

Hara, The Vital Centre of Man:
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Chapter 1

Eastern and Western Views of Hara

(a) The General Significance of the Centre of the Body

In all that has been said until now Hara has appeared as a phenomenon of Japanese life only. But if Hara were nothing but an aspect of Eastern life it would be of merely ethnological interest and the purpose of studying it would be only to obtain a deeper understanding of Eastern people and their way of life. But the longer one studies Hara as understood by the Japanese the more obvious it becomes that the term expresses not just a specifically Japanese phenomenon but one that is universal and valid for all mankind. It is a prime factor of all human life, the realization and practise of which is of equal concern to ourselves.

The over-all human significance of Hara becomes evident in examples from Japanese life. It becomes a certainty as soon as one begins to practice it for oneself. From experiences gained through Hara one comes to see that it contains a hidden 'treasure of life' which is man's birth-right, which was lost in the evolution of his consciousness, and which he must re-discover and practise as a prerequisite for all higher development.

Investigation of the over-all human significance of Hara is, for the European, overshadowed from the outset by the question of how closely the special importance given to the

realization and practise of it in Japanese life is connected simply with the general Oriental character and outlook. A decision as to what importance Hara may have for us can of course be made only in relation to a Western scale of values. In exactly the same degree as the whole Western tradition and culture differs from that of the East the meaning and value of Hara will be different.

Because of the very nature of his mentality as well as because of his Christian tradition it seems to a European not only surprising but even odd that the discovery of the right bodily centre should be possible only by a downward shift of the centre of gravity. Is this really indispensable for Western man? A final answer to the question necessitates a deeper penetration into the phenomenon of Hara. For the moment let us say only this much:—

From the standpoint of the West, 'heart' and 'head'—the spheres of the individual soul and of the objective intellect respectively—play a completely different and more important role, not only in their secular but also in their spiritual connotation, than they do in the East where neither man's ego nor his intellectuality has ever been given the importance that they have for us. Similarly in the East 'mind' has never gained the significance it has for Western humanity, whether understood in the sense of 'ratio', or of 'objective mind' as embodied in our system of values and achievements, or of an intuitive perception of a transcendental system of 'inner images'.

But whatever may be the relation of the basic, vital centre, the 'earth' centre, to the higher centres one thing is certain—without awareness of it there can be no progressive opening of the Self to the meaning of the higher centres. (It must not be forgotten that the East also knows about the 'circulation of the Light' which indeed flows through the 'earth' centre but does not flow out or culminate there.) Where this meaning is sought in a transformation which ultimately lies in the spiritual sphere

and is realized in the unfolding of the soul, there also the importance of that centre which shelters the great, primal Unity cannot be passed over. The realization of the truly spiritual Mind is possible only by a calling back of the limiting and always dualistic I-mind, that is, by merging it with the original Unity of life beyond all dichotomy. In every case where a Western man reached the highest development it was possible only because he had first traversed the 'deep dark'. The descent into the centre of the earth must always precede the ultimate ascent of the spirit.

(b) The European Attitude to the Belly

Everyone has a more or less conscious idea of how people ought to look and how he himself would like to look. He judges the figure of another accordingly, and, in his own case suffers from any disparity between his ideal and the figure he himself actually cuts. One's self-confidence is influenced more than is generally realized by an unconscious judgment of one's own appearance.

The ideal of the perfect figure, more or less conscious, differs according to character, age, outlook on life, cultural tradition and fashion. The ideal however is always determined by three factors—size, proportion and shape. Thus a figure may conflict with an inner ideal by being too full or too lean, or because the distribution of weight does not correspond to the 'right' proportions, or because it looks tight and confined, or, on the other hand, loose and 'uncontained'.

Despite individual differences, Western man today is generally afraid of being too stout; he seeks a harmony which has its centre of gravity in the upper part of the body, and he clearly prefers the confined to the too expansive. All this manifests itself in a universal rejection of the belly. Nothing is more opposed to the modern Western ideal of beauty than the big belly.

But, not content with rejecting the fat belly, we are prejudiced against any belly whatsoever. The ideal 'good figure'—not only in the case of women—is flat-bellied if not actually bellyless. For the young body this is justifiable, but even the perfectly natural increase of volume from a certain age onward is noted with regret, and the genial unconcern with which the landlord of the Golden Lion or the worthy vicar, the portly managing director or dear old Uncle George candidly acknowledge their abdominal centre of gravity is received with that indulgent smile generally conceded to people whose existence one willingly accepts but whom one would not wish to resemble in appearance.

