativity *akirame*. Likewise, when one tries to speak in front of a large group of people, if he accepts his nervousness with the attitude of *arugamama*, and, knowing he is tense, speaks without running away, soon his mind begins to concentrate on the speech, and eventually his nervousness simply fades away. Even if this inevitable psychological process is distasteful, I believe that it is natural and fruitful to accept it and to continue to try to fulfill the desire for self-development.

I have discussed the confusion that results from not knowing oneself and the constructive meaning of accurate self-knowledge. I would like next to mention one more important point: I would like you to consider what your real wishes are. Most people can discover that their true desires are to use their abilities fully and to work for the benefit of themselves and others.

If you recognize that you have a desire for improvement and development, then you will need to keep working according to your real wishes, even when you have to endure hard times. If your real wish is the desire to grow, your whole life will naturally deteriorate if your way of living does not go along with this desire. If one is happily dependent on someone else and lives a lazy and unproductive life, then he does not have the desire for improvement, so nothing can be done. As Confucius said, "Rotten wood cannot be carved." If you recognize the desire for improvement in yourself, then there is no other way than to try to make it happen.