The unpopularity of the belly is due to two converging factors. One is simply the unthinking acceptance of fashion, while the other is rooted in an intellectual notion. A big belly, or even a tendency to one, is regarded as a sort of mental fatty degeneration, a coarsening tantamount to a decline of all the mind's faculties. Secondly, it is equated with a loss of elasticity, particularly of mental energy; in fact, with increased materiality and cumbersomeness—things which modern man dislikes because he is always aiming at agility, at speed and the upward thrust. High-heeled shoes and padded shoulders stress these up-going tendencies. The urge to transcend gravity is quite natural to man as a spiritual being, but the desire to break loose from the vitalizing bond with the solid earth is in conflict with the law of his terrestrial existence. Finally, many people regard the frank avowal of a prominent belly as an offence against 'good form'.

In view of these prejudices against the belly as such (which understandably reject the suggestion of excess in favour of an unnatural deficiency) it is instructive and perhaps surprising to observe how rarely European art, in the representation of the nude, shows evidence of such prejudices.

The changing representations of the human body in art reflect the changes in each period of man's outlook on life. In the classical art of antiquity we find the ideal of the unity of heaven and earth, and in different periods of European culture an alternation between the joyous-sensual affirmation of this world and the turning to the world of the spirit. But that the physical centre of gravity lying in the middle of the body should often lead to an emphasis on the belly—particularly in the representation of the female body—seems an instinctive thing arising naturally from a feeling for the beauty of the human form. The affirmation of this centre of gravity irrespective of the size of the body, is what matters. The present day rejection of the belly is unnatural and betokens a misguided way of thinking. It shows that the natural instinct for the true bodily centre of gravity has been lost.

But the natural affirmation of the belly which can still be found not only in art but also among the broad masses of the people does not necessarily imply any knowledge of Hara.

It is possible to speak of Hara in its full meaning solely in those cases where the natural centre not only works of itself but where it is consciously used to determine posture. An unconscious understanding of the value of the belly in no way denotes the possession of Hara. Hara means an understanding of the significance of the middle of the body as the foundation of an over-all feeling for life. Its full existence as we see it in the life of the Japanese and as, in our opinion, the European should develop it, has its precursor in the phenomenon of the 'natural Hara'. Here it is not yet realized in its full significance, let alone consolidated by conscious effort, but it has already risen above a blind, unthinking acceptance of the mere belly. A brief reference to the natural Hara as actually found in the West may help to remove any idea that an affirmation of Hara by Europeans is somehow un-Western and hence artificial.

(c) *Natural Hara*

The development of Hara depends on a basic factor of our ordinary human life, just like digestion, heart-beat, breathing or any other natural function by which we live. Understood thus it is beyond good and evil, as is our physical strength. And yet its existence, like the existence of natural vitality, is a necessary pre-condition for the development of the highest levels of life. Hara is the very embodiment of man's contact with the fundamental powers of the Greater Life manifested in him. It is a gift from life which is his without his having earned it. But only by preserving a right centre of gravity can it unfold its fullest meaning.

As the ego-consciousness develops, contact with primal, basic forces is usually lost and as long as a man relies mainly upon his ego he is obliged to replace the deeper forces by the use of his reason and will.

Nevertheless there are men who have not only never completely lost their original contact with Great Nature, but who are continually nourished by it both in their self-consciousness and their life-consciousness. A firm anchorage in the forces of original Nature acts like a plummet by means of which such a man will always automatically swing back into his right centre of gravity even though for a time he may fall out of it. Unconsciously he is guided by it even when his conscious life circles around other things.

Thus a man's conscious life may revolve around a beloved person, a task, a God-concept, even around his own ego, and yet, behind it, like a hidden spring from which his rational life also draws its energy, always reaching out for wholeness, this natural centre may be at work controlling and guiding him. In such a case, no matter what conditions him in his waking state he has at his disposal an elemental force which sustains, shapes and guides him, maintaining him in harmony whatever his life situations may be. Even

dangers which threaten his security, his aims and his safety never completely shatter his faith and trust in life, because his basic vital centre has not been affected. What carries him through comes not from without nor is it based on his ego; it springs from a lasting contact with sustaining inner depths. In the man with natural Hara it can work unhindered and in all spheres of life, for psycho-spiritual no less than the physical forces all have their inexhaustible source of strength and order within it.

This sustaining, ordering and healing strength rooted in the fundamental unity of life is veiled, however, as soon as a man, relying on his rational powers, falls into the delusion that he can do everything by and through himself. Therefore we usually find natural Hara where rational life-consciousness is not yet formed, as for instance in the healthy-minded child whose uninhibited self and life-consciousness do not rest upon his ability or his knowledge but are simply 'given'. We find natural Hara also in certain adults, even in those with very powerful ego drives. In such cases the connection with the primordial sources of life often brings disaster, because people with natural Hara have irresistible power over others.

The man whose ego is the controlling factor of his consciousness and who at the same time draws his energies from the forces of the basic, vital centre develops magical powers. Not only does he possess inexhaustible energy, often an unbelievable resistance to disease and even an apparent immunity to death, but he also makes others fall under his spell. He easily wins a blindly devoted following on whom he imprints his stamp and whom he unites and carries with him: unites, that is, round himself. Such a man, drawing power from the primordial sources of life, to which others have little or no access, and using them in the service of his ego, invariably brings disaster in his train. But not to stress the negative, destructive exemplars, it can be said that every born leader—whether in the sphere of

politics, great enterprises or the spiritual life—draws his strength from the primordial forces of life.

Through his contact with these forces a man with such magical powers has an elemental contact with all those people whose collective dependence makes them defenceless against the elemental forces of life, i.e. those who are not yet, or are no longer in full possession of their normal judgment as individuals. The more a man grows away from his connection with the primal Unity of life, i.e. becomes intellectually differentiated and self-sufficient, the less susceptible he is to the influence of the 'magical' man. And yet, the more he is trapped in the blind alley of his rationality the readier he may become to open himself to the irrational. The tormenting emptiness of his up-rooted mind then makes him crave for a breath from the realms of a deeper life. This inner need not only opens him to the experience of Being but it can also make him susceptible to the occult in the bad sense, which includes black magic.

The magical powers of spiritual healers, great orators and dictators are incomprehensible unless one understands natural Hara. C. G. Carus quotes the observations of one of the men in Napoleon's train which directly bears this out and shows other characteristics of the working of Hara:

'The embonpoint of the Emperor is not a symptom of illness, on the contrary, it is a sign of strength. I was almost tempted to see something peculiar in the way in which the working of his mind and the knowledge of his strength reacted on his body. His face is in complete repose and yet there is an ease of movement in all his features. There is no restlessness, no grimacing. But his facial muscles instantly express every possible nuance of pleasure or displeasure.'

The ultimate fate of many of the great 'magicians' however, clearly shows that the strength drawn from Hara,

though originally beyond good and evil, becomes destructive when incorporated with a self-seeking and presumptuous ego. The more inflated it becomes the more the 'magician' loses his original secure relationship with the vital centre. If he loses the power and control coming from the deep he replaces it by the will to personal power and eventually the whole edifice collapses and destroys him with it.

There is another form of Hara, known to the ordinary man, which is not merely the expression of elemental strength but also an attribute of mature people who repose calmly in the fullness and vigour of their bodies, who are reliable and steadfast in their views and who radiate a kindly warmth. They obviously possess an imperturbable centre of gravity. Although found most often in older people with a certain degree of portliness, it has nothing in common with a paunch or a distended abdomen, or with exaggerated weight in the lower part of the body alone. The right weight shows rather in a firm fullness, an inner solidity and mature breadth. The 'man of good standing' and the 'sedate person' have their centre of gravity in the lower body. The supporting width of the trunk from the waist downwards is what often gives to old gentlemen and to matrons their essential dignity of bearing, the marks of the tranquil mind and of inner maturity. One finds this firm solidity down below in old craftsmen and master workmen whose long devotion to their craft and whose varied experience with people is, as it were, stored and preserved there.

A close observation of the whole manifestation shows that Hara means not the physical volume of the abdomen but rather the weight of an inner centre of gravity whose solidity frees its possessor from the unreliability of his ego-based forces. We recognise it in the attitude of all true kings and all truly religious people throughout the ages. It marks the appearance of the benevolent as well as the humble, expressing above all, freedom from conceit. This also throws light on the phenomenon of the 'Gothic belly'.

Hara

In the Romanesque and Gothic sculpture the belly is clearly stated and expresses strength, achieved self-renunciation and calm acceptance of the bond with earth. It shows the humility in which man, from the weakness of his I and from his bondage to the earth, opens himself to the Eternal. The Gothic belly seems to say: 'You cannot win heaven if you betray Earth.'

The classical reference in German literature to an unrecognised understanding of Hara occurs in Heinrich von Kleist's treatise *On the Puppet Theatre* from which we quote this passage:

'And what advantage would this puppet have over living dancers? What advantage? First of all a negative one, my dear friend, and that is that he would never put on airs. For putting on airs occurs, as you know, when the soul, the *vis motrix*, is located anywhere but in the centre of gravity of a given movement. Just observe P . . .' he continued, 'when she plays Daphne and, being pursued by Apollo, looks round at him. Her soul is in the small of her back; she bends as if she would break, like a Naiad from the school of Bernini. Or look at young F . . . when, as Paris, he stands among the three goddesses and awards the apple to Venus; his soul (it is almost frightening to watch) is in his elbow.' 'Such errors of judgment,' he added, breaking off, 'are unavoidable since we ate of the Tree of Knowledge. But Paradise is barred to us and the Angel stands behind us. We must travel round the world and see if, perchance, there is a back door left open to us anywhere.'

'We see in the organic world how in proportion as thought is dim and weak, bodily grace becomes brighter and more dominant. Just as, at the intersection of two lines, a point on one side, after passing through infinity, suddenly appears on the other side; or the image in a concave mirror, after it has withdrawn into the infinite, suddenly appears close again, so also when knowledge has, as it were, passed

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through the Infinite grace re-appears. It appears most purely in that body-structure which has either unlimited consciousness or none at all—the god or the puppet.

'So then,' said I, somewhat lost, 'Do we have to eat of the Tree again in order to drop back into the state of innocence?' 'Assuredly,' he answered, 'that will be the last chapter in the history of the world.'

This is the last word on the subject. To find his right centre of gravity, which is Hara, man must eat for the second time from the Tree of Knowledge.

(d) *The Two Levels*

Consideration of the universal human value of Hara, like all questions concerning man, can be taken on two levels—on the level of the natural world-view, or on that of the supernatural or transcendental view.

Man must live in the world of space and time but, in it, he is intended to manifest the transcendental. In his Being his nature is transcendental, but he can fulfil this Being only if he lives in the (natural) world. Therefore man can be understood only in terms of the tension between his Being beyond space and time, and his life in space and time, whether his path leads to an intensification of the tension or to a resolving of it.

On his way to increasing consciousness man alienates himself from the original unity of life, relies on himself in action and in understanding, and develops out of his ego an outlook on life which we have called the natural world-view. This includes healthy, common-sense understanding, also scientific knowledge as long as it does not transcend the ordinary comprehension of the I. Only by transcending the comprehensible and by accepting the incomprehensible yet binding content of certain inner experiences can a man attain a new vision which surpasses as well as gives new meaning to the natural world-view.

Hara

To the extent that man entrenches himself in his natural world-view the Truth of Life is veiled. And yet the unity of the Divine, of which, in his Being he has a part, even though it is concealed by the pattern of his consciousness, still contains and embraces him. It works within him unceasingly, renewing and healing. Above all it puts him under an obligation to strive for increased individual consciousness which will no longer block his feeling of the Divine but will manifest it. From his earliest experience of consciousness in childhood and at every stage of his development, man is always animated at his deepest level by the need to re-discover the primal Unity. The meaning of everything he now understands and does from the standpoint of the natural world will be revealed to him ultimately only from the transcendental standpoint. What transcendence means for man will be revealed against the background of that rational world order in which he alienates himself from the transcendental. Thus every effort to recognize the reality of the human condition drives the seeker first to one pole, then to the other. There is no valid recognition of the reality, as anchored in the ego-mind, without some awareness of the reality of the Greater Life concealed in it and straining towards the light. But man has no access to the transcendental unless he has first clarified the structure of his own ego-centred consciousness. Yet all his thinking must necessarily start from his natural world-view. Therefore we will consider Hara first as a phenomenon of the natural world-view, and only later show, by implication, its transcendental significance.

III

Man with Hara